



*Building Towards  
Antiracist Governments*

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# Sonoma County: Planting the Seeds



California Pan-Ethnic  
**HEALTH NETWORK**

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sonoma County is a medium-sized, urban-rural county one hour north of San Francisco known for its wine country. The county has been a democratic stronghold in recent decades. In response to the health and economic disparities exposed by devastating wildfires and the COVID-19 pandemic, Sonoma County enacted several key strategies to make the county a more equitable place for all its residents.

1. **Established an Office of Equity.** In August 2020, Sonoma County became only the third county after San Francisco City-County and Marin County to create an executive branch equity office.
2. **Adopted a Racial Equity and Social Justice Pillar in its Strategic Plan.** Sonoma County's Five-Year Strategic Plan (2021-2026) includes this new pillar with four primary goals to advance racial equity.
3. **Created the Equity Core Team.** In 2021, the Office of Equity developed a county-wide Equity Core Team with almost 80 employees across multiple departments with the goal of involving a broad, representative group of county workers in equity work.
4. **Deployed Data to Identify Health Inequities and Spur Action.** Sonoma County used data to identify health inequities and published multiple reports examining local health and economic disparities.
5. **Launched the Community-Driven Black Therapy Fund.** Black leaders successfully advocated for the creation of the Black Therapy Fund to address the mental health toll on the county's Black community and the shortage of accessible, affordable local Black therapists.
6. **Embedded Equity into Federal Relief Spending Decisions.** Sonoma County embedded equity considerations into the process and decision-making around how to spend the \$96 million the county received from the federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA).

While the county has shown commitment by planting the seeds to address disparities and racism and made substantial progress, there is still much work to do. Three key challenges stand out for sustaining and growing current equity work.

1. **Sustaining Internal Equity Infrastructure.**
2. **Holding County Elected Officials and Departments Accountable.**
3. **Ensuring Proactive, Ongoing Investments in BIPOC communities.**

Looking forward, Sonoma County equity leaders recognize it will take years and significant ongoing resources and commitment to undo years of racism and discrimination; yet they remain hopeful that the county will continue its progress.



## *Overview of* **SONOMA COUNTY**



Just a one-hour car ride north of San Francisco, Sonoma County evokes images of bucolic wine country and coastline hikes. A medium-sized, urban-rural county with a population of 482,650, [i] the county politically leans Democrat with an all-Democrat Board of Supervisors and three quarters of its voters voting as Democrats in 2020. Despite this, an alarming number of Black departmental heads have left their county positions in recent years citing challenging experiences or outward discrimination due to their race or gender. [ii] These high-profile departures included two Black women, Barbie Robinson, who directed the Health Services Department, and Sheba Person-Whitley, former executive director of Sonoma County Economic Development Board.

As of the most recent fiscal year (FY 2022-23), the county maintains a general budget of \$2.24 billion; one fifth of the budget goes towards the county's health and human services. [iii]

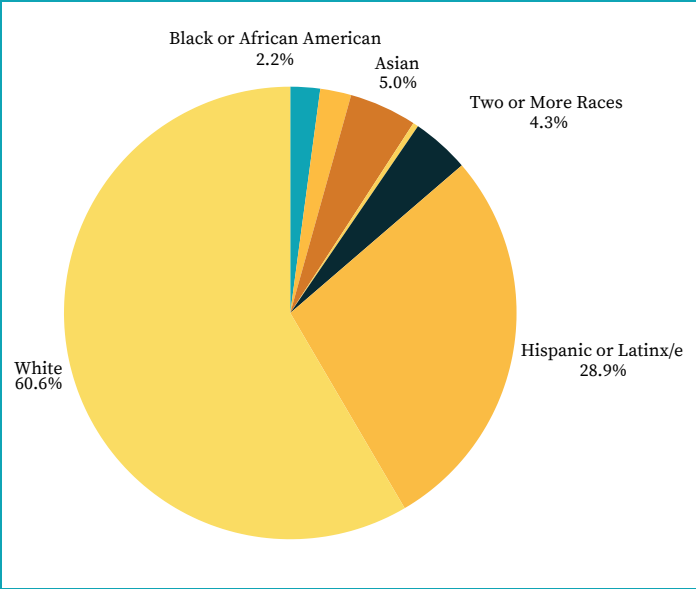


Demographics and Diversity

The majority of the county’s residents are White (60.6%, almost double the state’s average), the second majority being Latinx/e (28%). [iv] One in four Sonoma residents speaks a language other than English at home.

