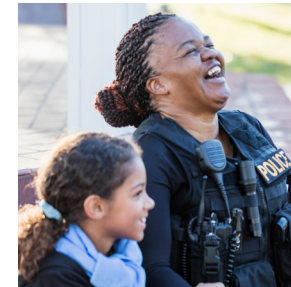


November
2022



Part 2 of 2:
**In Their Own
Words**

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Managing Workforce Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Local Government

Report prepared by MissionSquare Research Institute



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This report is intended to provide a direct window into the strategies, challenges, and outcomes achieved by those working on diversity, equity, and inclusion in the local government workforce. The views expressed by focus group participants and survey respondents are theirs alone and are not intended to represent the recommendations or views of MissionSquare Research Institute.

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Executive Summary

Storytelling is an important complement to quantitative data gathering. It can show a much more nuanced level of detail than averages or frequency distributions, and can also show a wider range of experiences, approaches, setbacks, and successes than case studies of high performers. Focus groups also allow for back-and-forth discussion among the participants and the expression of opinions that might not otherwise be voiced.

On the subject of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the public service workforce, MissionSquare Research Institute has compiled both an environmental scan of policy research and available data, as well as a survey of local government DEI decision makers.

The Institute's initial scope of inquiry included diversity by gender, race, ethnicity, age, veteran status, LGBTQIA+ identification, neurodiversity, disability, and other characteristics, as well as the positive organizational results to be achieved from workforce DEI prioritization, such as:

- Greater inclusion of women in public sector leadership is positively correlated to economic development results.
- Staff diversity has been shown to have a positive impact on productivity, quality, decision making, and financial success.
- Acceptance feeds not only a general sense of comfort and belonging, but also a 56% improvement in employee job performance.

See: [Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Public Service Workforce](#)

The survey asked each respondent to provide their own definitions and range of policy approaches, as well as details of organizational responsibilities for DEI (see [Managing Workforce Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Local Government - Part 1 of 2: Survey Data](#)).

Part 2 of the survey research, presented in this report, is a more in-depth exploration of the topic of workforce DEI in local government. A subset of survey respondents engaged in focus group discussions about:

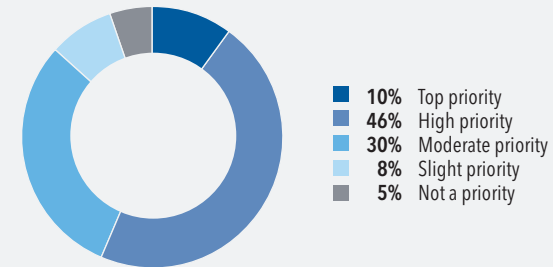
- How they have approached workforce DEI
- What efforts have been most successful
- What challenges they have encountered
- How they have measured their results
- How organizational leaders or other resources have facilitated those efforts

Not all of the focus group participants indicated that they have been successful yet on their DEI goals, and their comments are not shared as the leading practices in the field. Rather, they are offered as a snapshot of the state of workforce DEI efforts in local government, captured during a particularly challenging time both from the perspectives of the Great Resignation and an ongoing and often heated national dialogue around DEI.

Nevertheless, all focus group participants indicated that DEI was at least somewhat a priority for their organization. In the earlier survey of DEI decision makers, **56% indicated that DEI was a top or high priority, while another 30% indicated that it was a moderate priority.**

And where those efforts have been successful, the stories, strategies, or perspectives shared are intended to assist those just starting out in the field to chart their own way forward.

Figure 1 **How much of a priority is diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in your organization currently?**



Source: **Managing Workforce Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Local Government – Part 1 of 2: Survey Data**, Figure 7. While that survey report features quantitative results and related graphs, this focus group report drills down into the individual experiences and stories shared by workforce DEI managers.

Methodology

In 2021, to capture baseline data on diverse representation in various public sector occupations, as well as how that relates to equity and inclusion programs, MissionSquare Research Institute compiled a report on **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Public Service Workforce**.

That report informed the development of a survey of 353 human resources decision makers with some role in their government's workforce DEI policies. This survey was fielded from December 3, 2021 to January 14, 2022. For a full review of the quantitative results, see **Managing Workforce Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Local Government – Part 1 of 2: Survey Data** ("Survey Results").

As a follow-up to that survey, the Institute conducted more in-depth discussions with a sampling of those survey respondents. These were structured as focus groups, using a pre-arranged list of topics, but with the moderator also asking follow-up questions as the discussions unfolded. Considering the one-hour length of each discussion, this was a more significant time commitment on the part of the participants. While invitations were extended to a broad array of survey respondents, the sample presented here consists of 16 individuals, representing 4.5% of the 353 total survey respondents. These discussions were conducted on April 6 and 7, and May 16, 2022. All such sessions took place virtually.

Levels of diversity varied within the focus group participants' workforces and their communities, such as: high percentages of people of color vs. almost none, high levels of diversity in the community, but not necessarily on staff; or high levels of community diversity among a seasonal or migrant population, but not year-round. There were also dichotomies in the level of responsibility of diverse employees, with many noting that representation was greater among more unskilled or entry-level positions compared to professional, managerial, or policy-making positions.

Beyond the focus groups, the remainder of the survey participants also shared comments via several open response questions. All of these responses were coded and summarized within the quantitative **Survey Results**, but since some regions, population sizes, or demographics were less well represented as part of the focus groups, a sampling of additional comments has also been included in the shaded boxes below (on pages 18-21, 24), bringing the total number of respondents represented in this report to 56 (see Table 1).

