Diversity and Inclusion in VA Council (DIVAC) Meeting Minutes

October 19, 2016, 1:00-3:00 pm

VACO, 810 Vermont Avenue NW, Conference Room 830

1. Ms. Georgia Coffey, DIVAC Co-Chair and Deputy Assistant Secretary (DAS) for the Office of Diversity and Inclusion (ODI), welcomed attendees.
   1. The minutes for the July Meeting of the DIVAC were approved without objection.
   2. Ms. Coffey discussed the Office of Management and Budget’s (OMB’s) proposed revision to the Statistical Policy Directive on Standards for Maintaining, Collecting, and Presenting Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity regarding the classification of a Middle Eastern and North African group. ODI supports the addition of this new category to the five race categories currently used to help identify where barriers may exist for this group and to analyze and correct these barriers. ODI also recommends adding Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) status to classification standards. Ms. Tracey Therit, Associate Deputy Assistant Secretary, Office of Resolution Management (ORM), announced that ORM is collecting VA comments for submission to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB).
   3. Ms. Coffey announced that the Diversity and Inclusion in Government Council proposed a guidance memo, “Responding to incidents of societal tension and unrest.”
   4. Ms. Yvonne Rannels, Training and Communications, ODI, discussed the Secretary’s Sixth Annual Diversity and Inclusion Excellence Awards. The nomination period is open until December 1, 2016. Representatives from ORM discussed the Secretary’s Alternative Dispute Resolution Awards. Council members are asked to distribute nomination information for both of these programs widely.
2. Ms. Carolyn Wong, Director, Training and Communications, ODI, discussed the Secretary’s Equal Employment Opportunity, Diversity and Inclusion, No FEAR, and Whistleblower Rights and Protection Policy Statement. Differences from last year’s policy include language incorporating the Wounded Warriors Federal Leave Act of 2015 and bathroom access for transgender employees. There was discussion as to who oversees and how this policy is being implemented uniformly throughout the Department, including in non-Federal buildings.

Mr. Tamim Chowdhury, Construction and Facilities Management, will discuss this issue further with the General Services Administration. It was clarified that the intended audience for the Secretary’s EEO Policy is VA’s employees, not VA’s customers. Policies from the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Office of Patient Care Services LGBT Program address VA’s customers: <http://www.patientcare.va.gov/LGBT/VA_LGBT_Policies.asp>.

1. Mr. Sterling Akins, VA’s National LGBT Program Manager, Outreach and Retention, ODI, discussed VA’s proposed Transgender Employee Workplace Transition Guidance drafted by members of VA’s LGBT Workgroup including individuals who have experience transition in the VA workplace, two transgender individuals with published materials on this subject, and national VHA experts on gender identity. He reiterated that VHA policy already covers Veterans with regards clinical matters. DIVAC members were asked to review this guidance and to respond to an email with feedback and a vote of concurrence/non-concurrence. That email was distributed October 26, 2016; responses were due November 2, 2016.
2. Mr. Antony Washington, Training and Communications, ODI, discussed the revision of the VA Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Plan. It was undecided as to whether Employee Engagement would fit under an existing goal or whether an additional goal would be created. DIVAC members were asked to review this plan and to respond to an email with feedback and a vote of concurrence/non-concurrence. That email was distributed November 21, 2016; responses were due November 29, 2016.
3. Ms. Maxanne Witkin, Director, Office of Employment Discrimination Complaint Adjudication, discussed the Second Annual OEDCA Engagement Lecture: Religious Expression in the VA Workplace to occur November 1, 2016. Managers, Supervisors, and HR, EEO, and Legal Professionals are invited to attend to learn strategies to balance religious freedom with employees’ right to be free of religious harassment and discrimination and hear about new policy guidance on religious exercise and expression in VA facilities. There was discussion about POW/MIA display tables and Christmas caroling. Ms. Coffey referred DIVAC members to FAQ #6 in the August 19, 2016, Update of Policy Guidance Dated November 7, 2014 (Guidance on Religious Exercise and Expression in VA Facilities and Property Under the Charge and Control of VA available at <http://www.diversity.va.gov/policy/files/rel-exp-memo-2016-update.pdf>).
4. Dr. John Fuller, Employee Engagement Service, ODI, provided a World Café update. The Veterans Benefits Administration is leading the way; the Office of Human Resources and Administration will soon begin a series to be announced at an impending Town Hall meeting. There was discussion as to how to publicize this best practice. The Office of Public Affairs volunteered to assist in promoting this through the MyVA News blog and the larger media. There was discussion about how to reach those who do not volunteer for World Café sessions: word-of-mouth and ensuring that diverse groups are invited. It was clarified that for the emotional topics World Café addresses, a specialist is needed to manage World Café events.
5. Ms. Tracey Therit, Associate Deputy Assistant Secretary, ORM, provided an ORM update. Ms. Therit discussed her Leaders Developing Leaders (LDL) project focused the role of the Chief Human Capital Officer not performing as the EEO Director. Ms. Therit discussed Conflict Resolution Day to be observed October 20, 2016, in the VA Central Office Canteen. ORM staff would be on hand to discuss VA’s Alternative Dispute Resolution program.
6. Dr. Uchenna Uchendu, Chief Officer, Office of Health Equity, discussed the first-ever VHA National Veteran Health Equity Report. The report, available at <http://www.va.gov/healthequity/NVHER.asp>, embodies a comprehensive review of existing evidence of disparities among Veterans including relevant literature, VHA Fiscal Year (FY) 2013 administrative data, and descriptive analyses by subject-matter experts.
7. There was a discussion about challenges being faced currently by VA organizations:
   1. Measurements and strategies for Employee Engagement
   2. Employee empowerment and what that means to the front line employee in the field
   3. Providing and creating metrics for successful telework
   4. VA experiencing the same top three discrimination findings in FY 2016: reprisal, harassment, and reasonable accommodation
   5. Data science and ways to better measure results in achieving the model EEO program in VA
   6. Standing up new VA Office of Whistleblower Protection
   7. ORM/Human Resources and Administration is planning to house VA’s whistleblower complaint line
   8. Psychological safety
   9. Bridging generation gaps
   10. Reaching military personnel and training them for employment after the military prior to their separation
   11. If a Middle Eastern and North African group is created by OMB for the purposes of collecting Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity, that this group feels protected in identifying as such