

Barriers & Proven Practices for Integrating DEI into the Current Climate & Culture of the Fire Service



Fire Service DEI
Conference
Report Series:
Part One

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Report authored by: Maria DH Koeppel, Preet Bassi, Nathan J. Trauernicht, John S. Butler, and Sara A. Jahnke

About Advancing DEI in Fire and Emergency Services

The Fire Service DEI Conference was hosted by the Johnson Foundation and convened on Wednesday May 10, 2023, at the Wingspread Conference Center in Racine, Wisconsin. Twenty-nine fire service leaders from across North America met over two-and-a-half days to discuss how to enhance diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging within fire departments across the country, leading to greater cultural competence among service members and improved partnerships with the communities served.

Participants were randomly assigned workgroups with facilitators, with the make-up of each workgroup changing for each of the five sessions. The five sessions included the value of creating a diverse and inclusive fire service; barriers to progression of diversity in the current fire service; proven practices to overcome barriers in the current fire service; entry barriers of minority groups for recruitment and selection; and proven practices for recruitment and selection. The goal was to catalog proven practices, identify roadblocks, create actionable steps, develop research ideas, and solidify the fire service's commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion.



The Value of a Diverse and Inclusive Fire Service

Intentionally selected as the first session of the convening, participants were tasked with defining and articulating the value of creating a diverse and inclusive fire service. While research in other fields have identified numerous benefits of a diverse workforce including stronger organizational strategies and decision-making processes, wider skill set ranges, increased creativity and productivity, and greater cultural awareness, diversity and inclusion in the fire service has informally been viewed as an HR issue due to the association of bullying and harassment. Participants identified numerous benefits to a diverse fire service which could be categorized into three categories: benefits for fire department personnel, benefits external to the fire department, and tactical advantages.

Three Key Takeaways:

- DEI is not an HR issue, it is a health and wellness issue as an inclusive workplace can positively impact mental health, physical health, and job satisfaction.
- A diverse work force allows for higher quality service to the community and stronger relationship building.
- An inclusive fire service is essential to the future of the field through recruitment opportunities.

Benefits for Fire Department Personnel

Among the first benefits of a diverse and inclusive fire service was the general broadening of perspectives that occurs from a diverse group. As one participant succinctly explained, "I'll put a coffee cup on the table. They'll be sitting across from me and I'll say, "You're seeing it from one perspective. I'm seeing it from a different perspective."" Additionally, it was pointed out that "implicit biases are broken up when you have a diverse workforce." A diverse workforce was thought to possess the capabilities of learning and understanding and essential to normalizing differences and providing opportunities not previously offered, as normalization "can't happen unless the thing is there." "The value of it [diversity, equity, and inclusion] is we're never gonna get people to stop fearing something that they don't really have experience with."

Perhaps noted as the most pervasive value of a diverse fire service, the psychological safety and mental wellbeing of fire department personnel was consistently repeated across workgroups. "It's just fundamentally about how we treat each other" as "almost all of our members struggle at some point in their career with people treating them poorly." Seen as a way to open the door for a successful career, psychological safety and mental wellbeing was connected to buy in at the individual level because with it, people "want to give their very best to the organization because they know they're part of it, and they know they're gonna make a difference." More broadly, the benefit of a diverse and inclusive fire service "trickles down, and it seeps down into everything that we do with our families and our friends and our society... It's not just creating the diverse and inclusive environment within our own workspace, but it does branch out further than just what's in our space at work."

In addition to fostering a sense of humanity in and around the fire department, the concept of belonging and inclusion within the overall department culture and the individual crews had tangible outcomes. For example, working as a team is deeply imbedded in the fire service and it was noted that trusting each other is a cornerstone of team success. Inclusiveness and belonging were directly tied to trust because "if you don't trust each other, if you don't feel like you belong, if you don't feel like you've had every opportunity to succeed, if you don't feel valued, you don't feel supported, you're unlikely to function well as a team."

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The ability of an individual to function was also mentioned in both physical and mental capacities. For example, while uniform policies may seem simple, dissection highlighted their impact on the bigger picture because "...if my uniform is uncomfortable...that impacts my ability to function at my highest performance at work." Meanwhile, inclusion "help prevents isolation for our members," which directly affects work function because "you're not working to your potential, 'cause you're thinking people are just always looking at you."

The discussion of policies also brought up concerns of physical safety, another benefit of a diverse and inclusive fire service. Similar to uniform policies, while grooming policies may seem one-dimensional upon first glance, dated and exclusionary policies directly impacted physical safety and health. For example, until recently, women were directed to wear buns while on duty, the height of which can impair the function of the facemask webbing and adverse impact how the fire helmet sits on the head. Additionally, the tension of the hair chronically being pulled back may lead to migraine headaches, which could result in the increased use of sick days.


Maternity and paternity policies were another example of physical safety being adversely impacted from an exclusionary fire service. Many fire departments do not have clear pregnancy, lactation, or return to work policies which can substantially impact the health of the mother and child. While a full discussion of this topic is beyond the scope of this report, the safety concerns of firefighting while pregnant due to a lack of guidance or support were mentioned in the workgroups.

