



## ACTION BRIEF

### ACHIEVING RACIAL EQUITY: CALLING THE SOCIAL WORK PROFESSION TO ACTION

#### > OVERVIEW

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW), under the auspices of its Social Work Policy Institute (SWPI), convened a think tank symposium, *Achieving Racial Equity: Calling the Social Work Profession to Action* on November 17 and 18, 2013 in Washington, DC. The symposium brought renewed attention to the strategies outlined in NASW's *Institutional Racism & the Social Work Profession: A Call to Action* (2007) tool-kit. It also built on NASW's leadership in development and promulgation of standards and indicators for achievement of cultural competence in social work practice (NASW 2001; NASW, 2006); recognizing that there is also a need to develop a practical and actionable racial equity framework to better understand how our systems and services are structured.

Given the social work profession's primary mission "to enhance human well-being and to help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty," (NASW, 2008), the symposium organizers believed that social workers should be leading efforts to achieve racial equity. A useful definition of *racial equity* is provided by the Center for Assessment and Policy Development — *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 root causes of inequities not just their manifestation. This includes elimination of policies, practices, attitudes and cultural messages that reinforce differential outcomes by race or fail to eliminate them* ([www.racialequitytools.org/glossary#racial-equity](http://www.racialequitytools.org/glossary#racial-equity)).

The symposium brought together leading race equity experts, key social work stakeholders from all aspects of the profession, representatives of foundations and think tanks and community organizers committed to undoing racism and achieving racial equity. The symposium goals were to:

- > Understand the roots and manifestations of institutional and structural racism.
- > Identify principles, practices, and analysis that are effective for undoing institutional and structural racism.

The symposium speakers included Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (Duke University); Ron Chisom, Kimberly Richards and Diana Dunn (The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond); Joyce James (Race Equity Consultant); Ralph Bayard (Casey Family Programs); Diane Bell-McKoy (Associated Black Charities); Erlene Achille (Boston Public Health Commission); Mary Flowers (City and Region of Seattle); Joseph Barndt (Founder, Crossroads Ministry); Ruby Gourline (Howard University); Joshua Miller (Smith College) and Laura Lein (University of Michigan). The symposium culminated in identification of action steps and targeted

recommendations to move forward the social work profession's commitment to achieving racial equity.

#### DEFINING INSTITUTIONAL RACISM

**As cited in *Institutional Racism & the Social Work Profession: A Call to Action* (NASW, 2007):**

**Institutional or structural racism is the social, economic, educational, and political forces or policies that operate to foster discriminatory outcomes or give preferences to members of one group over others, derives its genesis from the origins of race as a concept (Barker, 2003; Soto, 2004). Race as a biological fact has been invalidated by biologists and geneticists, but race as a social construct is very real. Physical traits still have meaning as markers of social race identity. It is this social race identity that confers placement in the social hierarchy of society, and thereby access to or denial of privileges, power, and wealth (Smedley & Smedley, 2005)."**

**([www.socialworkers.org/diversity/institutional\\_racism.pdf](http://www.socialworkers.org/diversity/institutional_racism.pdf) NASW, 2007)**

#### > LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

**The Basics of Color-Blind Racism.** Bonilla-Silva provided an overview of the new racial order in the post-civil rights era (what he terms "new racism") that includes racial practices that tend to be subtle, institutional, and avoid direct racial references. While current manifestations of racism seem to be 'non-racial,' according to Bonilla-Silva, they

are just as effective as Jim Crow practices for maintaining racial inequity in every aspect of life. By understanding the “frames” - core arguments or themes of the ideology (Abstract Liberalism, Naturalization, Cultural Racism and Minimization of Racism), it can easily be seen how colorblind ideology manifests in our own thinking, the words and writings of others, and the collective actions of our programs and institutions. Together, these frames create a flexible and virtually impenetrable wall that allows current racial inequity to go on uncontested.

