

Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiative (BARHII)

# THE POWER OF PUBLIC HEALTH UNITED

CATALYZING HEALTH  
EQUITY DURING  
COVID-19



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## OVERVIEW

This impact report celebrates the action of the everyday heroes who pushed to catalyze health equity throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The last two years of COVID-19 have been the most intense times that most public health staff can remember. COVID-19 has tested everything in local public health departments. Hours spiked. Stress was constant. Meanwhile, life at home did not stop. Kids were out of school. Families needed support. Amidst all of this, public health workers and communities also confronted the dual pandemic of racism, with nationwide marches and calls for structural change during the summer of 2020, and continuing the call for justice in the months following. Despite these grave and constant challenges and obstacles, public health staff rose to advance equity and justice to protect their communities.

Non-profit staff and community volunteers also leapt into action, joining forces across boundaries to deliver deep impact. The shared commitment to advancing family safety and economic stability was unlike anything in recent memory, and brought together multitudes of people committed to mutual goals. For example, in the first three months of the pandemic, over 1,000 people joined BARHII to craft an "equitable rapid response" guide that centered community partners' needs.

For everyone who has championed equity during these trying times, who is exhausted from the ongoing struggle, who is grieving what has been lost, we salute you. Your amazing efforts throughout the pandemic have brought us four primary lessons about how to advance our health equity future:

**Lesson 1: Rapid learning and sharing of what works, plus immediate implementation, can create equity in real time.** Our successful campaigns, including passing COVID-19 eviction moratoriums, establishing equity officers in emergency response, and keeping our parks open, demonstrated the power of fast information-sharing and strong networks to achieve equitable results quickly.

**Lesson 2: On-the-ground coalitions of communities most impacted by inequities advance solutions rapidly and effectively.** We are immensely grateful to the Rise Together and Pacific Islander Taskforce community partners, who quickly took to the streets to respond, and helped BARHII design our "equitable rapid response and rolling recovery" guides. We celebrate you.

**Lesson 3: Race-specific strategies save lives and reduce disparities.** We don't all experience a crisis the same way, and our region's epidemiologists and community partners ensured that we fully understood what advancing equity would require. We thank you for your tireless service.

**Lesson 4: Regional collaboration matters.** What a difference it makes to have a region that knows each other, plans together, and understands that we all depend on each other.

This report celebrates all the parts of public health that united in common goals these last two years—governmental public health, non-profit partners, and volunteer coalitions. Thank you all for your work.

We look forward to continuing to push forward, together, towards an equitable recovery this year and a more resilient future for our communities!



Melissa Jones  
Executive Director





# CHAMPIONING AN EQUITABLE COVID-19 RESPONSE & RECOVERY

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 prompted dramatic changes to “normal” life. Schools shut down, and parents had to rapidly adjust for childcare and to ensure food at home. Some struggled to adapt to working virtually, while others deemed “essential” headed to their worksites, hoping to stay healthy by the end of their shift. We all watched the news anxiously and worried about the well-being of our family and friends amidst deep uncertainty.

The pandemic impacted everyone. But communities that faced systemic health inequities before the pandemic felt the effects far more deeply. For example, the response’s initial emphasis on the need to “shelter in place” ended up overlooking many families that lacked physical, economic, and health means to do so. “Essential workers”—a population that is disproportionately Black, Latinx, and Pacific Islander—were left exposed to elevated risks, fostering a racial divide between those who could “shelter in place” and those who could not.

From the beginning, BARHII led the call to center health equity in all stages of COVID-19 response and recovery in the Bay Area. The pandemic laid bare longstanding systemic inequities in our communities and compounded other existing public health emergencies, including racism, housing instability, climate change, and access to quality healthcare. COVID-19 has made it abundantly clear that health emergencies are not solely confined within hospitals or clinic walls, but occur at work, in our homes, and in public.

In the two years since COVID-19 has dominated public health’s attention and focus, BARHII and its members have stepped up to care for Bay Area communities and eliminate the inequities that shape our health and well-being. This report highlights and celebrates many of these efforts across our region.

