



One Journey

National Child Welfare Workforce
Institute Racial Equity Team



Acknowledgements

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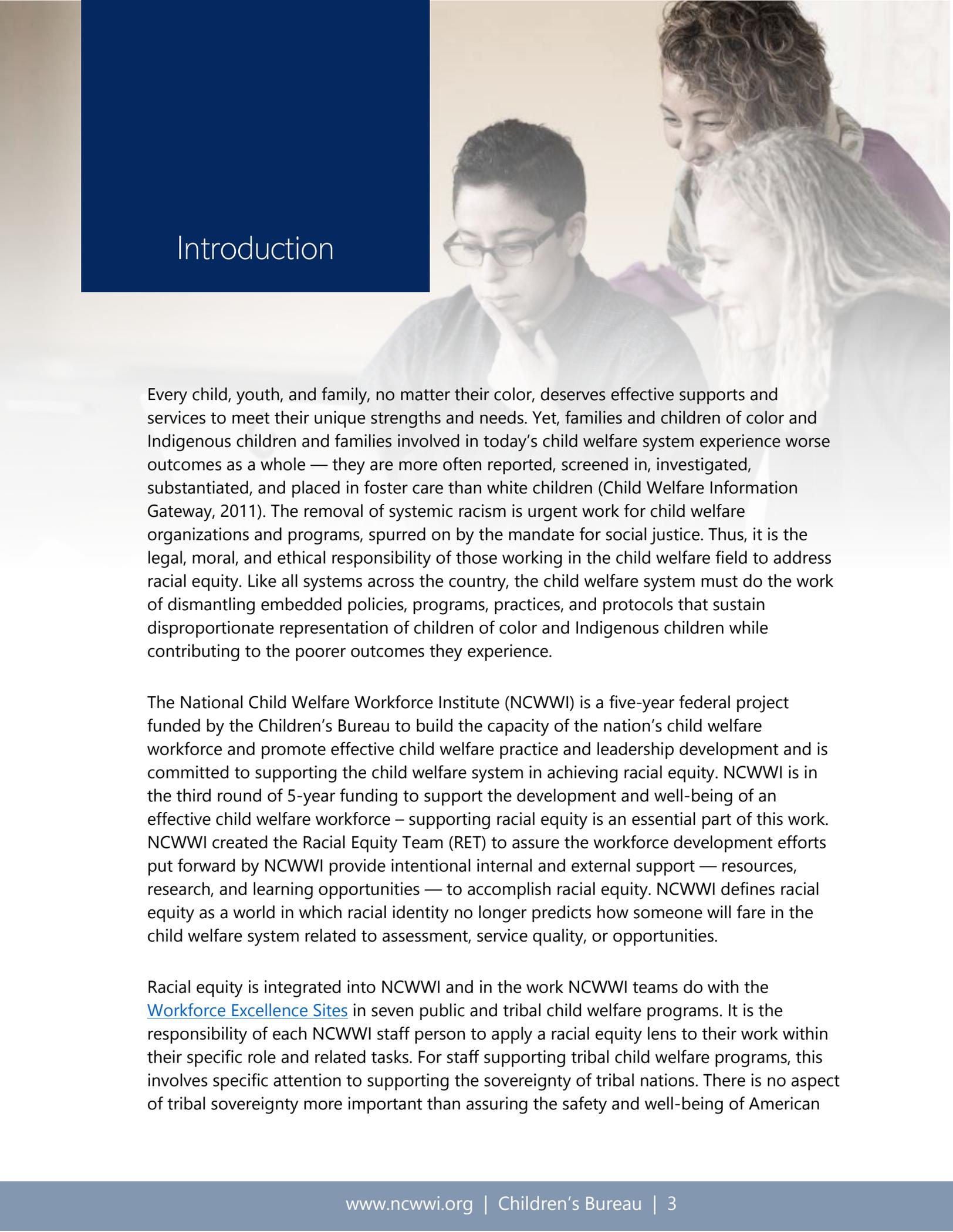
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Introduction

Every child, youth, and family, no matter their color, deserves effective supports and services to meet their unique strengths and needs. Yet, families and children of color and Indigenous children and families involved in today's child welfare system experience worse outcomes as a whole — they are more often reported, screened in, investigated, substantiated, and placed in foster care than white children (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011). The removal of systemic racism is urgent work for child welfare organizations and programs, spurred on by the mandate for social justice. Thus, it is the legal, moral, and ethical responsibility of those working in the child welfare field to address racial equity. Like all systems across the country, the child welfare system must do the work of dismantling embedded policies, programs, practices, and protocols that sustain disproportionate representation of children of color and Indigenous children while contributing to the poorer outcomes they experience.

