

PROJECT SUMMARY

For the past several years, the VCF Board of Directors has begun to explore how issues of diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) impact the Foundation's work and role in the Valley community. As part of its five year strategic plan (2019-2023), one of VCF's goals is to build a DEI awareness/education plan for Board, staff, and Valley NPOs. With the onset of the pandemic coupled with the death of George Floyd, that work has had both internal and external focus for Board and staff.

VCF is aligning efforts in 2021 and beyond with its partner The Community Foundation for Greater New Haven(TCF) in Stepping Forward to help the Valley recover from COVID-19 and to expand equitable opportunities. An integrated plan is evolving as community needs change in response to the changing dynamics of COVID-19 and racial equity. Strategies are being created to help close existing equity gaps by being more inclusive of people of color and individuals from other under-represented groups.

In order for VCF to operationalize this work, it sought the assistance of a consultant to survey the landscape of diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in the Lower Naugatuck Valley. This work has included but not been limited to determining what is currently underway, who is involved, and what plans for the future might entail; surveying local community leaders about their knowledge/awareness of DE&I issues; identifying areas of common ground; and identifying gaps in knowledge and awareness and what work needs to be done to address these gaps.

The report that follows is a compilation of the comments and perceptions of 32 Valley stakeholders who were surveyed during spring of 2021. It has literally scratched the surface of this topic, and can be used as a starting point for future Board discussion about where VCF's work on DE&I issues should be directed, such as what to fund and where to provide capacity help going forward. The more that we know about the Valley's needs and opportunities, the better we will be to work with our community partners to nurture an equitable and inclusive Valley both now and for generations to come.

A Report of the Survey of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Landscape of the Valley

A report submitted to the Valley Community Foundation

May 2021

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Executive Summary

Introduction and Approach

The Valley Community Foundation (VCF) has been aware of the growing conversation discussing Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI) issues in the Valley. VCF engaged Kristen Runk Consulting (KRC) to survey stakeholders in the region about their perceptions of successes and challenges in the region as it pertains to DEI.

Questions asked of respondents were purposely broad and included:

- Does your organization think about Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) in its staff? Leadership? Board?
- Do any of your organization's programs address DEI in the community? Have you altered any of your programs to make them more diverse/inclusive?
- Do you see any gaps in the community or among your clients that you feel need to be filled, if not by your nonprofit then through another organization or agency?
- What do you think you and/or the Valley community is doing well when it comes to DEI?
- Is there anyone else working or living in the Valley region that you think I should speak with about issues related to DEI?

KRC held conversations with stakeholders throughout the region. The conversations began with members of the Valley Council for Health and Human Services (VCHHS) and spread to community organizations, churches, and school districts:

- 32 respondents participated
 - 23 female and 9 males
 - 23 White, 7 Black, and 2 Unidentified
- 28 different nonprofits, community groups, and school districts were represented
- The identity of the respondents will remain anonymous

The findings fell into five categories

- **INTERNAL DEI CONVERSATIONS** – Nonprofits and school districts are having these conversations internally although the amount of action being taken varies.
- **DIVERSITY** – Respondents’ perceptions are that there is much work to be done in the Valley region when it comes to diversifying leadership across all sectors. Those surveyed also felt that nonprofits need to improve the diversity of the clientele they support.
- **BARRIERS TO EQUITY**– Respondents shared their beliefs that barriers to success that communities of color in the Valley are facing are the results of systemic racism¹ including but not limited to food insecurity, and a lack of transportation, childcare, and affordable housing.
- **NEED FOR CONVERSATION** – All respondents looking to enact change agreed that conversations among all stakeholders needed to happen.
- **PERCEPTIONS OF THE VALLEY AND VCHHS** – VCHHS and its extended partners are a collaborative group who work together to fill gaps where they find them and have begun to form committees to help discuss additional challenges, but the work being done for racial equity is sometimes viewed as too “White-led” and some are concerned about the lack of access both physical and abstract to the Valley.

In this report, we have chosen to capitalize all included races. We have also chosen the descriptor “Hispanic”, as this term was used by most respondents and often refers to the challenges non-English speakers face.