**Poverty, Power and Undoing Racism.** The People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond (PISAB) provided a high level overview of several key concepts – Why people are poor; understanding power and white privilege; defining racism and graphically depicting the cross-systems nature of the power imbalance and systemic racism that are at the root of economic and racial inequity. The PISAB believes that an effective, broad-based movement for social transformation must be rooted in the following Anti-Racist Community Organizing Principles:

- > Undoing Racism
- > Learning from History
- > Sharing Culture
- > Developing Leadership
- > Maintaining Accountability
- > Networking
- > Analyzing Power
- > Gatekeeping
- > Undoing Internalized Racial Oppression
- > Identifying and Analyzing Manifestations of Racism (PISAB, n.d.)

Of particular relevance to this social work convening was to consider the role that social workers play as *gatekeepers*. As agents of social control, whether intended or not, social workers can hold power over people in poor communities rather than engaging with the communities to restore decision making power or to work in ways that establish mutual accountability.

### > PUTTING THE PRINCIPLES FOR ACHIEVING RACIAL EQUITY INTO ACTION

Drawing from on-going work to promote racial equity underway at the Texas Department of Health and Human Services, Casey Family Programs, the Boston Public Health Commission, the City and Region of Seattle, and Associated Black Charities in Maryland, the first panel identified key strategies that have been used to move toward achieving racial equity. This second panel included representatives from social work education and it provided information on projects and strategies intended to address racial inequities and health disparities. The panel covered efforts underway to evaluate the racial equity guidelines promulgated by the Black Administrators in Child Welfare; the development of behavioral health disparities advanced practice competencies by a task group of the National Association of Deans and Directors of Schools of Social Work (NADD); and Smith College School for Social Work’s 20 year journey to focus on anti-racism at multiple levels. A summary of each of these presentations can be found on the symposium’s full report.

### > RECOMMENDATIONS

Using the lessons learned from these presentations, the participants identified a set of strategic actions (see Graphic on p. 3) that should occur if we are to truly invest in undoing racism and to promote healing. The following are targeted action steps that were developed by the symposium participants.

#### **Be Explicit about Race and Racism and the Social Work Profession**

- > Social workers should apply a racial equity lens to everything.
- > Traditional social work organizations –

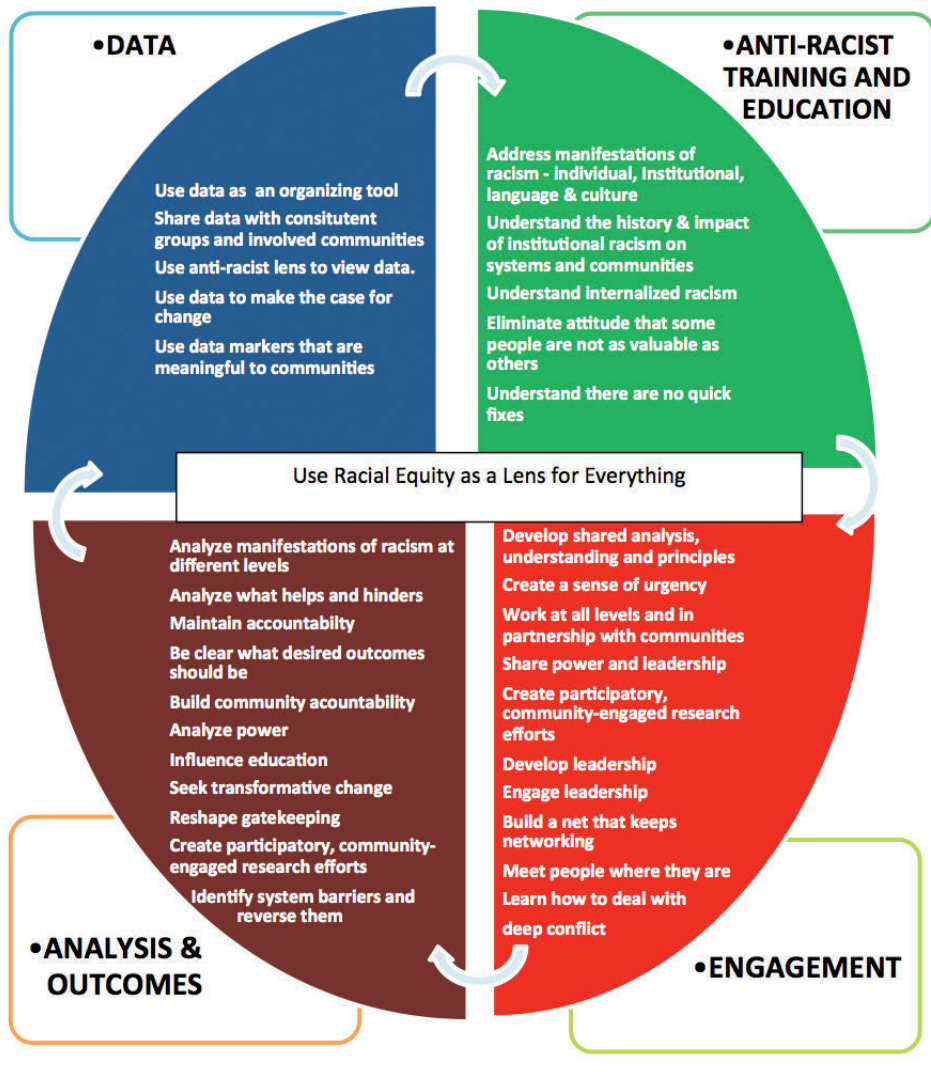
NADD, NASW, and CSWE – need to listen to organizations led by people of color (e.g., National Association of Black Social Workers)

