
Sponsor: Board of Commissioners

Meeting Date: 9/21/2021

Title: Funding for Ramsey County's Racial Equity and Community Engagement Response Team to Advance Racial and Health Equity Through the American Rescue Plan Act

File Number: 2021-512

Background and Rationale:

The American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) of 2021 was signed into law on March 11, 2021. The relief package provides funding in several areas such as state and local aid, education, rental assistance, transit, stimulus payments for individuals, and other provisions. ARPA also provides \$350 billion in additional funding for state and local governments.

Under ARPA, federal funds are available for spending in multiple categories, including funding necessary to respond to the public health emergency or its negative economic impacts. Further, due to the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic on health and economic outcomes in low-income, and racially and ethnically diverse communities, the ARPA Interim Final Rule identified a broader range of services and programs to be responsive to the public health emergency when provided in those communities disproportionately impacted.

Advancing racial and health equity, shared community power, and effective community engagement is an integral part of Ramsey County's mission, vision, and values. The Racial Equity and Community Engagement Response Team (RECERT) was formed in April 2020 to help inform the county's racial equity response and provide critical links between county operations and the residents we serve. During the COVID-19 pandemic, RECERT initiatives have allowed us to work with trusted community partners that have shared culturally, linguistically, and age-appropriate public health information, county and community resources and services to our most vulnerable communities throughout the pandemic. RECERT has also distributed thousands of masks to Ramsey County residents, provided early childhood vouchers to families in need during distance learning and worked with the Equity Action Circle to co-develop and align community identified recommendations to meet the unmet needs of racially and ethnically diverse residents, in order to prevent exacerbated inequities and improve County operations, service delivery and program administration.

Recognizing the importance and value of leading with race, to address compounded disproportionality and ensure community voice in decision-making processes, RECERT formed a Community Advisory Committee in spring 2020, now known as the Equity Action Circle (EAC). In July 2020, the EAC identified the following key priority areas that led to the formation of committees that included EAC members, community members and representatives of the RECERT. These priority areas included:

- **Family and Youth:** To ensure families are connected to a Service Center Navigator and receive wrap-around services through a Family Coach model. Service Center Navigators assist residents in accessing county services.
- **Healthcare:** To increase the reach and effectiveness of COVID-19 and important public health protection messaging, communications, prevention, and strategies developed by Ramsey County.

- **Housing:** To prevent evictions and supporting communities that are impacted by evictions during COVID-19 and beyond.
- **Policies and Practices:** To identify key recommendations and outcomes for Procurement, Community Engagement, and Accountability during COVID-19 and beyond.
- **Workforce:** To improve workforce outcomes for both internal employees and county residents during COVID-19 and beyond.

The goal of the EAC's priority areas and recommendations are to help the county realize how decisions and services can carry some inherent disadvantages that disproportionately impact the racially and ethnically diverse communities during this pandemic and beyond and to inform the county's efforts in advancing racial equity during the COVID-19 response. The full EAC recommendation report can be found here:

<https://www.ramseycounty.us/sites/default/files/Projects%20and%20Initiatives/Coronavirus/COVID-19/EAC%20Recommendations%20Report%2010.18.2020%20FINAL.pdf>

RECERT's goal is to work collaboratively to have a multi-faceted and multi-dimensional impact. As RECERT moves from response, to recovery and resilience with community and staff from across the County, we will continue to center race and ethnicity as part of our broader strategic priority. During the past 18 months RECERT has been responding to the racial equity impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although not out of response mode, RECERT is strategically preparing to shift racial equity efforts on recovery and resiliency to help ensure racial inequities are addressed as our organization and community leaders lead us on a path towards economic recovery.

In order to have the greatest impact, RECERT has identified the following **6 key investment areas for this request** which are necessary to respond to the public health emergency, its negative economic impacts, and to serve those disproportionately impacted, as directed by ARPA. Further, the investment areas also align with Policy Link's recently published "[10 Priorities for Advancing Racial Equity Through the American Rescue Plan A Guide for City and County Policymakers](https://www.policylink.org/sites/default/files/RecoveryGuide-LJ-2021_050621c.pdf)" https://www.policylink.org/sites/default/files/RecoveryGuide-LJ-2021_050621c.pdf that stated, "Every city and county in this country faces the challenge of eliminating racial inequities, and every city and county should use these recovery resources to remove barriers to full participation and proactively advance racial equity and inclusion."

