Government's equity imperative

The path toward systemic change

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The Deloitte Center for Government Insights shares inspiring stories of government innovation, looking at what's behind the adoption of new technologies and management practices. We produce cutting-edge research that guides public officials without burying them in jargon and minutiae, crystalizing essential insights in an easy-to-absorb format. Through research, forums, and immersive workshops, our goal is to provide public officials, policy professionals, and members of the media with fresh insights that advance an understanding of what is possible in government transformation.

In February of 2021, Deloitte published *The equity imperative* with the goal of inspiring better understanding, deeper insight, and more meaningful action *now* toward greater racial equity. This perspective, *Government's equity imperative*, builds upon that work, providing recommendations for government and public sector organizations and their leaders to promote more equitable outcomes.

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NEQUITIES IN GOVERNMENT services, programs, contracting, and the workforce are often rooted in systemic issues—the result of decades of regulations, programs, policies, and practices which failed to account for the unique barriers faced by systemically marginalized communities. It's critical that US federal agencies address these inequities both within and outside their organizations to improve the lives of all Americans and make the country truly the land of opportunity it aspires to be.

To this end, the Biden administration has placed equity and racial justice among its highest priorities. It's a truly ambitious goal and one that, if achieved, will have a lasting and permanent impact on the nation.

Through a series of executive orders, President Biden has directed that the federal government "pursue a comprehensive approach to advancing equity for all, including people of color and others who have been historically underserved, marginalized, and adversely affected by persistent poverty and inequality."[1] These

orders include a number of broad actions, including an equity assessment in federal agencies; an examination of recent regulatory actions and discriminatory housing practices and policies; universal access to high-quality, affordable health care; reforms to the criminal justice system; strengthened relationships with tribal nations; and actions on environmental justice (see sidebar, "The Biden executive orders").

The truly ambitious goals put forth by the administration, if achieved, will have a lasting and permanent impact on the US government and the nation overall. It will be a difficult task; the wide-ranging, interconnected, and persistent nature of disparities in society will require years if not decades to unravel. It will require the administration to use every tool at its disposal to understand and combat the causes of inequity and to address its harms.

"We need to open the promise of America to every American. And that means we need to make the issue of racial equity not just an issue for any one department of government. It has to be the business of the whole of government."
—President Joe Biden

Source: The White House, "Remarks by President Biden at signing of an executive order on racial equity," January 26, 2021.

"This whole notion of diversity, equity and inclusion does not happen simply because there is a policy in place, but it happens because individuals take it upon themselves to lead change both internally within themselves and in relation to one another in organizations."
—Rita Sampson, chief of equal employment opportunity and diversity at the Office of the Director of National Intelligence

Source: Nicole Ogrysko, "How agencies are tackling Biden's new diversity and inclusion order," Federal News Network, July 14, 2021.

The federal government has a decided role to play in creating a just and equitable future. In fact, almost every activity agencies perform— from hiring to policymaking to service delivery—can challenge orthodoxies (unstated assumptions that go unquestioned) that perpetuate systemic disparities and biases.[3] To respond to the executive orders and to build an equitable future, federal government leaders should use the full breadth of their control and influence across their organizations, in workforce, vendor ecosystems, and communities and society.

Many states and cities are engaged in their own efforts to advance equity and reduce disparities in access to public services. Several states, including Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Connecticut, California, and Utah, have taken steps to ensure equitable access to the COVID-19 vaccine, allocating extra supplies and prioritizing eligibility for disproportionately affected areas, many with large minority populations.[4] Other states have taken a variety of measures to advance greater equity, from reducing racial disparities within the courts to improving health treatment for the underserved.[5]

Achieving equity requires systemic change. It begins with deliberate choices to challenge old patterns and drive better results. In the following sections, we explore how federal agencies can activate equity in workforce engagement, procurement, policy and regulation, and service delivery. For each, we describe what an equitable outcome could look like, potential pitfalls, actions to consider, government's stewardship role, and examples of bright spots where progress is being made.

> *According to Citi Global Perspectives & Solutions, racism in general takes a huge financial toll on the US economy—US$16 trillion in lost opportunity costs in the past 20 years.[2]*

THE BIDEN EXECUTIVE ORDERS

As soon as President Biden took office, he turned the spotlight on issues of race and equity. In fact, racial equity seems to be a significant part of his agenda and may drive the public conversation during the next four years. In his first days in office, President Biden signed several executive actions aimed at addressing issues around racial inequity.

Advancing racial equity and support for underserved communities: This order calls for the federal government to "pursue an all-inclusive approach to advancing equity for all, including people of color and others who have been historically marginalized, and adversely affected by persistent poverty and inequality." The order directs each agency to assess whether, and to what extent, its programs and policies perpetuate barriers to opportunities and benefits for systemically marginalized communities and other underserved groups.[6]

Redressing our nation's and the federal government's history of discriminatory housing practices and policies: The memorandum states that the "federal government shall work with communities to end housing discrimination, to provide redress to those who have experienced housing discrimination, to eliminate racial bias and other forms of discrimination in all stages of home-buying and renting, to lift barriers that restrict housing and neighborhood choice, to promote diverse and inclusive communities, to ensure sufficient physically accessible housing, and to secure equal access to housing opportunity for all."[7]

