



Infusing Intersectionality into Disability Employment Systems Change Efforts

A Primer for Strengthening Your Organization's Internal Focus on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

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Introduction

People with disabilities, across the United States, are continually in pursuit of employment that is fulfilling, meaningful, and of value to themselves and the employers in their community. With the range of opportunities, unique dreams, and ever emerging needs, they come in all shapes, sizes, colors, and backgrounds. As an Administration on Disabilities (AoD) grantee that supports people with disabilities, you are uniquely positioned to advance a stronger focus on cultural shifts related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). But to achieve this, your organization likely has some initial work to do internally to make sure that you are ready to promote and even lead systems change efforts that focus not only on improving employment outcomes of people with disabilities, but also on addressing inequities in the labor market and generic workforce that transcend disability, race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity.

In May 2019, [Wise](#) partnered with The Evans School of Public Policy and Governance at the University of Washington on a project to “[work to analyze] how the field currently addresses equity and the common barriers that prevent the successful implementation of racial equity in the disability field”.¹ The following resource offers a model based on the Wise experience for entities who are ready to embark on internal organizational transformation toward becoming a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive organization. The model serves two purposes: helping AoD grantees begin to transform their own organization’s approach to DEI, and also how to become a leader in their state in terms of promoting a focus on disability employment through a DEI-lens. Similar to the model described in the Disability Employment TA Center’s TA resource entitled, [“Developing a Competency-based Competitive Integrated Employment Program within your](#)

¹ See Wise’s report, [Integrating Race: Applying a Racial Equity Lens to the Disability Field](#).



[UCEDD](#)², this resource helps AoD grantee leaders think about building an intentional DEI focus based on the following areas: Planning, Collaboration, Resource Mapping, Leadership, Training, and Lessons Learned. Just as is the case when an AoD grantee is venturing into developing any new program or initiative, the model for initiating your internal work around DEI can have a similar starting point and navigation for many of the processes you need to take. What we learn in one area of systems change and organizational transformation can be tailored to other major endeavors for AoD grantees, and DEI is no exception.

Additionally, this technical resource builds upon an [earlier blog](#) (O’Quinn, 2021) on organizational transformation in support of DEI³ published in September of 2021 by the AoD Disability Employment TA Center, and outlines an initial set of questions and steps that AoD grantees interested in rolling up their sleeves and taking on the important challenge of resetting your organization’s internal culture with respect to DEI can use to get started.

Planning Your DEI Internal Organizational Change Work: Key Questions

Here are five challenging questions for your organization to explore as you begin assessing its culture for promoting a diverse, equitable and inclusive workplace. These questions represent a sample of the guided conversations from Wise’s Equity Conversation process and tool.⁴

Are You Ready for Inconvenient Change?

Do you experience the following: fear, confusion, lack of control, feeling limited in scope, or making moves that are compliance driven or focused? If you answered yes that is perfectly ok. Change is always complex and difficult, even when you’re doing it right. The question is, do you feel excited, motivated, and ready to start? That may also look like excitement, being centered, resourceful, knowledgeable, planful, optimistic and collaborative.

What Would Change Look Like for Your Organization?

Diversity, equity, and inclusion have become buzz words, but often are not implemented with meaningful intent to change the ongoing systemic and cultural discrimination that has plagued every sector of American society throughout its history. It feels like organizations everywhere have branded themselves as diverse, equitable and inclusive -- what does that really look like for you, your organization, and the people you serve? Can you describe what concretely makes a difference

² See <https://aoddisabilityemploymentcenter.com/developing-a-competitive-integrated-employment-cie-competency-training-program-within-your-ucedd/>.

³ Published September 21, 2021 by the AoD Disability Employment TA Center.

<https://aoddisabilityemploymentcenter.com/looking-inward-assessment-of-your-organizations-current-culture-for-promoting-a-diverse-equitable-and-inclusive-dei-workforce/>

⁴ For more information on the Wise Equity Conversation process and tool, contact Wise directly at www.gowise.org.



or what change looks like? Are you doing the work when no one is paying attention? Will it look like celebrating individual successes, or will it look like a revision of company policy?

Who Should Lead your Organization's Change?

Who's at the table, and who's voice is missing? Is your target audience at the table? The “[nothing about us without us](#)” applies to more than disability. Does your Board, leadership team, equity team, and service delivery staff reflect the population of people you serve? Do self-advocates have the power or leverage to influence and impact change in your organization?

How can you Sustain the Momentum of Change?

How are you leveraging the strengths, gifts, and full capacity of your talent (workforce)? What is your succession plan? How fluid is the conversation on DEI throughout your organization?

Why Does Change Matter?

