

TOWN OF ORONO

STAFF REPORT ON OPERATIONAL DIVERSITY, EQUITY, & INCLUSION

JANUARY 31, 2022

Introduction

In the spring of 2021, the Orono Town Council (Council) appointed an ad hoc committee to evaluate and advise the Town Council on a plan for the Town to address diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) issues. In the summer of 2021, the committee submitted a report of their findings to the Council. Following that report, the Council directed staff to identify areas within Town operations where efforts toward DEI currently existed and where improvements could be made. This report summarizes the findings of Town staff.

Method

After reviewing several different tools to aid in the collection of data it was decided that the City of Austin Equity Assessment Tool would be employed in conjunction with the ad hoc committee's recommendation report.

Following the design of the Austin Tool, this report will use the strength, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) format to communicate the findings of the internal survey. A SWOT consists of four sections starting with strengths and weaknesses. These sections look at the organization internally. In the second and third sections identified as opportunities and threats, the organization assesses external influences which can influence operations, political positioning, and reputation.

This report focuses on the following areas:

- 1. Organizational Commitment, Leadership, and Governance**
- 2. Equity Policies and Implementation Practices**
- 3. Service Based-Equity**
- 4. Municipal Workforce Composition**
- 5. Community Collaboration**

Limitations

There are a few limitations associated with this report which should be noted. First, the primary tool used to structure the assessment is a pilot project between the City of Austin and the University of Texas Dell Medical School. While this likely did not affect the process of data collection or the outcome it should be mentioned as a matter of transparency.

Second, the absence of clear directives from Council and a report from the ad-hoc committee that identified issues which were difficult to connect locally created challenges. This is not to say that either group is wrong in their approach, but rather that it is difficult to know what information to obtain and where to look especially when dealing with topics that are as sensitive as DEI related matters.

As a result this document is a reflection of where we see ourselves currently. It also acknowledges that there are likely items that could have been included in the weaknesses and opportunities section had the evaluation been more focused.

Results

Strengths

- ***Pre-existing awareness of the community's desire for local government to be more DEI aware and responsive***

Even before the commission of the ad-hoc committee, Town leadership and department managers were aware of Orono's unique and diverse population. While not publicized, efforts were being made to ensure that municipal services are being delivered in a fair and equitable manner. One of our core goals has been to ensure that Orono's local government reflects respect, support, and inclusion for the entire community, especially for those historically disenfranchised populations who may experience systemic barriers to full participation.

- ***Embrace teamwork***

At its core, public service is about teamwork and the Town of Orono relies on that fact to be successful in many endeavors. Issues related to DEI can be complex and will undoubtedly require a team effort involving internal and external stakeholders to effect change. Our experience with teamwork makes us well suited to navigating challenging issues and achieving successful outcomes.

- ***Willingness to do the work***

Leadership and staff recognize that work must be done to build trust, implement systems, and change perspectives to address DEI weaknesses. Some of this work will be challenging and uncomfortable, however, it must be done for positive institutional change to be successful.

- ***Recognition of the strength of diverse teams***

Leadership and staff recognize that It is impossible for like minded people from a single culture, race, orientation, or other groups to truly understand the experiences, challenges, or beliefs of others. Diversity must exist in order to make decisions for the community or within departments that reflect the desires and interests of the community stakeholder groups.

- ***Willing to accept, even if we do not agree - Safe place***

All Town of Orono staff acknowledge and appreciate different perspectives and thoughts. This includes beliefs surrounding DEI topics. While not all staff members may agree with various positions on a topic, members understand and respect an individual's rights to their own feelings and perceptions. This helps drive our desire for collaboration and connectedness with the community.

