

Senate Government Operations Committee Feb. 27, 2018 2:30PM
Testimony S. 281 Diana Wahle, Community Equity Collaborative

Thank you for this opportunity to review the latest version of S.281. In consultation with members of the Community Equity Collaborative, I share the following recommendations. We are impressed with the direction you are taking. Needless to say, please know we want this plan to succeed.

DEFINING THE WORK

Include a definition of Institutional Racism in the bill. Maybe something along these lines:

“Racism has been consciously and systematically erected, and it can be undone only if people understand what it is, where it comes from, how it functions, and why it is perpetuated. Through the analysis of institutional power, we can identify and unpack the systems external to the community that create the internal realities that many people experience daily.” Excerpt from the Peoples’ Institute materials <http://pisab.org/our-principles#analyzing-power>

The mitigation of racism in our State government is a process not taken lightly. We need to recognize the enormous scope of the task at hand and understand this effort will take at least 10 years to make meaningful change.

ADVISORY PANEL

Use the Green Mountain Care Board as a model. The amount of oversight responsibility requires members be paid for their work to insure accountability.

Responsibilities include creating a job description, hiring, supervision and firing of the Chief Officer, development of the State government inventory RFP and consultant appointments, monitoring of the strategy resulting from inventory.

The majority of panel membership should be people of color.

Relationship between the Advisory Panel and the Governor’s Equity and Diverse Workforce Council needs to be defined more clearly.

CHIEF OFFICER POSITION

We are not sure the title “Chief Civil Rights Officer” correctly describes the depth of the work – perhaps “Chief Equity Officer” describes it better? The title requires some discussion before it is finalized.

We need to step back and reflect on how a single Chief Officer focusing on discrimination and racial issues has fared in other work settings. This approach is well-known and sadly has all too frequently not succeeded. A highly qualified person of color is appointed and expected to solve the institution's issues. What evolves is they do not have enough back-up or authority and end up resigning in frustration.

Our recent experience at Brattleboro's School for International Training (SIT) is an important lesson. Last year, after much discord between the school's administration and its graduate students of color, a Chief Diversity Officer was hired. She was a good choice, highly skilled with excellent credentials. However, SIT did not prepare for the steps required to implement the strategy she introduced. She was isolated on the SIT administrative team and therefore ineffective. Within four months, she had resigned.

How do we insure this Officer has the necessary power within various spheres of influence in State government? How to make sure we have the Officer's back?

We reflect on these questions as S.281 is nearing completion and recommend a team approach be established to do the work. We ask you to consider creating a multi-racial three-person team of Officers to proceed together with combatting institutional racism within State government. A carefully crafted job description needs to be developed in advance, insuring a range of skills and ability is reflected on the team. We also need to name the conditions required to provide a supportive framework for these new positions.

We recommend bringing on the appointment of the Chief Officer(s) early enough to witness the assessment. Because this first step is the beginning of our racial disparities education, the Officer(s) should work hand-in-hand with the consultants completing the assessment.

Insure that there is sufficient administrative support for the team to complete their work.

Close collaboration with the Chief Performance Officer will be required:

- in defining racial equity related to Conditions of Well-being for All Vermonters
- in defining racial equity in measuring program performance for each branch of government

NEEDS ASSESSMENT/INVENTORY

We see the inventory as a "power analysis" of State government focusing on institutional racism. The depth of the inquiry relates to the quality of the outcome. Key areas of inquiry will include recruitment, hiring, retention, workplace culture and client advocacy.

The needs assessment/inventory is a building block in a long-term strategy. It is the beginning of racial disparities education where the focus is on relationship building. We need to be aware that by unveiling what has not worked, this inventory is excavating peoples' worst fears. We are asking participants to name how privilege is operating in their work setting. A carefully crafted design will result in honest feedback. The hope is to use methods promoting effective conversations – perhaps through focus groups—that the team of officers can refer to as they proceed with their work.

A multitude of disparities will be identified in this process. They will need to be prioritized: which are creating the most harm? The strategy will focus initially on impacting the disparities which are most harmful.

This assessment should not only cover the three branches of State government, but also the Governor's Equity and Diverse Workforce Council. How was this Council created and with what intent? How have they impacted the reduction of racial disparities? The assessment could make recommendations on the Council's role going forward related to the overall work. How can they become stronger and gain the support they need?

Recommendations on training curriculum and particular training needs would be included in the assessment. The team of Officers will use this part of the assessment to further define the training curriculum in more depth.

TRAINING CURRICULUM

The team of Officers' responsibilities include the oversight of a comprehensive training curriculum which will respond to the needs outlined in the inventory related to recruitment, hiring, retention, work-place culture and client advocacy. Curriculum content includes:

Understanding our own social identity as members of the dominant culture related to race.

Knowledge of institutional and structural racism in Vermont and nationally. Gaining an understanding of the underpinnings of race as a social construct.

Exploring the intersection with socio-economic, ability, LGBTQ, social competency development topics, all the while keeping in mind how uncomfortable it is to keep our focus on racism.

The team will work with key State partners including the Chief Performance Officer and the Commissioner of Human Resources on training design and the development of train-the-trainer opportunities – all the while insuring an overlap with training on Results-Based Accountability.

Providing adequate financial resources for training is essential.

Thank you for your consideration of these recommendations. Members of our Collaborative look forward to future exchanges on these topics.

