



# One Fairfax

A Brief History of a County-Wide Plan  
to Advance Equity and Opportunity

Kyle McCarthy | December 2018



**Center for the  
Study of  
Social Policy**  
Ideas into Action





**The Center for the Study of Social Policy** works to achieve a racially, economically, and socially just society in which all children and families thrive. We do this by advocating with and for children, youth, and families marginalized by public policies and institutional practices.

Published December 2018

#### **Acknowledgments**

The authors are grateful for assistance from the following people in writing this publication: Karen Shaban, Strategic Project Manager, Fairfax County Government and Karla Bruce, Chief Equity Officer, Fairfax County Government.

Their contributions considerably enriched the final product.

# Introduction

In November 2017, Fairfax County in Virginia passed a far-reaching policy known as ‘One Fairfax,’ requiring that the Board of Supervisors and School Board must “consider equity in decision-making and in the development and delivery of future policies, programs, and services.”

The story of how the citizens of a large, affluent suburb of the District of Columbia came to widely support a broad racial and social equity policy spans more than a decade and involves many actors, including a committed team of government employees who banded together to advocate for change; outside institutions that encouraged self-reflection; and high-level government officials who championed the cause. However, key among all these ingredients was an institutional analysis, which provided a foundation for conceptual shift in the county’s approach to racial and social equity. Here is some backstory:

In 2009, longstanding concerns over persistent disproportionate minority contact (DMC) with the juvenile justice system led to Fairfax County commissioning the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) to conduct an Institutional Analysis<sup>1</sup> of the system. An Institutional Analysis (IA) gathers and analyzes information in a way that is designed to uncover the structural and institutional contributors to poor outcomes—like DMC—for children, youth, and families. Any agency or organization engaging in an IA is essentially “baring its soul” to better understand how it can improve.

CSSP’s Institutional Analysis in Fairfax County made it clear that the problem of DMC rested not with any one County agency or set of actors. Rather, the IA revealed contributing structural and institutional factors across County agencies and institutions. Therefore, the solution couldn’t or shouldn’t be housed in one agency. Fairfax County leadership recognized that county-wide structural and conceptual change was necessary. The story of Fairfax County’s response to the IA findings is instructive for other jurisdictions wrestling with similar issues or striving to create more equitable opportunities for all its residents. As Fairfax County has learned, there is no single strategy, beyond attunement to opportunities for advancing equity as they arise.

---

“Appointed as County Executive just following the adoption of One Fairfax presents a unique opportunity for me as Fairfax County’s County Executive.

**I applaud and respect the important foundational work in the journey to reach this milestone** and eagerly accept the leadership challenge to move the county forward. Our willingness and ability to change to be more efficient, forward thinking, and inclusive will ensure that we realize the transformational potential of government to advance equity through changes in policy and practice. There still is much work to do to become One Fairfax but **working together with partners, stakeholders, and community, we can strategically and intentionally shape the structure of opportunity throughout the county so everyone can participate and prosper.”**

**BRYAN J. HILL, County Executive**

---

<sup>1</sup>The Institutional Analysis is an analytical approach grounded in a research method known as institutional ethnography and developed by the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP), in collaboration with Praxis International. For more information about the methodology, see <https://www.cssp.org/reform/child-welfare/institutional-analysis/IA-Methodology-web.pdf> and for more information about the work in Fairfax County, see [https://www.cssp.org/publications/child-welfare/institutional-analysis/The-Story-Behind-the-Numbers\\_September-2012.pdf](https://www.cssp.org/publications/child-welfare/institutional-analysis/The-Story-Behind-the-Numbers_September-2012.pdf)

# Background & Context

Fairfax County in some ways resembles many areas in the country: suburban, formerly majority-white, but now with a rapidly growing non-white and immigrant population. The county is also exceptional in numerous ways, not least of which is its wealth: Fairfax County has the second highest median household income in the country. This prosperity, combined with its highly ranked school system and commitment to mixed-income housing, gives Fairfax County residents and leaders a sense of exceptionalism. Fairfax, it is widely felt, simply does things better.