Figure 1: Demographic Breakdown of Sonoma County Population

Race/Ethnicity	Percent Age
Black or African American alone	2.2%
American Indian and Alaska Native alone	2.3%
Asian alone	5.0%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone	0.4%
Two or More Races	4.3%
Hispanic or Latinx/e	28.9%
White alone, not Hispanic or Latinx/e	60.6%



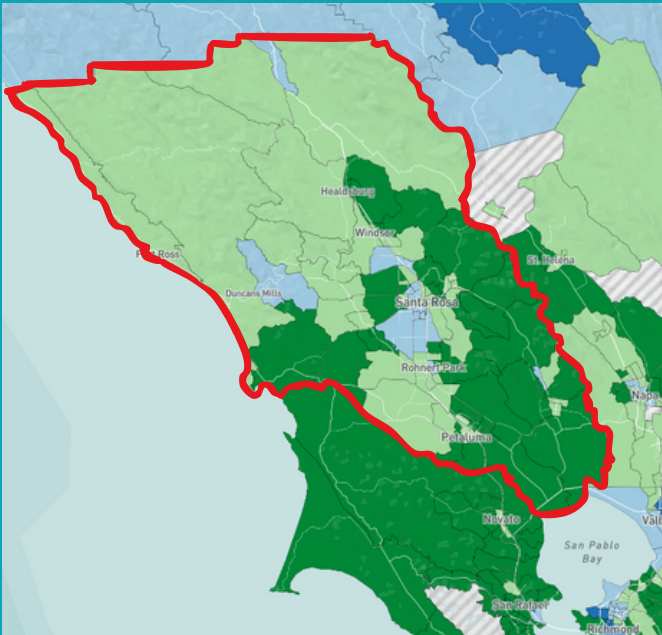
Health and COVID-19 Disparities

At first glance, Sonoma County is doing well - scoring high on the Healthy Places Index, [v] a California map that measures wellbeing and access to resources by neighborhoods (see Figure 2). Indeed, the county outperforms the California state average in its life expectancy (82.2 years), high school graduation rates (89.2%), and median household income (\$91,607). [vi] However, recent evidence including the county’s own assessments highlighted stark health inequities within the county. For example, the county’s “A Portrait of Sonoma County” (“Portrait”) reports in 2014 and 2021 underscored significant, persistent, and at times worsening gaps in income, education and health across race/ethnicity, gender, and neighborhoods of Sonoma County. [vii, viii]

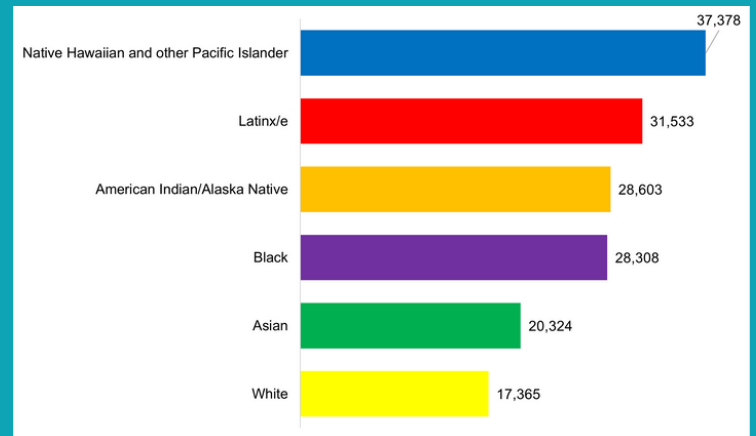
Additionally, CPEHN's analysis of cumulative COVID-19 cases as of February 14, 2023 [ix] found disparities between White residents and all other race/ethnicities in Sonoma County (see Figure 3). Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders who make up only 0.4% of the county's general population have the highest cumulative COVID-19 case rates across communities. When it comes to COVID-19 death rates, Latinx/e residents are also overrepresented compared to White residents in Sonoma. CPEHN's analysis also found that as of June 2023, Sonoma's Latinx/e residents had low primary and up-to-date vaccination rates compared to other racial/ethnic groups.

"The inequities we see in Sonoma County are the results of decisions and policies people in power –most of them white men— put into action; different decisions can create better, more equitable outcomes," as acknowledged in the 2021 Portrait.

**Figure 2, Sonoma County on the Healthy Places Index map, 2023; deeper green shades indicate better wellness**



**Figure 3, Cumulative COVID-19 Case Rate (per 100,000 people) as of February 14, 2023, Sonoma County**



# TIMELINE OF ACTIONS

Sonoma County published the first edition of a health equity report, “A Portrait of Sonoma”

2014

Sonoma County joined the Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE)

2018

The Board approved a 5-year strategic plan, which includes a Racial Equity and Social Justice pillar with specific goals and objectives to improve racial equity

January 2021

A cross-departmental Equity Core Team that facilitates learning and training around racism was established

July 2021

Sheba Person-Whitley, then executive director of the Sonoma County Economic Development Board resigned

October 2021

The county published an updated version of “A Portrait of Sonoma”, available in English and Spanish. The update was a collaboration between government, philanthropy, and community, and highlights health disparities across race/ethnicity, gender, and geography

January 2022

2017

Under Barbie Robinson’s leadership, Department of Health Services formed Sonoma County’s ACCESS Initiative, a care coordination model to improve well-being, self-sufficiency, and recovery for vulnerable communities [xii]

August 2020

The Sonoma County Board of Supervisors created an Office of Equity

March 2021

Barbie Robinson, then Director of the Health Services Department resigned

Since July 2021

Office of Equity has been co-leading the county’s ARPA grant-making and resulting implementation process with the Human Services Department

November 2021

Santa Rosa, the county seat and largest of nine cities in Sonoma County, passed a resolution to declare racism as a public health crisis. [xiii]

