



**CENTRAL HEALTH  
EQUITY POLICY COUNCIL**

**MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** Austin Mayor and City Council Members

**FROM:** Central Health Equity Policy Council - Pandemic Equity Committee (Brandon Wollerson, Catalina Berry, Emily Zhang, Iliana Gilman, Kristin duBay Horton, Matthew Jeans, Nora Comstock, Patricia Hayes, Raul Alvarez, Vanessa Sarria, and Vince Cobalis), Megan Cermak, and Rebecca Hickey

**CC:** Mike Geeslin, President & CEO of Central Health

**DATE:** August 9, 2021

**SUBJECT:** Recommendations for Identifying and Addressing Inequities in Disaster Preparedness, Disaster Response and Post-Disaster Community Healing and Recovery

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As we move into a new pandemic surge, we want to recognize the City of Austin's contribution to supporting the community, including the strong collaboration between community organizations and entities responsible for disaster response. The nation was hit last year with a crisis for which we were ill-prepared, and the healing ahead of us will be yet another challenge. In addition to showing us how interconnected our lives are, this pandemic highlighted the significant challenges that our society and our local community face.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the inequities experienced daily by People of Color, including Asian American, Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latino Communities, and other historically marginalized populations (including, but not limited to LGBTQIA+, the elderly, the geographically isolated, people living with disabilities, etc.) and the opportunities for the City to adequately prepare for disasters. It is imperative that these inequities are addressed prior to the next catastrophe.

Foremost, it is important to note that disparate outcomes during the pandemic for People of Color and low-income families could have been significantly lessened if there was equitable access to health care/insurance, technology, and economic opportunity in our community. This also rang true during Winter Storm Uri as described in the Mayor's Committee on People with Disabilities' resolution acknowledging the impacts of the storm. These disparate outcomes will continue to exist if we don't work together to center the most vulnerable in our work.

In December 2020, Central Health Equity Policy Council convened the Pandemic Equity Committee to assess health outcomes related to the pandemic and develop recommendations to help ensure that decision-making regarding the City's preparedness, disaster response, and post-disaster community healing and recovery meaningfully accounts for existent and emergent disparities experienced by People of Color, including Asian American, Black, Indigenous and Hispanic/Latino Communities, and other historically marginalized populations.

After several months of assessment, dialogue, and deliberation, the Pandemic Equity Committee developed the attached “recommendations for action,” which centers equity in the disaster preparation, response, and healing process. In so doing, this helps identify strategies and institutionalize systems that more effectively address the needs of the most vulnerable members of our community. This document will be evergreen to be responsive to community needs and feedback.

## Central Health Equity Policy Council – Pandemic Equity Committee

### Recommendations for Action in Identifying and Addressing Inequities in Disaster Preparedness, Disaster Response and Post-Disaster Community Healing and Recovery

#### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Central Health Equity Policy (CHEP) Council convened the Pandemic Equity Committee in December 2020 to assess pandemic-related health outcomes and develop recommendations that can help lead to more equitable outcomes for People of Color, including Asian American, Black, Indigenous and Hispanic/Latino Communities, and other historically marginalized populations. Attachment One to these “recommendations for action” provides additional background about the CHEP and its Pandemic Equity Committee.

It became clear within the first few months of the pandemic that adverse health outcomes relating to COVID-19 were not equally distributed across race or ethnicity. The latest data from the COVID-19 dashboards still note disparate outcomes for Latinos (specifically with regard to cases, hospitalizations, deaths, and vaccine access) and Black people (specifically with regard to hospitalizations, deaths, and vaccine access). Attachment Two summarizes the latest data that is available from the Austin Public Health and Texas Department of State Health Services COVID-19 dashboards as well as data related to Winter Storm Uri. It is possible that these disparities may actually be greater than indicated on the dashboards because there is a high percentage for “race-unknown”, “other race”, and “ethnicity-unknown,” (specifically for cases) which calls attention to the need for clarity and consistency in data collection and reporting.

