This foreword represents a moment of reflection for Forsyth Futures — a data and research non-profit organization that ‘studies our community to inform action.’ It is important that this forward begins with an unambiguous acknowledgement that Forsyth Futures’ actions and behaviors, throughout our history, have caused harm and are still causing harm to marginalized peoples and communities across Forsyth County.

When we say marginalized, we mean those who experience social, economic, or political exclusion and are often disadvantaged or oppressed because of characteristics like their race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, disability, and/or religion — although this list is not exhaustive.

Harm done through research can include tangible and intangible negative consequences experienced by people as a result of unethical research practices — such as exploitation, misinterpretation, and stigmatization. For example — reporting potentially stigmatizing information about a group of people can result in others interpreting that information through their own preconceived biases instead of challenging them. Such harms can exacerbate existing inequities and damages public trust in research processes and institutions.

The data and research content we produce represents power. This power manifests as assertions of what is ‘true’ or what is ‘real.’ This is powerful because people make decisions based on what they believe or understand to be true and harm can be caused in how information is used — when information that is incomplete or lacking context is published, that information can potentially lead to the adoption of harmful solutions. We believe that the power of data and research must be accountable to people.

We acknowledge a direct contribution to disseminating information that is potentially incomplete, creates space for misinterpretation, lacks sufficient context, or otherwise inadequately reflects the reality of people whose daily lives are impacted by the issues being studied.

We profoundly regret our ignorance and involvement in activities that have caused harm in our community in these ways. As humans who make up a staff, we are grappling with the gravity of this understanding and we are committed to open, ongoing reflection and deliberation.
We are grateful for the grace shown to us by so many of our partners, and patience in allowing us to learn in public, as we navigate this transition.

To move forward from this moment requires that we rebuild trust with the community. In order to do this, it is not enough to alter our activities to prevent harm. We must transform to become more transparent, clear in our values and intentions, accountable, and collaborative with the communities that form the subject of our research. We must shift and expand who has influence over how research topics are chosen and how projects are planned, conducted, analyzed, interpreted, reported about, and applied to action.

The Intersectionality of Black Life and Being marks an early pilot effort for Forsyth Futures engaging in community-based research in a fundamentally different way. Through our partnership with Action4Equity, we helped produce a body of community-based research content that began with the perspectives of Black peoples in community as research participants and was shaped, interpreted, and even written and designed by a cohort of those research participants. This is significant because the content is framed around the lived experiences of marginalized peoples. In contrast, past Forsyth Futures reporting tends to include measures that have been selected and interpreted entirely by staff without the consultation of people who are experiencing the issues being studied — this approach is insufficiently grounded in such lived experiences and risks oversimplifying or misrepresenting the complexity of reality in a harmful way.

Most importantly, significant decision making power, which is typically wielded by Forsyth Futures and not shared on research projects, was given to research participants.

This is a big development for Forsyth Futures because we were able to learn through doing — what it means to show up authentically and respectfully, how we understand the staff role to support the community in carrying out the research and making decisions, and how to sit with moments of discomfort and trust the process as we learn.

We are incredibly proud of this body of work and our collaboration with Action4Equity and the research participants — none of this would be possible without them.
While the publication of this report represents a bright moment, there is still much to grapple with. It is potentially impossible to fully understand the scope of the harm we have contributed to by publishing information that potentially invites misinterpretation — but this is most certainly the case. The cumulative studies, briefs, measures, and indicators we have produced over the years have no doubt impacted the perspectives of decision makers across all levels in our community and the decisions that have been made have contributed to the unacceptable conditions we now experience.

The interconnected systems upon which our community functions, such as healthcare, criminal justice, food access, education, financial and economic structures, government, and more, provide advantages to some and perpetuate oppression for others. Forsyth Futures envisions a different future for our community, one in which these systems create circumstances that enable all people to thrive, regardless of any aspect of their identity.

With this emerging vision, we are identifying new strategic goals and commitments. These strategic goals are taking shape as we conclude production on The Intersectionality of Black Life and Being, and they will continue to evolve as we reflect, deliberate, and hear from the community. Our intention is to avoid a mere pivot or the colonization of new space within this local work and we welcome the community’s input on these working plans; we are committed to being responsive to what we hear and learn from people in community.

If you have feedback, please take a moment to share it using this anonymous feedback form.

