LESSONS FROM CITIES ADVANCING RACIAL EQUITY

THE U.S. CONFERENCE OF MAYORS

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Introduction

America's cities are facing a volatile moment in the history of race relations, amplified by increasingly polarized federal politics and intense flash points of protest and political action. The cumulative weight of historic injustices has mobilized cities across the country to act through both targeted programs and instituting equity as a guiding goal of governance. Cities are beginning to take active measures to ensure that disparities are eliminated within government. From rethinking hiring and procurement processes that have historically acted as barriers for people of color to participate in economic prosperity and decision-making, to reconsidering investments in housing, infrastructure, and other physical and programmatic interventions that raise up traditionally-neglected neighborhoods, mayors are on the front lines of economic and social policy change.

The U.S. Conference of Mayors, with its strong history of leading on issues of civil rights and social justice, recognizes the importance of chronicling this moment and sharing the work underway by USCM member mayors across the country to advance equitable outcomes for all.

Our Process

The U.S. Conference of Mayors, with the support of the Ford Foundation, engaged HR&A Advisors to undertake a multicity surveying of existing racial equity programs, policies, and projects underway across the country. Grounded in the belief that mayors are blazing the trail in advancing racial equity and that there Is meaningful learning to be had between and amongst mayors, HR&A interviewed, either in person or on the phone, mayors, city staff, and community stakeholders from thirteen different cities:

— Austin, Texas
— Boston, Massachusetts
— Columbia, South Carolina
— Gary, Indiana
— Grand Rapids, Michigan
— Gresham, Oregon
— Houston, Texas
— Louisville, Kentucky
— Nashville, Tennessee
— New Orleans, Louisiana
— New York, New York
— Portland, Oregon
— West Sacramento, California

While the set of stakeholders interviewed differed in each city, HR&A generally conducted roundtable interviews with the mayor, the city's core equity team (if one existed), departmental heads and staff, and external community organizations. These interviews included candid discussions of the successes and challenges of existing city-led racial equity initiatives, in addition to an exploration of how USCM could best support on-going efforts to advance racial equity. Building on these site visits and one-on-one interviews with city leaders, HR&A also reached out to over two dozen organizations whose work supports cities' practice and policy change around racial equity. See the Acknowledgements for a full list of external organizations.

What is Racial Equity?

Historically, government policies have never been race-neutral. Decades of urban policymaking, from redlining to urban revitalization projects that have upended communities of color, have led to significant disparities, including uneven economic mobility, health outcomes, and access to services and quality neighborhoods. Addressing stagnant – and growing – inequities within cities requires a revisit of government policies and practices to disrupt an unequal status quo, and across the country, city governments are rising to the challenge. They are making efforts to advance towards **racial equity**, or, according to the Center for Assessment and Policy Development, a state in which "one's racial identity no longer predicts, in a statistical case, how one fares."

What Cities Are Doing

What Cities Are Doing

Through all conversations, mayors and their staff expressed a deep commitment to the principle of racial equity, and recognized the urgency of tackling the legacies of racist public policies within their cities. Approaches to addressing racial disparities vary across methodology and city, including:

Internal City Approaches

- Establishing equity as a goal throughout citywide planning and budgeting
- Undertaking departmental planning to develop policies, procedures, and metrics for advancing equity
- Including the reduction of racial disparities as an evaluation metric
- Mandating implicit bias training for city staff
- Participating in cohort-based programs with partnering organizations

Community-facing Approaches

- Conducting community dialogues to define equity and advance racial reconciliation
- Implementing place-based programs in historically underinvested communities
- Revising harmful policies and expanding equitable initiatives around procurement, job training, housing, and economic development

Over the next pages, we highlight a few of the many exemplary programs and policies that cities have implemented to advance racial equity. This list is in no way exhaustive; rather, it presents a small sampling of some of the innovative work being done across the country by mayors and their staff.

EQUITY NEW ORLEANS
The Road to Equitable Government

CITY OF NEW ORLEANS
Mitchell J. Landrieu, Mayor

New Orleans, LA | Mayor Mitchell J. Landrieu
Building a comprehensive citywide strategy from a portfolio of initiatives.

