



The Path *to* Transformation

*Structural Well-Being
in Ramsey County, MN:
A Case Study*

Prepared by



**HAYWOOD
BURNS INSTITUTE**
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Introduction and Overview

In 2018, Ramsey County entered into an agreement with the Haywood Burns Institute (BI) to participate in the inaugural Learning Communities—jurisdictions piloting BI’s [Structural Well-Being Framework](#) to transform the administration of justice and the provision of human services: namely, to *reimagine* the very notion of justice in this nation.¹ This partnership, which dates back to 2005, would later prove prescient when, 11 miles west in Minneapolis, George Floyd was murdered by police officers in 2020.

What follows is a brief case study of this multi-year collaboration in which community members and County stakeholders—with the considerable ongoing facilitation and support of BI leadership and staff members—utilized the Structural Well-Being Framework to lay a foundation for transformational system change and improved life outcomes for communities of color in the County.

This study illustrates how the County’s engagement and application of the Structural Well-Being Framework provided forums and other opportunities for community and system stakeholders to interact more equitably and strategically, modeling promising ways in which cross-sector collaborative inquiry aimed at increasing public safety can occur.

“We have expedited a long journey [to equity]. I don’t know if we’ll turn back . . . I believe that we will hold each other jointly accountable on that journey and we’ll be accountable to the community as the community expects us to be for the change that we want to see.”

—**Toni Carter**, former Ramsey County Commissioner



¹ Also including Lucas County (Toledo, OH)

Structural Well-Being: Raising the Bar

For many years, BI partnered with jurisdictions nationwide to *reduce* racial disparities in public systems and institutions. These efforts were aimed at *reform*. BI believed that all such systems and institutions are historically rooted in white supremacy and, without intentional and explicit harm reductions, would inevitably and, undisputedly, reinforce and perpetuate disparities, thereby harming people of color. Since 2002, BI's place-based partnerships with 300+ jurisdictions nationwide did, in fact, reduce disparities. These gains, however, clarified the significant *limitations* of conventional harm reduction methods.

Although tools and technology-based reform never challenged the fundamental concept of justice or the history of racial hierarchy in a meaningful way, BI did, in fact, engage those very tools and technologies, gradually becoming a leader in amplifying an approach to center community while also acknowledging racial and ethnic impacts. Eventually, however, it became evident that, after two decades of reform efforts which resulted in modest reductions in the overall numbers of incarcerated persons, there was an *increase in disparities for people of color*. BI ultimately concluded that system reform fails to address structural inequities—the legacy of institutionalized racist policies and disinvestments impacting every facet of life for people of color—thereby allowing continued disparities.

BI's realizations in this regard began to outpace the capabilities of its ongoing work, dramatically evolving its orientation, ambitions and goals. In time, BI decided to change its overall mission from reduction—mitigating harm, a symptom requiring ongoing triage—to *eliminating* the very mechanisms responsible for causing and perpetuating harm. BI would do this by pursuing a wholesale *transformation* of systems.

To reveal and eradicate the targeted harms of white supremacy, BI then developed and introduced the Structural Well-Being Framework to design and build *new systems* of public policies, institutional and inclusive practices, cultural representations and other norms in human service agencies to ensure belonging and strengthen families, communities and individual well-being for positive life outcomes.

The Framework activates an intentional cross-sector process steeped in services, restorative practices and humanity rather than custody, control and suppression. Structural Well-Being addresses both the justice sector and non-judicial public systems such as education, health, child welfare and housing—systems central to all facets of civic life that, historically and by design, worked to promote well-being for white people while suppressing thriving for people of color.

Through a process crucially informed by community voices and those directly impacted by the justice apparatus—as fully engaged authentic partners—Structural Well-Being begins with two foundational principles:

- Recenter our humanity such that we are willing to engage in a values-driven approach
- Own our contribution to the root of the problem (root causes of disparate outcomes) and actively work toward the solution

Furthermore, implementing the Structural Well-Being Framework requires participants to reject prescriptive or predetermined outcomes and to refrain from an overreliance on conventional tools and technologies. Instead, they are reminded to maintain adaptability and embrace uncertainty. There are no roadmaps, just guiding principles. Put another way, implementing the Framework is akin to bridge-building. Bridges are built all the time, yet the processes are never quite the same, varying due to the unique, place-based conditions such as climate and terrain.

