

Connecticut Department of Children and Families, Racial Justice Change Initiative

In this *Policy & Practice* interview series on race equity, APHSA shares stories from the field of how state and local human services leaders are working to embed a race equity lens into their policies, programs, and organizational culture. In this edition, APHSA focuses on the Connecticut Department of Children and Families (CT DCF), Racial Justice Change Initiative, designed to develop a culture of equity within its workforce through implicit bias training. **Tracy Davis** and **Jennifer Rondini**, Director and Supervisor of the Academy for Workforce Development, respectively, have spearheaded this effort and agreed to share their thoughts on their work.

Q: The Connecticut Department of Human Services has intentionally addressed structural and racial disparities in service delivery by adopting its antiracism initiative. To start, can you share what led to the implementation of this initiative and what role the Academy for Workforce Development plays in advancing this effort?

A: Our CT DCF Commissioner, Vannessa Dorantes, is committed to the stance of becoming an antiracist organization whose beliefs, values, policies, and practices achieve racially just and equitable outcomes. As CT DCF examines and redesigns the department as an authentically antiracist agency, our progress is apparent in its structures, policies, practices, norms, and values. The department continues its commitment to move from equity to justice to further



ensure that services are individualized and based on a comprehensive assessment of children and families' strengths and needs.

Two years ago, Commissioner Dorantes charged each office and division to develop a racial justice change initiative relative to their scope of work. Each leader from these offices and divisions has been charged in overseeing the work and making modifications to the initiative as they see fit.

The CT DCF Academy for Workforce Development's racial justice change initiative is comprised of a systematized mandatory implicit bias training for the entire DCF workforce. This training initiative was designed to help staff understand the impact of implicit bias on DCF workforce practice and decision making. Through this training initiative, the Academy explored the following question: *"Was there an impact from the Implicit Bias Training on CT DCF workforce practice?"*

Q: An essential aspect of CT DCF's antiracism initiative is implementing mandatory implicit bias training for staff. Can you talk about why the

agency opted to make this training mandatory instead of voluntary?

A: In June 2019, several staff within the Academy for Workforce Development received Implicit Bias Training. The message and information provided was pertinent to helping advance the CT DCF agency's antiracist process. The Academy was determined to spread this knowledge of implicit bias to the entire CT DCF workforce.

The Academy initially offered Implicit Bias Training as a part of the in-service offerings. This training was open to all DCF staff and providers on a voluntary basis. The feedback from these offerings expressed the same theme: *"All DCF staff should take this training."* This solidified our initial thinking about the value of providing this opportunity.

Our goal was to provide a level of consistency to the DCF Workforce, ensuring that everyone was operating under the same definition, language, and message regarding implicit bias.

Mandating this training gave staff an opportunity to look inward about the biases they harbor that may play a role in their decisions.



See *Race Equity Champion* on page 34

Q: The implementation of your implicit bias training was driven by existing data primarily in the CT DCF Child Protective Systems, which revealed racial and ethnic disparities in the system. Can you share the data's role in implementing your organizational training on implicit bias?

A: Through our professional training we understand that implicit bias can influence almost every decision a person makes.

Due to current biases within our agency and community, we have seen disparate treatment of minorities across multiple metrics. Our CT DCF Pathway's Data (referenced below) tracks the outcomes of White, Hispanic, Black, and Other Ethnic Groups of children to see how they are impacted in the following areas:

- Higher rates of Black children living in impoverished neighborhoods, social deprivation, and family dysfunction.
- Differential attention during the process of referral, intake, and service allocation.
- Differences in the underlying incidence of actual maltreatment.
- Workers' values, professional judgment, and biases lead to more substantiated reports.

Impact on practice is operationalized to include data related to staff considering or reflecting upon their own biases in decision making, specifically regarding substantiations and removals, and other aspects of case management, because of participating in the implicit bias training.

Additional impact includes evidence of staff considering or reflecting upon their biases in relation to working with superiors, colleagues, subordinates, or external partners and providers.

Q: Implementing mandatory implicit bias training is quite an undertaking. What barriers and challenges have you faced along the way as you implement this training

agency and how did/are you working to overcome them?

A: These are some of the issues we encountered.

