



Building a foundation for racial equity.

Our New Direction

JR O JOHN R. OISHEI FOUNDATION





Building a foundation for racial equity.

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SECTION ONE: OUR COMMITMENT

Real change
requires
real change.

To our

friends and

partners.

For decades, the Oishei Foundation has supported a diverse group of hard-working organizations and individuals, all dedicated to building a thriving Buffalo-Niagara region.

We're proud of our work and, through our partners, believe we've made a difference. But as we look around, it's clear that many of our neighbors—especially communities of color—still face stark inequities.

We've known this for years—which is why we started more concentrated efforts to support racial equity in 2017. We've built on these initiatives since then, including a recent strategic planning process through which we gained an even deeper understanding of some challenging truths:

Buffalo is both one of the poorest and one of the most segregated cities in the country—a city in which Black people, concentrated on the city's East Side, earn 40% less, die 10 years sooner, and own their homes one-third less often than white people.*

Can we really call ourselves the City of Good Neighbors when these are the facts?

Yes, we came together as a community after the racist attack on May 14, 2022. But the systemic barriers never went away. The COVID-19 pandemic and 2022 blizzard—both of which disproportionately affected those on the East Side, who are predominately Black—further exposed Buffalo's racial disparities.

The truth is our region's resurgence will not be complete until everyone is included. And that requires getting at the root causes that lead to racial inequities so that everyone can prosper. When people are financially stable, they can afford access to better healthcare, education, and transportation. They can build sustainable wealth. And the entire community benefits, with more well-paying jobs, more thriving businesses, and more ways for everyone to contribute. By removing barriers, more people can have opportunities and a path to realizing their full potential.

We recognize that we need to change our approach to achieve these goals. Moving forward—and we must move forward—the Oishei Foundation will narrow our focus to broaden our impact. Specifically, we will address the root causes of racial inequity and build financial prosperity for a racially just region. We will start with Black communities on Buffalo's East Side, where there are dozens of vibrant, proud neighborhoods, home to strong Black communities and people who contribute in powerful ways, yet do not participate equally in our regional growth.

While our initial focus will be in communities on the East Side, our mission will not be complete until all parts of our community can thrive.

Our new strategic framework is a beginning. Narrowing our focus in this new direction, we recognize that we have much to learn.

So, we will start by listening and learning, as we center the experience and expertise of the people living and working in East Side communities to inform how we best advance this strategic framework, because we believe those closest to the issues hold the keys to identifying the solutions.

We are inspired by leaders and organizations already doing this work.

We are grateful for our many partners across the region.

And we are hopeful that you will join in our efforts to build a foundation for racial equity—a foundation for a better Buffalo.

With resolve,

William G. Gisel, Jr., Chairman of the Board of Directors
Glenn Jackson, Chair-Elect
Christina P. Orsi, President

[*see endnotes for sources](#)

Centering
racial equity,
changing
systems.



OVERVIEW

The Oishei Foundation's new strategic direction is built upon the following framework—approved by our board of directors and embraced by our team after a year of diligent research and consideration. It asserts what we stand for, defines our goals, and reaffirms our ongoing commitment to our community.

As a framework, it is intentionally designed to evolve over time as we build on strengths together.

Mission.

Vision.

Values.



MISSION

We work with communities to change systems and build financial prosperity for a racially just, vibrant Buffalo-Niagara region.

VISION

A thriving, prosperous community for all, where diversity is our strength.

VALUES

Act against racism.

We are actively countering racism and the systemic barriers faced by Black and other residents of color in our region.

Build on strengths.

We center colleagues' and communities' agency, strengths, resources, and opportunities.

Be trustworthy.

We build and sustain trust through transparency, accountability, and humility.

Work together.

We listen to collaborate and build partnerships—across sectors and across differences.

Make a difference.

We achieve positive impacts by investing in our own and the region's capacity to learn, improve, and change.

Strategic

focus

and goal.

The Oishei Foundation will focus on building financial prosperity through a systems change approach, starting in Buffalo's East Side communities and expanding throughout the Buffalo-Niagara region over time.

By initially focusing on East Side communities, we will balance capacity with data and knowledge of significant historical, systemic, and recurring barriers to prosperity. We will support the assets of the communities on the East Side that are full of knowledge, pride, resilience, strength, and creativity.

Our goal is to contribute to the transformation of systems to support racial equity and decrease the disparities in regional prosperity (financial security and wealth).

As outlined in the following strategic pillars, we will build upon past achievements and leverage our capabilities while changing how we work with and alongside communities to achieve lasting change.

Strategic pillars.

These pillars represent new intentions, as well as new ways of thinking about and doing our work.

While specific activities and tactics will emerge, our success will depend upon mobilizing existing strengths as we build our capacity around these strategic pillars:

1

Centering racial equity.

- Act against racism by aligning our organization's governance, operations, grantmaking, nonprofit capacity building, and leadership programs with our strategic focus and goals.
- Prioritize breaking down barriers to wealth creation of Black residents on the East Side, then communities of color throughout the Buffalo-Niagara region.
- Strengthen white ally engagement in efforts to mitigate systemic bias and deepen involvement in educating on anti-racism to support racial equity across the region.

2

Becoming a learning organization.

- Use learning to inform responsiveness and reward action: build "action-learning cycles" (i.e., ask what we want to happen, ask what happened, then apply lessons learned, "now what?") into all programmatic efforts.
- Build collaborative and continuous learning partnerships with the community to listen, reflect, and evolve; community knowledge, experiences, concerns, creativity, and power are critical for generating strong and sustainable outcomes.
- Prioritize learning about and identifying inequities and disparities in Oishei's policies and practices that have given white people and white-led organizations material advantages over people of color.
- Create an internal culture of accountability for changing individual and institutional views, beliefs, decision-making, recruitment of board and staff, and sourcing grantees/partners.