¹ For the purposes of this report, respondents’ perceptions of the term “systemic racism” can best be defined as *the creation of systems that perpetuate ongoing racial disparities in wealth, employment, the justice system, housing, health care, politics, and education.*

Key Findings

Internal DEI Efforts

- **All organizations are discussing DEI internally with differing levels of action.** All respondents reported they are doing some DEI work. This could also include a staff committee that meets to discuss issues of equity and inclusion. In some cases this committee is still being planned and has not yet been formed. Some nonprofits put more time into these committees than others. Sometimes the committee is staff-led with the goal of achieving a level playing field around the table without a built-in hierarchy. Some committees have already had challenging conversations wherein staff share unpleasant experiences they have had in the workplace. Some committees share cultural differences or have discussions centered on books/movies/TV programs that address diversity, equity, and/or inclusion issues.
- **While most respondents agree that training in DEI is necessary for Staff and Board, they believe that this is only happening in a few workplaces.** Some organizations have required training for staff and directors, some have had internal consultants train staff, and some have held their own workshops for staff and/or board or sent staff to TCF/VCF workshops. Some offer DEI training for their non-Board volunteers as well. Multiple respondents believe that trainings and workshops are not valuable if there is no follow up or difficult conversation being had. Respondents believe that training needs to force people to face their own biases and actions. Multiple respondents feel their Boards are not as interested in tackling DEI issues as they would like.

Diversity

- **Those surveyed shared that nonprofit leadership and upper management is mostly White.** While direct service staff are often from diverse races and backgrounds, the higher-level management positions tend to be primarily filled by White people.
- **Respondents also shared that boards are mostly White.** Many organizations have intentions to diversify their Boards, but most have not had success or have even started trying. Some respondents recommend changing bylaws to require more diversity and even to completely overhaul the board's racial make-up without waiting for term limits to end. Other respondents encourage making the difficult choice to bring on and include board members of color to challenge the status quo of the organization.
- **Respondents believe that organizations need to be more accountable for their diversification efforts.** Multiple respondents suggested that nonprofits do an internal audit

on their job applicants. Tracking gender, race, and background of applicants vs. hires can be very informative and call out previously-unknown biases.

- **Respondents believe that the education sector struggles with racial diversity.** While education has a great need for staff and leadership diversification, administrators and directors expressed frustration with the small number of applicants of color in this field. Multiple respondents believe there needs to be encouragement early on within minority communities to enter the education field.
- **Respondents varied in their opinions about the scarcity of diverse applicants.** For every respondent that believes there is a lack of qualified applications from minorities, there is another respondent that stresses the importance of changing hiring methodologies in order to reach the abundance of qualified candidates. Respondents believe that people who live in this area want to stay in this area, and are looking for jobs here. Those surveyed shared Ideas for improving diversity efforts include but are not limited to: marketing job opportunities to community groups including churches or the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), removing potentially unnecessary requirements such as higher education degrees, and making a concerted effort to learn about and face unconscious bias head-on.
- **Those surveyed believed that staff members don't want to feel they are the "token" person of color.** More than one respondent has experienced a highly qualified staff person of color leaving the job after a short period of time. It is the belief of each respondent that this individual left because they did not feel comfortable.
- **Respondents believe that many organizations need to diversify their volunteers.** In order to gain trust in communities of color, it is important that those going into the communities to represent nonprofits are also people of color or, at the very least, understand cultural differences enough to gain their trust. One of the biggest needs is bilingual volunteers.
- **Those surveyed believed that organizations aren't reaching the communities of color.** Most respondents agreed that ideally a nonprofit's clientele would directly reflect the community. For example, if a nonprofit is based in a community with a 20% Black population, at least 20% of their clients should be Black. Some respondents are working to find ways to build trust in Black and Latinx communities in order to provide services. Other respondents feel the barriers these communities are facing go beyond distrust on their part and are based on systemic barriers including lack of transportation, childcare, and access in general.

- **Respondents shared that a lack of bilingual staff is keeping nonprofits from effectively serving the growing Latinx community.** A large number of respondents mentioned the need for bilingual staff, volunteers, and materials.

Barriers to Equity

- **Those surveyed believe the biggest barrier keeping communities of color in the Valley from reaching success is systemic racism (see footnote on page 2).** While every respondent discussing this issue agrees the problem is country-wide, this was repeatedly raised as a concern specifically within the Valley. Respondents across races question why the poorest communities of color lack access to transportation, childcare, activities for children, food pantries, etc.
- **Many respondents believe that food insecurity is a barrier.** Multiple groups and nonprofits throughout the region are working to get food in the hands of those who need it, but some respondents question why it is so hard to reach certain communities. While some respondents applaud the ability for larger nonprofits to partner with churches and community groups to distribute food, others wonder why this partnership is needed and why the nonprofit can't get the food to those areas itself.
- **Respondents believe that housing is a barrier.** Several respondents shared that there is a lack of affordable, safe housing options in the region and communities of color are suffering the most. They further noted that without secure, reliable housing it is hard to find and keep a job and set up roots in the community.
- **Respondents believe that transportation is also a barrier.** Many shared that the public bus route is extremely limited and the Valley Transit service stops running at 5:30pm. They also questioned what options are available for someone who does not own a car?
- **Respondents also believe that childcare is a barrier.** Those surveyed shared that a lack of childcare options keep parents, mostly mothers, from finding work. They also shared that there is a noticeable lack of organized activities for children in general, which they further noted not only exacerbates the difficulty in a mother finding work, but also potentially harms the children through a lack of social/emotional learning opportunities.

