



LAHSA Opportunities for Advancing Racial Equity

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LAHSA set out to identify a set of priorities and actions to build trust and momentum for achieving racial equity goals across the county. In this process, LAHSA worked with the NIS Center for Housing Justice to center the experiences and wisdom of organizational staff and lived experience board members as intentional engagement with it's related efforts on governance and organizational restructuring. This digital report provides key priorities and actions to advance deliberate practices as foundational to LAHSA becoming a more equitable organization.

The NIS Center for Housing Justice designs equitable public institutions in partnership with impacted communities to drive systems transformation. Learn more about the team [here](#).

This work was completed in partnership with:

LAHSA
LAHSA Lived Experience Advisory Board
Clutch Consulting
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About the Project:

Background, Methodology, and Process

The 2019 [Report and Recommendations of The Ad Hoc Committee on Black People Experiencing Homelessness](#) detailed the necessary actions to advance equity and eliminate racial disparities impacting Black people experiencing homelessness across Los Angeles County. Included in the report was a call to action for Los Angeles Homeless Service Authority (LAHSA) to thoughtfully examine the drivers of inequitable outcomes (including practices and policies) within the homeless system and to set a course as an agency in advancing racial equity.

Since the launch of the Ad Hoc Committee and the release of the initial report, Los Angeles City and Los Angeles County have both continued to see an increase of people experiencing homelessness as reported in the 2020 Point in Time count. The annual point in time count of sheltered and unsheltered people experiencing homelessness reported a [13% increase in the County of Los Angeles and a 16% increase in the City of Los Angeles](#).

The Ad Hoc Committee report aimed to address the staggering overrepresentation of Black people experiencing homelessness; an alarming statistic that seemed to worsen since the release of the report. [The 2020 Greater Los Angeles Homeless Count reported that although Black people only accounted for 8% of LA' county's population, Black people represented 34% of those experiencing homelessness.](#)

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the social justice uprisings of the summer have created an even louder call to action for LAHSA to re-examine its role in advancing racial and housing justice as a system leader.

It is against this backdrop that LAHSA first engaged with the National Innovation Service (NIS) in late-summer of 2020 to develop an Equity Action Plan that reflected the actions needed to become a justice based and equitable homeless system administrator.

Scope of Work

NIS first conducted an organizational audit. We systematically engaged LAHSA staff in order to understand their experiences, needs, and priorities related to racial equity; better understand the breadth and depth of the infusion of racial equity into policies and practices within LAHSA and across the homeless response system in Los Angeles; and identify further opportunities for antiracist practice and policy.

The audit also involved reviewing internal and external policies and documents related to racial equity, reviewing existing quantitative and qualitative data with racial and economic indicators, and conducting participatory research through an agency wide survey, in-depth interviews and co-design sessions with targeted groups of staff. During this process, NIS worked closely with frontline agency staff, agency

leadership, and key stakeholders. NIS conducted the process this way in order to understand the formal and informal policies and practices of the agency; the needs, experiences, and priorities of different groups with respect to racial justice, the challenges in implementing effective antiracist practice within the agency and the system more broadly; and the opportunities that people with lived experience of LAHSA's services identified for system(s) transformation. NIS's approach and methods are detailed below.

Approach:

Centering Racial Equity in Homeless Services Reponse

To understand what it means to advance racial justice and antiracist practices requires an understanding of the origin of policies and practices that already exist in those spaces. Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) have historically experienced housing instability and homelessness at significantly greater rates than their white counterparts. [This disproportionality is the result of systemic racism and histories of white supremacist policy enacted to deprive BIPOC communities of access to resources and wealth building mechanisms--including home ownership.](#) While experiencing homelessness, (in addition to the trauma suffered through the experience of homelessness) [institutional and systemic racism from within the homeless response system, especially its services, results in harmful and negative outcomes.](#)

In [A Brief Timeline of Race and Homelessness in America](#), NIS and partners describe the historical connections between race and homelessness in the United States; including a timeline that illuminates the origin of policies and practices that drive homeless response systems today. An antiracist system must be able to really see and translate the historical and present day racist trauma into policy, practice, and action that both redresses that previous harm and moves towards a new reality. This approach is at the center of the audit and planning process that NIS is leveraging with LAHSA.

Methods

NIS worked closely with the LAHSA Racial Equity Leadership Workgroup to implement an approach to better understand the organization's experiences, needs, and priorities and identify key areas of intervention in order to further and deepen the agency's racial equity work through driving system-level change.