3

Building, sharing, and using power.

- Share decision-making with residents most affected by wealth disparities and co-create strategic activities and measures of progress.
- Build bridges and meaningful connections, join and/or set tables for community leaders of varied lived experience to learn together, build community, and align around a common goal.
- Support and/or lead cross-sector partnerships to align and enhance resources/capacity while centering community voices.

4

Supporting systems change to address root causes, including policy solutions, to dismantle racial and other structural barriers to prosperity in marginalized communities.

- Support advocacy work, which may include grassroots mobilization, public education campaigns, and research.
- Use communications strategies to educate and influence.
- Create and/or support high-impact coalitions to address systems change.
- Revitalize local assets, the primary building blocks of a sustainable community development (e.g., neighborhood commercial corridors, green infrastructure, vacant lot development, quality affordable housing, etc.).
- Promote equitable and inclusive civic engagement.
- Direct grant funding toward resolving underlying root causes of inequity in communities.

5

Leveraging all our financial resources by making grants and mission-aligned investments.

- Align grantmaking policies, procedures, and decision-making with strategic direction and goal.
- Use the investment portfolio to go beyond grantmaking to support mission while ensuring strong fiscal stewardship.

Indicators

of progress.

SHORT-TERM (1–3 years)

Operationalizing the new strategy.

As we build specific plans to drive our new direction, we will keep these short-term goals in mind, understanding that

change will take time.

- Community, public, and private coalitions are joined or built, supported, and aligned on common strategy and goals.
- Racial-equity focused stakeholder engagement is our way of practice.
- The Oishei Foundation has developed a policy agenda.
- Increased participation of community members in Oishei decision-making.
- Staff and board have cultural humility to work with relevant stakeholders.
- Governance, operations, resources, and policies/ procedures reviewed and revised to align with values and strategy.
- The Foundation's grantmaking practices are experienced as transparent, meaningful, and streamlined for grant-seekers.
- Develop mission-aligned investment criteria to utilize in decision-making for the Foundation's investment portfolio.
- Increased economic investment on Buffalo's East Side: neighborhood revitalization initiatives and civic infrastructure, without displacement.

LONG-TERM (>10 years)

Collective efforts contributing toward positive long-term change.

We realize the Oishei Foundation is **one of many contributors** to long-term, generational change and we plan to work in partnership with stakeholders across the community to drive toward change together.

- Communities of color attract outside public/private investment.
- Decline in people of color (families/children) living in poverty.
- Reduced spatial segregation by race—dissimilarity index and isolation/exposure indices.
- Median income increases, disaggregated by race.
- Household debt reduced to not be a barrier to economic security.
- Increased rates/amounts of home ownership, savings/retirement, and business ownership for people of color.
- Wealth gap closing in Buffalo-Niagara region for people of color.

These short- and long-term indicators of progress are **a starting point**—preliminary milestones that will be modified and updated with input from the communities we work with.



Next steps, together.

Working together to build a foundation for racial equity will take time. We will approach this work in phases.

Phase 1: Understanding

From June 2022 through September 2023, the Oishei Foundation conducted initial research, developed the Strategic Framework shared on the previous pages, and designed a transition plan for our grantees and partners.

Phase 2: Commitment

In fall 2023, we began informing grantees, partners, and people throughout the community of our commitment to this new strategic direction.

- The Oishei Foundation is pausing grantmaking as we take time to listen and learn with East Side communities and determine and develop the specifics of our future work. We are enacting a thoughtful transition plan that provides time for partners who rely on us for significant support to adjust. We are also evaluating our philanthropic support programs, using this new direction as a guide.
- These decisions are made with careful consideration to the very valuable work of so many organizations that are deeply committed to advancing racial equity.