The discussions of policies including the grooming and pregnancy policies highlighted an unintended benefit of inclusivity, which was the positive impact felt by the majority group of the fire service. For example, men have taken advantage of reformed grooming policies in the name of self-expression and have also benefited from gender-less parental leave associated with the birth or adoption of a child, policies formally focused on maternity leave. In general, the broader reach of an inclusive fire service is "...important to frame it for equal access and opportunity for everyone. That looks like not only underrepresented groups, but something like...paternity leave. You're both parents." These examples emphasize how a diverse and inclusive fire service benefit everyone, not just underrepresented groups, a benefit that was also discussed at length by workgroups in terms of the community around the fire department.

Benefits External to the Fire Department

Service to community was repeatedly noted as a benefit of a diverse and inclusive fire service, a benefit that took many forms. To begin with and related to the overall wellbeing of firefighters, the quality of service offered to the community was noted as a byproduct. For example, "if we have firefighters that are not in a healthy state, they're gonna treat their patients badly." This suggests a positive relationship between the health of the firefighters and the quality of customer service, although it may be bidirectional. One participant noted diverse fire crews experienced lower rates of tension, and aggression than homogenous crews as the diversity brings a wider variety of knowledge to each call. A crew with varied perspectives allows for the community to better communicate their needs and for the crew to provide more culturally competent service.





More broadly, however, was the dedication and responsibility the fire department has to its surrounding community. Simply put, “our highest responsibility is to come and not judge, is to come and help solve the problem, is to come and be compassionate. It’s why it’s so important for us to be diverse and inclusive and equal amongst who we are.” The ever-changing demographics of communities require a dynamic mindset and fire service work force, leveraged to bridge gaps of understanding and knowledge because “if our diversity is present within our department, then you may have someone that understands what not to do and can educate the rest of us.”

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The workgroups noted several ways community service was impacted by a diverse and inclusive fire service. First, diversity builds rapport “because they looked like them or they sounded like them or they acted like them, it changed the dynamic of the call.” Which led to the second benefit, improving dynamics of the call. While the safety of the crew was previously noted, a diverse fire crew “made calls move in what would have been a different way or a different time, smoother and normal... where it wasn’t a struggle.” A third benefit was improving relationships with the community as diversity and inclusion can build “trust within the communities, whether that’s the churches and faith leaders, different cultural groups, affinity groups.” A key component to the third benefit was the noted fourth benefit, language. While the obvious benefit of language included being multilingual, within group communication was also noted. Representation was important “because they’re speaking the same language where I can’t. I’ve been trained, but it’s still not the same as a woman talking to a woman or an African American talking to an African American.”

A second benefit external to the fire department was a wider pool of recruitment candidates. Becoming a more inclusive fire service means **broadening recruitment opportunities**, a crucial component at this time in the fire service. Both career and volunteer departments are struggling to get “enough people to apply for jobs anymore.” This is especially hard in volunteer departments where “the number of volunteers in the country has declined the last 30 years now and continues to decline.” Being an inclusive and diverse department opens the door for new recruits as well as existing firefighters to move to better work environments. As one department noted, despite not fighting a lot of fire in the region “they came to us because we had people who looked like them. They came to us because we offered work-life balance. They came to us because we offered a place where they weren’t going to have to be the one to pioneer in that station, in that division, in that district.” Simply put diversifying the recruit pool is critical because “we have to evolve or we’re going to die.”

Tactical Advantages

A tertiary benefit to a diverse and inclusive fire service were several tactical advantages the fire service could experience as a profession, such as **economic value**. To begin with, younger firefighters may select departments based on the health of the work environment, “they are going to make decisions on where to work based on how I’m treated.” These individuals seem to require a different level of respect from their superiors than previous generations as Officers simply cannot “be an asshole to them.” Therefore, increasing retention of existing firefighters can save a department money in constant recruitment, hiring, and training practices.

Additionally, for departments whose budgets are impacted by EMS services, increased diversity could impact the ability to transport medical calls successfully. Improved community relations previously discussed could play an essential role when fire districts ask for bonds or tax increases, providing a long-term benefit of diversity.



A diverse workforce also means a diverse skill set among employees that has many benefits. Pertaining to a broader variety of perspectives, one participant noted “It has been proven through research that it is a competitive advantage when you have different perspectives that can look at a problem.” Problem solving innovation and increased cultural competence not only save a department money, it allows a fire department to be at the forefront of field trends and community needs. Departments can leverage the skillsets of firefighters including those with previous careers such as teachers, mechanics, accountants, and writers. This is seen as a double benefit since “the amount of money it saves in addition to the level of service it allows us to provide is remarkable. That’s another strength of diversity.”