Are your organizational procedures, processes, and actions aligned with its values? Change only matters if you have clearly committed to living out the value that has been set forth in the vision, mission, and goals of the organization. There is a process of constant query and improvement that most of us must cycle through to continually stay on point with our external message to community stakeholders and partners. So, why does change matter to you?

There are no easy answers to these questions; we are beginning a journey towards sustainable progress together as a network. So, pace your efforts, be intentional, and stay positive about the future possibilities of this transformative work!

Strategic Collaboration – Partnership Development in Prioritizing DEI

Starting, maintaining, and growing your transformation work to reflect an organization that prioritizes DEI will require regular partnerships with a variety of key stakeholders. So, who should be at the table to support the agency to actualize DEI as a priority of your work? The following stakeholders are key players that you should engage in your internal organizational transformation efforts:

- ***People with disabilities and employers.*** Having consistent and intentional connection to those most impacted by the quality of the services delivered will afford a current reality of the challenges and opportunities in the community. People with disabilities and employers are the experts in the outcome of competitive integrated employment services.
- A representative group of existing ***DEI-centered staff or leadership***, including those who have decision making authority for the organization (board members, etc.). These leaders will prove invaluable for guidance and identifying the needs of their organizations and employees.



- The **major CIE services funding partners** (ID/DD, MH, VR, Education, Medicaid, Workforce Development, etc.) for the provision of CIE services hold a critical role in the availability and oversight to the services being delivered. Consider advocating with these entities for increased resources and changes in state policy that focuses on building the competencies of all stakeholders engaged in disability employment to improve their focus on diversity, equity and inclusion. As your own organization begins to become more intentionally focused on addressing challenges with respect to exclusion, segregation, and inequity, you will be able to speak to the gaps in service systems and will be a valuable resource to funding partners. You can also become a trusted partner for reaching other stakeholders and providing training to other entities in the state around DEI. Regular attention to potential system improvements can lead to efficiencies that may impact the availability of resources to be redeployed to implement DEI initiatives.
- The **public education system** in your state is the gateway to employment for people with disabilities. Building a strong partnership between K – 12 and post-secondary systems serves as a source of coordinated resourcing as well as builds trust in the community. This trust creates efficiencies and ensures that the effectiveness of education can be of regular value to people with disabilities, families, and employers. Engaging with your local education agencies early and often to assure that all youth and young adults with disability are receiving and accessing opportunities for work-based learning opportunities, integrated internships and apprenticeships, mentoring opportunities and other pre-employment training services is vital to assuring parity in accessing the economic mainstream during the transition to adulthood.
- The state **Vocational Rehabilitation department** has a self-interest in the quality and availability of partners who are committed to DEI as a priority in any disability employment systems change work. A regular review of the outcome data serves as an organizing strategy for understanding where performance is best and where improvements are needed, AoD grantees can identify gaps and unmet needs of underserved populations, and target geographical areas in the most need of increased capacity for CIE services. This practice ensures that no area of the state is left behind or limited in their ability to meet the employment needs of their community.
- Connections to **community partners** that represent diverse viewpoints (race/culture, gender identity, language accessibility, sexuality, accessibility) are key. Other affinity services, groups, and organizations, and even potentially an **external facilitator** who has worked in the areas of racial justice, disability rights, gender equality, cultural competencies, and the intersectionality among these concepts.

Resource Mapping

When building your model for becoming a DEI-centered organization, you want to make sure you have budgeted the resources necessary to offer adequate training, ongoing counseling and team



development around these concepts at all levels of your organization. Think of strategies that you could easily use to redeploy existing resources to ‘fund’ at least one-two staff and/or subject matter experts to be the core DEI core competency internal training team, which could be relied on for developing a “train-the-trainer” model internally (and possibly even externally if your organization opts to be a training organization for other entities in this area). Next, consider the broader build out of the influence of the DEI core competency training program. Here are a few key considerations when assessing the existing resources already available in this area and determining where you as an organization need to invest further:

- ***Review your existing resources/connections on DEI strategies across the disability field.*** What subtle shifts could happen to help you to build the narrative of the value of diverse and inclusive employment for people with disabilities?
- ***Do an inventory of what is already happening in your field locally and statewide to promote a stronger focus on DEI in generic systems.*** How is disability/DEI woven into existing systems, partner organizations, and local high growth industries. Sectors that should be included in this inventory include but are not limited to Social Work, Business, Education, Medical, Hospitality, Computer Sciences, Engineering, Public Health.
- What is your ***current approach to engaging with diverse employers as a strategic partner*** in improving competitive integrate employment outcomes at an individual- or systems-level?
- Are there ***existing models of education and engagement*** that could be enhanced or leveraged to bolster your organization’s access to new communities reflective of underserved populations?
- How can you ***leverage and impact the broader disability community*** with respect to DEI? What can your organization do to influence the inclusion of people with disabilities in larger DEI initiatives, and also build a stronger focus on the intersectionality between disability and race, gender, culture, and sexual orientation into the work you are performing as an organization?

