



# Fresno DRIVE: Paving the Way for Inclusive Economic Recovery by Prioritizing Racial Equity





What would it take to fundamentally transform the Greater Fresno Region by 2030 and create opportunities for all residents to achieve real economic mobility by fostering an economy that is inclusive, vibrant, and sustainable?”

## **THE IMPETUS FOR FRESNO DRIVE**

For years, Fresno has been referred to as the “tale of two cities,” alluding to the historic disparities that have long divided the more affluent north and impoverished south side of the city in California’s Central Valley. Rod Thorton, Board Chair of the Central Valley Community Foundation (CVCF), reflected on a board conversation in 2018 where members mulled over the sobering statistics. A study by The Urban Institute revealed “numbers that just shocked our board,” he recalled. According to the study, Fresno — one of the youngest, most diverse and fastest growing regions in the US — ranked near the bottom of 274 US cities on economic and racial inclusion, and it ranked last among 59 cities in California.<sup>1</sup> Despite rapid population growth, Fresno has been reported to have the highest rate of concentrated poverty rate in the country.<sup>2</sup>

“When I was looking back at my notes, I found this,” Thorton said, holding up a napkin with hand written notes and a sketch that mapped out how various funders could help to transform the contours of Fresno’s economic landscape. That sketch was the initial concept for what is now known as Fresno DRIVE (Developing the Region’s Inclusive and Vibrant Economy), a 10-year multi-pronged community investment portfolio designed to “create opportunities for all residents to achieve real economic mobility by fostering an economy that is inclusive, vibrant, and sustainable.” Initially conceptualized as a billion dollar challenge, DRIVE soon ballooned into a \$4 billion plan.

Moving from notes on a napkin to a dynamic and evolving cross-sector vision for change has not been easy. What started with “big audacious goals” and “strategic impatience” has led to a journey of breakthroughs and achievements, as well as trials and tough conversations. As one CVCF staff member recalled, “it wasn’t DRIVE yet, but it is what started us down this path and eventually became DRIVE.” Through it all, DRIVE partners have continued to push through challenging times — including a pandemic, a polarized political landscape, and a global call for racial justice — all while trying to cultivate a shared vision and create the conditions for transformative change.

### **About This Case Study**

For more than 15 years, The James Irvine Foundation has invested in inland California communities that face persistent challenges, such as high rates of poverty and unemployment, lower wages and educational attainment, low-paying industries, and significantly less philanthropic resources compared to other cities. The Foundation’s vision is a California where all low-income workers have the power to advance economically. To achieve this goal, local economies must create conditions where all residents can thrive.

This case study was developed by Engage R+D with funding from The James Irvine Foundation. As the learning and evaluation partner for the Priority Communities Initiative, Engage R+D developed this case study to share insights about what it takes to seed and create inclusive and sustainable economic recovery for all residents in the greater Fresno area.

Cover photo by Adobe Stock

<sup>1</sup> Poethig, E. et al. (2018). “Measuring Inclusion in American Cities.” The Urban Institute. <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/how-local-philanthropy-addressing-fresno-californias-severe-economic-inequities>

<sup>2</sup> Berube, A & Katz, B (2005). Katrina’s Window: Confronting Concentrated Poverty in America. The Brookings Institution. Special Analysis in Metropolitan Policy. [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/20051012\\_Concentratedpoverty.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/20051012_Concentratedpoverty.pdf)

This case study focuses on the early years of the Fresno DRIVE initiative and elevates key insights about what it takes to foster an inclusive economy and equitable recovery. Specifically, we highlight how Fresno DRIVE has prioritized racial equity and catalyzed the critical building blocks for an inclusive and equitable recovery. These building blocks include inspiring a shared vision, fostering and sustaining bold public leadership, recruiting cross-sector partners, leveraging regional assets, and activating community voice and power.<sup>3</sup> It is based on interviews with 21 diverse partners involved in the Fresno DRIVE initiative during the summer of 2021 (see appendix for interview list).<sup>4</sup> Fresno DRIVE is still a work in progress, but these early reflections provide useful insights for other systems change efforts striving to dismantle structural barriers and create conditions where everyone can thrive and benefit from economic growth. Our conversations were guided by the overarching questions outlined below and surfaced critical insights about key facilitators of Fresno DRIVE.



An inclusive recovery occurs when a place overcomes economic distress in a way that enables its residents — especially historically excluded populations — to share in benefiting and contributing to economic growth.”

**Solomon Greene, Urban Institute**

Building Blocks for Inclusive Recovery

Shared Prosperity Partnership Fresno Roundtable

August 22, 2018

## Guiding Questions and Emerging Insights from the Fresno DRIVE Experience



### THE ORIGIN STORY

*What was the impetus for DRIVE? What conditions and/or key facilitators have been most critical for establishing a solid foundation for the DRIVE initiative?*

**1.**

### Galvanize partners around a shared vision and call to action.

Sparked by sobering data about acute disparities and economic distress, regional leaders recognized the need for new models, partnerships, and approaches to turn unsustainable decline into inclusive economic recovery. Data continues to be a critical tool for assessing progress and accountability.



### CROSS-SECTOR PARTNERSHIPS

*What does it take to cultivate an effective community-driven partnership? What are the facilitators and ingredients for success?*

**2.**

### Foster trust and cultivate community assets.

Trust is the glue that holds DRIVE together and is a critical condition for this work. It takes time, humility, and the unwavering willingness to listen to community voices, leverage community cultural wealth, and make space at the table for shared decision-making.



### RACIAL EQUITY

*What does it take to embed racial equity and inclusion into a large-scale economic development initiative? What have been the challenges and facilitators?*

**3.**

### Create conditions for courageous conversations about race.

A shared understanding of the root causes of inequity requires courageous conversations about structural and systemic racism. DRIVE partners underscored the need to create space and build capacity for discussions about disparities, harm, healing, and reconciliation on the road to economic recovery and inclusion.