■ **Recruitment of 60 Trainers**

Statewide. The Academy requested that only voluntary participants, who were vested in the racial justice work within their own offices or divisions, be recommended as Implicit Bias Trainers. Leadership among these area offices and divisions had to agree with this request as staff would be pulled from their daily responsibilities.

■ **Pandemic/National Racial Unrest.**

Initially, when the mandatory Implicit Bias Training was scheduled to roll out, there was an unexpected statewide shutdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, compounded with the nation's heightened racial unrest. However, the breadth of this training required that we not stop; postponing was not an option. As we outlined the steps needed to prepare the trainers on the curriculum content, we realized we had to acclimate them to the virtual platforms by which they would deliver the material. Maneuvering the virtual world was challenging for many. The Academy offered one-on-one support and regularly joined trainings to provide technical support.

The Implicit Bias Trainers needed to ensure there was a safe training environment for all. This meant that the maximum number of participants allowed in each session was 15. To ensure upward of 3,000 staff participating in the training, trainers needed to schedule 20 to 30 sessions each. This schedule was very time consuming, as the trainers also had to contend with their full-time responsibilities.

■ **Support.** Most of the Implicit Bias Trainers were caseload-carrying staff that had no level of authority among their peers. To provide support to them, the Academy held monthly check-in meetings. During these meetings, training barriers were shared, and helpful suggestions and training interventions were

offered. In addition, the Academy provided the Implicit Bias Trainers with training skills for managing the virtual classroom, particularly with staff who were frustrated in having to participate in a mandatory training on Implicit Bias.

■ **Tracking, Data, and Survey**

Monitoring. CT DCF has a workforce of 3,000 staff. For each training participant, the Academy had to track and input their successful completion of Implicit Bias Training in our Learning Management System. In addition to tracking attendance, each training participant received a pre- and post-survey. The distribution of these surveys relied on accurate data entry into our Learning Management System.

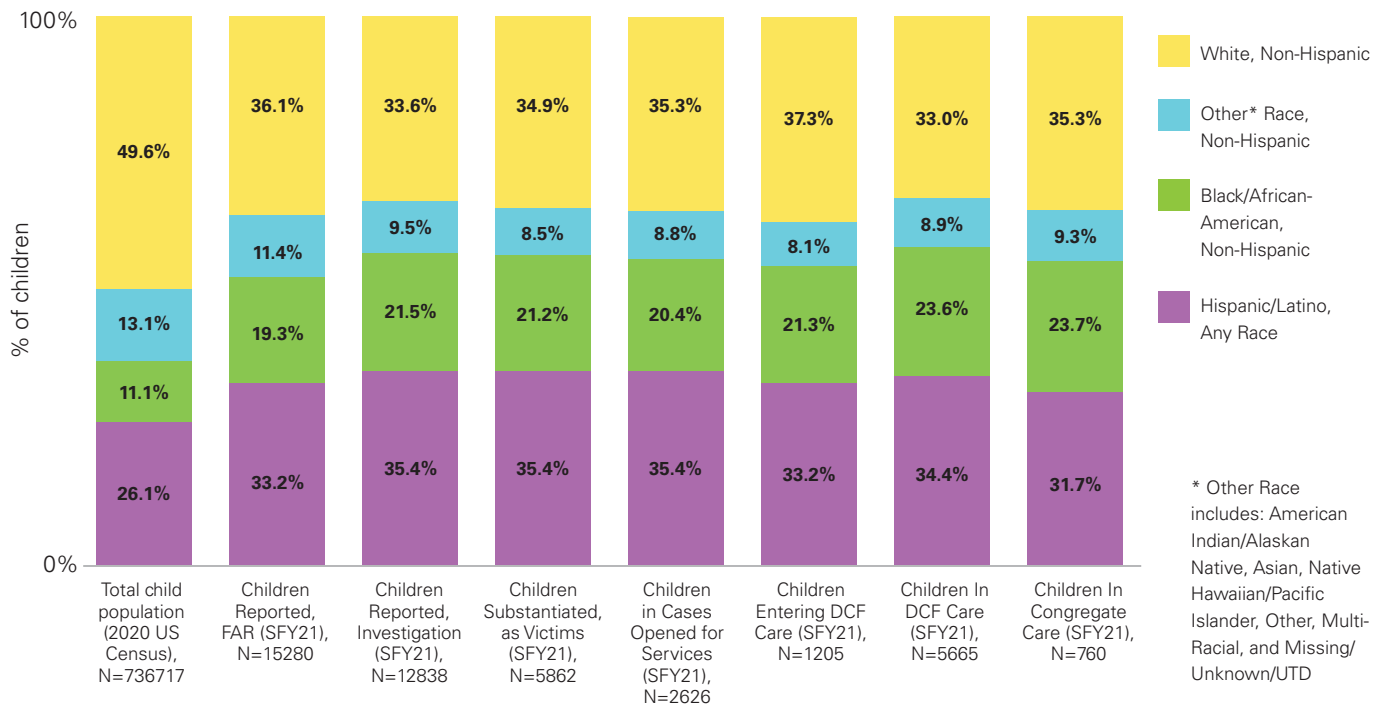
Each training participant's supervisor also received an impact survey two months after completing Implicit Bias Training. Accurate tracking and data collection was imperative for the final research results of the Academy's racial justice training initiative.

