A RACIAL EQUITY JOURNEY: RACE TO REBUILDING TRUST AND COMMUNITY GRANT

A PROCESS EVALUATION

ARLINGTON
VIRGINIA

United Way

United Way of the National Capital Area

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Arlington Racial Equity NOFA project was developed to address systemic inequities in Arlington County's grantmaking processes, particularly those that disadvantaged Black and Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) communities and their local service providers. Historically, the county's funding decisions favored established, predominantly White-led organizations, with long-standing relationships influencing grant awards. There was a lack of transparency and fairness in how funds were allocated, leading to underrepresentation of BIPOC voices in decision-making. The project aimed to reform these practices by transitioning to a more equitable, transparent, and needs-based approach.

Process Phases

1. **Design Phase:** This phase focused on co-designing the Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA) process, incorporating input from community leaders and ensuring accessibility. Key activities included racial equity training for reviewers, technical assistance sessions for applicants, and finalizing the NOFA documents.

2. **Application Phase:** Technical assistance sessions were held to help applicants navigate the process. A total of 40 proposals were submitted, with 38 deemed eligible for review.

3. **Review Phase:** Reviewers were trained to evaluate proposals using a scoring rubric. The review panels, consisting of both community members and county staff, assessed the proposals and arrived at final scores through consensus sessions.

4. **Award Phase:** Proposals scoring above a set threshold received funding, with the top proposals receiving full funding requests. A total of 22 proposals were funded, supporting diverse initiatives across the community.

5. **Evaluation Phase:** A process evaluation is planned to assess the project's effectiveness and gather feedback for future improvements.

Evaluation and Findings

The evaluation revealed that the Arlington Racial Equity NOFA project made significant strides in creating a more equitable and inclusive grantmaking process. However, challenges remained, including communication gaps, application complexity, and concerns about the review process. The evaluation underscored the importance of continuous improvement and stakeholder engagement to sustain the project's positive impact.

Proposed Solutions and Value

1. **Improved Communication:** Establish clearer guidelines and communication channels to address information gaps and ensure all stakeholders are informed and engaged.

2. **Simplified Application Process:** Streamline the application process to make it more accessible, particularly for smaller organizations with limited resources.

3. **Enhanced Capacity-Building:** Provide additional support and training for organizations new to the grantmaking process, helping them build the necessary skills and resources.

4. **Transparent Review Process:** Increase transparency in the review process by offering more insight into how decisions are made and ensuring diverse perspectives are considered.

The proposed solutions aim to further enhance the equity and inclusiveness of the grantmaking process, leading to more effective and fair distribution of resources within the community.

KEY FINDINGS AT A GLANCE:

- **Inclusivity and Community Engagement:** The project successfully expanded access to funding opportunities for smaller organizations, but some felt that the process still favored those with existing connections. Future improvements should focus on broadening outreach and ensuring all community voices are heard.

- **Communication Challenges:** Inconsistent communication, particularly regarding funding limits and multi-year funding options, created confusion among applicants. Clearer guidelines and more proactive communication strategies are needed.

- **Application Complexity:** The detailed application process was overwhelming for some, especially smaller organizations. Simplifying the application while maintaining accountability will help ensure broader participation.

- **Review Process Concerns:** While the inclusion of community reviewers was a positive step, there were concerns about potential biases and the transparency of the final decision-making process. Strengthening the review process and providing more context for decisions will enhance trust and fairness.

- **Equity Lens:** Despite efforts to address racial equity, some stakeholders felt that the process did not fully meet its equity goals. Ensuring that future iterations of the project better reflect the needs of all communities, particularly those historically marginalized, will be critical.

- **Trust and Relationships:** The project made progress in rebuilding trust between the county and the community, but lingering concerns about the influence of relationships on the process remain. Continued efforts to separate relationships from decision-making will be essential.

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

> The **Realizing Arlington's Commitment to Equity (RACE)** initiative guided a community partnership process that sought to inform local government on changes that would disrupt entrenched, systemic inequities in its grantmaking and priority-setting processes. These processes were determined to disadvantage the community's Black and Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) residents and their local service providers. A result of this community partnership process is the Arlington County's transition to a racial equity-based Notice of Funding Availability (**Arlington Racial Equity NOFA project**) for awarding human and community service grants.

The Arlington Racial Equity NOFA project originated amidst a national reckoning on racial inequity, catalyzed by the police murder of George Floyd and several victims of racial injustice. In 2020-21, heightened national discourse on racial equity amplified the introspection and impetus that Arlington County initiated in 2019 to address systemic racial inequities internally, and externally as it engaged with community. The Arlington County Board conducted a series of listening sessions to understand community concerns, revealing broader systemic inequities that extended beyond visible issues, such as policing, to deeply embedded governmental processes and funding practices. There exists a prevalent sentiment among the community that "Arlington runs on access," favoring those with established connections and relationships, predominantly older, wealthier White residents. Recognizing this, an Arlington County Board Member took a leading role in initiating this project among broader efforts to address systemic social and racial inequities across County government. Engaging in multiple discussions with community members and County staff, they identified a need to address inequity in how the County allocates funds to human services and nonprofit organizations.

> *"We, as a County, the County government, had been seeking to further racial equity and become a not just a sort of... well-meaning bystander [but] instead move towards an active force for progress." – County Board Member*

> *"It was a view that, hey, some of our systems have been inequitable. Our focus has not been always on those populations most in need that we should be [listening to]...We just focus on the loudest voice or the most persistent voice, which tend to be ... wealthy Whites with the most resources ... geographically oriented in the northern part of the County, which has always been a frustration." – County Manager's Office Staff*

> *"I know that the same organizations were getting funded over and over again. I think it's not just a issue. The problem is the people ... have long-standing relationships with people in our community who are kind of also very connected to people in decision making within the County government." – Nonprofit Community Leader*

> *"I think the default way of doing things is that very few folks make the decisions and there is little to no discussion on how we got there." – Nonprofit Organization Applicant*

Arlington's grantmaking process offered an opportunity to reform a part of the system that historically lacked transparency and fairness. The grantmaking process was influenced by long-standing relationships and access to power, which had favored established, predominantly White-led organizations for at least a decade or more. Consequently, community voices, particularly those from Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities, who were underrepresented in funding decisions. Additionally, certain funding decisions were made non-competitively by the County board, leading to perceptions of bias and favoritism. A significant amount of discretionary funding was historically allocated without a clear and transparent process, failing to reflect the community's current needs. As this process continued across several Board administrations without change, even existing beneficiaries couldn't adjust the amount they received as there was no formal process to request a modification.

> *"The general goal of the project was...to open a window to see what the general community, the constituencies we haven't really stimulated to give us."*
> *– County Board Member*

> *"The goal was to really build a process...that make[s] community a priority in this and really put people first in the process, in terms of the access, in terms of making sure that we integrated all of the recommendations into the process that the BIPOC community leaders brought forth." – County Manager's Office Staff*

Addressing these challenges required structural reform aimed at transitioning from politically influenced funding decisions to a more transparent, equitable, and needs-based approach. The project sought to ensure that funding decisions better reflected the community's priorities, values of equity and inclusion by inviting community leaders and stakeholders to help design and implement a reformed grantmaking process.

From the Fall of 2021 to the Spring of 2022, Arlington County collaborated with nonprofit community leaders, the United Way of the National Capital Area (United Way NCA), and a Diversity Equity Inclusion (DEI) expert to inform changes to its human services grant-making process. County staff identified the necessity of a community needs assessment to incorporate the perspectives of safety-net eligible residents. This assessment was led by a DEI expert who prioritized creating an open discussion space free from power imbalances. To achieve this, the sessions excluded elected and appointed officials, as well as staff from the County and United Way, resulting in a unique dynamic where all communication had to pass through the independent DEI expert facilitator. However, during the height of pandemic restrictions and the limitations of virtual platforms, this approach proved counterproductive. It was described as "chaotic," "negative," and as perpetuating longstanding distrust between the County and its community. Community leaders who were invited to participate eventually withdrew, citing frustration and reluctance to engage in what they saw as an imbalanced, top-down process imposed by the County. The DEI expert identified a key issue: while the County's process aimed to address inequity, it failed to involve the community in power-sharing and decision-making. The community had clear ideas about the necessary changes and did not need another needs assessment.

Furthermore, while the presence of government officials can indeed influence power dynamics in equity discussions, their complete absence from the conversation is not a productive way to address these dynamics or foster more equitable spaces.

With a communication reset and a revised approach centered on co-design and shared decision-making, the collaboration saw improved productivity over the summer of 2022. Efforts were made to transition discretionary funds to a more formal, competitive, and transparent procurement process, ensuring that essential human services were protected from political influences. This structural change aligned funding decisions with principles of transparency, fairness, and equity, which was vital for good governance. This reform process was accompanied by intentional efforts to repair historic distrust, focusing on the funding process as evidence of the County's commitment to change. The approach of co-design and shared decision-making established a model for genuine community-government partnership in reforming government practices. Discussions prioritized shifting grant award priorities to focus on the services received by community members rather than the needs of the organizations providing those services. This approach aimed to address underlying root causes rather than merely responding to immediate crises. Consequently, a set of recommendations was developed to guide changes in the County's funding process. The Arlington Racial Equity NOFA project emerged from a critical need to address systemic racial inequities and lack of transparency in the County's grantmaking processes. By engaging the community and focusing on structural reforms, the project aimed to create a more equitable and just system for funding human services and nonprofit organizations.

