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# Equitable Governance:

A COUNTY FRAMEWORK TO ACHIEVE  
BETTER OUTCOMES FOR ALL

# RETHINKING GOVERNANCE IN AMERICA'S COUNTIES

Counties play a critical role in building healthy and vibrant communities. Some communities experience poorer outcomes in areas such as education, health, safety and economic well-being – often for generations – because of a history of marginalization and unjust policies and practices.<sup>1</sup> The uneven impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic across different communities crystallized the disparities that can exist within a single county.

To achieve different and better outcomes, we can begin by first rethinking our approach. **Asking questions grounded in diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) positions counties to lead a paradigm shift in governance.** By embracing the diversity within communities, ensuring equitable access for all to resources and opportunities and practicing inclusive decision-making, county leaders create the conditions to achieve better outcomes for all.

The National Association of Counties employs the following definitions of **diversity, equity and inclusion.**



## DIVERSITY

The presence of different and multiple characteristics that make up individual and collective identities, including race, gender, age, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, national origin, socio-economic status, language and physical ability.



## EQUITY

The process of identifying and removing the barriers that create disparities in the access to resources and means, and the achievement of fair treatment and equal opportunities to thrive.



## INCLUSION

The creation of an environment in which any individual or group can be and feel welcomed, respected, supported and valued to participate fully.

“[Equity] issues are not new, they’ve been buried. There’s a thing called ‘disturbance ecology.’ When you have a flood or a fire, there’s devastation and pain. From that, life spring forwards. So having this out in the open, talking about it, trying to understand it, and identify where it is, that’s really the only way forward through this. And that’s a good thing for all of us.”

Dave Somers, County Executive,  
Snohomish County, Wash.

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# COUNTIES ARE ADVANCING DEI THROUGH FOUR APPROACHES

County governments across the country understand their responsibility to ensure everyone has equal opportunities to thrive. When inequitable access to opportunities exists, communities experience disparate outcomes that can have devastating and enduring effects. Many county governments are addressing these disparities with solutions that incorporate the principles of diversity, equity and inclusion. Through DEI, counties are understanding better what issues and barriers exist and are responding in ways that improve outcomes for those communities and the people who live there.

No two counties are the same, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach to achieving equity. County DEI strategies will vary across jurisdictions. This report offers a framework of four primary approaches to advance a DEI strategy: leveraging policy and decision-making powers, enacting or administering programs, forming community partnerships and reimagining county government employment. **The framework is brought to life by the stories and experiences of eight counties leveraging combinations of these approaches and demonstrating how a focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion creates communities where everyone can thrive.**



## **POLICYMAKERS:**

Counties pass resolutions and ordinances, inform county-wide planning and incorporate DEI language into policies and practices to better assist underserved communities and populations.



## **INVESTORS:**

Counties target investments to revitalize underserved communities and use data to better allocate assets and services to address the needs of historically disadvantaged communities.



## **EMPLOYERS:**

As a major employer in many communities, counties actively cultivate diversity by making workplaces more inclusive, creating pathways for career growth and fostering representative leadership in county government.



## **PARTNERS:**

Counties engage with community members, leaders, nonprofits and other stakeholders to resolve equity issues and provide essential services.



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# COUNTIES AS **POLICYMAKERS**

Counties enact laws and regulations that impact many aspects of residents' lives, including education, employment, healthcare, housing and public safety. When the impact of those regulations creates or perpetuates disparate outcomes for community members, counties can enact new policies or amend them to correct inequities. Armed with data, counties can identify underserved communities, evaluate policies and use our rulemaking and budget authority to provide more equitable governance.

1.3M  
Population (2020)



## FRANKLIN COUNTY, OHIO

59.5%	White Population
22.4%	Black or African American Population
6.9%	Hispanic or Latino Origin Population

Source: NACo County Explorer data, 2022

### Fostering Inclusive Prosperity

**Interviewees:** Kenneth Wilson, County Administrator, and Damika Withers, Chief Economic Equity and Inclusion Officer

Several years ago, Franklin County leaders realized theirs was a tale of two communities: by one account, the county was the fastest growing and thriving community in the state; and by the other, neighborhoods were being left behind and grappling with high unemployment rates. Franklin County moved to address this divide with a series of initiatives. **In 2017, the Franklin County Board of Commissioners passed a resolution to establish the Franklin County Advisory Council on Economic Inclusion (FCACEI or "the Council")<sup>2</sup> charged with convening community stakeholders (e.g., policymakers, business leaders and owners) to develop recommendations that address local barriers to economic inclusion.<sup>3</sup>** Franklin County included the broader community to produce more effective solutions and strengthen the community's sense of belonging. A second critical initiative was a comprehensive and community-wide approach to addressing poverty and the inequity of opportunities in the county.<sup>4</sup> Known as the Franklin County Rise Together Blueprint, this research-intensive effort identified the underlying racial inequities and disproportional experiences of communities of color across various issues, including unemployment, education, healthcare and criminal justice involvement.

