

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at the Commonwealth Fund: The First Three Years

2018–2021

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The
Commonwealth
Fund

MAY 2022

Acknowledgments

The Commonwealth Fund acknowledges the following individuals and groups who contributed to this report and the body of work it represents:

- **Every staff member of the Commonwealth Fund** who encouraged the organization to push the boundaries of what is possible and take risks.
- **Members of the Fund's Executive Management Team**, for their investment in efforts to further diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Not only did their allocation of resources reflect the urgency and importance of this work, so too did their participation in it.
- **Members of the DEI Design Team and the DEI Advisory Committee**, who have helped to shape and facilitate the Fund's work in this area.
- **Michelle Doty, Aisha Gomez, and Tonya Woodland**, for their leadership of the DEI Advisory Committee and their role as report liaisons. Their levels of patience and organization are second to none.
- **The Commonwealth Fund Board of Directors**, for being supportive of the DEI work and respectful of the way it has unfolded within the Fund's organizational culture. Board members have also enhanced this work by sharing their own professional experience and by providing overall guidance to the journey.
- **Interviewees from the Fund's staff, leadership team, and Board of Directors**, who generously shared their time and perspective to inform this report.
- **Consultants Mistinguette Smith, principal at M. Smith Consulting LLC, and Cardozie Jones, founder of True North EDI**, who helped the Fund see more clearly the work it needs to do and established a pathway and a process for the Fund to own it.
- **Aaron Joseph, founder of Identafire**, for the report design.

Letter from the President

Three years ago, when the Commonwealth Fund launched its diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiative, I knew it was the right thing to do, but I had little concept of how transformative it would prove or how challenging, uncomfortable, and rewarding it would be. Our DEI process may be the most important event in the 103-year history of the Fund, and one of the most important in my professional life. And we are just beginning.

Our DEI work has caused us to examine every aspect of our work, and for many of us, our conscious and unconscious views. There are the concrete things we have done: prioritized diversity in our own staffing and among our directors, grantees, fellows, investment managers, vendors, and invited speakers; reconsidered the traditional approaches we apply to grantmaking; funded our new Advancing Health Equity program; and created an implementation plan to guide our journey in becoming an antiracist organization.

But DEI has also forced me to think long and hard about my own personal life. As a white male of a “certain age,” I grew up in a society in which power, prestige, and resources flowed ineluctably to people who looked and acted like me. I had rare, and only passing, contact with persons of color. I did not identify with their lives or understand their history in the United States, their suffering, their challenges, or their oppression. The reading, reflection, and conversation entailed in our DEI work is gradually pulling some of these blinders from my own eyes and, I suspect, from those of many colleagues who shared my typically American white person’s lived experience.

All this is hard but enormously gratifying. Our DEI work is making us a better and more effective philanthropy and making me a better person. I am grateful to all of my colleagues, but especially to Tonya Woodland and Michelle Doty, who have so patiently and expertly chaired our DEI Advisory Committee, and to Cardozie Jones of True North EDI, who has deftly and sensitively coached us through the last two years of this process.

There is no turning back. We aspire to be an antiracist organization and philanthropy. We are just discovering what that means, and what it will demand of us. The journey will never end, but we embrace it with resolve and humility.



David Blumenthal, M.D., M.P.P.

President, The Commonwealth Fund



Purpose of This Report

Why prepare a report now, when the Commonwealth Fund is still on the path to becoming an antiracist organization? Here are some answers:

- ***The report creates a historical record.*** In its most basic form, the report captures a moment in time and creates a record of the Commonwealth Fund's DEI work to date. It should be a valuable resource for future leaders of the Fund as well as historians of philanthropy.
- ***The report provides a tool for reflection and learning.*** By stepping back from the work and considering it with some distance, the Commonwealth Fund hopes to surface new insights and opportunities for continued growth.
- ***The report contributes to the body of knowledge about DEI practices in organizations generally and in philanthropy in particular.*** The Commonwealth Fund is not the first organization to forge a path toward racial equity, and it does not expect to be the last. The Fund is indebted to the organizations that have inspired it to share learnings while pursuing this complex work. Organizations contemplating a more deliberate DEI effort might find value in this report as a source of encouragement and guidance for structuring that endeavor, meeting challenges they might encounter, and envisioning the change they can create. While the Commonwealth Fund is a private foundation engaged in activities to promote a high-performing health care system, many aspects of its DEI journey are sector- and mission-agnostic.

It must be emphasized that **the Commonwealth Fund's DEI work is not done.** Through this report, the Fund can document its work, celebrate its progress, share its learnings, and acknowledge its mistakes. Yet the report marks a point along the path — not the final destination. At the heart of this journey lies acceptance that there is no endpoint. The Fund will continue to evolve its policies, processes, and grantmaking programs to become more racially diverse, inclusive, and equitable. And while diversity is the most recognizable and quantifiable of these aims, the Fund knows that a goal met is not a box checked. One of the many things learned through this work so far is that diversity, equity, and inclusion are practices, not ends in themselves. They are ways of being and relating, and there is no benchmark or milestone for that. It is ongoing work, and the Fund is prepared to do it. The Fund is committed to its vision and pledge to promote racial equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Finally, it is important to underscore the fact that this report was distilled from many perspectives, provided by the individuals who were deeply engaged in the work over the past three years. This was not an editorial assignment, nor does it represent any one person's experience. Rather, the report attempts to present the Commonwealth Fund's DEI journey over the past three years as objectively as possible, by reviewing a comprehensive set of related materials and synthesizing participant perspectives to surface key learnings and common themes.

Executive Summary

While the Commonwealth Fund has a 103-year history of serving vulnerable populations, including low-income people, the uninsured, and people of color, events over the past several years have cast the foundation's perception of itself and its work in a new light. These events have emphasized the need for a purposeful effort to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within the organization as well as in its grantmaking and programmatic work. This report documents the first three years of that effort. Encouraged by staff and fully supported by the Executive Management Team, the Fund's work to become an antiracist organization was set against a societal backdrop of increasing racialized violence and a global pandemic that highlighted the need for transformative change.

Participants

Leadership on DEI efforts emerged from every level within the Fund, including:

- Staff members who participated in the DEI Advisory Committee and led small-group sessions. Their contributions helped shape the course of the Fund's journey and progress.
- The Executive Management Team, which assumed accountability for DEI work and dedicated personal and organizational resources to the efforts.
- The Fund's Board of Directors, which endorsed the DEI work as critical to the Fund's long-term sustainability and offered valuable feedback and advice.

The Fund also engaged external consultants and partners, whose support and subject matter expertise benefited the DEI efforts.

Components of the DEI Journey

The first years of the Commonwealth Fund's DEI journey comprised two phases of active learning and practice, marked by increasing emphasis on identifying areas for change.

Phase 1 (Aug. 2018–Nov. 2019)

The overarching goal of Phase 1 was to build a shared awareness and understanding about race and its intersection with society, the health care system, and the Commonwealth Fund's organizational culture, grantmaking, and programs. Activities in this phase helped the Fund hold a mirror up to itself to see where it needed to focus efforts to advance a DEI agenda:

- **Organizational assessment.** Consultant Mistinguette Smith led a comprehensive assessment of the Fund's policies, practices, and programs. This baseline report was an important tool for anchoring DEI efforts in areas of strength and opportunities for growth.
- **Workshops and learning sessions.** The Fund held three sessions over the course of Phase 1. Smith and the staff-led DEI Design Team together planned these events, in which staff engagement and a tolerance for discomfort produced meaningful learning and insights.

Phase 2 (Nov. 2019–Sept. 2021)

The Commonwealth Fund deepened its commitment to DEI in Phase 2, with shared learning, practice, and implementation. While the Fund leaned on consultant support, the transition to staff-led DEI work was a key feature of the activities in this phase, which included:

- **DEI vision statement.** [The Commonwealth Fund's Vision and Pledge to Promote Racial Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#) was released in 2021. All staff contributed

ideas, and a subcommittee crafted a final version that articulates the Fund's commitment to becoming an antiracist organization.

- **Collection of demographic data.** The Fund partnered with the Center for Effective Philanthropy in 2020 to collect and share a range of demographic data on the Fund's key stakeholder groups. [Data from the baseline effort is available on the Fund's website](#) and will be updated every two years to identify trends.
- **Continued learning and practice.** The Fund held three all-staff DEI workshops, several small-group learning sessions, and an ongoing speaker series to explore important and timely topics about DEI.

Putting DEI Commitment into Action

The Fund is focused on the following areas to implement change in response to its DEI work:

- **Organizational culture.** The Fund is shifting to a more participatory and inclusive way of operating, where everyone feels they are heard and have worth to the organization; holding more open and honest conversations about race and racism; and incorporating more transparency in decision-making.
- **Internal policies and processes.** The Fund is evolving its approach to recruitment and hiring; diversifying its partner network (especially its approach to investment management); and making changes to board service terms and recruitment.
- **Grantmaking and programs.** The Fund recognizes grantmaking and programs as a significant lever for affirming its commitment to DEI. One of the more significant initiatives is the Fund's \$15 million [Advancing Health Equity Fund](#). Other efforts include piloting new grantmaking strategies, evolving research practices, engaging more diverse audiences, and influencing policy through communications.

