



A Practical Guide to Planning Collaborative Initiatives to Advance Racial Equity

Divided Community Project, Moritz College of Law, and
Mershon Center for International Security Studies

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Executive Summary

Dozens of collaborative initiatives to advance racial equity are underway at both the state and local level and are under discussion at the national level and in additional communities. This edition of the guide offers promising ideas and illustrations gleaned from these new initiatives together with insights from historical and international contexts. The focus is on government-community collaborations with multiple goals: helping people understand the history of current racial harms, instituting changes to advance racial equity, starting the healing, and more. For simplicity, we call these initiatives “commissions” though they may be titled as “councils,” “task forces,” or something similar. What follows is a brief summary of each chapter in the guide.

1

The promise of government-community collaborations with multiple goals.

A commission with multiple initiatives can sequence them thoughtfully, so that they are mutually reinforcing. Immediate changes galvanize engagement in the process. An interchange between public officials and community members, informed by experts, seems essential to achieve the goals of change and reckoning with past injustice.

Public officials can...

2

Plan it.

Arrange for an assessment that will allow planners to tailor the initiative to the community and goals. So that the members of the commission can begin quickly, ask a planning group to set, perhaps tentatively, goals, authority, host institution, name, duration, staff, and other resources. Planners can then do the crucial work of recruiting commission members and their leader, preparing them, and standing ready to provide support.

The commission can then...

3

Work on changes to advance equity.

Decide what potential changes the commission should focus on and how these changes can be achieved. Collaborate with the community and public officials in doing so. Consult with experts. Engage others early and often, help them understand each other, frame the issues for those beyond the commission, determine which should be the focus in the short and long term, build coalitions to achieve the change and celebrate achievements.



4

Reflect on how to recount the history of current harm.

Weigh the benefits and challenges of a focus on the community's past and present injustices, amid a focus on changing the future. Various community stakeholders will react differently to each focus. It may help to explain to the community why talking about the past serves everyone's interests. Expedite writing the history so that the focus can then move to the present and a shared future. Document, commemorate, and educate about key historical moments.

5

Reflect on how the commission should remediate past injustices.

Depending on community receptivity, consider completing Point 4, above, before moving to remediation. Expand remediation options to include broad policy and resource changes in addition to those directed to individuals and payments or investments from both private and public sources. Consider the best way to frame remediation to align the interests of public and community leaders.

6

Work to promote healing and changes in hearts and minds in a sequence that fits the community.

Consider when to begin the work of acknowledging, apologizing, storytelling, reducing separation, group discourse, commemoration, rituals, symbols, and more.

7

Plan post-commission activities.

Identify the work that remains. Help build a foundation for implementation. Provide for measurement of results and accountability for implementing recommendations.

1.

The promise of a multi-pronged initiative that connects the government and community members.

Support to advance racial equity in the United States is strong.¹ Most Americans acknowledge the existence of inequities.² Businesses have increasingly announced that they support enhancing racial equity.³ Many believe that advancing racial equity strengthens communities and opportunities for everyone. Equity advances may also expand the workforce, increase consumer spending, and enhance productivity.⁴ For these reasons, change seems possible. The challenge is to figure out processes to address those inequities, which cross institutional boundaries and require multiple solutions, while building a stronger shared sense of community.



The multi-pronged initiatives hold promise for their projects to be mutually reinforcing by promoting the changes that will move toward a society that offers each person an opportunity to thrive while also developing well-researched narratives regarding the past and promoting healing. Another aspect of the promise is that these initiatives invite community members and public officials to work together.

California, Vermont, New York City, and at least ten other cities, small and large, have already seized the moment by convening multi-pronged, sequenced approaches – whether called a truth and racial healing commission or something else. (For simplicity, we call them “commissions,” though they may be “councils,” “task forces,” or something else.) This guide focuses particularly, though not exclusively, on these multi-pronged initiatives with public (e.g., city, university, state) sponsorship. It may be helpful for related initiatives as well.

Unlike short-term “blue ribbon” task forces that conclude with recommendations, these processes facilitate collaborative problem-solving, public engagement, healing, and implementation over several years. The multi-pronged initiatives hold promise for their projects to be mutually reinforcing by promoting the changes that will move toward a society that offers each person an opportunity to thrive while also developing well-researched narratives regarding the past and promoting healing. Another aspect of the promise is that these initiatives invite community members and public officials to work together.

We use “equity” rather than “equality” to emphasize the goal of offering opportunity for all – sometimes achieved through different approaches that recognize that people and communities begin from different starting points. For example, giving a seeing and non-seeing student each a hard copy of a book would be “equal,” while giving the book to both in a format tailored to each student’s ability to see would be “equitable.” The Brookhaven, Georgia, Social Justice, Race and Equity Commission defined equity as “the just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential.”

U.S. initiatives distinguished from “truth and reconciliation commissions” in the context of governments in transition

Though probably inspired by well-known truth and reconciliation commissions abroad that operated in the context of regime change, U.S. commissions to advance racial equity will achieve change only to the extent that they persuade existing government officials and community leaders to offer support. Further, the U.S. initiatives will not be tasked with identifying which government officials in a prior regime should be prosecuted or given amnesty, as was the celebrated commission in South Africa and commissions in other nations transitioning to a new government. But these international models of transitional commissions share with U.S. initiatives the goals of truth-telling, remediation for those who have been harmed, community engagement, and healing. They can be a source of promising ideas for these shared aims.

Those creating processes with multiple aims have noted the advantages of working toward some of these goals simultaneously and sequencing others over a period of years so that they are mutually reinforcing.

Potential benefits of multiple, mutually reinforcing initiatives:

Those creating processes with multiple aims note the advantages of working toward some of these goals simultaneously and sequencing others over a period of years so that they are mutually reinforcing. Those advantages include:

- immediate changes increase credibility and galvanize engagement in the process (Chapter 2);
- increased public understanding broadens the coalition for achieving change (Chapter 3);
- a public that understands more fully the record created of historical and current injustices (Chapter 4) may then also support a reckoning with the past (Chapter 5);
- acknowledging and commemorating past injustices and continuing wrongs, in turn, opens the door to healing and social and cultural changes (Chapter 6).

This mutually reinforcing cycle of action differs from a short-term commission charged narrowly with holding discussions, hearing witness testimony and experts, and then quickly issuing recommendations. The latter format seems, thus, less likely to promote broad, deep, and lasting change.

COMMON GOALS FOR U.S. INITIATIVES TO ADVANCE RACIAL EQUITY

- Truth:** Create a shared authoritative narrative of the past and/or current effects of inequities.
- Urgent action:** Secure immediate changes, particularly some significant actions toward a long-term effort to address, for example, health disparities, harsher treatment by law enforcement, and hate incidents.
- Transformative Change:** Explore and develop deep and broad change in economic, policy, and legal structures and initiate the long-term effort required to make social and cultural changes to create a more just and peaceful society. At the same time, guard against efforts by some groups to turn back past advancements in these respects.
- Justice:** Create a public reckoning for historical and ongoing injustices committed by government and other institutions and their continuing effects that sustain racial inequities.
- Change hearts and minds and begin racial healing:** Increase public understanding of the challenges faced by those suffering the effects of racial inequity and its costs for everyone. At the same time, begin to build over time a shared determination to eradicate inequities, improve relationships, and reap the benefits of what Heather McGhee calls the 'solidarity dividend.'¹¹
- Recommendations and accountability:** Recommend both additional changes and a process for tracking results as the process evolves and when it concludes. Identify direct or shared accountability of those responsible for implementing the recommendations, including public officials and the larger community, and watching for and warning about any re-emergence of past inequities.

ILLUSTRATIONS OF MULTI-PRONGED, SEQUENCED INITIATIVES

An example of sequencing initiatives – Providence, Rhode Island

In July 2020, Providence Mayor Jorge O. Elorza announced a truth, reconciliation, and reparations effort. He began with a broad agenda but then indicated the sequencing among the varied prongs of the initiative. “The reconciliation process will allow us to look at ourselves with clear eyes and match our highest ideals of who we want to be with the reality of the ground,” said Mayor Elorza. “My sense is that we’ll find that we have a long way to go to meet those high ideals. I believe in a fundamental goodness that exists in all of us, and when confronted with the reality of the systematic injustices that our Black community has faced, our broader community will respond to be part of the solution.”⁵ The first two initiatives on the graphic below were directed by the mayor, working with an African American Ambassadors Group⁶ and local nonprofits and city resources. They produced a historical account of racial injustices in Providence and, in February 2022, the Mayor and City Council appointed the Providence Municipal Reparations Commission to address the third prong of the sequenced initiatives – to advise the city on how to begin repairing the harm and to engage the community.⁷



Examples of short-term commissions to be followed by longer-term commissions – Brookhaven, Georgia, Charleston, South Carolina, and New York City commissions:

In contrast to the master plan created from the start in Providence, the mayors and city council in Brookhaven and New York City authorized an initial period of approximately one year to organize the initiatives, leaving open the possibility that the commission could then recommend multi-year authorization of a commission to continue their work. All these short-term commissions recommended the continued commissions. The city councils in Charleston and Brookhaven approved the extended commissions, while the New York City's recommended commission will be determined by a city-wide charter-amendment vote in November 2022.

Benefits of community-government-expert connections:

An interchange between public officials and community members, informed by experts, seems essential to achieve the goals of change and reckoning with past injustice. The government connection, though helpful, seems less critical to advancing other important goals, such as truth-telling and reconciliation, which have been achieved as well through grassroots initiatives such as the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission.⁸ Change, though, is of vital importance for many initiatives to advance racial equity. Change typically requires government action and resources.



An interchange between public officials and community members, informed by experts, seems essential to achieve the goals of change and reckoning with past injustice.

It will thus be necessary to engage and persuade those with the power to implement desired changes. Despite local protests in many communities that awakened and shook the public, private, and social sectors alike, as one truth commission expert pointed out at a Divided Community Project meeting, “It won’t help to have agreement at the community level if politicians are not aligned with that outcome.”

Another prominent priority among commission initiatives has been to develop and implement a narrative of a just and shared future.⁹ To create the narrative, commission members will want to listen to those who can help them understand what must change for everyone to thrive and to feel safe and respected. Indeed, without that step, many in the community will not trust the result of government actions.

The interchange between the commission and affected public will also benefit from engaging with experts, both from within the government and outside it. Racial justice movement protests called attention to racial inequity and disparities in law enforcement, housing, education, and health care, among others. Economic experts have made the case that advancing racial equity results in expanding the workforce and consumer spending.¹⁰ Commentators have pointed to the costs of inequities for all and the mutual benefits from reducing those inequities.¹¹ Experts can help identify the opportunities to achieve change,¹² and the commission can connect that input with the evidence and insights derived from lived experience.

ILLUSTRATIONS OF GOVERNMENT-COMMUNITY-EXPERT CONNECTIONS

Joint gains from collaboration between government and community members – Lansing, Michigan:

The Metro Lansing, Michigan Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation Commission (TRHT) identified the problem that Black youth were 70 percent of arrests but only 20 percent of the youth population. What occurred next illustrates the joint gains achieved by combining a broad array of members.

“The local prosecutor, a member of the TRHT Law Design Team, considered the data and said she was in a position to do something. So, TRHT of Metro Lansing has been working with the prosecutor’s office and about 30 assistant prosecutors for the past year. They started by exploring implicit bias . . . From there, the prosecutor’s office began using their power to produce more racially equitable outcomes . . . Based on this work and the deep commitment of the prosecutor to racial equity, the Vera Institute of Justice awarded Ingham County Prosecutors with a technical assistance grant. All members of the Law Design Team, including the prosecutor, have participated in racial healing circles, helping them deepen trust and strengthen relationships.”¹³

Joint public/private/expert conversations – Charleston, South Carolina:

Charleston’s Special Commission on Equity, Inclusion, and Racial Conciliation identified increases in Black businesses as a goal. A Commission subcommittee meeting during summer, 2021, brought together several Black businesspersons, the leader of a local housing nonprofit, staff members for the city, and the mayor. What happened next illustrates the advantages of joint community-government- expert interchanges.