> *"I think having the community focus group...we took that time to really hear from the people who really are out there doing the work who are on the front lines every day."*
> *– Nonprofit Community Leader*

> *"It was a good opportunity to be more inclusive of organizations that are trying to get funding. And I was particularly interested in it because I wanted organizations to have an even playing field along with other organizations that are larger and have more staff that can help out with this sort of applying for funding and grants and navigating their way to getting not just submitting applications but getting funding."*
> *– Nonprofit Community Leader*

Pursuing racial equity is multi-faceted, driven by diverse philosophies and successful only through candid and transparent communication. Co-creation means government sharing power with community leaders through equitable participation and communication.

– Community Leaders Recommendations, see Appendix.

The Importance of Racial Equity in Arlington County

The importance of racial equity in Arlington stems from a commitment to ensure all residents are valued, educated, healthy, and safe regardless of race. This commitment is reflected in the vision of an equitable Arlington where disparities in income, housing, education, and access to services are addressed. The document emphasizes that "while there have been improvements in 'closing the gap so that race is no longer a predictor of one's success' in Arlington between 2010 and 2020, disparities still exist" in several key areas, including wealth and income, housing, and education. – Arlington's RACE Website

Arlington's efforts to promote racial equity are guided by a strategic framework with four goals: Normalize, Organize, Operationalize, and Assess. This framework helps the County use data to measure success and impact, build a shared knowledge base for informed discussions about race and equity, and implement projects aimed at reducing disparities. For example, the County's Race and Ethnicity Dashboard provides valuable data on income disparities, showing that median household income among Black and Multiracial populations has declined, and Persons of Color disproportionately earn less than $100,000—a wage that is insufficient to afford the median home in Arlington without assistance. Additionally, the County has focused on increasing awareness and understanding of racial equity through initiatives like the Leading with RACE online courses for employees and community dialogues on race and equity, which aim to foster conversations, build understanding, and create a more inclusive environment. – RACE Annual Report, 2022

PROJECT PHASES:

DESIGN PHASE: The Design Phase concentrated on developing the RACE to Rebuild Trust and Community Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA). This phase involved creating a detailed process roadmap and framework to ensure alignment with the Community Leaders' recommendations and to maintain accessibility for community members. In preparation for the NOFA launch in September 2023, a Project design team composed of County staff and United Way staff designed racial equity training for reviewers and planned for several grant technical assistance sessions for potential applicants. Additionally, regular updates and presentations were made to various stakeholder groups, including Board members and the broader community, to gather feedback and ensure transparency throughout the process.

Throughout this phase, the team met regularly—both virtually and in person—to finalize the NOFA and coordinate next steps, including reviewer recruitment. A series of community meetings were held at the Lubber Run Community Center, with attendance of as many as 50 participants, including Arlington County Board members. Nonprofit organizations who

had participated in the Community Leaders' group were not involved in the NOFA's design to ensure they were eligible to participate in the competitive process alongside other nonprofit organizations. The NOFA and supporting documents were finalized during an in-person meeting on September 5, 2023, at the United Way NCA's office, after which the documents were submitted to Arlington County's Health and Human Services team and legal team for final review, in preparation for the scheduled release in October 2023. The RACE to Rebuilding Trust and Community NOFA was released on October 10, 2023.

APPLICATION PHASE: The Application Phase began with a series of technical assistance sessions designed to support applicants in navigating the NOFA process. The first session, held in person on October 25, 2023, provided an overview of the entire NOFA. A second session on November 15, 2023, focused on the Logic Model process, offering applicants a working session to begin designing their models. The third session, held on December 11, 2023, covered the proposal evaluation process and included a practice scoring exercise. The final session, conducted virtually on December 18, 2023, served as a wrap-up for any final questions before proposals were submitted on December 21, 2023. A total of 40 proposals were submitted, with 38 deemed eligible for review after initial screening.

REVIEW PHASE: The Review Phase commenced in January 2024 with the training of 20 reviewers, including 10 subject matter experts from various County agencies and 10 community reviewers with lived or professional experience. These training sessions, held throughout January and early February, focused on using a scoring rubric, providing constructive feedback, reviewing objectively, and understanding the County's RACE training modules. All reviewers were required to complete conflict of interest and non-disclosure agreements and to practice scoring using a mock proposal.

In February 2024, reviewers were randomly assigned to panels consisting of two staff members and two community members, with each panel reviewing 7-8 proposals. Careful measures were taken to ensure no conflicts of interest existed within the panels. All reviewers completed conflict of interest non-disclosure forms, and all forms were used during the randomization process. Reviewers had approximately one month to individually review, score, and comment on their assigned proposals. In March 2024, the panels met in facilitated consensus sessions to discuss and arrive at final scores for each proposal. These sessions were completed by the end of March, with all final scores and comments summarized for presentation at the Arlington County Board's April 2024 meeting.

AWARD PHASE: To arrive at the final award distribution, a funding structure was created where all proposals that scored above the average score of 34.95 out of 51 possible points were funded. The maximum award could not exceed $225,000 for one year. The proposals that scored in the 75th percentile (40.75 points out of 51 possible points) received their full year one funding ask up to $225,000. The proposals that scored below the 75th percentile to the average score received 75% of their funding request for year one up to $225,000.

Through this process Arlington County was able to fund 22 of the 38 proposals submitted for this NOFA which had total award funding of $2,392,655.

On April 24, 2024, the County announced that 22 nonprofit organizations received funding through the RACE to Rebuilding Trust and Community grant. The grants, designed to support historically marginalized communities by ensuring equitable access to resources, transparency, and accountability, were approved unanimously by the Arlington County Board. The funding supported a diverse range of initiatives, including legal services, workforce development, afterschool programming, domestic violence intervention, and comprehensive health care. In June 2024, the project team shared applicant scoresheets and conducted individual sessions with 14 of the 38 organizations that requested personal feedback on their proposals.

EVALUATION PHASE: A process evaluation is scheduled for the end of this first year's funding cycle to reflect on the project's progress and gather feedback from diverse stakeholders across its different phases. This evaluation aims to provide a comprehensive perspective on the project's success in meeting its goals and to offer insights for continuous improvement as the project advances.

EVALUATION DESIGN

Process evaluation marks a natural point for reflection and assessment of the first-year cycle's grants. In addition to feedback gathered from applicants and Board members, we seek to synthesize the viewpoints of different stakeholder groups, including reviewers, the community leadership group (some of whom were also applicants) and the County manager's office staff. The goal is to review stakeholder's perspectives on what the process has yielded so far compared to where the project started, assess whether the project has become more accessible, transparent and equitable, and gather recommendations for further changes and improvements for future cycles.

KEY EVALUATION QUESTIONS:
1. What has the stakeholder's experience been with the Arlington NOFA process, what worked well and what were challenges that they experienced?
2. Has this Arlington NOFA process become more accessible, more transparent, and more equitable to stakeholders?

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative grounded theory design was used to examine the views of diverse stakeholders involved in the design, implementation, and participation in a reformed human services procurement process. This qualitative approach is effective for understanding governmental processes from diverse perspectives, allowing for exploration of the contexts in which this initiative operates, and building a nuanced, multifaceted understanding of this first year's process and impact.

Participants were recruited using a combination of purposive and convenience sampling, in line with qualitative methodologies and methods. Given the scope of this process evaluation, alongside time and resource constraints, data analysis was limited to content analysis. To enhance the validity and credibility of the findings, member checks, participant quotations, and debriefing were utilized. Researchers adhered to best practices and procedures for human subjects' research, ensuring the protection, rights, and well-being of participants.

From May to July 2024, 33 participants were recruited for this evaluation. Five distinct stakeholder groups were invited to participate in the evaluation based on their relationship to the project and level of involvement in the first year's cycle. These stakeholder groups include nonprofit organizations who applied for funding, a subset of nonprofit organizations that primarily serve BIPOC communities and/or are BIPOC-led organizations formed the Community Leaders group, community reviewers who reviewed and scored the applications, County Board members, and staff from the County Manager's office who stewarded the development and implementation of the process. A non-probability approach, using purposive and convenience sampling strategies, was employed to encourage maximum variation among participants, all of whom were recruited from Arlington, Virginia. The participant breakdown is as follows:

- 15 participants represented nonprofit organizations applying for funding.
- 4 participants served on the community leaders group collaborating with the County to co-design the reformed procurement process.
- 7 participants were community reviewers, including 3 County employees.
- 5 current County Board members and 2 former Board members.
- 4 staff members from the County Manager's office.

REVIEWER DEMOGRAPHICS:
Among the 20 reviewers who participated, 14 shared their demographics:

- 93% identified as female.
- 57% were aged between 35-54, and 35% were over 55 years.
- 36% identified as Black or African American, and 64% identified as White.
- 71% were employed full-time, 7% were unemployed and seeking work, and 14% were retired.
- 76% had a graduate degree, and 14% had a bachelor's degree.

