



HARRIS COUNTY

BUDGET MANAGEMENT DEPARTMENT

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COVID-19

April 22, 2021

To: County Judge Hidalgo
Commissioners Ellis, Garcia, Ramsey and Cagle

From: David Berry, Executive Director, Budget Management Department
Pamela Chan, Executive Director, Department of Economic Equity and Opportunity
Dr. Adrienne Holloway, Executive Director, Community Services Department
Katie Short, Director, Commissioners Court's Analyst's Office

Re: American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Equity Framework

On March 30th, 2021, Commissioners Court approved a motion directing the Budget Management Department, the Department of Economic Equity and Opportunity, the Community Services Department, and the Commissioners Court's Analyst's Office to create an Equity Framework for use in guiding investments funded by the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA).

The following Equity Framework describes goals and strategies for advancing equity in the selection, development, implementation, and evaluation of projects funded by ARPA.

Harris County Equity Framework for Investments Funded by the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA)

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has been devastating to all, but it has not impacted all Harris County residents equally. Instead, it has exacerbated long-standing inequities. Black and Hispanic residents, already facing disproportionately negative health outcomes, have suffered the highest coronavirus disease burden and death rates.¹ With lower pre-pandemic wages and less money available to cover shortfalls, Black and Hispanic families have felt the economic fallout of the pandemic acutely, facing additional loss of income and greater-than-average housing insecurity.² Women, and particularly women of color, have also experienced higher rates of unemployment, dealing with virtual schooling, reduced daycare and afterschool options, and inflexible work schedules on top of the collapse of essential industries like retail and hospitality. These are just a few of the disproportionate impacts that have affected already-struggling households.

Equity Goals

Advancing equity means striving for the same outcomes and opportunities across different groups, not simply delivering the same treatment when it fails to yield fair, just, and equal results. With this Equity Framework, Harris County will ensure an equity lens is applied to investments made possible by the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA).

In determining how to deploy ARPA funds, Harris County will pursue investments that advance the following equity goals:

- Reversing negative pandemic-related trends and closing gaps in health, economic, and housing outcomes; positioning disproportionately impacted groups and neighborhoods for improved future outcomes.
- Building capacity within County government, creating a shared understanding of and commitment to equity, and developing tools and practices to support equity-centered solutions.
- Measuring racial and ethnic disparities in health, economic, social, and environmental outcomes so that pandemic recovery plays a role in the long-term remediation of systemic harms to populations of color.
- Incorporating an equity assessment in each project, with opportunities to reflect and adapt based on interim results and community input throughout the project.
- Monitoring investment across the entire program to ensure the overall portfolio is reaching populations and neighborhoods most impacted by the pandemic.

¹ The Institute for Research on Women, Gender & Sexuality, “Pandemic Gender Snapshot #8.” University of Houston, March 18, 2021, available at <https://uh.edu/class/ws/docs/2021/pangen-8---final.pdf>.

² Potter, Bao, Cashiola and Stice, “COVID-19 Pandemic in the Houston Region – Family and Well-being.” Houston Education Research Consortium at Rice University, April 9, 2021, available at <https://herc.rice.edu/research/covid-19-pandemic-houston-region-family-and-well-being>.

Equity Strategies

To ensure Harris County addresses existing and exacerbated inequities, we will employ the following strategies when developing, selecting, and delivering ARPA programs.³

- ***Disaggregate historical data and outcome measures by race, ethnicity, gender, and/or geography and other demographic variables*** to identify inequities and ensure programs are prioritizing disproportionately impacted groups.
- ***Analyze specific factors underlying inequities*** such as racial and gender discrimination, disparate policy impacts, and institutional and structural barriers, adjusting program design accordingly.
- ***Include community representatives*** of groups disproportionately impacted by the pandemic throughout program development, delivery and evaluation.
- ***Target resources and strategies*** to minimize incremental burdens on groups most affected by the pandemic while maximizing their access to relief.
- ***Evaluate the performance of projects through defined metrics and provide opportunities for reflection***, creating space for continual improvement throughout implementation.
- ***Publish transparent program results*** via a publicly available website and other outlets, ensuring performance information reaches disproportionately impacted groups.

