



United Community Services
of Johnson County

RACIAL EQUITY IN COMMUNITIES

Pilot Project
2021-2022

Executive Summary Report



KANSAS
LEADERSHIP
CENTER



Funding Provided by



Collaborative Grant Partners



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In partnership with the Health Forward Foundation, Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, and five local jurisdictions, United Community Services of Johnson County (UCS) launched the Racial Equity in Communities pilot in April 2021. Racial Equity in Communities (REIC) is a six to eight-month program that provides a customized series of workshops to a community of practice that includes residents, staff, and elected officials from jurisdictions in Johnson County, KS.

The goal of REIC is to support implementation of culturally-responsive systems change in Johnson County jurisdictions that want to move beyond a symbolic awareness of racial equity towards substantive analysis, action, and accountability. REIC supports jurisdictions capacity to (a) learn—define key REI terms and concepts, (b) respond—address residents needs/call for action related to REI, and (c) govern—shape and adopt a policymaking framework that centers racial equity.

UCS engaged 45 residents, staff, and elected officials from five jurisdictions in the REIC community of practice. Those jurisdictions included Johnson County, Lenexa, Mission, Prairie Village and Roeland Park.

UCS convened a roundtable of Thought Partners including the University of Kansas' Public Management Center, Kansas Leadership Center, and Critical Social Change Project to assess the readiness of participating jurisdictions, design learning objectives and program activities, facilitate the workshops, and provide technical assistance to the jurisdictions.

"REIC was really an eye opening experience because we got into it in depth and in breadth. So even though I'm not a young person and I think I'm a seasoned professional, I learned a lot and had my understanding expanded a great deal."

— Staff member, Johnson County Government

The program was implemented over the course of six sessions facilitated by the Thought Partners roundtable. Facilitated session lasted for 4-5 hours and took place between September 2021 and March 2022. Each session built upon the prior session, and participants received intersession homework to support applied knowledge and sustainability of the learning that was happening in the workshops.

By the end of the pilot, each jurisdiction made a preliminary plan for next steps for racial equity systems change, including details of key participants, infrastructure, and activities. Equipped with the leadership competencies and content knowledge gained in the workshops, jurisdictions have begun to implement their plans with ongoing technical assistance from UCS and its partners.

Participants

United Community Services engaged residents, staff, and elected officials from five Johnson County jurisdictions in the REIC pilot. Those jurisdictions included Johnson County, Lenexa, Mission, Prairie Village and Roeland Park. The total number of individuals participating in the program was 45. The demographic characteristics of participants include:

- 62% staff, 18% elected officials, 20% residents
- 18% Black, 67% White, 2% Asian, 8% Latino, 5% Multiracial
- 55% Female, 43% Male, 2% Transgender

"I think the value that all of the jurisdictions brought was the diversity of functions in the community. We had individuals at all levels: we had individuals in corrections, we had individuals with police and law enforcement, we had individuals that were with human resources that had experience in terms of hiring practices. The dimension of participation was pretty broad."

— Elected official, City of Mission

Thought Partners

Workshops and technical assistance were facilitated by the REIC Thought Partners. Each Thought Partner contributed content and applied skills expertise in leadership, public service, and cultural responsiveness that supported jurisdictions in both cultivating and navigating organizational change.

United Community Services of Johnson County (UCS) is a catalyst and resource to ensure that the human service system meets the needs of Johnson County, Kansas residents. The core work of UCS is illuminating needs and solutions through Education & Advocacy, fostering a for collaboration through Mobilizing & Planning, and prioritizing community investments through Targeted Resource Allocation. In this project, UCS served as the convenor and project manager. Additionally, UCS:

- Led session design and planning
- Facilitated workshop sessions alongside Thought Partners
- Created the learning and evaluation framework for the project
- Provided technical assistance and implementation support to jurisdictions after the session ended
- Leads continuing education and learning sessions
- Leads planning for future iterations of the REIC program