## Keeping Parks Open and Accessible

Access to public open spaces has been vital for physical and behavioral health during the pandemic. This is particularly true for low-income populations and BIPOC communities—many of whom face overcrowded living conditions, lack of private recreational spaces, and inequitable access to public recreational resources in their neighborhoods.

When Bay Area jurisdictions began instituting shelter-in-place orders, several jurisdictions closed their parks and recreational facilities, and a full-scale regional parks closure looked increasingly possible. In late March 2020, BARHII issued a [brief](#) that explored the health equity implications of closing parks and identified methods to ensure access to open space while maintaining physical distancing and other COVID-19 protections.



*Dr. Curtis Chan*

Dr. Curtis Chan, BARHII executive committee member and then Medical Director of Maternal, Child & Adolescent Health at the San Francisco Department of Public Health, was inspired by BARHII’s materials. He worked with BARHII to host a regional convening of parks department directors to address the issue of keeping parks open. Dr. Chan then hosted a series of meetings with parks directors and their staff across the Bay Area to identify how to manage COVID-19 transmission risks while maintaining access to open spaces.

This rapid engagement was critical to prevent more park closures and to reopen parks across the Bay Area. Importantly, the Bay Area has been able to keep its parks open since then—a critical success for the health of the region’s 7.8 million residents.



## Improving Data for Equity-Informed Interventions

Thanks to the deep and committed engagement of data equity champions, COVID-19 data collection and analysis has evolved substantially since the early days of the pandemic, helping to illuminate profound disparities and shape public health interventions for distinct populations.



*Meileen Acosta*

Meileen Acosta, epidemiologist at Solano County Public Health and co-chair of BARHII's data committee, is one of those data equity champions who kept a critical focus on the racial disparities emerging from COVID-19. Since the beginning of the pandemic, she has been a champion for greater disaggregation of data by race and ethnicity to inform our interventions. Importantly, Meileen disaggregated data for the Bay Area's Pacific Islander population, which helped reveal significantly elevated rates of disease and death and lead to more strategic and focused interventions. She also coordinated with the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) on the Bay Area's COVID-19 regional profile to illustrate the impact of COVID-19 on the area's health disparities. A believer in the power of the region, Meileen ensured that BARHII's data committee leveraged its collective strengths during the pandemic, meeting monthly with regional epidemiologists and data-oriented partners for regional data sharing and problem solving.

## Protecting Stable Housing

Before the pandemic, the Bay Area faced a severe housing affordability crisis that impacted family health and well-being, especially for BIPOC communities. The pandemic complicated this crisis, raising the stakes for those facing housing instability, and exacerbating systemic inequities in housing and health. With businesses shuttered, many low-income residents lost their income. Employees faced choices of coming to work while sick or losing their homes. Overcrowding and homelessness heightened transmission of COVID-19 and limited people's ability to isolate and recover.

“*These rapid, coordinated efforts resulted in 100 percent of the Bay Area protected by local emergency eviction moratoriums.*”

In response, BARHII rapidly engaged to increase housing stability, starting with local emergency eviction moratoriums. In partnership with housing justice advocates, we mapped which Bay Area communities had established moratoriums and where policy gaps left communities vulnerable. We then developed powerful health messages to support local campaigns, coordinated with local health departments and elected officials, and secured supportive media coverage. These rapid, coordinated efforts resulted in 100 percent of the Bay Area protected by local emergency eviction moratoriums. The Bay Area's success led to similar protections being established statewide and nationally. It is estimated that eviction moratoriums prevented thousands of deaths from COVID-19 in just the first few months they were in effect.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Data estimates as of November 2020, per calculations based on: Leifheit, Kathryn M. and Linton, Sabriya L. and Raifman, Julia and Schwartz, Gabriel and Benfer, Emily and Zimmerman, Frederick J and Pollack, Craig, *Expiring Eviction Moratoriums and COVID-19 Incidence and Mortality* (November 30, 2020).