Key Lessons from the DEI Journey

As an organization that values learning, the Fund reflected on its work to this point and identified the following key lessons:

- DEI work is ongoing and complex, and it cannot be rushed or siloed.
- Senior leaders should be participants and champions in the work.
- Transparency is a guiding principle.
- Generational tensions are inevitable in DEI work.
- When differences arise, they often concern tactics, not values.
- Adherence to established ways and low risk tolerance hinder progress.

What's Next

The Fund's DEI journey continues. Staff and leadership will continue to build capacity for DEI work and grapple with the complexities of it. The Fund is turning its attention toward implementation while sustaining a focus on learning and growth. Priorities guiding the next phases include:

- Creating and cultivating an inclusive community where everyone can thrive.
- Fostering an environment that supports people of color.
- Meaningfully increasing the number of grantees of color.
- Reflecting on and improving the Fund's grantmaking process in order to build equitable, transparent partnerships with grantees.
- Increasing risk tolerance in grantmaking and operating.
- Consistently applying a racial equity lens in public policy analysis.
- Sharing the story of its DEI journey with other organizations in the spirit of transparency and accountability.



Introduction

The Commonwealth Fund is a philanthropic organization dedicated to affordable, quality health care for everyone. Anna M. Harkness established the foundation in 1918, charging it with a broad mission to enhance the common good. The Fund has enjoyed a stable existence throughout its 103-year history, supported by a carefully managed endowment and led by only eight presidents — all white. Through its resources and reputation, the Fund has accumulated a measure of influence in U.S. health care policy and practice.

A constancy of mission and method, delivered with a responsiveness to the changing landscape of the U.S. health system, has defined the foundation. The Fund made health care an early focus of its work. Starting with the launch of a pilot project focused on children's health in 1922, the Fund has sought to be a catalyst for change by identifying promising practices and contributing to solutions that could help the United States achieve a high-performance health system. The primary instruments of change have included independent research on health care issues; grantmaking and fellowships to improve health care practice and policy; and efforts to strengthen the capacity of legislators and officials to adopt and implement policies that can promote high performance. The Fund's approach is to identify root problems and recommend evidence-based solutions.

A sustained focus on serving vulnerable populations through the reduction of health disparities — and the outcomes achieved — led the Fund to believe that it was doing its part to advance racial diversity, equity, and inclusion. It established [programs to develop leaders in minority health](#), starting in the 1960s with grants to support Meharry Medical College and continuing with the establishment of fellowship programs for physician-leaders, today known as the Commonwealth Fund Fellowship

in Minority Health Policy at Harvard University and the Pozen-Commonwealth Fund Fellowship in Health Equity Leadership at Yale University. The Fund produces [research to highlight policies and practices that can improve health outcomes for Black, Hispanic/Latinx, Asian, Pacific Islander and Native Americans](#). And the Fund regularly benchmarks health insurance coverage, access to care, affordability, and quality of care using its [Biennial Health Insurance Survey](#) and [Scorecard on State Health System Performance](#) to expose vulnerabilities and disparities in the health care system.

External events in the last decade have cast the Fund's beliefs in a new light. Across society, there has been growing awareness of the harm and injustice experienced by people of color, especially Black people. In 2016, a new presidential administration ushered in an era of implied consent to openly demonstrate bias against people of color. The [Black Lives Matter](#) movement, started in 2013, came to symbolize the escalating protest against incidents of racism and racially motivated violence. Social media and police body cameras offered a platform to broadcast these incidents, so that they became a searing presence in society, impossible to ignore or rationalize away. Meanwhile, other movements — #MeToo, March for Our Lives, renewed mental health awareness — drew attention to issues of equity and inclusion beyond race. All these influenced the Commonwealth Fund's thinking about how it operated as an organization and what its role was in creating change.

A parallel awakening was happening across philanthropy. [Multistakeholder initiatives](#) and [reports from philanthropy-serving organizations](#) highlighted the need to advance racial diversity, equity, and inclusion both within and through philanthropic organizations. Action followed awareness, including the launch of [cohort-based learning experiences](#) for foundation leaders, designed

to build capacity for racial equity work. This work in the philanthropic sector brought a sense of urgency to accelerate the Fund's DEI efforts.

At the same time, calls for change echoed within the halls of Harkness House. Staff from younger generations brought different expectations for transparency and desired more opportunities to contribute to the Commonwealth Fund's work. A staff survey revealed issues regarding internal communication and organizational risk-taking. The Fund was becoming more aware that its ways of operating did not support an inclusive culture. The Fund needed to confront what could no longer be ignored: it was part of the problem.

Like many organizations in philanthropy, the Fund was contributing to inequities through its ways of being and working. It had an all-white leadership team, a hierarchical structure that left junior staff members without much voice, and a culture that discouraged difficult conversations. It funded a fairly closed pool of investigators, often from elite institutions, that did not reflect the populations the foundation aimed to serve. The Fund needed to hold a mirror up to itself, in the way it holds a mirror up to the health care system. It needed to reckon with its history, instincts, and conceptions of what an organization looks like and how it should be run. It needed to revisit assumptions about how it hires, whom it promotes, what it funds, and how it reaches those decisions. The Fund needed to become more racially diverse, inclusive, and equitable, both internally, through its policies and processes and how it allows diverse people and perspectives to show up at work, and externally, through its grantmaking and programs. While understanding none of this would be easy, the foundation's leadership firmly believed it was necessary.

The Commonwealth Fund's DEI journey has played out against a backdrop of social upheaval and defining moments of the 21st century. Many of those moments involved the killing of Black people at the hands of police. Freddie Gray, Trayvon Martin, Breonna Taylor, Eric Garner, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd are just a few of the victims of America's long legacy of racism and

racial injustice. Their deaths sparked a growing outrage, culminating in nationwide protests calling for change. Nine minutes and 29 seconds of video documenting the horrific spectacle of Floyd's murder made it possible for white Americans to finally feel the fear, the grief, the anger, and the desperation with which people of color in the U.S. live every day.

At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic was wreaking havoc on the world. The crisis impacted every American but disproportionately those in Black and Latinx/Hispanic communities, where [long-standing health disparities have left citizens with worse outcomes](#). The pandemic exposed the structural racism and inequities embedded in the U.S. health care system — the very system the Fund aims to improve, a system meant to heal, not harm. These dynamics reinforced the need for the Fund to reckon with its past and examine its legacy in a new light.

What follows is the story of the first three years of the Commonwealth Fund's DEI journey. It is a story of commitment and learning — sometimes through mistakes. It is about revisiting a long history through a new lens and carrying that view forward into a new and more equitable place. And it is a story of preparing for transformative change, the kind the Fund intends to make in the implementation phase of its DEI journey.

Participants

The effort to advance racial diversity, equity, and inclusion is a large undertaking, the responsibility for which is best shared broadly in an organization. Leadership has emerged at every level of the Commonwealth Fund. The foundation's DEI efforts have benefited from the work of the following individuals and groups, among others, over the course of the past few years.

Executive Management Team. All members of the Commonwealth Fund's Executive Management Team (EMT) — Melinda Abrams, David Blumenthal, Kathleen Regan, Barry Scholl, and Eric Schneider — play a crucial role in the DEI work, both as champions and participants. The Fund learned from other organizations the importance of placing accountability for this work at the highest level of leadership. All EMT members, past and present, have consistently messaged the critical nature of this work through the personal and organizational resources they have invested in the DEI journey and their unflagging commitment to the process. In addition, Kathleen Regan, Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer, has played an important role as a liaison between the Fund's board and the staff and programs engaged in the work.

DEI Design Team. The Commonwealth Fund formed a racially diverse group of 11 staff volunteers from every division and level below the EMT, commissioning them to be an internal resource for the outside consultant and to provide critical support for the Fund's efforts. The group met regularly over the course of Phase 1 of the initiative ([described below](#)) and worked with the consultant to shape the learning agenda and the organizational assessment. Flexibility was an important guiding principle; the DEI Design Team adjusted the plan and approach in real time, based on an assessment of goals versus outcomes of completed work.

DEI Advisory Committee. This group evolved from the DEI Design Team in late 2019, at the completion of Phase 1 and in response to a desire for continued structure and engagement on DEI work. Its mandate is to sustain momentum on DEI work at the Fund. Participation in the advisory committee is open to any member of the Fund, and its 18 members (many of whom are legacy members from the original design team) represent a cross-section

of program and administrative staff, with varying levels of seniority (including two members of the EMT). Some of the committee's important contributions include spearheading development of a shared vision for DEI, identifying an outside consultant to lead Phase 2 of the initiative, creating opportunities for ongoing learning, and curating a repository to share DEI-related resources among staff. The advisory committee continues to meet monthly, sharing important developments with all staff and operating with a spirit of transparency and accountability — as evidenced by members' ongoing engagement and the internal posting of meeting minutes for all Fund staff to review.

Committee members worthy of special mention are three individuals who have taken a leadership role: Michelle Doty (Vice President, Organizational Effectiveness, Survey Research, and Evaluation) and Tonya Woodland (Vice President, Administration), who co-chair the DEI work, and Aisha Gomez (Manager, Office Services), who serves as Project Manager. This trio forms the backbone of the Commonwealth Fund's DEI work.