## SONOMA COUNTY'S EFFORTS TO ADDRESS HEALTH DISPARITIES AND RACISM

Multiple devastating fires and the COVID-19 pandemic's intensely disproportionate impact on local communities of color exposed and exacerbated racial health inequities within Sonoma. After George Floyd's murder by Minnesota police in May 2020, Santa Rosa police departments fired tear gas and barricade rounds not intended for use on human beings at protestors, causing severe injuries and leading to increased public outcry against police brutality and systemic racism. [x] *"Our county leadership has not reflected the people we serve,"* said De La Cruz (Office of Equity), who is one of a small number of County Directors of color. [xi]

In response to the racial inequities exposed and highlighted throughout this tumultuous period, Sonoma County has made significant progress in advancing racial equity. CPEHN interviewed local government and community equity leaders including Alegría De La Cruz (Director at Sonoma County Office of Equity), Regina Brennan (Co-Founder of Sonoma County Black Forum), D'mitra Smith (2nd Vice President of NAACP Santa Rosa-Sonoma County Branch), Kirstyne Lange (President of NAACP Santa Rosa-Sonoma County Branch), Max Bell Alper (Executive Director at North Bay Jobs with Justice), Nora Mallonee-Brand (Health Policy, Planning, and Evaluation Manager at Sonoma County Department of Human Services) and Heilyn Gandia (Administrative Aide at Sonoma County Department of Human Services). This story will focus on six efforts undertaken by the county in recent years:

1. Established an Office of Racial Equity
2. Adopted a Racial Equity and Social Justice Pillar in Its Strategic Plan
3. Created Equity Core Team
4. Deployed Data to Identify Health Inequities and Spur Action
5. Launched Community-Driven Black Therapy Fund
6. Embedded Equity into Federal Relief Spending Decisions

### 1. Established an Office of Equity

In August 2020, the Board of Supervisors in Sonoma County approved the creation of a new Office of Equity (OOE), funded by the County's General Fund and with its director reporting to the Board, making Sonoma County the third after Marin County and San Francisco City-County to have an executive branch equity office in the Bay Area (see figure 4). In September 2020, the Board appointed Alegría De La Cruz to direct the Office. [xiv]

The creation of the Office of Equity grew out of the county's racial equity activities dating back to 2018, when department heads nominated staff to participate in a cohort run by the Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE) [xv], "a national network of government working to achieve racial equity and advance opportunities for all". Additionally, the Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiative (BARHII) provided trainings such as adaptive leadership for racial equity in Sonoma, according to BARHII's Executive Director Melissa Jones. A second, larger GARE cohort was established in 2019 that included more Sonoma County departments. *"The idea of creating an equity office at the county emerged from these two*



**Figure 4: Bay Area Counties' Executive Branch Equity Offices as of September 2023**

Bay Area County	Executive Branch Equity Offices	Time Established
Alameda	N/A	N/A
Contra Costa	Office of Racial Equity and Social Justice (to be established)	N/A
Napa	N/A	N/A
Santa Clara	Office of Diversity, Equity, and Belonging	Jan 2022 [xviii]
San Francisco	Office of Racial Equity	July 2019 [xix]
Solano	N/A	N/A
Marin	Office of Equity	Dec 2020 [xx]
San Mateo	N/A	N/A
Sonoma	Office of Equity	July 2021

*GARE cohorts*,” said Nora Mallonee-Brand, who is a manager at the Health Policy, Planning, and Equity (HPPE) unit under the Department of Health Services (DHS) and who participated in the second GARE cohort.

During the height of the pandemic, the Office of Equity worked closely with the county’s Health Services Department to address inequities in the county’s COVID-19 response. Starting in 2021, the office started to look at systems as a whole and tackle broader equity issues such as farmworkers’ rights. Max Bell Alper, Executive Director at North Bay Jobs with Justice, a labor rights advocacy organization, spoke highly of the Equity Office’s involvement and De La Cruz’s leadership in fighting inequities faced by farmworkers. Alper said that the Office of Equity “changed the tone of the conversation” as historically the county’s

agricultural commissioner aligns with the interests of farm and vineyard owners rather than workers.

The Sonoma County OOE was initially created with one director and one and a half full-time staff, with a budget of \$750,000, including staff salaries from the county’s General Fund in 2020. The OOE’s budget later increased to \$930,361 in FY 2021-22 and \$1,375,097 in FY 2022-23. [xvi] The Office of Equity now consists of six full-time staff as of October 2023, double its size from 2020. These positions include an “Equity & Social Justice Data Analyst” and a “Bilingual Community Engagement Analyst” that were budgeted through the Local Fiscal Relief Funds that Sonoma County received from the federal American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 to ensure the County’s pandemic recovery efforts were focused to address inequities.



In December 2022, the Board approved the OOE's vision to work towards a county "where power and resources are distributed equitably; where systems support every community member as they work together to cultivate well-being, agency, and liberation; and where people of all races and identities can live authentically." [xvii]

## 2. Adopted a Racial Equity and Social Justice Pillar in Its Strategic Plan

Another pandemic-era milestone for Sonoma County was adopting a "Racial Equity and Social Justice Pillar" in its recent Five-Year Strategic Plan (2021-2026). The pillar includes specific goals and objectives that "will lead to normalizing, organizing, and operationalizing a new way of seeing our challenges, conducting analysis, and implementing new policies" to advance racial equity. [xxi]

The four primary goals of the Pillar are to [xxii]:

1. Foster a County organizational culture that supports the commitment to achieving racial equity.
2. Implement strategies to make the County workforce reflect County demographic across all levels.
3. Ensure racial equity throughout all County policy decisions and service delivery.
4. Engage community members and stakeholder groups to develop priorities and to advance racial equity.