There were four distinct parts to our jointly planned process and overlapping data collection: an audit of written policy and practices (materials audit), organizational listening sessions and survey, lived experience leadership and engagement assessment, and leadership and staff support and coaching.

The objectives of this process were the following:

1. Create space for organizational staff and leadership to have confidential conversations to feel fully self-expressed in sharing concerns and needs.
2. Assess core organizational needs around diversity, equity, and inclusion by evaluating organizational policies, practices, strategic plans, data, and related documentation.
3. Understand the experiences of people who are served by the homeless system in Los Angeles, to highlight areas where inequities and bias may appear in current approaches to lived-experience engagements and housing services.
4. Identify opportunities for equitable decision-making within LAHSA and amongst city and county partners.
5. Provide a new Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Director with tools, resources and relationship power to deliver on racial equity actions.

Project Components

Materials Audit

NIS identified, collected, and reviewed programmatic data, organizational, departmental, and office strategic plans, process documents, and other service delivery materials and tools to support the development of the staff and leadership focus groups and interviews. Additionally, NIS assessed for evidence of racial equity tools and concepts to inform decision-making processes, program design and evaluation and organizational practices. NIS's organizational audit was also used to help inform opportunities for interviews to dive deeper into content (i.e. human resource management) and where to target areas of support for subsequent leadership coaching.

Survey and Organizational Co-Design Sessions

LAHSA Agency-Wide Survey: NIS conducted a survey open to all LAHSA staff to gain deeper understanding of the current level of organizational literacy related to key equity concepts organizational activities around anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion; LAHSA staff's views of organizational strengths and areas for improvement with regard to racial equity; and gain staff input about what types of racial equity actions should be prioritized for LAHSA going forward.

An invitation to complete the survey was sent to all current LAHSA employees with a LAHSA determined goal of achieving 100% participation and 60-70% representation from the 13 departments. The survey was open for responses between November 16-25, 2020.

The survey was completed by 187 LAHSA employees reflective of a diverse representation of all departments and various staff positions and length of time employed at LAHSA. Highest levels of survey participation were in the Access and Engagement, Policy and Systems, and Executive Management departments.

Upon closing, the results were shared as part of a high-level theme report-out to the Directors Team at the end of November. The themes identified informed iteration to the materials audit and preparation for the co-design sessions.

In-depth Interviews

NIS conducted 11 in-depth interviews based on sampling criteria prioritized by the Directors team. Staff who were invited to participate in interviews and focus groups were randomly selected from a sample set created by using a stratified random sampling method, based on organizational department, race and ethnicity. The sample set was then reviewed to ensure identified criteria were met (criteria included: representation of various positions, representation from varied tenure at LAHSA, and an overrepresentation of members from the Access and Engagement department given their overrepresentation in the the percentage makeup of the organization).

NIS also conducted several listening sessions with different cohorts of staff to gain perspective and proposed solutions in response to the audit findings during the discovery and diagnosis phase.

Lived Experience Board Engagement and Relationship to LAHSA

In addition to reviewing available materials regarding LEAH governance structure, activities, compensation and LAHSA's coordination support, NIS also met with the Lived Experience Advisory Board (LEAB) at three different times during our process to introduce the effort, solicit feedback and to review and discuss our audit findings. NIS also conducted in-depth interviews with five LEAB board members.

Leadership and Staff Support and Coaching

Over the course of our engagement, the NIS team has coordinated routinely with LAHSA leadership in order to support its continued ability to shepherd the advancement of racial equity work. The NIS team has conducted bi-weekly touch base calls in order to steer the work forward. The NIS team has used this time as a potential resource with regard to other governance design questions that are currently being undertaken. The NIS team also supported the LAHSA leadership through the hiring process for the Director of Equity position during these meetings.

Limitations

NIS was not able to go as deep in the quantitative analysis as originally planned. Given the limitations of the organizational materials received, NIS was able to take a cursory review of general processes related to strategic planning, service programming, continuous quality improvement and policy planning.

In addition, given limited time and capacity, NIS focused its assessment of lived experience leadership and engagement based on the current relationship with the LEAB board and board members and was not able to speak to all groups of people who are engaged with LAHSA. The NIS team was not able to include in the audit any additional materials or interviews with stakeholders who represent the intersection of LAHSA's organizational services and other parts of the homeless response system.