Outside Consultants. The Commonwealth Fund benefited from the wisdom and guidance of two talented consultants and capacity builders from the field of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Their involvement was essential to the Fund's growth in the first few years. Mistinguette Smith, principal consultant of M. Smith Consulting, supported the organization through Phase 1. With a goal of helping the Fund establish a basic, foundational understanding of how race impacts its work and workplace culture, she facilitated several all-staff workshops and learning sessions and conducted a baseline assessment of the Fund's internal practices, policies, and culture through a DEI lens. Cardozie Jones, Founder and Principal of True North EDI, helped the Fund deepen and cultivate its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion in Phase 2. He supported the crafting of a DEI vision statement and an implementation plan.

Board of Directors. The Fund is fortunate to have 14 wise and experienced individuals serving as directors of the foundation. Diverse in many ways, they bring perspective as leaders from the private and public sectors in the fields of medicine, finance, public policy, and academia. Board members are the primary stewards of the Fund's resources, and they are tasked with ensuring a sustainable future for the organization. Thus, their endorsement of the DEI work and their belief that it was important to the long-term health of the Fund were essential. Directors were kept apprised of activities and updates related to the DEI work through board meetings held three times a year and through regular in-depth updates to the board's Governance and Nominating Committee. Directors also offered invaluable feedback and advice throughout.



Components of the DEI Journey

Two phases defined the first three years of the Commonwealth Fund's DEI journey. Phase 1 involved building a foundation of shared awareness and understanding about race and how it informs, impacts, and intersects with society, the health care system, and the Fund's organizational culture and programmatic work. Phase 2 incorporated more shared learning experiences and the crafting of a shared vision of the Fund as an organization aligned internally and externally with a deep commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Both phases offered opportunities for ongoing learning and engagement. And, to be sure, throughout this time the Fund introduced changes and made funding decisions in response to what it had learned and in service of its vision. When considering the full trajectory of this journey, Phases 1 and 2 were about getting started, often the hardest part. The more transformative changes that will bring the Fund closer to becoming an antiracist organization lie in Phase 3, which is being guided by an implementation plan — a roadmap to advancing the DEI work.

Phase 1: Building a Foundation of Shared Awareness and Understanding (Aug. 2018–Nov. 2019)

Learning and discovery marked the first phase of the Commonwealth Fund's DEI journey. With guidance from Mistinguette Smith and the support of the Executive Management Team and DEI Design Team, the Fund completed a comprehensive assessment of internal practices, policies, and culture and engaged in several workshops and learning sessions.

DEI Design Team formation. On Smith's recommendation, a DEI Design Team was formed to serve as an internal resource. The team worked with Smith on content selection, agenda design, and organizational assessment development.

All-Staff workshops and learning sessions. The Fund held three all-staff workshops and learning sessions co-planned by Smith and the DEI Design Team. The sessions, which covered a range of foundational topics in DEI work, involved individual learning, reflection, and assessment activities; consultant-led instruction and facilitation; group learning and discussion; and race-based caucusing, as means to further engage staff.

In the first workshop, held in October 2018, Smith introduced a common vocabulary for DEI work and helped staff build a shared understanding of what racial DEI means for the foundation. Attendees also defined aspirations for a racially diverse, inclusive, and equitable organization.

The half-day session began with a self-assessment poll, using Equity in the Center's [Awake to Woke to Work framework](#) to place the Commonwealth Fund on a

continuum along several dimensions of racial equity work. The results confirmed the need for action and growth, with most staff indicating that the Fund was just awakening to racial exclusion and injustice.

The common themes emerging from a post-session survey included surprise at the level of emotional engagement demanded by the session and a degree of discomfort with the candor the discussions required. This was not a typical Commonwealth Fund meeting; it signaled the need for a new approach to fully engage in DEI work. Most participants also wanted a roadmap for the work, as well as a list of actions they could take within their purview to move the Fund toward racial equity. However, eagerness to get started would soon confront the Fund's growing awareness that lasting change unfolds slowly on a less predictable path.

The session also reinforced an obvious truth that is easy to overlook: the Commonwealth Fund is overwhelmingly white. As a sensory experience, the workshop and learning session — from the people and conversations in the room to the images on the screen — raised the Fund's consciousness of the senior leadership "snowcap" and the predominant whiteness across the Fund's staff, grantees, and fellows.

It is interesting to note the response to this session. Some people identified with the direct approach and explicit naming of bias as a way to create space for honest conversation. Other participants found the provocative style brought up feelings of defensiveness and a sense that the approach was pushed beyond its useful limit. Clearly, the DEI experience was going to be challenging and, at times, uncomfortable.

The second workshop and learning session, a full day in January 2019, was as an opportunity to develop a shared understanding of how racism works at the internal, interpersonal, institutional, and structural levels; practice open conversations about how race and racism affect the Commonwealth Fund's work; and develop team and personal priorities and action steps to shift toward a culture of racial inclusion.

The workshop included two caucuses with white staff and one caucus with staff of color to address the topics of white

fragility and racialized stress in the workplace and how each impacts the success of a DEI process. There were also small-group discussions to identify promising practices for advancing the DEI work. Recommendations that surfaced from these discussions included disaggregating data from program-related research and organizational climate surveys as well as data on Fund grantees, staff, and board members; explicitly identifying the racial equity impact of every policy and program decision at the Fund; and continuously evaluating and adapting to the emerging needs of the DEI process. Some common themes emerged around promising practices, including expanding networks (grantees, vendors, advisors), taking risks, and rethinking ways of working and measuring impact in promoting equity in health care and at the Fund. These discussions inspired a new level of intensity and a desire to prioritize equity in every aspect of our organization — from policies to programs, both external and internal.

In the third workshop and learning session, a full day in June 2019, attendees explored and practiced cultural elements of inclusive organizations, such as self-organizing, critical inquiry, and group reflection. Attendees also discussed what they felt they needed to learn before creating a DEI action plan. The areas of reflection and critical inquiry spanned the Fund's internal and external work, from hiring and administration to research, grant programs, and outcomes of the Fund's work.

The workshops and learning sessions increased the Commonwealth Fund's knowledge and capacity for DEI work. Most participants, however, found themselves eager for more opportunities to learn and build their DEI muscles.

Organizational assessment: Mistinguette Smith conducted an assessment of the state of racial DEI at the Fund, providing a needed baseline for gauging future progress. The assessment focused on attitudes and formal or informal practices across divisions and departments, including Operations and Grantmaking, Human Resources and Administration, Communications, Policy and Research, and each research program separately (Health Care Coverage and Access, Health Care Delivery System Reform, Federal and State Health Policy, Health Care Cost Control, Medicare, and International Health Policy and Practice Innovations).

The findings, discussed at an all-staff meeting in November 2019, were used to explore sources of strength at the Fund and opportunities to deepen the foundation's commitment to racial DEI. While staff found it affirming to acknowledge the ways the Fund already demonstrates an active commitment to DEI, they also felt motivated to further understand areas where work was needed to truly embody that commitment.

[The Foundation's mission statement](#), for example, was named as a fundamental source of strength for the DEI journey. By disaggregating “vulnerable populations” into distinct groups of people with low income, people without insurance, and people of color, the Fund had articulated an understanding of coded language and made a commitment to DEI that could serve as a cornerstone for work. The assessment identified other promising trends or developments inside the Fund, such as the steps being taken to recruit more diverse staff members and the Health Care Delivery System Reform program's focus on patient populations disproportionately comprising people of color.

The assessment also found plenty of fertile ground for change. Some recommendations seemed fairly straightforward: expand talent pools and pipelines for senior and leadership roles, and build equity into the hiring process. Other opportunities represented best practices in DEI work: place accountability with the EMT and integrate the commitment to racially equitable health outcomes across all programs and departments. And some findings, such as the symbolism of the Commonwealth Fund's physical location in a Gilded Age mansion on Manhattan's Upper East Side, revealed the depths of self-examination the foundation was willing to undertake.

The recommended next step was to create a shared vision of the outcomes desired for the Fund's DEI efforts. The seeds of this work had been planted across the activities in Phase 1. Now the task was to cultivate those seeds, with input from the Board of Directors, and build a coherent plan to lead the Fund into Phase 2.

Phase 2: Affirming and Deepening the Commonwealth Fund's Commitment to DEI (Nov. 2019–Sept. 2021)

With findings from the organizational assessment and a better understanding of the issues gained through a year-

The Intersection of COVID-19 and the Commonwealth Fund's DEI Work

By March 2020, the virus that causes COVID-19 engulfed the world in a pandemic that upended life as we knew it. While COVID-19 has impacted all systems, institutions, and ways of life, the pandemic is at its core a health crisis — and thus immediately became one of the Commonwealth Fund's primary concerns.

Thanks to the flexibility of the Fund's team and the resources at its disposal, a successful transition to a work-from-home model allowed the foundation to maintain staff engagement at a critical time. The transition was challenging for many staff. The pivot to remote work coincided with an increased volume of grantmaking, including “rapid response” support to community organizations and time-sensitive grants tied to policy windows. For staff with no childcare and with young children learning remotely, or for staff sharing living and working space with others, the virtual environment added a layer of complexity that required the Fund to remain flexible while staying focused on what it could do to promote a high-performing health care system at a watershed moment.

In many ways, COVID-19 was a large-scale natural experiment through which the Fund could apply its DEI learnings to an examination of disparities in health care delivery, access, and outcomes and their root causes. As more of the Fund's resources were dedicated to understanding the crisis and supporting efforts to combat it, evidence mounted that the pandemic was having a disproportionate impact on people of color. The DEI work positioned the Fund to better understand and explore the race-related impacts of COVID-19. Staff understood racism as a structural and institutional issue, an important insight for their analyses and discussions about the pandemic and its impact on society.