After several months of assessment, dialogue, and deliberation, the CHEP Council’s Pandemic Equity Committee offers the following recommendations:

- **Disaster Preparedness**
  1. Center equity in the City of Austin Emergency Operations Plan (Plan) and make this an evergreen document.
  2. Improve data collection to more quickly respond to the needs of People of Color, including Asian American, Black, Indigenous and Hispanic/Latino Communities, and other marginalized populations.
- **Disaster Response**
  3. Designate community voices who will be activated at the beginning of a disaster to inform the process at the highest level of the Incident Command System and the Emergency Operations Center (EOC). These people will be determined by the groups who are involved with revising and continuously updating the Plan and who represent the interest of People of Color, including Asian American, Black, Indigenous and Hispanic/Latino Communities, and other marginalized communities.

4. Engage behavioral scientists through Central Health, Austin Public Health, and the EOC to inform education campaigns and communications.

- **Post-Disaster Community Healing and Recovery**

5. Develop and implement a “trauma-informed”<sup>1</sup> community-wide plan to address trauma and call for healing during re-entry and recovery.
6. Promote multidisciplinary collaboration to: assess the widespread impact of trauma, specifically related to domestic and family violence; recognize the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and other community members; collectively respond and support the community using trauma-informed approaches; and support development of trauma-informed policies, procedures, and practices.

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<sup>1</sup> Trauma-Informed Care (TIC): an approach that explicitly acknowledges the role trauma plays in people’s lives. TIC means that every part of an organization or program understands the impact of trauma on the individuals they serve and promotes cultural and organization change in responding to the consumers/clients served. (Adapted by Cardea Services from SAMHSA’s Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach and NASTAD’s Trauma-Informed Approaches Toolkit)

## Central Health Equity Policy Council – Pandemic Equity Committee

### Recommendations for Action in Identifying and Addressing Inequities in Disaster Preparedness, Disaster Response and Post-Disaster Community Healing and Recovery

Through our research, informational interviews, and expertise, we strongly recommend Austin City Council immediately implement the following changes to ensure the City and emergency response structures are properly prepared in advance of the next disaster; respond swiftly, equitably, and compassionately; and have the infrastructure in place to address post-disaster healing from trauma.

From conversations with different community groups, we heard several members strongly express that the disaster response to the COVID-19 pandemic and to Winter Storm Uri could have been handled better. The response to these recent emergencies was not improved or informed from lessons gleaned from prior disaster response efforts (like floods in Southeast Travis County and the water crisis of 2018) and from experiences and knowledge gained early in the pandemic. When dealing with public safety and potentially life-threatening situations, it is incumbent upon the entity having jurisdiction to conduct a thorough and honest assessment of any shortcomings and failures that may have occurred during the disaster response and demonstrate a commitment to proactively address these shortcomings and failures in an expeditious manner. Just as the winter storm arose unexpectedly, other emergencies may arise within a moment's notice. This assessment and corresponding system changes must be shared publicly and broadly to ensure the community has confidence in the emergency operations going forward.

#### **Disaster Preparedness:**

We may never be fully prepared for a disaster, regardless of how many people are involved or how many resources are dedicated. However, there are timely opportunities to learn and improve upon our collective disaster preparedness, particularly preparedness and coordination among intergovernmental and regional partners:

- 1. Center equity in the City of Austin Emergency Operations Plan (Plan) and make this an evergreen document.**

The most recent Plan was revised in 2016 to clarify various items and again in 2020. The City of Austin Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management is responsible for developing emergency management plans that must be revised every four to five years.

Here are the recommendations to update the Plan:

- a. Make equity the central principle in planning for emergencies and disaster recovery.** Plans and standard operating procedures (SOPs) should take into account the disadvantages and socio-economic needs as well as the impact of the disaster on the city's most vulnerable populations. This includes ensuring all SOPs are developed or revised through an equity lens and that communications are translated into Spanish, the five most spoken Asian languages, and additional languages. In addition, methods and tools that

facilitate the dissemination of information to hard-to-reach communities should be identified and utilized. The Asian American Quality of Life Advisory Commission recently put forth a budget recommendation to provide \$100,000 to the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) for translations, interpretations, and emergency communications to non-English speaking communities. The Pandemic Equity Committee supports this recommendation.