The stories and observations that follow have been anonymized to remove not only the names of the individuals and their jurisdictions but also other potentially identifying information. While Table 1 shows a detailed breakdown of the focus group participants and other commenters, the only information presented on the pages that follow is the agency type (local government or public K-12 education) and a summary population indicator:

Small	Under 10,000 population
Mid-sized	10,000-100,000 population
Large	Over 100,000 population

Table 1 **Respondent Demographics**

	Focus groups (16 participants)	Additional survey comments (40)*
Midwest	62.5%	42.5%
Northeast	12.5%	17.5%
South	12.5%	25%
West	12.5%	15%
Public K-12 education	56%	45%
Local government	44%	55%
Under 10,000	31%	30%
10,000-24,999	31%	22.5%
25,000-49,999	6%	17.5%
50,000-99,999	12.5%	7.5%
100,000-199,999	12.5%	17.5%
200,000 or more	6%	5%
Male	75%	55%
Female	25%	42.5%
Prefer to self-describe	---	2.5%
White or Caucasian	100%	67.5%
Black or African American		12.5%
Hispanic/Latino/Spanish descent		5%
Asian or Pacific Islander		5%
Native American		5%
Other		5%

*Note: While all 353 survey respondents were asked for extended comments, only a sampling are included in this report. For full comment data, see **Survey Results**, Figures 17 and 19.

Discussion and Comments

The topics below were the starting point for the focus group discussions. In some cases, those conversations may have branched out into related

areas of interest, such as how recruiting for diverse staff relates to larger workforce challenges.

2. How does your organization approach workforce DEI?

Regardless of their circumstances, large and small organizations are attempting to **recruit diverse staff**, and are having varying levels of success:



We're located in an area where there's a lot of diversity, so it's important for us that our students see themselves in the adults around them, and that's a goal that we're actively pursuing." – **Mid-sized K-12**



In interviews, I find myself frequently [questioning other interview panelists on their approach]: **'What's the basis for that assumption?'** Why is it important that [job candidates] have a traditional sort of family approach and orientation?' For me, it means more than just race, sex, class, sexual orientation....It's about representing the diversity of your populace, and the nation. Don't start asking people, 'Are you married? What does your family do? What about kids?' Those are all non-starters. I'm not going to have some broad policy initiative or broad statement... only from a position of what's best practice, what's going to prevent legal claims. It's coming more from a sort of **professionalism** perspective." – **Mid-sized local government**



We're in a state where there is very little racial diversity. We are doing everything we can to recruit, so our students could have more experiences around true diversity, because they don't have that right now, and it's tough." – **Small K-12**



We have a program where **veterans** get preferential treatment in the recruitment process. We're always trying to market with them and partner with the different veteran groups in the area for recruitment reasons, and we've had a lot of success with it." – **Large local government**



What we have found to be most successful is being **very transparent** and being very open. It's allowed us to bring in some presenters and do some of the trainings that we've done. They're possible because we've been able to bring people into that dialogue and be a part of the conversation rather than [having DEI policy simply being imposed]." – **Mid-sized K-12**

Implementation may take the form of **policies, dedicated staffing, and strategic goals** (in an overall strategic plan or a more targeted “equity plan”):

“

Our elected officials amended their mission statement to include diversity as one of the goals. We hired a **diversity, equity, and inclusion manager** and are doing a DEI survey to get some data on identification, how are we doing as an employer, how are we doing as managers, and how are we doing as human beings interacting with each other.” – **Large local government**

Understanding, **anti-bias training**, and **inclusion** are also priorities:

“

We’ve partnered with the Government Alliance for Race and Equity (GARE)...with a **representative from every department**. Our focus is eliminating racial disproportionalities so that race can no longer be a predictor for success. We really pride ourselves on being inclusive.” – **Mid-sized local government**

“

When we’re completing culture surveys, we are asking questions about whether people feel like they’re being treated equitably and feel included and welcomed into the organization.” – **Mid-sized K-12**

“

Make sure that everyone that we hire has the **resources**, the network, the tools, the connections immediately to really feel connected [and can] find the foods, shopping, support, and social activities that they’re used to in maybe a larger community.” – **Mid-sized local government**

“

We’re trying to do a better job of helping ensure that our staff who are serving diverse populations understand some of their biases or understand some cultural competencies, that not everybody sees the world and has the same experiences that they do. Right now, we’re doing an equity audit to operationalize and define what we mean by DEI.” – **Large K-12**

“

We brought in a couple specialists to work with all of our administrators and our supervisors. The focus of that training was on some of our natural tendencies to be biased and our perceptions. Whenever we’re doing our interview process and we’re looking to hire, how are we making sure that maybe some of those biases that we already have, that we’re not allowing that to maybe jade or to blind us whenever we’re looking at potential candidates. The **training was very eye-opening**.” – **Mid-sized K-12**

In what ways is workforce DEI influenced by your goals for DEI in the community or in service delivery?

