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How Nonprofits Can Use Information from the Federal Government's Sweeping New Project to Advance Equity and Racial Justice

By: Tim Delaney

For most of us in the nonprofit space – whether as nonprofit employees, board members, volunteers, or donors – we're driven by both a personal sense of calling and a collective sense of shared mission to make the world, our community, a better place.

Fortunately, that drive to improve is not restricted to nonprofits. In 2021, the federal government launched a comprehensive internal review of major services it provides to the public to assess whether systemic barriers are blocking people from receiving high-impact services.

Federal agencies used their assessments to develop Equity Access Plans for removing barriers. The agencies recently published their plans, many summaries of which have been assembled in an online report, [Advancing Equity and Racial Justice Through the Federal Government](#), along with other useful information.

[Assess whether] programs and policies perpetuate systemic barriers to opportunities and benefits for people of color and other underserved groups.’ Those underserved groups include veterans, rural residents, people with disabilities, the elderly, and more.

As organizations committed to the public good, nonprofits would benefit by learning more about this sweeping project. These plans can change the way your nonprofit works with the government and can hold lessons on how to adjust your programs to be more equitable. To that end, this article describes the government’s comprehensive approach, identifies how nonprofits can use the information, and offers steps nonprofits can replicate to advance equity and racial justice in their organizations.

A Comprehensive Approach

On his first day in office, President Biden signed an [Executive Order](#) establishing “an ambitious whole-of-government equity agenda” that would “pursue a comprehensive approach to advancing equity for all, including people of color and others who have been historically underserved, marginalized, and adversely affected by persistent poverty and inequality.”

He also articulated this fundamental truth: that “advancing equity, civil rights, racial justice, and equal opportunity is the responsibility” of the entire government. The same applies to us all in the nonprofit community.

Assessing and Planning the Equitable Delivery of Services to the Public

The President directed each agency to “assess whether, and to what extent, its programs and policies perpetuate systemic barriers to opportunities and benefits for people of color and other underserved groups.” Those underserved groups include veterans, rural residents, people with disabilities, the elderly, and more.

In 2021 and early 2022, more than 90 federal agencies, including all Cabinet-level agencies, conducted equity assessments of three to five of their high-impact services to uncover where systemic barriers might exist. Then each agency developed an Equity Access Plan to replace barriers with “policies and programs that

deliver resources and benefits equitably to all.”

This landing page, [Advancing Equity and Racial Justice Through the Federal Government](#), posts summaries of the Equity Access Plans of the largest 25 agencies. That online report arranges the information so readers can look:

- For reports from specific agencies (e.g., Department of Health and Human Services).
- Within broad areas of interest (e.g., Economic Justice, with subparts like “strengthening the social safety net”).
- At overarching ways the federal government is embedding equity in the everyday business of government (e.g., delivering equity through grantmaking).

Implementing Plans and Monitoring Progress

As federal agencies implement their Equity Access Plans, they’re also monitoring their progress. Agencies also have been charged with monitoring how effective they’ve been advancing an equitable recovery to the pandemic through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA).

To illustrate, the Treasury Department recently issued this [Equity and Outcomes Resource Guide](#) relating to one ARPA program – the historic \$350 billion Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Fund (CSLFRF). The Resource Guide identifies ways state, local, and Tribal governments have been weaving equity strategies into use of their CSLFRF allocations. Those equity strategies include actions such as:

- Goal setting
- Identifying high-need populations
- Engaging underserved communities so people can have a voice in their own future
- Collecting performance data to track progress toward advancing equitable outcomes

Importantly, state, local, and Tribal governments – once having learned and applied these strategies in connection with their ARPA funding allocations – can apply the strategies throughout all their operations.

How Nonprofits Can Use the Information

Information from the project can be useful to nonprofits in multiple ways. To cite just one example, nonprofit advocates and grant writers working to reform the broken government-nonprofit grants and contracting processes – including at state and local levels – can cite the fact that the federal government recognizes the need to “reduc[e] administrative burden in grants applications and in compliance activities.”

Each area of interest identifies a sampling – not a full inventory – of ways Congress has tasked multiple federal agencies to apply their special expertise to tackle the same broad interest area. For instance, the Economic Justice sampling shows programs by six different agencies.