Phase out the use of private criminal detention facilities: The Biden administration has issued an executive order to "reduce profit-based incentives to incarcerate by phasing out the federal government's reliance on privately operated criminal detention facilities," and "ensure that [the United States'] incarceration and correctional systems are prioritizing rehabilitation and redemption." The order states that incarcerated individuals should be given a fair chance to fully reintegrate into their communities through programs tailored to help them earn a living, secure affordable housing, and participate in democracy as fellow citizens.[8]

Ensuring an equitable pandemic response and recovery: This executive order signals a governmentwide effort to "address the disproportionate and severe impact of coronavirus disease on communities of color and other underserved populations." It calls for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to establish a COVID-19 Health Equity Task Force that will provide specific recommendations for mitigating health inequities during the ongoing pandemic, and for preventing similar inequities in the future.[9]

Advancing diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) in the federal workforce: This executive order reaffirms "that the United States is at its strongest when our nation's public servants reflect the full diversity of the American people," and establishes a governmentwide initiative to advance diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility in all parts of the federal workforce. The order also focuses on a number of issues including addressing workplace harassment, advancing equity in pay and professional development, advancing equity in the workplace for LGBTQ+ public servants and individuals with disabilities, and expanding federal employment opportunities for formerly incarcerated individuals.[10]

Activating equity within and through government

Activating equity within and through government

THE DELOITTE GOVERNMENT **equity activation model**[11] shows how government organizations can activate equity within and outside their own agencies. It is structured around three primary *spheres of influence* within the reach of government organizations:

(1) **Workforce**, focusing on public-sector workforce engagement

(2) **Vendor ecosystems**, focusing on government procurement

(3) **Communities and society**, including policy, regulation, and service delivery

Government also plays a role in *ecosystem stewardship*, by supporting public-private ecosystems within each of these spheres.

Activators: Each sphere, in turn, includes multiple *activators*—key areas of activity and everyday choices through which government can exert its influence to achieve equity. Within each activator, agencies can take specific *actions* in pursuit of equity (figure 1).

Organizational enablers: Across these spheres of influence, organizations need *enablers* that drive accountability and support their actions. These include leadership, governance, resource allocation, legal, risk and compliance, data and analytics, infrastructure, workplace, and technology. Without these elements, efforts to drive equity may fail.

Organizational culture

Organizational culture is the context in which priorities are set and choices are made. It's "the way we do things around here"—the sustained patterns of behavior supported by shared experiences, values, and beliefs.[12] Culture both influences and is influenced by the workforce, the vendor ecosystem, and society at large. It provides the context in which *actions* are prioritized and *enablers* are expressed.

Organizational culture is enduring, but it's also always evolving, the result of an ongoing feedback loop between beliefs (subconscious assumptions), values (stated strategies, goals, and philosophies), and behaviors (people's decisions, actions, and processes). As a result, it can adapt to new needs and changing conditions. Over time, new behaviors and beliefs can change an organization's culture, but these changes are difficult to achieve and require explicit attention and formal programs.[13]

Principles for equity

An equity-focused mindset requires more than a checklist of actions; it requires sustained commitment from leaders and workers, even when it is uncomfortable or unpopular. Equity has to be *built*, day by day, in line with a series of principles:[14]

1. **Equity requires *sustained* commitment.** It's not a one-off initiative; it must be embedded into how the organization and, more broadly, society functions, and must be sustained over time. Government agencies must provide the education and resources their leaders need to continuously build toward, achieve, and *maintain* equitable outcomes.

2. **Know yourself and your organization.** Systemic change requires a recognition and acceptance on the part of everyone in public service that they *too* must be willing to change. Individual reflection and evolution must be an explicit part of any systemic change.

3. **Beliefs drive behavior and behavior changes beliefs.** To achieve equitable outcomes, organizations must overturn common beliefs and behaviors that get in the way. New behaviors shape new values, while those values can reinforce new behavior.

4. **Collective action amplifies impact.** Organizations uniting to challenge each other learn from one another, change outdated rules, and mend broken systems. Organizations can create feedback loops that promote change and reinforce action at the individual, market, and societal levels.

5. **The power to spend is the power to change.** Government organizations have the power to drive equity through all the ways they spend money—for example, directing funds in pursuit of equitable outcomes through everyday business operations.

All government ecosystem partners—contractors, nonprofits, community groups, businesses, academia, and constituents—should work collaboratively to set and build on goals for equity. The work is far too important and far too urgent for any one organization to do alone.

