

CLOSING EQUITY GAPS WITH DATA

City of San Jose case study

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City of San José: Closing Equity Gaps with Data October 2022

San José is a city known for its technology innovation and entrepreneurship, qualities the city government also embodies. The pandemic laid bare both the critical importance of data to government decision-making, and the dramatically disparate health and economic impact on different demographic groups. To address this challenge, Mayor Sam Liccardo tasked his Mayor's Office of Technology and Innovation (MOTI) with prioritizing the use of data to understand and improve the equity issues exposed by the pandemic. He also sought to deliver city services with a greater focus on equity for all residents. While many cities have hired equity leaders, few have married data and equity efforts as powerfully and with as great an impact as San José has.

The goal of this case study is to provide other cities with a description of how San José tackled this task, and to share tools and ideas that other cities can use in their efforts to close equity gaps using data.

Step one in closing equity gaps: hire a data leader to define scope and strategy

As a first step, in August 2020, Liccardo hired Christine Keung, a [Harvard Business School Leadership Fellow](#) who became the city's chief data officer (CDO) during the response phase of the pandemic. Her prior government experience at the Small Business Administration improving participant access to the Paycheck Protection Program helped her understand the barriers people can face when trying to access government services and gave her insight into the culture and quirks of government operations. Her business degree gave her a unique sense of entrepreneurial spirit, as she approached public policy from a new perspective. Keung started her work in San José by first trying to understand the scope of the equity issues facing her city, and then clearly defining the goals for this work. As Keung and her colleague, Data Equity Project Manager Julia Chen wrote in [their MOTI blog post](#),

“To the outside world our place as the Capital of Silicon Valley may not merit a serious conversation around our unique challenges: how our perceived growth has further exacerbated existing inequities, e.g., our 95,000 residents without internet access and 42% increase in our homeless population from 2017–2019. How do we use the resources of the city to determine how we best serve our residents? What is data equity to those who are most affected by how we define it?”

Keung started as a data team of one, but gradually grew the team with a bootstrapping startup mentality, leveraging a wide variety of resources -- city funding, fellowships and internships, and philanthropic funding. The team now tops 20 people across internships and partnerships with entities like Coding it Forward, San José State University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and others.

A cross-functional data team incubates and facilitates data equity work

Organizationally, the data team is part of the MOTI, which launched in 2019, and is separate from the city’s information technology (IT) agency. The work is guided by José’s [Open Data Policy](#) (established in 2016) and the city’s [Digital Privacy Policy](#) (among the first municipal data privacy policies crafted in 2020). The team has three main areas of focus: enabling city service delivery to be data driven, working to support digital service delivery, and engaging a diverse talent pool to bring a variety of skills and experiences to the work, as shown in the graphic below.

Building Better Basics

MOTI reinforces San José’s commitment to being a smart city by focusing our work on three pillars:

Data Driven

We build, unify, and transform the city’s data analysis capabilities, foster a culture of data-driven decision-making, and drive equitable outcomes.

Digitally Engaging

We democratize the economic benefits of technology for all people by addressing resident needs through easy to use, functional, and reliable products.

Diverse talent

We’ve intentionally built a talent pipeline from nontraditional sources that can compete with the private sector and reflects the communities we serve.

Source: City of San José

One of Keung’s main goals, supporting city agencies in improving service delivery, uses a “three legged stool” approach to integrating data analytics, community engagement and storytelling shown in the graphic below.

Roles & Responsibilities

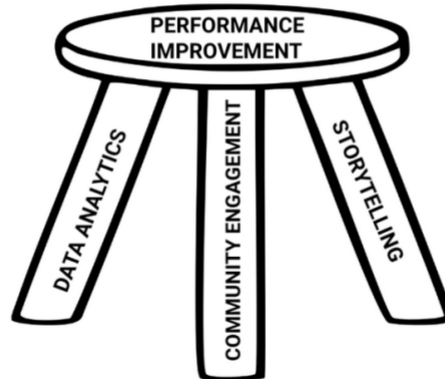
Project Managers are focused on performance improvement.

The **Performance Improvement** team, led by Christine, drives meaningful operational changes that lead to equitable outcomes.