A Charleston, South Carolina, subcommittee made quick planning progress by gathering pertinent city officials, businesspersons, and community leaders into the room for 90 minutes.

In discussions, they identified major hurdles for Black entrepreneurs, such as securing financing and engaging business mentors. The mayor offered to ask local businesses to contribute mentors. Would they be willing to bring public attention to the businesses agreeing to do so and the mentors? The mayor quickly agreed.

It was pointed out that Black entrepreneurs often could not meet the requirements for financing used by local banks, but banks elsewhere had modified loan requirements to make them more suited. How could they attract one of those banks to Charleston? It might help to establish a fund that could be used for loans to minority businesses. They put this on the agenda for another discussion.¹⁴

Challenges of government-community initiatives

The public-private collaboration that seems key to achieving broad and deep change also creates some of the tensions discussed in this guide. Government involvement may make it more difficult to be nimble and/or achieve the trust of all groups. The combination may also add time-consuming requirements for approvals and may be more politically challenging if opposing political parties fear losing power in a zero-sum game. Public meeting laws may make candid discussions more difficult.

The remainder of the guide deals with these and other special challenges. Overcoming them may be necessary to achieve the goals for change and remediation that communities have set.



California capitol building in Sacramento.

2. Planning the Initiative

Planning will vary as each community tailors its initiative to its context, goals, opportunities, challenges, and more. Ron Wakabayashi, former regional director for the U.S. Department of Justice Community Relations Service, worked closely with the U.S. Commission on the Wartime [World War II] Relocation and Internment of Civilians. He says about developing a process unique to each community: “There are multiple dynamics that interact. The history and legacy; developmental stage and sequence; degree, character and extent of community infrastructure and organization, will shape the path and form of initiatives at different locations and levels.”



Ultimately, each initiative will need to be tailored to be responsive to the goals and special character of the community or state in which it is located.

The concept of iterative planning

Define preliminarily how the commission will work and how others will fit into the process. The focus here should be on “preliminarily.” The initiative’s name can be tentative. The initial list of members of the initiative’s body can be augmented later through appointments to committees. Leadership can change. New methods can be developed to involve a broader segment of the community in the work of the body. The scope and mission can be modified. Even the membership, staff, funding, and host can shift over time. Chris Carlson, founding director of the Policy Consensus Initiative, suggests, “If there are many issues that need to be taken up, it might be useful to think of the process as having multiple stages. At each stage when a new issue is taken up, it could require the involvement of additional people. That could slow things, but it could broaden the reach of the process.”

Despite the iterative nature of the planning process, the commission will reach substance more quickly if the planners provide a preliminary model for process – initial leadership, members, name, institutional home, outreach possibilities, funding, authority, and staff members—so work can begin. Then they can reassess and adjust as the initiative proceeds.

Assessment

Given the need to fit the initiative to the community, a detailed assessment of the community’s concerns and problems, stakeholders, patterns of practice, and processes can yield the highest priority goals and optimal shaping of the initiative. Some initiatives, such as Charleston’s Special Commission on Equity, Inclusion and Racial Conciliation, leveraged existing research on racial disparities by a university and nonprofit initiative and began their work with an evidence-based assessment of local conditions and needs. The result was that Charleston commissioners were able to agree quickly, based on the center’s assessment, on the subject areas of focus and appoint committees to work with city staff on those topics.

Assessment inquiries might include:

Goals, concerns, and problems:

- o What can the initiatives learn about racial inequities, concerns, or goals dividing or uniting residents, their history, the interests and values implicit in them, and the sources of distrust, anger, grievances, perceived injustice, or division? What joint gains can be identified through which the community as a whole benefits from opening the opportunity to all to thrive, belong, and succeed? How can it track shifts in those perceptions over time as the commission works? How can it track the implementation and impact of change efforts?

Stakeholders:

- o Who are the stakeholders who will determine the trust given to the commission and its likely success in securing implementation of its plans and recommendations? In a sense, the stakeholder analysis requires planners to think through what the commission is likely to identify as goals as well as to analyze the way that the community typically operates. Who understands the racial inequities, concerns, and/or goals important to each stakeholder, is effective in conveying them, and is trusted by those involved? Who are the bridge-builders, as they are “stakeholders” as well? Bridge-builders include both persons with expertise and other resources that are needed to achieve major change across a broad spectrum of arenas and decision-makers who can enact (and resist) changes in policy and practice and allocate resources to implement those changes. They also include those persons with influence in each of these arenas. What are the power dynamics that will indicate whose support will be required to achieve change?

Allied Processes:

- o What processes exist and/or have been used regarding racial inequities and community building, concerns, and/or goals? What are the strengths and weaknesses of each? Are there processes or practices that have worked in the past to achieve change? Are there existing processes with capacity to achieve some of the initiative’s goals? Should there be coordination with these or, at a minimum, efforts to avoid competition or conflict?

Creating a planning group

An informed, thoughtful, and service-oriented planning group with varied backgrounds becomes critical to design an initiative as complex as a government-community, multi-pronged initiative that has staying power over time. The planning group members’ understanding of the community and government will be especially important if there is not time for the community assessment described above. Planning is a pivotal part of the initiative, so the planners can ill afford to include those who do not listen and consider the views of others.

A series of questions may guide selection of planning group members:

Is each planning group member a wise and thoughtful person who cares deeply about residents of the geographic area encompassed by the initiative and the racial problems or concerns of each community within the larger whole? Do they bring different perspectives about and understandings of the community? Is the group selected able to work well and efficiently together? What preparation and support will planners need?

ILLUSTRATIONS OF APPOINTING AND PREPARING PLANNERS:

Vermont Truth and Reconciliation Commission: Authorize a purpose, appropriations, and appointment of a planning group:

In spring 2022, the Vermont legislature and governor charged a commission with examining, dismantling, and recommending initiatives to repair the damage caused by “institutional, structural, and systemic discrimination in Vermont,” appropriating \$748,000 for the first year of the commission’s work. The statutory scheme begins with planning. It authorizes multiple appointing authorities to designate a “selection panel” to name and recruit three commissioners, who would be full-time state employees, serving for about three years. This unusual approach would facilitate some planning by the selection panel – enough to help them select commissioners – to be augmented and supervised over time by the commissioners. The three commissioners, in turn, would plan commission initiatives and the committees to carry them out, appointing up to 30 committee members. Commissioners could also engage the commission’s staff and consultants to pursue the purposes of the commission.¹⁵



Planning by a specially selected group of paid “commissioners” will precede the choice of other members in Vermont.

Bloomington, Indiana’s planning group first attended an academy together:

In response to a racial issue that arose at the local farmers market, Bloomington formed a group of leaders from the city government, Indiana University, and the broader community to address racial issues within the community. This group participated in a three-day Divided Community Project academy, together with leadership groups from several other cities. Afterward, the Bloomington academy group became an informal sounding board as the city created both a Racial Equity Task Force and a Policing Task Force.

Both task forces have now issued interim reports. The Director of Community and Family Resources Department for the City of Bloomington said, “I would recommend this [academy] training to all communities, whether they are experiencing unrest or not, because they likely will at some point... it can happen to any community at any time.” The Director of Political and Civic Engagement for Indiana University said, “The Academy was very helpful, validating, and supportive. The lesson was that we have each other, and we can get through this.”¹⁶

Setting goals for the initiative

To establish goals, a series of preliminary questions may help. These might include:

Opportunities and challenges:

What could go right and wrong as the initiative works to achieve the identified goals? Identify opportunities and challenges the commission will face. Opportunities might include residents' broad awareness of the need to enhance racial equity and their desire to reduce polarization and achieve mutual respect. What can be done to take advantage of the opportunities? Challenges might include, for example, backlash by a portion of the community or disagreement about the targets of new programs. What shared values about the process and outcome will bind the members to their mission when challenges arise? How might the initiative meet those challenges?

Likely reach:

What is the geographical area? What subject matter concentrations are likely to emerge? Here members of the initiative should trust their collective intuitive understanding, based on listening, and recognize the specific opportunities and challenges operating in their communities. For example, the Charleston's Special Commission on Equity, Inclusion, and Racial Conciliation created seven committees for its primary subject areas of interest: economic empowerment, housing and mobility, criminal justice reform, youth and education, history and cultural awareness, health disparities and environmental justice, and a city structure that continues to advance racial equity.¹⁷

The charge and the tentative obligation:

Will government officials seriously consider the kinds of changes that the commission thus charged will likely recommend? If not, it may be better to adjust the listed goals for the commission than to follow the hard work of the commission with a blanket refusal to act.

Initial questions:

What is the group's collective vision for a more equitable community? What would have to change for each person in the community, regardless of race, to thrive and feel protected and respected? What would the planners like this initiative to accomplish?

Scope and mission:

How can the scope and mission be worded to engage a broad group of people? Does the commission's mission to effect change match its influence and geographic reach? Is it broad enough to achieve the goals and does it have resources to implement them?

Tentatively list and prioritize goals for the process:

What will have to happen to achieve the changes that you seek? Among those goals that seem achievable, which of these could be achieved quickly and which will take more time? What then are the highest priority short-term and longer-term goals?

Organizational issues

The goals and assessment/planners' understanding of the community can shape the answers to the organizational questions below:

Convener and host:

What institution(s) should convene the initiative and what institution(s) should house the initiative? Does the institution have the access to and trust of the community and public officials? Does the institution have staying power over time with changes in administration?

Name:

What name will clearly convey its mission? What name communicates the seriousness of the endeavor? What name makes it clear that this is about achieving change and not only about racial healing? What will engage the broadest group of people? In the latter respect, should the word "reparations" appear in the title (see Chapter 5)?

Duration, resources, and funding:

Is this a multi-year effort with decisions on duration to evolve? What resources and funding are needed? How can these resources and funds be procured? Will the initiative have any statutory authority (e.g., subpoena power, public funds allocation)?

EXAMPLES OF NAMES FOR RACIAL EQUITY INITIATIVES

- Social Justice, Race and Equity Commission (Brookhaven, Georgia)
- NYC Racial Justice Commission
- Charleston [South Carolina] Special Commission on Equity, Inclusion, and Racial Conciliation (After some controversy over the name, the City Council named its successor commission the Human Affairs and Racial Conciliation Commission.)
- Vermont Truth and Reconciliation Commission
- Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation Commission of Metro Lansing, Michigan
- California Truth and Healing Council
- Task Force to Study and Develop Reparations Proposals for African Americans, with a Special Consideration for African Americans Who Are Descendants of Persons Enslaved in the United States (California Reparations Task Force)

Recruiting members and leadership for the initiative

To achieve an optimal combination of commission members, the planning committee can expect that they will have to recruit them.

The ideal combination of members seems not to emerge from a group of applicants, as some community leaders who have achieved trust and influence often feel too busy or do not recognize the value they add (and so may not apply).

Some desired qualifications seem to apply to all members:

Broad public support for the process will depend on whether varied constituencies believe the initiative worthwhile based on the composition of the commission and the way that it works together. News media coverage of “squabbles” will potentially divert the public and undercut the seriousness of the initiative. On the positive side, a diverse group of people working together effectively for the good of the community will inspire others in the community to bridge differences in similar ways. People who are posturing to serve private interests or have prickly personalities can cause other members to quit. To avoid these results, several questions might usefully be weighed about each potential member:

- Is each member a thoughtful person who cares deeply about residents of the geographic area encompassed by the commission and the problems or concerns of each community within the larger whole?
- Does each member have experience in leading or dealing effectively with both public officials and community members?
- Are members of the group adept at and committed to problem-solving together to benefit the community, and to do so pragmatically? Even with a skilled facilitator, personal frictions can divert a group from achieving its goals. Sometimes this means choosing persons with influence in particular sectors rather than those who have led groups that are raising the issues. Different skill sets are involved in helping peoples see the issues and in solving problems. Moreover, leaders of advocacy groups may need to take credit, use particular words chosen by their groups, and stay true to the positions announced by their groups. A commission can best succeed with a more flexible, pragmatic approach that requires extensive relationship building across groups within the community.