RECERT has identified the following areas of alignment as part of the ARPA Tier One request that require fiscal support/investment:

Investment Area #1: EAC Health Care Priority Area - Trusted Cultural Community Messenger and Connector (TCCMC) Initiative

In response to the public health emergency, Ramsey County's RECERT will work in partnership with Saint Paul-Ramsey County Public Health and additional departments to replicate the TCCMC initiative that will focus on our racially and ethnically diverse communities and youth/young adults in Ramsey County through 2022. The initial goal of this initiative is to reduce the spread and impact of COVID-19 through increased vaccine media outreach, education and engagement that is medically accurate, culturally specific, and linguistically appropriate that connects residents to community vaccine sites and related resources.

Ramsey County will support the existing contracts that are fully executed with partners for the TCCMC program, in addition to a competitive process to increase the number of funded sub-recipients. We anticipate funding up to 21 contracts. Sub-recipient funding in 2021 will include allocations to hire dedicated staff and additional funds to select and train staff, implement the TCCMC program, make needed purchases and finalize a workplan. Award amounts will vary based upon the number of participants each sub-recipient anticipates reaching. The TCCMC initiative will

be evaluated.

Investment Area #2: EAC Family and Youth Priority Area - Family Coach Model

To address the negative economic impacts of the public health emergency, Ramsey County's RECERT will work in partnership with Health and Wellness Administration, Financial Assistance Services, Enterprise Services, and additional service teams and departments to families disproportionately impacted are connected to a Service Center Navigator and receive wrap-around services through a Family Coach model. Family Coaches will be reliable, social capital builders supporting families historically oppressed and impacted by socio-economic disparities who are further impacted by the public health emergency. Selected family coaches will have deep, culturally responsive understanding of racially and ethnically diverse family dynamics and will provide dedicated coaching; streamlined access to resources and education; and follow along support to assist families in acquiring skills and increasing community capital necessary for gaining independence from long-term public services. Together with Service Center Navigators, families will be able to better find county and other community-based resources, setting the stage for a more holistic county/ community service approach and long-term, family self-sustainability. The program will be successful when the families working with the Family Coach feel empowered and knowledgeable enough that they can, in turn, help other families. The Family Coach model is also being supported by the Pre-School Development Grant (PDG) that was awarded to Health and Wellness Administration from Minnesota Department of Human Service and accepted by the Ramsey County Board of Commissioners on April 6, 2021.

Investment Area #3: EAC Policies and Practices Priority Area

To address the negative economic impacts of the public health emergency, Ramsey County's RECERT will work in partnership with the Policy and Planning, Compliance and Ethics, and Office of the Chief Clerk, to develop a county-wide racial equity plan that prioritizes transparency and accountability while supporting the integration of community centered approaches and ongoing work with community as a co-creative partner to best serve the county's impacted families and individuals.

Investment Area #4: EAC Engagement

To address the negative economic impacts of the public health emergency, Ramsey County's RECERT will continue to work in partnership with current EAC members, RECERT staff, and countywide leadership and staff to implement the priority recommendations identified by EAC in Spring of 2021. This ongoing partnership will require compensation for our EAC members as they continue to advise the county on advancing the priority recommendations necessary to serve families and individuals impacted by the public health emergency.

Investment Area #5: COVID-19 Response, Engagement & Outreach

In response to the public health emergency, these initiatives will be in partnership with and led by Ramsey County Public Health with support from RECERT.

- **Mask for Everyone Initiative:** Re-launch the Mask for Everyone initiative with targeted messaging about mask use for children under the age of 12 years old and to unvaccinated adults. Distribute masks at back-to-school events.
- **Vaccine Incentive Initiative:** Utilize \$50 Visa gift-card incentives at targeted events and sites to increase vaccine rates.
- **Vaccine Pop-up Sites, Engagement and Outreach Initiatives:** RECERT in partnership with Public Health will work with select trusted community agencies to host pop-up vaccine opportunities, engagement and outreach that focuses on our racially and ethnically diverse communities, including youth and young adults that builds on existing vaccine efforts.