This sense of exceptionalism both motivated and hindered the progress on racial equity. People here are eager to best the national average; discovering that the county's rates of disproportionate minority contact in the juvenile justice system are about on par with the national average, for instance, was disappointing, and spurred action. However, this sense of exceptionalism also made it difficult to admit there was a racial bias. Wasn't the problem simply poverty?

---

"People here are **eager to best the national average**; discovering that the county's rates of disproportionate minority contact in the juvenile justice system are about on par with the national average, for instance, was **disappointing, and spurred action.**"  
VERDIA HAYWOOD

---



Prior to conducting the Institutional Analysis, disparities in outcome by race were widely known, but attempts to address them had been minimally successful. Verdia Haywood, the long-serving Deputy County Executive for Human Services who retired in 2010, recalled, "We'd been looking at this [issues of disproportionality] for years, developing traditional programs to cope, and investing substantial sums, but these programs had an overall minimal impact. We weren't dealing directly with the issue."

For instance, during Haywood's tenure, he convened "Together We're the Answer," a community collaborative, to think through why African-Americans were over-represented in the foster care system. Composed predominantly of African-American government, business, community, and faith leaders, "Together We're the Answer" strove to engage the larger community in foster care issues, and eventually education, health, juvenile justice, and, more generally, child welfare.

"Together We're the Answer" was an important early step, bringing leaders together to discuss social problems explicitly in terms of race at a time when such discussions were unusual in Fairfax County. However, while the cultural competency trainings for county staff that emerged from these discussions succeeded in reducing the total number of children in foster care, the disproportionality persisted.



"We had been working on **Disproportionate Minority Contact (or DMC)** for a long time, but we weren't hitting our marks. I knew we needed another set of eyes to look at the issue."

**BOB BIRMINGHAM, Director, Court Services Unit, Fairfax County Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court**

With Haywood's retirement approaching, Karen Shaban, Strategic Project Manager, wondered how to ensure the continuity of this racial equity work. She, along with others, began to broaden their focus to the juvenile justice system. Convinced that an institutional focus was key, these leaders in schools, police, and the human services founded the Disproportionality and Disparity Prevention and Elimination Team (DDPET) in 2010, co-led by Shaban and Marlon Murphy, Director of Shelter Care, Juvenile, and Domestic Relations Court, which aimed to educate representatives from various government agencies about institutional/structural racism, and then help them pass on their findings to their peers. Mike Kline, a now-retired police officer with Fairfax County, recalls, "The [meetings] helped me gain a better understanding of our working peers, and the things we should be looking at in terms of the citizens we were serving."

The DDPET succeeded in reducing the overall number of juvenile arrests; however, just as with the efforts in the foster care system, disparities by race persisted. As Bob Birmingham, Director, Court Services Unit, Fairfax County Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court, recalls, "We had been working on Disproportionate Minority Contact (or DMC) for a long time, but we weren't hitting our marks. I knew we needed another set of eyes to look at the issue." Katherine Williams, the Former Director of Research and Development for The Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court, echoes, "We had sliced and diced our data in every way we could think of, but we kept coming back to: these kids are coming to our system, our front door, in disproportionate numbers."

Thus, the desire for an Institutional Analysis was born.

# Institutional Analysis: The Process



An Institutional Analysis is like an x-ray: it is a mechanism for looking deep beneath the skin of institutions and systems to better understand how what is seen at the surface is driven by what lies below. The intent is to make the invisible visible. In this case, the IA plumbed the depths of Fairfax County's juvenile justice system. To begin to understand how youth and families of color experience this system, the IA team reviewed the juvenile case files of 70 youth and conducted in-depth interviews with eight youth, their families, and the service and education personnel who engaged with these youth. All told, 71 interviews were conducted in this activity.



---

**The intent is to make the invisible visible.** In this case, the IA plumbed the depths of Fairfax County's juvenile justice system. To begin to **understand how youth and families of color experience this system**, the IA team reviewed the juvenile case files of 70 youth and conducted in-depth interviews with eight youth, their families, and service and education personnel who engaged with these youth.