FIGURE 1

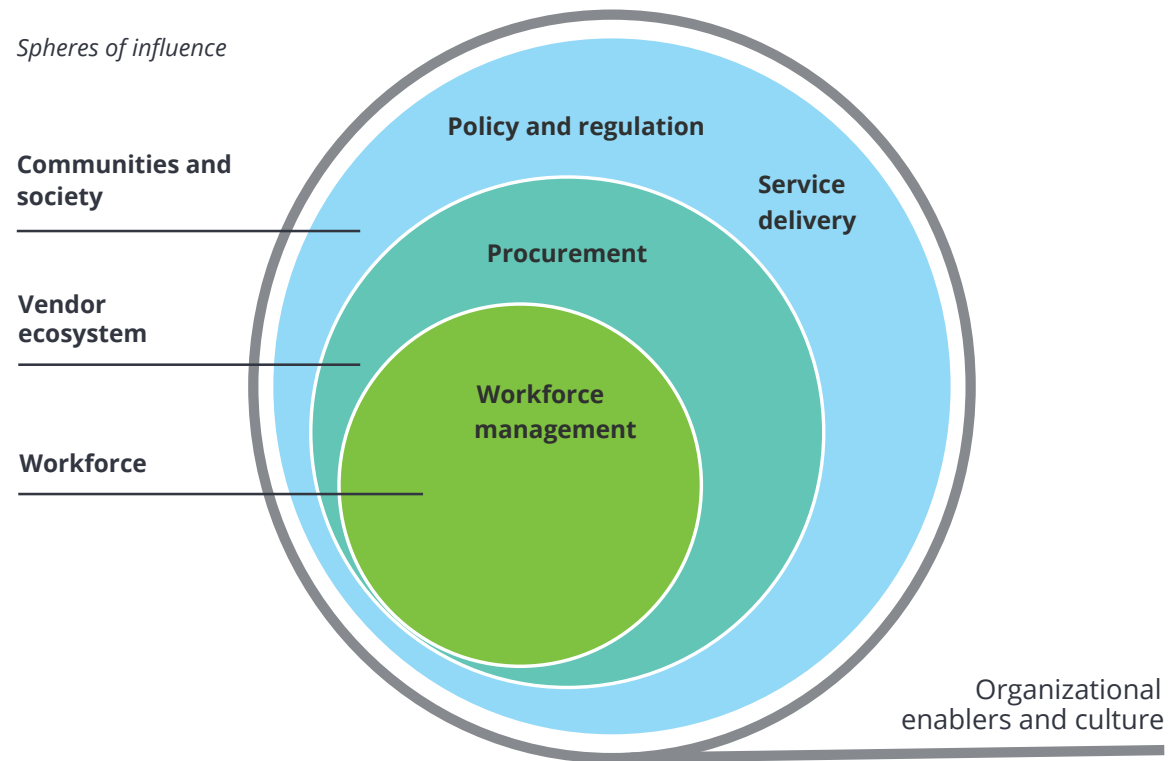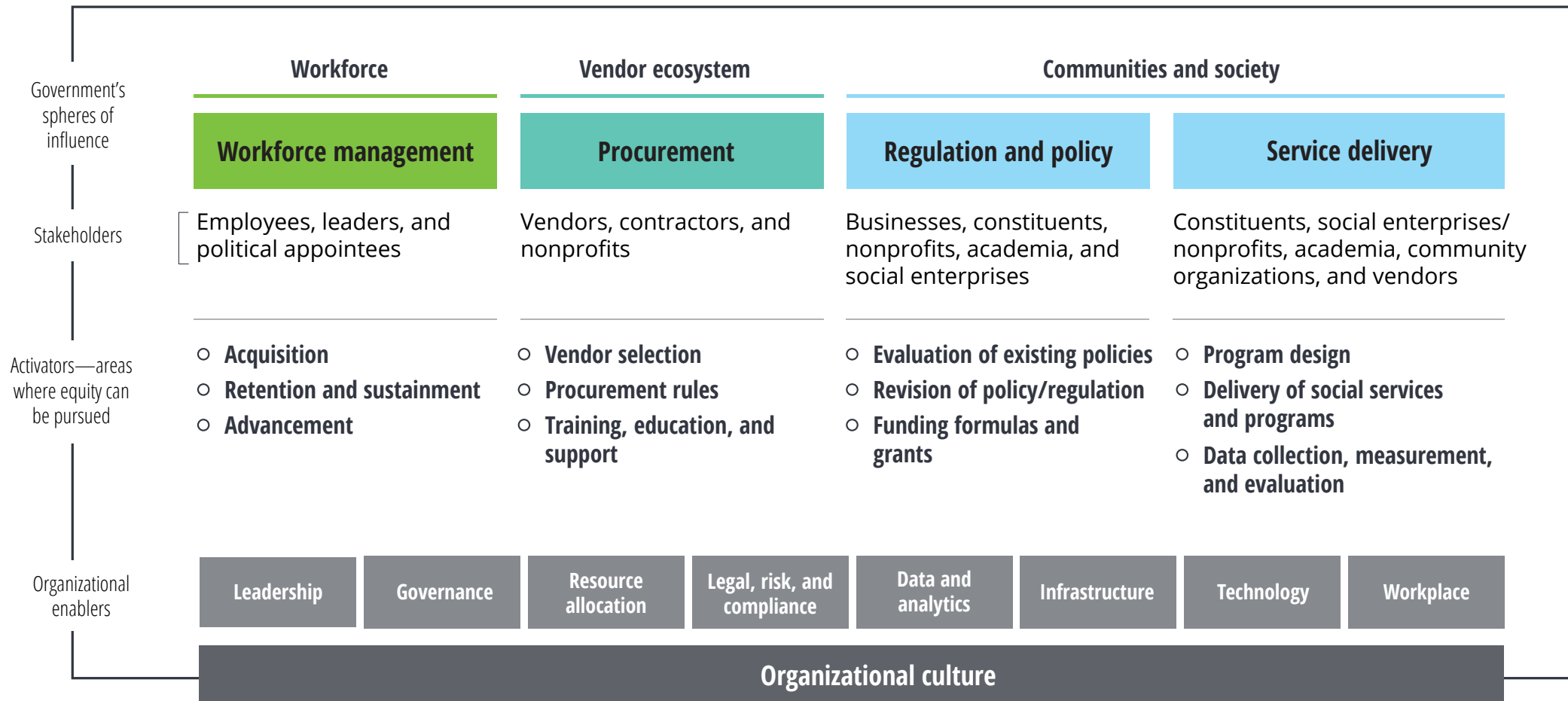# Government organizations can activate equity within and outside their own agencies across three spheres of influence

