

# **ADVANCING RACIAL EQUITY ACROSS THE WATER SECTOR:** A Toolkit for Utilities



# PREFACE

With the imperative for racial justice and the historic federal investment in water infrastructure through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021, the water sector is primed to make meaningful progress in addressing racial disparities across water services.

Water-related inequities have persisted through time and are growing more urgent in the face of an increasingly disruptive and volatile climate. We must set an example for racial and service equity.

Advancing racial equity requires openness to exploring past wrongs, hearing uncomfortable truths, and actively working towards shifting the status quo. Although current water utility leaders did not initiate historical racial inequities, utilities have the duty as anchor institutions in our communities to acknowledge and address these disparities with equitable solutions.

The Racial Equity Toolkit serves as a starting place to help water utilities look both inward at their own policies, practices, and programs, and outward to build relationships and collaborate with their community. No matter where a utility is in its racial equity journey, this Toolkit provides guidance, a common language, and a sensible framework to assess current practices and develop a path to make progress. As practitioners gain practice with the Toolkit, they will be able to inform its future development and evolution. We welcome and encourage your ongoing feedback as we evolve and adapt this Toolkit over time.

The Alliance hopes you join us in our journey towards an equitable water future, in which race is no longer a predictor of access to safe, affordable, and reliable drinking water and wastewater services; where all people benefit from investments in our water systems; and where all communities are resilient in the face of a changing climate. Together, we can achieve an equitable and sustainable water future for all.



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# INTRODUCTION

The Racial Equity Toolkit was developed to enable water utilities to work to improve their racial equity practices and outcomes. The Racial Equity Toolkit is comprised of:

1. **This introduction to the Racial Equity Toolkit**
2. **The Racial Equity Toolkit**
3. **[The Racial Equity Resource Bank](#)**

Given that every utility has unique governance structures and on-the-ground conditions, the Toolkit was designed as a guide that encourages utilities to start where they are and progress systematically through a maturity framework. The Toolkit is not a prescriptive blueprint, but instead a living framework that supports utilities in assessing their current practices and identifying, prioritizing, and implementing strategic actions for more racially equitable outcomes.

Not unlike other institutions, the water sector was built upon policies that have created persistent racial disparities in water services across the US. The US Water Alliance has previously published seminal reports touching on the state of racial disparities including *Closing the Water Access Gap in the United States: A National Action Plan*, which found **that race is the strongest predictor of water access and sanitation in the United States.**<sup>1</sup> Frontline communities experience water inequities and impacts from an increasingly disruptive and volatile climate “first and worst.” Black, Indigenous, and People of Color are disproportionately impacted by water equity issues affecting water access, affordability, water quality, flooding, environmental hazards, and public health threats such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

As outlined in the US Water Alliance report, [Water Equity Taskforce: Insights for the Water Sector](#), water utility leaders embrace the depth of their mission to deliver equitable water and wastewater services, safeguard public health, and protect the environment. As anchor institutions within their communities providing critically important public health services, water utilities are in the prime position to inform and guide greater racial equity across all aspects of delivering water services.

An equitable water future for all requires proper representation and inclusion of those who have historically been excluded from the decision-making process. Utilities are looking both inward at staff and outward at their communities to understand whose voices are missing and intentionally welcome them to the table. This is especially important as the sector faces workforce challenges. In 2018, Brookings reported that 67% of water workers are white, and many of the Black, Indigenous, and People of Color that do work in the sector hold administrative and frontline positions rather than managerial roles.<sup>3</sup>

The Toolkit does not offer a racial equity destination; rather, it is intended to help inform and guide the evolution of water utilities and to be informed by the experience of those who apply the Toolkit to their work. This feedback loop will help ensure the Racial Equity Toolkit is a “living document” that will continue to advance racial equity across the water sector.

# Glossary

Presented here are three terms relevant to this introduction to the Racial Equity Toolkit. To access other terms related to the Toolkit, please visit our Racial Equity Toolkit [webpage](#).

**Anchor Institutions<sup>4</sup> are:**

- Public service entities—like hospitals, universities, or utilities—tied to a location due to infrastructure or mission.
- Entities that provide critical services and vital assets to improve the economy, health, environment, and well-being in communities.
- Organizations that provide active civic leadership, as well as participate in and add to the public life and character of their community.

**Racial equity** is the condition that would be achieved if one's racial identity no longer predicted, in a statistical sense, how one fares. When we use the term, we are thinking about racial equity as one part of racial justice, and thus we also include work to address the root causes of inequities—not just their manifestation. This includes the elimination of policies, practices, attitudes, and cultural messages that reinforce differential outcomes by race.

**Water equity** occurs when all communities have access to safe, clean, and affordable drinking water and wastewater services; are resilient in the face of floods, drought, and other climate risks; have a role in decision-making processes for water management in their communities; and share in the economic, social, and environmental benefits of water systems.

# RACIAL EQUITY TOOLKIT

## OVERVIEW

The Racial Equity Toolkit focuses on five thematic areas: **Organizational Development, Community Partnerships, Workforce Development, Capital Projects, and Customer Service.** The Toolkit offers key foci for each theme and presents the objectives and actions to be taken in a phased approach to develop greater maturity across each. It should be noted that the thematic areas and foci presented are the beginning of the work to be accomplished. As leaders gain experience with racial equity, new themes will emerge and new foci within each will be identified to advance greater racial equity in our practices, policies, and programs.

