

EQUITY MATTERS:

Why Attacks on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) are a Threat to Multiracial Democracy

TOOLKIT

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OVERVIEW AND HOW THE DISCUSSION WAS FRAMED

The federal government has **attacked** Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) initiatives, policies, and programming since the first day of the second Trump Administration. The attacks, operationalized largely through **Executive Orders** (EOs), are advertised as a way to return America to a society driven by meritocracy and equality. However, the EOs and institutional changes orchestrated since January 2025 will deepen historical inequities that still plague historically underrepresented and marginalized communities in the United States.

While the multi-pronged assault on the gains may appear to be overwhelming because of its reach, identifying where constituents/institutions and their resistance will be crucial for developing plans for collective action across sectors.

However, individuals, corporations, schools, and state officials have responded to this cross-sector assault with equally expansive resistance. State officials in Minnesota and New York told the Trump Administration that they will **not** comply with demands from the Department of Education to gather signatures from local school systems certifying that they're no longer implementing DEI policies. And at least five of the nine universities originally offered priority access for adhering to the **Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education** that pushes a conservative agenda at the university level have rejected the administration's efforts to control their curricula.

Large companies have also pushed back against the administration. **Ben & Jerry's**, E.I.f, Goldman Sachs, Francesca's, Patagonia, Pinterest, and **JPMorgan Chase & Co.** have thus far publicly defended their DEI policies.

These actions are essential, but they are not enough. Effectively countering the administration's anti-DEIA policies, EOs, and threats means understanding not just the current political moment, but the history of civil rights in this country; the most effective ways that local policymakers and advocates can protect those most harmed by these attacks; and the need for clarity and moral courage at a time of profound instability and fear. *Equity Matters: Why Attacks on DEIA are a Threat to Multiracial Democracy*, which CLASP held on September 18, 2025, served as a moral intervention that grounded participants in consciousness, courage, and accountability. Across the interactive dialogue, five leading advocates, scholars, and movement builders traced a clear line from the nation's unfinished civil rights project to the escalating backlash against diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) today. Their collective message was that these attacks are not isolated cultural disputes but deliberate attempts to weaken multiracial democracy itself.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM THE DISCUSSION

MOST IMPACTFUL AND URGENT INSIGHTS

- **A Historical Pattern of Backlash:** Speakers linked current anti-DEIA efforts to America's recurring cycle of progress and retrenchment. Dr. Deadric Williams described this moment as "an extension of systems that have existed for generations," while Skye Perryman traced modern legal assaults on DEIA to decades of right-wing organizing that weaponized civil rights law. Dr. Khalilah Harris cautioned that restoration alone is insufficient: "We cannot fight to get back to where we were, because that was not justice either."
- **Language and Law as Tools of Retrenchment:** Panelists warned that equity language and legal frameworks are being distorted to undermine inclusion. Perryman observed that "defining fairness as discrimination" has become a core tactic, while Clarissa Martínez de Castro noted that diversity itself is being turned into a wedge issue. Dr. Williams added that colorblind rhetoric "preserves inequality under the guise of neutrality." Together, they highlighted how semantics and law are being weaponized to roll back equity gains.
- **Fear, Division, and Economic Anxiety:** The discussion revealed how fear and scarcity are strategically deployed to erode solidarity. Martínez de Castro explained how "economic anxiety is weaponized to pit communities against one another," and Dr. Harris described cuts to social programs as "divide-and-conquer tactics." Sim Singh Attariwala countered with a vision of unity: "Coalition is our antidote: when we come together, abundance replaces scarcity."
- **The Moral Imperative of Equity and Justice:** Speakers reframed DEIA as a moral covenant, not an administrative program. Singh Attariwala called DEIA "deeply spiritual and moral," while Dr. Harris reminded that "every retreat from justice is a moral failure." Perryman underscored that courage in leadership "is not optional; it's the cost of preserving democracy." Across perspectives, they affirmed that equity is not politics: it is principle.
- **Truth-Telling and Transformation:** A shared conviction ran throughout the conversation that the defense of DEIA must rest on truth and imagination. Dr. Williams warned that truth-tellers are being silenced but insisted "the truth remains." Perryman urged using law and storytelling to "break through disinformation with truth," while Dr. Harris and Martínez de Castro called for systems built around what communities "should have had from the beginning." The speakers agreed: the goal is not restoration but transformation: to rebuild democracy on a foundation of belonging, justice, and shared power.

