



Strategies for Advancing Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity

in the Pacific Southwest's (HHS Region 9) Mental Health Workforce





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INTRODUCTION

Committing to and applying principles of diversity, inclusion, and equity into staff recruitment and retention practices demonstrates a strong value in diverse experiences and perspectives and leads to a workforce that is more reflective of and responsive to the community.

The Pacific Southwest Region¹ of the United States is geographically and culturally diverse. Its ten states and territories include the Pacific Islands, the country's second largest city, and rural tribal nations. Region 9 includes three of the country's states with the highest share of immigrants in their populations,ⁱ many of whom speak a variety of languages in addition to or other than English. In the Northern Mariana Islands, a commonwealth with three official languages, more than 90 percent of the residents of Saipan, its largest island, speak a language other than English in the home.ⁱⁱ

Taking higher education and employment data into consideration, studies demonstrate that current students and recent graduates of mental health professional programs are more diverse than the current workforce. However, even in places as culturally and ethnically diverse as California, nearly 80 percent of the state's psychologists are white.ⁱⁱⁱ These data indicate a gap in the pathway between education and employment in the mental health field, and a likelihood that access to employment opportunities, as well as professional development services, is more limited for some communities than others. Conversely, this data also suggests an exciting opportunity in diversifying your organization through partnership with higher education and intentional recruitment of new professionals.

To attend to access and outcome disparities that persist in communities of color and indigenous communities in the Pacific Southwest, mental health organizations are called on to diversify their workforce. Committing to equitable recruitment and retention practices requires time and resources that, while challenging on the front end, result in positive long-term gains for both the workforce and communities served. Ultimately, organizations are better equipped serve their communities, which leads to better health outcomes. This is supported by research, which suggests improved outcomes and stronger therapeutic alliances for patients who share a culture with a provider.^{iv}

This resource offers strategies for advancing diversity, inclusion, and equity in your recruitment, hiring, and retention processes. A convenient checklist outlining these strategies is located at the end of the document. For those interested in assessing their successes and challenges related to their organization's workforce diversity, the Pacific Southwest MHTTC's [Assessing Workforce Diversity: A Tool for Mental Health Organizations on the Path to Health Equity](#) serves as a companion to this resource.

Diversity is the condition of having or being composed of differing elements. The inclusion of different types of people (as people of different races, cultures, backgrounds, opinions, religious/political beliefs, sexual orientations, heritage, age, and life experience) in a group or organization.

Inclusion puts the concept and practice of diversity into action by creating an environment of involvement, respect, and connection—where the richness of ideas, backgrounds, and perspectives are harnessed to create business value. Organizations need both diversity and inclusion to be successful.

Equity is when everyone, regardless of who they are or where they come from, has the opportunity to thrive. Equity requires acknowledging root causes of inequities, eliminating barriers, lifting community strengths, and relentlessly pursuing justice.



¹ The Pacific Southwest Region includes Arizona, California, Hawaii, Nevada, and U.S. Pacific Islands of American Samoa, Guam, Marshall Islands, Northern Mariana Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, and Palau.

RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES

Your mental health organization can advance diversity, inclusion, and equity at every phase of the recruitment process. Everything, from the language in your job postings to whom you include in interview panels is an opportunity to foster more equitable, inclusive, and engaged recruitment processes.

1. Lead with your organization's values of diversity, inclusion, and equity.

Most organizations have a statement of equal opportunity and non-discrimination, but usually include these statements at the end of a job posting. Feature these values more prominently in your job posting to emphasize to diverse candidates that diversity, inclusion, and equity matter to your organization. A growing number of organizations acknowledge LGBTQ+ candidates by referencing “sexual orientation” and “gender identity” in their equal opportunity statements.^v Engage your team to gather input on equity statement updates and check to see if your organization is living your values. Consider the following examples from Funders for LGBTQ Issues and Google:

- “The [Institution Name] is committed to diversity and to equal opportunity employment. [Institution Name] does not discriminate on the basis of race, creed, color, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, age, height, weight, physical or mental ability (including HIV status), veteran status, military obligations, or marital status. This policy applies to hiring, internal promotions, training, opportunities for advancement, and terminations and applies to all [Institution Name] employees, volunteers, members, clients, and contractors.”^{vi}
- “At Google, we don't just accept difference — we celebrate it, we support it, and we thrive on it for the benefit of our employees, our products, and our community. Google is proud to be an equal opportunity workplace and is an affirmative action employer.”^{vii}

