

Advancing Racial Equity within Federal Housing Policy

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Given the historic movements to redress the government's role in perpetuating racial inequality, HUD's Learning Agenda for Fiscal Years 2022–26 invites us to collectively reflect on the role of race, racism, and racial equity in federal housing policy. Without a doubt, the Biden-Harris Administration is committed to building an inclusive urban recovery that drives resources to disinvested neighborhoods through equitable development. Along with other federal agencies, HUD leaders are charged with implementing [Executive Order 13985](#), which instructs federal agencies to pursue a comprehensive approach to advancing equity and support for underserved communities. In this short essay, I invite us to consider how federal housing policy can advance racial equity in ways that has catalytic impacts for years to come.

For generations, academics, policy experts, and researchers have employed traditional learning and evaluation methods that are extractive and, at times, exploitative. Evaluation goals are typically determined by researchers, government administrators, or foundation representatives with limited input by community members or on-the-ground stakeholders. What input exists typically comes in the form of needs assessments, which have a strong deficit framing. This traditional way of approaching learning and evaluation has harmed Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities by promoting transactional and often one-sided learning dynamics while leading to more resources, publications, media attention, and other accolades for historically White-led institutions (such as universities and think tanks). It has also arguably led to a lack of meaningful impact for the BIPOC communities that these same institutions intend to support. *We would all benefit from a radical shift away from this extractive, one-sided approach to one that is grounded in collaboration and racial equity.*

As an antidote to the current status quo, I propose that HUD's leadership, particularly those who are part of HUD's Equity Workgroup, should engage in a process of learning directly from and about the most valued HUD constituency: those individuals and families living within HUD-funded programs. This process would aim to center the voices of BIPOC community members. To start with, a few key topics are identified below that would be helpful to emphasize with a particular commitment to ensure racial equity within HUD's Learning Agenda.

Land Ownership

Land costs and ownership can be major drivers in the production and preservation of subsidized housing. The loss of Public Housing Authority (PHA) land and hard housing units (such as project-based Section 8 and traditional public housing buildings) is most experienced within majority-BIPOC communities where disinvestment and segregation readily occur. No major national research studies document the trends and long-term effects of the disposition of federally subsidized housing and land. It would be helpful to explore questions related to the shift of land and housing away from PHAs/HUD control and toward market entities. What are the pros and cons of PHA land and property disposition for low- and moderate-income individuals and local communities, and what is the ongoing role of the federal government in supporting subsidized housing and the land it occupies?

Building Wealth and Power Through Emergent Local Strategies

Many local communities are advancing emergent policy strategies aimed at mitigating wealth extraction via market-based housing provision. Many of these local policies focus on building wealth and power among BIPOC communities. Along with a research team led by Larry Vale, Mariana Arcaya, Patrice C. Williams, and Justin Steil at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), we are looking toward exploratory research that is not easily attached to a HUD program or policy. For example, we are hopeful about developing an evidence base on the following types of programs and policies: (1) community land trusts, (2) public housing policies that expand the stock of de commodified housing, (3) local reparations efforts for African-American residents in the form of housing assistance, and (4) inclusionary housing policies that prioritize anti-racism. I believe there is much to be discovered about how to advance racial justice within the field of housing and community development—if we are open to learning about these emergent policy strategies. I would suggest adding a question such as this: What emergent policy strategies are being implemented in local communities with the aim of addressing racialized wealth extraction and structural racism in the housing market?

Equitable and Resilient Communities

Finally, new initiatives across the nation are sparking change focused on ensuring disinvested, low-wealth BIPOC communities are equitably resourced. One example is the Partnership for Equitable and Resilient Communities (PERC), a new philanthropic effort anchored by the Melville Charitable Trust. The goal is to support collaborative decisionmaking between communities and government to ensure federal resources target equitable solutions. Initially, select cities, regions, and tribal governments will have access to funding and technical assistance in order to maximize the use of federal resources and support populations who have been consistently and disproportionately left behind. The partnership is also committed to understanding how equity is advanced within local communities in ways that lead to shifts in practices, policies, and systems. HUD's Learning Agenda would benefit from the inclusion of an evaluation focused on racial equity initiatives, such as PERC. I would suggest adding a question such as this: How do local communities, philanthropic partners, government, and other key stakeholders advance equity

through the early implementation of racial equity initiatives, and what difference does that make for BIPOC communities?

For this and future generations, we must not just sit by with hopes of infusing racial equity into our federal housing policies. We must create and sustain the brave spaces that are necessary in ways that continually center BIPOC communities. We need transformative shifts that ensure federal resources target equitable solutions so all people can thrive. We need to be the future ancestors that we want our descendants and their descendants to respect.

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