---

The issues and themes that surfaced from this deep dive into the lived experiences of these youth and their families were further examined in 108 interviews with social workers, judges, probation officers, community and faith leaders, service provider staff, and others. To understand how common the themes were among similarly situated youth, focus groups were conducted with four groups of youth and two groups of parents. These interviews and focus groups were supplemented with more focus groups of school and juvenile system staff, 23 structured observations of juvenile justice intakes, court and diversion hearings, and other processes that are part of the juvenile justice system. The observations helped

enrich understanding of what was said in the interviews by making vivid the experiences of youth and their families and the pressures workers faced “on the ground.” The observations also revealed the everyday circumstances that might require workers to veer from established policy and procedure.

Throughout, the emphasis was to diagnose the system, not the individuals working in the system. Birmingham stressed repeatedly to his staff that the emphasis was on examining systems and policies, not people. Still, he compares the experience of going through the IA to one of a “dog going submissive, showing your vulnerable underbelly.”

The IA enlists the system’s own participants—in this case, police officers, court workers, school employees, etc.—to conduct the interviews. Kline and Williams recall that finding time to complete this additional work alongside their current responsibilities was challenging. Williams adds, however, that she loved the qualitative aspect of this work, saying, “The idea that you go out and talk to families was terrific.”

Among the recommendations put forth by the IA were suggestions to increase coordination among participating agencies and to cultivate a cross-systems vision of how to help youth thrive; to tailor prevention services to meet the specific needs of African-American and Hispanic youth and families; to increase access to mental health and substance abuse counseling specifically for those populations; to prioritize the needs of families over system efficiency; and to coordinate the sharing of information between schools and courts, including helping older teens in contact with the juvenile justice system stay connected to their “home schools whenever possible and appropriate.”

---

“The idea that you **go out and talk to families** was terrific.”

**KATHERINE WILLIAMS**, Former Director of Research and Development for The Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court

---

These findings, accompanied by the essential commitment of those who participated in the IA, contributed to promising developments in schools, the police department, and social services across Fairfax County. While clearly stating where and how systems failures had occurred, the IA also offered concrete suggestions for how Fairfax might begin to address these shortcomings. Throughout, the emphasis was on how various systems functioned, rather than the actions of any individual. These decisions around tone and organization were key for how the IA was received.



# Effects of the IA

Among Fairfax employees most closely identified with One Fairfax, there is consensus that the IA served as a catalyst by bringing visibility to the problems, and by applying an objective lens and institutional focus to the problem of DMC.



Indeed, the Institutional Analysis made it clear to all that DMC was not a problem contained to human services. To solve it, a more systematic approach—multi-agency and across the community—was needed. Importantly, the IA report was worded in ways that opened up dialogue. Patricia Harrison, Deputy County Executive for Human Services during the time of the IA comments, “The recommendations could have been harsher, but they were written in such a way that it allowed dialogue.”

Determined that the IA would not be a report that simply “sat on a shelf,” DDPET convened a “Dialogue with Directors” series to further support cross-organization collaboration and explore specific findings, drilling down to reveal and better understand institutional racism. These monthly meetings, moderated by Sarah Morrison of CSSP, brought together targeted leaders from the school system and county agencies to whose scope of work related to specific themes and problems. Together, these directors would review data; explore the relevant IA findings; and share their own agency’s perspective on that month’s

---

The Institutional Analysis made it clear to all that DMC was not a problem contained to human services. To solve it, **a more systematic approach—multi-agency and across the community—was needed.**

---

theme. However, getting conceptual buy-in—and a collective commitment to better understand and address the institutional contributors to racial inequity—was as important as this data review. As Morrison recalls, “The Fairfax leadership [including Karen Shaban and Marlon Murphy] approached this very purposefully, meeting with individual directors [from the various agencies] before arranging the series.” This translated, according to Pat Harrison, into making the Dialogue with Directors, a “safe place” for directors to learn and plan.

