

DECEMBER 2022

# **RACIAL EQUITY & BELONGING AUDIT**



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# INTRODUCTION FROM THE IDEA WORKING GROUP AT VAAF

After nearly a year of working with a contractor to support the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets' (VAAF) efforts to increase equity, the Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accountability (IDEA) group is pleased to have this report in hand. We hope it will offer a meaningful assessment of current conditions and provide an impactful set of action steps for VAAF moving forward.

The IDEA group began back in the summer of 2020, as the country reacted to the circumstances surrounding the murder of George Floyd. VAAF staff were increasingly aware that as individuals and as an organization we needed to tackle issues of inequity, bias, and discrimination at our workplace in ways that were explicit, educational, and actionable. Knowing the required state employee trainings currently available were insufficient, a grassroots group emerged to learn, plan, and facilitate conversation.

With Agency leadership knowledge and financial support, we put out a bid to gain professional guidance to help make equity a core principle of VAAF's work. After multiple rounds of vetting, MMG EARTH (MMG) was deemed the contractor who could most skillfully carry out this work. Together, we sought to understand:

- Staff's current/baseline perceptions and values around equity
- Gaps both within and outside of VAAF
- What VAAF is already doing that we can build upon
- Issues we feel we can change, will have the largest effect, or are highest priority

- If we are reaching marginalized populations and what are the barriers to engagement
- How to engage a mostly white staff in a mostly white state
- How supremacy culture shows up in our work and recommendations for how to respond

We anticipate that this report will facilitate greater buy-in from VAAF. For this report to enact lasting change, the recommendations need to be prioritized and IDEA work must be integrated into each Division's and staff member's work. We aim for funding to be made available as necessary to implement the next steps identified in this report and through collaborative decision-making processes.

We ultimately hope this report brings everyone together, no matter where we are each at in our own interest or familiarity with equity work. We hope this is a starting place to ensure that:

- All VAAF staff are treated with respect and are called into equity work
- We have created a shared culture around learning and growing in the equity space
- We foster an improved understanding and engagement for staff (trainings, etc.)
- Staff have greater confidence in completing the state's Equity Impact Assessments
- As a result of having a positive and equitable internal culture, we can recruit and retain employees who bring a variety of diverse experiences and feel respected

The group is grateful to the team at MMG for their months of dedicated work to design this resource. The IDEA group acknowledges that this work is not easy but is necessary. No report will be perfect or comprehensive of each person's experiences, but we hold this as a meaningful set of data and recommendations with which we can move forward together.

The comradery this group has fostered has allowed for a small but growing team to come together across divisions to share challenges, excitement, motivation, difficulty, and ultimately to foster a space to promote greater equity. We are especially guided by the notion of creating a "brave space," as explored in the poem below. We hope that you come forward to explore the findings in this report with bravery.

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## **An Invitation To A Brave Space**

**By Beth Strano**

*Together we will create brave space*

*Because there is no such thing as a "safe space"*

*We exist in the real world*

*We all carry scars and we have all caused wounds.*

*In this space*

*We seek to turn down the volume of the outside world.*

*We amplify voices that fight to be heard elsewhere,*

*We call each other to more truth and love*

*We have the right to start somewhere and continue to grow.*

*We have the responsibility to examine what we think we know.*

*We will not be perfect.*

*It will not always be what we wish it to be*

*But*

*It will be our brave space together,*

*And*

*We will work on it side by side.*

If you are interested in learning more, please reach out to anyone on the IDEA Team: Abbey Willard, Alyson Eastman, Brooke Decker, Emilie Inoue, Faith Raymond, Gina Clithero, Julia Scheier, Kathryn Donovan, Kristen Brassard, Melissa Moon, Shalini Suryanarayana, Sonia Howlett, and Thea Schwartz



**I want to discourage you from choosing anything or making any decision simply because it is safe. Things of value seldom are.**

— Toni Morrison

If someone asked you right now to define equity, justice, or belonging how would you define it? In a society founded on white dominant culture<sup>1</sup> and the upholding of damaging and forever life-altering norms of superiority over people based on caste, race, ethnicity, region, gender, disability, language, size, sexual orientation, etc., what is the role of racial justice? As purpose-driven researchers and analysts who have been engaged in this work for 10 years, we define racial justice as individual, ideological, interpersonal, and institutional changes that bring about communities and societies which liberate people from systems of oppression. Justice is brought about through power-sharing, collaborative decision-making, and policies that are informed and led by a broad range of stakeholders who have been most detrimentally impacted by societal marginalization and disenfranchisement. The following Racial Equity and Belonging Audit (REBA) report presents the collective qualitative and quantitative experiences of respondents across the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food, and Markets (VAAFM) and external community partners. As you review our findings and recommendations, we ask you to keep eight key points in mind:

1. Race is a social construct that carries varied meanings across cultures and countries. As researchers, when we use the terms “racially just” or “racially equitable” in the context of VAAFM’s work in our society, we are also referring to caste and ethnicity. In addition, because our intersecting identities shape and change the ways in which we are treated and perceived, our research is intersectional. We look not only at race, but also age, class, LGBTQIA+ identity, education, geography, and more.
2. When using the term “equity” we refer to a definition created by The White House and the USDA<sup>2</sup> which reads as follows: “the consistent and systematic fair, just, and impartial treatment of all individuals, including individuals who belong to underserved communities that have been denied such treatment, such as Black, [Latinx], and Indigenous and Native American persons, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and other persons of color; members of religious minorities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) persons; persons with disabilities; persons who live in rural areas; and persons otherwise adversely affected by persistent poverty or inequality.”

1. See Language Choices for a description of this term.

2. <https://www.usda.gov/equity>

3. Tokenism is not racial justice<sup>3</sup>. Increasing the representation of Black, Asian, Latinx, Indigenous, and other staff members of Color is important, but if a working culture has not been designed to create an affirming and safe environment for People of Color, representation alone does not lead to equitable and just outcomes. In addition, representation without ongoing commitment tokenizes Black, African, Asian, Latinx, Indigenous, and other People of Color.
4. This work requires us to be vulnerable. In the words of writer, activist and facilitator, [adrienne maree brown](#), “transformation cannot happen in low risk spaces.” Every single staff member and leader across the organization who participated bravely in this process took a risk in doing so. To speak openly and honestly about our social identities, bias, and injustice is challenging. We thank all who have participated and we admire, acknowledge, and appreciate your labor.
5. This audit should be considered as one of many first steps toward VAAFM further solidifying its commitments to racial and belonging justice work. But this report is not the culmination of that work or the agency’s commitments to lasting change. This is the beginning.
6. Not everything you read in this report will be easy to grasp at first glance. We encourage you to take your time in reviewing and processing the findings and recommendations. As you read, ask yourself “how do my identities and my experiences with equity, justice, inequity, and injustice shape and inform the ways in which I am processing and receiving this information?”
7. Racial and social justice work is inherently subjective. The goal of this report is to present a wide range of experiences across gender, race, disability, class, etc., in ways that are true to how they were initially described. We honor the lived experiences of those who shared them with us and appreciate your contribution.
8. Lastly, typically in interviews, interviewees use the terms “staff” and “leadership” variably. The use of the term “leadership” within the context of the report refers to Directors, Managers, and Executive Leadership.
9. Organizational justice is key to this work<sup>4</sup>. People’s experiences with fairness and justice within an organization are critical to building capacity and buy-in for external work related to anti-racism and belonging. An organization’s commitment to anti-racism is only as strong as its commitment to fairness and equity with its own staff and leaders.

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3. Illing, S. (2019, February 11). How capitalism reduced diversity to a brand. Vox. <https://www.vox.com/identities/2019/2/11/18195868/capitalism-race-diversity-exploitation-nancy-leong>.

4. Myers, T., & Paul, M. (2020, November 25). Umbrella summary: Organizational justice. Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development. <https://www.qic-wd.org/umbrella/organizational-justice>

# SETTING AN INTENTION

First, we would like to set an explicit intention for this report. We hope that your organization feels partnered with us as we explore how you can best move toward your anti-racism and anti-oppression goals. In this report, we work to hold the complexity of your organization - its strengths and weaknesses - and the varied perspectives of respondents across your Agency in ways that embrace the complexity and do not dilute it. We hope that all VAAFM employees and external partners, but particularly those with the most marginalized identities, feel acknowledged, seen, and heard in this report. We look forward to continuing the conversation as part of the “Where do we go from here?” presentations as well as offering optional all staff small group Collaborative Decision-Making (CDM) sessions where any additional questions or concerns can be discussed.



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our Racial Equity and Belonging Audit (REBA) is a people centered process that wouldn't be possible without the time, attention, and labor of current VAAFM staff, past staff, and community partners. It would also not be possible without those who dedicated substantial time and labor to advocate for this audit to take place. The following report you are about to read is a report that we have developed in hopes of honoring your fellow colleagues and community partners' efforts to see VAAFM begin on an extensive journey to becoming an Agency guided and informed by principles of racial equity.

Over the past several months, our audit process surfaced a need among staff and partners for clarity, structure, and capacity. Staff expressed being proud of the organization's commitment to anti-racism and belonging but also expressed concern regarding the organization's capacity for long-term commitments to anti-racism. Community partners reported needing a formal acknowledgement of the history of land ownership and racism in Vermont for them to believe that the commitment to racial equity will be authentic and sincere.

Community partners also reported feeling affirmed by VAAFM's Agriculture Development (AgDev)

division department and shared their experiences with AgDev staff who have reportedly been thoughtful and intentional and who had created a welcoming environment for historically and currently marginalized people. Staff reported feeling confident in VAAFM being made up of staff and leaders who want to do what is right, but are concerned about hierarchical leadership structures that produce distrust among staff. Some respondents expressed disappointment at not being involved in decision-making as they want to be involved in integrating shared expertise into VAAFM's organizational racial equity strategy and mission in the long term. This came with a number of staff expressed concern about a relational dynamic that puts staff and leaders in a position to leave conflicts unresolved and expressed being committed to doing the work necessary to making the culture at VAAFM a culture where all staff can engage in conflict and disagreement openly and thoughtfully. VAAFM has taken a good first step in recognizing and accepting the critical need to stand for racial justice issues. Staff express the need to see tangible action, consistency and alignment across the agency's organizational priorities. The following REBA report should be considered one of many first steps to making anti-racism and belonging work an organizational priority across the Agency.

# THEMES IN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

*How does VAAFM Meet the Needs of Community Partners  
Who Are Committed to Anti-Racism Work?*

## Findings:

- Community partners report **needing a formal acknowledgement of the history of land ownership and racism in Vermont** for them to believe that the commitment to racial equity is authentic and sincere.
- Community partners report **feeling affirmed by VAAFM's Agriculture Development (AgDev) division department** and share their experiences with AgDev staff who have been thoughtful and intentional and who have **created a welcoming environment for historically marginalized people**
- Community partners shared that they **want to see more concerted and progressive efforts around hiring, recruitment, and retention** of respondents and leaders of Color at VAAFM.
- Community partners shared needing VAAFM to **streamline communication and build equitable, anti-tokenist approaches for relationship-building** as at times they have felt tokenized by requests for feedback or other requests for time and labor
- Develop a Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-Bound (SMART) plan for hiring and retention as part of the VAAFM's hiring, recruitment, and retention processes. This increases the likelihood that VAAFM will succeed in creating a culture that is affirming of BIPOC respondents, contractors, leaders, and partners at every level in the organization.
- Hire a Director of Equity at the executive level who has the decision-making authority and ample budget to lead racial equity work across VAAFM.
- Develop a shared and streamlined approach for relationship building that helps to better organize community relationships and to ensure that historically marginalized partners (whether prospective or current) are not positioned to become tokens within VAAFM's necessary feedback loops and programming strategies.
- Institute funding programs for specifically providing ample grant funding to farmers, producers, and other food system leaders of color. The development, design, and governance of these programs, in order to be equitable and to dismantle existing systems of inequity, should be led by BIPOC food systems leaders.

## Based on these findings, we recommend that VAAFM:

- Formally and publicly acknowledge the history of land ownership and racism in Vermont and develop and share clear and actionable strategies for confronting and accounting for the harm that has been done in communities of Color across the state.
- Leverage the work of AgDev as an internal case study for better understanding how leaders, managers, and staff are creating the kind of psychological safety that is having a considerably positive impact on producers, farmers, and other community partners.



**Guides & Opportunities for Reimagining:**

- Some of the work being led by Vermont-based foundations focused on contending with the U.S. history with racism can serve as a blueprint for identifying what opportunities lie ahead of VAAF. [Learn more about the High Meadows Land Sovereignty Fund here.](#)
- Funding alone is just one step. Positioning historically marginalized people to lead allocation of funding in their communities is another step and is crucial to longterm success. In 2021, the High Meadows Fund gave a gift of \$2 Million to the Vermont Land Trust Land Sovereignty Fund. The goal, in part, is to **begin to address the historical harms that have shaped current-day racial and ethnic disparities in land access and ownership.**
- For the Vermont Land Trust, land sovereignty “includes access to, and ownership of, land. It is also a term that goes beyond these ideas to **stress a fundamental belonging to the land.** This **sense of belonging and agency is the opposite of colonization, slavery, and racism that has often underpinned this country’s practices around land.** We use “land sovereignty” to recognize past harms and signal an intent to foster justice, equity, and inclusion. Read more about how the VLT is moving forward with building a collaborative [decision-making process for the new fund here.](#)
- VAAF has an opportunity to envision new approaches for **community engagement and community outreach centered around anti-racism.** Read the University of Washington’s guiding practices for moving towards [anti-racist community engagement here.](#)

*How Does VAAF’s Governance Structure Equip the Agency To Lead With Accountability and Trust?***Findings:**

- Staff report feeling confident in VAAF being made up of staff and leaders who want to do what is right, but are concerned about hierarchical leadership structures that produce distrust among staff.
- Some respondents expressed disappointment at not being involved in decision-making as they want to be involved in **integrating shared expertise into VAAF’s organizational racial equity strategy** and mission in the long term.
- **Some respondents report being afraid to voice contrary opinions** in an agency that doesn’t lend itself to encouraging dissenting opinions and disagreement.
- Staff report missing past years in the history of VAAF when “democratic decision-making” was more common.
- Respondents report a “good old boy” approach to agency operations which preferences the leadership of “white male leaders” over everyone else.

**Based on these findings, we recommend that VAAF:**

- Conduct an audit on promotion practices across the agency with the goal of gaining a deeper understanding of how promotion decisions are being made.
- Develop a new **framework for decision-making** as it relates to its racial justice work that can weigh in on and offer insights prior to it being finalized across the organization.
- Create a pathway for ongoing **two-way communication** between VAAF staff and leadership to reflect on progress.
- Create communication channels between staff and IDEA Group where feedback and IDEA questions can be submitted and answered.
- Collaborate with **various stakeholders across the organization** including but not limited to staff, leaders, and external partners to decide which REBA recommendations to prioritize first and how.

**Guides & Opportunities for Reimagining:**

- There is an opportunity for staff and leadership to **co-create a governance structure that shares decision-making power, rebuilds trust, and aligns impact with intent while setting firm boundaries with staff and leadership** as to how they collaborate and at times work independently of one another.
- Refer to the detailed explanation of the **4 I's framework**, adapted by the Chinook Fund<sup>5</sup>, which gives us a deeper understanding of how oppressive systems in our society are constructed: Individually, Ideologically, Interpersonally, and Institutionally (as applied above).
- Refer to **“Doing the Inner Work”** in the Resources section near the end of this report for more guides.
- This is an example of a **community governance board**, established in the wake of [The Ferguson Report](#) after Michael Brown was killed by police<sup>6</sup>.
- The Resist Foundation, **led by and from the communities they fund**, aligns their radical philanthropy practice by creating a Circle of Elders and a **4-step accountability** process as part of its governance, and shares their model of how they became a **worker self-directed nonprofit**: [“The truth is, structure matters. How you do your work is equally as important as the work itself”](#)



5. GRCC. (n.d.). *The Four I's of Oppression* . Grand Rapids Community College . [https://www.grcc.edu/sites/default/files/docs/diversity/the\\_four\\_is\\_of\\_oppression.pdf](https://www.grcc.edu/sites/default/files/docs/diversity/the_four_is_of_oppression.pdf).

