



**NORTHWEST ARKANSAS**

**THE STATE OF DIVERSITY, EQUITY &  
INCLUSION IN NORTHWEST ARKANSAS:**

**A TRUE REPORT**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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By many yardsticks, Northwest Arkansas is thriving with an economy, education system, cultural amenities and natural splendor that is widely valued and attracting an ever more diverse community of residents who call the region home. But like communities across the nation, not everyone is yet able to fully participate in all that the region has to offer. So long as significant disparities exist – from the economic opportunities available to diverse citizens to the way people treat one another and respect differences – Northwest Arkansas will be held back from achieving its full potential.

This report is an effort to advance important conversations both within and across the many communities that make up Northwest Arkansas and to establish a foundation of knowledge that can be used to pursue and measure future progress toward greater diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). These conversations and analyses have helped identify timely actions that can fuel immediate progress.

The story of DEI in Northwest Arkansas<sup>1</sup> is unfolding against the backdrop of rapid growth and change. Like other parts of the country, the region has experienced a dramatic demographic shift over the past 30 years, driven by increased educational and economic opportunities, social and familial ties and quality-of-life improvements. However, Communities of Color do not fully experience the many benefits of the region's increased prosperity. Members of

the LGBTQ community also too often face ongoing discrimination and similar, persistent disparities.

TRUE Northwest Arkansas (TRUE NWA) is a three-year, community-based initiative to Train, Report, Uplift and Engage the region around diversity, equity and inclusion. This TRUE NWA report utilizes existing data and original research to examine the state of DEI within the region's business, education, healthcare, law enforcement and government sectors. Primary data collection methods included a telephone survey conducted by Mississippi State University, one-on-one stakeholder interviews with community leaders, as well as focus group conversations.

It should be noted that DEI-related conversations can be new, sensitive and even uncomfortable for individuals. This has likely driven research findings that at times appear to conflict with one another. While telephone survey results suggest that most groups have largely positive experiences and perceptions of DEI in the region, the more nuanced focus group and interview conversations, as well as existing data on disparate outcomes, show discrepancies in the lived experiences of white residents and those of diverse communities. These gaps help identify areas for potential DEI interventions and support, including the recommendations that conclude this report.



Trail of Tears Mural by Johnnie Lee Diacon. Museum of Native American History; Bentonville, AR

## Among the Key Findings:

- ▶ Northwest Arkansans take pride in their community and value the economic opportunities, high quality of education and natural landscape of the region. However, **fissures emerge when it comes to whether diverse community members “feel valued and respected”** and whether they feel Northwest Arkansas is a place where “differences between people are respected.”
- ▶ While Northwest Arkansas is the most economically prosperous region in Arkansas, **poverty rates among Communities of Color are almost uniformly higher**, particularly in Washington County.
- ▶ Public high schools in the region experience high graduation rates across all population groups, however, **significant disparities among college enrollment rates for Communities of Color point to systemic challenges** for these students in accessing higher education and attaining a college degree.
- ▶ **Diverse communities are substantially underrepresented** in the ranks of teachers and doctors, contributing to disparities in educational and health outcomes.
- ▶ There are often **stark differences between the two counties** covered in this report. Benton County is the most affluent in the region and home to thriving Fortune 500 companies. Washington County is far more diverse by race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status.
- ▶ Significant **data gaps continue to persist, most notably relating to the experiences of the LGBTQ community**. Indeed, the TRUE telephone survey appears to be the first in Northwest



Arkansas Latinas Bike; Bentonville, AR Square

- Arkansas to include the LGBTQ community alongside racial and ethnic groups in its exploration of their DEI experiences.
- ▶ Inclusion has illuminated one area of particular concern. While participants **generally reacted positively to the region’s growing racial and ethnic diversity, telephone survey respondents from all other subgroups were at least three times more likely to say that increasing the diversity of sexual orientation in Northwest Arkansas would make the region worse.**
  - ▶ **There was broad agreement across groups that the area most in need of improvement is representation – in government agencies**, among the region’s teachers and healthcare providers, in business and nonprofit leadership. This finding points to the need not only for specific actions to expand DEI, but to ensure underrepresented communities have an equal and empowered seat at the table in defining and realizing solutions that work.
  - ▶ While all Northwest Arkansas residents play a role in how community members experience DEI, leaders within the **business, nonprofit, education, law enforcement, healthcare and local government sectors must champion DEI work within their own institutions** and externally through their partners and in their relationships with all the region’s diverse communities.

This report seeks to establish a baseline of knowledge around the state of diversity, equity and inclusion in Northwest Arkansas that incorporates multiple community viewpoints. In doing so, it is essential to note that the data in this report was collected prior to the events of 2020 – from the COVID-19 pandemic to a nationwide, civil rights reckoning and calls for social justice. As such, this report offers a snapshot in time against which future progress can and should be measured.

Throughout our community conversations, DEI was described as both an end-state objective and a continuous journey. These kinds of conversations and analyses must continue as the region pursues this journey in order to gauge both meaningful progress and areas in need of ongoing improvement.

Eliminating barriers to true inclusion and equitable outcomes for diverse communities will require both individual growth as well as structural changes to institutions and sectors around leadership, organizational culture, community engagement, data collection and procurement. All stakeholders are invited to visit the TRUE website at [www.TRUENWArkansas.org](http://www.TRUENWArkansas.org) for access to the tools and resources noted in this report. Broad engagement in and commitment to these efforts will help make Northwest Arkansas not only a diverse community, but a truly equitable and inclusive place for all.

## Why DEI Matters

Studies show that diversity, equity and inclusion have numerous societal and economic benefits. Diverse business teams, for example, have been shown to produce stronger outcomes in their ability to recruit, retain and satisfy employees and consumers.<sup>2</sup> Diversity also enhances creativity. It encourages the search for novel information by drawing on different perspectives. This, in turn, has been shown to lead to better decision-making and problem solving. In addition, including diverse perspectives at the table has been documented to improve the bottom line of companies and lead to breakthrough innovations.<sup>3</sup> When people of all backgrounds experience inclusion – a sense of being fully valued, considered and appreciated – entire communities thrive.

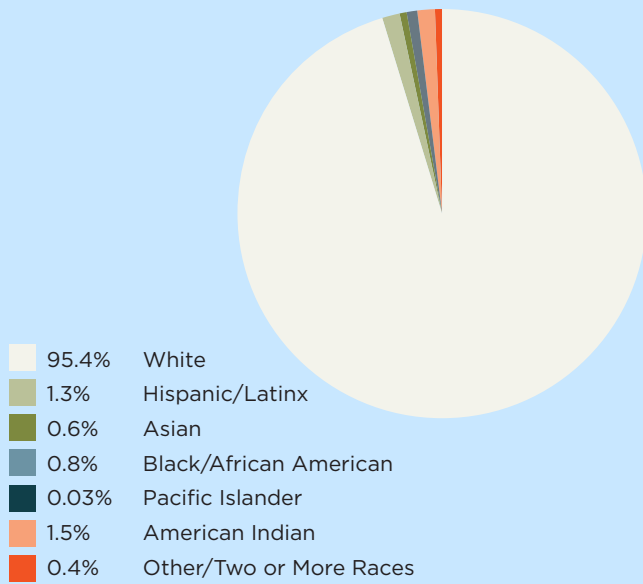
Like many communities throughout the nation, DEI is of particular importance in Northwest Arkansas due to the rapid evolution of the region's demographics – changes that necessitate intentional and sustained efforts to ensure all the region's diverse populations have equitable access to the opportunities and services that Northwest Arkansas has to offer.

Over the past 30 years, the Northwest Arkansas population has more than doubled and welcomed a surge in diverse residents.



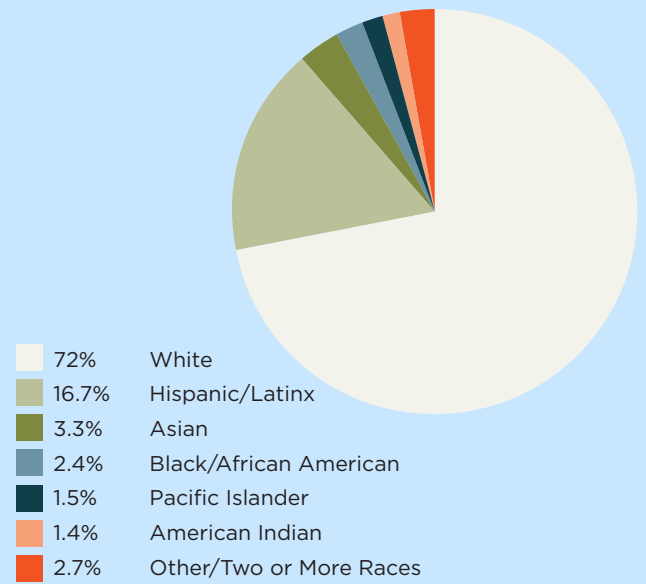


**1990 — TOTAL NORTHWEST ARKANSAS POPULATION — 239,464**



EngageNWA “Engage the Future” 2020 report

**2019 — TOTAL NORTHWEST ARKANSAS POPULATION — 558,075**



EngageNWA “Engage the Future” 2020 report

As a result, Northwest Arkansas is one of the most prosperous and ethnically diverse regions in Arkansas. However, its economic prosperity is offset by persistent structural barriers that drive, at times, significant disparities among its residents. Reinforced by the opportunities for improvement identified through this research, TRUE NWA is committed to cultivating a culture of consistent and intentional DEI work. We believe this work is mission-critical to all that Northwest Arkansas aspires to be – economically and culturally – for those who live and visit here now and for generations to come.



## Findings by Sector

As a result, Northwest Arkansas is one of the most prosperous and ethnically diverse regions in Arkansas in terms of ethnicities represented (although the total percentage of persons of color is still lower than some other areas of the state). This section also utilizes existing data and primary research to further examine the state of DEI within each sector.