Learning Communities: Partnerships to Demonstrate Place-Based Transformation

BI had sought collaborative members within the national justice network, including field practitioners and philanthropic entities, to jointly explore and undertake a plan for system transformation. Almost without exception, however, this vision proved too ambitious, large-scale and daring—roundly criticized for its excessive emphasis on community power—for anyone else to think achievable. Therefore, for this pioneering work, BI concluded that it would have to search for jurisdictions willing to take the leap to transcend status quo, “race-neutral” approaches, tools and technologies to explore how racial hierarchy in the administration of justice and provision of human services perpetuates racial and ethnic disparities.

Primed by the following questions, these jurisdictions would develop, test and demonstrate the effectiveness of this holistic approach for transformation:

- Whether pushing from the inside out or outside in, are there local champions pushing for racial and ethnic equity?
- Are there leaders who have expressed vision, fearlessness, curiosity and an openness to a new path? And can they achieve explicit buy-in?
- Is there a commitment to engage community partners in an authentic way, beyond tokenizing or just a seat at the table—but as decision-makers—with valuable expertise?
- Is this a place willing to engage in truly radical re-imagination and effectively articulate it?

For a proof of concept to be possible, jurisdictions indicated promise or demonstrated capacity in three critical areas: 1) Orientation toward Equity, 2) Leadership Composition and Willingness and 3) Aspirations to Center Community. Other indicators—signaling the viability of jurisdictions to face and overcome the myriad challenges that stall equity efforts—included their potential and capacity to:

1. Participate in a cross-sector collaborative journey about how racial hierarchy manifests in the delivery of public services
2. Engage processes and plans to move beyond community engagement and inclusion to establish and codify processes to orient new community and directly impacted members to become key decision-makers in self-determining the conditions of their own well-being
3. Engage stakeholders to participate in challenging conversations about the firmly embedded historical and structurally racist drivers of the administration of justice perpetuating racial hierarchy and social control

Ramsey County's Demonstrated Capacity for Equity Reform

During the national protests demanding systemic change in the aftermath of Floyd's murder, Ramsey County was already well underway in examining its own systemic racial and ethnic disparities, tragically exemplified in the 2016 fatal shooting of Philando Castile (streamed live on Facebook by his girlfriend). A victim of a pretextual stop—a practice in which minor traffic or vehicle equipment violations (i.e., a broken taillight) that allows police officers to investigate motorists for separate criminal violations—Castile was among the disproportionately high number of people of color impacted, in fact, targeted, for these stops.

Through its consultative process with BI to reveal, recognize and eliminate racial and ethnic disparities, the County Attorney established a policy to cease charging cases solely based on pretextual stops. County government and residents also codified a shared decision-making initiative, Transforming Systems Together (TST) (discussed later), jointly managed by the community and system leaders, to reimagine its human service operations.²

For nearly 10 years before these notable systemic shifts, the County was part of the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI), which began as a countrywide network of jurisdictions working to reduce unnecessary and inappropriate use of detention.

² The County also received technical assistance on research and data analysis from Vera Institute of Justice as well as Fair and Just Prosecution.

BI had been an integral part in facilitating and providing technical assistance for the County's JDAI efforts, which reduced the overall number of youth of color sent to carceral facilities. Significant disparities remained, however, between the percentage of youth of color sent to juvenile facilities compared to white youth.

Despite this reduction would ostensibly lessen the number of youth of color exposed to harm, BI recognized that reducing racial and ethnic disparities, though a necessary step, had to lead to larger, more comprehensive systemic transformation. This partnership led BI, the Ramsey County community and its system stakeholders to raise the bar. BI leadership encouraged the County to assess its own political will to move beyond traditional reforms and into a then-unprecedented large-scale process to examine current structures, government operations and community engagement and co-decision-making toward radical transformation.

When County partners, who had initially exhibited enthusiasm, interest and willingness, assumed various leadership positions, the political stage, as it were, was set and abounding with possibility. With the support and engagement of then-well-positioned political partners, BI helped to establish the Learning Community cohort comprising a diverse group of system stakeholders and community residents committed to a yet-undefined shared process to usher in transformational change. Because of this jurisdiction's commitment to equity, along the journey, they moved to application. BI's primary objective was embarking upon a collaborative journey of inquiry, to establish a proof of concept by *learning*.

Ultimately, with a charge to design a reimagined, transformed and restorative ecosystem of well-being—*designing with, and not for community*—Ramsey County's Learning Community comprised a cross-sector of elected and appointed officials (e.g., social services, mental health, schools, judiciary, County executive and legislative branches, court personnel, corrections/probation) responsible for the administration of justice and the provision of human services, alongside community-based organizations and community advocates.