Spheres of influence

Communities and society

Vendor ecosystem

Workforce

Policy and regulation

Service delivery

Procurement

Workforce management

Organizational enablers and culture

FIGURE 1 contd. **Equity activation model for the public sector (detailed view)**

	Workforce	Vendor ecosystem	Communities and society	
Government's spheres of influence	**Workforce management**	**Procurement**	**Regulation and policy**	**Service delivery**
Stakeholders	Employees, leaders, and political appointees	Vendors, contractors, and nonprofits	Businesses, constituents, nonprofits, academia, and social enterprises	Constituents, social enterprises/ nonprofits, academia, community organizations, and vendors
Activators—areas where equity can be pursued	○ **Acquisition** ○ **Retention and sustainment** ○ **Advancement**	○ **Vendor selection** ○ **Procurement rules** ○ **Training, education, and support**	○ **Evaluation of existing policies** ○ **Revision of policy/regulation** ○ **Funding formulas and grants**	○ **Program design** ○ **Delivery of social services and programs** ○ **Data collection, measurement, and evaluation**

Organizational enablers

Leadership	Governance	Resource allocation	Legal, risk, and compliance	Data and analytics	Infrastructure	Technology	Workplace

Organizational culture

Note: The Deloitte government equity activation model has been adapted for application in the public sector from the equity activation model—a systems-based view for how businesses can activate equity within and outside of their own organizations, as explained in *The Equity Imperative.*
Source: Joanne Stephane et al., *The equity imperative*, Deloitte, February 2021.

Workforce management

The US government is the country's largest employer, and its actions and priorities can have lasting consequences for millions of Americans. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) figures showed that 2018 federal diversity levels had improved little or, in some cases, actually declined in recent years.[15] Data shows that "people of color make up about 40% of the US population and about 38% of the full-time federal workforce." And while they represent 46% of full-time workers in entry-level positions, they hold only 32% of senior federal positions.[16]

Employment is the first sphere in which government agencies can make changes to achieve equitable outcomes. Such changes can include providing greater employment access and advancement opportunities to candidates who contribute to the racial, ethnic, gender, and other identity diversity of the workforce. This includes helping all individuals develop and apply a broad and varied set of skills, experiences, and capabilities, and creating a culture that promotes inclusion and belonging.

EQUITABLE OUTCOMES

An equitable outcome requires the consideration of racial, ethnic, gender, and other identity diversity in all steps of the hiring process—in candidate consideration, interviews, and offers—at all levels of the organization and in all roles. In an equitable system, systemically marginalized individuals advance at an equitable pace and are proportionately represented at all levels of the organization, including in roles of power and influence. They are fairly represented in succession plans and candidate slates being considered for key roles.

PITFALLS

- Vague criteria such as "cultural fit" and "likeability," which tend to reinforce the status quo

- Role descriptions and required qualifications in the hiring process expressed in biased language

- Narrow filtering mechanisms and requirements that may artificially limit the pool of candidates (only recruiting at certain schools, etc.)

- A diversity focus that occurs too late in the talent pipeline, such as a lack of robust training-to-job pathways[17]

- Failure to include unconscious bias education for those involved in the talent selection process

- Unconscious use of different standards for systemically marginalized individuals

- Inconsistent requirements for proof of ability across identity groups—Black professionals historically have advanced based on proven skills or ability, while their white colleagues often are advanced based on potential[18]

- Mentoring or sponsorship that fails to take unique strengths, challenges, or needs into account—and note also that reserving sponsorship only for "top performers" may reinforce inequity

- The failure to recognize that bias in peer relationships is a key reason for people from systemically marginalized communities to quit their jobs

ACTIONS TO CONSIDER

Reevaluate talent selection requirements. Take a deeper look at what it takes to be successful in specific roles and teams. Once these success factors are identified, explore the many ways in which they may be demonstrated or measured (e.g., consider life experience as well as GPA). Consider what can be taught or learned through training or on the job before making various skills a prerequisite for employment. Once job requirements are established, ensure they are employed ethically and in a way that limits bias in filtering mechanisms.

Develop skills in the market. Identify new sources of talent rather than selecting exclusively from traditional ones. Collaborate with communities to help identify and access alternate labor pools, such as neurodiverse individuals, veterans, etc. Develop and administer open courses available to anyone, to provide potential candidates with the skills the job requires. Look to nontraditional sources for entry-level candidates and turn to professional associations and "diversity" recruitment specialists to fill mid-career, professional roles.

Use succession planning as a worker development process. Identify candidates early for advancement opportunities and provide them access to the experiences and roles they need to develop and advance their skills. Look ahead to the positions for which individuals show potential and create opportunities for them to grow to meet the advancement criteria.

