COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY ABOUT EQUITY
Equity in Advocacy Series, Fact Sheet #6

October 2020

This fact sheet is the sixth in the *Racial Equity in Advocacy* series for social policy advocates addressing unequal opportunities by race. Each fact sheet will provide information equipping advocates to embed a racial equity lens into their work to close gaps and improve outcomes for communities of color. Please see the first fact sheet in the series for a review of key terms and concepts.

One of the biggest challenges for social policy advocates is presenting their work and making the case for change before unfamiliar or hostile audiences. While persuading and constructing convincing arguments is part and parcel of an advocate's job, where it concerns the topic of race, winning allies brings an extra layer of complexity because of historic and enduring divisions in this country. Fortunately, it is not an impossible task if we study the lessons learned from past wins for people of color.

Encouraging Equity Within Organizations

We are living through a time of significant social upheaval and there is no shortage of media coverage concerning social and structural racism. Social policy advocates are becoming more aware that they may have room to grow in their understanding of equity, especially pertaining to social policies that disproportionately affect communities of color. When attempting to effect change within organizations where there may be some resistance, it is helpful to first try to get everyone on the same page about what racial equity means. We encourage you to take your staff through this series of fact sheets to increase their awareness about the fundamentals of racial equity, understand the historical and contemporary inequities in safety net programs, and to plan for sharing power with the communities you serve.

You may encounter leaders who, for fear of agitating opponents or distracting from an advocacy goal, prefer to avoid discussing race in the policymaking process. Counter these notions by sharing that safety net programs have always been highly racialized. Avoiding discussions about race only functions to sustain prevailing myths about communities of color. To communicate effectively about reaching racial equity in social policy, begin by reframing the discussion on racial disparities.

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Communicate the Truth about Racial Disparities

There is no empirical evidence to support the prevailing narrative that communities of color experience poorer outcomes because of personal or cultural deficits. We must counter this narrative by presenting the facts. There is ample proof that lack of opportunity holds communities of color back.

Opportunities propel all people toward advancement in education, careers, and even health. Merriam-Webster defines *opportunity* as "a favorable juncture of circumstances," which manifests in many areas of life. For example, attending schools with advanced coursework better prepares people for higher education and/or professional careers. Internships and social networks connect job seekers to lucrative advertised and unadvertised opportunities. Comprehensive healthcare coverage offers access to medical treatment that could have otherwise been cost-prohibitive. On the other hand, it is much more difficult for residents of communities with lower quality schools and fewer businesses offering family-sustaining wages and benefits to achieve their goals.

The following points will be helpful as you communicate these and other important messages to colleagues in the field.

1. Appeal to our shared humanity. Each racial and ethnic group wants to be able to live independently, provide for themselves and their families, nurture their children, and watch them grow and thrive.

2. Debunk myths about safety net programs. Dehumanizing narratives about "welfare queens" and "deadbeat dads" are the biggest reason for the hostility toward safety net programs. Lay these myths to rest by presenting the facts. For example, 58 percent of SNAP households with at least one working-age, non-disabled adult are employed and do not earn enough to leave SNAP.[i] Do your research to find more examples that confirm how the safety net truly functions as a *safety net* helping families bounce back during times of adversity.

3. Emphasize that safety net programs are *work supports*. This counters negative narratives by sharing that those receiving benefits desire to work and that safety net programs make it easier for them to work. Safety net programs meet basic needs. It is extremely difficult for anyone to get up and make it to work every day on an empty stomach, if they slept on the street or a crowded shelter the night before, or if they are suffering with an untreated, chronic illness. Safety net programs provide or facilitate the acquisition of food, housing, and healthcare that give people the stability they need to work.