The group as a whole:

People will be deciding whether to trust the process based on what they first hear about it. Some trust may be lost if the membership does not represent the racial and other diversity of the community; at the same time, the more diverse the members’ experiences, the greater the need for personal abilities and preparation to bridge their various backgrounds and orientations.



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Some appointing authorities selected all persons of color – for example, California’s Reparations Task Force, Iowa City’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the NYC Racial Justice Commission. As a result, all shared the feeling of having faced racial injustice. Others, such as Charleston and the Borough of Carlisle, Pennsylvania, chose commissioners who reflected the racial diversity of the community. Thus, they encountered as part of their work on the commission the need to explain their views and perceptions to those with different backgrounds, just as they would have to do when they reported to the general public.

To avoid slowing down the progress of the commission, the planning group could either consider this in the appointments or arrange a briefing ahead of commission meetings for those commissioners who have not suffered racial discrimination and may not appreciate the weight that others carry on behalf of their families, their ancestors, and their communities.

Don Tamaki, a member of the California Reparations Task Force and an attorney on the legal team that achieved the overturning of Fred Korematsu’s criminal conviction for defying the removal of almost 120,000 Japanese Americans, pointed out how crucial this is:

“There are probably few subjects in America that are as difficult to have a meaningful discussion about than race. Therefore, whatever the racial make-up of appointees, I think that it’s important that appointees are knowledgeable and experienced about the relevant history and racial justice issues and have done some reading about reparations. As the California report¹⁸ reveals, there is an astounding degree of erasure and denialism about facts and current events.”

Generational differences also increase both diversity and potential clashes in approach to the task. Some initiatives included commissioners in their twenties who had been involved in organizing demonstrations along with public officials and community leaders well into middle age; by contrast, New York City appointed community leaders and a deputy mayor, all of whom had some decades of experience in advancing equity.

Political differences among commission members, all of whom share a commitment to advance racial equity, also offer the potential advantage of anticipating political reactions to the commission's work and broadening support for it. But, of course, they may introduce even more interpersonal tensions among commission members.

The initial membership list may also communicate to the public whether this will be a serious endeavor in terms of having the power to bring about needed change. California's Reparations Task Force choices illustrate a group likely to be viewed as powerful because it included a member of each house of the legislature and, as described by the Attorney General's Office, others who had "experience working to implement racial justice reform."

Several questions may help to achieve these group-as-a-whole goals for appointing commission members:

- What combination of members will encourage people to trust the seriousness of the process aimed at enhancing racial equity and believe that the community's diverse views will be represented on it?
- Do the commission members' personal abilities and preparation match their need to bridge likely differences in commission discussions and decision-making?
- Do some members have expertise in structuring such an initiative, including dispute resolution, administrative, legal, and counseling (such as clergy, mental health professionals) expertise?
- Do some members have influence with those who must approve or provide resources for the new process and provide support for the changes it identifies to be successfully implemented?

Leadership for the group, advanced selection:

There are compelling reasons for a commission to begin its work with a chair (or co-chairs) who is able and experienced, with the confidence of both public officials and broad segments of the community. The chair(s) will lead a group with diverse backgrounds. The commission will be addressing racial differences that are fraught with emotion. It will hold discussions in public meetings in which commissioners fear a misstep.

The planners can make a major contribution to the commission's progress by selecting that leader, though in consultation with stakeholders and members of the commission. In addition, the planners will want to work to recruit the prospective leader. The person who assumes a chair position commits time and takes risks. Being able to convey the broad support may help that person decide that this may be a pivotal life contribution, well worth the time and risk.

An alternative – telling the commission members to elect a chair at the first meeting – has the potential to introduce problems. If a member announces the ambition to lead during the first public meeting, commission members may be hesitant to disagree or nominate a rival candidate. As a result, they might not always select an experienced and widely respected leader. Alternatively, they may also display initial divisions or create internal divisions through their divided vote.

Several questions may help with the selection of a chair:

- Who will generate both trust and regard for the initiative?
- Who is/are both inspirational and pragmatic/get-it-done leader(s) who know when to listen and when to keep the meeting moving?
- Is there a way to de-politicize this position?
- If there is no consensus “ideal” chair candidate, should there be more than one chair (with consideration of the chemistry between any co-chairs)?

Staff

Commissions that work expeditiously toward their goals have had extensive staff or contractors to assist.

Commission members are typically layering their commission work over already demanding work and personal schedules. Most (with Vermont’s three commissioners as an exception discussed above) seem to be volunteers. Even those who receive a per diem and reimbursement for designated expenses and a per diem, as contemplated in the proposed commission on forced de-culturalization through Native American boarding schools,¹⁹ will still have jobs and other volunteer commitments.

At its peak the NYC Racial Justice Commission had thirteen dedicated staff, though ten supported the commission when its final report was submitted. The legislation authorizing the California Reparations Task Force required the California Department of Justice to provide technical, administrative, and legal assistance. These staff members have included variously talented writers, lawyers, communications experts, and researchers. The California Task Force’s parliamentarian in some instances played similar role to a facilitator.

By the end of the California Task Force’s first year, staff support resulted in a carefully documented narrative text on past and current effects of racial enslavement exceeding 500 pages.²⁰ Having dedicated, talented staff to support the work seems likely to bolster the Task Force’s influence on legislative and public reaction to its recommendations for remediation.

A few questions might assist in assembling a staff and contractors: Given the aims and scope, what research and data gathering should be undertaken, and subject matter expertise engaged? What staff will be needed to provide necessary data and expertise? What staff can work to engage the broader public? What staff are needed for communications with the public and other constituencies, including those who might oppose the work of the initiative? Who are skilled communicators who can establish regular channels of communication with credible media? Is there easy access to social media experts, both to observe public reactions and to reach those who receive news through social media? What are the specific roles of the staff, who do they report to? What will be the relationship between administrative staff and the commissioners? How will trust between them be built? Who will be attributed for the research and writing of any documentation?

Building rapport, preparing, and supporting commission members

The planning group can help in building a trusting and effective working group if they:

- 1) help the commissioners to get to know each other before the first (often recorded or livestreamed) public meeting;
- 2) arrange for them to learn about arrangements that have helped similar bodies elsewhere work together; and
- 3) suggest a tentative agenda to begin the work.

Members of a commission appointed to reflect the broad diversity of the community may be unacquainted with each other. These strangers with diverse experiences and interests will discuss fraught issues of racial justice and equity. Under these circumstances, even the most personable individuals may stumble if they meet for the first time and then each time thereafter in public sessions.

Modeling effective conversation:

If commission members discuss their differences in an effective fashion, they can serve as models for others in the community. But, of course, it is also true that commissioners who exchange public insults and stereotyping comments can encourage similar conduct in the community as well as lead some to believe that the commission effort is not a serious one and its work ought to be disregarded. It may help to agree on ground rules for the conversation, such as: demonstrate respect for each person, listen thoughtfully, don't look for a reason to take offense.

How should the planning group prepare commission members to get to know each other on a personal level so that they will interact with a generous spirit, understand and clarify roles, become better equipped, minimize rivalries, unite under a shared vision/mandate, work together as a team, and support each other? The challenges, while manageable, are complex: Should a parliamentarian and/or facilitator be named to develop the meeting operations? What should be done to maintain teamwork and personal connections, especially as issues become tense?

If commission members discuss their differences in an effective fashion, they can serve as models for others in the community.

What preparation and engagement may overcome inter-generational conflicts? What values should govern the commissioners' interpersonal contacts? Which decision-making process would be optimal (simple majority votes, super majority, consensus, other?)? When in the process should commissioners face their most controversial decisions? To avoid what has been a source of conflict with several commissions, what are optimal ways for commissioners to relate to the commission's staff and contractors and to the hosting agency?

In deciding how to prepare the commissioners in a publicly appointed body to work together constructively, the planning committee will want to check with legal counsel about the applicable public meeting laws, which vary throughout the nation. The planning committee members can first explain to counsel the preparatory purpose of the gatherings. Then they can explore with counsel the governing statutory framework and its exceptions and seek counsel regarding how the commissioners can achieve their goals in ways that will not violate either the letter or spirit of the public meeting laws.

The planners can prompt such advice by posing to counsel questions such as whether the members of the new body could do the following together without holding a public meeting to do it:

- Attend a social gathering to get to know each other if they do not discuss commission business during the gathering, perhaps inviting counsel to attend and remind if the discussion drifts toward their official duties?
- Attend a conference or training on effective public commissions that has been convened by an independent organization if they do not discuss commission business? (If so, must the conference or training be open to members of other public bodies or to the general public?)

Planners can establish support for commission members and staff, anticipating that some are not accustomed to public criticism and arguments voiced during public meetings.

Operating in public meetings amid a bitterly divided community and active social media can be demoralizing, even frightening, to those new to it. Planners can commit to staying involved to provide counseling, communications, and facilitation assistance when needed or delegate that responsibility to staff members who have the experience to manage it.

Departing from the organizational structure featured in this guide

The government-community, multi-pronged and sequenced initiative that has been the focus of this guide may not fit the goals and context of all communities. In fact, this guide cites contributions by a number of groups that depart from this model but are advancing racial equity.

Multiple, single-focus groups:

Though this guide assumes a multi-pronged, sequenced initiative, several communities have chosen to assign a particular focus to a variety of different commissions or committees. For example, city officials in Bloomington, Indiana created one committee that focused on police-community issues and another for other racial equity issues, both of which issued interim reports in 2022.²¹ Sanford, Florida, convened several committees after Trayvon Martin's death in 2012. They began by creating an interfaith leaders' committee and a committee to select a new police chief. During the decade that followed, city staff helped organize groups to advance equity within the community, including efforts to increase entrepreneurial success in low-income neighborhoods, expand youth employment and educational opportunities in under-served parts of the city, and commemorate civil rights advances.²² An advantage of this multiple-organization approach is that each committee can be constituted with a narrower subject focus in mind. The sequencing in this situation would be left to the public officials who appointed the groups.

Advisory groups rather than public commissions:

This guide focuses on commissions with public authority, some of which have the power to compel disclosures or appoint staff. By contrast, the mayor of Providence, Rhode Island began his initiative by working with advisory committees and nonprofits. Only later did he appoint a public commission (Chapter 1). The advisory groups may not have to follow public meeting requirements, which allows for more spontaneity and candor in meetings. On the other hand, the creation of an advisory committee may not gain the public notice and engagement nor be taken as seriously by the public as would be a new public commission with some ability to act independently.

Community-formed rather than publicly appointed groups:

Community groups have sometimes provided an opportunity for progress when officials refuse to address an issue. The privately organized and funded Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission investigated and reported on the role of police in the killings of demonstrators by members of a white supremacy group. It played an important role in both raising public understanding of what occurred and bringing together the community on other civil rights issues.²³ Cincinnati's private National Underground Railroad Freedom Center plays an educational role. In addition, the board can speak out on civil rights issues because it is privately organized and funded.²⁴ Examples include a national consortium, the New Pluralists,²⁵ and All-In Cincinnati, a community-foundation consortium focused on building thriving and equitable neighborhoods.²⁶ As discussed in Chapter 1, a drawback of private initiatives can lie in the lack of prior public commitment to work with the group to achieve legal, resource, and policy shifts.

PLANNING ILLUSTRATIONS

Brookhaven, Georgia's Social Justice, Race and Equity Commission consultants:

City staff contracted with a nonprofit facilitator, the Chrysalis Lab, and arranged consulting from the Kettering Foundation to advise the commission as it began. These consultations resulted in initiatives that brought the commission members quickly together and engaged city officials and the larger community. The Brookhaven, Georgia commission members created a book club that met periodically with the goals both of learning and getting to know each other. The commission hosted 41 dinners with other city residents and participated in a full-day police department training.



The Brookhaven Commission created a book club, hosted 41 dinners with city residents, participated in a police training, joined in a public speaker series, engaged city staff members in committee work, met with city leaders regularly, and developed a common schedule of their work.

Members attended and invited the public to join them in a speaker series related to racial equity. To maintain interchange with city officials, commission committees engaged pertinent city staff members as participants in their committee work. To further aid city-community relations, commission officers met regularly with city leaders. Early in their work commission members, working with the Chrysalis Lab and a consultant from the Kettering Foundation, developed a common approach to and schedule for their tasks, under the acronym "GOAL" below.²⁷

G

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Grounding

(January-March)

Who are we and what do we believe?
How do issues of race and equity affect Brookhaven families?

