



## **Building Diversity and Inclusion into Commission Workforces**

On November 15, 2021, NARUC facilitated a state commission staff “surge” call to discuss the opportunities and approaches to building diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the commission workforce. As commissions are faced with making decisions on increasingly complex questions, commission staff are also required to adapt to these challenges and exhibit expertise in a range of emerging issues such as cybersecurity, climate change, and energy justice. However, commission staff capacity to focus on both emerging as well as traditional regulatory issues may be limited by staff turnover, development, diversity, and inclusion within the commission. On this call, commission staff from three states discussed internal commission approaches to hiring, training, developing, and retaining a diverse staff workforce capable of tackling emerging challenges.

### **Recognizing the need to address diversity, equity, and inclusion in the public utility commission workforce**

Commission staff discussed the importance of building a commission workforce that is representative of both the population they serve in the state and the global community. While multiple commissions have been able to achieve even gender representation, racial diversity has been more difficult to achieve. Staff noted that a deeper look at DEI within the commission structure was necessary to recruit and retain talent from underrepresented groups. Staffers added that the recent focus on DEI issues at the state level was catalyzed by the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent protest movements in the summer of 2020. This mobilized several staff-driven efforts at one commission, including the development of a staff survey to evaluate DEI concerns which was used to orient the direction of other activities. From this survey, the commission organized a series of five thematic listening sessions comprised of a panel of mostly senior commission staff to discuss outstanding DEI issues. These initiatives received a positive response from commission staff.

### **Examining internal commission cultures**

Some commission staff have led and participated in efforts to reform commission cultures to be more inclusive, responsive to social issues, and internally reflective. In one commission, staff organized quarterly book discussions to have small group conversations about DEI. The group has explored works such as [Hood Feminism](#) by Mikki Kendall, [How to be Anti-Racist](#) by Dr. Ibram X. Kendi, and [Wounds](#) by Razel Jones and Daniel Abbott. Staff also acknowledged the importance of having commissioners championing DEI efforts and participating in DEI-related conversations with staff. One strategy a commission had employed was hosting fireside chats where commissioners from underrepresented groups could discuss their paths with staff. Commissions have also collaborated with other state agencies to advance these issues and provide resources for their staff. One commission also indicated that they adopted DEI into its mission statement.

Staff recommended that commissions hoping to address these issues develop a DEI operations plan and examine the extent to which their budgets focus on these issues. Having a DEI plan in place can establish a commission culture that can overcome commissioner turnover or political shifts. One commission has started to build a record of historical budget allocations to ultimately help illustrate the business case for DEI investments. Staff recognized that organization change is not going to happen quickly and may be incremental. However, they challenged commissions to consider how to best leverage these opportunities to see the biggest return on investment.



Staff also mentioned that their commissions have made efforts to incorporate these considerations into their regulatory work such as through filing requirements or stakeholder engagement. One commission contracted with an outside agency to compensate community members who participated in a workshop on COVID impacts, thus making participation in commission discussions more economically viable to marginalized communities.

### **Reforming the recruiting, hiring, and training processes**

Staff identified the processes of recruitment, hiring, and training as key opportunities for improving DEI in their commissions. For example, one staff member highlighted the need for commissions to address the systemic biases inherent in many hiring processes that contribute to a lack of diversity in applicant pools. These considerations can include re-thinking of the educational requirements for applicants, which can reinforce biases against certain populations. The staffer further noted that lived experiences should be considered alongside formal educational in the review of applications to enable “non-traditional” applicants to enter regulatory roles. Other efforts to improve the hiring process at commissions include taking a panel approach to candidate interviews; collaborating with community members to develop job descriptions; and utilizing a blind resume process (i.e., removing identifying information from candidate resumes such as name, educational institution, race, or gender).

Lack of racial and ethnic diversity within the commission, and among the broader community in which the commission is located, was cited as one of the challenges for recruiting a diverse workforce. To address this issue, one staffer challenged other commissions to consider how they could connect candidates to resources and community opportunities that support their identities. A question was also raised as to how commissions could allow space to acknowledge or discuss current events that may impact their well-being, such as the trial for the murder of Ahmaud Arbery. Staff also noted early efforts that commissions have taken to recruit more diverse candidates. These includes conducting outreach to institutions such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and affinity groups such as the American Association of Blacks in Energy, Asians in Energy, the Hispanic Bar Association, and state chapters of the National Association of the Deaf. Some commissions have also hired staff to focus exclusively on DEI issues, but staff recognized the limitations of only hiring one person to fill the role. They discussed the importance of rethinking DEI not as a singular program, but as a way of conducting business. With this context, staff suggested hiring for multiple analyst-level positions to support DEI efforts.

With regards to training, one staffer noted that it is challenging to identify effective DEI training programs. Another staffer also suggested that commissions could improve training by hiring an educator with expertise in adult learning. This is particularly needed to address the steep learning curve that is characteristic for new staff in public utility regulation. Lastly, staff suggested that staff training was needed to facilitate examination of the internal commission culture and individual beliefs.

### **Conclusion**

Commission staff across the country indicated that efforts are underway to improve DEI within their commissions. However, staff noted many opportunities to improve the hiring, retention, and training of diverse staff as well as transformation of commission cultures to ensure that staff are prepared to meet a suite of emerging challenges.

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