Need for Conversation

- **Respondents believe that conversations among stakeholders are the only way to enact change.** Several of those surveyed shared that they believe many stakeholders are operating in separate silos trying to solve the same problem, but without understanding the others' needs, concerns, and viewpoints. They further noted that problems cannot be solved until all angles of the problem are understood. As one respondent put it, educating each other across the table creates relationships that ultimately make everyone more accountable for one another.
- **Respondents believe that conversations should begin with common definitions of terms.** What does inclusivity mean? What does equity mean? How does equity differ from equality? Many respondents referred to inclusivity as the fact that their mission did not actively exclude any group. However, some believe that this is not the same as including the voices of those being served, ensuring that all staff and board members feel comfortable speaking their mind, or ensuring that all people in a service area are being given the same level of service.
- **Those surveyed believe that these conversations be shared in a safe, brave, accepting environment so everyone can be truthful.** The safe environment is necessary for all stakeholders to be heard and to share what they need. Although respondents acknowledged that this can be a very uncomfortable space to be in they shared the need to feel their voices are being included. Many respondents believe that in these situations, a White person should not be leading the conversation and should potentially not be at the table at all. Some White respondents expressed the concern that to learn, grow, and educate themselves further about anti-racism, they need a space to feel comfortable asking questions that could be perceived as ignorant or hateful. In addition, some Black respondents expressed frustration that Black people were often called upon to teach White people about racism.
- **Many surveyed shared that conversations about taking action for change should be led by those who are being discussed.** Respondents of color expressed the need to be heard and to be the leader at the table. Many felt White-led organizations can help provide resources and participants behind the scenes, but should not be the lead organizer of the conversation. There was the sentiment that White people should be at the table to listen and learn—that too often White-led nonprofits decide what problems exist for the Black and Hispanic communities and the organizations need to hear from those being directly affected what the barriers to success are and what is needed from the nonprofits, schools, businesses, and government to make it better.
- **Respondents believe that it is important keep in mind intersectionality.** While one's race, for example, certainly has an enormous effect on their life experience, so does one's

gender, sexual orientation, geographic location, socio-economic level, etc. Many shared that It is important not to assume that every Black person's experience, for example, is the same and it is not fair to put one person in the position of being the voice for everyone.

- **Those surveyed believed that in some cases the conversation may need to be among people of the same color.** For example, it's easier for a White person to tell a fellow White person that their comments can be perceived as racist. Respondents mentioned that it's not fair to put a person in color in the position to do that. On the flipside, people of color shared that they may only feel comfortable truly expressing their needs, concerns, and frustrations to a room of people who look like them. Respondents felt that this could be a safe way to begin having difficult, educational discussions, with everyone needing to come together with a common, understood goal and language.
- **Those surveyed believe that the following groups need to be a part of the discussion as leaders/organizers:**
 - Valley NAACP
 - RACE (Racial Awareness and Cultural Education) program out of NAACP
 - MLK Committee
 - Black faith leaders
 - Other grassroots/community-based groups led by people of color
- **Respondents also believed that the following groups need to be at the table to listen and respond:**
 - Schools
 - Government
 - Police
 - Chamber of Commerce
 - Nonprofits

Perceptions of the Valley and VCHHS

- **Respondents believe that nonprofits in the Valley are collaborative and work well together.** Most respondents who are a part of this community feel that the separate organizations do a good job of pooling together their limited resources and sharing information to avoid duplication of services and to make the most impact on their communities.
- **Respondents shared that discussion of DEI is pervasive and many groups have already been formed to broaden the conversation.** Thanks to multiple players including the MLK Committee, NAACP, and TEAM, there have already been many committees formed and stakeholders brought together to begin to address these issues in a formal way. A sample of these committees or groups include:

- Housing forums organized by TEAM to address the affordable housing issue
- Abundant Life Fellowship Ministries and Life Health and Wellness Center are running multiple programs to provide food, healthcare, childcare, and children's activities to families in the north end of Ansonia
- The MLK Committee is focusing on youth leadership development as well as youth engagement
- The RACE program in Shelton is bringing together community leaders such as police, politicians, and teachers to discuss these issues that can divide a community
- VCHHS has started a Youth Committee to focus on issues of DEI
- Junior NAACP has been started at Ansonia High School to help children learn healthy ways of advocating
- Multiple respondents mentioned internal committees they were creating to improve diversity and inclusiveness in their workplaces
- Multiple respondents mentioned changes they had made or were making in order to ensure that their programs were more accessible and/or inclusive

Respondents shared that they believe nonprofits are thinking about racial diversity and equity on some level, but there is concern that outside the nonprofit and educational sector, not enough leaders in government and business are having these conversations. Multiple respondents mentioned that nonprofits are led by White people, schools are run by White people, most of the government leaders are White, and the Chamber of Commerce is majority White. Some are concerned that it will take a long time to change the collective minds of those in power. One respondent asked “Why would people change what they’re doing when they’re making a great living doing it their way”?

