

Workforce Alliance Board Meeting Minutes

July 23, 2020

Members in Attendance: Joe Mirra, R. Golden, Serena Neal-SanJurjo, Larry McHugh, Angel Rivera, Ed Dooling, Chris Brown, Howard Hill, Stephanie Wolfe, Maria Harlow, David Reitz, Marcia LaFemina, Andrew Inorio, Chris Cozzi, Tiana Osorio, Bonita Grubbs, Mary Burgard, Marc Nadeu

Members not in Attendance: Linzi Bell, Richard Borer, Dr. Thomas Coley, Mary Burgard, Garret Sheehan and Toni Walker

Invitees: Steve Minkler, Lawrence Ly, L Gallicchio, Lisa Sementelli, Keri Humphries, Pamela Tonello, Mike Dunne

Staff: John Brancato, Ann Harrison, Earl Foster, Bill Villano, Josie Vazquez, Kymbel Branch, Sudhakar Vamathevan

Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 8:05 a.m.

Approval of Minutes

The minutes from the previous meeting were presented for approval. With no changes, Ms. LaFemina moved the minutes and Mr. Mirra seconded them. The minutes were approved unanimously.

Ms. Golden welcomed those present to the meeting and indicated that this meeting would focus solely on one agenda item, the Racial Equity Accountability Initiative (REAI). This Initiative was launched by the Executive Committee and WA senior staff as a result of the racial inequities laid bare by the pandemic and the most recent evidence of violence against Black citizens by police. The initial action taken by WA was the public statement dated June 19, 2020 that laid out the major areas of commitment which we will hold ourselves accountable for.

The process of addressing racial equity in all aspects of WA will take time and may require difficult conversations. In doing this work together, we will strive to make a safe place for dialogue.

Ms. Golden added that WA's mission, to develop comprehensive and community-wide options that deliver employment solutions to South Central CT, has never been more important. The REAI will allow the staff and board of WA to build on this foundation. Ms. Golden invited anyone interested in being part of the Team that will oversee the planning of the Initiative to let her know.

As a way to begin this initial board -wide conversation a four-minute video, “Unequal Opportunity Race,” was shown followed by the first of two 2 polling questions.

Question 1: The group was asked which of the following issues included in the video were, in their opinion, the most pressing in South-Central CT?

- Discrimination
- Poor schooling
- School to Prison Pipeline
- Connections
- Privileges

While waiting for the polling results, Ms. Golden asked members if they have had conversations on racism in their workplace and if their businesses/companies were doing any work on racial equity. Ms. Golden then asked if anyone wanted to share any experiences they have had related to this topic.

David Reitz stated he is disappointed with the current leadership in response to equity discussion and also police violence against people of color. He later stated that he is glad to see we are taking action.

Ms. Wolfe stated that in her role as an HR director, she realizes the need to be sure that hiring practices are fair.

Mr. Hill indicated that he is cautiously optimistic that change can be impactful. But that when we talk about racial equity, diversity and inclusion, it will require people to be uncomfortable. He will continue to communicate so folks can become comfortable in closing this gap. He then thanked Ms. Golden and the executive committee for all their work on this issue.

Maria Harlow stated that as an immigrant from Columbia, she considered the laws in this country to prevent racism to be sufficient compared to what she'd seen elsewhere. Since the death of George Floyd, however, she sees that the depth of pain and anger is deeper than she thought.

Bonita Grubbs stated that the phrase “All men are created equal” hasn't happened. The current crisis has revealed how unequal we are. At the local level, can we do something about how people are surviving and not surviving Covid19.

Marcia LaFemina stated that the last eight weeks have given her personal clarity even though she considered herself aware and educated; she said she can do better.

Mr. Dooling added that his organization has seen the specific impact of racism. There are patients that are over 80 and 90 years old and express directly that they do not want to be cared for by African American staff. This is hurtful for the staff people of color who have to respond to these situations. He is glad to see this conversation take place.

Ms. Golden indicated that the 1st polling results were in and Ms. Harrison shared the results of the pole.

Results – 58% of the board felt that Poor Schooling was the major issue facing our area, followed by 16% indicating that Discrimination and 16% indicating that Privilege were the major issues. The School-to-Prison Pipeline and Connections each had 5% of the board members indicating that they were the major issues.

Mr. Brown stated that we are all born equal, but we learn discrimination. Based on the polling question response, poor schooling is a part of the problem because people are still missing knowledge. Education is a way to get out of certain situations but is hampered by belief that if someone is rising up, someone else is lowering. Our memories are sometimes short term and we go through cycles, he hopes that this is not a cycle that is forgotten. Mr. Hill stated that there is never one thing that can be done to fix these types of issues. Mr. Mirra believes the education system is where the efforts should be focused; we need consistency in the school system. Part of educating our students is to incorporate the students into real world situations and expose the kids to different experiences in life.

Ms. Neal-SanJurjo stated she relates to the female runner in the video who faced so many systemic obstacles and hit a brick wall. She will keep trying but coming up against that wall is not easy. She went on to say that her son and daughter now face the same hard road. Ms. Neal-SanJurjo added that this is real and very personal to her and she is glad to hear that we as a group are doing something. Mr. Minkler noted that he feels discomfort with a system set up for people who look like him. He feels that the education system failed him for not giving the full story of historic events.

Before Ms. LaFemina presented the status of the work done by the REAI Team, Howard Hill discussed the urgency of the need to act on these issues. There is a small window of opportunity to make systemic and cultural change within this country. He stated that COVID19 will come back and people will become desperate. Larry McHugh stated that education is vital but can only do so much. He shared experiences of his bi-racial granddaughter in school and as an adult.

Ms. LaFemina then reviewed the framework for actions going forward and thanked the staff for the good work they are doing. The three areas of focus in the planning of this Initiative are:

- Knowledge Building
- Internal WA Actions to be implemented by staff
- Outward Action by board members

Ms. LaFemina asked if anyone had any comments or questions.

Eventually, we will be looking for each board member to get involved one or more aspect of this initiative. The second polling question was an effort to get people thinking about what areas were of greatest interest to them.

Question 2 – The group was asked which of the 5 action steps in the WA statement are the members most interested in.

- Assess organizational operations
- Outreach and Engagement
- Advocacy on statewide barrier issues
- Serving African-American businesses & entrepreneurs
- Build upon impact of Next Steps for Ex-offenders

While awaiting the results of the second poll, Ms. Golden talked about on-going communication. The board will receive regular updates from the REAI Team on progress. In addition, we will look for ways for board members to interact with each other between meetings, including sharing recommended articles, book and videos. Ms. Golden asked that if anyone had any suggestions for platforms to share information (Slack, Google Drive) to let Ann Harrison know.

Ms. Golden asked Ms. Harrison to give the results on the 2nd poll.

Results – 47% of the board indicated Outreach & Engagement as the action area of most interest to them, followed by Assess Organizational Operations & Serving African American businesses and entrepreneurs which each received 18%, next was Build upon impact of Next Steps for Ex-Offenders program with 12%, and Advocacy on statewide barrier issues with 6%.

With no other business, the meeting adjourned at 9:00 a.m.

Submitted by,

Josie Vazquez
Executive Assistant