The findings reflect the complexity of collecting honest and frank perspectives relating to DEI. For example, when asked via a telephone survey, almost all population groups responded positively about their access to opportunities and experiences of inclusion. Yet in focus groups and one-on-one interviews, respondents painted a more nuanced picture of a region that still has substantial room for improvement to ensure all residents feel welcome, included and able to fully access all that Northwest Arkansas has to offer. Existing outside data cited

in this report also reinforces this more complex picture, pointing to, at times, deep inequalities in access to resources, opportunities and thus outcomes for diverse communities in Northwest Arkansas. This report reveals that individual perceptions of the inclusivity of the region contrast in many respects with the disparate outcomes seen in healthcare, housing, education and employment statistics. Members of the dominant community have experiences and perspectives on DEI that are often very different from those of diverse residents. Both the qualitative data and quantitative data support this finding.

### Business/Nonprofit Sector

Many business and nonprofit ventures large and small in Northwest Arkansas have been intentional in attracting diverse talent to the region, however, challenges in attaining economic and other equity milestones across populations persist. Existing regional data around unemployment, median income and poverty mirror the perceptions of inequality identified by focus group and stakeholder interviews. The data in this section was gathered via EngageNWA.org (a local nonprofit initiative focused on the business sector) and the U.S. Census. While

the nonprofit sector was not a formal area of inquiry in this report, it is included in this section due to the strong parallels received in community feedback regarding the importance of representation at all levels of the organization, including leadership, that better reflects the diverse populations both businesses and nonprofits serve.

### Unemployment

Available 2018 unemployment data by race/ethnicity at the county, state and national levels is shown in the chart below. <sup>4</sup> The data indicates disparities between groups tend to be wider in Washington County, and unemployment rates are highest among the Black and Native American communities in both counties. These results invite a two-prong inquiry for future research. One prong would explore the theory that Benton County’s unemployment disparities are not as wide due to the county’s overall affluence. The second prong would pursue a deeper understanding of the mechanisms driving these disparities and potential policy interventions that could help drive greater equity.

UNEMPLOYMENT RATES, 2018				
	Benton County	Washington County	Arkansas	National
White, not Hispanic or Latino	2.8%	4.2%	4.7%	4.7%
Black or African American	3.6%	6.5%	10.0%	10.6%
American Indian and Alaska Native	3.2%	8.1%	7.3%	11.2%
Asian	2.2%	2.8%	3.7%	4.6%
Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander	0.8%	5.9%	5.1%	7.7%
Hispanic or Latino origin	2.0%	4.5%	4.5%	6.8%

U.S. Census Bureau, 2018

## Median Income

In Benton County, the most recent estimated median household income (U.S. Census, 2018) is \$64,141, while in Washington County it is \$49,629. Both figures are substantially ahead of the median annual income of Black households statewide (\$30,758).

The overall income disparities that exist between Benton and Washington counties are even more

apparent when broken down by race/ethnicity. With the exception of Native Americans and Pacific Islanders living in Washington County, median incomes are higher in Benton County for all racial and ethnic groups. Black residents of Washington County and Pacific Islanders in Benton County are furthest behind, with household incomes just 57% and 53% of the overall median income in their county.<sup>6</sup>

MEDIAN INCOME, 2018			
	Benton County	Washington County	Benton v. Washington Variance
All Households	\$64,141	\$49,629	29.2%
White, not Hispanic or Latino	\$66,334	\$53,190	24.7%
Black or African American	\$61,052	\$28,264	116%
American Indian and Alaska Native	\$43,971	\$38,173	15.2%
Asian	\$91,528	\$49,208	86%
Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander	\$33,864	\$41,053	-17.5%
Hispanic or Latino origin	\$51,059	\$40,684	25%

U.S. Census Bureau, 2018

## Poverty

Northwest Arkansas is the most economically prosperous region in the state, but not everyone shares in this prosperity. Some 9.9% of Benton County residents live in poverty, and the figure is considerably higher in Washington County at 16.8%.<sup>5</sup> With the exception of Asian Americans in Benton County, poverty rates are substantially higher across race/ethnicity in both counties, when compared to the dominant population (see chart on the next page).



Rosa Parks 1955 Mural by Samuel Hale & Arkansas Latina Bike. Downtown Rogers, AR



POVERTY RATES, 2018				
	Benton County	Washington County	Arkansas	National
White, not Hispanic or Latino	8.6%	13.9%	13.8%	10%
Black or African American	11.6%	28%	30.5%	24.2%
American Indian and Alaska Native	20.4%	13.9%	23.9%	25.8%
Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander	34.2%	27.7%	31%	4.6
Asian	6.6%	18.1%	14.2%	11.5%
Hispanic or Latino origin	11.5%	24.5%	27.5%	21%

U.S. Census Bureau, 2018

### Community Perspectives

Throughout this report’s survey, focus group and one-on-one conversations, participants routinely cited economic opportunities as a primary reason they call Northwest Arkansas home. However, not all opportunities are yet created equal – and opinions vary as more detailed and nuanced dialogues ensue.

As experienced throughout the data collection process, perspectives across race, ethnicity and sexuality in the telephone surveys were relatively consistent and optimistic – with between 88% and 93% in all groups stating that they had a positive experience in the region with regard to their access to economic opportunities. Findings were similarly consistent when asked to contemplate the broader experiences of their specific subgroup with the notable exception of Marshallese respondents, who were more negative in their opinions of their community’s access to economic opportunities in Northwest Arkansas.

However, opinions far more direct and negative surfaced in the more in-depth and open-ended

focus group conversations. For example, in stark contrast to the telephone survey results, only one participant each in the Black and Latinx focus groups indicated a positive outlook on the economic opportunities available in Northwest Arkansas. No Native American focus group participants indicated a positive experience, and feedback was neutral to negative for the other diverse groups.

Business leaders spoke of their commitment to DEI – and of the significant strides still needed ahead, as evidenced by these two comments from their focus group:

“If you don’t have a diverse workforce, it’s kind of hard for you to connect and engage with your community and also show value. Everyone has a social responsibility when your clientele is within your community.”

“I’ve talked to Marshallese students, and I’ve talked to Hispanics, and I’ve asked will you be the next CEO of Walmart, and they didn’t even know what that was.”

Others, including this participant in the LGBTQ group, were far more direct with regard to their view of the current state of equity with regard to economic opportunities and their community:

“ Outside the City of Fayetteville, you can be fired for being gay.”

## Education

Similar to economic opportunities, the high quality of K-12 education in Northwest Arkansas was consistently cited across groups as a major benefit of life in the region – across existing data, survey results and focus group conversations. However, barriers like poverty and lack of access to resources still restrict opportunities for non-dominant communities, particularly when it comes to higher education. Overall performance on state exams, as well as racial and ethnic disparities, are educational concerns in Arkansas, while high school graduation rates and adult education levels have been

improving. The data in this section was gathered via the National Center for Educational Statistics, Arkansas Department of Education Data Center, Aspire Arkansas and the U.S. Census.

## Student Achievement

### Third Grade Reading Readiness

Third grade reading levels are often used as a predictor of future academic success, as third grade marks the point at which students are expected to have mastered basic reading skills and use those skills to learn other subjects.<sup>7</sup> As the table below indicates, less than half of students in both counties are meeting state benchmarks. Even at this early age, there is a significant divergence between white and Asian students in comparison to other groups – pointing to the importance of early interventions and a particularly intensive focus on Washington County, where disparities among our community groups are most significant.

THIRD GRADE READING READINESS			
	Benton County % Meeting or Exceeding Readiness Benchmark	Washington County % Meeting or Exceeding Readiness Benchmark	Arkansas % Meeting or Exceeding Readiness Benchmark
Overall	47%	39%	38%
White, not Hispanic or Latino	52%	51%	43%
Black or African American	37%	25%	22%
American Indian and Alaska Native	33%	32%	34%
Asian	62%	44%	56%
Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander	29%	8%	15%
Hispanic or Latino origin	35%	27%	28%

Arkansas Department of Education, ACT Aspire standardized test results, 2018–2019 school year.

## Eighth Grade Math Readiness

As students progress through middle school, researchers continue to examine readiness at multiple times - including eighth grade math readiness. At this juncture, a modest majority of students in both Benton and Washington counties

are exceeding the state's benchmark. In comparison to the third grade benchmarks, many communities are making significant strides. However, there continues to exist a substantial gap between white and Asian students and their counterparts from other communities.

ARKANSAS DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, ACT ASPIRE ASSESSMENT RESULTS, 2018-2019 SCHOOL YEAR			
	Benton County % Meeting or Exceeding Readiness Benchmark	Washington County % Meeting or Exceeding Readiness Benchmark	Arkansas % Meeting or Exceeding Readiness Benchmark
Overall	59.7%	53.8%	48%
White, not Hispanic or Latino	65.0%	65.2%	55%
Black or African American	48.5%	25.6%	23%
American Indian and Alaska Native	51.6%	41.7%	45%
Asian	85.7%	69.9%	72%
Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander	13.6%	21.6%	27%
Hispanic or Latino origin	44.9%	41.1%	41%

*Eighth Grade Math Proficiency, Benton and Washington Counties*

*Source: Arkansas Department of Education, ACT Aspire assessment results, 2018-2019 school year*

## High School Graduation Rates

Progressing to high school graduation, Benton and Washington counties' graduation rates are consistent with statewide trends. Benton County students of all races and ethnicities graduate at slightly higher levels than their Washington County peers, with the exception of Pacific Islander students where graduation rates are higher in Washington County. Asian students have the highest graduation rates, while Native American and Pacific Islander students face the most barriers to attaining a high school degree.



Mural by Robert Montgomery, Downtown Rogers, AR



## HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES

	Benton County	Washington County	Arkansas
Overall	89.3%	86.3%	87.6%
White, not Hispanic or Latino	90.9%	88.4%	89.6%
Black or African American	87.1%	85.5%	83.4%
American Indian and Alaska Native	74.0%	71.4%	78.6%
Asian	95.7%	91.0%	93.9%
Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander	74.0%	71.4%	78.6%
Hispanic or Latino origin	66.7%	73.5%	76.1%

*Arkansas Department of Education high school graduation rates, 2018-2019 school year*



“BLM”

## Teachers by Race

Research shows that diverse teachers have higher expectations of their diverse students and play a critical role in encouraging their academic progress. For example, Black students who have had just one Black teacher by third grade are 13% more likely to enroll in college, and that figure leaps to 32% if they have two Black teachers in those influential early years, according to the National Bureau of Economic Research. Yet only 18% of U.S. teachers are People of Color, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. In Benton and Washington counties, the gap between the racial make-up of the local population and its K-12 public educators is even more concerning. In a two-county population where roughly 28% of residents are racially and/or ethnically diverse, just 7% of public school teachers reflect this diversity. The widest chasm exists in the Latinx community, which makes up nearly 17% of the region’s population but less than 3% of teachers in the two counties.