Organizing

(April-June)

How do we organize ourselves for learning and action?
How do we gain community input?

Aligning

(July-September)

What does the community seek to achieve? What are our options and what are the tradeoffs?

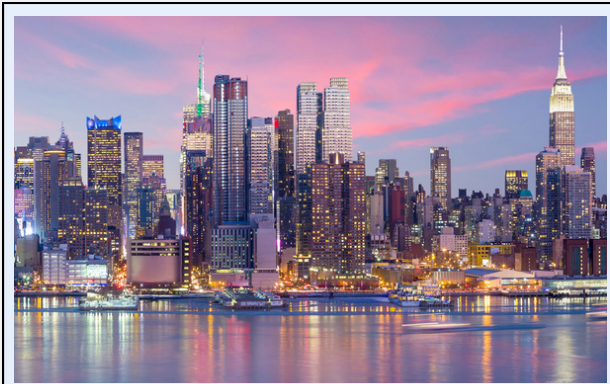
Leading

(October-December)

How do we guide the city in areas of equity and social justice?
How do we ensure continued participation?

New York City commission's membership, starting mission, values:

In March 2021 New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio announced the NYC Racial Justice Commission and its 11 commissioners, designating its chair and vice chair before the commission's first meeting.



The NYC commission published its mission, vision, and goals within two months of its first meeting.

Commissioners included a deputy mayor and leaders from nonprofits, universities, and labor. The announced goal was to propose “policy and programmatic changes to the powers, structures, and processes of New York City government that underlie sources of inequity.”²⁸ The approximately ten-person staff prepared members, arranged public sessions, conducted research, and provided drafting. By its third meeting in May 2021, the commission had announced its mission, vision, and goals, geared at improving the city for all persons. For example, it announced:

A mission:



“The Racial Justice Commission, empowered with the legal authority of a Charter Revision Commission, will seize the transformative potential of this moment in history to identify and propose structural changes and significant policy reforms that will advance racial justice and equity and begin to dismantle structural racism for all New Yorkers.”

Its vision for a better future:



“The worth, talents, and contributions of all people in society are valued and recognized. Race is not a determinant of economic, political, social, or psychological outcomes, as it neither confers privilege nor denies opportunities.”

Its focus:



“In pursuit of racial equity, the Commission will examine NYC Charter and City agencies to identify structural and institutional laws, regulations, policies, and practices that by design, implementation, or impact enable and perpetuate inequitable power, access and opportunity, and will put forward ballot proposals to both redress these injustices and ensure City adherence.”²⁹

3.

Developing a coalition for change: concurrent engagement with community and government

There are compelling reasons for an initiative to advance racial equity to diverge from the approaches taken by a traditional “blue ribbon” task force model. The “blue ribbon” approach is to draft recommendations, hold public hearings and then finalize and send those recommendations to the government and public. By contrast, some reasons to adopt a multi-pronged, sequenced approach relate to encouraging an active interchange with the community and public officials include:

- Members of the public are more likely to get involved in the commission’s goals of promoting changes in hearts and minds if they have already become engaged in the commission’s work.
- The public will be making immediate decisions about whether the commission can be trusted to reflect their experiences and concerns, and their early perceptions will be difficult to change, once made.
- Public officials will be asked to make public statements about the commission, and they will be likely to stick with their initial statements when it comes time to implement commission recommendations.
- Engaging early and deeply will increase both the community’s and public officials’ confidence that the commission understands and values their input.
- The earliest commission communications are likely to resonate if they have first listened to the public and considered the expertise of various public staff members.
- If well-planned, commission sessions offer value, both to those who speak in order to feel heard by a public body and to those who hear the stories and might then appreciate the concerns of those speaking.

Though valuable, developing these interchanges will be challenging. Those who have been targeted by discrimination may offer input only if they trust the organizers. Participation in person by low-income persons may be limited to particular times and places, and their virtual participation requires technology access. Significantly, people coming to talk about traumatic events may need preparation before and counseling when and after they speak, especially in a public setting.

Engagement challenges will emerge for public officials as well. Commission members may be reluctant to interact with city or state staff early on because of some constituents’ distrust for public officials and the commissioners’ desires to demonstrate their independence. These public employees may be limited in the time they can devote to the commission’s work.

Fortunately, some of the initiatives have found ways to deal with these challenges. Success seems to follow a strategic approach developed by those who know all sectors (young people, clergy, Urban League, etc.) within the community, along with provision of multiple accessible ways and times to offer input.

Building engagement

Identify opportunities to create interchanges early in the work.

The critical early engagement of members of the public and public officials poses logistical challenges for a newly formed commission of members who have other full-time jobs, especially if the commission meets only every few weeks for a few hours and faces other pressing agenda topics. Some ideas for dealing with the challenges include:

- **Authorizing staff or contracting with a consultant to set up listening sessions with fellow residents, with manageable participation by the commission members.**

For example, the NYC Racial Justice Commission held a series of community listening sessions that were separate from the Commission's regular meetings. Commission members were encouraged but not required to attend one or two of the input meetings, thereby not taxing its members too much. By delegating the logistics to its staff, the Commissioners were able to hold the first community listening sessions quickly – about three months after its first regular meeting. Six months after its first official meeting, the commission had held nine such listening sessions, heard from 104 speakers, interviewed 50 community-based organizations, and received 1,110 online submissions. The staff summarized what they heard in an interim staff report, which then also provided opportunities for reactions to that report as part of the public input. These sessions continued until the month before the commission issued its final report. Commission members were encouraged to attend one or two of the input meetings, so some commission members would hear public input directly, yet this time commitment would not strain volunteer commissioners. These sessions were separate from the commission deliberations, so that commission meetings could continue concurrently during this period.³⁰

- **With staff support, a commission may provide counselors to help prepare individuals delivering public testimony while providing an opportunity to de-brief to those giving emotionally triggering stories.**

Discussions of race, racism, injustice, and inequity can evoke painful memories, and some will experience trauma. For example, the Japanese American Citizens League allowed the witnesses for the World War II internment commission to practice their testimony beforehand, and social workers provided emotional support for them. Trauma-trained facilitators may also help. Staff can also help assure that the public hears about compelling situations faced by fellow residents.

- **Keeping commission reports more general until public input could be arranged.**
(See Chapter 2 regarding NYC Commission's early announcement of general goals.)



The image shows a promotional graphic for a virtual public commission meeting. At the top, there is a grid of video thumbnails showing various participants. Below this is the NYC Racial Justice Commission logo. The text reads: "Join us! Virtual Public Commission Meeting. Observing public meetings is a great way to stay up to date on the Commission. Wednesday, April 13 3 p.m. View live at on.nyc.gov/racialjusticemeeting".

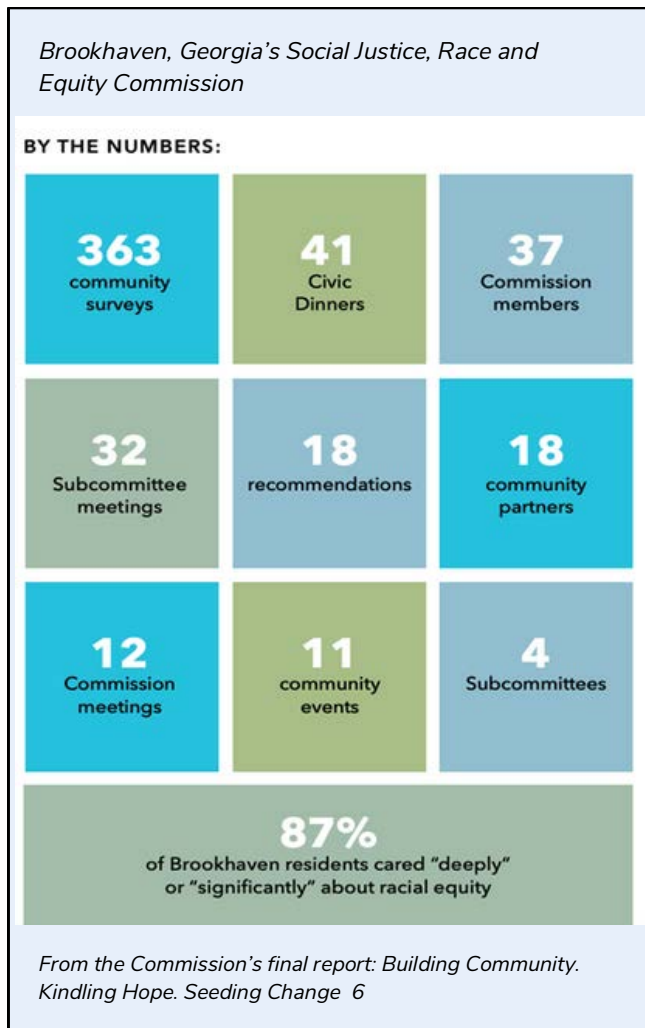
The NYC Racial Justice Commission used a variety of approaches to engage the public in its work.

- Soliciting public officials' reactions to ideas that emerge.

Charleston's commission had city council members among its members and invited key city staff to participate in the commission's subcommittee meetings. This engagement of Charleston's officials/staff also moved implementation forward more quickly and allowed the commission to realize some gains early. California's Reparations Task Force would report back to the legislature and had two legislators among its members. The state's Department of Justice served as staff for the task force as well.

Offer an opportunity to speak "off the record."

People may hesitate to speak in public. The reluctance may stem from fear of retaliation on social media or through other means. Or they may simply dislike the public setting. The statute authorizing the Vermont Truth and Reconciliation Commission provides that the commission should not mention a person's identity in a public setting or document without permission.³¹ Under this statute, more community members may be willing to engage with the commission.



Stay in touch with other residents and public officials throughout the process.

Public views change. Public officials leave and are replaced by others. Commissions can address these changes if they remain in touch with residents and public officials throughout the process. Staying in touch with public officials and community organizations will help the commission learn what is necessary for implementation of emerging ideas. Maintaining a listening role also allows people to feel heard and for their stories to be heard by others.

Know those who oppose the commission.

Developing a means to stay in touch with those groups objecting to the initiative's work or its recommendations may reduce the likelihood of unexpected resistance and prevent opponents from acting on false rumors. If there are racist or violent groups, rather than reaching out to engage them, it may be possible to find intermediaries, such as the Justice Department's Community Relations Service or law enforcement, who know these groups and will stay in touch with them, explain the process to them, and listen for their plans.

Offer a variety of ways that people can engage.

In doing so, seek to attract voices otherwise unwilling or unable to participate because of technology, unequal power dynamics, fear of trauma, etc. Creating options will also expand those involved in the work and thus in the solutions.

Consider commemorative or other activities to involve and educate the public.

With time, it may be feasible to promote understanding through multiple dialogue processes: circle discussions are guided conversations among those with differing views³² while deliberative democracy sessions engage residents in educating and deliberating the issues with one another. Dr. Alex Lovit, a historian who studies deliberative democracy at the Kettering Foundation, points out:

As American politics have become increasingly polarized, any public conversation about public issues incurs risks of becoming mired in partisan division. Theorists and practitioners of deliberative democracy can provide some guidance in how to avoid these pitfalls. This process will be more likely to be productive if it is based in a widely shared understanding of a public problem, considers a broad set of potential approaches, and includes frank discussion of the tradeoffs of each of these approaches. These suggestions will help to ensure that participants with diverging opinions can all see a role for themselves in the conversation.³³

Framing

The focus on framing reflects the reality that public opinion is often superficial and moves in reaction to language in statements, questions, or titles. Reaching the public effectively requires careful attention to that language. For example, researchers have found that “about 20% of the American public believes that too little is being spent on ‘welfare,’ but about 65% say that too little is being spent on ‘assistance to the poor.’” A³⁴ group of scholars reviewing public reactions to racial equity commissions’ framing approaches suggest the following promising ideas:³⁵

Frame the issues for those outside the commission in ways that serve the commission’s goals.