In addition, the Plan must be reviewed by community-based organizations (CBOs) and community members to validate its approach to equity and it must become an evergreen document. We suggest involving:

- the Joint Inclusion Committee;
- City of Austin Equity and Inclusion Program Manager;
- each community complete count committee that was created during the 2020 Census through the Austin-Travis County Complete Count Committee;
- faith leaders in the Black community, as they typically serve as first responders during a disaster; and
- other CBOs that represent the lived experience of People of Color, including Asian American, Black, Indigenous and Hispanic/Latino Communities, and other historically marginalized communities to ensure their voices are elevated and heard.

As a response to the pandemic, community coalitions convened to respond to the disaster in areas that the EOC was lacking and ineffectively reaching communities in need. Those coalitions and natural networks that exist to support communities must be recognized and formally incorporated into the EOC's SOPs to ensure they are activated ahead of future disasters.

We understand the City of Austin's Equity Office has been incorporated into the EOC, sits with command staff and that the Chief Resiliency Officer will be integrated into the department. Nonetheless, the feedback received indicates there are many community voices that are not listened to or supported in a meaningful way.

- b. Second, an **SOP must be developed that ensures funds are allocated towards stipends and paid training** for CBOs and community members to learn how the EOC works.
- c. Third, **the Plan has an incomplete Hazard Risk Index, which serves as the basis for the City's Hazard Mitigation Plan.** Each hazard was identified based on historical records, national data sources, and discussions with experts. These hazards were prioritized based on the probability of occurrence and potential financial losses from each hazard and then prioritized based on the severity of impact, such as lives lost and other factors,

which are not elaborated upon in the plan. By more clearly defining community factors, centering equity in the prioritization model, and broadening the Hazard Risk Index, the City will improve its response to future disasters.

- d. Fourth, **the updated Plan needs to include a long-term goal to establish a dedicated emergency funding stream for providers during a disaster** as they care for vulnerable populations, whose financial loss is greatest during a disaster.
- e. Fifth, **develop and/or review after-action reports about previous Austin disasters to determine what lessons can be gleaned and adjust the Plan accordingly.** The City has experienced numerous disasters, including the Onion Creek floods, Hurricane Maria, Bastrop fires, Austin water crisis of 2018, Winter Storm Uri, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Following each disaster, it is the EOC's practice for each department to develop a post-event debrief. Each department must develop their debrief with equity in mind and address the question, "did we address the needs of the most vulnerable?"
- f. Sixth, **the current Plan does not adequately prepare the City for other real scenarios such as civil unrest.** Following the death of George Floyd, the City of Minneapolis was unprepared for what ensued. In the event that this happens in Austin, the City must be prepared to respond quickly and compassionately.
- g. Seventh, **the updated Plan should include an SOP that uses the Center for Disease Control's (CDC) Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) and 211 data as baseline data and that engages the City's demographer for all decisions made.** According to the CDC, "A number of factors, including poverty, lack of access to transportation, and crowded housing may weaken a community's ability to prevent human suffering and financial loss in a disaster. These factors are known as social vulnerability." By incorporating the SVI into the plan, the City will center individuals who are most vulnerable in our community and ensure they are meaningfully represented in decision-making. In addition, by utilizing 211 data, the City will be able to more quickly identify which geographic areas should be the focus of their response.
- h. Eighth, for neighborhoods/areas that face frequent flooding (like Southeast Travis County) or other safety hazards, **the City should make efforts to develop localized emergency response plans for those neighborhoods/areas and work cooperatively with stakeholders in those neighborhoods/areas.**
- i. Ninth, to ensure confidence in the after-action assessment and response process, we suggest that **the City of Austin and Travis County each identify an independent party who will review and assess the EOC's response to: after-action self-assessments, incorporate community feedback, and Winter Storm Review Task Force recommendations.**