The National Child Welfare Workforce Institute (NCWWI) is a five-year federal project funded by the Children's Bureau to build the capacity of the nation's child welfare workforce and promote effective child welfare practice and leadership development and is committed to supporting the child welfare system in achieving racial equity. NCWWI is in the third round of 5-year funding to support the development and well-being of an effective child welfare workforce – supporting racial equity is an essential part of this work. NCWWI created the Racial Equity Team (RET) to assure the workforce development efforts put forward by NCWWI provide intentional internal and external support — resources, research, and learning opportunities — to accomplish racial equity. NCWWI defines racial equity as a world in which racial identity no longer predicts how someone will fare in the child welfare system related to assessment, service quality, or opportunities.

Racial equity is integrated into NCWWI and in the work NCWWI teams do with the [Workforce Excellence Sites](#) in seven public and tribal child welfare programs. It is the responsibility of each NCWWI staff person to apply a racial equity lens to their work within their specific role and related tasks. For staff supporting tribal child welfare programs, this involves specific attention to supporting the sovereignty of tribal nations. There is no aspect of tribal sovereignty more important than assuring the safety and well-being of American



Indian/Alaska Native children. The tribes' protection of children was impacted by the forced dependence and destruction of traditional tribal governance structures (Cross & Simmons, n.d.). This can influence the structures and supports for the workforce within tribal child welfare programs. At the heart of this effort, the RET acknowledges the impact of racism on our history and how it is embedded in our social institutions. The RET recognizes the ways in which the white dominant frame and related norms are upheld and contribute to the oppression of historically marginalized peoples. This is an important consideration even when racial equity is included as a priority within an organization or program. This brief shares the journey of the NCWWI RET to support the child welfare workforce in confronting the impact of systemic racism and the lessons we have learned along the way thus far.

Team Development

NCWWI works toward our vision of racial equity by building our internal capacity to meet the challenge of dismantling systemic racial inequities. NCWWI supports child welfare programs and university schools of social work to embrace a racial equity culture and practices that ensure equitable outcomes for all children and families. Our mission is to operationalize an anti-racist approach, both internally and with our partner jurisdictions and the field, to develop child welfare leaders who work to achieve racial equity within their organizations and implement system changes that reduce disparate outcomes for children, youth, and families. NCWWI created the RET in 2015 during the second round of the federal grant project to guide the work of fulfilling this vision of racial equity.

To form the RET, members were intentionally drawn from various teams across NCWWI. At the beginning of these efforts, the RET questioned whether to hone in on race or broaden the team's focus to include ethnicity and other areas where having intersectional identities often lead to people experiencing inequities. After much discussion, the RET chose to focus on race, as it is the most influential indicator of poor outcomes within the child welfare system. Members of the RET determined attention would be more purposeful and less diluted with a specific focus on racial equity and tribal sovereignty.

Since our journey began in 2015, the RET has deepened our intent and related actions to advance racial equity, self-awareness, and self-guided learning and growth. We have also increased diverse staff representation within NCWWI and on the RET.



Structure and Commitment

A racial equity team is a vehicle for change because it guides intentional action. NCWWI's RET found it helpful to create a team structure that assures distributive leadership and inclusive practices. We have learned a racial equity team is best developed using principles of inclusivity and transparency. We encourage other racial equity teams to include representatives across roles and program areas within the organization and from diverse populations. Considerations for creating team structure include:

- Recruitment – Be clear about how members join the team, include representatives across roles and program areas within the organization, and include team members from diverse populations.
- Membership – Establish a plan for maintaining team members with longevity and welcoming new team members. Long-standing team members help set the tone for roles, reinforce the process that has worked, and keep efforts moving forward using a historical team perspective.
- Meeting frequency and length – Meet often and for enough time to support relationship development and building and use videoconferencing to encourage equal access to discussion.
- Distributive leadership – Share and rotate meeting roles to mitigate the impact of position hierarchies and how positionality impacts interactions and participation. Meeting roles include facilitator, notetaker, and process monitor:
 - Facilitator creates the agenda and facilitates the meeting
 - Notetaker captures key decisions or observations from the meeting and includes information for next meeting regarding roles and future agenda items
 - Process monitor follows how team members adhere to the group agreements and reports out at the end of the meeting

Along with team structure, the RET found that group agreements create an overarching commitment to the long and deep work required to accomplish racial equity. These specific agreements amongst team members guide how team members work together and hold team members accountable to each other over time. The team's initial work should involve



developing these group agreements or norms. For example, the NCWWI RET works within the following agreements:

- Honor and celebrate differences
- Be intentional and explicit about inclusiveness, participation, and process
- Listen actively, be present, and commit full attention
- Develop and practice self-awareness
- Offer respectful communication
- Use an inclusive and distributive leadership approach
- Learn each other's strengths and use them to advance the work
- Make room for full participation and consideration of range of viewpoints
- Maintain a sense of humor and enjoy working together

Ground the Work

An RET should create a foundation of understanding about their shared principles and framework to guide their work together. Establishing a shared language with common terminology is critically important to effective communication, particularly on the topic of racism — a topic historically avoided or talked around by white colleagues due to discomfort and [white fragility](#) (DiAngelo, 2011). White fragility is the experience of discomfort a white person may feel or defensive behavior they may display when confronting racial inequality or injustice. Shared language paired with the group agreements provide a helpful foundation for working together.

The NCWWI RET keeps the four levels of racism at the forefront of our discussions, planning, and actions. These levels include personal, interpersonal, institutional, and structural racism (Suarez, 2018). Every action item is discussed within the context of these levels to assure impact is targeted to the levels of racism it is intended to address:

- Personal – focuses on the privately held beliefs, prejudices, and implicit bias about superiority of whites and therefore inferiority of people of color and Indigenous colleagues.
 - RET action step: Administering the [Intercultural Development Inventory initiative](#) (IDI®) to NCWWI team members to promote individual awareness and growth



on intercultural capacity. The IDI® is a research-based, reliable, and validated assessment instrument that provides group and individualized results regarding capacity to connect and bridge across cultures. The results of the IDI show an individual's perceived orientation and developmental orientation on intercultural capacity.

- Interpersonal – focuses on the interactions between colleagues and how they experience individual implicit bias and private beliefs with each other.
 - RET action step: Conducting an internal organizational assessment to measure bias, inclusivity, and discrimination within NCWWI. Information was gathered from staff about their experiences of prejudice and microaggressions within NCWWI. As a result, NCWWI developed processes and procedures for addressing microaggressions experienced by staff.
- Institutional – focuses on policies and practices that result in inequitable opportunities within an organization.
 - RET action step: Consistently using a distributive leadership approach to organize our work in all meetings across teams. This approach engages staff in the collective responsibility of anti-racism work and encourages the open sharing of ideas and collaborative decision-making.
 - RET action step: Supporting the development of a NCWWI-wide framework within which to build a racial equity culture.
- Structural – focuses on the impact public policy, cultural representations, and practices across systems have on the workforce and therefore families.
 - RET action step: Using our connection to the child welfare workforce to communicate an anti-racism message across multiple channels. For example, NCWWI hosted a six-part webinar series on [Dismantling Racial Inequity Through Child Welfare Systems Change](#), curated a special collection of [racial equity resources](#), and developed a [Racial Equity Discussion Guide](#). In addition, NCWWI is committed to integrating racial equity into all NCWWI events, products, and supports.

Communication

Regular and frequent communication is essential to sustained dedication to racial equity. NCWWI intentionally provides updates across teams and implements multiple communication methods. Each person on the RET, as a member of another NCWWI team,



crosswalks knowledge, ideas, and action steps in their different roles and carries ideas, suggestions, and action steps across their teams.



Tribal Child Welfare

The inclusion of American Indian NCWWI staff on the RET team helps to define and focus efforts on ensuring equity for Native children and sovereignty of tribal nations through the development of the tribal child welfare workforce. This representation, and the regular focus on the tribal contexts of equity actions, has supported the development of action steps such as leadership intentionally focusing on equity, enhanced Indian Child Welfare Act training, and cross-collaboration between RET members with Tribal Workforce Excellence Sites and the Tribal Advisory Board Work Group.

Tribal child welfare programs are working to strengthen their tribal nations and preserve tribal culture and sovereignty by creating healthy futures for children, families, and communities (Lucero & Leake, 2016). The NCWWI RET has focused on assuring that tribal child welfare program perspectives are part of the RET discussions and actions. For example, tribal child welfare programs are working to build systems of support that keep families together, healthy, and strong by acknowledging and harnessing the strengths of their cultural traditions. Past policies of the federal government sought to destroy Native cultures and kinship systems and assimilate Native children into mainstream white society; these policies have resulted in trauma, suffering, and loss for generations (Bussey & Lucero, 2013). Thus, the development of the child welfare workforce includes supporting tribal child welfare programs in their active efforts at decolonization and overcoming the injurious effects of attempted genocide while supporting healing of families in the community. Given this context, the language NCWWI uses around racial equity for public child welfare agencies does not resonate with tribal child welfare programs and is reframed accordingly.