New Orleans began its commitment to racial equity through standing up numerous individual programs, such as NOLA for Life, a homicide-reduction program that has lowered murder rates by 18% in four years, and the Network for Economic Opportunity, a workforce development program that has helped to reduce black male non-employment from 52% to 44%. While these programs were successful in their own realms, the City understood the need to build a more comprehensive approach to racial equity that affected all parts of government. In 2016, the City undertook a planning process to institute an equity lens citywide, appointing an Equity Program Director and carrying out community engagement to come to a common definition of equity. By shifting from individual programs to Equity New Orleans, a comprehensive citywide equity initiative, the city began to position equity as a central role of governance and reach into all departments (and not only social service agencies) to foster educational, economic, and cultural opportunities. By inviting departments to think through this lens, offices and staff have begun to experiment with incorporating equity in numerous ways, such as understanding equity impacts of their budgets and turning code compliance city contracts into a de facto job training program.

One New York
The Plan for a Strong and Just City

The City of New York
Mayor Bill de Blasio

Anthony Shorris
First Deputy Mayor

NYC

New York, NY | Mayor Bill de Blasio
Ensuring accountability through policies, assessments, and action plans.

Equity serves as one of four pillars of New York City's comprehensive citywide plan. By incorporating equity as a principle into the plan, departments are now held accountable to working towards this goal, and must document progress through annual evaluations. In addition, certain agencies are required by City Council resolution to produce annual equity assessments to review practices, policies, and budgets and develop action plans based on outcomes of these assessments. Notably, the Department of Mental Health and Hygiene has launched the Center for Health Equity, which combats health inequities rooted in historical and contemporary injustices. The City has also undergone agency-wide rules reviews, eliminating previous policies that have unintentionally (or intentionally) created barriers for people of color, and is a core member of the Racial Equity Alliance within GARE.

Portland, OR | Mayor Ted Wheeler
Embedding equity into department training, budgeting, and policymaking processes.

Portland's Office of Equity and Human Rights provides technical support to City staff and elected officials, including embedding an Equity Officer as staff lead in each department. Departments are provided with checklists of questions to ask during policy decisions and the budgeting process. All staff are required to take mandatory equity training. While adjustments to policy and procedures through revisions of hiring policies and staff-wide trainings have created tangible impacts, including an increase from 17% to 22% of the proportion of the city's workforce who are people of color, it has been the most difficult to implement change within police and economic development departments.

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Louisville, KY | Mayor Greg Fischer
Integrating numerous citywide efforts under one guiding departmental mission.

Louisville has numerous initiatives touching on equity, including the Department of Safe and Healthy Neighborhoods, created to reduce violence through a public health approach, and the Center for Health Equity, which works to reduce health disparities. These departments have created initiatives such as the Racial Equity Youth Council, a summer employment program engaging high school students in designing more effective ways to serve teenagers in a racially-sensitive manner. As a part of the Racial Equity Here cohort program, the City has coordinated a team with 12 City departments that meet on a regular basis to review city operations and training City employees on implicit bias. This year, the City appointed a Chief Equity Officer with deep knowledge of city operations to coordinate the number of efforts across the city, and the centralized role has proven valuable to the numerous department heads.

Austin, TX | Mayor Steve Adler
Engaging community organizations and the business community in governmental change.

Driven by a community-led process, the City Council passed a resolution creating an Equity Office. Since its establishment in 2016, the equity office has prioritized engagement with local community organizations, building community trust. By hiring a former organizer as staff, the office has been able to develop equity programs and policies with significant input from community organizations, including the creation of an assessment tool for City departments to think about how the outcomes of their work advance equity, currently being piloted in eight departments. In addition, the mayor created a mayoral task force to examine institutionalized racism and invited business leaders and City Council members to participate in implicit bias training efforts.

Columbia, SC | Mayor Stephen K. Benjamin
Prioritizing support for youth programming and police diversity.