INTERVIEWS:
One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow for an in-depth exploration of individual perceptions and experiences. The interview protocols included open-ended, ranking, and probing questions. A total of 33 interviews were conducted, each lasting between 30 and 90 minutes. Interviews were conducted on a virtual telecommunications platform, and the transcripts were captured using a generative artificial intelligence tool. These transcripts served as the primary unit of analysis. Datasets were cleaned of all personal identifiable information. Content analysis and thematic coding was conducted with the assistance of generative artificial intelligence tools.

DISCUSSION

INCLUSIVITY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:

A fundamental objective for the Arlington Racial Equity NOFA project is to foster an inclusive and equitable grant-making process. The project aimed to "level the playing field" in offering a funding opportunity that would be more accessible for smaller organizations that may be lacking extensive resources. The intention was to avoid prescribing what type of organizations or projects would be funded, allowing service providers to articulate how the project would respond to a community need, and for community reviewers to validate which projects should address the needs identified.

The project was successful in ensuring that organizations, regardless of their size, had the opportunity to apply for funding. Many interviewees pointed to the resources and efforts from the County's project team in ensuring that information about this process was accessible and transparent.

> *"I think that there was a lot of intentionality on how to present information and how to, like, have an application that was inviting and welcoming to all types, you know, like parts and members of the community." – Nonprofit Organization Applicant*

Community Leaders' recommendations to the design of this funding opportunity emphasized the importance of incorporating the lived experiences of community members in the application and review process.

> *"Fairness was one of the things we wanted … that the review panel be made of people with lived experiences. That's one of the key things that we wanted … to bring in, the fairness and understanding so that there be people in the review process that have an understanding and their own personal experiences; they know … what the different proposals are about, and they can connect and understand what the needs are." – Nonprofit Community Leader*

By structuring the funding opportunity so that the applicants could define the community need that they were serving and demonstrate how they would address that need, the broad scope of possibility led some interviewees to question if some structure would be beneficial.

> *"The main challenge lies in truly assessing community needs equitably, which depends heavily on the quality of people recruited to the process each year. While the system is not bad, I believe there's room for improvement in how we assess and align funding with identified community needs. Achieving the best principles of equity isn't just about fairness among those who seek government support; it's also about ensuring that our approach genuinely reflects the broader community's needs in a more robust way." – County Board Member*

> *"What I'm worried about is what you feed in the rubric: If you don't feed health and safety, then it won't come out. It was so much about making it about what the community wants, [the reviewers] may not see the whole big picture. It may be the dominant input, and it may*

not should be (sic). I'm weighing my concern versus the concern of others. And I need to justify it to myself as an elected official, ensuring that I invest in taking care of the people."
– County Board Member

Efforts to create an inclusive environment were positively received. The training, technical sessions, community meetings, and overall outreach were robust, for many nonprofit organizations. Nearly all applicants expressed appreciation for the individualized, post-award feedback sessions with the County. Several applicants signaled that this level of support was more than what they were accustomed to when applying for funding and benefited from these resources to build their internal capacity and ability to communicate their mission externally. This touchpoint, along with this process evaluation, offers the County insights in how to further refine this funding process.

"Other agencies aren't always as thorough and do not give this much detail and technical assistance. And when I spoke with [them] about our award, I did share with [them] some of the challenges I had with the budget template." – Nonprofit Organization Applicant

"I think it's a great initiative, and I wish it'd be great if more counties undertook an initiative like this. So far, I am impressed not just with the initiative itself, but the way Arlington County and actually using, with the help of United Way going about this process, you know, releasing information on the initiative itself first, and then the way to NOFA was and how detailed the NOFA was, how useful it was, because not all real [requests for applications] are that useful. The application feedback process and now this, getting the opportunity to be a stakeholder and give my input." – Nonprofit Organization Applicant

"I really liked the opportunities to have both in person and virtual technical assistance sessions with United Way. It helped understand what folks were looking for, also what some of the applicants were thinking about doing … Mostly it was great. The other thing was that it was nonjudgmental because some of the things were on nights that I had other meetings that I had, so I was unable to go to those, but I was able to catch up by watching the recording. And again, you could come to these. You don't have to come. It's up to you. We're not taking attendance. We're not going to give you points or not give you points because you showed up at these meetings." – Nonprofit Organization Applicant

"I am a great believer that no grant, even if you don't get it, is wasted because it's an opportunity to create content in a way that you haven't created it before, and that provides you an inventory of content that can be used in other grant proposals or modified for other grant proposals." – Nonprofit Organization Applicant

However, other interviewees feared that the inclusivity was more theoretical than practical. Despite efforts to socialize this opportunity widely with the community, a recurring theme is that only those organizations who were somehow connected to the County and the existing system of procurement processes were able to participate in this process.

"And I actually did not hear … about it through any regular channels. I actually had somebody from Arlington come over and meet with me and say, did you know about this grant? It'd be a great idea for you to apply. And then I had another person tell me that from Arlington. Both kind of inside folks." – Nonprofit Organization Applicant

"Even with community involvement, it seemed like some voices were still missing from the conversation" – County Board Member

"One of the things I feel like, I'm glad there was the focus on the racial equity part. I feel like some of the organizations struggled a little bit with it, of, like, does my project … Is my project supposed to be race-based? Is it supposed to be equity-based? Is it just supposed to be the work that I'm doing that didn't really seem to be spelled out for them? And I feel like some of them kind of struggled on that." – Community Reviewer

"I think because we let it be so open ended, a lot of people kind of, like, read into it their own version of equity and diversity, and then, you know, if it didn't come out the way that fit with their version of what they thought were trying to accomplish on equity, then it was like, well, then the process didn't work. And it's like, you know, the process didn't achieve what you wanted it to achieve. But was that what we're trying to achieve at all?"
– County Board Member

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS:

Despite positive strides toward creating a fair and inclusive process, the project encountered several "growing pains." These issues primarily stemmed from technical and procedural difficulties, including how objectives were defined and communicated, perceived complexity of the application and submission platform, and reviewer capacity to deliver funding recommendations. These challenges highlight areas where further attention and improvement can be invested.

COMMUNICATION

A breakdown in communication often serves as the root cause for most of the confusion and challenges throughout a project, and nearly all interviewees pointed to aspects that can benefit from more intentional communication. In seeking to effect systems change and develop a new way of operating, assumptions and misunderstandings abound as stakeholders seek to learn and adapt to a new and unfamiliar process. Emergent themes revolved around guidance on funding availability and limits, as well as the structural, technical, and procedural changes in how the application would be submitted, scored, and evaluated.

One issue concerned guidance on funding availability and limits. The decision to open this funding opportunity to a broader range of topics, without imposing funding caps or structured limits, presented challenges for some participants. Several interviewees expressed uncertainty about how much funding they should request, which led to confusion.

"I got the impression that $100,000 would be the maximum that we could possibly apply for. Even though the written instructions say limitless, and if it was truly limitless, then, had I submitted a million-dollar application, would you have rated it based on me doing a

million dollars' worth of work to close all the gaps in the application process? If you can honestly say yes, then I guess it was a fair process. But if you can't say yes to that question, then you should have given us some kind of sky so we would operate on the same level playing field." – Nonprofit Organization Applicant

Another communication challenge stemmed from an information lag between the project team and County leadership, partially exacerbated by transitions involving two Board members and a senior leader in the County Manager's office. This leadership change contributed to inconsistencies in communication and decision-making, further complicating the process. As a result, a gap in decision making authority proximate to the project created delays in communicating information to the community, which had a cascading impact on nonprofit organizations' ability to make key decisions and adequately prepare to participate in the process.

"I think some things also got lost in translation or just completely missed until the end of the process, and then things became a fire when I think that a lot of that could have been avoided if there had been consistent communication throughout the process." – County Manager's Office Staff

"Regarding transparency, while perfection is unattainable due to some inherent confusion, I believe significant strides were made in identifying organizations, funding, and explaining the rationale behind the program. The process was generally very transparent, with no major instances where information needed to be withheld, except in cases where it was necessary." – County Board Member

There was also significant confusion among applicants regarding the differences between one-year and three-year funding requests. The Community Leaders group strongly recommended the option for multi-year funding to enhance financial stability for nonprofit organizations, enabling them to concentrate more on service delivery rather than administrative tasks. A County Board member on the design team had identified this as a systemic challenge, noting the difficulty in balancing community service providers' expressed desire for stable, multi-year funding with the prerogative of future Board administrations to not be committed to funding that they did not pass themselves. Another County Board member illustrated that critical decisions in how the new process would address structural changes to funding were affected by communication challenges.

