

Black Women Leading Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiatives in Government

Author's Note:

I am proud to present this paper, which serves as the culmination of my studies in the course, Black Women Work: The labor of Black women in communities, families, and institutions. My interest in this topic was piqued during my second-year field placement at The Administration for Children and Families, where I work on various initiatives related to equity in government.

This piece is dedicated to the Black women who made it possible: Lisa Moore, Nell Crittenden, Kira Edwards, Jamie Carmichael, Angela Green, and Debra Johnson. The labor made it possible for me to conduct and publish this research and I can't thank them enough for their support at various stages of this project.

I also dedicate this paper to the countless Black women throughout history who have led the fight for racial equity and justice, long before the role of DEI officers existed.

Abstract

In their positions designed to foster greater diversity, equity, and inclusion in the public sector, Black women are at the forefront of creating the knowledge and tools currently being used to address systemic inequities. To better understand the labor involved in those leadership positions and the practices they strive to cultivate, I interviewed three Black women in who work in local, state, and federal government. The paper thus presents their daily challenges and their ultimate accomplishments at this crucial time in American history. Disclaimer: Ms. Angela Green speaks here as an individual and no official support or endorsement of the content presented by the

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As the social and political landscape of the United States evolves, there have been greater calls for systemic changes in government to address inequities in health, education, housing, and human services. As a response to these calls, federal, state, and local agencies have established official Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Commissions and Offices and associated officer positions. Those who lead or staff these agencies have the mandate to address various issues related to DEI, or to focus on a specific topic, such as equity in the state workforce practices. Because the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion are central to the practice of social work and the functioning of human services, social workers must understand—and then seek to incorporate—the knowledge being created by those implementing these new tools and make efforts to support them in roles of advancing change.

My experience in this arena came at the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), a division of the Department of Health and Human Services. There I witnessed efforts to foster collaboration between DEI professionals and expand the reach of DEI initiatives and policies. The ACF has built a database of DEI officer contact information, to my knowledge the largest such database in the country. In that database one sees that many of those serving as state human service equity officers are Black women. I wanted to know more about how these women began working in DEI, the challenges they faced, and if they felt their respective positions were built for long-term sustainability and change. I chose, therefore, to interview three of these women.

I selected them based on the variety of their responsibilities and type of agency where they worked. They work at the local, state, and federal level respectively; two lead an agency, the third was an intern and just starting her career; two were social workers. While DEI

public officials occupy relatively novel positions, we can use the evolution of DEI work in the private sector to help understand the work of these women.

The Politics of DEI

Work addressing diversity, equity, and inclusion has long been the domain of human resource departments, while the proliferation of professional DEI positions is relatively new. There has been a four-fold increase in such positions over the past five years (Green, 2021)—particularly following the 2020 uprisings and calls for racial justice stemming from the murder of George Floyd - and organizations seek to address DEI in all aspects of their work. Thus, we see the prevalence of Chief DEI Officers rising. But while DEI principles may be moving into organizational priorities and strategies, the responsibilities of such roles are often ambiguous or undefined, which can undercut authority. This barrier to the success of Chief DEI Officers may account in part for the high rates of turnover. In 2019, the average tenure of a Chief DEI Officer was 1.8 years compared to the average of 4.9 years for other C-suite roles (Goldstein et al., 2022).

The role of DEI professionals in the government are subject to significant shifts brought about by changes in political power. For example, Dr. Janice Northwood served successfully as Virginia's inaugural Chief Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Officer (CDO) under Governor Northam. In that role she launched a statewide DEI strategy for over 100 agencies and worked with Northam to pass legislation that codified the CDO position into Virginia law in 2020. However, when Greg Youngkin (R) won election in 2022, he filled the position with a former executive of the ultra-conservative Heritage Foundation. Youngkin used an executive order (Exec. Order 10, 2022) to rename the cabinet position the Commonwealth Chief Diversity, Opportunity, & Inclusion Officer, and tasked it to "promote ideas, policies, and practices to expand entrepreneurship and economic opportunities for disadvantaged Virginians"; "be an ambassador for unborn children";

and “ensure that the teaching of Virginia's and the United States' history is honest, objective, and complete.”