### THE ROAD AHEAD

*What are we learning from the Fresno DRIVE experience, and what key lessons can be carried forward on the long road to recovery?*

**4.**

### Harness cultural, political, and financial capital for inclusive recovery.

COVID-19 has exacerbated disparities and economic distress, making equity-driven efforts like Fresno DRIVE an imperative for a vibrant and sustainable future. Centering racial equity, building trust, coalescing diverse partners, using data for learning, and leveraging public-private funding are critical lessons on the road to transformation.

<sup>3</sup> Poethig, E. et al. (2018) (The report includes: Adopt a Shared Vision, Build and Sustain Bold Public Leadership, Recruit Partners from Across Sectors, Leverage Assets and Intrinsic Advantages, Think and Act Regionally, Build Voice and Power, Reframe Inclusion as Integral to Growth, Lay the Building Blocks of Inclusion). See the full report at <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/inclusive-recovery-us-cities>

<sup>4</sup> Interview participants were given the opportunity to review and provide feedback on a draft of the case study, and those with attributed quotes provided consent prior to publication.



## The Origin Story | Galvanize partners around a shared vision and call to action

The Central Valley Community Foundation (CVCF) was founded in 1966. Its mission is to “connect capital and communities for a just and thriving Central Valley.” After 50 years operating under a more traditional model of philanthropy, CVCF shifted in 2017 to a broader mission of “community leadership”, assuming responsibility for supporting and catalyzing city-scale change in three areas: economic mobility, human capital development, and neighborhood revitalization.

Former Fresno mayor Ashley Swearingin became the CEO of CVCF in 2017, leveraging her past experience and relationships with state and local leaders as well as the philanthropic sector. In 2018, CVCF hosted a roundtable with the Kresge Foundation’s Shared Prosperity Partnership (a partnership of the Urban Institute, the Brookings Institution, and Living Cities), bringing together civic leaders to explore ways to advance economic opportunities in the region. Reflecting back on the roundtable discussions, Ashley Swearingin shared, “The data was so indicting. After all those years of trying to build our economy and add wealth to the region and then the Urban Institute data showed our community was actually worse off than the 20 years prior ... and our racial disparity had grown. We have to be open to completely new and different partnerships and ways of thinking and putting different people in charge.”

### Coalescing partners around a call to action

Not long after, the Foundation’s board voted to take on the role of leading, fundraising, and convening partners for what would eventually become the DRIVE initiative. It was followed by an initial planning grant from [The James Irvine Foundation](#) to develop a comprehensive strategy for the region. CVCF engaged a number of consultants and partners in this process, including McKinsey & Company, the Brookings Institution, the Urban Institute, Jobs for the Future, and the Central Valley Health Policy Institute at California State University Fresno. Around the same time, California Governor Gavin Newsom launched the [Regions Rise Together](#) initiative and challenged Fresno to share what it developed at the 2019 California Economic Summit.

In the summer of 2019, CVCF convened nearly 300 civic and community-based partners to design a business plan and identify prospective projects for investment. Proposed investments were evaluated for their potential impact and additional input was gathered from the community, resulting in 18 draft [investment plans](#). Each plan fell within the three goal areas of economic mobility, human capital development, and neighborhood revitalization (see graphic on DRIVE investment areas).

### DATA FOR ACTION

Fresno Rankings Among

# 59

CALIFORNIA CITIES

As part of a 2018 study of 274 cities with populations over 100,000, the Urban Institute assessed vitality of local economies using three key indices, including economic health, racial inclusion, and economic inclusion. Among the 59 cities in California, Fresno ranked last on racial, economic, and overall inclusion.



## 55th

in economic health  
(qualifies as distressed)



## 55th

in racial inclusion



## 59th

in economic inclusion



## 59th

in inclusion overall

### ORIGINAL FRESNO DRIVE INVESTMENT AREAS



#### ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

- Fresno-Merced Food Corridor
- Betting Big on Small Business (women and people of color)
- Second Office Fresno
- Next Generation Aviation
- Water for All



#### HUMAN CAPITAL

- Upskilling
- Pre-conception to Five
- Integrated Data Systems
- College Completion
- Integrated K-16 System in High Growth Sectors
- Teacher Workforce
- UCSF Fresno Medical School Campus
- Fresno Attracts Talent



#### NEIGHBORHOOD DEVELOPMENT

- Wealth Creation in Communities of Color
- Downtown 2.0
- Fresno Opportunity Corridor
- Civic Infrastructure for Low Opportunity Neighborhoods
- Permanent Affordable Housing



Photo by Sarah Del Pozo, courtesy of the Central Valley Community Foundation

Many of the investment areas built upon existing, but often siloed, efforts that lacked the connection and resources to bring to scale. A draft of that plan was presented to the Governor in October 2019 in preparation for the California Economic Summit in November 2019, garnering a commitment of \$65 million from the state to support three of DRIVE's investment projects. The COVID-19 pandemic would later result in new challenges and budget cuts, reducing the State's investment in Fresno DRIVE to \$17 million.

The CVCF leadership recognized their "shoot for the moon" ambitions would require significant capital that would take them "way outside the box of a traditional community foundation resource mix." In June of 2020, The James Irvine Foundation committed an additional \$15 million over three years to advance five of DRIVE's strategic priorities. While seeking to leverage both public sector and philanthropic investments, Ashley Swearingin later underscored the importance of foundation partners, noting, "philanthropy is our social risk capital. Public dollars would take far too long and be too difficult to use. Our philanthropic partners are making this work possible and it will result in significant policy and institutional change."

