

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, segregation, Indian reservations, 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 still occur in employment, housing, education, health care, government and other sectors. While many laws were passed in the mid-20th century to make discrimination illegal, major inequalities still exist – and they have led to a disproportionate number of People of Color living in poverty in our communities.

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, 64% of our population is White and 36% are People of Color of all other races (U.S. Census Bureau) – and institutional racism continues to create huge inequities for People of Color:

- **Gap between richest and poorest:** Only 9% of White households live below the Federal poverty line, compared to 35% of Black households, 26% of Hispanic households, and 22% of American Indian/Alaska Native households. Moreover, the median income of White households is almost twice that of Black households. (*Communities Count 2013: Social & Health Indicators Across King County*)
- **Food insecurity:** Of adults who report that food money for their families often does not last, 38% are Hispanic, 21% are Black, and 7% are White. (*Communities Count*)
- **Housing:** Of King County renters and mortgage-holders reporting unaffordable housing (i.e., more than 30% of their income went to housing), 55% were Black, 48% Hispanic, 47% American Indian/Alaska Native, 40% Asian and 36% White. (*Communities Count*)
- **Youth:** King County juvenile detention data shows that 3/4ths of all youth booked in 2012 were youth of color (46% Black and almost 20% Hispanic). The disproportionate number of youth of color in the justice system locally perpetuates a cycle of racial inequity that contributes to multiple, long-term and harmful consequences. (*United Way of King County Key Racial Disparity Data, 2014*)

Expectations & Consequences

Through our Anti-Racism Initiative (ARI), 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 programs, services, staff and Board of Directors are accountable to the individuals we serve. Toward 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 engage in individual ARI goal-setting and receive feedback in their performance evaluations regarding their ability to meet these expectations.

In addition, while intentional racist acts will not be tolerated and lead to disciplinary action, 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 addressed, 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 work to end poverty and undo racism and other oppressions that are root causes 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, Native Americans 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. *(As of 2014, the racial breakdown of Solid Ground's Strategic Leadership Team is 50% People of Color and 50% White.)*
 - 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.
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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

All Solid Ground job descriptions include expectations related to our Anti-Racism Initiative (ARI) activities to help clarify and support each individual staff person's growth and development, and to hold us all accountable to be involved with ARI efforts. Directors have the greatest and most responsibility.

ALL Solid Ground employees are expected to:

- Demonstrate the initiative to learn and enhance skills that promote anti-racism, cultural competency and an understanding of oppression and its impact.
- Participate in intentional learning efforts, including events related to understanding and dismantling institutional racism and building cultural competency.

In addition to the above, Supervisors & Managers are expected to:

- Encourage staff to fully engage in the above activities.
- Foster discussion and learning among staff to better understand and dismantle institutional racism.
- Abide by and support agency-wide efforts to incorporate anti-racism principles and cultural competency and standards into all hiring processes and performance evaluations.

In addition to all of the above, Directors are expected to:

- Provide leadership to departmental and agency anti-racism initiatives; develop and grow an anti-racist culture within each department.
- Support departmental Action Teams, and set up structures and systems for responding to and implementing Action Team recommendations.
- Encourage staff participation in ARI committees and events.
- Enhance personal skill development as well as guiding Managers and Supervisors in their own skill development.



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