

July 2, 2024
(Addendum to July 1, 2024 submission to the Office of DOI)

Dear Governor Youngkin and Members of the Virginia General Assembly,

Pursuant to Va Code § 2.2-602 I am writing to you on behalf of the Virginia Indigent Defense Commission (VIDC)] to present our Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Report for your review and consideration. As an Independent state agency committed to fostering an inclusive and equitable workplace environment, we have diligently pursued initiatives aimed at advancing DEI principles across our organization.

Under multiple administrations, we have made significant strides in enhancing diversity, improving employee engagement, and fostering greater satisfaction among our workforce. These achievements are the result of intentional and purposeful measures that we have implemented over the years.

Our approach to DEI is not merely a set of isolated programs, but rather an integral part of our organizational development strategy. We firmly believe that Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion should permeate every facet of our agency, contributing to a more resilient, innovative, and responsive organization. This holistic view of DEI underscores our commitment to creating a workplace where all employees feel valued, respected, and empowered to contribute their best.

In this report, we outline the initiatives that have proven successful in promoting diversity and inclusion within our agency. Our goal is not only to sustain these initiatives but also to expand their reach across all levels of our organization.

We appreciate your continued support and look forward to discussing our DEI initiatives in more detail at your earliest convenience. Please do not hesitate to reach out if you have any questions or require further information.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

Amari Harris
General Counsel and Director of Equity & Operations
Virginia Indigent Defense Commission

CC: Martin Brown, Chief Diversity, Opportunity, and Inclusion Officer.



At the VIDC, we believe in creating an environment where diversity, equity, and inclusion are not just ideals but integral and inseparable parts of our culture and operations. Since 2019, we have undertaken significant initiatives to champion these principles across every facet of our organization. Our commitment extends beyond rhetoric; it is evidenced by tangible actions that propel us toward a more equitable and diverse future.

Affinity Groups: Recognizing the importance of community and support networks, we initiated the formation of eight affinity groups in 2020. These groups serve as vital platforms for fostering connections, amplifying voices, and addressing the unique needs of various communities within our agency. They have been the drivers behind many initiatives and policy changes at the VIDC.

Recruiting/Onboarding: We have included our affinity groups, wellness materials, and a comprehensive summary of our benefits in our onboarding materials and careers page to communicate to applicants and new hires that we have worked to foster multiple communities and initiatives to support their sustained efficacy and wellness in this work.

Hiring and Promotion Policy: To ensure fairness and competitiveness in our hiring and promotion processes, we implemented revised policies that prioritize equity. These measures are designed to mitigate biases and create opportunities for all qualified individuals, irrespective of background. This includes requiring a job posting and recruitment for any management-level positions and standardized interview questions and assessments for all roles.

Internship Programs: Our commitment to diversity is also reflected in our internship programs. We established paid internship initiatives aimed at enhancing diversity within our ranks and providing opportunities in legal deserts. Furthermore, our partnership with NCCU for a paid internship program signifies our dedication to providing opportunities for underrepresented talent.

Advocacy for Systemic Change: We actively advocate for systemic change within the legal profession. Our efforts include lobbying the Virginia Supreme Court and Board of Bar Examiners to adopt the Uniform Bar Exam and a Public Defender Admission rule. These measures enable us to attract diverse talent from across the nation, fostering a more inclusive legal community.

Community Partnerships: Collaborating with organizations such as the Black Public Defender Association (BPDA) through the Community Access Partnership underscores our commitment to continuous learning and engagement. This partnership provides us access to invaluable resources, including training, conferences, and fellowships, enriching our understanding and practice of inclusive excellence.

Language and Representation: Recognizing the power of language in shaping perceptions, we have diligently reviewed and updated our job postings, website, and policies and procedures to eliminate non-inclusive language. By ensuring our communications reflect our commitment to diversity, we aim to create an inviting and inclusive environment for all.

Inclusive Excellence Training: Embracing diversity requires ongoing education and awareness. To this end, we have conducted inclusive excellence training sessions tailored to all position groups within our agency. Additionally, specialized sessions for individual offices, aligned with their core values, further reinforce our commitment to fostering an inclusive culture.

Impact: Our efforts have yielded tangible results, with our overall racial and ethnic diversity increasing from 18% to 27% since 2020. These statistics not only reflect our progress but also serve as a testament to the efficacy of our initiatives in building a more diverse and equitable workplace.

At the VIDC, diversity, equity, and inclusion are not just aspirations; they are part of the fabric of our identity. As we continue on this journey, we remain dedicated to fostering an environment where every individual feels valued, respected, and empowered to thrive.



Mentorship and professional development opportunities to promote diversity, equity and inclusion.

The VIDC has several mentorship and professional development initiatives to promote DEI.

The POC (People of Color) Leadership Development Committee, a subcommittee of the Alliance for Race Equity that is open to all VIDC employees, is dedicated to identifying and mitigating barriers to advancement and professional development for people of color within the organization. One of the primary programs this group generated was the “Leadership Forum” where Leaders and Supervisors from our agency sit on a panel and discuss their path to leadership and what they believe it takes. While the program was open to all lawyers and interns, we made sure the panel was diverse so that employees of different backgrounds could visibly see their demographics in leadership and hear about their unique journey.