Framing in early external communications will shape the views of the public and public officials about its goals and work. Attention to framing throughout a commission’s work may maintain a broad coalition for change while making the public receptive to learning from the commission.

In general, emphasize joint gains.

Many people are open to a more positive and inclusive frame that focuses on “the kind of community/city we would like to have.” Where do we fall short now? What do we need to do to achieve that vision? How will these improvements make life better for all? These questions begin by acknowledging a shared future and including everyone in the discussion of what that should look like.



“A racial justice agenda, properly conceived, should bring all people into the social fabric, although be attentive to differences in circumstances, conditions and needs. Targeted Universalism (“T/U”) does this well. This is a process by which Universal Goals are established for all groups through democratic deliberation where all voices count, and targeted processes are implemented to help all groups reach those goals.”

“For example, if we want all children to learn to be proficient at reading and Latinx students are at 50% and white students are at 70%, T/U, unlike equity, will not just focus on closing the gap nor just on the needs of the less favored group. Instead, it will develop targeted and different strategies for each group to get them to the universal of 100%.”

– john powell and Ned Conner
Form and Substance: Understanding Conceptual and Design Differences Among Racial Equity Proposals and a Bold Application, 38 Ohio St. J. on Disp. Resol. (forthcoming 2022). Quoting from a draft of the article.

Community residents are also drawn to initiatives that meet their basic desires for safety, fairness, opportunity, security, respect, and more. Berkeley law professor john powell and Ned Conner promote a concept they call “targeted universalism” to advance equity among everyone – not targeted by race -- in matters essential to having an opportunity to thrive in the community, such as access to education that meets the needs for each child.³⁶

All-In Cincinnati, a group of foundations and community organizations, emphasize this point about broad gain, though they point to a targeted income approach rather than the broader approach advocated above by Powell and Conner:

“Research proves that inequality and racial segregation hinder growth, prosperity, and economic mobility in regions, while diversity and inclusion fuel innovation and business success. As baby boomers retire and the region’s workforce grows more and more diverse, the costs of racial economic exclusion for Cincinnati — and the value proposition of inclusion — will continue to rise. Already, our analysis finds that Hamilton County’s economic output could be almost \$10 billion higher every year if racial gaps in income were eliminated.”³⁷

Choose words deliberately.

Politicians have begun trying to enshrine particular words and phrases as the language of the “other.” Using word choices that adequately convey meaning but reduce alienation from the initiative might help retain a broad enough group to achieve change; on the other hand, using words employed by a targeted community helps to build their trust in the initiative. Recognizing this dilemma, a member of the Carlisle (Pennsylvania) Truth and Reconciliation Commission raised the issue at the commission’s first meeting in August 2021, asking whether they should consider the audience for their work the “skeptical public” or the “supportive public.”³⁸ This is a tough issue for many commissions, as the Charleston experience, below, illustrates. (pp. 33-34)

Some researchers regularly test words for reactions by people with varying political views or for their effectiveness in building broad support for change on difficult social issues.³⁹ If a commission places a high priority on building a broad enough coalition to achieve change, checking the wording and framing with various constituent groups can help as well to maintain broad support.

Report both what was said and how the commission understands it.

People feel heard and understood if the commission indicates its understanding about what those contributing said and felt in the language those individuals used. At the same time, that language may imply a zero-sum game rather than a joint gain and therefore produce pushback from those who anticipate losing (e.g., “They noted that without enough leadership that comes from and exercises power on behalf of BIPOC communities, government will continue to fail to meet BIPOC needs.”).⁴⁰ One idea, used by the New York City Commission staff in its interim report, is to indicate what they heard and then separately how they would frame their understanding of the issues raised, under the heading “Unpacking What We Heard.” (e.g., “Justice requires that New Yorkers be represented in the decisions governing their life. New York City, a multicultural center of the world, has a chance to demonstrate that democracy can serve people of all cultures, and not be chained by the legacies of slavery or xenophobia.”)⁴¹



Frame through a story.

Sometimes, rather than dwelling on division over what words should be used to describe a general phenomenon, resorting to more concrete terms, such as a story, can convey the issue in ways that all can relate to, as discussed below (Chapter 6).

Explain why a seemingly divisive matter needs to be expressed.

Often people are not ready to engage in problem solving or healing until the truth about past and ongoing injustices have been told, however uncomfortable that is for those who were not the recipients of the injustices or their descendants. Those who still feel the consequences may not trust a process that does not acknowledge them, while others may need to be persuaded that the injustices have continued.

A commission can help the community understand how they gain in ways that they seek – healing and unity, for example – by having the commission acknowledge these injustices firmly and publicly (Chapters 4-6). Without that, a commission might explain, those they seek to establish respectful relationships with will not be ready to participate in activities to promote that healing.

Determine priorities among goals so that these priorities can be applied when there are framing dilemmas.

The initiatives to advance racial equity seek to engage both the community that experiences discrimination and the community that assumes that discrimination does not continue to occur. Sometimes there simply must be a choice, because the language that would induce trust by the first group will alienate the second group. To avoid frustrating the highest priority goals, the commission can deliberate on the priorities before deciding on the framing.



To avoid frustrating the highest priority goals, the commission can deliberate on the priorities before deciding on the framing.

FRAMING ILLUSTRATIONS

NYC Racial Justice Commission – its membership, starting mission, values:

By its third meeting in May 2021, when the NYC Racial Justice Commission announced its values and mission, one value reflecting a desire to improve the entire community was: “Vision for Racial Equity: The worth, talents, and contributions of all people in society are valued and recognized. Race is not a determinant of economic, political, social, or psychological outcomes, as it neither confers privilege nor denies opportunities.”

Changing Systems at Multiple Levels

| Structural | Institutional | Cultural |
|--|---|---|
| <p>Foundational laws and values that set up power, access, and opportunity</p> <p>Approach:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Charter revision recommendations that shift the structural foundations• Propose or advocate for legislative changes to state or federal law | <p>Policies, practices, and decision making embedded in the day-to-day workings of agencies</p> <p>Approach:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Major changes NYC agencies should undertake to change approach to policy design, implementation, and assessment of impact• This could include changes in admin code, agency rulemaking, or changes that do not require any formal policymaking procedures | <p>Rooted in broader societal movements and practices</p> <p>Approach:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Recommendations for continuation of reconciliation process begun during the commission's work• Recommendations for role of other sectors – nonprofit and for-profit – and what they can undertake to facilitate broader cultural change that dismantles systemic racism |

NYC Racial Justice Commission Prepared for May 3rd, 2021 Public Meeting | NYC Racial Justice Commission | nyc.gov/charter

The NYC Commission staff developed the graphic above to convey to the public that the Commission understood its mission to include proposed changes in law, institutional policy, and hearts and minds.

Charleston’s ideas and dilemmas in building support to achieve racial equity goals:

The Charleston’s Special Commission on Equity, Inclusion, and Racial Conciliation worked regularly with its six members who also served on City Council, allied community organization leaders, and city staff. Together they developed recommendations that were informed and feasible and established support for them. As a result, they targeted “low hanging fruit” – commission ideas for change that were achievable and could be implemented – even before issuing the final report and recommendations.

But once the final report was issued in which the Commission recommended establishment of a commission to continue its work, City Council voted 7-6 against doing so, and then symbolically declined acceptance of the Commission's final report and recommendations. The naysaying City Council members who explained their reasons said that some recommendations were impractical and that terms such as "critical race theory" and "reparations" were divisive.⁴² A few months later, the resolution to renew the Commission was introduced again, this time without some of the words that had been criticized at the City Council meeting. The City Council then approved the continuation of the Commission's work.⁴³

At the Commission's final meeting, held just before the City Council meetings where the initial votes were taken, a Commission member who also served on City Council warned that a negative Council vote might occur if the report retained terms that had become politically charged. Despite that comment, the Commission as a whole decided to retain those terms. Those who wanted to retain the controversial language said that the document was appropriately "not centered in the white experience," that there was a reason for "uncomfortableness" ("It's been harsh and hard for us for a long time."), that other constituencies would be upset if the terms were not included, and that words such as "reparations" were central to their report ("Any more bending is going to feel disingenuous to what we are trying to do."). Another pointed out that the risk in including what was termed by one special commission member "flashpoint" language was small. The commissioner explained (incorrectly, as it later turned out) that if all City Council members on the Commission voted in favor at the City Council meeting, they ought to be able to persuade one additional member to add the vote required for passage. One member gave voice to another issue when she regretted that the small amount of time given for the Commission process had precluded their having time to try out the draft report on various constituencies before finalizing it, leaving commission members guessing as to the effects of their choices of terms on achieving their highest priority goals.⁴⁴

Coalition building

Engage a broad enough coalition to listen, learn, and achieve change.

Engagement and persuasion with a broad segment of the community represent important aspects of achieving the commission's goals. For example, advancing racial equity results in expanding the workforce and consumer spending.⁴⁵ Many community members would value this broad potential benefit if it could be conveyed in a way that they heard and understood it. Communicating it adequately may require experts, repetition, and stories that bring home the connection between advancing equity and the economic benefits for the community. Attending to the needs of each part of the community and engaging them in support is also vitally important in engaging and persuading those with the power to implement desired changes.

Engaging by celebrating early and ongoing achievements

People will be more inclined to support a process that they see achieving things that they value.

Securing a few important changes – the “low hanging fruit” – early in the life of a commission may provide the necessary motivation to continue with a process that seems initially uncomfortable for those who typically work at the grassroots level or for those holding powerful positions. Continuing progress throughout the life of the commission can expand the engagement.

ILLUSTRATIONS OF PROGRESS SPARKING ENGAGEMENT

Sanford, Florida's decade of progress:

Sanford, Florida has been engaged in an extended process to advance racial equity. As they achieved change, more people joined in the effort. Several initiatives have moved forward during the decade following the Trayvon Martin killing. Early discussions led to community participation in the choice of a police chief and changes in police practices. City officials learned that residents of west Sanford resented an action taken by Sanford at the state level a century earlier to dissolve and annex what had been the African American city of Goldsboro, thereafter re-naming many streets that had honored African American citizens and providing inferior city services to that area. Sanford officials returned the street names and restructured resources to improve city services in that area.



Sanford's progress in creating a more just and welcoming community involved over a decade of purposeful work.

Andrew Thomas, at the time Community Relations and Neighborhood Engagement Director, City of Sanford, Florida, explained, “The city continues its work, recognizing building trust, creating positive relationships and fostering a healing process takes time and resources. It is critical for local government to approach community relations the same as other city services like public works, parks and recreation, code enforcement, planning, etc. All these services require maintenance and constant attention to prevent a major expensive situation from occurring.” As people watched the progress, more and more became willing to engage, understanding that Sanford was making progress in terms of becoming a more just and welcoming community for all.

4.

Dealing with the past and present, amid a focus on changing the future

Dilemmas will likely emerge as these initiatives deal with the past and present while trying not to lose momentum toward a better future. How extensively should a commission focus on the past and its continuing effects? How will this affect its efforts to seek change, public understanding, and healing in the future?

Change, understanding, and healing are future oriented. People often can agree on making changes even if they do not agree on why they are needed. Examples of this future orientation include public policy planning (name the problem; solve it) and using mediation to address a conflict (hear the parties' stories, state the issues and interests, reach consensus on the future).

Unlike these situations, however, an initiative to improve racial equity operates in the context of centuries of enslavement and discrimination, creating an imperative to acknowledge the tragic history and continuing legacy of inequities in America. Regarding the continuing effects, Kyle Strickland, Deputy Director of Race and Democracy, Roosevelt Institute and Senior Legal Analyst at the Ohio State University Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, said:

“For too long, we’ve ignored the truth of racism. There will always be the rush to get to change, and analysis of the data, policies and practices that sustain them. Attention to the present, thus, can usefully be interwoven with efforts to define a better future and routes to achieving it. Description and analysis of contemporary inequities need not dwell on attribution of motivations or blame, however, when doing so may build barriers between advocates for change and those who may be reluctant to embrace those changes as noted below, but without truth we will not get there.”

