

February 2021

START WHERE YOU ARE

*Tools for assessing racial equity
and powering change*

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In collaboration with:
Houston Food Bank
Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellowship





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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report will offer insight into the process of implementing an organizational race equity assessment by guiding readers through Houston Food Bank's (HFB) experience. The assessment captured perceptions across the food bank on where employees believed the food bank was on their racial equity journey. The assessment was adapted from the 2019 Washington Race Equity Justice Initiative (REJI) Organizational Assessment, developed by JustLead Washington, which focuses on five dimensions of race equity.

After careful modifications to the assessment, it was launched on November 5th, 2020, to 150 permanent staff participants out of 388 Houston Food Bank employees. These participants included leadership staff and a pool of general staff. The assessment closed on December 23rd and there was a total of 113 assessments submitted through Survey Monkey.

With assistance from HFB's Data Department, the assessment findings surfaced differences in perceptions between leadership staff and general staff through the creation of a benchmarking tool and identified how different demographics scored HFB through the use of Tableau.

The assessment found that overall respondents believed HFB was in the Planning and Implementing stages of each racial equity category, which is a score of 3 and 4 out of 5. Those in leadership believed HFB was in the planning stages, while general staff believed they were in the implementing stages. It highlighted that majority of people were unsure of all that was being done within these categories but were optimistic that progress was being made. Based on participant feedback, the assessment also brought forth recommendations on ways HFB could grow within these three areas: commitment across HFB, common frameworks and language, and working with community. An explanation of each recommendation can be found in the Results section.

REJI's Five Race Equity Dimensions

- Securing an Organizational Commitment to Race Equity Work
- Creating More Equitable Organizational Culture
- Recruiting, Hiring, & Retaining a Diverse Workforce
- Developing Accountability to and Partnerships with Communities of Color
- Applying an Anti-Racism Lens to Programs, Advocacy, & Decision-Making

HOUSTON FOOD BANK

The Houston Food Bank (HFB) is the largest food bank by distribution in the Feeding America network, the largest network of food banks in the United States. Their mission, “Food for better lives”, and vision, “A world that doesn’t need food banks”, illustrates the way they are serving their community through emergency food assistance, as well as working to address root causes of hunger. Through 1,500 community partners, HFB distributes food to 18 southeast Texas counties, where more than 1.1 million Texans are food-insecure.[1] Currently, HFB is working under disaster mode due to COVID-19 and has seen a 92% increase in households who needed food assistance between March - December 2020 compared to March - December 2019.[2] As the number of people experiencing food insecurity increases, food banks have become a necessity for many families across the country.

In addition to distributing food, HFB provides “programs and services aimed at helping families achieve long-term stability, including nutrition education, job training, health management, and help with securing state-funded assistance.”[3] Their Food for Change program partners with social service programs and uses data to better understand how they can offer health-related and economic opportunities for the community they serve. Additionally, HFB is working to advocate for policy change and racial equity to increase access to food and reduce poverty. As one of the largest food banks in the nation, HFB is helping pave the way towards the future of food banking by making sure they are not only serving the line but also shortening the line.

Currently, HFB is working to better understand the ways the food bank lives out its mission and vision not only externally, but internally as well. This past December 2020, HFB underwent an organization-wide salary raise so hourly employees earn at least \$15 an hour. This internal lens has also resulted in the launch of Equity Work Groups which facilitate dialogue on equity and action within the food bank and the implementation of an organizational race equity assessment to supplement these conversations and gather an understanding of HFB’s current work towards becoming more aligned with equity and justice.

[1] “About Us.” Houston Food Bank, September 8, 2020. <https://www.houstonfoodbank.org/about-us/>.

[2] “Houston Food Bank COVID-19 Response,” Houston Food Bank, January 2021, https://www.houstonfoodbank.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/factsheet_covid19_cumulativethruDecember_20210120_FINAL.pdf.