Dr. Underwood went on to become the US Office of Personnel Management as the director of the Office of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (Office of Personnel Management, 2022) under President Biden. The Biden administration has been clear that the federal government should “pursue a comprehensive approach to advancing equity for all, including people of color and others who have been historically underserved, marginalized, and adversely affected by persistent poverty and inequality” (Exec. Order 13985, 2021). The Black women I interviewed represent the many who are working to build coalitions, create strategic plans, and change policies to be more equitable.

Each of my interviews lasted an hour. Two of the interviews were completed virtually and were recorded and transcribed. The other interview was performed in person but not recorded. Instead, I took notes as we spoke. In lieu of a precise set of questions, we had conversation about their path to the role, their challenges, and their observations.

Angela Green, Regional Administrator,

Administration for Children and Families Region 5

From her Chicago office, Regional Administrator Angela Green oversees the human services initiatives for the Great Lakes region of the country, serving Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin. She has led several notable initiatives, such as coordinating quarterly meetings for the governor-appointed state-level DEI officers in the Midwest and chairing a committee for an inaugural National Convening on Building an Inclusive Human Services System. She told me that while equity has long been inherent in human services work, President Biden’s executive order empowered officers like her to use language that foregrounds the concept of equity, rather than merely “trying to support vulnerable people.” She says that the

training she received throughout her career—such as the formal training through the Boys and Girls Club as a new social worker and the informal training of working with families to understand barriers in accessing services—has been important for her current work. She added, however, that her recent trainings and certifications also gave her the epiphany that professionals need to stay nimble to address the “evolution of humankind,” despite the challenges to do so. There is, for instance, a significant legal dimension related to dealing with harms done in the past as one tries to learn from them and grow. As she puts it:

When you think about how to make these changes, you have to be able to demonstrate the inequity. And when you demonstrate the inequity, then there is a risk of liability for the role and actions which caused the inequity, right? Because you have now proven that the policies and practices implemented were discriminatory and caused harm. And there are clear laws against discrimination so I think there's been a real pendulum swing in terms of whether we address inequity openly or not.

This is to say, accountability may be stifled by a broader set of political and legal priorities.

In addition to coming to terms with the legal considerations, Regional Administrator Green also spoke to the difficulties related to addressing equity in a convoluted and racist human services system:

This is systematic, ingrained, multiple layers of barriers, and then you have perception and beliefs. Perpetuated negative stereotypes really compound those issues. So, it's hard to pull them apart and it's hard to say, “Here's the linchpin.” That if you fix this one, it will turn the corner on equity, right? It will put us on a better path. I think it's too hard to say what those things are because they are purposely convoluted and multilayered and ingrained.

I asked Regional Administrator Green about what personal challenges existed when addressing DEI as a Black woman. She said that,

generally, Black women's labor tends to be undervalued and unacknowledged:

A lot of times people do not recognize that it really requires you to pull in multiple champions to do the work, and that, as African American women, we have often been the bearer of heavy lifting of efforts for change. Major policies from voting rights to civil rights, we've been the backbone to a lot of that, but often hidden or minimized. If you think of the role many African American women played during slavery, you breastfed your slave master's child, you groomed them. You cared for them, but you were never thought of as an invaluable caretaker. And we see it now today. When you think of those who are in early childhood education, they are typically African American women educating our youngest children but not paid as a teacher, not paid equally to their profession. So oftentimes, I think our service and our voice is needed, but we're undervalued. It's not given the same credit . . . the same weight as when another race, especially a white female or white male, echoes the same sentiment. One thing I don't think you'll ever see in a job description is you're going to do the heavy lifting, but you might not get any credit for it. You may provide the solution, but you might not ever be acknowledged for it . . . but that's something I think most African Americans have recognized and learned to bring in allies to assist. Because what you're striving for is greater than the personal acknowledgement.

She said, furthermore, that she has sustained her passion for this work by taking small steps forward and that because her work has allowed her to address equity "without ever needing to say equity," she was protected from many of the challenges associated with being a DEI professional. As a result, she was not interested in the recently posted ACF Chief DEI Officer position because, referencing the Virginia case, "another administration could come in and have you doing work that's the total antithesis of the true intention of the role."

