



**In this interview series on race equity, APHSA shares stories from the field from state and local human services leaders who are working to embed a race equity lens into their policies, programs, and organizational culture. In this issue, APHSA focuses on the extraordinary work in Arizona. Michael Wisehart, Director of the Arizona Department of Employment Security (AZDES), has prioritized developing their Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) plan to achieve equitable outcomes and has agreed to share with us his agency's work on that front. APHSA extends our gratitude to him and his entire team for sharing their story.**

**It is clear you and your organization have made a commitment to prioritizing your agency's Equity-Diversity-Inclusion (EDI) plan and are doing the hard work necessary to build a culture of equity in human services. What drove you to begin this journey?**

**Michael Wisehart:** Across our agency and the communities we serve, conversations related to equity have always been present. The events in the summer of 2020 in response to police brutality, combined with the pandemic, only amplified the centuries-old systemic, institutional inequities that exist within our structures. These disparities have been tragically amplified during the pandemic, as we see more deadly COVID-19 and underlying health consequences amongst non-White people and other vulnerable populations. We are uniquely positioned in human services to look at the data and outcomes, ask questions about the disparities and inequities that people and communities are facing, and develop a focused, data-informed plan to achieve equity in human services. Together, with an extremely dedicated workforce and cadre of community partners, we are committed to identifying solutions, building an anti-poverty framework, and tackling institutional racism.

**Your EDI Core Team will be instrumental in achieving your race equity goals. How are you establishing that team to reflect different backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives?**

**Wisehart:** The individuals on the core team span the agency's programs and operations with varying levels of leadership and oversight. It was important to bring people to the table who may not traditionally interact with the Director or their Division's Executive Leadership, recognizing that their voices and experiences are often closer to the client-facing, ground-level work we do in human services and therefore hold value and importance.

**Your race equity work in Arizona is in its infancy and will continue to evolve. What will it take for your agency to sustain the momentum for a long-term vision where race equity is a core value of your agency's work?**

**Wisehart:** In the short term, the agency must build upon its dedicated group of individuals, while compelling leadership

to hold ourselves accountable to the work. The momentum will be sustained if we create opportunities to meaningfully incorporate diverse stakeholders in the work. Holding ourselves accountable requires working the roadmap, while also beginning to integrate the concepts, data analysis, and language shifts throughout the agency's staff, communications, and partners upon which we rely to accomplish our work. Of the utmost importance will be ensuring we do not further perpetuate stigma and systemic inequality that exists in our government structures. To achieve long-term success, our staff, and the partners with whom we work, will approach human services from an equity lens in a natural, but intentional way.

**You seem to be clearly prioritizing a systematic approach to using data to inform your EDI strategy. How do you hope to leverage your existing data and establish new data to benchmark your progress?**

**Wisehart:** Government agencies are often data-rich, but information-poor, which provides us with an opportunity to take a close look at the kind of data, where they come from, and to find opportunities for interconnectedness across the programs and funding streams, statewide, to

**Interested in learning more?** Visit APHSA's Call to Action page for information and resources developed by other human services agencies to advance their race equity work. This page will continue expanding as we share more voices through our race equity interview series.

achieve better outcomes. Through the EDI strategy, we are looking to define outcomes from an equity lens and ask what the data are really telling us through questions such as, *What is happening both internally and externally from a client and provider perspective? What's missing in the data? Where do we need to focus in one area that the data are showing us currently have disparate outcomes? Why do the disparate outcomes exist and what components exist in that community to capture opportunities to enhance equity?*

From there, we can approach mutually serving agencies and organizations, and the communities we serve, to determine the next natural process point to test opportunities for improving disparate outcomes.

### **What is something you are incredibly proud of that your team has accomplished through the development of your EDI plan?**

**Wisehart:** Moving the needle to think from an equity lens and ask questions as to why there are gaps across race and place. The team's work will hold the department accountable to understand that disparate outcomes are harmful to the overall success of the work we are trying to accomplish, and that achieving an equitable outcome will result in improvement for all.

### **For your peers in other human services agencies who are considering beginning their own journey, what words of advice can you share with them?**

**Wisehart:** Get comfortable with the process—the system had decades and even centuries to uphold inequitable outcomes. Health and human services agencies operate within systems that have a direct link to data to show disparate outcomes as well as community resilience. So we must be comfortable asking the questions. Use the “why” approach to understand how to look at the organization's desired outcomes with data through the lens of the gaps—what are the disparities, where are they, and who is not advancing from our systems? And... why, why, why? The key components that are needed to move from why to how will be a system of collecting and analyzing data and a plan for accountability to both share the information and track and adjust. 📊

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## **PRESIDENT'S MEMO continued from page 3**

noted that “the most ‘a-ha’ thing for me during the crisis is how willing everyone (partners, advocates, stakeholders) has been to give grace and set aside agendas to come together to solve the problem.” Another of our members reflected that she had “to turn to people who are experts in their own lives to help lead the conversation and take control”—and how illuminating the very act of ‘letting go of control’ has been to the ways in which she is leading today. And a common sentiment across our membership has been the recognition that “our systems are capable of much more than we thought.”

Read more in our recent publication, “The COVID Response Project: Lessons Learned from State Adaptations and Federal Flexibilities,”<sup>1</sup> which documents the real-time impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on state human services agencies and captures state perspectives on lessons learned to guide future federal policymaking and state implementation.

When we look deeper at the factors that both enable and thwart this resiliency, it is clear that our sector is at the *Cornerstone* of a redesign and a rebuild we must embark on together:

Human services are the essential bricks and mortar that undergird what allows all of us an equitable

opportunity to live our fullest lives. Human services help shape and support us at key points in our lives, opening opportunities for lifelong success. Human services provide foundational supports to families facing adversity and ensure resilience at familial and community levels that help us weather life's inevitable ups and downs. They are a stabilizing force when we are hit by an unexpectedly severe storm such as the COVID-19 pandemic we are all experiencing.

Read more in our recent publication, “Cornerstone for Resilient Communities and a Revitalized Economy: The Role of Human Services in Building Well-Being from the Ground Up.”<sup>2</sup>

I have never been as sure of the preventive and primary role that human services must play in our communities than I am today. To become a nation where all Americans can thrive, we must understand that human services are part of our critical infrastructure—like schools, hospitals, and roads—and therefore foundational to driving a revitalized economy, repairing the multitude of harms caused by structural racism and inequities, and, ultimately, to building *resilient* communities.

As one CEO in our member network recently shared: “Human services is

an incredible engine for the public health response.” Together we oversee services that build resilience and bolster family well-being through access to food, health care, employment, and other key building blocks. We should not understate what the pandemic has illuminated about this engine that we sit on, and what we are called to do in support of the public good.

Those of you who know me, know I am, by nature, an eternal optimist. I believe in the good of humanity and that together we can emerge from this moment with a learning mindset that positions us as systems leaders to do better for all. I'm also a realist and recognize the road ahead is long and rocky. At APHSA, we are proud of the incredible effort of the local and state leaders in our network who have worked tirelessly on behalf of their communities, many of which have been impacted directly by COVID-19. We remain as committed as ever to working alongside all of you to build a more resilient tomorrow.

Check out our 2021 Action Plan overview<sup>3</sup> to learn more. 📊

### **Reference Notes**

1. [http://bit.ly/COVID\\_APHSA](http://bit.ly/COVID_APHSA)
2. <https://bit.ly/CornerstoneAPHSA>
3. <http://bit.ly/ActPlan21>