While raising billions of dollars is in-of-itself a bold ambition, building a truly diverse and inclusive community-driven process has proved to be equally bold and challenging. As Ashley

Swearingin recalled, the plan has to "come from the people who are doing the work everyday and who are local community change agents." Ultimately, the goal of Fresno DRIVE is "to build a community leadership structure committed to an inclusive economy that is effective in addressing the challenges of racial equity and poverty in the Greater Fresno Region, an inclusive structure that values resident voice and leadership, efficient and effective financial investment, measurement, and results."<sup>5</sup>

For Fresno DRIVE, creating the conditions for inclusive economies has required a very intentional focus on bringing diverse voices to the table, building trust, developing a shared vision for change, and engaging in critical conversations about the root causes of race inequity. While that may sound like obvious ingredients for success, it is deep and difficult long-term work. While the need for change is urgent, progress often moves at the speed of trust and can be painstakingly slow. The Fresno DRIVE initiative is fundamentally about people and the willingness to think, act, and approach economic development with new mindsets, approaches, and partners. According to one Fresno DRIVE partner, "Other groups have spent lots and lots of hours developing blueprints that sit on a shelf never to be looked at again. Fresno DRIVE is not that. We see it as something that is going to be around [and] it's going to have impact. [It] is really designed for action, is inclusive, and we believe is going to get the funding that we need in order to make the transformation happen."

<sup>5</sup> Fresno DRIVE's plan <https://www.fresnodrive.org/the-plan>



## **NORTH STAR GOAL**

**Economic growth in Fresno that is based on transformed infrastructure and systems that enable historically excluded racial minority communities to prosper.**

Photo by Sarah Del Pozo, courtesy of the Central Valley Community Foundation



Even with audacious goals and support from public and private partners, transformative change does not happen by declaration and without the authentic engagement of community partners.<sup>6</sup> CVCF's focus on community leadership meant moving beyond the usual relationships to include a broader coalition of community leaders and residents in ways that had not been done before. There were already notable community assets and existing efforts to build upon throughout Fresno, but most of those efforts were not coordinated and, at times, worked at odds with each other. In reality, building a broader and more inclusive partnership has been an iterative process of listening, learning, and building trust.

### Bringing more diverse voices and representation to the table

When the Governor initially challenged Fresno to develop and share its strategy, CVCF moved swiftly to engage partners and identify investment priorities. While many nonprofit providers and community-based organizations were at the table to contribute to the initial draft, there was recognition that more intentional efforts were needed to bring other advocates and residents to the table. One DRIVE partner suggested the absence of some environmental justice organizations and elected officials may have initially been an artifact of “who showed up” and that there was limited time and intentionality dedicated to bringing other groups and community residents into planning conversations. For some community partners, the exclusion of these key players in early conversations was “perpetuating the same pattern of exclusion in our community that we’ve seen over the years.”

Since then, Fresno DRIVE leaders have been working to build a community engagement framework and a shared understanding of what community engagement means and looks like. In the early stages of the work, it was presumed that leaders of community-based organizations (CBO) represented the voice of community residents in spaces where resident input was needed. However, some reflected on the misalignment between what CBO leaders conveyed and what residents said once they had a seat at the table. “It wasn’t that we didn’t talk to any residents,” reflected one DRIVE partner, “but when we did it was a bit of an after-thought, and it wasn’t super well-coordinated.” Alternatively, some CBO leaders described the tensions associated with community

representation, given their dual roles as leaders of CBOs and residents of the community. They felt they should be able to speak from that vantage point too. Another challenge with the community engagement process included a concern that Fresno DRIVE came up with solutions before the community was fully engaged and had a chance to share their perspectives.



What gets me up every morning — in terms of the work — is the idea of bringing community voice into decision-making spaces.”

**Dr. Tania Pacheco**

Central Valley Health Institute

In retrospect, DRIVE leaders and community partners acknowledged the need to “be very purposeful about how you engage the entire community upfront instead of having to try to go back and pick folks up.” While there are resident councils and civic infrastructure groups that are currently part of the governance structure and decision-making bodies, some community partners are concerned this process may not yield results that reflect community priorities. “All of the power players are in this space,” one partner reflected, “and we need to figure out how to move through and actually get tangible benefits for community.”

Despite the inherent challenges of cross-sector partners — not to mention those posed by the pandemic — progress is being made to ensure the authentic participation of residents and those most impacted by the lack of economic opportunities. In 2020, Fresno DRIVE adopted the *Transformative Community Engagement Spectrum*, a framework developed by the International Association for Public Participation, to help clarify the role of community in planning and decision-making.<sup>7</sup> It focuses on five levels of community participation, the impact of each level, and the messages those types of engagement approaches send to the community.

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.policylink.org/sites/default/files/COMMUNITYENGAGEMENTGUIDE\\_LY\\_FINAL%20%281%29.pdf](https://www.policylink.org/sites/default/files/COMMUNITYENGAGEMENTGUIDE_LY_FINAL%20%281%29.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> <https://organizingengagement.org/models/spectrum-of-public-participation/>



Photo by Sarah Del Pozo, courtesy of the Central Valley Community Foundation

## Fostering trust and building bridges across historic divides

Fresno’s long history of exclusionary policies has contributed to an erosion of trust in public institutions and private industry motives. Many community-based organizations and advocates have been skeptical about DRIVE motives, assuming it was just another traditional model that would provide lip service to community priorities. There was a lot of distrust to overcome. One community partner noted, “the most challenging part [of this work] is bringing people together [and getting] partners on the same page about approach, definitions, and planning and implementation timelines [...]. It will take time to build the needed trust, comfort, and alignment.” The involvement and leadership of key social justice leaders proved to be a critical motivator for other community-based organizations to get involved and stay the course. “The community partners that were willing to be in conversation was really the biggest drive for me,” one CBO leader shared.