Establish infrastructure for "reverse mentorship." Create a formal program to connect successful, networked senior leaders with junior colleagues from systemically marginalized communities. This offers junior members more exposure to senior leadership while allowing them to share their own unique perspectives, providing valuable insight for senior workers. A project-based approach—that is, offering this relationship through a shared initiative or task —can help both mentors and mentees develop new skills. Research from Cornell University's School of

Industrial and Labor Relations suggests that mentorship programs improve promotion and retention rates by 15% for women and 38% for "individuals from systemically marginalized communities."[19]

Improve the quality of sponsorships. Sponsorship entails a commitment to create opportunities for advancement. Organizations should enable sponsors to use their influence and networks to support and advance their protégés; provide protégés with high-visibility opportunities; and extend and strengthen their own networks. The organization should help sponsors better grasp the unique challenges faced by systemically marginalized individuals and the subtle ways in which bias impedes their success. And the organization should hold sponsors *accountable* for the successful preparation and advancement of their protégés.

Invest in education. Continue to educate workers on antiracism practices and unconscious bias—subtle biases that can affect the way we see others and the decisions we make.

Train decision-makers. Equip leaders to incorporate diversity, inclusion, and equity practices into everyday decision-making. Activities could include updating selection criteria, reviewing interview guides, and launching unconscious bias training for leaders who are conducting interviews.

Ecosystem stewardship. Invest in a robust talent pipeline and support talent ecosystems. This should involve acknowledging the depth and breadth of available talent and investing in skills and career path development across a variety of sources that provide diverse talent (such as schools, associations, after-school programs, mentoring arrangements, and skills development programs). Connect with local community colleges to identify and invest in skills and professional education pathways to help students better understand different career paths, develop tangible skills, and access opportunities in government.

BRIGHT SPOTS

Inclusive hiring practices. In 2015, a Multnomah County, Oregon project team began reexamining existing policies and procedures concerning minimum qualifications. The resulting "Equity and Empowerment Lens" helped the team rethink who may be advantaged or disadvantaged by current minimum qualifications. One theme that emerged was that then-current practices emphasized the need for formal education and prior government experience. Women and systemically marginalized individuals found it more difficult to meet these qualifications because of systemic barriers. Based on the input of numerous stakeholders, the team created a best-practices document that is now used as a tool by staff involved in hiring decisions throughout the county.[20]

Fellowships and internships to encourage diversity. The State Department's Pickering and Rangel fellowship programs encourage applications from groups historically underrepresented in the U.S. Foreign Service. Recently, the State Department raised the number of fellowships awarded by 50%, to a total of 90 fellows per year.

Efforts to support a more diverse and inclusive workforce. In June 2020, the Secretary of Defense outlined nine immediate actions to help reduce bias and discrimination in the armed forces. Some of these included removing photographs from consideration by promotion boards and selection processes; obtaining data to identify patterns and trends of prejudice and bias; and reviewing hairstyle and grooming policies for racial bias.[21]

New approaches to attracting diverse talent. The Air Force's plan to diversify its pilot corps includes attracting talent from diverse backgrounds at a young age, mentoring individuals from systemically marginalized communities and female candidates, and using data to track diversity and inclusion.[22]

Procurement

The second sphere of influence concerns procurement and the vendors and partners involved in the process. Government organizations should set specific goals for equity in procurement and regularly evaluate their performance against them. Examining the root causes of previous inequities can help agencies to create policies, regulations, and strategies to mitigate and remediate them, while spurring new and creative approaches to sourcing. Various state and federal Historically Underutilized Business (HUB) programs already promote full and equal procurement opportunities for small, minority- and women-owned businesses; they provide an example of how governments can increase equity while meeting procurement and contracting goals.

EQUITABLE OUTCOMES
Government spending, which directly supports tens of thousands of businesses and entrepreneurs, can be used to integrate diverse enterprises more fully into the American business landscape as contractors, suppliers, and partners.

PITFALLS
· Narrow definitions that limit the pool of potential suppliers

· Diversity efforts that focus only on spending, without developing or connecting with minority entrepreneurs

· Any leadership assumption that diversity efforts must entail an economic or quality-related penalty

· Limitations on the use of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) criteria in procurement and contracting

ACTIONS TO CONSIDER
Embrace the premise that equity drives outcomes.
To achieve procurement process equity, it's important for agencies to first acknowledge that their processes may unwittingly contain inequities, and then commit to identifying and mitigating them. An outcome goal might include **increasing purchases** of goods and services from vendors that employ systemically marginalized individuals and support their communities and **set goals** for accountability. These goals should consider factors such as the share of full-time workers from systemically

marginalized groups and worker access to health care and other benefits.

Identify Inequities. It's important to review the procurement phases—requirements development, acquisition plan development, source selection plan development, and solicitation scoring—that are most susceptible to inequity.

Inequity can creep into each of these phases, disproportionately affecting underserved communities. It can occur in the form of overly bundled requirements; acquisition plans structured as single awards out of administrative convenience; criteria in the source selection plan that favor one segment of the supply market; or simply by not masking supplier names during the solicitation scoring process. None of these actions are prohibited by the Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR), and pressure to execute procurements quickly while controlling costs and avoiding real or perceived risk can lead to decisions that may create inequities unwittingly.

Make targeted process changes. When such inequities are uncovered, they can be mitigated by making targeted changes to the activities that led to them. This could mean, for example, introducing a step in the requirements development process that identifies opportunities to disaggregate requirements, allowing opportunity for more suppliers. Another would be to **increase transparency and user-friendliness** to make it easier for prospective vendors to access information and RFPs.

Invest in the development of a diverse supplier base. This should involve a variety of actions, such as providing infrastructure, training and expertise for small contractors, shadowing programs, benchmarking processes, and networking opportunities.

