



**NRPA** National Recreation  
and Park Association

*Because everyone deserves a great park*



# EQUITY ACTION PLAN



PHOTO COURTESY WICK MAZANIN WINNETT COUNTY PARKS AND RECREATION, GEORGIA.

Kids participate in STEM activities in the 16th Annual Lights on Afterschool in Lawrenceville, Georgia.

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**COVER IMAGE:**

People share a laugh during the adaptive paddling program at Wiregrass Lake Metropark in Toledo, Ohio. *Photo by Mary Pencheff.*

# Why Equity Is at the Center

At NRPA, we believe that quality parks and recreation opportunities are essential to individual and community health, well-being and resilience. However, we estimate that as many as 100 million people — 30 percent of the U.S. population — do not have ready access to the lifesaving and life-enhancing benefits parks and recreation provides. To put it simply, this is unacceptable. In response, we are centering equity in all that we do to change this reality.

## Our mission depends on it.

Our mission is to advance parks, recreation and environmental conservation efforts that enhance the quality of life **for all people**. We cannot rest until we close the gap in access to quality parks for good.

## Our vision inspires it.

We seek a future where the full power of parks and recreation is widely recognized for creating a *better life for everyone* by building strong, healthy and resilient communities.

- And yet, in the United States, people of color, low-income communities and tribal populations have been disproportionately exposed to environmental conditions that can harm their health. Across the country, race is the most significant predictor of a person living near contaminated air, water or soil.
- And many communities of color and other marginalized groups, such as LGBTQ+, immigrants, people with low income and people with disabilities lack the opportunity to experience and engage in high-quality parks and recreation — because they lack physical access near home or work or they do not feel welcome.
- According to one study, non-white and low-income neighborhoods are 50 percent less likely to have one recreational facility in their community as compared to predominantly white and high-income neighborhoods.

## Our moral and ethical obligation to the field of parks and recreation demands it.

We are dedicated to the field of parks and recreation and to helping park and recreation professionals meet emerging and future challenges. The inequity in this country is the challenge of our time. It is evident in so many ways — through persistent and systemic racism, health disparities, and the chronic lack of access to quality, life-supporting, life-enhancing parks and recreation. The inequity in our country is the ultimate challenge, and the fact is parks and recreation can make a profound difference.

We wrote our strategic plan and put EQUITY at the center because we must. Achieving our mission, advancing our vision,



Participants get ready to make a splash at a drop-in swim session at the Allentown Splash, Tennis & Fitness Park.

PHOTO BY CASSI HAYDEN. COURTESY OF MARYLAND-NATIONAL CAPITAL PARK AND PLANNING COMMISSION.

and meeting our moral and ethical obligation to the park and recreation field require that all of us at NRPA put equity at the center of all we do.

The future we are striving for — our vision — requires us to:

- Recognize the systemic inequities that have created very different lived experiences in communities across the country;
- Strengthen our organizational culture and practices centered around equity, inclusion and diversity;
- Build equity, inclusion and diversity into how we prepare the park and recreation field for the future; and
- Build up equity-centered outcomes while working to dismantle the barriers to equity.

Because *we are parks and recreation*, committing to equity and striving for an equitable world also means approaching this work with joy, celebration and a hunger for learning. The future we envision is a truly beautiful one, with quality parks and recreation embedded into every community for everyone.

# Demographic Shifts

*“In 2017, 78 percent of America’s seniors were white, while 49 percent of the nation’s youth were people of color — a phenomenon that we call the racial generation gap.”<sup>1</sup>*

America is in the midst of two dramatic demographic shifts: the highest levels of diversity among our youngest and rapidly aging populations, as more baby boomers head into retirement. These twin forces — the browning and graying of America — are widening the demographic divergence between our youngest and oldest.<sup>2</sup> It’s more than just race, this divide exists in other dimensions of life as well — language spoken at home, belief systems, religion, gender identities and physical abilities. Demographic shifts and resultant pressure reveal the undeniable reality of America — our country’s institutions were designed to benefit some at the expense of others. The browning and graying of America may represent an existential threat to the old systems and practices, but they present immense opportunity for a healthier, more economically and socially lucrative America that simultaneously builds from and benefits people across all demographics.

