



DHS News

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COVID-19 and OEI: A Q&A

Staff in the Office of Equity and Inclusion took a few moments to discuss their office's response to the pandemic.

What was the most challenging issue your office faced when responding to COVID-19?

The [Office of Equity and Inclusion](#) has had to pivot our work several times this year, which has been a challenge. At the start of the year, our primary focus was to begin equity planning with DHS offices. However, the focus of our work shifted in March when we started to support the agency's response to COVID-19. We knew early on that communities of color and the LGBTQIA+ communities were going to be disproportionately impacted for a number of reasons, therefore we facilitated listening sessions with communities about what they were experiencing and to determine what support was needed. Our team also began collaborating with the health department to develop communication and engagement strategies, distribute translated COVID-19 guidance and schedule community-based testing.

As we approached the summer, civil unrest swept the country in response to the most recent deaths of black people including George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery at the hands of police and vigilantes. These deaths, coupled with the fact that people of color are more likely to become severely ill or die from COVID-19, culminated into an enormous sense of urgency to advance racial equity. Staff across the department were hurting and they needed support, so our team resumed the equity work that we planned to start in March before the pandemic hit. Our Deputy Director, Jessica Ruffin, held weekly calls with other deputies, and we talked with managers and supervisors about the importance of checking in with staff of color to ask how they were doing. We also supported offices as they convened dialogue groups about systemic racism, the New York Times' "1619 Project," and Robin DiAngelo's "White Fragility." Some staff had been having these conversations for a long time; others had never had them before or didn't understand why so many people were in pain. Our approach had to consider that staff were bringing different lived experiences to these conversations and the equity work.

As we approach the end of the year, the Office of Equity and Inclusion is currently continuing to work with other DHS offices on equity planning. We have shared the results of the 2019 Racial Equity Institutional Assessment with staff at all levels, and we are building Core Teams within the offices who are responsible for designing, coordinating, and organizing the office-level racial equity plans. We also continue to support the response to COVID-19, including ensuring the CARES Act funding is equitably distributed.

What lessons did your office learn from its COVID-19 response?

We knew from the outset that we couldn't adopt a one-size-fits-all approach to COVID-19 and community engagement, so we held listening sessions with different communities about their specific needs, and we learned a lot in the process. As we listened to immigrant and refugee communities, we learned that traditional communication methods wouldn't be sufficient to get the word out about COVID-19 guidance. We needed to use different platforms like social media and automated phone calls to reach some communities, and we needed effective visuals that everyone, regardless of language, could understand. We also planned how we could best serve clients who needed to access services but didn't have smart phones or reliable internet, or how we could support the frontline staff who are, or could become, DHS clients. We had to think creatively about what we needed to do differently to deal with the impact of COVID-19 on our systems and communities.

How will the lessons you learned help your office better serve Allegheny County residents in the future?

The Office of Equity and Inclusion exists to address the fact that people of color have the worst outcomes in our system. COVID-19 is no exception, as this pandemic has disproportionality affected people of color and their communities. We've worked hard to raise awareness about the fact that people of color, LGBTQIA+ people, immigrants and refugees, and other communities are not getting what they need from our systems. The greater awareness that we have built this year will help our team and all of DHS better serve Allegheny County residents in the future.

What aspect of your office's response makes you most proud?

The Office of Equity and Inclusion has eight staff, and our small team has done so much to advance equity in the face of COVID, including:

- Adapting our one-day, in-person racial equity training to a three-part online version, as well as making similar virtual modifications to our other trainings like SOGIE;
- Creating informational videos about key racial equity concepts with the CATTS team;

- Writing the [Racial Equity Facilitation Guide](#) to support staff who were leading dialogue groups;
- Compiling [Racial Equity Resource List](#) which includes books, articles, films, podcasts and other resources;
- Developing a virtual library of racial equity resources that are specific to Allegheny County.

We accomplished all of this as we dealt with a lot of uncertainty. Allegheny County DHS is just one of 200 jurisdictions nationwide to make racial equity a priority, so we do not have many examples on which we can model our work. In addition, the Office of Equity and Inclusion is going through a big change as it merges with the Office of Community Relations under the leadership of Jessica Ruffin. Throughout all of these changes and unknowns, our team has been committed and innovative, and has acted with integrity, and we could not be prouder of the work this team has accomplished.