Monitor the new process. Metrics can be developed and collected to help evaluate the success of new processes in monitored equity. In the requirements development phase,

this could mean measuring the number of standalone requirements created out of a single original requirement; more standalone requirements create more opportunities for additional supplier participation, which can create more equitable outcomes.

Actively encourage trusted participation. The history of real or perceived inequity in the procurement process can make members of underserved communities reluctant to participate. Actively encouraging participation can require a rebranding campaign to publicize steps taken to improve equity.

Ecosystem stewardship. Invest in networks that bring together a diverse mix of people and allow them to make social connections. Play the role of *convenor* to foster the connections between agencies, companies, and talent that promote the creation of innovative ecosystems.

BRIGHT SPOTS

Increased vendor diversity. Boston's efforts to improve vendor diversity involved a three-pronged strategy. In 2016, Boston's mayor Marty Walsh signed an executive order establishing targets for the use of minority/women-owned business enterprises (MWBEs) for architectural, construction, engineering, and professional services contracts. The mayor also dedicated staff to provide outreach and technical assistance to small businesses. Finally, the city streamlined its procurement processes, reducing complexities that hampered small vendors, often MWBEs. Boston's city government has streamlined these processes and focused on structuring contracts to make them more accessible and transparent.[23]

Going from race-agnostic to race-conscious policymaking. Ashville's city council passed a policy on moving from a race-neutral to a race-conscious approach on minority business contracting. Specific measures under this include establishing annual aspirational and contract-by-contract subcontracting goals for minority and women-owned businesses, keeping a database of available and certified minority and women-owned businesses, and directing the city manager to ensure the integration of the new policy into all departments' practices and processes.[24]

Regulation and policy

Government can promote equity through its role as a regulator and policymaker by assessing the impact of existing laws on marginalized communities, ensuring that future policies advance equity, and determining how to allocate funds or grants equitably.

EQUITABLE OUTCOMES

Governmentwide policies and programs confront and eliminate systemic barriers on marginalized communities.

PITFALLS

- Previous government policy that contributed to the inequitable development of some neighborhoods, exacerbating disparities for systemically marginalized communities

- Segregation and discriminatory policies that created engrained inequities across the nation, including those that put vulnerable populations at a higher risk of displacement and restrict their access to benefits

- Legal requirements that disproportionally affect systemically marginalized individuals and low-income individuals, such as occupational licensing challenges or issues accessing support services for those who have criminal records

- Inequitable or outdated funding formulas that put systemically marginalized communities at a systemic disadvantage

- Laws and regulations that engender bias against practices that deviate from the "cultural norm." For example, excessive licensing rules restrict entry to some occupations with significant shares of Black and Hispanic workers.[25] Similarly, some occupancy requirements often preclude low-income individuals and families.

ACTIONS TO CONSIDER

Establish mechanisms to help identify policies and regulations that place disproportionate burdens on disadvantaged, vulnerable, or marginalized communities.

Make driving toward equitable outcomes a core component of policy formulation to help address historic barriers and prevent their perpetuation.

Assess the impact of policies and regulations on different communities. Combine direct constituent engagement with input from subject-matter experts from academics to members of marginalized communities. Dialogues between constituents, policymakers, and experts could provide a more complete view of the impact of existing policies and rules.

Seek and evaluate new sources of information on the consequences of policy. Measure the success of specific program and policy changes made; establish goals and measure progress toward them.[26]

Build technological capabilities that can help improve regulations in an equitable and just manner. For example, artificial intelligence can help governments identify regulations that may be inconsistent with current equity policies. Data analysis and behavioral science also can help improve the equity and effectiveness of new policies and programs.

Update policies and laws to reflect changing circumstances and constituent needs, especially in cases in which existing ones pose barriers to access.

Promote community engagement. Identify and connect with stakeholders representing systemically marginalized communities to aid them in influencing government decision-making. Develop strategies to promote inclusive community engagement and pilot their use among selected departments by type (service, infrastructure, and planning).[27]

Set up internal organizational teams to support the government's equity strategy and ensure **the use of inclusive engagement practices**.

Ecosystem stewardship. Use *cocreation*, in which stakeholders share responsibility for a problem and work with government to solve it. The principle is "no change without us"—don't do it "to" us, do it *with* us, tapping the collective wisdom of diverse groups. A partnership between the city of Minneapolis and Nexus Community Partners, for example, works to improve racial equity in the membership of government boards and commissions, which in turn influences major policy decisions toward more equitable outcomes.[28]

BRIGHT SPOTS

Simplified processes to improve access to college financial aid. The Senate's FAFSA Simplification Act that was passed in December 2020 represents an overhaul of the federal financial aid process. When implemented, it seeks to streamline the application form, expand the Federal Pell Grant to more students, and link eligibility to family size and the federal poverty level. It will also automate tax data sharing (with parental consent) so students don't have to reenter tax information.[29]

Restored Pell Grant access. In 1994, Congress banned incarcerated individuals from applying for Pell Grants, but reinstated this privilege in December 2020. The legislation also simplified the qualification formula, making 500,000 additional students eligible for the awards.[30]

Equity impact assessments. The Chicago Department of Housing (DOH) has developed a Racial Equity Impact Assessment (REIA) for low-income housing tax credits. DOH uses the REIA to analyze the impact of existing and proposed policies and programs on different racial and ethnic groups. The assessment informs decisions on tax credits and helps ensure that developers from marginalized communities can participate.[31]