Developing such a record – often called “truth telling” – may, if publicized, also contribute to building broad public understanding of what fellow Americans’ ancestors faced and what they now face. Truth commission experts Eduardo Gonzalez and Howard Varney point out, “The truth can assist in the healing process after traumatic events; restore personal dignity, often after years of stigmatization; and safeguard against impunity and public denial.”⁴⁶

In addition, developing a clear picture of the current barriers to achieving racial equity is a prelude to identifying strategies for change. This picture will include careful descriptions of the nature of those inequities, for example, in health care, housing, policing, and education.

One challenge is to develop such a record; a second may be how to make the account authoritative so that it is widely accepted. Yet another challenge is that some people — typically those who have not experienced the injustices — will resist what they view as shaming or divisive discussions leading to the historical and current account.⁴⁷ (Desires for a reckoning for past or current wrongdoing raise additional, and overlapping, issues that will be the focus of the next chapter.) These differences may claim much of the attention and resources for the initiative and sow dissent among those participating in its deliberations, diverting them from working toward change.

Though there are no simple recipes for dealing with these counter pulls, illustrations from other initiatives, such as those noted below, may inform planners as they make choices for initiatives for their communities.

Understanding the reasons for examining the past

The Nova Scotia Restorative Inquiry, regarding a home for children of African descent, described what occurred in the past and its effects, explaining, “The Restorative Inquiry looked back, not to ascribe blame, but to shed light on the history and experience of the Home in order to learn from it and move forward into a brighter future. The Report reflects this commitment to look back and learn to make a difference for the future.”⁴⁸ In its final report, the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission spoke to the healing value of historical findings and stories for both indigenous and settler peoples:

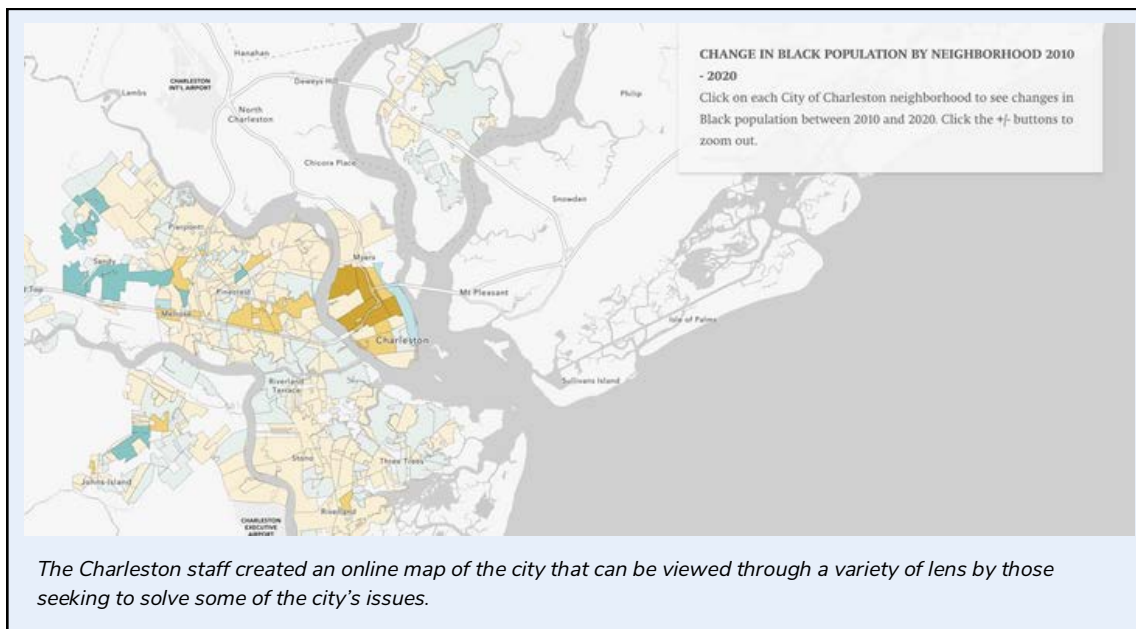
*To the Commission, reconciliation is about establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in this country. In order for that to happen, there has to be awareness of the past, acknowledgement of the harm that has been inflicted, atonement for the causes, and action to change behavior.*⁴⁹

The Kellogg Foundation has found phrases that may be helpful: “how to create a more complete and accurate narrative that will help people understand how racial hierarchy has been imbedded in our society” and “a new narrative about who we are as a country and as interconnected individuals.”⁵⁰

Expediting the work to chronicle injustice and individual stories

The necessary narratives about the past can draw on the work of others to portray the national context. The California Reparations Task Force, for example, has already released an extensive review of the national history and its current effects.⁵¹ Other commissions can focus on the more manageable research to understand the nature and history of racial inequity “locally.”

For example, the Evanston, Illinois City Council engaged with others to write a well-documented history of its own community, detailing the lingering economic and other effects of that discrimination, particularly in housing, services, and financing.⁵² The Charleston Special Commission utilized an interactive history and interactive map of the city created by commission staff working alongside city planners; residents can click on one of several historical or current lenses (e.g., housing migration by race, moves by those renting) through which to view the city.⁵³



Educating the public

Reaching the public is hard work. Justice Murray Sinclair, chair of the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission, told the New York Times that reaching people in their living rooms was essential but a major challenge.⁵⁴ (See Chapter 6 for more on reaching multiple audiences.)

Historical commemoration

Some groups, such as “Facing History and Ourselves,” are already at work in the U.S. to educate young people particularly on the connection of history to current events.⁵⁵ Canada recognized a distinct continuing role for keeping the history alive by creating a new federal agency that supplements the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada and, even today, continues to award funds for commemorative activities regarding Canada’s mistreatment of its indigenous peoples.

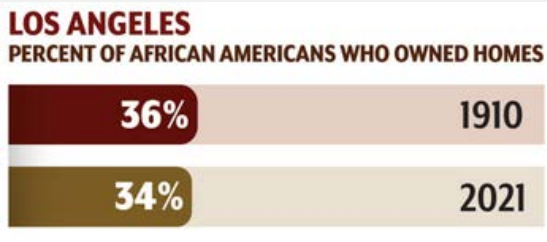
ILLUSTRATIONS OF DEALING WITH PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

Separate sections of the group working at the same time on past, present, and future in proposed creation of a U.S. Truth and Healing Commission on forced removal of indigenous children from their homes and communities to federally supported Indian boarding schools:

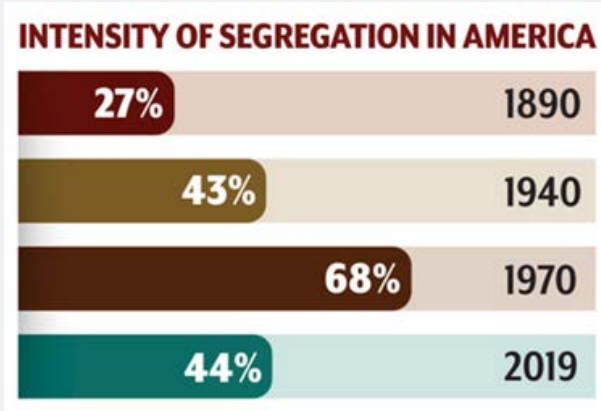
The bill to create this new commission gives heavy investigative duties to the commission, even granting subpoena power to uncover abuses. But it also establishes an advisory committee to work alongside the commission and focus on healing and the changes needed to help survivors of the schools.⁵⁶

Using help from multiple sources to write a detailed record of the past injustices and compile stories on continuing effects – California Reparations Task Force:

The California Department of Justice, tasked by the legislature to assist the Task Force, created a research and writing team that consisted of ten Department of Justice attorneys. A number of Ph.D.s and university professors contributed to it and edited portions. As a result, the Task Force issued a U.S. and California history of discrimination against Black residents, resulting in a 500-page history that traced effects to the present, published in June 2022.⁵⁷ In addition, the Task Force contracted with a university-based program to work with community organizations to host storytelling about the lived experience of discrimination. Some of these stories became illustrations in the interim report. And the Task Force brought in scholarly expertise that provided explanations of the current effects of past discrimination as it impacted housing, education, wealth, and more. By drawing on these resources, the Task Force was able to complete this historical review in about a year and begin work on next steps for the state.



The California Reparations Task Force Interim Report focused on the history and continuing effect of racial injustices both in the nation as a whole and in California.



California Task Force to Study and Develop Reparations Proposals for African Americans, Interim Report 163 (2022).

5. Remediating past injustice

People often propose a truth and racial healing commission-style approach with the belief that it will help to achieve justice for past and present racial injustices. Any commission in the United States might be expected to offer vindication, acknowledgement, and/or economic reparations for past injustices. While a broad array of remedial measures has been used in such efforts, the most controversial option is reparations through cash payments to individuals.

Those whose relatives have not experienced racial injustice seem to want to skip this step and move to “unity” or “healing” (an aim discussed below in Chapter 6). As noted in Chapter 3, such advocacy to avoid “divisive” discussions occurred during the Charleston, South Carolina City Council sessions when that commission presented its final report and sought creation of a continuing commission. Dr. Nomfundo Walaza, a South African psychologist and truth and reconciliation scholar, passed on the following story to illustrate why it just feels wrong to begin with reconciliation and leave repair for past and current wrongdoing out of the work:

“Once there were two boys, Tom and Bernard. Tom lived right opposite Bernard. One day Tom stole Bernard’s bicycle and every day Bernard saw Tom cycling to school on it. After a year, Tom went up to Bernard stretched out his hand and said, ‘Let us reconcile and put the past behind us.’ Bernard looked at Tom’s hand and said, ‘And what about the bicycle?’ ‘No,’ Tom said, ‘I am not talking about the bicycle. I am talking about reconciliation.’”

Dr. Walaza’s anecdote might be read as a story about an individual wrong and the absence of redress for it in the quest for reconciliation, but it can also be read as a tale about collective wrongs and the importance of dealing with those wrongs before reconciliation can occur or as it is occurring.

A remedial focus for a U.S. initiative to advance racial equity and healing is distinct from fixing punishment on individual wrong doers. This chapter proceeds under the assumption that U.S. commissions will focus on collective justice as opposed to finding individuals culpable for acts of violence, exploitation, or other wrongs.

Establishing the record first

Documenting and telling the community about how historic injustices continue to cause harm seems to help. Though the national picture is pertinent, each community has a distinct history of injustices and therefore distinct continuing effects. These effects may fall on descendants, persons sharing a particular heritage, and the neighborhoods and communities in which they reside. Even businesses may be paying a price in terms of employee recruitment and the public's perception of their headquarters community. There may be a brain drain of professionals who want to live in a community that seems to be dealing more directly with its injustices.

Anticipating that the public view will change after the research, some commissions delayed a mention of reparations until that phase was complete. The World War II internment commission, discussed in Illustrations below, did not discuss reparations until the case had been made and they were certain of Congressional support. The proposed U.S. Indian Schools commission bill does not mention reparations, though that topic may emerge as part of helping survivors.

Creating options and dealing with challenges


Remediation acknowledges harm and has added credibility if it involves some level of change or commitment of resources.

As one truth commission expert pointed out, regarding the quest for justice, a commission should do its best even though it can never do enough to satisfy fully those who have suffered from the injustice. Several approaches may help.

Success may be increased if the commission develops and tests a variety of options. For example, one option might be an investment that restores some of the current economic losses stemming from past injustices, such as established reductions of wealth as the result of “red-lining” and housing discrimination (see Evanston illustration below). The commission might help secure remedial funds from philanthropic and business sources as well as public funds, thus reducing contention over alternative potential uses of the funds.

Regarding the quest for justice, a commission should do its best even though it can never do enough to satisfy fully those who have suffered from the injustice.

Publicly financed cash reparations paid to individuals for past injustices are welcome in some contexts and timeframes but in others may be a reason to oppose everything that a commission hopes to achieve. For example, the California legislature authorized a commission to recommend a form of compensation while a Charleston, South Carolina City Council blocked continuation of a commission's work until it removed reference to reparations. Nationally, most Americans oppose cash reparations.⁵⁸ If a focus on reparations generates political controversy, that opposition may alienate potential allies needed to achieve change.