One CBO leader candidly recalled joining “because there was a lot of distrust. We didn’t see eye to eye on economic development,” referencing past economic development decisions that did not take into account the environmental, social, and public health impacts of surrounding communities. “For us there was a lot of hesitancy to participate but we felt that given the opportunity [...] if there wasn’t community voice in the process, it could make things worse instead of better.” Another community organization called out the distrust and challenge of partnering with “private sector leaders and others that have traditionally not been on the community side, not called for participatory processes, not really

supported authentic community engagement and community-driven planning.” For them, the DRIVE initiative appeared to be another strategy for attracting money but without authentic and meaningful community engagement.

Trust and deep dialogue about institutional and individual barriers to equity have become the critical glue that holds the DRIVE partnership together. Simply getting new partners to the table does not translate into an effective cross-sector partnership, much less transformative change. “It’s really, really, really hard when there’s not enough trust,” one partner reflected, particularly when you have “activists and systems [leaders] in the room for the very first time together. There’s a lot of trust building that needs to happen before you get to doing the work. Systems [leaders] aren’t used to doing that.”



DRIVE has created the need to have courageous conversations about what our region can and should be together. It has created tension sometimes [...]. Sometimes you have to have that tension to get to a better place.”

Fresno DRIVE partner



Partners openly acknowledged there have been heated debate and differing perspectives about what is needed to move forward. Several community partners referenced times when they contemplated walking away, but, despite the frustrations, community partners have stayed at the table. One reflected, there were “a lot of moments where we almost blew everything up and just said, forget it. We’re not doing this together. But people stayed [often because] a key person that was respected by social justice groups would say, hey guys, we can’t quit.”

As the leader and convener of DRIVE, CVCF has had to work hard to mend relationships and build bridges across deep divides that have been present for decades. The Fresno DRIVE experience provides ample evidence of the critical importance of slowing down to establish trust, acknowledge past harm, and invest time in building authentic relationships. Many of those bridge-building moments came in the form of trials and crucial conversations. For example, in 2018, Fresno Building Healthy Communities (a place-based initiative funded by The California Endowment) and CVCF rallied behind Measure P, a sales tax ballot initiative designed to fund local parks and arts programming over the next thirty years. It was a hotly contested measure opposed by some local politicians, the police and fire association, and the Chamber of Commerce. Despite the endorsement of over 100 organizations and community leaders, Measure P was defeated. Two years later, a state appeals court ruled on the 2018 ballot measure; it actually passed with 52% of the vote. It initially appeared to go down in defeat because it did not reach the required two-thirds majority. CVCF and the DRIVE partnership have continued to publicly support and stand behind the community-driven campaign, in what one DRIVE partner described as “one step towards some sense of trust and unity.” Ashley Swearingin also described the experience as a “bridge builder” while an environmental justice advocate described it as a “test.” The experience provided a tangible opportunity to demonstrate CVCF’s leadership and commitment to community priorities despite resistance from several key institutions.

CVCF also has had to contend with the optics and community skepticism of engaging big national consulting firms, experts, and even the Governor’s office. While some stakeholders felt the involvement of the internationally recognized consulting firm of McKinsey and Company brought prestige and credibility, other community stakeholders viewed their involvement with suspicion, particularly when it comes to racial equity and inclusion. One stakeholder noted community partners saw their traditional business model as problematic, noting the work in Fresno should not be about “capitalizing on people’s labor” but rather centering equity and wellbeing. The Fresno Race Equity Plan [report](#) described in the next section underscored that “transformative community engagement goes beyond the merely symbolic, one-off solicitation of input from the community to deeper engagement that creates pathways to more equitable power distribution.”

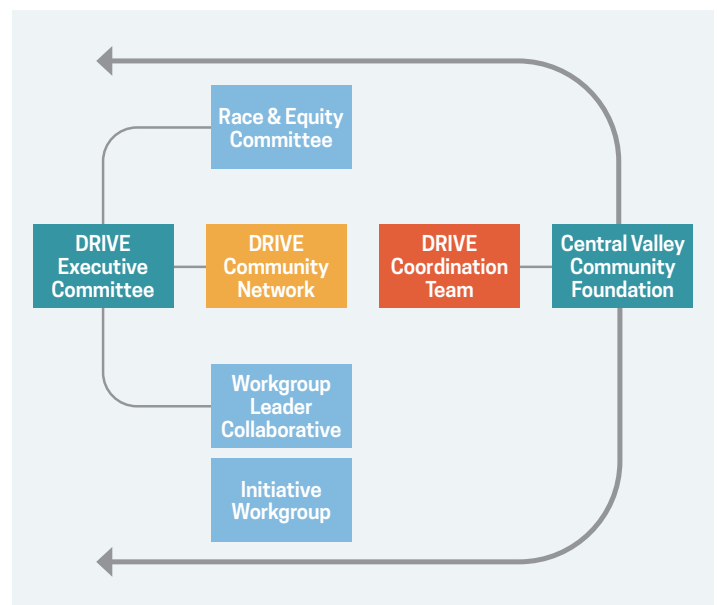
The Fresno DRIVE partnership has been resilient through challenging times and contentious conversations, and, with the stakes so high, it has stayed focused on the shared vision for transformative change. One DRIVE partner reflected these challenging conversations are, in many ways, part of the process of disrupting old ways of doing and thinking. “The prep leading up to this has been significant,” she said “and [has helped] establish the enabling conditions for the work to occur.”