Jamie Carmichael, Chief Health Opportunity Officer,

Ohio Department of Public Health

Jamie Carmichael was named Chief Health Opportunity Officer for the Ohio Department of Public Health by Governor Mike DeWine (R) in November, 2020. The position was created to support the recommendation of the COVID-19 Minority Health Strike Force, which examined the disproportionate impact of the coronavirus on minority and underserved communities (Ohio Department of Health, 2020). Chief Carmichael collaborates with the Governor's Equity Advisory Board, state agencies, and stakeholders to advance health equity in Ohio.

When asked what brought her to the position she responded:

For me, I never really felt like people were in the situations they were in solely because of their personal choices. Like I always understood, and I think being a Black woman gives you that perspective that all of these things are happening in the context and the pressure and the limitations and in the assets that you experience as being a Black person in America... So for me, it was just an evolution of my career. But it was definitely a challenge that I felt like almost every part of my career had led to and every part of my personal experience as a Black woman.

Chief Carmichael said that in order to do this work, one needs a passion for it and that she drew her passion from experiences like losing family members to COVID and almost dying in childbirth. She stressed, however, that passion must be tempered by patience. As she put it:

When I started this job, I had this huge strategic plan. Because I could see it, I could see what had to happen. I had mentors tell me, "You need to do less. Do fewer things. You have twenty things. Pick two things." And I was like, "No, all twenty you need done. They're all critical with a small window. I'm just push myself. I'm gonna push my team. We're gonna push, push, push, push, push." And we were effective, and we got a lot of stuff done. Yeah, we've gotten a lot of stuff done, but now we're all burned out. Right, so patience and really

acing yourself and prioritizing the work is hard because it all feels so important, especially if it's personal.

Among the things she has accomplished include utilizing her office to build a commission of state agencies to address health equity issues. It has not been easy, and she described how many agencies, such as the Department of Tax, did not immediately understand what they had to do with equity. She stressed the lessons learned from building coalitions and the importance of being "a catalyst for cooperation," telling me:

My role is to implement change and the power structure that controls change may not understand what I'm trying to do. They may not value it. Or they may value it and not understand how we improve the situation. And so a big part of my role is about either figuring out what's important to them so that I can align the work with where they want to go, where they want to see the state go. Another big part of it is helping people to understand the issues in ways that they don't feel attacked.

Helping others understand these issues is easier said than done, she said. Early on, she found herself navigating very differing attitudes about how to address health equity in the state:

Everybody in the power structure was starting from wildly different levels of not just levels of understanding, but I think we can all agree that disparities exist, at least most reasonable people who can read data. Where we get off track is the cost and the cause. So people have different opinions about why these disparities exist. But let's say we can even get everybody on page about why they exist. By some miracle, then we have to get everybody on the same page about what the government's role is in it.

In some cases, this meant understanding issues from different perspectives and reframing them to foster build buy in. As she put it:

If I'm walking into a room with someone who may not be a fan of my field or what I'm working on, what I want to know is what they do care about. What gets them excited? What gets them fired up? Because I guarantee you if they care for example, like they're, let's say, they're all about pro-life... Let's talk about how we can create environments for babies to thrive. So relating it back to their issue... And I think as Black people, we do that a lot. We spend a lot of time, at least for me, because I grew up in an environment where I was around a lot of different kinds of people. But what I learned was how to pay attention to people. How to pay attention to them and how to value them for who they are, and I try to take that with me.

When I asked her about the emotional labor involved in being an equity leader, Chief Carmichael admitted she had concerns about authenticity. She said some Black leaders she admired thought she was letting herself be "used" by the Governor. She said:

I knew it was an impossible task politically and on both sides. And I don't mean because we're in a Republican led state. I knew that there would be pushback from the other side as well, and I think that's the thing that I don't know if it's surprised me as much, as hurt me. The amount of friction and pushback we got from leaders in the Black community... That was really hard. I have to say, because I did feel at times, like, am I in some way betraying something? Am I being authentic to myself and am I being authentic to my family and am I being authentic to my friends? And at the end of the day, yes, and not only authentic, I'm doing a service like you can't convince me otherwise. Like, you don't have to like me. And I had to get to that point where, "OK, you don't have to like me. You can call me a token. You can do, you know, whatever. I'm getting things done" and that is how I had to navigate that.