Equity Approach

An equity-oriented approach will be embedded throughout the lifecycle of each ARPA-funded project and across the full ARPA program as follows:

1. **Capacity Building**: The Budget Management Department will identify resources to provide training and technical assistance on equity-centered program development to support ARPA Working Groups, relevant Department staff, and project administrators.
2. **Project Development**: All project proposals should incorporate responses to the Equity Reflections (Appendix A) or other materials describing implementation of the Equity Strategies listed above.
3. **Project Selection**: An Equity Assessment tool (Appendix B) will be used to inform project selection. The tool includes questions assessing each project's application of the Equity Strategies. It must be completed by the Working Group Lead, approved by voting members of the associated Working Group, and included in the project's submission to the Steering Committee.
4. **Project Monitoring & Evaluation**: At an interim checkpoint and at the end of each project, qualitative and quantitative responses to the Equity Reflections (Appendix A) will be refreshed to ensure consistency with the original project intent and identify opportunities for improvement.
5. **Program Evaluation & Accountability**: Program-wide financial analyses will be conducted by the Budget Management Department to determine ARPA funding impact on targeted populations and geographies where feasible. Reporting on investment relative to social vulnerability, reporting on investment by race, ethnicity, gender, and/or other specific populations where available, and/or other program-level equity analyses will be provided to Commissioners Court on a quarterly basis beginning in Q4 2021 and also made available online.

³ Inspired by guidance on improving equity in governance and organization change such as, Nelson, Spokane, Ross and Deng, "Advancing Racial Equity and Transforming Government," Government Alliance on Race and Equity. September 2015, available at <https://www.racialequityalliance.org/2015/10/22/resource-guide/> and The Annie E. Casey Foundation, "Embracing Equity: 7 Steps to Advance and Embrace Race Equity and Inclusion within Your Organization." 2014, available at <https://www.aecf.org/resources/race-equity-and-inclusion-action-guide/>.

Equity Framework Modifications

Modifications to this Equity Framework may be required based on learnings throughout its use. Minor modifications may be approved by the ARPA Steering Committee, comprised of Commissioners Court Chiefs of Staff or their designees, and transmitted to Commissioners Court. Substantive modifications must be approved by Commissioners Court. All modifications must be tracked in the Change Log below.

Change Log

Version	Effective Date	Description of Changes
1.0	Request for approval at Commissioners Court April 21, 2021	Initial document

APPENDIX A: Equity Reflections

For each project, the following questions addressing the Equity Strategies may be adapted for use in the initial project proposal, at interim checkpoints, and in a final look-back. Team members responsible for proposing and implementing a project should reflect on the project's impact on equity via overall project results and associated community engagement.

1. How does your project leverage clear outcome measures and disaggregated data from beginning to end to identify inequity and ensure programs are prioritizing disproportionately impacted groups? Who has been disproportionately impacted?
2. How have you analyzed specific factors underlying inequities? What did the analysis reveal?
3. How does your project include voices from disproportionately impacted groups? How have community members been engaged in project development and / or evaluation?
4. How does your project minimize additional burdens and maximize benefits for disproportionately impacted groups?
5. How does your project evaluate performance through defined metrics and provide opportunities for reflection? What do the evaluation and reflection reveal and what changes may be needed?
6. How are you sharing information about the project? Is it reaching people from disproportionately impacted groups?

APPENDIX B: Equity Assessment Tool

	Does the project proposal...	Score
Leverage clear outcome measures & disaggregated data	Include a statement of inequities to be addressed: specific outcomes, disaggregated by race, gender, geography, or other relevant variables (using appropriate proxies for these if not available)?	
	Identify specific groups disproportionately impacted by the pandemic?	
	Prioritize disproportionately affected groups as primary audiences?	
Analyze specific factors underlying inequity	Describe how discrimination, policy impacts, institutional barriers, or other social or environmental conditions have contributed to the identified inequities?	
	Consider if other groups, not identifiable in data, may also be affected by the identified inequities based on the factors above?	
	Articulate how the program design takes into account discrimination, policy impacts, institutional barriers, or other social and environmental conditions?	
Include voices of community representatives	Identify potential partners from community institutions, non-profits, and other organizations representing disproportionately affected groups?	
	Incorporate meaningful moments to engage with representatives or individuals from the disproportionately affected groups?	
	Incorporate input from representatives of disproportionately affected groups who have participated in project development, taking into account their lived experiences?	
Target resources and strategies to minimize burden & maximize access	Target resources and strategies to minimize burden on disproportionately impacted groups?	
	Target resources and strategies to maximize access for disproportionately impacted groups?	
Evaluate performance through defined metrics and reflection	Include a plan to measure and evaluate outcomes, specifying metrics to be tracked and how data will be disaggregated by race, gender, geography or other demographic variables?	
	Include a plan to expand access to relevant data if original data sources were insufficient?	
	Include plans to engage in Equity Reflections and adapt the project as needed based on interim results and community impact?	
Publish transparent program results	Discuss channels for disseminating reports and information?	
	Include means of reaching disproportionately impacted groups within the results dissemination plan?	
	Total Proposal Score	

Scoring:

- 1 = Not done, or including adverse impacts contrary to the Equity Strategy
- 0 = Minimally completed
- +1 = Thoroughly completed

Proposals are scored by the relevant Working Group.

Proposals with a negative score are rejected or sent back for significant redesign.

Proposals with a neutral score are further reviewed and refined by the Working Group.

Proposals with a positive score may be considered for submission to the Steering Committee.