

# Promising Practice: Diversity Circles, from Catholic Community Services of Western Washington

Compiled by Irene Ward, Executive Vice President

## **Overview of Practice:**

The Diversity Circles are cohorts of staff who are all participating in a curriculum developed by Catholic Community Services (CCS) staff and facilitated by trained CCS staff. The curriculum focuses on the relationship between racism and poverty. There are 6 training cohorts in Western Washington; 1 north of King County, 3 in King County, 2 in Tacoma.

## **History**

The practice started in the agency as leadership wanted to take a more activist role in promoting a deeper understanding of the ravages of racism in our country and our community. The Diversity Circles include a training curriculum which lasts for 12 sessions and a final project. We first started Diversity Circles in March, 2014. The training curriculum is divided into twelve sessions and we are completing a session every month, so we have not yet completed it. Once the twelve sessions are completed, each cohort will then complete a project. I anticipate the complete cycle of Diversity Circles will be completed in summer of 2015.

## **Results**

This initiative is focused on our Catholic Community Services (CCS) and Catholic Housing Services (CHS) staff. Rooted in one of our 8 primary strategic initiatives from our last strategic planning process, 'We will move beyond racism,' the Diversity Circles are aimed at galvanizing a broad based group of staff to a more in-depth understanding of the relationship between racism and poverty in so many facets of our society and to assist the agency in addressing these issues with the hope of making a lasting impact both inside the agency and externally in the communities we serve.

We are currently in Session 9 of the 12 sessions. I am hearing very positive feedback from participants and facilitators but I have not yet asked participants to complete an evaluation form. That will occur at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> session.

## **Impact on Racial Equity**

The following is the stated goal of Diversity Circles. Because we are still in the process and some of the outcomes will not be immediately realized, it is hard to measure the impact. I have heard anecdotally of some changes in staff

understanding and responses to situations based on their experiences with the Diversity Circles.

The following is an outline we developed to summarize the goal of Diversity Circles.

The process for Diversity Circles is:

***To build***

- ❖ Upon the training and discussions we have had in the organization about racism, disproportionality and diversity

***In order to***

- ❖ Gain a more integrated understanding of how racism and poverty intersect and how they impact those in our communities and those we serve

***And put***

- ❖ That knowledge and understanding to use in evaluating the impact it has had on our services and in our community

***So that***

- ❖ Diversity Circles can provide feedback to agency leadership on how we might change/enhance our services to more directly impact racism and poverty in our communities

***And***

- ❖ Diversity Circle members can discuss the experience with other staff and initiate meaningful changes in programs and services throughout the agency

***And***

- ❖ Diversity Circles can develop, implement and present a group project intended to enhance our agencies' ability to impact these issues either on a local, programmatic, systemic or community basis.

**Keys to Success**

1. Developing a curriculum including resource materials
2. Selecting and training facilitators
3. Selecting class participants

There has been a great deal of work done to make this project a success. One of the most important factors is having the strong commitment of agency leadership behind the project. Another very important factor is assembling a good team to work on the initiative which is committed to making Diversity Circles a success for staff involved and for the organization as a whole.

There are several characteristics that make this practice attractive and worth trying. They include that it involves learning modules which involve different types of learning experiences and processes; it involves the same group of staff meeting regularly together to learn, discuss and experience together and it culminates in a project that participants will do together at the end of the curriculum and which hopefully will provide some impact either in our agency or in the community. In addition, I think it is a positive thing that the experience lasts for 12 months – 18 months so staff can study, experience and discuss over a long period of time.

### **Resources Required**

It is difficult to estimate the cost of this project. The biggest cost was for staff time involved in developing the curriculum and materials and then for staff to attend. We have done all the work internally and did not request any outside support. The only other costs were for supplies for attendees – everyone received a notebook with resource materials and a flash drive with other content, the cost for videos and streaming rights and some incidental costs for food, admission to museums, etc.