

Summary of Learnings from 1-on-1 interviews with REI working group members

July 13, 2022

From March to June of 2022, staff have interviewed 14 of the working group members to gather direct input from each member. These conversations were very helpful to gaining insights from a combination of public members and board members about how SACOG, as a government agency, can fulfill its commitments to reduce racial disparities through its work.

The interviews were wide-ranging, covering best practices from outside the region, examples of other practices within the region, as well as direct recommendations for what SACOG should do. The notes from the interviews are presented below categorized into three areas:

- I. SACOG's operations
- II. SACOG's programs
- III. SACOG's board practices.

They are further organized around five areas:

LISTEN and LEARN: Work to build and strengthen relationships with organizations representing historically marginalized communities in both urban and rural areas, to integrate their perspectives and priorities, and to give voice to these communities.

PLAN: Develop a racial equity action plan for SACOG's programs and operations, that includes measurable activities, and regularly review the plan to ensure the integration of policies, procedures and programs to advance racial equity.

SUPPORT: Provide continuous support to our member and partner agencies to integrate the agency's racial equity action into local plans, build and strengthen relationships with community-based organizations, non-profits, advocacy organizations, and other equity experts and practitioners;

ACT: Continue to build the capacity of the SACOG staff and board to fully implement SACOG's racial equity action plan, and carefully consider how our decision-making processes address historic inequities in transportation and housing;

MEASURE: Establish, regularly monitor, and report publicly on 1) regional equity indicators associated with housing, transportation, and economic opportunity; 2) organizational equity indicators of employee and stakeholder (community members, public agencies, non-governmental partners) experience of existing policies, practices, and procedures; and 3) indicators of authentic project sponsor engagement in the planning and design of regionally significant projects.

These have been summarized and edited for clarity but are intended to convey what we heard. Unless otherwise indicated in the comment, the term "community" means any group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common. The terms equity and inclusion are defined per the definitions in SACOG's racial equity glossary of terms.

Staff reviewed these learnings and the learnings from stakeholder listening sessions to develop goals, objectives, and actions for a draft racial equity action plan.

I. What SACOG can do to make its operations more equitable and inclusive

LISTEN & LEARN

Working group members shared two themes for listening and learning within the agency: the agency should support staff that provide a voice for equity and inclusion, including their cultural experiences and specific ideas for programs and operations; the agency should provide training to staff, like the training suggested for local agency staff, on finding and learning the experiences of the public we're trying to serve.

PLAN

Agency leadership and management should talk regularly about progress on SACOG's racial equity action plan. The racial equity action plan should be published and SACOG should be transparent in the plan about when it is reviewed, how often it is updated, what the metrics are.

SUPPORT

Racial equity trainings are as important for SACOG staff as for local government staff. There are training programs in existence that staff could access through, or in partnership with, other organizations. SACOG should also work to make its own internal practices equitable first, in order to help its member agencies next.

ACT

Working Group members pointed to all internal operations decisions as places where equity can be infused. Examples include: procurement (e.g., consider preferences for veterans and BIPOC owned businesses, set a standard or requirement that proposals include meaningful engagement of people of color), recruitment (e.g., target recruitment efforts in the broader community), internal practices (e.g., onboarding, celebration of cultural events), training.

MEASURE

A theme of measurement was: the importance of equity outcomes that can clearly be measured and reported on so that SACOG and its stakeholders can assess the effectiveness of its internal equity efforts. For operations, particular attention to staff recruitment and retention of people from diverse backgrounds, reflecting the diversity of our region.

II. What SACOG can do to make its programs more equitable and inclusive

LISTEN AND LEARN

Working group members, particularly public members, emphasized that government in general, and SACOG in its own programs, should work more intentionally to reach and meaningfully engage underrepresented communities. When it comes to equity-focused engagement, start by thinking about whose voice is being left out in a community discussion and then think about how to engage them, whether through community based organizations (CBOs), local government, or directly, really think about how to lower barriers to entry for people to engage.

Building relationships with CBOs is a way to, over time, build understanding of what SACOG does so that CBOs and their members/clients can better engage as public stakeholders. To build those relationships, SACOG needs to be thoughtful about how it does that, so CBOs are not overtaxed or disengage for perceived lack of value. SACOG also needs to be thoughtful about which CBOs it engages to have assurance that those CBO truly work with or represent a particular community.