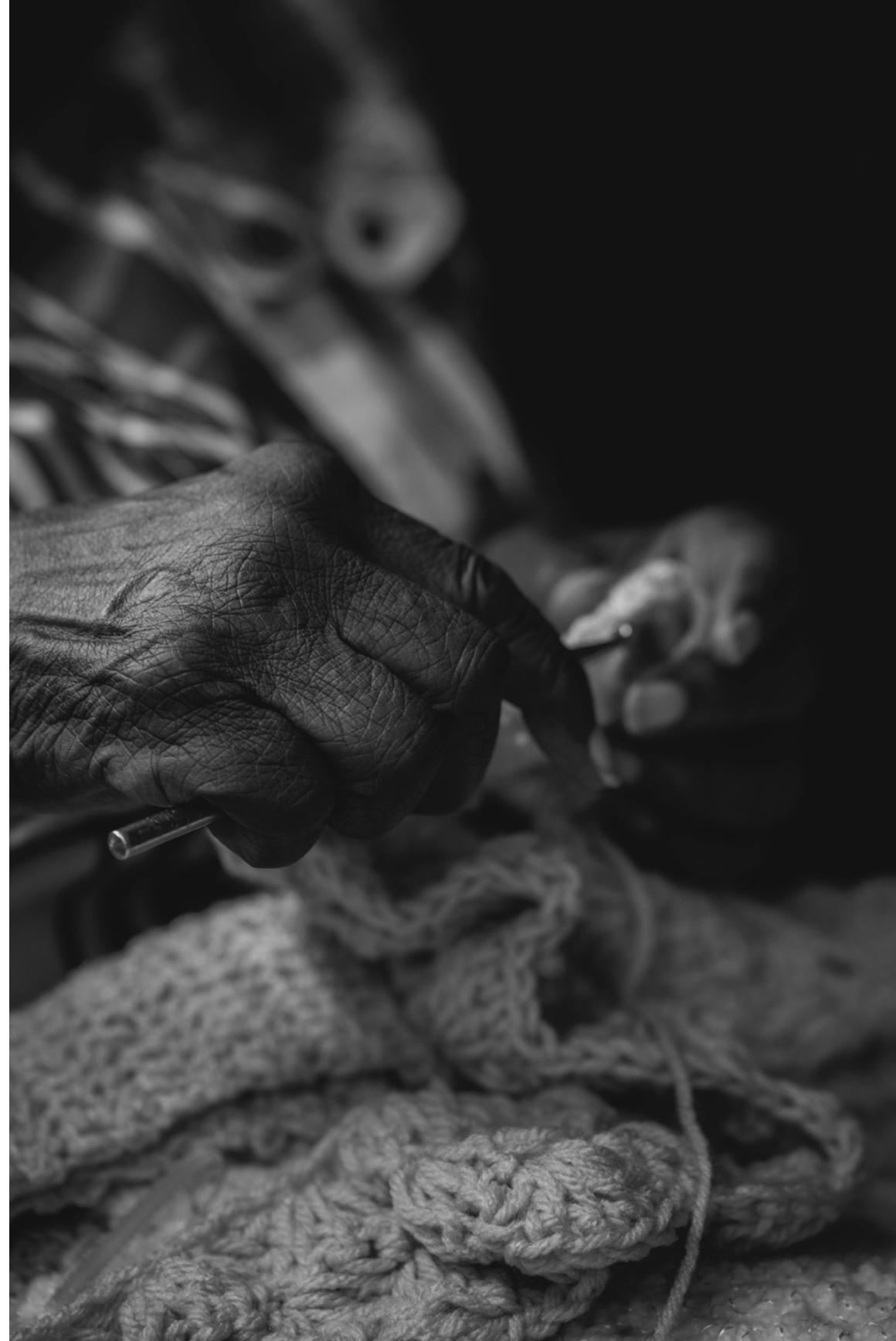
Phase 3: Learning & Engagement

Beginning in fall 2023, we will:

- Invest our time working with and within East Side communities to listen and learn, and to ensure that a shared path forward directly reflects the communities' collective vision of progress and prosperity. During this time, the individuals within these communities will guide our actions—because we believe that those closest to issues and with lived experience hold the keys to possible solutions.
- Further develop a learning culture that will allow us to center equity in learning, improve knowledge sharing, and answer strategic questions to advance our mission.

Phase 4: Action

While our learning and engagement will continue on an ongoing basis, we will also begin taking action. We will try new approaches, and use more of our capabilities in various ways to achieve our shared goals.



It's about time for foundational change.

We will balance urgency with patience, advancing this work together in phases.

We will transition all grantmaking, support, and services to align with our new strategic focus.

We will strengthen existing partnerships and build new ones with those advancing racial equity.

We will leverage our networks, leadership, and resources to rebuild systems that thrive on equity.

We will extend expertise with humility.

We will share our power with communities, so they can lead.

We will listen more, learn more, and act more.

And together,
we will build
a foundation for
racial equity—
a foundation for
a better Buffalo.



This new strategic direction isn't about us.

It's about all of us.

The entire Oishei Foundation team commits to this work, having learned enough to know that we have much more to learn. One thing we are certain of, though, is that we cannot do it alone. This shared opportunity will only be realized if **we work together**—as partners and as a community—joining with those already engaged in these efforts.

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Also contributing:

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Allison Geddes
Brandon Redmond
Annie Todd



JOHN R. OISHEI FOUNDATION

Evidence
and
context.



OVERVIEW

The initial evidence collected here emerged from a year-long internal assessment, external assessment, consultation with partners and community leaders, review of community surveys, and engagement with peer foundations to consider what has and has not achieved change in similar contexts.

We are grateful to so many who shared insights that helped inform this work.

These findings directly support the Oishei Foundation's new strategic direction while affirming the need for our continued learning with communities.

Foundational concepts.

These interrelated principles support our strategic framework and will guide our work moving forward.

1 Economic Justice

2 Shifting Power for Greater Equity

3 Building, Sharing & Wielding Power

4 Curb-Cut Effect & Championing Equity

5 Advancing Equity Through Targeted Universalism

6 Civic Engagement

1

ECONOMIC JUSTICE

“ Philanthropy is commendable, but it must not cause the philanthropist to overlook the circumstances of economic injustice which make philanthropy necessary. ”

Martin Luther King, Jr.¹

2

SHIFTING POWER FOR GREATER EQUITY

“ Presence isn't power. Power is the ability to change the rules. The truth is that we can achieve lasting equitable outcomes, but only when people and communities that traditionally don't have power are able to change the rules and help secure a thriving future. ”

Interview with Rashad Robinson, Executive Director, Color of Change²

3

BUILDING, SHARING & WIELDING POWER

“ To build power: Funders make grants that strengthen capacity and leadership of underserved communities, and address root causes of inequities.

To share power: Funders successfully hand over some control of their inherent power.

To wield power: Funders responsibly leverage reputation, financial assets and capacity to advance equitable goals. ”

POWER MOVES:

Your essential philanthropy assessment guide for equity and justice, NCRP³

4

CURB-CUT EFFECT AND CHAMPIONING EQUITY

“ There's an ingrained societal suspicion that intentionally supporting one group hurts another. That equity is a zero-sum game. In fact, when the nation targets support where it is needed most—when we create the circumstances that allow those who have been left behind to participate and contribute fully—everyone wins. ”

The Curb-Cut Effect

Angela Glover-Blackwell⁴

5

ADVANCING EQUITY THROUGH TARGETED UNIVERSALISM

Targeted Universalism means setting universal goals that can be achieved through targeted approaches. This approach targets the various needs of each group while reminding us that we are all part of the same social fabric.