Investment Area #6 Digital Equity and Tech Equity

To address the negative economic impacts of the public health emergency, with current and other possible federal resources, we seek consultant support to help Ramsey County to develop an updated community digital and tech equity roadmap that works for all residents impacted by the public health emergency. The roadmap includes Ramsey County's collaboration with the City of Saint Paul, and connectivity blueprint scope.

This roadmap of recommendations would help us answer technical, financial, and policy questions while also identifying and capturing the community needs and challenges:

City and County Collaboration

Ramsey County, in partnership with the City of Saint Paul continues to discover more about the extent to which residents are unconnected to high quality, high speed broadband, limited access to devices and deficient digital literacy skills as the drastic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to force the world online. The pandemic highlights the ongoing need in our community to make sure everyone, regardless of income level, can participate in digital life.

Through a variety of efforts and relying mostly on CARES funding, county, school district and city leaders pursued emergency strategies to connect residents with internet access and devices. These efforts included:

- TechPak giveaways to COVID-impacted job seekers distributed by Ramsey County and Saint Paul Public Libraries.
- Modified public computer access protocols at both Ramsey County and Saint Paul libraries to follow public health guidance.
- Mobile hotspots and Comcast Internet Essentials for students.
- Increased number of mobile hotspots available for lending through the Saint Paul Public Library.
- Exterior WiFi access points on public buildings and the Saint Paul Library's Bookmobile.

Connectivity Blueprint Scope

The scope of this project includes:

- Convening stakeholder conversations: city council, other city departments, school districts, nonprofits, county government, Connected MN and Internet Service Providers.
- Conduct broader community engagement on digital equity needs, opportunities, and challenges in Ramsey County.
- Map existing infrastructure and assets of the city and other community partners.
- Identify and analyze local, state, and national policies and legal issues that impact community internet solutions in Ramsey County.

Beyond an asset inventory, consultants will convene stakeholder groups and plan community engagement regarding Ramsey County's future digital strategy. This community engagement will center neighborhoods and demographics in Ramsey County experiencing lower rates of home broadband connection and other digital challenges. The selected consultant will be expected to partner with identified vendors on the county's community engagement master contract list.

Expected deliverables of the Connectivity Blueprint include a report which will include recommendations for:

- Short-term, medium-term, and long-term actions and options to move towards a future with affordable high-speed internet access for all Ramsey County residents.
- Recommendations should address technical/infrastructure, financial, policy, and governance

issues and solutions.

- GIS files of existing and recommended network infrastructure.
- Ongoing governance and community engagement strategy around digital inclusion and equity.
- A particular focus on the gaps and impacts of a digital strategy on the future of work and workforce inclusion.
- Financial implications and long-term funding strategies to support sustainability of all recommendations.
- Presentation of recommendations to county/city leadership and policy makers. The recommendations will be also shared with suburban communities and all school districts in Ramsey County.

Recommendation:

The Ramsey County Board of Commissioners resolved to:

1. Approve \$2.72 million of American Rescue Plan Act funds to support Racial Equity and Community Engagement Response Team initiatives through 2022.
2. Authorize the County Manager to enter into agreements and contracts and amendments to agreements and contracts in accordance with the county’s procurement policies and procedures, provided the amounts are within the limits of the grant funding.
3. Authorize the County Manager to establish a project account for Racial Equity and Community Engagement Response Team initiatives and transfer related expenses and revenue, including any previously incurred expenses and recognized revenue.
4. Approve extending the existing Trusted Cultural Community Messenger and Connector contracts ending December 31, 2021 to December 31, 2022.
5. Authorize the County Manager to approve and execute amendments to the Trusted Cultural Community Messenger and Connector contracts ending December 31, 2021 to December 31, 2022.

A motion to approve was made by Commissioner Ortega, seconded by Commissioner Reinhardt. Motion passed.

Aye: - 6: Frethem, MatasCastillo, McDonough, McGuire, Ortega, and Reinhardt

Absent: - 1: Carter

By: 

Mee Cheng, Chief Clerk - County Board