- Compile and present data analysis and community insights to key stakeholders.
- Support department stakeholders in designing and implementing key recommendations.
- Serve as the single through line for work streams across the 3 internal functions, and other internal and external stakeholders.

The **Data Analytics** team, led by Kin-Yip, leverages data to make policy recommendations and program improvements:

- Train City stakeholders on how to integrate data into daily operations
- Apply analytical rigor and nuance to the City's toughest problems
- Maintain data quality standards and process across entire portfolio of projects



The **Community Engagement** team, led by Beatriz, democratizes access to the program insights and takes a grassroots approach to understanding equity.

- Share data insights with key community stakeholders for each program / department we support
- Collect feedback to understand the why behind the trends in the data
- Integrate qualitative community feedback into a set of program and policy recommendations

The **Comms & Storytelling** team, led by Julia, makes our insights and recommendations accessible and compelling to internal and external stakeholders.

- Communicate the work on a consistent, regular cadence across Mayor and MOTI comms channels.
- Educate internal and external stakeholders on our values, approach, and learnings.
- Transform the way the City and the public engages and communicates with data.

Source: City of San José

“The way we organize ourselves is recognizing that performance improvement is the key result,” explained Keung “At the end of the day, the goal isn't some academic paper or some intellectual analysis, because that's not really what government is for, right? Our job is to translate data insights into improvements to the program and to make sure that's measured. It's our manifesto, and we say it over and over again.”

In most cities, it's the data analytics work that gets the headlines and the invitations to present at conferences. But Keung said that's the easier part of the work. The harder part is the translation of data insight into policy or practice as that involves behavior change for city staff, their customers or residents, and other stakeholders. Implementation and change management work are vastly improved when informed by rigorous community engagement. Continuous storytelling and communications build the case for change, build buy-in for it, and help people adapt to new processes and methods.

While many other cities engage in data analytics and performance improvement, San José is a leader in how actively the team pursues community engagement and storytelling. The excellent communication and storytelling efforts, led by Chen, are among the best in the nation – due to the fact that this city is among only a few who have recognized the importance of the work and dedicated resources to it. The data team took care to tailor its messaging to each audience, whether it be internal city stakeholders engaged in defining equity or external stakeholders

providing feedback on city services. Data insights were translated into plain language understandable to a general audience, rather than data experts. Messages were customized to the audience. For example, when reaching out to the leadership of community-based organizations to request a short meeting, brevity was key, since these stakeholders are often stretched in resources and time — and may be less receptive to a larger request. The team sent out emails asking for no more than 10 or 15 minutes of their time, and within two weeks, had over 50 meetings scheduled. To document results and create a record of the work, toward the end of each project, a report or MOTI blog post summarized for the public what had been accomplished.

Creating a data team reflective of the character of her city was personal for Keung, a first-generation college graduate. It mattered to her that the city create a team that reflected the diversity of San José. As she pointed out, “At the end of day, our team looked like San José. In San José, for over 50 percent of households English is not the primary language. Our team has first generation college students, folks who don't speak English at home with their families. And that translates into the work -- it creates diversity of thought, diversity of skill sets, diversity in terms of how folks have been engaged in government.” And as noted by Chen [in her blog post](#), the team includes many people who have “nontraditional backgrounds into data science and are underrepresented in the industry at large.”

Using data to guide and frame equity work

Keung approached the task of using data to advance equity in a collaborative fashion, engaging with the City Manager’s Office as well as the city’s Office of Racial Equity, among the first such dedicated teams in the country. One of the first things Keung and her team did was to define what they were trying to achieve. As Keung and her colleague Chen pointed out,

“Ask any five people what they think is “data equity” and you’ll receive five different answers. At MOTI, [we define data equity as using the city’s data ethically and in ways that drive equitable outcomes for our constituents.](#)”

A top-down approach to closing equity gaps in the city might have focused on developing dashboards and tracking citywide progress with the mayor and other key city leaders as the main audience. Keung did the opposite and chose to focus on those responsible for delivery of key services to the public. She saw the quest for equity as a policy vehicle for engaging decision-makers across the enterprise in a search for data that would give them insight and allow them to make choices about how to improve service delivery in the way that best serves the community.

