

# Safe Horizon's Commitment to Racial Equity

**Safe Horizon serves New York City**, one of the most multicultural cities in the world. The majority of Safe Horizon's clients and staff are people of color<sup>1</sup>. In the United States, race, power, and privilege are structural forces that shape the way each of us moves through the world, in our daily lives and over time. As a result, most Safe Horizon clients and staff have experienced the harms of racism in many ways during their lives. Safe Horizon's staff and Board of Directors seek to create an organizational community grounded in equity, justice, and empowerment. Therefore, we are making an enduring commitment to this effort, and will work together to maintain an ongoing process of anti-racist<sup>2</sup> change and growth. The work is difficult, and progress may seem slow at times. Yet we see this effort as necessary to fulfill our mission and vision, and to build a more just society.

## Why we need to combat racism to fulfill our mission

Safe Horizon's mission is to **provide support, prevent violence** and **promote justice** for victims of crime and abuse, their families and communities. We envision a society free of family and community violence. In such a world, staff and clients could be their full selves, access what they need, build authentic relationships, and share both power and healing. Systemic racism<sup>3</sup> obstructs our efforts to fulfill this mission in many ways. Moreover, systemic racism interacts with other forms of bias and inequity, including but not limited to those based on class, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, immigration status, and faith. We will take an intersectional approach in our work.

Systemic racism obstructs Safe Horizon's efforts to **provide support** for victims of crime and abuse:

- It creates *barriers to safety for people of color*. For example, the presence of immigration authorities in the courthouse may make it unsafe for an undocumented domestic violence victim to seek an order of protection. A history of racial disparities within the child welfare system<sup>4</sup> may stop a young victim of sexual abuse from seeking help. And racially biased attitudes combined with lack of language access among service providers may leave some victims of labor trafficking without help.
- It complicates the *relationships between Safe Horizon employees and our clients*. Each time we engage with a survivor of violence, the racial and cultural experience of both the client and the staff member are present in the interaction, in ways that are both seen and unseen. When we ignore these dynamics, it limits our ability to engage clients in ways that are authentic and empowering.

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<sup>1</sup>See glossary.

<sup>2</sup>See glossary.

<sup>3</sup>See glossary.

<sup>4</sup>Numerous studies have shown that children of color are more likely to be reported to child protection than white children even when the same risk factors are present. And once reported, children of color are more likely to be removed from their parents' care, and remain in foster care longer. See this summary, for example: <http://www.aecf.org/resources/synthesis-of-research-on-disproportionality-in-child-welfare-an-update/>

Systemic racism obstructs Safe Horizon's efforts to **prevent violence**:

- It *causes violence*, in the form of hate crimes against people of color, immigrants, and people of Muslim and other marginalized faiths.
- It *makes people of color more vulnerable to violence*. National and local data shows that people of color experience violence at higher rates than white people.<sup>5</sup>
- It *prevents public agencies and communities of color* from building and sustaining the strong partnerships that are needed to prevent violence. For example, when policy makers hold the biased view that communities of color are culturally inclined towards violence, they enact policies that are punitive, failing to recognize the true root causes of violence. This includes mass incarceration, which is another vehicle of violence. Similarly, racially biased attitudes towards young Black and Latino men have created systems in which young men who are victims of crime rarely receive the trauma-focused care they need and deserve.<sup>6</sup>

Racism obstructs Safe Horizon's efforts to **promote justice for victims of crime and abuse**:

- *Persistent racial disparities in the criminal justice system<sup>7</sup> harm victims who are people of color, as well as their families and communities*. Survivors of color may experience biased responses from law enforcement, attorneys and court personnel. This can affect their ability to participate in the process; it can compromise their rights as victims; and it can increase the risk for further violence.
- Due to income disparities rooted in historical oppression, low-income *crime victims of color often don't have access to critical resources*—such as safe, affordable housing or quality legal representation—that would help them access safety and justice.

## Why we need to combat racism to support and empower our workforce

Safe Horizon's success depends on our ability to:

- build authentic relationships with our clients, among staff, and with our partners, and
- build and sustain a diverse, talented and empowered workforce at all levels

When staff are not able to bring their full selves to work, organizations lose vital resources. We believe organizations that create truly inclusive spaces are more productive, innovative, client-centered, and healthy.

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<sup>5</sup>Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), National Crime Victimization Survey, <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/sheets/cvsprshs.cfm> (accessed March 12, 2018).