Cash reparations may also generate internal controversy. The amount of such cash reparations may seem ridiculously low (or excessively high), given the level or duration of the injustice. Japanese American civilians who lost property and were incarcerated in prison camps during World War II, often for years, received \$20,000 in reparations more than 45 years later. The California Reparations Task Force split on the issue of whether reparations should be limited to descendants of enslaved persons or should also be given to Black immigrants who suffered racial discrimination.⁵⁹ Such controversies, especially those occurring early in a commission's work, could swallow the energy that might be devoted to other and potentially deeper change.

For these reasons, cash reparations have had a rockier road in past commissions than vindication or acknowledgements of past wrongs or targeted cash investments to benefit a group of persons. But that does not reduce the call for cash reparations.

Framing

Language matters. Reparations suggest individual compensation, but compensation can be viewed as collective rather than individual. Focusing on repairing the inequities that were created over generations opens the possibility, for example, of allocating resources for communities left behind by racial inequities. Evidence of injustices within a particular community that are tied to current wealth losses may appeal. Alternatively, the investment could be framed as targeting all of those left behind for any reason. Professors John Powell and Ned Conner point out that investments that create a floor in certain respects, what they call “targeted universalism,” builds desirable conditions and opportunities that the community wants for all residents (Chapter 2). Describing that compensation as investments in communities to reduce racial inequities also has a different ring than cash payments to individuals as reparations. Asheville, North Carolina, for example created “community reparations” through which the city would invest in Black neighborhoods.⁶⁰ These can be framed in reference to evidence that demonstrates how repairing the inequities help businesses thrive and attract employees and help all feel proud of the community's commitment to becoming a more equitable community.

Another framing approach is a targeted program that both provides cash assistance and helps the broader community. For example, Georgetown University decided to provide preferential admission and scholarships for descendants of the enslaved people who were forced to build the university.⁶¹ The scholarships will also enhance the diversity of Georgetown's student body. Such economic aid is less likely to produce backlash and may provide positive contributions to those suffering from the continuing effects of injustices.

ILLUSTRATION OF CASH REPARATIONS THAT BENEFIT A LOCAL COMMUNITY BROADLY

Reparation housing grants – Evanston, Illinois:

A city council committee, assisted by economic experts and historians, documented the damage caused by housing segregation and related policies in their own community between 1919 and 1969. Evanston residents were more likely to hear about and connect to the research and report than would be all Americans reacting to a national initiative. Evanston residents may have observed the segregated housing or may have known fellow residents or their descendants who suffered from this injustice. Further, all Evanston property owners could understand how they would benefit from rehabilitation of deteriorated housing. Finally, it was easier to gain support to finance the initiative since the City Council proposed that the funds come from the assignment of new funds created by a tax on marijuana sales. While the result generated some controversy, nonetheless, in 2022 Evanston began awarding grants to improve housing for descendants of Black Evanston residents who lived there during the period that had documented losses in housing values for Black residents.⁶²



A man walks by a sign welcoming people to the city of in Evanston, Illinois, on March 16, 2021.

Credit: Kamil Krzaczynski/AFP via Getty Images

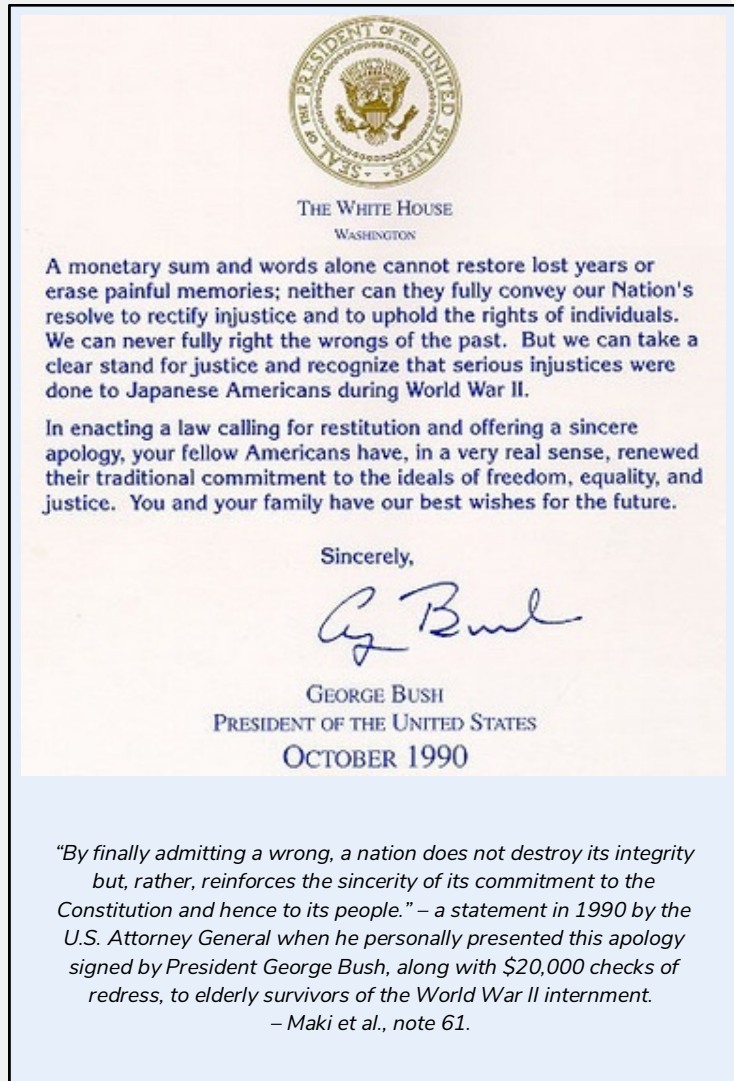
ILLUSTRATION OF DELAYING THE REPARATIONS REQUEST

Sequencing the work to secure public support – World War II Internment Commission:

The commission dealing with the World War II internment of civilians,⁶³ which met from 1979 to 1982, notably illustrates such a multi-project, sequenced initiative. As the commission began its work, there was little support for providing any remedies for those injustices. Then 750 witnesses told their stories, with media coverage, and commission staff researched and documented injustices. Dr. Mitchell Maki and his co-authors who reviewed the commission's work and results concluded:

"The commission hearings were a dramatic theater through which America could come to know the Japanese American experience and through which Japanese Americans would come to know themselves in a new way. The commission hearings, along with the media coverage of the hearings and the commission's report, changed the nature of the debate. The issue was no longer whether a wrong had occurred but what should be done about that wrong.... The hearings were a cathartic experience for many Japanese Americans on a personal, generational, and community level."⁶⁴

After the commission concluded its work, Congress apologized formally, created a public education fund to help the public-at-large understand the injustice to our fellow citizens, and made restitution to eligible recipients as one way to discourage similar events and demonstrate the renewed dedication to protecting human rights.



6.

Sequencing initiatives and coordinating them with the promotion of changed hearts and minds, with healing

The ability of a joint public-community commission to begin what will be a long-term process of changing hearts and minds is one of the potential advantages of a truth and reconciliation-style of commission to advance racial equity and healing. While some healing may occur as the result of achieving greater racial equity, launching additional healing activities seems both worthwhile and challenging.

Healing goals will differ by context. A few questions for a discussion of commission healing goals include: What needs healing? What does “to heal” mean? Why is healing important for those who have suffered from inequities? Why does it also matter for those who are or feel responsible for inequities? What happens if communities don’t heal? What are various pathways to healing? When there have been traumatic events or when trauma has been transmitted historically and generationally, what are some important considerations?

The related goal of changing hearts and minds on matters of race will require purposeful work, much on the local level, with frequent monitoring for results (Chapter 7).



Americans broadly support initiating the long-term process of changing minds and hearts and promoting racial healing, but those affected by injustice may not support it right away.

Sequencing

Americans broadly support initiating the long-term process of changing hearts and minds and promoting racial healing, but those affected by injustice may not support it right away. This point applies especially in the case of violence. For example, immediately after a white supremacist killed Black shoppers and staff at a Buffalo grocery store in 2022, polling indicated that three quarters of Black people did not feel safe as they went about their daily lives.⁶⁵ In the immediate aftermath, these affected persons were likely experiencing outrage as well as fear, so considerations of healing would seem premature.

Scholars at Eastern Mennonite University have studied the relationship between an act of violence and reconciliation as experienced in other nations and conclude that there is a typical sequence that occurs on a personal and then at a community level. When those affected feel safe, the sequence begins with personal processing of the trauma. At the community level, grieving precedes acceptance, discussion of what occurred and accountability, memorialization, and cause identification.

Once these have occurred, those in the group enduring the harm may have increased openness to engage with those not harmed. At that point, the community more productively engage in discussions about establishing responsibility and achieving change. Later still, those involved will be able to engage the community broadly to achieve needed changes, and the possibility of conciliation and healing seems more feasible.⁶⁶

This analysis also suggests that commissions incorporate this typical cycle into its design and operations. When beginning a storytelling initiative, they may need trauma counselors, for example. Broader participation in activities that bring people back into relationship with each other may occur once they have commemorated the past (Chapter 4), dealt with remediation for past injustices (Chapter 5) and settled on changes that will deal with causes for inequities (Chapter 3).

This approach still suggests beginning healing processes early, even if participation is light. Including activities that improve relationships, even slightly, early in a commission's work may have the positive effect of broadening participation later in efforts to achieve acknowledgment and change. In other words, even if greater equity is a commission's primary goal, racial healing can be an important step to reach it. The Kellogg Foundation's publications nearly always mention all three types of initiatives together and include them all in their proposed name, "Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation Commissions."

Defining healing

Planners must decide how to define healing. Some resist "reconciliation" because it seems to imply a return to better times. Other terms might include recovery, integrating, overcoming, transcending, and transformation. Whatever the term, the definition may include increasing:

- understanding of the value that emerges from Americans with varying backgrounds and ideas;
- inclusion of everyone in opportunities; and
- respect for each other.⁶⁷

La June Montgomery Tabron, President and CEO of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, captures these dimensions when she defines racial healing as a process in which "we recognize our common humanity, acknowledge the truth of past wrongs and build the authentic relationships capable of transforming communities and shifting our national discourse."⁶⁸

Taking responsibility

People suffering harm may be more willing to engage in healing activities if someone in a position of authority apologizes. For example, the City of Charleston, by a City Council resolution, issued an apology in 2018 – before convening the Special Commission on Equity, Inclusion and Racial Conciliation.⁶⁹ The apology recounts the city’s role in fostering slavery and atrocities against African Americans.

Pictured right: The 2018 Charleston apology, shown in part, acknowledges its tragic history and offers a public apology. It was followed by the convening of the Special Commission on Equity, Inclusion and Racial Conciliation.

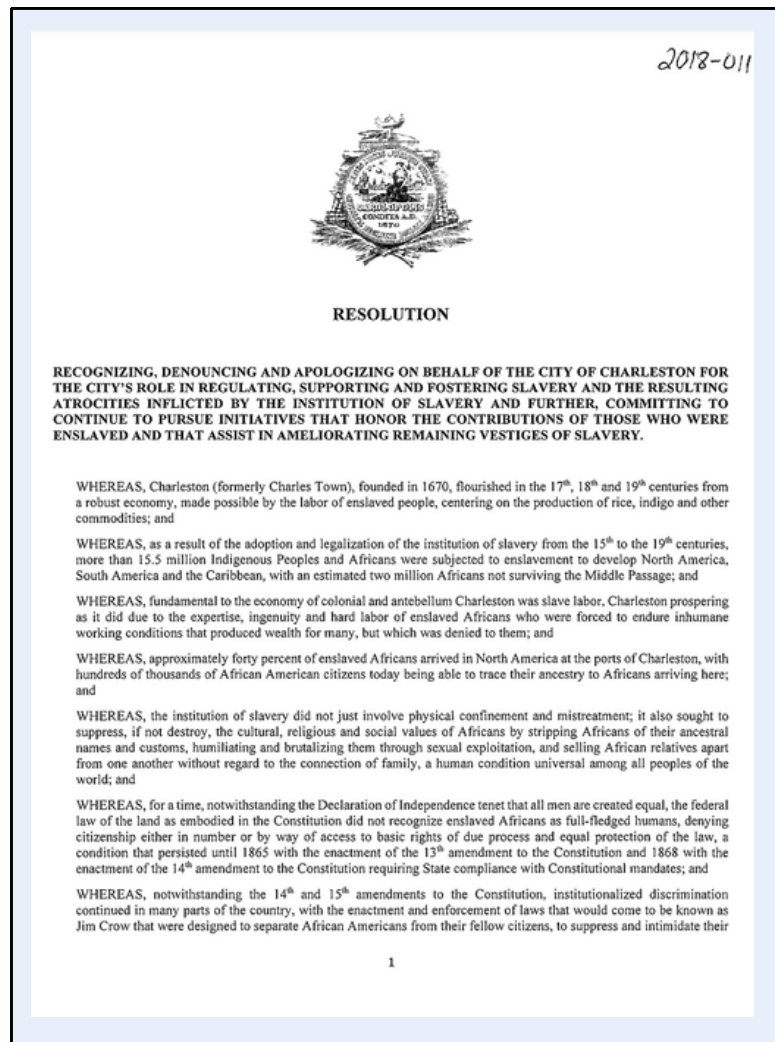
Beginning the changes early

As just discussed, changes can reinforce engagement and healing. Thus, it may be important to make and celebrate change throughout the commission’s work.