According to our interviews, the development and inclusion of the pillar in the County's Strategic Plan was led by Sheba Person-Whitley, former Director at the Economic Development Board, who left the County a few months after the strategic plan's approval.

The pillar legitimized and built the foundation for additional efforts, such as creating an Equity Core Team, racial equity trainings across the departments, establishing a racial equity analysis tool for policy, decisions, and services. *"The Racial Equity and Social Justice Pillar 'has been the*

*permission we need' and justifies the work of De La Cruz and many others,"* said Mallonee-Brand (Department of Human Services).

## 3. Created a Cross-Departmental Equity Core Team

In mid-2021, the Office of Equity developed a County-wide Equity Core Team with almost 80 employees across multiple departments to ensure a broader, representative group of county workers were involved in equity work. *"The goal is not to have a big Office of Equity but to ensure that skilled equity champions are located inside of every department,"* said De La Cruz (Office of Equity). Cultivating leadership with frontline staff who are from and work directly with the community is crucial for Sonoma County. De La Cruz stressed that county decision makers need to listen to frontline BIPOC county staff better because of *"all the ways in which they [staff] see brokenness throughout our systems that are hurting the communities that they come from. Unlocking the assets that BIPOC folks at that frontline service level bring to identifying strategies for anti-racist work in local government was something that can bring practical change to county clients' and staff's experiences daily."*

This Equity Core Team addresses some of the downsides of Sonoma County's early involvement with GARE. First, early GARE cohort members were selected by department heads, resulting in largely White cohorts. Second, GARE cohorts lacked institutional support and resources, and had little power or influence on systemic changes in the county. *"Many of us who were doing actual equity work didn't get invited by our managers and supervisors to participate in a GARE cohort,"* said De La Cruz (Office of Equity).

From July 2021 to October 2022, Equity Core Team members reported more than 3,110 hours of training and learning about racial equity together. Currently, a Steering Committee made up of 13 members from the Core Team has been formed to

lead the development of a county Racial Equity Action Plan (REAP). On February 1, 2022, the OOE received \$240,000 in Strategic Plan funding over three years for the Core Team Steering Committee and Racial Equity Action Plan (REAP) efforts. [xxiii] These efforts both decentralize and normalize equity responsibilities within the county, so that equity efforts are not siloed or limited to the responsibility of the small OOE.

Organizing a cross-departmental Core Team has been challenging. On the one hand, participation is being asked of county employees who already have full time jobs, while on the other not everyone who wishes to participate could be approved. “Ideally, equity work is embedded in everyone’s job as a public servant in the County of Sonoma. Practically, many departments require additional resources to begin this work.” [xxiv] The Core Team lost 19 members in the last two years, some due to lack of capacity or job transitions. Currently there are 57 participants representing 15 county departments and agencies, including the county’s largest departments of Human Resources and Health Services remain on the Core Team. Notably, the Sheriff’s Department did not participate.

Additionally, in a majority White and affluent county, starting conversations around race and racism was new and caused discomfort for many. The OOE tackled the issue by organizing the initial Core Team into race affinity groups. “*Very quickly, we learned that being in a multiracial space at the outset of this effort was not going to work,*” as BIPOC staff experiences resulted in distrust and pain, while White staff and leaders were unskilled and uncomfortable in these conversations, as De La Cruz (Office of Equity) described. In fall 2021, OOE centered the needs of Black Core Team members and created three affinity groups dedicated for Black, non-Black people of color, and White employees to build community and skills. OOE facilitated eight weeks of affinity-based group discussions to build trust, safety, and community, so that both Black and other non-Black POC staff

could have initial conversations about race and racism without judgment. “*As equity champions developed skills and trust with each other, multi-racial training and implementation spaces became safer and more effective,*” said De La Cruz.

Racial affinity groups are an established strategy used by many racial equity capacity building organizations to advance learnings for people of color and white people separately, predominantly to avoid further exhaustion and labor from people of color, especially Black folks, from having to educate or justify their experiences around racism with others. [xxv] Mallonee-Brand (Department of Health Services), who currently serves on the Steering Committee, is proud of the infrastructure the county was able to create following the relationship and trust building, noting that the multiracial steering committee nowadays is “*a different space in which people can be energized,*” have allies there and shared dialogue and purpose.

The county however has not allocated additional funding for the racial affinity group since the initial eight-week trial, according to the 2023 Pillar updates.