Summary of the Value of a Diverse and Inclusive Fire Service

- Psychological safety and wellbeing can create stronger teams and improve both individual and crew function.
- Increased physical health and safety with better policies and healthier firefighters
- Broader positive impacts beyond minority and underrepresented groups.
- Increased quality of service to the community by building rapport, improving call dynamics and relationships with community, and increased language and communication skills.
- Broadens recruitment opportunities for new recruits and existing firefighters.
- Added economic value by departments saving money through retention and increasing budgets through community relationships.
- Broadens skill sets of employees to be leveraged by department.

Current Culture and Climate of the Fire Service: Barriers to change/progression/integration of diversity

After discussions of the value of a diverse and inclusive fire service concluded, participants turned their attention inward as workgroups focused on the current culture and climate of the fire service. Barriers, challenges, and problems to the integration of DEI initiatives at the department level were identified and could be grouped into four categories: structure of the fire service; lack of resources; areas of leadership; and mindset and perspective barriers. Interestingly, these four categories posed challenges to both individual departments and the wider fire service field.

Three Key Takeaways:

- There is a need for a national framework to set expectations, guidelines, and provide standardized resources.
- Investment in interpersonal and communications skills at the leadership level will pay dividends in mentorship development and relationship building.
- Establishing boundaries between personal and professional life will aid in the development of safe occupational environments for all firefighters.

Structure of the Fire Service

Components of the overall structure of the fire service were identified as barriers to change, beginning with the brute strength of tradition in the field. The “fire service is known for their traditions”, with full acceptance that the profession is “so set in our ways on certain things that it makes it more difficult.” Tradition is “so deep-rooted, so hard reaching throughout the fire service, that to even tackle and make a culture shift, sometimes it feels like such a huge task to take on.” The need to reconcile the current culture of society with the culture of the fire service was acknowledged as a required step to move the field forward.

Similar to the strength of tradition, consistent union resistance was also identified as a barrier. While participants did not insinuate that union resistance was associated with being fundamentally against diversifying the fire service, it was associated with policy and structural changes that would have removed barriers to the fire service, such as the shift schedule, another noted challenge. Beginning the conversation with the simple question of “is the current shift structure one that supports a diverse, equitable, and inclusive workforce?” Participants recognized the current shift structure of the field may negatively impact groups from becoming firefighters, such as single parents or new mothers. Simply put, “you cannot work a 24-hour shift if you're a single parent and you don't have a support system, you cannot do it.”

Although often considered an advantage to the job, the 24-hour shift can have serious implications for both parenting and marriages. Firefighters may be faced with decisions such as “your child or your marriage, and that's not exclusive to women because I have guys who are going through a divorce. The court makes them look like a bad parent because they're working 24-hour shifts.” However, the challenge associated with adopting flexible shifts schedules returns to the unions as “they're gonna be very resistant to any type of change in that 24-hour schedule to accommodate anybody.”

Lack of Resources

While all barriers identified carried significant weight, the noted lack of resources held a bit more tension as participants expressed a desire to move the field forward while experiencing frustration due to a lack of guidance, knowledge, or support. Chiefly identified, the lack of a national framework of metrics was at the forefront simply because “that launches the discussion.” While the uniqueness of individual departments was acknowledged, especially differing based on size, location, and volunteer or career status, the missing framework provided an opportunity for “hiding behind, ‘But we don't have a—we don't have guidance in that area. Our city, or county, or institutional attorney hasn't gotten back to us yet on how we should tackle this, that, or the other,’” prompting the question “How do we start to have a national conversation amongst the groups gathered here collectively and collaboratively that takes away some of the excuses for movement?”

“... is the current shift structure one that supports a diverse, equitable, and inclusive workforce?”



Diving deeper into the missing framework, it became clear that a *lack of clear definitions* may play an important role. While it is clear that many administrators including city managers and fire chiefs “are looking to make our department more diverse,” many struggle with the question “can you define what that looks like?” While an obvious answer may be to have a department reflect the community, there was pushback to consider “what is a tangible item that we can come forward with that somebody in Arkansas that has a complete Caucasian community, that this is going to make sense to?” This, and other examples left participants admitting definitions may need to be flexible based on the area and department. As for the fire department, it seemed important “have to have people who are not afraid to define what that [the best for a department] means for their organization.”

Continuing to move more to a micro level, the concept of *insufficient training* was discussed at the department, crew, and individual level. To begin with, there was a desire for more information regarding language. This ranged from language regarding gender identity, of which there is “a steep learning curve because there’s so much going on in the space of gender fluidity,” to inclusive terms (“firemen’s to me never meant anything...I knew a lot of females that are firefighters, and I was one, and it didn’t matter to me,”) and the differences between biological sex and gender (“I am excluding trans women every time I say female.”). While eye opening moments were shared from a number of participants, the understanding of the importance of language was stressed as “it matters to people...Especially for people who are marginalized and traumatized because of those things, it creates an acknowledgement, and it creates allyship and hopefully sends a message of safety.”

