

Health equity assessments: A brief review

Health equity is achieved when all people can attain their highest level of health; it is when differences in health outcomes between groups of people are eliminated. To be effective, organizations and agencies working to advance health equity need not only consider how they are working with community residents, but also how their internal policies, practices, and priorities support or hinder this work. The Center for Prevention at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota requested that Wilder Research review available tools that can assess organizational capacity to advance health equity. This summary briefly describes relevant tools identified in this literature search. It provides a link to each tool, a brief overview of the tool's advantages and disadvantages, and additional information about the tool and the organization that developed the tool.

What tools were included in the review?

Online searches and a focused review of peer-reviewed journal articles were used to identify assessment tools that measure organizational capacity to advance health equity. Many of the tools focus on racial equity. However, this review does include one tool that assesses organizational capacity to advance equity for LGBTQ communities. Tools that have not been made public are not included in this review. A number of resources provide a framework or logic model that can be used by organizations to think strategically about their efforts. Although these may be helpful resources, they were excluded from this review because they do not include a self-assessment component.

What was considered in this review of available tools?

This review of organizational assessment tools considered the overall content of the tool, the time needed to administer the tool, and the capacity necessary to interpret the results and identify action steps. We did not contact organizations that have used the tool to ask them about their impressions of the assessment's ease of administration or usefulness. The literature search we conducted focused primarily on assessments used to assess organizational capacity for advancing health equity. Other tools developed to assess structural racism, community empowerment, or other related topics may not have been identified in this search.

How should organizations determine which tool is best to use?

There are advantages and disadvantages for all of the assessment tools reviewed. Organizations may find it helpful to consider the following questions when thinking about the type of tool or assessment approach that will be most helpful in their work.

- Is there buy-in across the organization to a) assess the organization's current capacity to advance health equity and b) take action to address issues that emerge through the assessment process? If not, what type of pre-work is needed before the organization is ready for an assessment?
- How much guidance does the organization need to interpret the assessment results and consider potential action steps?

- What is the organization’s capacity to administer the tool, analyze any survey results, involve staff in discussions or planning efforts, and to facilitate discussion of next steps?
- Does the tool’s language reflect how the organization talks about health equity, or do modifications need to be made?

What should organizations do after conducting an assessment?

The steps an organization takes to further their work to advance health equity will vary, based on their current capacity, support from leadership, and clarity on next steps. In any organization, it is important for staff at all levels to have a common language and shared understanding of current gaps and opportunities to develop their capacity to advance health equity. It may be helpful for organizations to develop an equity plan to clearly describe their planned next step and to identify who is accountable for implementing key tasks. The Racial Equity Strategy Guide developed by the Partnership for Racial Equity (Portland, Oregon) is one example of a comprehensive equity plan.

<http://ulpdx.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/RACIAL-EQUITY-STRATEGY-GUIDE-FINAL.pdf>

Review of available resources

Note: The following resources are listed in alphabetical order. Any of the tools listed could be helpful for organizations interested in evaluating their current work and organizational capacity to advance health equity. The best tool is one that aligns most closely to the organization’s interests, language to describe equity, and capacity.

A. The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2006). Race Matters: Organizational Self-Assessment.

Retrieved from: <http://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/aecf-RACEMATTERSorgselfassessment-2006.pdf>

This brief assessment is part of a Race Matters toolkit, developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Brevity is the main advantage of this tool; although that also means the assessment is not very helpful for organizations interested in doing a more comprehensive assessment of their organizational capacity. The assessment results lead an organization to another set of tools that can be used to determine next steps. It does seem that the tools direct organizations interested in more in-depth assessments, consultation, training, etc. to the Race Matters Institute, which offers paid consultation services.

Advantages	Disadvantages
<p>The assessment tool is a brief (19-question) questionnaire that can be completed quickly and scored easily.</p> <p>The final score provides the organization with next steps that can be considered and other relevant “Race Matters” tools that may be helpful for developing staff competencies and changing organizational operations.</p>	<p>Because the assessment is short, it does not go into the detail of other assessments; some items may feel too broad and, as a result, difficult to rate.</p> <p>The framework for the tool focuses on racial equity; other groups experiencing inequities may be overlooked.</p> <p>The tool doesn’t provide broader context or definitions of terms; a base of shared knowledge is assumed.</p>

This tool may be a good fit for organizations that have limited capacity to conduct a more in-depth assessment or who need to increase interest in and buy-in for the organization to take more intentional steps to advance health equity.

