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

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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?**

**Reference Notes**