Shared Values: Anchoring the Work

Cross-sector efforts rarely, if ever, take the necessary time to initiate and emphasize adaptive elements such as relationship-building, establishing trust and examining and developing core values. The importance of this grounding cannot be overstated for Structural-Well-being because *values, not objectives*, are its essence. Values quite literally anchor every aspect of the Framework's processes because, without exception, all persons convened will, to some degree or another, hold varying and sometimes quite adversarial perspectives, resulting from any number of racial, political, social, economic or other viewpoints and/or lived experiences. This inevitability must be explicitly acknowledged, addressed and moderated before any meaningful collaborative work can begin.

With that in mind, at the outset of the Learning Community work, BI facilitated several activities to engender deeper relationships and trust, something many system stakeholders and community members in the room had never before experienced.

The first step was to establish Learning Community norms and working agreements designed to help diverse collaboratives manage and address conflict. As a result, among other things, the Learning Community agreed to maintain a brave and safe space, mindful of how privilege and power operate, recognizing and respecting history and its current impacts, and for participants to be optimistic and aspirational. In developing and agreeing upon these Learning Community norms to engage one another in productive ways throughout the process, participants expressed honest goodwill and a renewed sense of humanity toward one another—even among those who had known one another for years.

“The Learning Community opened a path for many of us to challenge the system, and to reach conclusions about our sectors and how these systems worked seamlessly to intentionally deepen inequities . . . Norms and values became core to our journey together—informed and grounded us in a shared language, anchored us in building trust and establishing working agreements that were revisited and refined over time, but that were rooted in shared values.”

—Sara Hollie, Ramsey County Director of Public Health

The established norms and values, which also included deciding upon shared language, were critical to cultivating a space of inquiry and vision, productive debate and innovation, and shared accountability. Moreover, they preempted fear-based decision-making.

Just as importantly, the values driving the administration of justice and the provision of human services must undergo an *interrogation* to enhance historical competency. BI, therefore, provided materials to promote learning about the historical and contemporary pillars of structural racism that shaped and upheld institutional values, the policies and practices intentionally deployed to enforce those values, and the devastating outcomes for people of color.

Building Awareness: Structural Racism

The next step was strengthening each individual stakeholder's awareness of structural racism and the mental models that perpetuate it. As with any country and its citizenry anywhere in the world—but particularly here in the US—Ramsey County's system stakeholders and community members have been, to varying degrees, passively or directly influenced by issues of race. Depending on their own lived experience, they have also passively or actively endorsed or enforced racism, consciously or subconsciously. Although it is impossible to fully comprehend how widely accepted norms and practices shape an individual person's endurance of, or culpability in, racism—or other -isms for that matter—it remains that everyone is somehow implicated and/or impacted.

As stubbornly intractable and unpredictable as these views are, BI knows that raising awareness about them is vitally important. Failing to call attention to the possibility of profound biases and core beliefs would prevent any meaningful work in transforming systems. Therefore, BI facilitated the Learning Community through several introspective exercises. In one, participants were shown a graphic of the various stages of self-awareness of structural racism and then asked to journal about where they saw themselves in the spectrum and how that impacted their approach to their job roles, particularly when engaging with their constituency. Designed for everyone, the efficacy of this particular tool lies in how it creates awareness of one's own position and possible conscious or unconscious collusion with structural racism, while underscoring awareness as a universal need, a social good.

“After traveling to the Civil Rights Memorial and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, I returned home with a greater resolve . . . There is much work to do to correct injustice and racial discrimination toward African Americans, and it must start with a truthful understanding of our brutal history and acknowledgment of society's role, then and now, in continuing injustices.”

—**John Choi**, Ramsey County Attorney

As expected, there was some apprehension among participants to lay bare their thoughts, experiences and knowledge about structural racism. Nonetheless, the tool's design utilizes fear, reluctance, pain and other emotions to prime the space for open and vulnerable conversations. Among other things, this crucible, as it were, allows people of color, especially, to safely give voice to internalized oppression and, frankly, ennoble the process as something much more meaningful than a political process, but a rite after which transformation can begin in earnest.

Next, BI established historical competence to ensure that everyone shared the same historical context, exploring how existing systems were founded—compounding one policy at a time over decades—to entrench interlocking institutions of structural racism, with both blatant and seemingly innocuous discriminatory practices that influence the US mainstream until today.