Keung sees equity as a continuous pursuit and not a specific endpoint, noting that “Equity isn’t a static goal, but an iterative ongoing process” with a goal of forging lasting culture change. She pointed out the importance of continuous inquiry this way, “By focusing on the wrong metric or a single metric, we risk losing the forest for the trees.” In the end, she said it’s about the results

achieved for the public and, “We’ve failed if our work does not drive equitable outcomes for our residents.”

Some data leaders face pushback when they engage city agencies in data projects, as agencies are reluctant to share data for fear of judgement for any gaps or inaccuracies in their data, or by exposing where their service delivery falls short of desired outcomes. Keung’s approach was to engage program delivery staff in an iterative discovery of policy options and ideas, using data as the tool to uncover issues and answer questions. As a result, she did not encounter resistance, but rather found that her peers in city government were eager to have data insight so they could refine and improve their service delivery. She noted, “People want to do a good job and when data can help them make choices about how to better serve the public, they will appreciate our help in sifting through the data for them.”

The Data Equity Framework

It was important to the team that there be an established framework and structured process for engaging with city departments and programs around equity, rather than using an ad hoc or customized approach for each project or department. “We can’t address equity gaps without defining equity objectives and outcomes for key city programs,” said Keung “Our data equity framework creates consistency, transparency, and accountability towards equity goals.”

The framework recognizes that every city department measures equity differently. Developing a framework that was adaptable and scalable was important. The Data Equity Framework has three distinct stages:

1. **Equity Objective:** Defining the “what” -- “What is an equitable outcome for the department and programs?”
2. **Equity Metric:** Establishing the “how” -- How will we measure this? (derived from the Equity Objective)
3. **Monitoring & Evaluation:** Asking, “How do we ensure this long term?”

In using the data equity framework with departments, the MOTI team mostly uses internal city administrative data, rather than external sources such as survey and census data. The main reason to focus on city administrative data is that other sources of data collection have inherent bias in who is not counted. With city administrative data, the limitations are more well known, and the amount of available data is enormous. Much of the administrative data used by MOTI in supporting city departments was an untapped resource to which the team could bring fresh perspective and data skills.

A key input into the Equity Framework is the voice of community groups and other stakeholders who are engaged with issues on the ground. San José has a structured method for gathering community input that was developed by a multi-disciplinary team. Their approach to community engagement reflected the team’s diverse backgrounds, including strategic communications, education policy, social impact, and data analysis. The community

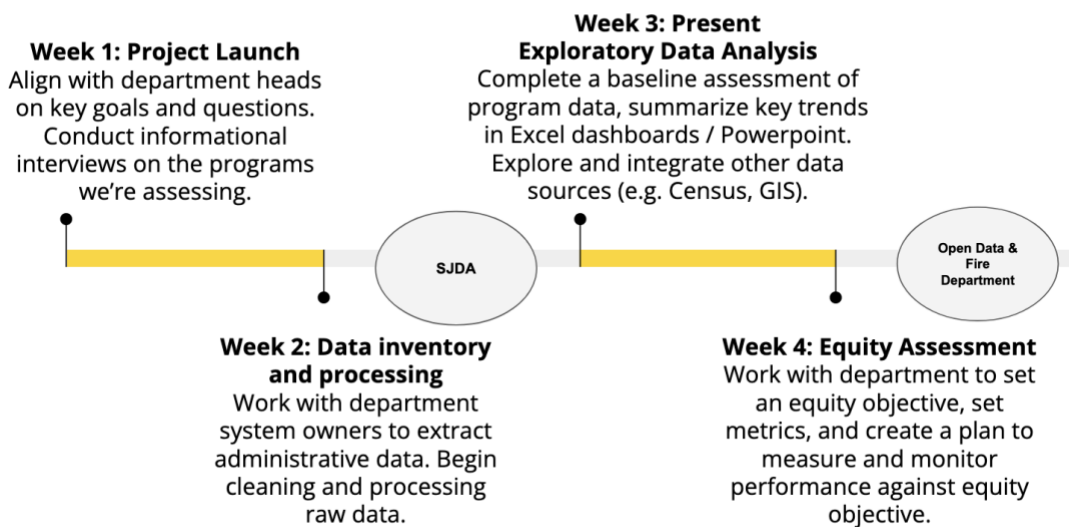
engagement process used tools that could easily be used by new members of the team after a brief onboarding process and relied heavily on listening and facilitation rather than solution-building. This effort and method of engagement has proven successful; one project used this engagement method and co-created 16 tangible policy proposals and actionable solutions – ideas that were valuable to the city because they reflect the needs of those for whom the program was designed but who had having difficulty accessing them.

