Executive Summary

Race-Explicit Strategies for Workforce Equity in Healthcare and IT

race forward

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Racial equity is the systematic fair treatment of people of all races that results in equitable opportunities and outcomes for everyone.

Healthcare and information technology (IT) are two of the fastest-growing sectors in the United States and provide numerous high-paying career options around the country.[1] However, most of these living-wage careers are only available to individuals who have advanced degrees and other costly credentials, which are real barriers for many people of color in low-income communities. Workforce development is a system of interconnected services and programs that are focused on preparing and placing workers in careers fit for the current economy. Providing access into healthcare and IT careers will become an increasingly critical role for workforce development agencies as these sectors continue to take over more of the labor market. What else can the workforce development system do to reinvigorate its original, civil-rights-era aims of advancing equity and addressing occupational segregation within these sectors as a whole?

By focusing on racial equity in an analysis of workforce development, this report provides leaders and other practitioners with solutions to support workers of color to advance in healthcare and IT careers.

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1. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015), healthcare practitioner and technical occupations are projected to grow at a rate of 16 percent between now and 2024, healthcare support occupations will grow at a rate of 23 percent, and computer and mathematics occupations will grow at rate of 13 percent.

PART I:
Historical Legacy of U.S. Public Workforce Policy (1933–Present)

The first part of this report provides historical context to the creation and expansion of U.S. federal workforce development policy and the particular ways that system became susceptible to prevailing ideologies about marginalized communities and the nature of work. Amid a political context in the 1960s of increasing pressure from civil rights organizing, legislative battles, and a storm of urban protests, the federal government rose to the calls coming from Black and poor communities—a demand for better work. However, with the election of Ronald Reagan and the arrival of a new conservative agenda, funding and public support for federal workforce policies targeted towards workers of color and the poor shrank substantially: a reality that many within the workforce system are now witnessing under the new Trump administration.

We learn from history and past policies that as federal workforce programs continued to grow, an overemphasis on individualism and the assumed fairness of a meritocratic system pervaded the field. The message is clear: In order for workers of color to advance in their careers, they must be disciplined, educated, and skilled. The reality, however, is that dominant messages about personal responsibility, achievement, ability, and talent fail to recognize the historical and inter-generational way in which multiple systems—including not only workforce, but also education, housing, criminal justice and others—have created an inherent set of disadvantages for people of color. Even though workers of color work hard and have abilities, they are not guaranteed full, life-sustaining employment. In short, workers are told that learning the necessary skills and working hard will guarantee their success. The implication, however, is that if attaining a job or a promotion remains out of reach for workers, there is no one to blame but themselves.

What is glaringly absent in this rhetoric are the realities of systemic racism and implicit bias that pervade both the labor market and the workforce development programs. Often, rhetoric about employability and opportunity drives social inequity, creating impenetrable roadblocks for workers of color along pathways that are already limited. Moreover, these frameworks deny workforce practitioners an opportunity to craft holistic approaches towards systemic solutions.

PART II:
Barriers to Advancing Racial Equity Outcomes in Workforce Development

The second part of this report presents data and stories from practitioners and workers of color that shed light on intraorganizational problems and external barriers to advancing racial equity in the field. Workforce development leaders and practitioners reported several key major challenges within their organizations including the following: problems with tracking racial disparities and outcomes; lack of services to support low-income workers of color; tension between One-Stop Centers[2] and CBOs[3]; and a cultural disconnect among staff and clients.

During focus groups, workers of color expressed skepticism and concern about finding job opportunities after leaving the training program. Practitioners echoed these concerns. External barriers that feed into these shared anxieties include the following: racial bias of employers; racial and gender discrimination in healthcare and IT sectors; government legal restrictions and funding cutbacks; and lack of technical training and inadequate education among clients.

Despite these deficiencies and barriers, there are opportunities for leaders and key stakeholders to learn from other organizations that incorporate an equity lens in their work. There are also opportunities for practitioners and workers alike to coalesce around strategies that address external barriers and improve racial equity outcomes for workers of color in healthcare and IT sectors.

"Community-based organizations are poorly funded. They receive most funds from grants and contracts for direct-service provisions. It's highly prescriptive of what they can pay staff. People with better options get better jobs and education and have better social networks. So White workers get jobs after leaving community college or One-Stop programs, but workers from CBOs—not so much."

DAWN
WHITE FEMALE POLICY ANALYST AND ADVOCATE

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2. Also known as American Jobs Centers, One-Stop Centers provide assistance to job seekers and businesses free of charge, including training and education, referrals, career counseling, job listings, job search assistance, on-site resource rooms (PCs, telephones, etc.), and other specialized employment-related services.

