

# Creating a Diverse, Equitable, and Inclusive Workplace Culture: An Overview

Summary Report



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The field of long-term services and supports (LTSS) is a microcosm of the systemic racism that exists throughout our nation.

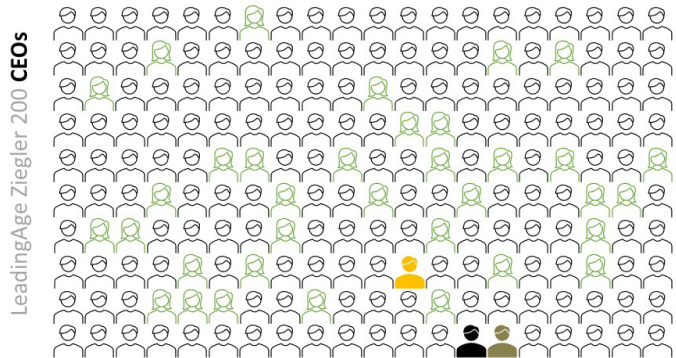
Inequities within the LTSS workforce—and a lack of diversity among mid-level managers, senior leaders, and board members of LTSS organizations—have existed for many years. As illustrated in the graphic at right, the 200 largest nonprofit senior living communities in the country offer ample evidence of this lack of diversity: only three of these organizations have CEOs who are people of color (Adams, 2020).

There is some evidence to suggest that the situation is beginning to change, albeit slowly.

The national focus on social justice issues over the last few years helped bring diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) to the attention of aging services organizations. In response, a growing number of LeadingAge providers have launched initiatives to promote DEI or have added greater structure, discipline, and intentionality to their existing DEI efforts.

During 2021, the LeadingAge LTSS Center @UMass Boston engaged in a series of research studies focused on identifying ways to help LeadingAge and its members expand racial and ethnic diversity, particularly among their mid-level and senior leadership teams and boards of directors.

“**The 200 largest nonprofit senior living communities in the country offer ample evidence of this lack of diversity...**”



This overview summarizes key findings from the following studies, which form the core of the LTSS Center’s “Creating a Diverse, Equitable, and Inclusive Workplace Culture” series. Follow the links below for more details.

- ➔ A [Review of the DEI Literature](#) explores published research focusing on principles and strategies that can be used to advance DEI in the LTSS field.
- ➔ [Perspectives of LeadingAge Members](#) describes the processes that leaders at nine member organizations are using to plan and implement DEI activities.
- ➔ [Perspectives of Leaders of Color in the LTSS Sector](#) shares insights from 13 leaders of color about their career journeys, experience with DEI issues, and recommendations for change.

LTSS Center researchers also conducted two DEI-related activities that are not reflected in this overview:

- ➔ A [survey](#) to gauge the level of DEI activities among LeadingAge members.
- ➔ A [Snapshot of the LTSS Field](#), which identifies career opportunities in the field of aging services.



## What is DEI?

The terms, “diversity,” “equity,” and “inclusion” represent three distinct, yet interconnected, components of what we commonly refer to as “DEI.”

- ➔ **Diversity** is the representation of multiple identity groups.
- ➔ **Equity** is freedom from bias. It is achieved by promoting justice and fairness in the procedures, processes, and resource allocation of institutions or systems (Extension Foundation, 2021).
- ➔ **Inclusion** happens when all people, especially people from marginalized groups, are recognized for their worth and dignity, respected, empowered, and allowed to contribute and thrive at work without sacrificing individual uniqueness (Winters, 2013).

Diversity alone is not enough to sustain a DEI effort. Organizations must also integrate inclusion and equity into all aspects of their cultures (Ferdman et al., 2010; Bourke and Dillon, 2018). This involves addressing systemic issues and behaviors that affect all employees, while also creating a DEI workplace culture where all employees can thrive.

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**Diversity**  
**Equity**  
**Inclusion**

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## How Can Organizations Create a DEI Workforce Culture?

It takes time, work, and persistent effort to implement DEI so it becomes part of an organization’s day-to-day practices. Several strategies, identified in the literature and by LTSS providers, could help organizations cultivate a DEI workplace culture with the following characteristics.

### Integration

Diversity, equity, and inclusion are integrated fully into the organization’s operations, including its:

- ➔ Policies and practices.
- ➔ Governance.
- ➔ Hiring and retention.
- ➔ Finances.
- ➔ Values, vision, and mission.
- ➔ Monitoring and evaluation.
- ➔ Human resources.
- ➔ External communications.
- ➔ Community engagement (CommunityWise Resource Centre, 2017).