## Establishing governance structures to foster inclusive decision-making

In December 2021, the Fresno DRIVE Executive Committee adopted a new governance structure to support coordination and ensure stronger representation from community and BIPOC leaders. Embedded in this structure is an explicit effort to operationalize DRIVE’s core values for respect and collaborative decision-making process, as well as its objective to “transform society’s unjust structures and institutions.” This new governance structure, which was presented by the Ad Hoc Governance Committee, is designed to include 21 seats for residents and grassroots leaders and 17 institutional and civic leaders.

One DRIVE partner shared that “this new model will support the transition of the Executive Committee composition to a governing body that is comprised of a balance of residents and grassroots leaders alongside institutional leaders.” The DRIVE Race Equity Committee also serves in several roles, including overseeing and supporting the outreach involved with this process.

## Fresno DRIVE Governance Structure





Efforts to address equity and systemic barriers to economic mobility are not new, but the COVID-19 pandemic and movement for racial justice have taken conversations about justice, equity, and inclusion to a new level. As Fresno DRIVE partners will attest, the process of embedding racial equity into the DNA of the initiative has been a difficult but necessary journey, requiring deep analysis, reflection, and crucial conversations. For many DRIVE partners, this has prompted an examination of individual, organizational, and institutional mindsets, practices, and culture. In many ways, it is the collective commitment to the process that will determine progress.

### Developing a race equity plan has helped Fresno DRIVE articulate and operationalize its commitment to equity

With the recognition that “race has defined access to opportunity in Fresno,” achieving racial equity was a driving factor for DRIVE from the start.<sup>8</sup> Several breakthrough moments — including the “drop the mic” meeting in 2019, data meetings that highlighted the racial disparities, and crucial conversation about community engagement — fueled the need to center racial equity. However, what was missing was a well-articulated approach for addressing racial disparities and inclusive economic growth (i.e., operationalizing racial equity).<sup>9</sup> As was noted in the DRIVE plan in 2019, the committee “has made it clear that racial equity must be both an overall programmatic goal for the DRIVE Plan and a lens through which to analyze and fortify each of the plan’s individual components”. That same year, the DRIVE executive committee created a Race and Equity Advisory Committee (REAC) (also referred to as the Race Equity Team), elevating racial equity and community engagement as key drivers of economic development, neighborhood revitalization, and human capital goals. Specifically, the Race Equity team developed a DRIVE Theory of Change (TOC) to make explicit a pathway for change and establish the preconditions and intermediate outcomes that center racial equity. The Race Equity Plan describes how the TOC centers race equity in all aspects of DRIVE, with the intention to advance the following<sup>10</sup>:

- **Shared analysis** and understanding of the racial history and current realities in Fresno
- **Access and generate data** about racial disparities and guide programmatic decision-making
- **Community engagement** plan that promotes the continuous engagement of black and brown communities in planning and decision-making
- **Strengthen capacity of community organizations, leaders, and residents** to enable mobilization and engagement
- **Strengthen the capacity of private and public institutions** to facilitate inclusive economic growth, as well as build cultural competence of key leaders and providers in implementation
- **Race equity monitoring, evaluation, and learning** plan to ensure accountability for racial inclusion

**“Race equity must be at the center of economic initiatives to achieve inclusive economic growth, and it is placed at the center of the theory of change, shared analysis, and the community engagement pieces of this plan. DRIVE embeds race equity at the core of the work to maintain its central importance throughout the rollout and implementation of the initiatives, and to achieve growth and prosperity for marginalized Black and Brown communities in Fresno.”**

**- DRIVE Race Equity Plan 2020**

<sup>8</sup> [Fresno Drive Plan](#)

<sup>9</sup> [DRIVE Race Equity Plan](#)

<sup>10</sup> Refer to the Race Equity Plan for full details on how race equity will be embedded in all aspects of DRIVE



Photo by Adobe Stock

## Embedding racial equity is a messy, difficult, and non-linear process

An explicit operationalization of racial equity did not happen from the start. In fact, the Race Equity (RE) Plan was developed after the 19 DRIVE initiatives had been identified. The Race Equity team has taken a “forward-looking” approach and is currently working on adapting the initiative plans to better align with the equity-centered theory of change.<sup>11</sup> During the development of the plan and theory of change, the committee helped surface critical issues, such as the level and depth of community engagement and uneven incorporation of racial equity in all of the initiatives plans. As one DRIVE partner shared, “you almost need something like this to sort of explode all over you to be able to truly deal with it the way that it needs to be dealt with.”



[Centering equity] hit me at a different level than it had before and just completely changed the way we even talk about the work.”

**Lindsay Fox**  
United Way

Putting equity at the center is an on-going process that requires deep engagement. One partner noted, “We’re not done yet having these conversations. This is not a one and done, this is an ongoing conversation. This is an intentional engagement. This is constantly looking at data, reminding people.” Coming to this awareness was important for partners. Whereas the norm or expectation in past initiatives involved clear organized goals and timelines, this process needed to welcome nuance, tension, and complexity. One CVCF leader reflected, “There’s no right way ... I come to the table with an expectation of methodical process, organized things... We spend all the money in the world. It’s still this messy. It’s still this hard. So maybe that is the point. Just to be okay [with the messy].” The work brought forth from the race equity committee helped shift the shared understanding and framework of the initiative. As one partner reflected, “the leadership around the theory of change, the insistence of continuing to have these conversations, and the insertion of the question and the challenge has really helped. I don’t know, because we haven’t done anything, whether it’s transformative. But I believe that our trajectory was changed because of the work of this committee.”

<sup>11</sup> Currently the Race Equity Committee, along with consultants, are reviewing logic models created for each plan. The goal is to better integrate equity, community engagement, and shared understanding and analysis into planned activities, outputs, and goals.