“ We see a concerted effort to shift the goal from equality to equity. The goal is not, and should never be, equalization of resources, but achieving the universal goal. In some cases, this will require unequal resource expenditures. ”

john a. powell, Targeted Universalism⁵

6

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

In philanthropy's brief history, three distinctive traditions have emerged: relief, improvement, and social reform. Although the approaches are not mutually exclusive, foundations are moving toward “civic engagement.”

They are investing resources in strengthening relationships and nurturing conversations among citizens, to build, as the President of P.E.N., Wendy Puriefoy, put it, more reflective and resourceful local communities. ”

Four Traditions of Philanthropy,
Elizabeth Lynn & Susan Wisely⁶

Internal analysis.

Our first step was to look at ourselves and understand the strengths of our diverse board and staff, our history, and our commitment to racial equity that will support a more systems-focused, transformational, long-term strategy.

- **Leverage resources beyond grantmaking:** Building on past strengths in supporting nonprofit capacity building and leadership development, along with mission-aligned investing, we will leverage and build on all of our resources to enhance the “tools” we use to support greater impact.
- **Position of influence and power:** We can absorb risk and leverage influence, leading in new and different ways that can build support, strengthen partners, and include a multitude of voices that, historically, have been excluded.
- **Strategic collaboration:** In building and/or supporting public, private (business), philanthropic, and nonprofit partnerships both inside and outside of the region, we can enhance and leverage multiple sources of funding to achieve measurable impact and outcomes.
- **Perpetuity:** The Board will follow sound long-term financial principles to ensure the Foundation remains a resource in perpetuity while also being responsive to community needs.
- **Prioritized & narrowed focus:** With grantmaking dollars limited by multi-year commitments and allocation targets, the Foundation must focus its strategy topically and geographically to identify the most impactful contributions it can make to create **enduring community change**.

Community

context.

People of color have consistently faced systemic and policy barriers to financial well-being and, as a result, endure disproportionate levels of poverty and other negative outcomes.

Regional growth isn't benefiting everyone.

- Despite Buffalo's economic revitalization—including the development of the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus and the waterfront, population growth, strength in real estate investment, and the creation of jobs—East Side residents are still at risk of displacement and other forms of continued marginalization. The concentrated racial poverty in the region is a force that is preventing more widespread benefits of economic growth.⁷

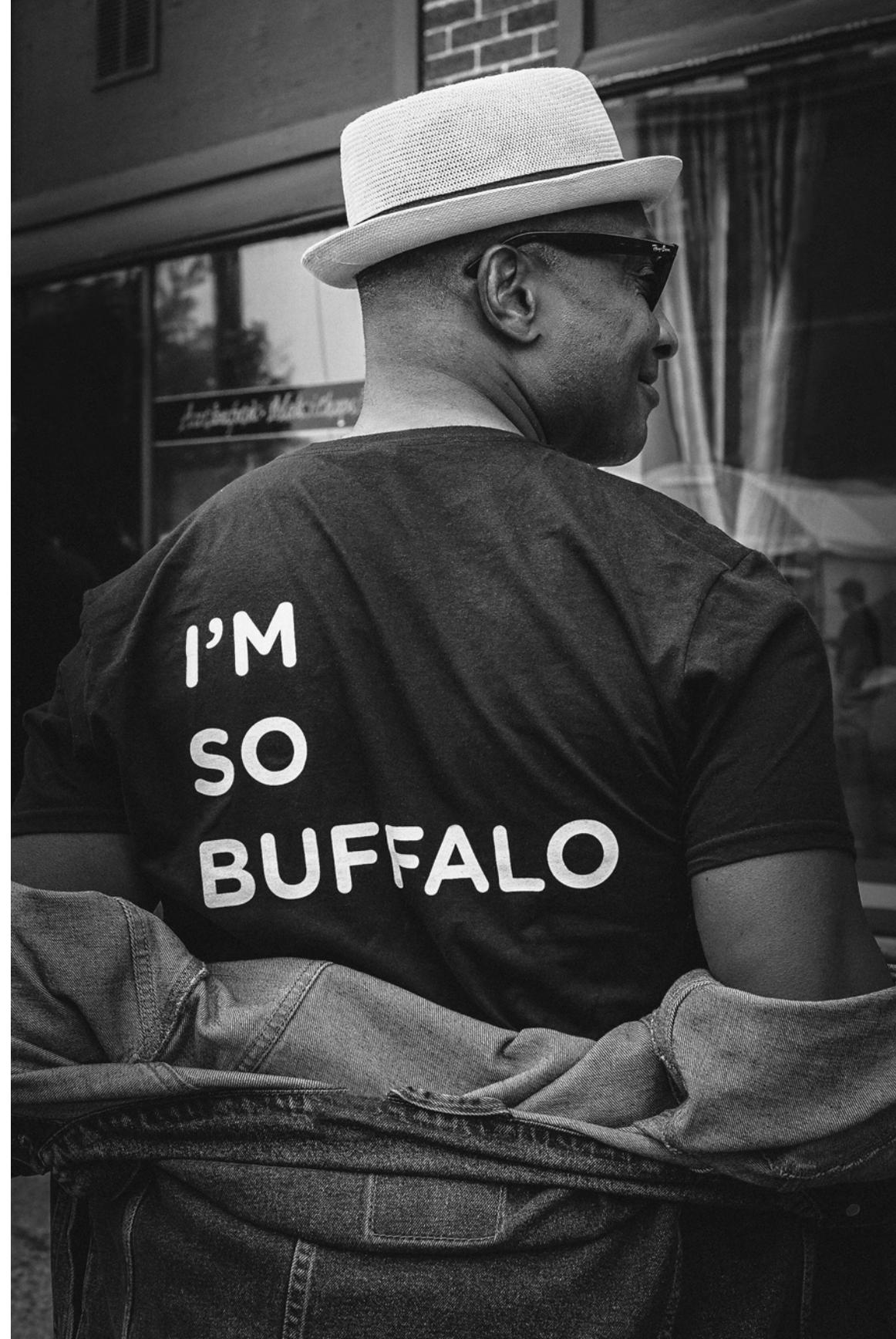
Segregation tied to systemic racism has led to concentrated poverty.