Q: CT DCF has adopted this implicit bias training to achieve equitable outcomes in human services. How did you assess the impact of your training, and were you surprised by your findings?

A: We developed pre- and post-surveys and impact surveys to assess where staff was prior to training, after training, and what impact the training had on their actual work. To help us synthesize the data, we partnered with St. Joseph's University in Connecticut. Our initial findings yielded the following:

- More staff became aware of the Pathways Data (see chart)
- More staff was able to define the term "privilege" in the context of identity and bias
- More staff is aware of their biases/stereotypes
- More staff unlearned previously held biases
- Staff identified more with providers after the implicit bias training

Chart 1: Racial/Ethnic Disproportionality Across the CT Child Protection System SFY21: STATEWIDE



■ More staff agreed that clients should be matched with staff they identify with

Regarding the impact survey for management/supervisory staff, a large majority of supervisors agreed that there were positive shifts in defining, recognizing, and discussing implicit bias. However, a lesser majority of respondents indicated that staff were more aware of the Pathways Data (see chart), with more than a third of staff noting no change.

The Academy and St. Joseph’s University conducted five, 90-minute, virtual focus group interviews with:

- Area Office Staff who are caseload-carrying staff
- Central Office Staff consisting of IT, Fiscal, Office of Equity and Diversity,
- Non-Caseload-Carrying Staff, clerical, social work case aides, and our transportation staff

One hundred twenty-two staff volunteered to participate in the focus groups conducted between August and December 2021; we had a 25 percent follow-through rate. The respondents indicated the following:

- An overall increase in awareness about implicit bias and its potential to impact the work

■ An increase in comfort around engaging in difficult conversations about race

■ Instances where people felt more supported in challenging decisions or confronting situations where implicit bias and racism might have played a factor

■ Reflecting on past (or current) cases as a way of recognizing the impact of implicit bias

■ Supervisors supporting and/or initiating the scrutinizing of cases for instances of implicit bias

Concerning themes that emerged from the transcripts of the focus groups:

- Lack of clarity and consistency regarding how to apply the training in practice
- Concern that the training had no impact, that it mostly was “preaching to the converted”
- A need for safe spaces for individuals to ask questions and discuss concerns
- Questioning follow-through and achieving real change

Q: As CT DCF evaluates the effects of its implicit bias training, what are some of the next steps you anticipate taking to increase the effectiveness of this program?

A: The Academy continues to provide Implicit Bias Training to all new hires. In addition, we will be creating a supervisory/management coaching training module to guide and encourage leadership to continue the discussions of implicit bias, racial inequity, and racial disproportionality.

Q: For your peers in other human services agencies who are earlier in their own journey, what words of advice can you share with them based on your own experiences and lessons learned?

A: Determination, perseverance, and patience are needed if you are going to commit to developing something that will assist your organization with furthering their antiracist practice. The work should be grounded in a culture of psychological and physical safety that allows individuals to reflect internally and seek to make personal modifications that transcend the practice. Be prepared, it takes time. 📖

Interested in learning more? Visit APHSA’s Call to Action page for resources and tools to advance race equity. This page will continue to be built out as we share more voices through our race equity interview series.