

The Importance of Ensuring a Diverse Workforce

October 2024

Public health and safety professions are facing widespread staffing challenges. These recruitment and retention issues are pressing and come at a time when many employers have also become more aware of the benefits of a diverse and representative workforce. Notably, strategies for hiring diverse employees often also benefit overall recruitment. This brief outlines actionable strategies for addressing hiring issues while keeping in mind specific considerations for diverse hiring.

Why Is Diversity in the Workplace Important?

Over the past several years, there has been growing awareness about the benefits of a diverse and representative workforce, particularly in public health and public safety jobs. While it is not easy to quantify all the cascading benefits of a diverse workforce, recent research highlights several important and tangible examples:

- **Building community trust.** To effectively address the needs of a community, it is important to build trust between the community members and their public safety officers, health care providers, first responders, and other state and local government agencies. In fact, research shows that substance use programming and other public health and public

What is workforce diversity?

Workforce diversity includes the differences among employees in terms of age, cultural background, physical abilities, race, religion, gender, and sexual orientation.

safety initiatives are more successful when trust is previously established in the community.¹ Cultivating a diverse workforce reflects the values and demographic makeup of the community being served, which helps build trust and communication with community members.

- **Promoting equitable services.** Workforce diversity in public health and public safety realms can also promote more equitable services for better community outcomes. For example, when compared to white law enforcement officers, Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) officers are less likely to use force against BIPOC community members, while female law enforcement officers are less likely to use excess force in general.² In jails and prison, gender diversity among correctional staff is associated with lower suicide rates among incarcerated individuals.³

In addition, when a health care provider's race or ethnic identity is the same as their patient's, treatment retention rates are higher.⁴ Administering more equitable services, regardless of setting, allows public health and public safety agencies to efficiently utilize resources to reach populations in need of care while addressing widespread health and safety disparities.⁵

- **Utilizing lived experience.** Staff members with lived experience provide valuable expertise for implementing substance use programming and other programs for underrepresented communities. Research shows that peer support services, specifically, are associated with reduced substance use and relapse rates for clients, improved relationships between clients and treatment providers, and increased treatment retention rates and satisfaction with treatment services.⁶ Hiring staff members with lived experience can be difficult when applicants have criminal histories; however, some Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Use Program (COSSUP) grantees have successfully updated human resource processes to address these challenges by changing hiring policies.

Recruiting With Diversity in Mind

In the past several years, recruiting challenges have been common across the public health and public safety fields. To increase an agency's likelihood of filling a job position, it is important that it be able to reach a large pool of eligible and qualified applicants. By employing intentional recruitment strategies that target a diverse audience, grantees can increase their pools of applicants and help address broad recruitment issues.

- **Writing a good job description.** The way that a job description is written may impact the volume as well as the type of applicants who respond; therefore, it is important to be deliberate when creating a job description. In a focus group of diverse public health

students, participants reported that an unclear or opaque description was one of the biggest deterrents when considering a job in public health.⁷ To address this issue, the most compelling job descriptions will clearly and succinctly outline job responsibilities and requirements in an accessible format, such as a bulleted list, and be accompanied by the contact information of a staff member so that applicants can follow up with clarifying questions.⁸

- **Leveraging creative and inclusive outreach strategies.** When advertising job opportunities, grantees can use creative and inclusive outreach strategies to reach diverse pools of applicants. For example, posting a mix of both physical and electronic job advertisements (e.g., limiting physical advertisements to strategic geographic locations, using directed social media advertising) and targeting their dissemination to underrepresented communities will reach a broader range of eligible applicants.

Appealing to public health undergraduate and graduate students is another opportunity for inclusive outreach. Presenting at university career fairs or information sessions, particularly at historically black colleges and universities, can be effective for publicizing job opportunities to a diverse audience. Further, partnering with professors in public health and public safety programs may expand an agency's reach; public health students report that they value career recommendations from their teachers and advisors.⁹

Did you know?

Including gendered or exclusive language such as "competitive," "leader," and "dominant" in a job description is shown to discourage qualified female applicants.¹⁰ In addition, female applicants show more interest when a job description includes the physical requirements of the job, if applicable.¹¹

- **Evaluating applicants.** Public health students report that rigid job requirements are a significant barrier when searching for job opportunities,¹² which highlights an opportunity for more equitable strategies. When done strategically, rethinking eligibility requirements (e.g., educational requirements, physical requirements, residency restrictions) can lead to hiring more diverse individuals, without compromising the quality of applicants.

Maximize the appeal of your job postings!