1. Insights from the Equity Access Plans of Individual Federal Agencies

If a nonprofit works directly with a federal agency or has a grant or contract with a state or local government that is paid with funds from a federal agency, then the nonprofit may benefit from reading the full Equity Action Plan posted on that agency’s main website.

2. Ideas from the Areas of Interest

The online report, [Advancing Equity and Racial Justice Through the Federal Government](#), includes an “Areas of Interest” section that lists eight broad social challenges:

- Civil Rights
- Criminal Justice
- Economic Justice
- Educational Equity
- Environmental Justice
- Global Equality
- Health Equity
- Housing Justice and Community Investment

3. Innovative New Strategies to Embed Equity in Governing

The online report’s section on “Embedding equity in the everyday business of government” may be the most useful. It features five “innovative new strategies \that agencies are using for the first time \to embed equity in day-to-day governing”:

- Reducing administrative burdens and simplifying government services

- Engaging with stakeholders and communities who have been historically excluded from policy-making processes
- Narrowing wealth gaps through federal contracting and procurement
- Delivering equity through grantmaking
- Building accountability for equity through data collection and reporting

Replicable Steps for Nonprofits

There's another way nonprofits can utilize the federal project: to ask whether the federal government – which often gets stereotyped as slow and stodgy – is light-years ahead of your organization on the topic of advancing equity and racial justice? Have you, are you, or will you conduct a similar review? If not, what would it take to make such a review possible?[*]

Delivering on the ideals of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice requires granular-level work, not just lofty good intentions.”

The federal project illustrates some key features for organizations embarking on a review to ensure they are walking their talk about their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) throughout their external and internal work.

- Divide the task into smaller pieces to make it more manageable and impactful. Simply issuing an edict from on high declaring that henceforth everyone in the organization will respect the importance of DE&I will not be effective. Instead, engage everyone in every part of the organization (e.g., each board committee, each program area, and each function of internal operations) to review what they do – and can do better – to advance the organization's commitment to DE&I. Delivering on the ideals of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice requires granular-level work, not just lofty good intentions.
- Consider issuing a report to key stakeholders, and then do it. Gulp, this part can feel scary. What if the results aren't perfect? What if, double gulp, the results are bad? Well, that's the thing about accountability – it can help drive improvements. Would we have studied as much in elementary, middle, and high school if our parents didn't have to sign our report cards?
- It's a lifelong commitment, not a one-and-done assignment to scratch off a list. The White House recognizes, **“Advancing equity is not a one-year project – it is a generational commitment that will require sustained leadership**

and partnership with all communities.”

- Calibrate for real improvements, not perfection. As an older white male with what I believe to be good intentions on equity issues, I really want to be correct on DE&I matters so I don't inadvertently offend anyone. And as a former ethics student of Congresswoman and then-Professor Barbara Jordan, whom I admired deeply and identify with in so many ways, I *especially* don't want to blow it on matters of ethics or equity. So, reader, if you're like me and worry that others expect perfection, let's chill. Consider our collective experience with the Constitution, which has been amended 27 times: immediate perfection is not required, just an earnest effort to do your best. Do not let elusive perfection hold you back. *Just do it.*
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[*] We occasionally hear of resistance from board members to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) programs and policies. Sometimes opposition is styled, “Our mission is different – we’re not a civil rights organization.” True, every group’s mission should be honored, but no one is asking for such a change. The federal government’s review whether systemic barriers are blocking people from receiving high-impact services did not transform it into a civil rights organization. Other times, we hear the argument, “We’re just too big to do that.” Well, if an entity as mammoth and complex as the federal government can conduct a comprehensive review, then nonprofits can, too. Of course, nonprofits often don’t have the capacity or resources to undertake one more project immediately. That’s why breaking the overall project into smaller pieces helps to ensure forward progress is made. The entire project doesn’t have to be done instantly; the federal government took a year. Yet, we all need to find a way to lean in and move forward. The issue is too important to relegate to a “want-to” or “if we could.” A commitment to equity is a must-have. It’s not optional.