



SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: July 1, 2022.** Please include this submission form with the electronic entry. If you do not receive an email confirming receipt of your entry within 3 days of submission, please contact [Gage Harter](#).

PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: County of Henrico
Program Title: Embracing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: Employee Conversations and Experiences
Program Category: Organizational Development

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SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: Brandon Hinton
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Signature: 

Program Overview

As COVID-19 remained a severe international threat, the 2020 global civil unrest and social movement sparked a deep desire at Henrico County for candid, honest conversations on current events, race, inclusion, and belonging. In response to this growing need, Henrico County's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Specialist, in collaboration with the Director of Social Services, hosted virtual forums across the county to assess employee well-being and provide a safe space for employees to dialogue and express thoughts on the pandemic, national events, and DEI topics.

The forums consisted of WebEx focus groups, virtual inclusion workshops, panel discussions, and a partnership with the Department of Public Relations (PR) to produce a Voices of the Heart video series, highlighting the diverse, lived experiences of eleven county employees.

The results of this initiative have been overwhelmingly positive for building trust in the organization's commitment to DEI. Human Resources (HR) received positive feedback from employees expressing gratitude for the county's support and opportunities to connect with peers to discuss critical topics of importance to them. As of January 2022, the Voices of Heart YouTube video series has received 2,320 views and 82 "likes."

Problem/Challenge/Situation Faced by Locality

The events of 2020 took an emotional toll on the county's workforce and left many employees grappling with how to move forward. Henrico County employees – and millions across the nation – voiced concerns about the pandemic, civil unrest, and national events, citing feelings of anxiety, exhaustion, and fear. Due to the rise in COVID-19 cases across the nation, many county employees transitioned to teleworking in March 2020.

As the county swiftly responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, employees navigated virtual platforms to collaborate and communicate across divisions and teams. The change in work arrangements drastically impacted the county workforce's ability to meet in person due to COVID-19 restrictions. Henrico County recognized that employees had a desire to connect with peers and collectively process the events of 2020. The county responded to this need by creating pathways for employees to discuss current events and DEI topics in safe, supportive ways.

How Program Fulfilled Awards Criteria

In 2020, the spirit of excellence, innovation, and leadership kept Henrico County anchored as we navigated the COVID-19 global pandemic, countless tragedies, and the civil unrest sparked by racial and social injustices across the nation. The new realities that the county faced left a profound impact on the well-being of employees and forever changed the landscape of our organization. Henrico County seized those moments to engage in honest dialogue and deep reflection about our core values and priorities.

With purposeful intention, the county welcomed voices from all levels of the organization to help us think strategically and innovatively about the county's future and prioritize the work of DEI at Henrico County. The video series and diverse employee forums created safe environments for employees to engage and lean into Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion discussions to build a culture where all individuals can thrive and excel. The positive feedback, video views, likes and support from county leadership indicate that the county is headed in the right direction and providing the right resources to support its employees during this critical time of need. These efforts can be easily replicated by other local government organizations in a no/low-cost format and can be adjusted to meet the needs and culture of the organization.

How Program Was Carried Out

The COVID-19 pandemic, 2020 global civil unrest, and social movements stirred myriad emotions and desires for candid discussions on race, inclusion, and belonging. Recognizing an organizational need, HR staff met with the County Manager and his Chief of Staff in the summer of 2020 to share recommendations to support the county in ensuring an inclusive culture at Henrico County. Staff proposed establishing a position to focus exclusively on DEI and help guide the county by promoting best practices and resources to achieve county DEI goals.

Throughout the year, county leaders and employees shared additional recommendations to help the county think strategically and organizationally about DEI. In June 2020, a TV Producer/Director from PR reached out to HR to propose a diversity video series, which would consist of employees being filmed sharing their diverse identities and lived experiences. In September 2020, the Director of Social Services met with the County Manager to share a proposal for roundtable employee focus groups. Based on conversations with county staff, the Director of Social Services heard a need for safe spaces to discuss thoughts and feelings on current events, race, and inclusion. The Director of Social Services met with HR staff to share his proposal, which the county manager approved in October 2020. In December 2020, the Director of Social Services scheduled a WebEx meeting with a small group to plan the focus groups.