“

It is an **expectation of our residents** that DEI be a focus for the community.” – **Mid-sized local government**

“

A big focus is making sure that our students get opportunities and awareness, that there are those who maybe are different, who believe different, who look different, and just who approach life differently than those within the community and those who maybe they have within their normal circle of influence. It’s been a challenging road because we just don’t get a lot of applicants who maybe visually appear much different than many of our students, but we do want to try to bridge that gap of awareness and exposure.” – **Mid-sized K-12**

“

Most of our data is around disciplinary issues for students, because what we did find—and this is national—is our discipline issues, especially our suspensions, were significantly higher for our disabled, our gay, lesbian students and our Black and Hispanic students. And so, we made some major changes in our disciplinary policy and as well, we keep pretty significant data on that, and now, it’s pretty good, but for years, it wasn’t. That’s where we started [in DEI, which has led to staff] implicit bias **training** also to make some dents there.” – **Small K-12**

“

[Regarding DEI in both community outreach and workforce,] we have a lot of construction workers that come to our community in the summer, and they aren’t always English speaking. It’s a huge barrier. When somebody comes in who speaks Spanish, [one staff person just] talks louder. I try to work with her, and we have put **[translation] apps** on our phones. But it has very much enlightened me that I need to figure out how we are going to be better about it.” – **Small local government**

“

Transgender is a very hot topic right now in the community in which I serve. Several students are either in the middle of a transition or are thinking towards something of that sort. As part of our inclusivity efforts, we are trying to get across to students and to staff members that there are things that kids might do that we might not agree with personally, and that’s perfectly fine. But at the same time, they are still our students, and we want to make sure that they feel comfortable and that they feel welcome here.” – **Mid-sized K-12**

Q. How does workforce DEI relate to goals regarding organizational culture, employee retention, or morale?

“

Try to **normalize the conversation**, make it more comfortable to talk about DEI. Every department is challenged to review their policies and practices through that lens to see if any minority or BIPOC [Black, indigenous, people of color] population may be inadvertently affected.” – **Mid-sized local government**

“

We’ve got a pretty sophisticated way of screening candidates for quality and making sure that they have the aptitudes in addition to the credentials to serve. The interesting thing is, as we screen these candidates and eventually get to the final interview stage, which is usually amongst employees and people that will be working with them...We used to call that a fit interview and I’ve just recently recognized, if we’re seeking diversity and most of the people that are on this committee aren’t diverse, **‘fitting into the culture’ might not be the best way to look at that.**” – **Mid-sized K-12**

“

Often, [diverse hires] don’t particularly feel comfortable and don’t stay, but we continue to try.” – **Small K-12**

“

On sexual harassment, bullying, diversity, inclusion...every year attempt to meet with all employees in small groups to set our organizational standards. Encourage employees at all levels that if they see behaviors that aren’t consistent with their core values, they intervene and stop it.” – **Mid-sized local government**

“

We’re confronting morale head on, explicitly in administrative memos, in staff or management retreats. The sorts of workplace culture environments

that have gone awry, what happens is you get sort of an in crowd and an out crowd. In my organization, it’s generally centered around what I would call hometown conservative family value-oriented folks... talk about other people behind their back. It just destroys that organizational culture. For me, the diversity initiative..., it’s not some political thing about, ‘Oh, I want to push transgender rights, or I want to push racial equity, or things like that.’ It’s more just on a basic level, **[respecting each other]**, and when there are] people who object to it, those are targets for your influence and persuasion.” – **Mid-sized local government**

“

What I’m doing is very consistent with the work culture that I’m in, and the elected officials who want this and push for this. When I bring a new program forward or I try to give a new benefit to same sex couples, [those officials will say] ‘I thought we already had that in place.’” – **Large local government**

“

We’re not only working with our staff, but also sharing with our staff the efforts that we’ve undertaken as an organization that underscores our commitment to DEI. It might be a tweak here or an easy step here, so that they understand that this is **part of who we are** and what our efforts are throughout the entire organization. It’s not just an event.” – **Large K-12**

A few also cited **affinity or employee resource groups** as an avenue to encourage peer-to-peer support among people of color or those who identify as LGBTQIA+, as well as more generalized employee support such as with dealing with mental health and stress or accessing internal coaching or mentorships.

Q. What are the biggest challenges you face when it comes to DEI efforts?

“

Our biggest challenge is **police and fire**. [For some groups in our community], those are not occupations that they as a culture generally pursue. [By highlighting existing diversity in the ranks or in leadership], advertising, videos...that is seeming to help show a path, that we as an employer are interested in diversity.” – **Large local government**

“

This is just an extra thing now that’s been added to our plate [without additional resources]. We’re pushed and **pulled in so many directions**.” – **Small local government**

“

Any time we introduce things that are different than the status quo, there are going to be issues that you have to work through. Having the will to stay that course, even though you get some opposition, I think is really important. But being inclusive is also this thing that people don’t necessarily support [without further explanation]. What is it you’re trying to do? [Focusing on and **clearly communicating** that] helps us gain wider support for what we are trying to accomplish.” – **Mid-sized local government**

“

People see human resources as a cost center. I’m not bringing money in. Our elected officials are very fiscally oriented. They want to drive down the tax rates. And I’m a taxpayer as well, so that’s fine with me. But [I work at] conveying the business case for why it is important to be able to hire qualified people, why it is important to have an environment where people feel welcomed, and where they can invite their friends and associates to apply. We’ve recently made a series of technology

hires. And these folks with technology skills, it’s a different demographic. It’s much more diverse, generally far younger, way less tolerant of kind of very traditional methods of approaching and understanding and appreciating problems. I need those people. So the challenge for me is to **demonstrate the business case** as to why we may need a DEI policy [to enable us to recruit effectively].” – **Mid-sized local government**

“

It isn’t that we are unwelcoming, it’s just the idea of coming here, is that they would be the **only one that looks like them** or comes from that background. The community has had some focus group meetings and talked to people about that very fact. One [African American] person made the comment that, ‘If I moved to your community, there’s no place for me to get my hair done.’” – **Mid-sized K-12**

