

Definition & Analysis of Institutional Racism

Solid Ground defines **Institutional Racism** as “*the systematic distribution of resources, power and opportunity in our society to the benefit of people who are white and the exclusion of people of color.*” Present-day racism was built on a long history of racially distributed resources and ideas that shape our view of ourselves and others. It is a hierarchical system that comes with a broad range of policies and institutions that keep it in place.

In the United States, institutional racism has been responsible for slavery, settlement, Indian reservations, segregation, residential schools (for American Indians), and internment camps. While most of these institutions no longer exist, they have had long-term impacts on our society. As a result of institutional racism, racial stratification and disparities have occurred in employment, housing, education, healthcare, government and other sectors. While many laws were passed in the mid-20th century to make discrimination illegal, major inequalities still exist.

Institutional racism is distinguished from the bigotry or racial bias of individuals by the existence of systematic policies and practices within institutions that effectually disadvantage certain racial or ethnic groups. Institutional racism can only exist in institutions where the power to enforce and perpetuate policies and practices is invested in white people. Certain housing contracts (such as restrictive covenants) and bank lending policies (such as redlining) are forms of institutional racism. Other examples include racial profiling by security and law enforcement workers, use of stereotyped racial caricatures by institutions (such as “Indian” mascots in sports), the under- and misrepresentation of certain racial groups in the media, and barriers to employment or professional advancement based on race.

In King County, 70% of our population is white, and 30% are people of color. According to the *Communities Count 2008, Social & Health Indicators across King County* report, there are many examples of how institutional racism continues to create inequities, including:

- **Gap between richest and poorest:** People of color are more likely to live in poverty than whites, with 29.1% of African Americans and 19.2% of Latinos living below 100% of the Federal poverty line, compared to only 7.6% of white households. Moreover, the median income of white households is almost twice that of African-American households.
- **Food insecurity:** Of adults who report that food money for their families often does not last, 29.2% are Latino, 15.5% are African American, and 5.3% are white.
- **Health & environmental justice:** African Americans are almost 2/3rds less likely than white adults to have health insurance, and 79% of hazardous waste sites are located in communities where the majority of residents are people of color.
- **Youth incarceration:** In 2006, 66% of youth involved in King County’s Criminal Justice System were white – yet 65% of those actually locked up in Juvenile Corrections were youth of color. (*Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2007*)

Expectations & Consequences

Through our Anti-Racism Initiative, Solid Ground works to address the root causes of institutional racism by using our resources and expertise to identify the conditions that lead to inequities and working to improve them – both internally at Solid Ground and in the broader community. Solid Ground is committed to ensuring that our program, services, staff and Board of Directors are accountable to the individuals we serve. Towards this end, we have developed Anti-Racism Accountability Standards (see below) that spell out agency responsibilities and expectations of employees related to this work. Employees will receive feedback in their performance evaluations regarding their ability to meet these expectations.

In addition, while intentional racist acts will not be tolerated and will lead to disciplinary actions, we also understand that not everyone working for Solid Ground has a full understanding of institutional racism and how it manifests itself. This can lead to unintentional behaviors which are racist in nature. While such behavior will be challenged, it will also be discussed in a manner designed to promote further understanding, and additional learning opportunities will be provided to staff who do not meet the expectations outlined in the following Anti-Racism Accountability Standards.

Anti-Racism Accountability Standards

Background

Solid Ground is committed to ensuring that our programs, services, staff and Board of Directors are accountable to the individuals we serve. In doing so, we have the opportunity to provide services in a participant-driven manner (i.e., responsive to participants' needs). This commitment is a direct result of our anti-racism work, which is based upon the following premises:

- 1) Solid Ground's mission is to create a just and caring community free from poverty, prejudice and neglect. Institutional racism is a direct cause of poverty.** To address poverty, we need to address racism. Undoing racism is a key to unlocking the door to some particular forms and patterns of poverty established during the earliest history of this country when people of specific racial groups were identified as commodities (e.g., African slaves, Chinese railroad workers and other groups). The institutions established in those early days were clearly structured to benefit white men. If you look at who has power in this country today, it is still *primarily* white men. What this tells us is that our institutions haven't changed much over the years – and that they are still structured in a way that excludes women and people of color.