SPEAKER SPOTLIGHTS

SKYE PERRYMAN, PRESIDENT AND CEO, DEMOCRACY FORWARD

- “We believe at Democracy Forward that attacks on civil rights, diversity, equity, and inclusion are attacks on democracy itself, and that there is no way to separate a true democracy from advocacy for and champion of these values and principles.”
- “What we are doing, and what we believe and have seen is effective, is to swiftly bring legal challenges where we can in order to push back. On the attempts to misuse the law and to roll back, [we must] ground our advocacy in the experiences of real people and the communities that are being affected, understanding that sometimes those experiences and stories can cut through what is otherwise a pretty saturated and polarized kind of media environment.”
- “At times, we’ve also had setbacks, but what we have seen in our work is that many of the actors that are seeking to undermine civil rights, diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility... they’re actually betting that people aren’t going to push back. Our job is to make sure they are wrong about that.”

DR. KHALILAH HARRIS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, PUBLIC JUSTICE CENTER

- “What I hear too much of are people who are scrubbing their websites, scrubbing internal materials to remove concepts of equity and fairness from their practice, and that chilling effect can communicate to members of the team who do not have a racial-equity analysis that it’s not important anymore.”
- “We really need to think about ways that we have allowed our judgment to supersede that of people who are directly impacted... or using people to show our funders that we are connected but not actually digging into the types of policies that they want to see.”
- “Reparations are not only about money. They’re about repairing systems: access to land, to opportunity, to dignity.”

CLARISSA MARTÍNEZ DE CASTRO, VICE PRESIDENT, LATINO VOTE INITIATIVE, UNIDOS-US

- “The administration is testing and pushing the limits of its ability to engage in these actions. It is no surprise that it has started with the most vulnerable ... But this is not just about persecuting immigrants. It’s about testing how far those tactics can be applied well beyond...Persecution today is a dress rehearsal for broader suppression.”
- “The dominant driver [for some voters] was economic anxiety ... that is exactly how you

undermine the generally held belief that diversity makes us stronger—by stoking fear and anxiety. Economic anxiety is the first step.”

- “We need an all-of-community response. ... My shorthand is, be a PRO — Prepare, Respond, and Organize. Prepare by knowing your rights ... Respond by connecting to rapid response networks ... Organize by telling our stories and demanding accountability.”

DR. DEADRIC T. WILLIAMS, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR AND DIRECTOR OF THE CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF BLACK FAMILIES AND CHILDREN

- “If we understand that racial categories are an invention to justify pre-existing inequities, then our understanding of racial inequality can help us ... to understand why it exists and why it persists.”
- “When we talk about DEIA, the critiques or anti-DEIA, propaganda and disinformation, it is a... it's an extension of stuff that has happened long before many of us were born. So, this is just a new iteration of the same thing...The kind of preservation of whiteness is inextricably linked to anti-Blackness, anti-immigration, anti-LGBTQ+, etc. So, we have to look at these attacks in historical context.”
- “There's... there's a tendency for, people to think of inequality as categories, and not inequality as processes.”

SIM SINGH ATTARIWALA, DIRECTOR, ANTI-HATE PROGRAM, ASIAN AMERICANS ADVANCING JUSTICE

- “DEI is about fairness and dignity... it's not about partisan ideals... They're about ensuring that everyone has a fair chance to succeed and be valued. And that is foundational to... democracy...The attacks on diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion, are deflecting blame... And the irony is that... initiatives lawfully exist precisely because our institutions have failed to deliver fair opportunities for all Americans.”
- “It is all being driven by fear... there's economic uncertainty that seems to be driving this... this argument over scarcity... But when we all unify... There's no scarcity there for us, there's abundance for all of us here.”
- “We need to make sure that there's pre-bunking strategies... making sure that our community is aware that the model minority myth is being used as a Trojan horse... it's designed to tear us apart from within.”

CROSS SECTOR IMPACTS

K-12 Education and Colleges/Universities

- Maintain legally sound access strategies: geography/rural targeting, first-generation scholarships, scholarships for students with low incomes, test-optional and job-related criteria; monitor disparate impact in admissions and aid.
- Require data disaggregation and climate reporting; publish student support usage (i.e., tutoring, counseling, disability services).
- One-sentence summation: "We can comply with the law and still ensure every student has a fair shot. We're using outcomes-focused tools that improve learning and persistence."