## Critical conversations help partners reflect on implicit bias and assumptions about race and power

Partners had to unpack their own internal biases and assumptions and recognize their positions of power and influence. It was clear that partners experienced this work differently based on their positionality. For example, white leaders who have held power for a long time describe the importance of listening and unlearning. For some, learning about the root cause of racial disparities in Fresno was a challenging but necessary experience, and many came to these conversations with an open mind. One white leader reflected, “One of the biggest things that all of us have done, is really just had an open mind, and learned a lot from others. It was a struggle. It was difficult at times, but especially the race equity committee and the comments that are made around the table in these meetings. We’re having hard conversations and being committed to being open and just listening. We talked about it within our boards, we’re educating others as well as educating ourselves. Really just being committed to learning.”

Some white partners reflected on how they learned to show up differently in this work, “as a white person, you’re aware of like, hey, when I show up, realize how it is affecting the other people, and the people of color in the conversation,” They also recognized the emotional labor that BIPOC partners carried, “honestly, it’s a tribute to the people of color, mostly women who stuck it out and who stayed consistent. And it was rough. It was just really rough.”

Several partners referenced the pivotal community data sharing meeting where a political leader “dropped the mic” and “made it about race.” Ashley Swearingin also clearly recalled the pivotal meeting where she observed several colleagues of color not engaged in the conversation. She had hoped they would validate the findings and engage in conversation but then realized it was her job as a white leader to stand up and be bold. “White people always put it on people of color to stand up and teach the room,” she recalled. “I realized I have to do this. To stand up and say, until we start dealing with race disparity in our community, we’re never going to make progress. That was the moment that broke everything open in that meeting.” She also reflected on her previous role as mayor, noting “never once did I talk about race, never once.”

## Building personal awareness and capacity to engage in difficult conversations

While DRIVE partners are making progress, continuing to embed racial equity in the work and achieve racial equity as an outcome will not be an easy feat. Several BIPOC partners reflected on the

experience with their white counterparts with one noting, “I don’t think you can underestimate the primal fear that white people have of being confronted with the past and the present racial violence.” One white partner similarly raised this point, explaining how it takes people a while to understand that racism is baked into systems and everyone is wired for implicit bias. It is about understanding “unconscious bias versus you’re a terrible, awful white person. It just takes time for that to settle in.” Another white partner openly shared, “I’m pretty well schooled ... but my ignorance and arrogance around race equity issues was very painful for me. I hung in there and just kept going and realize that it wasn’t personal. I think until people realized it’s not personal, it’s collective, that you can’t really build the trust, or cross the bridges we must, to help our kids see a future for themselves.”

A few BIPOC partners also felt that at times what was shared by white partners came off as “tone-deaf.” Specifically, when some would present this work as if they “discovered” something new, when local community groups and organizers have been confronting systemic oppression in Fresno for years. Some partners remain cautious about the initiative. While there is a more explicit racial equity lens, some worry about reverting to the same old power structures. Knowing that power dynamics and relationships will not change overnight, some are hopeful that with more honest, transparent conversations, “minds and hearts” will change.



Equity is a natural byproduct when the community is designing the solution.”

DRIVE partner

As partners continue to engage in this work, they are not only building their collective capacity to address economic and systemic racial barriers, but also their individual mindsets and capacity to work differently. One partner stressed the importance of individual commitment and capacity to shift mindsets and behaviors rather than repeat the same old patterns. “If people don’t feel equipped and confident to do that work, but they feel like they know all the other stuff, when the rubber hits the road you’re going to find yourself in some of the similar spaces that we find ourselves moving, where people are willing to attend a workshop, but they just don’t want to actually change the way their business works or their investment plan that they’ve already written because they had it pre-packaged for years.”

## Disaggregated data and ongoing root cause analysis can help build racial equity into DRIVE's "DNA"

Partners agreed that taking part in a shared analysis of racial disparities in Fresno has been a key first step. This includes developing shared language, defining race equity, and using disaggregated data to understand how and why systems have been disproportionately preventing communities of color from advancing economically. These data-informed conversations would help move beyond a paternalistic mindset of "helping poor black people" to developing better solutions and inclusive systems.

One partner discussed the power of data to examine root causes as eye opening noting, "you could see light bulbs turning off and was a little tense yes, but those are the types of conversations that need to happen. I can see people's mind going, 'Oh, okay. I'm starting to get it now.' When you see minds change, you see hearts change. I think many, many, many people on all sides of this had the heart, but we needed to move the mind."



Disaggregated data is important and supports deeper conversations about what is happening in our community."

**Linda Gleason**

Cradle to Career Fresno County

The way data is presented and discussed is also important to consider, as one partner suggested using data not to "call out" but to call [people] into conversation, adding that "calling people into the conversation is very important and nuanced but it's an important factor that people need to feel safe to share and discuss."

Finally, while some partners feel that racial equity is becoming an explicit "gold thread" in the work, others feel it has yet to be fully embedded. While the DRIVE theory of change has a racial equity focus, some partners are not aware to what extent equity is operationalized in the metrics, goals, and objectives of each initiative. One partner shared how racial equity is "glued on the top of the pyramid," but "it still wasn't in the DNA. It didn't trickle down into the metrics, into the goals, objectives, tasks, and so that presents an issue. That requires enough buy-in from the initiative sponsors to make that happen."

## Healing work is critical for building trust and transformative change

Healing requires understanding and acknowledging past harm and making intentional efforts to address the structural inequities that led to the harm. Authentic community engagement, openness, and understanding the stories of communities who have been historically ignored is where healing and authentic trust building begins.<sup>12</sup> Healing work welcomes space for critical conversations, as one partner reflected, "I think there's this perception that, we're just going to talk about it and then once we talked about it it's done, we can check the racial box. No, you got to repair the damage. You got to listen to community when they say that they're mad as hell." Another explained the initiative needs to "address, acknowledge, admit historical systemic racial institutionalized realities... we need to tell the stories of those 100 language groups, and their experiences, and acknowledge and recognize that's part of a shared analysis... acknowledge the harm done, be honest about that, take responsibility for it, accountability for it."