6. Content advisory: For Black, African, Asian, Latinx, Indigenous, and other People of Color who have experienced, witnessed, or been impacted by harm and/or violence with police brutality, this resource describes the death of Michael Brown. Please proceed with care if you review the example of a community governance board discussed here.

*How Does the Agency Provide Process for Addressing Conflict, Confronting Harm, and Seeking Repair?*

**Findings:**

- Staff **express concern about a relational dynamic that puts staff and leaders in a position to leave conflict unresolved with one another.**
- **Staff are committed to doing the work necessary** to making the culture at VAAFМ better and report needing more leadership models for healthy approaches to conflict and disagreement.
- Lack of policies and procedures that offer staff resources and guidance for facing conflict and de-escalating when tensions are high breeds distrust and territorial relationships between staff.

**Based on these findings, we recommend that VAAFМ:**

- **Design policy-driven education on trauma-informed approaches to accepting accountability, embracing conflict (i.e. not identifying conflict as meaning that someone is just being negative or argumentative), confronting harm, and seeking repair with people.**
- Leverage education to develop collective understanding of bystander intervention, harm reduction, and de-escalation.
- Use performance evaluations to **measure the progress of individual staff members in their willingness, albeit not often easy, to name and talk through disagreement, to accept accountability when they make mistakes, and to sincerely and intentionally seek repair** when they cause harm.
- **Work with staff to develop not only education but processes and practices that hold all staff and leaders to creating brave and trauma-informed spaces.** Without these policies, there is little to no accountability when members of the community engage in toxic behavior towards one another. In addition, policies and practices are needed to provide accountability to all members of staff and leadership for creating just and harm-reductive spaces that do not put anyone at risk of repeated and unaddressed relational harm.
- Create change management **strategies for building cultures of leadership that lead to just and anti-oppressive outcomes**, by asking the following questions.
  - Individual: What resources can VAAFМ provide that focus especially on **staff and management team leaders of Color** in their growth and development within the agency - especially in the face of racialized resistance?
  - Ideological: What education is needed at VAAFМ so people can identify when **harm is happening and understand their role in intervening** in it?

- Interpersonal: How can the agency apply principles of **trauma informed bystander intervention** into annual evaluation strategies? This strategy should include a **360 evaluation framework** which enables all members of staff and executive team to be evaluated fairly not only on their work outputs and outcomes, but also on their **awareness of power and positionality** and their application of this awareness.
- Institutional: What structural levers can VAAFM develop to **protect leaders of Color** across the agency? What mechanisms need to be created for merging siloed racial justice work across the organization so that it becomes transparent, organizationally actionable, and effective for the long-term?

### Guides & Opportunities for Reimagining:

- The Anti-Oppression Resource and Training Alliance [provides preliminary guidance on addressing conflict in movement organizations](#). This is a tool that can be used to support the association in developing accountable guidelines for how people across the organization are required to treat one another in all aspects of work across VAAFM. There should also be a particular emphasis on how team members are required to treat one another in the face of difficult conversations about power, race, identity, and privilege.
- In addition, [Movement-Killing Behaviors](#) by NJIME is another resource we find to be incredibly helpful in supporting leaders in reimagining our approach to engaging in difficult conversations and doing the difficult work of changing culture and dismantling white dominant cultures. The behaviors defined in this document include shared principles and descriptions of behaviors that kill movements, lead to stagnancy, and damage relationships.

### *How Does VAAFM Create a Collaborative and Accountable Strategy for Racial Equity + Belonging Work?*

#### Findings:

- VAAFM has taken a good first step in recognizing and accepting the critical need to **stand for racial justice** issues.
- Staff express **the need to see tangible action, consistency and alignment** across the agency's organizational priorities.
- Respondents report that the agency's commitments lack strategy and are unsure as to VAAFM's current impact and ideal impact in historically marginalized communities and among staff members who come from these communities.
- Staff are unclear as to **what VAAFM's organizational commitments to racial equity are** and some named fearing that the ambiguous nature of this commitment will lead the agency into a cycle of unfulfilled promises and tokenism.

**Based on these findings, we recommend that VAAFM:**

- Develop and document **organizational guidelines** that set a clear, accountable, and structured Racial Equity + Belonging Plan that will empower the organization to grow into its commitments, learn from mistakes, and deliver quantifiable outcomes that support staff and leaders across the agency.
  - The plan needs to include a **project management framework that assigns specific responsibilities and tasks across the organization**, with input from all staff and leaders, and that tracks the progress of tasks and deliverables so that implementation is tracked throughout the organization.
  - Over the past 2 years, we’ve seen hundreds of state agencies produce commitments to racial justice and racial equity. We have also witnessed a number of organizations fail to consistently make racial equity work an organizational priority. **Without a solid base of understanding for how organizational decisions are made and how organizational decisions are implemented** and integrated into structures and policies, VAAFM **risks creating a cycle of “racial equity” work that is founded on reactionary and momentary decisions** that read as performative and stagnant.
1. **VAAFM holds considerable privilege and power** as a state agency. The goal is not for VAAFM to reinvent the wheel in this work, but instead to **follow the guidance of Leaders of Color who have been leading, organizing, and collaboratively designing actions toward progress for many, many years**. VAAFM can take its cues from staff within the agency and leaders external to the organization who are focused on the intersections of racial justice and education.

**Guides & Opportunities for Reimagining:**

- VAAFM has a great opportunity to define its commitment to racial justice work in collaboration with teams across the organization. This is an opportunity for VAAFM to ask, “Who are we excluding? Who are not receiving grants and other necessary resources to thrive?” and “How can we bring the people we may have inadvertently left behind with us in 2022 and beyond?”
- The following seven principles of movement organizing as developed by the Interfaith Council for Peace and Justice<sup>7</sup> is a framework we find to be especially helpful in guiding organizations in identifying their role in supporting the building of movements that create more equitable and anti-oppressive societies for us all with Black, Asian, Latinx, Indigenous, and other People of Color at the center:

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7. Warpehoski, C. W. (n.d.). **7 Principles of Community Organizing**. <http://www.icpj.org>. Retrieved July 5, 2021, from <http://www.icpj.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/7-Principles-of-Community-Organizing.pdf>

**1. *Organizing>Activism***

Activism is an individual pursuit, when one person takes an action to make a difference. It is a great thing. But organizing is greater, because organizing gets other people to take action, to work together, and to build an organization that can make a significant and long-term difference.

**2. *Organizing is about relationships.***

To organize people, you need to know them. You need to know who they are, what they care about, what they are willing to do, and how to get in touch with them. They also need to know you. They need to know you are sincere, competent, and that you care about them. Therefore, an organizer is always building and maintaining relationships. An organizer is also always asking people to sign up so that she can follow up and build that relationship. Finally, since an organizer is building an organization that is bigger than herself, she is tracking these relationships in a database so that the organization can ask people to get involved at scale.

**3. *Meet people where they are, not where you want them to be***

As an organizer, you are immersed in an issue. You read all the blog posts. You lay in bed thinking about it. You talk about it every day. That's not true for most of the people you will be organizing. They might eventually get to where you are, but you need to start where they are. What do they know? What do they care about? What do they hope for and what do they fear? You find this out through a combination of empathy and listening. Don't be fooled, though, projecting your own insecurities is not the same as empathy. I get caught in this one sometimes, where my insecurities tell me, "oh, they don't want to be bothered by me." But when I look back at when people have given me the chance to make a real difference, whether by helping them move or joining in a cause they care about, I'm generally happy to help.

**4. *An organizer defines success on her own terms and develops a campaign to advance toward victory***

If you do not define victory on your own terms, the opposition will define it for you. "Oh, you want us to do something about the homeless. Sure. Would you rather we lock 'em all up, or just drive them out of town."

Knowing what success means to you, you can then put together a campaign—a series of varied activities over time that move you forward toward victory. There are many tools you can use in the campaign, your job is to pick the ones that move you forward. Rallies, lectures, civil disobedience, social media actions, etc. can all be great tactics, but they should be selected based on how they move you forward.

**5. Focus on Action--always have something people can DO**

Every activity you take should include an ask for people to do something: make a donation, sign up for a tabling shift, write an email to the Mayor, etc. “Raising awareness” can be a means to your end in this process, but it is never your end in itself. I am perfectly aware that I need to limit my sweets, but that awareness did not stop me from eating two desserts yesterday. Awareness that does not contribute to concrete change in behavior, actions, or relationships is a dead-end.

**6. You get action by asking for it**

To get people to take action, you have to both work and ask for it, and you have to set that work and ask. That means: Make it easy to say yes. If you are asking someone to call their Representative, make it easy for them to say yes. Give them the phone number. Give them a sample script. Maybe even hand them your phone to make the call. Eliminate every barrier you can that will get in the way of them saying “yes.”

*Note for VAAFM staff and Leaders: Pair the ask with an offer of commitment (financial compensation, promotion, backing support of leadership, dedication of time, allocation of additional staff or other resources). This is an important note because white dominant organizations often ask women, genderqueer and gender nonbinary people, Black, African, Asian, Latinx, Indigenous, and other People of Color, disabled folks to do more labor with less time, less compensation, less resources. Organizations cannot get something for nothing. Support has to be backed with power so as not to be tokenist or exploitative. Sonya Renee Taylor refers to this as “being in right relationship.”<sup>8</sup>*

*Make your ask specific. This is part of making it easy to say yes. Which is easier for you to process, “Can you help out?” or “Can you volunteer to sell yard signs next Thursday from 10-2 at the Art Fair Table”*

*Ask for fewer things at a time, not more. Too many options can overwhelm people, and rather than choose between them, they just tune out. Don’t give 20 options, give one. Maybe two. No more than three. Engage the heart. Emotion is more important for motivating action than facts and figures.*

*Follow up. We’re all busy, and we sometimes need that reminder to actually follow through on our best intentions. Polite but persistent follow-up can be the difference between “yes, I’ll make that call” and actually making the call. What’s more, that personal touch of following up also deepens the relationship.*



8. Taylor, S. R. (2021, May 14). *On reciprocity and right relationship*. YouTube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CCvQ\\_36yxk0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CCvQ_36yxk0).

**7. Diverse and inclusive coalitions are stronger, building it takes work**

Interfaith Council for Peace and Justice is founded on the premise that we are more effective when we work together across our differences to make a difference. Diverse coalitions bring new ideas, help you reach broader audiences since “like organizes like.” Furthermore, diverse coalitions help you tap the power of unlikely allies (e.g. Veterans for Peace, Gun Owners for Smart Gun Laws).

But it takes work to create truly diverse and inclusive communities. It’s not enough to say, “Our doors are open to them, but they won’t come to our table.” Sometimes you have to go to them, knock on their doors, sit at their table, and be willing to change your agenda to meet their needs.

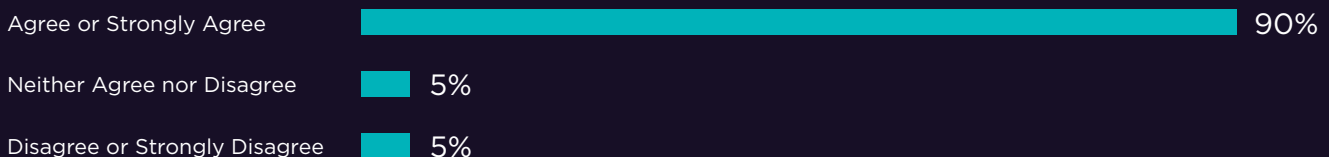
Building diverse coalitions also requires that you respect differences. If you are creating an interfaith coalition, a Saturday morning activity during the Jewish Sabbath isn’t going to work, for example.

Finally, if your coalition is diverse, you will run into structural power dynamics. For example, often voices of people of color are marginalized in mainstream society. To create a diverse and inclusive coalition, then, you need to recognize this dynamic, be attentive to how it affects your work (it will) and consistently take steps to address it.

# ***PLACES TO BUILD FROM***

There are always places to build from in this work. In VAAFMs case, the following highlights are organizational strengths that can be used as a foundation for the agency’s commitment to equity and belonging. Overall, staff report being proud to work for VAAFMs. When presented with the statement, ***I am proud to work for VAAFMs***, 90% of all respondents Agree or Strongly Agree and 5% Neither Agree nor Disagree, and 5% Disagree or Strongly Disagree.

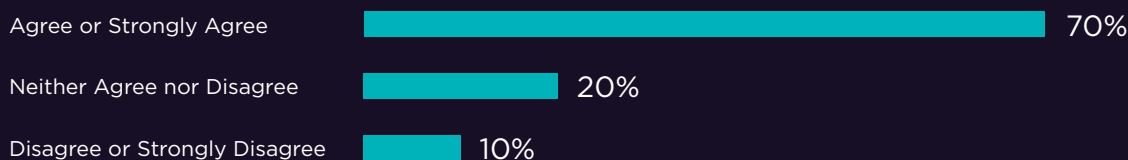
## **I am proud to work for VAAFMs**





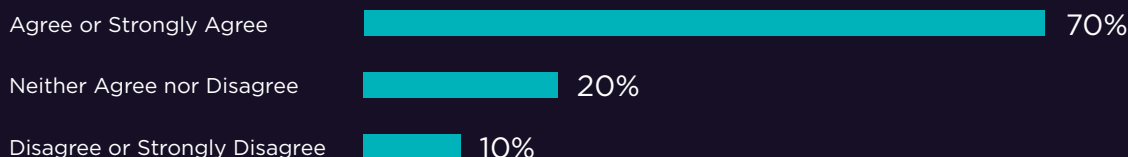
When presented with the statement, ***I would recommend VAAFM as a great place to work***, 70% Agree or Strongly Agree, 20% Neither Agree nor Disagree, and 10% Disagree or Strongly Disagree.

**I would recommend VAAFM as a great place to work**



When presented with the statement, ***VAAFM supports people to have flexible work structures when needed, to the best of its ability (e.g., around mental health, racist national events, etc.)***, 70% Agree or Strongly Agree, 20% Neither Agree nor Disagree, 10% Disagree or Strongly Disagree

**VAAFM supports people to have flexible work structures when needed, to the best of its ability (e.g., around mental health, racist national events, etc.)**



When presented with the statement, ***I feel affirmed and valued by my immediate teammates at VAAFM***, 90% Agree or Strongly Agree, 8% Neither Agree nor Disagree and 2% Disagree or Strongly Disagree.

**I feel affirmed and valued by my immediate teammates at VAAFM**



Qualitative interviews and responses demonstrate an ideological pride in working at VAAFM and staff who express having good experiences overall with small teams of colleagues at the agency. **Representative quotes are as follows:**



**I feel proud of the small group of people we work with”**

— Qualitative Interview Participant



**I feel proud of the work that I do here every day”**

— Qualitative Interview Participant



**I am glad that the Agency has engaged in this important work.”**

— Qualitative Interview Participant



**The colleagues I work with encourage collaboration and strive to do their part.”**

— Qualitative Interview Participant



**When it comes to VAAFM’s racial equity work, I think it’s great there is a designated group working through this. I really appreciate all the hard work that’s being put into this initiative.”**

— Qualitative Interview Participant

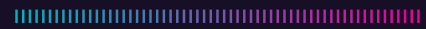
Organizer N’Tanya Lee of the organization [Left Roots](#) defines principled struggle as struggle that is principled. For example, struggling for the sake of building deeper unity, being honest and direct especially when it is difficult to do so while holding compassion for others around us, taking responsibility for our own feelings and actions, and seeking deeper understanding by asking questions and reading a text (such as an article or proposal) before we launch a counter argument.

For Lee, it also means considering that a meeting, community, committee may or may not be the container to hold what we need to engage in justice work. If we find that a structure of leadership or

power is ineffective in helping us to organize around commitments to racial justice, principled struggle means choosing a different path.

VAAFM does have a mission that many staff buy into. Based on our analysis of qualitative interviews, we find this pride to be grounded in both ideological and theoretical motivations: 1) staff members who believe not only in the mission of VAAFM, but also its capacity to follow through on stated commitments to equity and justice and 2) staff who, due to specific elements of VAAFM’s work that they have witnessed play out, believe the agency still has much work to do, but can see the progress currently being made and want it to continue.