**2. Improve data collection to quicken the response to People of Color, including Asian American, Black, Indigenous and Hispanic/Latino Communities, and other marginalized populations by:**

- a. Standardizing data collection, analysis, and presentation across all levels of government, including city, state, and federal governments. Including the Texas Division of Emergency Management as part of this effort will ensure disaster data analytics play a more integral role in equitable response and recovery.
- b. Including more granular data, such as race and ethnicity, primary language, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, and social/behavioral risk factors.
- c. Engaging translators/interpreters and culturally sensitive/affirming workers. This includes solidifying a partnership with the Quality of Life Advisory Commissions for Asian Americans, African Americans, Hispanics/Latinos, Individuals with Developmental Disabilities, and other relevant groups for review and translation of culturally sensitive data and educational materials.
- d. Addressing and eliminating all internal barriers to data collection, such as lack of data collection training, language barriers, lack of resources to continue data collection for other important research during disaster responses, patients' aversion to sharing data, and delays in entering data into a system and reporting on the same day, etc.
- e. Supporting the re-establishment of the Office for Health Equity, also known as the Center for Elimination of Disproportionality and Disparities, the Hogg Foundation Equity and Inclusion Committee, and the reinstatement of the Office of Minority Health and Health Equity at Texas' Health and Human Services Commission, which is charged with further informing an equitable distribution strategy and long-term disaster planning and response.
- f. Partnering with Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Hispanic-Serving and Minority Serving Institutions to address the implicit biases that are present in data collection and analysis.

Delays during the pandemic response occurred because of a failure to make decisions based on available data, including historical and real-time data, that clearly showed where high-need and under-resourced communities are located. Reliance on these readily available data sources will significantly contribute to an overall improved disaster response and assist with prioritizing populations and ZIP codes that are disproportionately impacted. Establishing resource hubs that serve neighborhood areas that are under-resourced and demonstrate high needs and social vulnerability will also help improve disaster response in these areas.



Data and information delays, confusion, and barriers to delivering a focused response to priority populations and ZIP codes must be properly addressed. Travis County took one month to identify People of Color who were disproportionately affected by COVID-19 regarding positivity rates, hospitalizations, and ultimately, death. Current data exchange structures, such as the Nationwide Emergency Department Sample Database, utilized in this disaster response are outdated. The duplicative data entry requirements for the vaccine caused delays in vaccine administration. State and local health systems use different platforms for data exchange and contact tracing that do not reconcile. The administrative burden on the local healthcare systems to feed data into the public health department is significant. It takes precious time and staff away from the more important work of the disaster response.

### **Disaster Response**

With an evergreen Plan and robust community representation, the City can improve its preparedness and response to a disaster and ensure an equitable approach that accounts for all of Austin's communities. During a disaster, it's imperative that the right people be at the emergency response table to elevate the voices of those who are underrepresented and equip the City with the tools they need to be successful. This can be accomplished by:

- 3. Ensuring designated community voices are activated at the beginning of a disaster response to inform the process at the highest level of the Incident Command System and the EOC. These community representatives will be determined by the groups who are involved with revising and continuously updating the Plan and should represent People of Color, including Asian American, Black, Indigenous and Hispanic/Latino Communities, and other marginalized populations.**

There are many CBOs who strive to improve the lives of the most vulnerable and ensure they have access to and support for what they need. They work to advance equitable policy, prioritize resolving disparities, and aim to improve the lives of many Austinites with measurable outcomes. By amplifying community voices at the disaster response table via these designated representatives, we can ensure representation and community ownership of populations who have been historically underrepresented.