## TEACHERS V. TOTAL POPULATION BY RACE

	Benton County Teachers	Benton County Population	Washington County Teachers	Washington County Population
White, not Hispanic or Latino	93.4%	73.7%	92.5%	71.4%
Black or African American	1.2%	1.7%	1.7%	3.6%
American Indian and Alaska Native	2.0%	1.40%	1.1%	1%
Asian	0.5%	3.8%	0.9%	2.5%
Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander	0.1%	0.6%	0.1%	2.2%
Hispanic or Latino origin	2.7%	16.4%	2.6%	16.7%

*Arkansas Department of Education, Certified Teachers by Race by County, 2019-2020.  
U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2018 5-year estimates.*

## Higher Education Attainment

Two influencers of higher education attainment are College Going Rates (the percentage of high school graduates who enroll in college within 12 months) and College Credit Accumulation Rates (the percentage of high school graduates who enroll in college within 16 months and complete at least a year's worth of college credit applicable to a degree within two years of their college enrollment).

Northwest Arkansas students are enrolling in college at slightly lower rates than their peers across the state. Black students, in particular, are enrolling in college at substantially lower rates than both their Black peers statewide and their age cohort in Northwest Arkansas. Black and Latinx students enroll at significantly lower rates than their white peers.

College Credit Accumulation Rates can provide a sense of how students are faring as they make the transition from high school to college. Benton and Washington County students who enroll in college are accumulating credits at slightly less than the state average. However, Black and Latinx students trail considerably behind their white peers in both counties.

## COLLEGE GOING RATES

	Arkansas	Benton County	Washington County
All Students	48.8%	45.1%	40.5%
Black	43.8%	33.1%	32.3%
Hispanic/Latino	39.8%	38.8%	33.8%
White	52.3%	47.7%	47.5%

## COLLEGE CREDIT ACCUMULATION RATES

	Arkansas	Benton County	Washington County
All Students	56.1%	53.4%	54.6%
Black	39.4%	23.8%	34.9%
Hispanic/Latino	47.5%	39.9%	34.6%
White	61.4%	56.4%	64.0%

*County figures are weighted averages based on district level data reported on the Arkansas State Report Card, 2018-2019 school year. Available at [myschoolinfo.arkansas.gov](https://myschoolinfo.arkansas.gov)*

## Community Perspectives

Participants across the data collection process for this report routinely cited the high quality of K-12 education as a central benefit of life in Northwest Arkansas. In the telephone survey, respondents were 87% positive about their own experience with the local public school system, with all groups reporting results close to that overall average. When asked about the broader experience of their subgroup, answers were 88% positive – with the most noteworthy exception being respondents who are members of the LGBTQ community (20% negative).

As was consistently found throughout this report, focus group conversations revealed specific concerns. Participants in the Black focus group had universally positive perceptions of the quality of educational opportunities in Northwest Arkansas, especially when compared to the rest of the state. Opinions were mostly positive in the Latinx focus group. Eight people in this focus group indicated that educational quality in Northwest Arkansas is better than elsewhere. Members of the Native American focus group all held negative opinions, primarily relating to the lack of cultural sensitivity in area schools. Whether this cultural insensitivity is coming from school staff, other students or both, it has an obvious detrimental effect on the educational experiences of Native American students and their families.

“ [Not advertising scholarships for Native American students is] discriminatory. As we’re sitting here, I’m getting angry. I’m starting to see connections of what seem to be innocent inconveniences that turn into institutional discrimination – that it’s just too hard to recruit Native Americans, so we won’t do it. We’ll recruit Hispanic/Latinx and African Americans because that’s easier. We’ll get more numbers.”



Chief Joseph from the Nez Perce by J. NiCole Hatfield. Museum of Native American History; Bentonville, AR

Participants in the Black focus group also mentioned the lack of cultural sensitivity:

“ My son who moved here didn’t look like Fayetteville Black folks. He had spiky, twisted hair. He wore cut up jeans. His underwear was showing, until he see his mama...But he was a GT (Gifted & Talented) student, straight As, high 20s on his ACT. But when he walked in, he was not accepted as that student...Academically [he] did better than them, but he wasn’t accepted as one of them.”

The theme of conditional acceptance also surfaced:

“ As long as they’re doing well with athletics or they’re at the top of their class academic-wise. But if they are a troubled kid, or if they are a child that doesn’t have the economics that a lot of us do have, then they’re treated differently.”

This lack of acceptance can extend to family members who are trying to be participants in their child’s education, particularly parents whose first language is not English.

“ I’ve heard from other Asian families about how if they’re speaking their own language with their kids in the schools that people will tell them to speak English now, so it’s just little things that help change the environment to make it more welcoming.”



On the positive side, several Marshallese focus group participants indicated that the local school districts have been very accommodating, especially with regard to issues of guardianship that are common within the community. Marshallese residents are more likely to live in large, extended families where many family members – not just a child’s parent – may share the responsibilities of child-rearing.

“[U.S. schools] don’t consider a niece or nephew immediate family. So, therefore that American school would deny enrollment. But in [Northwest Arkansas], it’s really different. They’re more willing to work with the Marshallese community.”

LGBTQ focus group participants were the most concerned of all sub-groups with regard to their community’s experience with public education in the region – with the opinions shared in the focus group conversations ranging from neutral to negative.

One of the most consistent and powerful lines of critique levied not only by LGBTQ participants but across diverse focus groups, was the theme of representation – in the curriculum as well as among those who teach it and those who run the schools. Among the comments, explaining negative opinions:

“I was thinking about curricular representation. I was thinking about whether students see themselves in the histories and the literature.” – LGBTQ participant

“They don’t have teachers that look like them. They don’t have administrators that look like them, and they don’t have school board members that look like them...They’re making a big move toward that...But we’re completely underrepresented.” – Latinx participant

“Diversity is not taught. Black history is not taught.” – Black participant

“They have social workers now, and none of them are Marshallese.” – Marshallese participant

“My daughter is the only Black girl in National Honor Society at her school. And my question was, well, where’s everybody else?” – Black participant

## Health Care

While Northwest Arkansas fares better than the rest of the state, Arkansas is consistently ranked as one of the least healthy states in the nation, with higher rates of obesity and chronic illnesses.

Health care outcomes for the region are better in comparison to the state as a whole, but disparities persist. According to the 2020 County Health Rankings, produced annually by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute, Benton County is the healthiest in Arkansas.<sup>8</sup> However, Benton County does less well when compared to the County Health Rankings for 33 similar counties throughout the nation. Among that peer group, Benton County is ranked in the bottom quartile of peer counties in several categories, including coronary heart disease, stroke deaths, older adult depression and adult physical inactivity, and equal to the median for life expectancy. Washington County ranks third in Arkansas for health outcomes, including longevity and quality of life. Washington County ranks fourth

for health behaviors, access to care, socioeconomic factors and the physical environment.<sup>9</sup>

This information is especially pertinent for the region’s health departments and physicians to assess where adjustments are necessary to address the unique needs of diverse communities in both counties. The data in this section was gathered via the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Northwest Arkansas Council, County Health Rankings and Roadmaps, and the U.S. Census.

## Physicians by Race

There is robust medical literature indicating that patients prefer physicians of the same race.

<sup>10</sup> According to the Arkansas Minority Health Commission’s 2018 Arkansas Health Workforce Report, 85% of general physicians in Arkansas are white, and 6% are Black.

Increasing diversity among physicians may be the most direct strategy to improve health care experiences for diverse community members and

may have a direct effect on clinical outcomes. Using the Black community as an example, a 2018 study by the National Bureau of Economic Research found that Black patients were 20 percentage points more likely to agree to a diabetes screening and 26 percentage points more likely to agree to a cholesterol screening from a doctor who is also Black – due to better communication and more trust.<sup>11</sup>

In Northwest Arkansas, physicians of Hispanic or Latinx origin are particularly underrepresented, making up 3.3% and 2.3% percent of the physician population in Benton County and Washington County, respectively, although the Latinx community makes up more than 16% of the region as a whole. The growing Pacific Islander community is also underrepresented by physicians from their own cultural background. White and Asian physicians are somewhat over-represented across the region relative to their share of the population as a whole.

NORTHWEST ARKANSAS LICENSED PHYSICIANS, ALL SPECIALTIES				
	Benton County Licensed Physicians (%)	Benton County % Total Population	Washington County Licensed Physicians (%)	Washington County % Total Population
White, not Hispanic or Latino	84.4%	73.7%	86.1%	71.4%
Black or African American	2.6%	1.7%	3%	3.6%
American Indian and Alaska Native	1.1%	1.4%	1%	1%
Asian	8.7%	3.8%	7.5%	2.5%
Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander	0%	0.6%	0.1%	2.2%
Hispanic or Latino origin	3.3%	16.4%	2.3%	16.7%

*Arkansas State Medical Board, 2020 data request  
U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2018 5-year estimates*

## Life Expectancy

According to the National Center for Health Statistics, life expectancy at birth represents the average number of years that the members of a particular life table cohort can expect to live at the time of birth. Life expectancies in Benton and Washington counties average 80 and 78, respectively. Both exceed the state average of 76. Among the most notable findings from the data (see chart below) is a more than 13-year gap in life expectancy between Black residents as well as Asian residents in Benton versus Washington counties. White residents have the lowest life expectancy.<sup>12</sup>

## Infant Health

The infant mortality rate varies by race and ethnicity. The statewide rate is 7 per 1,000 among white residents, 11 among Black residents and 5 among Latinx residents.<sup>13</sup> Because infant mortality is relatively rare, it is difficult to accurately measure by

LIFE EXPECTANCY (YEARS)		
	Benton County	Washington County
All residents	79.9	78.2
White, not Hispanic or Latino	79.2	77.8
Black	86.8	73.6
American Indian/Alaska Native	82.3	98.3
Asian	91.2	77.9
Hispanic	87	88.3

*\*Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander is not represented in this dataset.*

*CDC National Center for Health Statistics, National Vital Statistics System, 2016-2018 data*

race at the county level. However, low birthweight has a high correlation with infant mortality. It is influenced by similar social and economic factors, and county-level data is more readily available. The table below shows a similar prevalence of low birthweight babies in most groups across both counties. The most notable exception is Black infants in Washington County who experience low birthweight at nearly twice the rate of infants overall in their county.