Another direct result of the IA was the formation of the Successful Children and Youth Policy Team (SCYPT). The IA had shown that a lack of coordination among schools, child welfare, preventive, and juvenile justice services was contributing to the over-representation of youth of color in the juvenile justice system. Yet although the IA revealed a correlation between excessive truancy and criminal behavior, the short-staffed truancy teams at schools were already overwhelmed and forced to triage their involvement with youth. Harrison was determined to keep “the schools” at the table. As she recalls, “The police, public safety, the schools—any of them could have walked away at any time. It was my job to corral them and to pace them.”



This theme of pacing—of knowing when to push individuals for change and additional commitment and when to back off—recurs again and again in interviews with key Fairfax players. Many in Fairfax County were not used to talking explicitly about race, or approaching social problems specifically through the lens of race. By knowing “when to push, and when to give people a breather,” (Pat Harrison) those committed to the IA were able to follow through on relevant changes. SCYPT also stands out as an example of a new structure inspired by the IA that allowed for problem-solving in a new way. The IA had called for greater cross-agency collaboration and vision-sharing, pointing out that there was no one good vision for the county as a whole when it came to talking about youth. SCYPT, charged with looking at all children, created a new, dedicated, permanent space for this collaboration.

---

“The Fairfax leadership [including Karen Shaban and Marlon Murphy] approached this **very purposefully**, meeting with individual directors [from the various agencies] before arranging the series.”

**PATRICIA HARRISON, Former Deputy County Executive for Human Services**

---



# Steps Towards ‘One Fairfax’

Following the IA, there was some disagreement about what, beyond taking the suggested steps, should be done to continue the momentum. Fairfax agencies had never talked so explicitly about race; how should the conversation be continued?



The 2014 Governing For Racial Equity Conference, hosted by the Pacific Northwest Governing for Racial Equity Network (GREN), provided an opportunity to get insights from other county and municipal governments engaged in advancing an equity agenda. Using this as a key next step, a contingent from Fairfax including Shaban, Murphy, Morrison, and Karla Bruce, now Chief Equity Officer, attended. The Government Alliance on Race Equity (GARE) is a membership-led organization seeking to change the norms of what is expected of city and county policies around race and race equity. Through a weekend of speaking with leaders and government employees from municipalities across the country, the Fairfax visitors learned that they were not alone in grappling with how to confront inequity; in fact, there was an existing field of practice that GARE was (and is) strategically growing. GARE gave Fairfax templates of what other municipalities had done; in a nice symmetry, Fairfax’s policy is now used to help other cities develop their own policies. Julie Nelson, the director of GARE, recalls being impressed at the first conference by the Fairfax contingent’s tenacity, recounting, “They had some real advocates and sparkplugs.”

---

The Government Alliance on Race Equity is a membership-led organization seeking to **change the norms of what is expected** of city and county policies around race and race equity.