Lastly, given the size of the organization, NIS was not able to engage every staff member through the combination of the agency-wide survey, the in-depth interviews and the targeted groups jointly determined for the co-design sessions. NIS is confident that the voices of LAHSA staff were heard through the completed activities; there was significant representation across the organization even though the team was not able to speak to every current employee at LAHSA.

As LAHSA transitions to setting up an implementation structure and process for advancing racial justice; NIS recommends that LAHSA builds on what was learned through this process to identify areas of intersection and exploration with staff, contracted providers, current clients and other stakeholders engaged in the Los Angeles homeless response system.

Activities Completed

The specific research activities NIS engaged in are as follows:

Data Type	Activities
Current LAHSA Quantitative Data	<p>Policy audit and analysis + collaborative data review:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizational Staffing, Performance Management and Professional Development • Environmental Policy • Organizational Design and Governance • Homeless Services Programmatic Materials • Racial Equity Specific Materials <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programs and processes focused on equity • Current and pending policies and guidance focused on equity
New Quantitative Data	<p>All agency survey:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disseminated survey to all LAHSA staff. Completed by 187 individual staff
New Qualitative Data	<p>Participatory research:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentations, feedback sessions, and planning meetings: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Racial Equity Management Workgroup bi- weekly meetings • LAHSA Directors and Associate Directors Meetings • LAHSA Managers and Supervisors Meeting • GARE committee • Clutch Consulting Strategic Planning and Reorg Meeting • LEAB Board Meetings • In depth interviews with 17 people • Co-designs sessions with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lived Experience Advisory Board • Directors/Associate Directors • Access and Engagement Team • GARE committee • Managers and Supervisors

Priorities and Actions

Across survey responses, interviews and listening sessions, participants were asked questions about their experiences and perceptions of LAHSA, how they define LAHSA's commitment to racial equity, why they think racial inequities exist within LAHSA through their individual experiences, and their ideas for opportunities to address them. The remainder of this report is structured around the opportunities identified by participants in the discovery process with NIS, and the thematic findings that underlie those opportunities.

This engagement illuminated what NIS found to be a fundamental tension between LAHSA's current state as a large, fast growing, white-led organization responding to the largest population of Black people experiencing homelessness in the country, and the agency's goal of becoming an antiracist organization. This tension has coalesced around four overall findings.

In the following section, the findings are further explicated and additional opportunities for transformation are identified. Many of these opportunities stemmed directly from our conversations with staff, whose experience we're centering in this work. They are structured in a sequence that moves from short-term opportunities internal to LAHSA towards longer-term opportunities that would require LAHSA to advocate for change external to the agency.

Based on the organizational audit, engagement with a diverse group of staff from across the organization and with LEAB board members, NIS proposes the following set of goals and priorities to advance LAHSA's capacity and ability to be justice-based through equitable policies and practices. In developing the proposed recommendations, the following questions were asked and used as the design criteria:

1. Does it advance racial justice?
2. Do it accurately capture what staff identified as a priority?
3. Is it measurable by LAHSA? (i.e., Can LASHA develop concrete metrics to track progress and accomplishments)?

Shift Organizational Culture in Small and Big Ways

Shifting the organization's culture to create more alignment between values, shared beliefs [can change staff's perception](#) of LAHSA's commitment to advancing racial justice. The agency's intention must be authentic and in alignment with their working community to lead to impact. To grow and create a better impact in LA county, [it is essential for LAHSA to have institutional accountability mechanisms where every action is specific, timely, and attainable.](#)

"I have been working here for over 2 years and have not heard anything anything about equity, racism till the george floyd incident. It's a mixed bag, a top down approach, management sent an email and one staff meeting to say sorry about the way the world is. It felt artificial, doesn't feel like actual progress to me."

- LAHSA staff member

Findings

There is an urgent need for a culture shift that results in greater alignment of values, creating shared beliefs and changed organizational behavior.

Equity, as one of LAHSA's organizational values, reflects the organization's stated commitment "to racial, social, and economic justice" and "appreciating culture, experience, and values of all people" while "working to eliminate disparities within the system."