LOW BIRTHWEIGHT		
	Benton County	Washington County
All residents	8%	8%
White, not Hispanic or Latino	7%	7%
Black	10%	15%
American Indian/Alaska Native	8%	7%
Asian	9%	10%
Hispanic	7%	8%

*County Health Rankings and Roadmaps, 2020 analysis of CDC National Center for Health Statistics natality files*

## Access to Health Care

As of 2018, 92% of Benton County residents and 90% of Washington County residents had access to some form of health insurance. These rates are slightly ahead of Arkansas' overall rate of 88%. While timely insurance rate data by race/ethnicity at the county level was not available, state-level data indicate some disparities, most notably between Hispanic residents and the population as a whole. Black and Native American residents also had lower insurance rates than the general population.



ARKANSAS HEALTH INSURANCE COVERAGE RATES BY RACE/ETHNICITY	
White, not Hispanic or Latino	91%
Black	86%
American Indian/Alaska Native	84%
Hispanic	64%

*AspireArkansas.org, reporting on statistics collected from the Arkansas Department of Health and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*

Meanwhile, members of Northwest Arkansas' growing Marshallese community have historically been ineligible for Medicaid coverage due to their unique status as immigrants under a Compact of Free Association with the United States. One study conducted by researchers at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences found that only 53.6% of Marshallese adults surveyed had any health care coverage. Moreover, 79.6% indicated they did not have a personal doctor or healthcare provider.<sup>14</sup> Fortunately, national legislation signed into law in December of 2020 reverses this historic inequity and provides Medicaid coverage for citizens of freely associated states, including the Marshall Islands, although it will take some time for enrollment to be completed.

## Community Perspectives

The research in this report indicates high interest in improving overall well-being and health in Northwest Arkansas, and a particular appreciation for the area's increasing focus on outdoor activities. Yet access, affordability and representation were all consistent and largely negative concerns expressed across the focus groups, led by the LGBTQ, Latinx and Marshallese community discussions.

Marshallese focus group participants felt particularly excluded by federal policies that prevent many in

their community from accessing key components of the social safety net available to other residents of Northwest Arkansas.



“Marshallese adults over 18 are not eligible for Medicaid...not eligible for food stamps... We pay taxes...We even join the military. So, it's like the U.S. government decided what to give us and what not, and it's not fair.” (Note: Since this focus group was conducted, the U.S. has extended Medicaid coverage to the Marshallese community as part of national COVID-19 relief legislation that was signed into law in December of 2020; however, Marshallese residents remain ineligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, also known as food stamps).

LGBTQ participants took issue with access to health care providers who have experience working with their community:



“There's hardly any health care access and representation for LGBTQ people in Northwest Arkansas. There's basically one or two doctors.”

Note: During the 2021 Arkansas legislative session, the following bills were signed into law: SB-289, a bill that allows doctors and other health care workers to deny non-emergency services based on religious, moral, or ethical objections; HB-1570, which makes it a felony to provide gender-affirming healthcare to transgender youth; SB-354, which requires transgender student-athletes to compete based upon their original biological sexual classification.

Asian American participants talked about receiving a lower quality of care after facing discrimination relating to language barriers:



“People think that we don’t speak English that well. When we go to doctors, I’ve had to translate for family members and for other people. They don’t take our complaints seriously.”

One Latinx participant also made the connection between long-term DEI work and representation in critical fields:



“What failed to be done when the migration first happened in the ‘90s, we’re seeing the repercussions...Now we don’t have teachers. We don’t have doctors. We don’t have dentists. We don’t have anything in those higher professions, and then we are grossly misrepresented.”

## Law Enforcement

One of the most important elements of effective law enforcement is the development and sustainability of community trust. As recent events regarding police misconduct throughout the nation illustrate, it is important that law enforcement relationships with the diverse communities of Northwest Arkansas be examined in order to create and sustain safe, inclusive communities.

FAYETTEVILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT OFFICER DEMOGRAPHICS		
	Population	Sworn Officers
White	84%	89.1%
Black	6%	2.3%
Latinx	6%	5.4%
Other	4%	3.1%

*Fayetteville Police Department, 2018*

Reporting, statistical analysis and information-sharing are central components of modern-day policing. In 2015, the launch of the federal Police Data Initiative introduced a set of practices aimed at improving the relationship between citizens and police through uses of data that increase transparency, build community trust and strengthen accountability. The City of Fayetteville embraced several of the recommendations and, as a result, has made its demographic information available to the public. Of note, in addition to the race/ethnicity breakdowns, only eight percent of sworn officers identify as women.

## Community Perspectives

Consistent with the survey outcomes relating to the other sectors, telephone respondents were 87% positive with regard to their personal experience with law enforcement, slightly higher than their perception of their subgroup’s opinion of local law enforcement, which stood at 83% positive. The findings were fairly consistent across all groups, with the exception of Latinx and LGBTQ respondents. Latinx respondents said their personal experience with law enforcement was 86% positive. However, when asked about the Latinx community as a whole, those same respondents said they believe 24% hold a negative perception of law enforcement. Additionally, one in five LGBTQ respondents indicated having a negative personal experience with law enforcement, while 34% said they believe their community has an overall negative perception.

Once again, however, opinions diverged sharply in the focus group conversations, where diverse participants were far more negative. Indeed, Black and Latinx focus group participants were almost universally negative in their evaluation of the relationship between local law enforcement and their communities.

“So, if in the ‘60s they didn’t want us here, there’s a generation of police officers that come from that. But it was changing, not necessarily because people wanted to be nice, but because Rogers got a lawsuit for profiling with the Mexican American Legal Defense [and Educational Fund], and they lost, so they had to fix it. Every other agency in the area said, ‘We’re not going to go through that.’”

Marshallese focus group participants also held mostly negative perceptions of law enforcement. While sharing concerns, one participant also noted the positive impact individual officers can have:

“Some of the Marshallese that I’ve spoken with feel that the local law enforcement (are good and bad). They said they use their power too much and sometimes they would go into a house without any warrant and just walk in the bedrooms looking for people. But there are a couple of... police officers that help the Marshallese community a lot.”

LGBTQ focus group members also observed that some law enforcement agencies in the region were improving interactions with their community:

“In my experience, representation wasn’t there, but the Fayetteville Police Department has been very welcoming and safe. There are several L’s [lesbians] in the police department. And there may be one or two G’s [gay people]. I don’t know if there are any Q’s [queer people] or T’s [transgender people]. I know there’s several L’s and they’re always excellent to work with at Pride or any of the events we’ve done.”

However, one stakeholder reported that law enforcement agencies in the region vary in their willingness to engage with the Latinx community.

She stated that relations with law enforcement have improved, particularly with regard to racial profiling. She held a nuanced attitude, emphasizing engagement and dialogue with law enforcement agencies.

“Sometimes we fear that there are more disguised tactics for racial profiling. Some (law enforcement) still practice some type of racial profiling but working with the different groups is what is changing the positions...Community integration is a big part of the solutions.”

Native Americans in the focus group also shared uniformly negative perceptions. As it did throughout this community’s conversations about DEI, the theme of “invisibility” was prevalent:

“If the law enforcement arrest someone who might be Native, they might just assume they’re Latinx. I don’t think that they have this perception of a Native community, because I don’t think they realize that there is one in this area.”

Asian American focus group participants related mixed interactions with law enforcement. After one participant relayed the story of her father being followed around by the police in 2000, another focus group participant focused on the progress that has been made:

“Law enforcement people compensate for the political situation here, and I’ve noticed. I’ve been with folks that need a driving license or something, and they were super nice. They went out of their way to be nice...I think they compensate for what’s going on.”

## Government & Social Services

Experiences of local government and social services vary greatly within Northwest Arkansas. The provision of local social services is an important measure of a community's ability to alleviate poverty, support vulnerable groups and promote citizens' independent living<sup>15</sup>. Benton and Washington county residents share a desire to have more access around civic engagement information and resources to address race and class barriers. There is a strong consensus that the community as a whole would benefit from greater representation of the region's diversity in local government — both at the staff and leadership levels. Similarly, diverse community members would like to see a greater focus on DEI, including the creation of distinct experiences that are responsive to different communities' unique needs within social services and other government agencies.

Currently, social services agencies in the region do not make available disaggregated data on who they serve. Therefore, TRUE researchers were limited in developing a quantitative analysis of this sector. However, the City of Fayetteville has developed a report card that provides an equity analysis for various sectors to determine where disparities exist as well as short- and long-term goals to reduce these gaps. Efforts promoted in its 2019 Equity and Empowerment Report Card include joining the Cities for Citizenship initiative to increase citizenship — and, thus, eligibility for key social safety net services — among its residents. The report also identifies 2020 goals, including a 2020 Census outreach initiative to ensure all residents are counted, expanding diverse employment and workforce housing options and expanding the walking/biking trail system to include access points within one half-mile of all residents. Other cities in the region should be encouraged to engage in similar assessments.

## Community Perspectives

Most participants in the focus groups for Communities of Color and LGBTQ shared negative perceptions and experiences with social service agencies in the region. Indeed, everyone in the Black and Latinx focus groups indicated their community was viewed more negatively when seeking to access government services and resources. In contrast, white residents' perceptions of social service agencies were more neutral and perceived as "equal."

