

Innovation Through Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority
Management Innovation: Human Resources

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WHEDA is comprised of people with one strong common interest, WHEDA's mission. The mission to ensure that our neighbors have quality, affordable places to live is the answer most likely given when you ask many of us why we work for WHEDA. Providing the tools to help communities make positive changes to improve the quality of life for people, while stimulating Wisconsin's economy drives each one of us. It is this dedication to our mission that is the "secret sauce" of WHEDA.

Like many organizations, WHEDA is at a crossroads. We face competition in the delivery of our programs and attracting talent. We recognize the systemic failures that have driven inequities and oppressed communities of color for far too long. To make positive change, we know we must ask ourselves some hard questions. Do we have a space where we can be innovative? Where are we now and where do we dream to be moving forward? How can we transform into the next best version of ourselves?

We believe that by investing in our internal culture through the lens of equity, diversity and inclusion, minds and behaviors will be shifted to create a rippling effect to the external ecosystem of our communities, stakeholders and partners. Diversity of people, experiences and perspectives drives innovation. Equity, diversity and inclusion threaded throughout the other culture priorities is a key to drive change and innovation.

Strategic Objectives – the Pillars of WHEDA Culture

A healthy culture is significantly important to the success of an organization. Successful organizations need dreamers and innovators in their ranks. Without the freedom to be your authentic self, you won't have either.

WHEDA's Culture Steering Committee is staffed by volunteers and is supported by four pillars:

- **Employee and Community Engagement:** We see success when all of us at WHEDA and the communities we serve are energized by our mission and our daily work.
- **Learning and Development:** We create opportunities for ourselves and others when we remain open to lifelong learning and personal development.
- **Innovation:** We find new solutions and use resources more effectively when we listen to diverse perspectives and challenge ourselves to innovate.
- **Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI):** We deliver greater value when our strategic decisions and daily work are informed by the experiences of people from all backgrounds and walks of life.

The WHEDA Culture Committee began its work in January 2020. There was great excitement for the important work to begin when Wisconsin was thrust into the global COVID-19 pandemic. Over the course of the next year, the committee's work would end up being incredibly important to the health and wellness of staff when the face-to-face work environment was no longer possible and staff had to quickly adjust to working remotely. The Employee and Engagement Subcommittee was instrumental in planning virtual activities that helped socialize and support the wellness of staff.

An Opportunity



WHEDA's culture initiative was only a few months old when the death of George Floyd and the social unrest that followed, catapulted the committee's work around EDI to the forefront. Madison, like many communities throughout the country, saw an outpouring of grief and anger. We recognized that in the search for justice, old scars and lasting wounds surfaced.

We acknowledge that to be an ally of systemic change, we must confront and recognize the institutionalized oppression that has painfully devastated communities of color. WHEDA will drive systemic change to build a more equitable, sustainable place for all Wisconsinites to call home by expanding affordable housing and economic opportunity throughout the state.

The WHEDA Speakers Series, hosted by the Culture Steering Committee, began to address these conversations with staff members in mid 2020.

- **Guest speaker Tim Kenny – Nebraska Investment Finance Authority** – spoke about how our personal missions help drive organizational mission.
- **Guest speakers Adam Carr and Dr. Robert Smith** – talked about redlining and other exclusionary lending practices.
- **Guest speaker Dr. Andre Perry** – discussed the public housing boom and early home ownership efforts targeted to buyers of color.
- **Presentation of the film “Segregated by Design”** – the film examines the forgotten history of how federal, state and local governments unconstitutionally segregated every major metropolitan area in America through law and policy.
- **Housing equity small group discussions** – WHEDA's look at modern housing policies rooted in discriminatory practices, explicitly excluding households of color from equitably participating in local real estate markets while cementing neighborhood segregation across the U.S. Small group breakout sessions were designed to help WHEDA move forward in cultivating a more equitable ecosystem through our partners, programs and practices to increase equity in housing and economic opportunity.

In addition to the WHEDA Speakers Series, the EDI subcommittee planned a series of events to recognize and celebrate diverse communities. The effort began with a celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Black History Month. A highlight from the planned activities was special guest speaker Wisconsin Poet Laureate, Dasha Kelly Hamilton. Dasha was monumental in connecting staff with their personal narratives to further expand equity in our work. During Women's History Month, the EDI Subcommittee created WoW: Women of WHEDA, a panel series featuring women leaders at WHEDA. Women throughout the Authority were



invited to speak to staff about themselves, their careers and how their lived experiences shaped them into the leader they are today.

The EDI Subcommittee has plans to celebrate Wisconsin's diverse communities throughout 2021 with the Asian American community in May, the LGBTQ (Pride) and African American (Juneteenth) communities in June, Native American Heritage Month in September, Hispanic Heritage Month in late September and early October and Veteran's Day in November.

The Work Ahead

WHEDA's culture work is only just beginning. It is critical that our drive to foster diversity and innovation is cemented into the fabric of WHEDA's culture. Each subcommittee will create a charter, which will be combined to create a strategic plan for culture work moving forward.

We have much work ahead of us. We know it will take everyone at WHEDA to engage in the process as we begin to dive into the hard questions centered around innovation, our role in social justice and what the next best version of ourselves looks like.