- > Social workers should embrace anti-racist community organizing at all levels – from policy development to direct practice.
- > Social workers should use data to show the ways racial inequity is prevalent in our own organizations and institutions.
- > Social workers should understand, study, analyze, and address the ways that ‘color-blind racism’ has become the dominant ideology in our work, conversations, and institutions.
- > Social workers need to reclaim and assert their roles as agents of change.
  - » Social workers need to understand how our actions are part of the “Foot of Oppression” by recognizing our function as gatekeepers which requires compliance and perpetuates needs of those we serve.
  - » Individual caseworkers are not expected to come up with solutions.
- > Social workers operate within institutions, and these institutions need to incorporate anti-racism actions and principles within:
  - » Social work education and the institutions in which social work education programs operate.
  - » Human service, educational, health care, criminal justice, child welfare and other organizations and systems where social workers work.
  - » Professional associations.
- > Social workers need to tell the truth.

#### **Impact Social Work Education**

- > Ensure availability and access to core anti-racism/anti-racist curriculum content in social work education programs.
- > Operationalize, more fully, how the curriculum can provide tools to address institutional racism, not to just discuss race and poverty in terms of history and advocacy and in understanding the social environment.
- > Train social workers to identify and interrupt color-blind ideology
- > Ensure students know that helping is not enough – students need to understand that they have power that can hurt.

Anti-Racist Community Organizing Principles for Combating Institutional Racism and Achieving Racial Equity  
**TO INVEST IN UNDOING RACISM AND HEALING – THE FOLLOWING SHOULD HAPPEN**



**Ensure Availability of Professional Development for Social Workers to acquire the following Core Competencies to Combat Institutional Racism**

- > Understanding that people are poor because they lack power (resources, decision-making, law, land, etc.), not because they lack programs.
- > Understanding how social programs maintain poverty and institutional structures that limit access to wealth.
- > Asserting that the social work profession focuses on well-being and social justice —
  - » Consider anti-racism to be how social workers “do” social justice – it’s not outside the work we do – it should not be a separate subject, but rather a lens.
  - » Use the *Code of Ethics* to speak to anti-racism.
- > Recognizing that racism is the glue that holds classism/poverty together and is maintained through structures and systems of racial inequity.
- > Identifying and interrupting color-blind racial ideology.
- > Working to understand that it is essential to develop authentic relationships to create and maintain human boundaries – with individuals and communities and across systems.
- > Understanding that racism has negative impact on all races.
- > Fighting injustice due to lack of access to resources and opportunities; disinvestment; intertwining of racism and poverty which have both structural and systemic dynamics; continued existence of racism, even when no longer poor and manipulation of poor whites using racism (for example, poor whites vote on race).