Having a dedicated community engagement team helped the data team immensely, as they were able to gather structured bi-directional feedback. Keung reported that departments and agencies found this especially powerful, as “Even if they're on the front lines of serving residents, they've never had a way of systematically getting that feedback.”

A structured process assures consistency across projects and efficiency in project execution

The team developed a structured and replicable process for equity engagements, with each engagement spanning eight weeks with a different task each week. Having a standardized approach assures consistent high-quality work across projects and helps make project management more efficient and reliable. The chart below shows how each project begins with a launch to align on goals and project scope. The next step is the MOTI team beginning data exploration to set the tone for defining the equity objective, a process that is facilitated by MOTI using a structured process and guided by the facilitation worksheet attached as Appendix A.

How we work: 6 data projects completed in 6 months



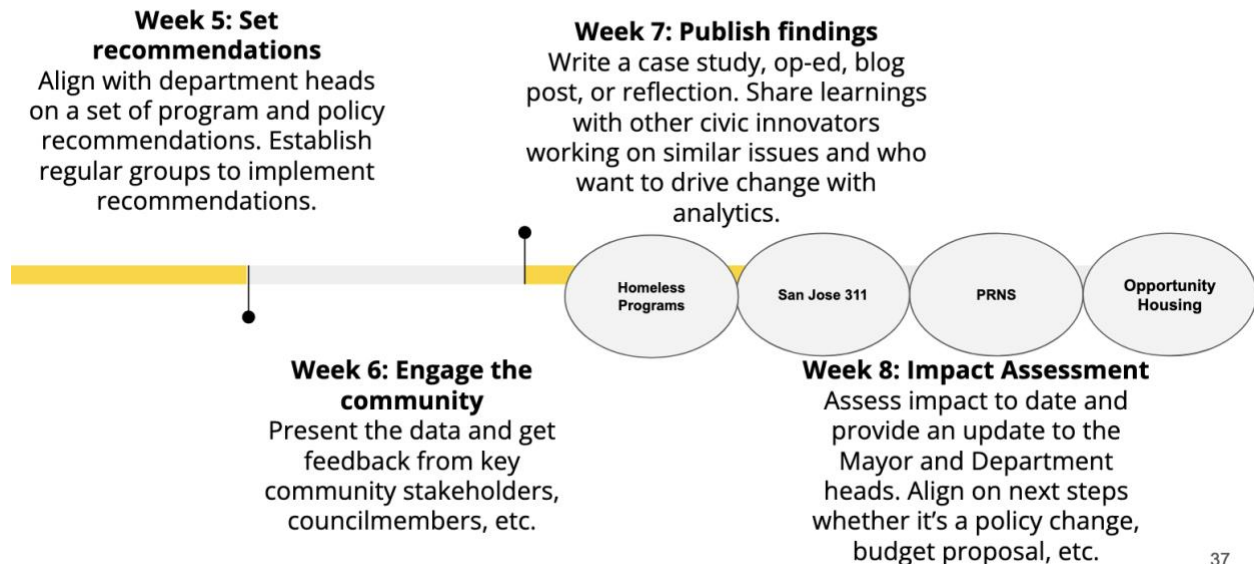
Source: City of San José

The exercise of developing an equity objective, slated for week four, usually took around three sessions per department, depending on how many people were involved – not a fast process, but consistent and well-structured. “It is definitely not a one-and-done conversation,” said Keung. To begin the equity objective process, the team would gather everyone around a virtual table and openly talk through what equity meant for them and what it looked like for their department. MOTI deferred to the expertise of those doing the work and would encourage everyone to actively brainstorming out loud. The facilitation process was about pulling together all the common threads that came up and then polishing that into a single objective that everyone could work with.

The second half of the eight-week schedule for data equity engagements is devoted to change management, as shown in the chart below.

Change Management Timeline

Project Managers are the single throughline between our team and department stakeholders.