Encouraging small group facilitated interactions on an equal basis

From its first days, Corrymeela, Northern Ireland’s oldest peace center, has been a place of gathering, work, faith and discussion – of bringing people of different backgrounds, different political and religious beliefs, and different identities together. Its leaders believe in the strength of gathering, of courageous speaking, and listening. As part of their efforts, trained facilitators host weekend retreats and community dialogues, creating hospitable spaces that are safe, welcoming, and inclusive.

Many efforts to bring community members together across societal fault lines are occurring throughout the U.S. New York Times columnist David Brooks offers stories about them through the Weave the Social Fabric Project that he founded.⁷⁰ Healing City Baltimore might be one of these stories as it holds healing youth summits, convenes healing professionals, and holds a “truth and healing” virtual conversations series.⁷¹



Storytelling and communications

In the U.S. and throughout the world, storytelling has been touted for many purposes, and especially in the context of changing minds, as a means of promoting mutual understanding and catharsis. The stories of the gold stars, signifying a family member who died defending the United States, fastened onto the tents of Japanese Americans interned during World War II both brought home the injustice for members of the public and helped those who spoke finally feel some acknowledgment of what they suffered.⁷²

Commissions may allow storytellers to opt for either a confidential or public account, providing extensive publicity of key public stories. They can create “safe spaces,” with counselors available both to help shape any questions and to counsel the witness. Questions from the deliberative body to the storytellers may elicit stories that help others to see with “new eyes” the challenges of being targeted or denied opportunity.

A challenge for a commission will be to convey effectively the illustrations of deeply embedded sources of racial injustice to a broad audience. The story needs to impart a larger picture extending beyond the individual accounts to help awaken public understanding and promote support for enhancing racial equity. And a commission will need to use the media that will reach many people.

The ubiquitous video of the George Floyd killing, of a policeman squeezing the life out of a Black man handcuffed and pinned on the ground, was one such story that broke through to a global audience with significant effect on public understanding, in part because it was seen as illustrative of a broad pattern, not an isolated event. Similarly, encounters recorded on cellphones and body cameras, shared in social media and mass media, tell the story that some Black and Brown people are threatened and killed, because people perceive them to be unfamiliar, fearsome, and threatening. A commission might consider that many different media, including a bystander recording with an iPhone, might be the source or author of a compelling story.

The initiative’s use of communications professionals can aid in achieving these storytelling goals. Justice Murray Sinclair, chair of the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission, said, “When you come through an event that is emotionally that challenging, a healing moment occurs for the person who has told you their story, but also for you as the one who has accepted the story. So, you have to know how to make that moment understood in the proper way. [T]he most important part of it was to publicize the testimony to bring the hearings into the living rooms of the people.”⁷³



A group in Columbus, Ohio noted racial justice concerns and sought to add inspiring public artwork focused on a social justice and unity theme from Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" in 1963: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

Reducing separation

Implementing policies, economic approaches, and practices that bring together people of different races to work together on an equal footing on projects of mutual interest may produce healing over time. In Flint, Michigan, a local Truth Racial Healing and Transformation Commission worked with federal housing officials when a “local public housing complex was to be demolished because it had been illegally built on a flood plain. Families living in the complex now have an opportunity to move into a brand-new housing area made up of mixed-income housing being constructed between two other active neighborhoods in another part of the city.”⁷⁴ Plans include efforts to build trust and friendship among the new neighbors.

Offering another illustration, Corrymeela recently completed a successful, multi-agency program called PRISM (Promoting Reconciliation & Integration through Safe Mediation). The program aimed to promote positive attitudinal change within the Catholic/ Nationalist/Republican, Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist and Refugee Asylum Seeker and Vulnerable Migrant communities. These highly segregated communities were brought together to build trust and strengthen social cohesion through a range of activities, workshops, and weekend retreats.

Rituals and symbols

Rituals and symbols that stimulate shared experiences by a group of people may contribute to healing. The commission itself could become something of symbol and model, providing a vivid expression of a group that operates with an eye to justice, accountability, constructive civic engagement, truth telling, equity, mercy, compassion, healing, and promotion of peace.

Illustrating a more traditional view of rituals, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada held several celebrations that involved the commission members and other settler Canadians attending dancing and other First Nations’ rituals. As Dr. Dominic Bryan, Queen’s University, Northern Ireland explains, public spaces can be the arena or vehicle through which conflict becomes enacted, citing parades, memorials, and museums as critical spaces where power is enshrined, narratives are captured, and boundaries are marked. However, these spaces can become intentionally and deliberately transformed into sites that celebrate and promote “good relations,” and where inclusive events are held, i.e., that spaces for resistance becomes acceptable “shared” space for civic representation.⁷⁵



Tens of thousands participate in the Walk for Reconciliation through downtown Vancouver, September 2013.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada,
Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future,
Summary of Final Report 34 (2015).

ILLUSTRATIONS OF HEALING AND RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

California Truth and Healing Council's⁷⁶ modeling of and instigating of respectful and caring interactions:

The California Truth and Healing Council is not waiting until it makes final recommendations in 2025 to begin the work of enhancing relationships. Its members demonstrate concern for each other's interests. Though theoretically divided in terms of whether the council members are part of federally recognized tribes, living on ancestral lands, part of different generations, and other differences, and though facing fraught issues such as who owns the ancestral lands, they begin meetings with a ritual that causes them to reflect on what they share and their role in the world. As they or guests speak, Council members often give an empathic response to the last comment before beginning their own, focusing, for example, on the importance of the general topic raised. To emphasize their approach to newcomers, the chair reads a detailed set of values in interacting, with explanations,⁷⁷ at each meeting and sets the stage for the reality one encounters watching the meetings:

"In order to create a space where participants feel welcomed, respected and able to speak comfortably, we will uphold the following principles in all convenings of the Council; we ask that all participants... work towards sharing in their stewardship

"If you are a participant in a convening with the Council, we ask that you:

- Engage in the work of the Council and with others in an open and respectful way.*
- Engage in behaviors that will make others feel welcome.*
- Take care of your emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical well-being.*
- Seek support as you need it."*

The Council arranges counseling support that can be offered to participants. Council members show interest in community participants at meetings and online. To augment that, the Council sponsors talking circles for people to converse with each other and with Council members. The Council offers both open and closed hearings to suit the comfort of those coming to speak. They offer funding so community members who cannot afford the transportation can nonetheless attend Council events. They have already begun the work of creating oral histories for various tribes within the state.

This is an initiative that seeks ultimately to do truth telling and recommend legal and policy changes, but it has simultaneously modeled and begun healing activities. One can observe the synergies among these activities.⁷⁸

Independent analysis of healing resulting from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada and related activities:

Canada addressed the history and legacy of forced relocation to boarding schools of Aboriginal children with meetings that began in 2004 and resulted in an apology, compensation, and a 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission report.⁷⁹ An independent study, released in 2021, noted those events that seemed to contribute to healing in what it emphasized would need to be a longer-term initiative:



Recognition of the existence and impacts of the residential school system took a significant step forward when the then Grand Chief of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, Phil Fontaine, spoke on national television about his personal experience in residential school. It progressed even more when the Settlement Agreement was announced, and when the then Prime Minister apologized on behalf of the Government of Canada in the House of Commons. It grew with the development by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation of curricula on Indian Residential Schools for use in our public schools. It was greatly encouraged when the Truth and Reconciliation Commission held events [over a six-year period], provided a forum for people to share their histories, and garnered media attention that helped commemorate the residential schools experience. That commemoration brought knowledge; knowledge breeds understanding; and understanding can provide a basis for justice, healing, and reconciliation.⁸⁰

7.

Continuing the implementation, assessment, and accountability

The deepest change will unfold over time. While it is important to plan for implementation, assessment and accountability, a variety of approaches might be indicated.

Long-term commission

The proposed U.S. Indian Schools commission takes a longer approach than some others – an anticipated a five-year tenure for the commission.⁸¹

New agencies

At least three of the recent racial equity commissions – New York City, Charleston, and Brookhaven – have advocated for continuing agencies to help implement, assess, and hold the government accountable for progress.

Independent assessments over time

The Canadian government provided funding for two assessment approaches. First, the Canadian Broadcasting Company continually updates progress in implementing the truth and reconciliation commission recommendations.⁸² Second, the government funds research on progress. Both approaches allow for corrections when an approach does not work and encouragement to engage in further work when initial efforts are successful. University partnerships might provide periodic assessment of implementation and its impacts on communities.

Ultimately, deep changes will include changes in law and economics as well as in hearts and minds. One approach to keep attention on the latter is to select public attitude measures for which regular surveys are conducted periodically and find out if administrators can disaggregate national data and report the data for a particular region.

For example, since 1965, Gallup has conducted surveys annually about views on racial equity, broken down by racial groupings.⁸³ The General Social Survey conducted by the National Opinion Research Center also provides data on racial attitudes over time. A commission might inquire about contracting for isolating local data from such a survey over time.⁸⁴

Listing the ideas that should be studied further before being recommended or implemented

Even a multi-year commission will encounter ideas that it does not have time to study extensively enough to recommend them. The NYC Racial Justice Commission listed many of these in its final report, thus setting out a beginning set of ideas for the next commission.⁸⁵



Conclusion – Leaving a legacy

As a commission concludes its work, the commissioners will better understand the community’s racial equity issues. They will have gained wisdom from the work completed, about the potential gains as well as the challenges of undertaking a multi-pronged government-community commission to effect change. These commissioners can make the additional contribution of recording their thoughts, while fresh in mind, on how the next initiative to advance racial equity might most constructively be structured. No single commission can close the racial equity gap, but that does not mean that it has not made vital contributions in that continuing worthy endeavor. Using what they have learned to help their community plan ahead, and other communities following in their path, leaves an additional legacy – the foundation for even more progress.

We published *A Practical Guide to Planning Initiatives for Working Together to Advance Racial Equity* (2021) in the hope that communities might benefit from design thinking about truth and reconciliation-style processes to effect change in racial equity in the United States. We recognized in the first edition of this guide that the lessons we shared, as researchers, scholars, practitioners, and stakeholders in disparate communities struggling to design responses to urgent demands for social justice and progress, were based primarily on historical and international experience as the current U.S. processes were new. In this edition we have added what we have learned over the course of the last year as a number of communities took up the challenge to achieve greater racial equity. We anticipate that this ambitious venture, in which our nation’s cities and states are now engaged, will continue to evolve. We understand — and we hope — the tools to justly resolve inequity, heal communities and advance society will continue to be refined.

We humbly offer our learning as it stands in August 2022 in this second edition, *A Practical Guide to Planning Collaborative Initiatives to Advance Racial Equity* (2022). We look forward to hearing from you, will continue to study these processes, stand ready to assist where appropriate, and will share further learning as additional commissions accomplish their work.

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Resources

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