Participants in the Black, Latinx and Marshallese focus groups expressed mostly negative perceptions of government agencies and services in the region. Equally noteworthy, they believe that these negative perceptions are mutual:



"It really depends on the location. Fayetteville is very accessible. They have... the bilingual window and all that stuff. But I've heard people from Rogers saying that they are not friendly at all. Like DHS [Department of Human Services] over there. I've got horror stories because I need my clients to go get shots or stuff like that at the health department, and if they say it's anything for immigration, they won't give it. Immediately, no."

Other interviewees opined that bad service stems from a lack of cultural awareness:



"On services, I think as long as people understand cultures or try to be open, there's no problem...I think as long as the organizations understand culture, they tend to be more open. They can provide good service. Whenever they don't have that service, or they don't have the experience, that's when there's conflict."



"When I was in law enforcement, if you're dealing with a Native person, understanding some of the common mental health factors



that might go in, some of the resources that might be needed dealing with our children (is important)...because failing to do that is violating their federal and basic human international rights.”

Others faulted a lack of information and community outreach to make diverse residents more aware of the resources and services available to them—pointing to possible solutions:

“With government agencies, I think there’s still a lot of not really knowing what’s available. Once the community does know, then they begin to utilize the agencies... Then as far as experiences, I know a lot of government agencies...have bilingual staff or use interpreters. I think they have been trying to help with that, ensuring that their services are accessible.”

During the Native American focus group, once again the theme of invisibility surfaced:

“[My daughter] lingered in the DHS system for years. Now she does not look Native, but she was born in a tribal hospital; she’s Cherokee. I literally had a DHS worker from Washington County say, ‘she’s Native American?’ And I’m like, ‘Yeah, I’m the wrong person to ask that to, first of all. Second of all, yes, she is.’ And the other part of that is then also translating—dealing with kids from trauma. We’re passing generational trauma. We carry those stories. I’m from it. My kids are from it. And trying to communicate that into Northwest Arkansas’ government process has been ridiculous.”

Comments gleaned from the Asian American focus group suggest a desire for more information and outreach with regard to government agencies and services:

“My two-year-old boy, he’s super naughty. Now I have to shout at him, or I have to say don’t do this, don’t break that, don’t put the house on fire, right? My wife is always afraid that if I say something hard, then somebody gonna’ call the Child Protective Services to take the kid away. That is a huge fear (for) Indian mothers...What I want is that workshop by the Child Protective Services on what parameters they use to take a child away.”

And, the LGBTQ focus group conversation sounded concerns about the responsiveness of elected officials:

“Almost every city council except for Fayetteville is extremely conservative. In Bentonville, you can’t even – they don’t allow public comment. Call your city council member to complain about something, and they never return your phone call.”

One consistent solution was more diverse representation in local and regional government:

“One of the big issues that I see is the people in leadership are white, right? It takes a lot of effort and intentionality to reach out to the Latino community, and they’re not willing to do it. They’re not willing to change their ways. So, the communities are disconnected.”

“I’ve been in a lot of conversations with other groups about diversity, equity and that sort of thing. Sometimes, I’m the only Asian person in the room. When we’re in the room to have these types of conversation, we don’t just need to be there to share our stories, we have to help make the decisions, too.”

# MOVING FORWARD

Northwest Arkansas still has progress to make in ensuring all people are included in the region's prosperity and that distribution of opportunities and access is equitable. While Communities of Color and LGBTQ people are well aware of existing disparities, many in the dominant community are not. The recommendations included below are meant to provide actionable next steps and accompanying resources to improve DEI in the region.

Attention to issues of DEI is critical to closing equity gaps and ensuring that all residents receive the support and resources necessary. Furthermore, policies and practices must be tailored to the unique needs of the region's diverse communities. DEI is not a fixed end-state goal, but a continuous journey. There is no one-size-fits-all plan; instead, all residents have a responsibility to ask key questions and engage in suitable discussions with the communities affected.

NWA residents, business owners, nonprofit leaders and elected officials are invited to visit the TRUE website library at [www.TRUENWArkansas.org/library](http://www.TRUENWArkansas.org/library) for access to the tools and resources noted in this report. These efforts will help to make NWA one equitable community, ensuring diversity and inclusion for all.



Railyard at Night

## ALL NORTHWEST ARKANSAS RESIDENTS CAN WORK TO PROMOTE DEI IN THEIR HOUSEHOLDS AND IN THEIR COMMUNITIES:



Attend an event or spend time interacting and learning with culture, faith or other groups outside of your own. Northwest Arkansas has a diverse tapestry of groups that intentionally build bridges and offer a rich calendar of events to experience their cultures.



Develop a commitment at your job to build a diverse and inclusive culture.



Start or participate in an employee resource group that organizes diversity-related activities.



Have the courage to speak up when you see someone slighted for a personal characteristic, such as their race/ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, faith, etc.



Attend an individual DEI training such as: [People's Institute for Survival & Beyond's Undoing Racism Training](#)

## Recommendations & Resources

In order to deepen the impact of cross-sector efforts to advance DEI, leadership and policies need to deliver and reflect explicit commitments. Definitions and interpretations of diversity, equity and inclusion across sectors are as diverse as the constituents they serve. A holistic effort must include higher education, K-12, nonprofits, faith-based institutions, businesses and government/public agencies. Below are actions, strategies and resources to support DEI in Northwest Arkansas organized into cross-sector recommendations as well as sector-specific recommendations for the sectors identified in the report.

## Cross-Sector Recommendations & Resources

### Leadership

- ▶ Require a commitment to DEI at the Executive/C-suite/Board levels and clarify what DEI means at that level via demonstrable actions and behaviors.
  - Define why DEI is important and central to the organization's success.
  - Initiate a DEI task force to review organizational DEI audits and develop DEI goals, strategies and key performance indicators and provide a budget to support this work.
- ▶ Update bylaws, constitutions and other governing documents to set a proportion of the board to reflect the clients/customers served by the organization.
  - Sample [Board Matrix](#)
- ▶ Include a standing board or leadership team to discuss DEI in board/leadership team meetings.
  - [A Framework for Inclusive Governance](#)
  - [Governance for Equity](#)
  - [Challenging Assumptions and Practices in Board Diversity](#)



“Elbow Bump”; TRUE NWA Community Work

- ▶ Encourage employees/customer base to serve on nonprofit boards, which can lead to more collaborative opportunities within the communities served.
- ▶ Use organization's platform to push for greater inclusion of diverse communities.
  - Support a policy agenda to dissuade policymakers from pursuing discriminatory practices.

### Human Resources & Organizational Culture

- ▶ Conduct an annual internal DEI audit ([Beloved Community Equity Audit](#)) and develop a dashboard to provide a snapshot on the current state of DEI within the organization's workforce and the impact of DEI efforts.
  - Include staff demographics, leadership demographics and hiring/pay/promotions/retention by subgroup.
  - Identify internal gaps in staff representation and familiarity with the particular contexts of diverse communities within Northwest Arkansas.
  - Assess the impact of organizational policies and practices by sub-group.
  - Survey staff annually around internal DEI



BIPOC Solidarity Ride & No Justice, No Peace Mural by Multiple Artist. Fayetteville, AR

experiences and create space to share the results and reflect on individual capacity. ([Organizational Culture Assessment Tool](#))

- Ensure staff have shared definitions for DEI terms. (See Appendix: Glossary of DEI Terms)
- Include a standing agenda item to discuss DEI in staff meetings and use resources like those below as starting points for conversations.
  - [Beginning Courageous Conversations about Race](#)
  - [Common Behavioral Patterns that Perpetuate Relations of Domination](#)
  - [To Equalize Power Among Us](#)
  - [Transforming Institutional Values: Revisited](#)
  - [Challenging Homophobia, Racism and Other Oppressive Moments](#)
  - [Continuum on Becoming an Anti-Racist Multicultural Organization](#)
  - [Facilitator's Guide for Continuous Improvement Conversations with a Racial Equity Lens](#)
  - [Step-by-Step: A Guide to Achieving Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace](#)
- ▶ Develop processes to support diverse candidates in recruitment, hiring and retention. ([Equity, Diversity & Inclusion in Recruitment, Hiring & Retention](#) and [A Toolkit for Recruiting and Hiring a More Diverse Workforce](#)).
- Express a willingness to reconsider selection criteria and written or physical examinations that do not correspond to job-related duties and disproportionately screen out individuals from underrepresented populations.
- Streamline and make more transparent hiring and selection procedures.
- Consider providing assistance and preparation materials to help applicants prior to assessments.
- Adopt a holistic view of the skills and strengths each applicant brings to the position.
- Involve community members in the hiring process to develop workforces that reflect the diversity of the community.
- Update human resources policies to support LGBTQ staff members (e.g. health insurance coverage provides benefits for LGBTQ families and covers transition-related health care costs for transgender employees).
- ▶ Ensure non-discrimination policies explicitly include protections based on sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression.
  - Build DEI into the competency library of skills, knowledge, characteristics and behaviors that employers use to evaluate employee performance, as well as all job descriptions and annual performance reviews.



- Use technology and social media to communicate and connect with all members of the community.
- Ensure the organization is attending to all aspects of DEI and not just hiring diverse employees.
- Provide DEI training and create a culture where ongoing learning around cultural competency is not only encouraged but expected.
- Support employee resource groups and listen to their recommendations.
  - [Why Diversity Can Be Bad For Business \(And Inclusion is the Answer\)](#)
  - [Diversity Doesn't Stick Without Inclusion](#)
- ▶ Promote and encourage work-life balance.
  - Leverage the fact that organizations that earn a reputation for supporting work-life integration differentiate themselves and have a competitive edge in the search for talent.
  - Best practices and trends for quality-of-life balance.
    - [Work-Life Integration](#)

## Procurement

- ▶ Be intentional about supporting businesses owned by diverse entrepreneurs and identify a specific procurement target (e.g. at least 25% of procurement sourced from these businesses).
  - [Decolonizing Lunch Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#)
- ▶ Identify mechanisms to track procurement data and review biannually to determine adjustments.
- ▶ Increase procurement target annually.
- ▶ Ensure the values of your vendors and other external partners reflect your organization's commitment to DEI.