In January 2021, the county hired a DEI Specialist to focus exclusively on DEI for Henrico County General Government. As one priority for the role, the DEI Specialist collaborated with county thought leaders and employees to invite the organization's voice on race, inclusion, and belonging. Recognizing that stories inspire people to change behaviors, the DEI Specialist collaborated with a PR TV Producer/Director during that same month to produce a **Voices of the Heart** video series. Voices of the Heart explores eleven county employees' diverse identities and lived experiences through informal

conversations and storytelling. The Voices of the Heart video series aims to promote awareness of diverse identities, encourage learning, and create a sense of belonging and inclusion for all employees. Voices of the Heart video segments highlighted various diversity and inclusion topics, including generations in the workplace, LGBTQIA+ inclusion and belonging, race, wellness, religion, multicultural identities, and awareness. PR initially met with the HR Organizational Learning and Talent Development team in December 2020 to discuss his vision and scope for the diversity video proposal. The collaboration between the DEI Specialist and the TV Producer/Director was a continuation of that effort.

During the project's initial phase, the DEI Specialist and TV Producer/Director collaborated with HR staff to identify eleven county employees for the video project, including the County Manager. The DEI Specialist and TV Producer/Director met on several occasions to plan and strategize for the video series. Following the extensive planning sessions, the DEI Specialist scheduled virtual meetings with potential participants to share the project vision, gauge interest, and brainstorm stories for participants to share in their video segment. Because the project involved the County Manager's participation, PR's TV & Media Services Manager reached out to gauge his interest and involvement in the video project. In January 2021, the TV Producer/Director filmed ten employees and the County Manager discussing their unique stories, identities, and lived experiences. Later that month, the TV Producer/Director and the DEI Specialist met to edit the footage and partnered with HR OLTD staff to house the content on OLTD's YouTube channel. In February, the DEI Specialist and TV Producer/Director shared the Voices of the Heart video series with the County Manager and the HR Director for their review and approval. The County Manager shared positive feedback on the series and granted approval for the series to be shared with county employees.

In March, the DEI Specialist partnered with HR OLTD staff to create a video description, and playlist, and to upload the content to OLTD's YouTube channel. On April 2, 2021, the DEI Specialist sent a notice to all Henrico County General Government employees announcing the **Voices of the Heart** video series (see attachment A). The message encouraged employees to "watch this video series with an open heart in hopes that it will spark deep conversations, learning and continue to bridge connections across our organization." As of January 26, 2022, the video series has received 2,320 views and 82 "likes." The feedback on the series has been positive and sparked dialogue across the organization on these topics.

With the establishment of the DEI Specialist role, the county welcomed ongoing conversations to help the county more firmly embed DEI into the DNA of the organization. In February 2021, the DEI Specialist collaborated with the Director of Social Services to plan and host seven virtual well-being focus groups to assess employee needs and solicit feedback to create an inclusive workplace for all employees. Henrico County General Government employees received a general notice on February 22, 2021, announcing the focus group opportunities (See attachment B). The message encouraged employees to sign-up through the HR Employee Portal. The virtual focus groups were offered in early and mid-March 2021. Fifty-three county employees from fourteen county departments attended the sessions. Participants were deeply engaged and openly expressed thoughts on the global pandemic, mental wellness, civil unrest, race relations, and inclusion topics. Employees also shared recommendations to guide the county forward in its county-wide DEI efforts. In late March, the DEI Specialist and Director of Social Services met with county leaders and the County Manager to provide an overview of the focus group findings, share initial recommendations, and discuss the next steps for the organization.

Following the virtual well-being focus group sessions, county employees reached out to the DEI Specialist and Director of Social Services to share that they wanted more opportunities to dialogue on DEI topics in a safe environment. With employee needs in mind, the DEI Specialist proposed additional initiatives to engage employees and further the county's DEI efforts. Building on the concept of storytelling, the DEI Specialist designed a *Candid Conversations on Inclusion and Belonging* workshop. She pitched the idea to the Director of Human Resources and HR OLTD in March 2021. She also shared the proposal with the Director of Social Services due to his passion for DEI and involvement in the virtual well-being focus groups. *Candid Conversations on Inclusion and Belonging* is inspired by the focus groups and *Voices of the Heart* video series. Through panel discussions and interactive class activities, workshop participants candidly dialogue on diversity and inclusion topics and share lived experiences through honest reflections and storytelling. Participants also identify practical strategies and actions to promote inclusion in their spheres of influence.