2. Include responsibilities that align with your organization's commitment to diversity, inclusion, and equity.

In addition to a provider's typical job duties (e.g., develop plans to improve client's well-being), list responsibilities specifically related to the culture of your organization and the populations served. For example:

- “Work respectfully across a variety of cultures;”
- “Learn about how mental health issues manifest in the different cultural groups we serve;” or
- “Engage and outreach to cultural brokers in the community.”

3. Highlight how you support your staff in connecting with both their peers and the community.

Non-Hispanic white adults receive mental health treatment twice as often as Hispanics.^{viii} This exemplifies why prioritizing staff engagement with your community is a critical step for improving service access. Additionally, studies suggest that employees like it when community engagement or volunteerism is integrated into their role.^{ix} Consider how you can market your commitment to community engagement in job descriptions. Highlight community mentorship programs or affiliations with organizations that support historically underrepresented professionals, like the Black Psychologists Association. Emphasize the work of your equity committee or other diversity-centered internal groups. If community engagement, mentoring, and equity committees are not meaningfully represented in your organization, consider how to advance these practices. A few organizational policies worth examining include:

- Paid time off for volunteering. Offering even one or two days of organizationally sponsored days off for employee volunteering can make a big impact.
- Match employee donations or make charitable gifts in employees' names. Some organizations match employee donations to nonprofits to support good work in their community. Other companies develop programs that allow employees to apply for grants to their preferred nonprofit organizations.
- Collaborate with minority-serving institutions and local high schools on mentorship programs. Region 9 includes at least one of the following minority-serving institutions: Predominantly Black Institutions, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, Tribal Colleges and Universities, Alaskan Native- or Native Hawaiian-Serving Institutions, and Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions.

4. Accept equivalent experience for degrees.

The education system produces lower outcomes for people of color and indigenous people, those who are poor, live in rural or disinvested communities, and/or whose home language(s) are not English. While some provider positions may require a masters or other advanced credential, always emphasizing formal education may leave out diverse candidates with important



experiences and skills who lack degrees. Strategies include elevating lived experience and expertise (e.g., peer support positions) or taking a competency-based approach. Consider deeper collaboration with community colleges engaged in mental health workforce pipelines. They tend to attract a more diverse student population than four-year institutions,^x and your organization can serve as a pathway for attracting these students to the mental health field. Partnering with community colleges on internships or job shadowing opportunities may also help you identify talent for position vacancies.

5. Specify experience with diversity, inclusion, equity, and populations of focus in job qualifications.

Job qualifications such as, “knowledge and/or experience with eliminating disparities, equity, and cultural and linguistic competence;” and/or “knowledge of and previous work with Latinx communities,” signals to potential applicants that this experience and knowledge is important and valued.

6. Focus on inclusive language.

Subtle language choices can significantly impact your candidate pool. Use language that is inclusive of culturally and linguistically diverse groups. Demonstrate that your organization is welcoming of non-binary and gender non-conforming candidates by including they/them pronouns in postings and related materials. Masculine or gendered language may also keep women from applying for jobs.^{xi} Software programs that identify gendered language can help you overcome this issue (e.g., gender-decoder.katmatfield.com).

7. Honor and value bi- or multi-lingual skills that will be used on the job.

Nearly 20 percent of adult Hawaiians report that they speak English “not well” or “not at all.”^{xii} Many other Region 9 states and territories include high percentages of families who speak a language other than English in their home. In an increasingly diverse society, bi- or multi-lingual staff increase access for clients with limited or no English proficiency. Additionally, research suggests that the skills required for fluency in multiple languages makes these staff better multitaskers, communicators, and listeners.^{xiii} These are critical skills for mental health organizations, so consider how to attract bi- or multi-lingual candidates through bonuses or increased pay.

