

How Land Banks Are Leading Racial Justice Efforts

Moving from Vision to Action for Equitable Development

It is not a coincidence that systemic vacancy—and its associated social, economic, and environmental harms—disproportionately affects Black and Brown neighborhoods.¹ This is the result of decades of racist, inequitable policies and institutional disinvestment. Land banks are a powerful tool to break this cycle of vacancy,² coordinate new investments in long-neglected areas, and contribute to the meaningful repair of places and communities harmed by racism.³

Equipped with unique governmental powers, land banks can flexibly transition problem properties to responsible purchasers for results that align with community goals, rather than to the highest bidder. As powerful instruments for community revitalization, land banks have a responsibility to use these powers to address resident needs and work toward creating just, inclusive, and resilient communities.

To center racial justice effectively, land bank stakeholders must first understand the specific ways racism has shaped their community. This requires engaging residents as both land bank leaders and fellow stakeholders in the community to identify resident needs and challenges around vacancy, racism, poverty, environmental hazards, and food and housing insecurity. It also requires accurately assessing the historical and current barriers to equitable development, land access, homeownership, and building wealth.

Once land banks understand these needs and barriers, they are better positioned to champion racial justice within their organizations and the communities they



What is a land bank?

A land bank is a public entity with unique powers to put vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties back to productive use according to community goals. A land bank's primary purpose is to acquire properties that some call "blighted"* and temporarily hold and take care of them until they can be transferred to new, responsible owners. State laws give land banks their unique powers. While these powers vary state to state, ideally land banks can:

- acquire tax-foreclosed property cost-effectively
- flexibly sell property to a responsible buyer or developer, driven not by the highest price but by the outcome that most closely aligns with community goals
- extinguish liens and clear title
- hold property tax-exempt
- generate and collect revenue from delinquent property tax fees, property tax recapture, or other funding mechanisms

* Note: Read more about why Community Progress avoids using the word "blight": "The Problem with Calling Neighborhoods with Vacant Properties 'Blighted'," Center for Community Progress, (blog), April 11, 2024, <https://communityprogress.org/blog/what-is-blight/>.

¹ "Explaining the Cycle of Systemic Vacancy," Center for Community Progress, (blog), August 24, 2023, <https://communityprogress.org/blog/explaining-systemic-vacancy/>.

² "What is a land bank?" Center for Community Progress, (blog), June 15, 2023, <https://communityprogress.org/blog/what-is-a-land-bank/>.

³ "Progress Points: Demonstrating the Positive Impacts of Land Banks," (Center for Community Progress, 2022), <https://communityprogress.org/publications/progress-points-land-bank-impact/>.

serve. Six fundamental strategies land banks use to center racial justice are: expanding staff and board representation; organizational commitment; local partnerships; resident-centered program design; evaluating ongoing efforts; and celebrating what works.

The following case studies highlight how land banks have integrated these strategies to prioritize racial justice through their programs, policies, and initiatives. While they often combine multiple strategies, each case study is organized under the strategy it demonstrates most prominently.

Six Strategies Land Banks Use to Center Racial Justice





Legal Considerations

As government entities, land banks should be aware that efforts to address racial injustice can raise legal concerns related to the Supreme Court’s interpretation of the Fourteenth Amendment’s Equal Protection Clause and some federal statutes. While many land banks play a critical role in building just, equitable, and inclusive communities—and this policy brief celebrates and highlights those efforts as a roadmap for others—it is essential for land banks to consult with local counsel before developing any such programs or policies to understand their legal landscape and any potential challenges.



Expanding Community Representation

Regular, ongoing engagement and communication with community members most impacted by vacancy is vital to understanding the dynamic needs of the communities land banks serve. By facilitating frequent, meaningful opportunities for stakeholder input and creating leadership roles for residents, land banks can drive impactful change for those who have endured the harmful effects of vacancy the longest.

Omaha Municipal Land Bank

At the Omaha Municipal Land Bank (OMLB) in Nebraska, members of the Board of Directors are required by the state’s land bank law⁴ to meet specific criteria, including real estate and banking experience. To expand the pool of applicants, in 2021 OMLB launched its Ambassador Program. The nine-month program includes participants from each city council district and offers monthly training sessions on topics related to land banking, community development, and housing policies.

Since the program’s inception, 65 people have become ambassadors, with some going on to serve as board members, funders, and property purchasers. The program has also been an invaluable tool for community education and engagement around OMLB’s operations and policies.