What does this mean for us as individuals? What does it mean for our profession? Recent national challenges have shown the rest of society what we always have known — parks and recreation is essential. We are essential because our agencies operate at this intersection of difference and as the trusted gathering places for our communities. What’s more, parks and recreation is essential because it builds strong communities by supporting social, educational, physical and economic development. Parks and recreation, as we’ve seen time and time again, is poised to lead communities by responding to, embracing and ultimately celebrating these demographic shifts by meeting people where they are. Parks and recreation is especially essential for communities that have been underserved, or mis-served by our institutions, and that have been more disparately impacted by the crises at hand.

Our strength lies within our differences, and these differences are not just observed in the communities we serve, but also are reflected in the professionals, members and staff who make up our agencies. At NRPA, our mission is to advance parks, recreation and environmental conservation efforts that improve the quality of life for all people. To do that we must take to heart our role in supporting professionals in the knowledge and skill building necessary to navigate our increasingly complex reality thoughtfully and inclusively.



Marana’s Cape Chase is an adaptive race designed for participants of all abilities to show off their superpowers.

PHOTO BY JD FITZGERALD PHOTOGRAPHY, COURTESY OF MARANA PARKS AND RECREATION, ARIZONA

1 <https://dornsife.usc.edu/pere/racial-generation-gap/>  
2 [https://www.policylink.org/sites/default/files/RacialGenGap\\_%20final\\_0.pdf](https://www.policylink.org/sites/default/files/RacialGenGap_%20final_0.pdf)

# What Centering Equity Means

**We lead with race**, because racial inequities persist in every system across the country — housing, health, education, criminal justice, employment, and parks and recreation. Racial inequities were embedded into the founding of our institutions, like government and media, and their vestiges are still present in ongoing practices and policies, and they will remain unless intentionally countered. Racism operates at individual, institutional and structural levels, including health, education, criminal justice, employment, and parks and recreation.

We also lead with race because when you look within other dimensions of identity — income, gender, sexuality, education, ability, age, citizenship and geography — there are inequities based on race. Knowing this helps us take an intersectional approach, while always understanding the role that race plays in people’s experiences and outcomes.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it is imperative that we acknowledge systemic racism’s influence from the beginning, examine with intention ways to dismantle these inequitable systems, and rebuild — possibly reinvent — the policies and practices that shape these essential places, spaces and our profession.

**We uplift our core value of continuous learning** and embrace a growth mindset, as individuals and as an organization, and support this shift in our members. Organizations that embody a growth mindset encourage appropriate risk-taking, knowing that some risks will not work out. They reward employees for important and useful lessons learned.

They support collaboration across organizational boundaries. They are committed to the growth of every member, in words and actions, supporting development and advancement opportunities.<sup>4</sup> **They are committed to progress, not perfection.**

**We, as an organization, examine how we embody inequitable systems and perpetuate exclusionary practices.** Through the implementation of our diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) assessment and resulting action plan, we systematically and intentionally back up our words with actions. As a membership organization, we lead by example, inviting our members and affiliates along with us on this journey.

Park and recreation professionals are on the front lines of many of today’s most pressing challenges. They are essential in advancing community health, resiliency and overall well-being. Park and recreation professionals are in a unique position to champion efforts that advance DEI. However, across the park and recreation profession, there remain gaps in the understanding of how systemic racism, unfair power structures, and a lack of cultural competency and humility affect access to quality park and recreation spaces, programs and services for Black people, Native Americans, people of color and low-income communities. Centering equity in all we do sets a foundation for confronting these inequities and ensuring that all people have access to the benefits of parks and recreation.

Four- and five-year-old children play youth flag football at the Otis M. Andrews Sports Complex in Plant City, Florida.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JACK HOLLAND.

3 <https://healthequityguide.org/about/why-lead-with-race/>

4 <https://hbr.org/2016/01/what-having-a-growth-mindset-actually-means>

# Words to Action: What We Are Doing

We seek a future where the full power of parks and recreation is widely recognized for building strong, healthy and resilient communities. We lift up our guiding principles of equity, health and well-being, and climate resilience through our 2021-2023 Strategic Plan. This is our road map for action.