### Commitment

The board, CEO, and senior leaders make a formal commitment to creating opportunities that increase diversity among leaders, allow frontline staff to advance in their careers, and build an inclusive and equitable organizational culture. Leaders are willing to address systemic issues and behaviors that impact the experiences of all employees. These leaders work to create a workplace culture where each person feels their voice and opinions are heard and respected (Mazur, 2014).

### ***Intentionality***

The organization takes an intentional approach to its DEI work. That approach involves:

- ➔ Conducting a DEI assessment to help the organization determine its readiness to develop a DEI culture and establish its DEI priorities.
- ➔ Setting goals to identify what the organization wants to achieve through the DEI effort.
- ➔ Aligning those goals with the organization's mission and strategies.
- ➔ Developing metrics to help the organization assign accountability, measure the impact of DEI activities, and incorporate measurable DEI goals into performance evaluations.

### ***Inclusive Recruitment***

The organization is inclusive and intentional about how it recruits candidates for mid-level management and senior leadership teams and the board of directors. Providers:

- ➔ Revise recruiting and hiring strategies by, for example, addressing diversity in senior leadership job descriptions or requiring that recruitment firms present slates of diverse applicants.
- ➔ Work with community partners to identify diverse networks for recruiting employees.
- ➔ Take deliberate steps to mitigate bias in recruiting and hiring decisions.
- ➔ Offer internships that give students of color real-world experience in the field of aging services.
- ➔ Increase board diversity by, for example, limiting board terms or expanding the size of the board and filling vacancies with experienced candidates from diverse backgrounds.

### ***Coordinated Education and Support***

Education and training, conducted in conjunction with other DEI activities, promotes an equitable and inclusive workplace environment by:

- ➔ Providing all staff with the same basic understanding of DEI.
- ➔ Helping to build cultural competence.
- ➔ Enhancing awareness of unconscious bias or other barriers to DEI.
- ➔ Motivating staff to adopt positive behaviors and attitudes.

### ***Ample Resources for Employees***

Employees of color have access to networks, forums, and resources to help them overcome organizational cultural barriers, access learning and development opportunities, and talk about race and racism. A formalized sponsorship program, through which junior employees build helping relationships with powerful senior leaders, boosts the engagement, retention, and promotion of employees of color (Winters, 2013; Herminia, 2019).



## The Perspective of Senior Leaders of Color

Senior leaders of color identified inequities in the aging services sector that make it difficult for people of color to advance in their careers. The leaders offered these reflections:

### Valuing Frontline Caregivers

Most leaders of color acknowledged a disconnect between frontline caregivers, who are mostly people of color, and the senior leadership of LTSS organizations, which is mostly white. Organizational leaders can do a better job of understanding frontline staff, recognizing and valuing their work, and offering them opportunities to advance in their careers or continue their education.

### Barriers to Advancement

Several factors make it difficult for people of color to advance into leadership positions in the LTSS field. Some factors mentioned by leaders of color include:

- ➔ The general lack of diversity in an organization's leadership and resident populations, and lack of organizational intentionality about increasing that diversity.
- ➔ The pressure leaders of color feel to conform to the majority culture and continually prove themselves when their expertise is questioned.
- ➔ Hesitance among leaders of color to raise DEI issues, especially to a leadership team that is predominately white.
- ➔ Difficulty recruiting people of color who are new to the LTSS field. These potential leaders may be dismissed prematurely because they do not yet have a deep knowledge of aging services.

### Facilitating Advancement

Several factors helped senior leaders of color advance in their own careers:

- ➔ Supportive supervisors and mentors.
- ➔ Access to high-quality continuing education.
- ➔ Connections to diverse networks that helped the leaders navigate DEI-related challenges and identify promising career opportunities.

### Hope for the Future

Leaders of color acknowledged that the LTSS field has a long way to go before it becomes diverse, equitable, and inclusive. Yet, these leaders remain convinced that there are vast opportunities for advancement in the aging services field. They urged mission-driven organizations to invest in DEI and spread awareness among communities of color about career opportunities in the LTSS sector.

### Conclusion

DEI is a continuous journey that must be tailored to the unique circumstances of each organization. A successful DEI effort will have buy-in from the CEO and board members, align DEI with the organization's strategic plan and mission, integrate DEI into the organizational culture, measure the impact of DEI efforts, and hold all staff accountable for a long-term commitment to DEI.

“**DEI is a continuous journey that must be tailored to the unique circumstances of each organization.**”

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