

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Introduction

**Engaging Foundational Black Households** was an 8-month evaluation and assessment project that began in the fall of 2020. The project was led by **Research in Action (RIA)** for **Twin Cities Habitat for Humanity (Habitat)**. The objective was to analyse how well Habitat’s homeownership and financial coaching programs have served foundational Black households (defined as U.S. descendants of enslaved African people).

## Equity in Action Process

Using its *Equity in Action* Process Model (Figure 1), RIA assisted Habitat in moving beyond the limits of high level quantitative data findings by conducting an in-depth qualitative evaluative data analysis. This helped Habitat understand how to operationalize its strategic plan by identifying what prohibits foundational Black households from achieving their goal of homeownership through Habitat’s financial coaching program.

The *Equity in Action* model relies on the development of reciprocal relationships that recenters community voices and convenes a table of diverse stakeholders. It serves as a

way to identify institutional harms, pain points, impacted partnerships, stakeholder goals and interests, in addition to developing a shared understanding of history and context.

The model is a six-step process that begins with assessing the project landscape and creating a community advisory and/or action committee (in this case, the Habitat Black Homeownership Advisory Committee - discussed below). The selection and appointment of an advisory committee is followed by co-development of mixed methods, tools, and approaches, which is then followed by data collection and shared meaning-making. The Engaging Foundational Black Households project utilized advisory and participant surveys, participant focus groups, and a community data walk. The next step in the process is to redefine the issues and co-produce winnable policy and practice solutions. The final step is to disseminate findings in a manner that supports authentic community engagement.

## Establishing the Habitat Black Homeownership Advisory Committee

- RIA collaborated with Habitat to create the selection criteria, goals, and expectations for committee members, as well as develop the language for outreach. Habitat conducted outreach by inviting a selection of current and past program participants to serve on the advisory committee, detailing the commitment, requirements, and benefits of serving.

**FIGURE 1: Equity in Action Process Model**



**Establishing the Habitat Black Homeownership Advisory Committee continued**

- Together, RIA and Habitat identified ten members to serve on the Habitat Black Homeownership Advisory Committee which was composed of a diverse cohort of five impacted foundational Black households that participated in Habitat’s programs (referred to as community advisory committee members) and five members from Habitat staff.

- The community advisory committee members were selected because of their varying perspectives and experiences from participating in Habitat programs. The community advisory committee members represented a variety of household sizes, incomes, and tenure. They also varied in level of program participation and pathways to homeownership, and each expressed a commitment to reducing racial disparities for Black families.

## DATA COLLECTION & THEMES

<p><b>Homeowner-ship Advisor Surveys</b></p>	<p>Allowed Habitat staff to reflect on their experiences with foundational Black clients. Advisors reported that large caseloads impact their responsiveness and expressed a desire for Habitat to hire more advisors and that all advisors should receive additional training on topics like financial literacy and financial trauma.</p>	<p><i>"[Offer] training[s] that [are] relevant to different population groups to understand challenges, as well as best practices, to ensure that respective group's success." - Black Homeownership Advisory Committee Member</i></p>
<p><b>Participant Surveys</b></p>	<p>Completed by Black program participants (nearly two-thirds of whom were single Black women who headed their households) revealed key themes such as a lack of communication and feelings of abandonment, inadequate support and guidance, inappropriate education and advising, deployment of improper resources, a lack of trust and security between coaches and participants, lack of understanding of who they are helping, institutional racism, and financial barriers to homeownership.</p>	<p><i>"My coach simply responding to me once... would have done wonders. But yet, and still, he has never once reached out or apologized for his actions. His supervisor has apologized..."</i> - Survey Participant</p>
<p><b>Participant Focus Groups</b></p>	<p>Attended by a majority of single Black mothers who headed their households, presented similar themes like barriers to the Habitat program (particularly the eligibility requirements, including but not limited to debt-to-income ratios, savings, etc.), ineffective communication and support, and a lack of understanding of the context and needs of Black program participants.</p>	<p><i>"I got as far as the [point] where they sent out [listings], and my financial coach, he emailed and asked if there was any other income you get. One of the questions was do you get child support, and I don't, per se. It's verbal, there's no contract, it's verbal between me and the other parent. Because I was not able to submit documentation saying that [I was bringing] that income into the household, the communication stopped." - Focus Group Participant</i></p>
<p><b>Community Data Walk</b></p>	<p>Produced suggestions like: minimizing barriers to homeownership created by the Habitat program; individualizing the program so it works for everyone; understanding the specific needs and context of single Black women who are the head of house/sole provider for their families; and addressing the lack of communication, a consequence of overworked coaches with burdensome caseloads.</p>	<p><i>"Debt Management (DTI) is always problematic when liveable wage is a concern."</i>  <i>"There should be a way to look into the student loan program where families with lower income have more accessibility to the program."</i> - Data Walk Participants</p>