In 2020, Franklin County formally acknowledged racism as a public health crisis to guide intentional policymaking and investments.<sup>5</sup> As part of this acknowledgment,

**Franklin County officially recognized racial equity as a core governing principle, identifying racism as a root cause of poverty and health disparities and a barrier to upward economic mobility.** The county established its Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion to lead its work addressing county-wide systemic inequities and disparities.<sup>6</sup>

Like many communities across the nation, Franklin County has grappled with the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. **Small businesses contribute an estimated \$13 million to Franklin County's local economy but were hit hardest by the pandemic, particularly those owned by minoritized groups.<sup>7,8</sup> To support small minority-owned businesses struggling in the pandemic and strengthen the local economy, the county partnered with the Columbus Urban League to create the Business Growth and Equity Fund, which initially awarded grants of over \$1.6 million to 65 local small businesses.<sup>9</sup>** The county found that nearly two-thirds of these businesses did not receive Payroll Protection loans or any other form of COVID-19 relief, nor did they have relationships with local banks. In March 2022, the county expanded the Business Growth and Equity Fund by an additional \$8 million and will continue to serve historically underserved businesses, those owned by minoritized groups, women or veterans.<sup>10</sup>





**Kenneth Wilson**  
County Administrator,  
Franklin County, Ohio

Don't just announce that you're going to do something.  
Don't just appoint a Chief Equity and Inclusion Officer.  
Don't just celebrate the declaration. But almost  
immediately, become action oriented."

## FRANKLIN COUNTY'S DEI JOURNEY

2017

- *Advisory Council on Economic Inclusion established*

2020

- *Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion established*
- *Racial Equity established as core principle*
- *Small Business Growth and Equity Alliance created*
- *Racism declared a public health crisis*

2019

- *Developed Franklin County Rise Together Blueprint*

2021

- *Hired Chief Economic and Inclusion Officer*



43.<sup>1</sup>K  
Population (2020)

## SULLIVAN COUNTY, N.H.

90.9%	White Population
1.9%	Hispanic or Latino Origin Population
0.9%	Asian Population

Source: NACo County Explorer data, 2022



### Supporting Justice-Involved Residents

**Interviewees:** David Berry, Superintendent, Department of Corrections and Donna Magee, Program Director, Community Corrections Center

To address the prevalence of substance use disorders in its growing jail population and insufficient jail capacity, Sullivan County launched its Transitional Reentry and Inmate Life Skills (TRAILS) program in 2010. **Recognizing that with treatment and support, many people suffering from mental health and substance use disorders can recover and live productively with dignity and respect,<sup>11</sup> the county elected to build a community corrections center to house the TRAILS program for \$6.8 million instead of a new jail facility estimated to cost over \$30 million.<sup>12</sup>** The impetus of the TRAILS program was in response to a 2005 study that revealed that more than 80 percent of county inmates required treatment for substance use issues and those needs were largely unmet.<sup>13</sup> TRAILS targets individuals with co-occurring substance use and mental health disorders and utilizes trauma-informed and client-centered care in two phases: 90 days of in-house substance use disorder programming followed by 6 to 12 months of post-release counseling, peer coaching support and assistance with supportive housing.<sup>14</sup> TRAILS centers equity in its outline with its multiple tracks designed to meet individuals' needs.<sup>15</sup>

Incarceration impacts an individual's life post-release, including housing, health care, employment and social connectedness.<sup>16</sup> To address unequal outcomes for formerly incarcerated individuals, Sullivan County expanded on its reentry efforts and announced 2021

plans for a transitional housing facility called Sullivan House.<sup>17,18</sup> The Sullivan House project will address the crucial gap in safe, clean and affordable housing needed for residents seeking to continue to work on their recovery with vital social support. Not only will Sullivan House create a space to support individuals creating a healthy future, but it will also help to reinforce a sense of community for individuals who are experiencing the same treatment programs. Overall, the county estimates that it has raised nearly \$4 million to launch this sober house facility that will support approximately 30 or more beds and offer the lowest sober housing rates in the state.

Sullivan County's community transitional reentry program has disrupted the cycle of recidivism and mitigated substance use issues in the local justice-involved population. **By implementing the TRAILS program, Sullivan County reduced its recidivism rate from 68 percent to 20 percent by 2017, placing the county in the top 99th percentile nationwide for successful reentry programs.** In the process, the county cultivated critical partnerships and the support of key stakeholders, working together to ensure a comprehensive support network for those involved with the criminal justice system.





David Berry,  
Superintendent,  
Department of Corrections,  
Sullivan County, N.H.

Build a stakeholder's coalition. That is where the success of this has launched because everybody had a say early on, so they are our biggest supporters in the community. If we can go out of business because we have a healthy community and none of us are needed anymore? That is the goal."

