



Fostering Equitable Contract Outcomes

Part 2: Designing Equity-Centered RFPs

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Introduction: Why Designing Equity-Centered RFPs Matters

Rather than simply a method to request proposals from vendors to perform a service, the RFP can be a major tool in your toolkit to address inequities.

Begin by acknowledging that disparities exist – across all programs and services, some residents are likely disproportionately benefitting or not benefitting from contracted services and programs, regardless of what vendor has historically delivered those services. Disparities may exist in the provision and distribution of government services across neighborhoods, regions, or populations. The RFP can be an opportunity to correct these disparities by enabling you to:

1. Focus the vendor community on your goals for closing disparities in access or outcomes,
2. Articulate where you hope vendors will bring innovative approaches to addressing disparities,
3. Specify which residents or geographic areas should be prioritized for service delivery (which can move vendors or providers away from targeting those individuals or neighborhoods that they perceive as easier to serve, rather than those who could most benefit).

Take for example the case of Boulder, Colorado. The city set out to address disparities in internet access for residents by building 65 miles of new fiber optic infrastructure. The city immediately centered equity in their goals statement: “Disparities in infrastructure access perpetuate disparities

in online opportunities for lower-income residents. For all Boulder residents to share in the benefits of internet access and the prosperity of the digital economy, all must have equal access to the fiber optic infrastructure that underpins them.”

The solicitation was also designed with specific, equity-focused goals so that no neighborhood would be disproportionately affected by construction, such as a requirement to sequence the work so that the number of days of continuous construction in individual communities was roughly comparable. The winning proposal saved the city \$8 million and utilized 13 small, minority, or women-owned businesses as subcontractors. To learn more about our work in Boulder, read the GPL’s [project feature](#).

This second part of our three-part series on delivering contracted services equitably focuses on designing equity-centered RFPs.

Incorporating Equity in Every Component of Your RFP

Designing equity-centered RFPs involves translating your ideas from the planning and stakeholder engagement phases into action, as well as communicating your government’s values to prospective proposers and the larger community. In general, we’ve seen successful RFPs contain the following key components:



Need Support?

If you seek more support in RFP writing, the GPL has guidance, prompts, and suggestions in our [Guidebook: Crafting a Results-Driven Request for Proposals](#).

Typically, program and procurement staff do not incorporate equity considerations holistically into planning, drafting, and advertising an RFP. More often, governments limit mentions of equity to an introduction section or a line or two in a Scope of Work. By integrating equity-related concepts throughout the RFP, you can better prompt vendors to plan more thoroughly for how they will address inequities. An equity-centered RFP may also result in a more capable vendor being hired, especially if evaluation criteria assess proposers on their focus on and experience with delivering services equitably.

RFP Section: Problem Statement

Opportunities to Advance Equity

- Clearly explain the gap between the current state of the problem and desired future state, including the history and magnitude of the problem.
- Identify who is being impacted by this problem and to what extent.
- Identify key variables and share disaggregated data when possible and where relevant.
- Be neutral about potential solutions. Do not bake anticipated solutions into the issue description.
- Sufficiently scope the issue by providing a manageable, clear, and relevant amount of context.

Illustrative Example

Food insecurity is growing in Statelandia, especially among low-income residents. Between 2019 and 2021, roughly 40 percent of all low-income Statelandia residents were considered food insecure, compared to 35 percent between 2016 and 2018. Black and Filipino American youth between ages 8–18 made up the disproportionate majority of those impacted: Black and Filipino American youth accounted for 50 and 20 percent of all low-income food insecure youth in Statelandia in 2021, respectively.

RFP Section: Outcome Goals

Opportunities to Advance Equity

- Describe what you hope to achieve, as opposed to how it will be achieved. Allow vendors to propose their plan in their responses.
- Define the ideal state (Acknowledging that this program may be one step in that direction, as opposed to solving the entire problem defined earlier.)
- Be specific and set a benchmark for program effectiveness and resident outcomes.
- Quantify and appropriately scope them when possible.
- Connect how specific contracts advance strategic priorities and align on collective goals related to racial and social equity.

Illustrative Example

By 2025, decrease by 15 percent the number of Black and Filipino American youth ages 8-18 years experiencing food insecurity in Statelandia.

RFP Section: Target Population

Opportunities to Advance Equity

- Leverage data to get specific. Aggregated data can mask disparities, while specificity helps determine whether services are received by the most historically underserved or difficult to reach populations.
- Consider coverage: If certain residents are less “covered” by related services, try focusing on targeted inclusion.
- Mitigate barriers to access: If your target population could face challenges learning about or receiving services, ask how service providers will overcome access needs related to language, time-of-day, childcare, transportation, and compensation.

Illustrative Example

The target population to be served by this program is young people between the ages of 10–18 years old living within the following 10 zip codes with the lowest 3rd-grade reading scores.

Tutoring contract outcome disparities exist among students from low-income (<45% Area Median Income (AMI)) households, immigrant families, and Black and Hispanic communities.

