Racial Impact Statement Policies: An Important Tool for Addressing Systemic Racism

What are racial impact statements? Racial impact statements are a tool for lawmakers to evaluate the potential harms or discriminatory effects of a proposed policy, practice, or bill. Many state and local governments, including Pennsylvania, use fiscal and environmental impact assessment tools to understand the impacts of proposed policies on a state’s finances or environmental wellbeing. Racial impact statements similarly allow lawmakers to determine whether pending legislation, policies and practices are likely to create or exacerbate existing racial disparities.

What are some examples of racial impact statement policies? One of President Biden’s first Executive Orders, “Executive Order on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government,” required that all Federal Agencies assess whether underserved communities “face systemic barriers in accessing benefits and opportunities available pursuant to those policies and programs.” At least nine states have also implemented mechanisms for the preparation and consideration of racial impact statements. But local governments have been the true leaders on racial impact assessments. Seattle’s Racial and Social Justice Initiative (RSJI) has required all city departments to use a racial equity analysis in policy and budget decisions since 2005. Every city department must submit a RSJI work plan to the mayor each year, and the city provides a Racial Equity Toolkit to give the departments guidance. Cities in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Oregon have followed Seattle’s lead. In 2021, Chicago put out the first ever racial equity impact assessment to guide allocation of federal Low-Income Housing Tax Credits.

Why should Philadelphia adopt a racial impact statement policy? In Philadelphia, racial impact statements can be an important tool to help lawmakers understand how decisions will affect marginalized communities. By evaluating proposed policies before they are enacted, legislators can mitigate the effect of systemic racism on marginalized communities and identify alternative options to remedy unanticipated negative consequences. As Philadelphia confronts the presence of systemic racism, the city’s next mayor should take proactive steps to combat discrimination and prevent harmful practices. The use of racial impact statements is one way to do this.

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