



# **Delta Regional Authority Equity Action Plan**

**Submitted:** January 20, 2022

## **Executive Summary**

Authorized by Congress beginning in 2000, the Delta Regional Authority (the “Authority” or “DRA”) is a regional commission designed as a federal-state partnership to promote and encourage the economic development of the Mississippi River Delta and Alabama Black Belt regions. DRA’s mission is to help create jobs, build communities, and improve the lives of those who reside in the 252 counties and parishes of the eight-state region (Alabama, Arkansas, Illinois, Louisiana, Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri, and Tennessee).

DRA statute (7 U.S.C.§2009aa) requires the Authority to make its federal funds available for the following activities in order of priority:

1. Basic public infrastructure in distressed counties and isolated areas of distress.
2. Transportation infrastructure for the purpose of facilitating economic development in the region.
3. Business development, with emphasis on entrepreneurship.
4. Job training or employment-related education, with emphasis on use of existing public educational institutions located in the region.

Statutory provisions also mandate the Authority to:

- Allocate at least 75% of federal funds “for programs and projects designed to serve the needs of distressed counties and isolated areas of distress in the region”; and
- Allocate at least 50% of federal funds “for transportation and basic public infrastructure projects”.

DRA’s Equity Action Plan identifies three barriers to equitable outcomes and commits to undertaking strategic actions to minimize these barriers in the near to mid-term (2-4 years) and long-term (5-8 years).

### **Action #1: REVISE PROGRAMMATIC GUIDELINES TO INCREASE ENGAGEMENT WITH HBCUs AND FEDERALLY-RECOGNIZED TRIBES.**

**Barrier:** Minimal investments in and/or partnerships with Historically Black Colleges & Universities (HBCU) and federally-recognized tribes.

### **Action #2: DEVISE A MORE INCLUSIVE STAKEHOLDER OUTREACH STRATEGY AND REVISE PROGRAMMATIC GUIDELINES TO INCREASE ENGAGEMENT WITH BIPOC, LGBTQ+, FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS, AND OTHER MARGINALIZED GROUPS.**

**Barrier:** Lack of outreach to and/or engagement with Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Queer (LGBTQ+) persons, faith-based organizations, and other marginalized groups.

### **Action #3: REVISE PROGRAMMATIC GUIDELINES TO INCREASE INVESTMENT IN PERSISTENT POVERTY COUNTIES.**

**Barrier:** Making investments into persistent poverty counties under all agency programs and assisting impacted communities with leveraging Authority programs and related federal resources.

### **Summary of Early Accomplishments**

Between January 20, 2021 and November 22, 2021, DRA operated in the absence of a presidentially-appointed federal member. During that time, DRA maintained existing policies, regulations, and procedures from the previous Administration. Once President Biden officially nominated Leslie A. Durham to serve as Alternate Federal Co-Chair of the Authority, DRA began to assess changes that could be made to programmatic guidelines and policies to increase equity internally and externally, in accordance with Executive Order (EO) 13985.

Equity-related achievements between January 20, 2021 and January 19, 2022 include the following:

- More than half of the individuals who graduated from the Delta Leadership Institute's 2021 Executive Academy represent minority groups;
- 40% of organizations awarded through the 2021 Delta Workforce Grant Program are located in persistent poverty counties/parishes; and
- Chairwoman Durham conducted outreach to HBCUs and federally-recognized tribes located throughout the Delta Region to schedule roundtable discussions.

Now that DRA is operating under the leadership of Chairwoman Durham, the Authority will begin to make the appropriate programmatic and policy-related changes contained herein to increase equity and maximize participation from marginalized groups throughout the Delta Region.

## Equity Action Plan

### 1. Revise programmatic guidelines to increase engagement with HBCUs and federally-recognized tribes.

#### A. Barrier to Equitable Outcome(s)

DRA has historically underinvested in HBCUs and federally-recognized tribes throughout the Delta Region. There are 20 HBCUs located throughout five of the eight states in the Delta Region, yet DRA only made one grant to an HBCU over the past three years. Similarly, there are five federally-recognized tribes in two of the eight states, yet DRA has not made any grants to these federally-recognized tribes during the same time frame. Although HBCUs and federally-recognized tribes are eligible to apply for all DRA grant programs, the Authority does not specifically identify HBCUs and federally-recognized tribes as eligible entities nor prioritize their applications within programmatic criteria under every program. This lack of recognition in programmatic guidelines has likely impacted HBCUs and federally-recognized tribes from applying for and receiving DRA funding with any regularity.