BARHII continued to engage to increase housing stability throughout the pandemic. We helped generate support for several extensions of the moratoriums, with Sonoma County's Health Officer Dr. Sundari Mase providing a health expert voice at a state press conference. BARHII also convened 50 partners to create [Eight Essential Actions: Preparing for the COVID-19 Eviction and Foreclosure Cliff](#), which outlines steps that local government and philanthropic leaders can take to prepare for the end of emergency housing protections. We then held press conferences and trainings to support effective implementation of our guide.

### Spotlight on Housing Justice in Vallejo

During COVID, the work of the Vallejo Housing Justice Coalition (VHJC) was critical to increase housing stability for Vallejo's diverse residents. Their successes during the pandemic built upon several years of collaboration between Vallejo residents, BARHII, and Urban Habitat to build local infrastructure for housing justice and health equity. BARHII helped secure funding for VHJC to hire their first community organizer, who was hired a few months prior to the pandemic. In 2019, local community leaders and impacted tenants worked to secure a local cap on rent increases through the end of the year. When COVID hit, VHJC worked in partnership with other local organizations and community based groups to successfully advocate for the Solano County Eviction Moratorium, which was one of the strongest moratoriums in the region.

As the group pivoted to respond to the impacts caused by the pandemic, the work on the Vallejo Community Land Trust continued. In 2021, the state's CalHome program awarded VHJC and partners with a little over \$2 million for down-payment assistance for first-time home owners and ADU construction, which will help launch the County's community land trust. The community land trust will help provide housing stability for Vallejo residents by offering permanently affordable housing to low-income families.

## Design and Integration of Equity Officers

As the COVID-19 crisis deepened and health disparities made national headlines, jurisdictions across the Bay Area recognized the need to embed equity into their local emergency response processes.

In July 2020, BARHII produced [Embedding Equity into Emergency Operations](#), in partnership with the Public Health Alliance of Southern California. The guide highlights the importance of integrating Equity Officers and their support staff into governmental emergency management structures. BARHII then hosted a series of webinars, trainings, and learning communities to catalyze the creation of equity officer positions throughout the region and ensure those leaders were positioned for success.

These efforts are paying dividends. Now, two-thirds of the Bay Area's counties have an equity officer in place. The California Department of Public Health has dedicated \$32 million to fund local equity officers and other equity infrastructure in 47 health departments across the state. The Bay Area's equity officers continue to make critical contributions to tip the scales toward equity.

Analilia Garcia is Santa Clara County's Chief Equity Officer, former Racial & Health Equity Sr Manager and a long-time BARHII member. Working in Santa Clara County's emergency operations center, Analilia led numerous efforts to secure COVID-19 resources and funding for the communities hardest-hit by the pandemic. One effort mobilized promotores de salud from Mujeres Empresarias Tomando Acción (META) to communicate COVID-19 guidance and distribute resources quickly and effectively to areas in need. This included organizing door-to-door COVID-19 tests in areas with high need, and setting up a system of trusted relationships to better understand population priorities and more rapidly deploy needed interventions.



*Analilia Garcia*



The establishment of equity officers is a major step forward toward an equitable response and recovery from COVID-19. It's also an essential action to position our communities to address the full range of public health emergencies coming in the years ahead—from pandemics to climate-driven wildfires and power shut-offs—as well as the chronic health inequities that should be treated as pressing emergencies.

## Informing an Equitable Response & Recovery

### Equitable Response Guides

In the first three months of the pandemic, over 1,000 government leaders, public health professionals, and community members attended BARHII's monthly general membership meetings to strategize about the pandemic. Many participants observed that the communities they represented—including BIPOC communities, those facing housing instability, and essential workers who lacked adequate workplace safety protections—were underserved by governmental responses to the pandemic. Together, they identified critical shortfalls and viable strategies to create an equitable response to the pandemic.