One of OMLB’s top goals is building generational wealth in Omaha’s northern and southern neighborhoods, areas with the highest concentrations of land bank properties and the most Black and Hispanic residents. Under Executive Director Leslie Smith, OMLB has sought to expand the Ambassador Program’s reach in these neighborhoods to foster deeper community engagement.

OMLB hosted interactive neighborhood forums where residents and ambassadors participated in role-playing exercises, making disposition decisions based on hypothetical yet realistic and routine property requests. Smith noted that the process was deeply informative, “It was incredible to witness how powerful this mock process was in helping residents understand the property sales process and to put them directly in the delicate process of evaluating property applications and deciding which applicant should be approved and whether a discount in sales price was warranted.”⁵ Indeed, resident participants tended to be more restrictive for out-of-state applicants, reflecting their negative firsthand experiences of living next door to properties investors had flipped without community regard.

OMLB also used these neighborhood forums to facilitate discussions about the history of racist lending practices and their ongoing effects in Omaha. These conversations led participants to strongly support OMLB’s prioritization of legacy residents in property sales within historically redlined neighborhoods.

By expanding representation on its board and actively involving the community in guiding their policies, OMLB is better positioned to meet the needs of Omaha’s residents.

Calhoun County Land Bank

In Calhoun County, Michigan, vacancy and abandonment issues are particularly prevalent in the City of Battle Creek and its majority-Black Washington Heights neighborhood. The Calhoun County Land Bank Authority (CCLBA) owns over 200 properties in Washington Heights alone. With support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, CCLBA launched a three-year initiative to address vacancy in Washington Heights, prioritizing resident involvement through the creation

⁴ “Ambassador Program,” Omaha Municipal Land Bank, <https://omahalandbank.org/get-involved/>.

⁵ Conversation with Community Progress staff on June 27, 2024.

of the Washington Heights Neighborhood Advisory Committee (WHNAC).⁶

WHNAC consists of 17 members from the neighborhood with diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives. These members have a formal role in gathering community input, reviewing data, and helping shape the direction of the land bank's projects and policies. The committee also has voting rights on recommendations for land bank policy changes and a neighborhood land use plan they co-created with CCLBA. The CCLBA Board of Directors considers WHNAC's recommendations when making decisions. WHNAC also works closely with key partners including the City of Battle Creek, Habitat for Humanity, Neighborhoods Inc., and faith-based groups to reactivate underutilized land.

WHNAC has elevated a key neighborhood challenge of heirs' property,⁷ where the lack of clear title and ownership can prevent heirs from accessing home repair or tax foreclosure prevention programs. This issue contributes to the loss of intergenerational wealth, property deterioration, and vacancy. In Battle Creek, several former heirs' properties are now held by CCLBA. With the guidance and input of WHNAC, CCLBA is developing a new program allowing relatives of those who lost property to purchase vacant land bank lots through a "legacy buyers" initiative.



Organizational Commitment

Publicly committing to justice helps the land bank staff and board review and prioritize projects to better align with the needs of the community. Land banks can update their mission statement, annual benchmarks, and project goals to reflect both a commitment to racial justice and a willingness to be held accountable to such principles and outcomes.

Rome-Floyd Land Bank Authority

Spurred by nationwide calls for racial justice in 2020, the Rome-Floyd Land Bank Authority in Georgia moved to name and address the racial inequities in the



What is Heirs' Property?

Heirs' property occurs when a property owner dies without a will or estate plan. State laws governing inheritance determine how the property is passed to family members legally entitled to it. Probate courts can clarify the distribution of real property (e.g., land and buildings), but some family members may be unaware of probate, lack the resources to use it, or distrust the system. These unresolved property issues become more complex over time, especially with multiple heirs, or when heirs pass away, leaving their interest to other relatives. Resolving this heirs' property phenomenon—also referred to as tangled title, family property, or family land—requires tracking down all living heirs to clear the title and specialized legal expertise. This process is complex and often unaffordable for many families, especially if several generations have gone by since the original title owners passed.

predominantly Black and low-income neighborhoods they served.⁸ During a strategic planning session with staff and board members, stakeholders confronted the history of redlining and segregation in their community, naming the direct impact this legacy has on their work. Following the planning session, Rome-Floyd Land Bank Authority updated their mission statement to commit the land bank to fostering equitable and inclusive communities.

Their mission statement now reads:

The Rome-Floyd Land Bank Authority's mission is to eliminate all evidence of redlining in the community by creating equitable, inclusive opportunities for all by returning tax delinquent, underutilized and abandoned properties back to a productive use.