#### B. Action and Intended Impact on Barrier

In an effort to engage HBCUs and federally-recognized tribes in a more meaningful way, DRA will revise the following programmatic guidelines:

- **States' Economic Development Assistance Program:** Add HBCUs under the list of "Eligible Entities"; Add a new criterion to the "Federal Priority Eligibility Criteria" to emphasize strategic partnerships with institutions of higher education, such as HBCUs, and federally-recognized tribes.
- **Delta Workforce Grant Program:** Add HBCUs and federally-recognized tribes under the list of "Eligible Applicants"; Add HBCUs and federally-recognized tribes under the recommended list for "Project Team Composition"; Add a new scored criterion for "Demonstration of Strategic Partnership with one or more HBCUs and/or one or more federally-recognized tribes".
- **Delta Leadership Institute:** Within the Request for Proposals (RFP), specifically encourage submissions from institutions of higher education, such as HBCUs.
- **Delta Small Business Academy:** Within the Request for Proposals (RFP), specifically encourage submissions from institutions of higher education, such as HBCUs.
- **Innovative Readiness Training Program:** Within the Community Readiness Checklist, encourage use of HBCU facilities to host the military for an IRT mission.
- **Delta Summit:** Request speakers from one or more HBCUs and/or federally-recognized tribes to highlight their economic and community development efforts, such as workforce training initiatives and/or research.

Additionally, DRA's Alternate Federal Co-Chair will host HBCUs and federally-recognized tribes semi-annually for roundtable discussions about how the Authority can improve its inclusion of their organizations in agency programs and initiatives.

These roundtable discussions will also include a DRA program briefing to provide HBCUs and federally-recognized tribes with the latest updates.

### **C. Tracking Progress**

For each of the sub-actions listed above, DRA will track progress in the near- to mid-term (2-4 years) and long-term (5-8 years) using the following performance measurements:

- **States' Economic Development Assistance Program**
  - Near- to Mid-term: Number of applications submitted by HBCUs and/or federally-recognized tribes; Number of applications demonstrating strategic partnerships with HBCUs and/or federally-recognized tribes.
  - Long-term: Number of awards made to HBCUs and/or federally-recognized tribes; Number of awards made to organizations demonstrating strategic partnerships with HBCUs and/or federally-recognized tribes.
- **Delta Workforce Grant Program**
  - Near- to Mid-term: Number of applications submitted by HBCUs and/or federally-recognized tribes; Number of applications demonstrating strategic partnerships with HBCUs and/or federally-recognized tribes as part of the project team.
  - Long-term: Number of awards made to HBCUs and/or federally-recognized tribes; Number of awards made to organizations demonstrating strategic partnerships with HBCUs and/or federally-recognized tribes as part of the project team.
- **Delta Leadership Institute**
  - Near- to Mid-term: Number of proposals submitted by HBCUs to serve as one or more of the program partners operating on a cooperative agreement with DRA.
  - Long-term: Number of HBCUs serving as one or more of the program partners operating on a cooperative agreement with DRA.
- **Delta Small Business Academy**
  - Near- to Mid-term: Number of proposals submitted by HBCUs to serve as one or more of the program partners operating on a cooperative agreement with DRA.
  - Long-term: Number of HBCUs serving as one or more of the program partners operating on a cooperative agreement with DRA.
- **Innovative Readiness Training Program**
  - Near- to Mid-term: Number of eligible entities including HBCUs as mission partners in their application.
  - Long-term: Number of IRT missions hosted in partnership with one or more HBCUs.
- **Delta Summit**
  - Near- to Mid-term: Number of individuals from HBCUs and/or federally-recognized tribes speaking at the Delta Summit.
  - Long-term: Number of breakout sessions featuring individuals from HBCUs and/or federally-recognized tribes at the Delta Summit.

DRA will experience the most success if the Authority realizes an increase in each of the outcomes listed above.