In April 2021, the *Candid Conversations* workshop was approved and advertised to county employees in HR OLTD's training catalog on July 1, 2021. The workshop was advertised as two 3-hour virtual sessions. The first class was held on December 3 & 9 and co-facilitated by the DEI Specialist and Director of Social Services. Twenty county employees attended the workshop. As of January 2022, the class has received positive results. Several participants reached out to the DEI Specialist thanking the facilitators for providing a platform for employees to "look into other cultures, experiences and/or lifestyles that they don't always think about."

Financing and Staffing

There were no direct costs incurred in developing the program, and operating costs consisted of staff time. The *Voices of the Heart* video series was created by PR staff using video production and editing equipment. The videos are housed on HR OLTD's YouTube channel. The virtual focus groups and

inclusion workshops were facilitated on the county's WebEx platform. Class materials for the inclusion workshop were shared electronically with participants during the session.

Program Results

The "Embracing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion" program has received positive feedback from county employees across the organization. As of January 2022:

Voices of the Heart

The Voices of the Heart video series has received 2,320 views and 82 "likes." The County Manager and employees sent notes expressing gratitude for the video series in April 2021:

- *"You give this local government the oxygen that we need to be real. For me - it's about a workforce that might be able to impart love in service. Belonging. The "we." "Thank you all for sharing your stories in such a beautiful way. This experience is something that I will always carry with me—thank you for everything."*
- *"Thank you for everything you each do for our county. I am so proud to be a part of this team."*

Virtual Well-Being Focus Groups

Several focus group participants reached out to the DEI Specialist and Director of Social Services to share positive feedback regarding their experience:

- *"I thoroughly enjoyed the time we all spent together, even though, at times, the subject matter wasn't easy. **It's nice to know that there are others that aren't afraid of discussing (sometimes) difficult topics, while still keeping composed.** We learn so much through this type of interaction."*
- *"Thank you for facilitating such an interactive discussion. You both created an atmosphere of safety and made it clear you were very interested in hearing what we said AND that you*

planned to follow up with what was discussed. It was a very positive experience. On a scale of 1-10, I would rate this event 10++."

- *"I truly appreciated the call and hearing from others. It is a reminder that we are not alone in this. "*

Candid Conversations on Inclusion and Belonging Class

Workshop facilitators received a rating of 92% for the Candid Conversations workshop. Employees reached out to the DEI Specialist to share verbal feedback and messages expressing gratitude for the workshop experience:

- *The training provided the opportunity to be in a **safe place for discussion and chances to examine oneself, attitude, bias, diversity, and issues that might prohibit individuals from being the best personally and professionally.** The training is open for honest conversation without judgment. The feedback allows individuals to flourish. Listening as others share their story provides a sense of hope, perseverance, and strength within our own lives when dealing with various issues.*
- *Thank you for creating a safe space for us to be able to share parts of our lives that we typically wouldn't share with coworkers/strangers. **Many of the shared stories allowed us to have a closer look into other cultures, experiences and/or lifestyles that we don't always think about. Regardless of our race, religion, education, political affiliation, or financial status we each dealt with similar traumas and funny experience.** It was...refreshing to learn that "you are not alone."*
- *I loved this class, truly enriching to hear others' stories. I normally prefer in-person classes, but the virtual platform was better for me in this scenario to open up about my own story without worrying who will be listening - it was controlled. Overall, fantastic class. Thank you!*
- *This has been one of the most wonderfully led classes I have attended. Having the selected three share their story in the first session that were so raw helped me feel comfortable to talk*

*openly. I felt connected to others in the breakout and large group. **It has given me a lot to think about regarding others and will help me change or adjust my behaviors and thoughts.***

The "Embracing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion" program far exceeded employee expectations and built employees' trust in the organization's commitment to DEI. The County will build upon the success of this program by exploring other avenues to invite diverse perspectives and voices, and we continue to develop a culture of inclusion and belonging at Henrico.

