

# Employment Practices *Update*

Bringing important information to emergency service organizations

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*As a follow-up to our most recent diversity article (see Empl. Pract. Update, Vol. 7 No. 4), this article focuses on issues that may arise when ESOs serve multicultural communities.*



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## The Role of Diversity in Serving Multicultural Communities

*Emergency services organization (ESO) professionals work with an increasingly diverse population. A greater understanding of these multicultural communities will encourage safer and more effective delivery of services.*

### Our Differences Make Us Alike

A common myth is that diversity is only about race and gender in the workplace. Diversity is a broader concept encompassing the entire multicultural community and should not strictly be assessed by the make-up of your ESO's workforce but in relation to its *community*—its service area, city, county, state, region, and country.

A multicultural community reflects the variety in our society today, regarding:

- Age
- Physical, mental, and emotional abilities
- Race and color
- Military experience
- Parental status
- Gender
- National origin (country of origin)
- Religion/spiritual beliefs and values
- Educational background
- Work experience/work style
- Position or rank within the workplace
- Language skills
- Socio-economic status
- Geographic location (where people live)
- Political views
- Sexual orientation/identity
- Communication style

### Diversity and Inclusion

Many people have misperceptions about diversity and how it should be addressed within a work environment. For our purposes, work-related diversity should not be associated with:

- ✓ Quotas
- ✓ Total assimilation and loss of individuality
- ✓ Sensitivity training
- ✓ Conversion of personal beliefs
- ✓ Forced acceptance of different perspectives or lifestyles
- ✓ Exclusionary teaching — centering on how we are all different

Focusing on diversity simply means treating others with respect and fairness. Diversity does not demand preferential treatment, but instead calls for equal treatment.

**Recognizing diversity only requires that you do not act in an exclusionary manner.** Inclusion is necessary to maintaining a truly diverse work environment. It is possible to have a diverse workforce that is not inclusive. For example, the gender make-up of a workforce could reflect that of the population, but sex-based bias and discrimination could still be pervasive. Likewise, a person does not have to be a member of a minority group to be inclusive and respectful of differences.

*Continued on page 2*

### Understanding Your Cultural Community

ESO professionals are committed to providing a high quality of fire and rescue service to all citizens, without bias or discrimination. Therefore, it is important that ESOs understand a community's needs and differences so that they are reflected in ESO policies, practices, and philosophies.

Providing emergency services to a diverse community can be complicated by cultural differences in many areas, such as:

- Language and communication
- Gender-appropriate physical contact
- Culturally inappropriate touching and modesty concerns
- Religious customs
- Citizens reluctant to call 9-1-1 out of fears associated with the inability to pay for services, deportation, or embarrassment for causing an emergency

Has your ESO explored the demographic and other culturally related information about the population you serve?

### Leadership

**ESO leaders must set the example for non-discrimination and awareness of cultural diversity.** Top ESO administrators may initiate contact with local cultural group leaders to help improve communication and safety. When applicable, management and union leaders may work together to heighten awareness of diversity issues and prevent work-related discrimination.

### Community Education and Public Safety

Educating a multicultural community about emergency services can be challenging due to language and communication differences. Clearly, the more informed the public can become about fire prevention and EMS, the better for the community and its service providers.

ESO leaders are encouraged to solicit help from community members in providing multicultural education. Citizens can help spread the word within their communities about fire prevention and safety. They can also help the ESO by translating for in-person and written communications.

### Education for ESO Members

Diversity training is more than learning how to prevent discrimination and harassment. This training is extremely valuable, but diversity education extends beyond legal issues.

**Extend your ESO members' understanding of diversity education.** Seek speakers from outside your ESO who can educate your members on specific community groups' cultural practices, rituals, and customs. Work with your ESO leaders, community leaders, and professionals in employment law and human relations to develop a plan for diversity education.

### Attract and Recruit a Diverse Workforce

**In today's multicultural society, it is essential for ESO leaders to foster an environment of inclusion where people feel valued and integrated at all levels.** Employees and volunteers become more engaged when they feel their skills and perspectives are appreciated and utilized. Since current members are an ESO's best source for recruiting, it helps to have valued and engaged workers who can enthusiastically recruit talented colleagues to fill open positions and expand membership. A diverse and inclusive workforce can also benefit your ESO with new ideas and ways to solve problems. This is another reason why ESOs are encouraged to reach out to all groups in their communities.

### Diversity Audit

ESO leaders are encouraged to assess how your ESO reaches out to its multicultural community to advance public education, safety, and bias prevention by asking:

- What steps have you taken over the last year to prevent work-related harassment and discrimination?
- Has your ESO established clear written policies regarding equal opportunity employment/membership?
- Do your policies to prevent harassment and discrimination include various avenues of internal complaint and resolution?
- Have designated members been trained to receive allegations of work-related harassment or discrimination and conduct prompt, impartial, and comprehensive investigations?
- How frequently are your members educated on diversity, inclusion, and discrimination prevention?
- Do you utilize a qualified professional to educate your workforce on respecting diversity, both in worker-to-worker interactions and with the community?
- Have you identified the multicultural communities within your service area?
- Have your ESO leaders contacted cultural leaders to increase awareness of emergency services and best serve the community?
- What efforts have been made to overcome communication and language barriers in educating local groups about your services?
- What measures have been taken to attract, recruit, and retain a diverse workforce?
- Besides emergencies, what interaction does your ESO have with multicultural groups? Does it participate in cultural festivals, parades, or gatherings in the community?

### Conclusion

Simply put, understanding diversity is essential to serving citizens of various cultural groups and maintaining a healthy work environment. ESO leaders are encouraged to take proactive steps to better educate all employees and volunteers and to build bridges of communication with diverse community groups.