

# Advancing Well-Being by Transcending the Barriers of Whiteness

PolicyLink

A Conversation of Significance:  
Community Dialogue Guide



Transcending the barriers of whiteness will be no easy feat. Overcoming our nation's deep roots in racism and inequality will require undoing layers of legacies and structures that were built to keep people of color from having access to opportunity. But in order to improve health and well-being for all, we must challenge the status quo and deeply consider what isn't working, why, and what can be done.

With that in mind, this guide is intended to lead individuals through a collective reflection on whiteness and the barriers it presents to achieving racial equity in America. Dialogue among community members is essential to equitably addressing local issues such as police responses to mental health crises, the opioid crisis and mass incarceration, predatory lending, and racial inequities in education and workforce development.

## Dialogue to drive shared understanding

A dialogue is a collaborative experience in which people work toward a shared understanding, as opposed to just presenting arguments and aiming to prove others wrong. Dialogue does not seek out one right answer, it acknowledges that answers do not always come whole—but rather, as puzzle parts that can be pieced together through discussion. To promote well-being in communities, we need dialogue that advances shared goals and a vision of a better America.

## Characteristics of a community dialogue

The U.S. Department of Justice's *Community Dialogue Guide* suggests that those in dialogue with each other should aim for the following (we've excerpted the advice in full):

*“Move towards solutions rather than continue to express or analyze the problem. An emphasis on personal responsibility moves the discussion away from finger-pointing or naming enemies and towards constructive common action.*

*“Reach beyond the usual boundaries. When fully developed, dialogues can involve the entire community, offering opportunities for new, unexpected partnerships. New partnerships can develop when participants listen carefully and respectfully to each other. A search for solutions focuses on the common good as participants are encouraged to broaden their horizons and build relationships outside their comfort zones.*

*“Aim for a change of heart, not just a change of mind. Dialogues go beyond sharing and understanding to transforming participants. While the process begins with the individual, it eventually involves groups and institutions. Ultimately, dialogues can affect how policies are made.”*

# Facilitator's Guide to Community Dialogue

(Excerpted and adapted from the U.S. Department of Justice's *Community Dialogue Guide*)

Here are some suggestions for how to facilitate a community dialogue:

## 1.

**Start with introductions, define your role, and lay out the intentions of the dialogue.** The session begins with group members briefly introducing themselves after the facilitator has welcomed everyone. Explain that your role is “neutral,” one of guiding the discussion without adding personal opinions. Give an overview of *Advancing Well-Being by Transcending the Barriers of Whiteness*, the dialogue effort, and any other relevant information.

## 2.

**Set ground rules.** Central to the opening dialogue is establishing ground rules for the group's behavior and discussion. Start with a basic list and add any others the group wants to include. Post the ground rules where everyone can see them and remember that you can add more to the list as needed. The group should establish the dialogue as a brave space and be sure to discuss how to handle conflict and disagreement, as well as the need for confidentiality.

## 3.

**Facilitate discussion.** Begin by asking participants what brought them to this dialogue, perhaps asking, “Why do you feel it is important to have honest dialogue about issues of race?” or “How have your personal experiences influenced your opinions about race?” The discussion questions on the next page can be used to guide the dialogue. It is important to facilitate the discussion so that it goes somewhere, is grounded in intention, and offers participants a chance to take action on the issues. Participants may get frustrated if they feel the conversation is too abstract, too vague, or “going around in circles.”

Keep track of how the discussion is going. Is it time for a clarifying question or a summary of key points? Are all members fully engaged, or are some people dominating? Is the discussion wandering and calling for a change in direction? The participants can summarize the most important results of their discussion and consider what action they might take individually or together.

## 4.

**Wrap it up.** In the final minutes, participants can offer their thoughts on the experience. Thank the participants and ask for final thoughts for staying involved in the effort. What are their next steps, individually and as a group or community? Participant evaluations of the dialogue can be expressed verbally and/or in writing. It may also be helpful for someone to take notes or minutes, if possible. Documenting the conversation can help you to qualitatively measure its success and identify any needed improvements.