- 4. Engaging behavioral scientists through Central Health, Austin Public Health, and the EOC to inform education campaigns and communications.**

Behavioral health scientists are experts at crafting messages that address barriers and help people create desired changes in behavior. The messages that the EOC shared were generalized for the Travis County community. It is critical to be culturally responsive and appropriate when crafting messaging and outreach to provide information on safety behaviors and address vaccine hesitancy. Should a future disaster include the need for a vaccine or a government-distributed resource, Texas' large number of residents who live in households that include at least one non-citizen (approximately 6 million) would benefit from consistent messaging that confirms the availability of resources without regard to citizenship or immigration status.

In addition, Communities of Color face barriers in receiving information so it's important to engage trusted leaders and/or organizations to help disseminate information, whether it be about changing social behaviors, messaging about preparing for difficulties ahead, or simply offering words of hope and unity within the community.

### **Post-Disaster Healing**

Providing support to People of Color, including Asian American, Black, Indigenous and Hispanic/Latino Communities, and other marginalized populations that are disproportionately affected before, during, and after a disaster is critical to the long-term health and economic recovery of the city. Trauma is inherent in any disaster, creating a need and demand for mental health services and other resources that fall under the Social Determinants of Health, including but not limited to assistance with utilities, food insecurity, temporary housing, and other basic needs. Recommendations for post-disaster healing include the following:

- 5. Develop and implement a “trauma-informed” community-wide plan to address trauma and call for healing during re-entry and recovery that uses a “strengths-based service delivery approach and is grounded in an understanding of and responsiveness to the impact of trauma;** that emphasizes physical, psychological, and emotional safety for both providers and survivors; and that creates opportunities for survivors to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment." (Source: Hopper, E. K., Bassuk, E. L., & Olivet, J. (2010)). We must do this by:
  - a. offering counseling and support for partners and families;
  - b. addressing mental health and substance use;
  - c. and addressing the capacity limitation and need for mental health services.
  
- 6. Promote multidisciplinary collaboration to: assess the widespread impact of trauma, specifically related to domestic and family violence, recognize the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and other community members, collectively respond and support the community using trauma-informed approaches, and inform development of trauma-informed policies, procedures, and practices. As part of this effort, we must:**
  - a. Monitor hotlines for trends in domestic violence and determine where support is needed.
  - b. Develop an Austin-Travis County plan to address domestic violence.
  - c. Ensure the City of Austin’s Office of Violence Prevention and domestic violence shelters are adequately funded and equipped to equitably provide resources to the community and launch a perpetual messaging campaign. Hence, populations, especially vulnerable ones, are aware of its services. Also, coordinate with Travis County’s Attorney to align strategies and disseminate information and resources appropriately through Austin-Travis County to avoid redundancies.

The recommendations to improve Austin-Travis County’s disaster preparedness, response, and post-disaster healing from trauma will improve the outcomes for all residents. These are

aligned with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's health equity principles, the largest philanthropy in the U.S. focused solely on health. The pandemic is our current crisis, but we need to prepare for future catastrophes and challenges and work toward a more equitable reality.

## **Attachment One**

### **CENTRAL HEALTH EQUITY POLICY COUNCIL**

The Central Health Equity Policy (CHEP) Council launched in September 2015 and is composed of more than 80 volunteer community partners. Central Health staff provides administrative support to the community-led Central Health Equity Policy Council. The Council includes policy, data, and community advocates passionate about health disparities in our community. All members have received training on evidence-based best practices and innovative policies from local, state, and national experts.

The Council provides recommendations for local chronic disease prevention policies inside the geographic boundaries of Travis County, Texas. The Council's population of concern is Travis County residents at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level. The Council's mission is to identify and advance effective health equity and wellness policies for Travis County residents.

Anyone is welcome to join the CHEP Council at any time. We encourage community groups and individuals to get involved.

### **PANDEMIC EQUITY COMMITTEE OF THE CENTRAL HEALTH EQUITY POLICY COUNCIL**

In summer 2020, Central Health interviewed frontline and internal staff to evaluate pandemic response and identify what had been done well up to that point and what could be done moving forward. Following the completion of interviews, several members of the CHEP Council convened to evaluate the interview findings and discuss an approach to improving future disaster responses and making them more equitable. As the conversation evolved, the group determined the discussion should be formalized into a committee, open to anyone with interest in joining.

