Equity in Everyday Practice: Lessons Learned

First, thank you to everyone who participated in the Center for Strategic Prevention Support's *Equity in Everyday Practice* sessions—presenters and participants alike. Your willingness to engage in these challenging but extremely important topics, and the honesty and vulnerability you brought to the conversations, was moving, inspiring, and extremely informative.

To that end, we wanted to capture some of practical tips generated through these discussions. The following is a summary of some of the suggestions shared, organized by *Equity in Everyday Practice* session.

Session 1: Addressing Equity in our Personal Lives

- Check your own thinking. Do a self-assessment. Get beyond shame or embarrassment.
- Learn about the history of equity and inequity.
- Set an intentional time each week to focus on self-reflection and education—and make sure to honor that time.
- Understand that the learning is also in making mistakes.
- Ask for help and get the coaching you need.
- Slow down.
- Realize your own biases and own that you have them. Then ask, "What do I want to do with these biases? How are they serving me?"
- Instead of saying, "what's wrong with those people?" ask "what happened to those people?" Understand the trauma groups experienced and then see how these experiences shaped behaviors.
- Lean into your discomfort.
- Recognize that we know more than we think we know; this allows us to tap into our humanity.
- Pay attention and listen to the language you and others use.
- Educate your family and peers if and when they make inequitable statements.
- Talk about equity and disparities with your children—bring up stories in the news and point out how "isms" come into play.
- Try not to assume levels of ability or understanding of language.
- Make sure to ask people how they pronounce their names, then try to pronounce them as they do.
- Ally with other groups moving toward equity. Be amongst peers who are pushing toward social justice/leveling the playing field.
- Get into conversations.
- Volunteer—for example, help out in community organizations where people experiencing poverty receive services.

- Keep a journal. Find someone to work with. Get connected. Open your mind. And be respectful of others.

Session 2: Embedding Equity in our Work

- Remind communities of the *Eight Guiding Principles of Cultural Competence*—that they need to pause and not continue work as usual. Spend time reviewing them and working, collectively, to understand them.
- Develop a collective language for discussing issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion. Start off with definitions to make sure everyone's on the same page.
- Talk regularly about inequity and disparities, in all their forms. Carve out time during meetings to focus on these issue. This can't be a one-time conversation.
- Provide a safe space for difficult conversations. Notice the temperature of the room. Are you having the conversations you need to have or playing it safe? Make sure you're not trying too hard to make other people comfortable.
- Take steps to integrate what emerges from these conversation. Don't just talk—do!
- Expect anger, hostility, and frustration. Sit with it. Listen to it. And build trust.
- Invite people to share their personal experiences. This will help everyone understand the nuances of racism and build empathy.
- Create a culture of conversation vs. shaming. Say things like, "I just learned this . . ." to show that we're all learners.
- Find ways to have these conversations with less diverse communities. Reiterate that equity isn't about just benefiting groups that have been underserved in the past, but that it benefits the whole community.
- Acknowledge that the underlying problem is distance. Show up in places where communities that have been traditionally less valued are the majority and hold the power. And once there, listen. Don't be the expert. Don't cut them off. Be open to feedback. Let empathy build.
- Be accountable and follow through—this show's respect. Acknowledge the power you hold and the power of the systems you represent. This will help you to understand how you might be perceived/why there may be mistrust.
- Talk openly about equity and inclusivity in your leadership roles. Consider how bias/advantage affects who you are as a leader. Be concrete about naming these biases.
- Incorporate health equity into all levels of policy. This will help to hold people accountable to reducing disparities and ensure that policies are equally applied.
- Focus on equity and reducing disparities in strategic planning.

- Review hiring practices. Hire people based on the skills they bring. Intentionally hire colleagues of color. Advocate for staff members of color to be promoted into higher management roles.
- Don't promote organizations that don't prioritize equity and reducing disparities, but do reach out to them regarding how they can be more diverse.
- Think incrementally. Don't try to do too much at once or you'll get overwhelmed.

Session 3: Power Sharing

- Think about the power of institutions but also the power of people (i.e., the community). We need to bridge these power structures. Consider who is being paid to do the work and who isn't.