### Organizational Development

Organizational Development is defined as a planned and systematic approach to improving the performance of an organization and/or its culture. As it relates to achieving racial equity, the Toolkit offers four core foci of organizational development: inclusive culture, service and equity ethos, racially equitable outcomes, and data collection and transparency.

### Community Partnerships

Community Partnerships take many forms, and while each has unique objectives, the foundation of community partnerships is built upon a collective desire to work towards a common good through shared responsibilities and reciprocal processes. To ensure utilities build reciprocal and supportive relationships with Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, three foci are presented: community relations, community engagement, and community leadership programs.

### Workforce Development

Workforce Development is an area of increasing importance across the water sector, with significant retirements underway and a lack of a skilled, diverse talent pool available to help ensure a representative water workforce. Four key foci are presented: representation, community recruitment pathways, hiring practices, and staff retention.

### Capital Projects

Capital Projects are long-term and capital-intensive projects that seek to build, improve, maintain, or develop a capital asset. This is an important area of focus to ensure a multi-generational approach towards water equity. To achieve equity in capital projects, the Toolkit presents four foci: equitable resource investments, climate resilience, inclusive planning and design, and contracting and procurement.

### Customer Service

Customer Service is a set of actions and interactions that define the experience customers have before, during, and after they receive water services. To guide greater equity in this often one-on-one interaction, the Toolkit provides four foci: compassionate customer care, assistance and affordability, collection practices, and equitable operations and maintenance.

# A Phased Approach

Racial Equity is a journey, not a destination. This Toolkit lays out a four-phased approach to advancing, with greater maturity, across each of the areas of foci within each theme. It is important to note that many of the phases have dependencies with others. Further, due to the diversity of utility structures and enabling conditions on the ground, the time it takes to move from phase to phase is not predictable or prescriptible, and it is highly probable that how one progresses across the phases will not necessarily be a linear process. As one learns and gains experience, there may also be a need to revert to earlier phases.

To facilitate engagement within and across each theme, the Toolkit provides four clearly outlined phases presented with clear steps and actions to be achieved, reflecting a greater depth of engagement as one progresses from Phase 0 to Phase 3.

## **Phase 0:** Pre-Action

Represents a “business as usual” approach and indicates that the utility has not yet effectively engaged around this objective. Current practices may be contributing to racial inequities.

## **Phase 1:** Initiate

The utility is taking preliminary or foundational steps towards addressing racial equity in this objective.

## **Phase 2:** Implement

The utility is beginning to put systems in place for racial equity action to occur and be sustained.

## **Phase 3:** Operationalize

The utility is working to operationalize racial equity action across the organization.



# HOW TO USE THE RACIAL EQUITY TOOLKIT

The Racial Equity Toolkit is designed to be used as a self-assessment tool for water sector utilities to establish and then measure progress against a baseline of racial equity. Presently, the Toolkit offers areas of foci, descriptions of maturity levels, and recommended actions across five key themes: Organizational Development, Community Partnerships, Workforce Development, Capital Projects, and Customer Service.

Utilities can use the Toolkit to understand how current policies, practices, and programs continue to promote and exacerbate racial inequities. The resources provided will enable utilities to identify opportunities to improve their internal operations, actions, and external relationships to better center the needs of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. By taking the following suggested steps and sharing one's experience using the Toolkit, we can collectively make strides in achieving greater racial equity across the entire water sector.

## **Step 1: Build Your Team.**

Bring together cross-departmental teams with differing levels of experience, ensuring diversity in race, thought, and perspectives. Further, consider outside connections and connect with other like-minded utilities, join the US Water Alliance's Water Equity Network, and reach out to others in your networks who have spent time doing equity work.

## **Step 2: Start Where You Are.**

Each utility has a different history and context. The Toolkit was built with this in mind, designed to help you start from wherever you are to find entry points and strategic levers to improve the equity outcomes of your utility.

## **Step 3: Establish a Clear Work Plan.**

Create clear timelines and accountability measures to support advancement through the phases to reach Phase 3 within a timeframe that both matches internal capabilities and moves at the speed of trust.

## **Step 4: Do Your Homework.**

The fundamental purpose of this Toolkit and exercise is to center the needs of the Black, Indigenous, and People of Color most impacted by water equity challenges. By focusing on the communities most impacted by these disparities, we have the greatest opportunity to correct historic and systemic inequities. As this work begins and throughout the phased approach, continue your own learning and education so that you are better aware, focused, and set up for success.

## **Step 5: Create Accountability Pathways.**

For racial equity work to progress meaningfully in a utility, leaders need to be accountable for racial equity outcomes. Building pathways for accountability within strategic plans, work plans, performance reviews, and community relations strategies will help your utility stay focused on the racial equity work.

## **Step 6: Sustain Momentum.**

The timelines for different actions vary based on your utility's circumstances, capacity, and leadership. Some actions will be easy adjustments while others may take years to implement. It is important to advance through the phases at a reasonable pace while sustaining momentum.