Of those who participated in taking the REBA survey, the majority are cis, white, Western, woman, heterosexual, Christian, non-disabled staff working outside the leadership team whose native language is the primary language spoken at VAAF. We've included select aggregated demographics below. As you read through these demographics, consider how they might apply to the aggregated survey responses found in this report. Often, when applying dominant principles of research and data analysis to surveys and qualitative interviews, we focus on the highest numbers only and these tend to be the patterns researchers present as being most compelling. In our analysis, we sought to look at the data collected through a lens of intersectionality, meaning, we consider the ways in which minority populations (minority in terms of survey responses only, as People of Color, for example, are the global majority) respond to questions relative to their lived experiences, macroaggressions<sup>9</sup> in the workplace, aspirations for pay equity and upward mobility are being expressed through the data. In this section, we have included select demographics information which includes race, gender, pronouns, sexual orientation, religion, job level, disability, mental health, caregiver status, and primary language.



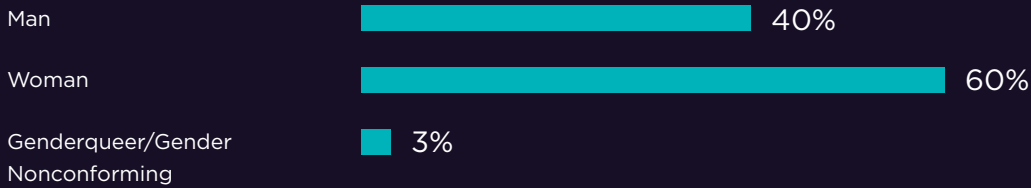
9. At MMG, we use the term “macroaggressions,” instead of microaggressions. Microaggressions are defined as daily indignities or slights towards marginalized people that are informed by stereotypical, prejudiced, and/or oppressive views and perceptions. The original term, microaggression, is used to describe the ways in which the person expressing the aggression may not even notice because of how “small” of an infraction they are making. We use the term “macroaggression” to focus on the impact that stereotypical and exclusionary perceptions of people and communities has on those people they are directed towards.

## Q: How do you identify?\*



\*Note: Percentage here is not intended to equal 100% as people can be more than one race.

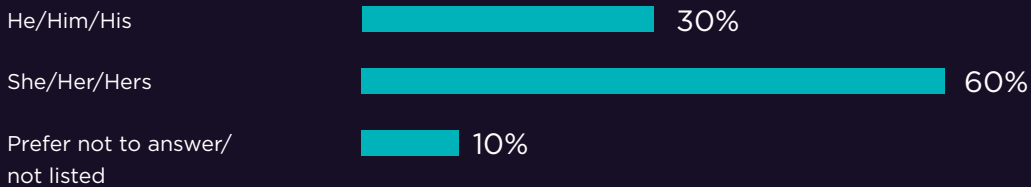
**Q: What gender identities do you hold?**



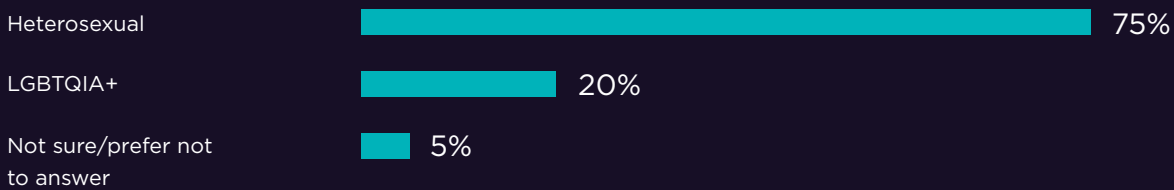
**Q: Are you transgender?**



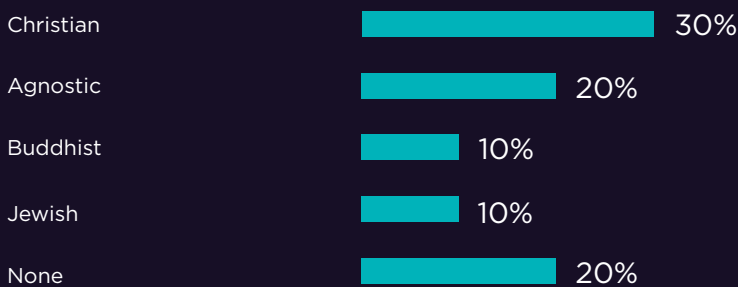
**Q: What are your pronouns?**



**Q: What is your sexual orientation?**

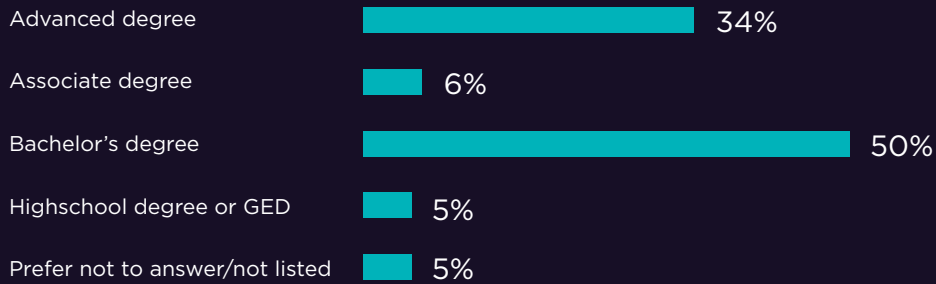


**What is your religion?\***

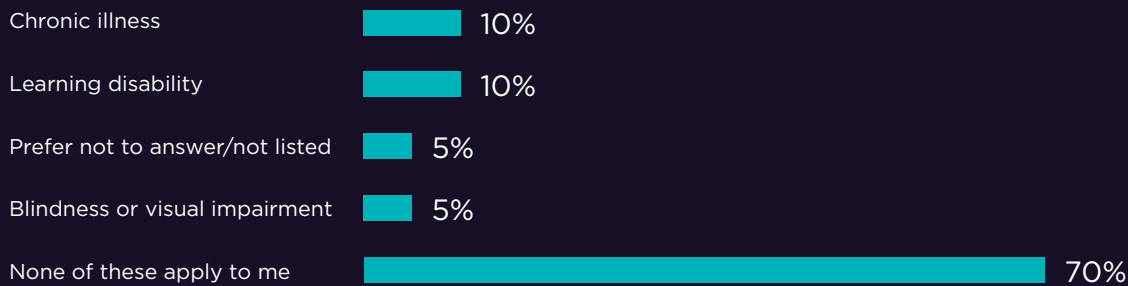


*\*Note: Percentage here is not intended to equal 100% as people can hold to more than one religion or religious practice.*

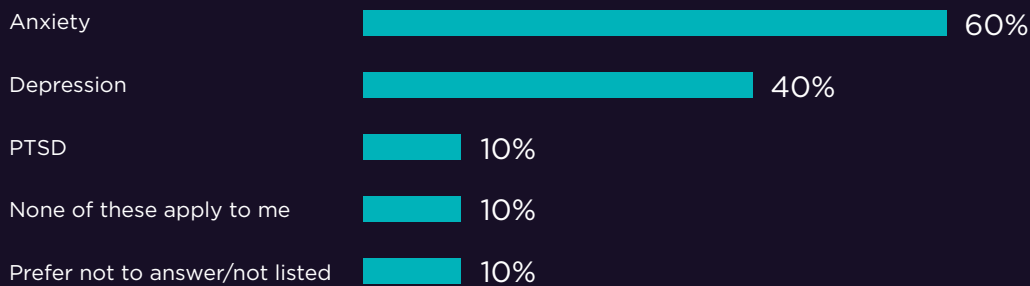
**Q: What is the highest degree that you have obtained?**



**Q: Do you have any of the following disabilities?**



**Q: When it comes to your mental health, do you experience any of the following?\***

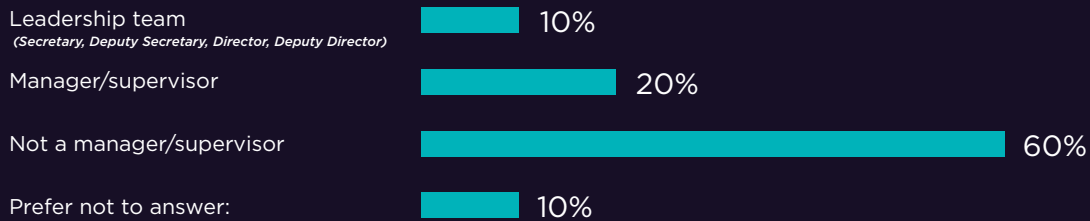


*\*Note: Percentage here is not intended to equal 100% as people can hold more than one experience with their mental health.*

**Q: Are you a parent or caregiver?**



**Q: Which of the following best describes your current job level?**

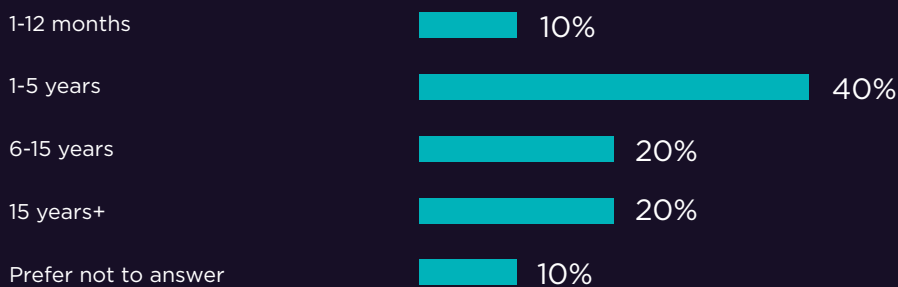


**Q: What is your current working environment? (Check all that apply)\***



*\*Note: Percentage here is not intended to equal 100% as respondents were asked to check all options that applied.*

**Q: How long have you been at VAAFM?**



# TIMELINE OF RECOMMENDATIONS

In this section we present recommendations and propose a high-level work plan and timeline. Here, we provide concrete and flexible recommendations such that the organization and its various teams can move forward in ways that respect their contextual needs. As you review these recommendations, you might wonder, ***What can I do individually to contribute to this work?*** The answer to that question may surprise you.

As MMGE, we encourage you to ask yourself, based on everything you know about your capacity, your strengths, your commitments to racial equity and belonging, your positionality, etc., what you have to give and what you would like to give to this process. Racial equity and racial justice work is a lasting commitment - made up of thousands of decisions,

steps, changes - some big and many seemingly small. As a first step, if you are a white staff member or leader, you can listen and be very thoughtful about not projecting feelings of discomfort onto staff, leaders, and community members of Color. As a first step, if you are a staff member or leader of Color, you can ask yourself about your care practices. ***How have I committed to caring for myself in a white dominant environment? What resources of support have been made available to me? Will I use them if I need them?*** We all hold power, some more than others, but we have a choice as to how we wield the power we hold to build and maintain cultures and communities founded in justice, accountability, repair, and belonging. Consider this timeline to be a first step.

Report Theme	Timeline	Recommendation	Potential Outside Team Role
How Does VAAFM's Governance Structure Equip the Agency To Lead With Accountability and Trust?	1-2 months	Leadership Team in collaboration with MMG: Share a summarized, high level report REBA across the association and invite staff to weigh in on which priorities they would like to see the association tackle first.	Develop a Collaborative Decision-Making (CDM) process that invites staff across the association to share their reflections as to which priorities they would like to see WEA hone in on for the remainder of 2022 leading into 2023
Community governance board (here's an example) with power to hold existing board and leadership accountable to staff + community	2 months	IDEA Working Group should organize discussion sessions divided by report theme for all who wish to attend to dig deeper into the findings and recommendations for each section - one theme at a time.	This recommendation comes from our small group CDM sessions wherein participants shared feeling overwhelmed by the findings and needing time to be able to process the information contained within the report.
How Does the Agency Provide Process for Addressing Conflict, Confronting Harm, and Seeking Repair?	2 months	In collaboration with an external consultant, develop a Working Through Conflict, Facing Harm, and Seeking Repair toolkit and training module focused on helping staff to engage in conversation about collaborative decision-making that prioritizes impact over intention.	Design a toolkit that will help VAAFM staff, leaders, and Board to contextualize the association's power and capacity in integrating principles of racial justice into its organizational work starting with the ways in which staff and leaders are expected to treat one another.

Report Theme	Timeline	Recommendation	Potential Outside Team Role
<p>How Does VAAFM Create a Collaborative and Accountable Strategy for Racial Equity + Belonging Work?</p>	<p>2 months</p>	<p>Following the lead of the USDA's Equity Action Plan, establish a <a href="#"><u>Racial Equity Commission</u></a> of external stakeholders focused on setting recommendations for how the Agency can advance commitments to racial equity. The equity commission should also follow the key foci of the USDA and seek to address the following: VAAFM's relationship to Native American territories, underserved farmers and producers, undocumented farm workers, and reducing barriers to equity based on race, gender, immigration status, sexual orientation, and economic class with a particular emphasis on racial equity and racial justice.</p>	<p>Work with an external consultant to build the framework for an Equity Commission in collaboration with farmers and other agriculture workers across the state of Vermont. Here's an example of the <a href="#"><u>City of Olympia's Social Justice and Equity Commission</u></a>.</p>
<p>How does VAAFM Meet the Needs of Community Partners Who Are Committed to Anti-Racism Work?</p>	<p>2 months</p>	<p>Formally and publicly acknowledge the history of land ownership and racism in Vermont and develop and share clear and actionable strategies for confronting and accounting for the harm that has been done in communities of Color across the state.</p>	<p>Models for what government level acknowledgement of the U.S. history of land, agriculture, and racism are far more common now than a decade ago. For an example of what a possible model could look like, see the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture's remarks on systemic racism and discrimination <a href="#"><u>perpetuated against Black farmers and other People of Color here</u></a>.</p>



Report Theme	Timeline	Recommendation	Potential Outside Team Role
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<p>How does VAAFM Meet the Needs of Community Partners Who Are Committed to Anti-Racism Work?</p>	<p>2 months</p>	<p>Formally and publicly acknowledge the history of land ownership and racism in Vermont and develop and share clear and actionable strategies for confronting and accounting for the harm that has been done in communities of Color across the state.</p>	<p>Models for what government level acknowledgement of the U.S. history of land, agriculture, and racism are far more common now than a decade ago. For an example of what a possible model could look like, see the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture's remarks on systemic racism and discrimination <a href="#">perpetuated against Black farmers and other People of Color here</a>.</p>

<b>Report Theme</b>	<b>Timeline</b>	<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Potential Outside Team Role</b>
How Does the Agency Provide Process for Addressing Conflict, Confronting Harm, and Seeking Repair?	2-3 months	Develop a Repair committee focused on organizing mediated sessions between staff and leaders focused on reaching shared understanding, seeking healing, and changing behavior so as not to continue the current cycle of relational harm across the agency.	Hire consultants/facilitators to 1) lead the communications process for presenting the repair sessions to external attendees, 2) to facilitate the repair sessions through a trauma-informed, consent-centered lens, 3) co-lead an All Staff Town Hall to discuss high-level themes from the repair sessions, and 4) to co-lead the communications process in collaboration with the repair committee to report back on the process internally and externally.
How Does VAAFMM Create a Collaborative and Accountable Strategy for Racial Equity + Belonging Work?	3-6 months	Design a Racial Justice Action plan with the goal of defining VAAFMM's commitment to racial justice and the core pillars defining its work. This should include the development of a Compass Framework which provides a high-level, birds-eye view of all the work VAAFMM is currently leading with a focus on racial justice in education. As a part of this plan, develop a SMART strategy for hiring and retention as part of the Agency's hiring, recruitment, and retention processes. This increases the likelihood that the Agency will succeed in fostering a culture that is affirming of BIPOC staff, contractors, leaders, and partners at every level in the organization.	Work with the Staff-led Racial Justice Committee to define racial justice through the lens of VAAFMM's current work, shape core pillars that provide additional clarity to VAAFMM's focus and intended outcomes, and to present key deliverables proposed by staff and leaders across the organization. Invite staff across the organization to share feedback on language, focus, and connection to VAAFMM's existing organizational priorities. External partners should collect reflections from across the foundation and these reflections should be applied to VAAFMM's organizational strategy and backed by ongoing support from the agency.