## SULLIVAN COUNTY'S DEI JOURNEY



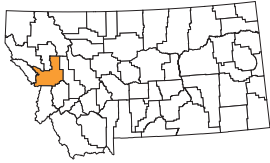




# COUNTIES AS INVESTORS

Counties invest over \$600 billion annually to operate and maintain infrastructure systems, run local health systems, deliver emergency response services and provide core human services across the lifespan, from early childhood development to elder care. To equitably serve all communities, counties can invest to improve outcomes for historically underserved communities. By increasing service delivery in the area, preserving the natural environment and thoughtfully developing the built environment, residents can thrive for generations.

118K  
Population (2020)



## MISSOULA COUNTY, MONT.

84.8%	White Population
5.1%	Hispanic or Latino Origin Population
2.6%	American Indian & Alaskan Native Population

Source: NACo County Explorer data, 2022

### Addressing Invisible Barriers To Equity

**Interviewees:** Shantelle Gaynor, Community Justice Department Director; Erin Kautz, Grants Administrator, Community and Planning Services; TJ McDermott, Sheriff and Jamar Galbreath, Equity Coordinator

Missoula County, Mont. is investing its resources, data capacity and personnel to address disparities in the local criminal justice system. In 2015, the county participated in a sequential intercept mapping workshop to better understand how people with behavioral health needs entered and flowed through the justice system. Informed by the tools from this workshop, the county developed a Jail Diversion Master Plan in 2016 to address systemic issues related to behavioral health and incarceration.<sup>19,20</sup> County leaders found that the Native American community was disproportionately represented in the county jail and also underutilized county mental health services. **Using grant funds, technical assistance and other resources from the MacArthur Foundation, the county implemented its Native Outreach Project (NOP), a listening campaign to better understand the Native American population's experience with and barriers to participation in county services; consequently, the county expanded culturally specific programming and increased access to its jail programming to improve Native American reentry experiences.**<sup>21,22</sup>

To support these efforts, the Sheriff's office invested in a lieutenant position that exclusively works with the courts, prosecutors and hospitals to divert those with mental health issues from custody. The county also developed a community-supported release program

that includes a reentry coordinator who helps those formerly involved with the criminal justice system connect to critical resources and a continuation of care, focusing on Native Americans and women leaving the system. These investments reduced the overall jail population and allowed the Missoula County Detention Facility to safely isolate and treat infected individuals properly throughout the pandemic. As a result, Missoula County did not lose a single inmate to COVID-19.

To further reduce reliance on the justice system, Missoula County invested in a Mobile Support Team pilot program in 2020 to serve as a first responder to 911 calls deemed a mental health crisis.<sup>23</sup> This one-year pilot program combined EMS and Licensed Clinical Social Worker services so that they could respond to a crisis separately from law enforcement if needed. During the first year, the Mobile Support Team had 11 confirmed jail diversions and more than 200 emergency room diversions. **Since its inception, Missoula County has invested an additional \$1 million of federal COVID-19 relief in the Mobile Support Team and secured state grant funding to focus future efforts on reaching more rural communities.**<sup>24</sup> Through these mutually reinforcing efforts, Missoula County has made strides in addressing the underlying issues and barriers in the justice system that have historically led to unequal health and socio-economic outcomes in the community.



**Shantelle Gaynor**  
Community Justice  
Department Director,  
Missoula County, Mont.

There can be invisible barriers that until you start asking questions you don't actually know what the barrier is."

## MISSOULA COUNTY'S DEI JOURNEY



561.<sup>5</sup>K  
Population (2020)

## DANE COUNTY, WIS.



76%	White Population
7.5%	Hispanic or Latino Origin Population
5.3%	Black or African American Population

Source: NACo County Explorer data, 2022

### Intersecting Equity and Opportunity

Interviewee: Wesley Sparkman, Director, Office for Equity and Inclusion

While Dane County is ranked as one of the best places to live in the nation, county leaders recognize there are still barriers to opportunity that need to be addressed so that all residents can succeed. One of those barriers is access to transportation, which is integral to obtaining employment. After driver education aid to school districts was eliminated in 2014, Dane County funded a Drivers Scholarship pilot project with the Madison Metropolitan School District to address the affordability barriers around driver's education. **As part of its Access to Opportunity agenda, the program provides summer driver education instruction to students who cannot afford to pay for private driving courses or who do not have a car to practice driving.** Since 2014, the Drivers Education Scholarship program has expanded to several other school districts; in 2019, almost 80 percent of students enrolled were Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC).<sup>25</sup> Many students that have taken advantage of the program say that it has allowed them to gain job opportunities that they otherwise would not have had without driver's licenses.

