

*Creating a Diverse, Equitable, and Inclusive Workplace Culture:*

# Perspectives of Leaders of Color

Research Brief



# About this Report

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This research brief was developed in support of a key LeadingAge strategic goal: to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the long-term services and supports (LTSS) workplace. Over the next three years, LeadingAge will use the findings from this and other DEI research to design and disseminate a host of practical tools and resources that its members can use to develop a more diverse and inclusive LTSS workforce.

## Authors:

[Alexandra Hennessa](#) and [Natasha Bryant](#), LeadingAge LTSS Center @UMass Boston.

## About the LTSS Center

The LeadingAge LTSS Center @UMass Boston conducts research to help our nation address the challenges and seize the opportunities associated with a growing older population. LeadingAge and the University of Massachusetts Boston established the LTSS Center in 2017. We strive to conduct studies and evaluations that will serve as a foundation for government and provider action to improve quality of care and quality of life for the most vulnerable older Americans. The LTSS Center maintains offices in Washington, DC and Boston, MA.

For more information, visit [LTSSCenter.org](https://LTSSCenter.org).

# Table of Contents

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- Introduction** ..... 1
- Awareness of Aging Services** ..... 2
- Experiences of Inequity in Aging Services** ..... 2
- Perceived Barriers to Advancement**..... 3
- Perceived Facilitators to Advancement**..... 4
- Psychological Barriers**..... 5
- Thoughts on Frontline Professional Caregivers** ..... 6
- Solutions for Addressing Disparities in the LTSS Workforce** ..... 7
- Leadership Style**..... 8
- Organizational Culture** ..... 8
- The Role of Membership Organizations**..... 9
- Conclusion**..... 9

# Introduction

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During 2021, researchers at the LeadingAge LTSS Center @UMass Boston interviewed 13 senior leaders of color who have experience working at organizations providing long-term services and supports (LTSS) to older adults.

The interviews, which are featured in this research brief, represent one component of a four-part study that the LTSS Center conducted in support of a key LeadingAge strategic goal: to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the LTSS workplace.

The LTSS Center's DEI research initiative included a member survey, a literature review, and two sets of leader interviews. It was designed to:

- Collect data on the DEI activities that LeadingAge multisite organizations and life plan communities are conducting.
- Review the current literature on strategies to advance DEI in the LTSS field.
- Gain insights into the processes that LeadingAge member organizations are using to plan and implement DEI activities.
- Hear from senior leaders of color about their own career journeys and their experience with DEI issues.

Over the next three years, LeadingAge will use the findings from its DEI research to design and disseminate a host of practical tools and resources that its members can use to develop a more diverse and inclusive LTSS workforce.

## Background of Leaders of Color

The 13 leaders of color whose perspectives are highlighted in this research brief have varied educational backgrounds, having been trained in social work, business administration, health administration, public health, therapy, or law. Most of the leaders have been working in the LTSS field for more than 10 years, either at the corporate level or at the provider level in LTSS communities.

Of the 13 leaders interviewed, only three started their careers in aging services. Some of the remaining 10 leaders started out working in family and child social services agencies while others worked at health plans or in health care. Prior to joining the LTSS field, a few leaders served on boards of directors at communities serving older adults.



## Awareness of Aging Services

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Two of the 13 leaders said they always knew they wanted to work with older adults. One of these leaders was raised by grandparents, while the other became interested in the field of aging services after writing a report on Alzheimer's disease in high school. Other leaders became aware of aging services either through college professors or courses, or through contacts they made in their previous careers. At least half of the leaders said they were recruited for their current position.

“Many of the leaders acknowledged the general lack of awareness about career opportunities in the field of aging services within communities of color.”

Many of the leaders acknowledged the general lack of awareness about career opportunities in the field of aging services within communities of color. A few leaders mentioned the need to begin raising that awareness among elementary, middle, and high school students. These leaders identified LeadingAge as a potential source of information about LTSS career opportunities and suggested that LeadingAge could play an important role in raising awareness about the LTSS field within communities of color.

Some leaders suggested that cultural barriers may keep people of color from seeking leadership positions in the field of aging services. Because assisted living, independent living, and life plan communities tend to serve primarily older white adults, leaders of color may be less likely to seek jobs in this sector. Negative misconceptions about aging services among some communities of color have also served to discourage interest in LTSS careers.

Leaders who now work in the LTSS field suggested that their career paths would have been smoother if they had been exposed to or aware of opportunities in aging services earlier in their lives.

Said one leader: *“I just feel like if I had had ... some more direction, if I had had (the) opportunity to do more job shadowing ... I could have made some better choices earlier about my career or (gotten) on the career path that felt most natural to me.”*

Once they became aware of career opportunities in aging services, leaders of color said they were attracted to several aspects of the field, including the opportunity it gave them to work for mission-driven organizations. Several leaders said they believe there are many opportunities to grow and advance in the field of aging services if you are willing to work hard and have a supportive supervisor.