<b>Report Theme</b>	<b>Timeline</b>	<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Potential Outside Team Role</b>
How Does the Agency Provide Process for Addressing Conflict, Confronting Harm, and Seeking Repair?	3-4 months	Provide trauma-informed staff and leadership training that is informed by concepts of power, privilege and identity that provides tools for identifying and responding to conflict and harm, particularly racialized harm and knowing the difference between the two in the workplace.	Facilitate additional training; support team managers to identify what their teams most need. Develop a measurement tool that connects what people are learning in their training sessions to the impact on VAAFM's culture. This tool should be used across all training and education activities and should be designed to help company leaders identify the efficacy of training and education work.
How Does the Agency Provide Process for Addressing Conflict, Confronting Harm, and Seeking Repair?	3-4 months	Develop an accessibility and disability justice framework for the Agency. This framework should seek to answer the following questions: How is accessibility defined by staff and leaders at VAAFM? What benefits exist to support disabled staff and employees at the Agency? What resources exist to support team members with caring for their mental and emotional health? What training and education is made available so that non-disabled team members can develop awareness of working alongside their colleagues in ways that are affirming and aware of how staff members are differently impacted by disability?	Provide feedback on accessibility framework creation.

<b>Report Theme</b>	<b>Timeline</b>	<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Potential Outside Team Role</b>
How does VAAFMM Meet the Needs of Community Partners Who Are Committed to Anti-Racism Work?	4 months	Leverage the dynamics of the AgDev team as an internal case study for better understanding how leaders, managers, and staff are creating the kind of psychological safety that is having a considerably positive impact on producers, farmers, and other community partners.	Utilize those learnings to develop internal education opportunities for staff across the Agency on creating cultures of psychological safety at work.
How does VAAFMM Meet the Needs of Community Partners Who Are Committed to Anti-Racism Work?	4-6 months	Hire a Director of Equity at the executive level who has the decision-making authority and ample budget to lead the Agency’s commitments to racial and social equity.	Allocate budget to inviting various producers of Color to support the interview process and compensate them for their time with a set honorarium.
How Does VAAFMM’s Governance Structure Equip the Agency To Lead With Accountability and Trust?	6 months	Define IDEA group’s decision-making power and the boundaries to the decisions they make within the foundation. If staff and committee disagree on a specific organizational priority, who gets to make the decision?	This should include the development of a process for Racial Justice Committee selection, tenure terms, and a set list of guidelines for deciding on annual foci and priorities of the committee each year. In addition, decision-making should incorporate staff voice, feedback, and buy-in so as not to create additional silos in decision-making. Note: The Racial Justice Committees should be led disproportionately by People of Color and they should be compensated for their labor.

Report Theme	Timeline	Recommendation	Potential Outside Team Role
<p>How Does the Agency Provide Process for Addressing Conflict, Confronting Harm, and Seeking Repair?</p>	<p>6 months</p>	<p>Develop a guiding set of norms and a clear and accountable process for facing conflict, intervene in harm and seek repair when harm is done. Training on these norms should then be developed and required to be taken annually by all members of staff and leadership. In addition, these norms should be included on annual 360 performance reviews(of staff and leadership) so that the VAAFM working community can hold itself accountable to developing socioemotional awareness and thoughtfulness. Note: This should also include measures of safety, protecting, and commitment to those harmed who seek repair, and acknowledgement of power imbalances as a default threat to that safety unless proactively protected.</p>	<p>Support leaders, managers, and staff in reflection and goal-setting around these norms. Develop them collaboratively, requesting optional feedback from all teams across the agency.</p>
<p>How does VAAFM Meet the Needs of Community Partners Who Are Committed to Anti-Racism Work?</p>	<p>8-10 months</p>	<p>Institute a funding program focused specifically on providing ample grant funding to farmers, producers, and other food system leaders of color. The development, design, and governance of these programs, in order to be equitable and to dismantle existing systems of inequity, should be led by BIPOC food systems leaders.</p>	<p>Collaborate with an external partner to build a collaborative decision-making process focused on inviting and compensating varied producers of color in the development of the funding program, application requirements and streamlined application evaluation strategies.</p>

<b>Report Theme</b>	<b>Timeline</b>	<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Potential Outside Team Role</b>
How Does the Agency Provide Process for Addressing Conflict, Confronting Harm, and Seeking Repair?	6 months	<p>Develop a guiding set of norms and a clear and accountable process for facing conflict, intervene in harm and seek repair when harm is done. Training on these norms should then be developed and required to be taken annually by all members of staff and leadership. In addition, these norms should be included on annual 360 performance reviews(of staff and leadership) so that the VAAFM working community can hold itself accountable to developing socioemotional awareness and thoughtfulness.</p> <p>Note: This should also include measures of safety, protecting, and commitment to those harmed who seek repair, and acknowledgement of power imbalances as a default threat to that safety unless proactively protected.</p>	Support leaders, managers, and staff in reflection and goal-setting around these norms. Develop them collaboratively, requesting optional feedback from all teams across the agency.
How does VAAFM Meet the Needs of Community Partners Who Are Committed to Anti-Racism Work?	8-10 months	<p>Develop a shared and streamlined approach for relationship building that helps to better organize community relationships and to ensure that historically marginalized partners (whether prospective or current) are not being positioned to become tokens within the Agency's necessary feedback loops and programming strategies.</p>	Host a public meeting to discuss proposed approaches to more effective, equitable, and streamlined approaches to relationship-building. Develop a system that enables various departments to follow standardized guidelines for outreach and community engagement.

Report Theme	Timeline	Recommendation	Potential Outside Team Role
How Does VAAFMs Governance Structure Equip the Agency To Lead With Accountability and Trust?	8 months	Audit flows of power and communications on each team at the association. Power is centralized and siloed and it serves as a barrier to building effective long-term strategies across the agency. Power is conditional on relationships and the people who hold the most power. That equates to a system where a select few are more likely to build relationships with one another hire, promote, and listen to white, cis, able-bodied, men in positions of leadership.	Work with senior leaders, executive team, and staff to organize the audit of these power and communication strategies.
How Does VAAFMs Create a Collaborative and Accountable Strategy for Racial Equity + Belonging Work?	10 months	Develop a strategic 1-2 year Racial Equity plan with the goal that the staff and leadership at VAAFMs feel integrated into decisions that most affect them.	Work with leadership and the IDEA working group to build principles of anti-oppression into the plan and support communication and feedback across teams.
How does VAAFMs Meet the Needs of Community Partners Who Are Committed to Anti-Racism Work?	2 Years	Engage in a bi-annual REBA to track the organization’s progress.	Engage MMG or an external consultant/consulting group to lead a bi-annual audit to benchmark the foundation’s progress in demonstrating tangible commitment to its racial justice commitments. In this iteration of the audit, include VAAFMs and other external partners in both the qualitative and quantitative data gathering so as to gain a broader understanding of VAAFMs cultural ecosystem.

## *Language Choices*

Language to describe our identities is constantly evolving and changing. Over time, the language we use in this report to describe race, caste, ethnicity, gender, class, and more will most likely become outdated. In this section, we cover select language choices that were used in the writing of this report.

### **Racial Equity**

As defined by the Race Forward organization, racial equity is a process of eliminating racial disparities and improving outcomes for everyone.

### **Sexism and Misogyny**

In addition, the term “sexism,” conflates sex with gender identity. Biologically and scientifically these two concepts are not synonymous with each other. Because of this we have edited frameworks found within this report to use the word “misogyny,” instead of “sexism,” in alignment with more contemporary understandings of gender bias, gender expression, and gender identity.

### **Microaggressions and Macroaggressions**

At MMG, we use the term “macroaggressions,” instead of microaggressions. Microaggressions are defined as daily indignities or slights towards marginalized people that are informed by stereotypical, prejudiced, and/or oppressive views and perceptions. The original term, microaggression, is used to describe the ways in which the person expressing the aggression may not even notice because of how “small” of an infraction they are making. We use the term “macroaggression” to focus on the impact that stereotypical and exclusionary perceptions of people and communities has on those people they are directed toward.

### **Latinx**

Terms that describe race and ethnicity terms are complicated and incredibly nuanced from region to region and country to country. We chose to use Latinx in this report because it more explicitly includes nonbinary and trans people’s experiences. When carefully considering this language choice, we reviewed the following resources: [Latina/o and Latinx](#), [Latinx and Latine](#), [the Indigenous-focused term Mazewalli](#), and a [historical background](#).

### **Landback**

Landback refers to a movement that has existed for generations with a long legacy of organizing with the purpose of returning Indigenous Lands back into Indigenous communities<sup>10</sup>.

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10. <https://landback.org/>



### Genderqueer and Gender Nonbinary

Due to small sample size and privacy concerns, we sometimes used the terms “genderqueer, gender nonbinary, gender nonconforming people” to encompass all people who identify with genders that do not exist on the gender binary, including gender nonbinary, gender non-conforming, two-spirit, genderqueer, bigender, and/or as individually specified. We use genderqueer, and/or gender nonbinary to describe a gender identity that may or may not fall into or fluctuate between the binary genders of man and woman.

### Intersectionality

A term coined by lawyer and civil rights advocate, Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw which describes how aspects of a person’s social and political identities intersect to create various experiences with discrimination and privilege. [Watch a video of Kimberlé Crenshaw defining the term here](#) and [here](#).

### Land Sovereignty

According to the Vermont Land Trust, access to, and ownership of, land. It is also a term that goes beyond these ideas to stress a fundamental belonging to the land. This sense of belonging and agency is the opposite of colonization, slavery, and racism that has often underpinned this country’s practices around land. We use ‘land sovereignty’ to recognize past harms and signal an intent to foster justice, equity, and inclusion.

### Organizational Justice

Organizational justice<sup>11</sup> is the extent to which an organization treats people fairly. Organizational justice includes fairness related to outcomes, procedures, and interpersonal interactions. Fair workplace outcomes and decisions (e.g., equitable/favorable pay, raise, promotion) are called distributive justice (Adams, 1965). Procedural justice means that outcomes are determined through procedures that are based on accurate information and standard ethics, represent everyone affected by the procedure, include opportunity for input and appeal, are free from bias, and are used consistently (Leventhal, 1980; Thibaut & Walker, 1975). Interactional justice refers to people feeling they were treated with dignity and respect and feeling they received sound information about the procedures and decisions (Bies & Moag, 1986; Lind & Tyler, 1988).

### Racial Justice

***“The systematic fair treatment of people of all races, resulting in equitable opportunities and outcomes for all. Racial Justice [is defined] as the proactive reinforcement of policies, practices, attitudes and actions that produce equitable power, access, opportunities, treatment, impacts and outcomes for all. Racial justice—or racial equity—goes beyond “anti-racism.” It is not just the absence of discrimination and inequities, but also the presence of deliberate systems and supports to achieve and sustain racial equity through proactive and preventative measures.”***

– ICMA

### Tokenism

The practice of making only a perfunctory or symbolic effort to do a particular thing, especially by recruiting a small number of people from underrepresented groups in order to give the appearance of equity or organizational justice work.

### White Dominant Culture

A list of characteristics of white supremacy culture that show up in organizations and broader society. These are characteristics that are used as norms and standards without being pro-actively named or consented to in community. You can find a list of these characteristics [here](#).

11. Myers, T., & Paul, M. (2020, November 25). Umbrella summary: Organizational justice. Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development. <https://www.qic-wd.org/umbrella/organizational-justice>

# DETAILED FINDINGS AND RELATED RECOMMENDATIONS

## *How Does VAAFM Meet the Needs of Community Partners Who Are Committed to Anti-Racism Work?*

From August 29, 2022 to September 16, 2022, we interviewed ten respondents made up of former VAAFM staff, community partners, LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC farmers and producers. These five topics were recurring themes that were raised by respondents across interviews :

1. A call for the Agency to confront and acknowledge the history of land ownership and racism in Vermont.
2. Former staff and producers emphasize affirming and validating experiences with the Agriculture Developmental Division (AgDev) team.
3. The critical importance of allocating grant funding to producers and farmers of color.
4. The need for streamlined communication and equitable, anti-tokenist relationship-building.
5. A need for re-imagining hiring, recruitment, and retention across the Agency.

### **Need for the Agency to confront and acknowledge the history of land ownership and racism in Vermont**

VAAFM community partners brought up a recurring theme naming the Agency's racial equity work as not being authentic and sincere without a formal acknowledgment of the history of land ownership and racism in Vermont.

In October 2021, the Burlington Free Press reported that out of 7,000 farms in Vermont, 17 were owned by Black people. As quoted from the article, "Nationally, Black land ownership has declined by nearly 90% over the last century, resulting in a total loss of **36.7 million** acres, according to Census of Agriculture [data](#). Investigations by Mother Jones and The Atlantic attribute this decline to racist government [policies](#), discriminatory lending [practices](#), white [vigilantism](#), and police [violence](#).<sup>12</sup>"



12. Fisher, A. (2021, October 1). **Black people own just 17 of the 7,000 farms in Vermont. new grant seeks to expand access.** Burlington Free Press. Retrieved September 2022, from <https://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/story/news/2021/10/01/farm-ownership-vermont-land-sovereignty-fund-black-indigenous-people-color/5944456001/>

**Community partners discussed this proposed need for the Agency to confront the racist histories of land ownership via the following representative quotes from our interviews:**



**I have this question for Agency leadership: What would it look like to see power to communities of color?"**

— Qualitative Interview Participant



**There needs to be this recognition of the historical and generational trauma and harm associated with People of Color, starting with Indigenous folks, and Black folks being enslaved for agricultural purposes. I would like to see sincere acknowledgment of that in general."**

— Qualitative Interview Participant



**Another big piece of it is how each and every member of the Agency interacts with the public and that needs to include a reckoning with history...where did the Agency come from? What past harms have been done? What discrimination might have occurred. The perception People of Color have of the Agency might depend on what they know and what they have experienced."**

— Qualitative Interview Participant



**Relationship building with indigenous people of Vermont is a huge gaping hole right now that needs to be really careful, intentional, and non-extractive. This is stolen land and the land and the landscape that we speak about so strongly and so lovingly about...we need to reckon with its history. How do we do that without alienating farmers when we have so many farmers who are on stolen land? How do we do this and provide land access to folks who are not white and new to Vermont?"**

— Qualitative Interview Participant

So why are community partners emphasizing the need for a confrontation with Vermont’s history of agriculture and land ownership among Black and Indigenous communities?

According to the High Meadows Fund, a supporting organization of the Vermont Community Foundation, Indigenous communities, once the sole stewards of Vermont’s land, have been diminished and marginalized by centuries of displacement and discrimination, including *the eugenics movement* in Vermont in the early 20th century<sup>13</sup>. It is estimated that Indigenous people lost 1.5 billion acres of land since the U.S. was originally founded.

So what are community partners asking for? They are asking for recognition and acknowledgement of this history and clear and actionable strategies to confront and account for the harm that has been done in these communities.

Former staff and producers emphasize affirming and validating experiences they’ve had with the Agriculture Developmental Division (i.e. AgDev) team

Our next theme is focused on a department which was brought up multiple times across our interviews with community partners and our interviews with current Agency staff. We included this theme surrounding people’s positive experiences with the AgDev team because when engaging in racial equity work, it’s important to ask if we have the culture, the principles, and the interdepartmental values needed not only to start the work, but to sustain it. As a note, it’s important to emphasize that positive experiences with a particular department within the organization do not mean there is not considerable room left to grow. These examples can assist with developing models from existing approaches to community development that VAAF staff and partners are finding to be effective.

**Community partners discussed affirming and validating experiences with the AgDev team via the following select quotes:**




**I used to work with AgDev - it was very progressive and very open. People were open to different ideas and perspectives there and we were allowed to have agency over what we did. People lower in the organizational hierarchy could express interest in something and be heard. That’s something in retrospect that I very much appreciate that I didn’t appreciate at the time. This is very different from other departments across the Agency. There is absolutely a generational divide.**


— Qualitative Interview Participant

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13. Meadows, H. (2021, September 30). A gift to seed vibrant farms. High Meadows Fund. Retrieved September 2022, from <http://www.highmeadowsfund.org/meadow-muffins-food-for-thought/2021/9/28/announcement-of-farm-transition-gift>

 **I have high hopes for this process. Some of the best experiences I have had with people at the Agency has been with Folks of Color and LGBTQIA+ people in AgDev who asked thoughtful questions and really made me feel comfortable and safe in the space.”**

— Qualitative Interview Participant

 **When I worked in the AgDev division, it was so collaborative, people were open and very accepting. I got the sense that age was the most cohesive, amiable, and really positive.”**

— Qualitative Interview Participant

When engaging in racial equity work, we have to ask ourselves if we have the tools, resources, and teams needed for our work to thrive. In 2016, the NY Times reported on a research project that was led by Google. At that time, Google researchers sought to study team collaboration and leadership to find the most critical elements needed to build the perfect team.