Leveraging this input, BARHII authored [a series of equitable response and recovery guides](#) to inform local decision makers' strategies, and presented these guides to audiences across the region. The guides provide frameworks for considering equity in the pandemic and identify solutions that address key social determinants of health during COVID-19—including flexible cash assistance, housing payment relief, community-based mental health, and more—along with examples of Bay Areas communities putting these strategies into practice.

Many communities, including Alameda, Monterey, Santa Cruz, Solano, and Sonoma, have reported that BARHII's guides have been essential to shaping their approach to the pandemic. In addition, some communities worked with BARHII to develop more specific guidance. Leaders in Alameda County and Oakland engaged BARHII to work with their COVID-19 Racial Disparities Taskforce to develop an [action plan](#) to address immediate racial and ethnic disparities in the pandemic and the social determinants that perpetuate racial health disparities. The plan became a grounding framework for Oakland's pandemic recovery.

### Equitable Recovery Strategic Planning

BARHII's expertise has informed equitable recovery planning for the region in numerous ways. BARHII's Executive Director Melissa Jones was appointed by the San Francisco Foundation to co-chair a regional taskforce that focused on shaping state and federal investments for an equitable recovery. Melissa also served on the steering committee of COVID Justice, a statewide coalition focused on equitable response and recovery. The coalition has helped drive federal recovery funding to community-based organizations and is building momentum for systemic changes to emergency funding to better address equity.



*Alejía De La Cruz*

### Spotlight on Sonoma County

Alejía De La Cruz leads Sonoma County's new Office of Equity. She has spearheaded a number of efforts to advance equity in the county's COVID-19 response efforts, including the county's Latinx Health Task Force to address the inequities of the pandemic on farmworkers and other Latinx communities. The Task Force has shaped efforts to distribute COVID-19 guidance, PPE, testing, and vaccinations to farmworker populations and others who faced systemic barriers to access.

Alejía harnessed BARHII's COVID-19 resources to develop an equitable recovery strategy for Sonoma County. She is also an active participant in BARHII's new Equity Officer community, supporting her colleagues across the region in their efforts to incorporate equity into their community's COVID-19 response and recovery activities.





*The Regional Pacific  
Islander Task Force (RPITF)*

### **Spotlight on Pacific Islander Community Preparedness and Response**

The Regional Pacific Islander Task Force (RPITF) has been critically important for the health of the Bay Area's Pacific Islander communities during COVID-19. Knowing that better data means better interventions and outcomes, the taskforce has worked with health departments to improve data collection and reporting on Pacific Islander health. Strong relationships with Pacific Islander community-based organizations, faith-based communities, and businesses have allowed for effective, fast-moving efforts to educate and protect community members from COVID-19 transmission, including distribution of masks, food, and organizing vaccination clinics. With support from BARHII, the taskforce is developing a strategy to collaborate with the Bay Area's local public health departments to support an equitable recovery for the region's many Pacific Islander communities.

### **Black-led COVID-19 Recovery Roundtable**

In July 2020, BARHII and our partners held a [media roundtable](#) to elevate the work and voices of Black leaders in the Bay Area who are supporting Black communities through COVID-19 and building a future that protects and advances Black health. Seven leaders spoke about their efforts, including youth organizing for Black Lives and defunding the police in Vallejo, teachers dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline, Black community development leaders in Richmond working to prevent the next foreclosure crisis, bus drivers organizing to protect residents and essential workers, Black entrepreneurs fighting to keep small businesses afloat, and formerly incarcerated people fighting to eliminate discrimination against inmates released during the pandemic.

## **Responding to Co-Occurring Disasters**

COVID-19 is not the only disaster that Bay Area residents face. During the pandemic, we experienced one of the most destructive wildfire seasons in state history, during an unprecedented heatwave that led utilities to conduct rolling power shut-offs, on top of a decade-long housing affordability crisis and other systemic inequities. Any one of these co-occurring disasters constitutes a public health emergency on its own; combined, they threaten the ability to protect entire populations—especially communities with greater equity needs.