To expand on its efforts to examine and address the causes of racial disparities, **Dane County worked with the Center for Social Inclusion (CSI) and the Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE) to conduct a Racial Equity Analysis of the county government in 2015, resulting in a report with**

**recommendations. The report recommended that Dane County create infrastructure for the overall implementation of report recommendations by creating a new office for racial equity and social justice.**<sup>26</sup> In 2016, the county created the Office for Equity and Inclusion (OEI) and the Office of Equity and Inclusion Advisory Board to support all programs and projects relating to equity and inclusion.

In 2015, the County Board of Supervisors and County Executive approved and piloted the Partners in Equity (PIE) grant to support local-based community groups that address systemic racial inequities in the criminal justice system.<sup>27</sup> The Office of Equity and Inclusion Advisory Board reviews applications for the Partners in Equity Grants and in 2021, the PIE grant awarded \$105,000 to seven organizations providing a range of services, from health and education for Black and Latinx women to supporting reentry work for formerly incarcerated women and mentorship opportunities for marginalized students.<sup>28</sup> In 2022, the OEI expanded the efforts and impact of these grants in partnership with the Dane County Food Council to invest in innovative projects that advance equity and access in local food systems throughout the county, particularly in under-resourced or underrepresented communities.<sup>29</sup>





**Wesley Sparkman**  
Director, Office for Equity  
and Inclusion, Dane  
County, Wis.

Teamwork is essential. There's got to be an appreciation and understanding that we have to work together to really achieve long-lasting goals in equity. So beginning with that in mind I think is important, and when you do that, allocating adequate resources and funding to those initiatives will produce long-term benefits."

## DANE COUNTY'S DEI JOURNEY











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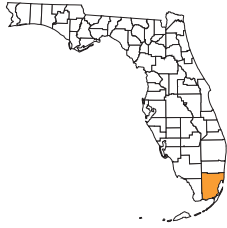
## COUNTIES AS **PARTNERS**



Counties alleviate budget constraints and increase organizational capacity by partnering with municipal and neighboring county governments, nonprofits and community organizations to provide critical services. When looking to address socio-economic disparities, counties can leverage relationships with these partners who often have deep community ties. By involving a range of stakeholders, counties can serve communities that may not have been reached before.



2.7 M  
Population (2020)



## MIAMI-DADE COUNTY, FLA.

13.4%	White Population
68.7%	Hispanic or Latino Origin Population
14.0%	Black or African American Population

Source: NACo County Explorer data, 2022

### Advancing Equity Through Parks and Open Spaces

Interviewees: Interviewee: Maria I. Nardi, Director for Parks, Recreation and Open Spaces Dpt.

Like many metropolitan areas across the nation, Miami-Dade County faces the population growth issue of increased congestion and declining open spaces for recreation and conservation of natural areas. **Parks, trails and other green spaces are critical to fostering healthy and vibrant communities, and high population density and rapid growth can significantly impact equitable access to these spaces.** Miami-Dade County is home to the third-largest accredited, and one of the most diverse, park systems in the nation. In 2007, the county forged a new path for these assets by identifying equitable practices in all parks and recreation areas through its Parks and Open Space Master Plan (OSMP), a community-driven plan developed to ensure that all county residents have equal access to a park, regardless of where they live. The OSMP prioritizes equitable investments and distribution of funding for projects that will increase programming in areas lacking equitable park access over the next 50 years.<sup>31</sup>

Miami-Dade County employs collaborative community approaches and partnerships in its efforts to advance equity whether through its park system or across the county government. When implementing the OSMP, the county established the South Florida Parks Coalition, which includes its 34 municipalities and other regional and federal park agencies, to support the execution of the plan. **Furthermore, the county partners with state agencies and local health partners to purchase land for parks and green spaces in a manner that prioritizes areas impacted by health disparities, and**

**addresses gaps in resiliency, walkability and access to fitness centers.** Miami-Dade County government and residents recognize the vital role parks play in advancing health and equity so much so that results from a 2021 county-wide survey identified parks and open spaces among the top three community services most important to residents and informed how the county could further improve equitable services within the county parks system.<sup>32</sup>

To build on its efforts to ensure that its parks system is accessible to all residents, Miami-Dade County parks sought to meet the needs of its growing population with disabilities and comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act within parks and open spaces. **The county parks developed a Therapeutic Recreation and Inclusion (TRI) unit to focus on serving all persons with disabilities.**<sup>33</sup> The TRI unit is operated by the county parks' Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialists and offers programs and events that serve children and adults with developmental and intellectual disabilities.<sup>34</sup> In FY 2018-19, the county recorded attendance for all parks' TRI programs and special events at approximately 23,812 participants.<sup>35</sup> The county partners with multiple local nonprofit and community-based organizations to fund opportunities for persons with disabilities to participate in quality leisure programs focused on recreational and competitive programming, including the first baseball field in the county designed especially for children and adults with disabilities.



**Maria I. Nardi**  
Director for Parks,  
Recreation and Open  
Spaces Department,  
Miami-Dade, Fla.

Parks are where everyone comes together as equals. It doesn't matter who you are or where you come from; parks bring people and communities together and strengthen bonds between neighbors. In the post-pandemic world, parks will continue to promote diversity, equity and inclusion, improving lives and helping communities emerge stronger, healthier, more equitable and more resilient than before."