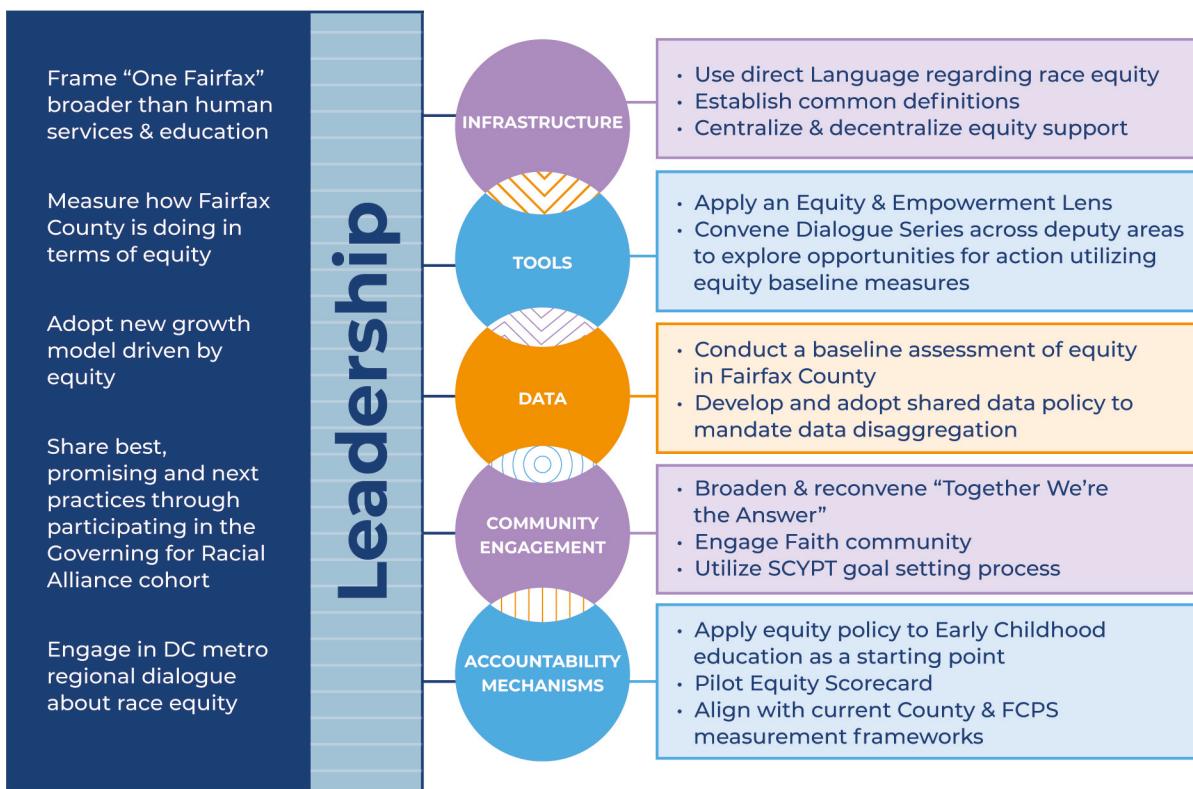
---

Collaborating with GARE also helped Bruce and Shaban make the transition from focusing on 'disproportionality,' a concept and language that could be politically difficult, to a focus on equity and opportunity. As Bruce comments, "If we hadn't made the shift from disproportionality to equity, we never would have gotten the elected officials on board."

---

## Strategic Plan to Advance Opportunity and Achieve Racial Equity

(draft actions updated September, 2014)



Shaban, Bruce, and others returned from the GARE Conference with the idea for establishing visible leadership, perhaps through a resolution or policy. Now they had to build popular and official support and firmly believed that carving out space for a strategic conversation among the elected officials on SCYPT together with those experts that inspired GARE was the next step to boldly reimagine equity and opportunity in the context of the local landscape. It was during this session after a serious and honest exchange of perspectives and ideas, the vision and power of becoming One Fairfax emerged. Bringing this forward in a manner that clearly framed the scope of work needed to move far beyond the transactional service delivery to being about meaningful, transformative organizational change to achieve and sustain racial equity was the next challenge.

# The Economic Plans

An unlikely helping hand came from the 2008 economic crash, from which Fairfax (and the rest of the country) was still recovering in the early 2010's. As Haywood and Bruce explain it, the crash created an opportunity: those concerned with Fairfax's economic success were finally ready to hear that disparities in outcomes would continue to lead to under-utilization of resources and productivity, with negative economic impact.

To make precisely that point, the Fairfax County Economic Success Strategic Plan of 2015<sup>2</sup> included "social equity" as one of its six key goals. As Rob Stalzer, the Deputy County Executive for Planning and Development and one of its authors, explains, "I wanted to try to get people to connect to the issue [of economic success] holistically, and to begin to think collectively." This meant not only that those who cared about the economy would need to consider equity; it also meant that those advocating for equity would begin to see the connection to infrastructure, including affordable housing, transportation, and place-making.



"I wanted to try to **get people to connect** to the issue [of economic success] holistically, and to begin to think collectively."