## **Step 7: Ensure the Toolkit Remains Relevant.**

The Racial Equity Toolkit is envisioned as a living document that will evolve along with the water sector based on its experiences and successes in advancing racial equity. The US Water Alliance will seek feedback on its future iterations of this Toolkit.

# THE RACIAL EQUITY TOOLKIT



## ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

### Inclusive Culture

Commit to building and sustaining an internal and external culture that is equitable, affirming, and inclusive of people of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.

#### Phase 0

Organizational leaders perpetuate a culture within the utility and outward to the community that is not equitable and inclusive for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. Differences are either ignored or individuals are encouraged to assimilate into the dominant culture. Feedback shows division and distrust between the utility and both staff and communities of different racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds.

#### Phase 1

The utility conducts a culture scan or equity assessment internally and externally to establish a baseline and identify whether the utility culture is equitable and inclusive, particularly for employees and community members from non-dominant cultures. Based on these results, policies and practices that are inclusive, as well as potentially discriminatory, are identified.

#### Phase 2

Leaders support the development and implementation of an internal and external culture change plan which includes regular racial equity and other equity-related trainings, discussions, events, and onboarding practices that center equity and transparency. In a collaborative process, the staff develop a shared set of equity values and principles. There are a range of procedures for employees, customers, and community partners to report instances of and for addressing discrimination and violation of equity policies. Examples include investigatory and disciplinary approaches, restorative justice, organizational ombuds, and mediation.

#### Phase 3

Based on staff and community feedback, organizational leadership and culture are affirming and inclusive to people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds—both internally and externally. Racial equity is consistently institutionalized in the culture of the organization and does not depend on one individual or a small group to be expressed or prioritized. Leaders support, implement, and are accountable for using inclusive practices. Staff feel safe and comfortable surfacing concerns or gaps without negative implications to their job security or standing with their peer groups.

### Service & Equity Ethos

Deliver inclusive and equitable service to all customers with the recognition of historic service inequities based on race and income.

#### Phase 0

There is no stated commitment to equitable service for all customers, and the utility does not acknowledge histories of inequity in the water sector, the community, or past practices. The utility does not emphasize forming meaningful partnerships with frontline community partners and other organizations to improve service. There is no commitment to compassionate customer service and community engagement, and feedback shows distrust between the utility, employees, and the community.

#### Phase 1

Utility leaders formally recognize a service and equity ethos as an important goal. The utility builds an action plan to become an anchor institution in the community. Leaders identify frontline community partners to develop reciprocal relationships with, to identify gaps, and to make progress towards inclusive and equitable water services.

#### Phase 2

Staff at all levels of the utility can see and communicate how a service and equity ethos and racial equity connect to their work at the utility. The utility has developed relationships with community partners, philanthropy, and other organizations to expand equitable outcomes and address community needs.

#### Phase 3

The service and equity ethos is operationalized throughout utility culture, policies, and practices. There is a clear understanding by all utility staff, board members, community partners, and the community that the utility is deeply committed to serving as an anchor institution within the community.

## ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT *(continued)*

### Racially Equitable Outcomes

Embed racial equity as a stated priority in organizational and departmental goals and outcomes.

#### Phase 0

Minimal data about the community and utility staff is available, and the utility is unable to disaggregate data by race, ethnicity, or other demographic categories. Any available data is not shared within the utility or publicly.

#### Phase 1

Procedures for collecting disaggregated racial data for staff, communities served by the utility, and water shutoff and restoration data are developed and implemented. Data collection procedures address any legal limitations to inform utility strategy prioritizations. The data collection process may need to rely on sources outside of the utility (e.g., Census Data or Federal Reserve Economic Data). Internal staff and external community perceptions of disparities are gathered and recorded. Disaggregated data is used to establish a baseline for future comparison.

#### Phase 2

Data collected in Phase 1 identifies any internal and service inequities at the utility. A gap analysis is used to determine additional data collection needs. Metrics are developed to measure the efficacy of various programs and projects related to advancing racial equity within the utility, as well as services offered to the community. Depending on legal limitations, disaggregated racial data is accessible to the public. Data is analyzed against perceived inequities. Protocols are identified for data access and sharing.

#### Phase 3

The utility regularly analyzes disaggregated data by race for customers and staff. The data is used to drive the prioritization of resource investment and to help determine if the utility is meeting racially equitable outcomes. Data to support workforce planning and decision making is presented in a way that is accessible and transparent to the public and creates internal and external accountability for racially equitable outcomes.

### Data Collection & Transparency

Improve the collection of disaggregated employee and community data to drive decision-making and ensure transparency and accountability.

#### Phase 0

Racial equity has not been identified as a stated priority in organizational goals and outcomes. Inequities in the utility's systems, policies, practices, and water services remain unknown.

#### Phase 1

The utility is aligned around shared values and definitions for equity within the utility. Awareness levels are high enough to identify prioritizing racial equity, but there is not enough understanding to carry it through implementation. Strategic racial equity outcomes may be identified for a few programs and initiatives.

#### Phase 2

Racial equity priorities are clearly understood by staff and partners and built into the accountability structures of the utility. Within every department and project team, at least one individual makes sure that equity goals are established and met.