"The challenge was a lack of clarity on or kind of lack of commitment on the timeframe and what would happen after the first year, also when the awards would be and whether the pool of money would be just redivided or expanded, the parameters were not really clear." – County Board Member

"But that hurts us in the process because we can't make good decisions, sound decisions, and we didn't. I don't know that we locked down anything around the funding piece other than we have about $1.5 million. And had we been able to lock some things down, stuff like people applying for multiple years and how to sort through all of that, those became last minute decisions, thinking through with the review process … what is

the role of the reviewers in the funding and the scoring recommendations to the board?
So, it just got really political at the last minute." – County Manager's Office Staff

APPLICATION COMPLEXITY

The application process posed significant challenges due to the extensive level of detail and information requested. This design was intended to balance community leaders' recommendations for flexibility and accountability with the County's responsibility to manage taxpayer funds responsibly. Following national best practices, the application was nevertheless considered "complex" by many nonprofit organizations, some of whom have characterized the application as more "difficult" or "demanding" than larger federal grant applications. Other applicants found the application to be "straightforward." Overall, this perceived complexity likely discouraged smaller nonprofits from applying, although the exact number of those deterred remains unclear.

> *"If this had been my first grant, I would have been way over my head."*
> *– Nonprofit Organization Applicant*

> *"It was the most difficult application we have ever attempted."*
> *– Nonprofit Organization Applicant*

The detailed nature of the application also conflicted with the need to adhere to page limits, which were intended to ease the burden on both paid and volunteer reviewers. Many reviewers described the process as *"intensive,"* and while the application was designed to be accessible and transparent, feedback indicated that smaller organizations with limited resources found it difficult to participate fully.

> *"There were still barriers for smaller organizations that are not as well-connected or experienced in grant writing." – County Manager's Office Staff*

> *"I do think that some of those really strong nonprofits with professional grant writing staff and all the right things probably wowed some of the panels." – County Manager's Office Staff*

For those new to grant writing, the complexity was particularly daunting. The application was challenging for those without professional grant-writing experience. While the rubric was detailed and helpful to some, it was confusing to others. The application's question format, designed to guide community reviewers in aligning information with the rubric, sometimes became a burden for nonprofit organizations.

Additional aspects of the application process, such as the 10-page limit and question structure, also caused frustration among applicants. Smaller organizations, which often lack access to grant writers, found the detailed requirements particularly overwhelming.

> *"The application required a lot of detailed information that could be overwhelming for new applicants." – Nonprofit Organization Applicant*

REVIEW PANELS

Community Review panels were established to score the applications during this process. Recruiting community residents to evaluate nonprofit funding applications brings a wealth of benefits, including diverse perspectives, increased transparency, and civic engagement. This process offers residents greater awareness of community needs and service providers who are working to address those needs, which in turn can lead to greater support and resources for nonprofit organizations beyond government funding cycles.

> *"Also, as a reviewer, it gave me insight into many organizations in Arlington County that I didn't know existed. And so, it was very educating to be part of this project as well as. As well as, you know, I fed my soul to see this work being done, and it gave me the opportunity to be part of walking the walk that I want to be walking in terms of dismantling oppression, the whole rating process itself." – Community Reviewer*

> *"But I thought that the overall structure with having staff and volunteers as like someone who's participated in before I thought that was a really interesting way of doing it especially because this you know like the monies was supposed to be used for kind of on-the-ground efforts and ... really like community development and community-based kind of activities. So, it just made sense to also have community members who are interested in it participating too. So, like I've never experienced that." – Community Reviewer*

Several participants expressed concerns about potential bias and the composition of review panels. Ensuring transparency and inclusiveness in the panel selection process was viewed as essential for maintaining the integrity of the evaluation. A common theme underlying these concerns was that while many participants had a basic understanding of the review process, they lacked detailed knowledge about how recruitment, training, panel composition, and bias mitigation were handled. Reviewers who did receive training and participated in the process were curious about how other groups performed and were interested in understanding how the applications they scored compared to the full range of submissions. There was a perceived narrowing of the process, as the County Manager's office managed the applications from the review stage through to the awarding of funds, which some felt undermined the principle of access and transparency. This was further exacerbated by the communication gap between the County and the project team that made the final stage of the review process in awarding organizations feel rushed and incoherent.

> *"I found it challenging to determine how much ... who to provide the awards to and how much to award, because it was, I only saw a small sample of all the proposals that were submitted. I didn't review ... all the proposals that had been submitted in totality. So being able to understand or conceptualize how the proposals I reviewed sort of stacked up to others. There wasn't that sort of context." – Community Reviewer*

> *"Our general lack of comfort with the decisions that we're making in allocating discretionary dollars. We didn't feel like we're necessarily doing so in a way that was both fully informed, transparent, and was really based on needs and awarded through a meritocracy." – Community Reviewer*

"The end of the review stage didn't seem thought through. The getting from the consensus scores to getting them the money. Feel like that part at least from my perspective nobody thought about that and you maybe guys did." – Community Reviewer

"There was no – like – consensus there. It just seemed like a bit of a mess at that stage, which honestly is the most important part in my perspective. Like, cool … we graded their application but whether they get funding and how much like that seems like that really needed to be thought through a lot more. And it felt like an afterthought, which was a disappointment to me." – Community Reviewer

NEED FOR CLEARER OBJECTIVES

The recurring theme of effectively communicating the process changes across the County significantly impacted stakeholders' understanding of the initiative's objectives. This, in turn, shaped perceptions of whether there had been genuine improvements in access, transparency, and equity. Many stakeholders expressed frustration over the limited clarity regarding the goals of these changes and questioned whether more time could have been invested in familiarizing the community with the process before implementation. Drawing on the "building the plane while flying it" metaphor, the co-design, construction, and implementation of this funding process, which spanned three years, was driven by the County's determination—a determination that might have weakened if the process had taken too long. The key challenge appeared to be balancing the need for expedience to deliver the program within the annual funding cycle with the participants' belief that clearer objectives and better understanding would have enhanced their experience of the process.

"A crisper description of the specific goals of the program" is needed. – County Board Member

"And then it also made it … a little bit hard to communicate outward. Right. Like, people expect Board Members often to speak for or on why we're making the decisions that we're making. And I think it was easy to kind of refer to the process and be like, we had a process." – County Board Member

"That's what I'm most anxious to see is, does this really change outcomes? And I'm really hopeful that whatever evaluation process we do over the next five years and how we write these agreements really demonstrates that, you know?" – County Manager's Office Staff

"Like some organizations asked for, like, a very modest amount and then some organizations were … fund my whole program and … there was no distinction on … I don't know amounts of … we just said … oh that we got no guidance really on how to gauge whether amounts were appropriate and what appropriate meant." – Community Reviewer

"To funding, we knew nothing about what the decision making around the funding was going to be, which … when you think about us talking about a transparent process, that definitely does not feel transparent at all." – Nonprofit Organization Applicant

"What were the assessments or kind of discussions and analysis that led our reviewers to make those conclusions? I feel like that was really missing." – County Board Member

[This process was perceived as a] "lottery...a funding opportunity without discretion." – County Board Member

"While I think it may have been initiated as an attempt to help, that it was much more a drag on the system than a support to the system, spent way more staff time and direct dollars. So, ... I don't know if they'll tell you this or not, but many applicants, even those who were awarded, said they won't apply again. It was just, like, too unpredictable, too costly for the application process, a high burden, and not getting at the fundamental of, like, their core services. It all felt like an add on."– County Board Member

A RACIAL EQUITY LENS

When interviewees were asked to reflect on the process through a racial equity lens, using guiding questions such as "Who is missing? Who is benefiting? Who is burdened?" (with the intentional omission of "How do we know?" and "What did we do?" for clarity in the interview context), several populations were identified. Interviewees highlighted groups that might still be excluded from the process included youth and young adults, smaller nonprofit organizations in Arlington that have not yet engaged in County funding opportunities, and other nonprofit providers lacking resources, such as grant-writing capacity or English language proficiency. Reviewers were drawn from a wide group of the community, but races and ethnicities such as Hispanic, Asian, and Middle Eastern, could be better represented.

"The biggest group that I think is missing is people who are truly kind of at the tipping point, at the margin of being in severe need and potentially having an opportunity to thrive. I think there are people at that tipping point that we're poorly suited to supporting. Helping people [get to] that position where they're not exactly firmly entrenched in stability, but just making sure that they don't fall backward. I think that's an area that this funding round, in my opinion, did not sufficiently address, nor have we ever."
– Community Board Member

"Those who are burdened are those who cannot participate, who cannot compete, who cannot enter this, who don't have a lever, you know, a lever to move in some sort of organizational sense. There was a promise of this program to support, to create, to incentivize organic sprouting of new initiatives. And help that."
– Community Board Member

A notable contrast emerged between stakeholder groups regarding which populations were overlooked. A County Manager's Office interviewee mentioned newly arrived populations in the community, while Community leaders emphasized that longstanding Black Arlingtonians were being neglected.