As an organization, we understand that there are limitations to the work we can do and we also understand that it’s our labor and responsibility to understand and articulate the harm that we've done. With this in mind, we present our emerging strategic goals:
1. **Clarify our values and commitments and institutionalize them within our organizational structure and policies to enhance transparency and accountability, and restore damaged trust.**
   a. Create a permanent committee within Forsyth Futures to oversee these aspects of our work and grant the committee authority to guide this work. The committee will include staff, board members, and representatives from community groups with relevant lived experience to our research topics. Our aim is to establish this committee in the Fall and Winter of 2023. We intend to maintain an honest and transparent partnership with Action4Equity and other community partners.
   b. In 2023, Forsyth Futures used grant funds from the Winston-Salem Foundation to hire the firm Equity Over Everything to conduct an organizational equity audit. The audit concluded with a report of key recommendations, which highlights the creation of this committee as a critical next step, among many other recommendations.

2. **Reduce the harmful impacts of community research.**
   a. Educate ourselves about harmful and extractive research practices, and best practices in equitable research and communications. Commit to goals to incorporate this learning into our work, share this learning through open community forums, and help shift the local narrative around research.
   b. Help establish a new community-led-and-directed research infrastructure for Forsyth County, designed to prevent harm through research and ensure future research is accountable to the community. This collaborative initiative, called The Peoples' Research Council, is a partnership between Forsyth Futures and Action4Equity, with plans to launch pilot research projects in the Fall and Winter of 2023.
   c. Audit our past and current work to identify how specific harms may have been caused, create a record, and share it publicly.

3. **Enhance community engagement and co-leadership in community research; effectively expand and diversify who has influence over research.**
   a. Commit to the goal of running all future research projects and work through the Peoples’ Research Council (PRC) within the next two years.
b. Commit to the leadership and decision-making framework of the Peoples’ Research Council (PRC); achieve and maintain a dynamic through which peoples in community are driving the selection, design, and measurement tools used for future research projects.

c. Explore the potential to expand Forsyth Futures’ Board of Directors to include seats explicitly for people closest to the issues of study from marginalized groups.

4. **Amplify actionable research to build people power, help deconstruct oppressive systems, and help deliver equitable outcomes for marginalized individuals and communities.**

   a. Use increased communications and content production capacity to support the research processes of PRC projects, help get information into the hands of community members, and help to support and reinforce action-focused efforts. Through a grant from the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust, Forsyth Futures recently expanded its communications and content production capacity. The primary goal for this expanded capacity is to use communications, content production, dissemination, and marketing skill sets to create more engaging and accessible informational content to reach a broader audience and more deeply connect to action.

   b. Invest in partnerships and opportunities to build critical research and communication capabilities among community members to support the impact of community research.

   c. Begin to shift how we define community wellbeing and measure community outcomes by emphasizing and prioritizing the wellbeing of all peoples in community. This means moving beyond tools of measurement that only consider individuals and households to establish new ways of measuring and understanding the role of systems in producing such outcomes. An example of such a systems measure would be working to define what a real ‘living wage’ might be for our community (i.e. a wage that allows workers to afford all of their necessary living expenses) rather than just measuring how many people are experiencing poverty or income insufficiency. In this way, we are flipping the microscope of research away from people to look at systems instead.
5. Advocate for peer institutions to align with our vision and strategic goals.
   a. Leverage our emerging vision and goals to champion the adoption of more community- and equity-centric practices and policies among organizations and institutions in Forsyth County. Use communications and content production capacities to uplift specific topics and conversations, convene local stakeholders and facilitate dialogue and bi-directional listening and learning.
   b. Work with our funders and partners to help them understand what it takes to do our work differently and why change is needed.

We are humbled by the learning and awareness that have brought Forsyth Futures to this point. While this is an uncomfortable moment, it is an essential one for openness and honesty. It is our sincere desire to be a force for good, changing people's lives in a meaningful and positive manner. The challenges our community faces are immense. We believe that by embracing this discomfort and acknowledging our past failures in serving the community, we can authentically learn how to show up, support, and contribute. We firmly believe in the possibility of a different future and are committed to being a part of it.

In humility and service,

Adam Hill, Executive Director

Elizabeth Perkins Lees, Director of Data & Research

Tyler Sparks, Communications Director