<sup>6</sup>For example, see this report from the Vera Institute of Justice: <https://www.vera.org/publications/young-men-of-color-and-the-other-side-of-harm-addressing-disparities-in-our-responses-to-violence> (accessed May 4, 2018).

<sup>7</sup>Numerous studies have found that people of color are more likely to be arrested, charged with a crime, jailed while awaiting trial, found guilty, and receive sentences that are more severe compared to white people whose conduct is similar. See this summary, for example: [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/crime/2015/08/racial\\_disparities\\_in\\_the\\_criminal\\_justice\\_system\\_eight\\_charts\\_illustrating.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/crime/2015/08/racial_disparities_in_the_criminal_justice_system_eight_charts_illustrating.html)

Systemic racism affects our staff in diverse and profound ways.

- Staff of color often face daily challenges in their lives due to systemic racism—whether in the form of a racist comment on the street, an experience with housing discrimination, or racial tensions that arise in the workplace. Traumatic experiences with racism can affect staff members' well-being and increase their vulnerability to vicarious trauma, which is a part of our work at Safe Horizon. Moreover, staff of color often face additional barriers to their career advancement. For example, disparities in access to education and implicit biases among hiring managers and supervisors can play a role in impeding staff development and advancement.
- At the same time, white staff can be ill-equipped and resistant to recognize their own biases, behaviors, and privilege. As a result, they may not recognize or respond appropriately to the impact of systemic racism on the lives of both clients and colleagues.
- As Safe Horizon has worked to address racism directly in recent years, we have seen that this effort actually generates additional burdens and stressors for staff of color. For example, people of color in management roles have found that the anti-racism work has placed new demands and pressures on them.
- We believe it is essential for white employees – especially those in leadership roles -- to build their awareness of the role of white privilege and implicit bias in their personal and professional lives, and to build their capacity to be committed, reliable allies in the effort to dismantle racism.

## What we are doing to combat racism

In 2015, Safe Horizon's Board of Directors approved a five year strategic plan which includes anti-racism as a core component. Our efforts to fulfill this aspect of the strategic plan are overseen by an Anti-Racism Steering Committee, including racially diverse staff members representing many different departments and programs, and many different roles and levels in the organizational structure. We recognize that our strategy will evolve over time, as we learn together, and as our environment presents new challenges and opportunities.

The organization is currently addressing the issue of racism in the following ways:

- **We are working to promote diversity and racial equity<sup>8</sup> within Safe Horizon.** We are reviewing internal policies with a racial equity lens, to avoid policy decisions that could adversely impact people of color on staff. We are investing in staff development and training, with the goal of maximizing diversity, equity and inclusion at leadership levels. We are working to enhance promotional opportunities and pathways for staff of color at all levels. And we are reviewing our compensation practices for staff at all levels using a racial equity lens.
- **We strongly encourage any staff member who believes they have experienced any form of discrimination in the workplace to contact a member of our Human Resources team.** We will carefully assess the situation and intervene wherever needed to promote an environment in which all staff are treated fairly.

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<sup>8</sup>See glossary.

- **Job Applications.** We know that the education system has inequities. And for most jobs, previous relevant experience is often a predictor of success in a job function. In order to be more inclusive, we are revising job descriptions to show that we value experience and skills as well as educational background.
- **Interviews.** We routinely ask candidates for employment about their experience in and commitment to anti-racist work. And we use panels made up of staff with diverse roles and backgrounds to interview candidates for senior positions.
- **Background Checks.** We do require applicants and employees to complete a background check in order to work at Safe Horizon. And we realize that there are significant racial disparities in arrest and incarceration in communities of color. Recognizing this, we apply a racial equity lens throughout the process of reviewing results of background checks for all prospective employees.
- **We are working to promote healthy cross-racial dialogue throughout Safe Horizon.** Healthy cross-racial dialogue about issues of race enhances the productivity of working relationships, including supervisory relationships. It improves trust and cohesion -- an important buffer against vicarious trauma. And it enhances our ability to address clients' needs in a culturally relevant way. Healthy cross-racial dialogue depends on staff's ability to self-reflect, and to recognize and address both internalized and externalized racism. It's also important for staff to recognize their own power and privilege (i.e. as white people, or as managers), and use that power to help level the playing field by actively listening, inviting those with less power to important conversations, and/or raising issues of race and equity in spaces where people of color or junior staff may not have access. We are building this capacity by establishing a common language for discussing issues of race and racism, and by integrating anti-racist content into a wide range of training programs for staff. In addition, we are creating diverse, frequent opportunities for dialogue, through trainings, workshops, staff meetings, and affinity groups.
- **We are working to equip our staff with awareness and skills to recognize and acknowledge the impact of racism in clients' lives. Our goal is to build effective helping relationships that take race and culture into account.** The reality is that race is always in the room in our client work. Acknowledging this reality and building staff skills to address it will both improve our practice, and build trust between Safe Horizon and the communities it serves. We will do this by integrating anti-racist content into training programs related to our practice. And we will build the capacity of program supervisors to lead conversations on race, both in individual supervision and in group settings.
- **We seek to counteract systemic racism in society by becoming a voice for change.** As a victim service agency, Safe Horizon has a long history of working in partnership with police, prosecutors, child welfare and other social service professionals. We also work closely with city, state and federal agencies that set and implement policy related to crime and abuse, poverty, housing, and mental health. We value these partnerships, because they are essential to fulfilling our mission. These partnerships position Safe Horizon to advocate for policy changes, to secure resources that clients need, and to be there for individuals, families and communities when they are in crisis. At the same time, we recognize that systemic racism is embedded in all these systems, in ways that harm survivors and the communities we serve. At times, these partnerships