- Brookings Institution ranks the Buffalo-Niagara Metro Area as the seventh most segregated of the largest metro areas in the nation.⁸ Tangible spatial segregation creates intangible social boundaries by limiting the potential for contact with individuals from different racial groups, and by creating differential access to amenities, services, and opportunity.⁹

- This segregation has allowed our region to develop in a way that perpetuates racialized income and wealth inequality, and offers unfair positive returns to privileged communities while draining life and opportunity out of economically disadvantaged communities. The Black communities on the East Side of Buffalo have higher poverty rates, lower homeownership rates, higher unemployment rates, lower median household income, lower net worth, higher rates of homelessness, and higher incidences of asthma, diabetes, and child poverty.¹⁰
- These disparate outcomes along racial lines—often related to policies implemented at the federal, state, and local level and reinforced by private sector practices—are deeply connected to racialized segregation and geographic inequality. This impact has been disproportionately felt on the East Side of Buffalo and has devastating consequences for our neighbors. Over the course of 30 years, an entire generation of Black Buffalonians saw “little if any improvements in their lives.”¹¹

Despite hard work, Black people are not getting ahead.

- While we have seen improvement in education attainment and labor participation rates among Black people, the progress has not significantly reduced poverty rates or addressed the wealth gap, suggesting there are ongoing systemic barriers to accessing economic opportunity.



**FIGURE 1:
HISTORICAL ROOTS OF SEGREGATION**

Inherently racist systems, including redlining, have been a significant factor in determining where Black people live in Buffalo.

Poverty in the City of Buffalo can be traced back to the institutional practice of redlining (denying mortgages to people who wanted to buy homes in historically Black neighborhoods).¹²

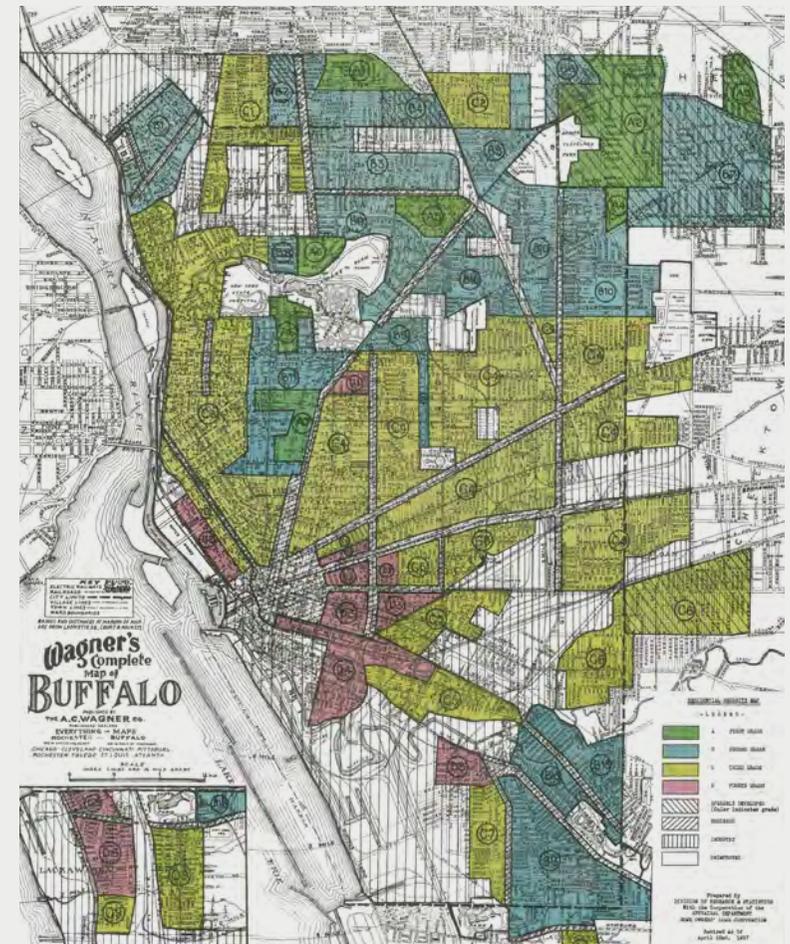
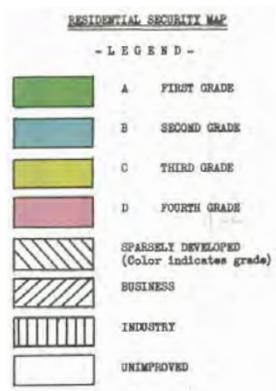


FIGURE 2:
POVERTY IN BUFFALO

Segregation's lasting impacts—and the ongoing effects of racist policies, practices, and power dynamics—can be seen in the percent of the population in Buffalo living below the poverty level by U.S. census tract.