"We're not focused on some of the non-Black minorities. I just would be honest about that. I really just think that we are not focused on the recent immigrant population."
– County Manager's Office Staff

"I've always had this thing with Arlington where they put all people who have tans, natural tans, in the same category. When I say that, I'm saying, like the people from Ethiopia and other African countries with Black Americans born in this country, we are so different... And I believe they do that to make it seem like they're really providing resources to American Black people, and they're not. How come we're not reaching out to these people? Everybody knows those people were forced out of Arlington. Maybe they want to come back, but they don't even know that there's an affordable building opening up."
– Nonprofit Community Leader

"But I do feel that even going through this process, even going through the application itself, that Black people, particularly Black folks of American descent, were left out of this process. More to the funding aspect of it than the other aspects of it."
– Nonprofit Community Leader

The responses to the questions of who is benefiting and who is burdened varied significantly, often depending on subjective interpretation. Some interviewees felt that community service providers, the County, and the communities being served were either burdened or benefiting from the process, while others asserted that "no one" was burdened and everyone was benefiting.

"Arlington County government is benefiting. I think it's the biggest beneficiary. This brings a lot of good image and attention, and I will be very hopeful that at the end of this year, we see who benefited from this, from the work that all these organizations are doing. That will be my hope. I do think that the biggest beneficiary right now is our government, our local government, because this looks really good." – Nonprofit Community Leader

"I do think that throughout this process, in my opinion, I think we've stayed really true to the recommendations that came from the BIPOC community leadership. And I think for me that is probably the biggest gold star in the whole process, is that it was really co created and we really use those recommendations as our North Star throughout the process. I'll also add that I think the technical assistance sessions were really beneficial to a lot of the applicants." – County Manager's Staff

EQUITY AS AN OUTCOME
In discussing this reformed process on equity, a recurring theme emerged: emphasis on relationships remain a powerful dynamic in demonstrating the County's commitment to addressing long-standing concerns about inequitable access and transparency in funding decisions. While some participants viewed this reformed process as a concrete example of putting equity into action, others raised concerns about the lack of clarity in how equity principles were applied, especially when cultivating relationships remain integral to the functions of the County

and community. They questioned whether the process alone could fully overcome the ongoing influence of established relationships, which still play a significant role in how the County and community interact and collaborate. While some found the separation of relationship and process to be blurred, others were more optimistic that the process can supersede any favor generated through relationship.

> *"I hope [the process] really does work as a true example of what equity in action looks like." – County Board Member*

> *"The goals and impacts of the project were not always clear, affecting the perceived equity of the outcomes." – County Board Member*

> *"So Arlington suffers from too much privilege in too few hands. And so that's... I mean, that's also why this is an excellent start, and I hope to see more." – Nonprofit Organization Applicant*

> *"And that's a part of equity, that some people who have insider knowledge know how to get what it is that they want or need, and others who don't have that insider knowledge don't. My work is so that everybody has access, or we expand... that we expand the pool. But... I think that's where Arlington's trying to go also. We're trying not to be a place where the loudest voice, or the whitest voice, or the richest voice, has all the room." – Nonprofit Organization Applicant*

> *"I think organizations that have achieved good outcomes basically have a good story to tell and can convey it, can prove it through sophisticated messaging or presentation. But people who have compelling outcomes and competency are going to benefit from this…Generally, more privileged organizations are going to be in a better place if they've got good outcomes. People who are able to think deeply and demonstrate how their services reflect improved outcomes for human beings—they're going to be beneficiaries of this … Certainly, I understand the concern of organizations wondering if those with a grant writer would be better off than the organization where the executive director does everything. But I think the awards kind of showed that didn't turn out to be the case. And I always trusted that the involvement of United Way here, and that people thinking about this stuff thoughtfully, would control those things … We heard concerns at all of these meetings that the organization with the communications department and fundraising team would dominate. I never thought that was going to be the case, and I think the results kind of prove that." – County Board Member*

IMPACT ON TRUST

This concern about the role of relationships impacting process points to the central theme of trust between the County and the community, a fundamental tenet of Arlington's racial equity initiative. The reformation of this funding process is a concrete example of how the County is following through in its commitment to repair decades of mistrust that have emerged between the

community and its local government, as delineated in the dual path approach from the collaboration between the County and the Community Leaders' group (see Appendix for detail). What emerged from discussion with participants is a nuanced perspective. For those who participated in this process, the effort to be more inclusive and transparent marked a promising step in rebuilding trust. For others, it felt that this may have perpetuated the old system of access and relationships and further deteriorated trust.

> *"Not that I don't trust the decisions or anything like that, but I think that there was... in terms of, like, the building trust with community part of this... I think it hurt some of the trust not being able to really articulate why, you know, this organization scored this high or why your organization did not score this high." – County Board Member*

> *"I don't sense that the trust level has gone up at all and, in fact, I think it has been depleted further." – County Board Member*

> *"There needs to be a system of accountability because that in itself becomes a foundation of the trust that you're hoping to cultivate or retain with the community." – County Manager's Office staff*

> *"The process has helped in making some progress towards building trust, but there's still a long way to go." – Nonprofit Community Leader*

> *"We did have some incremental progress about which I'm pleased were true to, I think. And I told Elizabeth and Amber, this was like, you all should be very proud of the work that you did. We were true to everything we said were going to do. We did not, you know, change the process. We didn't change anything. But the politics is separate ... and so if you can kind of square that in your mind ... I think that were still, we still had integrity, were honest, were transparent, all of the things that we wanted to do, and we showed what equity looks like. Is it hard for people? Yes. That's another thing that we showed. It's a challenge." – County Manager's Office staff*

EXAMINING THE POLITICAL LENS: A CALL FOR RACIAL EQUITY IN ARLINGTON

The analysis of communication, equity, trust, and relationships through the lens of racial equity presents a critical opportunity to reevaluate how Arlington County and its community functions— a chance to redefine the "Arlington Way." Participants in this study have consistently identified the relational dynamics within the County as pivotal in either perpetuating or disrupting inequity. This underscores the significant role of political influence in the County's allocation of resources and its communication with constituents.

At the core of this discussion is the recognition that Arlington County operates within a well-established system for decision-making. Although this process is ostensibly rooted in the principles of community dialogue and collaboration, there is a pervasive belief that a subset of the community leverages this system to their advantage, often to the detriment of historically marginalized populations. This phenomenon, colloquially referred to as the "Arlington Way," raises serious concerns about inclusivity and equity.

"There have been decades of writing about what the Arlington Way is. Everybody can argue about what it is, but certainly many people would say it was intended as a consensus building, transparent, like lots of community dialogue. And you could say, is it working or not? … I guess I would rather see it grounded in what are our community values and how we do our work together."
– County Board Member

However, the lived experiences of community members suggest a different reality. A nonprofit applicant observed, *"The Arlington way seems to, like, come as a proud slogan most of the time of being innovative, progressive, and also wanting to do things its own way. I think quickly that also has become, you know, this is the way that we do it, and we're not interested in learning any other way."*

This sentiment is echoed within the County itself. A representative from the County Manager's Office explained, *"The Arlington way means that there is a system or structure in place that has been accepted as the process for how people interact with the County… And it means that there is over reliance and over engagement, in my opinion, in terms of how far, how much to what end. People have opportunity to speak to and participate in government on the communications and engagement side, and that it is only those people who have really strong relationships, who are connected and or aware of how things actually work, that have, and have access to certain people that benefit from it."*

This perspective highlights a crucial issue: the Arlington Way appears to be deeply intertwined with existing power structures, favoring those with established connections. As one community leader pointed out, *"the Arlington way is building up people, organizations… It's not what you know, it's who you know…if you don't have that type of access, it makes it genuinely harder for you to … sometimes get the things that you need."*

The political alliances and generational connections that influence resource distribution often exclude people of color and the organizations that serve them. A community leader noted, *"So the money comes not just, like, from friendships. Right. It comes from these different types of alliances that are generational, that are political, and it often leaves out people of color and organizations that are serving through people of color."*

In further reflecting on the process, this community leader admitted, *"I don't think we scoped out the political connection at all early. Right. We kept thinking about it in this relational sense, but we didn't think about the political sense."*

This analysis reveals a crucial tension: while the community sees the County's decision-making process as heavily politicized and potentially exclusionary, the County views it as an established framework that the community must navigate. Both perspectives underscore the need for a racial equity lens in future decision-making processes.

To move forward, it is essential to evaluate future cycles of decision-making through this racial equity lens. A set of recommendations or priority areas, co-determined by both the County and the community, could guide this process and ensure that it reflects the values and needs of all

Arlington residents. Although the development of the process involved ample communication and transparency, lingering mistrust remains—especially among nonprofit organizations and board members—regarding how decisions were ultimately made and who was responsible for them. Addressing these concerns is crucial for building a more equitable process for the benefit of the Arlington community.

FUTURE IMPROVEMENTS

There was a consensus among interviewees that while the current system is not fundamentally flawed, there is significant room for improvement, particularly in how funding is assessed and aligned with community needs.

> *"While the system is not bad, I believe there's room for improvement in how we assess and align funding with identified community needs. Achieving the best principles of equity isn't just about fairness among those who seek government support; it's also about ensuring that our approach genuinely reflects the broader community's needs in a more robust way." – County Board Member*

Looking forward, participants offered several constructive suggestions for refining the process in future iterations:

A key area for improvement is broadening outreach efforts to ensure that smaller, grassroots organizations, which may not have established relationships with County officials or local nonprofit network, are fully aware of funding opportunities and feel adequately equipped to apply. The current process benefits those with existing connections to County officials, potentially disadvantaging less connected organizations. Potential improvements could include a collaborative communication plan between the County and nonprofit partners to ensure that new potential applicants have equal access to information and resources, thereby leveling the playing field for all participants.