1. Lack of Theory of Change to Drive Goals, Resources and Accountability

Staff across the organization expressed the lack of capacity, quality time and decision-making power as barriers to focusing on racially explicit goals. Shared experiences of pivoting from one competing priority to another, and the lack of stated goals and accountability made it more common to not center the engagement,

collaboration, decision-making processes and learning to support advancement of racial justice as an organization. In literature, these behaviors and cultural practices are defined as a scarcity mindset where decisions are rooted in the belief that there is not enough and the reality of uneven distribution of time, resources, and support is justified. To be clear, LAHSA is operating in an environment where there is a scarcity of resources needed to address the complex and complicated issue of homelessness. Additionally, the staff were able to reflect that while they were operating in an environment with limited resources, they were also operating internally with a limited bandwidth imposed onto themselves. Maintaining the status quo, and in action, will continue to actively cause harm to staff and people experiencing the system.

2. Lack of Representation of Black Senior and Executive Level Leadership and

Staff pointed to the need for more Black leadership within programmatic departments in the organization, given their responsibility for policy making and program design decisions that directly impact individuals experiencing homelessness who are black and are overrepresented. For example; at the time of this report Black staff made up about 25% of the programmatic functions of the organization and 12% across the related Directors, Associate Directors and Executive Suite positions. On the operations side of the house, Black staff represented about 27% of all assigned staff and 31% at the Associate Director and Director Level. This concern was highlighted across survey responses, interviews and through the co-design sessions as a critical indicator of racial equity at LAHSA.

3. Lack of Shared Language and Process:

Discussions during the co-design sessions illuminated the desire and hopefulness staff hold for the organization but also a fear and hesitancy to “do the work” well related to (1) experiences of ownership and accountability projected downward in the organization structure and/or siloed to specific individuals or groups, as opposed to being held as a responsibility from the very top of the organization and (2) the tendency to avoid discussions about race and racial equity due to lack of shared language, agreements and process to address implicit bias, white fragility and trauma.

“When we come together to talk about racial equity - people feel uncomfortable because they are feeling judged; for us to have a useful conversation moving forward we need to have the ability to have the conversation.”

- LAHSA staff member

Through survey responses, interviews and co-design sessions, staff expressed that the organization is focused more on its image in relation to equity than action and impact. The materials audit produced several examples of incomplete processes aimed at setting racial equity goals internally and incidents of staff of color offering feedback and solutions with no follow through or follow up.

“When we talk about community engagement/listening sessions- we miss the mark sometimes. We are very responsive to the elected but less responsive to the constituents/people receiving the work.”

- LAHSA staff member

The controversial response to staff proposals to end contractual relationships with law enforcement during the summer of George Floyd’s murder was pointed to by staff as a missed opportunity to take action, and continues to be a source of tension in conversation about what it means for LAHSA to live into it’s values of racial justice. The lack of meaningful change in relationship with law enforcement as an organizational response to the social justice uprising following George Floyd’s murder has compounded the feelings and perceptions by staff of LAHSA taking a performative posture.

Actions

1. **Develop a theory of change for LAHSA that explicitly names and operationalizes its antiracist intentions.**

The theory of change is meant to provide possible direction and scaffolding for the forthcoming strategic design and implementation process in the next phase of this work LAHSA has ahead of itself. It is recommended that the theory of change include an organizational point of view for why it is critical that LAHSA live into its value. This may include, but is not limited to:

- Acknowledging historical impacts of structural racism and white supremacy
- Acknowledging LAHSA's role and responsibility in actively assessing and dismantling white supremacy and systemic oppression
 - Opportunity to be bold about making more space to make this a priority by practicing saying no and taking new risks/transferring risk
- Asserting what it means to be a white-led organization doing this work
- Making a commitment to making the time to do the work
- Sharing a narrative around what it aspires to promote and believes is possible
- Affirming that it needs relationships and partnerships to continue the work and its commitment to partner engagement (ex: co-design)
- Naming its intentions around accountability

2. **Establish shared language and a commitment to building ongoing knowledge, skills, and confidence to talk about racism and white supremacy and strategies to operationalize racial justice for every staff member at LAHSA and key stakeholders.**

This may include:

- Establishing and supporting brave spaces
- Building a shared language on the historical and current-day impacts of white supremacy culture, systemic racism, anti-blackness, in community and in the workplace, as well as in the solutions designed to respond to people at risk of and/or experiencing homelessness
- Centering learning around first-hand knowledge of what is happening on the ground through the outreach team and the Access and Engagement Department, including what works and what does not; while creating opportunities for this voice to be elevated across and outside of the division.
- Leaning into the discomfort