These challenges, as well as the social context over the past several years, had weighed on her and worn her down:

It has taken a toll, but I think COVID took a toll on anybody and everybody who worked on COVID. It took a toll. I had like the double

whammy of losing people I love and also, feeling this tremendous responsibility for minorities and their safety in our community like that was my job to get people vaccinated to keep people safe like that was my role and... But I felt like it was worthy of all of my efforts, who just kept getting up, doing it again, getting up and doing it again. Fall down, get up, do to get and I think that's just resiliency, but I'm actually at a point where my resiliency is pretty low, and I can tell because of how I respond to adversity.

Considering the challenges surrounding the role, I asked Chief Carmichael how she sustains her work. She told me that a major support has been the other Black women in the field. She put it this way:

One of the blessings, one of the gifts has been that there are so many Black women in this space right now. And we formed networks. And not just Black women, minority women, Latino and others who I meet with... To me, that network has been absolutely invaluable. Like those women are amazing.

Despite all that, at the time of our interview she was planning to change positions. Chief Carmichael felt that her passion for the work had kept her in it up to this point, but looked forward to moving into a new role where she would be better supported:

I'm also a single mom... There's a whole big job emotionally and physically and trying to do a tremendous amount of work while parenting while managing political landmines is extremely draining, like it's just extremely draining and if I hadn't cared about the work so much, I could have never done it. And my passion for it, like it's what I think about when I'm falling asleep at night. What I'm thinking about in the shower in the morning, I'm thinking about strategy. It's a passion and I feel like it's a gift. It's a part of my gift, but I don't think it's limited to this role... I'm actually in about 3 weeks going to be moving on to a wonderful opportunity for me where I can still be an advocate for this. But I do think I'll be better supported and that's not a poor reflection on the administration or on the Ohio Department of Health. It's just

that it's new when you're standing something up like... you're in the lead... it's hard to be supported when something is brand new. And I think people, it's an awkward topic, like a lot of people don't even know how to be supportive.

Although Chief Carmichael is extremely passionate and talented as a DEI leader, she was burnt out by the burdens of leadership while feeling at once unsupported and responsible for working on issues that were so personal to her.

Kira Edwards, Social Work Intern,

Chicago Public Schools Office of Equity

Kira Edwards is an advanced-standing student in the Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice, completing her social work internship at the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) Office of Equity. As a social work student, she also serves on the Crown Family School's Inclusion, Equity, and Diversity Committee. Kira came to Crown directly after her undergraduate education but with a variety of work experience—in grant making, public engagement, and direct education support—that led to her interest in educational equity and policy. After choosing the CPS Office of Equity for her field placement, Kira found herself on a racially diverse team but is the only social worker in her office.

Kira sees things differently than many of the people she works with (she called this her “superpower”) and noted a disconnect between what she called the work and humanity. She felt to do this work, one should be bold and strategic. “If I were a director, I'd be even more upfront,” she said, because “people have good intentions but are happy with the bare minimum.” Like Chief Carmichael, however, she also stressed the importance of being receptive and not pointing fingers.

Kira identified many challenges in the field, and like Regional Administrator Green, said that it could be difficult to address issues at

their root, noting as an example that her office tried to rename schools so as to remove references to racists and colonizers while not addressing the underfunding of schools or school closures. She expressed disappointment with this, having expected the work to feel more groundbreaking. As an intern, she struggles to remain engaged in the work and admitted that she was “here to get her hours” and “learn a bit.” Like Regional Administrator Green, Kira also brought up the challenges around community engagement, stating that she felt CPS’s Youth Advisory Council was not fully committed to important social and cultural conversations now taking place.

We discussed the political and social contexts surrounding equity work in schools now, such as some states banning critical race theory or social-emotional learning, and Kira said that her office learned from the controversy and challenges that came with trying to rename schools and is now more conscious of involving stakeholders, such as principals and community members. She stated that DEI principles garner greater community support now, but there is lingering tendency to not “rock the boat.” In her opinion, however, we can’t be impartial because we must call out where systems are failing and oppressing people.