Critical Social Change Project (CSCP) provided customized comprehensive education and dialogue that go beyond the traditional training/presentation format to provide clients with baseline data, recommendations, and implications for cultivating culturally responsive transformative change. For this project, CSCP:

- Provided racial equity content and culturally responsive research expertise
- Facilitated workshop sessions alongside Thought Partners
- Cultivated cohort capacity for integrating a culturally responsive praxis within Johnson County jurisdictions
- Researched, evaluated, and assessed organizational readiness for REI change
- Provided technical assistance and implementation support to jurisdictions after the sessions ended

The Kansas Leadership Center (KLC) offers training for organizations, teams, and individuals to foster civic leadership for healthier Kansas communities. For this project, KLC:

- Helped individuals think and act adaptively
- Facilitated workshop sessions alongside Thought Partners
- Taught leadership competencies and principles
- Provided leadership technical assistance to jurisdiction cohorts after the sessions ended

The Public Management Center at KU (PMC) offers training and consulting services throughout Kansas and Missouri to meet the needs for skills enhancement among public service managers, staff, and teams and to support organizational development in government agencies and other public service organizations. For this project, PMC:

Helped individuals identify opportunities for change within their jurisdictions.

- Helped individuals think and act adaptively
- Facilitated workshop sessions alongside Thought Partners
- Provided context and perspective on the dynamics of local government entities.
- Provided technical assistance and implementation support to jurisdictions after the sessions ended

REIC Thought Partners worked collaboratively to leverage expertise and knowledge along with evidence-based insight from the REI readiness assessment to develop an interdisciplinary culturally responsive leadership curriculum for the REIC Pilot.

"Each participant brought their own perspective, so UCS was very helpful in being the convener. It was also helpful to have the Thought Partners that had experience with this and really helped lead the program at different points in time, so that was quite valuable."

-- Resident, City of Prairie Village

Key Program Components & Outcomes

Research and Design

UCS began the design process of the pilot initiative in May 2021. This included the recruitment of Thought Partners. From May until September, the Thought Partners met regularly as a “roundtable” to design the curriculum for REIC.

During this time, UCS also recruited jurisdictions to participate in the pilot initiative through presentations to local city councils and other governing bodies, and through one-on-one conversations with jurisdiction leaders. After UCS secured commitment from five jurisdictions, each jurisdiction received guidance on how to select participants who would join the REIC community of practice.

CSCP also designed a comprehensive readiness assessment tool which was distributed to the panel of participants from each participating jurisdiction during the summer of 2021. The readiness assessment included the following components:

- Evidence - strength of current organizational evidence for proposed REI change as perceived by stakeholders
- Context - quality of the organizational culture and climate to support REI change
- Capacity for Cultivation and Sustainability - processes and systems by which the implementation of REI will be cultivated, expanded upon, and sustained within the respective jurisdiction.

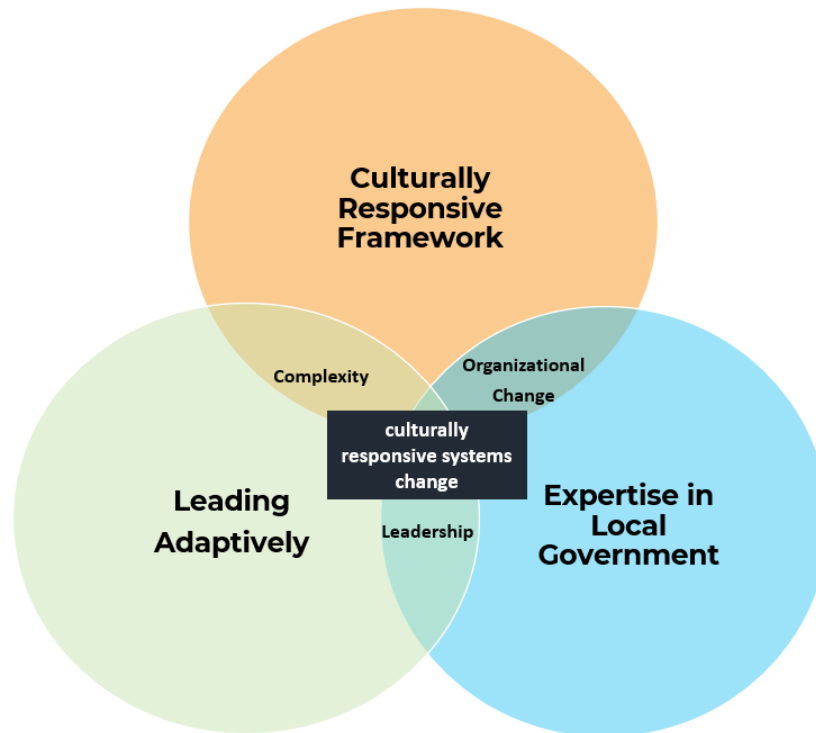
Data from the readiness assessment helped the Thought Partners understand how to structure and sequence the curriculum, as well as helping to anticipate the needs that each jurisdiction might have as we entered the program.

