

# Equity in Place: How Community Groups Are Shaping Investment in the Twin Cities Region

Equity in Place is a diverse group of strategic partners from place-based, housing, and advocacy organizations. We believe that everyone in the Twin Cities region deserves to live where they want to live and have access to opportunity. Our region benefits from many assets, but we continue to be unable to translate these benefits to everyone, specifically to communities of color.

Equity in Place engages community-based organizations in influencing planning and investments that will shape the future of the Twin Cities region. We believe:

- Equitable growth is good for everyone—individuals, communities and the greater region.
- Equitable growth requires intentional planning, policymaking and implementation.
- Government plans about communities of color need to be completed in partnership with communities of color.

A major opportunity came in 2012, when the Metropolitan Council was asked to complete a regional assessment called the Fair Housing and Equity Assessment (FHEA). The FHEA was a first-of-its-kind process, mandated by U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and intended to identify where opportunities existed (or didn't) in the Twin Cities region, with particular attention to low-wealth communities of color.

## Influencing Regional Investment

Equity in Place recognized that the FHEA could drive future investment and policy, and understood the possible impact of those decisions in our communities. We also knew that without external pressure, the Met Council was likely to complete the FHEA without meaningful community input. We were able to turn what might have been a status quo government process into a powerful opportunity for low-income people and people of color to shape the futures of our communities by:

- Building a self-interest in engaging in this process: Community-based organizations are often overworked and don't have the capacity to engage in processes that don't have an immediate and visible connection to their constituents. But Equity in Place knew that the health of our communities depends on being connected to one another and to decision-makers. We also knew that the region had been having conversations and making decisions about race and place for a long time without much consultation with people of color. We were able to rally around the idea that outsiders would not make decisions, once again, for our communities.
- Crafting a shared analysis around opportunity and equity: We developed a shared narrative about opportunity, which crossed different geographies, races and cultures. We decided that working collectively would be the most powerful way to engage in the process, impact the assessment as it developed and be at the table for future policy decisions.
- Reframing the problems and the solutions facing our region: The FHEA conversation was initially focused on defining racially concentrated areas of poverty (RCAPs) throughout the region, which positioned low-wealth communities of color as the problem. In response, Equity in Place asked questions about the region's racially concentrated areas of wealth. That provocative change allowed decision-makers to consider why concentrations of affluent white people were not also seen as a problem for the region. We were able to subtly shift the narrative, opening peoples' minds to new ways of thinking.
- Democratizing expertise: One of our goals was to redefine who is seen as an expert in the region. After years of traditional, top-down planning in the Twin Cities region, government had been positioned as the expert on how to solve problems in low-wealth communities of color. This process, in contrast, elevated the wisdom, experience and vision of people who lived in those communities.
- Pushing for an equitable process: Throughout the assessment, the relationship between the public sector and the community periodically broke down or deteriorated. We found ways to hold government accountable. For example, at one point we wrote a letter to HUD and the Met Council, signed by every organization, which demanded a better process. We emailed the letter, and had a positive response from Washington, DC, within 24 hours, which sent a powerful signal that we were an important player in the project.
- Bridging relationships and leveraging external allies: With support from the Northwest Area Foundation, we started a dinner and dialogue series with potential allies on the Met Council to discuss the issues that mattered most to each community. We also developed strong relationships with HUD staff. This enhanced the social connectedness of the communities at the table and created pressure points through which external stakeholders could emphasize that community engagement was critical to the process.

- Securing community-level input on the FHEA document: In the past, it would have been common for an intermediary organization to review a document, share the feedback with community leaders for approval, and then present it to government stakeholders. This process, in contrast, brought community-level leaders into relationship through a complex government process. Together, we provided three rounds of feedback on the 100-page FHEA document.

## Shifting the Regional Narrative

Equity in Place is involved in this process because we want to ensure that all Twin Cities communities are geographies of opportunity. We told the Met Council, “Tell us what impact we can have, don’t just meet with us to say you met with us.” Our results include:

- Reframing the analysis: Early drafts of the FHEA did not offer a historical analysis of what factors and decisions led to racial and spatial inequities. We collectively asked the Met Council to tell a more complete story of how disparities were created and reinforced in our region. We stressed the need to clarify that “access” to opportunities such as good jobs, housing, health and education, was very different than “proximity” to those resources.
- Naming institutional racism: The Equity in Place table knows that how our regional problems are defined impacts how solutions are developed. We pushed a narrative that named institutional racism and decades of disinvestment as key causes of concentrated poverty in communities of color. The resulting plan goes into greater depth in detailing the history of each community and names factors, including explicit references to institutional racism, that tell a better story of how the Twin Cities region got to this point.
- Shifting governmental process: Over the year or so that Equity in Place worked on this issue, we have observed a shift in how the Met Council approaches community engagement and talks about racial equity. Met Council staff and leadership now speak more openly about the need to lead with racial equity for the Twin Cities to thrive.
- Securing positional power for community members: With our encouragement, the Met Council has added several community leaders of color to its Housing Policy Plan Working Group. This will help ensure that when investments actually land in communities, people of color are at the decision-making table.
- Securing commitments for deeper community connection: The Met Council has committed to a process that will engage multiple jurisdictions and community organizations to create reinvestment strategies in historically disinvested communities. Improved community engagement practices will set up the potential for a shift in resources and policy that will contribute to more future investment in communities of color.

The FHEA, now titled Choice, Place and Opportunity: An Equity Assessment of the Twin Cities Region, shifted the narrative about engagement and investment in communities of color in the Twin Cities region. It changed the agenda for the region and influenced decisions that will create healthier communities. Our work helped reinforce that government can't make decisions about people without their involvement, and that low-income people of color are not a problem to be solved or a deficit to our region—they are an asset and a part of the solution.

## Next Steps: Blueprints for Investment

To ensure the Twin Cities region offers opportunity for everyone, regional stakeholders will have to engage in a sustained and intentional conversation about how equity can be embedded into our policies and practices. It will require commitments and investments across multiple jurisdictions and sectors.

Throughout the series of public planning sessions in communities of color that will be convened by the Met Council, Equity in Place will support communities in developing comprehensive blueprints for intensive, equity-driven investments and policies. The process will bring together stakeholders with different areas of interest and expertise, knowledge, experiences and constituencies to allow for more effective solutions and more coordinated investments. It will also prioritize the wisdom of low-income communities and communities of color in shaping our future vision, developing plans and allocating resources in their own communities.

Equity in Place recognizes that healthy communities are created through a variety of physical, social, economic and environmental factors. We can no longer view these issues in isolation. The way our region plans for and invests in opportunities can contribute significantly to healthier communities.

---

*To read Choice, Place and Opportunity visit <http://bit.ly/1mE7HXa>. The work of Equity in Place was funded in part by the Blue Cross Blue Shield Foundation of Minnesota.*

**Equity in Place is a coalition convened and supported by The Alliance for Metropolitan Stability and the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs. Members include:**

African Career Education & Resource, Inc.  
Alliance for Metropolitan Stability  
Aurora St. Anthony Neighborhood Development Center  
Center for Urban and Regional Affairs  
Community Stabilization Project  
Frogtown Neighborhood Association  
Harrison Neighborhood Association  
Hope Community  
Housing Preservation Project  
La Asamblea de Derechos Civiles

Metropolitan Interfaith Council on Affordable Housing  
Minnesota Center for Neighborhood Organizing  
Native American Community Development Institute  
New American Academy  
Northside Community Reinvestment Coalition  
Northside Residents Redevelopment Council  
Organizing Apprenticeship Project  
Minnesotans Standing Together to End Poverty  
West Side Community Organization