Building the Work by Training Others: Lessons Learned, Tips & Tricks

There are several AoD grantees that are not only working toward becoming more DEI-focused in how they approach their mission, but who are also building their expertise and capacity to train other entities in their state. Here are some lessons learned in this recent work:

- Trainers need to have a working knowledge of how to deliver employment services and the quality standards expected in the state.



- If the training is to be facilitated by your organization’s staff, it is ideal if the staff have hands-on experience in how to provide employment services through a DEI-lens.
- If trainers do not have experience in DEI strategies and the intersectionality of the delivery of disability employment services, they need access to opportunities to gain experience. They will need an experienced trainer to mentor and develop their training content, build their personal stories, and provide feedback on their skills-development journey.
- Training staff need to have their own stories based on their experiences or experiences from their organization with respect to countering challenges around diversity, equity and inclusion.
- The training team needs to have dedicated time to focus on development and delivery of training activities, both with the goal of continuing to sustain the focus internally as an organization and to build out an training offerings your organization wishes to offer externally to other partner organizations.
- Training staff will need support from subject matter experts on questions arising related to policy, practice, and human resource questions.
- Training staff must have a DEI vision for the development of a robust service system of employment supports.
- Each state needs dedicated leaders to commit to a long-term, sustainable plan to ensure that DEI in disability services delivery is expected in their state.
- Be willing to change what you are doing to make DIE work in your own agency, and share lessons learned with others. Part of the training work is building a culture of possibility for DEI outcomes.
- Not everyone that you think can train on this subject will be successful.

What to consider when developing DEI Practice & Policies

- What’s your story?
- Develop and equity team
- Create an Equity Statement
- Engage in Diversity, Equity, Inclusion Trainings
- Policy and Governance
- Representation in Leadership
- Leadership Values Should reflect Equity
- Community Presence
- Resource Development/Acquisition

Having people with disabilities as a key part of any training you are delivering internally or externally is critical to building the work. It is especially important to focus on engaging people with disabilities that are diverse in terms of type of disability, race, religion, gender identity, and sexual orientation in all training and educational activities. They will be able to speak to unique challenges that people with multiple barriers to the economic mainstream face in accessing employment, and they can also offer insights on the impact a DEI-centered entity can have on the



purpose and ultimate outcome of systems and programs intended to support people with disabilities in achieving competitive, integrated employment and optimal socioeconomic advancement.

Taking the Leap with DEI & Employment – Lead the Change

Strengthening your organization’s internal approach to DEI work is a critical step towards embedding a DEI emphasis successfully into your employment systems-change work. It will take time and an unwavering commitment to doing things differently than we’ve done them in the past. And the result of the commitment will be services centered on equity that change the lives of people with disabilities, your own internal team, and community partners. Below is a tentative timeline for phasing in the internal organizational change work, as well as key actions/milestones that your organization should prepare to complete.

Short-Term (Year 1)

Upper management to commit to ongoing efforts to learn about and address racial inequity.

Intermediate (Years 2-3)

Partner with community-based organizations that collaborate closely with communities of color. Gather data and information on communities of color to assess their needs through intentional outreach and data collection.

Long-term (Years 4-5)

Address the intersectionality of race and disabilities in the design of technical assistance training and support.

As you embark on this journey and begin to also embed a stronger emphasis on DEI in your employment-systems change work as an organization, here are a few things to consider:

- Align your team with like-minded others regardless of their formal role.
- Keep striving for more outcomes and new opportunities in your services.
- Share your resources widely.
- Constantly question the status quo with your peers.
- Seek stories that demonstrate and validate your vision for DEI.
- Engage the business community to facilitate and lead the conversation on the value of hiring a diverse workforce to include people with a wide range of disabilities.

Reframing Your Own Organization to Support DEI Work: Key Activities

- What’s your story?
- Develop an equity team
- Create an equity statement
- Engage in DEI training & coaching
- Reassess/update policies & governance
- Assure diverse leadership structure
- Assure leadership values reflect equity
- Promote DEI through your organization’s community presence



- Continually engage people with disabilities to share their vision of equity and employment for themselves and others.
- Be committed to creativity and innovation as you deepen your knowledge of core competencies in your training program.

Building DEI within your organizational culture is the bedrock of a high performing service agency. When the going gets tough, go back to the stories of people with disabilities from diverse communities to remind your team of ‘why’ this work is so important and necessary. Your agency is uniquely positioned to have an enormous impact on improving the employment, independent living, and socioeconomic outcomes of people with disabilities.