#### Phase 3

Racial equity outcomes are embedded and tracked in the strategic plan, work plans, and individual and organizational performance indicators. The utility has a clear internal and outward-facing commitment to improving racially equitable outcomes. Top-down and bottom-up buy-in is evident for these initiatives. Staff openly recognize disparities and inequities and are motivated to eliminate them.

## COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

### Community Relations

Build trust and develop respectful relationships with communities served by the utility with a specific emphasis on establishing partnerships and accountability in service to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color disproportionately impacted by water inequities.

#### Phase 0

Community feedback shows a lack of trust between Black, Indigenous, and People of Color disproportionately impacted by water inequities and the utility. There are no significant investments in time and resources to engage with frontline communities, and instead, the majority of engagement is with communities that are self-advocating and vocal. The utility sees itself as a product-driven enterprise rather than a service-driven anchor institution.

#### Phase 1

The utility identifies as an anchor institution essential to the well-being of people and communities. There is a community relations strategy in place to build trust and improve community relationships between the utility and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color disproportionately impacted by water inequities.

#### Phase 2

The utility has trained its staff to understand their biases or misconceptions towards Black, Indigenous, and People of Color disproportionately impacted by water inequities—including the history and dynamics of exclusion, redlining, discrimination, and lack of water services in their communities. There is improved responsiveness to communities due to new or improved partnerships with Black, Indigenous, and People of Color-led community-based organizations (CBOs) and community leaders. The utility also improves community relations by investing time and resources into existing community priorities.

#### Phase 3

The utility operates as a racially equitable anchor institution. Black, Indigenous, and People of Color disproportionately impacted by water inequities see the utility as a trusted and accountable service provider that is accessible, responsive, equitable, and supportive of their needs. Utility staff who interface with the community are positive ambassadors for the utility's equity, access, and inclusion work. The utility actively supports Black, Indigenous, and People of Color-led visions and efforts that align with its mission or goals.

### Community Engagement

Work with community partners to center the perspectives and expertise of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color in utility work.

#### Phase 0

The utility only works with traditional partners and does not intentionally engage community leaders, residents who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, and community organizations led by those who are disproportionately impacted by water inequities. The process does not create the time and resources to engage with racially and ethnically diverse communities, or if it does, it does so in a tokenizing manner.

#### Phase 1

Black, Indigenous, and People of Color disproportionately impacted by water inequities are consulted on projects, but engagement and decision-making processes do not honor and incorporate their perspectives and needs. Community members are engaged too late in the process to influence outcomes and are not adequately compensated for their time and expertise. There is a lack of accountability surrounding community input, and community partners are not considered co-creators of solutions.

#### Phase 2

The utility seeks the community's input on priorities and programs and has allocated a budget for community engagement. An engagement plan guides the process that gathers information from and shares information with the community, including Black, Indigenous, and People of Color disproportionately impacted by water inequities. Measures are taken to ensure digital and language access, including language interpreters and translation of resources. Community members are offered financial compensation for their time spent in the process. Diverse racial and ethnic communities are engaged in dialogue, and the process has accountability measures for input received.

#### Phase 3

Black, Indigenous, and People of Color disproportionately impacted by water inequities are valued as co-creators of utility solutions. Community members are well-compensated for their participation in community-driven decision-making. The utility creates paid partnerships with CBOs and community leaders to develop programs that improve racially equitable outcomes. These programs may consist of community benefits agreements with accountability measures, transparent participatory planning, collaborative efforts between contractors and the community, and the creation of racial equity-focused community advisory boards.

## COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS *(continued)*

### Community Leadership Programs

Develop opportunities for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color disproportionately impacted by water inequities to develop their leadership skills and water sector awareness.

#### Phase 0

There are no formal programs for education and leadership development for community members.

#### Phase 1

Educational programs are developed for the general public, focusing on raising awareness of water issues. However, educational programs are not part of a cohesive ongoing engagement plan that centers on the community's needs and do not specifically reach out to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color disproportionately impacted by water inequities.

#### Phase 2

New programs are developed, or existing programs are leveraged to engage Black, Indigenous, and People of Color disproportionately impacted by water inequities in a way that centers their needs and interests. Programs include building job skills and/or supporting advocacy to address community concerns with the utility or local/regional government. Through these programs, participants gain knowledge and skills to secure utility and other water sector jobs, contracts, and other community-desired outcomes.

#### Phase 3

There are ongoing programs in place, potentially in partnership with CBOs, to recruit participants from Black, Indigenous, and People of Color disproportionately impacted by water inequities. Participants are compensated for their time and participation. In addition, participants receive leadership and job skills training that may include advocacy, public speaking, and other soft skills. Graduates from these programs effectively participate, advocate, and lead around equitable water management and planning in their communities as utility staff, policymakers, educators, and leaders at the local level and beyond; and/or as board, commission, or advisory group members.

## WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

### Representation

Build staff, governance bodies, and community advisory councils that are representative of the full racial and ethnic diversity of the surrounding communities.

#### Phase 0

Utility staff, governance bodies, and community advisory councils are racially homogeneous and do not represent the diversity of the community they serve. Staff composition is not seen as a problem, nor is there a plan to diversify the workforce. Black, Indigenous, and People of Color are underrepresented in the staff, particularly in higher-level and higher-paying positions. The Black, Indigenous, and People of Color working at the utility are predominantly concentrated in administrative, operations, and maintenance positions.