Labor/Workforce and Employers

- Keep inclusive recruitment (i.e., targeted outreach to underserved regions, community-based pipelines), job-related selection, routine disparate-impact audits, and barrier-removal supports (i.e., child care, transit).
- One-sentence summation: "We hire for merit using validated, job-related criteria; and we widen the funnel so talent from every community can compete."

Health and Human Services

- Safeguard language access, disability accommodations, and culturally responsive care; link mental health and family support to all care settings; protect navigators.
- Use race/ethnicity/sexual orientation and gender identity data to close gaps; "no health equity without data equity."
- One-sentence summation: "Our priority is safe, effective care for every patient; these steps improve outcomes and reduce costs."

Immigration and Multilingual Families

- Update language-access plans; contract with immigrant-serving community-based organizations; conduct listening sessions to document harms and fix access barriers.
- One-sentence summation: "Language should never be a barrier to public services; we're meeting people where they are."

LGBTQ+ and Disability Inclusion and Justice

- Reaffirm anti-harassment protections, privacy, and continuity of care/services; protect reasonable accommodations in public settings.
- One-sentence summation: "Everyone deserves safety and dignity in public life; our policies reflect that."

Maternal and Reproductive Health

- Protect Medicaid coverage, perinatal mental health supports, and culturally responsive models of care.
- One-sentence summation: "Attacks on DEIA correlate with worse maternal health outcomes for Black women."

PRACTICAL ADVOCACY AND POLICY TOOLS

While gestures like sending a **letter** to Marco Rubio voicing concerns about the federal government's DEI purge by a limited number of House Democrats show solidarity, we need to take more action-oriented steps as well. Here are two examples from Illinois:

- In Chicago, Mayor Brandon Johnson signed an executive order **prohibiting** any city department from partnering with ICE or the National Guard in immigration enforcement.
- Illinois's Attorney General and Governor J.B. Pritzker filed **lawsuits** against DHS and ICE for unconstitutional interference in local governance.

For academics, advocates, journalists, and researchers, it remains necessary to partner with others in your field to pursue and investigate issues in a moral, ethical, and equitable way. This can include:

- Continuing to form coalitions with other advocates and organizations like the one formed after the "Demand Diversity" **roundtable** hosted by the National Urban League. Over 20 organizations met to partner in the fight against Trump's attacks on DEI.
- Convenings like *Equity Matters* to share information and strategize how to best coordinate efforts, and breakdown silos.
- Documenting the harm caused by anti-DEI EOs and policy rollbacks.
- If you're in a nonprofit, organize within a union to take a collective stance on DEI within the employer's organization.
- Coordinate advocacy efforts to push Congress to vote against anti-DEI bills and to fight against holding federal funds hostage for political gain.

MESSAGING AND ADAPTATION STRATEGIES

The core narrative lays out what's happening, what's at stake, and your response. For example:

1. **What's happening:** Attacks on DEIA are coordinated, fast-moving, and designed to narrow opportunity, silence communities, and weaken multiracial democracy.
2. **What's at stake:** Public institutions' ability to comply with civil rights law, deliver effective services, and keep their promises to every community.
3. **Your response:** A cross-sector, law-grounded strategy that (1) clarifies what's changing vs. what still stands, (2) documents harms and chilling effects, (3) mitigates risk and keeps people safe now, and (4) builds durable, community-led systems for the long term.

Sample scripts for briefings, testimony, and/or media appearances

- **Opening (60 seconds):** "We're seeing a coordinated campaign to roll back DEIA, mischaracterizing compliance tools as ideology. The result is confusion, program cuts, and chilled access for the people who most need services. Civil-rights protections still stand, and we have lawful, outcomes-focused options to keep serving everyone fairly."

Here's what changed, what didn't, and how we'll protect people now while building stronger systems."

- **If asked, "Isn't DEIA illegal now?"** "No. While some race-explicit approaches are constrained, core civil-rights duties remain. Agencies can still prevent discrimination, ensure language access and disability accommodations, use validated, job-related criteria, and target services by income, geography, or first-generation status. That's compliance and good governance."
- **If asked, "Why prioritize data?"** "Because what gets measured gets managed. Disaggregated data show where outcomes diverge so we can fix problems. In health, there's literally no path to equity without data equity."