## Experiences of Inequity in Aging Services

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Interviewees acknowledged that there are inequities in aging services that can make it difficult for people of color to advance in their careers. Leaders who have spent most of their careers in aging services said they tried out jobs in several organizations before finding one that offered the opportunities for growth they were seeking.

Leaders who had previously worked in social services, child and family services, or public health-related fields shared their impressions that organizations in those fields promoted more people of color into leadership positions than LTSS organizations.



Leaders who had worked outside the health and social services fields said they felt the inequities in aging services are similar to those encountered in other white-collar fields. However, these leaders acknowledged that there are different layers and complexities to equity in aging services because LTSS consumers are mostly white.

## Perceived Barriers to Advancement

Leaders of color identified the following areas of inequity that serve as barriers to advancement among people of color in the LTSS field.

### Lack of a DEI Culture in Aging Services

Aging services organizations are not always intentional about increasing diversity in leadership. Several interviewees said they feel their majority-white colleagues do not always understand how DEI can be beneficial or why it is important.

### Lack of Representation in Leadership

Over half of the interviewees acknowledged the lack of diversity among leaders in LTSS organizations and suggested that this lack of diversity promotes inequity. Overall, most of the leaders acknowledged that many LTSS organizations do not prioritize diversity, and do not intentionally work to diversify their leadership teams. They pointed out that conferences attended by leaders of LTSS organizations often serve as a stark illustration of the large-scale lack of diversity among leaders in the field of aging services.

Some leaders of color suggested that when only white individuals serve on leadership teams, those individuals are more likely to rely on their own, often non-diverse networks when hiring and recruiting. In addition, these leaders said, white executives often do not realize the biases they may have when recruiting or evaluating potential candidates for leadership positions.

### Lack of Diversity Among Residents

A few leaders maintained that the lack of diversity among residents, particularly in life plan communities, is a source of inequity in aging services. Having a mostly white resident population might deter people of color from working at the community. Likewise, people of color might be hesitant about working for a leader who does not look like them.

### Steep Learning Curve

Learning the ins and outs of aging services can be challenging for leaders who come to the LTSS field from other fields. This steep learning curve may create a barrier to recruiting a diverse pool of potential leaders. Leaders of color reported that they were able to master the skills they needed to succeed in the LTSS field, but only because they had supportive supervisors or mentors who helped them along the way.



“Aging services organizations are not always intentional about increasing diversity in leadership.”

# Perceived Facilitators to Advancement

The following factors are integral to the advancement of leaders of color, according to the interviewees.

## Supportive and Intentional Supervisors

All the leaders reported that, at some point in their careers, they had supervisors who offered support, were intentional about helping them succeed, and offered them opportunities to grow and advance in their careers.

Said one leader: *“I had the advantage of having, on a number of occasions, very fine managers, supervisors, and VPs to whom I reported, who were willing to accept errors on my part, as well as successes, and tell me clearly how those successes came about, why they were successes, as well as where those errors were, and how to correct (them). It’s really important, in my view, for anyone’s development, no matter their color or ethnicity, to have people that are ready to manage their growth.”*

## Mentors

Mentors play a crucial role in helping to develop leaders of color.

Leaders typically described their mentors as supervisors who supported them in their goals, provided them with the opportunity to learn and make mistakes, and guided them as they advanced in their careers. Leaders reported having mentors who were white and people of color. Those leaders who had mentors early in their careers said they keep in touch with those mentors—a practice that demonstrates how meaningful the relationship has been to their professional development.

**“It’s really important, in my view, for anyone’s development, no matter their color or ethnicity, to have people that are ready to manage their growth.”**

Said one leader: *“What’s helped me most in my career is just having great mentors that I’ve worked for that have believed in me, saw my potential, invested in my growth and development, and helped map out ...a career trajectory for me.”*

## Continuing Education

Having an advanced degree, and continuing to take relevant courses and certifications, were identified as important factors in advancing the careers of leaders of color.

## Networks

Over half of the leaders were recruited for their current position through the vast network that exists in the field of aging services. At least half of the leaders of color who were recruited had also served on the boards of directors at communities for older adults. These leaders acknowledged how important a board position proved to be in helping them broaden their networks and learn more about the LTSS field.

Other leaders reported that their own diverse networks, including sororities and churches, helped them identify potential career opportunities and served as sounding boards when the aspiring leaders were experiencing challenges related to race.

# Psychological Barriers

## Need to Conform

When asked to identify a barrier they faced during their careers, several leaders mentioned the need to conform to the majority culture at an organization. Leaders recalled not feeling comfortable bringing their whole self to work, even after being at an organization for several years.