They found that the most critical component to building the perfect team was psychological safety, a concept characterized by “interpersonal trust and mutual respect in which people are comfortable being themselves.”

The dynamics of the AgDev team should be considered as an opportunity for the Agency to better understand how leaders, managers, and staff can create the kind of psychological safety that is having a considerably positive impact on producers, farmers, and other community partners.


### **The critical importance of allocating grant funding to producers and farmers of Color**

In September 2021, *the High Meadows Fund announced a \$6 million gift to the Vermont Land Trust. The main purpose of the gift, as defined by fund administrators were the following:*

- to enable more farm enterprises to provide safe and meaningful livelihoods for those working the land,
- to provide greater opportunity for land and enterprise ownership by low-income and under-represented communities, especially Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, and
- to promote farming practices to steward clean water, healthy soil, and climate resilience

Due to the historic disenfranchisement in Black Indigenous, Brown, and other Communities of Color, resource allocation is a critical aspect of anti-racism efforts in agriculture.


*Community partners discussed the importance of allocating funding to producers and farmers of color via the following select quotes:*

 **Who they know is who they perceive as legitimate and they lack in knowing folks who don't have as much access."**


— Qualitative Interview Participant

 **There needs to be programs developed to make up for historical inequity."**

— Qualitative Interview Participant

 **I don't know why people think Black people don't farm...historically speaking we have not supported Black farmers in anything...if anything we have gone out of our way to take land and to keep Black farmers from being successful."**


— Qualitative Interview Participant

 **With the lack of new producers and producers of color, there ought to be a much more robust effort to engage young and beginning farmers in agriculture and hopefully it would come with an understanding of increasing the breadth of the outreach and funding to organizations that focus on these communities."**


— Qualitative Interview Participant

 **There's a lot of money that the agency distributes in the form of grants and it does seem like it is constantly going to the same people or the same group of people."**


— Qualitative Interview Participant

 **You really have to be an insider to get grant funding. You have to use the right language in your grant application or have people to call...there's huge potential to figure out how to better distribute funds."**

— Qualitative Interview Participant

 **There are so many things we want to do to support farmers of color and new and beginning farmers but we don't have the funding to do it."**

— Qualitative Interview Participant

 **It's hard - It doesn't feel like there's an obvious mechanism to push from regulatory grant-funding tools because they are not built for change. They are built for the status-quo...some conflict between the vision and the bounds of what's possible right now. I want to know what the Agency can do within its current purview."**

— Qualitative Interview Participant

As noted earlier in this section, the High Meadows Fund announced a \$6 million gift to the Vermont Land Trust last Fall. In its announcement surrounding this gift, the organization specified that one third of this donation would be allocated to seed a land sovereignty fund led by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color with the design and governance of this fund to be determined by BIPOC leaders following the announcement. Why BIPOC leadership, governance, and design?

In July 2020, the Heal Food Alliance [published a letter](#) on Medium from BIPOC Leaders in food and agriculture to food systems funders. In their own words:

***"Despite this collective body of work by BIPOC-led organizations, your foundations are continuing a harmful and dangerous pattern. Over the years, it has become a common practice of foundations to resource white-led organizations to do service work in BIPOC communities, or to fund a white-led organization with an established funder relationship to subgrant to an under-resourced BIPOC-led organization. BIPOC organizations are asked to partner for bottom dollar while the white led groups get the majority of resources. This is unacceptable. There are many examples across the nation of foundations who have worked together to create more just ways of giving: Chorus, Surdna, Mertz, Nathan Cummings, Solutions, Solidaire, Ceres Trust, Hidden Leaf, to name a few. We ask that foundations take bold steps to stop the moving train and move in concert with BIPOC-led orgs doing work in BIPOC communities."***

The Agency has a unique opportunity to leverage its social capital to institute funding programs focused specifically on providing ample grant funding to farmers, producers, and other food system leaders of color. The development, design, and governance of these programs should be led by BIPOC food systems leaders in order to be equitable and to dismantle existing systems of inequity.

**The need for streamlined communication and equitable, anti-tokenist relationship-building**

In 2021, the Evans School of Public Policy and Governance at the University of Washington released a report entitled, *Moving Towards Anti-Racist Community Engagement In Conservation And Land-Use Programming*. In the researchers' thematic analysis of data collected through semi-structured interviews with various organizations and coalitions, they sought to answer the following question: What are best practices for moving towards anti-racist community engagement?

Before we share some of the leading results from their research, we'd like to begin by sharing what community partners expressed about the need for streamlined communication and equitable, anti-tokenist relationship-building. Anti-tokenist means an approach that does not define racial equity as "hiring as many Black and Brown people as possible." Instead, it is a holistic approach that looks at the existing environment and seeks to make that environment better so as not to bring People of Color into spaces where they will be mistreated without intervention. *The select quotes from community partners are as follows:*

**“I initially came into contact with the Agency through my work with other nonprofits. I haven't collaborated with them a lot. I can say they always keep a professional tone and it can be so difficult to understand processes and structures that the Agency is beholden to.”**

— Community Partner

**“I was surprised to hear that the Agency was doing an Equity audit because it doesn't seem to be a focus in the work they do”**

— Community Partner

**“There's a lack of transparency about how they make decisions. For example, I have no idea how my name got on this outreach list for interviews.”**

— Community Partner

**“We have different folks reaching out to us from the Agency all the time. I don't know how our name got on the list and it doesn't seem like folks across the Agency communicate because I can get a request for my time on a Monday and then a few days later get another request for my time and feedback on a Wednesday.”**

— Community Partner

**“Include Black farmers, reach out to Black farmers who are trying to move into the State, give incentives to Black farmers. They could even be matching up farmers of color with farms that are up for sale.”**

— Community Partner

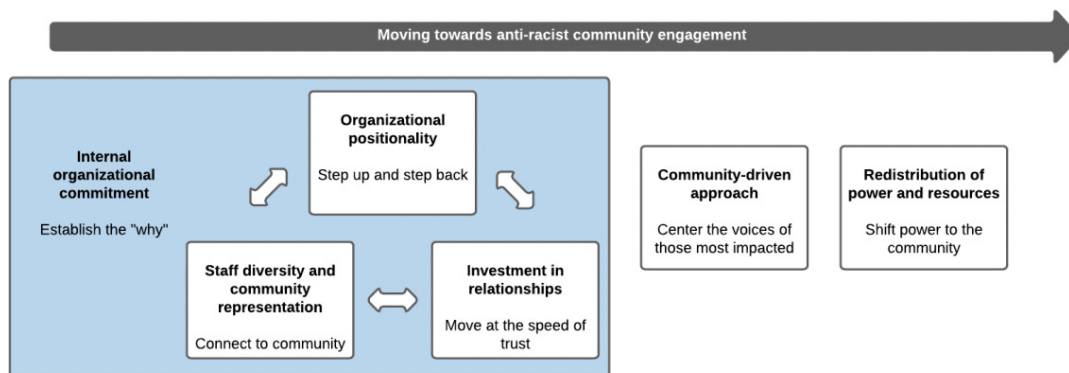


**Researchers from the University of Washington found identified six strategies for moving towards anti-racist community engagement:**

1. **Internal organizational commitment:** The organization establishes a commitment to defining and adopting an anti-racist approach to their work.
2. **Organizational positionality:** Organizational actors acknowledge when the organization is not the appropriate primary actor in a given space.
3. **Staff diversity and community representation:** Program staff are representative of the communities with which they are working.
4. **Investment in relationships:** The organization invests in building long-term relationships based on trust.
5. **Community-driven approach:** Projects are driven by the people who are most impacted.
6. **Redistribution of power and resources:** The organization shifts decision-making power and resources to those who are most impacted and works outside of traditional hierarchies.

Researchers define the above themes and strategies as steps organizational leaders can take to move from marginalization to delegated power and community ownership. These tasks are not easy and yet when well invested in they can lead to long term relationships that do not lead to tokenist outcomes. Tokenist outcomes are when historically marginalized people are brought into organizations for display and are not afforded the support and resources needed to thrive within programs, community organizations, grant initiatives, etc.

Figure 6. A Framework for Moving Towards Anti-Racist Community Engagement




Source: Moving Towards Anti-Racist Community Engagement In Conservation And Land-Use Programming

The Agency needs a shared and streamlined approach for relationship building that helps to streamline community relationships and to ensure that historically marginalized partners (whether prospective or current) are not being positioned to become tokens within the Agency’s necessary feedback loops and programming strategies.


**A need for re-imagining hiring, recruitment, and retention across the Agency**

The University of Vermont’s Career Center<sup>14</sup> reports that 76% of U.S. employees and job seekers say a diverse workforce is an important factor when evaluating companies and job offers, 63% of U.S. employees think their employer should be doing more to increase the diversity of its workforce, 32% of U.S. employees and job seekers would not apply for a job at a company where there is a lack of diversity among its workforce.

 **Your organization’s *mission, vision and values* helps students of color evaluate you as a potential employer because they define your workplace culture, vision for change, development of your employees, and engagement in the community. As the Glassdoor statistics below, being transparent about your diversity and inclusion strategies is key to *demonstrating your commitment* to transform your workplace to meet the expectations of a diverse workforce.”**

— University of Vermont, Career Center

When engaging in our semi-structured interview process, community partners named concern with the Agency’s current hiring and retention efforts as related specifically to communities of Color. **These concerns included the following selected quotes:**

 **There’s a HUGE range of ways that the agency could support the goal of anti-racism and improving equity...I don’t know that I see that marginalized communities are encouraged to apply ...even that line at the bottom of a job description”**

— Qualitative Interview Participant



14. Diversity Recruiting Strategies. Diversity Recruiting Strategies | Career Center | The University of Vermont. (n.d.). Retrieved September 2022, from <https://www.uvm.edu/career/diversity-recruiting-strategies>

“There’s a HUGE range of ways that the agency could support the goal of anti-racism and improving equity...I don’t know that I see that marginalized communities are encouraged to apply ...even that line at the bottom of a job description”

— Qualitative Interview Participant

“How are we recruiting people to come here and showing them that they are welcome when we’re releasing flyers with only white people on them.”

— Qualitative Interview Participant

“Seeing this process happen tells me there is a level of commitment there that I don’t often see in state government. When I saw this process happening, I thought “Ok, this is important enough that we are going to allocate funding to do work that could move us forward. I would love to see some real change and commitment...it would be great to see some different approaches to hiring practices, recruiting people from diverse backgrounds. I wish we could have made far more progress with this when I was there.”

— Qualitative Interview Participant

When reviewing these select quotes, you may be wondering, how would an Agency, organization, or company seek to hire and retain employees of Color in a predominantly white state?

The University of Vermont provides clear and actionable recommendations for hiring and retention strategies focused intentionally and thoughtfully on BIPOC communities. These recommendations include:

#### **Job Postings**

- Create hiring committees of people of varied identities that are part of each step of the process from reviewing job descriptions, posting in diverse locations, interviewing, and selecting candidates.
- **Be clear in job postings** - what skills are needed to do the job
- Share that you are an equal opportunity employer.
- Job Boards focused on communities of Color: generate a list of places to reach **candidates** of Color and are visible to multiple communities and networks.
- Use recruiting technology to keep job descriptions bias-free such as Textio and Gender Decoder.

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- Use recruiting technology to keep job descriptions bias-free such as Textio and Gender Decoder.

**Recruiting**

- Deconstruct [dominant ways of viewing professionalism](#)
- [Build a diverse internship program](#) that leads to an entry-level pipeline.
- Find mid-career professionals by developing relationships with key recruiters, search firms, and organizations that have strong reputations for sourcing and developing diverse talent such as [The Hispanic Alliance for Career Enhancement](#), [Ascend](#) (Pan-Asian professionals), and the [Executive Leadership Council](#) (Black professionals)

**Interviewing and Selecting Candidates**

- Create a [DEI hiring plan](#) to create systemic practices that promote equity
- [Strive for Culture Add](#) instead of Culture Fit
- Re-write your [behavioral interview questions](#) to be more inclusive

As the old adage goes, when we fail to plan, we plan to fail. By developing a SMART plan for hiring and retention as part of the Agency's hiring, recruitment, and retention processes, this increases the likelihood that the Agency will succeed in fostering a culture that is affirming of BIPOC staff, contractors, leaders, and partners at every level in the organization. In addition, it is important that the Agency hire a Director of Equity or DEI Lead who has the decision-making authority and ample budget to co-lead racial equity work across the Agency.

**Findings:**

- Community partners report ***needing a formal acknowledgement of the history of land ownership and racism in Vermont*** for them to believe that the commitment to racial equity is authentic and sincere.

**Findings (cont.):**

- Community partners report ***feeling affirmed by the Agency's AgDev department*** and share their experiences with team members and leaders in AgDev who have been very thoughtful and intentional and who have done a good job of ***creating a welcoming environment for historically marginalized people.***
- Community partners shared that they ***want to see more concerted and progressive efforts around hiring, recruitment, and retention*** of staff and leaders of Color at VAAF.M.
- Partners shared needing the Agency to ***streamline communication and build equitable, anti-tokenist approaches for relationship-building*** as at times they have felt tokenized by requests for feedback or other requests for time and labor .

**Select Recommendations**

***(please find a full list of recommendations at the end of this report):***

- Formally and publicly acknowledge the history of land ownership and racism in Vermont and develop and share clear and actionable strategies for confronting and accounting for the harm that has been done in communities of Color across the state.
- Develop a SMART plan for hiring and retention as part of the Agency's hiring, recruitment, and retention processes. This increases the likelihood that the Agency will succeed in fostering a culture that is affirming of BIPOC staff, contractors, leaders, and partners at every level in the organization.
- Hire a Director of Equity at the executive level who has the decision-making authority and ample budget to lead these hiring, recruitment, and retention efforts at the executive level.
- Develop a shared and streamlined approach for relationship building that helps to better organize community relationships and to ensure that historically marginalized partners (whether prospective or current) are not being positioned to become tokens within the Agency's necessary feedback loops and programming strategies.
- Institute funding programs focused specifically on providing ample grant funding to farmers, producers, and other food system leaders of color. The development, design, and governance of these programs, in order to be equitable and to dismantle existing systems of inequity, should be led by BIPOC food systems leaders.
- Leverage the dynamics of the AgDev team as an internal case study for better understanding how leaders, managers, and staff are creating the kind of psychological safety that is having a considerably positive impact on producers, farmers, and other community partners. This is still a white-dominant team and yet community partners report positive experiences with not feeling tokenized when reached out, consistent communication, and an awareness of identity and power dynamics.

**Guides & Opportunities for Reimagining:**

- Some of the work being led by Vermont-based foundations focused on contenting with the U.S. history with racism can serve as a blueprint for identifying what opportunities lie ahead of VAAF. [Learn more about the High Meadows Land Sovereignty Fund here.](#)
- Funding alone is just one step. Positioning historically marginalized people to lead allocation of funding in their communities is another. In 2021, the High Meadows Fund gave a gift of \$2 Million to the Vermont Land Trust Land Sovereignty Fund. The goal, in part, is to **begin to address the historical harms that have shaped current-day racial and ethnic disparities in land access and ownership.**
- For the Vermont Land Trust, land sovereignty “includes access to, and ownership of, land. It is also a term that goes beyond these ideas to **stress a fundamental belonging to the land.** This **sense of belonging and agency is the opposite of colonization, slavery, and racism that has often underpinned this country’s practices around land.** We use ‘land sovereignty’ to recognize past harms and signal an intent to foster justice, equity, and inclusion.” Read more about how the VLT is moving forward with building a collaborative [decision-making process for the new fund here.](#)
- The Agency has an opportunity to envision new approaches for **community engagement and community outreach centered around anti-racism.** Read the University of Washington’s guiding practices for moving towards [anti-racist community engagement here.](#)

*How Does VAAF’s Governance Structure Equip the Agency To Lead With Accountability and Trust?*

One of the leading themes that surfaced in our research is related to the governance structure of VAAF. Survey respondents and interviewees raised concerns about the resilience of the agency’s commitments to racial equity and belonging. These concerns were rooted in examining the current governance structure through a lens of accountability and trust. Reports of concerns surrounding what was referred to as a “top-down” approach to leadership were common. In addition, a number of interview participants and qualitative survey respondents shared a fear of retribution when voicing concerns or opinions in disagreement with VAAF leadership.