## Community Engagement & Data Collection

- ▶ Develop and maintain inclusive stakeholder/customer/client engagement strategies and practices relating to diverse communities ([Public Participation Continuum](#) and [Engaging Your Community: A Toolkit for Partnership, Collaboration & Action](#)).
  - Work to build effective informal partnerships with organizations and leaders representing communities and populations facing disparities.
  - Develop formal partnership agreements with organizations and companies representing diverse communities.
  - Develop strategies to remove barriers and create opportunities for the participation of diverse communities (e.g., time and location of meetings, availability of childcare, meeting style, stipends, language, etc.).
  - These practices will also support diverse staff recruitment and procurement efforts.
- ▶ Acknowledge that power dynamics exist and must be addressed to break down barriers to allow for diverse communities to participate.
- ▶ Ensure communications materials reflect the full diversity of the region, use gender neutral language and are available in the languages spoken in the region.
- ▶ Support awareness campaigns and initiatives that encourage diverse communities.

## Sector-Specific Recommendations & Resources

### Business/Economic Recommendations

#### *Overall*

- ▶ Provide access to capital, training opportunities and technical assistance to small businesses owned by entrepreneurs from diverse communities.

- ▶ Increase financial support and services to help promote and bring focus to small- and mid-sized businesses, especially those owned by People of Color and members of the LGBTQ community.

#### *Leadership*

- ▶ Ensure business leadership understands why DEI is important for their bottom line.
  - [The Business Case for Racial Equity](#)

#### *Human Resources & Organizational Culture*

- ▶ Bring diverse communities into your business. Propel them into leadership roles, and substantially change the way you work. Ask these questions: “Let’s figure out where to post our jobs, so we get more People of Color into our organizations” and “How can we remove systemic barriers, so that People of Color apply for — and get — these positions?”

#### *Procurement*

- ▶ Ensure smaller businesses in the region have opportunities to bid for work and become vendors for other companies—particularly small businesses owned by diverse communities—by providing access to real-time information.

#### *Community Engagement & Data Collection*

- ▶ See [Cross-Sector Recommendations & Resources](#)

### **Education Sector Recommendations**

#### *Overall*

- ▶ Ensure campuses provide support and retention services to diverse students and that these students are free from bullying.
- ▶ Identify and implement DEI training for students
  - [Yale Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning- Resource for DEI in the classroom.](#)

- ▶ Use the University of Arkansas’ [Office for Inclusion and Diversity](#) as a model for similar efforts at higher education institutions.
- ▶ Require educator preparation programs to improve diversity and strengthen program components that prepare all teaching and administrator candidates to educate all groups of students.
  - [The Promise of Restorative Practices to Transform Teacher-Student Relationships and Achieve Equity in School Discipline](#)

#### *Leadership*

- ▶ Encourage school boards to signal and embrace the importance of teacher and school leader diversity.
- ▶ Work with school boards to create commitment to DEI values statement, priorities and operational plan.
  - [Equity Rubric](#)
- ▶ Collaborate with school administrations to assist and support Arkansas legislation to protect DACA recipients.

#### *Human Resources & Organizational Culture*

- ▶ Identify targets and strategies to increase the number of diverse teachers in Northwest Arkansas public schools.
  - [Diversifying the Teaching Profession: How to Recruit and Retain Teachers of Color](#)
- ▶ Provide access to professional development on DEI to staff interested in promoting DEI.
- ▶ Create and support cohorts of teachers, assistant principals and principals of color.
- ▶ Invest in mentorship and career ladders for current and aspiring teachers, school and district leaders.
- ▶ Infuse DEI in the school and build a culture that celebrates DEI by integrating multicultural awareness into the curriculum and hosting cultural events that include family members (e.g., Diwali celebrations, Diez y Seis de Septiembre commemorations, etc.).

## Procurement

- ▶ See Cross-Sector Recommendations & Resources

## Community Engagement & Data Collection

- ▶ Ensure all materials are translated into other languages represented within the community and consider hiring translators to support teacher/parent relationships for parents who do not speak English.
- ▶ Require the collection and analysis of data that is disaggregated by race/gender related to student achievement and disciplinary action and administration/teacher/support staff recruitment, interview and hiring practices.
  - [Teachers' Perceptions of Students' Disruptive Behavior: The Effect of Racial Congruence and Consequences for School Suspension](#)
- ▶ Assist parents from Marshallese and Latinx communities by connecting them with other needed services, such as health care, legal aid, English-language classes, and U.S. citizenship classes.
- ▶ Lead research initiatives at higher education institutions to gauge the efficacy of DEI efforts in the region and identify new approaches.

## Health Sector Recommendations

### Overall

- ▶ Define health equity for your organization and develop an organizational commitment to health equity and an understanding of the social determinants of health.
  - [Association of State and Territorial Health Officials Health Equity Position Statement](#)
  - [Local Health Department Organizational Self-Assessment Toolkit](#)
  - [Build Health Challenge](#)

## Leadership

- ▶ Ensure medical boards mirror the communities they serve.

## Human Resources & Organizational Culture

- ▶ Support medical school recruitment and retention rates for diverse communities ([Rackham Graduate School DEI Plan – Focus on recruitment and retention starts on pg. 30](#)).

## Community Engagement & Data Collection

- ▶ Ensure health data are disaggregated by race and gender to identify outcome inequities and develop strategies to reduce inequities.
  - [Health Disparities by Race and Class: Why Both Matter](#)
- ▶ Engage with customers and patients. DEI in a healthcare organization is about more than human resources. It's crucial to solicit the thoughts and perspectives of patients and customers.
  - Create mechanisms to collect feedback in multiple forms as some patients prefer to provide feedback anonymously and ensure mechanisms are available in multiple languages.
  - Replicate and learn from best practices, including providing consistent professional development and training to existing medical staff.
- ▶ Support increasing advocacy, visibility, awareness and intentional processes to introduce the Marshallese communities to the health sector through community events, outreach and engagement.

## Law Enforcement Sector Recommendations

### Overall

- ▶ Create and co-fund an independent community monitoring office. This office will collect community complaints and partner with law

enforcement departments and community organizations to proactively address and improve community law enforcement.

- [New Orleans Independent Police Monitor](#)

#### *Leadership*

- ▶ See Cross-Sector Recommendations & Resources

#### *Human Resources & Organizational Culture*

- ▶ Work collaboratively across regional law enforcement agencies to fund speakers and/or trainers to enhance cross-departmental understanding of DEI in the region and how law enforcement can better support and serve all community members.
- ▶ Ensure departmental culture is guided by community policing (a strategy of policing that focuses on police building ties and working closely with community members); procedural justice (the idea of fairness in the processes that resolve disputes) and cultural inclusivity (welcoming and including all people).
- ▶ Engage stakeholders – both from within and outside the law enforcement agency – to help create a workforce that reflects the diversity of the community.
- ▶ Develop proactive and targeted community outreach efforts that can help encourage people from diverse communities to consider careers in law enforcement.
- ▶ Build partnerships with educational institutions and provide young people with internship programs to create a robust pipeline of potential applicants while also helping to address historically negative perceptions or experiences diverse communities have had with law enforcement.

#### *Community Engagement & Data Collection*

- ▶ Collect and analyze disaggregated race/gender data to identify disparities within the criminal

justice system (e.g., arrests, incarceration rates).

- ▶ Initiate a community advisory committee that is reflective of the diversity within the region and engage the committee on an ongoing basis to review disaggregated data and develop strategies for improving community law enforcement relations.

### **Government Sector Recommendations**

#### *Overall*

- ▶ Provide more civic engagement information and resources to build power for diverse communities.
  - [Seattle's Race and Social Justice Initiative](#)
- ▶ Change the narrative around service and resource provision across both counties (i.e., affordable housing, homelessness, etc.).

#### *Leadership*

- ▶ Develop leadership pipelines for diverse community members to increase their representation on public bodies (city councils, chambers of commerce, etc.) and as public officials (mayors, state representatives, etc.).
  - [Purdue CD Priority Area: Leadership and Civic Engagement](#)
  - [Unlocking Latinx Civic Potential Report](#)

#### *Human Resources & Organizational Culture*

- ▶ Conduct best practice research on equitable hiring practices and implement strategies to support diverse staff recruitment.
  - [City of Madison's Equitable Hiring Tool](#)

#### *Procurement*

- ▶ Develop comprehensive strategies to achieve equity in contracting and procurement, which could include setting equity targets for minority business enterprises and disadvantaged business enterprises, streamlining certification processes, breaking up large contracts into



smaller subcontracts, helping subcontractors grow into prime contractors and removing onerous financial burdens for small businesses.

- [Contracting for Equity](#)

#### *Community Engagement & Data Collection*

- ▶ Review and update current community outreach and engagement strategies to ensure they are inclusive of the full diversity of Northwest Arkansas.
- ▶ Facilitate public meetings with intentionality around inclusion of diverse communities.
- ▶ Conduct annual DEI assessments to document disparities in social and economic well-being and use this information to guide budgeting and policy-making decisions.

### **Nonprofit Sector Recommendations**

#### *Overall*

- ▶ Focus on deconstructing barriers that create inequity rather than addressing “failures” of communities.
- ▶ Research funding opportunities to support organizational DEI learning and implementation.

#### *Leadership*

- ▶ Update bylaws to mandate a proportion of the board reflect the communities served by the organization.
  - Utilize a comprehensive board matrix to capture data on current board members and identify gaps for recruitment. (Sample [Board Matrix](#))
- ▶ Initiate a DEI committee within the board to work with organization staff to support DEI learning, strategies and evaluation.
- ▶ Committee would also develop the vision, strategy and goals for DEI at the board level.
- ▶ Include DEI training as part of board orientation.