Revised laws and regulations. Austin's city council, for example, relaxed some of its zoning rules to reduce red tape and speed up the development of affordable housing for low-income groups. "We're ready to act creatively and quickly to find equitable solutions to address institutional problems," said one council member.[32]

At the federal level, in May 2020 the United States Office of the Comptroller of the Currency strengthened and modernized its regulations concerning the Community Reinvestment Act (CRA). The update increases CRA-related lending, investments, and services in low- and moderate-income communities.[33]

Simplified "clean-slate" policies in criminal justice. Some states have laws permitting individuals to seal or clear their criminal records after a certain crime-free period, but due to the inconvenient and complex nature of the process, only a fraction of eligible individuals take advantage of it. Michigan, however, has relaxed its criteria for expunging criminal records and, by 2023, plans to automatically clear misdemeanors after seven years beyond sentencing and felonies after 10 years.[34]

Service delivery

Within this sphere of influence, government organizations can take actions to ensure those most affected by systemic exclusion get the assistance they need, ultimately benefiting all members of society.

EQUITABLE OUTCOMES
All constituents have the same ease and level of access to public services that they may need and for which they are eligible, irrespective of their race, ethnicity, or any other identity characteristics. Project funding allocation decisions are fair and address the interests and needs of all constituents.

PITFALLS
- Any assumption that the needs and challenges of various constituents and systemically marginalized communities are homogenous

- Burdensome application processes—often the first step toward receiving services or benefits—that disproportionately affect systemically marginalized communities

- Outdated rules and onerous recertification processes that deter low-income or systemically marginalized groups from applying for benefits

- Low digital literacy, lack of access to technology, and language barriers that lead to incorrect forms, benefit delays and difficulties with service delivery

- A lack of awareness or misinformation about government benefit programs and eligibility criteria

ACTIONS TO CONSIDER
Understand the unique barriers faced by systemically marginalized communities. This includes analyzing data as well as conducting interviews, focus groups, and other direct contacts to shed light on human challenges and the root causes behind certain behaviors that can't be gleaned from data alone.

Map the user experience. "Journey mapping" is a method for visualizing the experiences a person has while interacting with government programs and agencies. When combined with financial and demographic information found in census and tax data, it can be a powerful tool for understanding how persons respond to government programs—and the barriers and burdens faced by the hardest-to-reach individuals and families, particularly those living at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities.

Streamline the benefits process. In addition to improving in-person services, update online application systems by building more dynamic, user-friendly web portals that reflect the principles of human-centered design. For example, single sign-on solutions allow people to access programs across agencies with a unique digital identity.

Share data. Such solutions can be furthered through data-sharing arrangements among agencies to reduce the time constituents must devote to forms and information sharing. A "tell us once" approach improves the user experience and reduces errors.

Configure benefit portals to update constituent records automatically to reflect current life events, reducing the need for multiple inputs by constituents.

Invest in culturally sensitive outreach and assistance efforts to increase awareness of available services among systemically marginalized and underserved populations. These can include tailoring communication to break down language barriers or acknowledging that some cultures including certain Hispanic American and Arab American households believe that family issues should be resolved within the family—and adapting outreach accordingly.[35] This can help break down barriers caused by a history of mistrust, misinformation, and fear.

Consider making certain benefits available by default; alter systems so that persons must opt *out* of programs rather than opt in.

Ecosystem stewardship: Invest in **infrastructure for programs that serve systemically marginalized communities**, rather than restricting funding to social workers or other predefined services only.

BRIGHT SPOTS

Streamlined enrollment processes. Previously, many Californians who qualified for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) were discouraged from applying by an online application process that took nearly an hour to complete, with 50+ web pages and 100+ questions. Code for America's GetCalFresh program now guides users through the eligibility and enrollment process, reducing the average time needed to apply from 45 minutes to about eight minutes.[36]

Automatic enrollment. The past year's COVID-19 relief payments represent a recent automatic enrollment success story; Congress authorized the Department of the Treasury to make direct payments to individuals in need using prior tax data.[37]

Equity assessments. The city of Austin worked with the community to create its first racial equity assessment tool; today, its equity team works with all 42 city departments to monitor and improve the assessment process. "Our departments will do a racial equity assessment, and then we provide a SWOT [Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats] analysis for them," says Brian Oaks, Austin's chief equity officer. "They develop it and execute the action plans, [then] come back two years later and do that process again."[38]

Equity toolkits. The San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency's Equity Toolkit improves the city's ability to provide equitable and inclusive transportation by using data on routes, schedules, and frequencies layered with maps to identify and fix service gaps. This exercise led the city to focus more resources on transit-dependent neighborhoods and higher-ridership routes connected with essential jobs and services. In the city's Bayview neighborhood, for example, this effort improved the accessibility of transit for essential workers by 12%.[39]

Looking ahead

GOVERNMENTS AT ALL levels can make a meaningful difference in equity in both the short and long terms, across every sphere of influence. In addition to the steps we outlined throughout the study, we recommend agencies consider including the following elements in their enterprise-level approaches to equity:

- **Clear, measurable, outcome-oriented goals** that articulate the priority areas of inequity.

- **An overarching strategy** grounded in evidence that communicates the agency's overall *theory of change*—how agency, administrative, legislative, regulatory, management, and budgetary efforts *interconnect* to address the root causes and harms of systemic inequities.