There was a strong call for increased capacity-building opportunities, especially for smaller organizations who may not have previously developed logic models or feel 'overwhelmed' with the requirements to submit an application. These opportunities would help equip organizations with the necessary skills and resources to navigate the grant application process more effectively.

> *"It's important for the County to be very proactive in providing capacity-building opportunities that don't necessarily have to be technical sessions."*
> *– Nonprofit Organization Applicant*

Improving the application process, particularly through a better use of technology, was another common recommendation. Enhancements in this area could simplify the application procedure and help reduce the technical barriers faced by applicants.

> *"The application online could have used a little bit more of technology to identify where something was lacking." – County Manager's Office Staff*

Additionally, there was feedback that the process did not sufficiently address racial equity, particularly in terms of accessibility for organizations led by people of color. It was noted that information should be more accessible, especially for those not using grant writers.

> *"We need timeliness and clarity...repeating information and making it more accessible to people who are not using grant writers... It would be great if [the NOFA] came out earlier."*
> *– Nonprofit Community Leader*

CONCLUSION

The evaluation of the Arlington Racial Equity NOFA project reveals a multifaceted effort to enhance equity, inclusiveness, and fairness in the grant-making process. While significant progress has been made toward these goals, the feedback from interviewees highlights several challenges and areas for improvement. The insights provided offer valuable guidance for refining the process in future iterations, ensuring that it better meets the needs of all community organizations involved. This ongoing commitment to improvement will be essential for sustaining the project's positive impact and advancing its objectives of equity and inclusivity.

Overall, the project was seen as a necessary step towards more equitable and transparent funding practices, despite its imperfections. Many participants acknowledged the learning curve and expressed hope that future iterations would build on the lessons learned to better serve the community's diverse needs.

> *"Like, I really felt throughout the whole process that they were dedicated to meeting the needs of the community through supporting these organizations ... that's the best part about this whole process, is that they're supporting nonprofits that are really ... in the trenches doing hard work ... some of these community groups are doing stuff that no one wants to do." – Community Reviewer*

> *"You know, very easily, there were multiple points of things just getting uncomfortable where people could have just walked away and said you know what? Not now. We'll continue doing business as usual. If it ain't broke – don't fix it. You know, all those things that people do to prevent doing meaningful change; all of those things were apparent within this process. And so, I believe that by going through it, sticking with it, coming out with something that was ... smart, good policy at the end was sort of a necessary step for an organization who's really, truly committed to change. You know, if you say that you're committed to change, you actually have to do so when it's easier not to. And I think this was a case where it would have been easier not to."*
> *– County Board Member*

STATEMENT OF INTENDED PURPOSE:

This process evaluation provides a comprehensive overview of Arlington County, Viriginia's RACE to Rebuilding Trust and Community Grant project, tracing its development from its inception as a community-county partnership through the conclusion of the first year's grant cycle. The evaluation is grounded in a reflective approach. It centers the perspectives of diverse stakeholder groups as a complement to the feedback the County has received during this pilot year. The report synthesizes the voices of a wide range of stakeholders into a cohesive narrative that serves two main purposes: to inform those who have not been engaged throughout the project over the past three years (or are learning about it for the first time) and, to offer insights that will help refine the process and foster continued dialogue in an ongoing effort to build a more equitable community for all Arlingtonians.

It is important to acknowledge the potential for researcher bias in this qualitative process evaluation due to the author's involvement in the project since its inception. The use of Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodologies inherently positions the author as an active participant in the research process. While this level of engagement allows for a richer, more nuanced understanding of the project's context and dynamics, this dual role has the potential to introduce bias due to the author's deep familiarity with and vested interest in the project's outcomes.
To mitigate these concerns, reflexive practices were employed throughout the evaluation. These practices included regular self-reflection, peer debriefing, and the triangulation of data sources to ensure that the findings are grounded in the lived experiences of participants and are not unduly shaped by the authors' perspectives. However, complete objectivity may not be achievable in this context. The findings of this evaluation should be interpreted with this understanding in mind.

In presenting the data, ellipses (…) have been used in the main text to indicate portions of dialogue that have been omitted for the sake of brevity. These omissions do not alter the overall meaning of the participants' responses, ensuring that the essence of their perspectives is preserved.

This report aims to offer a meaningful synthesis of diverse viewpoints, guiding both new and returning stakeholders in understanding the full scope of the project while providing valuable insights for its continued improvement and the ongoing pursuit of equity within the community.

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APPENDIX

Timeline of Events
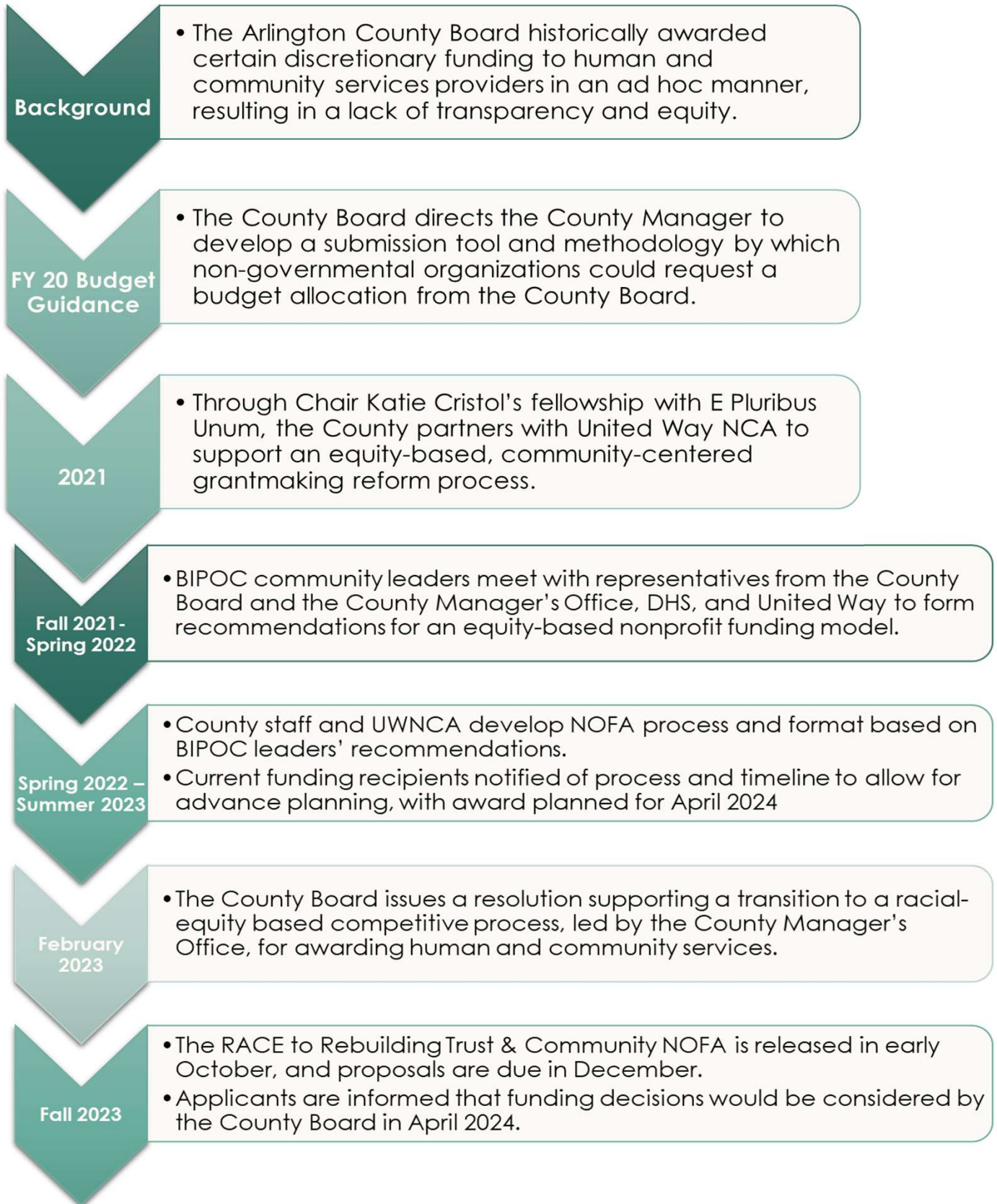Arlington Racial Equity Project One Pager
Arlington Racial Equity NOFA Feedback Sessions
Interview Form template
Consent Form template

Arlington Racial Equity Project: An Equity-based Nonprofit Funding Model for Arlington

Timeline of Key Events

Background
- The Arlington County Board historically awarded certain discretionary funding to human and community services providers in an ad hoc manner, resulting in a lack of transparency and equity.

FY 20 Budget Guidance
- The County Board directs the County Manager to develop a submission tool and methodology by which non-governmental organizations could request a budget allocation from the County Board.