Along with language, there was a call to focus training on interpersonal skills, such as how to have difficult conversations as if there was a noted barrier of “not training on how the officer can manage those aspects in the fire housing.” Understanding “there are guidelines to have a crucial conversation,” it was noted that the firehouse may be a vulnerable spot for important discussions of diversity and inclusion. While individual groups may have conversations about it, “we dare not talk about it in mixed company, because we don’t know how.”

Areas of opportunity regarding interpersonal skills lead to a final desired area of training development which was a safe space to learn. It is widely accepted that “the firehouse has not been a safe place to talk about feelings, historically,” but with the introduction of topics surrounding DEI, there was a noted barrier of fear. Officers may routinely say “I don’t know what to say and I’m afraid to deal with this,” while white fire chiefs worry about “how do we not get cancelled as we’re trying to learn?” The call for a safe space was important as the field begins to learn to fail as “you have to be able to fall on your face a little bit and make mistakes” while learning to admit “I feel afraid ‘cause I don’t know how to figure this out and I’ve never done this before.”

Related to a need for a safe space to learn were numerous discussions of who is presenting DEI material to the fire service. Seemingly overnight, a new field of professionals has risen to meet the increased demand for DEI training and materials. While this development may provide extra resources, experts uninitiated into the fire service culture were noted as a unique barrier to the advancement of DEI efforts. Further, it was noted that many presentations currently on the market take an adversarial approach to engagement with the majority group which can lead to dismissal of the training materials altogether. Perceptions of a disconnect between trainers and the target audience may lead to tension, close-mindedness from both parties and a lack of forward progression. The importance of understanding how a predominantly white male audience learns and engages most effectively with this topic is essential to ensuring a productive and healthy relationship between DEI experts and the fire service.

Areas of Leadership

Barriers that may be associated with the department or individual, included a number of areas of leadership. Perhaps the most pervasive challenge to change was *hiring and promotional practices*. At the leadership levels, enacting change means “you gotta get the right people in the organization,” but it also requires an extensive look into “what is the testing process that we’re using to select our supervisors?” More broadly, participants discussed the need for departments to review hiring practices as many current practices may be exclusionary. For example, “a lot of the physical agility tests are based on how fast you can do it without any training. I can tell you that when I started, I’m way better now than when I started, because when I learned the techniques.” These physical tests along with material that is often included on written tests means “not having the fire experience puts you at a disadvantage.” Succinctly, hiring barriers included “testing processes that look for incumbent knowledge or near incumbent knowledge. Pre-requisites that limit individuals from poor socio-economic conditions, from even being able to have the opportunity.” Additionally, “promotional processes that focus on fire ground and emergency scene strategy and tactics instead of the human and people component of what we do” may limit the type of progressive leadership required to integrate DEI into the department. While technical mastery of the job should remain a priority for promotion, increasing the value placed on interpersonal skills may further enhance the department’s future leaders.

“... what is the testing process that we’re using to select our supervisors?”

Once immersed in the fire service, participants cited *a lack of mentorship or support* as an additional barrier. As one participant explained “I want the affinity groups have to be a part of it, because if I have this young female, Asian female, LGB, I’m thinking like, well, who do I have that may be able to watch over them?” This highlights the importance of peers being “somebody they can talk to. A support mentor.” In general, it was acknowledged “we have not done a great job of supporting each other,” and “each of us has been neglected in a certain way, and... it’s a way that we’re connected...and it’s not just singling out.” To move forward, “I think just regrouping and saying as a collective, we have not done a great job of supporting each other.”

Similar to a dearth of supporting relationships, leaders were noted as lacking interpersonal and leadership skills. This gap started with understanding the responsibility of leadership and the requirement of “leadership at every level.” The challenge is many departments may have young officers who “don’t really want to lead. They want the title, but they don’t want to make decisions. They don’t want to impact anybody else.” This may be attributed to academies focusing on “all tactics and strategies, no soft skills,” leading to a dearth of strong leaders further into their careers. Meanwhile, at the other end of the spectrum leaders close to retirement struggle with staying engaged, “the person that’s on drop or three years out, there still has to be the covenant. There still has to be an expectation for those officers.” It is important for older leaders to understand “just because you’re on the way out, you’re here today. You do have a choice. You can exit early, or you can uphold the expectation, the core values of this organization.” In general, a noted lack of accountability was associated with poor leadership skills, especially for veteran firefighters who believed “we absolutely need to hold these new people accountable, but don’t hold me accountable, because accountability is for them.” As part of culture development, not being held accountable for behavior was tied into the fire service because “we sometimes get to be all the bad things we want to be, because we think we’re at the firehouse and it’s okay, ‘cause we can get away with it, and nobody’s gonna hold me accountable.”

Finally, briefly acknowledged was the challenge of competing priorities. In general fire departments face tighter budgets but higher service expectation. As one participant observed, “You’re trying to do a tremendous amount more with a tremendous amount less, and this is a very important... but is it immediate? Is it urgent? Is it cutting in on 911, and if it is not, is that perhaps why it’s being de-prioritized, not because people suck, not because they’re horrible, but they literally are so busy and so stressed that they can’t do it.” Additionally, as fire departments across the nation face staffing shortages, there is tension between simply hiring people for staffing and investing in the current staffing to ensure retention.