Some applicants respond best to job advertisements that focus on the personal benefits and enrichment of a job,^{13, 14} while others respond better to advertisements that focus on the public service aspect of the job.^{15, 16} Including language from both types of messaging may be the most successful method for attracting diverse applicants. See below for examples:

Personal Benefits: “Choose your future! The City Police Department is hiring. The work of the sworn police officer involves an opportunity to learn specialized skills, abilities, and knowledge. Opportunities include Patrol, Motors (Traffic), Community Liaison Officers, Detectives, K-9s, Crime Prevention, and School Resource Officer. We provide training and opportunities. There is a good starting pay; comprehensive benefits, including retirement; and ample opportunities for career advancement.”¹⁷

Public Service: Interested in serving your community? The City Police Department is hiring! The work of the sworn police officer involves partnering with the community to protect and enhance quality of life. To accomplish this mission, officers must employ effective communication and problem-solving skills. We utilize our philosophy of community-oriented policing to foster relationships and find solutions for problems in our community. If you strive to make a positive difference in the lives of the people in our community, apply now!¹⁸

Expanding educational requirements to include applicants with alternative yet equally qualifying backgrounds can help bring new and valuable skills

to an agency. For example, rather than requiring a bachelor’s or master’s degree for a position, agencies may consider applicants with years of experience engaging with the community or working as a practitioner.

In addition, while physical fitness is an important attribute for law enforcement and other public safety officers, research shows that several entry-level measures of physical fitness, including grip strength and sit-up requirements, do not predict the likelihood of police academy graduation.^{19, 20} Making deliberate and evidence-based decisions about physical fitness requirements can keep qualified applicants from being excluded during the evaluation process. Finally, strict residency requirements can unnecessarily discourage qualified applicants who live in neighboring cities or counties from applying for job positions, even if they are willing to commute or relocate.^{21, 22}

During the evaluation process, public health and public safety agencies may wish to consider collaborating with local community groups, who can offer a valuable perspective on which traits and skills will make an applicant successful in working with community members. Conducting a panel interview with a diverse group of community leaders is one way to identify applicant strengths that may be overlooked by less diverse agency staff.

Did you know?

Police departments (PDs) such as the Austin, Texas, PD, the Madison, Wisconsin, PD, and the St. Paul, Minnesota, PD are already rethinking their protocols for evaluating job applicants.²³ A handful of agencies are removing pushup and bench press requirements to avoid excluding qualified female applicants. Other agencies are utilizing a panel interview process with community advisory groups to get a more diverse perspective on applicants.²⁴

Funding Opportunities to Increase Diversity in Law Enforcement Agencies

While requests for proposals for Fiscal Year 2024 have not been released, several funding opportunities have previously been available for law enforcement agencies to increase the diversity of their staff.

- **[U.S. Department of Justice \(DOJ\) Community Oriented Policing Services \(COPS\) Hiring Program \(CHP\)](#)**: *“CHP is a competitive award program designed to provide funding directly to law enforcement agencies to hire and/or rehire additional career law enforcement officers in an effort to increase their community policing capacity and crime prevention efforts.”*
- **[DOJ COPS Community Policing Development \(CPD\) Microgrants Program: Officer Recruitment, Retention and Workforce Diversification](#)**: *“The COPS Office seeks demonstration or pilot projects with creative methods for recruitment, retention and the advancement of diverse representation within law enforcement that include quantitative measures of success to better reflect the diversity of the community or to meet the standards of the 30x30 initiative.”*
- **[Bureau of Justice Assistance \(BJA\) Smart Policing Initiative Grant Program](#)**, Priority Area 2, Goal ii: *“Recruiting and retaining diverse and service-oriented law enforcement professionals.”*
- **[BJA Connect and Protect: Law Enforcement Behavioral Health Response Program](#)**: *“OJP [Office of Justice Programs] is committed to advancing work that promotes civil and racial equity, increases access to justice, supports crime victims and individuals impacted by the justice system, strengthens community safety and protects the public from crime and evolving threats, and builds trust between law enforcement and the community.”*

Conclusion

In the wake of pervasive staffing challenges across public health and public safety jobs, targeting a diverse pool of applicants is a tool for addressing broader recruitment issues. While there is no perfect solution for recruiting and retaining diverse staff members, employers and agency leaders can benefit from implementing the evidence-based strategies mentioned here. Moreover, years of research demonstrate that employing a diverse and representative workforce has many positive impacts on program implementation and subsequent community outcomes.