Said one leader: *“I never felt like I could be my authentic self. I always felt like I had to conform to the culture, whether it was the way I wore my hair, my jewelry, my clothing, my demeanor, my speech ...”*

## Need to Prove Yourself

Some leaders, particularly women, said they often are not taken seriously, have their expertise questioned, and feel they need to work twice as hard as their majority counterparts by obtaining certifications, continuing their education, or working longer hours. Some leaders, who wondered whether they were chosen for their current position because of their race, mentioned their need to prove that they are qualified to do the job they were hired to do.



Said one leader: *“You just always feel that you’re constantly having to prove yourself. I look at my job like I’m a contract employee, and every year I’ve got to prove myself so I can get next year’s contract. ... You don’t feel comfortable unless you are producing.”*

## Microaggressions

All the leaders reported that, throughout their careers, they experienced microaggressions: that is, casual remarks, questions, or actions that are painful because they relate to a person’s membership in a group that is discriminated against or subject to stereotypes. These microaggressions come from residents, board members, volunteers, or other leaders, according to the interviewees.

**“I don’t think that people realize how dismissive they can be...”**

Leaders of color mentioned two common microaggressions that they’ve experienced:

- ➔ Having their expertise questioned. Women leaders of color felt they experienced these microaggressions more frequently than their male counterparts.
- ➔ Frequently being dismissed by others.

One leader described a frequent occurrence: *“I don’t think that people realize how dismissive they can be. ... If I’m standing with a colleague and ... the colleague is white, and ... another white person walks up ... they will talk to the white person and totally make you feel invisible. I have some great colleagues that are able to make the introduction but then the individual will shake my hand and go back to ignoring me. And that’s very dismissive.”*



## Raising Diversity Issues

Some leaders said they have sometimes hesitated to raise diversity issues, especially to a primarily white leadership team, for fear of being perceived as “only caring about diversity.” At the same time, some leaders felt they had a responsibility to bring up these issues when white leaders did not seem to view diversity as a priority.

## Thoughts on Frontline Professional Caregivers

Most of the leaders acknowledged a disconnect between frontline caregivers, who are mostly people of color, and the senior leadership of LTSS organizations, which is mostly white. Some leaders of color attributed this disconnect to class rather than race, while also acknowledging that race still plays a factor, given that most frontline caregivers are people of color. These leaders felt that many of their white counterparts had trouble understanding or empathizing with the challenges frontline professional caregivers may be experiencing in their personal lives. This lack of understanding and empathy created tension with frontline staff, they reported.

Said one leader: *“One of the things we were exploring is the likelihood that the mostly low-income, (professional caregivers of color) had experienced some trauma in their life. And that trauma played out in behavioral styles or problems at work. ... And, you know, that asks for a different kind of a management style that I think most managers are not equipped to be able to deal with. And then you add race on top of that, and it just makes it all the more complicated. ... If you have management tier that is much more representative of the direct care workforce, there will be more empathy, there would be less tension ... and I think you’d be able to resolve tensions a little more easily.”*

How can LTSS organizations become more equitable for frontline professional caregivers? Several leaders maintained that those organizations must offer frontline staff opportunities to advance in their careers or continue their education if that is something to which they aspire. Leaders clarified that this approach would require different career paths or ladders than most organizations now have in place.

**“To move into positions of leadership, aides need access to other opportunities in administration or social work and a workplace environment that supports them in furthering their education.”**

One leader noted that most aides are pushed into nursing, and that nurses don’t commonly work at an organization’s senior leadership level. To move into positions of leadership, aides need access to other opportunities in administration or social work and a workplace environment that supports them in furthering their education.

A few leaders made the case that recognizing the work of frontline professionals would help reduce inequity.

One leader commented: *“Quite frankly, if I don’t show up, it is not a bad day for us. (If) CNAs (and) dishwashers ... don’t show up, we are tanked. ... So how do you flip that, that appreciation, that recognition and value? ... We need to champion that. ... How do we do that? And how do we pay for it? And how do we celebrate it?”*

Most of the leaders felt they offered hope to many frontline staff who, seeing someone who looks like them in a position of leadership, would become more aware of career opportunities that were also available to them. Many of the leaders felt it was important for them to connect with frontline staff regularly and become someone to whom professional caregivers could bring issues and ideas.

## Solutions for Addressing Disparities in the LTSS Workforce

Leaders of color were asked how LTSS organizations could address disparities in the aging services workplace. The following are some key actions they recommended.

### Practice Intentional and Committed Leadership

An organization's leadership needs to be intentional and committed to creating opportunities that:

- ➔ Increase the diversity of the leadership team.
- ➔ Facilitate career advancement opportunities for frontline professional caregivers.
- ➔ Create an overall inclusive and equitable organizational culture.

