



Fostering Equitable Contract Outcomes

Part 1: Equity in Service Planning

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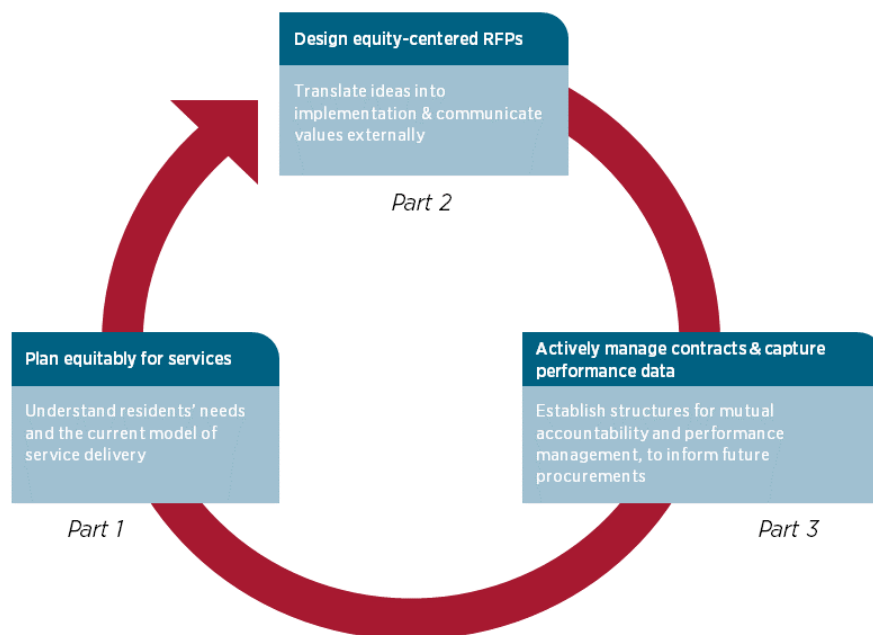
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Introduction: Government Procurement & Advancing Equity

State and local governments are responsible for contracting out many consequential products and services for residents – but historically, some communities have received disparate access to services and experienced disparities in outcomes which still persist today. To correct these disparities, it is essential that governments carefully consider how residents receive and access services during every step of the contracting process.

The Harvard Kennedy School Government Performance Lab (GPL) believes that procurement can advance equity and mitigate disparities at three separate stages of the contract lifecycle: 1) as you plan for the model and array of services that will be offered, 2) as you design the RFP that will translate your ideas and communicate with prospective vendors, and 3) as you manage the performance of the contract and collect data and insights to inform future procurements.

There are opportunities to advance equity at each of these three stages. In this series, we'll suggest steps you can take within your government in the short- and long-term. Throughout this cycle, purchasing offices play a critical but often understated role in uplifting and facilitating equitable service delivery and contract outcomes at the department or agency level.



During the planning stage (Part 1) we'll help you focus on planning equitably for services by reviewing past performance data and engaging stakeholders and clients to determine what services are needed. During the RFP writing stage ([Part 2](#)), we'll describe how to integrate equity into the design and dissemination of RFPs. Finally, during the period of contract management ([Part 3](#)), we'll cover how to set up structures for more active contract or grant management and how to use data about the vendor's performance and how services have been delivered to inform future contracts.

What is equity?

Investing in equity moves beyond a commitment to “sameness,” “fairness,” or “equality across groups.” It requires dedicating tailored opportunities, resources, and services to individuals, communities, and organizations who have been historically excluded or underserved to meet their respective needs. For example, a government may opt to focus on crosswalk rehabilitation in neighborhoods with higher rates of pedestrian death or offer more services in Spanish to reach specific immigrant communities with greater need, regardless of their share of the total population. Justice goes even further, with the goal of fixing systems so that no group is excluded or underserved. While justice is the ideal state, equity is an essential step on the path to getting there.

Equity in Procurement and Service Planning

Efforts toward equitable service delivery should begin with planning for how to address inequities before RFP drafting starts. Over time, services being delivered more equitably will mean higher quality service delivery, services better aligned with resident needs, and ultimately better outcomes for residents and communities. Governments can incorporate equity considerations into service planning by incorporating the steps below:



Step 1: Review program data to identify past disparities in service delivery and outcomes

Before your team begins RFP drafting, engage in a comprehensive evaluation period that looks at key data points from the past program or service delivery data to understand and gauge the program or service's effectiveness. We recommend that you look at four categories of program or service data:

First, if you are considering a program that directly serves individuals, families, or organizations (such as a small business support service) **evaluate who entered the program or who were referred into the program.** Consider:

- When the data are disaggregated, do disparities exist around who enrolled or entered the program (e.g., by race, income level, or neighborhood)?
- Was there bias in who was referred to the program? Does the referral or outreach process for the program need to be more closely examined?

- Did who started in the program or who received the service match the ideal target population that the program or service was designed to serve?

Second, **ask who completed the program as intended and who dropped out.** Consider:

- Were certain types of families, individuals, or organizations more likely to attend all program sessions, or successfully complete services?
- What does this information tell us about how the program might need to be redesigned? For example, you might find that families who live over 10 miles away from the program site were more likely to drop out. That finding could make you think about holding the program sessions in different locations.