RFP Section: Scope of Work

Opportunities to Advance Equity

- Reiterate goals with a focus on “what” you want to achieve, outlining essential activities and streams of work.
- Limit program requirements to those that are necessary, are required by law, or are strongly aligned with your safety, regulatory, or policy priorities.
- Encourage vendors to achieve results by aligning pay incentives or pay timing with outcomes.

Illustrative Example

The vendor is responsible for providing services in 5 high-need census tracts as provided in the map below.

Proposer shall describe in their proposal how their proposed project plan will achieve the outcome goals listed and will engage residents in the 5 census tract areas described above.

RFP Section: Metrics

Opportunities to Advance Equity

- Define metrics to track and measure contract performance in collaboration with service providers (vendors) or community-based organizations (CBOs).
- Disaggregate data by racial/ethnic groups and/or neighborhoods/location.
- Identify a mix of output (e.g., number of residents served in specific zip codes) and outcome (e.g., increase sense of belonging, increased economic stability) metrics.
- Place performance metrics within a logic model, noting desired outcomes to determine inputs and outputs to track progress towards desired results.
- Determine which metrics the vendor/provider will be held accountable for and how they link to the program's outcome goals.

Illustrative Example

- *Output metric: Number of youth served by program (disaggregated by age, race, neighborhood)*
- *Outcome metric: Increased food security as reported via survey (3 months after participation in program/service)*
- *Outcome metric: Reliance on food access programs 6 months after participation in program/service*

RFP Section: Contract Management

Opportunities to Advance Equity

- Set up a governance structure with appropriate requirements for oversight and collaboration (e.g., reporting, meeting cadence, and data collection).
- Devise a clear process to collect and analyze prioritized quantitative and qualitative data from service providers (e.g., disaggregated data by race/ethnicity, neighborhood, gender).
- Identify data tracking responsibility among government and services providers (e.g., note within the RFP when and how you will be relying on the service provider to provide data).
- Consider using metrics that are based on existing or administrative data, as these may be a lower burden for the vendor to provide, can be more complete, and may reduce the risk of false reporting.

Illustrative Example

Contract management structure will include monthly meetings between the government's core team and the service provider in which the five key dashboard metrics shared above will be discussed. Ahead of these meetings, the service provider is responsible for collecting and analyzing data for the five key dashboard metrics and disaggregating the data by race/ethnicity, gender, and zip code of program participant.

Twice annually, the government and the service provider will hold a deep dive session to explore additional data points and findings of interest, or to discuss qualitative data findings from surveys of program participants.

RFP Section: Evaluation & Selection

Opportunities to Advance Equity

- Select customized scoring criteria that connect to your outcome goals, metrics, and scope of work.
- Align proposal questions to scoring criteria and prioritize clear, compelling plans to address inequities in service delivery and knowledge of existing challenges.
- Remove vendors' barriers to submitting a proposal by simplifying the process as much as possible (streamlining required extra steps, attachments, and additional forms).
- Develop an evaluation process plan that is transparent, involves a diverse evaluation team (across background and subject area expertise) and has a clear, collaborative structure.

Illustrative Example

One evaluation criterion might be: "strengths and qualifications of the team" (25 points):

- *Demonstrated prior experience engaging with the target population*
- *Clear knowledge of the target population's specific needs and barriers faced*
- *Demonstrated understanding of other local services and programs currently being provided to the target population*

Conduct Outreach with Service Providers with Deep Community Relationships

Once you've released your RFP, be sure to invest in robust advertising to a wide range of community-based organizations (CBOs) who may have deeper ties to the communities they serve or may better reflect the racial identity or background of program clients. Consider hosting information sessions about the RFP or grant opportunity in community-based locations such as libraries, community centers, and other neighborhood-based locations. You should strive to accommodate various access needs of prospective vendors, including language, time of day, and childcare needs. This outreach is easier if you partner with trusted messengers in the community you are looking to serve, such as intermediary organizations, community organizers, or associations.

For many of these CBOs, capacity to respond to RFPs is also a challenge. Your government may want to invest in capacity building for selected categories of organizations to address disparities in their ability to respond appropriately and competitively to RFP opportunities. This capacity building could look like bringing in a trusted third party – such as an organization that serves the non-profit community – to offer technical support and coaching during the grantmaking or RFP process.

Governments can also look critically at their own RFPs, requirements, and processes. Are there steps that only incumbent vendors feel comfortable navigating? Are documents hard to navigate or understand? Is every required form, notarization requirement, and affidavit truly necessary? Simplification across the board can make CBOs with deeper ties to the communities they serve better able to respond.

Conclusion

Integrating equity into every component of your RFP requires extra time and planning, but it can make a significant difference for the residents whose lives are impacted by the services your government procures. Your government's expectations and goals around equity are clearer to vendors, which pushes all vendors to step up their equity efforts and may encourage more small, local, and minority-owned firms or organizations to compete for contracts. Not only does this lead to greater opportunities for these historically underrepresented providers, but also to better results for residents as vendors with closer ties to the community deliver services to target populations with shared lived experience. Once you've released your RFP and selected a service provider, it's time to work closely together to incorporate equity into the way services are delivered. For more guidance on managing your contract to close service delivery gaps, see the third part in our series, [Managing Contracts with Equity in Mind](#).

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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