2021
- Through Chair Katie Cristol's fellowship with E Pluribus Unum, the County partners with United Way NCA to support an equity-based, community-centered grantmaking reform process.

Fall 2021- Spring 2022
- BIPOC community leaders meet with representatives from the County Board and the County Manager's Office, DHS, and United Way to form recommendations for an equity-based nonprofit funding model.

Spring 2022 – Summer 2023
- County staff and UWNCA develop NOFA process and format based on BIPOC leaders' recommendations.
- Current funding recipients notified of process and timeline to allow for advance planning, with award planned for April 2024

February 2023
- The County Board issues a resolution supporting a transition to a racial-equity based competitive process, led by the County Manager's Office, for awarding human and community services.

Fall 2023
- The RACE to Rebuilding Trust & Community NOFA is released in early October, and proposals are due in December.
- Applicants are informed that funding decisions would be considered by the County Board in April 2024.

ARLINGTON COUNTY RACIAL EQUITY PROJECT SUMMARY

A JOURNEY IN GOVERNMENT-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP

PROJECT OVERVIEW

WHAT – *A working group to center BIPOC community voices in making recommendations for changes to Arlington County's funding processes.*

WHY – *To reform Arlington's* **community services funding** *and disrupt "the Arlington Way," to* **be more inclusive,** *and to* **center BIPOC voices** *so that processes are* **more transparent, accessible, and racial equitable.**

WHO – *Representatives from community-based service providers and from Arlington County board.*

> *What is "The Arlington Way"?*
> *A colloquial reference to the local status quo: a funding process that prioritizes relationships, lacks transparency and access, and has historically disadvantaged BIPOC community organizations and residents in favor of the "usual" voices that have been predominantly homeowners, White, and older.*

PROJECT TIMELINE

START

Realizing Arlington's Commitment to Equity's (R.A.C.E.) focus group on racial inequity found a **need for the County to engage the voices of safety-net eligible residents**

Arlington **planned a needs assessment** to link changes to the lived experiences of community residents who don't engage the County

Arlington would **engage residents via trusting relationships** that community-based service providers have in their communities

Arlington **invited United Way NCA and DEI expert** to design and deliver a needs assessment

Project team engaged community service providers to **nominate community leaders** connected to BIPOC-led organizations and/or serving BIPOC communities

Community leadership group was formed with intention to engage their respective community populations

Leadership group signaled that the **project design and engagement perpetuated inequal power dynamics** amidst a climate of long-standing distrust, demanding meaningful commitment to change from status quo

RESET

Opportunity to reset the project's design and approach to meet identified needs as well as a starting point for wider engagement with community members, other service providers, and County stakeholders

REFORM PROCESS

Redefined scope to focus on a specific funding process as evidence of **County's commitment to change status quo**

Co-design and shared decision-making power from the start provided model for true community-government partnership in reforming government practices

Discussion centered on shifting priorities in grant awards to **focus on services received by community members** over needs of organizations providing essential services.

Progress in seeking to **address the underlying root causes** rather than limiting response to latest crises and immediate need

Result is **a set of recommendations** developed to make changes to the process of County awarded funding

REPAIR TRUST

Arlington County and community Leadership Group recognized an urgent need **to repair historic distrust** between community members and County.

Arlington County must continue **to develop internal processes and training** to ensure staff engage community members with a deep understanding of the historic and cultural drivers of inequity that persist today.

Arlington and Leadership group **commit to engaging the wider community** to invite their perspective and contribution toward collective change of structural inequity.

PROJECT RECOMMENDATIONS

Focus areas of changes to process

PROPOSAL EVALUATION

Develop holistic evaluation approach that invites community to form central part of defining needs, evaluating applications, encouraging collaboration and community voice when selecting awardees

PROPOSALS STRUCTURE

Establish competitive NOFAs that are structured, transparent, accessible, and offer technical support throughout the process

FUNDING AWARDS

Create mechanisms for greater transparency, flexibility and feedback to term-limited awards wherever possible

ACCOUNTABILITY

Balance a system of structured accountability and reporting with responsive and supportive oversight

NEXT STEPS

Dual priorities to pursue

REFORM PROCESS

Implement recommendations with fidelity in redesigning how the County Board allocates community services funding.

The impact of changes to the grant process can take time to become visible, so small incremental changes must be consistent to demonstrate the commitment that the County and community are making in collaborating toward meaningful change and greater racial equity for all Arlington community members.

TRUST REPAIR

Develop an extensive communication campaign to bring diverse community stakeholders to support this project's goal.

Courageous conversations to identify points of tension, the root causes of distrust between County and community, and to co-create a path toward repair and continued collaboration.

LESSONS LEARNED

Valuable insights from our collective experience

Co-design with community **begins at the ideation stage**. All stakeholders need to have **agency** in setting the terms of engagement and equitably sharing power

Success of government-community partnership dependent on **mutual trust**, which includes **shared understanding, sufficient time, and accountability**

Pursuing racial equity is multi-faceted, driven by diverse philosophies and successful only through **candid and transparent communication**. Co-creation means government **sharing power** with community leaders through **equitable participation and communication**

Arlington Racial Equity NOFA Project – 2024-2025

Feedback Sessions Summary

Key Insights from BIPOC Leaders and Applicants

1. **Collaboration and Reporting**: Applicants appreciated the requirement to collaborate with other organizations and suggested clearer reporting guidelines to balance accountability with the ability to deliver services effectively.

2. **Technical Assistance (TA) Sessions**: TA sessions were valuable, but scheduling flexibility is needed, especially for day sessions. However, the logical model was challenging and could benefit from restructuring.

3. **Funding Clarity and Sustainability**: Applicants emphasized the need for clear communication about available funding amounts, sustainability challenges, and the impact of funding limitations on service delivery. They also highlighted the benefits of multi-year funding and the need for clear criteria for funding decisions.

4. **Application Process and Documentation**: Concerns were raised about page limits, font specifications, and the challenge of integrating responses into a single document. There was also a desire for a more user-friendly portal and better document version control.

5. **Partnerships and SMART Goals**: Clarity on partnership requirements and better examples of SMART goals were requested. The emphasis on new partnerships felt burdensome and not always necessary.

6. **Equity and Inclusion**: Participants valued the RACE equity lens and the need for more diversity in the process. There were calls for enhanced DEI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion) policies and participatory research.

7. **Review Process**: Applicants suggested a more equitable review process, with clear distinctions in the rubric and a tiered approach to grant awards based on organizational size.

Feedback from Reviewers

1. **Rubric and Question Clarity**: Reviewers highlighted the need for clearer, more concise questions and a rubric that better distinguishes between different types of revenue sources and program priorities.

2. **Funding Recommendations**: Reviewers were uncomfortable making funding recommendations and preferred focusing on whether applicants should be funded. They suggested a tiered approach to support smaller organizations.

3. **TA and RACE Framework**: More TA sessions were recommended, particularly around the RACE framework. The rubric should be updated to better integrate these components.

Board Insights

1. **Application Burden**: The Board recognized the burden of lengthy proposals, particularly around the holidays, and suggested earlier communication of applicant numbers and funding requests.

2. **Tiered Opportunities**: The Board supported the idea of tiered opportunities based on organizational size and suggested site visits as part of the evaluation process.

3. **Equitable Process**: Concerns were raised about the fairness of the competition for organizations that previously received funding without competition.

Leadership Insights

1. **Holistic Review Process**: Leadership called for a broader review process to ensure equitable funding distribution across service categories, organizational sizes, and populations served.

2. **Community-Centered Focus**: Maintaining a community-centered focus was emphasized, along with clearer goals and priorities from the Board.

3. **Coordination with Equity-Focused Grants**: There was a need for earlier decision-making and better coordination with other equity-focused grants.

Recommendations for Future NOFA

1. **One NOFA with Tiered Options**: Propose a single NOFA with two tiers based on organizational operating budgets to ensure fair competition.

2. **Clear Funding Maximums**: Establish clear maximum funding amounts for each tier, ensuring they are sufficient to sustain the proposed work.

3. **Align with Other Grants**: Coordinate timelines and funding decisions with related grants like the RACE NOFA and CPHD.

4. **Community Reviewer Process**: Implement a more structured and inclusive community reviewer process, with clear expectations, fair compensation, and language support.

5. **Diversity and Equity**: Ensure diversity in the review process and address any gaps in representation through proactive measures.

6. **Streamlined Timeline**: Propose a streamlined timeline for the entire NOFA process to ensure timely decision-making and awards distribution.