PERCENT OF POPULATION IN BUFFALO LIVING BELOW THE POVERTY LEVEL¹³

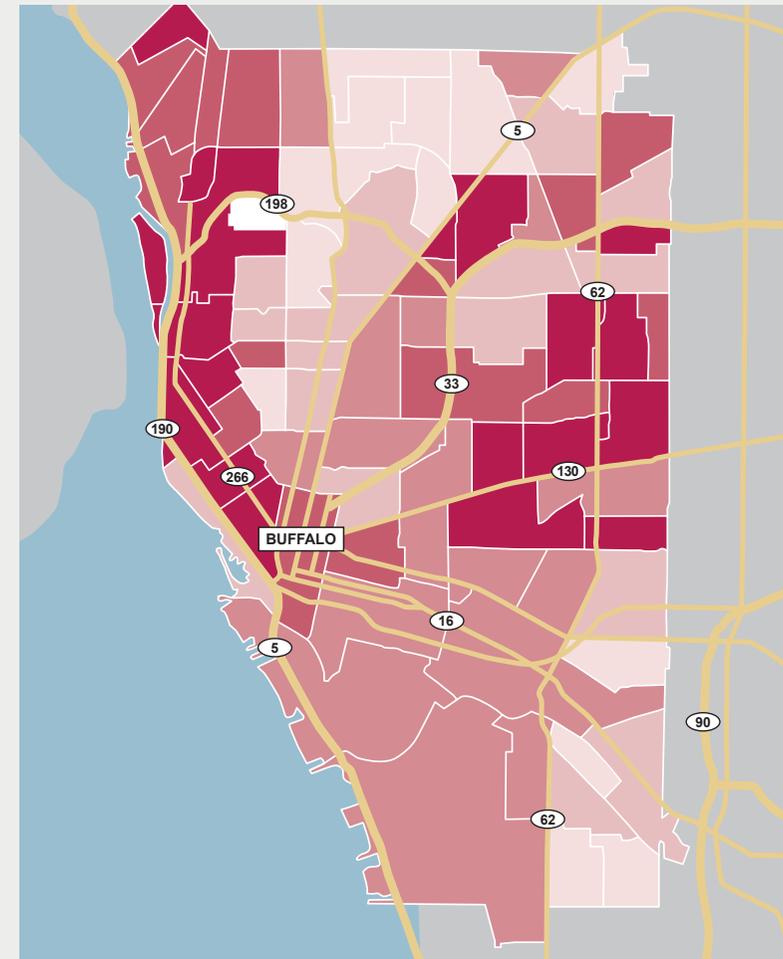
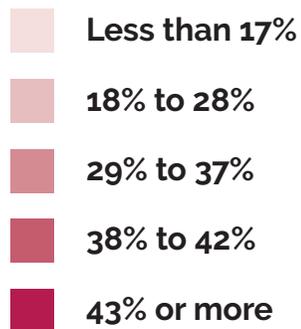
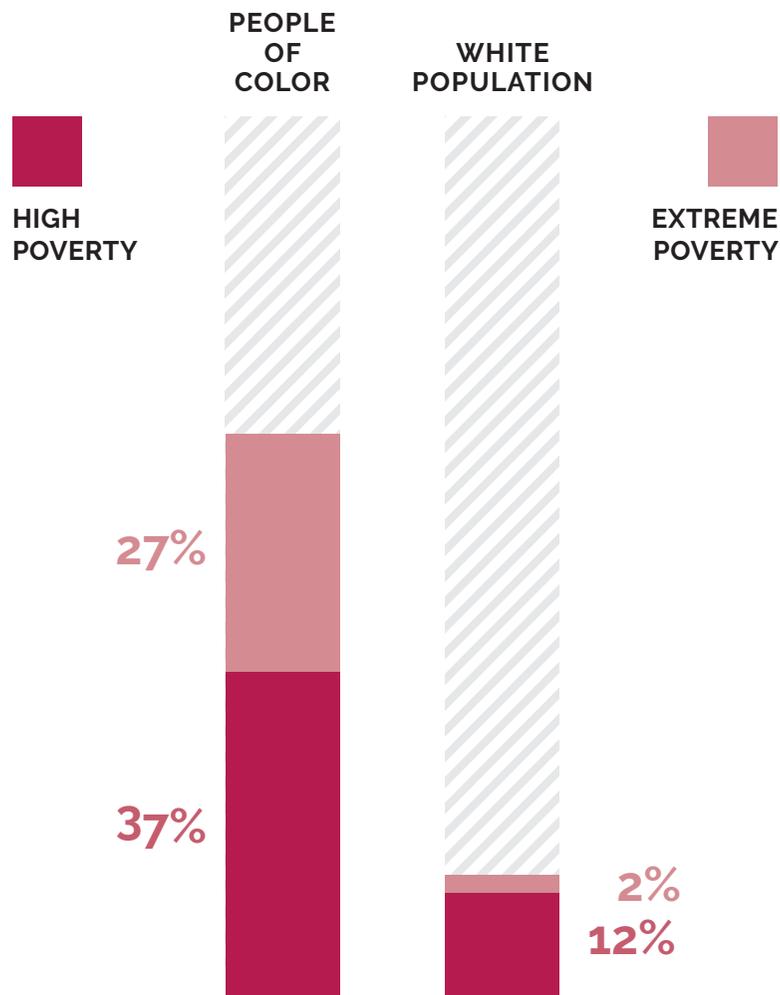


FIGURE 3:
POVERTY BY POPULATION

Spatial segregation has resulted in concentrated poverty in the region.

In Buffalo-Niagara, people of color are much more likely to live in a neighborhood with concentrated high or extreme poverty.¹⁴



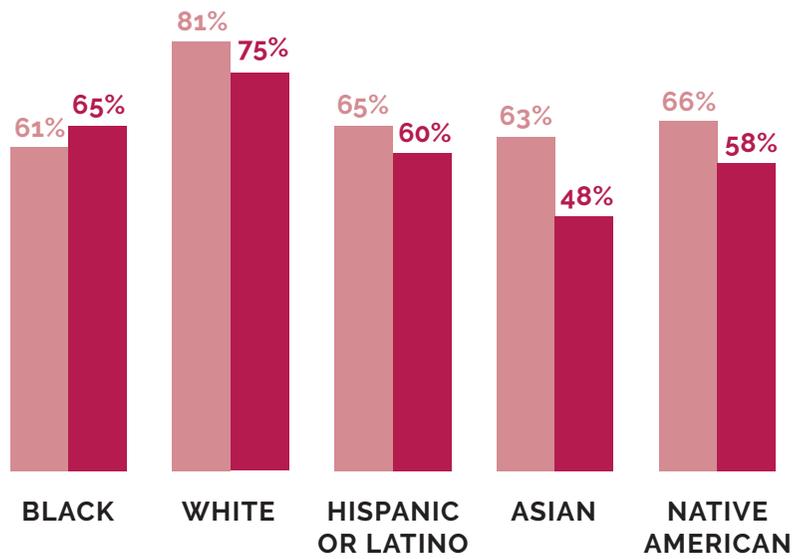
More than 55%
of Buffalo's
East Side residents
pay 30% or more
of their income
on housing,
and 36% spend
more than 50%.¹⁵

Poverty hits children and families particularly hard in Buffalo.