Community Development Director, Bekki Fox, views the mission statement as the first step of many, stating, "Every time we read our mission statement it always

⁶ "Washington Heights Neighborhood Advisory Committee," Calhoun County Land Bank Authority, accessed September 16, 2024, <https://calhounlandbank.org/washington-heights-neighborhood-advisory-committee/>.

⁷ "Progress Points: Heirs' Property - How Tangled Title Can Lead to Property Vacancy, Abandonment, and Deterioration," (Center for Community Progress, 2024), <https://communityprogress.org/publications/progress-points-heirs-property/>.

⁸ Rome-Floyd Land Bank Authority, <https://www.rome-floyd.us/425/Land-Bank-Authority>.

brings us back to remind us of what we're doing."⁹ The mission statement led to renewed efforts to diversify their board, resulting in the recruitment of two leaders of color enmeshed in community organizations, to the board.



Local Partnerships

Building partnerships with local leaders and organizations increases the design, reach, and effectiveness of a land bank's programming. Local collaboration also expands the land bank's ability to address barriers to equitable development. By being willing to take risks and form new partnerships, land banks can better connect with the neighborhoods most impacted by vacancy, foster trust, and maximize their impact.

Albany County Land Bank

In its early years, the Albany County Land Bank (ACLB) in New York identified priority neighborhoods based on poverty levels, vacancy rates, and need, but mapping their inventory over Albany's redlining maps revealed the shocking impact of a legacy of racist lending practices. This realization, along with reports highlighting Albany's racial homeownership gap,¹⁰ prompted ACLB to reimagine itself as a tool for equitable development.

In 2017, ACLB launched the Equitable Ownership Program (EOP) to help first-time homebuyers—especially underserved populations in ACLB's priority neighborhoods—overcome typical barriers to acquiring and rehabilitating land bank homes.¹¹ EOP made land bank properties that only need minimal repairs available at a discounted purchase price to eligible participants, who were also paired with construction mentors to guide them through the rehab process. However, early participants struggled to access the necessary capital from traditional financial institutions to make repairs.

⁹ Conversation with NLBN Staff on October 30, 2023.

¹⁰ "Attorney General James Highlights Deep Racial Gaps in Homeownership Across New York," New York State Attorney General, (press release), October 31, 2023, <https://ag.ny.gov/press-release/2023/attorney-general-james-highlights-deep-racial-gaps-homeownership-across-new-york>.

¹¹ "Equitable Ownership Program," Albany County Land Bank Corporation, accessed September 16, 2024, <https://www.albanycountylandbank.org/eopp>.

¹² Conversation with NLBN Staff on April 8, 2024.

¹³ "What are CDFIs?" US Department of the Treasury – CDFI Fund, (infographic), https://www.cdfifund.gov/sites/cdfi/files/documents/cdfi_infographic_v08a.pdf.

William Sikula, Planning and Projects Coordinator, describes how ACLB was able to transform the program through local partnerships:

At the end of 2020, we had a buyer that really made us rethink the process and how we connect buyers with access to capital. The buyer was someone who had lived on the block that one of the properties was on for many years. They were very involved with the neighborhoods we served but they were unable to access capital to do the rehab.¹²

Spurred by this particularly committed EOP participant's need for capital lenders, ACLB partnered with Home HeadQuarters, a Syracuse-based community development financial institution (CDFI),¹³ to design a unique lending product for buyers of vacant land bank properties. Home HeadQuarters became the first lender to help this EOP participant access not just capital but opportunity.

This partnership has removed a primary barrier for EOP participants—access to capital. Home HeadQuarters lent almost \$1 million to land bank buyers in the first year of the partnership alone, enabling six first time homebuyers in Albany County—and has since expanded its financial products to several upstate New York land banks to help similar buyers who struggle with traditional lenders.



Resident-Centered Program Design

Centering residents in program design and amending policies and practices accordingly allows land banks to turn organizational commitment into action. By tailoring their programs, acquisition and disposition policies, and operational practices to align with community needs, land banks can prioritize goals co-identified with those most impacted by vacancy.

Lucas County Land Bank

The Lucas County Land Bank in Ohio has always prided themselves on being a service-based organization.¹⁴ This commitment is embedded in their work, especially in Black and Brown communities in Toledo and Lucas County, Ohio, where they focus on reducing the racial homeownership gap and addressing the effects of redlining. Lucas County home lending trends show a “stubbornly wide” gap between Black and white mortgage denial rates from 2018 to 2022.¹⁵ Lack of capital access has often made it difficult for community members to access land bank properties to become homeowners. To address this, the land bank created the Neighborhood Justice Fund (NJF)¹⁶ in 2020 to help their land bank tools reach people in the communities they serve.