Arlington Racial Equity Project Evaluation – Semi-structured Interview Question Bank

CHK	ITEM	QUESTION/RESPONSE
	Interviewee Name	
	Organization	
	Title / Position	
	Date / Time	
	Interviewers	
	Stakeholder Relationship to Project	- Arlington County Manager's Office - Arlington County Board Member - Nonprofit Organization Applicant - Community Leaders Group - Community Volunteer Reviewer - Racial Equity Contractor - Community Resident
	Consent to Interview	Yes/No
	Introduction	- Who we are and the project that we're doing: Evaluation of the Arlington Racial Equity Project - What we seek from you: Your perspective and insight; your participation is voluntary, and you may stop at any time. - What you can expect from your participation: 60-min semi-structured interview (X) questions; we shared (Y) documents with you ahead of time and will walk through them with you. Please share your reactions, thoughts, opinions to help inform your experience of the process. - How we will use this information: The transcripts will be preserved by United Way NCA and your participation will be limited to the description of your stakeholder relationship to the project. Instead of saying your name, we will say 'Nonprofit applicant,' or 'volunteer reviewer'. SCRIPT: Hello. My name is _____, and I'm here with my colleague _____. We are part of the Arlington RACE to Rebuilding Trust and Community NOFA development team and are conducting a process evaluation to gather perspectives from diverse stakeholders.

		Thank you for agreeing to participate in today's interview. Your reflections and insights will inform a summative report on this project that will be shared with the County board and Arlington Community. We anticipate that the interview will take no more than an hour. During that time, we'll ask a set of questions about the different phases and activities of this project. If any of the questions are unclear, please let us know, and we'll rephrase the question to provide you with the best opportunity to respond effectively. If at any point you want to pause the interview, please let us know. Before we get started, do you have any questions for us?
	Prompt Question on Emerging Topic	• (If mentioned) You mentioned the "Arlington Way." Tell us what that phrase means to you? • How has this project affected, if any, your perception of the Arlington Way? • (Re NOFA Review phase, if appropriate) What are your impressions on the timeline of the NOFA process, and communication from the County post-submission? • (Re NOFA Post-application, if appropriate) Did you attend the post-application feedback TA sessions for your proposals? If YES – were they helpful? If NO – why not?
	Opening Question	• Tell us about yourself and your relation to the Arlington Racial Equity NOFA project as part of the Realizing Arlington's Commitment to Equity initiative. • How did you come to learn about it? (Prompt) To what extent do you feel you were involved?
	Racial Equity Roundtable	• Did you attend the Racial Equity Round table in April of 2021? • What was your reaction or perspective on Arlington County organizing that event? • Did you have any impressions or takeaways from that event? • In the summer of 2021, what was your understanding of racial equity in Arlington County?
	Project Launch Phase	• How were you involved in the Arlington Racial Equity NOFA project as part of the Realizing Arlington's Commitment to Equity initiative. • At the project's outset, what was your perception on what would be accomplished?

		Project Steering Group Phase	- What was your understanding of the Community Leadership / Project Steering Group's purpose and goals? - In your view, did the group achieve the Group's purpose and goals? - What challenges or barriers, if any, did you experience in participating in this group? - What progress or achievements, if any, came as a result of participating in this group? - What are your impressions, if any, from your participation in this Group?
		NOFA Design Phase	- What was your understanding of the NOFA Design Project Team's purpose and goals? - To what extent did you participate in this phase of the process? - What challenges or barriers, if any, did you experience in participating in this group? - What progress or achievements, if any, did you experience in participating in this group? - What are your impressions, if any, from your participation in this Group?
		NOFA Application Phase	Considering the Application Phase overall: - In rating from (Poor, Moderate, Good, Excellent), how would you rate the NOFA Application Phase (from open date to deadline): - Access - Transparency - Equity - Please share why you gave these ratings - To what extent did you participate in this phase of the process? - Did you participate in or use any of the following resources during the application phase: - Technical Assistance Sessions 1-4 (live or recordings) - Logic Model or Budget Template - Arlington RACE website and Frequently Asked Questions - What challenges or barriers, if any, did you experience in participating in this process?

		• What progress or achievements, if any, did you experience in participating in this process? • What are your impressions, if any, from your participation in this process?

	NOFA Review Phase	Considering the Review Phase overall:
		 • In rating from (Poor, Moderate, Good, Excellent), how would you rate the NOFA Review Phase (from open date to deadline):
		     o Access
		     o Transparency
		     o Equity
		 • Please share why you gave these ratings
		
		 • To what extent did you participate in this phase of the process?
		 • What challenges or barriers, if any, did you experience in participating in this process?
		 • What progress or achievements, if any, did you experience in participating in this process?
		 • What are your impressions, if any, from your participation in this process?
		 • (Re NOFA Review phase, if appropriate) What are your impressions on the timeline of the NOFA process, and communication from the County post-submission?

	NOFA Award Phase	Considering the Award Phase overall:
		 • In rating from (Poor, Moderate, Good, Excellent), how would you rate the NOFA Award Phase (from open date to deadline):
		     o Access
		     o Transparency
		     o Equity
		 • Please share why you gave these ratings
		
		 • To what extent did you participate in this phase of the process?
		 • What challenges or barriers, if any, did you experience in participating in this process?
		 • What progress or achievements, if any, did you experience in participating in this process?
		 • What are your impressions, if any, from your participation in this process?

		• (Re NOFA Post-application, if appropriate) Did you attend the post-application feedback TA sessions for your proposals? If YES – were they helpful? If NO – why not?

	Overall Reflection	• What are your overall impressions of the project?
		 • To what extent do you feel that the project fulfilled its stated purpose of 'MISSION'?
		 • This project aimed at promoting greater racial equity in the community. Using Arlington's equity lens, could you share your perspective on:
		     ○ Who is missing?
		     ○ Who is benefiting?
		     ○ Who is burdened?
		 • What further changes would you like to see to the process?

	Closing	• Please share anything else on your mind about this overall process and experience.

Project Title: Arlington Racial Equity Project - An Equity-based Nonprofit Funding Model for Arlington County

Project Process Evaluation – Participant Overview and Consent to Participate

Purpose of Process Evaluation

You are being asked to participate in a process evaluation conducted by Scott Mengebier, Stephanie Crane, Madeleine Angerdina, and colleagues from United Way of the National Capital Area. This process evaluation has multiple purposes. The first is to learn from the perspectives of diverse stakeholders who participated in this process, and the second is to determine whether the project impacted access, transparency, and racial equity to the nonprofit funding model in Arlington County.

Evaluation Procedures

Should you decide to participate in this evaluation, you will be asked to sign this consent form once all your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. This study consists of a 1-1.5-hour interview that will be administered online via Zoom in a personal meeting room. You will be asked to provide answers to a series of questions related to your experience with and knowledge of the Arlington Racial Equity Project. Your interview will be audio recorded and transcribed by Firefly.AI software unless you prefer for the interviewer to take notes instead.

Time Required

Participation in this study will require 1-2 hours of your time.

Risks

The evaluators do not perceive more than minimal risks from your involvement in this evaluation. A minimal risk is the possible breach of confidentiality, but the evaluators have taken several precautions to lessen this risk. Some ways the evaluators will work to keep participant identity confidential are: 1) conducting the interviews in a secure online setting; 2) keeping participation data and interview data separate from any data that identifies participants; 3) using a pseudonym when participants' responses are included in results; 4) ensuring any identifying data are kept on locked computers only with evaluators named on this form; and 4) allowing participants to read reports or results before they are released to check that there is no identifying information included.

Project Title: Arlington Racial Equity Project - An Equity-based Nonprofit Funding Model for Arlington County

Project Process Evaluation – Participant Overview and Consent to Participate Page 2 of 3

Benefits

There are no direct benefits to participating in this evaluation. However, there are some potential benefits from the evaluation. There are possible direct benefits to Arlington County if the knowledge produced from this evaluation helps the municipal government improve their grantmaking processes and promote racial equity. The knowledge from this research could also, possibly, be applied to other counties to improve their grantmaking processes and approach to promoting racial equity.

Confidentiality

The results of this evaluation will be presented to Arlington County Board for the purposes of furthering their commitment to promoting racial equity across their systems and processes. The results will also be shared with community stakeholders who express interest in learning more about the project. The results of this project will be coded in such a way that the respondent's identity will not be attached to the final form of this study. The evaluator retains the right to use and publish non-identifiable data. While individual responses are confidential, aggregate data will be presented representing averages or generalizations about the responses. Individual responses that cannot be identified may also be included in the final form of the study. All data will be stored in a secure location accessible only to the evaluators. Upon completion of the study, all information that matches up individual respondents with their answers, including audio tapes will be destroyed.

Participation & Withdrawal

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to choose not to participate. Should you choose to participate, you can withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any individual question without consequences. Your participation is not connected in any way to your involvement with Arlington County.

Questions about the Evaluation

*Project Title: Arlington Racial Equity Project - An Equity-based Nonprofit Funding Model for Arlington
County*

Project Process Evaluation – Participant Overview and Consent to Participate Page 3 of 3

If you have questions or concerns during the time of your participation in this
evaluation or after its completion, or you would like to receive a copy of the final
aggregate results of this evaluation, please contact:

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Stephanie Crane
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Madeleine Angerdina
Data Associate, United Way of the National Capital Area
Email: mangerdina@uwnca.org

Giving of Consent

I have read this consent form, and I understand what is being requested of me as a
participant in this evaluation. I freely consent to participate. I have been given
satisfactory answers to my questions. The evaluator provided me with a copy of this
form. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.

I give consent to be (video/audio) taped during my interview. (initials) _____

Printed Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

ARLINGTON

VIRGINIA