

**MSA Workforce Diversity Committee (MSAWDC) Conference Call
September 14, 2011 at 2 P.M.**

Attendees:

Edgar King, AD
Archie Tucker, DAD
Jimmy McAlpine
Rita Keeling
Deepak Bhatnagar, Chair
Georgina Acosta
Prakash Arelli (unable to sign-in)
Robert Danka
Carlean Horton
Randy Luttrell
Gay McCain
Kumudini Meepagala
Cathy Sabatini
Karamat Sistani
Barbara Smith
Jim Strickland
Dexter Watts
Bill White, absent
Valerie Reed, Secretary

Deepak Bhatnagar's opening comments addressed the thoughtful email sent by Jim Strickland regarding suggested activities for the committee.

- Deepak indicated that for us as a diversity committee, the focus has always been overall diversity, not just ethnicity as the only issue in diversity. However, in our recruitment practices, we are required to have a larger participation from minorities in our workforce, so we need to carry out some targeted recruitment. We are not suggesting to anyone that one should select a minority who is not the best qualified. We emphasize the need to develop a diverse pool of candidates so that we can select the best possible candidate from that pool and not leave out any group. On our website we need to make every effort that this focus of the committee is clear.
- The diversity committee has stayed away from civil rights issues within MSA, so we don't get caught up in ethnicity and those kinds of issues. Diversity to us, Deepak emphasized, has always been a board term, and that diversity plays a role in our approach to the assimilation of our workforce.

Deepak then introduced Dr. King, who thanked Deepak for reassuming the role as chair person of this committee. He also talked about some membership changes within the committee which he approved. The changes were made not because there was any dissatisfaction from the members in the committee that are no longer with us. They evolved to other roles and it gives some other people a chance to serve on this committee. Each one of the members has always been carefully selected, he said, because we have an important role to serve. The current selection has been based on commitment and passion for the cause of diversity in the MSA workforce. He reiterated

his personal commitment in that it is not only a requirement by USDA, but also the right thing to do, especially from a sociological point of view.

- Tomorrow at noon there is a cultural transformation webinar emphasizing diversity, maybe Deepak can tell us more. Effective Oct 1, we are moving toward the business service center/concept and Jimmy McAlpine will be a part of this service center and will no longer be attached to the MSA office but will still continue to work with us as the Civil Rights Manager (this transition was subsequently announced to be on hold).
- We must pay close attention to diversity in MSA because our Area in terms of minorities is the most diverse area among the 8 areas within ARS, and maybe, the most diverse in any of the agencies within the USDA: 31% are minorities and 40% are women. We ensure that we have a diverse workforce and we use all kind of mechanisms for achieving this goal. As far as a productive workforce standpoint, a diverse group brings different ideas from different cultures, races, ethnicity, education, and gender to the table, and in terms of how they perceive things.
- Major initiative from the Secretary of Agriculture in maintaining a diverse workforce as well as an Executive Order to this effect was put out by the U.S. President. Dr. King clarified that we are not doing this in MSA because of these mandates; we have been doing this since 1998 when the first workforce diversity committee was started soon after he took over as Area Director.
- The Area Office goal is to be supportive of this committee as much as he can. We want to keep moving forward and I am looking forward to ideas and recommendations the committee will come up with. If there is anything we can do from a funding standpoint, we can try to do that. Deepak as the chair person brings a lot of energy and commitment to this diversity committee. Our goal is to be diverse in every possible way.

1. Reports from locations on activities:

- Dexter Watts, Auburn, AL – no report.
- Bob Danka, Baton Rouge, LA: thank you, Deepak, for highlighting the objectives on the topic of recruitment of a candidate pool. Talked with K- College students about honey bees. Technician gave Girl Scout group a tour a couple of weeks ago.
- Karamat Sistani, Bowling Green, KY: not hiring – no positions available. In the past have tried to have a diverse pool of candidates when hiring, and will do so in the future.
- Jim Strickland, Lexington, KY: not hiring. Working with students through agreements – bringing students in from different cultural backgrounds. Scheduled to participate in the transformation webinar on Sept 19.
- Gay McCain, Mississippi State, MS: no report.
- Georgina Acosta, New Orleans, LA: working on MSA workforce diversity website and updating posters/handouts on verbiage and activities.

David Ambrogio: a couple of activities planned for the Hispanic Heritage observance month.

Deepak Bhatnagar: in June SRRC celebrated the Caribbean Heritage Month (designated by President George W. Bush), had Jamaican food brought in, guest speaker, and music played from the region. To give an opportunity to the SRRC staff to experience various cultures from around the world, a Cultural Diversity Day is celebrated in August; staff cooked dishes specific to the region of the world of their origin – 27 cooks representing 20 countries – about 80 employees attended, had slide show of previous events, had a vocal musician and some people were dressed in traditional clothes. We have a large diversity in our student workers – this year we are down from 60 to only 40 students employed, some for throughout the year, and most of them for the summer. USDA Undersecretary, Dr. Woteki, during her visit to SRRC, had a separate session with these students because she strongly encourages this as a responsibility of current employees.