This included an introduction to the weaponization of family separation to create enduring multigenerational harms across various groups such as Native Americans (boarding schools as sites of violence against Native children) and more recent atrocities against migrant and refugee families—all masquerading as policies securing public safety but functioning to enforce racialized social control and suppression. One of the most poignant experiences for the Learning Community was a BI-sponsored trip to the Civil Rights Memorial and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, AL.

“Not only did the visit bring the group even closer, more cohesive, but cohesive in their will, in what they wanted to see change, and why.”

—Raquel Mariscal, BI Senior Strategist



Revealing Pathways: Cross-Sector Data

Before any work can commence in earnest, before any headway can be achieved, BI must squarely identify and demystify four key assumptions, or conundrums, that persist as barriers to transformation:

1. Justice is colorblind and race-neutral, thereby negating the necessity to address policies and practices that reflect racialized social control.
2. Investment in communities that most populate the justice sector is outside the justice sector's purview. Community disinvestment is a structural issue larger than the justice sector can handle alone, requiring political solutions that public systems cannot control.
3. Government is not structured to promote flexible cross-sector responses to complex human services problems that involve safety.
4. It is difficult for elected and appointed officials to share power with each other and communities most in need of human service interventions.

For the purposes of this study, a brief examination of #3 is instructive. While it is true that governmental agencies function in silos, it is also true that developing mechanisms to collect, share and analyze cross-sector data is, in fact, possible and crucially essential to create pathways that foster intra-agency partnership and integration. It is crucial, foremost, because the status quo of allowing these agencies to act independently, essentially giving them *carte blanche*, disproportionately harms communities of color.

To see, firsthand, how seemingly disparate and unrelated government systems possess the capacity to coordinate, thereby sharing responsibility and accountability for accommodating and activating holistic services, County officials were tasked with assembling and analyzing various data points frequently proven to reveal previously unrecognized racial and ethnic disparities. Among others, service delivery and departmental budgets allocated to those services were examined. Upon completing the initial process, the County had at its disposal demographic and geographic data—in the unambiguous form of zip codes—from which to build in performance accountability measures in concert with deploying resources, budgetary and otherwise, to form actionable plans to eliminate these disparities, which included duplications and inefficiencies. Three zip codes—representing nearly 18% of the County's population—comprised a demographic of largely Asian, Black, Latinx and Native American communities. Various individual County agencies analyzed budget and expenditure costs for the targeted zip codes:

- The Public Health Department considered data for families enrolled in the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program as well as properties treated for hazardous lead exposure and home visits.
- The Social Services Department shared data on adoption guardianships, mental health treatments, calls for child protection services and a host of other youth and teen services.
- Public safety departments examined criminal referral and medical assistance calls.
- Housing and Economic Development analyzed grant and loan investments in the focus areas.
- The County Attorney's Office examined the percentage of its budget allocated to its criminal division.

Having undertaken this unprecedented coordination of work, County leaders could—for the very first time, ever—apprehend the totality of the sheer inequities and gross inefficiency defining its public operations, giving them an opportunity to implement strategies to eliminate racial and ethnic disparities. In other words, this momentous undertaking was pivotal: it marked the first step in *operationalizing transformation*.

To complement these system advances, BI conducted a factor analysis in collaboration with Credible Messengers (indigenous community leaders and people with lived and shared experience) to inform well-being goals specific to the demographic and geographic population.

Centering Community and Cross-Sector Collaboration

Invigorated by their deepening relationships and tough conversations, which had led to real system coordination—the resultant and revelatory data points, complete with actionable plans—the Learning Community began to identify other agency-specific concerns.

In one session, a staff member in the County Attorney’s Office shared how a young man had been referred to his office 27 times, beginning when the youth was 13 years old. After hearing the litany of court dispositions and interventions meted out to the young man, the group sought to identify additional and alternative options. As they considered this living, breathing human being—not an abstract example, but a person with obvious, unmet needs—system and community partners exhaustively considered feasible, real-life alternatives, ways to maximize resources to ensure the well-being of all young people. Notably, this activity had, in fact, been a deliberation upon #3 of the aforementioned key assumptions, or conundrums (“Government is not structured to promote flexible cross-sector responses to complex human services problems that involve safety.”)

This story and ensuing deliberation visibly impacted several of the government leaders present. For them, it was an epiphany: their respective agencies were working as designed, yielding outcomes that are harmful. Without anyone pointing a finger, berating them for their failed policies and practices, this activity led them to conclude this for themselves, and they owned it. County services not only insufficiently served youth, but, as this one story showed, they failed to consult or engage community partners whose expertise could support successful outcomes for youth.