#### 4. Deployed Data to Identify Health Inequities and Spur Action

Beyond establishing the county infrastructure and adopting goals to focus on racial equity, De La Cruz (Office of Equity) emphasized the importance of identifying health inequities through data, and decolonizing data practices so that “*communities of color are not being blamed for their own suffering and marginalization.*”

In 2014, the Department of Health Services contracted with Measure of America, a national non-profit think tank, to publish “A Portrait of Sonoma County,” a groundbreaking report that examined health and social disparities in Sonoma mostly by geographic locations. Sonoma’s “Portrait” was modeled after a similar report in

Marin County. [xxvi] The Portrait included alarming data on access to resources such as housing and education and inequitable health outcomes, including a 10 year-gap in life expectancy between Sonoma's East Bennett Valley (the wealthiest) and Roseland Creek (the poorest), neighborhoods less than five miles apart. [xxvii] *"The 2014 Portrait forced people to look at 'places' in the county that they did not before,"* said Mallonee-Brand (Department of Health Services). Berkeley Media Studies Group, a public health non-profit organization featured the report as one of four equity case studies across the state in 2015. [xxviii]

During the height of the pandemic in July 2020, the Sonoma County Health Services Department published another report titled "High Utilizers of Multiple Systems in Sonoma County". [xxix] The 2020 "High Utilizers" report cross-analyzed data such as incarceration and behavioral health treatments from various county systems to showcase disparities by race, ethnicity, gender, age, and geographic location. The report painted a picture of the most vulnerable or marginalized residents who rely heavily on the county's service systems. Alarming, the report underscored significant racialized disparities for Black Sonoma residents (3.6% of the County's "High Utilizers"). Young, urban, Black Sonoma residents were found to be much more likely to use the county's hospital, behavioral health, housing, and shelter services and to be in and out of jail, compared to every other racial and ethnic group.

In early 2022, the county published an updated "A Portrait of Sonoma County" that further highlighted social and health disparities directly associated with race, ethnicity, and gender, in addition to geographic areas. *"Not much has changed [since 2014], and some indicators got worse,"* Mallonee-Brand (Department of Health Services) said. The 2021 Portrait found that Black residents of Sonoma County have a lifespan ten years shorter than any other racial and ethnic group in the county, and three years shorter than Black Californians on average.

A commendable shift in the 2021 Portrait project from 2014, was that instead of merely contracting with an external think tank to write up a list of recommendations for the county, the majority of which have gone unrealized since 2014, the county decided to co-create priorities with impacted communities through conversations. Measure of America worked with "an advisory panel of eminent public servants, advocates, scholars, and nonprofit leaders from across Sonoma County." The county also organized a Health Action Together workgroup to foster partnerships between department equity staff and impacted communities, which has now become its own 501(c)(3) non-profit, with Mallonee-Brand (Department of Health Services) and De La Cruz (Office of Equity) both on its Board. [xxx] Health Action Together was tasked to create action steps informed by the updated 2021 Portrait report.

Mallonee-Brand (Department of Health Services) revealed a shift in mindset on how the county might ensure that communities can truly be in the driver seat for solutions, instead of the county collecting feedback superficially for their own proposals: *"too often in government, we have this sense that community doesn't quite know what it needs. We won't come out and say that, but we might say things like, well, you know, they wouldn't know how to formulate a policy [or] from a policy perspective how to do that. I think that's just been proven to be untrue. It's about how we engage in that co-creation [of policy] and it's the government's job to figure those things out. For example, communities have asked for rental assistance, and that is a policy."*

## **5. Launched a Community-Driven Black Therapy Fund**

A first in the county's history and unique across the state, Black leaders proposed and created the Black Therapy Fund to address the mental health toll on the county's Black community as well as the shortage of accessible, affordable local Black therapists. The Sonoma County Board of

Supervisors provided \$574,200 to launch this initiative, as one of the 27 community-based programs the Board approved in May 2021, from the \$96 million American Rescue Plan Act fiscal relief funds that the county received. The Black Therapy Fund would provide 234 Sonoma County residents with up to 12 free video counseling sessions with culturally competent therapists and more than 40 therapists across the Bay Area participate.

The program is managed by the Sonoma County Black Forum in partnership with the NAACP Santa Rosa-Sonoma County Branch. [xxxi] While the NAACP Branch has been around for decades, the Sonoma County Black Forum was founded in 2018 by community organizers, artists, and educators to “Lead, Serve, and Thrive!” among Black youths and communities at large in Sonoma, shared by Brennan (Sonoma County Black Forum). Besides the Black Therapy Program, the Black Forum also runs a program that provides direct cash aid for Black communities. [xxxi]

Securing funds for culturally congruent mental health services for Black communities was a result of community organizing, building upon the recognition of anti-Black racism and health inequities for Black communities in the county. Smith (NAACP Santa Rosa-Sonoma County) said that Black community organizations were responsible for advocating for actions following reports such as the Portrait, High Utilizers, etc. *“And since [the data] has come out, we are the only group that has used the data to meet with various elected officials.”*

Smith (NAACP Santa Rosa-Sonoma County) also pointed out that Black communities were at risk for statistical erasure, especially because the first Portrait data sets painted Black communities in Sonoma as statistically insignificant. *“It’s 10,000 folks. So that’s like telling a small city like Sonoma or Cotati that they don’t exist.”* The 2021 Portrait by highlighting health disparities directly linked to race was a keystone, as it *“echoed the lived experience,*

*the oral history of what was going in the county,”* Smith said to secure the therapy program, *“it was really vital that we actually get this data so that we could use those receipts to underscore [the lived experience]. Yes, it’s true this community that is historically insignificant is actually most impacted.”*

## **6. Embedded Equity into Federal Relief Spending Decisions**

Participatory budgeting is a critical means to advance racial equity. [xxxi] One highlight of Sonoma County’s work is to embed equitable processes and decisions in spending the \$96 million the county received from the federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). Appropriated in response to the ongoing COVID-19 public health crisis, these flexible funds presented once-in-a-generation opportunities for local governments to invest towards health and racial equity as well as co-creating priorities with local communities.