[3] “About Us.” Houston Food Bank

INTRODUCTION

In 2018, Texas had a 15% food insecurity rate, putting them higher than the national average. [4] Today, Feeding America estimates the rate is now up to 20.2% with about 5,806,140 people experiencing food insecurity due to the impact of COVID-19.[5] COVID-19 has heightened food insecurity numbers across the country while continuing to showcase how people of color are disproportionately affected by food insecurity. According to a 2018 study conducted by Dr. Odoms-Young, their findings indicate that, “Although levels of food insecurity have declined and risen over [this past 20 year] period, one trend that has continued to persist is the gap in the prevalence of food insecurity between people of color and whites.”[6] This gap has now been magnified due to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the COVID Tracking Project, Texas data shows that, “through January 29, Black/African American people were most likely to have contracted COVID-19 [and] Hispanic/Latino people were most likely to have died.”[7] As more Americans are faced with the harsh realities of paying for rent, healthcare costs or job loss/decreased hours due to the pandemic, paying for food has become a greater challenge and how anti-hunger organizations respond will be critical.

Many anti-hunger organizations have acknowledged hunger is a racial equity issue and the need to use a racial equity lens to their work. In Bread for the World’s report on “Applying a Racial Equity Lens To End Hunger”, they explain how the application of a racial equity lens will help address the consequences brought on by structural racism and will help bring the U.S. closer to the national goal of ending hunger by 2030.[8] This lens pushes organizations to leave behind a one-fits-all approach and focus on addressing root causes that address structural racism in their work. Without acknowledging the intersectionality and the role structural racism plays in hunger, anti-hunger organizations will perpetuate inequities in food insecurity.

Over the past couple of years, there has been a rise in racial equity resources and toolkits that help organizations implement and understand what it means to lead with a racial equity lens. Resources ranging from webinars to organizational assessments have become accessible to those looking to dive into the work and understand ways an organization can become aligned with equity and justice.

[4] “The Impact of the Coronavirus on Local Food Insecurity.” Feeding America. Feeding America, May 19, 2020. https://www.feedingamerica.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/Brief_Local%20Impact_5.19.2020.pdf.

[5] “The Impact of the Coronavirus on Local Food Insecurity.”

[6] Odoms-Young, Angela, and Marino A. Bruce. “Examining the Impact of Structural Racism on Food Insecurity.” *Family & Community Health* 41, no. S2 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1097/fch.0000000000000183>.

[7] “Infection and Mortality by Race and Ethnicity.” The COVID Tracking Project. The Atlantic Monthly Group, 2021. <https://covidtracking.com/race/infection-and-mortality-data#TX>.

[8] “Applying a Racial Equity Lens to End Hunger.” Bread for the World, January 30, 2021. <https://www.bread.org/library/applying-racial-equity-lens-end-hunger>.

This report will focus on how the Houston Food Bank adapted the Race Equity Justice Initiative's (REJI) Organizational Assessment, developed by JustLead Washington, to understand the awareness and commitment of HFB's current racial equity work, and will offer insights into how other hunger-fighting organizations can too. Since organizational assessments are a tool used to collect information and identify both strengths and opportunities for growth, they can be conducted at any stage of an organization's journey.[9] This tool served as a learning opportunity for HFB's current work and will inform HFB's Equity Action Plan.

BACKGROUND

How did HFB come to this decision?

In September 2020, the Equity Work Groups (co-facilitated by Director of Advocacy and Advocacy and Equity Specialist) met for the first time, and as they began to better understand equity and HFB's internal processes, one of the first tasks was to understand who made up their current workforce. The Advocacy Department worked with the Human Resource Department to access de-identified data about staff. The data of all 388 permanent, full-time employees was disaggregated by different HFB teams (managers, supervisors, directors, executives, and general staff) and demographics (gender, race and ethnicity, and age) to help paint a picture of who makes up the food bank. The Equity Work Groups were shown the differences in demographics in the leadership teams in comparison

to overall HFB employees. Figure 1 illustrates how the Leadership Team, made up of directors and executives (highest level of management), was a very different story compared to HFB's overall workforce when put side by side. The Equity Work Groups dived into why this may be and talked about barriers that may have played a role in this outcome like education requirements in different positions. Additionally, an overall finding was that there is still much to learn about where HFB is starting from as they move towards becoming more aligned with advancing racial equity. As a result, an equity organizational assessment was identified as a tool that would best guide this objective, as they "often can reveal a true starting point for the work." [10]