When presented with the statement, I am satisfied with how decisions are made at VAAF, 40% Agree or Strongly Agree, 40% Neither Agree nor Disagree, and 20% Disagree or Strongly Disagree. Across a number of survey questions related to decision-making and people’s experiences with governance at VAAF, we found the story of two agencies, with qualitative results nearly split down the middle between agree responses and neutral and/or disagree responses. In this case, the fact that 60% of the organization responded either neutrally or negatively to being satisfied with how decisions are made points to a bigger issue. Can VAAF engage in racial justice work without the trust of staff and leaders in how decisions are made across the organization as a whole?

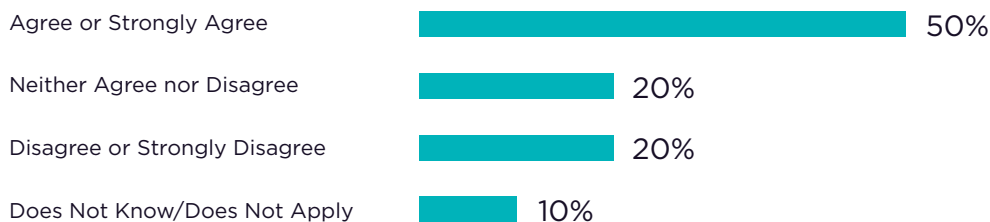
We know that in any form of equity, belonging, or organizational justice work, there is no way to make tangible progress without developing organizational capacity and bandwidth for conflict. Without this organizational capacity, no working community can effectively listen to and integrate collective feedback from internal staff and external stakeholders. The more we listen and apply what we learn; the more we open our collective organization up to the potential for conflict and the opportunity to gain deeper understanding of one another.

**I am satisfied with how decisions are made at VAAF**



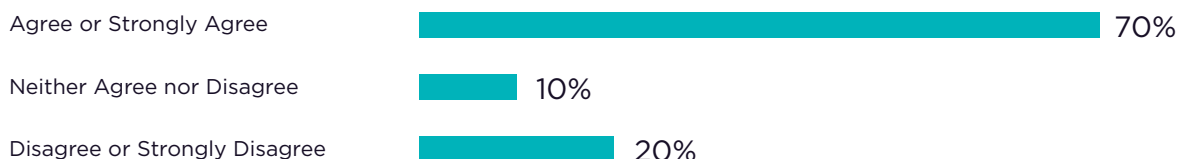
When presented with the statement, *Perspectives like mine are included in the decision making at VAAF*, 50% Agree or Strongly Agree, 20% Neither Agree nor Disagree, 20% Disagree or Strongly Disagree, and 10% shared not knowing or not believing the question applied to their role or position at the agency.

**Perspectives like mine are included in the decision making at VAAF**



When presented with the statement, *I am included in decisions that affect my work*, 70% Agree or Strongly Agree, 10% Neither Agree nor Disagree, 20% Disagree or Strongly Disagree

**I am included in decisions that affect my work**



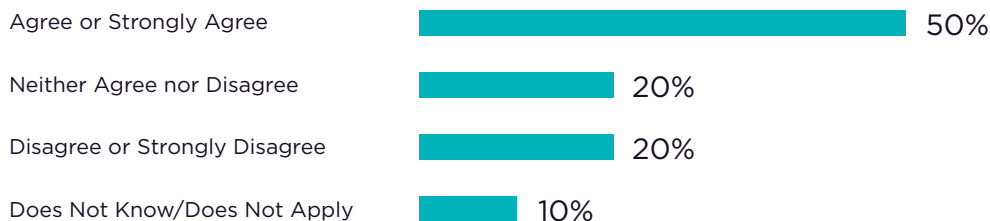
When presented with the statement, ***At VAAFM there is open and honest two-way communication***, 50% Agree or Strongly Agree, 30% Neither Agree nor Disagree, 20% Disagree or Strongly Disagree

**At VAAFM there is open and honest two-way communication**



When presented with the statement, ***I can voice a contrary opinion without fear of negative consequences***, 50% Agree or Strongly Agree, 20% Neither Agree nor Disagree, 20% Disagree or Strongly Disagree, 10% Don't Know/Doesn't Apply

**I can voice a contrary opinion without fear of negative consequences**



What do the responses to the above questions demonstrate to us? One of our concerns with the neutral responses is that they make up 20% of all respondents in questions related to 1) being able to voice a contrary opinion without fear of negative consequence, 2) being able to experience open and honest 2-way communication, and 3) feeling that personal lived perspectives are included in decision-making. In a question focused on being an active participant in decisions affecting a person's day-to-day work, we would hope to see a lower percentage of respondents in the neutral category. The difference we'd like to note in these findings is that there is a very large percentage of staff who report that they are included in decisions that affect their work. This can be explained through qualitative respondents who expressed, at times, more comfort with decision-making on a local team while expressing different experiences with decision-making at the broader organizational level.



These sentiments are underpinned by qualitative responses that focus on staff's experiences with leadership at VAAFM. Representative quotes are as follows:

“Leadership can be defensive and conflict-averse when it comes to diversity, equity, and inclusion. I feel like I work in a culture where people are generally more comfortable with other people like them, and it comes across in how they relate to others.

— Qualitative Interview Participant

“There are unspoken rules and it can be difficult to discern where and how it is safe and productive to share opinions that challenge leadership. I've witnessed some talking about people rather than talking to people here. I think people are afraid of speaking up. We might have a conflict-averse culture. Communication across programs, divisions, and other agencies is limited. Staff are very siloed in their own programs.”

— Qualitative Interview Participant

“There's an inevitable tension between appointees who are in a chain of command (serving at the will of the governor), and their management supervisees who have some civil service protections, and non-management employees who are outside of a chain of command (serving the good of the public).”

— Qualitative Interview Participant

“The 'good old boy' culture that was so foundational to the Agency until quite recently may be fading, but the Agency organization and distribution of power is still very much informed and impacted by the past (people in leadership positions who learned from and were mentored by the previous generation have only been taught one way to do things—usually an oppressive, top down approach, that doesn't allow for creativity or fuel empowerment of staff.)”

— Qualitative Interview Participant

“The power wielded by the agency can largely depend on who is making the decision, their perceptions of fairness, process, justice and outcomes. It can be variable and difficult to understand from the outside. People in power need to demonstrate good judgment which comes from experience and openness to differing ideas. The use of terms and phrases like *Enforcement*, *Holding people accountable* narrow and restrict the possibilities which can be considered. Everything becomes zero sum. *Intent* is another term that is used a lot but can be harmfully used. No one is perfect, especially in interpersonal communication.”

— Qualitative Interview Participant

“Power has traditionally been held in the hands of white men who have been here for decades, or the people who work directly for them. Often those people work in an old-boy network and many decisions and actions are made in a way that primarily supports those individuals’ best interests.”

— Qualitative Interview Participant

“When I think of the power at VAAF, Male dominated, comes to mind, in the sense that predominantly males are in the leadership positions/roles. One thing that immediately comes to mind here is the process for getting promoted and getting a raise. Dominant males are more comfortable advocating for themselves and even exaggerating their qualifications/abilities. Less dominant genders, LGBTQ, and I imagine (BIPOC) may not feel empowered to advocate for themselves to get a raise or promotion or even be identified as leadership potential.”

— Qualitative Interview Participant

“Power is held by few within AAFM. People are caring and want to do *what is right* but don’t always ask or know what is best or needed across the Agency. We don’t have clear processes and systems in place to ensure that power is well shared and decision-making is just.”

— Qualitative Interview Participant

**Findings:**

- Staff report feeling confident in VAAFM being made up of staff and leaders who want to do what is right, but are concerned about hierarchical leadership structures that produce distrust among staff.
- **Some staff report being afraid to voice contrary opinions** in an agency that doesn't lend itself to encouraging dissenting opinions and disagreement.
- Staff report missing past years in the history of VAAFM when "democratic decision-making" was more common.
- Respondents report a "good ol boy" approach to agency operations which prefers the leadership of "white male leaders" over everyone else.

**Select Recommendations**

*(please find a full list of recommendations at the end of this report):*

- Conduct an audit on promotion practices across the agency with the goal of gaining a deeper understanding as to how promotion decisions are being made across the agency
- Develop a new **framework for decision-making** as it relates to its racial justice work that everyone across the organization can weigh in on and offer insights prior to it being finalized across the organization
- Explore a collaborative, aligned, and clear path to engaging in policy and decision-making.
- Refer to the **7 point framework** by the National Innovation Service on designing how decisions get made.
- Create a pathway for ongoing **two-way communication** between VAAFM staff and leadership, establish periodic conversations among leadership, and staff to reflect on progress once a racial justice action plan has been designed, all relevant VAAFM stakeholders have been offered the opportunity to be consulted, and implementation of the plan has begun.
- In deciding which recommendations to prioritize first and how, this **decision should be made by various stakeholders across the organization** including but not limited to staff, leaders, and external partners

**Guides & Opportunities for Reimagining:**

- There is an opportunity for staff and leadership to **co-create a governance structure that shares decision-making power, rebuilds trust, and aligns impact with intent while setting firm boundaries with staff and leadership** as to how they collaborate and at times work independently of one another.
- Refer to the detailed explanation of the **4 I's framework**, adapted by the Chinook Fund<sup>15</sup>, which gives us a deeper understanding of how oppressive systems in our society are constructed: Individually, Ideologically, Interpersonally, and Institutionally (as applied above).

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15. GRCC. (n.d.). **The Four I's of Oppression** . Grand Rapids Community College .  
[https://www.grcc.edu/sites/default/files/docs/diversity/the\\_four\\_is\\_of\\_oppression.pdf](https://www.grcc.edu/sites/default/files/docs/diversity/the_four_is_of_oppression.pdf).

**Guides & Opportunities for Reimagining (cont):**

- Refer to *“Doing the Inner Work”* in the Resources section near the end of this report for more guides.
- This is an example of a [community governance board](#), established in the wake of [The Ferguson Report](#) after Michael Brown was killed by police<sup>16</sup>.
- Resist Foundation, *led by and from the communities they fund*, aligns their radical philanthropy practice by creating a Circle of Elders and a [4-step accountability process](#) as part of its governance, and shares their model of how they became a *worker self-directed* nonprofit: [“The truth is, structure matters. How you do your work is equally as important as the work itself”](#)

*How Does the Agency Provide Process for Addressing Conflict, Confronting Harm, and Seeking Repair?*

Each section of this report works to present a collective vision of the state of racial equity and belonging at VAAFM. Many might expect a report like the one you are reading now to focus only on racial equity initiatives, the emotional labor needed to lead and sustain them, and the importance of building bandwidth for discomfort. We find all of the above attributes of organizational justice work to be important. And also, we find it critical to ask the following question in relation to this work, “If the most collaborative, actionable racial action plan was created in this organization tomorrow, would the organization’s current practices and policies provide the necessary container to make that plan a reality?”

In this report we’ve shared a few frameworks focused on actualizing commitments to racial justice within organizations. An important note to add here is that without accountability in addressing conflict and facing harm, people in organizations cannot build trust with one another. Trust is a critical pillar of racial justice work. Without it, we can’t build the collaboration necessary to lead effectively, to fail integrally, and to succeed in community. When we use the word *harm*, we are defining it as follows:

*Speech or action that causes physical, mental, or emotional damage to another person or group of people. In the context of this Racial Equity and Belonging Audit (REBA), we focus specifically on harm that minimizes, marginalizes, or disenfranchises individual people and groups on the basis of their race, gender, class, caste, ethnicity, LGBTQIA+ identity, region, caregiver status, or disability.*

When we use the term *conflict*, we are defining this term as follows:

*A state of disagreement, misalignment, or difference of opinion; conflict in itself is not inherently bad, evil, or harmful.*

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16. Content advisory: For Black, African, Asian, Latinx, Indigenous, and other People of Color who have experienced, witnessed, or been impacted by harm and/or violence with police brutality, this resource describes the death of Michael Brown. Please proceed with care if you review the example of a community governance board discussed here.

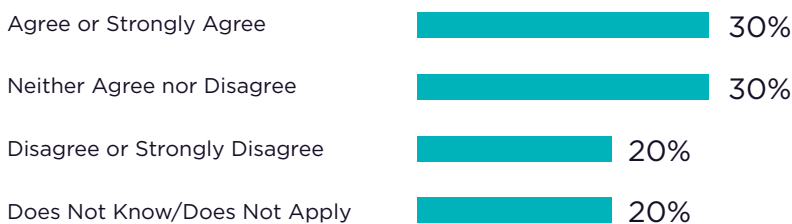
When presented with the statement, *At VAAFM, we have clear policies and guidelines that guide us in seeking repair when we make mistakes/ inadvertently cause harm*, 20% Agree or Strongly Agree, 20% Neither Agree nor Disagree, 40% Disagree or Strongly Disagree, and 20% don't know or don't believe it applies to their role or position at the agency.

**At VAAFM, we have clear policies and guidelines that guide us in seeking repair when we make mistakes/ inadvertently cause harm**



When presented with the statement, *At VAAFM, emotional labor<sup>17</sup> is recognized as real labor*, 30% Agree or Strongly Agree, 30% Neither Agree nor Disagree, 20% Disagree or Strongly Disagree, and 20% don't know or don't believe it applies to their role or position at the agency.

**At VAAFM, emotional labor<sup>16</sup> is recognized as real labor**



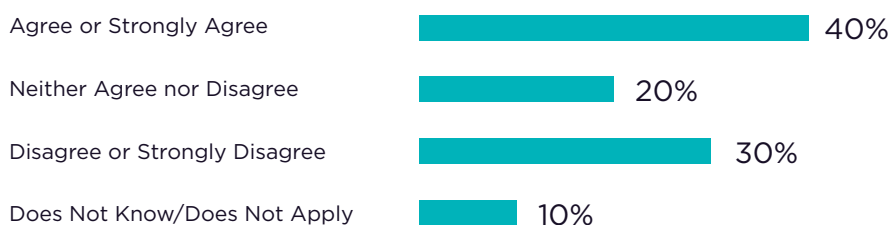

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17. Here, the term “emotional labor” refers to regulating or managing emotional expressions with others as part of one’s professional work role. Emotional labor is parallel to physical labor; both are occupations that tend to require a lot of effort, but emotional labor is effort around emotions and tends to be labor that is implicitly and explicitly assigned to women and nonbinary people in the workplace [i.e., service or caring work], and physical labor is effort with the body that tends to be assigned to men in the workplace.

18. <https://weld.la.psu.edu/what-is-emotional-labor/>

When presented with the statement, *Facing and embracing conflict is considered an important part of VAAFMs culture*, 40% Agree or Strongly Agree, 20% Neither Agree nor Disagree, 30% Disagree or Strongly Disagree, and 10% don't know or don't believe it applies to their role or position at the agency.

**Facing and embracing conflict is considered an important part of VAAFMs culture**



What do these responses tell us? Quantitative and qualitative responses demonstrate a culture wherein at least 50% of respondents report neutrally or in disagreement to questions asking about the existence of processes and structures for facing conflict, facing harm, and seeking repair within the organization.

**When asked about the relational dynamics at VAAFMs, this is how VAAFMs staff and leaders responded:**

“There is no conflict resolution. It’s more like, “I’m right. You’re wrong. You do as I tell you.” There’s bullying. It’s not atypical to receive badgering emails and it doesn’t need to be that way. Really... Conflict is very stressful at VAAFMs. There are accusations and yelling. I’m just glad we’re not in the office because the office politics put so much labor onto staff. There’s no sense of healthy leadership and we really need that healthy leadership model.”