#### Phase 1

Diversity of staff, governance bodies, and community advisory councils are identified as an area for improvement with sufficient buy-in from leadership and staff. There is a plan in place that identifies metrics or goals to achieve racial representation that reflects or exceeds the communities served (especially in the case of low-diversity communities).

#### Phase 2

Plans to diversify staff, governance bodies, and community advisory councils are implemented, and progress is monitored. Representation of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color is starting to improve at all levels, including leadership.

#### Phase 3

The racial and ethnic diversity of the staff, governance bodies, and community advisory councils proportionally meets or exceeds that of the population served by the utility. In addition, individuals from racial and ethnic groups that have been historically underrepresented are found at all levels of the organization and are well-represented at the leadership level.

### Community Recruitment Pathways

Develop opportunities that create a clear path for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color to gain employment opportunities.

#### Phase 0

No programs or efforts exist that directly support Black, Indigenous, and People of Color to explore new employment opportunities in the utility or the water sector. The utility does not strategically post and advertise jobs in a way that intentionally engages diverse racial and ethnic groups.

#### Phase 1

The utility partners with easy-to-reach local schools and universities to create awareness of job opportunities and internships. These expanded efforts do not intentionally engage communities or academic institutions that serve Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, and therefore do not significantly change the demographics of applicants. The utility may develop an employee mentorship program to help emerging professionals network and gain opportunities, but many Black, Indigenous, and People of Color are not actively engaged.

#### Phase 2

Utilities have formal relationships with academic institutions that take students through an employment pipeline from school to the utility. Recruitment ambassadors actively build and maintain relationships with the community and academic institutions. The utility cultivates reciprocal relationships with targeted vocational services, CBOs, and educational institutions that serve Black, Indigenous, and People of Color to promote apprenticeships and internship programs. Utility mentorship programs actively recruit Black, Indigenous, and People of Color on staff, giving them opportunities to gain knowledge and skills to compete for higher-level and higher-paying jobs within the utility.

#### Phase 3

There are established, well-funded apprenticeships and internship programs developed with educational institutions and CBOs that serve Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. These programs help participants gain certifications and licenses required for utility work. Programs have specific recruitment goals, and low-cost financing options are available to program participants. Pre-apprenticeship programs teach trainees work-ready skills and help them acquire apprenticeship positions in skilled trades. Participants in workforce development programs have clear pathways to vacant positions within the utility and support structures to assist them throughout the application and interview processes.

## WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT *(continued)*

### Hiring Practices

Create and implement hiring practices to counter discrimination and racial bias, as well as diversify the staff at the utility.

#### Phase 0

Utility hiring practices favor people who 'fit' the dominant culture rather than recognizing the value of diversity in the organization and focus on recruitment through informal networks of existing staff and unions. The hiring practices have discriminatory impacts due to implicit bias and institutional policies and practices that intentionally or unintentionally favor white candidates over candidates who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.

#### Phase 1

The utility conducts a hiring equity baseline review and develops a hiring equity plan to identify strategies for improvement. All staff who are involved in the hiring process undergo implicit bias and hiring equity training, which is offered regularly.

#### Phase 2

The utility implements a hiring equity plan that complies with the utility's civil service requirements, structure, governance, and bargaining. The plan includes hiring practices that reduce the impact of implicit bias and institutional racism in hiring through the application, screening, interview, offer, and onboarding phases of the hiring process. There are tools to assess candidates based on the diversity of lived experience, skills, and expertise. Hiring panels are diverse and are accountable for ensuring the equity plan is implemented throughout the process.

#### Phase 3

Racial equity practices are embedded in hiring and human resource functions, changing civil service requirements and processes if necessary. The utility explicitly communicates expectations regarding racially equitable hiring and promotional practices to union representatives if unions are present. Jobs are offered to and accepted by racially diverse candidates. The utility is identified within the community as an equitable and desirable place to work.

### Staff Retention

Support the leadership and development of racially and ethnically diverse staff by implementing practices that support the cultivation, promotion, and retention of staff.

#### Phase 0

If and when people from diverse racial and ethnic groups are hired, they likely do not feel supported and included, frequently experience microaggressions or overt racism, and have a high turnover relative to the standard turnover rate for their position. Documented and undocumented complaints of racial discrimination are not adequately addressed or resolved. Administrative, operations, and maintenance staff do not have clear pathways for promotion or finding positions in different departments.

#### Phase 1

Utility leadership commits to retaining diverse talent. Retention surveys and focus groups are used to understand the factors contributing to job satisfaction. Exit surveys gather information on whether former employees felt supported and included. Data is disaggregated by race and used to inform improved practices.

#### Phase 2

Black, Indigenous, and People of Color on staff have clear pathways to leadership roles, feel supported by their supervisors and team, and are equitably compensated. There is an accountable grievance procedure for employees to report discrimination and violation of equity policies. The utility offers opportunities for administrative, operations, and maintenance staff to build skills and compete for other jobs within the utility. Racially diverse staff have access to organizational support and report working in a genuinely inclusive environment that is respectful and welcoming to everyone.

