

Hello Food Bankers,

It has been a true honor to serve the community and work to develop innovative ways to support our partners address hunger in their communities. I have met some amazing people along the journey, made some close friends, and will always remember the warmth and commitment that so many of us here approach our work with as well as one another.

However, I would be remiss if I didn't give a full illustration of what I have learned during my three and half years working here, including areas of growth that I still see for the organization. I have had several conversations with senior leaders and other staff here regarding our lack of interest in recognizing the impact of institutional racism on staff and participants on an organizational level. The message I received was that senior leaders here see institutional racism as "an issue outside of the scope of things that we can address....an upstream issue that we cannot fix." Not only was this message I was told an extremely problematic [microaggression](#), but it also became clear to me that we need to provide some serious white privilege training for our senior leadership team. Because if anyone thinks that institutional racism is an optional variable outside of one's lived experience, well then one is either greatly misinformed about the history of this country or too deeply entrenched within their white privilege to even consider the different realities many staff and participants of color face, more likely the latter. The fact that one even has the option to consider institutional racism is white privilege. Many of our staff and participants do not have that same choice and that needs to be acknowledged.

Strong leaders must place aside their own temporary discomfort to listen and learn from the communities they seek to serve. Essentially, the message I received was that the impact of institutional racism was not important enough to be a consideration in our work, even though there is plenty of [data](#) illustrating how years of institutional racism has led to the disproportionate rates of poverty, hunger and poor health. Not acknowledging institutional racism is the equivalent of saying it never happened. This denial of truth creates an extremely toxic working place for a person of color. Check out this article on [Challenging White Dominant Culture](#) which articulates the conundrum we are currently in very well. If we want to truly improve our diversity, equity and inclusion efforts, then we must challenge our leaders here at the FB to spend significant time thinking deeply about how their white privilege both benefits them and informs their decision making. If our leaders continue to refuse to embrace focused introspection and humility, staff from marginalized communities will continue to feel excluded here at the Food Bank.

And the formation of a DEI committee is not the answer to our lack of diversity here, it is changing the existing toxic white dominant culture because if we do not the Food Bank will continue to lose and deter POC talent.

How can we truly be committed to ending hunger if we refuse to consider the very systems that created it to begin with? If we consider age, sexual orientation/gender identity status, language and citizenship status as barriers to food security status then why not also consider race? [Why are African Americans twice as likely to experience hunger?](#) Why is the entire senior leadership team here at the Food Bank white while we serve predominantly POC communities? It certainly isn't because of a lack of POC talent in the job-searching pool as a coworker once told me, to my dismay. If you are still having a hard time connecting the dots please check out this fact sheet I received from the CAFB Conference on the racial wealth gap and institutional racism entitled, ["Hunger is a Racial Equity Issue"](#) for an overview of why race matters in the fight to end hunger. We need someone outside of this organization, a neutral DEI expert to come in and help senior leadership start this conversation because I do not trust the current leadership to continue to push the DEI initiative further in an authentic way. We have to challenge our white leaders to confront their [white fragility](#) before trying to hire another POC or forming a DEI committee.

Speaking of which, it has been an interesting experience sitting on the DEI committee, it provided a space for myself and other staff to voice some concerns, but it will never become anything more than checked box for the organization without the active support and self-reflection of our senior leadership team and board. The DEI committee will only be symbolic with no real power to enact change. If we ever do achieve genuine leadership buy-in, here are my recommendations for the organization to become more diverse, equitable, and inclusive that I have shared both with the DEI committee and HR during my exit interview:

Recommendations

These recommendations are based on my experiences, conversations with colleagues across the organization as well as from my own racial equity work in collaboration with SFDPH. One way we can combat the institutional racism that is so deeply ingrained within our society is to intentionally implement some anti-racist strategies in our work. This list isn't comprehensive, but could be starting point:

Internally

- Bring in a DEI expert to provide a white privilege training for BOTH our senior leadership team and board. Most of the staff already know and experience this daily, *it's our leaders who need the training*. The [Racial Wealth Gap Learning Simulation](#) activity is a great tool that I learned from the CAFB conference. Without senior leadership team buy-in and active engagement to support this DEI initiative, this committee will continue to be a bi-weekly venting session
- Restructure our organization by hiring a Director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion who can oversee HR and ensure that our DEI efforts become institutionalized. Oregon Foodbank has also done this as well by hiring a Director of Equity, People

and Culture. We need to post the position and hire someone with *extensive* experience in DEI who is invested in the work and not afraid to have difficult conversations. If DEI is a priority for the Food Bank, then we need to invest more dollars into it.

- Create an internal system for employees to anonymously report microaggressions/racist/sexist/homophobic and other discriminatory comments and behaviors that is separate from HR and managed by someone else (ideally an internal Director of DEI). Track this feedback and if there is a trend with an individual, address the offender and send them to some sensitivity trainings or let them go. I have had too many conversations with my colleagues regarding racist comments and microaggressions from the same few individuals here. Unfortunately, HR has been a part of the problem on several occasions, being too quick to diminish experiences as unintentional mistakes, defend ignorance or be completely unresponsive therefore silencing the marginalized.

- Work with the DEI committee to roll out an equity statement that addresses institutional racism, sexism and other forms of structural oppression and put this on our website. Check out [Oregon Food Bank's](#) equity statement.


- Create 1-2 seats on our Executive Board for program participants (someone who is not corporate, rich and white). Our board, like our senior leadership team does not have enough representation from the communities that we serve, board members are so far removed from the realities that our participants face, which leaves them with very limited perspectives. How can we entrust them with making executive decisions regarding funding and staffing if they remain so disconnected from the lived experience?

Externally

- Develop a Strategic Equity Framework tool that can help us start approaching our work keeping in mind marginalized communities, a series of questions we can ask ourselves to ensure we approach the work equitably, [here](#) is an example. I tried to challenge the Food Bank to consider the impact of racism on health for our Food Pharmacy Program but had my content on racism directly removed from content for the program by senior leadership. Seriously problematic.

- Data- we need to start capturing race/ethnicity at the participant level on the applications, so we can start accurately tracking participation by race and ethnicity to have a clearer picture of the community we serve

If any of this resonates with you, please SPEAK UP! Your experience matters! This is one of the greatest lessons I have learned while working here. And if you are white/present as white, and you care about this, don't leave all the work for your POC colleagues to do, as it is *very* emotionally taxing for us (we are literally fighting to be acknowledged and to stay alive in this world), examine your own white privilege and use your position of power to call

attention to racial equity. [Become an ally](#) ! Continue to challenge the dominant narrative, even when you are shut down or feel uncomfortable or inadequate. Continue the fight for racial equity because it is the right thing to do for our colleagues and the communities that we serve. We should ALL be able to come to work and have our identities and experiences acknowledged and celebrated. We can begin to move away from our work being rooted in feel-good charity to it being rooted social justice.

“Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.”- Arundhati Roy

Nelson Mandela said, “. . . overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice.” We are not a charity. And the people we work with are not a “cause.”

It is truly bittersweet as I leave the Foodbank because I really love working with our community partners, and I have learned quite a bit from some of my amazing colleagues. I am happy to see us thinking about DEI, but we have a very long way to go and I am sad to step out of that marathon, but it is time for me to invest in myself. I will be returning to school to get my Master's in Public Health with an emphasis on racial equity at UCLA. Don't hesitate to reach out if you are so inclined, here is my personal email jones.velora@gmail.com.

Thank you,