Kira pointed out that this work often falls on Black women, and it can be affirming to know that others share your experiences with racism, but that this awareness comes with its own emotional cost. She gave her work on the Crown Family School Inclusion Equity and Diversity Committee as an example of such costs. She said that Black students are brought to the Crown Family School and then asked to change a space that they didn’t create while being offered little support. Kira explained that social work and equity feel like an extension of herself because she’s affected by it—pointing out the amount of white saviorism in the field, and saying, “People want to do things to make themselves feel better but don’t want to confront who they are and change.” This is why Black women are seen as the perfect candidate for DEI work, but as Kira said, they “have to always be moving” because the work is so difficult.

Conclusion

Although each woman had a very different set of responsibilities, there were common themes that arose from the three interviews. The first is the importance and challenges around community engagement. Chief Carmichael saw community engagement as essential:

You know, there's no social service program that's going to undo 400 years of injustice, and actually much further than that in terms of attitudes about race... but what we can do is invite people to the table to govern, to govern themselves, to have a sense of self-determination, and to broaden the locus of control of people out here.

While each of the women recognized the importance of community buy-in, they each identified challenges, from a lack of trust to legal barriers. The difficulty of addressing equity in a meaningful way also arose. According to Green, it can be difficult to use the voice of stakeholders to nail down a particular issue or solution. This was further complicated for her, by the potential perception of the federal government admitting their regulation or policy could be discriminatory. The importance of institutional constraints in government also arose in my conversation with Kira when she said that while the work at Crown is "political and complex," that is less the case with CPS. Because the University of Chicago is a private institution, she said, they should have more agency to address racism, and yet do not.

Each of the women discussed the personal challenges involved in the work, as well as the emotional labor required to articulate their existence in spaces where white colleagues did not share their lived experiences. For example, Chief Carmichael told me that she was the only staff member in her office to actually lose family members to COVID while Kira criticized her white classmates for discussing equity issues theoretically instead of in terms of personal impact. All three of the women also each brought up their sense of urgency. Kira stated that she didn't want to wait a long time for equity and inclusion to be

achieved because “kids are aging quickly.” Chief Carmichael discussed not pacing herself and the consequences of burnout for her and her team.

The concerns raised by each of the women leaves questions about the sustainability of DEI labor. Contrary to Chief Carmichael, Regional Administrator Green identified pacing herself as a key reason she has been able to sustain herself in this work. The concerns around the emotional toll raised by each of the women illustrate the need for better support and resources dedicated to DEI professionals. Kira called for organizations to “be ready to support employees,” while recommending that DEI professionals seek the support of mental health and safety plans and for equity be ingrained in every part of organization, rather than just the responsibility of DEI professionals.

Given my conversations with these women, I believe we can expect the growth of DEI professionals. When asked about the future of the DEI field, Regional Administrator Green responded:

Racism, sexism, you know, all the -isms will always be here. I don't think there are easy solutions to those because it really starts with a change of heart . . . with true compassion and ending the need for other-ism. I think that's a lifetime of combatting so I've come to reconcile that this will always be here. It's just how do we keep trying to move towards the best of what America can be, an inclusive welcoming multi-racial, multi-cultural, diverse society. I don't think there's an easy solution but I just think we are inching towards betterment.

In order for government agencies to successfully address the *-isms* referenced by Regional Administrator Green, they must provide the proper support and influence needed for DEI professionals to create structural change in their organizations. As Green said in her interview, Black women have long been the drivers of change while meeting resistance and contempt at every step of the way. Organizations should be conscious of uplifting the well-being and

reinforcing the efforts of the Black women heading their DEI work as part of their commitment to equity.

Autumn is a Second-year Social Work Master's student in the Social Administration concentration and the Addressing Social Inequalities program of study. She's passionate about child and family poverty and the role that child care and early learning quality and access plays in addressing it. She's worked with families and young children in a variety of roles, including economic mobility coaching, a children's museum, and the federal government at the Administration for Children and Families. She also works at the Crown Family School as a research assistant for Professor Julia Henly on various projects related to child care and the pandemic. In her free time she loves sitting in the park, trying different foods, and gossiping about reality TV with her classmates.

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