- **Building a movement** to elevate the role of close-to-home parks and recreation services and park and recreation professionals through strategic storytelling campaigns, public relations efforts, partnerships and research, demonstrating the impact and vital work of parks and recreation.
- **Ensuring access for all** by innovating solutions to ensure communities have fair and just access to great parks, spaces, facilities and programs. NRPA will ensure safe, inclusive and culturally relevant spaces, and that park and recreation professionals are seen as key partners in addressing critical gaps.
- **Advancing community health and well-being** by leveraging the power of parks and recreation to serve as community wellness hubs, trusted gathering places that connect community members to essential programs and services that advance health equity, improve health outcomes, and enhance quality of life.
- **Building community resiliency** by co-creating and promoting local and replicable models for climate-ready parks and spaces that are resilient and regenerative in

Presenters at the 2019 NRPA Annual Conference in Baltimore share on the topic of inclusion.



PHOTO COURTESY OF NRPA

- addressing our most pressing environmental challenges.
- **Preparing the profession for the future** by developing and implementing a research-informed professional development and membership engagement strategy that centers equity, so that our field stays relevant, adapts to better serve, and reflects our communities.

Putting equity at the center means acknowledging our past and how we got where we are, and it requires that NRPA live our values.

## Acknowledging the Past

The United States boasts beautiful park systems, from local and state parks to the great expanses of national parks like the Grand Canyon. Parks and recreation is critical infrastructure, adding beauty, clean water, clean air, climate resilience, and places for exploration, recreation, socialization and peace. However, they also represent places of exclusion, discrimination, segregation and disparity. Historical and contemporary land-use policies have shaped the contours of public park and recreation spaces across the nation in ways that continue to make it easier for some, and much harder for others, to access and use these spaces.

To expand park access, one must first understand the factors that have shaped the unfair access and distribution of park and recreation facilities across communities. To that end, we have created a park access story map.<sup>5</sup> This story map is a snapshot of policies

and stories of park inequities throughout U.S. history and the opportunities and challenges ahead. It is designed to acknowledge the experience of unequal access, as well as the policies and practices that created them, to share information and stories about our history, and to provide a tool for reflection. Our goal is to create a new starting point to inspire the transformation of a just and equity-driven park and recreation system for all.

### What Is Park Access?

The just and fair quantity, proximity and connections to quality parks, green spaces and recreation facilities, as well as programming that is safe, inclusive, culturally relevant and welcoming to everyone. \*This definition was developed by NRPA.

<sup>5</sup> <https://arcg.is/1Hyzue0>

A participant of the Homewood-Flossmoor (Illinois) Park District's 2019 Park Pride Day shows off plants before placing them into a flower bed.

# Living Our Values

As an organization, we have named the values of **trust, continuous learning, diversity and inclusion** as those we are most invested in honing and reflecting in our day-to-day work lives. Values reflect what is important and defines an organization's culture. Below are the steps we are taking to foster individual learning and organizational change for DEI. This is the work we do to lift up and live our core values. And it is the way we will positively impact the park and recreation field in service of creating inclusive spaces, communities and country.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ROBERT BIRGEL