3. **Develop racial equity goals and annual action plans at the executive level of the organization, integrated into the organization's strategy plans so that it drives additional goal-setting within the new organizational structure (Senior Advisors, System Level and Component Departments)**

This may include:

- Goals related to onboarding all current staff and new hires to the theory of change and connecting it to individual team and personal goals, in order to

ensure all staff are clear on how their role contributes to racial equity outcomes,

- Goals related to cultivating inclusion and belonging amongst teams and departments
- Goals that require providing consistent, transparent updates on progress towards goals to ensure there is a formal continuous improvement process to support pivots in strategy where relevant ([emergence](#)), etc. to allow for accountability and flexibility, etc.

"I am hopeful that by bringing a racial equity director we will have change, we will have safe space to speak to policies that effect participants and within the agency. You have a pool of people who believe. It's just a matter of time."

- LAHSA staff member

Priority Action 02

Invest in transformative relationships, program and policy designs

The ultimate goal of LAHSA should be to have transformative relationships which create a workplace community built from a strong social fabric, meaningful community leadership, and vibrant groups within the agency (Falkenburger et al, 2018). [That is why it is important to center healing that allows for an intentional and proactive consideration of the relationship between justice and wellness. When staff have faced years of disinvestment and negative experiences with LAHSA, they will be more hesitant to rely on the organization and will not believe in the efforts to produce tangible changes. That is why it is important to center healing that allows for an intentional and proactive consideration of the relationship between justice and wellness.](#) LAHSA needs to build multiple intentional interactions to engage with employees in a community building process and full transparency in actions being taken to create more equitable systems.

Findings

The lack of transformative relationships with staff, the LEAB board, BIPOC-led providers and community stakeholders limits the organization's ability to advance racial justice.

1. Limited Inclusion Efforts

Frontline employees of LAHSA spoke passionately about their roles, purpose and affinity to the communities they serve, but also discussed the disconnect between the racialized and emotional toll of their work and the experiences and the available resources and understanding from LAHSA leadership. For example, the Access and Engagement department, which represents the majority of the organization, is the most diverse team and has a higher representation of Black staff as compared to other departments,

shared missed opportunities to center the experiences and identifies of frontline staff as a path to better center the experiences and identifies of the communities served by LAHSA. For example, staff discussed the disregard of HET team feedback during the pending decision on assigned uniforms, which the HET team has communicated is triggering to clients and sets outreach workers at a disadvantage because of its similarities to law enforcement uniforms.

2. Lack of Professional Development and Career Pathways

As LAHSA has grown to meet the needs of the community and as the organization has prepared to implement a new governance and programming structure, there is consensus that internally, LAHSA's growth potential was

described by staff as not being evenly distributed in relationship to the diverse demographics of the organization. Through interviews and survey responses, staff commented on the need for more targeted professional development and promotion opportunities for BIPOC staff, particularly Black staff and the need to continue to diversify at the senior and executive leadership level.

“LAHSA hires more white people into executive leadership roles and does not provide enough support for people of color to gain leadership opportunities, hiring outside of the agency instead of building leadership within.”

- LAHSA staff member

In addition to increasing representation at the senior and executive level, staff also named the importance of representation in the programmatic pillars of LAHSA. In reviewing staff demographics based on organizational departments, it was noted that most of the leadership positions driving program design and budget decisions were held by white staff, in contrast to the overrepresentation of Black people in the homeless population in Los Angeles.

3. Lived Experience Board

The Lived Experience Advisory Board (LEAB) was created in 2016, to contribute to the [Measure H](#) funding advocacy activities. LAHSA's Executive Director at that time supported the continuation of the board to provide help with other LAHSA activities related to the annual PIT count, program design and policy advisory. Over the course of two LEAB meetings and across in-depth interviews, members highlighted the following ways the current structure and relationship with LAHSA is experienced as transactional and inequitable.

“There is no foundation, no guidance, no guidelines that we are operating from. We have no power in order to understand who we are. We just show up once a month or when there are special or additional meetings.”

