



City of Eugene's representatives to the Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE).
 Photo courtesy of city of Eugene

DEI

Cities Take Steps to Update, Improve Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Initiatives

By Melody Finnemore

Several cities across Oregon have long had policies and programs in place to ensure the diversity of their communities is represented and their internal operations are equitable and inclusive. Others began implementing these measures more recently.

City leaders agree that while conversations about diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) may have already been ongoing in their communities, those conversations took on a greater sense of urgency following the killing of George Floyd in May 2020 and the public's reaction to it.

“That called on all of us to level up in several ways,” said Mia Cariaga, executive director of Eugene’s Central Services Department.

Rethinking, Revamping Existing Practices

Eugene has developed several formal channels for ensuring that DEI is a focus both internally and externally, and Cariaga said city leaders were already rethinking them when Floyd was killed by Derek Chauvin, then a Minneapolis police officer.

One of the updates involved the city’s “Belonging Training,” which is aimed at supporting city staff to promote a sense of inclusion



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– Mia Cariaga, Executive Director, Central Services Department, Eugene

within the organization and in the community. New modules of the two-day training were offered in August and another will be available in September.

“In light of the killing of George Floyd, we had several members of the community and several employees sign up. Nearly all of our 1,600 employees have participated,” Cariaga said. The trainings are organized by the city’s Human Resources department in partnership with its Human Rights Commission, and are based on the framework of the Coaching for Educational Equity seminar.

Eugene established a series of forums called Brave Workspaces that bring together people who identify as Black, White, Indigenous and other people of color. “That created the space for people to bring their voice and talk about their experiences of what was happening at the height of national activity in May 2020,” she said.

In 2019, city leaders began working with the Government Alliance on Race and Equity to review all of its internal systems, including hiring processes, and provide recommendations on how to improve them. Eugene’s executive team will begin addressing the recommendations this fall. In addition, a consulting group is talking with city employees who bring new and different perspectives related to racial equity and inclusion.

Eugene also has revamped its Public Participation Guide, which walks employees through how to engage with community members and reach underrepresented populations to help bring their ideas to the table and shape city policies.

Over the course of the pandemic, employees have had weekly drop-ins with their supervisors, which created another opportunity for staff members to share their personal and professional perspectives.

“We wanted to make sure people still had an opportunity to connect,” Cariaga said. “We recognize that keeping our leaders informed about issues related to diversity, equity and inclusion is probably the most impactful thing for most of our employees.”

An Opportunity for Engagement

Peter Hall, Ontario’s assistant city manager and human resources manager, has served on the city’s Diversity Advisory Committee for three years and said the city council stated the need for the committee to help it make decisions for the community.

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The city of Ontario's new wayfinding program includes signage with multicultural motifs to represent different populations in the city.

“The big thing that spurred it on was the massive amount of diversity and history our city has. The groups of people who have come over from the Basque population, the Japanese population during and after World War II, the Mexican population we have and, most recently, the Somali population who have come as immigrants and refugees,” he said. “It was an opportunity for the council to engage our citizenry and get them more involved.”

Hall said the committee’s first charge was to establish its identity. Early meetings were based on core values of advocacy, engagement, social justice and collaboration, and discussion revolved around what those terms meant and how they would serve as a framework for the committee.

Over the past 18 months, the committee focused on outreach and attending community events like the annual Global Village Festival and the Dia de los Muertos celebration. While the COVID-19 pandemic has hampered those plans, the committee remains committed to building relationships.

“One of the things our committee members have realized is that making sure those relationships are strong is essential,” he said. “We do have some natural relationships with key players and nonprofits in our community, and they have done a really great job of reaching out to people who aren’t going to come to a public meeting and ask for help. They are extending a hand and the committee has been really good about that.”

The third action phase centers on opportunities to help diverse populations make their voices heard and improve communications. As an example, last year Ontario implemented a wayfinding program that improves signage around the city. It hired a vendor to design signage with multicultural motifs to represent different populations, and the Diversity Advisory Committee reviewed them and provided feedback on cultural accuracy and representation.

In addition, a committee member conducted outreach during the 2020 Census to ensure underserved populations were being recognized and represented.

Julie Hernandez, chair of the Diversity Advisory Committee, said that while it’s been a struggle to build the committee’s membership during the pandemic, the group is now able to connect more and seek out individuals who are ready to take action so it can work with the city council to achieve its goals.

“I wanted to get involved because I grew up in Ontario. I left for a few years to go to school in eastern Oregon but, ultimately, I wanted to come back and give back to my community,” she said.

“I’m Hispanic and I work with members of that community. They feel like they don’t have a voice for opinions they have about our town, so I want to give them a voice.”

– Julie Hernandez, Chair, Ontario's Diversity Advisory Committee



“I also want to be able to represent those who aren’t represented. I’m Hispanic and I work with members of that community. They feel like they don’t have a voice for opinions they have about our town, so I want to give them a voice.”

Listening Sessions Part of Plan

Troutdale City Manager Ray Young said that regardless of where he, the city council or the community lies on the political spectrum when it comes to equity issues, the key is “you have to be aware of what’s going on in your community that may give the impression, or actually be, discriminatory.”

To that end, the city evaluated its committee system last year and revitalized its former Public Safety Advisory Committee, which had become dormant when Troutdale closed its police department and consolidated and contracted with the Multnomah County Sheriff’s Office. They added to its mission ensuring that city police and fire services are being provided equitably for all citizens.