Mindset and Perspective Barriers

Pervasive at all levels of command, rank, and leadership, mindset and perspective barriers were present among all discussions of DEI in the fire service. In general, the concept of change was repeatedly frowned upon by the fire service since “they hate change, and they hate keeping things the same.” Integrating diversity and inclusion is “brand new to us to this is a change for us, and I think that people resist change as a whole in our profession.” Perhaps as a result of a dislike of change, challenges with social buy-in were prevalent across departments. “You’ve gotta find a way not only the company officer, but for the rank-and-file to feel this and participate in a culture of shared governance where they’re solving this problem,” shared one participant emphasizing the buy-in at both the top-down and bottom-up levels. “A lot of it’s driven by the guys, to be honest with you,” explained another participant, although “getting more people to see and understand that is a significant challenge.”

At the cultural level, lack of boundaries contributed to additional barriers beginning with an understanding of what is appropriate for the workplace. Given the firehouse’s history of informal social protocol, “I think one of the challenges too is just simply recognizing what is inappropriate.” “We do things in the fire service that we would never do at home,” resulting in blurred lines of appropriate and inappropriate behavior. To create a healthy home/work boundary, it is on the fire service “to educate our people on the fact that...you can be a clans [sic] person, or you can be whoever you want to be at home. You can’t bring it here.” One participant, contrary to the popular connection between the firehouse and family explained “I don’t like the family term. I never have liked it because I’ve always viewed the Fire Service—it’s a workplace. First and foremost, out here, it’s a job, and there’s a relationship that gets built over time, but it’s really that you’re getting paid for a service that you’re willing to provide.”

Additional mindset and perspective barriers included strong differing perceptions; a sense of entitlement; and an us versus them mentality. Related to a lack of boundaries, comments, remarks, or jokes can often be misconstrued leading to tension between groups. Sometimes “I think sometimes it’s just a matter of not actually being aware of how things are perceived by others.” What frequently “causes misunderstandings, hurt feelings, alienations, when they weren’t really intended to be such,” are jokes and comments “simply not suited to the environment in which they were presented.” Meanwhile, “...some people, that there’s a sense of entitlement...It’ll show up with regard to resistance, with respect to change, with no fundamental proof other than, this is how I feel, or the way it used to be.” These barriers have resulted in a clear line in the sand since “we’ve always had trouble in the fire service agreeing to disagree, but it has become embraced that either you’re with me, or you’re against me, and that’s all there is.”

“... they hate change, and they hate keeping things the same.”

“We do things in the fire service that we would never do at home...”

Summary of Barriers to Change/Progression/Integration of Diversity

- The strength of tradition in the fire service makes change difficult.
- The current shift schedule may create barriers for groups of people to become firefighters.
- Unions may resist policy or structural change that could make the fire service more inclusive.
- Lack of national framework makes it difficult for departments to set success metrics.
- Defining diversity may be flexible based on community and department contexts.
- More training is needed in regards to understanding language (including pronouns), and the development of interpersonal skills to have difficult conversations.
- Culture changes are required to embrace failure while learning and create safe spaces to learn.
- Hiring and promotional practices need to be redeveloped to be more inclusive.
- A lack of mentorship and support lead to delayed development of leadership skills.
- Competing priorities of the department and officers close to retirement distract from devoting energy into DEI.
- In general, the fire service can be resistant to change, which leads to poor social buy-in.
- A lack of personal and professional boundaries and differing perceptions has resulted in entitlement and an us-versus-them mentality.



Current Culture And Climate Of The Fire Service: Proven Practices To Overcome Barriers

Solutions to previously identified problems are essential to the progression of the field. Workgroups focused on proven practices to overcoming barriers by sharing their successful experiences. This dissemination of knowledge and creative solutions provides immense value to the fire service and reduces duplication development efforts. The collection of proven practices to barriers regarding the current culture and climate can be organized into three groups: administration, culture, and community.

Three Key Takeaways:

- Polices, procedures, and programs should be evaluated to ensure they support a diverse and inclusive fire service.
- Accountability, consistency, transparency and engagement at all levels is key to changing fire service culture.
- Engaging the community is key to developing relationships which will benefit public support, training opportunities, and recruitment prospects.

Administration

Administrative related solutions provided tangible objectives for the focus of fire departments. These practices helped departments redefine their structure in more diverse and inclusive ways, beginning with changes to policies. Seemingly small policy changes such as a change in holiday time, could have profound impact on individual's right to religious expression. While it is common to include Christmas as a holiday, one department recognizes that "not everyone celebrates Christmas. What they did is, they allowed people to modify their holiday time to take time for their holidays." That flexibility allows individuals to choose which holidays they celebrate, with minimum impact on the broader department's budget and staffing concerns. Another policy change previously discussed concerned grooming standards. Removing gendered language and recognizing professionalism may be based on personal opinion shows a support of individual expression.