The NJF was seeded with \$1.5 million dollars from the land bank’s operating budget and is available to all residents in neighborhoods with a majority population of color, over half of Toledo’s neighborhoods. Over the past three years, NJF has provided significant grants and staff expertise to residents, ranging from small home repairs to full rehabs, from driveway installments to façade improvements. The land bank strategically engages with residents who live nearby land bank properties receiving investments, hoping to create block-wide impacts with the fund.

Since NJF is a partnership between the land bank and the community, flexibility of the fund is key. According to Shantaé Brownlee, Senior Vice President for Operations and Chief Financial Officer, “We’re creating a pot of money and not attaching *our* hopes and expectations to it but [instead] attaching a community need...The tool is not just a wrench, it could be a screwdriver, it could be a hammer.”

NJF helps fill a significant equity gap in Lucas County. For land banks shaping their practices to better meet their community’s needs, Brownlee suggests “understanding where you’re serving, who you’re serving... and being willing to be open, honest, and

brave enough to communicate where your organization is not meeting that gap.”

Chatham/Savannah County Land Bank Authority

While addressing vacancy in their communities, land banks across the country increasingly encounter challenges with heirs’ property. Just 24 percent of Black Americans have a will.¹⁷ This issue is compounded by the legacy of slavery and racist land ownership laws, especially in the South where heirs’ property disproportionately affects Black landowners.

After encountering many vacant properties with fractured title in their tax foreclosure pipeline, the Chatham/Savannah County Land Bank Authority in Georgia is developing a program to offer heirs a first opportunity to purchase properties from the land bank. After strategically using their typical acquisition pathways, the land bank contacts all heirs identified during the title clearing process to inform them of their right of first refusal and offers potential resources depending on their interest in acquiring the property. The program is still being rolled out at the time of this brief’s publication, with a plan to increase public education and outreach as the program grows.

Property ownership offers families a way to build a meaningful legacy, build wealth, and preserve their heritage. Alison Goldey, Director of the Chatham/Savannah County Land Bank Authority, emphasized the value of prioritizing heirs in property disposition, “Even if their children don’t want to stay there, they want to have something to leave to their children and the next generations and that is very, very important to them. And if it’s important to them, it’s important to us.”¹⁸

Heirs’ goals for a property vary, from living in it to renting it out, underscoring the need for a variety of flexible resources and programs. Depending on the heirs’ interest and capacity, the land bank can connect them to financial support for downpayment or rehab work, in partnership with the City of Savannah and

¹⁴ Conversation with NLBN staff on November 1, 2023.

¹⁵ Matt Klesta, “Home Lending Trends from Select Counties in Kentucky, Ohio, and Pennsylvania: 2018–2022,” Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland – Community Development Reports, April 18, 2024, <https://www.clevelandfed.org/publications/cd-reports/2024/20240418-home-lending-trends>.

¹⁶ “Neighborhood Justice Fund,” Lucas County Land Bank, <https://lucascountylandbank.org/njf-invite>.

¹⁷ Lizzie Presser, “Their Family Bought Land One Generation After Slavery. The Reels Brothers Spent Eight Years in Jail for Refusing to Leave It.” *ProPublica*, July 15, 2019, <https://features.propublica.org/black-land-loss/heirs-property-rights-why-black-families-lose-land-south/>.

¹⁸ Conversation with NLBN Staff on November 1, 2023.

Community Housing Services Agency. As the land bank continues to build out the right of first refusal program, they aim to build trust with heirs. “We are serving this neighborhood to heal this neighborhood and to rebuild this neighborhood,” said Goldey.



Evaluate Ongoing Efforts

No matter how well-intentioned, programs and policies can still have unintended consequences that harm disinvested neighborhoods and residents when they fail to apply a racial justice lens. Ongoing evaluation can help land banks learn and grow from past failures—and successes.

Louisville-Jefferson County Landbank Authority

For years, the Louisville-Jefferson County Landbank (Landbank Authority) in Kentucky, among the oldest land banks in the country, was like many land banks, focused on quantity and speed of transactions. In 2019, however, the community started to question who the Landbank Authority prioritized in property disposition and outcomes. While nearly all the properties held by the Landbank Authority are in neighborhoods with predominantly Black households, staff analysis revealed that Black homeownership rates actually decreased in those same neighborhoods from 2000 to 2020.

