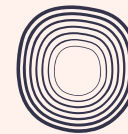


Self-Study Learning Guide



OPIOID LEARNING
AND RESPONSE
COLLABORATIVE

Beginner Racial Equity Response (Stage 1 Foundation)

Your Organization in Stage 1

Organizations at the Foundation stage are alerting to the reality that their opioid response work, however well-intentioned, may not be reaching all communities equitably, and may in fact be replicating or deepening racial disparities.

Leaders and staff are asking important questions sometimes for the first time: Do our programs serve Black, Indigenous, and People of Color at the same rate and quality as White clients? Do our hiring practices reflect the communities we serve? Do people whose primary language is not English have genuine access to our services, not just a phone number for a translator? Is our organizational culture welcoming to staff and clients of color?

The primary work of this stage is building a common understanding, shared language, and unified motivation, before moving to structural change. Moving too quickly through this phase is one of the most common mistakes organizations make. When leaders rush to create a DEI committee or publish an equity statement without first doing the internal groundwork, those structures often collapse under the weight of unresolved tension. The Foundation stage is essential work and should not be treated as minor.

The Systems Thinking Lens at Stage 1

Organizations at the Foundation stage are learning to see the system they are operating in, transitioning from only seeing the outcomes that appear unfair or ineffective to gaining a deeper understanding of the underlying structure producing those outcomes. David Peter Stroh, in *Systems Thinking for Social Change*, describes how well-intentioned efforts often fail because they address symptoms rather than the underlying system. Part of the learning here in this phase is to develop the ability to connect unintended consequences to the policies and practices that are responsible for producing inequitable outcomes.

Typical Organizational Behaviors at Stage 1

- Staff have varying and sometimes conflicting definitions of terms like equity, diversity, cultural competency, and systemic racism, making productive conversation difficult.
- Leadership may be personally committed but uncertain how to translate that commitment into sustainable organization-wide action.
- Language access may be addressed informally or inconsistently relying on bilingual staff members who have not been trained as interpreters or using family members of clients as interpreters in clinical settings.
- Workforce demographics may not reflect the communities served, and the organization may not yet have examined why.
- Data is collected but not disaggregated by race or ethnicity, making it impossible to identify disparities in access, engagement, retention, or outcomes.
- Training efforts tend to be episodic with a one-time workshop or guest speaker rather than integrated into ongoing professional development.

Why Stage 1 Matters

Meaningful change through the lens of racial equity cannot rely simply on good intentions. The Foundation stage requires deep investment to build relational trust and shared understanding that makes the harder structural work possible.

Primary Learning Goals for Stage 1

- **Build Shared Language:** Establish common definitions for equity, race, culture, systemic racism, cultural humility, and related concepts across the organization.
- **Examine Internal Culture & Data:** Conduct an internal assessment of workforce demographics, staff experiences, and organizational climate.
- **Learn Cultural Humility Basics:** Begin the shift from cultural competency (to the lifelong practice of cultural humility).
- **Assess Language Access Gaps:** Identify which languages are spoken in your service area and how well your current services meet those needs.
- **Begin Equity Strategy Planning:** Move from informal commitments to structured planning with leadership accountability.

Direct Service Providers: Professional Learning Path (Stage 1)

For direct service providers, counselors, case managers, outreach workers, support specialists, and others in daily contact with clients, the Foundation stage is about developing a new lens for understanding the people they serve and the systems those people navigate. Effective culturally responsive practice requires providers to examine their own identities, assumptions, and biases as an ongoing personal and professional discipline.

[FOUNDATION] National Standards for Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services (CLAS) in Health and Health Care

https://thinkculturalhealth.hhs.gov/assets/pdfs/EnhancedNationalCLASStandards_Revised_June2025.pdf

Full CLAS Standards (June 2025). The National CLAS Standards establish a federal blueprint for providing culturally and linguistically appropriate health services.

[FOUNDATION] CLAS Standards: Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services (HHS)

<https://thinkculturalhealth.hhs.gov/assets/pdfs/resource-library/clas-clc-ch.pdf>

Full CLAS Standards (June 2025). The National CLAS Standards establish a federal blueprint for providing culturally and linguistically appropriate health services.

[SKILL BUILDER] Effective Cross-Cultural Communication Skills (HHS)

<https://thinkculturalhealth.hhs.gov/assets/pdfs/resource-library/effective-cross-cultural-communication-skills.pdf>

Resource for providing direct service across cultural difference. Cross-cultural communication requires specific, learnable skills that go far beyond being friendly or open-minded.

[TOOL] Working Effectively with an Interpreter (HHS)

<https://thinkculturalhealth.hhs.gov/assets/pdfs/resource-library/working-effectively-with-interpreter.pdf>

Checklist for knowing when to engage the services of an interpreter.

