

Pursuant to Executive Order 14091 (February 16, 2023) on "Further Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government"

2023 Equity Action Plan Summary

U.S. Department of Homeland Security

Delivering equity through DHS

By working to advance equity throughout the Department, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) embodies its commitment to its mission: With honor and integrity, we safeguard the American people, our homeland, and our values. As part of his priorities for the Department, Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro N. Mayorkas stated that his goal is to enhance openness and transparency, to build greater trust with the American people, and to ensure the protection of the privacy, civil rights, civil liberties, and human rights of the communities we serve. Inherent in that vital role is an unwavering commitment to uphold the American values of advancing equity and safeguarding civil rights and civil liberties for all people, especially members of underserved communities. DHS strives to treat all people in a fair, just, and impartial manner.

New strategies to advance equity

DHS has identified nine areas of focus for its 2023 Equity Action Plan through internal assessments, feedback from program offices, engagement with local communities via outreach events, existing evidence, and more. DHS will continue to engage the public on these action areas, its progress, and next steps throughout the year and beyond.

1. *Reduce barriers to citizenship and naturalization through continued evaluation of programs, policies, and outreach opportunities.* *There are proven beneficial economic and civic outcomes for immigrants who become citizens, including increased homeownership and lower levels of poverty. However, there is a significant gap between the annual naturalization rate and the annual size of the population eligible to naturalize. Commonly cited barriers to naturalization include: a lack of understanding about the naturalization process; a real or perceived inability to meet the English language requirement that is part of the naturalization process; a lack of ability to pay application fees; and a lack of understanding about reduced fees and fee waiver options. Such impacts can be considerable when aggregated to the national level. To address these barriers and others, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) will:*

- Award and administer \$25 million in grants to provide high-quality citizenship instruction classes and provide naturalization application services within the authorized practice of immigration law.
- Evaluate Form N-648, Medical Certification for Disability Exceptions, for burden reduction, assess the possibility of allowing additional medical professionals to certify N-648s, and implement any appropriate changes.

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- Consider efforts to redesign parts of the naturalization test. One of the goals of the proposed redesign is to reduce barriers to citizenship by creating a more fair and transparent speaking test.
- Expand the number of Citizenship Ambassadors, who help demystify the naturalization process and increase awareness of the life-changing impact of United States (U.S.) citizenship, and explore various marketing activities to promote naturalization.

2. *Promote equitable use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology across the Department through the development and application of new guidance as well as intra-agency coordination.* Given increased reliance on AI within DHS's homeland security missions, members of underserved communities may be concerned about possible risk of disproportionate or disparate treatment or impacts, such as unmerited additional scrutiny or improper denial of benefits based on erroneous reliance on algorithms, or on the potential for algorithms to operate in a manner that exhibits inappropriate biases in violation of law and DHS policy. To address these barriers and others, DHS will:

- Continue to implement the recently issued [DHS-wide Policy Statement](#), signed by the Secretary, regarding the use and implementation of AI technology, which includes explicit privacy, civil rights, civil liberties, and equity guidelines (including nondiscrimination provisions).
- Issue application-specific policy, as appropriate, including a DHS-wide policy on facial recognition and facial detection technologies, requiring and enabling the minimization of risk of improper bias in operational use and safeguarding of individuals against risk of disproportionate or disparate impacts based on protected

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characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, gender, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, and disability.

- Leverage the ongoing work of the DHS AI Task Force (AITF) and the DHS AI Policy Working Group by establishing a DHS-specific AI risk management framework, including a focus on trustworthy and responsible AI that protects privacy, civil rights, and civil liberties and advances equity.

3. *Counter Domestic Violent Extremism (DVE) and targeted violence through a public health-informed approach.* *As the Department continues to tackle DVE threats, members of certain underserved communities (e.g., AMEMSA, Black, Jewish, and LGBTQI+ communities) continue to have concerns about DVE threats that impact their communities. To address these barriers and others, DHS will:*

- Build capacity of prevention professionals / providers by developing evidence-based trainings and technical packages, including data-driven information on how underserved communities are often the targets and victims of domestic terrorists.
- Enhance equity in the [Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships \(CP3\) Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention \(TVTP\) Grant Program](#) by investing in the diversification of grant applications for the FY 2024 grant cycle through an intentional outreach campaign to underrepresented groups and communities.
- Prioritize and expand education programs regarding tools and resources available for combatting DVE threats to underserved communities using a public health-informed approach to target violence and terrorism prevention and raise awareness of this approach through a public communications strategy.