Other possible talking points include:

1. **DEIA = Good governance and civil rights compliance**
 - DEIA practices (language access, reasonable accommodation, barrier removal, disaggregated data, participatory engagement) are how agencies meet Title VI/IX, ADA/504, EEOC standards, and deliver results.
 - Even amid rollbacks, civil rights protections endure; institutions must still prevent discrimination and disparate impact.
2. **The anti-DEIA strategy is coordinated, and ours must be as well**
 - Attacks are occurring across government layers and sectors; align legal, policy, administrative, communications, and organizing responses across education, health, workforce, immigration, and justice systems.
3. **Protect people now while building for later**
 - Use lawful, outcomes-focused approaches (place-based, income-based, first-gen, rural, or underserved-region targeting) that sustain access where race-explicit levers are restricted.
 - Maintain essential inclusive practices (language access, disability accommodations, data disaggregation) to prevent service gaps.
4. **Let data and lived experience drive action**
5. **Disaggregate outcomes** and publish what's working; pair numbers with stories to counter misinformation and document harm.
6. **Multiracial democracy needs inclusive, equity, and just institutions**
 - DEIA advances effective government, trust, and participation—especially for communities targeted by rollbacks (Black, Indigenous, Latino, immigrant/multilingual, LGBTQ+, and disabled communities).

RESOURCES

GUIDANCE FOR LEGAL BATTLES

Public officials, advocates, lawyers, and judges in favor of DEI have fired back against some of the federal government's actions in the courts. This [list of lawsuits](#) related to the Trump Administration's actions is updated in real-time and may help guide the attacks to come. The ACLU also released a [memo](#) providing guidance for legal, legislative, and advocacy efforts.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Everyday Acts of Resistance](#), from VOX
- [Onyx Blackout Report](#)
- [Despite Attacks, Civil Rights Protections Endure](#), a report from Democracy Forward

ACTION STEPS

In the words of Clarissa Martínez de Castro, be a PRO: Prepare. Respond. Organize.

- **Prepare:** Know your rights and understand what laws and protections remain.
- **Respond:** Document harm, push back legally and publicly against misinformation, and support organizations on the front lines.
- **Organize:** Tell the truth, amplify stories, and build durable coalitions across race, faith, and sector lines.

STRATEGY BY LEVEL AND TIMELINE

Use this grid to fill in your plan:

Translate → **Document Harm** → **Hold the Line & Build Power** → **Vision Forward** → **Organizational Strengthening**

| LOCAL AND COMMUNITY LEVEL | | | | |
|--|---|--|---|---|
| Translate (0-90 days) | Document Harm (0-90 days) | Hold the Line & Build Power (3-12 months) | Vision Forward (12-36 months) | Organizational Strengthening (12-36 months) |
| Issue plain-language memos to mayors, school boards, superintendents, hospital systems, and employers re: what has changed and what still applies, as well as immediate, lawful alternatives | Establish a harm-reporting channel with CBOs | Adopt or update language access polices; fund interpretation and translation services; require plain-language notices and bilingual outreach | Institutionalize disaggregated data dashboards and public learning cycles | Create community-led advisory boards with design authority on matters including program design and procurement scoring, and resource them |
| | Collect stories and operational data, including | Extend memorandums of understanding | Tie improvements to budgets and | |

| | | | | |
|--|--|---|------------------|--|
| | program reductions, waitlists, and complaint volumes | across agencies to preserve inclusive outreach, job-related selection criteria, and supports that remove barriers (i.e. transportation) | management goals | |
| | Publish monthly summaries | Train frontline staff on evidence-based screening criteria, disparate-impact checks, and reasonable accommodations | | |

STATE LEVEL

| Translate (0-90 days) | Document Harm (0-90 days) | Hold the Line & Build Power (3-12 months) | Vision Forward (12-36 months) |
|--|--|--|--|
| Issue plain-language memos to mayors, school boards, superintendents, hospital systems, and employers re: what has changed and what still applies, as well as immediate, lawful alternatives | Establish a harm-reporting channel with CBOs | Pass or update statewide nondiscrimination and language access standards, data disaggregation requirements, and inclusive procurement/hiring rules | Modernize state civil-rights enforcement and require equity impact assessments for major bills and rules |

| FEDERAL LEVEL | | | |
|---|---|---|--|
| Translate (0-90 days) | Document Harm (0-90 days) | Hold the Line & Build Power (3-12 months) | Vision Forward (12-36 months) |
| Provide implementers with guides regarding what has changed and what remains the same | Share aggregated harm evidence with federal partners and litigation allies to inform oversight, rulemaking, and defensive litigation. | Support statutory/appropriations language that preserves inclusive grant criteria, data equity, and language access | Advance a whole-of-government equity framework that ties performance, budgeting, data, and community participation to measurable outcomes across agencies. |
| Spotlight how misinformation is causing over-compliance or unnecessary program cuts | | | |

