



A CALL TO ACTION

APPLYING A RACE EQUITY LENS TO BUILD THRIVING COMMUNITIES

FIFTH IN A SIX-PART SERIES

Race Equity Efforts Underway in New Jersey: Families Need Advocacy and Assurance

By Christine Norbut Beyer

The New Jersey Department of Children and Families (NJDCF) believes that Black Lives Matter. We recognize that there is, and has always been, inequity in the child welfare system and that nationally—as well as in New Jersey—children of color are disproportionately placed in out-of-home care through child welfare and behavioral health systems. They also stay longer in out-of-home placement than their White and Latinx peers. And while there have been efforts in New Jersey through the years to address this inequity in the system, racial inequity remains pervasive and persistent.



ABOUT THIS SERIES ON ADVANCING RACE EQUITY

Last year, APHSA incorporated a race equity lens into our **Strategic Playbook**—a five-year plan that guides our work and shows our commitment to advancing the potential and well-being of all people.

Applying a race equity lens means at the core of our work we are actively seeking to illuminate disparate outcomes and paying disciplined attention to race and ethnicity while analyzing problems, looking for solutions, and defining success. This involves actively working to understand the environmental and structural root causes preventing social and economic mobility and health and well-being for all people. Within our national context and point in history, APHSA is committed to be an accountable actor and supportive in systematically eliminating racial inequity.

As part of our commitment, we are including a feature article in every issue of *Policy & Practice* this year showcasing communities working to apply a race equity lens to health and human services. If you have an inspiring story to tell, we would love to hear from you. Please contact Jessica Garon at jgaron@aphsa.org.

Check out the APHSA website for our full *Call to Action for Human Services*, which includes resources we will continue to add to throughout the year (https://aphsa.org/About/call_to_action.aspx).

This has been an ongoing issue for child welfare agencies across the country, even more so as racial and social justice movements are raising awareness about the impact of structural and systemic racism facing Black families. Early in 2018, New Jersey's DCF included race equity as a core component in its 2019–2021 NJ DCF Strategic Plan (<https://www.nj.gov/dcf/about/strategic.html>). These hard and uncomfortable discussions about race and equity are imperative for changes to be made and to take hold. And, the NJDCF is affirming its commitment to Black families and cultivating transparency and trust in a variety of ways.

The NJDCF mapped the geographic distribution of current child protection reports to historical geographic zones that were “redlined” by the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation in the 1930s and it gave us a compelling sense of how racist policies of the past continue to impact families and communities today. As a result, the NJDCF created a Race Equity Steering Committee to study department data and policies, as well as to research best practices and engage experts in the field—one of whom is renowned race equity and child welfare expert, Dr. Carol Spigner, Professor Emeritus of the University of Pennsylvania, who is working with leadership to identify, acknowledge, and rectify racial disparities.

Among the internal changes taking place, the department is examining racial disparity county by county through ChildStat, a continuous quality improvement approach that reviews county and local office data, including removals, short stays, and permanency. These reviews allow staff to monitor removals and placements, review related policies and procedures,

The NJDCF created a Race Equity Steering Committee to study department data and policies, as well as to research best practices and engage experts in the field.

and self-correct as necessary, to reflect the department’s values and priorities.

In addition, the department is working on revisions to policies regarding background checks for kinship caregivers to keep children connected to their biological families. Increasing kinship placement is also one of NJDCF’s transformation goals, and it ensures that if an out-of-home placement is necessary for the child’s safety, that they are placed in familiar surroundings, with a higher likelihood of reunification. And, the department is making steady progress in reducing the use of family separation as a tool in its child protection system—from more than 13,000 children in out-of-home placement at its peak in 2003 to just a few more than 4,000 today, and year-over-year reductions in out-of-home placements continue, by 10 percent in 2018 and 20 percent in 2019.

The NJDCF has partnered with the Children in Court improvement committee and the Administrative Office of the Courts in New Jersey to engage in joint training and education opportunities regarding race equity, and to examine racial disparity in permanency outcomes. The department has created an Office of Family Voice that allows real-time feedback and guidance from people who have previously been unheard. An Office of Staff Health and Wellness has also been created that, among other services,



Christine Norbut Beyer, MSW, is Commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Children and Families.

will provide emotional support to workers of color.

These responsive—and in some cases, long overdue—actions have increased meaningful dialogue among staff, program providers, stakeholders, families, and the public. This is made possible because New Jersey has a Governor and First Lady who support and encourage equity in all systems. Their personal and political commitment to parity has empowered state agency leaders to marshal resources that advance social justice initiatives.

From a messaging perspective, the department has a strong foundation of policy leadership from which to build its voice and speak about our principles as a department. The communications unit has played an important role in creating the themes, shaping the narratives, and informing and educating audiences.

Internal and external messaging has been shared with staff, legislators, provider partners, and New Jersey's residents through email, all-staff calls, social media platforms, and videos. The department is using traditional platforms such as Facebook,


The department is making steady progress in reducing the use of family separation as a tool in its child protection system.

Instagram, and Twitter, as well as less considered, but highly trafficked channels such as NextDoor and LinkedIn to reach unique audiences. It is important to remain accountable to the public and the families we serve on matters of race equity by declaring broadly our vision and the steps we are taking to realize it.

There was and is tension surrounding social justice in New Jersey—and across the country. The state's work to

correct the systemic racism that exists in every social and government structure is being watched closely and the department is doing its best to keep workers and families engaged in the process. To date, we have created a webpage that details what we've done and what's happening with race equity in child welfare across the country. We've also included resources for staff and families to access related to anti-racism trainings and materials.

On multiple occasions, the NJDCF has publicly taken a stand for equity and inclusion, and against racism. First, because it is the right and value-centered thing to do. And, second, because it is the only way to change the narrative around our work and to gain the trust and respect of the families we serve. At a time when families need it most, we want to acknowledge their struggle and our country's harsh history so that we can advance meaningful efforts toward healing and reconciliation.

For more information about the NJDCF's race equity work, check out the website at <https://www.nj.gov/dcf/equity.html>. 



Job Bank and Career Center

Connecting Talent with Opportunity in the Human Services Industry



EMPLOYERS

Post and Search Résumés

Manage Candidates via Access to your Recruiter Account

Start Today by Visiting Online at
<http://aphsa.careerwebsite.com/>

JOB SEEKERS

Post and Search Jobs

Access the Resource Center for
Résumé and Career Building Tools and Techniques

Setup and Receive Job Email Alerts

Manage Résumés via Access to your Job Seeker Account