#### Phase 3

In addition to the practices in the previous phase, the utility conducts surveys of staff to collect data and anonymous suggestions on how to improve cultivation, retention, and promotion practices. Retention practices improve worker satisfaction, including pay equity reviews, mentoring programs, and professional development opportunities. Continuing education opportunities are well funded, accessible, and promoted to the staff at all levels and departments of the utility. As a result, there are high levels of retention and satisfaction of racially diverse staff at all levels. Black, Indigenous, and People of Color on staff feel comfortable enough to recommend candidates from their networks to apply for utility jobs.

## CAPITAL PROJECTS

### Equitable Resource Investments

Prioritize investments and staff time into infrastructure and capital improvement that address disparities in utility services experienced by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.

#### Phase 0

Infrastructure and capital improvement projects are not evaluated and prioritized using equity analyses, and resources disproportionately flow to majority-white and affluent communities within the service region. Black, Indigenous, and People of Color bear a disproportionate burden of water equity challenges due to inadequate, aging, or poorly maintained infrastructure and high levels of impervious cover in their communities. There is an inequitable distribution of green infrastructure in the utility's service area.

#### Phase 1

Equity is included as a criterion for capital projects, but this does not significantly change historically high levels of investment in majority-white and affluent neighborhoods or address systemic disinvestment in Black, Indigenous, and Communities of Color. Priority is largely given to projects that disproportionately benefit affluent majority-white communities.

#### Phase 2

The utility uses data-driven approaches to support the prioritization of equitable investments and to account for historical service disparities. Equity is a prioritized criterion for infrastructure and capital improvement investments and leads to increased allocation of resources for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.

#### Phase 3

Resources needed to fully address racial disparities (financial investments, staff/consultant time, data analysis and modeling, community input, etc.) are integrated into infrastructure and capital projects. Resources are allocated and pathways are developed to educate and compensate Black, Indigenous, and People of Color to participate throughout all phases of projects (planning, design, implementation, maintenance, assessment, and communications).

### Climate Resilience

Prioritize infrastructure and capital improvement investments that foster resilience in Black, Indigenous, and Communities of Color in the face of a changing climate.

#### Phase 0

Infrastructure and capital improvement projects are not evaluated for climate resilience benefits, do not improve the resilience of Black, Indigenous, and Communities of Color, and may have adverse effects on the region's climate resilience.

#### Phase 1

Climate resilience-building is included as a criterion for prioritization. The utility conducts climate modeling and scenario planning to consider the effects of climate change on water infrastructure in its community. Efforts to improve climate resilience do not prioritize neighborhoods facing the most pressing climate impacts.

#### Phase 2

Climate scenario analyses for the utility include the impact of climate change on water infrastructure in Black, Indigenous, and Communities of Color. Data-driven approaches are used to support prioritization and improve resilience in frontline communities that are more vulnerable to climate impacts. This leads to additional allocation of resources specifically for resilience-building in frontline Black, Indigenous, and Communities of Color. Planning actively counters historic disinvestment and considers the potential impacts of green gentrification and infrastructure investment.

#### Phase 3

Climate resilience for frontline Black, Indigenous, and Communities of Color is a primary criterion for infrastructure and capital improvement project prioritization. Community members work with the utility to identify the most pressing resilience-building community needs. The utility implements initiatives that build community climate resilience, provide multiple community benefits to frontline communities, and mitigate the harms of future climate impacts.

## CAPITAL PROJECTS *(continued)*

### Inclusive Planning & Design

Ensure that capital projects address the needs of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color disproportionately impacted by water equity issues.

#### Phase 0

Black, Indigenous, and People of Color disproportionately impacted by water equity issues are not part of project planning processes, or if they are part of planning processes, they are included in a tokenizing way. Community members are not provided with sufficient background information about programs and projects and therefore cannot engage in a meaningful way. The process is siloed within the utility and from the community and excludes diverse expertise, perspectives, and consideration of community-driven solutions.

#### Phase 1

A community engagement plan or protocol is developed to ensure consistent application of equity principles throughout capital planning processes. Engineering, planning, and design staff regularly confer with equity-focused colleagues from internal and/or external departments. Black, Indigenous, and People of Color disproportionately impacted by water equity issues are invited into the planning process, but the process is not set up to center their perspectives and needs. Community members are likely engaged via logistics (place, time, timing in the process, etc.) that limit their participation and influence, and they are not adequately compensated for their time and expertise.

#### Phase 2

Black, Indigenous, and People of Color disproportionately impacted by water inequities are invited into the planning and design process with a shared understanding of their influence on the process and logistics to enable their participation. Further, they are treated with respect, are well compensated for their time, and are provided with sufficient context and background information to effectively engage. Clearly defined community benefits are included in project goals.

#### Phase 3

In addition to the practices mentioned in the previous Phase, the planning process fosters informed democratic participation and community-driven decision-making. There are accountability measures in place to ensure that community needs have been addressed.

### Contracting & Procurement

Create opportunities for supplier and contractor diversity to help counter systemic and institutional barriers that prevent Black, Indigenous, and People of Color-owned firms from being competitive for supplier contracts.