**Engage NASW as a Leader in Undoing Racism**

- > Strategically embrace and operationalize anti-racist community organizing tools throughout the social work profession.
- > Update and advance – *Institutional Racism and Social Work: A Call to Action* – with practical tools for practitioners at all levels.
- > Involve NASW chapters in anti-racist organizing work in their communities.

- > Train social workers to use data as an organizing tool – for example, to understand tenure and promotion decisions, and to advocate for change.
- > Train social workers to think about and analyze power.
- > Create a support system for those who teach the classes on diversity and cultural competence – who are mostly people of color.
- > Connect CSWE’s *Educational Policy & Accreditation Standards* (EPAS) to political changes underway targeted to achieving racial equity, on the ground, in schools of social work and in communities.

**Build Opportunities to Develop, Engage and Strengthen Leadership of Color**

- > Support opportunities for leaders of color by sharing power.
- > Develop and deepen authentic relationships with communities to build a base of support to identify and support new leaders.
- > Use multiple strategies, including resources and incentives, to develop and promote leaders from groups usually underrepresented, and sometimes shut out of leadership opportunities.
- > Involve communities in research – at every step – from planning, assessment, analysis and dissemination including use of participatory action models.

- > Expand continuing education offerings related to undoing racism and achieving racial equity.
- > Consider revising the *NASW Code of Ethics* and licensing requirements to specifically address structural racism.
- > Address undoing racism at NASW July 2014 conference.
- > Pursue funding, including from foundations, to support initiatives targeted to achieving racial equity and undoing institutional racism.

## > CONCLUSION

The 2005 Social Work Congress selected 12 imperatives to guide the profession over the next decade. Two of them addressed racism.

- > Address the effect of racism, other forms of oppression, social injustice, and other human rights violations through social work education and practice.
- > Continuously acknowledge, recognize, confront, and address pervasive racism within social work practice at the individual, agency, and institutional levels (Clark et al., 2006, p.4)

Almost a decade later, they have not been fully actualized. The *Achieving Racial Equity* think tank symposium was one step to move these imperatives and the subsequent *Institutional Racism & the Social Work Profession: A Call to Action* (2007) forward. By engaging social work stakeholders and

race equity experts in the development of recommendations and an action agenda, NASW and its partners must now meet the challenge to continually work toward the implementation of these recommendations.

It is essential that each of the targets — building leadership, enhancing social work education, infusing core competencies into practice, using a racial equity lens in all social work actions — be seen as vital. To accomplish these goals, it will be important to create networks and strengthen relationships across institutions, to gather and use data, to measure progress and to create strategies to sustain changes. It is clear that the social work profession — whether clinicians, community organizers, managers, supervisors, CEOs, policy makers or educators — must all work to undo the impact of racism and work toward truly achieving racial equity.

Our society and its institutions do not operate in a color-blind manner. Despite many advances over the past 50 years, we continue to hear new studies that confirm structural racism. The work of undoing racism and achieving racial equity cannot be relegated to actions by people of color; whites are essential in this effort. At times this will mean sharing power and leadership in deeper ways, and taking proactive steps to undo oppression and racism.

As a professional association and as agents of change we need to change the trajectory of outcomes for many in our society. We need to put anti-racism up front, and use a racial equity lens, not just in child welfare or criminal justice, but throughout the institutions in which we work. Social work focuses on individual, family and community well-being and on social justice. Achieving racial equity is important for all that we do.

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**The full report, including references and an array of useful resources can be found at [SocialWorkPolicy.org](http://SocialWorkPolicy.org).**



## ABOUT THE SOCIAL WORK POLICY INSTITUTE

**The Social Work Policy Institute** was established in 2009 and is a division of the NASW Foundation. Its mission is:

- > To strengthen social work's voice in public policy deliberations.
- > To inform policy-makers through the collection and dissemination of information on social work effectiveness.
- > To create a forum to examine current and future issues in health care and social service delivery.

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