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Source: City of San José

Week six is when the community engagement process begins. To formalize and document the community engagement process, MOTI brought in a data equity fellow whose background is in community organization and facilitation. Every project finishes with an impact assessment, with a report to the mayor and department head on any suggested policy changes based on discussion of the data insights.

Success case: understanding access to and use of scholarships for low-income families for recreation programs

To demonstrate how the Data Equity Framework has been implemented, Keung describes how her team worked with the Parks, Recreation, and Neighborhood Services (PRNS) department to understand how their afterschool and summer programs could serve more families in need. They examined a scholarship program that would give families up to 75 percent off the cost of the program, chosen because it represents one of the longest standing city-subsidized child care programs in San José.

After agreeing on project goals, the MOTI team explored ten years of administrative data on the families who had applied for scholarship funding, those who completed the application process, and those who fully used their scholarships. All data was examined by neighborhood. Data were analyzed looking for patterns and trends in program participation by neighborhood and by various family and income characteristics. Data was analyzed not in a vacuum, but in close consultation with the owners of the data -- the staff with the knowledge that comes with longtime program management. These staff have the most intimate understanding of service delivery details, and often also have ideas on how to improve programs. MOTI was a facilitator and enabler of city program managers who want to use data.

A few weeks after project kickoff, the MOTI team presented their preliminary data analysis. Some key findings from this analysis include:

- **Strong retention** of past scholarship recipients, decline in new recipients served.
- **Diminished growth** in number of individuals served.
- Small households take lion's share of scholarships
- 96% of scholarship recipients, over the past 10 years lived within a mile and a half of the recreation center where they enrolled for the program.

These insights had been hiding in plain sight; the administrative data had been available for a decade, but it wasn't until PRNS applied the data tools and skills of MOTI that they could unlock the insights held within. "I saw my team's job not as arbitrating what's fair and what's equitable. Our job is to measure distribution for a really important resource, and to also find a fair way of measuring need, because if we only measure who we were able to serve, we're also not measuring who we weren't able to serve," said Keung.

Next, the MOTI team helped PRNS define their equity objective, which in this case was: "*What is an equitable outcome for the PRNS Citywide Scholarship programs?*" The objective morphed and became clearer over time, through multiple facilitation sessions. Keung defined these sessions as MOTI helping with the process rather than coming in and trying to define the definitions and goals themselves;

So much about facilitation is actually just taking the notes and helping synthesize, but all of that debate and discussion and richness just came from passionate civil servants.

We're not out there to do the work of defining data equity, we're there to facilitate the work. We'll never know more about city scholarships and recreational programming than our colleagues who have been with the city for 20-30 years. But we can help align everyone on common objectives, common metrics, common processes, and also systematically support them in reaching out to the communities to verify what we decided and help with the communications and storytelling aspect.

To build a data-informed community engagement strategy for the Parks and Recreation scholarship program, MOTI looked at registration data to understand which city council districts were sending low or high volumes of low-income families to the programs. Then the MOTI data analysts compared participation rates to household income data across the city. This identified areas with high concentrations of low-income families who might benefit from the program but were not yet participating. Equipped with the data, community engagement fellows reached out to every organization that supports children and families in those underserved districts -- everybody from superintendents, the boys and girls club leaders, youth peer-led programs, faith-based organizations, and so on. This was an intensive week of identifying key stakeholders who supported diverse communities but were not already in city contact lists, including non-traditional sources such as culturally based community organizations and houses of worship.

In total, across the PRNS project, the robust community engagement strategy reached:

- 300+ community stakeholders, from school administrators to faith-based organizations
- 50+ partner presentations and 3 community roundtables with 20+ community partners
- 1200 low-income households with flyers; survey translated into 6 languages

The community engagement team translated data insights into language and messaging that would resonate with on the ground leaders, devoid of data or technology jargon and solely focused on benefits to the community. The community engagement team put significant work into the public presentations for stakeholder listening sessions to make sure they were clear and could easily be understood by a general audience, not simply data experts.

One insight that came from the stakeholder listening sessions was that in some neighborhoods, parents weren't accessing the scholarships for the recreation center programs because kids had to be picked up at 5:00pm, but the parents worked later and couldn't pick them up by five o'clock. So, while these parents may have very much needed the help with their children, the structure of the program didn't fit with their needs. Without this feedback loop, that need would never have been flagged.