- **Robust agency-level plans** to guide implementation. These plans should both drive action and articulate the expected impacts of actions along the way.

- **Management to results** through regular monitoring, to ensure that expected progress is being made and to identify and address barriers to progress; guide course corrections if necessary; and help the government capture, disseminate, and act on lessons learned.

- **Coordination across government and with stakeholders,** to align their efforts and develop holistic solutions to complex problems. Nearly all societal outcomes are influenced by the actions and efforts of multiple government agencies at more than one level of government, as well as those of commercial and nonprofit organizations. For example, reducing disparities in childhood obesity will require addressing the multiple factors, including the social determinants of health that lead to obesity. Such an effort would require coordination among federal, state, and local health; education; transport; housing and regulatory agencies to reinforce rather than undermine one another's efforts. It also would require collaboration with external organizations such as businesses, community-based organizations, nonprofits, and advocacy groups.

- **Sufficient capacity to address barriers to equity** at the agency, state, local, and community levels, in areas such as data analysis, human-centered design, community and stakeholder engagement, behavioral science, program design, and policymaking.

- **Meaningful engagement with stakeholders** at all stages, from the selection of goals to the evaluation of efforts. These stakeholders range from policymakers and academics to program providers and recipients; identifying and addressing their concerns can help win their support, amplifying the impact of the administration's efforts. Many community and advocacy stakeholders have a deep understanding of the needs of marginalized communities and enjoy high levels of trust in those communities. Their insights and assistance can have significant positive impacts on the program design and delivery.

- **Transparent progress reporting,** both in the implementation of plans and their impacts, to create an open dialogue with the public and maintain agency focus on critical issues.

- **Executive sponsorship at the highest level** to signal the importance of the issue and to hold various parts of the organization to account for their parts of the strategy.

The time is now—to commit to taking courageous action and collaborating to create the equitable future we wish to see.

About the authors

Kimberly Myers | kimyers@deloitte.com

Dr. Kimberly Myers is a leader in Deloitte's Health Care practice, with over 15 years of experience working with federal and health care nonprofit clients. Myers translates science into business strategy, with a focus on helping organizations leverage data assets to meet mission needs. She has experience managing large, complex biomedical science and translational research programs with successful results. She has a proven ability to build domestic and international partnerships, develop and implement strategic plans, and formulate science policy. Myers also serves as the Diversity, Equity & Inclusion lead for Deloitte's Government & Public Services (GPS) practice.

Kelly A. Batts | kbatts@deloitte.com

Kelly A. Batts is a Human Capital managing director in Deloitte Consulting's Government & Public Services (GPS). He has over 15 years of experience in analytics, diversity equity & inclusion (DEI), and workforce transformation. Batts is the GPS DEI Market Offering leader, leading a practice of 70 practitioners in the delivery of DEI strategy, analytics, and learning solutions to clients across the federal, state, and local governments and higher education. Additionally, Batts helps leaders in the public sector solve their most challenging people-related problems using data and visualization, as well as helping organizations think through the future of work and how they can leverage technology to augment their workforces.

Shrupti Shah | shrshah@deloitte.com

Shrupti Shah is a public policy and performance management specialist with more than 25 years of experience in the public and private sectors. She currently leads the team advising the Executive Office of the President on the President's Management Agenda and the team developing a vision for US government technology in 2030 for the U.S. General Services Administration. At Deloitte, she is the leader of the Behavioral Insights practice, which helps government agencies design, develop, and test behavior change interventions.

William Eggers | weggers@deloitte.com

William Eggers is the executive director of Deloitte's Center for Government Insights, where he is responsible for the firm's public sector thought leadership. He is the author of numerous books including *Delivering on Digital: The Innovators and Technologies that Are Transforming Government* (Deloitte University Press, 2016), *The Solution Revolution*, the *Washington Post* best-seller *If We Can Put a Man on the Moon*, and *Governing by Network*. He coined the term Government 2.0 in a book by the same name. His commentary has appeared in dozens of major media outlets including the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Post*.

Amrita Datar | amdatar@deloitte.ca

Amrita Datar is a researcher at the Deloitte Center for Government Insights where she develops research publications and thought leadership focused on emerging trends at the intersection of technology, business, and society and how they could influence the public sector. Her previous publications cover topics such as the future of work, customer experience, digital transformation, innovation, and future trends in government.

Acknowledgments

Contact us

Our insights can help you take advantage of change. If you're looking for fresh ideas to address your challenges, we should talk.

Industry leadership

Kelly A. Batts
Managing director | Deloitte Consulting LLP
+1 571 882 7154 | kbatts@deloitte.com

Kelly Batts is a Human Capital managing director in the Government & Public Services (GPS) of Deloitte Consulting.

The Deloitte Center for Government Insights

William D. Eggers
Executive director, the Deloitte Center for Government Insights | Deloitte Services LP
+1 571 882 6585 | weggers@deloitte.com

Bill Eggers is the executive director of Deloitte's Center for Government Insights where he is responsible for the firm's public sector thought leadership.

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Deloitte Insights contributors
Editorial: Abrar Khan, Aparna Prusty, Dilip Poddar, and Nairita Gangopadhyay
Creative: Sanaa Saifi and Sonya Vasilieff
Promotion: Maria Martin Cirujano
Cover artwork: Ryan Olbrysh

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