The Fund focused its efforts on people whose access to health care and other critical services had been most affected, including communities of color and people with low income. Program staff took advantage of opportunities as they arose to fund COVID-19 projects with an equity focus; one example was a grant supporting the creation of public service announcements and an accompanying promotion plan to offer information about vaccines to Black Americans, at a time when they were disproportionately getting sick and dying from the virus. The Fund also hosted over 45 COVID-related virtual convenings, many of which touched on the pandemic's racial disparities. Staff produced nine COVID-related publications that helped garner more than 20 COVID-related media mentions and interviews. Junior staff members authored blog posts exploring related issues, such as [how the cash bail system endangers the health of Black Americans](#) and [the challenge of COVID-19 and American Indian health](#).

long learning process, the Commonwealth Fund was poised to continue with the work of deepening its commitment to DEI. Fund staff members expressed a range of emotions at this point. Some were optimistic about the potential for change; others were impatient and frustrated by the pace of work. And while some individuals felt energized by the journey, others felt overwhelmed. This range of responses is typical in organizational change efforts, and the Fund needed to make space in its process for all of them.

Phase 2 saw a shift from staff being led through DEI work to staff leading this work. Once a rhythm had been established, the Fund retained Cardozie Jones of True North EDI for support. His commitment to helping individuals feel that change is possible made him a good fit to guide the Fund through a phase of deeper learning and action.

Reimagining of the DEI advisory group. The DEI Advisory Committee expanded as the Fund moved into Phase 2, with an open invitation for all staff members to join. Several members of the original DEI Design Team participated, adding continuity from Phase 2. Meeting on a regular basis, the group's overarching task was to develop a set of recommendations to guide the next phase and oversee its evolution. Members of the group established a set of guiding principles to define their role and intention to model an open and inviting environment for discussing issues of race and racism.

Building a shared vision statement. The DEI Advisory Committee facilitated a process to define a shared vision for the Fund: what it would look and feel like to be an organization that is richly diverse, has a robust culture of inclusion, and advances racial equity through every aspect of its work. A number of similar ideas arose from the small-group discussions organized by program or department. Staff wanted a bold, ambitious vision that embodied the Fund's ultimate goal for both external work and internal culture. In other words, the vision should reflect the desire for DEI to be incorporated into everything the Fund does, while respecting the fact that diversity, equity, and inclusion are related but separate concepts.

The advisory committee formed a subcommittee to draft a DEI vision statement for the Fund. Through a participatory process, this group crafted a statement that it believed successfully captured the beliefs, aspirations, and commitments of staff. The advisory committee then shared

The Commonwealth Fund's Vision and Pledge to Promote Racial Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

VISION

The United States has long been marked by racism and discrimination. This legacy of inequity is also embedded in our health care system. It is evident in the profound disparities in health care access, delivery, and quality that adversely affect the health and well-being of Black Americans, Indigenous Americans, and people of color.

We as a foundation are conscious of our own role in the creation and perpetuation of these injustices. And we are committed to dismantling racism in health care.

The Commonwealth Fund envisions a health care system that values and benefits all people equally — one that combats racism and pursues equity, both in treatment and outcomes as well as in leadership and decision-making.

We believe achieving this goal requires an antiracist alliance of people and institutions across sectors of society. Only by working together can we recognize and value the lived experience of all individuals; ensure the delivery of compassionate, affordable, quality health care; and strive for equitable outcomes for all.

PLEDGE

The Commonwealth Fund is committed to an antiracist agenda. As we work toward our mission, we pledge the following:

- To expand and diversify the group of individuals and organizations whom we listen to, learn from, and support.
- To draw upon the Fund's resources, history, and credibility in advancing the principle of antiracism and the goals of racial equity, diversity, and inclusion.
- To highlight and address structural and systemic inequities in U.S. health care through our grantmaking, intramural research, and dissemination activities so that the nation can achieve fair and just outcomes for people of color.
- To accelerate efforts within our own organization to cultivate a diverse and collaborative workplace, one where the life experiences and vantage points of every staff member are respected and valued, and where all staff can meaningfully contribute to the foundation's work.
- To commit to concerted, sustained, and multifaceted action.
- To always be transparent in our actions and hold ourselves accountable for successes and failures in this endeavor.

(Taken from [the Commonwealth Fund's website](#).)

the draft statement with the entire Fund to obtain input. In late 2020, the final version was approved by the Executive Management Team and the Board of Directors and shared publicly in February 2021. The Fund uses this statement, the “Commonwealth Fund Vision and Pledge to Promote Racial Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion,” as a compass to keep it oriented during the DEI process and to serve as a reminder of what is at stake if that effort should falter.

An outward facing statement on racism. At a virtual all-staff meeting in June 2020, members of the Fund’s Executive Management Team shared personal reflections on the recent police murders of George Floyd and many other African American citizens, as well as the protests against systemic racism that erupted in their wake. Staff shared thoughts, concerns, emotions, personal experiences, and ideas for how the Fund could move forward. The outcome was a list of recommended actions and a decision to issue a public-facing statement, “Standing Against Racism.” The statement was explicit in naming the systemic racism embedded in the justice and health care systems, a first for the Fund. It was also unequivocal in holding the Fund accountable, by connecting these issues to the foundation’s mission and outlining its commitments to addressing issues of racial inequity. The statement was emailed to the Fund’s general audience with staff urging and is available on the Fund’s *To the Point* blog.

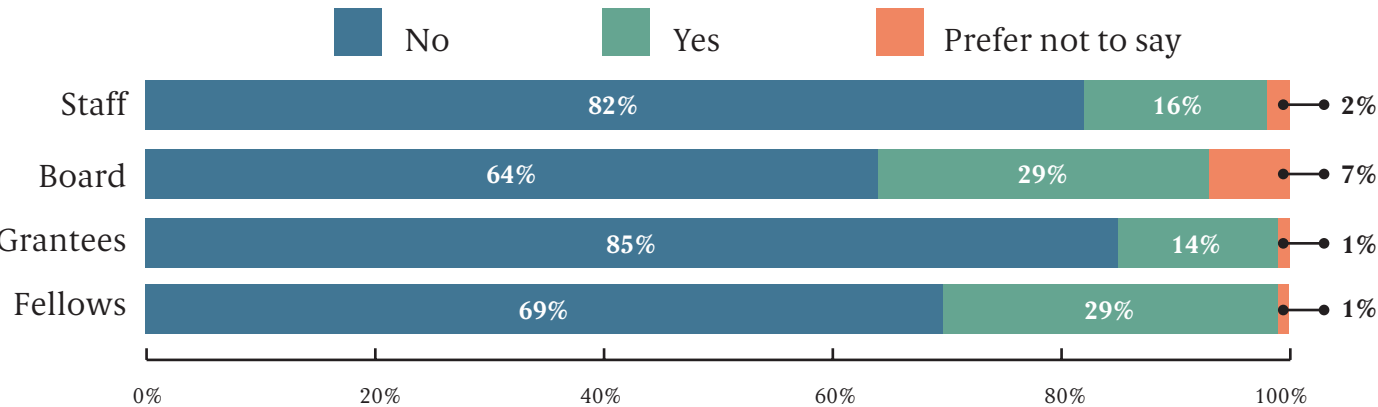
Collection of demographic data. The Commonwealth Fund’s Grants Management Office engaged the Center for Effective Philanthropy in 2020 to collect demographic data on the Fund’s key stakeholder groups, including grantee applicants, staff, Harkness Fellows, and directors. As a foundation committed to using data to inform policy, the Fund felt it was important to gather and share this information as part of its efforts to expand and diversify the individuals and organizations whom it listens to, learns from, and supports.

The data¹ provided a baseline understanding of group characteristics with respect to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, age, and ability status. These metrics of representation are important for — but not exhaustive of — DEI work. The findings confirmed that Commonwealth Fund fellows are racially diverse but that staff, board members, and grantees were overwhelmingly white. The data, which are posted on [the Fund’s website](#), are another measure of organizational transparency and accountability. The Fund plans to repeat the survey every two years to examine trends.

1 See Appendix for demographic characteristics of the survey respondents.

Demographic Characteristics of Staff, Board, Grantees, and Fellows

Q: Do you identify as Black, Indigenous, or as a member of a minority or traditionally marginalized ethnic group?



Total N=432; Board N=14; Staff N=45; Fellows N=294; Grantees N=79.
Survey administered in 2020 by the Commonwealth Fund and the Center for Effective Philanthropy.

Continued learning. A thread of learning ran throughout Phase 2 of the Fund's DEI journey. Cardozie Jones facilitated three DEI workshops for all staff, who also had opportunities to suggest topics and facilitate ad hoc learning sessions. For example, one staff member volunteered to host a reading and discussion group on Ibram X. Kendi's 2019 book *How to Be An Antiracist*. The Fund used several formats (described below) to facilitate continued learning on its DEI journey, but one that has not been formalized is affinity grouping. Race-based caucuses were held at a workshop in Phase 1, and since then staff of color have convened informal, self-organized affinity group sessions. Thus far, white staff have not convened similar sessions, nor has the Fund created an official space or expectation for affinity groups in its process. This is an area for consideration for the Fund.