- Acknowledge that everyone has innate power. Acknowledge that need to enable this power in order to flourish, engage the populations being centered, and go beyond collecting opinions to taking action based on these opinions.

- Understand the relationship of power and money. It's the underlying reason for why populations of color have been denied resources [to deny them power]. Be creative about finances and funding opportunities.

- Consider where we shine the spotlight and who is directing the light. What are we paying attention to? Are we only focusing on the negative—where we think things need to be improved? Are we also celebrating successes? When we talk about communities, do we always talk about how "we" can help "them"? Who is in helping role? We're *all* helpers in our communities.

- Think carefully about how we interpret and/or translate the data we receive. Who was counted? What was measured? Is it informed by the institution or by the power of the people? For example, we need to re-think using crime statistics to define community needs. Are we giving equal weight to community assets? We have power when we create a narrative/write reports. So, when we do so, we need to consider if we're doing the community justice. Am I speaking on behalf of the community or on behalf of the institution?

- Go beyond "who is sitting in the room." The people who show up are the one who see themselves as people in power. We need to welcome these people but also go beyond. Look at who's missing and why. Really understand why (or why not) people are voting with their feet.

- Be intentional about who we turn to for the answers. If we want to make real change, we need to look at census data. Pick up a newspaper. "If the people in the room have the answers, we would have already had a solution." We need to look at where the power truly sits.

- Do more listening and less talking. Follow 20 people on social media who aren't like you.

- Be prepared to make real and often uncomfortable changes, otherwise more harm can be caused to the folks we have recruited.

- [To find the seat of power]: First, follow the money. Who's been getting all the grants? You can tell who lacks power by finding out when and where certain groups feel most oppressed. Convene focus groups and ask people where they feel most oppressed, who is using power against them.

- [To build connections]: Go to where they are (social media sites, religious communities). Do the stuff they want to do. It's not about meeting your own workplace needs. Show up as whole person. People want you to meet them at a people level.

- Know who's in the community. Provide information in the languages of the community. Speak the language of the heart. Provide incentives for people to get involved. Host meetings in places/times that facilitate inclusivity. Invite participants to set the agenda. Make sure we don't assume all power/manage the conversations. Develop allies in each of the communities and let them speak for themselves. Don't speak for them.

- Look to untraditional groups (e.g., food policy council) that aren't typically part of the leadership of town but who can offer important perspectives. Build connections through the connections you already have.

Session 4: Using Equitable Language

- Understand how language affects how we think and who we see. By not naming certain groups, it's as if those people aren't there. If we don't have a term for you, we can't count you. We can't look for you. and our funder won't be asking us to provide services for you. Words create worlds. Worlds where we're being inclusive. They decide who we appreciate and love, and who we demean and hate.

- Understand how language (both verbal and non-verbal) assigns value—and strips people of it, and how it can both include and alienate people.

- Listen to how others interpret the words we use. There's a link between language and power. We take power away when we use certain types of language and don't acknowledge how power has stripped away people's identities.

- Understand that using stigmatizing language makes it more difficult to build trust.

- Model equitable language whenever possible. As public health and prevention professionals, this is our responsibility.

- Understand that different generations will use language in different ways. Some generations have chosen to claim some words that produce tension for others. One solution may not work for everyone.

- Acknowledge that some words are appropriate for people within a community but not for people outside it (e.g., the prevention field uses the term substance use disorder while the recovery community uses terms like alcoholic and addict).

- Recognize that we all have blinders on and that we can still fumble. When you make a mistake, own it. Then try to remember the lesson and forget the mistake. Don't hold onto the shame of it. Doing so can keep us silenced and entrenched in old patterns of behavior.

- Establish the regular practice of letting people self-identify at the start of each meeting (pronouns, race, ethnicity) and remember people's preferred pronouns. Don't' assume gender, race, or anything else about a person's identity.

- Think carefully about how you phrase things. For example, if you want to reach certain populations and get diversity in your boards and coalitions, name who you want in the room; don't just say "all are welcome". Understand the difference between saying "come to my party if you want to" and "I want you to come to my party".

- Use positive words instead of negative words. For example, say "including all genders" rather than "regardless of gender".

- Continue to listen and learn from colleagues, be flexible about learning new words, and set personal goals around using equitable language.