

DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION IN MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT

Establishing and Defining Shared Values: Why It's Important

Pursuing “diversity, equity, and inclusion” (DEI) as a municipal priority can be daunting. Unlike many municipal responsibilities, such as budgeting, business development, or public works, DEI does not neatly fit into any one municipal department and is often not easy to define in tangible, actionable terms. In many cases, community members, staff, elected officials, or other key stakeholders come to the table with different understandings, perceptions, or expectations of what DEI work might be. Depending on each individual’s lived experience, these understandings of DEI may carry varying degrees of positive or negative connotations, ranging from enthusiastic support to cynical hesitation.

Because these terms may be understood differently by different members of a community, it can be helpful to establish shared values communicating why DEI is a priority to your municipality:

- **It serves as a starting point:** When it comes to DEI work, municipalities often ask, “where do we start?” Though this is not necessarily an easy step, a statement of shared values or guiding principles can serve as a foundation for subsequent action.
- **It can help everybody feel heard:** Working to establish shared language around these topics takes time, patience, and persistence. It requires active outreach to individuals or groups that are not always included or engaged in municipal processes as well as those who are hesitant and unsure about DEI. Bringing diverse perspectives to the table and allowing them to express their needs, hesitations, and concerns is part of building trust with the community and laying the foundation for this work to happen.
- **It can set realistic expectations:** Local government can’t do everything. Many community needs related to DEI fall under the jurisdiction of other entities, such as townships, school districts, park districts, or local libraries. A statement of values can help set priorities and expectations for the municipality and serve as a starting point for collaboration with partner agencies.

The establishment of shared values is not always an easy task, but it is a valuable one. Municipalities may draft their statements of values multiple times.

COMMUNITY PROFILE – VILLAGE OF FLOSSMOOR

In 2016 and 2017, the Flossmoor Village Board began engaging in conversations about diversity and inclusion, prompted by observations of geographic differences in the community. Though Flossmoor is a relatively small community, elected officials and municipal staff alike noted a division between the east and west sides of town. The east side of the Village, which hosts the Village Hall and downtown Flossmoor, was typically much more engaged in Village events and festivities, while the west side of the Village was not.

These conversations led the Village Board to identify a need to “foster a more diverse, united, and inclusive community” as a strategic priority in 2017. They tasked the Community Relations Commission with determining what this would look like in practice. The Commission began by developing a set of [Guiding Principles for Diversity and Inclusion](#), which were intended to create a common language around diversity, equity, and inclusion. The Guiding Principles are aspirational and are intended to act as a vision statement for the Village's work on diversity and inclusion.

When the Commission brought the guiding principles to the Village Board, the Board initially expressed hesitation and requested more clarification on what the Village would be committing to in adopting them. Then-Mayor Paul Braun met with each trustee individually to hear any concerns or hesitations they might have, and communicate the Commission's intent in creating the principles. While this took time, it ensured the principles reflected the vision of all on the Board. Flossmoor adopted the guiding principles in August 2018 and they set the foundation for further strategic planning, including the [Community Relations Commission's Purpose and Intent](#), completed in January 2020.

Lessons Learned

- A municipality does not need a consultant to establish shared values. To make this work more attainable, start by engaging the residents that have a passion for their community and neighbors.
- Diversity, equity, and inclusion work requires a whole-of-government approach. It cannot be siloed to one commission or department.
- It is helpful to include elected leaders early in the process to ensure that everyone feels heard and that consensus is met.
- Be patient, open-minded and meet people where they are. It can take time to have conversations with people, but it is also important that everyone feels ownership over the values.

Quote: "The people with privilege in the system must be brought into the process. In Flossmoor, those with the historic privilege in the Village are the white residents. Although people of color have lived in Flossmoor for decades, there has been a more recent increase in the Black population. These families did not have the same level of influence over decision-making. We needed the white residents and Village leadership to feel ownership over this work, too. It is still a team effort at the end of the day." – Trustee Rosalind Mustafa, Village of Flossmoor

Learn More:

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Regional Resources: MMC Definitions of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

In July 2021, the Mayors Caucus DEI Working Group held a roundtable discussion in July 2021 to develop [shared definitions of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion within the context of local government](#). The Working Group encourages other municipalities to use the following language as a reference point in developing their own locally-specific understandings of what meaningful, impactful, and lasting DEI efforts will look like in their communities.

Resources:

- [Village of Flossmoor Guiding Principles for Diversity and Inclusion](#)
- [Village of Flossmoor Guiding Principles Memo to Village Board](#)
- [Village of Flossmoor Resolution Adopting the Guiding Principles](#)
- [Village of Flossmoor Community Relations Commission Purpose and Intent](#)