“

The **candidate pool is not what it was two years ago**. And from a diversity perspective, I feel that we’re getting the same percentages of diversity, but we’re getting a lot less qualified candidates.” – **Large local government**

Some noted that regardless of expressions of equity and acceptance in their state, community, or organization, there are issues of both **conscious and unconscious bias**:

“

It's there—**sometimes hidden, sometimes not**—but we've been trying to work on that.” – **Small K-12**

“

Not everybody is always willing to open their eyes” – **Mid-sized local government**

“

People in my part of the world are very loving and very tolerant of the diversity that they believe was bestowed by God, if you understand where I'm headed with that.” – **Small K-12**

“

Some of the most ageist statements or assumptions come from people who are most senior in age, I've found, which is weird. I've had people ask, 'Well, that person is 62. Do you think they're going to be here all that long?' [I've had to step in and say,] 'Whoa! Time out. Don't think from that perspective.'” – **Mid-sized local government**

“

I'm the boss around here, but I don't always come off that way when you have males that do not want to listen to a girl. That is very much my world on pretty much a daily basis of **making my voice be heard**, and somebody also following through and listening to me. Just because they may think that I'm younger, they don't have to listen to me, or because I'm a female.” – **Mid-sized local government**

Regarding that last comment about how women are perceived in leadership roles, the focus group format allowed for a participant from another organization to see a viewpoint they had not even considered in the past: “It's amazing, that kind of diversity never even crossed my mind.”

Actions at the state or federal level or in the **political sphere** can also be a source of friction:

“

We **detest having edicts** come down from on high, like that boys and girls could use the same bathroom. And my board said, ‘No, we’re not going to do that. If they sue us out of business, that’s fine. We’ll go out of business.’ [Despite that policy stand, several recent bathrooms we have built are for one person]. And so I put in a male/ female restroom sign and had an uproar because people saw that. And I said, ‘No, that doesn’t mean any gender in there together. There’s only one at a time who can go in. It means that you don’t have to have a longer line at the girls’ bathroom that you do at the boys’ bathroom.’ But when DC tries to solve our problems, it really gets troublesome.” – **Small K-12**

“

Candidates talking about critical race theory and things that we may or may not be doing with our curriculum and how we’re handling transgender and bathroom issues and pronouns...that’s just a reality of what many districts or service industries are working with right now.” – **Mid-sized K-12**

“

It’s become kind of normal now that if you have just a small bathroom, you just don’t expect it to be shared by other people and you just label it unisex. – **Small local government**

“

The state had been doing a good job of educating and facilitating discussions around DEI until they all came under fire by the legislature. The brakes got put on everything there. We’ve continued to move forward, because this has been ongoing work for us for decades now. We just try to kind of keep our head down and make sure we don’t step over the line.” – **Mid-sized K-12**

“

When we do diversity training, our people have to have their slides and their information all vetted to make sure that we didn’t go against [recent legislation.]” – **Large K-12**

“

The two extremes of the political spectrum have become much more emboldened and wanting to speak out, wanting to provide oversight into the work that we’re doing to make sure that it doesn’t go too far in their minds. And so those are challenges—trying to step through some of those land mines.” – **Mid-sized K-12**

What level of support do workforce DEI efforts have from **organizational leadership**?

“

[Having diverse representation among elected officials] helped move [DEI] forward. They saw that we need to make this part of who we are as a community. [The staff] are being challenged by them, which is a great thing. **I'm pretty stoked that they're driving this.**" – Large local government

“

We have worked with local Native American populations... trying to work around implicit bias and including others at the table who could be policy decision makers – Small K-12

“

Our board just this year formed a **DEI committee** to address [extended diversity beyond entry-level positions and similar issues]." – Mid-sized K-12

“

Until our leadership circles—whether it be city councils, school board, chamber of commerce—start to have equitable representation of our populace by race, I think it's going to be hard to become a very inclusive community. [There's talk about making it] a great place to live, learn, work, and play, [but so far, we're] hoping that we're creating that, but **in reality, creating a place that most appeals to people [who already live here.]**" – Mid-sized K-12

“

Monthly meetings with all the [area] civic leaders and private industry to discuss these issues." – Mid-sized local government

Q. How do you find other resources or examples to support your DEI efforts?

Among the consensus approaches cited were:

- Brainstorming together at regular meetings of regional peers
- Participating in professional organizations and listservs
- Consulting with legal counsel
- Taking advantage of resources from local universities

Other strategies included:

“

[The DEI officer works with local] **religious organizations and not-for-profits**, because those are getting us access to some different resources that we don't have directly.” – **Large local government**

“

I **meet monthly** with a group of students and try to gain their input on issues.” – **Mid-sized K-12**

“

Local government **HR directors forum**—that's a source of inspiration. Also, really trying to get the feel of our workforce and what's important to them.” – **Mid-sized local government**

“

[We have a community nearby] that happens to be majority minority.... We certainly use them to get information and help.” – **Small K-12**

“

If I say, 'I want to do X,' within the first five questions I hear, 'What about Community A and Community B—what are our **peers** doing?' The second place I go would be the **professional associations** that I've found that sort of provide the best information, documents, templates, etc.” – **Mid-sized local government**

“

The Department of Defense has a program called **SkillBridge**. That provides us access to military candidates literally worldwide, from all the different military branches. They come here for varying time lengths up to 180 days and, in some cases, we hire them. That also has been able to represent more diverse candidates.” – **Mid-sized local government**

Technology and flexibility are among the recruitment considerations, both for those who wish to live in a small community but work for a large corporation or who want to live in a metro area but take a job with a smaller local government or school district. Thinking outside the box on fully in-person staffing may also be a bridge to hiring diverse staff who may not relocate to the community they're working for on day one.