Small-group learning sessions. Six groups of staff from different teams, positions, and tenure convened for readings, facilitated discussions, and other activities to advance learning around topics such as implicit bias and systemic racism. Each group met several times, using a shared set of reading materials and discussion questions. The sessions included:

- a June 2020 exploration of the intersection of race, class, and the U.S. response to the COVID-19 pandemic
- an October 2020 general check-in on the DEI small-group process and experience with DEI work
- a November 2020 debrief on the 2020 election, the role that race played in it, and how the results might shape the DEI work
- a March 2021 discussion of race, class, and privilege, based on *Such a Fun Age*, a work of contemporary fiction by Kiley Reid

"Lunch and Learn" forums. The DEI Advisory Committee pivoted to a "lunch and learn" model in response to staff desire for a change in format. Planning and facilitation moved outside the committee, so that any staff member could suggest a topic, choose the content, and facilitate a virtual session. Sample topics included:

- Racism against Asian American/Pacific Islanders: Two staff members facilitated a session in the wake

of the March 2021 murders of six Asian women at an Atlanta spa. It was a time when racist rhetoric used to describe the coronavirus was at its height, stoking fear and fueling acts of anti-Asian sentiment and violence.

- Race and disability: Two disability rights advocates and experts shared their perspectives on the intersection of race and disability and disability-inclusive grantmaking.

Coaching. Any staff member who wanted more individualized support was offered coaching time with Cardozie Jones. Staff found this helpful as a way to deepen their skills and navigate their journey based on individual identity and lived experience. Through his own extensive work with Jones, Commonwealth Fund President David Blumenthal modeled the value of coaching support to identify gaps in awareness and deepen learning and growth.

Seminar Series. Originally launched in 2016 as a professional development opportunity, this ongoing seminar series considers topics and trends in health care through a DEI lens. While program organizers have always planned the agendas with gender and racial diversity and inclusion in mind, since the start of the Fund's DEI journey they have been increasingly successful in recruiting speakers of color to address racial justice issues. Topics have included:

- "What Black Panthers and Root-Seekers Can Tell Us About Race, Medicine, and Justice," with Alondra Nelson, President of the Social Science Research Council
- "Structural Racism in the Medicines System," featured Priti Krishtel, Co-Founder and Co-Executive Director of I-MAK, the Initiative for Medicines, Access & Knowledge
- "Thoughts on Structural Racism," with Mary T. Bassett, Director of the FXB Center for Health and Human Rights at Harvard University
- "Reflections on Dying of Whiteness," featured author, physician, and sociologist Jonathan M. Metzl



From Commitment to Action

The Commonwealth Fund has introduced a number of changes inspired by its desire for organizational change, informed by its DEI journey and learnings to date, and stimulated by its vision of becoming an antiracist organization. Implementation efforts will coincide with continued assessment and learning; the latter two activities are viewed by the Fund as critical, ongoing work. Below is a summary of changes the Fund has made as it works to apply a DEI lens to all aspects of its work and operations.

“All staff have had an opportunity to weigh in and put their own stamp on their specific area, and how they can apply DEI within their domain.”

- PROGRAM STAFF

Organizational Culture

Changes to organizational culture — the collection of values, beliefs, and assumptions about how people should behave and interact — are often sensed before they are measurable or definable in words. This was the case with the shifts occurring within the Commonwealth Fund. Staff notice something that was not there before. Things feel different; there's a change in mindset and spirit.

The foundation's culture over the years has typically been perceived as hierarchical, paternalistic, and risk averse. Junior staff and staff of color, in particular, experienced these qualities as isolating, as discouraging of speaking up and sharing ideas, and as calling for assimilation and adherence to white-dominant norms. Younger staff have experienced race differently than previous generations; they bring a strong social justice consciousness and an ethos of candor. In this environment, coupled with commitment and support from leadership, the DEI

work has led to changes in the Fund's culture. To be sure, culture change is a work in progress, and continued evolution will occur. A few of the more noticeable changes are summarized below.

Increased inclusion. The DEI work introduced a more participatory and inclusive approach. Staff hope this change will carry over into other activities, leading to even greater transparency and an environment where everyone feels they have a voice and a sense of worth to the organization. Staff have felt invited to participate in the DEI journey in ways beyond active learning — from membership on the advisory committee to facilitating learning sessions and shaping program-specific changes. For example, Laurie Zephyrin, M.D., Vice President for Advancing Health Equity, drew on her preferred leadership style to make the development of the new Advancing Health Equity program an inclusive process. She sought input from all staff on content and priorities and invited them to the table for important discussions and decisions. Zephyrin involved staff in literature reviews about structural racism and development of the program's logic model. She modeled an inclusive approach that can be replicated when designing new programs in the future.

Greater comfort in naming race and exploring related topics. Staff are better equipped to talk about race, racism, and racial equity impacts. There is recognition that what happens in the world at large has implications for the individuals who work at the Commonwealth Fund, and there is willingness to create space for these topics. Staff have an expanded vocabulary and a heightened awareness of the importance of language: everyone is more mindful of how they communicate and share ideas, and more sensitive to the impact. The Fund needs to continue to develop these skills. Still, staff are learning how to speak up, have difficult conversations, and point out where race confers privilege or disadvantage.

This dynamic, observed in one-on-one interactions as well as in small-group and all-staff meetings, was highlighted in the Center for Effective Philanthropy’s 2021 Staff Perception Report. Among the survey questions related to DEI, comfort in holding DEI-related conversations was lower when staff members interacted with supervisors, executive management, and external partners.

How comfortable are you discussing topics related to race and racism with the following individuals?	
Relationship	Average (7-point Likert Scale)
My peers	6.03
Supervisors and executive management	5.26
External partners (e.g., grantees, applicants, colleagues in the field)	5.03

Source: Commonwealth Fund 2021 Staff Perception Survey, administered by The Center for Effective Philanthropy

Internal Policies and Processes

While a larger and more formalized set of policies and processes will roll out with the DEI implementation plan in Phase 3, several positive changes are worthy of mention.

Recruitment and hiring. The DEI journey has made the Commonwealth Fund more aware of how it can use recruiting and hiring as a lever to advance DEI. The Fund tends to rely on its grantee and personal networks to spread the word and identify promising candidates for open roles, especially in senior positions. But these networks are fairly narrow and predominantly white. Grantees tend to come from elite institutions, which have historically presented barriers to investigators of color. The Fund prioritizes credentials such as elite academic affiliation and selective training experience, but these are more difficult for people of color to attain. These choices have resulted in candidate pools that lack diversity and in an inequitable hiring process for candidates of color.

The Fund has recently widened its search net and now posts open roles on mainstream platforms, such as Indeed

Mission-Related Investing and DEI: Building more inclusive investment management practices

Choosing investment management partners is a critical task for any foundation that funds its mission through an endowment. In 2016, the Fund chose Agility to be its outsourced chief investment partner, following an evaluation process in which the firm proved it could work with the Fund to incorporate greater mission alignment into portfolio management while also producing excellent investment returns. The Fund partnered with Agility to develop and implement an investment policy statement that incorporated higher levels of ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) considerations into portfolio management as well as divestment from tobacco and firearms – industries considered antithetical to the Fund’s mission.

In 2019, the Fund held discussions with staff and board members about the gender and racial diversity of the individuals it relied on to manage investments and asked Agility to field a demographic manager survey. Through this, the Fund learned that racially diverse and female-owned investment firms were underrepresented both in its portfolio and across the entire investment industry – even though research shows that investment return performance, the main criteria of selection, is statistically indistinguishable between funds led by people of color or by women and funds led by others. Based on these findings, the Fund partnered with Agility in 2020 and early 2021 to evaluate opportunities to align the foundation’s investment approach with its DEI vision statement by using an equity framework to assess the portfolio.

Recognizing that foundations can play an important role in advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion in the investment space by pioneering new metrics and models of investment, the Fund developed three measurable goals and charged Agility with seeking higher representation of investment platforms majority-owned by people of color and positioned for strong investment performance. Through the establishment of these goals and related efforts, the Fund sought to encourage investment managers to create more opportunity for women and people of color. The Fund has also asked Agility to measure the success of pipeline-building for women and people of color in its manager cohort, as well as the representation of people of color among senior leadership and owners of the portfolio companies in which it invests. These goals are incorporated into the Fund’s investment policy statement and a new framework, LEAP, or Leadership and Equity Action Plan. The plan will be evaluated annually through a third-party independent survey, with findings reported to the Board and posted on the Fund’s website. The first baseline independent survey will be available in April 2022.

The Fund hopes these efforts will contribute to the field of philanthropy’s shift toward more inclusive investment management practices. To further this goal, the Fund recently signed the Association of Black Foundation Executives (ABFE) [Investment Manager Diversity Pledge](#) and is now exploring opportunities to support the group’s efforts to expand the reach and influence of the pledge.

and LinkedIn. Everyone on staff is asked to share job postings with their networks. In fact, efforts to recruit people of color to the Fund have often been led by program staff and senior managers. While it can lengthen the search timeline to execute a more comprehensive and equitable search process, the staff added through this approach prove it is worth the wait.