— Qualitative Interview Participant

“We need to create a culture that is open to open communication without retribution.”

— Qualitative Interview Participant

“Here we have big egos and people are territorial between Agencies at the leadership/management levels. This has been toxic and destructive to those of us trying to build healthy relationships based on respect, trust and collaboration with colleagues from other agencies. There are individuals in the leadership ranks who put their own personal interests first, at the cost of others.”

— Qualitative Interview Participant

“Changing the culture within an Agency takes time and effort. I think that there is going to be confusion, misperceptions, and misunderstandings about this effort. For some it will feel like an attack. Others will feel like they just don’t see what the problem is. There is a whole group who really just don’t know who to talk about it without feeling like they will be judged for not saying things the right way. This inability to communicate can lead to fear and isolation.”

— Qualitative Interview Participant

“The Agency has changed under current leadership. There is less willingness to have frank and open discussions with fellow directors and section chiefs on big issues that impact the whole agency. Only certain people are included and decisions come as a surprise to many when they are announced. The past appointed authorities were polar opposites - talked everything over together but it was more inclusive at the leadership level.”

— Qualitative Interview Participant

#### Findings:

- Staff *express concern about a relational dynamic that puts staff and leaders in a position to leave conflict unresolved.*
- *Staff are committed to doing the work necessary* to make the culture at VAAF better and report needing more leadership models for healthy approaches to conflict and disagreement.
- In addition, the lack of policies and procedures that offer staff resources and guidance for facing conflict, de-escalating when tensions are high, and *seeking repair when mistakes are made and harm is done*, leaves unresolved issues and relational wounds that breed distrust and territorial relationships between staff and varied departmental agencies.

**Select Recommendations**

*(please find a full list of recommendations at the end of this report):*

- **Design policy-driven education on trauma-informed approaches to accepting accountability, embracing conflict (i.e. not identifying conflict as meaning that someone is just being negative or argumentative), confronting harm, and seeking repair with people.** Without knowledge of what emotional labor is and how emotional labor is inequitably distributed across the sector and the agency, leaders in the organization cannot develop just policies and procedures that speak directly to this issue.
- **Develop an accessibility and disability justice framework for the Agency.** This framework should seek to answer the following questions: How is accessibility defined by staff and leaders at VAAF? What benefits exist to support disabled staff and employees at the Agency? What resources exist to support team members with caring for their mental and emotional health? What training and education is made available so that non-disabled team members can develop awareness of working alongside their colleagues in ways that are affirming and aware of how staff members are differently impacted by disability?
- Education is needed across the agency to develop this collective understanding of bystander intervention, harm reduction, and de-escalation. **But education alone is not enough.** This education needs to be supported by organizational policy which accounts for the additional emotional labor being undertaken by historically marginalized staff members.
- Use performance evaluations across the agency to **measure the progress of individual staff members in their willingness, albeit not often easy, to name and talk through disagreement, to accept accountability when they make mistakes, and to sincerely and intentionally seek repair** when they cause harm.
- Leadership should **work with staff to develop not only education but processes and practices that hold all staff and leaders to creating brave and trauma-informed spaces.** Without these policies, there is little to no accountability when members of the community engage in toxic behavior towards one another. In addition, policies and practices are needed to provide accountability to all members of staff and leadership for creating just and harm-reductive spaces that do not put anyone at risk of repeated and unaddressed relational harm.
- Create change management **strategies for building cultures of leadership that lead to just and anti-oppressive outcomes**, by asking the following questions.



- Individual: What resources can VAAFAM provide that focus especially on **staff and management team leaders of Color** in their growth and development within the agency - especially in the face of racialized resistance?
- Ideological: What education is needed at VAAFAM so people can identify when **harm is happening and understand their role in intervening** in it?
- Interpersonal: How can the agency apply principles of **trauma-informed bystander intervention** into annual evaluation strategies? This strategy should include a **360 evaluation framework** which enables all members of staff and executive team to be evaluated fairly not only on their work outputs and outcomes, but also on their **awareness of power and positionality** and their application of this awareness.
- Institutional: What structural levers can VAAFAM develop to **protect leaders of Color** across the agency? What mechanisms need to be created for merging siloed racial justice work across the organization so that it becomes transparent, organizationally actionable, and effective for the long-term?

#### **Guides & Opportunities for Reimagining:**

- The Anti-Oppression Resource and Training Alliance provides preliminary guidance on addressing conflict in movement organizations. This is a tool that can be used to support the agency in developing accountable guidelines for how people across the organization are required to treat one another in all aspects of work across VAAFAM. There should also be a particular emphasis on how team members are required to treat one another in the face of difficult conversations about power, race, identity, and privilege.
- In addition, Movement-Killing Behaviors by NJIME is another resource we find to be incredibly helpful in supporting leaders in reimagining our approach to engaging in difficult conversations and doing the difficult work of changing culture and dismantling white dominant cultures. The behaviors defined in this document include shared principles and descriptions of behaviors that kill movements, lead to stangnancy, and damage relationships.

#### *How Does the Agency Provide Process for Addressing Conflict, Confronting Harm, and Seeking Repair?*

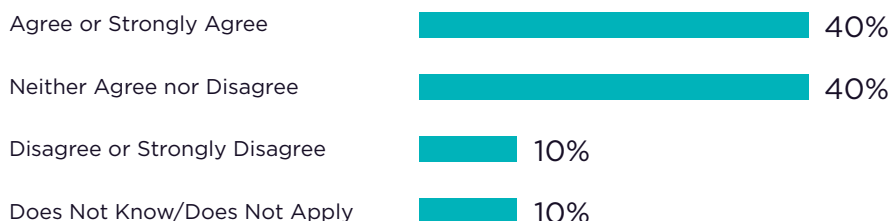
Our qualitative and quantitative analysis shows a stark contrast in the ways in which VAAFAM staff perceive the agency's commitment to equity and belonging work. This contrast surfaces a number of questions from staff as to what this commitment means for the organization, how it will be implemented, and the agency's current impact on historically marginalized communities. When presented with the statement, **Racial equity is a priority for VAAFAM**, 30% Agree or Strongly Agree, 30% Neither Agree nor Disagree, 20% Disagree or Strongly Disagree and 20% don't know or don't believe it applies to their role or position at the agency.

### Racial equity is a priority for VAAFM



When presented with the statement, *Building culture that is affirming for LGBTQIA+ people is a priority for VAAFM*, 40% Agree or Strongly Agree, 40% Neither Agree nor Disagree, 10% Disagree or Strongly Disagree, and 10% don't know or don't believe it applies to their role or position at the agency.

### Building culture that is affirming for LGBTQIA+ people is a priority for VAAFM



When presented with the statement, *Building culture that is affirming for people with disabilities is a priority for VAAFM*, 10% Agree or Strongly Agree, 40% Neither Agree nor Disagree, 20% Disagree or Strongly Disagree, and 20% don't know or don't believe it applies to their role or position at the agency.

### Building culture that is affirming for LGBTQIA+ people is a priority for VAAFM



When asked about VAAFMs work to prioritize 1) racial equity work, 2) developing cultures that are affirming for LGBTQIA+ people, and building cultures affirming for people with disabilities, between 30 and 40% of all respondents neither agreed nor disagreed across all questions. The highest rate of agreement to these questions was VAAFMs efforts to build cultures that are affirming for LGBTQIA+ people (40%), the lowest rate of agreement across these questions was VAAFMs efforts to build cultures that are affirming for people with disabilities (10%).

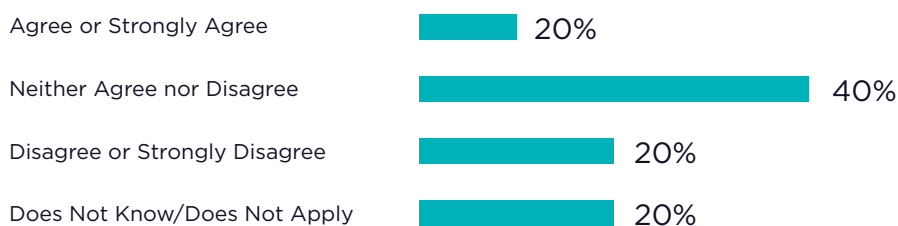
When presented with the statement, *At VAAFm, the work we do improves the lives of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) communities*, 20% Agree or Strongly Agree, 40% Neither Agree nor Disagree, 20% Disagree nor Disagree, and 20% don't know or don't believe it applies to their role or position at the agency.

**At VAAFm, the work we do improves the lives of BIPOC communities**



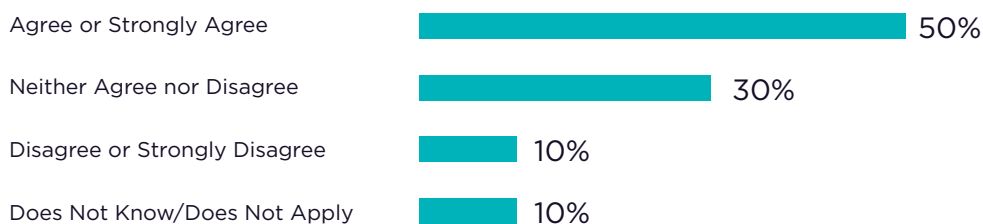
When presented with the statement, *At VAAFm, the work we do improves the lives of LGBTQIA+ people*, 20% Agree or Strongly Agree, 40% Neither Agree nor Disagree, 20% Disagree or Strongly Disagree, and 20% don't know or don't believe it applies to their role or position at the agency.

**At VAAFm, the work we do improves the lives of LGBTQIA+ people**



When presented with the statement, *At VAAFM, the work we do improves the lives of low-income families*, 50% Agree or Strongly Agree, 30% Neither Agree nor Disagree, 10% Disagree or Strongly Disagree, and 10% don't know or don't believe it applies to their role or position at the agency.

**At VAAFM, the work we do improves the lives of low-income families**



When presented with statements in relation to VAAFM’s work to improve the lives of 1) BIPOC communities, 2) LGBTQIA+ communities, and 3) low-income families, the highest rate of agreement was in connection to VAAFM improving the lives of low-income families (50%) while respondents agreed at a rate of just 20% that VAAFM’s work improves the lives of BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ communities respectively. In addition, neutral responses were fairly high across all the above-mentioned questions, estimating between 30% and 40% of all respondents neither disagreeing or agreeing with the statements presented. These results demonstrate a lack of understanding of VAAFM’s impact in its equity and belonging work. This lack of connection to VAAFM’s work as an agency and its commitment to equity and belonging leaves staff in the dark as to VAAFM’s organizational priorities and organizational impact as staff aren’t sure how current work impacts the lives and communities of historically and currently marginalized people. Here are select quotes that are representative of sentiments shared in regards to VAAFM’s racial equity and belonging work:

**“We need more diverse voices who are not token employees. It is difficult that a vast majority are or pass as white, able bodied, cis-gender, etc. I wish we had more training and more spaces for conversations around these issues instead of them coming up randomly and not knowing how to address it in the moment. One example is that some people state their pronouns when being introduced and others don’t. It would be nice for leadership or those in power to set an example and prioritize that practice to make it more OK for others to do so without seeming different.”**

— Qualitative Interview Participant

“We need more diverse voices who are not token employees. It is difficult that a vast majority are or pass as white, able bodied, cis-gender, etc. I wish we had more training and more spaces for conversations around these issues instead of them coming up randomly and not knowing how to address it in the moment. One example is that some people state their pronouns when being introduced and others don't. It would be nice for leadership or those in power to set an example and prioritize that practice to make it more OK for others to do so without seeming different.”

— Qualitative Interview Participant

“Consistent and timely messaging from top leadership on topics relating to inclusion, diversity, and equity - internally (agency emails and meetings), as well as externally (AgriView newspaper, press releases, and in weekly newsletters) will go a long way toward creating an anti-racist and diversity-supportive culture at the agency.”

— Qualitative Interview Participant

“It's not enough to just hire a person of color or a trans person or someone from a background that is not typically represented at VAAFM. We need to create an inclusive culture where individuals don't feel excluded from decision-making.”

— Qualitative Interview Participant

“I talk to my colleagues that may have had experiences with inequity or an injustice and when I have an opportunity to address a concern or advocate for anti-racist/ more equitable policy I will do so. I am learning and want to be part of a solution.”

— Qualitative Interview Participant

“We absolutely need the agency to provide in depth anti-racist training to all staff.”

— Qualitative Interview Participant

“There’s a lot that we could be doing. Like, removing select reporting requirements from grants, using plain language in our work, engaging in deep dialogue about labor structures in agriculture and engaging in land redistribution work”

— Qualitative Interview Participant

“I would like to see the Agency put their money where their mouth is. It’s easy to say they want to effect change but harder and more painful to actually do it. I have long thought the Agency should go to the migrant farmworker community and recruit those farmworkers and help with immigration and education status. But I don’t even know who I would talk to in the Agency about implementing this. But obviously hiring practices have not been successful in creating a diverse employee base.”

— Qualitative Interview Participant

“I feel like our culture is not racist”

— Qualitative Interview Participant

“I think anti-racism already exists at VAAFm....”

— Qualitative Interview Participant

“Creating a just culture within a workplace takes time and effort. People should have time to grow, learn and make mistakes. There are employees who have very limited experiences with cultures other than their own. The one thing VAAFm could do is encourage more diverse hiring without it appearing to be a quota.”

— Qualitative Interview Participant

“I hope this process points to clear opportunities for VAAFm to shift the culture of the organization slowly over time. Immediately, I hope it pinpoints clear areas where policies and practices should shift to have immediate benefits for current and future BIPOC employees.”

— Qualitative Interview Participant

**Findings**

- VAAFM has taken a good first step in recognizing and accepting the critical need to ***stand for racial justice*** issues.
- Staff express the ***need to see tangible action, consistency and alignment*** across the agency's organizational priorities.
- Respondents report that the agency's commitments lack strategy and are unsure as to VAAFM's current impact in historically and currently marginalized communities.
- Over the past 2 years, we've seen hundreds of state agencies produce commitments to racial justice and racial equity. We have also witnessed far less white-led organizations continuing to be committed to this work in 2022. Without a solid base of understanding for how organizational decisions are made and how organizational decisions are implemented and integrated into structures and policies, VAAFM risks creating a cycle of "racial equity" work that is founded on reactionary and momentary decisions that read as performative and stagnant.
- Staff are unclear as to ***what VAAFM's commitments to racial equity are*** and some named fearing that the ambiguous nature of this commitment will lead the agency into a cycle of unfulfilled promises and tokenism.

**Select Recommendations**

***(please find a full list of recommendations at the end of this report):***

- Develop and document ***organizational guidelines*** that set a clear, accountable, and structured Racial Equity + Belonging Plan that will empower the organization to grow into its commitments, learn from mistakes, and deliver quantifiable outcomes that support staff and leaders across the agency.
- Implement a project management framework that assigns specific responsibilities and tasks across the organization, with input from all staff and leaders, and that tracks the progress of tasks and deliverables so that implementation is tracked throughout the organization.
- Follow the guidance of leaders of Color who have been leading, organizing, and collaboratively designing actions towards progress for many, many years.
- Take cues from staff within the agency and leaders external to the organization who are focused on the intersections of racial justice and education. In order for VAAFM to be effective in this work, it has to be approached through the lens of state based organizing and VAAFM as a collective of people who work in it and support the organizations movement building, have to understand the privilege and positionality of the agency and its role in supporting the existing and/or longstanding work of People of Color.

**Findings**

- VAAFM has taken a good first step in recognizing and accepting the critical need to ***stand for racial justice*** issues.
- Staff express the ***need to see tangible action, consistency and alignment*** across the agency’s organizational priorities.
- Respondents report that the agency’s commitments lack strategy and are unsure as to VAAFM’s current impact in historically and currently marginalized communities.
- Over the past 2 years, we’ve seen hundreds of state agencies produce commitments to racial justice and racial equity. We have also witnessed far less white-led organizations continuing to be committed to this work in 2022. Without a solid base of understanding for how organizational decisions are made and how organizational decisions are implemented and integrated into structures and policies, VAAFM risks creating a cycle of “racial equity” work that is founded on reactionary and momentary decisions that read as performative and stagnant.
- Staff are unclear as to ***what VAAFM’s commitments to racial equity are*** and some named fearing that the ambiguous nature of this commitment will lead the agency into a cycle of unfulfilled promises and tokenism.