Under ARPA, Sonoma County directly invested in marginalized communities:

- Approved a total of \$39 million towards 27 community proposals. Notable programs include the Black Therapy Fund (\$574,200), an Emergency Financial Assistance program (\$405,800) awarded to the Sonoma County Black Forum to provide mental health services and cash aid for Black communities, and another Emergency Financial Assistance program (\$4,825,000) awarded to a Bay Area non-profit On the Move, to assist Latinx/e and indigenous adults. [xxxi]
- Established a \$5.4 million guaranteed basic income program that offers cash support for 300+ families in need. This was accomplished in partnership with local cities (\$3,045,250 from Sonoma County ARPA funds, \$1,008,000 from the City of Santa Rosa and \$636,000 from the City of Petaluma) and a coalition of non-profit organizations led by First 5 Sonoma County. [xxxi]



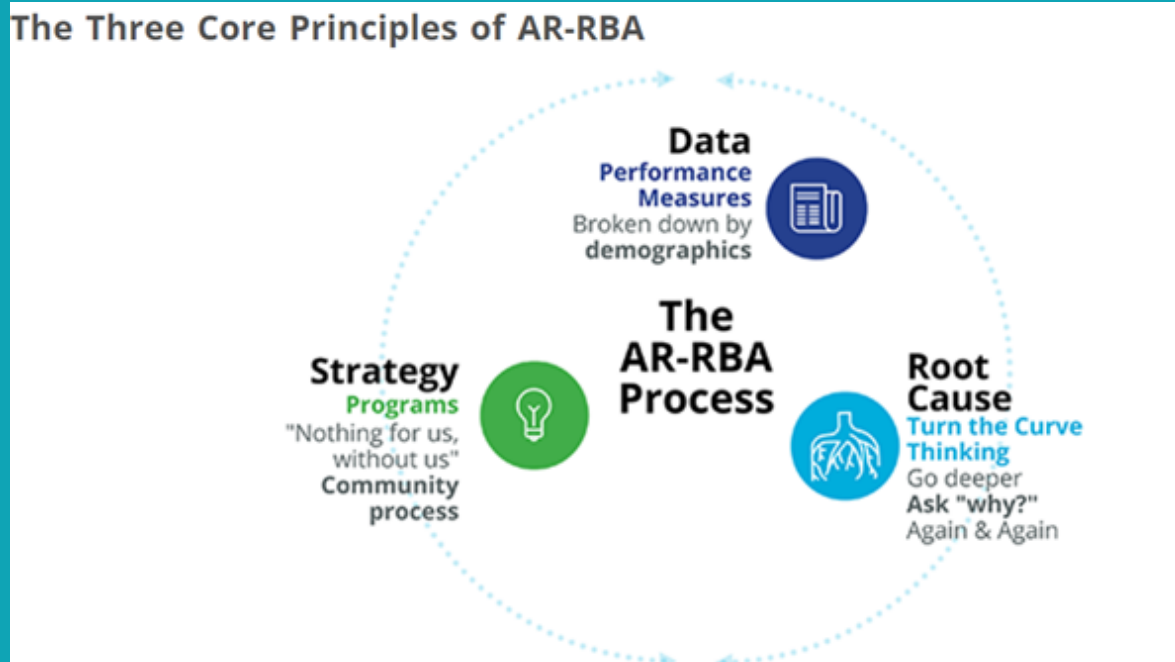
Sonoma County also created equity-centered strategies and processes for ARPA, which can benefit future countywide budgetary actions:

- Created an “ARPA Team” composed of members of the Office of Equity and Human Services Department’s Upstream Investments Initiative. [xxxvi] The ARPA Team conducted community surveys, town halls, and community meet-and-greets to collect community feedback.
- Hired dedicated staff at OOE to focus on ARPA implementation, including an “Equity & Social Justice Data Analyst” and a “Bilingual Community Engagement Analyst.” By embedding equity staff in partnership with a well-established Human Services Department, the OOE was able to prioritize equity across the county’s ARPA process.
- Formed an “ARPA Review Committee,” consisting of “33 community members representing a range of lived and professional experiences, particularly of communities of color, as well as the expertise of the ARPA Equity Workgroup, local nonprofits, local

businesses, and local government entities.” The committee reviewed equity data including the 2021 Portrait and was charged to help ARPA Team select community proposals for ARPA. [xxxvii]

- Required that ARPA awardees use an Antiracist Results Based Accountability (AR-RBA) metric to track data and measure outcomes. “AR-RBA begins by recognizing that inequities that exist in Sonoma County are the result of generations of institutional and structural racism and assessing whether County investments are actively mitigating inequities in Black, Indigenous and other local communities of color. The methodology also assumes that if government investments are not mitigating inequities on communities of color, they continue to perpetuate historical harms in those communities.” The AR-RBA builds upon an earlier system that required programs to track impacts through three areas: “How much did we do”, “How well did we do it”, and “Is anyone better off”. The anti-racist RBA incorporates additional race-centered practices such as community participation, root cause

**Figure 5: Antiracist Results Based Accountability (AR-RBA) for Sonoma County’s ARPA Decision Making**



analyses, and equitable data use (see figure 5). [xxxviii] Particularly, county staff in the Equity Core Team have been training on how to use AR-RBA through the OOE-facilitated learning series since 2021.