**D. Accountability**

DRA will incorporate its programmatic goals related to inclusion of HBCUs and federally-recognized tribes in its forthcoming Regional Development Plan IV (RDP IV) – the Authority’s strategic plan which governs its priorities and key actions for a five-year period. Additionally, DRA will encourage the Board of Governors to align their DRA state plans with these provisions. DRA will also measure its performance for the outcomes listed above in its annual Performance and Accountability Report (PAR) submitted to the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB).

**2. Devise a more inclusive stakeholder outreach strategy and revise programmatic guidelines to increase engagement with BIPOC, LGBTQ+, faith-based organizations, and other marginalized groups.**

**A. Barrier to Equitable Outcome(s)**

DRA has not meaningfully conducted outreach to and/or strategically engaged with Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Queer (LGBTQ+) persons, faith-based organizations, and other marginalized groups. Although DRA incorporates a non-discrimination clause into its programmatic guidelines and related documents, the Authority does not clearly demonstrate inclusivity for all people in its programs and initiatives. A lack thereof possibly deters individuals representing marginalized groups from engaging with DRA and benefiting from the federal resources the Authority has to offer.

**B. Action and Intended Impact on Barrier**

In an effort to execute more inclusive stakeholder outreach and increase engagement with BIPOC, LGBTQ+, faith-based organizations, and other marginalized groups, DRA will revise the following programmatic guidelines:

- **Delta Leadership Institute:** In the Executive Academy application, specifically encourage submissions from individuals representing BIPOC, LGBTQ+, faith-based organizations, and other marginalized groups. Applicants will be provided the option to self-identify themselves in one or more of the aforementioned categories, but will not be required to report this information to protect the privacy of all applicants.
- **Delta Small Business Academy:** In the Small Business Academy application, specifically encourage submissions from individuals representing BIPOC, LGBTQ+, faith-based organizations, and other marginalized groups. Applicants will be provided the option to self-identify themselves in one or more of the aforementioned categories, but will not be required to report this information to protect the privacy of all applicants.
- **Delta Summit:** Request individuals representing BIPOC, LGBTQ+, faith-based organizations, and other marginalized groups to participate in a speaking role at the Delta Summit.

Additionally, DRA's Alternate Federal Co-Chair will meet with affinity groups to determine how the Authority can facilitate more inclusive engagement with BIPOC, LGBTQ+, faith-based organizations, and other marginalized groups.

**C. Tracking Progress**

For each of the sub-actions listed above, DRA will track progress in the near- to mid-term (2-4 years) and long-term (5-8 years) using the following performance measurements:

- **Delta Leadership Institute**
  - Near- to Mid-term: Number of Executive Academy applications submitted by individuals representing BIPOC, LGBTQ+, faith-based organizations, and other marginalized groups.

- Long-term: Number of individuals representing BIPOC, LGBTQ+, faith-based organizations, and other marginalized groups selected to participate in the Executive Academy.
- **Delta Small Business Academy**
- Near- to Mid-term: Number of Small Business Academy applications submitted by individuals representing BIPOC, LGBTQ+, faith-based organizations, and other marginalized groups.
- Long-term: Number of individuals representing BIPOC, LGBTQ+, faith-based organizations, and other marginalized groups selected to participate in the Small Business Academy.
- **Delta Summit**
- Near- to Mid-term: Number of individuals representing BIPOC, LGBTQ+, faith-based organizations, and other marginalized groups invited to speak at the Delta Summit.
- Long-term: Number of individuals representing BIPOC, LGBTQ+, faith-based organizations, and other marginalized groups that accept and participate in a speaking role at the Delta Summit.

DRA will experience the most success if the Authority realizes an increase in each of the outcomes listed above.

#### **D. Accountability**

DRA will incorporate its programmatic goals related to engaging with BIPOC, LGBTQ+, faith-based organizations, and other marginalized groups in its forthcoming RDP IV. Additionally, DRA will encourage the Board of Governors to align their DRA state plans with these provisions. DRA will also measure its performance for the outcomes listed above in its annual PAR submitted to OMB. DRA will also celebrate the diversity of the Delta Region in Authority-related publications, including the Delta Current and in op-eds written by its presidentially-appointed leadership.

### 3. Revise programmatic guidelines to increase investment in persistent poverty counties.

#### A. Barrier to Equitable Outcome(s)

DRA does not prioritize making investments into persistent poverty counties under all agency programs nor regularly assist impacted communities with leveraging Authority programs and related federal resources. Out of the 252 counties and parishes located in the Authority's region, 116 or 46.03% are designated persistent poverty counties.