# Assessing and Improving Our Practices

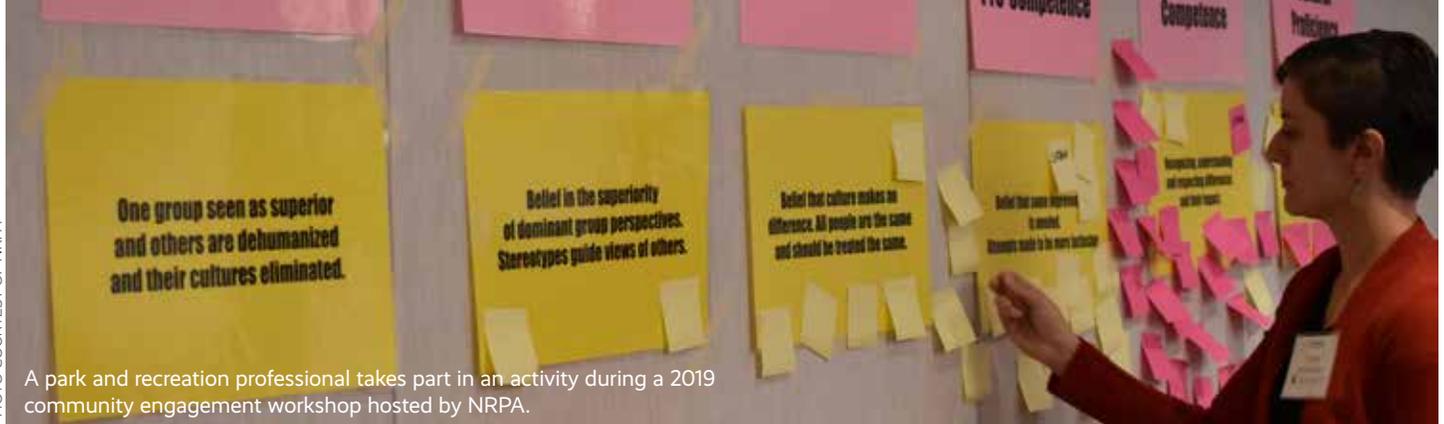


PHOTO COURTESY OF NRPA

A park and recreation professional takes part in an activity during a 2019 community engagement workshop hosted by NRPA.

In 2020, as a complement to the strategic plan, NRPA conducted a DEI assessment that looked at everything from human resource practices to grantmaking. It included a document review and program audit, as well as stakeholder and staff interviews and surveys. The resulting recommendations were comprehensive and will guide our work forward, including:

- Governance — board governance training, recruitment and accountability
- Human Resources — training on new processes and support for equitable hiring, compensation, benefits and employee engagement practices
- Operations — equitable practices for procurement, vendor management, and contracting and development of stan-

dard policies and rubrics to ensure consistent equitable practices across all departments

- Marketing and Communications — development of an equity- and asset-based glossary of terms, audit of all communications assets and platforms, improved accessibility for website and social media, and staff training on use of equity-based and asset-based frameworks
- Grantmaking and Partnerships — continued improvement in equity-based grantmaking, fundraising and partnership development
- Education and Professional Development — development of comprehensive DEI core competencies in parks and recreation and training curriculum

# DEI Engagement Strategy

The park and recreation profession has the potential to be a critical lever for addressing inequities in our communities, but this requires a field that:

- Is trained in DEI;
- Applies cultural competency and humility in community engagement;
- Embeds equity-centered practices in all planning, programs, practices and decision making; and
- Assesses their impact against meaningful changes in community outcomes.

To do this, we must create an intentional and informed approach. Preparing the Profession for the Future is a key element of NRPA's 2021-2023 Strategic Plan and reflects the need for park and recreation professionals to continuously build upon their professional skills. Over the past six months, NRPA has surveyed directors and state affiliates to better understand what work is happening, how they are moving the work forward, and what support they would like to see from us. Responding to the needs from the field, the results from these surveys are the foundation of the DEI engagement strategy for the next two years.

Specific to state affiliates, the strategy will include:

- **Co-beneficial professional development opportunities** – The majority of state affiliates employ less than four staff members. Working with state affiliates, NRPA's strategy will include the creation of co-branded webinars and professional development opportunities that build member competency in DEI. NRPA will use its capacity and ability to convene subject matter experts, to facilitate national conversations and learning, and to share with state affiliates so that they can facilitate space that allows for nuanced conversations rooted in local needs and context.
- **Organizational Change Modeling** – As membership organizations, DEI must be something we work toward as individuals with our staff, and in our policies and practices. As NRPA learns how to center equity as a member organization, we are committed to sharing learnings and assisting state affiliates in creating plans that focus on both internal and external strategies.
- **Demographic Information Collection** – A large majority of state associations do not collect demographics from their members. Having a baseline of who members are, affiliates will be better able to identify gaps in representation, helping them to create targeted plans or programs



People play wheelchair rugby at the Adaptive Sports Festival in Pasadena, California.