In retrospect, the county's efforts to involve directly affected communities or even its own equity staff into this funding decision was not at all by accident. Lange (NAACP Santa Rosa-Sonoma County) shared: *"When it came to the ARPA process and how it was designed to be community led [...] we all had to go to board of supervisors meetings maybe five or six times and speak on public comment around it's in your pillar to include the community and still with reticence."*

De La Cruz (Office of Equity) shared that she had to advocate in order to embed OOE into the countywide ARPA process, as there was no precedent for OOE to be involved in the county's overall budgetary decisions, nor was there precedent for other departments to collaborate with OOE in administering services and programs. OOE saw the importance of breaking silos within government and reached out to the Human Services Department who would be in charge of the ARPA funds. It is OOE's hope that the county's current ARPA process is understood as an antiracist strategy and is utilized in future efforts.

*Looking Forward:*

# CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN SONOMA COUNTY

Sonoma County's successes thus far can be attributed to starting conversations around racial equity a decade ago with support from external entities such as GARE and BARHII and then harnessing 2020's momentum under the dual public health crises of COVID-19 and racism. The county has achieved many successes, including creating an equity office and expanding equity infrastructure within the county; utilizing the county's equity learnings and infrastructure to inform key budgetary decisions; and finally, fierce advocacy from BIPOC organizers on the ground.

As Mallonee-Brand (Department of Health Services) described how the county has planted seeds for further equity actions: *"I don't know externally if people see how hard we're working, and maybe we shouldn't have to work this hard to make progress happen internally. But for the first time in a while, I feel really optimistic about what this infrastructure building will enable us to do... [though first] we really have to get our house in order."* Gandia (Health Services Department) said that the creation of an Office of Equity "opened a huge door" at the county.

While the county has planted the seeds internally to promote equity, questions remain as to how to maintain momentum and grow Sonoma's efforts to achieve equitable outcomes. Our interviews surfaced three key challenges and opportunities moving forward:

- 1. Sustaining Internal Equity Infrastructure.** Sonoma County has seen multiple, high-level Black leaders leave their positions due to persistent racism and burnouts. Two of these leaders played critical roles in the county's efforts to address discrimination and racism. Sheba Person-Whitley, former Economic Development Board Director, was instrumental in pushing Sonoma County to provide support for small business owners during the pandemic and helped provide much needed data on the lack of Black home ownership. *"She had to leave the county because there was pushback against her equity based economic development initiatives. The agricultural and business power structure which has relied on exploited labor, did not think that this position was going to go that far in terms of equity. Those powers are instrumental in supporting and keeping the Board of supervisors in their positions, who are in turn, dependent on the support from the growers, the vineyards, the Farm Bureau, law enforcement, et cetera. I personally don't see them willing to rock the boat and so when there came to be pushback on that work, Sheba didn't have the support to stay,"* said Smith (NAACP Santa Rosa-Sonoma County).

The County needs to do a better job supporting its OOE, Equity Core Team and developing additional decentralized, normalized equity infrastructure across the county. Multiple interviewees noted that the county's Office of Equity lacks sufficient capacity to effectively advance equity internally and externally. Lange (NAACP Santa Rosa-Sonoma County) said, *"we never really get to work with [OOE] due to their limited capacity."* In the Pillar updates, the current six-people Office of Equity mentioned the dilemma of

not having the capacity needed to grow more capacity. For example, currently OOE does not have any dedicated grant writing staff to apply for grants within the county in order to grow the office and/or secure a new grant writing position. Additionally, positions funded through the ARPA grant need to be sustained from the county General Fund moving forward. Lastly, De La Cruz (Office of Equity) suggested ideally each county department could fund and dedicate an equity analyst both to support individual department's equity work and to maintain a central, coordinated hub of racial equity work across the County.

**2. Holding County Elected Officials and Departments Accountable.** Interviewees expressed frustration with the expectation that a few leaders of color and the Office of Equity will be wholly responsible for equity work across the county. De La Cruz (Office of Equity) shared *“because of white supremacist thinking and because of tokenism, you have institutions that essentially put people in leadership positions in a tokenistic way without recognizing that it is those deeper connections to the communities that is what is valuable.”* She often pushes back inside the county and stresses that she does not speak for the entire Latinx communities nor all communities of color: *“it can never be just one person’s responsibility to change an entire system; it has to be all of us, working together.”*

*“There can start to be a perception that, okay, we’ve created the Office of Equity. You know, we are champions of equity, and then we’re done... It’s become the office of equity’s job to just deal with the working-class people, to deal with the people of color, to deal with immigrants, and that it somehow allows the Board of Supervisors not to have to deal with it, and not to take on the challenges but just to say, well, we have an Office of Equity, so everything is fine. And I think that that’s a real challenge...there’s definitely a disconnect between elected officials and staff of office of equity; some officials who disapprove it and some who approve but don’t embody it.”*