Our community struggles. They're looking to the people who are from this area who want to stay, but there's just no jobs for them here. Hopefully, technology will help improve that somewhat. We've got younger professional adults staying in the area because they can **work online** from firms that are based in major urban areas outside of here, and they can do their work from home. In terms of diversity, at this point, we're just looking for bodies that are capable who want to work." – **Small K-12**



We use an **augmented writing platform** that enables us to write our job descriptions in a way that is as non-biased as possible—not written in a way that is slanted towards males or females or a certain age or demographic or ethnic background." – **Mid-sized local government**

Q. What strategies have been most effective in recruiting diverse candidates?

“

A lot of our initiatives are based more around those systemic issues that people may not be so conscious of, and trying to mitigate them. Looking at the hiring process, we now **don't have names on resumes**. We [remove from applications the] years when people graduated so age isn't quite as clear. And we're trying to make sure that we have **diversity in our interview panels**.” – Large local government

“

[A few years ago for a department director position,] I got almost 100 applications. More recently, we posted for another director, and there were fewer than 10. [It's not about diversity for diversity's sake.] It's more about who are we not reaching? We need to make sure every stone is turned, every bush is beaten finding quality candidates. It used to be that I had a choice from many different quality applicants, whereas now I feel like I'm put into positions where I had one. I had to close it and reopen it again. And I haven't had to frequently do that. That's a very simple argument to increase your channels. You need to speak louder and wider and broader and attract more people to your organization. What are our other channels? How are we limited by our own thinking? How can we improve the volume, the diversity, et cetera, of our recruiting pool, of our talent pool, to figure out what is it that we're not doing? Where are we not posting? Who are we not talking to? How might we potentially be turning certain people off? All that sort of thing. Is that **partnering with different colleges or community groups** and things like that? Yes. Attacking processes, seeing if they could be improved? Yes. It's formal and informal. But it's a stated objective, and it's on my plate right now.” – Mid-sized local government

“

[Reaching out to] less fortunate **individuals that are on state assistance** and need job skills. Those programs [and other efforts] bring in not only diversity in race, but diversity in economics, diversity in veteran status, diversity in the LGBTQ community.” – Mid-sized local government

“

Our most successful way of increasing our high-quality workforce of diversity is to **grow our own**—to create career pathways for teaching or to provide work-based learning experiences that dovetail into some of our other employee groups, whether it requires post-secondary attainment or not. In the Hispanic culture, family is so important—they want to stay or come back to the community. So we're figuring out ways to help students get the knowledge, skills, talents, and attributes that are desired and partnering with local community colleges and four-year institutions.” – Mid-sized K-12

“

The internship program brings in employees and candidates outside of our core area. We've reached out proactively to a lot of colleges [beyond state borders as well]; offer **internships** to a very diverse set of students that go to those schools [and enable them to work for us] both **virtually and in-person**.” – Mid-sized local government

One question asked of all survey respondents was what have been the most successful workforce DEI programs/policies your organization has implemented and why?

While the responses were coded and summarized in the [Survey Results](#), a few of the extended comments include:

“

Hiring a [DEI professional](#) to guide and lead our efforts.” – Large local government

“

Encourage [professional growth](#) in the careers of employees in underrepresented groups.” – Small local government

“

The most successful programs and policies are the ones that directly involve our diverse staff. We’ve [included staff in the planning process](#) and recognized them as integral.” – Large K-12

“

Focus recruitment efforts on new sources of potential employees and identifying unusual [applicant characteristics](#) through volunteer activities or organizational memberships shared on their resumes.” – Small local government

“

We encourage [small group employee gatherings](#) so the entire staff can get to know each other. We also encourage job shadowing. We have found that the lack of these events

keeps each department in their own areas and sometimes communication suffers from each department not fully understanding what the other does.” – Small local government

“

Encouraging policy review for implicit biases, [expansion of FMLA/sick leave](#) for parents caring for children, more flex work schedule options, expanded [bilingual capabilities](#) among staff, bilingual signage, and removal of requirements not directly tied to [job duties].” – Mid-sized local government

“

[Gender pay equity](#) focus to ensure equal pay for equal work, especially in police. [Female representation in the department has tripled.]” – Small local government

“

We don’t do anything under the DEI moniker. It would cause friction in our community, in the same way that CRT has brought out the concerned citizens. But we are [quietly committed](#) to equity and inclusion.” – Small K-12

Most successful workforce DEI programs/policies... (cont).