## MIAMI-DADE COUNTY'S DEI JOURNEY



269.<sup>5</sup>K  
Population (2020)



## BUNCOMBE COUNTY, N.C.

79.7%	White Population
6.8%	Hispanic or Latino Origin Population
6.3%	Black or African American Population

Source: NACo County Explorer data, 2022

### Planning for Equity

Interviewee: Rachel Edens, Chief Equity and Human Rights Officer

Implementing a diversity, equity and inclusion plan that reflects the community involves engaging and fostering partnerships across the county. In 2019, Buncombe County began work on its 2025 Strategic Plan, which places equity as a foundational focus area and a core value.<sup>36</sup> This plan signaled the county's commitment to identifying systems, policies, programs and partnerships that support and integrate equity across the county government, as well as foster an organizational culture that embraces diversity and inclusion.<sup>37</sup> **To hold itself accountable, the county formed an Equity & Inclusion Workgroup comprised of county staff that crafted the Racial Equity Action Plan (REAP): actionable steps to guide the county from strategic plan to systemic change.** REAP is the culmination of collaborative research, planning and feedback from county leadership, community members and county employees and provides a framework for addressing Community Engagement, Quality of Life, Equity Learning and Support, Accountability and Equity-Informed Decision Making. Through a targeted equity lens, REAP implementation will foster genuine forms of community engagement and leverage strategic partnerships to produce more equitable outcomes for all.<sup>38</sup>

**Buncombe County is building on its work with REAP to create a safe and equitable community by coordinating efforts through strategic and transformative partnerships with municipal governments, school systems and other community-based organizations.** One of Buncombe County's key collaborations is with the North Carolina School Justice Partnership, which brings together stakeholders from school law enforcement and the court system to implement effective strategies to address student misconduct and reduce unequal outcomes in the justice system.<sup>39</sup> This partnership has reduced the overall number of suspensions, expulsions and referrals to the justice system by constructively and timely addressing student misconduct when and where it happens. **For Buncombe County, committing to advancing equity through the strategic plan has allowed residents to follow the work being done and demonstrates how county government can actively partner with the community to address longstanding disparities.**





**Rachel Edens**  
Chief Equity and Human  
Rights Officer, Buncombe  
County, N.C.

Our work is our community, and we are a huge driver of what the landscape of our community is and how we provide for individuals who are marginalized and under resourced.”

## BUNCOMBE COUNTY'S DEI JOURNEY

### 2019

- *Buncombe develops 2025 Strategic Plan with equity as a foundational focus area*

### 2021

- *Office of Equity and Human Rights is created*
- *Racial Equity Action Plan goes into effect*
- *County Commissioners approve non-discrimination ordinance*

### 2020

- *County Commissioners commit to reparations*
- *Racism is declared a public health and safety crisis*
- *Equity & Inclusion Workgroup begins developing Racial Equity Action Plan*
- *Equity & Inclusion Workgroup is formed*

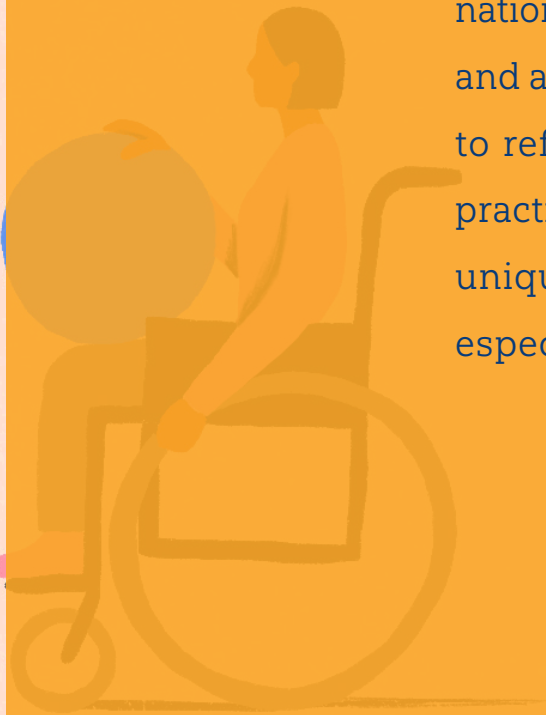




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## COUNTIES AS **EMPLOYERS**

Counties employ more than 3.6 million workers – or more than 1% of the American population – to deliver essential services and ensure healthy, safe and vibrant communities across the nation.<sup>40</sup> To make sure certain community needs are understood and addressed equitably, it is valuable for county government to reflect the people served.<sup>41</sup> Counties can develop hiring practices to employ and retain a diverse workforce that brings unique experiences and perspectives to problem-solving, especially from traditionally underrepresented populations.