- ***Focus on outcomes***

Legislative and Municipal officials understand that efforts must be focused on having a fair and equitable outcome that is right for our community as opposed to satisfying specific individuals or

activist groups. This belief guides the actions of municipal leadership and our desire to be competent and thoughtful when considering DEI concerns. Focusing on outcomes helps to drive our willingness to be proactive and responsive to change

- ***Have a common cause and ideology***

All staff members share the belief that we work for the public, that all reasonable requests for service must be provided to all who request them, and that those services are given regardless of race, gender, orientation, or any other potentially differentiating factor. Staff has been trained and is expected to work with individuals to identify and provide reasonable accommodations to address barriers to participation in services or the local government process.

Weaknesses (Potential Internal Obstacles)

- ***Lack of awareness of the issues - Why is this important to us?***

For decades, Town staff has worked to implement best practices and train staff to foster a respectful work environment focused on carrying out the vision and policies established by the Town Council. Understanding our diverse population, relative to other rural Maine communities, staff has taken special care to ensure evaluation and communication loops that are sensitive to concerns raised about service delivery quality and personnel actions. Given the feedback loops and constant evaluation, with no specific issues within Orono it is hard for staff to recognize how perceived “national” DEI issues are relevant to the community or town operations. Staff fully acknowledges that these national issues and conversations will result in the development of new municipal best practices and training that will ultimately further the Town’s goals.

- ***Less than an optimal understanding of privilege, equity, and entitlement***

In general, staff's training and approach have, for a very long time, been focused on treating everyone the same or equal which means that it can miss the opportunity or fail to identify the need to find an equitable solution.

- ***No systems in place to identify or prevent unintentional structural bias***

There is currently no process in place to evaluate municipal policy or ordinance through a DEI lens. This is one of the Town Council’s articulated goals to implement. The specificity of a policy or guiding document would assist in the evaluation of new and development of future policy and procedures.

- ***No clear direction from the legislative body on expected initiatives***

While it is forthcoming, there has been no direction issued by the Council to guide staff's actions in dealing with matters pertaining to DEI issues. Concrete and clearly defined Council objectives are critical in establishing priorities for staff and allocated resources to meet these expectations.

- ***Lack of formalized instructional materials or practices***

Formal instructional material and internal written policy/procedures will need to be developed after the Council has determined its DEI initiatives.

- ***Lack of formalized process to set DEI expectations for new hires during onboarding***

While discussions around DEI topics are part of the formal onboarding process and within each department, there is no standardized process to ensure that new employees are exposed to Town beliefs and values about DEI related topics. Currently, staff waits until there is a critical mass of new hires before scheduling a formal DEI/Implicit Bias training with an outside professional DEI trainer.

- ***The Town has not formally communicated its efforts to be more inclusive and diverse***

Since the Town has long been committed to providing equitable services and considers its efforts as a matter of course, it has not prioritized formally communicating its routine activities that might be seen as supportive of DEI goals.

- ***There are few specific resources allocated to DEI initiatives or hiring efforts***

Currently, while all agree that improving the Town's formal DEI framework and related communication is a priority, few resources, monetary and personnel, are allocated or available for this effort. This will likely require an understanding of Council's DEI initiatives and development of a formal plan from which staffing, technical support, and financial resources can be allocated.

- ***No department currently maintains a "diversity" database of clients they serve***

Decades of municipal service training and best practices have guided staff to not gather demographic data unless clearly needed as part of the service delivery. Not collecting this information prevents us from understanding what groups are and are not using our services. It also prevents us from collecting further data as to why they are not being used and what we can do to make those services more accessible. Discussion with the Town Council and adoption of a formal policy regarding whether and how to gather this data would be required in order to move forward.

Opportunities

- ***Become a regional leader in topics of diversity, equity, and inclusion as it relates to local government***

While some communities in our area have undertaken DEI work, there is currently no clear regional leader in this area. As a matter of general course, the Town of Orono often serves as a municipal leader for smaller, more rural communities. The needed DEI work and implementation of more best practices provides an opportunity for regional leadership.