Approximately 43%
of all children
under the age of 18
live below the
poverty line—
higher than it was
in 2005.¹⁶

FIGURE 4:
LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION

PEOPLE 16–64 YEARS OLD LIVING IN
BUFFALO–CHEEKTOWAGA–NIAGARA FALLS METRO AREA¹⁷



Labor force participation is not as disparate as the gap in earnings. Despite hard work, people of color are not getting ahead.

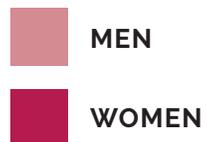
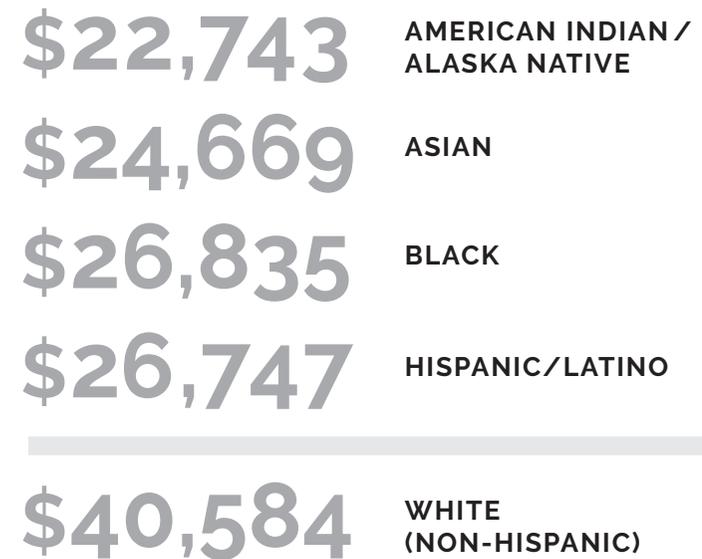


FIGURE 5:
LOWER EARNINGS

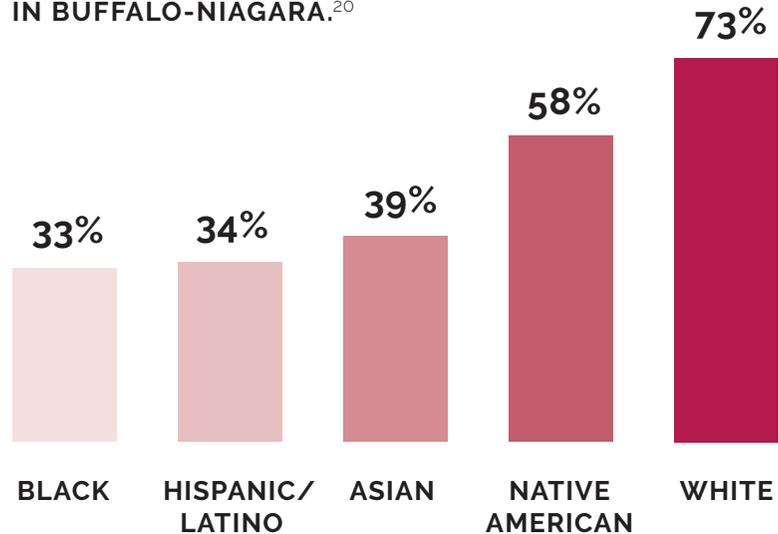
MEDIAN INDIVIDUAL EARNINGS BY RACE/ETHNICITY
IN THE BUFFALO-NIAGARA METRO AREA¹⁸



Workers of color earn less than their white counterparts. If current gaps remain, a median-earning white worker will earn half-a-million dollars more than a median-earning Black worker throughout their careers.¹⁹

FIGURE 6:
HOMEOWNERSHIP DISPARITY

SHARE OF HOUSES OCCUPIED BY OWNERS
IN BUFFALO-NIAGARA.²⁰



Homeownership is a good proxy for wealth and economic mobility—people of color are much less likely to have such an asset.

People of color face significant challenges in building wealth and achieving financial stability.

FIGURE 7:

BARRIERS TO FINANCIAL STABILITY

In a recent survey, community members prioritized the most pressing issues they face.