262.<sup>3</sup>K  
Population (2020)



## MARIN COUNTY, CALIF.

66%	White Population
18.8%	Hispanic or Latino Origin Population
6.2%	Asian Population

Source: NACo County Explorer data, 2022

### Operationalizing Equity In County Government

Interviewees: Jamillah Jordan, County Equity Director

Historically marginalized groups often face barriers to opportunities that may help advance their careers. Marin County began an effort to identify these disparities within the county's jurisdiction, highlighting income and life expectancy discrepancies in its 2016 State of the County report. In 2017, Marin County translated this data into action and developed its internal-facing Racial Equity Plan – the first county in the state to do so – focusing particularly on attracting and hiring a more diverse workforce.<sup>42</sup> The following year, Marin County established the Office of Equity to formalize the county's work to provide racial equity training to its workforce, increase community engagement and create equity in sustainable jobs.<sup>43</sup>

One of Marin County's key initiatives in this area was developing a Diversity Hiring Toolkit to address barriers to county employment, such as implicit bias in recruitment practices.<sup>44</sup> **The Diversity Hiring Toolkit provides a comprehensive approach to recruitment, interviewing, hiring and retention and offers county employers a range of multimedia resources and templates.** The county implemented new hiring practices such as redacting all applicant names in the initial resume screening, carefully balancing hiring panels to reflect gender and racial diversity and piloting a talent pipeline program to provide opportunities for

youth from historically marginalized communities to gain experience in public service careers. These hiring practices are constantly refined, focusing on uplifting underserved and under-resourced individuals who desire county employment.

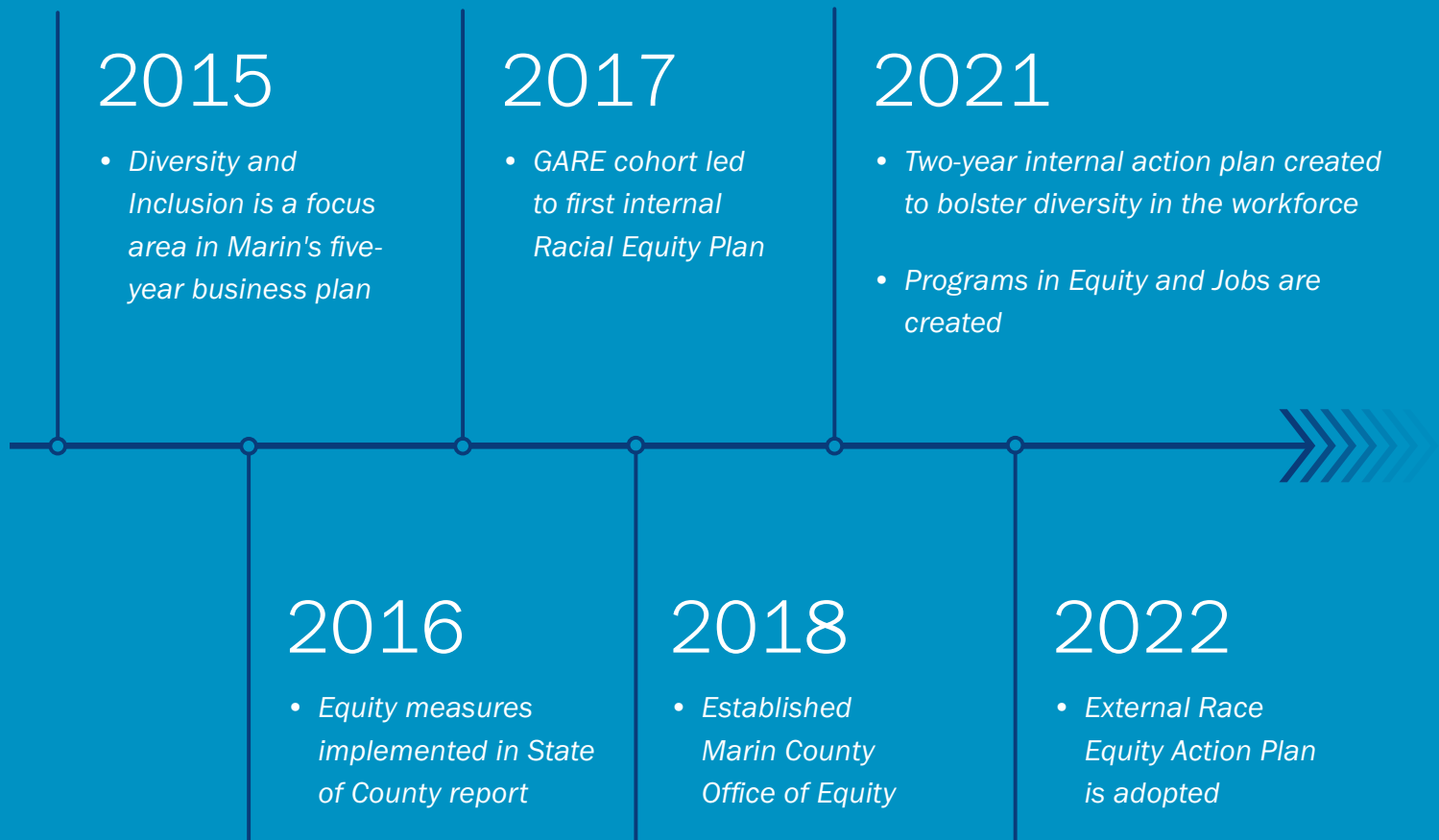
Marin County has also created programming centered on equity in job training to help a broader range of the community access sustainable wage jobs.<sup>45</sup> **For instance, the Fire, Inclusion, Recruitment & Education program works to establish a community-oriented wildfire prevention workforce by providing job training, skills development and wraparound services for underserved and underrepresented community members.** Additionally, the county's Career Explorer Youth program focuses on bringing in various departments to engage underserved youth on public service careers. As the county looks to the future, alignment and integration of these efforts into the three focus areas identified in the county's 2020 Race Equity Action Plan – mental health, housing and opportunity – will be critical to the county's success. Through these efforts, Marin County is working to operationalize equity in its day-to-day work, putting equity into action and fostering a more diverse and representative workforce.