The resurrected Public Safety and Equity Advisory Committee will begin meeting this fall and is charged with evaluating and making recommendations to the city’s elected and appointed officials on matters relating to public safety, including law enforcement, fire and medical services. The committee is not responsible for reviewing use of force complaints or citizens’ complaints against public safety personnel.

Young said the city is ensuring that officers who patrol Troutdale are connected with the new equity and inclusion manager in the Multnomah County Sheriff’s Office. He also has invited guest speakers to provide their perspectives on DEI issues, and the city will host community meetings in which people in marginalized communities can share their experiences.



A community march and event in support of equity was held in the summer of 2020 in downtown Troutdale's Mayor's Square. Photo courtesy of city of Troutdale.

“Understanding how they have been treated and how they feel they have been perceived is much more effective than telling people what to do,” he said, adding listening sessions can allow people to hear others’ experiences and develop empathy and understanding.

Young noted that it’s crucial to listen to people who are in poverty and are experiencing homelessness, and to try to understand what that experience is like. “A lot of times people will say, ‘Why don’t they just get a job?’ and that’s a pretty simplistic response to a complicated problem.”

Removing Roadblocks and Acknowledging Differences

Bonnie Barasch, Medford’s human resources director, went to work for the city about three years ago and previously was active in DEI issues for the state. She said Medford’s conversation started with an evaluation of what the city was doing to promote DEI because city leaders felt it had not been fully addressed.

“We feel like we have equitable hiring practices, but we didn’t feel like, as an organization, we had a group that was discussing how to take roadblocks out of the way,” she said.

Medford has an external committee of volunteers formerly called the Multicultural Commission and renamed the Commission on Access, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (CADEI) that reports to the city council. Barasch and a human resources specialist work with the CADEI and an internal committee, and the internal group began meeting last fall to craft a mission and a charter.

Barasch said that, due in part to COVID, the process has been slow so far. One of the biggest challenges is identifying what improvements need to be made. “Why do we need this (internal) group? I think that’s been the biggest question. People are asking what’s wrong. Nothing’s wrong, we just know we can be better,” she said.

The HR Department, assisted by the city’s IT group, conducted a confidential survey of employees to help identify DEI perspectives and concerns. While job applications don’t ask about religious preferences, sexual orientation or other personal matters, such preferences are often part of workplace diversity and the survey is intended to ensure that diversity is represented.

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The Beaverton Night Market is held each summer and features food, craft and merchandise vendors and performers representing cultures around the world that live in Beaverton. Photo courtesy of city of Beaverton.



“We want to acknowledge differences and create environments that welcome those differences.”

– Bonnie Barasch, Human Resources Director, Medford

The internal DEI committee, with Barasch taking the lead, organized a naming contest for the internal committee, which meets once a month for an hour and a half, and where action items are delegated to city employees. “We got a lot of great responses and we were happy that people were at least engaged enough that they wanted to be part of naming the group,” she said, adding the name will be selected during the group’s next meeting.

Medford’s leaders also are evaluating administrative language, bargaining agreements, job fairs and other official communications and events to ensure they serve all populations and no one group is singled out by wording. As an example, some of the bargaining agreements have been amended so that gender language is “they” or “employee” rather than “he/she” and “his/her.”

In addition, Medford is using grant funding to hire a consulting group that will evaluate the city’s DEI goals and how well it is

achieving them. “We want to acknowledge differences and create environments that welcome those differences,” Barasch said.

Updated DEI Plan Reflects Needs, Successes

Beaverton’s DEI work began in 2009. The city already had hosted several cultural events and received positive feedback from community members about how diversity was one of the city’s strengths. However, a community visioning process revealed that something was lacking.

“I think during the visioning process we realized that we were disconnected with the community and, particularly, traditionally underrepresented populations,” said Alexis Ball, equity and inclusion manager for the Cultural Inclusion & Community Services programs in the city’s Public Engagement Division.

The city responded by hosting multicultural community forums, which led to an ad-hoc Diversity Task Force. The task force recommended an official Diversity Task Force to be created on par with other boards and commissions. The city also added staff capacity to its Cultural Inclusion Program. The Diversity Advisory Board crafted Beaverton’s first DEI program in 2014 and city leaders renewed the plan in 2019.

Ball said the updated plan narrows the focus to make action items more measurable and increase accountability at an institutional level around those items. Other action items that have been accomplished were removed from the plan, such as improving language access through translation and interpretation services and staff training. Ball said the team has produced an annual



The city of Beaverton's partners with the nonprofit Unite Oregon on an annual Beaverton Organizing and Leadership Development (BOLD) Program to engage immigrants, refugees and people of color in local government. Photo courtesy of city of Beaverton.



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— Alexis Ball, Equity and Inclusion Manager, Public Engagement Division, Beaverton

report on the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Plan and is now gathering data for a second report.

"That program has taken off and has a lot of infrastructure now that supports language access for the public," she said.

Other successes include encouraging underrepresented populations to be more involved in advising the city on critical issues such as its development of affordable housing. Support for small businesses include economic opportunities such as the multicultural Beaverton Night Market. Through its Beaverton Organizing and Leadership Development (BOLD) program, the city provides leadership development and civic engagement training for emerging immigrant and refugee leaders and leaders of color.

In addition, a cross-departmental internal equity team exists to further the city's DEI work in the areas of internal policy and organizational culture. That team has made recommendations on hiring and recruitment processes, staff training and the formation of employee resource groups. ■

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