- LEAB member

Representation, Purpose, Decision-Making Authority

Neither LEAB members nor assigned LAHSA staff could state the role and purpose of the board beyond attending monthly meetings facilitated by LAHSA and responding to and/or reacting to what other stakeholders (LAHSA staff and consultants, Commission, City and County Staff) determined was a priority. In discussing the lack of role and purpose as a board, members expressed concerns about the lack of representation in relation to the geographic and cultural needs of the different SPAs. Through discussion, members reflected that representation on the board did not and could not adequately reflect the multi-racial needs and intersectionality of people experiencing homelessness in the community. This lack of representation was related to informing the role and purpose of LEAB and other mechanisms to engage people with lived experiences to advise the work of LAHSA.

“Things are brought to us at the last minute. No information in advance to study, review, and understand. No language to give you an understanding of what the presentation is- no history, purpose or reasons as to why this is something they want to move on.”

- LEAB member

Related, is the lack of authority and decision-making power LEAB has in the board's desire to hold LAHSA accountable. This constant struggle and tension was shared by both staff and board members when talking about priority-setting and desired access to LAHSA executive leadership.

Being Tokenized, Disrespected and Devalued

LEAB members expressed that although they individually brought years of personal experience, educational and professional expertise to their roles, their value as a board member continues to be limited to their ethnicity and their lived experience, perpetuating the idea that LAHSA was only interested in the LEAB board as a box to check or, as one board member put it, add a “window dressing” on their process. Experiences

of feeling tokenized also came up in relation to the lack of communication and follow-through on policy efforts and program design that LEAB did provide feedback to. Although LAHSA staff could point to the impact of LEAB input on efforts such as Project Room Key and the Homeless Count Rules, board members expressed that they were never informed of what came from their engagement and/or feedback, or that they would learn about it after a policy was already passed or after a program had been implemented.

"We try to come with ideas of policy but we are ignored. We are window dressing. That needs to stop. We are either helping the process or you are wasting our time. You got your degree but we are the ones with the PHDs in homelessness."

- LEAB member

members who are available to be more deeply involved in the work of education and awareness, program design and policy advisory on behalf of their community.

"The turnover has been bad. When Project RoomKey was launched, they pulled everyone and we were left in the dark- we had to keep banging on the door to have them (LAHSA) speak to us."

- LEAB member

In response to discussions of how race and racism showed up in their experience as board members, there were a mix of responses that spoke to interpersonal dynamics between board members related to roles and perceptions of positional power, as well as interpersonal dynamics between the board members and LAHSA staff. Members who NIS spoke with used terms like "disrespected," "treated like a child," and "treated like a threat," in talking about experiences when trying to express themselves, asking for transparency in a process, asking for professional development resources or challenging a process or decision.

Being Under-resourced and Underpaid

The constant turnover and reassignment of support staff to the LEAB was expressed as another signal of deprioritization of LEAB role and activities within the organization. Members reflected that not only did frequent change in staff require the need to rebuild trust and credibility with a new individual; it also meant there were gaps of time where the work and support of LEAB was put on hold completely until LAHSA was ready to pick the work back up again. Compounded with the instability of the coordination role, LEAB's compensation policy, primarily based on attendance to meetings, is received as paternalistic and tokenizing to

Actions

1. Invest in resources, activities and policies to increase a sense of belonging and inclusion amongst LAHSA teams and team members, particularly for the frontline staff.

These investments should include:

- Promoting and encouraging community and cultural rituals and practices
- Prioritizing wellness - creating both structural and tactical drivers that promote the ability to rest
- Centering the experiences of frontline staff in all-staff communications and meetings

"would love the opportunity to engage thoughtfully w/ front line staff, to gain that perspective and to really show that we care for the work they do and learn from them and create more meaningful ties across the agency."

- LAHSA staff member

2. Create internal mechanisms that promote, center and compensate the expertise of BIPOC Communities & individuals with lived experience.

Including:

- Addressing intersectionality- Understanding what is happening in communities related to the racial, ethnic and cultural makeup of the service areas, particularly the native community and individuals experiencing homelessness.
- Engaging individuals with lived experience at the start of program and policy design and ensuring they are in leadership positions throughout the process

"If LAHSA brings lived experience to the forefront and CEO- and they hand in hand say we are doing this it would be huge because - bringing the client centered perspective- It would make everyone who is not doing that think again. To set a standard- design, implementation, continuous engagement with participants of the program, reevaluation."

- LEAB member

"Any structure is about control and not wanting to give up anything. To end homelessness you are going to have to have heart and give up some control."