B. The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2014). Race Equity and Inclusion Action Guide: Seven steps to advance and embed race equity and inclusion within your organization.

Retrieved from: <http://www.aecf.org/resources/race-equity-and-inclusion-action-guide/>

This high-level framework provides organizations with a set of steps they can follow to thoroughly understand the needs of community residents who experience inequities and develop strategies for action. It is different than other tools reviewed in that it does not include a self-assessment completed by organization administrators and/or staff.

Advantages	Disadvantages
<p>The document offers a clear framework that organizations can follow to guide their work, including a focus on community engagement.</p> <p>The guide's list of core concepts and definitions may provide organizations with a helpful starting point in establishing common language among staff and stakeholders.</p> <p>The guide includes a set of questions organizations can use to conduct a "race equity impact assessment" to consider how a proposed action or decision will likely affect different racial and ethnic groups.</p>	<p>This high-level document does not provide a detailed structure to analyze relevant data sources.</p> <p>The framework does not include an organizational assessment tool that can be completed by program administration and staff.</p>

This tool may be a good fit for organizations that have experience and high interest in advancing racial equity in their work, and capacity to develop the specific tools needed by their organization to be more reflective and intentional in their work. It may also be a good framework for organizations that need to develop a shared language on key racial equity concepts.

C. Bay Area Regional Health Inequities (BARHII) (2010). Local Health Department Organizational Self-Assessment for Addressing Health Inequities: Toolkit and guide to implementation.

Retrieved from:

<http://www.phi.org/uploads/application/files/orxow77pv5ql7zq8ibbecfxfkvbmxnskqe0hohbmx6h6q2adk.pdf>

BARHII developed a framework of organizational and staff competencies needed to effectively address health inequities. The framework and related toolkit was based on a review of public health and organizational development literature, as well as existing organizational and cultural competency assessment tools. The toolkit was piloted by the City of Berkeley Public Health Department. The toolkit includes five instruments to conduct a comprehensive assessment:

- Staff survey: Most in-depth tool, completed by staff of all levels
- Collaborating partner survey: Completed by other organizations to give feedback regarding health equity work
- Staff focus groups: Based on a matrix, explores topics that emerge through the staff survey and collaborating partner survey
- Management staff interviews: Intended to further explore organizational strengths and areas for improvement
- Human Resources data system worksheet: Offers guidelines for extracting information from key internal documents, data systems, etc.

Their toolkit is based on the assumption that the following characteristics and workforce competencies are needed to advance health equity.

Organizational characteristics	Workforce competencies
Institutional commitment to addressing health inequities	Personal attributes such as passion, self-reflection, and listening skills
Hiring to address health inequities	Knowledge of public health framework
Structure that supports true community partnerships	Understanding the social, environmental, and structural determinants of health
Supporting staff to address health inequities	Knowledge of affected community
Transparent and inclusive communication	Leadership
Institutional support for innovation	Collaboration skills
Creative use of categorical funds	Community organizing skills
Community-accessible data and planning	Problem solving ability
Streamlined administrative processes	Cultural competence and humility

Advantages	Disadvantages
The process includes a solid checklist to be used when the self-assessment is being considered to ensure organization is ready for assessment, has the capacity to conduct the assessment, and is ready to act on the assessment results.	Primary audience is local public health departments; some competency areas are specific to the field.
Appendix includes a “roadmap” showing relationship between specific survey items and key domains, allowing an organization to focus on most relevant topic areas.	Assessment process is very in-depth, requires notable commitment from leadership and staff implementing the project.
Toolkit offers step-by-step implementation and analysis process that can be followed; assumes a relatively low level of past experience conducting similar assessments.	Data collection tools and approaches assume a large workforce; a staff survey in a small organization may have identifiable information, mixed method approach may not be necessary because same staff would be involved in all tasks.

The toolkit may be a good fit for local public health departments interested in and committed to improving their work to advance health equities. Tools within the toolkit may also be helpful references for other organizations who want to consider using staff surveys, interviews, or focus groups to consider their current organizational capacity and staff competencies. However, the language may need to be adopted to include terms that apply to organizations that are not in the public health field.

D. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2013). A practitioner’s guide for advancing health equity: Community strategies for prevention chronic disease.

Retrieved from: <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dch/pdf/HealthEquityGuide.pdf>

This large guide includes reflection questions on key topics to help organizations consider the degree to which they have practices in place and the capacity to advance health equity. The following areas are addressed: organizational capacity; community engagement; partnerships and coalitions; identifying health inequities; strategy selection; communication; and evaluation. The reflection questions assume a fundamental knowledge of health inequities; organizations that are just starting to consider how to advance health equity through their work may have more difficulty with a self-directed approach. The full guide offers many examples of work done in different parts of the country and offers ideas about ways to effectively communicate information about key public health topics and strategies that address common barriers.

Advantages

Questions for reflection are thought-provoking and intended to stimulate conversation among staff.

Topic areas can be explored individually, rather than through a single, comprehensive assessment.

Less structured questions for reflection could allow an organization to address topics on their own timeline.

Disadvantages

Guidance is not offered about how to solicit feedback or to use information to guide planning.

Because questions for reflection are all open-ended discussion topics, a skilled facilitator and trusting workplace environment will be needed to gather staff input.

Self-assessment process could stall out because it requires staff to create the process that will be used to have the discussion and develop related strategies.

The toolkit may be a good fit for organizations committed to advancing health equity in their work, particularly organizations with strong leadership that can identify action steps that can be taken when concerns are identified through a more reflective process.

E. Eliminating Disparities in Child & Youth Success Collaborative (2014) A tool for organizational self-assessment related to racial equity.

Retrieved from: <http://coalitioncommunitiescolor.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Tool-for-Organizational-Self-Assessment-Related-to-Racial-Equity-2014.pdf>

This tool was developed by a coalition launched to advance educational equity and social justice in Multnomah County, Oregon (Portland and surrounding areas). The tool is intended to be completed by senior leadership of an organization. The tool instructions encourage organizations using the tool to contact the coalition for technical assistance, but instructions around interpretation of the tool and its use in planning are not readily available.

Advantages

The tool is intended to be completed by a few senior management, making it more feasible to administer.

If responses to the first set of questions suggest the organization is early in its work to advance health equity, a shortened version of the tool is completed.

The tool was designed to be applicable for a broad range of organizations: nonprofits, school districts, corporations, foundations.

Disadvantages

It is not clear how an organization should use and interpret the information collected during the assessment. (The coalition offers technical assistance to others in Oregon, but this support would not be available to organizations in Minnesota.)

The tool was developed with a focus on educational disparities. While the questions apply across topics, some health-specific questions included in other assessments are not present with this tool.

The framework for the tool focuses on racial equity; other groups experiencing inequities may be overlooked.

The tool may be a good fit for organizations with committed leadership who would find benefit in using a brief tool to assess their current work and to launch future discussions on changes that can be made by their organization.

F. Housing Development consortium. (2014). Racial equity toolkit: Applying a racial equity lens to your organization.

Retrieved from: <http://www.housingconsortium.org/2014/12/17/racial-equity-project-toolkit/>

This toolkit was developed with input from organizations and local government staff in King County and the City of Seattle, an area of the country leading the way in actions to advance health equity and address structural racism. It was written with an audience of housing advocates in mind, but the concepts apply to other types of

organizations. The full toolkit includes key definitions, a process for initiating conversations around race within an organization, and exercises to identify characteristics of dominant culture and influence of white privilege in the work place. Their tool is an adaptation of the Eliminating Disparities in Child and Youth Success Collaborative (also reviewed in this document), and includes language that is easy to understand. The consortium that developed this toolkit offers technical assistance to organizations that use the materials. However, this support is not available locally to help organizations interpret and use the assessment results.