3. Community-based organizations (CBOs) are nonprofit organizations that provide job training and placement at the grassroots level along with family support services such as childcare or foreclosure assistance in cultural and socially sensitive environments.

PART III:
Systemic Solutions for Advancing Racial Equity Outcomes

The third part of this report outlines three major areas where workforce development practitioners can most effectively leverage their position to embed equity into their organization and the greater industry. Successfully training, placing, and supporting workers of color to secure quality employment depends on more than workforce practitioners alone.

We recognize the role employers, regulatory agencies, and philanthropists also play in ensuring that equity is prioritized and realized as workers move through the system. Our recommendations focus on how workforce development practitioners can advance racial equity outcomes both within their own organizations and as key advocates in the larger workforce ecosystem.

This section also includes two examples of workforce development organizations that are taking innovative approaches to building racial equity within their institutions:

- **Brighton Center**, which is advancing a new system to collect, track, and analyze outcome-focused data by race.
- **Per Scholas**, which provides free technical training and certifications for workers of color to attain entry and mid-level careers in IT.

WHAT IS YOUR ORGANIZATION'S ROLE?

Ninety-one percent of respondents from community-based organizations and sixty-seven percent of respondents from One-Stop Centers agreed that it is their role to provide services or programs that address the societal reasons for the under-representation of clients of color in IT or healthcare sectors.

Key Findings

This report examines **dominant narratives** in the public workforce system and the extent to which workforce development organizations reinforce narratives about employment opportunities for workers of color. We report on **perceived barriers** in workforce development that get in the way of equitable employment outcomes. We also report on **opportunities** to break down those barriers. This *Race-Explicit Strategies for Workforce Equity in Healthcare and IT* report draws on academic research, interviews with workers of color and key experts in the field, and results from a 2016 Race Forward survey of 70 workforce development organizations nationwide. The survey respondents were primarily leaders and practitioners from community-based organizations (CBOs) and certified One-Stop Centers (also known as American Job Centers) that provide a full range of assistance to job seekers and businesses, including specialized employment-related services.[4]

These interviews and surveys helped to identify major internal and external barriers to greater adoption of a racial-equity lens in the field. For example:

- Practitioners point to the following **internal challenges** that contribute to the underrepresentation of workers of color in healthcare and IT sectors: limited tracking of racial disparities and outcomes; lack of services to support low-income workers of color; tension between One-Stop Centers and CBOs; and a cultural disconnect among staff and clients.

- Practitioners and workers of color agree that the following **external barriers** make it challenging for workers of color to advance in healthcare and IT careers: racial bias of employers; racial and gender discrimination in healthcare and IT sectors; government restrictions and funding cutbacks; and lack of technical training and inadequate education among clients of color.

- **Solutions** to increase racial equity in the workforce development field through a systemic, race-explicit, and outcome-oriented approach abound, including
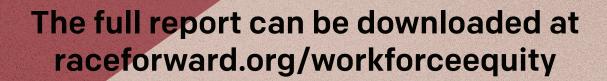
the following: integrated data-management systems; industry-informed certifications; racial-equity employer trainings; and the development of race-specific success indicators within funding models.

- Despite the internal challenges and external barriers listed in this report, sources highlighted the underlying strength that client-practitioner relationships can offer to future transformations. **Workers of color trust that trainers, coordinators, and managers — regardless of race — will help them advance in their careers in healthcare and IT.**

Key Recommendations

Workforce development practitioners are strategically positioned to advance racial equity to their organization both internally and externally. We recommend the following four key strategies where practitioners are most capable of transforming institutional deficiencies and structural barriers in order to achieve better outcomes for the workers of color that they serve:

- Implement an **institutional assessment and racial equity plan** to develop a targeted method for addressing internal bias and institutional racism. To develop a racial equity plan, institutions need to have a shared foundation and common definitions of key concepts, such as racial inequity and racial equity, implicit and explicit bias, and individual, institutional, and structural racism.

- Negotiate a racially explicit **employer partnership** that shifts the awareness and priorities of employers in the industry.

- Engage in **structural advocacy** with philanthropists and regulatory agencies to redefine the funding requirements that determine client outcomes.

- Build an inclusive and racially explicit **narrative strategy** to guide individual institutions and broader workforce development coalitions.

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4. See the "Methodology, Limitations, and Key Terms" section of this report for descriptions of the types organizations involved in this study.

The full report can be downloaded at
raceforward.org/workforceequity

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