In this interview series on race equity, APHSA shares stories from state and local human services leaders about their work embedding a race equity lens into their policies, programs, and organizational culture. In this issue, APHSA features the Oklahoma Department of Human Services’ (DHS) Internal Council on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) and the External Council of Voices, which both focus on evaluating and addressing the agency’s systemic bias in order to improve outcomes for Oklahomans. The agency has established an Executive Leadership True North Goal of building a culture of equity, diversity, and inclusion. True North Goals are the guiding principles of the entire agency. The DHS leadership team has been supporting this effort and shared their insight on that work.

Question 1: What led the DHS executive team to establish a True North Goal to build a culture of equity, diversity, and inclusion?

The DHS prioritized this work early in the current administration’s tenure. It was created after hearing from the agency workforce that there was a ceiling for advancement for some staff. We dug into the data and further validated that truth, and so we prioritized a bold vision to build internal and external structures to both understand the shortfalls in our system and to implement change. We believe we are performing at our best when our organization represents, values, and respects unique identities, cultures, ideas, values, experiences, and perspectives.

Question 2: The Internal Council on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging has been a driving force in shaping the agency’s equity work. Can you talk about how the composition, roles, and activities of that council have driven the work forward?

The Internal Council is comprised of 15 members and 15 alternates. Through a solicitation for applications, members were selected utilizing a blind review process where nearly 400 applications were reviewed and scored by members of the DEIB workgroup and agency executive team members. The blind review process was intended to alleviate bias in the selection process and resulted in the selection of a group of Council members that represent diversity in such areas as ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, family composition, geographical location, division, and position.

Priority areas of focus are training, equity support structures, and internal communication. The Council has developed a set of recommendations in each of these areas, which have collectively informed training content, equitable practices in hiring and promotions, communication strategies, and process improvements to promote inclusion, among other issues.

Question 3: Your Council of Voices is an exciting approach to use the expertise and experience of the community to spur organizational change. How did you come to establish the Council and what are your short- and long-term goals for the group?

The External Council of Voices is a group of external stakeholders that represents traditionally marginalized or underrepresented voices that serve in an advisory committee role for the agency. They meet monthly with the
agency director and with other leadership to speak about DHS’ work. They began more informally as individual advisors to Director Brown, but over time he realized that there was real value in bringing them together as a group, so he they were formally organized as the External Council of Voices. They have collectively brought tremendous value to our work. We recently utilized them to speak about recruitment practices—to expand our reach as we look to increase diversity at all levels of the organization—and have had immediate success in this area. These genuinely vulnerable and meaningful conversations around equity and inclusion have led to improved program design and service delivery for our agency, and our external communications. They are a critical component in the agency's infrastructure to reset our culture.

Question 4: Although you are early in your equity planning efforts, you’ve made it a point to benchmark your baseline and measure progress in achieving equity goals in a transparent manner. Tell us what you’ve done to date and what you hope to accomplish in the future on these efforts.

Measuring employee engagement and satisfaction has been a part of the culture of the organization for many years. Recently, we’ve revised and added additional items to our data collection tool to measure attitudes, experiences, and beliefs related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. Additionally, we measure individual and collective hope within our staff. We’ve also completed an extensive analysis of our human resources and employee data to look for areas of strength and opportunities for improvement. We used these actions to create baselines for our work.

An initial quick win for us was simply adding DEIB language to our job announcements and unclassified job specifications. We believe this action, along with infusing these values into our interviewing, hiring, onboarding, and training practices establishes an expectation about who we are and what we value as an organization. We’ve utilized the Council to provide input into our communication practices and have deployed strategies to celebrate diversity and provide educational opportunities for staff.

Our long-term goals include creating positions within the organization to work alongside our Office of Civil Rights to focus specifically on equity and inclusion; dedicating resources specifically to identify areas of impact within our communities related to inclusion, equitable access, and outcomes; and infusing practice standards, called Diversity Imperatives, within the culture of the organization.

Question 5: It seems evident in your plan that you intend to invest heavily in the staff within your agency to build a culture of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. How do you see your workforce as part of the success of this effort?

Our workforce is the subject matter expert on our DEIB work! They are incredibly diverse with a wealth of experience. They live, work, and raise their families in the communities we serve. They are our ambassadors and our greatest resource.