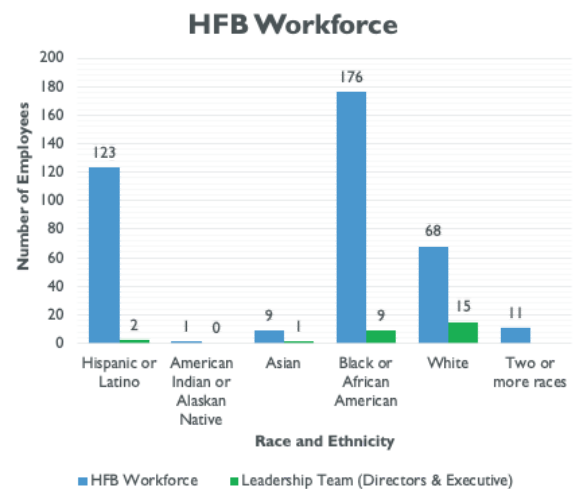


Figure 1. The HFB Workforce graph compares HFB's overall workforce to HFB's Leadership Team. The Leadership Team is not in addition to the HFB Workforce (i.e. of the 123 Hispanic or Latino workers, 2 are part of the Leadership Team).

[9] "REJI Organizational Race Equity Toolkit," JustLead Washington (Washington Race Equity & Justice Initiative (REJI), 2020), <https://justleadwa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/REJI-Toolkit-v2-Final-2020-3.pdf>.

[10] "REJI Organizational Race Equity Toolkit," JustLead Washington, 32

TOOLS FOR THE JOURNEY

Finding the tool that works best for your organization

This specific report focuses on the application of an organizational assessment. However, there are many resources out there that will guide you towards operationalizing equity into your organization and will vary in processes and audience. Some of the most common are racial equity impact assessments, racial equity analysis tools, racial equity scorecards, and organizational assessments. Focus on narrowing it down to ones that align with your objectives the best.

After careful consideration of multiple organization assessments, the Washington Race Equity & Justice Initiative's (REJI) Organizational Toolkit was chosen for HFB. The toolkit includes their Organizational Assessment, as well as information that focuses on understanding racial equity, information on their assessment, and the creation of an action plan. This specific toolkit was created by legal aid organizations but was also applicable for the work at the food bank. Something to keep in mind is that some assessments can be adapted to fit your organization's needs.

Limitations: The timeframe for implementing an assessment at HFB was limited, so having more time to lay out clear objectives before diving into finding a tool would have been beneficial. When looking for tools, be sure to think about how the tool aligns with your timeline and how it will lead you towards short and long-term action. Your organization should be ready to be committed to the ongoing work.

Other assessment tools HFB considered

- Self-Assessment Workbook for Hunger-Free Communities by Alliance to End Hunger
- Tool for Organizational Self-Assessment Related to Racial Equity by the Coalition of Communities of Color
- Race Matters Organizational Self-Assessment by Annie E. Casey Foundation

Organizations and resources found useful during the process

- Racial Equity Tools – Organizational Change Process
- Bread for the World
- Race Forward

Identify your participants

One of the most important steps in the process is identifying who will be participating in this assessment. The REJI Toolkit recommends choosing key stakeholders in your organization, which will play an important role in highlighting your organization's true starting point. For HFB, key stakeholders would have included staff, leadership, board members, and community partner agencies. However, for the purpose of this initial assessment, only leadership and select staff were asked to take the assessment.