- LEAB member

3. Make significant changes and investments to the existing engagement and leadership platforms for people with lived experience (i.e. the LEAB board), and co-design and collectively establish additional opportunities for past and current LAHSA clients to design, evaluate, and inform policy, programs and external initiatives.

This would include:

- Acknowledging the harm that has been done and making space for healing practices
- Beginning with jointly establishing clear goals, mission, and vision for the LEAB and LAHSA relationship
- Jointly determining roles, duties, representation, shared power and decision-making framework for the LEAB
- Jointly determining shared goals, outcome metrics and credit for impact and success
- Cultivating mutual trust and respect (pivot from performative, charity, paternalistic and ownership approach to LEAB.) This should include:
 - Creating shared agreements
 - Implementing a conflict resolution framework
 - Jointly (LEAB and LAHSA) designing the

LEAB coordinator role that exists within the LAHSA staff structure (ex. shared design of duties, needed skills and accountability to the board)

- Investing in support that is responsive to both individual and group goals (individual professional development, training opportunities, etc.)
- Investing in support and coordination that results in leadership opportunities for LEAB members beyond LEAB participation

Priority Action 03

Be Accountable to Equity in Policies and Practices

There are years of policy and systems failures rooted in racism that LAHSA needs to work on, so the impact of changes will likely not be felt immediately. It is a process that requires full transparency and trust from everyone. [Building trust requires a demonstrated commitment from leadership over the long term.](#) Additionally, it is essential to examine LAHSA's relationships with its partners and providers. If those groups continue under a "business as always" mindset, there will be no real growth. [Efforts between LAHSA and their partners must be coordinated to expand impact.](#)

Findings

Inequitable decision-making and program design is perpetuated by a lack of agency for LAHSA to authentically set its own priorities and make its own decisions.

The staff is ready to change, but it is currently unclear if the institution as a whole is prepared to, or actually can take action in deep and meaningful ways. The pressures from outside entities, especially from LA city and LA County, are real and demanding, and create a circular pattern of harmful organizational behavior internally. Although leaders within LAHSA want to champion the organization and position it in the forefront of excellence in the national homeless services sector, LAHSA's organizational goals and priorities take a backseat to those that are being developed and forced by external bodies (LAHSA commission, ad hoc committees, etc). The directives given from the Commission create disorganization and shift the roles of employees who were focusing on one thing and now how to place responsibility on another goal.

1. Internal Organizational Behavior

This disorganization creates confusion across all levels within LAHSA. Employees in Senior Leadership roles have to deal with constant incoming and shifting priorities from both the county and the city, which doesn't allow them to pause to focus on internal strategy and to act with intention across the organization. The influx of outside demands creates a cycle of reactive priorities and decision-making, and this shows up in small, daily decisions, like what meeting takes priority over another for particular leadership staff to attend, to bigger, long-term organizational decisions like the planning for, structure, and support for a Chief Equity officer position. Capacity restraints are most evident at middle management, even where employees want to ameliorate LAHSA's issues with racial equity. However, neither middle management and nor front-line staff have the time to focus on that internal work. They are so consistently shifted from one goal to another that they lose focus on any essential work that has no deadline. Front-line/outreach employees also experience a

lack of transparency about these dynamics from senior leadership, which makes them distrust the organization, decisions, and priorities. Given these dynamics, any organizational restructuring that is occurring must center the ability to be accountable to changed behavior in response to the outside demands. And the accountability, within the new structure, cannot continue to be one-sided, or perceived as one-sided. [One-sided accountability creates inauthentic communication, inherent inequality, and ineffective collaborative practices.](#)

Many staff repeat a label that LAHSA is treated as an “ugly stepchild” in the dynamics with partners in Los Angeles. LAHSA ultimately lives into the narrative of the “ugly stepchild,” and all the stereotypic attributes that go with that image, by exhibiting the behavior that is projected onto them. Specifically, this manifests in a lack of empowerment, lack of follow-through and hesitation to take control. The need to navigate the political landscape informs the way LAHSA minimizes its actual power to lead change internally. For staff of color, this is further viewed and experienced in the context of layers of systemic oppression.

White privilege is a systemic reality primarily grounded in inequitable systems and stereotypes (Thomas, 2017). At LAHSA, the relationships between staff and upper management are asymmetric relationships, in which one party is capable of disproportionately imposing their will on the other. This means that upper management has the power to set conditions, make decisions, take action, and exercise control-- which determines the relationship (Guess, 2006). Through time and space, established patterns of race relations reproduce structures of domination. It may not be strongly felt or demonstrated, yet those systems uphold inequality within and outside the organization.