Endnotes

1. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2016, *Advancing Diversity in Law Enforcement*, U.S. Department of Justice, https://www.justice.gov/d9/advancing_diversity_in_law_enforcement_report_october_2016.pdf.
2. Ba, B. A., Knox, D., Mummolo, J., and Rivera, R., 2021, “The Role of Officer Race and Gender in Police-Civilian Interactions in Chicago,” *Science* 371(6530): 696–702, <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.abd8694>.
3. Carter, T. J., and Whittle, T. N., 2023, “The Impact of Correctional Officer Gender on Prison Suicide,” *Health & Justice* 11: 10, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40352-023-00214-z>.
4. Cheng, A. W., Nakash, O., Cruz-Gonzalez, M., Fillbrunn, M. K., and Alegría, M., 2023, “The Association Between Patient–Provider Racial/Ethnic Concordance, Working Alliance, and Length of Treatment in Behavioral Health Settings,” *Psychological Services* 20(S1): 145–156, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34472952/>.

5. Cooper, L. A., Purnell, T. S., Showell, N. N., Ibe, C. A., Crews, D. C., Gaskin, D. J., Foti, K., and Thornton, R. L. J., 2018, "Progress on Major Public Health Challenges: The Importance of Equity," *Public Health Reports* 133(S1): 15S–19S, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6243442/>.
6. Eddie, D., Hoffman, L., Vilsaint, C., Abry, A., Bergman, B., Hoepfner, B., Weinstein, C., and Kelly, J. F., 2019, "Lived Experience in New Models of Care for Substance Use Disorder: A Systematic Review of Peer Recovery Support Services and Recovery Coaching," *Frontiers in Psychology* 10: 1052, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6585590/>.
7. Locke, R., McGinty, M., Ramirez, G. G., and Sellers, K., 2022, "Attracting New Talent to the Governmental Public Health Workforce: Strategies for Improved Recruitment of Public Health Graduates," *Journal of Public Health Management and Practice* 28(1): E235–E243, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33570871/>.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Gaucher, D., Friesen, J., and Kay, A. C., 2011, "Evidence That Gendered Wording in Job Advertisements Exists and Sustains Gender Inequality," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 101(1): 109–128, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/21381851/>.
11. Ibid.
12. See note 7 above, Locke et al., "Attracting New Talent to the Governmental Public Health Workforce: Strategies for Improved Recruitment of Public Health Graduates," E235–E243.
13. Linos, E., 2018, "More Than Public Service: A Field Experiment on Job Advertisements and Diversity in the Police," *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 28(1): 67–85, <https://academic.oup.com/jpart/article-abstract/28/1/67/4590248>.
14. Campbell, D. J., Christman, B. D., and Feigelson, M. E., 2000, "Improving the Recruitment of Women in Policing: An Investigation of Women's Attitudes and Job Preferences," *Police Chief* 67(11): 18–28, <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/improving-recruitment-women-policing-investigation-womens-attitudes>.
15. Aiello, M. F., 2018, "Gendered Messages in Police Recruitment: Understanding the Impacts of Descriptors and Physical Fitness Requirements on Potential Applicants," *Policing: An International Journal* 42(3): 455–473, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2230614037?sourcetype=Scholarly%20Journals>.
16. Taniguchi, T. A., Rineer, J. R., Hoogesteyn, K., Wire, S., and Mangum, L., 2023, "Recruiting Women Into Policing: Experimentally Testing the Effectiveness of Recruiting Materials," *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice* 17, <https://academic.oup.com/policing/article/doi/10.1093/police/paad049/7239848>.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Lockie, R. G., Dawes, J. J., Dulla, J. M., and Orr, R. M., 2022, "Extending Research on Law Enforcement Academy Graduation and Fitness: A Research Note on Receiver Operating Characteristic Curves," *Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research* 36(7): 2018–2022, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/35544353/>.

20. Shusko, M., Benedetti, L., Korre, M., Eshleman, E. J., Farioli, A., Christophi, C. A., and Kales, S. N., 2017, "Recruit Fitness as a Predictor of Police Academy Graduation," *Occupational Medicine* 67(7): 555–561, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29016876/>.
21. See note 7 above, Locke et al., "Attracting New Talent to the Governmental Public Health Workforce: Strategies for Improved Recruitment of Public Health Graduates," E235–E243.
22. See note 1 above, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, *Advancing Diversity in Law Enforcement*.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.

Visit the Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Use Program (COSSUP) Resource Center at www.cossup.org.

About BJA

BJA provides leadership and services in grant administration and criminal justice policy development to support local, state, and tribal law enforcement in achieving safer communities. To learn more about BJA, visit www.bja.gov and follow us on Facebook (www.facebook.com/DOJBJA) and X (formerly known as Twitter) (@DOJBJA). BJA is part of the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs.

This report was supported by Grant No. 15PBJA-23-GK-02250-COAP awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Office for Victims of Crime, and the Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking (SMART). Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.