# SUMMARY FINDINGS

The *Equity in Action* process revealed some high level pain points, which can be summarized as:



## Unacknowledged, unaddressed, and persistent institutionalized racism in the program structure

including a lack of understanding of the context of Black single motherhood and the overlapping systems of oppression that have disadvantaged them, as well as a failure to listen to the expressed needs of Black participants resulting in the reproduction of harm and distrust between Black community members and Habitat support staff.



## Problems with program methods and delivery

including a lack of communication, ineffective and inaccessible educational tools, and overly restrictive program and underwriting eligibility requirements.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

The Engaging Foundational Black Households project produced several recommendations for Habitat. Through shared meaning-making, the advisory committee prioritized addressing institutional racism as essential to Habitat's delivery of equitable services. In order to make effective programmatic changes, foundational Black program participants expressed that Habitat must first embrace organizational changes. The advisory committee concurred that addressing organizational concerns should be the first priority for Habitat and should precede necessary programmatic reforms detailed below.

Based on the findings from its *Equity in Action* process, RIA and the Habitat Black Homeownership Advisory Committee recommended the following changes.

## Institutional changes

- RIA recommends Habitat assess its program and underwriting eligibility requirements by conducting a legal audit. While some requirements may need to remain, others could very likely be altered to align with equity.
- While a legal audit is conducted, Habitat can research and select or create new trainings for its advisors. RIA recommends that these trainings include but are not limited to specific topic areas such as financial trauma, high and low context communication, cultural competency, and implicit bias. Such training must be required and incorporated into onboarding processes and conducted annually.

- RIA recommends that Habitat continue to prioritize the intentional hiring of foundational Black staff, both within the financial coaching program and more broadly. A staff person said it themselves: “Lived experience is also valuable experience that should be recognized.”
- RIA recommends that Habitat develops partnerships based on information exchange and resource sharing. Information exchange with agencies and organizations in the housing, home buying, and homeownership field will benefit all of Habitat’s program participants. Any information learned and shared with participants also opens up access to other spaces that will further participants on their journey toward homeownership. In effect, these partnerships will break the social service runaround that anyone seeking Habitat’s services is experiencing and bridge gaps.
- RIA recommends Habitat internally assess its commitment and values to be outspoken proponents of race forward state/federal policy change. This assessment not only needs to investigate Habitat’s commitment and values but also the organization’s bandwidth to do this work. RIA also recommends Habitat works with a third party contractor to conduct this internal assessment. An expert is required to understand staff’s values and assist in building an internal infrastructure to support this work, which might include hiring a new staff person or reorganizing the organizational structure. Once the assessment is complete and necessary changes have been made, RIA recommends that Habitat develop authentic relationships with grassroots and advocacy groups to push for larger institutional change.
- RIA recommends Habitat continue its engagement efforts by empowering a community action board that is an official part of the Habitat staffing and board hierarchy. Structural changes to Habitat should be informed by the community as they are the recipients of Habitat’s

services. The advisory committee members feel strongly about empowering participants to make decisions, be involved in board or leadership meetings, support grievances processes, and hold Habitat accountable for their commitments to foundational Black households.

## Programmatic Changes

- RIA recommends Habitat hire an individual that will annually evaluate staff performance and programmatic success. The individual in this role would have the responsibility of quality assurance, which would remove instances of neglect from homeownership advisors and help maintain strong programming by reviewing programmatic data to identify and eliminate any disproportionate findings.
- RIA recommends Habitat conduct a benchmark analysis of similar organizational programs in an effort to determine best practices and educational curriculum and resources. The new evaluator, supported by the community action board, can lead this work. Habitat can learn from other organizations to determine what curriculum best suits its foundational Black program participants by utilizing developed information-sharing partnerships, publicly available information, and interviewing.
- RIA recommends Habitat embrace a participant-centered approach to program design that is informed by earlier institutional changes and committed to collaboration. Developing a participant-centered cohort model with the community action board can offer a strategic advantage in addressing specific programmatic pain points identified by participants.