can complicate our efforts to deliver services that are client-centered and trauma-informed. Going forward, we will seek out opportunities to draw on our partnerships with these systems and organizations to promote greater awareness of systemic racism. And we will advocate for practice and policy changes that enhance racial equity. We will also use our external communications to shed light on the problem and its connection to our mission. And we will share our experiences with anti-racist organizational change in order to help other human service agencies undertake similar efforts.

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## Glossary

### Anti-Racism

Anti-racism includes beliefs, actions, movements, and policies adopted or developed to oppose racism. In general, anti-racism is intended to promote an egalitarian society in which people do not face discrimination on the basis of their race, however defined. ([www.definitions.net/definition/anti-racism](http://www.definitions.net/definition/anti-racism))

### Implicit Bias

Also known as implicit social cognition, implicit bias refers to the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. These biases, which encompass both favorable and unfavorable assessments, are activated involuntarily and without an individual's awareness or intentional control. Residing deep in the subconscious, these biases are different from known biases that individuals may choose to conceal for the purposes of social and/or political correctness. Rather, implicit biases are not accessible through introspection. ([Kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/research/understanding-implicit-bias](http://Kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/research/understanding-implicit-bias))

### People of Color

People of color is an inclusive term for peoples of African, Latinx, indigenous, Asian or Pacific Island descent—that is, for people who do not fall into the social/political construct of whiteness. This inclusive term is often used to emphasize the related experiences of systemic racism impacting people of many different cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

### Racial Equity

Racial Equity refers to what a genuinely non-racist society would look like. In a racially just society, the distribution of society's benefits and burdens would not be skewed by race or skin color. This is in contrast to the current state of affairs in which a person of color is more likely to live in poverty, be imprisoned, drop out of high school, be unemployed and experience poor health outcomes. Racial equity

holds society to a higher standard. It demands that we pay attention not just to individual-level discrimination, but to overall social outcomes. ([www.aspeninstitute.org](http://www.aspeninstitute.org))

### Racism

Refers to individual, cultural, institutional and systemic ways by which differential consequences are created, so that the group historically or currently defined as white is being advantaged, and groups historically or currently defined as non-white (African, Asian, Hispanic, Native American, etc.) are being disadvantaged. This idea aligns with those who define racism as prejudice plus power, a common phrase in the field. ([www.racialequitytools.org](http://www.racialequitytools.org))

### Structural Racism, also called Systemic Racism

A system in which public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, and other norms work in various, often reinforcing ways to perpetuate racial group inequity. It identifies dimensions of our history and culture that have allowed privileges associated with "whiteness" and disadvantages associated with "color" to endure and adapt over time. Structural racism is not something that a few people or institutions choose to practice. Instead it has been a feature of the social, economic and political systems in which we all exist. ([www.aspeninstitute.org](http://www.aspeninstitute.org))

### White Privilege

White privilege, or "historically accumulated white privilege,"... refers to whites' historical and contemporary advantages in access to quality education, decent jobs and livable wages, homeownership, retirement benefits, wealth and so on. ([www.aspeninstitute.org](http://www.aspeninstitute.org))