4. Although discussing race can seem divisive, approach the subject from the standpoint of bridging divides and working toward unity and healing.
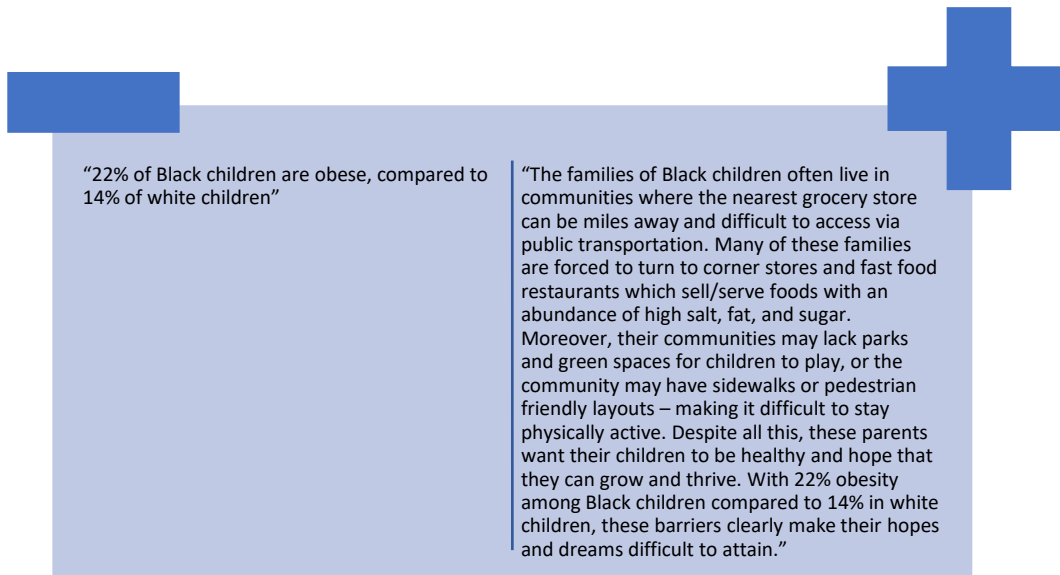
Changing the Narrative

The fear of discussing racial disparities often comes from attempting to avoid negative stereotypes about who utilizes safety net programs and why. Our goal should be to change the narrative altogether. We must move away from a focus on personal deficits rooted in racism to identifying and eliminating the barriers to opportunity that marginalized communities face.

Social policy advocates can change the narratives about communities of color by thoughtfully considering race and ethnicity in our use of data and analysis of policy impact. Describing the barriers to

opportunities that marginalized communities face will show that current outcomes are not a result of personal deficits, but of years of compounding neglect and marginalization. Moreover, the new narrative should be strengths-based and affirmative, highlighting the hopes and dreams of communities, which humanizes and connects them to the same aspirations that all communities share.

Consider this example:

| "22% of Black children are obese, compared to 14% of white children" | "The families of Black children often live in communities where the nearest grocery store can be miles away and difficult to access via public transportation. Many of these families are forced to turn to corner stores and fast food restaurants which sell/serve foods with an abundance of high salt, fat, and sugar. Moreover, their communities may lack parks and green spaces for children to play, or the community may have sidewalks or pedestrian friendly layouts – making it difficult to stay physically active. Despite all this, these parents want their children to be healthy and hope that they can grow and thrive. With 22% obesity among Black children compared to 14% in white children, these barriers clearly make their hopes and dreams difficult to attain." |

The fact sheets in the latter part of this series describe the ways in which communities of color have been left out of the strategies government has used to lift people out of poverty. As you advocate for policy change, be careful to include an accurate historical framing of the issue in order to help change the demeaning—and often dehumanizing—narratives about people of color. Conveying history can support a more tolerant, diverse, and inclusive society, by generating understanding of the diversity of human experience across time and place.[ii]

Further Reading

Below is a list of organizations with tools and resources on framing:

- Frameworks Institute body of work on equity
- Opportunity Agenda, Communications Toolkit
- 'You Can't Lift People Up by Putting Them Down': How to Talk About Tough Issues of Race, Poverty, and More, BMe Community

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[i] Phillips, N. (2018). *SNAP and Work*. Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy. Retrieved from https://www.clasp.org/sites/default/files/publications/2018/01/2018_snapandwork.pdf
[ii] Miller, T. L., L'Hôte, E., and Volmert, A. (2020). *Communicating about History: Challenges, Opportunities, and Emerging Recommendations*. Washington, DC: Frameworks Institute. Retrieved from https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/FRAJ8334-History-Strategic-Brief-200805-2-WEB.pdf