“

We have only implemented one—**redacting resumes**. Have seen a more diverse interview pool.” – **Mid-sized local government**

“

We try very hard to hire within our community to ensure that we have representation in our staff of our community as a whole. We try to recruit people that speak the languages of our constituents. We are an accepting group of people that **encourages self-expression**.” – **Small local government**

“

[**Diverse leadership representation**]: While we don’t have a formal program at this time, being a woman of color with a background that is different than the majority of the community, I am able to provide a different point of view of policy and procedures.” – **Mid-sized local government**

“

Starting a **diversity team** has been our first step.” – **Mid-sized K-12**

“

In our police department we were significantly underrepresented with women and minorities. We have utilized a mentorship mentality and aggressive promotion to [achieve increased representation.]” – **Mid-sized local government**

“

Having an outside vendor give our managers training in DEI topics. This was our most beneficial program.” – **Large local government**

“

Expanding our recruiting efforts to include **HBCUs** [Historically Black Colleges and Universities], other diversity platforms, and other regions of the country has improved the diversity of candidates.” – **Mid-sized K-12**

“

[To assist with diverse recruitment,] we changed the policy so you don’t have to live within the boundaries anymore.” – **Small local government**

“

When we have a second-place diverse candidate, we [**overhire**]—hire the two of them and find a place for the second.” – **Mid-sized K-12**

“

We have worked with our **local universities**, getting student teachers and paraprofessionals that fit our community’s diverse needs.” – **Large K-12**

“

A bias reporting hotline, an **equity leadership team**, and a streamlined hiring process with DEI interview questions for all candidates to respond to regardless of the position.” – **Large K-12**

Most successful workforce DEI programs/policies... (cont).



Rather than hiring middle managers on the outside, **training and building employees from entry-level positions** to provide [advancement] opportunities.” - Mid-sized K-12



Short-term disability is now part of the pension calculation, whereas before, mothers that went on disability would have to work longer for the same pension.” – Mid-sized local government



Open conversation about our previous failures in the DEI area have led us to recognition of gaps in our processes that have existed for years.” – Mid-sized K-12



Mentoring has been very effective at retaining staff. We aim to assign a mentor who is grounded in DEI thinking to help better accommodate the new employee.” – Mid-sized K-12



Job fairs, college visits, etc., are much more productive when you have a **diverse administration**—it is a visible sign of your efforts.” – Mid-sized K-12



Ensuring that all employees regardless of race or gender are given the **same opportunities** for mentoring or career advancement.” – Mid-sized local government



Professional development with opportunities for **small group discussions** related to DEI.” – Small K-12



Being more aware of **job description expectations** and ones that are not necessary.”
– Small local government



Ensuring a **diverse interview team**, [vetting] interviewing questions.” – Large K-12

Not successful or not interested

Several survey respondents used their open-ended comments to offer more **negative assessments**:

“

We only have HR policies that **meet the legal requirements** related to DEI.” – Small local government

“

The most successful policy has been a strict adherence to the equal opportunity in employment policies which have been in existence for decades. The policies provide a framework for an egalitarian meritocracy regardless of any label regarding identity which provides an equal footing [for] all employees to achieve based upon **performance rather than identity**.” – Mid-sized K-12

“

We do not have an approach, and **elected officials are reluctant to address it**.” – Mid-sized local government

“

Currently, I don’t have evidence that anything we’ve tried has been successful. Hiring diverse candidates and examining issues of equity **has been a challenge**.” – Mid-sized K-12

“

We have tried developing a partnership with a local HBCU, but that **has not been very successful**.” – Mid-sized K-12

“

We have **not implemented anything yet** [in the way of programs or results evaluation] but we will be soon.” – Mid-sized local government

“

Not interested in any DEI nonsense.” – Small local government

Q. How do you evaluate the results of your workforce DEI initiatives?

“

We have had a bit of a difficult time determining performance measures for our internal processes. One area we did a hard look at was **separation data**. We found a lot of our minority employees were leaving to go somewhere else for a better opportunity. Why weren't those opportunities being created within our organization for some vertical movement?" – **Mid-sized local government**

“

We're all learning a lot from our public safety folks because they have such a data-rich environment. Our fire department is probably our biggest advocate for DEI initiatives, and is working very closely with our DEI manager on how can they do a better job of **training and tracking** [particularly around community interactions]." – **Large local government**

“

The unfortunate thing is [the diverse staffing is so limited.] You don't have to have a computer to do much [data analysis] around that." – **Small K-12**

“

We were fortunate to have a native Spanish-speaker in our staff, so I asked her to translate our application into Spanish. And then also when we had entry-level positions, I made sure that we notified the Spanish station [in the nearest large city]. Nobody's acknowledged that when they've applied that they heard it through either the Spanish station or took advantage of the Spanish application." – **Small local government**

“

I either need a lot more time in the day or a lot more people to do it. There's so much data to go through, but then you can't just trust the numbers. You need to go out and **interview** and talk to the people. So if you're going to do both of those things, it's hard to present timely information because by the time you do all of that, you're looking at numbers that could be three, four months old." – **Large local government**

“

We don't do a lot of quantitative stuff with the kinds of things that we're talking about. I can look and see over time what we've accomplished. But we're not going to put on the phone, 'Press *dos* if you want to hear it in Spanish.'" – **Small K-12**