Said one leader: *"The reality that I see is that there are insufficient numbers of minorities in positions of authority. And in order to correct that, you need to take some aggressive steps."*

### Create Networks for Leaders of Color

More than half the leaders said it would be helpful if there were a networking forum for leaders of color in aging services. Some leaders suggested that LeadingAge could establish and support such a network.

### Manage Bias

Leaders of color stressed the importance of educating and helping organizational leaders identify and manage their biases.

**“The reality that I see is that there are insufficient numbers of minorities in positions of authority. And in order to correct that, you need to take some aggressive steps.”**

Said one leader: *"Early on in my conversations around (DEI), I had a manager say to me one time, 'But I want qualified candidates.' ... That statement is saying there's no qualified candidates that are people of color. And that's just not true."*

### Recruit Candidates from Other Fields

Organizations would have more success in diversifying their leadership if they were more open to recruiting candidates from fields, other than aging services, that may be more diverse. This could be accomplished by creating partnerships with community organizations and educational institutions that could help LTSS organizations identify diverse pools of potential candidates from which they could recruit new leaders.

Said one leader: *"It seems to me that you've got to be able to recruit in such a way that (diversity) becomes normative. ... It may be that you start out by reaching out to some group and creating relationships and pathways that are unusual."*

## Leadership Style

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Leaders of color were not asked specifically about their leadership style. However, during conversations with researchers, three elements of their leadership style became evident.

### Acting as a Mentor

All the leaders felt it was important for them to act as mentors to individuals at the managerial or leadership level and to frontline professional caregivers.

### Speaking Up

Most of the leaders were clear about not wanting to be the voice for all people of color at their organizations. However, nearly all the leaders said they feel a keen responsibility to address bias when they see it and to help educate other leaders about the importance of diversity.

“ I continue to learn that a lot of the mistakes I’ve made as a leader have been because of the lack of understanding the staff. ”

### Working Closely with Frontline Caregivers

A few leaders reported that they shadowed and worked with different frontline staff as part of their training so they could gain a better understanding of the work these professional caregivers do each day.

One leader commented: *“I intentionally brought a different leadership style to my community, mainly because it was a community I grew up with, and it had been so traumatized. ... I knew that the top-down leadership just wasn’t going to help, and people needed something different. I’ve been a very roll-up-your-sleeves type leader. I mean, to give you an example, I cooked for three months when we were down two cooks. ... I continue to learn that a lot of the mistakes I’ve made as a leader have been because of the lack of understanding the staff.”*

## Organizational Culture

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Leaders identified several characteristics shared by organizations with a diverse and inclusive culture:

- ➔ Staff at all levels of the organization experience intentional representation that goes beyond tokenism.
- ➔ Staff at all levels are committed to DEI values because DEI is a priority and part of the organization’s strategic plan.
- ➔ The organization has a diverse client base.
- ➔ An inclusive senior leadership advises, counsels, or mentors staff at all levels.
- ➔ Ideas and input from staff at all levels are welcomed and encouraged.

# The Role of Membership Organizations

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Most leaders stressed that they would like to see membership organizations in the field of aging services advocate more strongly for diversity, equity, and inclusion. Member organizations should put the same amount of effort into DEI as they put into other campaigns and initiatives, the leaders maintained. These member organizations could demonstrate their DEI commitment by:

- ➔ Creating networking groups for leaders of color.
- ➔ Helping their members develop career pathways that attract a more diverse pool of employees.
- ➔ Requiring business partners to have DEI plans.
- ➔ Providing educational materials to members.
- ➔ Increasing advocacy efforts related to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

## Conclusion

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Leaders of color in aging services acknowledge that the LTSS field has a long way to go before it becomes diverse, equitable, and inclusive. They also acknowledge the psychological barriers that make it challenging for people of color to work in the field. Chief among those barriers are the lack of diversity among leaders and residents, and the microaggressions that people of color experience daily.

Still, the leaders who shared their perspectives for this research brief tout the vast opportunities for advancement that careers in aging services offer. They readily describe the enjoyment they derive from working for organizations that are mission-driven.

Leaders of color offer three general recommendations to their colleagues in the field of aging services: increase diversity among senior leaders; invest in enhancing diversity, equity, and inclusion; and spread awareness of the LTSS field and its career opportunities to communities of color.

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*Research bridging policy and practice*

**WASHINGTON, DC OFFICE**

2519 Connecticut Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20008  
202-508-1208  
LTSScenter@leadingage.org

**BOSTON OFFICE**

Wheatley Hall, 3rd Floor, Room 124A  
University of Massachusetts Boston  
100 Morrissey Blvd.  
Boston, MA 02125  
617-287-7324  
LTSScenter@umb.edu

Visit [www.LTSSCenter.org](http://www.LTSSCenter.org) to learn more.