At HFB, there are about 388 employees so having everyone take this assessment in such a short period of time was not viable. The participants for this assessment consisted of all leadership teams: managers, supervisors, directors, and executives, as well as a pool of general staff. This resulted in about 150 people being asked to participate in the assessment. The goal was to not only bring awareness of the current racial equity work, but to understand the awareness between leadership and general staff. By comparing these different stakeholders, it helped illustrate whether communication about racial equity goals was spread evenly across the organization or if the awareness stopped at leadership.

Limitations: Since this was the first time conducting an organizational race equity assessment and there was limited time to complete it, the concentration was on leadership and some general full staff. Those who were considered supplemental staff were not included in the assessment. In other circumstances, the goal would be to include all staff to be part of the assessment to paint a more accurate picture. If your organization has the bandwidth and resources, branch out and include different stakeholders like board members and partners. The REJI Toolkit highlights, to move towards racial equity most effectively, everyone who plays a role in your organization should be involved in the process.[11]

Adapting the assessment

Understanding the needs of your participants and your goals will allow you to make the appropriate changes to the assessment. Guiding questions, found on the next page, helped establish what changes HFB wanted to make to the assessment.

At HFB, the REJI organizational assessment was adapted to best fit HFB's needs. The REJI organization assessment included five different sections and each section had about 5-10 statements that respondents needed to answer. HFB's Director of Advocacy and CEO looked over the statements in each section to determine whether they all were applicable for the

[11] "REJI Organizational Race Equity Toolkit," JustLead Washington, 21

work at the food bank or if there were other components that were missing. After making those changes, it was decided to also make changes to the answer choices. Instead of having an “Unsure” answer choice, a “Not sure what this question means” and “Do not wish to answer” answer choice was included. To each section, a comment section was also included to gather feedback and recommendations from participants.

A demographics section was also inserted. Names were not asked to maintain confidentiality and keep respondent information as anonymous as possible. Instead, the section asked about:

- Gender
- Sexual Orientation
- Race and Ethnicity
- HFB Department
- HFB Group Affiliation (i.e. Leadership Teams or Equity Work Group)
- Months and Years Worked at HFB

Once all the changes were made, the assessment was implemented through a digital survey platform - Survey Monkey. Survey Monkey kept track of how many people submitted responses or where respondents had left off, if it wasn't submitted. Survey Monkey gave participants an option to leave and come back to the assessment, which was helpful when reminding people during the data collection period. Paper copies were available for those who preferred, as well as language accommodations. Other digital surveys your organization can use are Google Forms, Qualtrics Online Survey Tool, or programs your organization already subscribes to.

Limitations: When adapting the assessment, HFB would have benefited from having a shorter assessment, as that would have increased participation rate. The assessment consisted of almost 50 questions/statements once demographic and feedback questions were included. This resulted in incomplete assessments. Keeping an “Unsure” answer choice, along with the other two additional choices, would have aided in participation rate. Making the assessment be as accessible as possible should be a priority.

Guiding questions HFB asked when adapting the assessment:

- Do any questions need to be changed or added to the assessment? Do they all make sense for the work the organization does?
- How will these answer choices give meaning to the organization's journey? Is there anything that is missing?
- Should there be questions on demographics? How will demographics play an important role in painting a bigger picture?
- What format should the assessment be given to HFB staff?
- Are there any other languages this assessment needs to be translated to? Are any other accommodations needed?

Data Collection

The organizational assessment was launched on November 5th, 2020 and respondents had until December 23rd. This gave them around a month and a half to complete the assessment. However, this timeline will depend on your own participant pool and time frame.

The hardest part of this process was campaigning for the assessment due to COVID-19. The assessment was promoted at 3 different leadership team meetings and 3 Equity Work Group meetings. These presentations served as a way to get people familiar with the assessment, why the organization was doing this, and how it would assist the work moving forward. Once the assessment launched, all participants received the assessment link through their emails. For the next month and a half, people received reminder emails every two weeks and near the end, socially distanced in-person visits for those working on-site. This helped keep the assessment in the front of people's minds. The goal was to get as many voices as possible, as this would result in most accurate findings. By the end, there were about 113 assessments submitted out of 153.