The Fund is also adjusting its interview process and rethinking how it evaluates candidates. Interviewers are listening for different stories now and placing value on lived experiences, resiliency, and grit, not just on traditional “credentials.” Candidates are also asked about their prior experience with DEI in the initial screening interview. Recognizing that some candidates cannot access the elite institutions and internship opportunities that have historically served as indicators of past performance and future promise, the Fund is expanding selection criteria and defining qualifications more holistically. Program managers continue to probe for fit and commitment to DEI through their program-specific lens when conducting later-round interviews.

A review of the Fund’s history and DEI journey is part of the onboarding process for new hires. As the foundation moves further along, it plans to add additional resources to this process, including participation in a racial equity training workshop or other experience to increase the capacity of new hires for DEI work. This and related hiring and recruitment processes will be codified as part of the implementation plan.

Partner diversification. Each program or operations team has considered ways it can honor the Commonwealth Fund’s DEI commitments through partner selection and engagement. For example, the Communications Department is expanding its pool of freelance editors and writers by looking for talent through new channels. Staff who provide administrative and operational support are looking at how they can embed the commitment to DEI in vendor selection processes. One of the more significant examples of the Fund’s commitment is found in the selection and evaluation of external investment partners to manage the endowment portfolio, where 95 percent of the foundation’s assets reside. The Fund believes this effort can have a long-term impact on its investments and on the field (see p. 17 for more detail).

Board of Directors. The Fund benefits from the guidance of its diverse board, which is currently led by the foundation’s first Black chairperson, elected in 2020. The board recently shortened new member terms to a maximum of 12 years to rotate in fresh perspectives and diverse voices more often. As they contemplate an upcoming transition in the Fund presidency, directors are designing a search process that recognizes and incorporates the Fund’s work and learnings around diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Grantmaking and Programs

Grantmaking is the core of what the Commonwealth Fund does and is a significant lever for affirming a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The Fund supports projects that produce and disseminate information to influence policy decisions and promote the spread of health care models with the potential to improve health care access, quality, and value. The Fund wants its work to advance DEI to be evident in everything it does: the independent research it funds, the grants it makes to improve health care policy and practice, the programs it underwrites to develop leadership capacity, and the language and vehicles it uses to communicate to the public. In fact, the analytic memo that accompanies every grant proposal now must include an explanation of how the project is aligned with the Fund’s DEI goals and how it might impact equity in the health care system.

This commitment is not a switch that was flipped at the start of the DEI journey. Rather, the Fund is dialing up existing efforts to eliminate disparities in health care access, delivery, and quality with a deeper understanding of the legacy of racism and inequity in U.S. health care and a broader toolkit for dismantling it. What’s more, a radiating effect is achieved through the Fund’s fellowship programs, including the Commonwealth Fund Fellowship in Minority Health Policy at Harvard University, the Pozen-Commonwealth Fund Fellowship in Health Equity Leadership at Yale University, and the Harkness Fellowships in Health Care Policy and Practice. Fellows continue to use the skills and knowledge they gained through these experiences as they assume influential leadership positions, amplifying the Fund’s work and its commitment to equity across the health care ecosystem.

The Fund is gathering information and examining its current grantmaking practices to identify areas for impact

and improvements aligned with its DEI work. This involves collecting baseline demographic data on grantees and fielding a grantee perception report in partnership with the Center For Effective Philanthropy to solicit candid perspectives on the Fund as a grantmaker and on ways to improve. The Fund is also conducting a comprehensive assessment of its grantmaking processes through a DEI lens. A cross-functional, cross-program team is reviewing proposal and reporting requirements to unburden the process and make it more equitable. Several positive changes have already been introduced: more opportunities for grantees to ask questions of Fund staff, increased budget allocations for indirect costs and overhead, and condensed payment schedules in which a greater portion of grant funds are distributed at the front end of the grant period.

At this point in the DEI journey, staff sense progress and can see DEI as a through line in their work. Below are some program highlights and examples of where the commitment to DEI is palpable.

Responsive funding for emergent needs. The Commonwealth Fund took decisive action in response to what it was learning about disparities in health care access, treatment, and outcomes through the COVID-19 crisis. In June 2020, outside the regular budget cycle, the Fund's board approved the creation of the \$1.5 million COVID-19 Health Equity Fund to support projects that address disparities and racism in the U.S. health care system — especially those exacerbated by the pandemic. The Fund awarded grants related to vaccine distribution, access, and trust. It supported studies of how international health systems were responding to the pandemic and adapting their approaches to health care delivery. In doing so, the Fund learned important insights that could improve health care delivery in the U.S., such as how to balance efficiency and equity in vaccine distribution and what role primary care providers should play in vaccine education, distribution, and uptake. The impact of the COVID-19 Health Equity Fund and the flexibility it gave in responding to real-time needs laid the foundation for a \$15 million investment in the Advancing Health Equity Fund several months later.

Piloting new grantmaking strategies. The Commonwealth Fund's traditional approach to grantmaking is to solicit ideas from established researchers and work in partnership with them to codevelop proposals. Involving

The 2021 Staff Perception Report showed a significant increase from 2018 in the measure:

"The Fund demonstrates a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion in its grantmaking and programs"

a group of people who were predominantly white and sourced from elite institutions, the approach perpetuated inequities in who gets funded and whose voices are heard in health care research and policy analysis. The Fund has experimented with new ways of grantmaking to diversify its grantee population and the ideas that receive funding. These processes are not new to the field, but they are new to the Fund and were developed in response to the DEI learnings.

- **RFP process.** The Fund's Medicaid program and the Controlling Health Care Costs program each issued a request for proposals (RFP) to engage historically underrepresented researchers, early career researchers, and researchers or institutions the Fund had not previously supported. Eligibility requirements reflected these goals, excluding anyone who had been a principal investigator on a previous Fund grant. The RFP process focused on institutions such as historically black colleges and universities, and the Fund contacted witnesses on congressional panels, queried its alumni fellows, and invited other organizations and associations to share the request with their networks. Based on a two-page letter of intent, selected applicants were asked to develop a full proposal. The internal and external review processes were blinded, with names and institutions removed from documents.

The RFP for Controlling Health Care Costs, which sought ideas on ways to lower prescription drug prices and spending, did not yield any funded proposals, in part because fewer researchers work in this area and because the topics were defined narrowly. The Medicaid RFP, with a broader range of timely and relevant topics, received nearly 100 responses and resulted in six grant awards. Because so many of the proposals aligned with the Fund's DEI work, the program team allocated more money to this effort than was originally budgeted and doubled the number of projects. Akeiisa Coleman, Senior Program Officer

for Medicaid, is taking a high-touch approach to supporting this pool of grantees. She has introduced new ways for them to engage with the Fund, including cohort convenings to share and learn together and mentoring opportunities with a more experienced Medicaid grantee.

The RFP pilot succeeded in identifying new talent and funding projects led by younger and more diverse investigators, who came from institutions that were either new to the Fund or had not recently received a grant from the foundation. One-fifth of the initial letters of intent received came from institutions in the South, a region underrepresented in Fund grantmaking. Staff were encouraged by this result and mindful of the resources required to achieve it. They learned that resourcing was insufficient for managing a comprehensive blinding and review process and that a third party should be engaged to manage the process in future rounds. While not expected to be an annual exercise, an RFP process will have a place in the Fund's portfolio of grantmaking strategies.

- **Expansion of intermediate grants.** The Commonwealth Fund is using intermediate-sized grants — \$50,000 to \$200,000 — as a way to innovate and diversify its grantmaking. Grants of this size provide program staff with more autonomy to determine which types of projects to develop, and the nature of who and what gets funding through them reflects a focus on DEI. The flexibility that smaller grants provide also affords the foundation an opportunity to learn more in areas where it has less expertise. For example, the Fund gave an intermediate grant to a Harkness Fellow and his mentor to examine lessons from other countries seeking to advance health equity. It supported a learning session on racism in health care at the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials Annual Conference, helping the Fund better understand these stakeholders' priorities. [Another grantee is examining federal health care legislation in areas with which the Fund has less familiarity](#) to identify regulatory and legislative reforms that can advance health equity.

Evolving research practices. To produce actionable insights on racism in the health care system, the Fund is exploring promising practices in DEI-aligned research and data

The Advancing Health Equity Fund

One of the biggest investments in Commonwealth Fund history was the Health Equity Action Fund. With the Board of Directors' support, the Fund authorized a three-year, \$15 million investment in activities designed to help dismantle systemic racism in policy and practice and counter inequity in treatment, patient experience, and health outcomes for Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color. The Fund made this decision amid the uncertainty and disruption of COVID-19 and with a willingness to exceed its budget if market conditions dictated a need to spend beyond the 5 percent minimum payout rule. This commitment was a statement about the priority the Fund placed on advancing equity in the U.S. health care system — a cause rendered more urgent by the pandemic.

The major initiative originating from this investment is the Fund's [Advancing Health Equity program](#). Vice President Laurie Zephyrin, M.D., was named to lead the program. As a physician, professor, and influential leader in policy and program innovation, Zephyrin brought a wide network and extensive professional and personal understanding of the equity issues underlying the health care system. Advancing Health Equity prioritizes work in three areas: 1) dismantling racism in care delivery; 2) using policy to bring about equitable access; and 3) changing institutional culture and personal attitudes that contribute to racism in the health system. Zephyrin and her colleagues have funded a number of innovative programs, including a 2021 Equity Summit attended by over 3,200 people and initiatives to improve maternal health — one of the more significant sources of disparity in health care access, delivery, and outcomes.

