



PolicyLink

# *Governing for All:*

2022

# An Equity Narrative Playbook for Policy- Makers

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# The Equity Manifesto

**THE EQUITY MANIFESTO, A GROUNDING DOCUMENT WHICH NOT ONLY DEFINES EQUITY BUT ACKNOWLEDGES THE BROADER CONTEXT AND ENABLING CONDITIONS OF EQUITY, HAS BEEN INSPIRED BY THE WORK, COMMITMENTS, INSIGHTS, AND RESOLVE OF THE MANY PARTNERS WITH WHOM POLICYLINK HAS SHARED THIS JOURNEY.**

**IT BEGINS** by joining together, believing in the potency of inclusion, and building from a common bond.

**IT EMBRACES** complexity as cause for collaboration, accepting that our fates are inextricable.

**IT RECOGNIZES** local leaders as national leaders, nurturing the wisdom and creativity within every community as essential to solving the nation's problems.

**IT DEMANDS** honesty and forthrightness, calling out racism, and oppression, both overt and systemic.

**IT STRIVES** for the power to realize our goals while summoning the grace to sustain them.

**IT REQUIRES** that we understand the past, without being trapped in it; embrace the present, without being constrained by it; and look to the future, guided by the hopes and courage of those who have fought before and beside us.

**This is equity: just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential. Unlocking the promise of the nation by unleashing the promise in us all.**

## The Playbook

# How to *Win On Equity*

*To uproot harmful narratives and replace them with equity narratives, here's the high-level guidance on messaging, language, storytelling, and data.*

### 1. BELIEVE IT'S POSSIBLE.

There are no language shortcuts to equity—your heart must be invested, your actions must be aligned, and you must commit to transforming the oppressive systems and institutions that have compromised our democracy and economy. It is only when we, ourselves, believe, that we can begin to transform the broader narrative and build support for that vision.

### 2. EMBRACE RACE AND EVERYONE CAN WIN: BUILD YOUR RACIAL EQUITY NARRATIVE.

Your equity narrative may look and sound different from those of your colleagues. Regardless of how you describe it, these elements are critical:

1. **Opportunity isn't the same** for everyone—race, gender, class, zip code, and abilities all affect our ability to participate and prosper in America.
2. Our country was built on a promise of freedom and prosperity for everyone, but there are **systems that were built** to keep some people from accessing that promise.
3. There is **enough for everyone**. Opportunity in America can be limitless if we open it up to everyone.
4. When we make policies that ensure those that have been left behind can participate and prosper, **everyone wins**.

You can—and should!—make it yours, speaking directly to the challenges and opportunities in your own community. And if you can commit to telling and retelling this narrative—the true story that our fates are intertwined—it will open the door for you to start delivering on that promise.

### 3. DON'T DEBATE, ILLUSTRATE.

Too often policymakers lose the opportunity to say and repeat an equity narrative because they are busy responding to the opposition—an intentional

distraction tactic. There is no winning when you engage in that type of debate. When you engage, you signal that the distraction has merit. Instead, it's important to detect, disrupt, and open up a new narrative.

### 4. START WITH VALUES.

Regardless of who you're talking to—whether it's your base, undecided voters, or your constituents—always start with shared values. Not all values are the same, and not all values inspire people to believe or take action. Especially as you speak to people outside of your base, consider what values will most resonate and how you can link those values with an equity narrative.

Examples of how to lead with values:

1. No matter where you come from, what you look like, or how much money your family has, everyone should have what they need to learn, grow, and thrive.
2. Most of us work hard for our families.
3. All children deserve a roof over their heads and a safe place to live.
4. We all have some responsibility to solve the problem of racism.
5. When whole groups of qualified people are excluded from schools, jobs, or advancement, our families and communities suffer.
6. We all deserve to have our basic needs met.
7. Nurturing the wisdom and creativity within every community is essential to solving the nation's problems.

### 5. WORDS MATTER: CHOOSE LANGUAGE THAT UPLIFTS AND INCLUDES EVERYONE

**Name the causes of inequity—both the systems and the people.** Whenever possible, specifically name both the systems that need redesigning and the people who designed them and remain incentivized to maintain them. Together, they represent the villain that we must overcome. To complete the story, describe how people's lives will change for the better when we undo those systems.

**Be explicit about race and class.** People are aware of existing inequities along racial lines and want to see themselves in the story.

**Focus on outcomes rather than policies or procedures.** Focus on describing the future that will be made possible by the policy—how everyone will have the ability to succeed, live a fulfilling life, and provide for their families. unwilling to let anyone distract us from the work of delivering on that promise. This requires dreaming big and boldly. It is only when we, ourselves, believe, that we can begin to transform the broader narrative and build support for that vision.

## 6. TELL STORIES THAT SUPPORT YOUR EQUITY NARRATIVE

Stories are powerful. They help storytellers connect with their listeners on an emotional level. Powerful stories can break down divides and move people from complacency to action.

Here are key things to keep in mind when telling stories:

- Tell your **own story** about how you came to this work and why it matters to you and connect it with the story of your community.
- Tell stories that **come from and reflect your communities** and constituents. People have a hard time finding the same compassion for a generic protagonist as they have for their own neighbors.
- Always **frame individual stories within systems** to show the full story. A story of a Black family struggling with the cost of dealing with chronic health issues could be interpreted within an individualistic narrative frame (“Were they eating right?”). When we place that story within a system—a health care system that routinely disregards the pain of Black people, or the lack of local health care facilities—we see the need for systemic solutions.
- **Don’t reinforce false or harmful narratives.** While a story of a person who achieved success against all odds on their own is compelling, it can unintentionally reinforce a bootstrap narrative and tokenize people as a means to downplay the realities of structural racism.
- **Invite people to tell their own stories.** People aren’t props, and their lives don’t exist to further policy

goals. Equity is about making it possible for every person to reach their dreams. It is more powerful to let people tell their own stories and share their own dreams.

## 7. USE POWERFUL EXAMPLES TO BRING EQUITY TO LIFE

The concept of equity is hard for many people to grasp. The most powerful way to bring it to life is through concrete examples that show, rather than tell, how when we focus on delivering outcomes for those who have been left behind, it benefits everyone.

The most powerful example that brings equity to life is in curb cuts. The ramps at most sidewalk corners are ubiquitous now, but only because of the pressure from disabled student activists in Berkeley in 1972. There are examples like this everywhere, if we look for them. When we reveal them, they can become the images that bring the concepts of equity to life.

## 8. ALWAYS CONTEXTUALIZE DATA

Facts without context or story are almost meaningless. It’s just human nature—we need stories to make sense of facts. When you do bring in data, focus on only one to two key statistics at a time, and contextualize the numbers you’re sharing so they become part of a story.

By wrapping a data point in an experience people can connect to, we offer the opportunity for greater resonance with our audiences. For example, the statement, “There are only 5 parks in our city and only 15% of residents have access” doesn’t feel as connected to human experience as the same data point articulated differently: “Families in the Richmond neighborhood have to travel one hour by bus, each way, just to reach their closest local park to have outdoor playtime with their children.”

## 9. REPEAT, REPEAT

Narratives are seeded and sustained by repetition and proliferation. Whenever you are speaking on an issue, tie it to a broader equity narrative, and sandwich your talking point in that narrative. For instance, if asked about housing, instead of diving right into the details of your policy proposal, start and end with narrative. For example:

- Start with narrative, rooted in values: “Housing is a basic human need, but not everyone has the same access to housing.”
- Describe the outcomes of your policy proposal
- End with narrative: “When we have safe places to live, we improve educational opportunities, family wellbeing, and health outcomes for everyone in the community.”