#### *Human Resources & Organizational Culture*

- ▶ Add DEI as a core value for the organization, if it is not already.
- ▶ Ensure staff are representative of the community the organization serves.
  - [Race to Lead Studies](#)

#### *Procurement*

- ▶ See Cross-Sector Recommendations & Resources

#### *Community Engagement & Data Collection*

- ▶ Ensure those utilizing nonprofit programs/ services have formal and ongoing mechanisms to influence, inform and evaluate them.
  - [Ripple Effects Mapping Hub](#)
- ▶ Collect program use and experience data by subgroup (race/ethnicity/socioeconomic status/ gender/sexual orientation/education level/ immigration status).
  - Train staff on best practices for collecting, analyzing and reporting on disaggregated demographic data.
  - Analyze this data and share results with organizational stakeholders.
  - Use disaggregated demographic data to inform planning and decision-making.
- ▶ Engage communities served by the nonprofit in the organization’s decisions (e.g. board, committees, advisory groups, community listening sessions, etc.).
- ▶ Share resources with partner organizations working with diverse communities.
- ▶ Ensure communications materials are inclusive and affirm the full diversity of the communities the nonprofit serves.

# APPENDIX

## Methodology

After discussions with stakeholders and community participants, TRUE decided to utilize a mixed-methods design grounded in the TRUE DEI framework. TRUE Advisory Council members informed the development of focus groups and stakeholder interviews and identified various sources of existing data for the sectors analyzed in this report. TRUE researchers also conducted additional data collection and analysis via primary sources including the U.S. Census, Arkansas Department of Education and County Health Rankings, as well as a conducting a telephone survey of 600 Northwest Arkansas residents. Based on the analysis of the data collected, researchers identified recommendations to address the challenges identified in the findings to ensure all communities in Northwest Arkansas can fully access the region's abundant opportunities.

Researchers reviewed existing demographic and other data on Northwest Arkansas in order to paint a broad picture of the area and serve as the foundation for a deeper understanding of conditions related to DEI. Sources for this phase of data collection included the Northwest Arkansas Council, Arkansas Economic Development Commission, County Health Rankings, U.S. Department of Education Civil Rights Data Collection statistics, the Arkansas Department of Education and the U.S. Census.

The phone survey was administered by the Survey Research Laboratory at Mississippi State University to a representative sample of 600 adult respondents residing in Benton and Washington counties. For maximum coverage, a dual-frame design was used that included both cellular and landline telephone numbers drawn from a list of all telephone numbers assigned in the two counties.



To ensure that a reproducible and representative sample was obtained, probability-based sampling via random digit dial was used within each of the two frames. In total, 19,500 landline and 63,000 cellular telephone numbers were sampled from their respective universes of 310,000 and 680,000 total numbers. The survey secured 600 interviews (540 from the cellphone frame and 60 from the landline frame).

One of the primary limitations to TRUE researchers' examination of existing quantitative data lies in the inconsistency of how the U.S. Census Bureau and

other data sources define racial/ethnic categories. Since “Hispanic,” referred to in this report as Latinx, is not a race in itself but rather refers to self-identification of heritage and/or ethnic identity, it transcends racial categories. The term Latinx allows people to ask questions about gender, language, inclusion and other changes among cultures.<sup>16</sup> In other words, someone who identifies as Latinx could also identify as white or Black. This makes disaggregating Latinx data from other demographic groups difficult. Similarly, the Census Bureau lumps the Marshallese community into its Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander category. This requires this report to make inference as to who likely identifies as a Marshallese person based on the larger-than-average number of people who identify as Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, given the substantial Marshallese population in Northwest Arkansas.

A second major limitation pertains to the availability of data relating to the LGBTQ community. Many of the major sources of demographic and public health data, like the U.S. Census and county health rankings, do not routinely collect information on the LGBTQ community. Indeed, the telephone survey conducted for this report appears to be the first attempt to capture this communities’ perspectives – in quantifiable data form – alongside those of ethnic/racial groups in the region to arrive at a more inclusive fabric of diverse, community-wide perspectives.

Another shortcoming relates to the dynamics at play in both telephone surveys and focus groups, particularly when respondents are asked for their opinions on sensitive topics, such as race relations and sexual identity. While phone surveys provide more quantifiable data that is easily analyzed, they are less personal and interactive and respondents may be more guarded in their answers. At the other end of the spectrum, focus groups can create peer pressure to give “correct” answers or align with “group think.”

Likely for this reason, the findings in this report from the phone survey often conflict with the sentiments expressed in the focus groups and key stakeholder interviews. Based solely on the results of the telephone survey, for example, one might conclude that most people in Northwest Arkansas are satisfied with the opportunities available in the region. The discrepancies between the telephone survey results and both existing regional data and insights from the focus groups and interviews provide essential context in helping to identify areas where DEI strategies and efforts require further attention and effort.

With assistance from the TRUE Advisory Council, a geographically diverse set of residents from identified ethnic and social groups were recruited to participate in focus groups. Both the 17 key stakeholder interviews and the roughly 90 participants across 10 focus groups represent the primary demographic groups in Northwest Arkansas. These included members of the Black, Latinx, LGBTQ, Asian American, Marshallese and Native American communities, as well as multi-generational white residents, faith-based groups, youth and members of the business community.



Mount Nebo State Park, AR

## Overview of the TRUE Northwest Arkansas Initiative

Over the last three decades, the Northwest Arkansas region, defined in this report as Benton and Washington counties, has experienced dramatic growth in population, employment and income. With this has come challenges that too often accompany such growth, one of which is the inclusion of diverse populations. To address this challenge, TRUE Northwest Arkansas aimed to develop strategies for supporting greater inclusion and equity across the region. This work is made possible by grants to the Arkansas Community Foundation from the Walton Family Foundation and the Walmart Foundation. The project is led by Converge, a DEI consulting firm.

**THE RESULTING TRUE NWA INITIATIVE IS A THREE-YEAR PILOT EFFORT THAT SEEKS TO DEVELOP A SHARED VISION FOR DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION IN NORTHWEST ARKANSAS. TRUE AIMS TO:**



**TRAIN** compassionate local champions of diversity, equity and inclusion.



**REPORT** on the region's state of inclusion to build understanding around gaps and barriers.



**UPLIFT** the work of underrepresented communities with a three-year grant program.



**ENGAGE** Northwest Arkansas communities in the process.

## TRAIN

The TRAIN cohort seeks to build local capacity to clearly and confidently approach DEI issues in Northwest Arkansas by providing training opportunities for 40 organizations to increase their capacity to integrate and apply a DEI framework throughout their work. The TRAIN program:

- ▶ Provides opportunities for shared learning among peers and across nonprofit staff and organization leaders.
- ▶ Uses strategies that target structural issues that limit opportunities for people in underserved communities.
- ▶ Invests in technical assistance for organizations to support DEI-focused best practices in organizational development.



## REPORT

This TRUE NWA report aims to capture diverse communities' experiences with various sectors in the region. The goals of this report are to:

- ▶ Develop a comprehensive analysis of the state of DEI in the region, including identifying underlying causes of disparities and inequities.
- ▶ Illuminate the experiences and perspectives of communities within the region.
- ▶ Identify opportunities to advance DEI in Northwest Arkansas and contribute to the development of place-based strategies and commitments to DEI.



# UPLIFT

The UPLIFT cohort was initiated to support the capacity and visibility of organizations already engaged in diversity, equity and inclusion work with underrepresented communities in Northwest Arkansas. The program combines capacity-building grants and technical assistance with shared learning experiences for 10 grantees over a three-year period from 2019 through 2021. The goals of the UPLIFT program are to:

- ▶ Increase the visibility of participating organization’s core missions and programs in the region.
- ▶ Strengthen the financial sustainability of participating organizations.
- ▶ Provide insights and learnings to key stakeholders in the region about how to build the capacity of organizations working to advance equity and inclusion in the region.



Indigenous Goddess #9 by J. NiCole Hatfield. Museum of Native American History; Bentonville, AR

# ENGAGE

In order to ensure consistent and diverse community engagement, the TRUE Advisory Council was established in 2017 to support the development of this initiative. The council is comprised of community leaders from the various sectors addressed in this report. The list below recognizes all current and past council members for their commitment and guidance throughout the TRUE initiative:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <b>Terry Bankston</b><br><i>Bankston Consulting</i>                    | <b>Melisa Laelan</b><br><i>Arkansas Coalition of Marshallese</i>               |
| <b>Kathryn Birkhead</b><br><i>Birkhead Consulting</i>                  | <b>Yvette Murphy-Erby</b><br><i>University of Arkansas</i>                     |
| <b>John L Colbert</b><br><i>Fayetteville Public Schools</i>            | <b>Nelson Peacock</b><br><i>Northwest Arkansas Council</i>                     |
| <b>Kim Davis</b><br><i>Walton Family Foundation</i>                    | <b>Eric Pianalto</b><br><i>Mercy Health</i>                                    |
| <b>Abdellah Essalki</b><br><i>Islamic Center of Northwest Arkansas</i> | <b>Anne Shelley</b><br><i>IDEALS Institute at University of Arkansas</i>       |
| <b>Emily Hackerson</b><br><i>Tyson Foods Upward Academy</i>            | <b>Janie Simms Hipp</b><br><i>Native American Agriculture Fund</i>             |
| <b>Ronnie Hoyt</b><br><i>St. Vincent de Paul Catholic Parish</i>       | <b>Mark Snodgrass</b><br><i>Bentonville Community Church</i>                   |
| <b>Debbie Jones</b><br><i>Bentonville Public Schools</i>               | <b>Margarita Solórzano</b><br><i>Hispanic Women’s Organization of Arkansas</i> |
| <b>Monica Kumar</b><br><i>Northwest Arkansas Community Member</i>      | <b>Lisa Stuart</b><br><i>Transgender Equality Network</i>                      |

## TRUE Funders

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### Walmart.org

Walmart.org represents the philanthropic efforts of Walmart and the Walmart Foundation. By leaning in where the business has unique strengths, Walmart.org works to tackle key social issues and collaborate with others to spark long-lasting systemic change. Walmart has stores in 26 countries, employs more than 2.2 million associates and does business with thousands of suppliers who, in turn, employ millions of people. Walmart.org is helping people live better by supporting programs that work to accelerate upward job mobility for frontline workers, address hunger and make healthier, more sustainably grown food a reality, and build strong communities where Walmart operates. To learn more, visit [www.walmart.org](http://www.walmart.org) or connect on Twitter @Walmartorg.