Advantages	Disadvantages
<p>The tool is intended to be completed by a few senior management, making it more feasible to administer. However, they recommend involving front line staff for a wider range of perspectives, if possible.</p> <p>If responses to the first set of questions suggest the organization is early in its work to advance health equity, a shortened version of the tool is completed.</p> <p>The tool was designed to be applicable for a broad range of organizations: nonprofits, school districts, corporations, foundations.</p> <p>The full toolkit provides examples of ways that organizations can use the assessment results to guide action steps.</p>	<p>The framework for the tool focuses on racial equity; other groups experiencing inequities may be overlooked.</p> <p>The full toolkit is centered on racial equity as it relates to housing in King County, Washington. Data presented in the report is specific to their geographic region of interest, although the take away messages are applicable to other areas.</p>

Of the tools reviewed, this toolkit seemed to be most widely applicable to a range of sectors and organizations with different levels of capacity.

G. Western States Center (n.d.). Assessing our organizations.

Retrieved from: <http://www.westernstatescenter.org/tools-and-resources/Tools/assessing-our-organizations>

Based in Oregon, the mission of the Western States Center is to “connect and build the power of community organizations to challenge and transform individuals, organizations and systems, to achieve, racial, gender, and economic justice.” Most of the other resources reviewed have a more narrow focus of racial equity. This tool was the other assessment found in our search that focused directly on assessing organizational capacity to advance LGBTQ equality.

Advantages	Disadvantages
<p>This is one of very few tools found that focus specifically on organizational capacity to address LGBTQ issues.</p> <p>The tool includes a facilitation guide to conduct the assessment and to have broader discussion about its results.</p>	<p>The initial framing on the tool notes that “getting started with LGBTQ issues can feel overwhelming.” That may not be the right tone to start the discussion.</p> <p>The tool provides organizations with a final set of strengths and areas for improvement, but does not offer direction on how to move this forward to developing an action plan.</p>

This tool is a good fit for organizations interested in considering their capacity for advancing LGBTQ equity. Because a number of other tools included in this review focus primarily on racial equity, it may be a helpful to include this tool if a different assessment is selected.

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Other related tools and resources

- BRIDGE Organizational Assessment Tool (BOAT). Developed by the National Gender & Equity Campaign and Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy, the tool is designed to help organizations assess their overall capacity to be a more effective and sustainable social justice organization. It was tested through their NGENC Organizational Fellows program, piloted in California and Minnesota. The final version of the tool is not yet available online. For more information: <http://www.genderandequity.org/boat>
- Health Equity Impact Assessment/Health Impact Assessment/Racial Equity Analysis. These are all variations of a tool or process that can be used to identify and mitigate potential negative health impacts of a proposed decision or policy. This framework can help organizations thoughtfully review the implications of both internal and external policies and to develop strategies to mitigate any unintended negative consequences. http://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/RSJI/RacialEquityToolkit_FINAL_August2012.pdf
<http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/hea/docs/workbook.pdf>
<http://act.colorlines.com/acton/attachment/1069/f-011e/1/-/-/-/-/ Racial%20Equity%20Impact%20Assessment.pdf>
- Multnomah County: The Equity and Empowerment Lens. This website, developed by Multnomah County (Portland, Oregon and surrounding communities), includes resources on understanding the social determinants of health and inequity and a suggested framework or “lens” that can be used by an organization to assess their work to advance health equity.
- Racial Equity Tools website. Multiple tools and resources are available on the “Racial Equity Tools” website (www.racialequitytools.org), which is a merged information source from three different sites. The resources available cover many different topics, and may be a good site to reference.

Social Transformation Project’s Transforming Organizations: A Guide to creating effective social change organizations. Written by Robert Gass, this toolkit provides organizations with tips and strategies about undertaking the difficult work of organizational change. The toolkit describes the elements needed in organizations to foster change and provides organizations with key activities and tips for avoiding potential pitfalls at each of the five stages of organizational transformation.

<http://9to5.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Transforming-Organizations-A-Guide-to-Creating-Effective-Social-Change-Organizations.pdf>

- Western States Center’s Racial Justice Assessment Tool. This tool was developed to help organizations identify gaps and opportunities for strengthening its commitment to social justice. This self-assessment can be completed at any level of the organization, and focuses on the following areas: racial equity in the development and measurement of program; considerations of power; organizational policies in place; the characteristics of staff and leadership; and organizational culture. Additional language would need to be added to focus the assessment tool more specifically on issues of health and health equity. Available online: <http://www.westernstatescenter.org/tools-and-resources/Tools/assessing-our-organizations-RJ>

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For more information

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