The Pandemic Equity Committee launched in December 2020 and has met bi-monthly for approximately eight months to assess health outcomes related to the pandemic and develop recommendations to help ensure that decision-making regarding our community's disaster preparedness, disaster response, and post-disaster community healing and recovery meaningfully accounts for existent and emergent disparities experienced by People of Color, including Asian American, Black, Indigenous and Hispanic/Latino Communities, and other marginalized populations. This work involved extensive interviews of other organizations on the frontline, listening sessions with Community Health Workers, and touring the Emergency Operations Center to better understand the Incident Command Structure. The committee would like to present these findings to City leadership and work in collaboration for action.

## Attachment Two

### PANDEMIC HEALTH OUTCOMES DATA

#### Demographics – Travis County

Data was sourced from the [U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Travis County, Texas](#)

Race	Percentage of Population
American-Indian/Alaska Native	1.2%
Asian	7.4%
Black	8.9%
Hispanic/Latino	33.6%
Two or More Races	2.7%
White (not Hispanic or Latino)	48.9%

#### COVID-19 Cases

(AS REPORTED BY AUSTIN PUBLIC HEALTH AS OF AUGUST 6, 2021)

Race	Outcome
Asian	3.03%
Black	7.55%
Other Races	13.97%
Unknown	19.79%
White	55.13%
Pacific Islander	0.13%

Ethnicity	Outcome
Hispanic	42.18%
Non-Hispanic	36.94%
Ethnicity Unknown	20.88%

#### COVID- 19 Hospitalizations

(AS REPORTED BY AUSTIN PUBLIC HEALTH AS OF AUGUST 6, 2021)

Race	Outcome
American-Indian/Alaskan	0.3%
Asian	2%
Black	11.02%
Other Races	14.83%
Unknown	0%
White	71.84%

Ethnicity	Outcome
Hispanic	45.4%
Non-Hispanic	54.6%
Ethnicity Unknown	0%

**COVID-19 Deaths**

(AS REPORTED BY AUSTIN PUBLIC HEALTH AS OF AUGUST 6, 2021)

Race	Outcome
Asian	2.56%
Black	11.23%
Other Races	15.68%
Unknown	1.22%
White	68.97%
Native American Alaskan	0.11%

Ethnicity	Outcome
Hispanic	49.94%
Non-Hispanic	49.28%
Ethnicity Unknown	0.78%

**COVID-19 Vaccine Access (Demographics of Fully Vaccinated People in Travis County)**

(AS REPORTED BY THE TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF STATE HEALTH SERVICES AS OF AUGUST 6, 2021)

Race	Outcome
Asian	7.98%
Black	3.73%
Hispanic/Latino	20.41%
Unknown	7.61%
Other Races	14.14%
White	46.12%

**WINTER STORM URI DEMOGRAPHIC DATA**

(AS REPORTED BY [THE CITY OF AUSTIN HOUSING & PLANNING DEPARTMENT](#) AS OF JUNE 8, 2021)  
 Demographics of persons impacted by Winter Storm Uri, eligible for tenant stabilization programs. Please note, eligibility must be based on demonstrated financial impact by covid-19 and not Winter Storm Uri.

Race	Outcome
Asian	7.45%
Black	25.74%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1.10%
Two or More Races	2.76%
American Indian or Alaskan Native	0.55%
Other Races	15.07%
White	47.24%

### **Attachment Three**

The committee met and shared the draft memo with several organizations in the Austin area to gather feedback on the recommendations including:

- African American Resource Advisory Commission
- Asian American Quality of Life Advisory Commission
- Austin Latino Coalition
- Black Leaders Collective
- Community Advancement Network
- Emergency Operations Center
- Joint Inclusion Committee
- Winter Storm Review Task Force