A more drastic policy change discussed by participants centered on hiring practices and the removal or modification of prerequisites. Participants acknowledge requiring specific certifications or places of residences substantially impacts their recruitment pool, often limiting eligible hires to middle class or white individuals. Often the advantage of prerequisites may be a financial one, however, **"if you're truly committed to having diversity, quit trying to save a couple of bucks so you don't have to train somebody, accept the responsibility, train 'em yourself."** One department has "gotten rid of all requirements for certification", while another has "even opened it up to non-resident population, they'll help you get your Visa," an impressive move to ensure diversity.

Training development was another area of discussion, both in terms of development classes and interpersonal skills. From a hard skills perspective, diversifying development training is key to diversifying who promotes. Traditionally, command staff positions are specialized and siloed, curbing the growth of important skillsets to further promotion including budgets and finances, other municipal department interactions, and community engagement. In response, one department has developed an officer training program based on diversifying skill sets: "we'll introduce you to city council. You'll sit and watch how city council executes what our budget looks like, what our facilities budget looks like. How do you present a research paper?" Modern officer training programs need to be dynamic to prepare tomorrow's leaders. "I think it's changed more so because the women that are driving the program have been in uncomfortable positions...when I was a battalion chief, you only wanted me to run fire grounds and now I don't have any experience with the budget."

While tactical and operational training may be a strength of a department, at every rank level, understanding the value of vulnerability is a challenge given strong influence of bravery in firefighting traditions. **"We have to be comfortable being uncomfortable."** To address barriers, "we have to be vulnerable." Creating these safe spaces can occur through repetition, as one participant pointed out "we are failing to train, and we can do that tabletop discussion, just like we do with incident command, new leaders, new chiefs. We talk about incidents. Well, we can do the same thing in scenario-based training. We have this situation at the station...It's happening in our own back door." This participant had the wise suggestion to pull from internal personal struggles as training opportunities for everyone, emphasizing the importance of training how to talk about conflict. Another department has also formalized the process of conflict through officer training: "we put 'em in real live, explosive situations that they have to mitigate all the way up to the battalion chief level...The Muslim wants to pray during your drill time and they act it out and they record it. They watch the interaction of the officers and how they handle that." Feedback from these scenarios have been positive, "they are loving it because they're taking something back to the fire station. They're prepared. Okay, I can be here with this."

Partnering with affinity groups was suggested as a way to strengthen intradepartmental relationships and establish a psychologically safe workplace. At the beginning of a career, these groups “help new members acclimate to the department, feel welcomed and included, and provide a point of contact for questions and concerns.” Such groups can provide the “mentorship mechanism ready to help pay it forward and to make sure that you have a successful career”. Additionally, leveraging relationships with these groups can be an asset when departments encounter a new challenge both internally and externally. The insight offered by affinity groups can aid in the development of a productive solution. “It’s important for you to connect with those affinity groups.”

A final administrative suggestion was to evaluate projects and initiatives. While the lack of national framework can hinder clearly defined metrics of success, “whatever you do to change, you have to make sure you’re evaluating it to see if it’s working. Having an evaluation in place also allows fire departments “to make adjustments along the way.” This flexibility allows for a response when “what you think you need to do may not be what you really need to do when you get to the end.” It was noted that in addition to evaluating projects, it is important to evaluate “our current policies, practices, and procedures to ensure that they’re equitable.”

Culture

Changing culture in the fire service is a notoriously difficult thing to do, as acknowledged by many participants. Despite the challenge, it is possible when there is an understanding the process may be slow. “We have to understand and have patience...we’ve gotta be smart about it...let’s just talk about caring for each other and respecting the individual then other things will fall into place.” Essential to the culture and change of culture is “active leadership. It’s not passive leadership.” Active leadership “has to be on board in order successfully enact culture change,” and leadership encompasses “from the company officer all the way to the fire chief.” Finally, active leadership is both inward and outward facing. ***“It isn’t just good enough to talk about this at a staff meeting. You have to go out in public and say, this is my vision. This is our vision, this is what we’re doing now.”***



Key components of leadership that have a direct impact on culture change include accountability, consistency, and transparency.

Accountability is important from the start when leadership expresses the expectations, “hold ‘em accountable for when there are missteps.” This level of follow through is important. “You can’t tell ‘em the expectations and ignore it when they don’t do it. You can’t ignore it when they don’t do it repeatedly or they do something wrong repeatedly.” Accountability can be a formalized concept by having “that action plan” and “SOPs or SOGs that reinforce DEI, and leadership should make sure these policies are adhered to.”

Tied closely to accountability is **consistency**, you have to be consistent in what your message is and how you allow your crews to operate.” Consistency also shows up in behaviors to “put the work in...we gotta keep pressing forward” so that new expectations are “just there. I think once you make it something that’s the norm and you’re the product of your leadership and you showing them this is easy.” With consistency change can be enacted when “it’s the norm that it’s frowned upon to be exclusive.”

