

June 2020 Board message on Racial Equity

To Wisconsin Planners, and the communities you serve:

A Call to Action

Recent events in American cities following the death of George Floyd appear to mark a new chapter in the pursuit of equity for people of color in our country. The protests in our cities are about much more than racism and excessive force in law enforcement. They are about the radically different life experience so many people of color live in this country and the fundamental unfairness of the stark racial disparities. We see persistent racial differences in educational achievement, incarceration rates, life expectancy, housing conditions, childhood trauma, COVID-19 infections, and more. Each of these measures correlates closely to differences in household income and wealth. Wisconsin stands out as one of the worst states in the nation on Black-White economic disparities. As documented in a report on [Race in the Midwest](#) by Colin Gordon of the University of Iowa, Wisconsin had in 2017 the third-worst median household income gap in the country (\$29,000 vs \$62,000), the second-greatest gap in poverty rates (29% vs 9%), and the worst disparity in unemployment rates (8.7% vs 3.0%).

Though we may be reluctant to talk about it, racism in planning and development practices has played a prominent role in the household wealth disparities that underpin many of the racial differences in our state and nation. As many American families were moving to the suburbs and building wealth in growing communities, Black families were too often caught in urban neighborhoods with poor job prospects and declining home values due to racist hiring and lending practices, exclusionary private covenants in new neighborhoods, and new highways or “urban renewal” projects that destroyed the fabric of urban neighborhoods. Exclusionary zoning ordinances were used in suburban communities to give preference to affluence, requiring large lots and relegating more affordable housing to the least desirable locations, often closer to sources of noise and pollution and further from jobs and schools. Publicly-subsidized housing was directed to those areas with the lowest household incomes, serving to further concentrate poverty. And because of the racial wealth gap, this concentration of poverty has reinforced racial segregation.

Our profession and the tools of our trade have contributed to today’s racial inequities. We must change our ‘business as usual’ planning and zoning practices. We must review every policy decision and proposed action through the lens of race, to consider whether our work is extending or correcting institutional racism. We can make positive changes in our communities, our state, and our nation, but we must be willing to recognize our own internal biases and we must be willing to be uncomfortable.

We *have* made some progress over recent decades, but not nearly enough. We can actively encourage young people of color to get involved in local government and urban planning, and we can actively seek out and hire people of color into the planning profession. We can actively

facilitate the development of neighborhoods that integrate a variety of housing types, sizes and price points. We can actively seek out and empower communities of color when making plans and setting policy. We can use our professional roles to actively share information, ideas, and encouragement in the pursuit of equity with local officials who have the power to set policies and budgets in our communities.

The key word is ACTION. We believe that planners can and should be more than passive facilitators of the majority viewpoint. We believe that planners must play an active role to empower people of color and reduce economic and racial segregation within and between our communities. With encouragement from our members, the APA-WI board has adopted an Equity and Diversity Action Plan and created an Equity and Diversity Committee to begin implementing that plan. Learn about each on [our website](#).

Please review our Action Plan and please join us in the active pursuit of equity within our communities.

The APA-WI Board of Directors

The APA-WI Equity and Diversity Committee