Limitation: Houston Food Bank would have benefited from a longer time frame, especially since it was rolled out during the Holiday Season and pandemic. COVID-19 also served as a challenge since large physical gatherings in the building were discouraged which made it difficult to reach people. Being purposeful with timing will help increase responses. Additionally, if you aren't using a third party, having the administrator be trusted members of your organization will also play a role in participation rate. Relationship-building and timing during this process is key.

Data Department Collaboration

Once the assessment was launched, HFB's Data Department assisted in interpreting the data received through Survey Monkey. A benchmarking tool or scorecard was created, which helped match the responses to a point system and create visuals to illustrate where HFB was on its journey. Each section had its own scorecard based on the number of questions or statements. Figure 2 illustrates Section 1's (Securing an Organizational Commitment to Race Equity Work) scorecard. Every respondent would receive a total based on how they scored HFB from No Work (1) to Firmly Established (5). After adding up all respondents' scores within each section, HFB would fall in one of three sections: Little to No Work (1 and 2), Planning & Implementation Stage (3 and 4), and Firmly Established (5).

The Data Department then created a Tableau board for each section, which illustrated a breakdown of responses by ethnicity/race and gender, years worked, EWG participants vs non-EWG participants, and average score by departments. This helped further interpret the data based on some of the demographics of participants. Figure 3 illustrates the outcome of responses in Section 1.

Limitations: HFB is extremely fortunate to have a Data Department that is available to assist in projects like these, as their interpretation of the data went beyond what resources Survey Monkey provided. Due to timing, the Data Department was looped in during the data collection process, which resulted in many changes throughout the process. If you have access to a data expert, try to collaborate with them once you have a clear vision for what you need from them and how they will help take you further onto the data. This will result in better collaboration. The goal was to create a framework that could be replicable for future years and help determine how HFB has grown since this starting point.

Securing an Organizational Commitment to Race Equity

Goal: Racial equity is a core part of the mission, advocated for throughout the organization and communicated broadly.¹

Little to No Work (1&2)	Planning & Implementing (3&4)	Firmly Established (5)
Racial Equity is not present within our mission, vision or values.	Our organization has begun incorporating racial equity in our mission, vision, or value statements.	Our organization already incorporates racial equity into its mission, vision, or values.
Little to no racial equity initiatives have been started.	Racial equity initiatives have begun in some areas of our organization.	Racial equity initiatives have been launched in all areas of our organization.
Our organization is not diverse across demographics and perspectives or reflects our community.	Our organization is mainly diverse across demographics and perspectives and somewhat reflects our community.	Our organization is diverse across demographics and perspectives and reflects our community.

1 No Work	2 Identified, but no plans/work yet	3 Planning/ Implementing	4 Implemented but not yet applied across org	5 Firmly Established
0-8 points	9-16 points	17-24 points	25-32 points	33-40 points

Figure 2. Section 1's Scorecard illustrates the point system a respondent would "place" HFB based on the answers provided.