A major change in the program that came about because of the community input was the way the programs were marketed. Seeing that so many of the participants lived nearby, and recognizing that there was no marketing budget for Parks and Recreation, the teams realized that if they just put a poster on a community center or put a flyer in a park bulletin board, they would only reach people who happened to walk by – and this may exclude the busy families that most needed the help but did not have the leisure time to stroll by and read the bulletin board. PRNS realized they were unintentionally benefiting folks who just happen to live closer

to the community centers where the announcements were posted. So, the community engagement team created flyers about the after-school programs and translated them into Spanish, Chinese, and Vietnamese. Then, working with community organizations, 1000+ copies were distributed door to door to increase awareness by going directly to families. An example flyer is included as Appendix B.

Summing up the Parks and Recreation work, Keung said, “Our impact is empowering city staff with the insight and options data can achieve, informing not only big, strategic decisions, but also improving the thousands of small decisions that impact the residence experience.”

Institutionalizing the data-informed equity approach

The success of the data equity program resulted in significant philanthropic investment to help permanently embed this function in city government. A summer 2022 Equity through Data and Privacy grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation will give the city funding to hire a permanent Equity Through Data leader, along with two community impact fellows who will engage in community outreach and increase transparency through publication of the work. As a nod to the importance of community engagement and careful guardrails on the privacy of information about individuals receiving government services or contributing ideas to the project, the data equity work will be co-led by the city’s digital privacy officer. This will also move the data equity work into the city’s IT department. When this was announced Keung tweeted that the move “Centralizes data leadership/talent, creates a less fragmented and more sustainable foundation for the City’s data investments, and captures the most leverage for increasing City Hall’s capacity to make better decisions with data.”

The grant-funded work continues the collaboration started by Keung among the Mayor’s Office of Technology and Innovation (MOTI), the Office of Racial Equity, and the Information Technology Department. The city’s Chief Innovation Officer Clay Garner notes that this expansion of data equity work will allow agencies to be better positioned to share service data across traditional government operational silos. Garner noted that “When it comes to collecting and using data, privacy and transparency go hand in hand to ensure public trust, and the team has already designed some campaigns for community outreach about why data equity matters.”

To share with the community of how the city balances digital privacy, security, and equity in a world where increasing amounts of personal data are collected via both active and passive surveillance systems, the team will redouble efforts to communicate directly with the public and explain how data is used, starting with how Automated License Plate Readers collect and use resident data for public safety in ways that balance security, privacy, and equity.

Other goals for long-term culture change include building a data-driven, equity-informed budget message to City Council, expanding the city’s data science team by giving employees access to a data science bootcamp, continuing the excellent data storytelling work, and

incorporating a continuous focus on open data and data literacy into community engagement efforts.

Conclusion

The San José data team has achieved a great deal in a short time by fusing a passion for public service with a creativity and fresh perspective that comes from being a diverse team with nontraditional backgrounds, and by relying on standardized frameworks and structured processes. “Changing the culture of an established organization, especially in the public sector, can be a tall order, but the successes of the data equity team has made the possibility of a data-driven decision culture that centers equitable outcomes tangible, and not just another act of innovation theater,” said Chen. This work is set to continue reaching new highs, with Mayor Liccardo recently reiterating the need to “squarely confront data, rather than pointing at anecdotes” in city decision-making.

Kudos to the team that has achieved a feat worthy of admiration, turning data into actionable insight and policy change.

Appendix A: Data Equity Objective - Workshop

What is data equity?

Data equity describes our commitment to using the City’s data ethically and in ways that drive equitable outcomes for constituents. Equitable outcomes will be different in each project.

Data Equity Framework

Step 1: Equity Objective	Step 2: Equity Metric	Step 3: Monitoring & Evaluation
<i>What is an equitable outcome for PRNS Citywide scholarship programs?</i>	<i>How will we measure this?</i>	<i>How do we ensure this long-term?</i>
*Today’s Goal	Derived from our objective	Supported by CMO partners

[Team]

Facilitator:

Participants:

Supporting:

Overview

This is a suggested timeline for how long to spend on the activities below!