# Discussion Questions

- What was your first memory of race?
- What concerns you about issues of race in America? What have you noticed about race relations in your community?
- What does “centering whiteness” mean to you? Can we come to a collective definition of what it means to those of us in this room?
- There are a number of personal stories in *Advancing Well-Being by Transcending the Barriers of Whiteness*. Which one struck you the most? Why?
- Have you ever benefitted or suffered from a white-centered America? If you feel comfortable, explain how.
- Can you think of economic or social problems that can be traced to systems and policies that centered whiteness? (*Feel free to reference chart of trends in racialized national politics later in this guide*).
- What does de-centering whiteness mean to you?
- What barriers do you or does our community face in transcending whiteness?
- How might we overcome pushback to efforts of centering Blackness?
- *Advancing Well-Being by Transcending the Barriers of Whiteness* discusses the idea of writing “new narratives for systemic change.” What is a new narrative you’d like to see in your community? (*Feel free to reference chart of new narratives later in this guide*).
- What would look different in our community if we de-centered whiteness? How does this vision make you feel?
- How can we practice solidarity in our day-to-day lives?
- What would an equitable America look like to you?

# Four Trends in the Racialization of National Politics

## Trends

**The rationale for mass incarceration** and the ways that “race-neutral” criminal-legal policies have had a decidedly racially biased impact.

**The evolution of “dog whistle” political frames and campaigns** that appeal to racial grievances while seemingly shielding the presenters from being called out as racists.

**Ideologically driven efforts to shrink the size and authority of government** which have origins in segregationist strategies as well as libertarian concepts.

**The tendency for lower and middle-income White voters to support politicians, often espousing a form of right-wing populism,** whose policies lead to greater harm and damage to their own health.

## Consequences

Street-level law enforcement, jails, courts, sentencing, prisons, and probation practices and much of the apparatus of government have been reconfigured as a form of social control, which has been applied differently for people of different races as an indirect method of sanctioning racial discrimination.

White identity extremism is reaching into the mainstream, and attacks on the interests, rights, and lives of Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color, especially immigrants, in the name of law and order became federal policy.

Conservative attacks on the legitimacy of the federal government grew out of “states’ rights” resistance to school desegregation and civil rights legislation. The resulting constraints on domestic public spending (other than law enforcement) have taken a big toll on government services as well as government employment as a pathway for stable livelihoods.

Conservative groups have aligned unlikely partners (blue-collar Midwesterners and Wall Street business interests, workers and bosses, populists, and right-wingers) and amassed enough people power to vote against strategies, such as strengthening the safety net, that would ultimately support some of those very people, such as low-income workers.

# Components of a New Narrative for Systemic Change

## Core Ideas

**Convey the reasons for economic disruption and dislocation** in terms and stories through which White workers can see the common roots of their losses in the experiences of Blacks, as a result of how contemporary capitalism relentlessly sheds jobs and disinvests in places.

**Make the case for how policies** initially intended to provide access to the people most excluded by social and economic structures can also benefit many other groups and society as a whole.

**Present “centering Blackness”—policies and practices that intentionally lift up and protect Black people—** as an alternative to opinions, attitudes, and beliefs that center whiteness. Centering Blackness is a perspective which will promote collective healing and better outcomes for people of all races.

**Raise public expectations for government** to become a force for solving significant economic and social problems.

## Elaboration and Illustration

**Acknowledge that people of color face more intense versions of these modern problems**, such as the racial wealth gap, due to historical inequities while showing how actions to address these inequities will benefit people of all races.

**Demonstrate the broadly shared positive consequences of equity-driven actions**, to overcome the persistent perception of redistributive programs as handouts for the undeserving.

**Centering Blackness can be conveyed as the basis for policies which can build a society and economy that are just and equitable for everyone** by centering those, notably Black women, who were previously deliberately excluded.

**The pandemic may present the opportunity to shift the balance of influence between competing narratives about government**, to reinforce its potential to generate economic fairness and stability as well as public health and environmental resilience.

# Personal Commitment to Transcending the Barriers of Whiteness

*(Excerpted and adapted from Hope in the Cities' Community Dialogue Guide)*

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## In order to de-center whiteness, I will commit myself to the following priorities:

- Educate others about America's failures to solve many social and economic problems as a result of centering whiteness and dismissing the experiences of Black people.
- Advance policies that are structured to intentionally support those made most vulnerable and least invested in our communities, knowing they benefit society as a whole.
- Center Blackness as an alternative to opinions, attitudes, and beliefs that center whiteness.
- Call on the government to proactively solve problems that impact people of all races and backgrounds.

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## These are the steps I will take to continue the process after this dialogue:

### 1st Step:

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Due date: \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_

### 3rd Step:

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Due date: \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_

### 2nd Step:

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Due date: \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_

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### Your signature:

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Today's date: \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_

**Put this in a prominent place that you can easily reference.**



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