[SKILL BUILDER] Improving Cultural Competence Part 1 of 3 (SAMHSA Tip 59)

<https://youtu.be/gCMCNReYnYs?si=hKSKa6sezREGog3D>

This module from Dr. Dawn-Elise Snipes, PhD, LPC intro module introduces the concept of cultural competence, defines culture, and explores problems with limited cultural competence.

[BOOK] Culturally Responsive Substance Use Treatment (Jones, Routledge), Chapters 1-3

<https://www.routledge.com/Culturally-Responsive-Substance-Use-Treatment-A-Guide-for-Practitioners-Students-and-Organizations/Jones/p/book/9781032708799>

Most comprehensive practitioner guide for integrating cultural understanding and sensitivity into substance use treatment. Stage 1 practitioners should focus on the opening chapters, which lay the conceptual foundation. providing culturally and linguistically appropriate health services.

Executive Leaders: Organizational Leadership Path (Stage 1)

For executive directors, senior leadership teams, and boards, the Foundation stage requires the willingness to look honestly at the organization's current state, acknowledge gaps, and begin sustained investment in racial equity work.

[FOUNDATION] DEI Starter Toolkit (FAIRER Consulting)

<https://www.fairerconsulting.com/dei-starter-toolkit>

This free toolkit is designed specifically for organizations at the very beginning of structured DEI work. It includes a DEI glossary that helps leadership establish shared language, one of the most frequently overlooked but can conversation starters for leadership teams to develop common understanding and shared language. These are critical first steps in any organizational transition to a deeper racial equity focus in its work.

[TOOLKIT] DIY DEI Toolkit (NH Center for Nonprofits)

<https://www.nhnonprofits.org/resources/do-it-yourself-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-diy-dei-toolkit>

Developed for small-to-mid-sized nonprofits, this toolkit offers ten practical, actionable steps for integrating DEI principles into organizational life. Ideal for board-level work.

[TOOLKIT] Equity Toolkit A Research-Based Guide to Operationalizing Equity (Achieving the Dream)

<https://achievingthedream.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/ATD-Equity-Toolkit-2023.pdf>

[LEARNING] Enhancing Cultural Responsiveness in Social Service Agencies (OPRE, 2023)

<https://acf.gov/system/files/documents/opre/OPRE-enhancing-cultural-responsiv-april2024.pdf>

This federal report, produced by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation within the Administration for Children and Families, synthesizes evidence-based frameworks for how social service agencies can assess and strengthen their cultural responsiveness.

[ASSESSMENT] Language Access Self-Assessment Checklist

<https://canatx.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Language-Access-Organizational-Checklist-Feb-2020.pdf>

Organizational self-assessment for language access. A first step diagnostic tool for organizational leaders to understand language access needs, current language access practices, and develop a plan for serving diverse communities.

Stage 1 Foundation Wrap-Up

Internal Organizational Focus (Stage 1)

Before an organization can credibly claim to be advancing racial equity for the communities it serves, it must look inside its own organizational walls to understand: Who works here? Who leads here? Whose voices shape decisions? Does our organizational culture feel welcoming to staff of color? Are our human resources policies, hiring, promotion, compensation, retention, producing equitable outcomes?

The critical systems thinking insight here is that internal inequities within an organization are deeply connected to the organization's external effectiveness. An organization where staff of color feel unseen, unsupported, or marginalized is not positioned to do effective equity work with BIPOC communities. Internal and external equity are part of the same system.

External Community-Facing Focus (Stage 1)

External work at the Foundation stage centers on ensuring basic access and beginning to understand the communities the organization aims to serve. This means addressing language access as a foundational infrastructure issue, learning about the cultural contexts of priority communities, and beginning to build relationships, not partnerships yet, but the first conversations that make future partnerships possible.

The National CLAS Standards provide a baseline external framework: every organization providing health-related services has obligations to provide culturally and linguistically appropriate services. Organizations at this stage can conduct a CLAS standards self-assessment, identify which standards they currently meet and which they do not, and prioritize language access infrastructure early.

Outcomes for Stage 1

- Shared equity vocabulary established across teams, leadership, clinical staff, administrative, and board all working from common definitions.
- Language access gaps identified through formal self-assessment and initial policy drafted.
- Cultural humility baseline learning completed organization-wide.
- Internal organizational equity self-assessment conducted, workforce demographics, promotion patterns, and staff experience examined.
- DEI strategy roadmap initiated by leadership with designated accountability.
- External CLAS standards understood and benchmarked against current practice.

Stage 1 Foundation Wrap-Up

Systems change begins by understanding the current system before redesigning it. Organizations that invest in deep self-assessment at this stage are building the knowledge base they will need for effective structural change in Stage 2.

Disclaimer

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