- ***Explore opportunities to learn the true definition of "culturally competent and responsive"***

Learning from and respectfully relating to other cultural backgrounds, heritages, and traditions is vital to creating a welcoming and inclusive community. This includes understanding our own culture and values, an often overlooked component of being respectful to others. Capitalizing on the existing Town of Orono/UMaine DEI Partnership allows for high quality, low to no cost opportunities for staff and the community.

- ***Understand how the history of the land and indigenous people is important to the community and its heritage***

While we know that the land and indigenous people are significant in Orono's history, we lack a global understanding of the depth of that importance and how we should properly honor it.

- ***Collaborate with University partners on matters relating to LGBTQ2SIA+ concerns and opportunities***

There are untapped opportunities that exist within the University system that can help us become more DEI competent, troubleshoot issues, and navigate legislative processes that may have unintended consequences. Capitalizing on the existing Town of Orono/UMaine DEI Partnership allows for high quality, low to no cost opportunities for staff and the community.

- ***Pursue accreditation for agencies that have a recognized process***

Accreditation is a voluntary process where agencies are routinely evaluated by a third party to ensure they are following best practices and maintain organizational standards. The Orono Police Department is currently accredited, with plans for the Fire Department to pursue professional accreditation in the coming 24-48 months. Public Works and the Library should also evaluate potential avenues for accreditation.

Threats (Potential External Obstacles)

- ***Community perception of a lack of action***

Failing to share our efforts toward DEI initiatives can unintentionally communicate that we are not taking any steps at all. This can lead to beliefs that the Town is not culturally sensitive or committed to having a community that is diverse and respectful of others.

- ***Community demographic drives complacency***

Our community makeup and service model can lull us into a false sense of fairness and equity. Because we are not an overly diverse community we are more apt to assume that our actions are correct and fit the needs of all community members. This mindset has the potential to disenfranchise members of groups who might oppose certain actions or wish to serve their community in various roles.

- ***Being overwhelmed by the negative***

Continued negative messages that are unbalanced by positive on both the national and local scale has a detrimental effect on recruitment, retention, and overall morale. Poorly thought out actions by municipal leadership, while well intentioned and appropriate for their position, erodes the trust of the employees, creating questions of support and appreciation for their efforts. The Orono Town Council has historically worked with its professional staff in a collaborative and inclusive manner. Being part of the process and ensuring that policy makers have a clear understanding of operations and staff's technical guidance will be an important element as the Town moves forward.

- ***Deep-rooted bias and beliefs***

This is a global issue that hinders town initiatives, clouds messages, and divides internal and external stakeholder groups who are ultimately working toward the same goal. These biases exist on both sides of the issue and must be identified and accounted for in the policy making and implementation processes.

- ***Some forces that drive action or initiatives are outside of our control***

Public opinion can easily be swayed by social media, disingenuous news outlets, and activist groups lobbying for their cause.

- ***Lack of trust in the accuracy of the information available***

Because there is so much conflicting and inflammatory information it is hard for someone to conduct their own research in order to form an opinion.

- ***A perception that local government has more authority to control DEI-related matters than it actually does***

Demands for reform on how we deal with people in crisis, decriminalization of certain crimes, restorative justice, and alternative sentencing are major talking points for some groups. While public safety officials support these efforts, the Town of Orono is powerless to implement many of the proposed suggestions. Authority to make change rests with the judicial system or other regulatory bodies. Often the best the Town can do is lobby for those changes to occur.