**Jamillah Jordan**  
County Equity Director,  
Marin County, Calif.

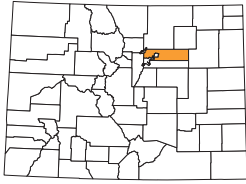
Working in close partnership with community, county staff and elected leaders, we can build trust and spark change to address long-standing racial and social inequities. Our goal is to create pathways that allow everyone to thrive and reach their full potential, regardless of race, ethnicity, income, ZIP code, disability, gender, immigration status, sexual orientation or age.”

## MARIN COUNTY'S DEI JOURNEY



519.<sup>6</sup>K  
Population (2020)

## ADAMS COUNTY, COLO.



46.1% White Population

41.7% Hispanic or Latino Origin Population

4.3% Asian Population

Source: NACo County Explorer data, 2022

### Investing in Community Resilience

Interviewee: Matt Rivera, Director of the Community Safety & Well-Being Department

Counties play a crucial role in fostering resilient communities. The COVID-19 public health crisis has strained this resilience and also shed light on the historical inequities and disinvestments that have prevented struggling communities from thriving – including individuals experiencing homelessness. In 2016, Adams County, in partnership with the University of Denver’s Graduate School of Social Work, conducted an internal assessment of homelessness in the county and determined a clear need to create county positions that specifically served those experiencing homelessness.<sup>46</sup> In response, the county filled these roles with individuals who have experience in homelessness, incarceration, poverty, participation in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, substance use and mental illness. The county strongly believes that experience gained firsthand through involvement with the justice system or poverty is just as important as lessons from a classroom or workplace, especially in programs that serve those specific communities.

**Adams County is committing fully to living its values through its employment practices. Hiring lived-experience professionals not only invests county resources equitably but has created a stronger and**

**more resilient workforce that is sensitive to the needs of its residents.** In 2020, Adams County also piloted the Adams County Day Works program, which provided 71 residents with the opportunity to provide day-labor services, earn same-day cash and work towards more permanent employment. In 2021, the program had 83 new applicants and 11 participants obtained full-time positions. The program has also since expanded to include veterans experiencing homelessness in the city of Aurora.<sup>47</sup>

This expansion of employment initiatives was also undergirded by a targeted and intentional effort to increase data collection and analysis at the county level. **Adams County recognized the need to invest in a dedicated data scientist to build capacity for this work and reframe how it approaches and asks pertinent questions; consequently, the county has significantly expanded equity efforts across the community.** Because of this focus on equity, the county is seeing changes in composition, empathy and performance across department culture and engagement, consistently obtaining the highest participation and satisfaction rates in its quarterly cultural competency survey.