- **Some respondents believe that organizations are not responding quickly enough to the shifting dynamics in the Valley.** To some respondents, the older White population in the Valley appears unwilling to accept the change and is unaware of or uneducated about the resulting racial inequities. Some respondents felt that nonprofits in the region are also having trouble responding to the changing needs of their populations and that strategic plans should be altered to reflect the new demographics.
- **Respondents shared that the VCHHS is almost exclusively White and there is very rarely a person of color attending the meetings.** Some respondents theorize that when a person of color attends a meeting they are turned off by the conversation, which can sometimes come across as White people deciding what people of color need.
- **Respondents believe that the Valley is a tight-knit, collaborative community, but it is also too closed off from the outside world.** Several respondents used terms like “insular”, “separate”, “old-school”, “limited view of the world around it”, “closed network”. Many felt this can perpetuate racism and keep progress from occurring.

Potential Next Steps

Recommendations Based on Recurring Themes

- **Respondents believe that The Valley Community Foundation is well-positioned to be a catalyst for change.** As a funder, VCF can help promote necessary actions steps in order to keep the positive discussion moving forward. With some exceptions, organizations with a national umbrella have had a DEI focus for longer than the smaller, local organizations. Many shared that they believed local nonprofits only started thinking about DEI issues when this became a discussion among funders. They further shared that this demonstrates the power that a funder can have in helping to bring about the change, and needs to be used to make much larger, disruptive change. Respondents believe that it is too easy at the moment for an organization to say it is working on diversity, discussing equity, and including everyone in the conversation. They further shared that VCF needs to prioritize funding for those nonprofits that are actively dismantling and rebuilding the old systems.
- **Those surveyed suggested that VCF could make attendance at a DEI workshop a requirement to apply for funding.** Furthermore, when asking questions about DEI in the application, respondents suggested that VCF carefully explore the true impact of the applicant's actions. Many believe that it is important to ensure that the applicant is employing the "Nothing about us without us" mindset of including members of the affected community in its decision making.
- **Respondents also suggested that VCF help to make sure the conversations are happening.** Many respondents shared the importance of 1.)reaching out to groups already convening and ask who else they wish would join the conversation or be there to listen; 2.)attending the conversations that are already happening in the community; 3.)helping to get the citizens involved and then stepping away.
- **Many believe that VCF could offer funding, transportation, and childcare to get people to the table.** Multiple respondents mentioned that it's not easy to bring the voice of the community to the table due to the barriers previously mentioned. In addition, respondents shared that most people aren't eager to discuss their own setbacks nor the "bully who is keeping them down". Other suggestions included providing a stipend as well as solutions to the other challenges can help improve the inclusivity of the conversation.
- **Many also believe that VCF could offer funding to smaller grassroots and community-led organizations.** Beyond funding these groups directly, respondents suggested offering funding to larger nonprofits that partner with them as long as the community-led organization is in the leadership position of the project.

- **Respondents suggested offering funding for programs that aim to diversify the education sector.** Lack of diversity in the public school system was raised again and again as an issue resulting in educational inequity and racial insensitivities in the school setting, as well as damaged self-confidence and mental health on the part of the students who lack educational role models who look like them.
- **Respondents suggested offering capacity support to the local, Black-led community organizations.** Respondents shared that many of these groups are the ones making a noticeable and tangible difference in the communities they serve and yet they are lacking the resources and skillsets the larger nonprofits have. Multiple respondents expressed a need for marketing/website resources, database resources, board training, grant writing training, fundraising training, etc.
- **Respondents suggested that VCF fund programs that work holistically with a family to address every barrier.** They further shared the importance of getting a family successfully out of poverty as opposed to helping the symptoms of poverty.
- **Respondents suggested that VCF resist the urge to step in and help.** Many suggested that VCF's role can be most effective by offering resources to those who are already in the community helping and who have a firm grasp of the issues at hand.
- **Respondents shared the importance of keeping all stakeholders updated on any action steps.** Many of the respondents, both Black and White, are frustrated that they continuously have the same discussions with community leaders and no forward movement seems to occur. There is a sense of distrust surrounding this new interest in DEI initiatives and some feel it will go away when the "trendiness" of the term wears off. Respondents believe that VCF must show all stakeholders in the community that it is serious about facilitating change.