Current Initiatives or Activities Related to DEI

- A sub-committee of the Town's Executive Planning & Operations Team was created in 2020 and has been working to identify best practices and consistent policy expectations across all operations related to ensuring a respectful and accepting workforce that prioritizes equitable service delivery.
- Town staff responsible for print and digital communications have focused on building a framework for transparent communication with the community about inclusion and Town operations. Staff is hindered by available time to devote to this effort; however, elements of the work have been prioritized to inform the community about the Town's commitment to DEI, offer ways for individuals to report incidents of discrimination, accommodation needs, and other related concerns. The Google Translate widget has been added to the Town website to provide a more accessible experience for those who speak languages other than English. The website has also been reviewed for ADA accessibility, areas for change identified, and work underway to improve access.
- Orono Public Library follows the Library Bill of Rights, published by the American Library Association, which guides libraries in ensuring that the intellectual rights of library users remain intact. This bill specifically addresses issues such as equal access for all, protection against

censorship, and the provision of materials representing all viewpoints without bias. New employees receive training on the Bill of Rights.

- Orono Public Library also exposes its users to different cultures and beliefs. Facilitated discussions and story times are provided by people from various demographics and cultural backgrounds throughout the year. Library staff also works to cultivate a dynamic collection of both fiction and non-fiction works on DEI related topics and from diverse perspectives. Last year, the OPL applied for and received grant funds for the explicit purpose of expanding the children's print collection related to diversity and inclusion.
- Staff works with leadership at UMaine's International Program to support transitioning international students, promote the annual Culturefest on campus, and connect students to Town operations and services.
- Executive Leadership has provided several trainings, delivered by outside vendors, for all staff on implicit bias and other DEI related topics. This training will continue to be provided to newly hired staff periodically based upon reasonable class participant numbers are met and consultant availability. Additional training for Council, department managers, and key supervisory positions is scheduled in March on *Being an Inclusive Leader* and later this calendar year in *Reducing Bias in the Hiring Process*. Moving forward the plan will be to periodically select Townwide trainings that build upon one another to increase DEI competencies among staff. This will lead to a custom new hire training process that staff will need to develop to ensure that organizational culture and training remains consistent.
- The Town Manager is an active member of the Diversity Hiring Coalition of Maine, continues to engage in extensive professional development in the area of DEI and other human resources topics, and obtained certification by the Society of Human Resources as a Senior Certified Professional which requires demonstrating competency in issues related to workforce DEI. The Manager also serves as the primary contact for concerns that cannot be resolved or addressed with departmental supervisors, handles or monitors response to complaints about workplace or service related discrimination, and oversees the Town's efforts related to providing reasonable accommodations.
- Staff is in the process of reviewing job descriptions as they are revised/updated to ensure that requirements actually reflect the needs of the job. Standard questions about diversity, equity, and inclusion have been developed and added to the list to be used during the hiring process for all positions. Staff is currently evaluating the removal of departmental residency and response requirements in order to widen the potential pool of applicants in an effort to improve candidate diversity.
- In addition to town sponsored training several departments also provide department level training annually on DEI related subjects.
- When possible, committees are utilized to discuss public projects in addition to traditional public comment sessions. Example of this is the recent Main Street Sidewalk project and the ACE team that met regularly prior to the pandemic.