8. Disclose salary range and do not ask for salary history or salary requirements.

Nationally, women, people of color, and indigenous people receive lower pay than their white, male colleagues for the same work. For example, a woman of color working full-time can lose more than \$1 million over a 40-year career.^{xiv} Asking for salary history perpetuates these wage gaps because organizations base their compensation offers on a candidate’s previous earnings. Recently, several states and cities, including California, banned employers from asking salary history questions.^{xv} Research indicates that removing salary questions improves pay, particularly for African Americans, who received pay increases that were 13% to 16% higher than comparable job changers.^{xvi} Rather than asking salary questions, use industry data or salary aggregation tools to identify appropriate compensation ranges. Posting salary ranges not only increases your organizational transparency but can help your organization save time by not interviewing candidates who will not accept a job within the planned pay range.

9. Remove barriers for candidates with disabilities.

Mental health organizations are not always designed to serve people with multiple disabilities, which can pose barriers to client access.^{xvii} Employing people with disabilities benefits mental health organizations because they both bring a different perspective to the work and support clients with special needs. Ensure that your job postings do not create unnecessary



barriers for candidates with disabilities. Consider the ways in which applicants can submit their information. Written language is often the standard, but audio recordings or videos may advance employment equity for those with disabilities. Proactively state that your organization will accommodate requests for video or other modalities for interviews typically conducted by phone. Thoughtfully evaluate whether text on your online job posting boards contrasts appropriately for those with visual impairments or if you can provide captioning services.

Avoid listing requirements such as, “must have a working vehicle,” unless essential. Requiring a car, driver’s license, car insurance, etc. may exclude candidates with disabilities who rely on public transportation. Cars are also expensive, which may exclude some low-income candidates. Think about whether a candidate really needs vehicle access to do the job.

10. Portray job duties for each position realistically.

Combining several jobs’ worth of essential duties can make it more challenging to find the right candidate (e.g., experience in administrative tasks and human resources). Overloaded descriptions also create challenges for young professionals and individuals who are starting out in their careers as they are less likely to apply if they feel under equipped for the job. Consider opportunities for training a new hire after they start their position. Prioritizing skills allows you to fairly evaluate candidates with different but equally valuable experience.^{xviii} Generational diversity proves critical both for succession planning and bringing different perspectives to the work.

11. Disseminate job postings through a variety of media formats and modalities.

How and where you disseminate job postings is critical. Utilize professional networks and professional organizations that support underrepresented communities, like the Latino Social Workers Organization or the Asian and Pacific Islander American Health Forum, when marketing the position. Conferences, newsletters, and directories of higher education mental health programs that support diverse individuals are great places to post.

Incorporate various formats for your job announcement. Online announcements may leave out those with limited internet access. Consider posting positions on job boards run by community/ethnic organizations and on websites and publications with a diverse readership. Also, explore posting opportunities on radio stations and at businesses that serve diverse clientele (e.g. barber shops, restaurants, etc.).

HIRING STRATEGIES

The hiring process is another opportunity to advance diversity, inclusion, and equity in your mental health organization. Organizational and individual biases may pose challenges, but organizational reflection, conversation, and shared learning can increase awareness and advance equitable hiring practices.

1. Create a diverse search or review committee.

Developing diverse search committees is extremely important both for obtaining different viewpoints and helping candidates see themselves in the position. For example, African Americans are underrepresented in the mental health workforce,^{xix} including psychiatry and social work. Seeing other African Americans in these positions may make these candidates more attracted to the role. It may prove helpful to include members of the local community, advocates for underrepresented and/or underserved communities, current or past clients, and those with lived experiences like the client population.

2. Discuss equity with your hiring team.

Ensure your organization possesses an equity definition, an understanding of the equitable processes you put in place, and why they are important. These are important topics to discuss before the hiring process begins. Acknowledge implicit biases that can influence the review and interview process. Discuss how to combat these biases with an open mind. Also, because of liability concerns, train your team on the distinction between legal and illegal interview questions. For example, you cannot ask a candidate questions about their race, ethnicity, age, or sexual orientation; however, you can ask questions about their experience working with diverse populations or related to their commitment to equity and inclusion.