The final piece of this trifecta is **transparency** in the process. In this context, participants spoke of the transparency between the fire department and the community since it can be “frustrating for some people in the community ‘cause as a fire service, we’re not as transparent in what it is the nature of what we’re doing.” Communication and transparency provide context for the work being done by the fire department “so when you’re meeting with the mayor...you can then show how this one thing is being worked on. People can see when attempts are being made, but if the numbers are bad, they don’t even understand the work that’s been done to help move the number.”

Finally, the integration of the majority group as well as line level firefighters and non-uniform employees is important to the culture change. The premise of DEI is based on the underrepresentation of several groups in the fire service. As previously mentioned, distorted perceptions of intentions result in an us-versus-them mentality. The majority group in the fire service, white males, however, can be a strong ally in the movement of DEI in the fire service. Although perceptions around DEI messages “has turned a lot of people away...I think you have to have some White dudes at the front of the room...You have to have White dudes included in the conversation.” Including white males in conversations creates awareness and ally ship between all groups. “We also have to share our stories so that people do increase their knowledge of the fact that they happen. Because if I’m a white man, I might not have known. ‘Cause it’s not my lived experience.” Additionally, buy-in from the bottom up is necessary to enact change. Firefighters and company level officers are the architects of culture and gate keepers to change. As such, “feedback from the membership should be solicited and listened to by leadership so improvements and adjustments could be made if needed...people want to feel like their voice is heard.” Along with line-level firefighters, one participant shared about the inclusion of civilian employees in the department’s mission as their department ensures “that everybody who works for the fire department regardless of your role, whether you’re finance, or HR, or operations, riding backwards, that everybody has that same sense of community, and value to the organization.”

“You have to have White dudes included in the conversation...”

Community

Based on the discussions among the workgroups, the community around the fire department has an essential role in the department’s ability to address barriers to DEI related change. These discussions revealed the deep value of community relationships as well as the respect participants had for their community leaders. First and foremost was the repeated suggestion to involve the community in the work being done by the fire department. As one participant simply explained, “we’ve gone out to the community,” deferring to the expertise of the community on their needs. This participant continued “we expressly encourage our departments within our association to engage community members because your community can change from one year to five years.” Not only does this engagement build relationships, it also allows for the department to better recruit, especially in the volunteer service by “finding out what they want and how they want to volunteer.” Normalizing community interaction through events, public education, and general outings is centered “around the idea of creating and establishing the fire station as a community destination and not just a fixture in the community.”

Outside of community interaction, participants spoke of the power of social media. ***Being active on social media is another way to engage the community in a two-way manner.*** “It’s important to take those pictures and it’s important to share what you’re doing out in the community.” Leveraging social media as a great way to maintain communication “‘cause what people don’t know in your neighborhood, they don’t know. What people don’t know what your department is doing, they don’t know.” Aside from maintaining an avenue of communication with the community, social media can serve as a valuable recruitment tool. “It’s really important just to be your own marketer and say, this is what we do. That’s the stuff that’s worked for us is just really being out there in the middle of everything and letting people know ‘cause a lot of people, especially in the volunteer service, they don’t know we need volunteers.”

A final community-related solution was to engage the community based on corresponding awareness months. Several months include corresponding public events or unique ways for the fire department to be engaged and show support. For example, “during Pride Month, we’ll allow and encourage people to put the pride logo on email. We’ll change it for every month. We do the same thing during Cancer Awareness Month.” This engagement can be paired with internal department training as well. “Whether it’s Native American Month, Pride Month, all of those different things, you stop and pause, but also have a discussion, there are all these different things that people don’t know about. Like how many people are Native American work for the organization? How many people are LGBTQ plus that work for the agency?” Awareness months also offer an opportunity for departments to highlight employees. For example, “when women’s history month comes around, if you wanna say, “Hey, by the way, in celebration of women’s history, we wanna show where women have come in the fire service. An example is these two employees.” That’s a great way to do it.”

Summary of Proven Practices

- Policy changes can have drastic impact on the inclusivity of a department or the diversity of a recruitment pool.
- Training on interpersonal skills, including the value of being vulnerable, at all rank levels can pay big dividends in the work culture.
- Diversifying the hard skills associated with officer training will lead to a diverse promotional pool.
- Partnering with affinity groups results in mentorship opportunities and built-in resources for unforeseen challenges.
- Having an evaluation process in place will help guide DEI related projects and initiatives to success.
- Active leadership, accountability, consistency, and transparency provide a strong framework to enact change.
- Include members of all rank in the development and implementation of DEI related change.
- Integrating the majority group of the fire service, white males, can increase ally ship and raise awareness of issues.
- Developing and maintaining close relationships with community groups can increase training and recruitment opportunities.
- Social media is a wonderful tool to highlight the fire department and increase accessibility from the public.
- Annual awareness months offer unique opportunities for community engagement and internal training.