Section 1 - Securing an Organization Commitment to Race Equity

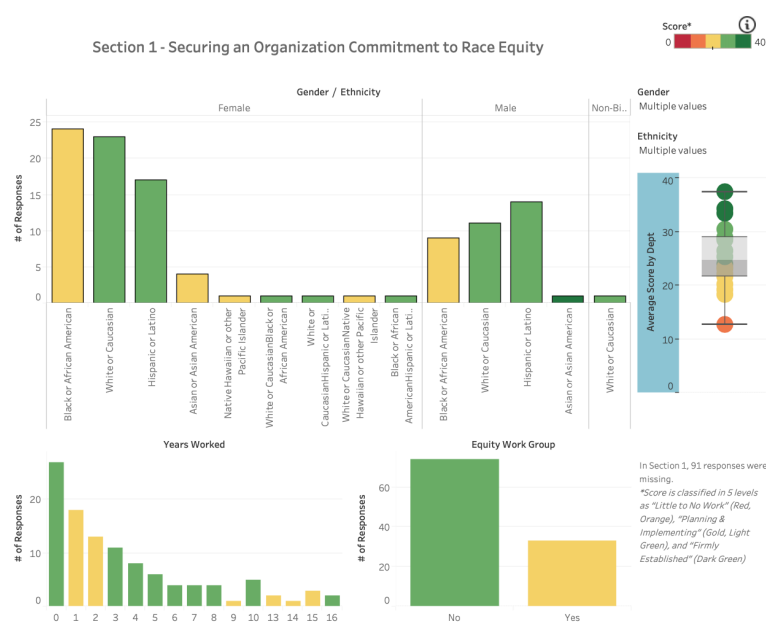


Figure 3. Section 1's Tableau dashboard is a combination of all respondent's feedback. Based on all respondents' scorecards for section 1, it would determine overall where HFB stood. Each color represents a section on the scorecard.

Closing the Feedback Loop: Share the Findings

After reviewing all the assessment responses and finalizing findings with the Data Department, the findings were compiled into a 15-minute presentation. This presentation was given to the Advocacy Team, Manager Team, Supervisor Team, Leadership Team (directors and executives) and Equity Work Group members (which consists of a combination of about 36 staff members) in the span of one month. The goals of this presentation was to better understand the awareness of HFB's current racial equity work, to evaluate commitment from leadership and non-leadership staff, and to identify tangible goals and steps toward racial equity based on the information presented. It also prompted people to think about what section stood out to them the most and in which they would like to see more change from moving forward.

Limitations: When thinking about sharing your findings, ideally, you would want to present this to your whole organization and/or make this information readily accessible to everyone. At HFB, due to time constraints and the organization's size, it was only presented to groups that have decision-making power and those who had already started talking about catalyzing equity like the Equity Work Groups. The video of the presentation will be made available to all-staff, though it is understood this is not the most equitable means of sharing the information since a question and answer dialogue would have to occur through follow up communication, such as e-mail or phone. The hope is that the video continues to be watched as information is spread across the food bank. It also hopes to encourage dialogue on changes people want to see within the five dimensions of racial equity and encourages different departments to begin thinking about ways they can play a role in advancing these changes in their day-to-day work.

RESULTS

This organizational race equity assessment will lead to an Equity Action Plan. This plan will focus on actionable next steps in response to the assessment findings. This step can look very different to every organization. At HFB, this assessment set a reference point and serves as a launchpad to more ideas. The hope is that year after year, HFB is progressing from where they started and continuing to become more aligned to a more just and equitable organization.

The benchmarking tool and Tableau board helped HFB illustrate that overall, most respondents believed HFB was in the planning and implementing stages on the five dimensions of racial equity work. General staff believed that they were already implementing initiatives and working to address inequities that may be present within HFB, but were unsure of how exactly this was being done. Differing from general staff, those who were a part of a leadership team, believed HFB was in the planning stages of most of the racial equity dimensions. When looking at demographics, the differences in responses based on gender and ethnicity/race were more telling than how long someone has worked at HFB. It was found that Black and Asian women scored HFB the lowest in most categories compared to everyone else, and female-identifying individuals overall scored HFB lower than male-identifying individuals.

Assessment findings and recommendations for HFB fit within three categories: commitment across HFB, common frameworks and language, and working with community. These three categories emerged as a result of the questions that respondents had the most trouble answering and feedback from open-ended questions. Additionally, the REJI Organization Race Equity Toolkit has a “Going Deeper” section, which focuses on each dimension and provides strategies on how to apply them to your organization. This section was very helpful when making recommendations in response to the findings.

1. ***Commitment across HFB: Internal communication of initiatives, goals and where HFB wants to be in 5 years***

Finding: There were about 40 comments throughout the assessment that resulted in people saying they were unsure of multiple statements presented within each category. Most people who selected “Do not wish to answer” clarified that they were unsure or did not have enough context/information to accurately score HFB. Some respondents explained that although they were unsure of all that was being done, they felt HFB was moving in the right direction.