Mayor Benjamin launched the Mayor's Mentoring Network, which connects mentoring organizations with interested potential mentors; and the Justice for All initiative, part of a $12 million program which mandated sensitivity and implicit bias trainings for police officers, and focused on more diverse recruiting efforts, increasing the percentage of minority hires from 39% in 2015 to 68% in 2016. The city has also participated actively with My Brother's Keeper, committing to building youth engagement and diversion programs.
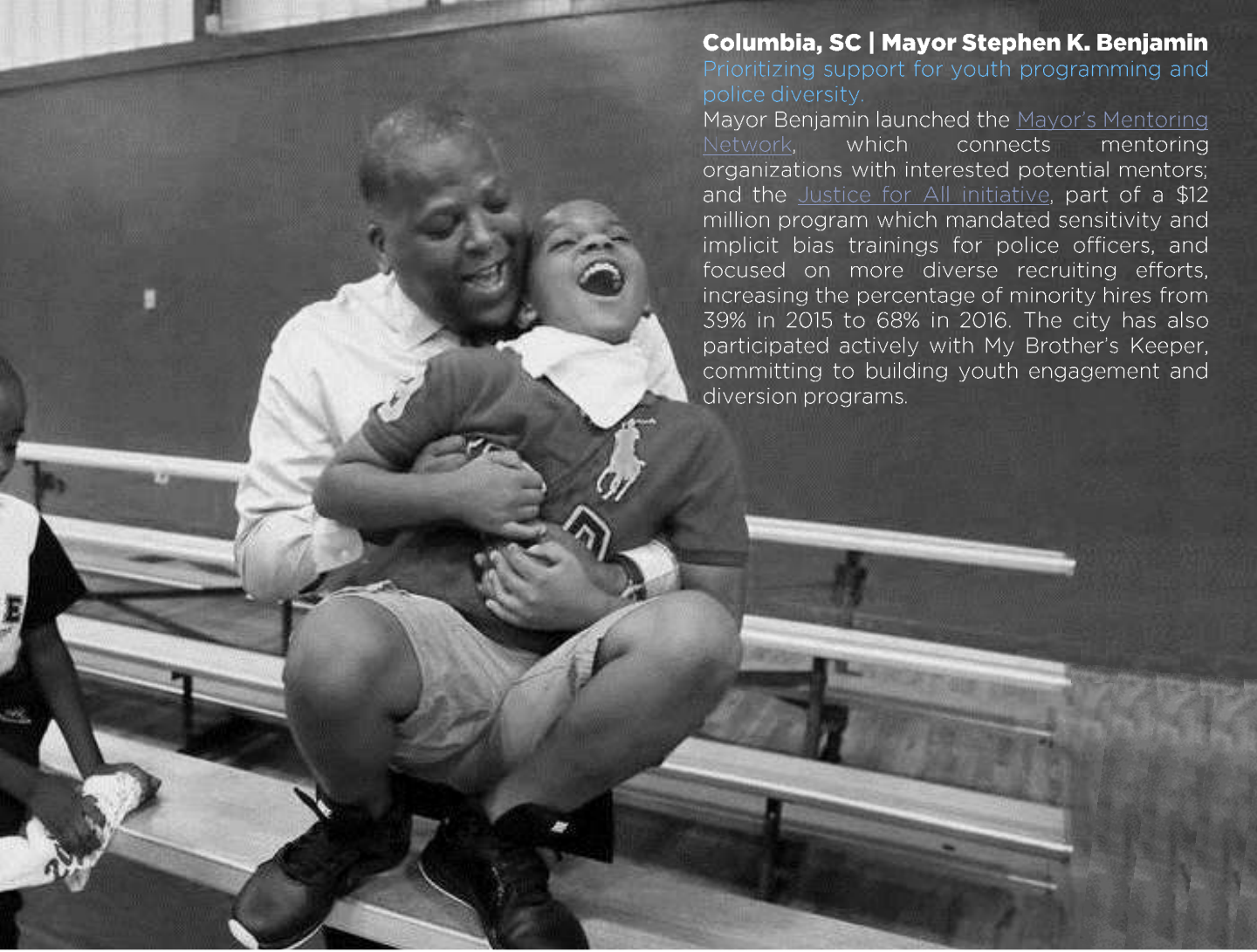
Houston, TX | Mayor Sylvester Turner

Improving outcomes in underserved neighborhoods through targeted planning

The City launched the Complete Communities initiative in five historically underserved neighborhoods to improve access to services and quality amenities, including affordable housing, jobs, open space, improved streetscapes, food access, and transportation. For each of the neighborhoods, the City is conducting a six- to nine-month community engagement process to identify short-term and long-term projects. Through this effort and through ensuring that departmental leaders reflect the diversity of the city's population, Houston is attempting to center equity as an underlying citywide principle.

Lessons from Cities

Lessons from Cities

Through our conversations with mayors, City staff, community partners, and experts in the field, a few key trends emerged:

Elevate The Conversation

1.   Normalize the Conversation

Mayors and City staff want a platform to normalize and elevate a discussion around race and how it plays out in government decisions. City staff want a multi-city commitment or coalition to support mayors as they directly address race in their communities, and bring more mayors to the table to be champions against racial disparities.