3. Provide linguistically appropriate services by recruiting multilingual staff.

Forty-four percent of Californians speak a language other than English at home;^{xx} therefore, it is important for your mental health organization to understand the linguistic needs of your community. Aim to hire staff that can speak the languages of the communities you serve. Use written or oral language skills tests in the hiring process to gauge proficiency and consider

compensation incentives for multilingual work. This will allow for more comprehensive care, as clients can more easily make appointments, speak with clinicians directly, and eliminate communications through an interpreter. Collecting data on the threshold languages in your community will help you identify your organization's specific linguistic needs.



4. Hire for passion, dedication, and life experience.

Pay disparities and gaps related to employment and career advancement begin for people of color and women at the very start of their careers,^{xxi} which may result in underemployment, workforce exclusion, or a less linear career path. While they may lack fully aligned experience or credentials, these staff can bring critical skills, such as passion, commitment to equity, adaptability, and lived experience to the role. Think about the ideal team you want to have in the future and whether candidates who do not have the skills now will, with support and mentorship, play a valuable role in your organization. This approach may prove particularly useful in the Pacific Islands, where peer support may help reduce cultural mental health stigma. Widening the path to employment can address critical workforce shortages.

5. Use the preferred skills section.

Qualifications should be based on the competencies needed for success in a position. Certain mental health positions require credentials (e.g., Master of Social Work), but consider whether you need a candidate from a top-rated institution. This sort of preference may pose a barrier to applicants of color or other marginalized groups, as they continue to face obstacles to elite higher education access. Unless you absolutely require a degree, license, or specialized skill, place these credentials in the “preferred” section of a job announcement. This opens doors for people with equivalent working experience.

6. Simplify and standardize the process.

Region 9 is home to a remarkably diverse population, so lack of community representation in the workforce is generally not a diversity pipeline or pathway issue, but representative of inequitable hiring practices. Many factors contribute to a persistent lack of workplace diversity, including lack of diversity in leadership positions. Research suggests that our unconscious biases lead us to favor those like ourselves; therefore, if leadership is the same race and gender or shares the same educational pedigree, they will continue to hire more people with similar backgrounds.^{xxiii} Burdensome hiring processes may leave out good candidates. Standardized processes may help reduce biases in hiring decisions.^{xxiv} Implementing skills tests where candidates can demonstrate their response to a “real life” scenario allows them to showcase their talents and provides you with valuable insight. A simpler process may also facilitate diversity in your organization by removing bureaucratic barriers to employment.

RETENTION STRATEGIES

Mental health clients benefit from diverse organizations that include staff and practitioners who share their backgrounds. Sharing a cultural background with a therapist, social worker, counselor, or other professional makes clients more comfortable^{xxv}; further, bi- or multi-lingual staff help ensure greater access to mental health services. Retaining diverse staff is not only critical to achieving your organizational equity goals and optimizing outcomes for everyone you serve, but also limits the draining of human resources time and energy from staff turnover.

1. Develop and implement an onboarding process to integrate new hires into your organizational culture.

A structured onboarding process can make a huge difference. It allows new hires to integrate more quickly into your organization, learn about your culture and values, and understand where they fit. One strategy includes requiring all new

employees take a work styles inventory, such as [StrengthsFinder](#), as part of their orientation and sharing results from their co-workers. This practice allows the team to see the full diversity of strengths represented on the team and can help combat biases that team members may have about other team members.

2. Include cultural competence as a requirement for job performance by incorporating it into performance evaluations, promotions, and professional development.

Cultural competence is essential for decreasing disparities in mental health outcomes.^{xxvi} Integrating cultural considerations into treatment planning can help remove mental health service utilization barriers. Lack of attention to providers' implicit biases and cultural competence can negatively impact client perception of care; indeed, in a research study, Black patients found providers with high implicit bias less trustworthy and of lower quality than those with low biases.^{xxvi} Cultural competence training that emphasizes bias mitigation both reduces the unconscious biases providers may hold toward certain populations and improves provider-client interactions.^{xxviii} Including cultural competence as a performance measure enforces its importance for all employees. Culturally competent, inclusive organizational cultures may also reduce turnover, as staff feel their differences are appreciated and valued.^{xxix} For information on cultural competence training for mental health providers, visit the [Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network](#) and the United States Department of Health and Human Services' [Office of Minority Health](#) for more general cultural competency training.