#### Phase 0

Suppliers and contractors used by the utility are primarily white-owned businesses, and the same contractors are consistently used for the majority of utility projects. A very small percentage of supplier and contractor budgets may happen to be Black, Indigenous, and People of Color-owned businesses.

#### Phase 1

The utility recognizes the importance of supplier and contractor diversity and identifies strategies to improve supplier and contractor diversity. A small percentage of contracts go to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color-owned firms.

#### Phase 2

A supplier and contractor diversity plan is implemented with the goal of increasing the funds allocated to diverse suppliers and contractors. If legally permissible, criteria that favor contractor bids with diverse racial and ethnic representation are employed. The supplier diversity program gathers information from Black, Indigenous, and People of Color-owned firms to understand the barriers they may face while pursuing bids and provide resources to overcome them.

#### Phase 3

The utility partners with organizations (e.g., local small businesses and minority-owned business programs) to support Black, Indigenous, and People of Color to build capacity and be more competitive in bidding for supplier contracts. Supplier contractor bids are weighted if they come from Black, Indigenous, and People of Color-owned businesses. Larger prime contractors are required to engage diverse suppliers in subcontracting opportunities and report annually on progress. A regular auditing process is implemented to track and ensure that contractors are meeting these requirements.

## CUSTOMER SERVICE

### Compassionate Customer Care

Prioritize investments and staff time into infrastructure and capital improvement that address disparities in utility services experienced by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.

#### Phase 0

The customer service ethos is not grounded in service or equity and is instead focused on collections. The utility does not prioritize the customer experience and customers often have trouble accessing the support they need. Customer service representatives are not trained to build trust with customers and do not reflect the community's racial and ethnic demographics. Customer service representatives may also be rewarded for collections.

#### Phase 1

Utility leaders formally commit to a community and customer service mindset. The utility may conduct focus groups with trusted community partners to have facilitated conversations around the customer service experience. There are mechanisms in place to receive ongoing customer feedback, but the feedback may not be adequately addressed. The utility conducts an assessment of the demographics of customer service representatives to see if they reflect the community served.

#### Phase 2

The utility implements a responsible, compassionate community service plan that improves the customer experience. A mechanism is in place for customer service staff and CBOs to regularly share their feedback from the communities they serve, and feedback is adequately addressed by the utility. Customer service representatives are hired to reflect the community demographics. Customer service representatives are offered regular training opportunities in compassionate and responsive customer service, unconscious bias, connecting customers to assistance, and conflict resolution.

#### Phase 3

The utility customer service experience is accessible, compassionate, responsive, and well-regarded by the community as reflected by feedback. Customer service staff are seen as valuable ambassadors to the community and are supported and trained to provide exceptional, accessible service and to build connections and trust with the communities they serve. Data shows that the quality of customer service experience for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color is the same as for majority-white and affluent communities. Customer service staff understand the indicators of possible financial need and are effective at connecting customers to assistance.

### Assistance & Affordability

Expand access to and funding for low-income assistance and affordability programs that address the needs of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.

#### Phase 0

The utility is not concerned with addressing affordability. Water rate structures create a disproportionate burden on low-income households, and the utility is not considering cost recovery practices to reduce this burden. Affordability programs do not exist or are difficult to access. Water shutoffs and liens are often used, and there is no ongoing funding for low-income assistance programs or emergency assistance (i.e., COVID and natural disasters).

#### Phase 1

The utility recognizes the need to create affordable rates but may not be collecting data on how rate structures and assistance programs affect customer debt and the number of shutoffs for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. Low-income water assistance programs are established, and traditional utility marketing campaigns are used for enrollment and raising awareness. Temporary assistance programs are funded by employee and customer contributions. Barriers to receiving assistance persist, such as complex application processes and few translation services.

#### Phase 2

The utility conducts a rate and affordability study to examine the income characteristics of its customers and the impact on revenue and expenditures. Low-income water assistance programs use proactive community outreach efforts to low-income and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. Outreach efforts include partnering with local businesses and CBOs, and strategies to manage affordability may include leak detection and repair programs, debt forgiveness, assistance to renters, customized payment plans, use of best payment technologies, and reducing/eliminating costs associated with late payments for qualified low-income customers.

#### Phase 3

The utility identifies and pursues funding and cost recovery alternatives to reduce the financial burden on the community. The utility employs pricing/rate/billing approaches that best serve community needs and system health. If affordability challenges persist and assistance programs are still needed, they are low barrier, highly visible, and easily accessible. The utility proactively links customers to assistance and employs modern analytics and technology to enhance access and affordability. The utility works with CBOs and policymakers to create programs to ensure continued funding for assistance and affordability programs and relief funds. Affordability programs are periodically assessed and adaptively managed.

## CUSTOMER SERVICE *(continued)*

### Collection Practices

Prevent shutoffs, liens, and other punitive practices for customers with financial barriers.

#### Phase 0

The utility does not have any measures to prevent shutoffs, liens, and other punitive practices for customers facing financial challenges that impact their ability to pay their water bills. As a result, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color may be disproportionately experiencing punitive practices compared to majority-white and affluent neighborhoods. This could lead to foreclosures and evictions for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color that cannot afford their bills.