BARHII has been a national leader on addressing co-occurring disasters equitably, especially climate-driven emergencies. In June 2020, BARHII hosted a [panel](#) with The Utility Reform Network (TURN) that brought together the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC), public health officials, and community-based organizations to discuss disaster preparation. In March 2021, we hosted an [event](#) on planning for intersecting health inequities from extreme heat, wildfire smoke, and COVID-19. We also released [Farther Together](#), which outlines how to transform the ways in which public agencies engage inequity-impacted communities in climate resilience planning to foster a healthy future for all.

## **BUILDING A BLACK HEALTH AGENDA**

Amidst the pandemic of COVID-19, BARHII and Bay Area communities continued to confront the long-standing and dual pandemic of racism. BARHII is committed to creating a society that honors and supports BIPOC health. We believe this begins with centering the perspectives and needs of African Americans, who have the largest and longest-standing differences in life expectancy and disease burden in our country. BARHII has launched a regional effort to advance Black health, including a focus on Black infant and maternal health, stable housing, and racial equity-informed solutions for homelessness.



*Darris Young*





*Monet Boyd*

### **Black Housing Advisory Taskforce (Black HAT)**

In 2021, BARHII catalyzed the creation of the Bay Area Black Housing Advisory Taskforce, known as "Black HAT." The coalition brings together over 35 Black-led organizations dedicated to serving the health and well-being of the Bay Area's Black communities, with expertise in housing development, housing finance, and Black economic development. Together, the members of Black HAT are charting a future for the Black Bay Area to stop Black displacement and harness government investment to repair harms caused to our region's Black communities. Black HAT is building support for the creation of a \$500 million Bay Area Black Housing Fund that would build the capacity of Black-led organizations, support local community visioning efforts, and fund development of housing and thriving Black cultural districts. The coalition has secured support from local, state, and national decisionmakers and is working with communities across the region to direct COVID-19 recovery funds to member projects.

### **Deliver Birth Justice Campaign**

In 2021, the [#DeliverBirthJustice](#) communications campaign was launched across the Bay Area to raise awareness of the negative health outcomes caused by racism within healthcare and social systems for Black birthing people. The campaign communicates the seriousness of Black infant mortality in the Bay Area, promotes upstream strategies to create policies and structural change to protect Black infant health in the future, and builds a healthy community network of support for Black infants and their caregivers. The campaign is the product of a multi-year collaboration between Alameda, Contra Costa, San Francisco, Santa Clara, and Solano counties, as part of the statewide Perinatal Equity Initiative (PEI). BARHII provides backbone support to this collaborative effort. [#DBJ](#) has made a splash with traditional and social media, compelling videos, and participation from popular American musician Goapele. The coalition held its [inaugural event](#) with leaders in Black maternal and infant health in November 2021.



*Deliver Birth Justice Campaign*

### **Racial Equity Action Lab (REAL) Cohort**

In October 2020, BARHII, along with our partners Homebase, All Home, and the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco, launched the Racial Equity Action Lab (REAL) to advance racial equity in Bay Area homelessness systems, with a focus on the disproportionate number of Black people who are unhoused in the Bay Area. For the next eight months, these partners convened, trained, and supported seven interdisciplinary county-based teams focused on reducing racial inequities among unhoused people—especially those at elevated risk of COVID-19 and Black Bay Area residents. These teams included formerly and currently unhoused people, public health and continuum of care representatives, service and shelter organization staff, and community organizers. The lab produced [powerful resources](#) for incorporating racial equity into homelessness programs, including the need to include and compensate people with lived experience in program planning and design. The county teams continue to pursue local priorities identified through the lab.

## **APPRECIATION**

In the face of one of the most devastating public health emergencies in history, BARHII staff, members, funders, and partners have accomplished critically vital work, while still caring for ourselves, our families, and our own communities. None of the stories highlighted above could have been accomplished without your dedication to equity and justice, and we know there is great work still to come. We are honored and grateful to work together for equity for our communities.





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