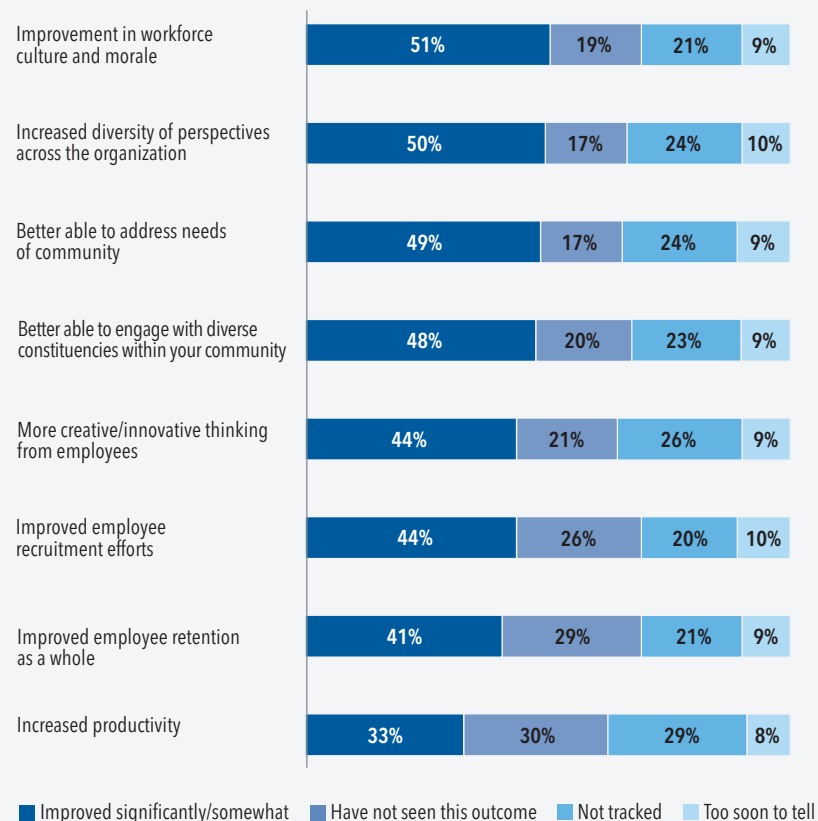
“

The objectives are to recruit and retain high-quality, highly professional staff. The metrics that we've done are pretty rudimentary, but it's about the tool that most closely fits whatever the objective is, and then being able to derive results that make sense and are persuasive. Morale is a perfect example. Who do I ask? When do I ask them? How often do I ask them? Who do I trust? We don't have any software models. So far, what we've done is various **360 evaluation processes** [and follow-up policy discussions]. It's hard to measure, but I do feel progress has been made." – **Mid-sized local government**

Too soon to tell

A sizeable number of survey respondents indicated that it is too soon to measure their results, ranging from the 8-10% in each of the categories in Figure 2, to 7% who indicated that they cannot yet assess their results in recruiting or retaining a more diverse workforce (see [Survey Results](#), Figures 15-16).

Figure 2 **To what degree have you seen the following improvements as a result of your organization's DEI efforts?**



Source: [Survey Results](#), Figure 16.

Other methods of evaluating results cited by survey respondents included:

“

Greater numbers of women and minorities in all positions, but especially in leadership positions, **climate/culture surveys** of the workforce indicate better I and E (Inclusion and Equity).” – Large local government

“

We look at **retention and recruitment data** and also survey our staff of color.” – Large K-12

“

Staff surveys and climate discussions.” – Small K-12

“

We annually review the demographics of our applicant pool and **shift our initiatives based on those results.**” – Mid-sized local government

“

It is less about a quantitative approach as it is about how our workforce comes together as a team. Especially in local government, when emergencies occur and the group has to make prudent and efficient decisions, **a diverse team results in those better decisions and better outcomes.**” – Mid-sized local government

Where do you see the organization's workforce DEI efforts heading over the next five years?

“

[With our employee survey, we are] trying to figure out where we go next. Do we want to create **affinity groups**? Do we want to have a different way that we're looking at promotional opportunities? We are taking this as a good first step toward our current employees as well as recruiting new employees.” – **Large local government**

“

Is there some **implicit bias** that keeps [diverse candidates] from coming to our region? How do you prepare a [non-diverse] community for the future? Right now, most of them would tell you they're very respectful and very caring...and they are. And yet, are they prepared in the event that they get somebody that challenges their status quo nature? I brace myself for when that happens—how are we going to tackle that?” – **Small K-12**

“

The makeup of our student body is about 10% minority, which is a huge increase from what it was just five years ago. But [so far] our staff would not be reflective of that.” – **Mid-sized K-12**

“

I guess, I'm a bit more **fatalistic** in that it's not even trying to prepare people for when [there is greater workforce diversity], because I don't know if there will ever be a when. It's embedded in the culture, and I don't see it changing. I always feel like this is an area that I've failed, because we've had it on our front burner, but we haven't made major strides.” – **Small K-12**

“

[We are considering] a **mentoring** program to help minority employees get to that supervisory level.” – **Mid-sized local government**

What advice do you have for others working to address DEI issues?

“

You're trying to do some of this work with other people who have full-time jobs doing other stuff and so, there's not always a **dedicated person** to really see everything through. I would advocate for that.” – **Large K-12**

“

If you're not representative of the diversity [you'd like to achieve] or trying to address, you don't know what you don't know. **Learn what's working, what's not, and how can we improve things.**” – **Mid-sized K-12**

Conclusion

For some organizations, it can be difficult to pursue any policy initiatives that are not directly related to financial or other bottom-line results. The political environment adds additional levels of complexity to discussions around DEI, but as one focus group participant noted, a low-key focus on agreed-upon goals rather than hot-button labels can be one effective strategy to achieving results. For example, if the number of qualified applicants for vacant positions is too low, one can make the business case that it makes sense to expand the outreach efforts, regardless of whether that is identified as a DEI initiative. Or even in communities where transgender issues are not openly discussed, the installation of some single-person occupancy restroom facilities can make logical and budgetary sense.

Among the focus group participants cited above, many identified initiatives they had successfully pursued, such as casting a wider net in their recruitment campaigns to reach more diverse candidates, reviewing their position descriptions to eliminate education or experience requirements that were not relevant to the job duties, or designating leaders, committees, employee resource groups, or outside advisors to assist with program implementation.