**ROB STALZER, Deputy County Executive for Planning and Development**

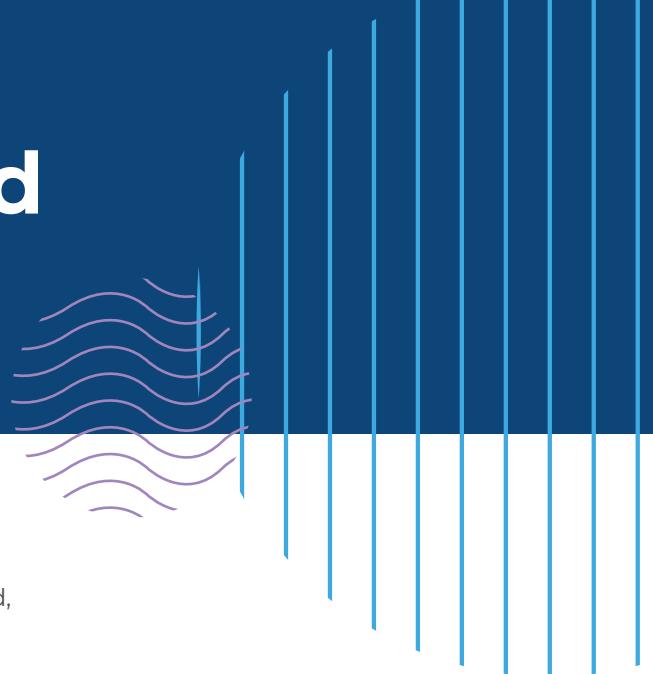
Relatedly, in 2015 Pat Mathews and Karen Cleveland, President and CEOs of North Virginia Health Foundation and Leadership Fairfax respectively, co-signed the Equitable Growth Profile of Fairfax County,<sup>3</sup> a report released by PolicyLink and USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity. This report makes its central argument in the opening line of its executive summary: "Communities of color are driving Fairfax's population growth, and their ability to participate and thrive is central to the county's success." In 73 pages, the report tracks economic and equity trends in Fairfax County over a number of indicators, and persuasively argues that the continued economic success of Fairfax County (as of this writing, the second wealthiest county in the country) depends on closing the racial gaps in income, employment, education, and opportunity that dog the population.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/economic-success/economic-success-plan>

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/topics/sites/topics/files/assets/documents/pdf/equitable-growth-profile-summary.pdf>

# One Fairfax Passed and Next Steps

In July 2016, following a series of committee meetings (joint, as well as among each respective board along with work behind the scenes) sparked by the building blocks paving the pathway forward, the One Fairfax Resolution passed; one year later, in November 2017, the One Fairfax policy passed.<sup>4</sup> (The Resolution affirms the county's commitment to racial and social equity and directed the development of the One Fairfax policy; the policy requires government to directly consider equity when making decisions).



Before the One Fairfax Policy went to a vote, there was one final stage. Francisco Duran, the Chief Equity Officer of the school district and Pat Harrison, organized 'two by two' meetings, in which each County Supervisor, from each of the nine districts in Fairfax County, met with his or her counterpart on the School Board. Also in attendance was Karla Bruce, at the time Deputy Director of Neighborhood and Community, a county human service agency. In these meetings, Duran, Bruce, and Harrison sought to explain why the One Fairfax Policy was important, and asked these county and school leaders for their input. The conversations were unique to each set of elected officials, focusing on the issues they cared about, but they also consistently underlined key reasons that the county had to adopt a proactive, rather than responsive, approach to inequity.

---

The conversations were unique to each set of elected officials, **focusing on the issues they cared about**, but they also consistently underlined key reasons that the county had to adopt a proactive, rather than responsive, approach to inequity.

---

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/publicaffairs/fairfax-county-adopts-social-and-racial-equity-policy-called-one-fairfax>

When asked how the One Fairfax Policy should be implemented, officials and directors had a range of ideas. Many spoke of the need to see the new emphasis on equity reflected in the budget. Others spoke of a need for accountability.

Supervisor Cathy Hudgins, a BOS long-time champion even prior to the IA, spoke of the need for the budget to reflect One Fairfax, commenting "That will be a real test for us." Pat Harrison excitedly noted that in next year's 2019 budget, the transportation unit, while making a pitch for a rapid transit system for an underserved neighborhood, made an explicit link to One Fairfax.