Brief Summary

The global pandemic, civil unrest and social movement of 2020 spurred moments of reflection and desires across Henrico County for candid conversations on topics of race, inclusion, belonging and global events that impacted the workforce. Henrico County's DEI Specialist and Director of Social Services hosted WebEx focus groups, virtual inclusion workshops and panel discussions to offer safe spaces for employees to dialogue and candidly express their thoughts and reflections on diversity, equity, and inclusion topics. The DEI Specialist also partnered with the Department of Public Relations (PR) to produce a video series, Voices of the Heart, which highlights the lived experiences and diverse identifies of county employees, navigating complex social situations and the world of work.

Henrico's efforts to embrace diversity, equity, and inclusion has had a positive impact on employees at all levels of the organization. Shortly after launching the program, the County Manager, and employees from all levels of the organization sent notes expressing gratitude for the video series, virtual forums, and workshops. As of January 2022, the Voices of the Heart video series has received 2,320 views and 82 "likes" and the inclusion workshops have received high ratings from class participants. The "Embracing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion" program exceeded expectations and built employees' trust in the organization's commitment to DEI. The County will build upon the success of this program by

exploring other avenues to invite diverse perspectives and voices, and we continue to develop a culture of inclusion and belonging at Henrico.

The year 2020 was a defining moment for Henrico County and it forced us to rethink how we interact, conduct business, and support our employees. With thoughtful intention and purpose, we remained anchored and seized moments to invite voices from employees at all levels to help us think strategically about our future and prioritize the importance work of DEI at Henrico County. Henrico is committed to continuing to build a culture where all individuals can thrive and excel in their roles by providing them with the right resources to support their professional and personal development.

Embracing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: Employee Conversations and Experiences

Supplemental Material

Attachment A

April 2, 2021, General Notice Message Resources for Supporting an Inclusive Workplace

Dear Henrico County employees,

Recently, the Department of Human Resources (HR) collaborated with Public Relations on a “Voices of the Heart” video [series](#), which highlights the stories, different identities and lived experiences of county employees, including our County Manager. I encourage you to watch this video series with an open heart in hopes that it will spark deep conversations, learning and continue to bridge connections across our organization.

As we look forward, it is important that we intentionally pause periodically to reflect on this moment and the lessons that we continue to learn together. We must listen to each other with open hearts and seize opportunities to learn from each other through open and honest conversations. When we listen with open hearts and invite the voices and perspectives of others, we create spaces where everyone feels welcome, seen and heard to build an inclusive workplace for all.

In the weeks and months ahead, I want to encourage our leaders to create safe spaces for employees to express openly, including scheduling regular check ins with your employees to assess their needs and the best ways to support their well-being.

As we navigate these difficult moments together, I want to remind you of a few critical resources that are available to you:

- [Resources for Supporting a Diverse, Equitable and Inclusive Workplace](#)
- [Employee Assistance Program \(EAP\) - HR Employee Portal \(henrico.us\)](#)

Without a doubt, you are our greatest asset and our success is built around you. Thank you for helping us to build upon our strong foundation by embracing change and growth, while honoring our Henrico heart and service to others.

With gratitude,

Shanone T. Sport

Attachment B

February 22, 2021, General Notice Message Share thoughts on well-being, inclusion at upcoming Employee Focus Groups

Dear Henrico County Employees,

As we move into a new year with hope and opportunity, we cannot forget the challenges and lessons that 2020 has taught us. In the spirit of community, we want to take a moment to check in with our employees and hear how you are doing. The Department of Human Resources (HR) is offering [virtual focus groups](#) to provide an opportunity for open dialogue to strengthen connections across the county, assess your needs and to offer support and partnership.

With the establishment of the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Specialist, we will also welcome conversation about how we are growing as an organization and solicit feedback to achieve an inclusive workforce.

Five focus groups are scheduled and will be led by Shanone Sport (HR) and Ty Parr (Social Services). I encourage you to participate in these continued conversations as they are necessary for us to support each other and grow together.

To register, [log in to Oracle](#), go to Employee Direct Access > Learning, Learner Home > Browse Catalog, Human Resources > Specialized > Wellbeing Check-In Sessions > select the class date you would like to register for.

Sincerely,

John A. Vithoukias
County Manager