CROSS-SECTOR APPROACHES OR “PLAYCARDS”

How to Use These Playcards

These playcards translate the *Equity Matters* virtual discussion into practical tools for leaders and practitioners. They are grounded in a clear premise: that despite escalating attacks on DEIA, core civil rights obligations remain in force and institutions retain both the authority and responsibility to ensure access, fairness, and dignity. The “Measurements that Matter” indicators and internal guardrails are designed to support lawful, outcomes-focused action and to help teams avoid over-compliance while identifying early signs of harm or exclusion.

These tools are intended as implementation guides rather than exhaustive scorecards. They help teams focus on what to watch, what to protect, and what to adjust in real time, pairing quantitative data with lived experience to maintain service quality, equity, and accountability across sectors.

Measurements that matter

- **Access:** Uptake by subgroup; interpreter requests filled; accommodation response times.
- **Fairness:** Disparate-impact tests of hiring/admissions/service decisions; error-rate reductions after policy changes.
- **Experience:** Climate surveys; harassment/denial complaints and resolution times.
- **Systems change:** Policies adopted, budgets aligned, data dashboards live, advisory boards with decision power, number of community-based organization contracts.

Internal guardrails for teams

- **Legal:** Keep counsel at the table; standardize review for new forms/criteria; document the “business necessity” and job relevance of selection tools.
- **Comms:** Lead with service quality and outcomes; avoid jargon; pair data with people’s stories; correct misinformation with plain facts and examples.
- **Operations:** Resource language access, accessibility, and data infrastructure as core functions (not pilots); track and publicly report progress.

RAPID-RESPONSE TOOLKIT

The rapid-response tools that follow are designed for when institutions and communities need clear, immediate guidance in moments of confusion, disruption, or intimidation. They reflect lessons from the *Equity Matters* discussion about the speed and coordination of anti-DEIA attacks and the risks of misinformation, fear, and unnecessary program rollbacks.

These materials are meant to be adapted quickly and used across legal, communications, and operational teams. Together they support fast alignment, consistent messaging, and early documentation of harm, helping organizations stabilize operations, reassure staff and communities, and preserve access while longer-term strategies are developed.

Myth-vs-Fact one-pagers (tailor by sector):

- *Myth:* “DEIA is illegal now.”
Fact: Core civil rights obligations remain; agencies can—and must—use lawful tools to ensure access and prevent discrimination. Provide examples for hiring/admissions/service delivery.

Proposal: 30-minute briefing deck for leaders:

- Slide 1: What changed and what didn’t.
- Slide 2: Immediate compliance-safe actions, i.e., language access, ADA accommodations, race-neutral but equity-advancing criteria.
- Slide 3: Messaging pillars and speaking notes above.
- Slide 4: Local/state/federal approaches/playcards.

Harm-tracking pipeline:

- Centralize reports of program cancellations, intimidation, or access barriers (hotline/form); code by sector, population, geography; synthesize quarterly for oversight, media, and litigation partners.

MAKE-IT-HAPPEN CHECKLIST

This checklist is designed for the first 90 days of response, when clarity, coordination, and visible action matter most. The checklist reflects recurring themes from the *Equity Matters* virtual discussion: clarify what has changed and what has not, protect access now, document harm as it occurs, and align legal, operational, and communications strategies.

Teams should use this checklist as a sequencing tool rather than a one-time task list. The intent is to establish durable practices that reduce fear, prevent over-compliance, and sustain equitable service delivery in a volatile policy environment.

First 90 days

- Publish what changed/What didn't FAQs by sector.
- Launch harm-reporting intake and monthly syntheses.
- Update language-access and accommodation protocols; train staff.
- Stand up an Equity Outcomes dashboard with two to three baseline metrics per program.
- Convene a cross-sector table (education, health and human services, labor and workforce, immigrant services) to coordinate narrative, legal, and policy moves.