#### Phase 1

There is a shift in focus from collections to minimizing shutoffs for customers. The utility analyzes shutoffs and liens in their community, including the demographics of those affected by shutoffs and liens, how frequently these practices occur, how long they typically last, how shutoffs are prioritized throughout neighborhoods, and which customers get shut off first. There is proactive communication with customers about late and unpaid bills using traditional utility outreach methods.

#### Phase 2

The utility implements income-based programs to help prevent shutoffs, liens, and other punitive practices for customers. Data helps determine which strategies would be the best solutions for the utility and its ratepayers. These strategies may include raising the debt threshold that triggers a shutoff or lien and immunity for customers enrolled in assistance programs before they are at risk for shutoffs and liens. The utility also partners with housing organizations and CBOs to connect customers with additional assistance resources.

#### Phase 3

The utility minimizes the use of shutoffs, liens, and other punitive practices for their customers and eliminates them for people who are unable to pay their bills. Prevention strategies are periodically assessed to confirm and improve their effectiveness, and adjustments are made as necessary. As a result, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color are not disproportionately affected by punitive practices compared to majority-white and affluent communities.

### Equitable Operations & Maintenance

Ensure that operations and maintenance practices address disparities in the quality of infrastructure and response times.

#### Phase 0

Operations and maintenance (O&M) practices result in inequitable service across a utility's service area. This could result in the O&M needs of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color not receiving the same level of prioritization as other communities. Complaint-driven maintenance and even regular maintenance and emergency work tend to prioritize majority-white and affluent communities. Pathways for communicating operations and maintenance needs are unclear or complicated for community members. O&M staff experiences and observations are not often considered in prioritization approaches.

#### Phase 1

The utility recognizes that equity requires a clear focus on serving communities that have been historically impacted by systemic racism, redlining, and disinvestment and creates a plan to address disparities such as flooding, access to green infrastructure, lead service lines, and odor issues. The utility conducts a review of O&M needs related to community demographic data to identify inequities in service and response times.

#### Phase 2

The O&M needs of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color are heard, prioritized, and responded to in a timely and respectful manner. Priority is placed on communities that have more need for maintenance investments. Mechanisms are put in place for utility staff and CBOs to easily share the feedback they get from the communities they serve. As a result, community feedback shows increased trust in the utility to address their needs.

#### Phase 3

In addition to the conditions mentioned in the previous phase, O&M staff are seen by the utility as valuable ambassadors to the community and are supported and trained to build connections and trust with the communities they serve. Data shows that the condition of the water infrastructure in Black, Indigenous, and Communities of Color is the same as in majority-white and affluent communities.

# NOTES

- 1 US Water Alliance and DigDeep, *Closing the Water Access Gap in the United States: A National Action Plan* (US Water Alliance and DigDeep, 2019), [http://uswateralliance.org/sites/uswateralliance.org/files/publications/Closing%20the%20Water%20Access%20Gap%20in%20the%20United%20States\\_DIGITAL.pdf](http://uswateralliance.org/sites/uswateralliance.org/files/publications/Closing%20the%20Water%20Access%20Gap%20in%20the%20United%20States_DIGITAL.pdf).
- 2 US Environmental Protection Agency, *Water Utilities as Anchor Institutions: Impacting the equity, social, and economic fabric of communities and regions* (US Environmental Protection Agency, 2018), [https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2021-09/anchor-institutions\\_report.pdf](https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2021-09/anchor-institutions_report.pdf).
- 3 Joseph Kane and Adie Tomer, *Renewing the Water Workforce: Improving Water Infrastructure and Creating a Pipeline to Opportunity* (Brookings, 2018), <https://www.brookings.edu/research/water-workforce/>.
- 4 US Environmental Protection Agency, *Water Utilities as Anchor Institutions: Impacting the equity, social, and economic fabric of communities and regions* (US Environmental Protection Agency, 2018), [https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2021-09/anchor-institutions\\_report.pdf](https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2021-09/anchor-institutions_report.pdf).



# ABOUT THE US WATER ALLIANCE

The US Water Alliance advances policies and programs to secure a sustainable water future for all. Established in 2008, the Alliance is a nonprofit organization that brings together diverse interests to identify and advance common-ground, achievable solutions to our nation's most pressing water challenges. Our members and partners include community leaders, water providers, public officials, business leaders, environmental organizations, policy organizations, and more. We:

**Educate the nation about the true value of water and water equity, as well as the need for investment in water systems.** Our innovative approaches to building public and political will, best-in-class communications tools, high-impact events, media coverage, and publications are educating and inspiring the nation about how water is essential and in need of investment.

**Accelerate the adoption of One Water principles and solutions that effectively manage water resources and advance a better quality of life for all.** As an honest broker and action catalyst, we convene diverse interests to identify and advance practical, achievable solutions to our nation's most pressing water challenges. We do this through our strategic initiatives and One Water Hub, which offer high-quality opportunities for knowledge building and peer exchange. We develop forward-looking and inclusive water policies and programs, and we build coalitions that will change the face of water management for decades to come.

**Celebrate what works in innovative water management.** We shine a light on groundbreaking work through storytelling, analysis of successful approaches, and special recognition programs that demonstrate how water leaders are building stronger communities and a stronger America.



One Water, One Future.

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