**Guides & Opportunities for Reimagining:**

- VAAFM has a great opportunity to solidify its commitments by defining its commitment to racial justice work in collaboration with teams across the organization. This is an opportunity for VAAFM to ask, “Who are we leaving behind,” and “How can we bring the people we may have inadvertently left behind with us in 2022 and beyond?”
- The following seven principles of movement organizing as developed by the Interfaith Council for Peace and Justice<sup>19</sup> is a framework we find to be especially helpful in guiding organizations in identifying their role in supporting the building of movements that create more equitable and anti-oppressive societies for us all with Black, Asian, Latinx, Indigenous, and other People of Color at the center:

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19. Warpehoski, C. W. (n.d.). **7 Principles of Community Organizing**. [Http://www.icpj.org](http://www.icpj.org). Retrieved July 5, 2021, from <http://www.icpj.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/7-Principles-of-Community-Organizing.pdf>



**1. Organizing>Activism**

Activism is an individual pursuit, when one person takes an action to make a difference. It is a great thing. But organizing is greater, because organizing gets other people to take action, to work together, and to build an organization that can make a significant and long-term difference.

**2. Organizing is about relationships.**

To organize people, you need to know them. You need to know who they are, what they care about, what they are willing to do, and how to get in touch with them. They also need to know you. They need to know you are sincere, competent, and that you care about them. Therefore, an organizer is always building and maintaining relationships. An organizer is also always asking people to sign up so that she can follow up and build that relationship. Finally, since an organizer is building an organization that is bigger than herself, she is tracking these relationships in a database so that the organization can ask people to get involved at scale.

**3. Meet people where they are, not where you want them to be**

As an organizer, you are immersed in an issue. You read all the blog posts. You lay in bed thinking about it. You talk about it every day. That's not true for most of the people you will be organizing. They might eventually get to where you are, but you need to start where they are. What do they know? What do they care about? What do they hope for and what do they fear? You find this out through a combination of empathy and listening. Don't be fooled, though, projecting your own insecurities is not the same as empathy. I get caught in this one sometimes, where my insecurities tell me, "oh, they don't want to be bothered by me." But when I look back at when people have given me the chance to make a real difference, whether by helping them move or joining in a cause they care about, I'm generally happy to help.

**4. An organizer defines success on her own terms and develops a campaign to advance toward victory**

If you do not define victory on your own terms, the opposition will define it for you. "Oh, you want us to do something about the homeless. Sure. Would you rather we lock 'em all up, or just drive them out of town."

Knowing what success means to you, you can then put together a campaign—a series of varied activities over time that move you forward toward victory. There are many tools you can use in the campaign, your job is to pick the ones that move you forward. Rallies, lectures, civil disobedience, social media actions, etc. can all be great tactics, but they should be selected based on how they move you forward.

**5. Focus on Action--always have something people can DO**

Every activity you take should include an ask for people to do something: make a donation, sign up for a tabling shift, write an email to the Mayor, etc. “Raising awareness” can be a means to your end in this process, but it is never your end in itself. I am perfectly aware that I need to limit my sweets, but that awareness did not stop me from eating two desserts yesterday. Awareness that does not contribute to concrete change in behavior, actions, or relationships is a dead-end.

**6. You get action by asking for it**

To get people to take action, you have to both work and ask for it, and you have to set that work and ask. That means: Make it easy to say yes. If you are asking someone to call their Representative, make it easy for them to say yes. Give them the phone number. Give them a sample script. Maybe even hand them your phone to make the call. Eliminate every barrier you can that will get in the way of them saying “yes.”

*Note for VAAFM staff and Leaders: Pair the ask with an offer of commitment (financial compensation, promotion, backing support of leadership, dedication of time, allocation of additional staff or other resources). This is an important note because white dominant organizations often ask women, genderqueer and gender nonbinary people, Black, African, Asian, Latinx, Indigenous, and other People of Color, disabled folks to do more labor with less time, less compensation, less resources. Organizations cannot get something for nothing. Support has to be backed with power so as not to be tokenist or exploitative. Sonya Renee Taylor refers to this as “being in right relationship.”<sup>20</sup>*

*Make your ask specific. This is part of making it easy to say yes. Which is easier for you to process, “Can you help out?” or “Can you volunteer to sell yard signs next Thursday from 10-2 at the Art Fair Table.”*

*Ask for fewer things at a time, not more. Too many options can overwhelm people, and rather than choose between them, they just tune out. Don’t give 20 options, give one. Maybe two. No more than three. Engage the heart. Emotion is more important for motivating action than facts and figures.*

*Follow up. We’re all busy, and we sometimes need that reminder to actually follow through on our best intentions. Polite but persistent follow-up can be the difference between “yes, I’ll make that call” and actually making the call. What’s more, that personal touch of following up also deepens the relationship.*



20. Taylor, S. R. (2021, May 14). *On reciprocity and right relationship*. YouTube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CCvQ\\_36yxk0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CCvQ_36yxk0).

### **7. Diverse and inclusive coalitions are stronger, building it takes work**

Interfaith Council for Peace and Justice is founded on the premise that we are more effective when we work together across our differences to make a difference. Diverse coalitions bring new ideas, help you reach broader audiences since “like organizes like.” Furthermore, diverse coalitions help you tap the power of unlikely allies (e.g. Veterans for Peace, Gun Owners for Smart Gun Laws).

But it takes work to create truly diverse and inclusive communities. It’s not enough to say, “Our doors are open to them, but they won’t come to our table.” Sometimes you have to go to them, knock on their doors, sit at their table, and be willing to change your agenda to meet their needs.

Building diverse coalitions also requires that you respect differences. If you are creating an interfaith coalition, a Saturday morning activity during the Jewish Sabbath isn’t going to work, for example.

Finally, if your coalition is diverse, you will run into structural power dynamics. For example, often voices of people of color are marginalized in mainstream society. To create a diverse and inclusive coalition, then, you need to recognize this dynamic, be attentive to how it affects your work (it will) and consistently take steps to address it.

## **PROCESS AND METHODOLOGY**

### **Our Process**

Our Racial Equity & Belonging Audit (otherwise known as a REBA) process involves four key phases: Research and Discovery, Discussion and Dialogue, Design and Development, and Action and Collaboration. Our process is grounded in mixed-methods research that centers the voices of organization staff, leaders, partners, and people who are most impacted by our client’s work in their communities. Our use of both quantitative and qualitative tools supports our four phases within the audit to create customized recommendations for your organization.

### **Our Methods**

Our mixed methods approach included a quantitative survey, qualitative interviews, and document data collection and analysis. Our qualitative interview questions were designed to measure aspects of belonging, anti-racism, and anti-oppression, while centering the experiences of Black, African, Asian, Latinx, Indigenous, and other staff of Color, disabled staff, caregivers, parents, and LGBTQIA+ staff. Our quantitative assessment was designed to measure VAAF’s work culture through an individual and collective lens of its staff and leaders.

Semi-structured<sup>21</sup> opt-in 30-40 minute interviews and a qualitative written response survey were performed with 47 respondents and 10 external partners between July 15, 2022 and September 16, 2022.

An opt-in 28 question quantitative survey was administered and N=66 respondents completed the survey between July 8, 2022 and August 10, 2022. N=120 employees were recruited into taking the survey, meaning that nearly 60% of VAAFM employees participated.

We also collected and analyzed organizational policies, procedures, and internal documents relating to the vision, history and mission of VAAFM. We held bi-weekly check-in calls with members of the Agency’s IDEA (Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accountability) Working Group to keep them updated on our process while offering insight and guidance as needed.

Our mixed methods approach to this organizational assessment informed the recommendations found in this report.

Our survey analysis follows “transparent opaque”<sup>22</sup> research design, which moves from anonymizing data at a detail level and protects respondents by obscuring identifying markers. Even quotes, if integrated into the report, are filtered through this lens to maintain their meaning but remove identifiable markers such as distinctive figures of speech. By using this approach, we acknowledge where the research came from and pertinent information about the data, but remove any details that could be used to identify survey respondents and interviewees.

When disaggregating data, we do not report on demographic information that could possibly identify a survey respondent. That means that in cases where we have a small number of respondents with a particular identity, for example, we either aggregate or do not present this data in a report or share this information with any member of the VAAFM team or community.

During our analysis and report-writing, we look for themes across the interview transcripts, survey data, and organizational documents. We will share these themes, along with representative quotes and/or graphs of survey data. We represent any quotes from interviews or information from surveys as part of broad themes that are not from any one person’s survey or interview.



21. Semi-structured interviewing is a method of preparing a specific set of interview questions to guide an interview. The method also allows for in-the-moment follow-up questions during interviews to allow for emergent conversation.

22. a term and methodology created by design researcher Caroline Sindors

Additionally, no one at VAAFM, including VAAFM leaders and staff, IDEA Working Group participants, State of Vermont Human Resources, or those who collaborated with us on the analysis of data, know the identities of interview participants. The Department of Human Resources (DHR) provided our research team with a contact list of VAAFM's employees and the IDEA Working Group suggested external partners. We reached out to an intersectional and representative sample of prospective interview participants who were invited to partake in voluntary, confidential interviews.

In addition, we do not present everything from the survey in this report. We present only a selection of information in order to protect participants' identities and privacy. Any graphic of survey responses in this report aggregates responses and presents carefully selected disaggregated responses so as to not single out any one person or small groups of people. We carefully attend to identifying figures of speech in our de-identification processes, and smooth out and/or combine quotes from multiple interviews or surveys to minimize identifiability. Due to the sample size of this audit, we are not using a considerable amount of disaggregated data, but are pulling broader disaggregations to protect the identities of historically marginalized people.

Due to this small sample size, we are limited in the depth of intersectional analysis we can share without revealing individual identities. Given this, we employ two practices inspired by *differential privacy* principles for further protection of individual experiences and identities:

1. adding *noise* to statistics (This means preserving and focusing on relative direction, e.g. agree or disagree, matters more than exact numbers, e.g. 26% or 30% versus 75% or 80%).
2. not sharing statistics below *thresholds* (For this report, our thresholds were  $n < 5$  for one dimension or  $n < 3$  for multiple intersecting dimensions).

We opt for a language of *approximation* (e.g. "over one-third" instead of e.g. 34%) and do not list comprehensive combinations of disaggregated statistics. Instead, we focus on important findings and main themes. Generally, if we are sharing a subset of statistics in any area, it is an area of focus and/or relative importance that is also privacy-protecting.

Areas of our research included developing: 1) relative (and intersectional) percentages of people who disagreed or strongly *disagreed* with positive-intent statements about VAAFM and 2) relatively large *differences* in experiences across questions or identities. Findings from these kinds of experiences provide more opportunity for awareness, understanding, and change-making.

Statistics from our respondents may err on the side of being positive/neutral due to common fear of retaliation and/or lack of trust in the organization as expressed by respondents. Many respondents chose the "neutral" option in Likert scale questions based on their experience of the organization. When considering neutral responses, we encourage readers to ask themselves: "What could these respondents be expressing when choosing a neutral response to a question about, for example, emotional wellbeing, affirming disabled staff members, or feeling safe enough to talk about privilege and power at work?"

# RESOURCES

(Compiled in collaboration with Project Include + Shoshin Insights)

## Mental health

For everyone: [Grief Resources](#), [The Body Is Not An Apology](#), [Inclusive Therapists](#)

For queer and trans people of color: [NQTTCN QTPOC Mental Health Practitioner Directory](#)

For Black people: [Self article](#), [Henson resource guide](#), [Black Mental Wellness site](#), [Ethel's Club](#), [Liberate App](#)

For Black women and girls: [The Loveland Foundation](#), [Therapy for Black Girls](#)

For Black men: [Therapy for Black Men](#)

For Latinx people: [Proyecto Solace](#), [Latinx Therapists Directory](#)

For Indigenous people: [Indigenous Circle of Wellness \(CA\)](#)

For Asian people: [Asian Mental Health Collective Therapist Directory](#)

For Muslim people: [Muslim Mental Health Directory](#)

For people in larger bodies, people with disabilities, people with chronic pain, people over the age of 65 and people who are part of the LGBTQIA+ community<sup>23</sup>: [Decolonizing Fitness](#)

For people with eating disorders, disordered eating, trauma, queer & LGBTQIA2S+ populations, and autistic & neurodivergent individuals<sup>24</sup>: [The Queer Counselor](#)

For transgender people: [Forge](#)

## Mental health crisis support

For everyone: [Crisis health textline](#): US and Canada: Text 741741 | UK: text 85258 | Ireland: text 50808

For LGBTQ Youth<sup>25</sup>: [The Trevor Project](#)

For trans people: [Trans Lifeline](#)

For Indigenous people: [StrongHearts Native Helpline](#)

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23. Identity terms are from Decolonizing Fitness.

24. Identity terms are from The Queer Counselor.

25. Identity term is from The Trevor Project.

## Principles of Movement Organizing

[Movement Killing Behaviors](#) By NJIME

[What is Racial Equity?](#) By Race Forward

[7 Principles of Community Organizing](#) by Interfaith Council for Peace and Justice

## Building Cultures of Accountability

[Organizational resources](#) by worker-owned co-operative AORTA (Anti-Oppression Resource & Training Alliance)

- [Uprooting White Supremacy in Organizations](#) - online workshop “unpacking the subtle ways that white supremacy tends to show up inside of organizations working to do good”
- [Continuum](#) on becoming a transformative anti-oppressive organization
- [Navigating](#) conflict in movement organizations
- [Dismantling](#) anti-Blackness in democratic organizations

[The 4 Parts of Accountability](#) by [Mia Mingus](#), transformative justice and disability justice educator

[What are obstacles to accountability?](#) By Barnard Center for Research on Women

[The Transformative Power of Practice](#) | Framework by Ng’ethe Maina and Staci Haines on understanding growth and change

[Event with Mariame Kaba on Building Accountable Communities](#)

[Resources](#) for [accountability](#) to guide conversations for change: defining accountability in the context of relationality and growth, rather than notions of fear and cancellation

- Community governance board ([here’s](#) an example) with power to hold existing board and leadership accountable to staff + community

## Examples of Racial Equity Work that other State Governments Have Done

- [Portland Parks and Recreation 5 Year Racial Equity Plan](#)
- [New York State Agriculture and Markets Racial Equity Working Group Report](#)
- [Racial Equity Toolkit: A Road Map for Government, Organizations and Communities](#)

### Doing the “Inner Work”

Changing narratives, worldviews, addressing fears/assumptions, and psychological unpacking of self:

- spiritual activism (e.g. [courses](#) by Rachel Ricketts)

decolonization (e.g. [practical decolonization](#) by Everyday Feminism, [modernity + coloniality](#) free seminar by Ahmed Ansari)

challenging comfort (e.g. [unity over comfort](#) group experience by Monique Melton)

reframing narratives of accountability (e.g. [calling on](#) by Sonya Renee Taylor)

from [allyship to coalition](#) (e.g. [What White People Can Do Next](#) by Emma Dabiri)

### Reflections on Power Mapping

Here’s an example of [power mapping](#) of police and carceral power in St. Louis. Some questions to reflect on when mapping out power dynamics, at WEA or in other contexts:

- How do people feel (emotionally, somatically) after explicitly diagramming the flow of power in the org? Why do people feel how they feel?
- Why do person A and person B have different/similar diagrams of power in the org? How are their position, positionality, and lived experiences part of these differences/similarities?
- How does this affect priorities and decision-making on WEA’s racial justice work? Who gets to define what “trust” looks like in practice, and who is denied or punished for the attempt?
- Where are there blockages of agency, clarity, or information due to the current flow of power? How are these blockages showing up in internal beliefs, unspoken social norms, individuals with power, or organizational practices?
- What happens if we maintain the status quo of how power is wielded? What are the costs of denial or lack of ongoing strategy towards commitment?
- What are the dangers/harms of the current diagram of power, and how can that be addressed or counteracted?



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- [Combahee River Collective](#) ([statement](#))
- [Kimberlé Crenshaw](#) ([intersectionality](#))
- [Mariame Kaba](#) ([Project NIA](#), [Just Practice Collaborative](#), [So You're Thinking About Becoming An Abolitionist](#))
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