All too often, system leaders are removed from and uninformed about the myriad realities and conditions (i.e., historical, social, economic, racialized) affecting the daily lives of their constituents. Centering community members as equitable partners in decision-making processes affecting their lives, therefore, is crucial to developing any public policy purported to nurture their well-being and sense of belonging.

Once again, utilizing data, the Learning Community identified geographic and demographic areas to focus immediate transformation efforts—emphasizing all the while that community-based organizations and leaders were central in identifying challenges and forging any meaningful pathways toward solutions. Accomplishing this community-centered power-sharing meant that the County had to ensure and sustain both the integration and inclusion of non-government community members into decision-making committees throughout all County operations.

Key results included:

- In 2020, County Manager Ryan O'Connor established the Racial Equity and Community Engagement Response Team to form a roundtable collaborative of resident leaders and county government departments during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- The County Attorney's Office established its own roundtable response team that consulted with community members on whether to file charges in certain cases.
- The County Board of Commissioners codified an 18-member committee (equally drawn from system and community stakeholders) called Transforming System Together (TST) to reshape how the County delivers key social services to its neighborhoods and citizens. TST leads are nominated and confirmed by the Board of Commissioners and utilizes its multi-million dollar budget to allocate grants to innovative and integral community groups.

Reaping Now, While Eyeing the Future Promise of Structural Well-Being

Throughout this multi-year process, there have been numerous noteworthy advances, victories and praiseworthy events. The County Manager once shared how the Learning Community had directly informed the structuring of County departments and budgets. After honestly expressing his initial skepticism that the Learning Community appeared to be just another racial disparities initiative, the Deputy County Manager of Health and Wellness later called it indispensable in demolishing the institutional pillars perpetuating racist policies and practices. The Deputy County Manager of Health and Wellness shared how the work of the Learning Community has moved the organization to take greater risks in resource allocation and power-sharing with the community.

Along with the aforementioned policy proposal that addressed pretextual stops, the Learning Community also successfully advanced the “Appropriate Responses Initiative” for community members and agency leaders to transform its 911 response system. This formidable shift (which could include dispatching a mental health professional or trusted community members for minor disturbances), coupled with the County's \$13 million investment (drawn from its American Rescue Plan Act) and other solutions resulting from the Learning Community, clearly illustrate the transformative change possible with the Structural Well-Being Framework.

The inaugural Learning Community came to a close in early 2022, transitioning and assuming its role as a now-historic collective of mentors who will continue to impact transformation in the County and beyond. Last year, County officials averred that the re-election of key officials in Ramsey County, and across the state, reaffirmed that they were on the right track toward transformative change. According to one County official: “What we saw in this last election was this doubling down of this fear narrative...that’s targeted to scare certain factions of our community to believe that they deserve safety better than anybody else . . . And it didn’t work in Ramsey.”

Looking Back to Move Forward: Lessons Learned

BI is now working with a second cohort of County leaders to comprise the new Learning Community, including members of the Board of Commissioners, Finance, Housing Stability, Public Works, Economic Growth and Community Investment, Assessor’s Office, Procurement, Workforce Solutions, and Parks and Recreation. BI is thrilled to build upon this work that has yielded such a rich array of actionable, measurable and replicable systems-change efforts. To move forward with assurance, all BI needs to do is look back at what community members and system stakeholders have accomplished. Together.

As we journeyed alongside Ramsey County’s Learning Community, we witnessed disappointment and elation, fits and starts, ups and downs, humility and arrogance, contradictions and shifting allegiances, vulnerability, ingenuity. While it would be disingenuous to suggest shortcuts or a simple checklist for enacting transformation, we must confess that certain conditions and traits seem to be elemental catalysts in moving from strength to strength, unifying stakeholders and bringing out everyone’s best. Furthermore, it appears that, regardless of strict iterative order and adherence, deep consideration of any number of the Structural Well-Being Framework’s elements have the potential to yield gains toward transformational change.

The main takeaway? When we imagine the vastness of our nation and its numerous systems, we tend to shrink. Imagine trying to impact just one of those systems, in all its unquestioned and seemingly unassailable power. It feels insurmountable, too great to face. Yet when we imagine ourselves sitting among other ordinary citizens, including leaders of organizations trusted and rooted in underrepresented communities like ours, as well as system stakeholders of goodwill, everyone vigorously discussing and debating transformation in their own words—assured of our own individual experiences and valuable expertise, each of us on equal footing and regarded equitably—gradually, or sometimes quite suddenly, imagining becomes the reality.

Being brave enough to dare and devote ourselves to change comes easier. Together.