PLAN

Working group members want to see SACOG's racial equity action plan in front of SACOG's board of directors and stakeholders. They want to see SACOG regularly reporting on the status of plan implementation, including measurement of successes or failures, and also regularly updated. Working group board members were interested in seeing the racial equity action plan as part of SACOG's Triple Bottom Line (Equity, Economy, Environment) approach to its work.

SUPPORT

There's interest from working group members, both board and public members, in SACOG providing, creating, or otherwise enabling training for local government staff to do racial equity work. Several the training ideas focused on equity-focused community engagement: local government staff learning how to identify disparities in their jurisdictions, identify the marginalized populations within their jurisdictions, learning how to engage with their marginalized populations (whether directly or through trusted CBOs), and learning how to listen to learn the experience of their marginalized community members. Working group members, particularly board members, were interested in SACOG's racial equity action plan being shared with local jurisdictions so those that have not started racial equity work could have an example to reference or draw from. SACOG support could also include convening local government for training or convening them to learn from each other.

ACT

A major theme from Working Group members is to seek out and integrate community perspectives much more into SACOG's work, and to do so in a way that moves beyond consulting community, into involving and collaborating with community. This could be by working with CBOs, or giving guidance to member agencies to help them identify and work with CBOs; regardless, a variety of CBOs need to be engaged due to their different perspectives, strengths, and community connections. Public members of the Working Group emphasized that engagement with CBOs or members of the public needs to consider the value of their time, just as consulting companies are valued for their time. This could be compensation in the form of stipends.

When it comes to SACOG’s funding, public members of the Working Group suggested SACOG should require grant funding recipients to engage constituents and demonstrate how they will do that authentically, not superficially. A theme was that any requirement of equity in SACOG programs should be set to ensure communities are meaningfully weighing in and shaping a project or program. Board Working Group members suggested several program areas as examples of opportunities to advance equity, including Youth Leadership Academy, housing affordability, access to transportation options, especially for youth, road safety, climate adaptation.

MEASURE

Two themes of measurement emerged from Working Group members. One theme was the importance of equity outcomes that can clearly be measured and reported on so that SACOG and its stakeholders can assess the effectiveness of its equity efforts. Another theme was establishing base lines demographics to measure the region over time, such as adopting or developing an equity index for the region, or work on filling in the gap on reporting for consistently underrepresented groups, (e.g., Native Americans and tribal communities in traffic safety data).

III. What SACOG can do to make its board practices more equitable and inclusive

LISTEN & LEARN

Both public and board members of the Working Group thought it important that board members have scheduled time to learn about equity issues and best practices. The board needs to hear about equity issues and practices in order to make equitable decisions. Most public members wanted board members to spend time looking within the region to learn who is underserved in their communities and their experiences. Several examples of learning opportunities were given including: field trips in the region, venues for community members to present about their communities, sending board members to conferences, continuing guest speaker presentations at board meetings, and creating spaces for board members to converse about the issues they are learning.

PLAN

It was important to Working Group members that SACOG create and implement the racial equity action plan, and regularly agendaize it for the SACOG board. Regarding transparency, the action plan is a visible sign to the SACOG and its stakeholders that the agency is taking steps toward racial equity. Then it is important to constantly monitor implementation to see if it's yielding our intended results.

SUPPORT

Working Group members saw it important that local elected officials, in addition to their SACOG colleagues, also get exposure to different community perspectives. There was some advice that SACOG should first work on its own board and agency, and then look to support local governments and other partner agencies.

ACT

Several Working Group members, public and board members, want SACOG's racial equity efforts agendaized regularly at SACOG's public meetings. Multiple examples of how to build the board's capacity to implement the racial equity action plan and consider how its decision-making processes address historic inequities: training or orientation for new SACOG board members on SACOG's racial equity work; regular reviews of the board's adopted racial equity statement; having people with lived experience running committees; workshops for best practices by other organizations; partnering with chambers of commerce, transit agencies, or community based agencies; including CBOs in regional policy discussion to bring in the perspectives of the community;

Among Working Group members there was interest in some version of the Race, Equity, Inclusion Working Group to continue to meet, to help SACOG hold itself accountable, and there was also interest in making sure the topic of racial equity is regularly in front of the full board.

MEASURE

Regular public reporting on implementation of the racial equity action plan was a consistent theme from Working Group members. SACOG should also regularly report to the board and public on regional race/ethnicity data, and on the benefits of funding awards to communities of color. This theme of measuring and reporting spans across all of SACOG's programs and operations.