- Cathy Sabatini, Oxford, MS: Kumudini and I are attending Internship Co-op Fair at the University of MS on Oct 5 to get the word out about ARS to the students for future hiring.
Kumudini Meepagala: talked to school teachers at the beginning of the school year on what we are doing here, and in about two weeks will bring students from these schools to the center.
- Barbara Smith, Poplarville, MS: had vineyard student tour, several H.S. and college biology classes have come through the lab.
- Carlean Horton, Stoneville, MS: National Hispanic American Heritage Celebration meeting on Sept 16. Invited to 4th Annual Career Fair on Oct 7 - will give us an opportunity to recruit students from across the area with a variety of ethnic backgrounds. So we do the best for our recruiting effort by registering with the university at this time. Jimmy McAlpine: initiated a Step Employees Program where we hired a number of students. Initiated an orientation process to track learning behaviors where the students gave an oral presentation and turned-in a 2 page written paper on what they learned here– the 27 video presentations are posted on the website. Carlean and Jim went to a Greenville public school and met with 40 science teachers, and the teachers want to set up experiments for Junior H.S. students.

2. Recruitment, Retention and Assimilation:

- a. Rita Keeling highlighted changes in recruitment procedures:
 - Emails were sent out on these changes on recruitment and also detailed instructions on recruitment. Administration hiring reform: goal is to meet an 80 day hiring procedure for permanent positions from start to making the offer. The process for filling positions has speeded up, but you will need to do a lot of homework before you do a SF 52. This procedure added 2 additional forms: REE Recruitment Agreement and Appendix A- REE Position Management Workforce Position Planning Checklist.
 - Additionally, now the recruiter will receive all the applicants that have qualified rather than a fraction, which provides for significantly more latitude in seeing as to

who have applied and what the pool looks like. Some of these changes have gone into effect as part of the USDA Cultural Transformation process.

b. IDP:

- Dr. King has always emphasized that everyone has an IDP in place; and it has been a long time focus of the MSAWDC as a tool for retention of employees. IDP gives the employees the opportunity to develop and better themselves in their career. IDP has been in place for a long time, but with this Cultural Transformation it has been brought to the forefront and more emphasis from MSA to aggressively pursue it and have 100% participation.
- So hopefully in the coming years, as people become more comfortable with doing their IDP, it will be more specific to them and not some general document attached to their PAP every year.

Questions:

- Bob Danka: Can you circulate some of the creative ideas for listing as activities in the IDP?
Deepak said that he would provide some examples.
- Jimmy McAlpine suggested that several types of training tools could be used:
 - In-house training
 - Aglearn training
 - University online trainingDeepak: We should have 100% participation because all the supervisors have reported back to MSA that the draft IDPs of employees are in place. The final IDP will go in with their PAP packets at the beginning of the next rating period.

c. Assimilation:

- When we do a celebration, the committee members need to capture how that activity benefited the staff at your location. If there was a presentation, what was the presentation and how did it help develop a better understanding of the discussed topic.
- We should have a reason for celebrating the activity, and try to make it more effective.
- Suggestions are welcome to allow all of us to better assimilate, so that we can have a better “we” feeling rather than “I” feeling.
- Rita Keeling: We had someone come in and we learned to write our name in Chinese. People get excited about such things and get to learn about other cultures.
- Deepak suggested that culture for an area can take many different forms. The New Orleans Saints are a part of the culture in this city. School kids wear Saints jerseys on Fridays during the football season. It is very important at your locations that you

support people's different "cultures" unique to that locality. Share with the committee your activities so we can do something similar at other locations.

3. Strengthen Student/Veterans Programs:

- Deepak suggested that during Disability Month, we need to add the disabled veterans in your celebration events. We will have a lot more veterans applying for jobs when they return home from the War. We need to make people more conscience in our locations and we need to reach out and target veterans group. I encourage you to look for ways to do that. We are trying to do something here with the WWII Museum. I have set up an appointment with them to see if we can hook up with some veterans groups.
- With regards to the student program, MSA highly encourages it. We need not use our own resources to support students.
 - A program in New Orleans, gives credit to students who work in labs, expenses are covered by the city and students are more inclined to come and work.
 - I sent out some grant information and other opportunities where you can talk to the school and they can apply to get students to work in your center.

Questions:

- Oxford, MS: Students want to volunteer but they have to be paid by the ARS because of safety issues – the University does not want to be liable. So we can't have students work here.
Deepak: We have volunteers that work here all the time. We have them fill out a form.
Jimmy: We have a federal lease for students to work in the labs on the University campus. We never had an issue that students could not work in the lab. Students had to fill out a form. We were liable for the students.

Deepak's comments:

- Find ways so students can get credit to work on campus. You will need to work with the University to have the students work in the labs.

4. Tools for recruitment:

a. Jimmy McAlpine on targeting places:

- I will send out an email on the "Greenberg Award for Innovation" for hiring college students with disabilities. The deadline for submission is Sept 26.
- Start early to recruit students – K-12. Agricultural science – get the kids involved.
- Pan American University.
- Workforce Recruitment Program for College Students with Disability.
- Native American colleges.
- A&M in AL – talked with them about the Step Program.
- 4-H clubs – elementary and H.S. students.
- Resources:
 - 1860 Land Grant colleges and universities where Native Americans in agriculture pursuing graduate degrees.
 - Agreements with universities to recruit Native Americans.

b. Georgina Acosta on MSAWDC website/other material:

- Input from committee members is needed on MSA Workforce Diversity Committee website.
- On the MSAWDC website see “Resources” to use as a tool for recruitment; and additional resources will be added.
- Need poster on what ARS does to dispel the myth that all we do is “stamp meat” or “test food.” See further information on recruitment tools (posters/brochures/booklets) click on “Activities” and then “Illustrations” on the website.
- None of the committee members objected to having their contact information posted on the website. At some point, we will need to include a group picture of the committee on the website.

Closing Comments:

Members are encouraged to interact with Colleges and H. S. and strengthen our student programs.