Through the research and design phase emerged the Theory of Practice. The framework is comprised of three core components: (a) cultural responsiveness, (b) leading adaptively, and (c) expertise in local government.

- The first component, *cultural responsiveness*, uses cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference and/or performance styles of diverse individuals’ backgrounds to make learning and engagement more relevant and effective for them. Culturally responsive learning and development, explicitly connects REI to the work and roles of organizations to improve service equity and is essential to sustaining multi-level transformative systems change efforts.
- The second component, *leading adaptively*, is done by creating true aspiration, cultivated through a shared vision, and generating commitment to work for the success of the organization. It requires curiosity, learning, and continuous experimentation to test possible solutions.
- The third component, *expertise in local government*, involves understanding the functionality of governmental systems and how it is key to the implementation of REI transformational change. Utilizing evidence-based strategies through assessments

and coaching brings awareness and focuses attention to areas (e.g., stakeholders, structure, policy, resources, etc.) that need strengthening and development.

REIC Theory of Practice



Facilitation

The program was implemented over the course of six sessions facilitated by the Thought Partners. Facilitated session lasted for 4-5 hours each, and took place in September, October, in November of 2021; and in January, February, and March of 2022. Four of the six facilitated session took place in-person with proper social distancing and mask protocols in place due to the pandemic. During the early 2021 COVID surge, UCS moved two of the facilitated sessions to a virtual format for the health and safety of our participants and Thought Partners.

Each session built upon the prior session, and participants received intersession homework to support applied knowledge and sustainability of the learning that was happening in the workshops.

Key learning themes and highlights from the series include:

- Brave Space vs. Safe Space
- Courageous Conversations
- Distinguishing Technical Work vs. Adaptive Leadership Work
- Learning as Cyclical Process

- Exploring Privilege
- Identity and Bias
- Dominant Culture
- Dimensions of Diversity
- Change, Transition and Loss
- Culture and Climate in Jurisdictions
- Perspectives of Systems Level Change
- Symbolic and Substantive Action
- Planning and Doing Systems Change
- Purpose to Practice Planning Process

Thought Partners originally anticipated that the sessions would enable jurisdictions to implement systems change in such a way that there would be evidence of improved racial equity culture. An early learning is was that significantly more time was needed to establish awareness, new knowledge, and sound analysis so that jurisdiction participants could understand the readiness of their organizations before setting racial equity goals.

Planning for Systems Change

During the final two sessions, jurisdictions began making plans for racial equity systems change using a facilitated process called Purpose to Practice.

Each jurisdiction closed the pilot with a plan for next steps, including detailing key participants, infrastructure, and activities that each jurisdiction would pursue, equipped with the leadership competencies and content knowledge gained in the workshops.

"I try to wrap my mind around the idea that if every participant was really excited about how this went and told one person about it, how quickly it would grow in our community."