Concluding Remarks

This is part one of a two-part report series. This report highlights findings from a series of workgroups dedicated to discussing the value of a diverse and inclusive fire service; identifying barriers to DEI related progression; and proven practices to address barriers and challenges. The second report will also include the discussion of the value of a diverse and inclusive fire service, as well as identifying the barriers for recruitment and selection and proven practices for recruitment and selection. Each report may be read individually based on the department's current need and focus: current internal culture or recruitment and selection. Taken together they provide a current view of the fire service in regards to its relationship with DEI and a push for a more diverse and inclusive fire service.



List of Participants of Advancing Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in Fire and Emergency Services Conference

Queen Anunay

Assistant Fire Chief
DC Fire and EMS
International Association of Fire Chiefs

Preet Bassi

Chief Executive Officer
Center for Public Safety Excellence

Mary Cameli

Fire Chief
Mesa (AZ) Fire & Medical Department
CPSE

Kwame Cooper

Deputy Commissioner
Office of Diversity & Inclusion
FDNY

Michael Cunningham

Chief of Staff
Cobb County (GA) Fire & Emergency
Services

Steven Dirksen

Fire Chief
 Fargo (ND) Fire Department
CPSE

Joseph Dixon

Chair of Board of Directors
Black Chief Officer Committee

Steve Dongworth

Fire Chief
Calgary Fire Department
Metro Chiefs

Eriks Gabliks

Superintendent
National Fire Academy
U.S. Fire Administration

Ashby Green

Sergeant
Fire Prevention Bureau
Louisville (KY) Fire Department

Amy Hanifan

Operations Chief
McMinnville (OR) Fire Department
Women in Fire

Steve Hansen

Fire Chief
Racine (WI) Fire Department

Brittany Hollerbach

Associate Research Scientist
Center for Fire, Rescue, and EMS Health
Research
NDRI-USA

Anare Holmes

Firefighter/AEMT
Atlanta Fire Rescue Department

Sara Jahnke

Director and Senior Scientist
Center for Fire, Rescue, and EMS Health
Research
NDRI-USA

Christopher Kaipust

Associate Research Scientist
Center for Fire, Rescue, and EMS Health
Research
NDRI-USA

Jim Keiken

Vice President and Director
Illinois Fire Service Institute
North American Fire Training Directors

Maria Koepfel

Associate Research Scientist
Center for Fire, Rescue, and EMS Health
Research
NDRI-USA

Aaron Lipski

Fire Chief
Milwaukee Fire Department

Kathleen Loveless

Representative

National Fallen Firefighter Foundation

Peki Prince

Chief (ret.)
Institution of Fire Engineers - USA Branch

Barbara Sellers

Captain/EMS Supervisor
Shreveport (LA) Fire Department
International Association of Fire Fighters

Philip Stittleburg

Fire Chief
La Farge (WI) Fire Department
National Volunteer Fire Council

Jennifer Taylor

Professor and FIRST Center Director
Environmental & Occupational Health
Drexel University

Nathan Trauernicht

Fire Chief
University of California, Davis Fire
Department

Amy Valdez

Deputy Chief
Virginia Beach Fire Department

Eric Valliere

Assistant Fire Chief
Scottsdale (AZ) Fire Department
Fire Department Safety Officers
Association

Toni Washington

Fire Chief
Decatur (GA) Fire Rescue Department
CPSE

Brian Wolf

Assistant Fire Chief
Racine (WI) Fire Department

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The Johnson Foundation at Wingspread convenes the right people on timely and compelling topics and empowers them to find innovative solutions with sustained impact. Our meetings among leaders and experts are small and intimate: the issues they address are big and important. Our neutrality creates a unique oasis of trust so the diversity of perspectives around the table are heard and respected. World-class facilitation inspires provocative, yet collaborative, dialogue. Interesting things begin to happen. A common vision emerges.



A new path is discovered. Alliances are built. Transformational change takes root.

The Foundation has been a catalyst for lasting change in a variety of areas for more than 50 years. We played an instrumental role in conceiving the National Endowment for the Arts, National Public Radio, and the International Criminal Court. Today, the Foundation is directing its energy and expertise on catalyzing greater coordination and collaboration among leaders and stakeholders to enhance our quality of life, drive economic vitality and ensure a stronger, better future for all of our communities within the Greater Racine region and beyond. We know problems can only be solved when diverse partners share their ideas, concerns and commitments in a way that leads to real understanding and positive change. We strive to be the catalyst for that change.

Who we are reflects the passions and values of the Johnson Family. Three generations of this successful Midwestern business family have guided our work. Their enduring commitment to a better world is also our vision.

The Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Johnson family home known as Wingspread, completed in 1939, is nestled amid 36 wooded acres near the western shore of Lake Michigan. It was donated to the Foundation in 1959 to promote “the free exchange of constructive and purposeful ideas.” The Johnson Foundation at Wingspread occupies a singular place among conference facilities and conveners with its combination of focused vision, mission, historic and stimulating natural setting and unique convening model.