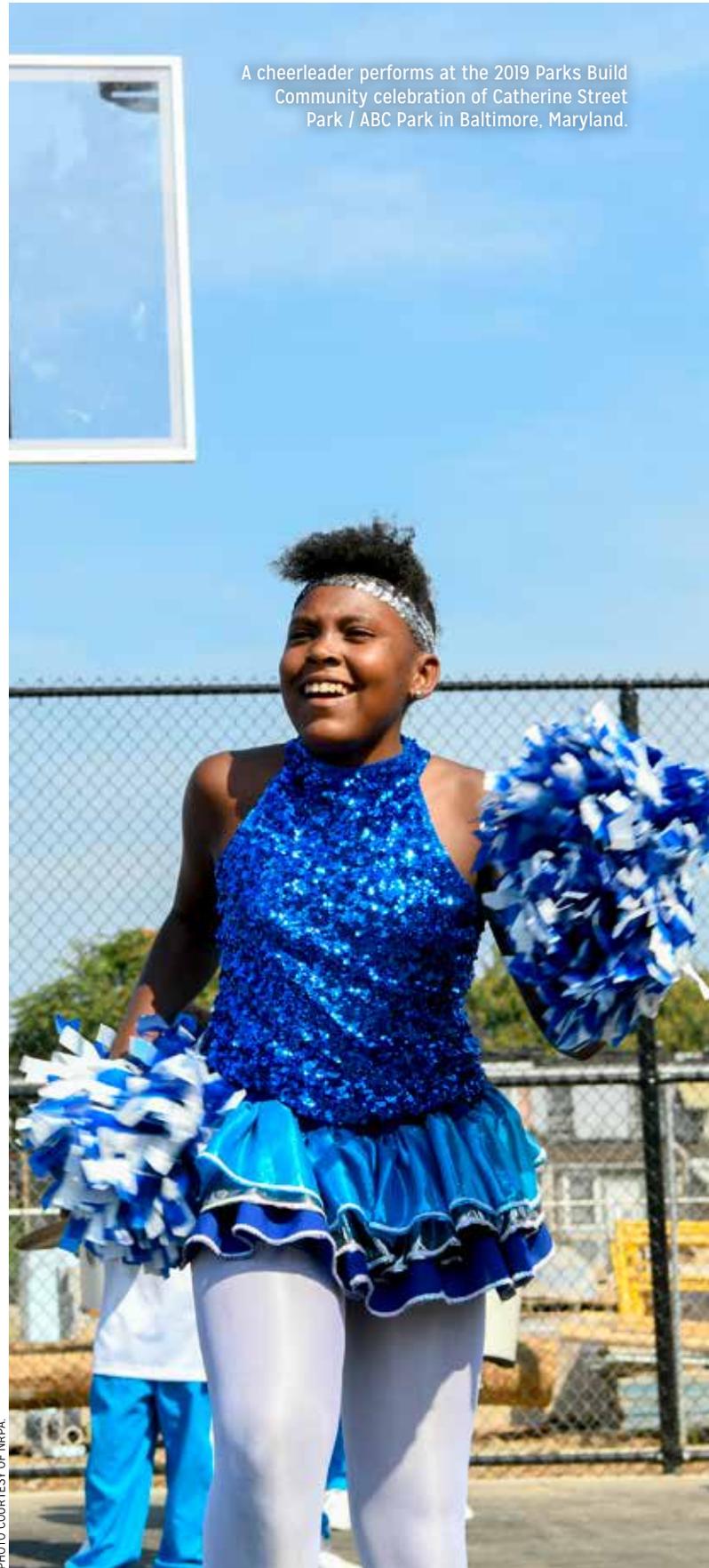
PHOTO COURTESY OF CITY OF PASADENA HUMAN SERVICES AND RECREATION DEPARTMENT

that speak to these groups. NRPA will create a standard set of questions for affiliates to use, as well as offer guidance on how to use it.