In the current sociopolitical context, some partners explained just how crucial healing work is for DRIVE. "I don't think we can underestimate how deep the wound is for people of color and specifically for black folks and indigenous people," one community partner shared. "This country is one giant gaping wound that we just refuse to acknowledge. The result of not acknowledging it has landed us in this January fix, and complete racial civil war." According to some partners, Fresno DRIVE has yet to "go deep" into the core issues that lead to the harm done to multiple generations of communities of color. One partner challenged Fresno DRIVE to "ask ourselves whether this portfolio is even going to help people catch up? Furthermore, does it even repair half a tiny drop of the harm? Does it repair the harm? Does it just ask all of us to forgive and move on? What are we doing? We haven't gotten to that point because frankly it's hard for white people to talk about it."



In order to actually create racial economic inclusion, there needs to be a healing process in our community because in Fresno, in the Central Valley, economic output is based on exploitation. It has been and continues to be today."

**Sandra Celedon**

President and CEO, Fresno Building Healthy Communities

<sup>12</sup> For more on transformational healing work, see W.K. Kellogg Foundation's, *Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation Framework*.



Global events in the last several years, most notably the COVID-19 pandemic, have both underscored and exacerbated the very disparities that Fresno DRIVE has set out to address. Perhaps now more than ever, well-resourced and equity-centered efforts like Fresno DRIVE are needed. As Fresno looks to the future, DRIVE partners are poised to leverage federal recovery dollars and transform systems to ensure all residents in the greater Fresno region benefit from an inclusive, vibrant, and sustainable economy. During the first several years of the initiative, DRIVE has endured its share of obstacles and, through the insights highlighted in this case, demonstrated what it truly takes to lay the groundwork for transformation. We conclude by lifting up four key takeaways from the early years of Fresno DRIVE.



If we can position the conversation, this is the greatest opportunity for change...for the future of the Central Valley. Our region struggles with disparities, from healthcare to employment, to education...there's a greater resolution we can reach together, if we become aware of the social bias as it relates to race and how we work together to undo some of those historical hurts.”

Fresno DRIVE Partner

# 1.

## Foster trust and reconciliation through conversations about causes and costs of racial inequity

Fresno DRIVE partners underscored the critical importance of trust as a precursor and necessary condition for this work. Building trust takes time and is tested, strengthened, or breached in small acts and tenuous moments. For Fresno DRIVE, trust has been tested and built through authentic and difficult conversations about structural racism, personal biases, assumptions, privilege, and power. It also has been built by listening to the voices and experiences of BIPOC partners and communities. Many partners acknowledge there has been progress and there is still more work ahead to “go deep” by acknowledging the past harm to black, brown, and indigenous communities and embedding healing practices into the work.

# 2.

## Use data for shared understanding, accountability, and assessing progress towards inclusion

Data has been a powerful tool for the DRIVE initiative. Initially, data on Fresno’s economic racial disparities sparked reflection and a call to action. Partners continue to use data to understand root causes, develop a shared analysis of systemic barriers, and to inform their strategies and priorities. Data is also gathered and used to track progress and assess how the various initiatives are contributing to racial equity goals. For example, in alignment with the *Race Equity Monitoring and Evaluation plan*,<sup>13</sup> Fresno DRIVE seeks to use disaggregated data to examine the progress of specific “race equity indicators” intended to help different racial groups in Fresno advance economically and improve overall quality of life. They also will be using data to generate lessons learned to inform ongoing decision-making, program improvement, and scaling efforts.

<sup>13</sup> [DRIVE Race Equity Plan](#)



Photo by Adobe Stock

### 3.

#### **Cultivate existing cultural capital and community leadership to fully participate in decision-making**

Multiple DRIVE partners stressed the importance of fully leveraging local cultural assets, expertise, and models, such as the asset-based community engagement approach used by Dr. Tania Pacheco-Werner of the Central Valley Health Institute at California State University, Fresno. Community experts bring deep knowledge, a core belief in community cultural wealth, and respect for the assets and cultural capital of community residents. While there is value in external expertise, local expertise and community assets should inform and shape the priorities in any plan that seeks to advance inclusion. Many DRIVE partners acknowledged that there was initially a lack of intentionality around community engagement and resident involvement. Over time, the DRIVE community partner organizations increased their focus on fostering relationships, building capacity, and developing leadership to participate in the DRIVE governance structure. This is exemplified by the Executive Committee's recent adoption of a governance structure (DRIVE Exec "2.0") designed to shift power to community, grassroots, and civic leadership.

### 4.

#### **Harness public and private partnerships to support inclusive recovery**

Cross-sector partnerships are nothing new, but Fresno DRIVE is poised to harness philanthropic funding, private sector support, and federal economic recovery dollars in potentially powerful and transformative ways. Creating the conditions and leveraging the political moment (in this case the Governor's challenge in 2019) also proved to be key and helped to position Fresno DRIVE partners for what was to come. The pandemic has clearly exacerbated the very inequities DRIVE seeks to address and will require a concerted effort and long-term vision to ensure those who have been historically excluded can benefit from and contribute to economic growth. In addition to the foundational conditions highlighted in this case study, Fresno DRIVE has been cultivating the financial resources and the political will to test and implement new approaches for an inclusive economic recovery. Fresno DRIVE also offers an exciting opportunity to prove that equity and inclusion need not come at the expense of economic growth.