Goal: The activities in this workshop are intended to (1) create space for reflection on what data equity might look like for your team, stakeholders, and constituents (2) to share and learn from each other’s ideas for equity objectives and (3) begin synthesizing and defining a shared equity objective.

5 min	Introduction and scene-setting
10 min	Brainstorm
20 min	Share ideas
15 min	Discussion
10 min	Synthesis

Introduction

5 mins - Scene-setting

- Framing data equity and past projects

Brainstorm

Brainstorm

What is an equitable outcome for [your department]? Equity objective statements can be simple, short, and specific.

1. Example (from 12/18 session): “BIPOC residents in any neighborhood have equal access to safe, stable, and supportive environments through PRNS programming.”

Key considerations

- Who are the stakeholders? What do they prioritize?
- Are any failure modes especially harmful?
- Are there historical inequities to address?
- How is this perceived by our community?

10 mins - Brainstorm

- Invite someone to read out the brainstorm prompt and key considerations
- **Reflect and write:** Individually write out ideas for equity objective statements, using the key considerations for inspiration as needed.
 - Feel free to draw or use images to express your ideas.
 - Ideas don't have to be written, they can be oral.
 - Feel free to draft your ideas in a separate document before copy/pasting into this document.
- When you're ready to share, copy/paste your equity objective statements (including any drawings or images) into this document under the Notes Section.

20 mins - Share ideas

One by one, share your ideas. If you are collaborating in this Doc as a group, feel free to put your ideas into the **Notes** section. As you are sharing, the notetakers will keep track of ideas and discussion.

As you share, feel free to discuss how the objectives connect to key considerations. Take care that everyone has time to share their ideas.

10-15 min - Discussion

After everyone has had a chance to share their ideas, open up for discussion.

Feel free to use the following questions as needed for inspiration:

- What resonates so far?
- What new ideas occurred to you from hearing others' ideas?
- What would you add to what's been shared thus far?
- What common ideas are emerging?

5-10 min - Synthesizing & Reflecting

Summarize overall themes and feedback from the discussion. Group related equity objective statements together under the **Synthesize** Section.

After workshop: Facilitator will distribute summary of conversation to participants over email

Notes

[Use this space to share your ideas for equity objective statements]

Synthesize

[As you listen to others share, what overall themes are coming up? What stands out to you?]

Common threads

-

SUMMARY OF ISSUES	
[THEME]	
[Definition]	
[Issue]	<i>Key Question</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Example

Appendix B: Sample flyer advertising afterschool programs



Youth Scholarships for the R.O.C.K. After-School Program

Are you looking for high-quality and affordable after-school care for your child?

Join the San Jose Parks & Recreation's R.O.C.K. After-School program. R.O.C.K. runs **every weekday until 6 P.M.** at libraries and community centers citywide. Fall Enrollment opens on **July 24th**.

If your child receives Free/Reduced lunch, you could qualify for a **30-100% discount** for R.O.C.K. Here's how to apply:

-
- 01** Fill out the **PRNS Citywide Scholarship application** to apply for a youth scholarship that covers 30% of R.O.C.K.
 - 02** Bring the application to a Parks and Recreation community center **before July 24th** along with **your child's free/reduced lunch letter and any photo ID**.
 - 03** If COVID-19 has affected your family's income, ask for the "**ROCK 2021-2022 Scholarship Intake Form**" at a community center. This form could qualify your child to enroll in R.O.C.K. **free of charge**.
 - 04** If you're approved for the scholarships, register your child for R.O.C.K. on or after **July 24**.
-

If your child does not receive Free and Reduced lunch, visit or call a community center to find out you're still eligible. For phone numbers, hours, and more, visit: <https://bit.ly/2VdMfUF>

Appendix C: Resources to help you dive deeper and get more detail

Blog post written by the Community Engagement team with tips on how they did their work and their key take-aways from the effort. [Link](#)

Blog post describing the City of San José partnership with DataKind to create tools to help users put demographic context around data on the city's open data portal in an effort to better provide equity context to city data, with information like income, education and racial and ethnic data by location. [Link.](#)

Blog post written by CDO Christine Keung and data storytelling lead Julia Chen describing the Data Equity Framework. [Link.](#)