Another important avenue for growth will be to continue encouraging greater partnership and power-sharing between the community and the government, and ensuring that various communities, particularly the African-American and Hispanic ones, have an authentic and respected voice. As Bruce comments, "we have to learn from the past, and learn from our history." Because of this history, there can be a lack of trust from the community—which makes genuine engagement even more essential.

Fairfax is in the early stages of growing this community power. For instance, seed money from GARE is helping Leadership Fairfax and Northern Virginia Health Foundation to convene various members of the community. In a similar vein, Haywood hopes that non-profits and foundations, including African-American nonprofits, will take even more of a lead in advocating with the community.

---

"While doing this work, **it's really important to engage people from all parts of your jurisdiction and community.** I mean everybody. Make sure you've got the faith community, the business community, and engage at all levels."

**KAREN CLEVELAND**

---



Karen Cleveland, who co-signed the equitable growth profile, comments, "While doing this work, it's really important to engage people from all parts of your jurisdiction and community. I mean everybody. Make sure you've got the faith community, the business community, and engage at all levels. Once people interact with those on the ground, they start to see things differently. Takes away the fear. People aren't comfortable because they don't know."

# Conclusion

Fairfax County's journey, from its early efforts to address disparities in the foster care and juvenile justice systems to a comprehensive, county-wide intentional race and social justice policy, offers several key lessons which may be helpful for other jurisdictions considering a similar policy. Though a "sure-fire recipe" for garnering support does not exist, several more ingredients here have emerged as essential. Government employees, non-profit workers, and concerned citizens eager to make their community a more equitable place might do well to consider fostering the following elements:



---

Though a "sure-fire recipe" for garnering support does not exist, **several more ingredients here have emerged as essential.**

---



**Visible Leadership.** Sometimes the obvious is overlooked. We know that leadership is important; the key is not to underestimate how important. Recognized leaders—elected officials and long-time community figures—have the authority and power to bring attention to the issues and prompt open and courageous dialogue that creates the space for staff to keep moving the work forward. Effectively using these leaders was a key to success for One Fairfax.



**Committed Champions.** Individuals deeply committed to pursuing a county-wide racial and social equity policy, with a correspondingly deep knowledge of their jurisdiction, and of its public and community institutions, are able to bring what they learn about equity and institutional racism to their community in a way that makes sense for all. Karen Shaban

and Karla Bruce were such champions in Fairfax County and it is almost impossible to overstate their importance to this work.



**Credible, honest analysis.** Introducing an outside, objective lens to a problem seen as intractable, such as racial disparities in outcomes for children, youth and families, can help people realize that multiple systems are implicated. The Institutional

Analysis was just such a catalyst in shifting focus and garnering widespread support.



**Everyone is Invited.** The vision created by the committed champions needs to be broader than a solution the immediate, pressing problem: it must be universal, and aimed at the greater good. This approach emphasizes inclusion. For instance,

SCYPT addressed the well-being of all children in the county, and the economic and equity plans detailed a vision of growth for everyone.



**The Focus Remains on Race.** For everyone to benefit, interventions need to be targeted to those who need it most. One Fairfax is consciously messaged to address the entire population of the county; however, the analysis, ideas, and solutions remain focused on race and reducing inequitable outcomes by race.



#### **Constant Communication and Deliberate,**

**Purposeful Progress.** Structural and institutional racism is complex and multi-dimensional; one can't simply read a poster or report and "get it." It requires what Supervisor Jeff McKay, BOS member and SCYPT co-chair, has called a "cultural shift." This shift

almost always occurs through constant attention and persistence, aimed at ensuring "conceptual buy-in," rather than mere lip-service. It requires leaders like Bob Bermingham to reassure his staff that they won't be called out, and well designed, carefully prepared individual leadership conversations, such as the "Dialogue with Directors," that prepare leaders and elected officials before they enter larger, more public discussions.

After 15 interviews with key players in the passage of One Fairfax, these themes emerge again and again as key to the policy's success. In offering these final thoughts, we hope to suggest which ways of thinking and acting were key here, and may prove useful to other communities pursuing the goal of increased equity.