- Efforts are made to meet people and service users as they need to participate in programs or obtain services. As an example this means that non-English speakers or those who use English as a second language will have support to help them communicate with staff. Orono Town Clerk staff often exceeds the accommodations identified for these municipal services. Staffers handle foreign documents, perform weddings for international visitors, arrange for translation services, and a host of other duties. Of note is the assertiveness of the Town Clerk in her efforts to make sure that those who need general assistance or other support receive it.
- Financial support is available for people who wish to participate in recreation programs or summer camp. It should be acknowledged that community members play a significant role in the success of the Town's Recreation programs. Through an informal network, participants who need transportation, sneakers, equipment, etc., staff members are usually able to find resources internally, through external partners, or the generosity of volunteers as necessary to allow those who want to participate to join the programs.
- Annually the Police Department personnel receive training on anti-biased policing. This year's topic was implicit bias. Training on DEI related topics is required by the Maine Criminal Justice institute and is a component of the accreditation process.
- Last year, the Orono Police Department restructured to add a Community Policing Division to the department. This division, led by the Community Policing Director, is focused on conflict resolution, community-problem solving, and liaising with individuals and groups who may not have historic positive and productive relationships with law enforcement. After nearly a year of activity, the department is evaluating the progress to date and working to retool its efforts toward community policing and continuing to foster strong, trusting relationships with Orono's residents and visitors.
- The Orono Police Department prioritizes maintaining as community friendly, non-threatening, service oriented approach as possible. This means attention is paid to officer affect, professionalism, uniforms, and equipment. The Town does not participate in programs that offer military equipment to law enforcement agencies and strives to mitigate its tactical presence except when necessary. The Department maintains extensive standard operating procedures, many of which are available on its website, aimed at ensuring appropriate response, strong supervision, and officer accountability.
- Police personnel regularly receive training in de-escalation tactics and how to manage people experiencing a mental health crisis. All officers receive critical incident training which focuses on this subject. Turnover within the department has reduced the number of officers with advanced training; however, the department continues to prioritize this advanced training.
- Orono Fire will be receiving similar mental health training in the near future. In addition to the eight hour class, specified members will be attending a forty-hour advanced training to better understand a patient's needs and assist other staff members with difficult cases.
- In order to address the unique needs of individuals who are transgender, Orono Fire personnel will also be receiving training later this year on how to specifically interact with members of this

community. This training will provide information on topics such as medications, mental health, and how to treat transgender individuals with dignity.

- The University of Maine and the Town are working jointly to address DEI issues both on and off campus. The group continues to work on a webpage to address issues related to DEI. This page will provide information and links to specific resources, public safety agencies, and how to report discrimination or other untoward issues that may arise. (Much of the Orono specific information is already posted on the Town's website.)
- Town representatives have been influential in introducing DEI related training in areas where it did not previously exist. Orono's Town Manager was an active participant in developing a day long DEI training for the Maine Town and City Managers Association (last month) and Chief Low has been introducing DEI topics during workshops which provide education for current and future fire chiefs.

NEXT STEPS

Staff

- Continue adopting best practices for supporting inclusive and diverse hiring processes
- Continue to adapt the Town website to more accurately reflect the Town's commitment to supporting a diverse workforce that prioritizes equitable service delivery and inclusive participation in the local governance process
- Continue staff training and development of policies, procedures, and material that supports the implementation of best practices, including maintaining and striving for operational accreditation where applicable
- Support the Town Council's policy making process, providing technical assistance and operational guidance

Town Council (Proposed)

- Identify priorities that will provide guidance for staff to draft a formal DEI Plan for the Town Council's consideration. The Council should consider including the development of formal tools to assist with the evaluation of structural bias and areas of inequity as well as concrete, clearly identified, measurable goals for staff.
- Consider whether and how the Town should collect individual demographic data about the individuals to whom we provide services.
- Consider the formulation of an advisory group to provide guidance to the Town Council and, if desired, clearly define the group's scope, method for selection of members, expectations, and integration with current organizational structure. If clearly defined, these elements will assist staff in drafting a committee charge for the Town Council's consideration.

- Consider utilizing the National Community Survey process to gather comprehensive data on the community's concerns, priorities, and satisfaction with Town operations and governance
- Identify the level of resources the Town Council is willing/able to allocate to support the Town's DEI efforts.
 - For example:
 - Formal on-going annual professional training for all staff and the Town Council would cost approximately \$10-\$15,000/year; however, training an in-house trainer to deliver a more basic annual training might be an alternative, depending upon Council's staff training goals.
 - The Town would have to engage an outside vendor to administer the National Community Survey at an estimated cost of approximately \$15,000-\$20,000 to develop, deploy, and analyze
 - Engaging a firm to work with staff to create a 3-5 minute animated video on how to participate in local government in Orono at an expected cost of \$5,500-7,500.
 - Faster rollout of a more comprehensive DEI initiative is possible, but it would require re-prioritization of expectations of existing staff time and/or the additional staff or consulting time.