— Staff member, Johnson County Government

Lessons Learned

Across Johnson County, governmental jurisdictions have been making commitments to achieving racial equity, focusing on the power and influence of their own institutions to affect policy change, and working in partnership with other sectors. Out of a history of residential segregation that birthed the Johnson County suburbs, local leaders have been setting the stage for progress in the areas of diversity, racial equity, inclusion, and belonging. These are the external conditions that helped us to create such a successful program.

The strengths of our approach include: a committed and knowledgeable team of Thought Partners, responsive and transparent communication with jurisdictions, expertise from a diverse set of trainers and facilitators, a willingness among Thought Partners and participants to act experimentally – often outside their comfort zones, and many willing partners in the jurisdictions who provided additional resources to support the project including financial investments and the space for in-person workshops.

We found that the participating jurisdiction representatives needed time to build trust within the community of practice so that they could be transparent about the challenges and opportunities facing their organizations. We had to slow down several times throughout the project to accomplish this and were able to do so while still meeting all of the learning objectives in the time allocated for the project. When the project, and by extension the participating jurisdictions, received public pushback and criticism due to misinformation about the content of the curriculum, we took the time to open channels of communication within the community of practice so that participants could build confidence in how they respond to resistance.

A survey conducted at the end of the pilot included the following findings from participant survey respondents:

- 93% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they have a better understanding of the culturally responsive framework and how it applies to transforming jurisdiction culture.
- 100% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they understand that, in conversations about race and racism, “safe space” is not safe and can revictimize BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) and other historically marginalized individuals and groups.
- 79% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they are confident in their ability to apply a Brave Space framework in their approach to REI transformative change.
- 96% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they have a greater awareness of how my identities intersect and ways to leverage their privileges.
- 89% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they have a greater awareness of distinguishing between adaptive challenges and technical problems when engaging in REI work.
- 96% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they are willing to apply this process to learning and unlearning about key frameworks such as identity development, white racial frame, systemic racism, symbolic actions, and institutional capital throughout their REI journey.
- 93% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they have a clearer understanding of how bias activates our brains to respond in either a fight, flight, freeze, or appease mode.
- 85% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they have greater understanding of how the White Racial Frame operates to assist people in defining, interpreting, conforming to, and acting in their everyday social worlds.
- 93% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they have a greater awareness of systemic racism and the impact it has on BIPOC individuals and communities.
- 97% of participants agreed or strongly agreed they understand that a key leadership skill for REI change is not simply a willingness to speak to loss but the ability to listen and learn from the losses BIPOC share about the discrimination, bias, and other insensitivities they have experienced.
- 61% of participants agreed or strongly agreed they have greater awareness of how the micro, mezzo, and macro dimensions of organizational structure intersect and effect how individuals perceive and experience the jurisdiction.

- 96% of participants agreed or strongly agreed they have a clearer understanding of how symbolic actions can undermine REI transformative change when not associated with substantive actions.
- 93% of participants agreed or strongly agreed they are confident that they can identify and/or articulate the difference between a symbolic and substantive action when initiatives, policy proposals, and other decision-making are taking place.
- 93% of participants agreed or strongly agreed they are aware that BIPOC/historically marginalized communities lack the social and institutional capital needed to successfully navigate predominately white spaces.
- 96% of participants agreed or strongly agreed they have a greater awareness of how social and institutional capital influences decision-making within the jurisdiction.
- 72% of participants agreed or strongly agreed they can confidently apply the Purpose to Practice framework to initiate efforts that influence systems level REI change.

Sustainability

UCS continues to convene the community of practice in Racial Equity Roundtables. These continuing education experiences are designed to help the REIC community stay connected with one another, learn new skills and knowledge, and grow opportunities to for advancing racial equity in organizations and the broader community.

The design of the pilot includes providing participating jurisdictions also have access to Thought Partners for tailored coaching and technical assistance to support implementation of racial equity systems change plans.

A final report of the REIC pilot has been provided to funders and participating jurisdictions.