Significant challenges remain, particularly around a difficult recruiting market overall and a political environment that can sometimes be quick to avoid topics perceived as controversial.

How to get started

As stated above, the comments shared by the focus group participants are theirs alone and are not intended to represent the recommendations or views of MissionSquare Research Institute.

Nevertheless, how-to advice for those just getting started at DEI programs can be a valuable tool, as one of the focus group participants suggested. The steps outlined below represent a distillation of the Institute's data gathering as well as input from focus group participants and others advising this research:

Conduct an inventory

Assess available data and what systems, software, staff, policies, and other resources already exist that may be relevant to understanding or managing workforce DEI. Identifying gaps is crucial to planning how to proceed.

Lead from the top

Leadership buy-in is essential, but so is a demonstration of organizational commitment. The strongest statement is one that is delivered and reinforced directly by appointed and/or elected leaders and borne out by example. Absent such active support, programs and policies are unlikely to lead to changes in the organizational culture.

Identify a coordinator

Whether DEI is the primary role of an individual, one of many duties for that person, or it's spearheaded by a team, identifying the leadership structure helps build in accountability and consistency. As with any strategic goal, clarify that everyone has a responsibility to help the organization succeed.

Start small

DEI initiatives need not involve a huge budget or an organization-wide focus. Consider an ad hoc committee, a pilot program in one or two departments, or a policy change like redacting names from initial application review.

Expand your outreach

Recruitment is a challenge in normal times, but in the present environment, all options should be considered, including: advertising outside your typical labor market; partnering with colleges, universities, and the military; using specialty or non-English language media; and promoting the policy or benefit offerings that may make a difference for some candidates, such as flexible hours, child care assistance, or a lack of residency requirements.

Don't overlook neurodiversity

Those who think differently are often sources of creativity and innovation, and minor workplace accommodations (e.g., quiet spaces, allowing employees to use noise-cancelling headphones at work, recognizing employee's preferred communication styles) are another way in which employers can create a welcoming work environment and not miss out on talented workers.

Value inclusion and belonging

Making staff feel welcome is about more than feel-good slogans. It also involves showing that you value their input and that they have opportunities for professional growth and advancement within the organization. Creating an environment of belonging can bolster staff retention.

Conduct regular training

Maintain and prioritize training for both staff and leadership. This can help to ensure there's a consistent understanding of policy as well as key terms (allyship, implicit bias, microaggressions, etc.). Using an outside facilitator may also help foster open, but respectful discussion.

Review policies

Just as job descriptions need regular review, so do recruitment procedures and organizational policies. In adding a DEI lens to that review, be sure to consider potentially unintended impacts these may have on recruiting and retaining a diverse workforce.

Adopt a plan

This can be a strategic plan, equity plan, formal roadmap, or a more informal action agenda. Regardless, it is an opportunity to pull together all the related program elements, set a schedule, measure your progress, and adjust as needed.

Expect (and accept) pushback

Whether the initiatives involve recruiting, hiring, retention, equity, or inclusion, there may be vocal opposition based on assumed motives or outcomes or even political or social media engagement among staff or the community. Accept the feedback, and where possible, shift the discussion to agreed-upon values or goals, the strategies that can help you get there, and the data that will inform those decisions.

Focus on the data

While it can be difficult to collect data on every aspect of a DEI program, there are some low-hanging fruit to consider:

- As part of any expanded recruitment advertising, track data on how applicants heard about the job, how many total applications were received, and how many were from diverse backgrounds.
 - If redacting names from initial application review, track the impact on the number of diverse candidates receiving interviews.
 - Regularly evaluate the application, interview, and hiring data to see which methods worked and which didn't, and use that information to guide further improvements.
 - Conduct regular employee surveys on satisfaction or morale, and supplement those with exit interviews to identify why people may be leaving. If policies are being considered to improve inclusion of diverse staff, compare those results before and after implementation.
- When questioned about the value of DEI, share the nationwide data that shows:
 - Greater inclusion of women in public sector leadership is positively correlated to economic development results.¹
 - Staff diversity has a positive impact on productivity, quality decision-making and financial success.²
 - Employees generally have expressed not being valued or not feeling as if they belong as a reason to leave an employer, with non-White and LGBTQ individuals being more likely to have left a job for that reason.³

Network, network, network

A number of focus group participants cited their professional associations, municipal leagues, regional peer roundtables, or other local employers such as universities, hospitals, and private sector companies as helpful examples or collaborative partners in proceeding with DEI programs. Another group to consider is the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) **Equity Officer Cohort**.

Resources

Managing Workforce Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Local Government - Part 1 of 2: Survey Data, MissionSquare Research Institute, June 2022.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Public Service Workforce, MissionSquare Research Institute, September 2021.

ICMA Equity Officer Cohort

CivicPride

Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE)

International Public Management Association for Human Resources (IPMA-HR)

National League of Cities, Race, Equity and Leadership (REAL) Institute

Endnotes

1. Cheryl D. Orr and Marcia L. Conner, **"The Path to Equity for Black Women in the Public Sector,"** Public Management, 2021.

2. Paul Gompers and Silpa Kovvali, **"The Other Diversity Dividend,"** Harvard Business Review, July-August 2018.

3. **"Great Attrition or Great Attraction? The choice is yours,"** McKinsey Quarterly, September 8, 2021; and Deena Fidas and Liz Cooper, **"The Cost of the Closet and the Rewards of Inclusion: Why the Workplace Environment for LGBT People Matters to Employers,"** Human Rights Campaign Foundation, May 2014.



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