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4. Advance equity for persons who are limited English proficient (LEP) by strengthening language access programs.

In carrying out its varied homeland security mission, DHS encounters millions of members of the public every day, many of whom are LEP and may experience communication challenges or barriers in accessing DHS programs. To address these barriers and others, DHS will:

- Implement the DHS Language Access Plan and the DHS Indigenous Languages Plan to ensure that the Department's language access programs are effective.
- Integrate language access considerations when assessing potential barriers that underserved communities may face in accessing and benefitting from the agency's programs and activities and developing strategies to address the identified barriers.
- Explore how limited English proficiency impacts access to DHS programs and activities for members of underserved communities, including but not limited to Black, Latino, Indigenous and Native American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander persons, Indigenous migrants of Latin America, and persons with disabilities, and seek to address barriers for individuals who are LEP and belong to multiple such communities.

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5. Advance equity in DHS's screening activities through updates to training, policy, and procedures. *Members of the public, including those from underserved communities continue to report concerns regarding their experiences when undergoing screening, including allegations of racial and ethnic profiling and improper treatment of persons with disabilities. To address these barriers and others, DHS will:*

- Train and ensure DHS law enforcement personnel comply and adhere to DHS [Policy Statement 500-02](#), Reaffirming the Commitment to Nondiscrimination in Department of Homeland Security Activities, and any subsequent policy reaffirming nondiscrimination and prohibiting profiling on the basis of protected individual characteristics (race, ethnicity, gender, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, and disability) in all DHS law enforcement and security activities.
- Expand and streamline the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) Passenger Support Specialist program, which provides previously scheduled and on-the-spot assistance to travelers requiring accommodations (e.g., for disabilities, translation services) or those who have concerns about the airport security screening process, in order to ensure consistency at airports across the nation.
- U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) will develop an agency-wide directive to define the roles and responsibilities of CBP offices and personnel to provide religious accommodations for members of the public during CBP-conducted services, programs, and activities.

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6. Advance equity for the 574 federally recognized Tribal Nations and their citizens by ensuring appropriate Tribal consideration and representation in the Department's work.

During consultations, Tribal Nations have reported equity concerns about inaccessibility and unfairness in grant and contract opportunities, screening and handling of sacred items, lack of DHS staff and other resources dedicated to fulfilling DHS responsibilities to the Tribal Nations, lack of representation on some advisory councils and committees, and uncertainty that DHS would pursue modifications to unfair practices that might require legislative fixes. To address these barriers and others, DHS will:

- Conduct a review of contract opportunities and grant funding opportunity announcements prior to release to determine if equity can be further advanced through design.
- Examine policies and procedures to determine whether, consistent with mission constraints, they provide for the respectful handling of sacred and cultural items. Train locally and nationally within DHS agencies that handle these sacred and cultural items.
- Pursue adequate staffing and resources where needed to meet Tribal Nations' needs and ensure equitable service delivery.
- Utilize the Secretary's Tribal Homeland Security Advisory Council's forthcoming recommendations on ways to enhance equitable access to the Department's programs and resources, including grant opportunities.

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7. Advance equity for persons seeking humanitarian protection during immigration processing by strengthening programs available to assist them.

To access the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, applicants need to be interviewed by USCIS while they are overseas, which presents many logistical and travel challenges for both the refugees and USCIS staff. When USCIS has no permanent presence in a geographic area, processing occurs when USCIS has the staff to make several international trips to complete different processing steps, thereby increasing the processing time. There are numerous steps involved in processing benefits for refugee populations, such as medical exams, refugee interviews, finalization of the decision, and assurances for placement with domestic resettlement agencies. These steps typically take place sequentially and may take a long time in between steps. To address these barriers and others, DHS will:

- Reduce barriers to humanitarian benefits by leveraging technology, increasing access, enhancing process efficiencies, and seeking opportunities to reduce fees.
- Strengthen resources for non-detained noncitizens released on an alternative to detention by building on existing case management programs, like the Case Management Pilot Program, which provides case management, legal information and screening, trafficking screening, and connection to a range of social services.
- As enumerated in DHS's National Action Plan to implement the Gender Policy Council Strategy, USCIS and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) will work to expand access to T and U nonimmigrant benefits and Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) protections.

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8. Advance equity in the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Individual Assistance (IA) Program to increase participation of underserved communities and address documented disparities in program administration.