Evaluate and Use Data for Sustainability

Collecting data through multiple methods and from multiple sources, including from varied stakeholders, is an important racial equity action step and is directly linked to accountability. The RET conducted an internal organizational assessment in 2016 and a revised version in 2019 to inform the actions needed to improve NCWWI's internal workings. The intent is to repeat the assessment every three years for comparative purposes to document NCWWI's successes in advancing racial equity internally across our teams. In addition to conducting an organizational assessment, the RET has worked to:



- Identify areas of strength and improvement
- Assess for implicit bias and develop self-guided learning plans
- Acknowledge where there is a lack of data
- Disaggregate data by race, gender, and other demographic variables
- Conduct analysis of root causes of inequities

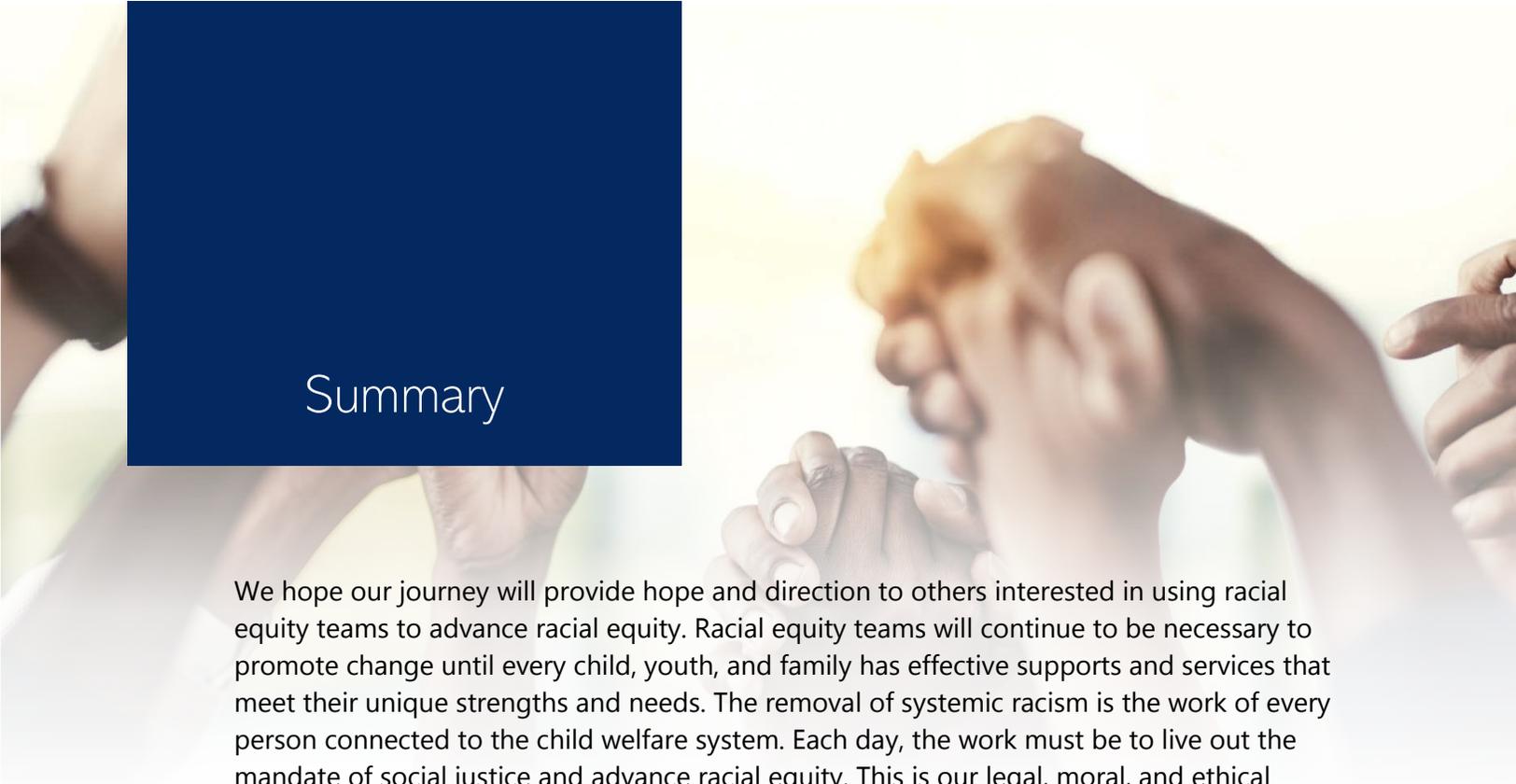
External Impact

A RET should hold the organization internally accountable while also seeking opportunities to advance racial equity externally. The NCWWI RET has integrated racial equity work into NCWWI's all-staff meeting. NCWWI's RET has also focused on specific actions necessary to support the work of team members in advancing racial equity including:

- Supporting the Workforce Excellence (WE) Sites by integrating a focus on racial equity into the Comprehensive Organizational Health Assessment (COHA) completed with each of the public Workforce Excellence jurisdictions and the separate assessment for the tribal sites which included specific factors relevant to tribal child welfare programs. These results provide important data for child welfare programs to identify specific strategies to include in their work.
- Integrating racial equity and adaptive skill-building into leadership training and resources:
 - Racial equity has been integrated into the NCWWI Leadership Academy curriculum more broadly through experiential learning activities.
- Calling out inclusivity/racial equity as one of the ten components of workforce development in the [NCWWI Workforce Development Framework](#) and adding "Racial Equity Lens" as a pillar in the [NCWWI Leadership Competency Framework](#).
- Co-developing a tribal leadership model and related framework with the Capacity Building Center for Tribes to assure supports specific to tribal child welfare programs.
- Schools of social work that partner with the Workforce Excellence public and tribal child welfare programs are recruiting and supporting diverse groups of MSW and BSW trainees through their stipend programs and integrating racial equity and cultural responsiveness into their traineeship work by:



- Providing supports for students who are currently in the workforce and as they transition from school to work
- Supporting schools in offering enhanced Indian Child Welfare Act and Tribal sovereignty curriculum and tribal learning approaches
- Encouraging university/agency conversations and actions focused on racial equity and inclusion
- Convening a student advisory board that is identifying and addressing racial inequity in schools and agencies
- Disseminating knowledge and information through the NCWWI LINKD team. The NCWWI LINKD team is responsible for knowledge management and dissemination of information and learning including developing helpful products such as webinars, toolkits, podcasts, and real story videos. The LINKD team’s racial equity efforts involved gathering, creating, and disseminating resources and tools about racial equity and inclusion in child welfare including:
 - Developing a [Racial Equity Discussion Guide](#) as a tool for leading the work of challenging and dismantling institutional and structural racism, including key messages and suggestions for leaders and specific discussion questions and resources that will engage partners and team members in holding “courageous conversations.”
 - Hosting a six-part webinar series [Dismantling Racial Inequity Through Child Welfare Systems Change](#) with the Center for the Study of Social Policy, which featured workforce and organizational development stories and strategies to achieve racial equity. Webinar topics included:
 - Using an Institutional Analysis to Identify Core Issues and Spur Change (Jul 2017)
 - [Community Collaboration & Grassroots Effort \(Cross-Systems & Tribal Partnerships\)](#) (Sep 2017)
 - [A Data-Driven Approach to Improving Outcomes for Black Girls in Child Welfare](#) (Dec 2017)
 - [Slow and Steady Wins the RACE of Child Welfare Equity](#) (Feb 2018)
 - Strengthening Our Efforts Through Partnerships with Academia (Jun 2018)
 - Sustaining Racial Equity Improvements in Child Welfare (Sep 2018)
 - Creating an infographic on [Promoting Racial Equity Through Workforce and Organizational Actions](#)
 - Developing [one-pagers](#) and a resource collection on racial equity



Summary

We hope our journey will provide hope and direction to others interested in using racial equity teams to advance racial equity. Racial equity teams will continue to be necessary to promote change until every child, youth, and family has effective supports and services that meet their unique strengths and needs. The removal of systemic racism is the work of every person connected to the child welfare system. Each day, the work must be to live out the mandate of social justice and advance racial equity. This is our legal, moral, and ethical responsibility. Our journey includes:

- Conducting institutional analysis to examine organizational factors, such as administrative practices, that contribute to disparate outcomes and identify gaps between intent and outcomes.
- Offering training and workforce development to staff at all level that emphasizes reflective practices on how racism and implicit bias impact the lives of children, families, and communities.
- Strengthening and creating partnerships to support disparity-reduction efforts.
- Supporting state and county child welfare agencies to support ICWA compliance and reduce disparity for BIPOC families.
- Engaging with tribal child welfare programs to develop culturally-based approaches and strategies for strengthening the workforce.
- Partnering with social work programs in colleges and universities serving racially and ethnically diverse students to exchange resources and implement strategies.
- Applying race/ethnicity and decision points analysis to understand racially disparate outcomes.
- Creating structures and partnerships with community groups that provide accountability and sustainability of racial equity work.



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