The new program is intent on diversifying the voices that contribute to its work and identifying new audiences for its research findings. Because this requires an evolution in funding practices, the Fund is reconsidering its due diligence processes through a DEI lens, including proposal requirements, the extent of document review, and who at the Fund engages with the applicant. The Fund will assess its processes and the performance of inaugural grants awarded through the Health Equity Action Fund in the 2022 Completed Grants Report.

analysis, including oversampling² underrepresented populations to facilitate data disaggregation. The Health Care Delivery System Reform program successfully implemented this approach to oversample Black and Latinx/Hispanic adults in the 2020 International Health Policy Survey, which yielded data highlighting the impact of COVID-19 on the economic and psychological well-being of members of these two groups. This project also helped the Fund reach a new audience of Latinx/Hispanic policymakers and learn about their priorities. While methods such as oversampling and data disaggregation

² <https://equitablegrowth.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/100120-oversampling-fs.pdf>

introduce higher costs, they can deliver greater accuracy and the ability to identify racial inequities in health care.

Communications. The Communications team plays an important role in the dissemination of research and program results to policymakers, health care leaders, researchers, and other influential audiences. This includes media training about DEI that prepares Fund spokespeople to share the foundation’s messages and positions. The team also manages a grants portfolio to fund communications initiatives aligned with the Fund’s mission. Having a DEI lens has allowed the Fund to reach new audiences through partnerships with organizations such as the National Association of Black Journalists and the Native American Journalists Association, as well as through creative, multimedia dissemination strategies.

With data and insights to share about equity, racism, and structural racism, the Fund is able to engage more diverse audiences, more authentically than before. One example of this work is [Confronting Racism in Health Care](#), a report by Martha Hostetter and Sarah Klein that highlighted what academic medical centers are doing to confront racism in health care and how these efforts are for the first time explicitly naming racism as their target.



Another [recent publication highlighted how white researchers are exploiting the increased availability of funding for health equity research](#) without citing previous work by Black and brown researchers or by partnering with

them as coauthors. This piece, which appeared in STAT in September 2021, is part of a series of Fund-supported articles on racism in health and medicine.

External-facing Examples of the DEI Commitment

The Dose podcast. Launched in 2018, the Commonwealth Fund’s biweekly podcast explores what the U.S. can do differently when it comes to health care. Host Shanoor Seervai has made it a priority to diversify guests, feature emerging voices, and make DEI explicit by asking about the equity impacts of the topic being discussed. For example, in the February 2021 episode “Not Just a Black Body,” Magdala Chery, M.D., an internist and Commonwealth Fund Minority Fellow in Health Policy, talked about the passing of both her parents from COVID-19. Chery gave a forthright and compelling account of her family’s tragedy, placing it in the context of what it means to be Black and sick in America.

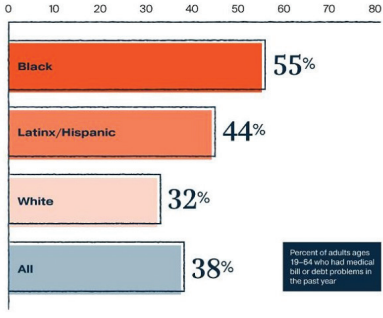
Instagram account. The Fund debuted its [@AdvancingHealthEquity](#) Instagram account in 2021 to raise awareness about its health equity and maternal health work among young professionals, students, and advocacy organizations. Posts with bold graphics and clear, direct language share news and resources on pervasive health inequities and how the Fund can create an antiracist U.S. health system. The account has over 3,500 followers.




advancinghealthequity Follow


Advancing Health Equity
Working to advance equity in U.S. health care by dismantling systemic racism in health care policy & practice. An initiative of @commonwealthfund.
bit.ly/AdvancingHE

THE INEQUITABLE BURDEN OF MEDICAL BILL AND DEBT PROBLEMS IN THE U.S.



Race/Ethnicity	Percent of adults aged 19-64 who had medical bill or debt problems in the past year
Black	55%
Latinx/Hispanic	44%
White	32%
All	38%





CONSIDER THIS

The path to health equity starts with reporting, collecting, and acting on complete, accurate, and reliable data on race and ethnicity.

Images from the @AdvancingHealthEquity Instagram account

Other communications products. Additional longstanding, external-facing products and initiatives now serve as tools for highlighting how the Fund embeds DEI in every aspect of its work. The website was refreshed to emphasize the Fund's commitment to DEI. *To the Point* blog posts are published several times a week, providing a recurring opportunity to spotlight issues around racism and racial disparities in the health care system and beyond. Also living on the blog are [the Fund's statement on racial justice](#) in the wake of George Floyd's murder and [a call for action to address racism](#) from the Fund's president. Finally, staff share their knowledge and express the Fund's views on advancing equity in health care through frequent participation on discussion panels and other speaking engagements.

DEI work cannot be siloed. A companion lesson is that DEI work should not be isolated to one program or operational area. Becoming an antiracist organization requires the Fund to reckon with its conceptions of what an organization should look like and how it should be run. The Fund needs to examine every assumption about how it hires, whom it hires, what it funds, how it decides what gets funded, and who is involved in those decisions. Every decision should be viewed through a DEI lens, where the impact on racial equity is questioned.

Mistakes are inherent in the challenging work of DEI. The Fund prides itself on striving for excellence, which can make it hard to accept the inevitable mistakes that are part of any DEI process. Staff had to let go of perfectionism as an ideal in order to grapple with the work. They did not always get it right over the past three years, but they learned there is nothing wrong with that if they embrace a growth mindset and a willingness to acknowledge and repair harm. Engaging in this work requires vulnerability and humility. Staff are working through their discomfort and finding it more natural to engage in the work and apply a DEI framework. They are learning to call out microaggressions or the presence of unconscious bias, while also learning to take responsibility for them and work to change.

DEI work requires a substantial investment of resources. The Fund started this journey aware that the work would require a commitment of time, energy, and money — and yet the extent of the investment was still surprising. Nearly 100 working hours have been devoted to DEI-related programming over the past three years, including all-staff meetings and learning sessions, small group discussions, and planning sessions. This does not account for the number of individuals who attended each event, the time spent in preparation to lead and facilitate activities, or individuals' time and energy spent on pre- and follow-up work (e.g., readings, reflections, action planning). The timing and extent of the organization's efforts signaled that this was critical work, at a critical time, and left staff feeling supported with time and resources. The Fund encourages other organizations seeking to start their own DEI journey to invest at a level that allows staff to feel supported and change to be meaningful.

Senior leaders should be participants and champions in the work. The Fund believes it is important that accountability



Key Lessons from the DEI Journey

The Commonwealth Fund values learning. It views reflection on its work as an essential discipline and a way to promote accountability and glean lessons for the future. This is especially important for the Fund's efforts around DEI. Following are key lessons from the first three years of the Fund's DEI journey.

DEI work is ongoing and complex; it cannot be rushed.

This work does not lend itself to the timelines, checklists, and milestones to which the Fund is accustomed. Staff had to hold the tension between a desire for impact and the nonlinear character of DEI work as it unfolded in a less predictable cycle of learning, integration, and change. They had to temper a sense of urgency and bias toward action. And they had to stop searching for signs that the work was “done” and instead trust the process, and each other, as they moved along the path.

for DEI work reside at the highest level of the organization, and that leaders demonstrate personal accountability as well. Fund executives have walked the DEI path along with the rest of the staff. They participate in planning efforts, attend training sessions, and adopt personal practices that lead to a more equitable, diverse, and inclusive organization.

Transparency is an important principle. A perceived lack of transparency within the Fund was part of the original impetus to begin DEI efforts. The foundation's work over the past three years has put a finer point on transparency — and its offshoot, accountability — as a critical success factor. Examples of efforts to increase transparency include the posting of demographic data on staff, grantees, and board members on the Fund's website and the sharing of DEI Advisory Committee meeting notes with all staff. Going forward, the Fund knows that it must push even harder to develop organizational practices that will increase transparency and break down barriers to realize aspirations around DEI.

Generational tensions are inevitable. Find ways to leverage them to advance the work. Today's junior staffers arrive at the Fund with an understanding of, and perspective on, race as a social construct and the way structural racism functions. They have definite ideas and high expectations for how much and how fast their organizations can address racial inequities. Staff with longer tenures hold a more nuanced understanding of organizational change and view it in light of the Fund's history. This sometimes leads to tension along generational lines.

But opportunity exists to harness the perspectives of both groups to move DEI work forward. Younger staff can share their knowledge and contemporary thinking about race and racism, while being cautious not to place an emotional burden on staff of color. Longer-tenured staff can share their career experiences to put progress made in historical context, helping the Fund realize that it is indeed making positive change. For its part, the Executive Management Team has an opportunity to respond to calls to share power in decision-making and articulate how ambitions will translate into action steps.

When differences arise, they often concern tactics, not values. A key question is how the foundation can help effect policy change and utilize its legacy network while also welcoming new voices and speaking to different audiences.

A debate is ensuing about how the Fund can lead most powerfully and effectively, and how it can speak to issues of race, racism, and equity in health care. Should the Fund lead the march to change? Or should it continue to walk alongside its audience and nudge them toward change? These are complex questions that reflect the conflict between many staff members' desire for more assertive advocacy and the foundation's traditional nonpartisan stance. While staff continue to debate this issue, it is important to remember what is not debatable: the Fund's commitment to both becoming an antiracist organization and fulfilling the mission to promote a high-performing health care system.