DRA administers five grant programs including SEDAP, Community Infrastructure Fund (CIF), Public Works and Economic Adjustment Assistance Program (PWEAA), Delta Workforce Grant Program (DWP), and Rural Community Advancement Program (RCAP). Only two of these programs – DWP and RCAP – prioritizes and/or mandates grantmaking in persistent poverty counties. Currently, SEDAP, CIF, and PWEAA do not prioritize nor mandate grantmaking in persistent poverty counties.

#### B. Action and Intended Impact on Barrier

In an effort to invest in persistent poverty counties in a more meaningful way, DRA will revise the following programmatic guidelines:

- **States' Economic Development Assistance Program/Community Infrastructure Fund/Public Works and Economic Adjustment Assistance:** Add a new criterion to the "Federal Priority Eligibility Criteria" to emphasize investments in persistent poverty counties.
- **Delta Workforce Grant Program:** Increase the number of points received in the scoring criterion for "Demonstration of Inclusion in a Persistent Poverty County/Parish" from two to three points.
- **Delta Leadership Institute:** In the Executive Academy application, specifically encourage submissions from individuals residing in persistent poverty counties.
- **Delta Small Business Academy:** In the Small Business Academy application, specifically encourage submissions from small business leaders and entrepreneurs residing in persistent poverty counties.
- **Innovative Readiness Training Program:** Within the Community Readiness Checklist, encourage eligible entities located in persistent poverty counties to apply for an IRT mission.
- **Delta Summit:** Provide scholarships in the form of waived registration fees for a specified number of individuals residing in persistent poverty counties.

Additionally, DRA's Alternate Federal Co-Chair will meet with stakeholder coalitions located in persistent poverty counties to discuss how the Authority can strategically invest into regionally-significant projects that impact the economic development of their communities. DRA will also promote special programmatic provisions, designed to increase engagement with individuals and organizations located in persistent poverty counties, through various media.

#### C. Tracking Progress

For each of the sub-actions listed above, DRA will track progress in the near- to mid-term (2-4 years) and long-term (5-8 years) using the following performance measurements:

- **States' Economic Development Assistance Program/Community Infrastructure Fund/Public Works and Economic Adjustment Assistance**
  - Near- to Mid-term: Number of applications submitted by organizations residing in persistent poverty counties.
  - Long-term: Number of awards made to applicants residing in persistent poverty counties.
- **Delta Workforce Grant Program**
  - Near- to Mid-term: Number of applications submitted by organizations residing in persistent poverty counties.
  - Long-term: Number of awards made to applicants residing in persistent poverty counties.
- **Delta Leadership Institute**
  - Near- to Mid-term: Number of Executive Academy applications submitted by individuals residing in persistent poverty counties.
  - Long-term: Number of individuals residing in persistent poverty counties selected to participate in the Executive Academy.
- **Delta Small Business Academy**
  - Near- to Mid-term: Number of Small Business Academy applications submitted by individuals (i.e. small business leaders and/or entrepreneurs) residing in persistent poverty counties.
  - Long-term: Number of individuals residing in persistent poverty counties selected to participate in the Small Business Academy.
- **Innovative Readiness Training Program**
  - Near- to Mid-term: Number of eligible entities residing in persistent poverty counties that submit an application for an IRT mission.
  - Long-term: Number of IRT missions hosted in persistent poverty counties.
- **Delta Summit**
  - Near- to Mid-term: Number of individuals residing in persistent poverty counties that register to attend the Delta Summit.
  - Long-term: Number of individuals residing in persistent poverty counties that receive a scholarship to attend the Delta Summit.

DRA will experience the most success if the Authority realizes an increase in each of the outcomes listed above.

#### **D. Accountability**

DRA will incorporate its programmatic goals related to making investments into persistent poverty counties and assisting impacted communities with leveraging Authority programs and related federal resources in its forthcoming RDP IV. Additionally, DRA will encourage the Board of Governors to align their DRA state plans with these provisions. DRA will also measure its performance for the outcomes listed above in its annual PAR submitted to OMB. Lastly, DRA will publicize its performance measurements related to the number of DRA-funded projects located in

persistent poverty counties as well as the amount of funding invested into persistent poverty counties by dollar figure and percentage in its annual Year in Review publication.