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Issues around race and inequality are front and center as protests continue in response to police brutality of Black Americans. What are EDOs doing to promote inclusion and economic prosperity for all in their communities? This brief is part of a series featuring responses to today's crises from members of IEDC's Economic Development Research Partners (EDRP) program .

Equity and Inclusion Strategies

The United States is concurrently experiencing three crises: the health effects of a global pandemic; the economic crisis from COVID-19 that is hurting businesses and causing mass unemployment; and the systemic racism and inequality exposed after the killing of George Floyd. All three of which disproportionately affect and hurt Black Americans.

Over the past month, after the killing of George Floyd by police officers and protests occurring across the country, many businesses, organizations, and leaders have made statements calling for the end to racial inequality. While there is still much work to be done in terms of inclusion, equity, and diversity throughout the economic development profession and in our communities, several EDOS have been and continue to lead the way in practicing inclusive economic development.

Setting the intention. “It starts with intention,” says Lyneir Richardson, executive director of the **Rutgers University Center for Urban Entrepreneurship and Economic Development**. Be intentional about being inclusive in all of the work you do by making

inclusion part of your strategic plan, mission, and vision. EDOs can use an inclusive lens to evaluate and design policies and programs in order to ensure they are working towards creating economic prosperity for all.

In 2018, **New Orleans Business Alliance (NOLABA)** redefined its work and started focusing on creating equitable and inclusive opportunities for all New Orleanians. The Alliance updated its logo and added “Culture. Equity. Prosperity.” as the tagline. Despite being told by several site selectors that the word ‘Equity’ was a bad idea that could lead to a loss in investment, NOLABA decided that it was important to include, as it reflects who they wanted to be as an EDO and what kind of business they want to attract.

“We need to not just think about equity and inclusion as a programmatic body of work, but it really is something that has to be embedded into every aspect of how you're approaching the work, to truly be effective,” says Victoria Adams Phipps. With this intention can bring programs that specifically target disadvantaged groups, but it should also include how EDOs

measure impact. For example, measuring the amount of quality, living wage jobs rather than just the number of jobs created.

Invest Atlanta has put diversity and inclusion at the forefront of the organization. “We believe economic prosperity and competitiveness starts with equity for all Atlantans,” the organization announced in a statement to its board and to the public.

In 2019, Invest Atlanta announced its plans to develop the city’s first economic mobility strategy. “A rising tide lifts all boats’ isn’t working. Many are not rising with this tide,” says Alan Ferguson, senior vice president of community development at Invest Atlanta. Prior to COVID-19, even while the economy was doing well, poor, majority Black communities did not have equitable access to opportunities. Invest Atlanta’s strategy will focus on creating accessible, middle-wage jobs with opportunities for additional skill development and wage growth for the people of Atlanta.

Working with businesses. The **Tulsa Regional Chamber** has done several things to make inclusion a priority, and works with businesses in the region to make it a priority for them as well. In 2011, the chamber launched Mosaic, Tulsa’s diversity business council. Mosaic’s mission is to educate, lead and influence businesses on creating diverse and inclusive workforce cultures to enhance their competitive advantage. Staying competitive in the business world requires inclusive practices, and while many small businesses may not be able to afford a diversity and inclusion officer, “let me be that for you,” says Kuma Roberts, executive director of Mosaic.

“Engaging people in power and privilege to commit to diversity and inclusion efforts is

critical to success in diversity and inclusion work”. One way the chamber does this is through CEO roundtables. These discussions provide a place to have honest, uncomfortable conversations about the challenges of doing diversity work, and the worries about getting it wrong. To make CEO roundtables on diversity issues work, have them consistently, demonstrate your commitment to the issues, and keep challenging the CEOs you work with. “Once they feel empowered to talk about these things, to know it is commonplace...once the CEOs come to expect it, then it won't be so hard. They will then start pushing you to push them harder on these initiatives,” says Roberts. Diversity and inclusion initiatives have become entrenched into the fabric of the chamber. There are now leaders throughout the chamber who know diversity is important, and it doesn't just come from the diversity and inclusion director anymore.