Adherence to established ways and low risk tolerance hinder progress. DEI work requires taking risks and adopting new ways of being and working. These remain areas of growth for the Fund, as evidenced by the lack of change between 2018 and 2021 in staff perceptions of the Fund's "willingness to take risk in funding new grantees," one of the questions asked in the Center for Effective Philanthropy's annual Staff Perception Survey. Some staff perceive an adherence to dogma and process that prevents the Fund from trying new approaches to operating and grantmaking. As part of the staff-led DEI Audit in Grantmaking initiative, Fund members are making recommendations on how grants are reviewed. This includes revising the existing rationale and criteria for assessing the potential of new grants to assure that rating criteria reflect the Fund's values and DEI vision.

What's Next

This report affirms the work the Commonwealth Fund has completed and the progress it has made in its DEI journey. It also demonstrates that there is a lot left to do. An implementation plan, collectively developed by Fund staff, will guide the next phase of the Fund's journey by identifying areas of commitment and long-term action related to various spheres of influence within the organization's culture and operations. The Fund wants external accountability and support and will continue to benefit from consultant Cardozie Jones's guidance and coaching through the first year of the implementation work. One thing is certain: the Fund is moving forward on its DEI journey.

Some of the priorities for the next phase include:

Creating and cultivating an inclusive community where all members of the Fund can meaningfully contribute and feel deeply connected to the foundation's work and antiracism journey. This requires the development and nurturing of systems and practices that can engender active participation and uplift the voices and experiences of those most impacted by organizational decisions. It will also require further progress in holding difficult conversations, especially between staff at different levels within the organization.

Fostering an environment that supports people of color, ensuring they feel valued and can thrive. The staff aspiration to recruit and retain people of color at all levels at the Fund, especially in leadership roles, will be reinforced by the existence of a self-reflective, critical, and inclusive organizational culture.

Meaningfully increasing the number of grantees of color with whom the Commonwealth Fund can create and nurture deep and lasting relationships. This same commitment will be located in the policies that inform how the Fund chooses fellows, partners, and vendors. Doing so will require experimentation with new ways of grantmaking in pursuit of a more equitable process. The Fund's internal audit of its grantmaking process is the first step toward developing one that is more transparent and equitable, builds partnerships with grantees, and reevaluates risk-rating criteria to reflect the Fund's values and DEI vision. The Fund will need to place more

trust in new grantees and methodologies, reconsider what qualifies someone as an expert, and provide an appropriate form and level of support, without overmanaging investigators.

Increasing risk tolerance and accepting the failures that inevitably result. The Fund needs to trust that learning and growth can still happen in the moments where efforts fall short of intentions. Honoring this priority also requires the Fund to reconsider decision-making about who and what projects receive funding. The current process places final authority over which grants get recommended for Board approval with the Executive Management Team. While these decisions are informed by analysis, input, and recommendations from the program teams — a fact that lends implicit authority and demonstrates the trust that is placed in program teams' judgment — vice presidents and senior program officers do not have any direct control over these decisions. The Fund is actively considering new opportunities to redistribute this authority and share power among program leads.

Consistently applying a racial equity lens in public policy analysis to achieve a clearer, more rigorous understanding of how people of color are affected by existing laws, rules, and regulations as well as proposed changes. This effort includes reflection on the implications of how the Fund communicates its research and analysis to policymakers, the media, and the public.

Implementation 2022

For the Fund's DEI implementation plan, Fund staff in 2022 are building new structures and processes for accountability, continued learning, and critical reflection. Staff teams have been meeting quarterly to set specific, actionable goals encompassing all aspects of the foundation, from organizational culture, research agenda, grantmaking, and communications to hiring practices and endowment management. During these retreats, staff share progress on their goals, engage in critical reflection, and discuss progress as well as tensions that may arise.

As the Fund's DEI journey evolves, the organization will continue to prioritize sharing experiences and learnings in the spirit of transparency, accountability, and a commitment to becoming an antiracist organization.

About the Commonwealth Fund

The Commonwealth Fund — among the first private foundations started by a woman philanthropist, Anna M. Harkness — was established in 1918 with the broad charge to enhance the common good. Today, the mission of the Commonwealth Fund is to promote a high-performing health care system that achieves better access, improved quality, and greater efficiency, particularly for society's most vulnerable, including low-income people, the uninsured, and people of color.

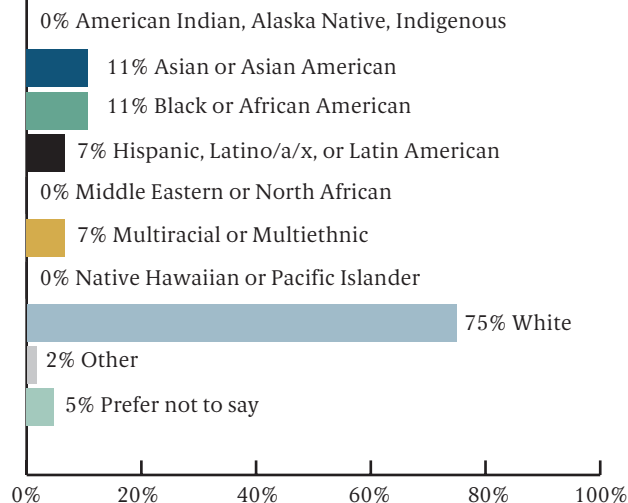
The Fund carries out this mandate by supporting independent research on health care issues and making grants to improve health care practice and policy. An international program in health policy is designed to stimulate innovative policies and practices in the United States and other industrialized countries.

Visit [the Commonwealth Fund's website](#) to learn more.

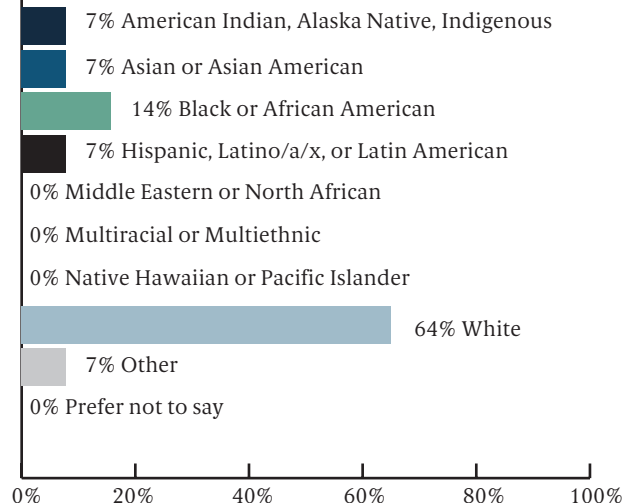
Appendix

Demographic Characteristics of Staff, Board, Grantees, and Fellows

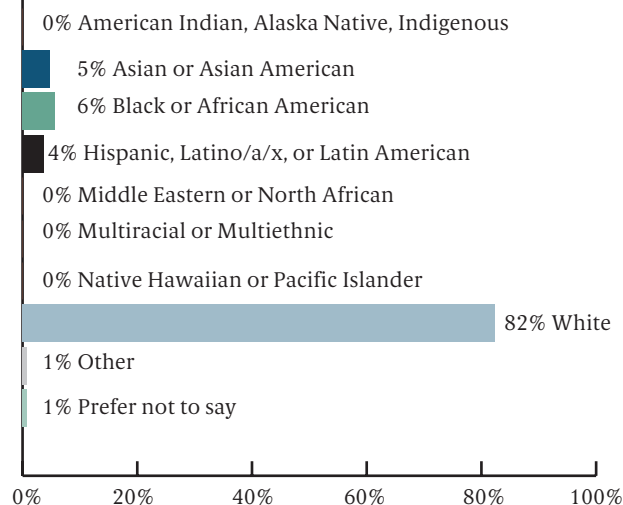
Staff



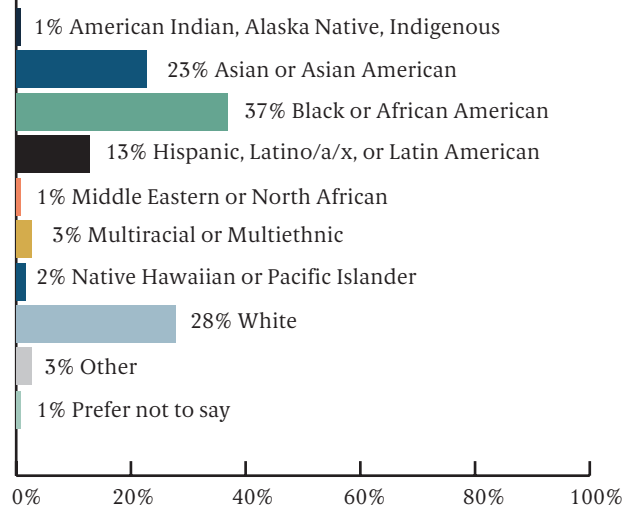
Board



Grantees



Fellows



Notes: Question asked of U.S.-based respondents only. Respondents selected all race and ethnicity options that apply to them.

Total N=261; Board N=14; Staff N=45; Fellows N=123; Grantees N=79.

Survey administered in 2020 by the Commonwealth Fund and the Center for Effective Philanthropy.



The
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The views presented here are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Commonwealth Fund or its directors, officers, or staff.