- 2) **More than half of Solid Ground’s program participants are people of color. Our staff and Board need to reflect the diversity of our participant base if we are to be truly accountable to the communities we serve.** For us, being accountable means sharing the power that we have as an institution with the people we serve. It also means making sure that there are people in our organization – particularly in positions of power – who are representative of the people we serve. Otherwise, we face the risk of perpetuating institutional racism by allowing one culture to dominate our decision- and policy-making processes.
- 3) **It is difficult to effectively serve program participants who come from different cultures if we do not understand these cultures and how they differ from our own.** We also need tools (like interpreters and translated materials) to serve people who speak languages other than English. Becoming culturally competent is a component of being anti-racist, particularly since the default culture for interactions and business in our country is white culture. This reinforces a single way of doing things that keeps racism locked into our institutions and society. Each of us needs to learn about the myriad cultures that make up our community – particularly those with which we interact daily – in order to effectively and respectfully live and work together and build a society that doesn’t allow any one culture and the people most associated with it to dominate. We’re working toward a system in which power is shared regardless of cultural (or racial) identity.
- 4) **Our staff want and need input into decisions that affect them – as do the people we serve.** We need to make sure that our participants have input in decision making at many different levels (on our Board of Directors, in relationship to program changes/enhancements, etc.).
- 5) **We cannot address racism alone. We must collaborate with and support other organizations doing community-based anti-racism work.** We both learn and teach through the relationships we build. Just as a person making a positive change in her/his life needs supportive people to encourage him/her to maintain change, we need the support of other individuals and organizations seeking to become anti-racist. While we need to focus energy internally at Solid Ground, ultimately we’ll only succeed in our efforts by addressing governmental or other institutional barriers side by side with other committed individuals and organizations. Internal and external efforts are both necessary to achieve our goals.
- 6) **For Solid Ground, doing anti-racism work means making sure that our staff have the knowledge, resources and tools they need to effectively serve people of color and people from different cultures.** It’s about eliminating the barriers that our program participants face in accessing benefits, entitlements and other services. It’s about helping us work better with each other by increasing our understanding of our different cultures and beliefs, making our work environment welcoming to everyone who works or receives services here, and ensuring that our workplace portrays the diversity of our community. Lastly, it’s about figuring out how we can share our power with the diverse racial, cultural and economic groups that make up our community.

Agency Responsibilities

Solid Ground must ensure that its policies, procedures, structures and systems:

- Do not create barriers to the full participation of people of color in our services and activities.
- Allow for the inclusion of the opinions and ideas of people of color in our decision-making processes at all levels of the organization.
- Support the hiring, retention and professional growth of people of color in the organization.
- Prioritize staff training to ensure that they understand the impacts of institutional racism and that we deliver services in a culturally competent manner.

As part of this process, management and supervisory staff must ensure that employees have a clear understanding of how racism manifests itself in our organization and the broader community, and how it impacts the services we provide and the people who receive our services.

Expectations of Employees

Employees at all levels of the organization will be held accountable for doing their work in a manner consistent with our mission, respectful of the cultures and beliefs of our program participants, and responsive to changing participant needs as determined in consultation with those we serve. As such, employees are expected to:

- Actively participate in agency-sponsored trainings designed to educate staff about institutional racism and how it manifests itself.
- Understand white privilege and internalized racial superiority.
- Provide services in a culturally competent manner.
- Be respectful of and support the leadership of people of color working at Solid Ground to ensure that their voices are heard and acted upon.
- Ensure that the decisions they make do not create unnecessary barriers to service for people of color.
- Ensure that program participants actively contribute to all decisions made about the services they receive.
- Actively work to identify and help Solid Ground undo the institutional racism that exists at our agency.