Entrepreneurship. Mentorship, capital, and deals are often more difficult for Black entrepreneurs to access, yet are critical to successfully starting a new business. As such, creating programs to specifically work with African Americans, people of color, women and other minorities is very important in fostering diverse entrepreneurs. The national discussion on race, inclusion, and racism has “given us an opening to talk about Black entrepreneurship,” according to Lyneir Richardson, executive director at the **Center of Urban Entrepreneurship and Economic Development (CUEED) at Rutgers University.**

CUEED works specifically with Black and Latinx entrepreneurs through programs such as the Urban Retail Acceleration Program (URAP) and the Black and Latino Tech Initiative (BLT), which are both

designed to help diverse entrepreneurs succeed. URAP is for entrepreneurs who currently operate a retail or restaurant business in New Jersey and are interested in opening a new retail store or restaurant. BLT is a three-month pre-accelerator program to help Black and Latinx founders attract capital investment, build relationships, and create a pipeline of diverse technology entrepreneurs with venture capitalists.

For economic development organizations that want to focus on assisting black owned businesses, Richardson advises to “just do business” with them. For example, most EDOs at least use an attorney, an accountant, an IT firm, and perhaps an investment advisor. As an EDO, a good place to start in being more inclusive to Black entrepreneurs is to do business with them.

Workforce Development. The **New Orleans Business Alliance** has partnered with STRIVE International, a nationwide program that serves people in disadvantaged communities, by connecting job seekers to employment opportunities throughout New Orleans. The Alliance has replicated this program into four additional workforce hubs, called ‘Opportunity Centers’ that provide wraparound services such as case management, skills training, and other supportive services for job seekers. When creating workforce programs, be clear about who you are trying to impact, “painting a broad brush doesn’t work”, according to NOLABA’s Adams Phipps.

“We have too often, [at least in New Orleans] undercapitalized, underdeveloped, underleveraged the creativity and the talents of the largest group in our city, black people. A city that is majority black cannot

do well if this continues, how can it?” says Quentin L. Messer, Jr. Looking ahead, Messer says that creating economic mobility for Black Americans is critical to inclusive economic development. Job placement with good paying jobs that provide opportunities to move up is a critical part of creating pathways to wealth creation for Black Americans.

Neighborhood development and affordable housing. One of **Invest Atlanta’s** most popular programs is its Heritage Owner-Occupied Rehab Program. Alan Ferguson described it as an anti-displacement program that keeps long-time, low-income residents in their homes by helping them make needed repairs. Seniors, people with disabilities, and veterans are the priority of the program. Assisting in ownership, both residential and for local and native businesses, is another way Invest Atlanta does anti-displacement work through their neighborhood development.

Understanding where your region is. Sometimes, the first place to start is to understand where your region and businesses are on diversity and inclusion. Starting in 2015, **GreaterMSP** has maintained a regional indicators dashboard which tracks critical economic, environmental and social outcomes such as livability, the racial wage gap, and education, with inclusion metrics embedded throughout.

“The point of the dashboard was to move from an anecdotal perspective of how the economy was doing to a very objective, data-driven approach,” says Amanda Taylor, director of research at GreaterMSP. The dashboard has changed the way GreaterMSP and its partners think about

inclusion, competitiveness, and economic success.

The **Tulsa Regional Chamber** uses the Mosaic index, which is an assessment intended to measure what a business has in place and what is missing in diversity and inclusion efforts. The index asks questions about recruitment, communications, hiring, and community outreach. After a business takes the survey, Mosaic responds by showing them their strengths and their areas of growth. Businesses are encouraged to take this feedback and make changes over the next year. With this data, Mosaic then puts together a yearly inclusion report to illustrate what the Tulsa region is doing well and where there are areas of improvement.

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