– Alper (North Bay Jobs with Justice)

Indeed, to sustain people of color who led equity work within the county, the role of non-POC allies is critical. Mallonee-Brand (Department of Health Services) shared her thoughts working as a white woman alongside her colleagues of color within government and the importance of doing personal work, on top of the professional: *“we have to be examining ourselves too and that can be really upsetting for people and triggering for people...of course we know fighting racism is the right thing to do. When we stop to think about how we actually do that and again, how that makes us feel and what it means for our positionality, our authority and our power, that is really ground shaking for some folks. Because it is there. Our whole lives have been built up in one direction. So, it really shakes that foundation.”*

Our community interviewees, frustrated with the government-industrial complex, further stressed the need for broader accountability with Elected Officials in Sonoma County. *“In a place like Sonoma County, its entire economy is based on working class people of color and without the labor, both physical labor, skills, and knowledge of immigrant and indigenous laborers, the economy would not exist,”* said Alper (North Bay Jobs with Justice). *“Currently there’s a lot of process that can seem good and feel good, but it’s not actually resulting in more policies that are specifically antiracist.”* Community partners spoke about the influence of Sonoma’s agricultural and viticulture industries on its all-White Board of Supervisors, and that such political influence largely outweighs that of grassroots advocates. [xxxix] *“We need to have*



*more elected officials who have their own lived experiences of what it means to be coming from community and to be working class people and to be within immigrant and indigenous communities. [We need to have] people with relationships to the community and support that comes from community, rather from business interests,” Alper (North Bay Jobs with Justice) said. “I’d like to see our leadership be held accountable...they make up their own rules or they just go along with their own agenda, and they are not held accountable,” Lange (NAACP Santa Rosa-Sonoma County) said towards the end of our interview.*

**3. Ensuring Proactive, Ongoing Investments in BIPOC Communities.** Currently, much of Sonoma’s progress, though important, remains internal. The county has yet to translate this progress into ongoing investments and resources towards historically excluded communities and/or to continue the community investments under the one-time ARPA aids. Community partners during the interviews expressed that the Board of Supervisors needed to put resources behind their words, by funding reparations or tangible support such as housing for Black Sonoma residents. *“No supervisors are really stepping up to invest in Black futures in the Bay Area,”* said Lange (NAACP Santa Rosa-Sonoma County).

Lange (NAACP Santa Rosa-Sonoma County) further mentioned that despite demonstrated success with the Black Therapy Program, the Black Forum had to advocate to be invited to Sonoma County’s Community Forum on Mental Health. Additionally, the county maintained bureaucratic and unrealistic reporting requirements such as requiring Sonoma County Black Forum to collect additional data that is difficult to collect from some of the most marginalized recipients of the Black Therapy Fund, such as houseless community members. Additionally, recent advocacy by the Black Forum for a financial assistance program for first time Black homeowners was unsuccessful. As Black Sonoma residents are disproportionately affected by housing insecurity and more likely to be unhoused or unsheltered, [x] there is an opportunity for future investment.

In addition, Sonoma County needs to invest in and increase their support of BIPOC staff across departments who have or could develop technical skillset of antiracist data work, such as the analyses required for ARPA funds. County “technical experts” who dominate the data and technical decisions are often White. *“Some of our systems that are most entrenched are the ones that need to change first: HR, budgeting and procurement...the big pieces of our government that enable us to do our work,”* shared Mallonee-Brand (Department of Health Services).

We wish Sonoma the best. To leave with Mallonee-Brand (Department of Health Services)’s note describing the complexity and timeline of racism and anti-racism work: *“we worked so hard and for so long not to keep certain people at the table. It’s going to take a long time to repair and get those people ‘back to the table’, to be back in relationship and having trust... and people want this to happen overnight. And that’s just not the way it’s going to work. Yeah, we can move quickly. We can do things quickly and make change. But we are not suddenly going to write all the wrongs of centuries.”*

# About

The California Pan-Ethnic Health Network (CPEHN) is 501(c)(3) non-profit organization in California dedicated to building power with communities of color through policy advocacy, research, network and leadership building, and storytelling.

Building Towards Antiracist Governments is a policy research project aiming to highlight how local governments can take meaningful steps to advance racial equity. “Sonoma County: Planting the Seeds” is one of the three county stories CPEHN produced in 2023 to document best efforts and lessons learned in the journey of government and community working to address systemic racism and inequities in a local jurisdiction.

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- Public Health Institute - State of Equity
- Central California Public Health Consortium
- Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiative (BARHII)
- Public Health Alliance of Southern California
- Berkeley Media Studies Group
- Prevention Institute
- Race Forward and Government Alliance on Race & Equity (GARE)
- Praxis Project
- Network for Public Health Law
- Big Cities Health Coalition
- Human Impact Partners
- ChangeLab Solutions

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- Nora Mallonee-Brand, Sonoma County Department of Human Services
- Heilyn Gandia, Sonoma County Department of Human Services
- Regina Brennan, Sonoma County Black Forum
- D’mitra Smith, NAACP Santa Rosa-Sonoma County Branch
- Kirstyne Lange, NAACP Santa Rosa-Sonoma County Branch
- Max Bell Alper, North Bay Jobs with Justice

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