### Walton Family Foundation

The Walton Family Foundation is, at its core, a family-led foundation. Three generations of the descendants of our founders, Sam and Helen Walton, and their spouses, work together to lead the foundation and create access to opportunity for people and communities. We work in three areas: improving K-12 education, protecting rivers and oceans and the communities they support, and investing in our home region of Northwest Arkansas and the Arkansas-Mississippi Delta. In 2019, the foundation awarded more than \$525 million in grants in support of these initiatives.

## TRUE Partners

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### Arkansas Community Foundation

Arkansas Community Foundation, a nonprofit organization with a half billion dollars in assets, fosters smart giving to improve communities. The Community Foundation offers tools to help Arkansans protect, grow and direct their charitable dollars as they learn more about community needs. By making grants and sharing knowledge, the Foundation supports existing charitable programs that work for Arkansas and partners to create initiatives that address unmet needs. Since 1976, the Community Foundation has provided more than \$314 million in grants and partnered with thousands of Arkansans to help them improve our neighborhoods, our towns and our entire state.



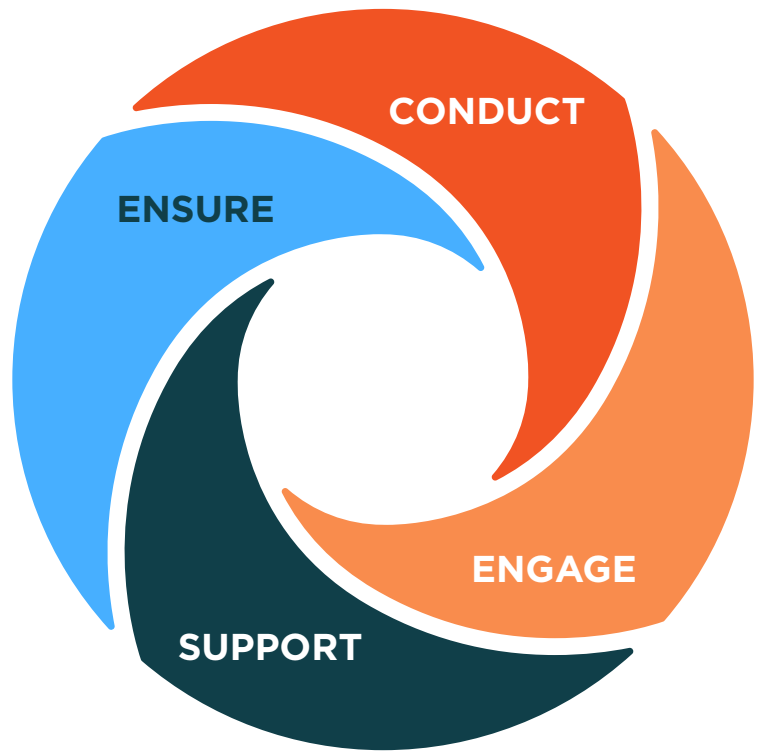
### Converge

Converge is a mission-driven, values-based national consulting firm based in New Orleans, Louisiana. Converge's mission is to accelerate the creation of a radically just new world where Communities of Color thrive. The firm specializes in philanthropic strategy development, nonprofit organizational development, strategic planning as well as diversity, equity and inclusion. Converge has extensive experience providing technical assistance and capacity-building support to social justice organizations and coalitions engaged in policy advocacy, community organizing and direct services. To learn more about Converge, visit [www.convergeforchange.com](http://www.convergeforchange.com).

## DEI Framework for TRUE

In order to assess the state of DEI in the region, it is important to first define DEI. The following framework is based on the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s framework for advancing racial equity as well as the racial equity and inclusion framework for the City of Edmonton in California.<sup>17</sup>

- Conduct root cause** analysis of existing barriers and disparities (e.g. disaggregated extent data surveys, focus groups, etc).
- Engage leaders and stakeholders** to identify place-based strategies to advance DEI.
- Support the implementation of DEI strategies** by providing resources & training to advance DEI.
- Ensure leaders are responsive & reflective of the diversity** within the community and all stakeholders are continually engaged.



## Glossary of DEI Terms

### DIVERSITY

A variety of social identities, demographic, cultural, personal experiences and philosophical differences within a group or community.

### EQUITY

People of all backgrounds have access to the resources, opportunities and influence/power they need to enjoy full healthy lives.

### INCLUSION

Being included within a group or a structure through authentic and empowered participation in which people feel like they belong.

### DOMINANT COMMUNITY

Not only the most prevalent group by demographics (race, sexuality, etc.), but also the group with power, privilege and social status that controls the values systems and rewards of society.

### PERCEPTION

A thought, belief or opinion based on appearances and personal experience.

### PLACE-BASED

Rooted in what is local—the unique history, environment, culture, economy, literature and art of a particular geographic area.

### RACE

A socially constructed system of categorizing human beings based on phenotype and ancestry. The ideology of race is embedded in our systems and structures and used as a basis of discrimination and oppression.

### PRIVILEGE

An unearned advantage, immunity, permission, right or benefit granted to or enjoyed by an individual because of their class, caste, gender or racial/ethnic group.

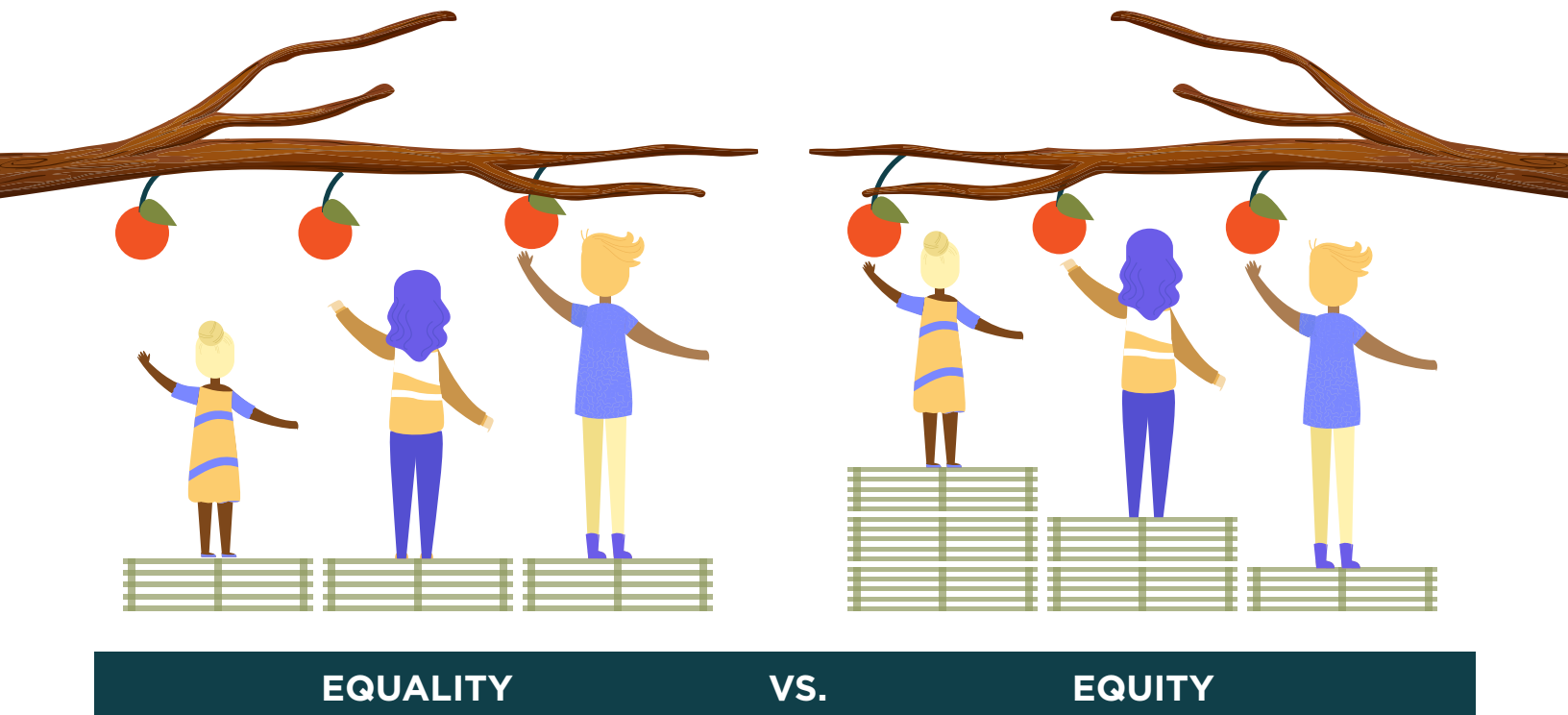
## OPPRESSION

The systemic and pervasive nature of inequality woven throughout social institutions and embedded within individual consciousness. Oppression fuses institutional and systemic discrimination, personal bias, bigotry and social prejudice in a complex web of relationships and structures that saturate most aspects of life in our society. Systemic oppression is experienced at the individual, interpersonal, institutional and structural levels, as illustrated on the right.



## Equality vs. Equity

Equality and equity are two strategies that can be used in an effort to produce fairness. Equity is giving everyone what they need to be successful. Equality is treating everyone the same. Equality aims to promote fairness, but it can only work if everyone starts from the same place and needs the same help (Sun, 2014). In order to take action to interrupt cycles of oppression, we need to understand the difference between equity and equality. Equity involves trying to understand and give people what they need to enjoy full, healthy lives. Equality aims to ensure that everyone gets the same things in order to enjoy full, healthy lives. Like equity, equality aims to promote fairness and justice, but it can only work if everyone starts from the same place and needs the same things.





# ENDNOTES

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- 6 U.S. Census, American Community Survey, 2014–2018 5-year estimates; available at: [https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=Income%20and%20Poverty&g=0400000US05\\_0500000US05143&tid=ACSST5Y2018.S1903&hidePreview=true](https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=Income%20and%20Poverty&g=0400000US05_0500000US05143&tid=ACSST5Y2018.S1903&hidePreview=true)
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# TRUE

NORTHWEST ARKANSAS

