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Franklin County Launches New Racial Equity Initiative

Columbus, OH – The Franklin County Commissioners Tuesday approved a partnership between Franklin County Department of Job and Family Services and Raising the Bar Performance Group to lead a racial equity initiative.

This new partnership aims to address the role racism and implicit bias play as underlying conditions of poverty and is the latest demonstration of the Commissioners' ongoing commitment to racial equity.

In 2019, the Commissioners released *Rise Together: A Blueprint to Reduce Poverty In Franklin County*, which was developed in partnership with residents as well as large system leaders in both the public and private sectors. The *Blueprint* consists of 13 goals with more than 120 short- and long-term action steps for the Franklin County community, including taking on the challenge of long-standing racial inequities.

“Our Blueprint lays out many goals and big ideas to ‘disrupt’ poverty across Franklin County, but we simply cannot move the needle by tip-toeing around the role of racism,” Commissioner John O’Grady said. “We need to name it and own it.”

The conversation started in the earliest phase of developing the *Blueprint*, as members of the Commissioners’ appointed steering committee were candid and direct about the historical and ongoing role race and racial inequities play in perpetual poverty.

The steering committee held thoughtful discussions about public policies that have and continue to impact communities of color in Franklin County. It reviewed research from the Ohio State University Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, which used empirical data and poverty indicators to further illustrate the impacts. Just as importantly, it considered first-hand accounts from conversations with hundreds of residents, which became the basis for the *Blueprint’s* action steps.

“What all of us understood is that for real change to take place, we need a concerted effort to counteract the institutional racism and unconscious biases that continue to permeate throughout our community,” Commissioner Marilyn Brown said. “It is absolutely critical that we do so.”

The Commissioners have tasked Franklin County Department of Job and Family Services, working in conjunction with all the agencies that fall underneath their appointing authority, to lead this initiative. Raising the Bar will work with JFS and County Administration to operationalize racial equity, drawing from recognized best practices and developing shared metrics.

“We know that historic policies and decisions implemented at all levels of government shape our system today and limit opportunities – often intentionally – for people of color,” Commissioner Kevin Boyce said. “We need to use the same level of intentionality to dismantle those racist policies and institutions.”

Over the next 12 months, Raising the Bar Performance Group will work with JFS to shape a collaborative racial equity process that includes:

- creating a new racial equity council to guide efforts among Commissioner-appointed agencies;
- coordinating content and curriculum from third parties, such as the Racial Equity Institute, for educational services;
- developing and facilitating racial equity workshop and trainings;
- working with partners to create and scale a racial equity curriculum for continuing education; and
- engaging with residents, community and civic leaders, partners and organizations focused on racial equity to establish a set of shared priorities and outcomes for the county as a whole, as well as identifying an ongoing training process.

“This process is just the start,” County Administrator Ken Wilson said. “We need racial equity ingrained in our DNA. That’s the goal.”

While the Commissioners and JFS are taking ownership of this initiative, they will be working with the Rise Together Leadership Council – the governing body tasked with coordinating and implementing the action steps laid out in the *Blueprint* – in addition to a host of other community partners and stakeholders.

“There’s something wrong when year after year, decade after decade, the same people are falling behind,” JFS Director Joy Bivens said. “The *Blueprint* provides a framework for aligning and integrating efforts across the Franklin County. We want to model that by creating racial equity framework that will have the same collaborative focus and relationships.”

Raising the Bar Performance Group is a locally based training and development company focused on whole-system capacity building. The firm provided project management services for Franklin County during the development phase of the *Blueprint*.

"Advocates and racial justice practitioners have long declared and recognized this as a problem. The solutions we are trying to reach and problems we want to solve cannot happen if we are not looking through a racial equity lens," said Courtnee Carrigan, CEO and Executive Trainer for Raising the Bar Performance Group. "The ultimate goal is to have our communities, systems and sectors apply a racial equity lens in all that we do."

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