Recommendation: This internal communication of initiatives, goals and where HFB wants to be in 5 years could come from Equity Action Plan. Following up with the plan, these goals and 5 year plan should be promoted across the food bank. This could look in the form of regular updates in All Staff Meetings, on HFB’s website, or HFB’s internal newsletter. The goal is to increase awareness of the progress and vision for where HFB hopes to be within the next couple years.

2. *Common frameworks and language: Bigger understanding of how racial equity connects to HFB's mission, vision, and values*

Finding: The assessment showcased that there wasn't a uniform understanding of the journey across the food bank. Some comments mentioned that they knew their own department was doing certain equity related initiatives, but weren't sure others were. Additionally, when answering how important it was for HFB to state "racial equity" in their mission, vision, or values, 77% respondents selected it is important for the organization.

Recommendation: This recommendation goes hand-in-hand with commitment across HFB. If there is a bigger understanding across HFB about why applying a racial equity lens is important, it would help operationalize racial equity into staff's everyday work. The Equity Work Groups are already having conversations on how equity fits into HFB's overall work and mission, which will be important as they continue to bring other staff into the conversations. Additionally, this could be in the form of organizational-wide training, specifically on implicit bias, promoting equity-related terminology (i.e. terms 'racial equity', 'health equity', and person-first language understood and normalized at HFB), or implementation of a racial equity impact tool during decision-making.

3. *Working with community: Prioritizing the voices of those they serve and being intentional with how HFB reaches communities of color*

Finding: The last two sections of the assessments (Developing Accountability to and Partnerships with Communities of Color and Applying an Anti-Racism Lens to Programs, Advocacy, & Decision-Making) resulted in people having the most trouble, as they were the sections respondents skipped the most statements and resulted in more people scoring HFB lower than other sections.

Recommendation: This could look in a variety of ways and these sections have great ideas that HFB could look into and adapt. A recommendation by a respondent was simply having an avenue where HFB can collect direct feedback from the people they serve like Town Hall Meetings. Adding on to this, most people were unsure who made up HFB's Board and what their diversity in experiences looked like, so a respondent recommended incorporating clients/beneficiaries into the governing body, as it comes from the idea that those who experience food insecurity are the experts in the work and should have a voice in the board. Lastly, continuing to expand organization-wide resources like accommodations, transportation, language access/interpretation to better reach communities of color.

LOOKING FORWARD

As food insecurity rates continue to increase not only in Texas, but across the country, the vision of “A world that doesn’t need food banks” is needed now more than ever. Food banks along with other anti-hunger organizations can play an important role in addressing root causes. A world that doesn’t need food banks means a world without poverty and to get there root causes of poverty need to be addressed. Although an organizational racial equity assessment for your organization will not alone solve this problem, it is a start. It can be a launching point into concrete actions your organization plans to accomplish and can help intentionally align your organization towards equity and justice.

The five dimensions of race equity covered in the assessment helped illustrate areas HFB can focus on. It makes sure that commitment is rooted in the core of the organization, the culture and workforce exemplify what it means to hold values of equity and justice, and it is put into practice when working with community and making decisions. It is not enough to just have some aspects of your organization be committed, but all areas and stakeholders. The REJI Toolkit talks about how “if you, your board, or other members of your organization do not hold values of equity, justice, anti-racism, centering of community perspectives, no decision-making tool or set of questions will guide you toward race equity.”[12]

At HFB, this assessment not only brought awareness to their current racial equity work, but also provided a starting point. A starting point that can lead to concrete change within their four walls and then toward their community. A starting point that keeps HFB accountable and begins to bring other stakeholders into the conversation like partner agencies, board members, and volunteers. The idea isn’t to have all the answers, but to meet your organization where it is and catalyze change from there.

[12] “REJI Organizational Race Equity Toolkit,” JustLead Washington, 65



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