In response, the board passed a resolution in 2020 initiating a racial equity review of all Landbank Authority policies and practices.¹⁹ According to Office of Housing and Community Development Director Laura Grabowski, having the board pass an official resolution helped the Landbank Authority preserve the practice of applying a racial equity lens to all future policies and programs, regardless of future leadership or staff changes.²⁰

The Landbank Authority completed the racial equity review over the next two-and-a-half years, using a racial equity toolkit created in a 2015 City-led initiative.²¹ The review considered the Landbank

Authority’s policies through the lens of four different stakeholder groups: initial property purchaser, end users, neighbors of the property, and professional servicers or contractors for the property.

The Landbank Authority made some of the biggest recommended changes to its sales policies, moving from a “first-come, first served” approach to a set of scoring criteria that prioritizes owner-occupants and favors neighborhood residents. Additionally, the Landbank Authority developed a homeownership program that would provide down-payment assistance for legacy residents seeking to become first-time homebuyers.

As a result of the review, the Landbank Authority began collecting socioeconomic information from buyers and end users to improve transparency and accountability, and equipping the Landbank Authority to set and communicate progress towards benchmarks for property disposition.

Two years following this exercise, the Landbank Authority is again reviewing their policies and programs. Through routine evaluation, they can better meet community needs as they arise. Grabowski says one key to success is starting with an open mind, avoiding pointing fingers or placing blame, and gathering a variety of stakeholders at the table.



Celebrate What Works

When land banks successfully center racial justice, even small victories should be celebrated. Communicating these successes with fellow community members and other stakeholders through community events, testimonials, and report-outs helps boost visibility of programs and build trust with those most impacted by vacancy and disinvestment. The following are two examples of how land banks featured in this brief have celebrated their accomplishments:

Omaha Municipal Land Bank hosted the inaugural Reignite2Unite Omaha Developers’ Symposium in June 2024, in partnership with Spark CDI, a local nonprofit that supports

¹⁹ “Landbank Racial Equity Review,” City of Louisville, <https://louisvilleky.gov/government/community-development/landbank-racial-equity-review>.

²⁰ Conversation with NLBN Staff on May 14, 2024.

²¹ “Racial Equity Toolkit,” City of Louisville, <https://louisvilleky.gov/downtown-revitalization-team/document/racial-equity-tool>.

neighborhood transformation efforts.²² The event aimed to improve community engagement and help residents and local stakeholders learn more about land bank initiatives. It also featured a graduation ceremony for the year’s Ambassador Program cohort, with special awards for program participation.

Lucas County Land Bank released five short films in April 2024 highlighting the impact of its programs in Toledo’s neighborhoods. The films, which included testimonials from residents about the land bank’s impact, were screened at a community event at a local theater, with residents, community stakeholders, and land bank staff in attendance.²³ The land bank also shared the films on social media and their YouTube channel in English and Spanish.²⁴

Celebrating racial justice efforts, whether by featuring a new initiative²⁵ or review process²⁶ online, hosting educational events,²⁷ or promoting a program on local news,²⁸ is vital to showcase the value and impact of these initiatives to both land bank and community stakeholders. Importantly, it shows land banks are being responsive to the unique needs of the communities and people they serve.

²² Omaha Municipal Land Bank (@omahalandbank), “Missed the inaugural Reignite2Unite Omaha Developer’s Symposium?” Instagram, June 21, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/omahalandbank/p/C8e5xywtuOK/>.

²³ “Celebrating Neighborhoods,” Lucas County Land Bank (blog), April 10, 2024, <https://lucascountylandbank.org/news/celebrating-neighborhoods>.

²⁴ Lucas County Land Bank, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/@lucascountylandbank>.

²⁵ “Washington Heights Neighborhood Advisory Committee,” Calhoun County Land Bank Authority, <https://calhounlandbank.org/washington-heights-neighborhood-advisory-committee/>.

²⁶ “Landbank Racial Equity Review,” Louisville-Jefferson County Metro Government, <https://louisvilleky.gov/government/community-development/landbank-racial-equity-review>.

²⁷ “Planting the Seeds: How Land Banks in Small Communities Can Grow Trust and Impact,” Center for Community Progress, <https://communityprogress.org/event-list/land-banks-grow-trust/>.

²⁸ “Albany Land Bank Offers Pathway to Home Ownership,” Spectrum News, October 16, 2020, <https://spectrumlocalnews.com/nys/capital-region/news/2020/10/16/albany-land-bank-offers-pathway-to-home-ownership>.