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## Interview List

NAME	ROLE	ORGANIZATION	FRESNO DRIVE ROLE
Elliott Balch	Chief Operating Officer	Central Valley Community Foundation	Executive Committee; Backbone Staff
Heather Brown	Co-Chair	Race & Equity Committee	Race Equity Committee Co-Chair; Executive Committee; CVCF Board
Sandra Celedon	President	Fresno Building Healthy Communities	Work Group Co-Lead (Civic Infrastructure); Executive Committee
Andrew Feil	Executive Director	Every Neighborhood Partnership	Work Group Co-Lead (Civic Infrastructure); Executive Committee
Lindsay Fox	Executive Director	United Way of Fresno and Madera County	Work Group Co-Lead (Wealth Creation)
Veronica Garibay	Co-Executive Director	Leadership Counsel for Justice & Accountability	Executive Committee
Linda Gleason	Executive Director	Fresno Cradle to Career	Work Group Lead (P-5); Executive Committee
Dr. Carole Goldsmith	President	Education, K-16 Integrated System Work Group	Work Group Lead (K-16); Executive Committee
Sabina Gonzales-Erana	Co-Chair	Race & Equity Committee	Race Equity Committee Co-Chair; Executive Committee
Andy Levine	President	Faith in the Valley	Work Group Co-Lead (Community Justice Network)
Kurt Madden	Director	Fresno Business Council / Career Nexus	Work Group Lead (Upskilling); Executive Committee
Gretchen Moore	Chief Strategy Officer	Central Valley Community Foundation	Backbone Staff; Executive Committee
Deb Nankivell	Executive Director	Fresno Business Council	Work Group Lead (Upskilling); Executive Committee
Dr. Tania Pacheco-Werner		Central Valley Health Policy Institute	Consultant; Executive Committee; Race Equity Advisory Committee
Dr. Alan Pierrot	Chair Emeritus	CVCF Board - Chair Emeritus	Executive Committee; CVCF Board
Joe Schilling	Sr. Policy & Research Associate	Urban Institute	Consultant
Ashley Swearingin	Executive Director	Central Valley Community Foundation	Backbone Staff; Executive Committee
Genelle Taylor-Kumpe	Executive Director	Fresno Business Council / San Joaquin Valley Manufacturers Alliance	Work Group Lead (Upskilling); Executive Committee
Rod Thornton	Board Chairman	CVCF Board Chair	Executive Committee; CVCF Board
Sheri Wiedenhofer	Executive Director	DRIVE Race Equity Committee / Community Justice Center	Work Group Co-Lead (Community Justice Network); Race Equity Advisory Committee; Executive Committee

## Methods

This case study was designed to elicit feedback from partners in the Fresno DRIVE initiative to learn about the contextual factors, process, challenges, and the role of racial equity in the inclusive economic development journey. The selected partners interviewed for this study were identified based on a listing provided by the Central Valley Community Foundation (CVCF), a backbone organization for Fresno DRIVE.

Partner interview groupings were selected based on Fresno DRIVE committee affiliation of each partner's organization. The Engage R+D team then conducted ten 60-minute interviews with 21 individuals from the listing provided by CVCF between July 2021 and August 2021. Interview transcripts were coded by three analysts using an axial coding method with Dedoose qualitative analysis software to identify categories and themes. Analyst meetings were used to discuss emerging themes and refinement of the coding framework. Interview findings presented in this case study were also member checked with interviewees to validate alignment in themes identified and presentation of contextual information in support of the evidence provided in this report.

## Interview Questions

- 1. To kick us off, could you start by sharing your name, role, and organization as well as how long have you been part of the Fresno DRIVE partnership?**
- 2. What are three words that you would use to describe your experience with the Fresno DRIVE?**
- 3. As you reflect on the early part of your journey with DRIVE, what motivated you/your organization to join in on this work with the other partners? Why did you think this partnership was important?**
  - a. Please describe any contextual factors that impacted your decision to join.
- 4. Early on, what specific steps did your organization take to support the success of this initiative?**
  - a. What specific steps did you see DRIVE leaders take to set this initiative up for success?
  - b. What (if any) additional resources did your organization dedicate to this work to get the initiative going or set a solid foundation?
- 5. As you were launching this work, what early challenges did you encounter?**
  - a. How did your organization overcome the early challenges?
  - b. How did other organizations overcome the early challenges?
- 6. Who was “at the table” early in this work and who was missing?**
  - a. What (if any), patterns did you notice among the individuals or groups who were missing (service area, geography/region, sub-population, and etc.)?
  - b. How did you bring missing key stakeholders to the table to do this work? What if anything was challenging about that process?
  - c. How would you describe the table now? What has been the unique role/contribution of each partner or group?
- 7. How have you engaged community members in this work?**
  - a. What lessons did you learn from your community engagement work on this initiative?
  - b. What advice would you give others who are striving for more meaningful community engagement and inclusive economic planning?



Photo by Sarah Del Pozo, courtesy of the Central Valley Community Foundation

- 8. Based on your experience with DRIVE, what key ingredients would you say are part of the “secret sauce” of this cross-sector partnership? What are the top 3-4 core attributes that have set a solid foundation for DRIVE’s work today?**
- 9. We’d like to hear more about how your focus on racial equity has evolved. How did racial equity become more embedded in the work?**
  - a. Who/what helped facilitate the transition to a focus on racial equity?
  - b. What were some barriers along the way?
  - c. How did you overcome the barriers (if applicable)?
  - d. What role did data play in this part of the work?
  - e. How does this look in your work now?
- 10. What advice would you give others who are looking to center racial equity in their economic development planning?**
- 11. How are you adjusting your plans given the COVID-19 pandemic and racial strife?**
  - a. What challenges are you grappling with on the road to recovery?
- 12. What are the opportunities and silver linings on the road ahead with this initiative?**
- 13. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with Fresno DRIVE before we wrap up?**



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[www.fresnodrive.org](http://www.fresnodrive.org)