Disaster survivors who have serious needs for emergency food, water, infant formula, diapers, or other essentials may experience a period of hardship due to a lack of access to credit or savings. To address barriers and suggested changes raised by stakeholders, DHS / FEMA will:

- Publish an interim final rule (IFR) amending its regulations governing the Individual Assistance program to increase equity by simplifying processes, removing barriers to entry, and increasing eligibility for certain types of assistance under the program.
- Increase eligibility for home repair assistance by amending the definitions and application of the terms “safe,” “sanitary,” and “functional,” allowing assistance for certain accessibility-related items, and amending FEMA’s approach to evaluating insurance proceeds.
- Allow for the re-opening of the applicant registration period when the President adds new counties to the major disaster declaration.
- Simplify the documentation requirements for continued temporary housing assistance.

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9. Advance equity through Community Disaster Resilience Zones (CDRZs). FEMA's National Advisory Council has found that smaller, less affluent communities with fewer resources cannot access funding to appropriately prepare for a disaster, which leads to inadequate response and recovery and little opportunity for mitigation. To address this barrier and others, FEMA will:

- Identify disadvantaged census tracts most at risk from natural hazards through implementation of the [Community Disaster Resilience Zones Act of 2022](#), including underserved rural areas, and provide targeted support to communities within or containing CDRZ census tracts to support them in resilience planning and project scoping.
- Implement Benefit-Cost Analysis (BCA) enhancements for all relevant mitigation programs, including incorporating equity weights into BCA.
- Develop a Recovery and Resilience Resource Portal, with ideas and information on available funding opportunities for state, local, Tribal, and territorial partners and community decision-makers.

What DHS accomplished

Below is a sampling of DHS's progress delivering on equity and racial justice since its first Equity Action Plan in 2022.

- ***Updated USCIS Form N-648, Medical Certification for Disability Exceptions, and related Policy Manual guidance.***
Applicants for naturalization with a physical or developmental disability or mental impairment may request an exception to the English and civics testing requirements for naturalization. This form and the [Policy Manual update](#) streamline the process for applicants to claim and substantiate a disability by eliminating unnecessary and duplicative questions.
- ***Prioritized reaching the most vulnerable populations, including victims of trafficking, in their languages and in a culturally appropriate manner.***
This work of the USCIS Language Services Branch (LSB), which spanned two fiscal years and involved multiple language specialists, resulted in approximately 1,000 pages of translation.
- ***Updated the PreCheck® application process by allowing individuals to select their gender marker based on self-attestation, regardless of sex assigned at birth.***
The TSA application was updated to include additional gender marker options to better serve non-binary and gender non-conforming travelers.

What DHS accomplished

- ***Deployed TSA’s new Advanced Imaging Technology (AIT) software for screening systems at airports across the country.***

This update eliminates the need for Transportation Security Officers to determine a passenger’s gender prior to AIT screening and is projected to reduce the instances of enhanced screening for transgender persons and members of other underserved communities.

- ***Exceeded all small business prime and socioeconomic goals as negotiated with the Small Business Administration in FY 2022.***

This equated to \$9 billion awarded to small businesses, including \$4 billion to small disadvantaged businesses. DHS is the largest spending agency to have this level of goal achievement.

- ***Released the Operational Draft of the Public Assistance Program Delivery Guide, which included considerations for FEMA recipients and applicants to conduct response and recovery efforts in an equitable manner.***

The [Guide](#), released in September 2022 by FEMA’s Office for Public Assistance, includes a performance metric for the prioritization of communities rated as highly socially vulnerable, including underserved rural areas.

What DHS accomplished

- ***Supported Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) targeted by bomb threats.***

In 2022, the Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) Office for Bombing Prevention (OBP) conducted 27 courses for HBCU students and faculty in prevention and building resilience, training more than 1,200 participants.

- ***Promoted equity in the Nonprofit Security Grant Program (NSGP).***

In FY 2023, FEMA advanced considerations of equity in awarding [NSGP](#) funding by adding up to 15 additional points to the scores of organizations that demonstrate how they serve an underserved community or population or that are located within an underserved community. Additionally, applicants who had never received NSGP funding had 15 points added to their project score (a scoring metric continued from FY 2022).

- ***Increased use of video technology for asylum interviews.***

In FY 2023, DHS began increasing the use of video technology to conduct I-589 asylum interviews domestically, and I-590 refugee interviews internationally, so that applicants living in remote locations will not have to wait so long or travel so far.