#1 Financial hardship

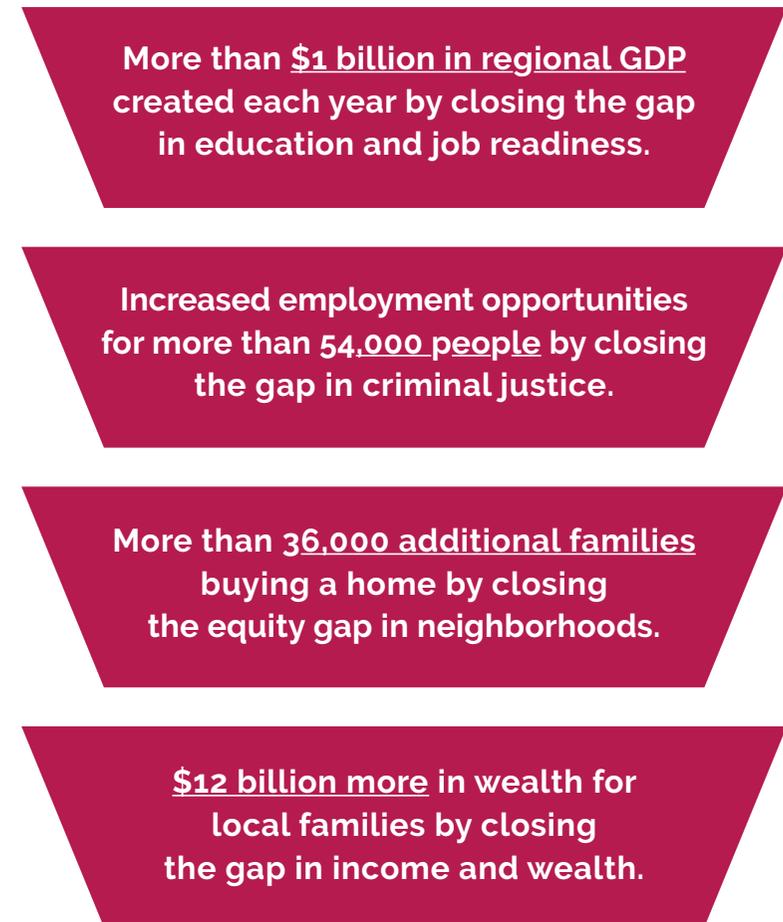
- 2 Housing
- 3 Transportation
- 4 Jobs & employment
- 5 Food access & availability
- 6 Health & wellness
- 7 Community safety
- 8 Education & training
- 9 Criminal justice inequity
- 10 Child care

Community members also shared that barriers to jobs, employment, training, education, and other factors impact their financial stability.²¹

FIGURE 8:

CLOSING EQUITY GAPS

Closing the racial equity gaps in specific areas, like education and wealth-building, would have many far-reaching effects.²²



**It starts with
a strong
Foundation.**

Addressing poverty in our community requires **understanding the dynamics of racial equity.**

Lasting change happens on a systems level. **Our work must go deeper than symptoms** and address root causes.

Equity means all people have real opportunity to share in the prosperity of our region.

The Oishei Foundation will join partners and community organizations that are already leading in this way. We will partner with them, and we will continue to learn from the lived experiences of those closest to these issues.

When systemic barriers are removed and policies refocused on strengthening financial security—beginning with Black people on the East Side of Buffalo—then prosperity can be experienced more equitably.

It will take time.

It's time for change.

Endnotes

and glossary.

ENDNOTES

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PHOTOGRAPHS

- PAGES 2-3 East Side Kids; Aitina Fareed-Cooke, 2019.
- PAGE 4 The City from the East Side; John Paget, First+Main Films, 2020.
- PAGE 14 The Freedom Wall, Michigan and East Ferry, Buffalo; Calvin Booker, Through His Lens, 2023. Featuring 28 portraits of Civil Rights leaders by John Baker, Julia Bottoms, Chuck Tingley, and Edreys Wajed. LEARN MORE: Buffalo AKG Public Art Project buffaloakg.org/community/ak-public-art/freedom-wall
- PAGE 17 Mother & Son; Aitina Fareed-Cooke, 2020.
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- PAGE 35 Momma Mom's Hands, Tales from the Porch Series; Aitina Fareed-Cooke, 2022.
- PAGE 38 Fountain, MLK, Jr. Park, Buffalo; Hope Grunert, 2020.
- PAGE 42 The Freedom Wall, Michigan and East Ferry, Buffalo; Calvin Booker, Through His Lens, 2023.
- PAGE 57 I'm So Buffalo; Aitina Fareed-Cooke, 2020.
- BACK COVER The City from the East Side; John Paget, First+Main Films, 2020.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Below are definitions of key terms used throughout this framework that we used to ensure mutual understanding as we determine our new direction. As language is dynamic and evolving, particularly in the context of race, this glossary is intended to provide a common set of definitions and mutual understanding. We remain open about the way communities, especially marginalized communities, self-identify and express themselves in their own voice.

Buffalo-Niagara Region: The Buffalo-Niagara region includes both Erie and Niagara Counties. The initial geographic focus will be on the East Side of Buffalo, with specific boundaries defined through inclusive community engagement.

Financial prosperity incorporates these concepts of economic/financial security and wealth building:

Economic/financial security: A state of being wherein a person can fully meet current and ongoing financial obligations, can feel secure in their financial future, and is able to make choices that allow them to enjoy life.

SOURCE: Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB)

Wealth building: Once households have more than enough income and savings to cover their typical expenses and be prepared for emergencies, then they can invest in key assets that secure their long-term financial wellbeing. These assets include but are not limited to homeownership, vehicles, higher education, and retirement accounts.

SOURCE: 101 Solutions for Inclusive Wealth Building, The Aspen Institute Financial Security Program, May 2022.

Systems change: A phrase used to explain an approach that targets the root causes of social issues instead of directly tackling the issue itself. It aims to alter or shift underlying structures such as policies, mindsets and power dynamics, which enable the system to function in a particular way.

Racial equity: The condition that would be achieved if one's racial identity no longer predicted, in a statistical sense, how one fares. This includes elimination of policies, practices, attitudes, and cultural messages that reinforce differential outcomes by race or that fail to eliminate them.

SOURCE: Center for Assessment and Policy Development and OpenSource Leadership Strategies and Racial Equity; <https://www.racialequitytools.org/glossary>

Racism: a system of advantage based on race. Racism is different from racial prejudice, hatred, or discrimination. Racism involves one group having the power to carry out systematic discrimination through the institutional policies and practices of the society and by shaping the cultural beliefs and values that support those racist policies and practices.

SOURCE: "What Is Racism?"—Dismantling Racism Works (dRworks) web workbook.

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