For the field at large, the strategy will include:

- **A need for targeted support for smaller agencies serving fewer than 50,000 residents** – Smaller agencies face tremendous challenges in initiating and implementing DEI practices. Directors from these agencies note a need for specific resources targeted to smaller departments, including earmarked grant funds or resources and web-based learning opportunities (e.g., webinars) to support staff training. As more than half of leaders from smaller agencies indicate they will be conducting assessments in the next two years, NRPA's strategy will include the development of distinctive opportunities with small agency needs in mind.
- **Building Member Capacity and Competency in DEI** – Agencies are searching for greater assistance, because of concerns over the sustainability of these efforts and a desire to build knowledge and skills that are intentional and comprehensive, as opposed to one-offs. In response, NRPA will develop a wide range of professional development opportunities in DEI to support different stages of learning. These resources will build upon what exists in some agencies and provide to other agencies a starting place as they develop plans for action and secure resources.
- **Equity Best Practices and Peer-to-Peer Learning Networks** – Park and recreation leaders note a strong desire for the sharing of best practices in DEI as they establish or build upon existing efforts at their agencies. NRPA will develop a suite of "Equity in Practice" learning opportunities that highlight leaders and best practices across all park and recreation functions (e.g., planning, maintenance, human resources (HR)/operations and programming). Professionals will gain access to examples of success, critical resources and lessons learned. NRPA also will facilitate peer-to-peer learning networks that will provide a space for those with shared experiences (e.g., DEI task forces, HR managers, small agencies) to learn from each other.
- **Development of Trusted Resources: DEI Resource Library** – Park and recreation leaders note the need for a set of vetted resources, from metrics, tools and templates across organizational functions, resources to support training and individual learning (e.g., articles, videos) and consultants. To answer this need, NRPA will curate a digital resource library to support individual learning and organizational change efforts, as agencies and professionals begin or continue their learning journeys.

NRPA enthusiastically embraces our role to help our staff, members and affiliates meet emerging and future challenges.



# Working Together So Others Can Play: NRPA DEI Framework

Creating lasting change requires commitment at both the individual and organizational level. An organization, in its most simple form, is a group of individuals working toward a common goal. If we want an organization to change, and in turn transform the ways it interacts with its stakeholders, there must be opportunities for people within the organization to learn and grow. This framework embodies a BOTH/AND approach, helping us both grow as individuals and apply that knowledge to our work, and focus on changing systems and policies within our organization that intentionally drive toward more fully present and supported DEI.

**“Frameworks organize the collective to work toward a common goal...they are a way to unleash our full potential.”**

– Glenn Harris, CEO, Race Forward

Modified from Avarna Group’s Quadrants of Equity, Inclusion and Diversity Work



# Current Actions

**Individual-Internal:** Building self-awareness and knowledge. Examples include understanding your own identity, uncovering and interrupting your hidden bias, confronting your privileges and power, and allocating time for learning.

- Support for staff learning journeys and practices
- Board learning and skill development
- Promotion of growth mindset
- Quarterly DEI staff meetings
- Board DEI retreat

**Organizational-Internal:** Building workplace culture where the organization engages to create an equitable and inclusive work environment. Examples include using fair hiring practices, training, and evaluating physical workspaces to meet the needs of individuals.

- HR Compensation Review
- Equitable recruiting and hiring practices
- DEI Assessment/Implementation
- Demographic data collection standardization
- Inclusive workplace culture
- Clarification and practice of organizational values
- SOPs for all departments
- Documentation of equity practices
- VP modeling and check-ins

**Individual-External:** Building allyship and relationship with other people and your communities. Examples include using inclusive language, challenging bias, addressing microaggressions, practicing micro-affirmations, receiving feedback and mentoring others.

- DEI Annual Performance goals
- Professional Development skill building
- DEI Glossary of Terms
- Asset-based language guide and training
- Anti-bias training
- Staff DEI Training – Phase 2

**Organizational-External:** As a result of the organizational-internal work, we develop programs and communications that increase access and representation and create equitable and inclusive experiences for people outside of NRPA. Examples include marketing, communications, fundraising, customer service, partnerships, scholarship allocations, event planning, curriculum development and programming.

- Personal pronoun email signature
- Park and Recreation DEI Glossary of Terms
- DEI standards for procurement (consultants and contractors)
- Supplier diversity
- Conference code of conduct and response mechanisms
- Website accessibility benchmarking
- ADA508 Compliance across all platforms
- Creation of equity practices in grantmaking and RFP process
- Value-led partnership model
- Equitable community engagement model



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