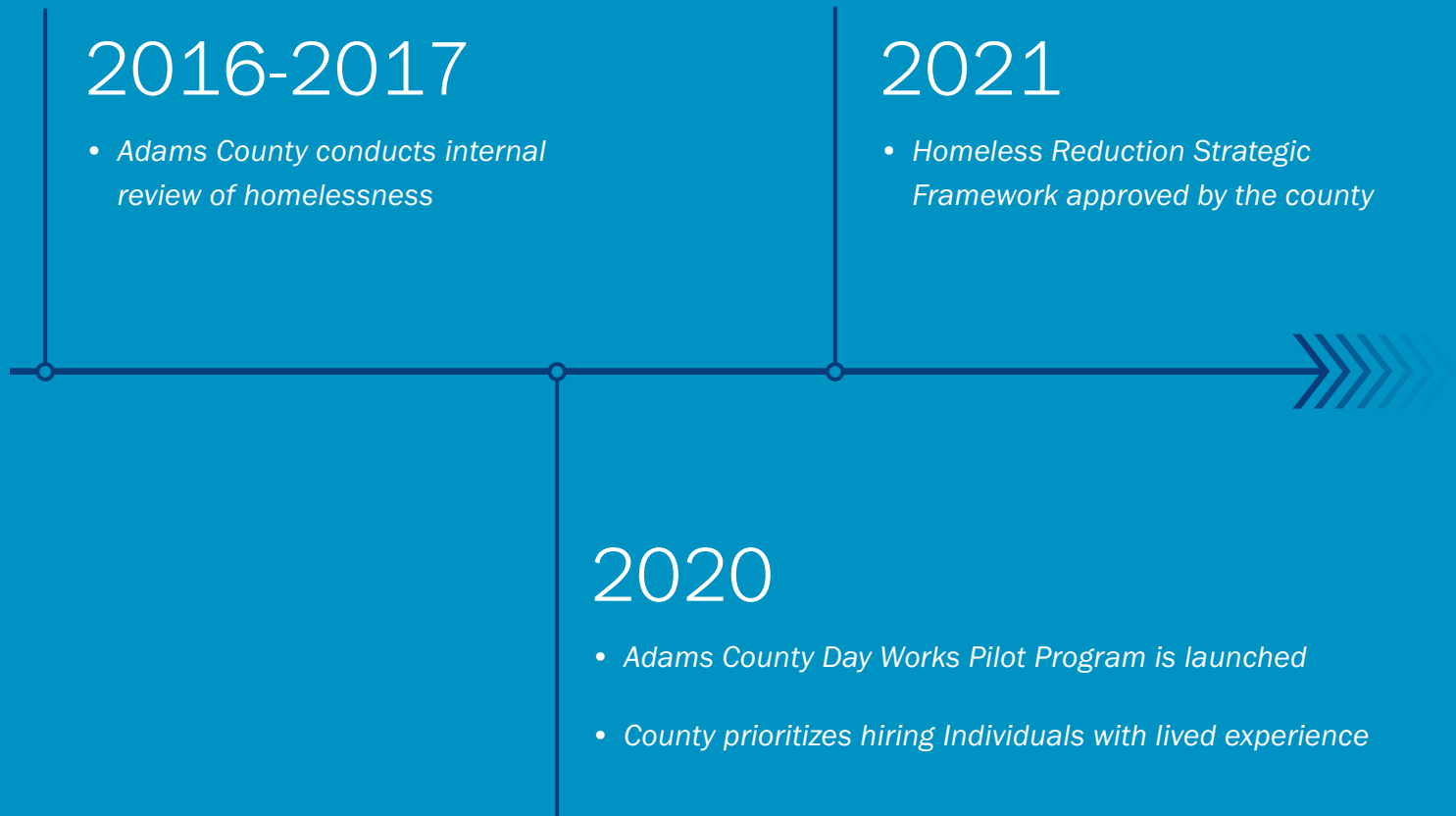


**Matt Rivera**

Director of the Community  
Safety & Well-Being  
Department, Adams  
County, Colo.

As the data indicates, far too many of our diverse neighbors are overrepresented in criminal justice, and have to overcome historical barriers and social stigmas, all of which can limit employment opportunities. Whether it's race, gender identity, sexual orientation, poverty, behavioral health, homelessness, or intersections of all of the above - we needed to move beyond simply acknowledging these systemic barriers and towards a dignified, jobs-first approach for these professionals."

## ADAMS COUNTY'S DEI JOURNEY



## CONCLUSION

Nationwide, counties are advancing the principles of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) to better serve communities. Counties are identifying inequity and building the necessary capacity to drive efforts in all four approaches of the equity framework. Regardless of the approach, county leaders contend that aligning and integrating efforts across sectors is key to successfully addressing barriers facing county residents. While every county's DEI strategy looks different, there are common threads that connect these case studies and speak to the collective nature of this work:

- 
- Cultivating strong leadership can help institutionalize equity across county departments and steer local policy. Counties can also identify community champions and create stakeholder coalitions that represent diverse perspectives and will advocate for the work, both internally and externally.
  - Investments in DEI initiatives often produce better outcomes if there is a careful review of existing needs and gaps. Data is a crucial part of the process; it can help inform decision-making by providing indicators of progress and guide county leaders in charting an intentional and inclusive path forward.
  - Local resources and capacity can be amplified through partnerships that uplift residents and provide sustainable solutions.
  - Representation is an essential element both within and outside county government. Assessing internal and external values can help reframe the narrative around who is actively sought out and included in these processes.
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Regardless of a county's starting point, the journey to achieving diversity, equity and inclusion is long and constantly evolving. Counties committing to the work, using these and many more strategies, create healthier and more vibrant communities for all.

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**How did we do? Tell us at [DEI@naco.org](mailto:DEI@naco.org).**

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