Third, **ask whether participants received different types of services, quality of services, or different intensity or level of service.** Consider:

- Did some families, individuals, or organizations receive better or different services than others?
- Was the level of service delivery higher quality in certain neighborhoods or for certain groups? For example, you might find that construction contractors clean up after themselves better in higher-income neighborhoods or that the vendor who provides school bus transportation arrives on time more frequently at three of a city's six elementary schools.

Fourth, **what outcome data do you have that helps you understand the effectiveness of a service or program** for different groups of individuals, families, or organizations?

- Broadly, does the program or service create the intended impact it was designed to create for those who participate? If not, what is your hypothesis for why it isn't so effective?
- Are certain individuals, families, or organizations who receive the same level or types of services more likely to see improved outcomes? What could be causing those disparities in outcomes?

Step 2: Conduct user research to identify service needs

Generally, we've found that governments tend to offer the same services year after year, without talking to users of those services or programs. This tendency to stick to the status quo can reinforce structural inequities. To gain greater insight and disrupt these patterns, government should learn from the experiences and needs of the people they intend to serve. While the table below shows a wide variety of stakeholders to consider engaging to understand inequities present before RFP writing, we encourage you to center the voices of those closest to or most affected by the issue. Consider whose voices have historically been excluded or underrepresented in service planning, design, or even program participation. Elevate those who might have unique needs or face barriers to service access and pay attention to the racial and geographic breakdown of the groups whose perspectives you are seeking.

When engaging clients, consider who is best positioned to identify participants with valuable lived experience, including perspectives on the program, service, or problem that the service aims to address. Partnering with local community-based organizations or service providers who have relationships with the target population may be a better approach to gathering feedback than direct outreach from government staff who lack those relationships.

The table below provides example questions to explore with relevant stakeholders:

Stakeholders	Sample Questions
Clients (especially past or current program recipients)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What benefit do you feel you gain from the program/service? • What did you like or dislike about the program/service? • If you had a magic wand, what would you change about program/service? • What barriers did you face that kept you from participating in all aspects of the program/service?
Frontline staff and supervisors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What common complaints do you hear from program clients? • Are program clients having trouble accessing services? • Are program clients dropping out of services? What do you think is the cause? • Are those who receive services our ideal target population?
Department administrators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What has the data shown you about program effectiveness? • What has the data shown you about who benefits from the program? Is this different from the population you had planned to serve?
Subject matter experts and professional associations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which organizations advocate for or already serve our target populations? • What competencies are needed to serve our target population? • What innovations in the field have you seen? Are there new best practices or services we should be aware of?
Peer communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you recently changed the array of services you offer? What prompted that change? • How have you used qualitative data to understand program clients' satisfaction with services? • How do you assess whether you have been successful at meeting program clients' needs? • What sub-population needs additional supports to access program/service?

Step 3: Collaborate with external stakeholders

When planning to write an equity-focused RFP, consider opportunities to foster better collaboration across the vendor community and with government during the procurement process. Collaboration can include a range of activities, from inviting coalitions of organizations to bid as joint ventures on an RFP to emphasizing more collaborative approaches to contract management or data sharing. For example, multiple vendors could be jointly consulted about what key performance metrics are most meaningful to the community you intend to serve and should be stated in the RFP document. By bringing smaller community-based organizations and larger vendors together to discuss metrics ahead of RFP writing, you might arrive at a more feasible, equity-oriented list of data that should be tracked for the program or service and should be shared across providers of services.

Other creative approaches we've seen:

- Conduct site visits to observe the service setting and any tangible barriers that might be impacting quality
- Observe service delivery to understand service recipient experience from start to finish
- Develop a journey map to understand service delivery from the service recipient's perspective and identify any pain points or opportunities for improvement
- Create opportunities for individuals to give feedback during service delivery
- Conduct research with other governments who have made progress on reducing disparities
- Break up service contracts into smaller pieces to award them to more grassroots organizations who may be able to better reach groups receiving fewer or lower quality services

Conclusion

Once you establish your service array and connect with stakeholders, you are ready to draft your RFP. For more guidance on this process, see the second part in this series, [Designing Equity-Centered RFPs](#).

The **Procurement Excellence Network** is an initiative of the Government Performance Lab designed to help public sector leaders use government procurement as a tool to improve resident outcomes and advance equity. The **Government Performance Lab**, housed at the Taubman Center for State and Local Government at the Harvard Kennedy School, conducts research on how governments can improve the results they achieve for their citizens. An important part of this research model involves providing hands-on technical assistance to state and local governments. Through this involvement, we gain insights into the barriers that governments face and the solutions that can overcome these barriers. By engaging current students and recent graduates in this effort, we are able to provide experiential learning as well.

The Government Performance Lab is grateful for support from Bloomberg Philanthropies.

What Works Cities Certification provides cities at all points in their data journey with a standard of excellence that shows how investing in data and evidence practices can lead to better and more equitable results for residents. This guide includes strategies in alignment with the following What Works Cities Certification criteria:

- Results-Driven Contracting (RDC) 5: Using Data to Manage Contracts and Improve Outcomes and Performance
- Results-Driven Contracting (RDC) 8: Supporting Vendor Participation and Competition

Learn more about how to get your city Certified.

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