2. Position Mayors as "Learners"

Mayors want more training to talk about race and racism, and help their community understand the urgency and rationale behind why government (and private organizations) must address racial disparities. Cities are worried that a focus on race may alienate certain constituents, and want a compelling, broad-based narrative to make a clearer case. Framing a discussion around race in a sensitive manner is difficult and requires nuanced language and expertise, and mayors can use a space to be learners, not experts, on race. The use of history and data have been effective approaches for some cities in framing a narrative around race. Learning from other mayors, who have effectively done this, can also be helpful.

3. Build an Effective Narrative

Across the board, cities and mayors desire a better business case around why racial disparities hamper economic growth and overall economic health in cities, as a way to appeal to a larger collection of stakeholders, including hesitant constituents and the private sector, and justify prioritization of (and financial allocation to) policies and practices that target specific groups in their cities.

Build Internal Capacity

1.   Establish a Baseline Understanding

City staff need to come to a shared definition and understanding of government's role in addressing racial disparities to truly effect practice change. Cities that have implemented toolkits or evaluation changes have stumbled without first training staff in implicit bias, systemic racism, and government's historical and current roles in perpetuating racial disparities. This is true especially for frontline staff, who need concrete guidance on how their individual roles affect racial outcomes and practical steps to changing their work.

2. Create a Network

City staff seek connections with peers in other cities to point to tangible examples of success elsewhere. While many cities are working on innovative programs in areas such as minority and women-owned business enterprise (MWBE) procurement, hiring, and equitable economic development, the best practices coming from these efforts are not widely shared. City staff want to convene with peers in similar roles in other cities, and city leaders want deeper connections with their peers to build and learn from each other's successes. Cities also want a streamlined resource to reach out to in order to find out about a broader set of best practices, from effective procurement policies that meaningfully engage MWBE businesses, to ways to get more departments or business leaders around the table, to programs that target economic mobility for specific populations.

3. Reflect the Community in Staff & Leadership

As mounting disparities fuel a moment of national crisis, city governments need sensitive ways to address the needs of the community, yet many municipalities lack a staff or leadership that reflects the diversity of their population at large. Cities are increasingly prioritizing having leadership and staff that reflects the make-up of their communities, and want to test innovative practices across recruiting and procurement to achieve this goal.

Bridge to Partners

1. Bring Partners to the Table

Achieving true community change is limited without partnerships with private and not-for-profit sectors. Cities want more effective ways to engage both community organizations and business leaders to affect broader change in practice and learn from creative mechanisms that the private sector has used. The bully pulpit of the mayor has begun to achieve this in some cities.

2. Include Physical and Economic Development

Urban residents often experience legacies of government discrimination in physical ways, yet the city agencies responsible for these decisions are often missing from the discussion. Many equity initiatives within cities center on social and human service agencies, and leave out departments focused on economic development, public works, transportation, planning and development, and thus limit the effectiveness of equity programs and practice change.

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Cities

Austin, TX
Boston, MA
Columbia, SC
Gary, IN
Grand Rapids, MI
Gresham, OR
Houston, TX
Louisville, KY
Nashville, TN
New Orleans, LA
New York, NY
Portland, OR
West Sacramento, CA

Organizations

PolicyLink
Equity and Results
JUST Capital
Training Partners
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Living Cities
100 Resilient Cities
National Urban League
Bloomberg Associates
Kresge Foundation
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Open Society Foundations
Center for Social Inclusion
Virginia Commonwealth University
Cook Ross, Inc.
Coalition for Communities of Color
Center for Equity and Inclusion

ABOUT THE UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF MAYORS

The United States Conference of Mayors (USCM) is the official non-partisan organization of cities with populations of 30,000 or more. There are 1,408 such cities in the country today. Each city is represented in the Conference by its chief elected official, the mayor.

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ABOUT HR&A ADVISORS, INC.

HR&A Advisors Inc. is an advisory firm of urbanists who care deeply about America's cities, and who have helped to build them for the last 40 years. We are known for the rigor of our analysis, our deep relationships with City governments, our knowledge of local economics and economic development actors, and our ability to get things done.

We focus on the last mile of policy change - translating the ideas of communities and their advocates into meaningful systems change within city government. We launch programs that advance social and economic justice and inform policy. We work with advocates so that they can be the most effective at using the levers available to them to distribute the benefits of growth. We help our clients to think about who will benefit from economic development from the very beginning, and show them how to make more equitable projects, neighborhoods, and cities.

We are a bridge between intentions and implementation.

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