

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

Child and Family Services Agency

Philosophical Statement on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion



Introduction

Racism is one of the most divisive forces in our society. Racial atrocities of the past continue to haunt current policies and practices that create unfair disparities of communities of color due to systematically oppressive design. If the desired outcome is for our existing child *welfare* system to be transformed into a child *well-being* system, we must obliterate barriers and eliminate long-term unequal social arrangements.

We know that children of color are disproportionately represented in the foster care system. As a result, they are less likely to encounter caseworkers, service providers, lawyers, judges, or GALs who share their race or ethnicity. In addition to people of color experiencing unfair disparate outcomes, we affirm that LGBTQ+ youth face increased discrimination, harassment, and hostility in the foster care system, as well as a higher-than-average rate of suicidality. We recognize that undocumented children face ongoing fear of family separation and experience significant barriers to accessing educational, health, employment, and housing services. These are just a few of the many real and complex issues we must take into consideration within our equitability framework. Our work with Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) is evolving, and we recognize the need for reviewing practices related to youth of color, LGBTQ+ youth, youth from various legal statuses in our country, and other historically marginalized communities.

The DC Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) is doubling down on a commitment to DEI by establishing a formal, agency-wide initiative to develop a change management plan to better meet the needs of the children and families we serve, as well as partners, stakeholders, and our staff. As an initiative founded on inclusivity, we seek to better understand the systemic inequities that impact communities of color, people who identify as LGBTQ+, and a plethora of other historically marginalized and underrepresented populations.

We cannot achieve equity of any kind without ensuring diversity and inclusion while working to acknowledge, mitigate, and dismantle oppression. CFSA will develop a theory of change, impact goals, and a list of tailored recommendations, to provide more culturally responsive practice. We strive to leverage this work to retain and maintain staff, contractors, service providers, resource parents, and stakeholders (e.g., task force members) that reflect the diversity of the children and families we serve.

We encourage intentional thinking, taking time to reflect, to consider, to question, and to inform yourself. We are committed to changing the child welfare agency to be more equitable and just. We



are committed to strengthening our relationships and building partnerships with people, organizations, and businesses that reflect the diverse identities and cultures of the children and families we serve. We believe bringing more voices to the table to influence our policies and practices will help us provide better advocacy and arrive at better outcomes for our children and families.

CFSA will identify, acknowledge, and address diversity, equity, and inclusion opportunities for improvement, accelerating our transition toward a more community-centered agency that values the gifts and potential of all the children, families, and communities we serve.

Vision

CFSA will be a child and family wellbeing agency that is equitable, just and centered on the voices and lived experiences of the children and families we serve. We envision CFSA collaborating with partner organizations to create and advance a more equitable child and family serving system by being accountable to those we serve.

Mission

We vow to prioritize the identification and elimination of all forms of racism, dismantling all policies and practices rooted in White privilege and centering on the voices and lived expertise of children, parents, caregivers, families, and their communities.

Theory of Change

A theory of change is a framework that outlines specific root causes and changes that need to be made within an organization to reach a goal. Discrimination due to race, ethnicity, gender identity, and sexual orientation is so pervasive in our society and detrimental to the work we do in child welfare. We recommend that a theory of change model be implemented to assure short-term and long-term goals for CFSA are met. Application of data, critical thinking, and meaningful stakeholder input are invaluable to effectuate a successful shift in corporate behavior.

Values & Beliefs

We believe that Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion are mutually reinforcing principles within our organization. A focus on diversity alone is insufficient because a person's sense of belonging (inclusion) and experience of fairness (equity) is critically important.

- **INTEGRITY:** *Integrity is the quality of being honest and fair, adhering to moral and ethical principles, a soundness of moral character.* This describes how members of our organization will “show up” and how members will treat others and expect to be treated.



- **RESPECT:** *Respect is the quality or state of being esteemed.* Respect for our clients, stakeholders, and colleagues is fundamental to belonging. We will develop mutual respect with colleagues, community partners, and the population served by using more thoughtful language.
- **LANGUAGE:** Language is vital to building rapport and recognizing the importance of the tools we use to communicate with each other, including how we discuss our clients and colleagues. We will need to be mindful that language is ever-changing, and we will need to adapt to it as we learn and grow.
- **CULTURAL HUMILITY:** *Cultural humility is a process of self-reflection and growth in order to build awareness about power, privilege, and prejudices. It requires a life-long commitment to learning and a commitment to be aware of and actively mitigate power imbalances rooted in cultural identity. This framework is important as race equity becomes the norm at CFS and inclusion is part of our everyday operations.*

Application of the Philosophical Statement

This philosophical statement requires acknowledging and addressing the impacts of historical and contemporary trauma, both from chronic racism and from the unnecessary separation of children from their families. This requires urgent advocacy for a social safety net that helps prevent deprivation and supports stability. Recognition of these traumas are fundamental.

We will address race equity matters at CFS by focusing on targeted processes and procedures.

- **Language** - We will review reports and other written documents for race equity considerations, as well as the use of equitable language and design within them.
- **Data** - We will examine how we collect data and identify trends in our data that result in inequity in the service we deliver to our families.
- **Policy** - We will analyze our policies to ensure that they do not result in a disparate level of service due to a client's or family's background.
- **Training** - We will update our current training which includes race equity ideas as we continue to become more aware of race equity issues as this process evolves. We will create a program to train current CFS employees and contractors about our race equity focus and how it relates to their role at CFS. We will also create pieces of training for onboarding employees and contractors so they will understand the importance of race equity in their work.
- **Practice** - We will apply race equity to our practice in that we more precisely identify the strengths and needs of the children and families we serve so that we can individualize our support of them rather than base our decisions on stereotypes or bias.



Additional Considerations

The work of equity for people of color and LGBTQ+ is a priority for CFSA to ensure equitable services for the people we serve. We are striving to remedy these issues through our multi-step organizational cultural shift. Concurrently, we recognize that there are several factors affecting our advancement in this work which we will remain mindful of as we address these issues.

- **Not everybody is on the same level of understanding** - As we address these issues within our workplace, we understand that different people are coming to these ideas from various vantage points. We will be mindful and respectful of those historic and current differences. Specific concerns that we've identified include:
 - Learning new, nuanced terms so looking at the context of language (e.g., always use undocumented vs. illegal; use resource parent depending on context).
 - Appropriateness of choice of term (e.g., resource parent is an umbrella term to use when referring to foster, adoptive and kinship caregivers globally).
 - Retiring outdated or inappropriate terms (e.g., explain why we use undocumented vs. illegal; separation vs. removal).
- **Using shared language** - We will create a glossary of terms for CFSA, comparing terms and definitions from various equity-focused glossaries, to develop a shared lexicon that will enhance the ways we communicate equitably within our agency and with stakeholders, children, and families.
- **Constant change** - As we address the issues of equity, we recognize that the process and language itself is not static and always evolving. Language is dynamic and we will adapt our language, the culture around language itself changes.

Conclusion

The Child and Family Services Agency is honored to engage the full diversity of our community, and we strive to continue in our efforts of being inclusive of all persons. Specifically, the statistics indicating the rate of Black/African American children coming into care compared to the percentage of the population of DC who are Black/African American is deeply concerning and something that requires continued problem exploration so that a cause, or causes, can be identified. Examining policy, analyzing data, auditing training, and conducting language exploration activities are just a few examples of the way we are consistently working to become a more equitable agency.