Additionally, the Women Defender's Affinity Group operates a successful mentorship program, which is set to expand agency-wide in the upcoming Fall.

Finally, the VIDC generally provides free Continuing Legal Education (CLE) courses to court-appointed counsel and public defenders. The VIDC also supports employees, both lawyers and non-lawyers, in attending external trainings and pursuing education relevant to public defense. Furthermore, the organization actively encourages its staff to become trainers, adjunct professors, and leaders within their local legal communities. These efforts collectively contribute to fostering a supportive and inclusive environment while advancing the professional growth of all employees.



Agencies commitment to hiring and promoting with a focus on diversity, equity and inclusion.

Our agency is deeply committed to diversity and equity in all aspects of our hiring and promotion processes. Recognizing the importance of representation and inclusivity, we have implemented several initiatives to ensure a more diverse workforce and leadership team.

Firstly, we have revised our hiring policy to mandate that all management-level positions be posted, allowing individuals to apply and be interviewed for promotion opportunities. This transparent approach ensures equal access to advancement within the organization. Additionally, we have modified our EWP's for all non attorney positions with the exception of our Mitigation Specialists/ Social Worker positions to remove any degree requirements or preferences and emphasize relevant experience.

Furthermore, we have proactively sought out talent from historically underrepresented backgrounds by intentionally recruiting from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and diverse law schools. Our partnership with NCCU for paid internships has not only provided valuable experience to students but has also resulted in multiple graduates joining our team as full-time employees. We have also provided recognition leave to employees who have gone above the call of duty to assist with our recruiting efforts by attending On-Campus Interview Sessions and other recruiting consortium events.

In addition to targeted recruitment efforts, we have extended our reach by sharing job postings on platforms catering to diverse and underrepresented groups. Attending events such as the Black Law Student Association Conferences allows us to engage with potential candidates directly, serving as panelists and actively recruiting talented individuals.

Moreover, our commitment to fostering diversity extends beyond recruitment to collaboration and support within the legal community. Through our Collective Access Partnership with the Black Public Defender Association, we aim to promote inclusivity and equity within the legal profession.

Lastly, by increasing our hiring of students straight out of law school, we have diversified our applicant pool and provided opportunities for emerging talent from diverse backgrounds to thrive within our organization.

In summary, our agency's dedication to diversity and equity in hiring and promotion is evident through our proactive recruitment strategies, transparent hiring processes, and collaborative efforts to support underrepresented groups within the legal community.



How our agency has worked to combat inequality, including outside philanthropic efforts and / or community endeavors.

Our agency's efforts to combat inequality are indefinite and comprehensive. By actively engaging in legislative advocacy, our public defenders are not only providing direct legal representation but also striving to address systemic injustices. Testifying at the General Assembly and participating in lobbying organizations such as Justice Forward demonstrate commitment to effecting meaningful change beyond the courtroom.

Our people have focused on issues like pretextual police stops, selective enforcement of marijuana possession laws, and the jury trial penalty highlighting successful attempts at addressing disparities within the criminal justice system. By advocating for legislative changes and even contributing to the drafting of new laws, we have played a crucial role in reform efforts.

We also pay for and encourage public defenders' participation in local bar associations to foster professional development and strengthen ties within the legal community. Within the local community, our individual offices have contributed to numerous programs including, but not limited to, Community Resource Guides, Toys for Tots, holiday gift bags, back-to-school supply, book and clothes drives, etc. This reflects a commitment to serving not only clients within the legal system but also the broader community. These efforts help build trust and support beyond the courtroom, fostering positive relationships and a sense of solidarity.

Finally, the expansion of staff positions through the Opioid Abatement Grant has helped us address complex issues such as substance use disorders within the criminal justice system. By providing support for individuals transitioning from incarceration back into their communities, we are contributing to both public safety and rehabilitation.

Significant accomplishments toward diversity, equity and inclusion.

- Increased our overall ethnic and racial diversity by 9% in 4 years
- Established 8 active affinity groups
- Established paid internship partnership with an HBCU
- Over half of paid internships have gone to underrepresented groups for summer 2022 and 2023
- Have increased % of POC in management by over 3%



Data or information that demonstrates commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion.

- Increased our overall ethnic and racial diversity by nearly 10% in 4 years

2020

537 Employees

97 POC (18%)

2023

659 Employees

179 POC (27.1%%)

- Established 8 active affinity groups
- Established paid internship partnership with an HBCU
- Over half of paid internships have gone to underrepresented groups for summer 2022 and 2023
- Have increased % of POC in management by over 3%

12 POC Leaders/ 117 Total Leaders in 2020 (10.2%)

19 POC Leaders/137 Total Leaders in 2023 (13.8%)

Future goals or benchmarks to support diversity, equity and inclusion.

- Establish an agency wide mentor program
- Establish additional paid internship and fellowship programs with diverse schools and programs
- Create a 1-2 Year Appellate Fellowship that focuses on applicants with diverse backgrounds
- Address the Virginia Bar Exam barrier (UBE or Public Interest Waiver Rule)
- Continue to increase diversity in agency and leadership
- Provide leading and managing for equity training to all supervisors