2. Organizational Behavior with External Parties

The same pressures that are exerting themselves internally to LAHSA, as described above, also play out in the way LAHSA shows up with external partners, including the Commission, and the City and County. The relationships between entities, and the embodiment of LAHSA as the “step child”, create a dynamic where movement on the recommendations on governance, as articulated in the recent report to the Commission, are at jeopardy of being actualized without particular attention being paid to ways to intentionally interrupt the dynamics of lacking agency and reactivity that continue to play out. If LAHSA is unable to interrupt these patterns, or be transparent about them in a more significant way, it is likely to continue to face barriers both internally and externally with advancing racial equity goals. Movement on governance, including transparency, role-clarity, and system-wide vision and goals must move forward in a racially explicit way. And although it will be difficult for LAHSA to navigate a role that is leading this work, it will be a necessary role to play to build trust, and to interrupt the harm that is occurring for BIPOC staff within the organization and amongst BIPOC who are experiencing homelessness and housing instability in Los Angeles.

Actions

1. **Make racial equity everyone's responsibility.**

This may include:

- Ensuring that each role has racial equity-related accountability and goals integrating racial equity actions and aligned strategy into team project/action plans and role related performance review processes
- Power Shifting, i.e., sharing inclusive leadership practices around how racial equity is part of everyone's role by centering Black, brown and other BIPOC staff, but not leaving it to these individuals to do racial equity work
- Provide professional development and training, including cultural humility practices

executive leadership communication, reflecting publicly and reporting-out progress, new challenges, new learning, and team growth

- Monitoring progress, impact and new opportunities across organizational pillars and leadership levels.
- Provide transparent access to change/progress via a tracking mechanism, so long as that mechanism does not drive transnational organizational behavior

2. **Implement an [equity based decision-making framework](#) in all pillars and functions of the organization to guide decision-making as leaders.**

This may include:

- Identifying the practices teams will adopt to transparently address power dynamics in their relationships and decision-making processes
- Creating an accountability structure to hold change

3. **Develop an annual continuous quality improvement plan.**

This may include but is not limited to:

- Continuing the established Racial Equity management workgroup as the primary home for holding theory of change, related organizational goals, resources allocation and continuous quality improvement.
- Providing a consistent cadence of

Closing and Gratitude

"How we are at the small scale is how we are at the large scale. The patterns of the universe repeat at scale. There is a structural echo that suggests two things: one, that there are shapes and patterns fundamental to our universe, and two, that what we practice at a small scale can reverberate to the largest scale."

adrienne marie brown, Emergent Strategy

LAHSA has major systems transformation toward racial justice to undertake, and the road ahead may seem daunting. Each of the actions included in this document are equal parts fundamentally necessary for change and major efforts unto themselves. It is easy to feel overwhelmed by work ahead. Believe that even the smallest changes in practice toward liberation, care for the humanity in people and repair from harm will ripple and grow to make much larger impacts.

NIS would like to express our gratitude for the partnership we have experienced with the people at LAHSA and members of the lived experience advisory board. We are changed by you; there is so much wisdom and vision in your lives and voices.

References and Resources

General

- [Report And Recommendations Of The Ad Hoc Committee On Black People Experiencing Homelessness](#)
- [A Brief Timeline of Race and Homelessness in America](#)
- [The History of Homelessness in the United States](#)
- [From Exclusion to Destitution: Race, Affordable Housing, and Homelessness](#)
- [Racial Equity: Getting to Results](#)

Organizational Culture

- ["But I didn't mean it!" Why it's so hard to prioritize impacts over intents](#)
- [Equity Based Decision Making Framework — National Innovation Service](#)
- [Operationalizing Racial Justice in Non-Profit Organizations](#)

Transformative Relationships

- [Emergent Strategy, Adrienne Marie Brown](#)
- [Powerful Partnerships: Transformative Alliance Building by Shelly Tochluk and Cameron Levin, AWARE-LA](#)
- [Toward a Psychological Framework of Radical Healing in Communities of Color](#)

Accountability and Shared Ownership

- [Toward a Psychological Framework of Radical Healing in Communities of Color](#)
- [Trauma Informed Community Building Model – Organizing Engagement](#)
- [Resources on Systems of Privilege and Oppression](#)