3. Offer Employee Resource Groups.

People from underrepresented groups need a way of connecting to others with similar backgrounds to avoid feelings of isolation; boost their engagement; and explore issues of diversity, inclusion, and equity. Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) offer a space for people to come together and address their work situations through a specific cultural lens. While approaches to ERGs and affinity groups are changing to reflect needed intersectionality, data shows that ERGs increase engagement for younger employees. Seventy-eight percent of surveyed 18 to 24-year-olds and 84 percent of 25 to 34-year-olds report that ERGs positively impact engagement.^{xxx} Additionally, these groups can serve as important links to employees' career advancement, development and support, and connection to the community. For more information on ERGs explore resources on [Catalyst](#), an organization working to build workplaces that work for women.

4. Define employees' career paths.

A key driver of turnover is the perceived lack of career opportunities and advancement. Non-dominant culture employees may experience this absence of opportunity more profoundly because they do not see their background represented in their organization. If you are in a managerial position, provide role clarity and career path information to your staff and translate career goals into day-to-day work. Organizational leadership around career path is particularly important in areas of mental health, like the substance misuse field, that lack uniformed standards or credentials.^{xxxi} This perceived lack of structure can make it challenging for employees or those interested in the field to visualize their advancement. Consider how to engage employees and boost productivity through mentorship, leadership training, and peer groups. When your employees are learning, they are engaged; additionally, defined career paths and leadership development aid your organization in succession planning efforts.^{xxxii}

5. Prioritize work-life balance, job flexibility, and paid family leave.

Lack of paid family leave disproportionately impacts women and young people. In many states, the cost of infant care is more than public college tuition and forces staff out of the workforce.^{xxxiii} This turnover can impact your financial bottom line and lead to gaps in the services you provide. Create a policy around leave that includes substantive paid family leave for parents of all genders when they have a new baby through childbirth or adoption or must take care of family members. Requirements around paid leave vary at the state and local levels, so it is important to research the laws in your community. Small businesses that are not subject to Family Medical Leave Act mandates may shy away from providing leave because of financial barriers; however, there are [resources](#) to help these organizations develop leave policies.

Generational diversity is critical for succession planning and leveraging strengths of different age groups. Additionally, emerging research suggests peer support may improve behavioral health treatment outcomes, including for youth and young adults.^{xxxiv} Flexible work schedules can support employee well-being and may prove especially beneficial for the mental health workforce, who often face significant job stress. Create talent strategies that engage all the generations that make up your workforce. The 2015 Millennial Majority Workforce Study showed 66 percent of Millennials value flexible working hours and 56 percent value flexible working locations.^{xxxv} Remote work may also prove useful for recruiting rural staff, an important consideration for the Pacific Islands and states like Arizona, Hawaii, and Nevada that include significant rural and frontier areas. COVID-19 drastically increased the number of people working remotely and is bringing to light both the systems that support collaborative telework and the inequities related to technology and child care that can pose challenges. Ensure you check in with your team and invest time in organizational culture even if you are working apart.

6. Conduct culturally and linguistically responsive job training.

Incorporate job training programs that are culturally and linguistically responsive. Provide all staff the opportunity to engage in cultural training for populations you serve and involve community members in the development and delivery of such training. For instance, consider training in Chamorro for organizations composed largely of Pacific Islander staff serving their communities. This will help ensure you are appropriately conveying cultural considerations and not exacerbating community or historical stereotypes or traumas. Engagement is critical for employee retention and skill development.

7. Engage in Self-Reflection and Continuous Quality Improvement.

A critical element of implementing diversity, inclusion, and equity efforts in your mental health organization is determining their effectiveness.^{xxxvi} Monitor your recruitment, hiring, and retention data to see whether your changes are making an impact. Embed individual assessment for all levels of staff related to their learning and practice around cultural and linguistic competence. Regularly evaluate your trainings for reliability and solicit feedback from staff on your offerings. Check in with all staff on the effectiveness of mentoring; employee resource groups; and other diversity, inclusion, and equity efforts. This will allow you to build upon your strengths, address barriers to success, and maximize the return of your efforts.



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