

## Some Thoughts about Diversity

This document was originally written as part of the Self-Management Resource Center's Fidelity and Implementation Manual. It has been slightly edited here to put more emphasis on working with Hispanic/Latino populations. This document can be copied without further permission if it contains this italicized statement: *"For further information write SMRC@Selfmanagementresource.com."*

All too often diversity is not considered or is considered later, after many other parts of the program are already in place. Program planning cannot be done well until you know who you want to serve and have those folks be part of the planning. The disability community says, ***"nothing about us without us."*** This should be true in all program planning. Those that you want to serve should be part of the planning and be represented as part of your staff.

Honoring diversity starts with deciding who you want to serve and making a long-term commitment to them. Is it a specific racial or ethnic group? Is it a disease-specific population? Is it a specific language group? Is it people with disabilities? Once you know, you can start learning about these groups or communities. This is necessary, even if you are already a member of that group. It also means looking at the staffing in your organization to be sure that the group or groups you are targeting are represented.

One of the most important things to remember is that there is as much diversity within a group as there is across groups. For example, a physician from Bolivia may or may not have much in common with a Mexican farmworker in California. A Serbian living in Canada may or may not be a good person to work with Bosnian refugees. A medical student from China may or may not be the best person to work with an Asian immigrant community. Just because people share some common characteristics (race, ethnicity, language, etc.) with a community does not always mean they can work well in or with that community.

Do not make assumptions, but always ask the people who know, the people you want to serve. Remember we are members of many groups and may or may not feel comfortable or confident when working in all these groups. Just take a moment and think about yourself. Of what groups are you a part and with which do you feel most competent and comfortable?

**Commitment and learning:** Working to honor diversity means making a commitment and being willing to learn. The commitment is for years, not months, weeks or just offering one workshop. It means establishing relationships and making friends with members of the community, asking them what you should know as well as reading about the community. It means showing up on Saturday when invited to an acorn or Cinco de Mayo festival or other special event or celebration. For some groups it may mean scheduling workshops for evenings or for Sunday afternoons. In short, it means devoting time and energy to learning and being willing to step outside your comfort zone. If these are not things you are willing and able to do, then find someone in your organization who is more comfortable with leading your diversity efforts. Even if you are comfortable and have the commitment, you still always want to work with partners from the community.

**Finding the right partners** is one of the keys to working successfully with diversity. Start by asking everyone you know and can find in the community of interest. For example, who are leaders in the elder community and who do older people trust? **Do not stop here.** Next, talk to all these people and ask the same questions. You should have many names of community leaders. Once you have a list of names, look for those that appear the most frequently. These are the people who may make great partners. You might ask these folks to be an advisory committee. Or you might hire one of these people to help with your diversity efforts or ask them to help find facilitators for your programs. By the way, the people whose names you gather may not always be who you expect, such as the usual community, church, or tribal leaders. The community, church, or tribal leaders are important because they are often the gatekeepers. They are the ones that decide if they will support your efforts. However, they are seldom the people to do the work or sit on advisory committees because as community leaders, they are often too busy. Still, you want to keep these gatekeepers informed. Always let them know what you are doing, and always ask what you can do for them. If what they ask is not possible, say so. If you make a commitment, be sure to keep it. The two things you want from these gatekeepers are that they, 1) name or appoint people to help you, and 2) support you by introducing you to the community. Always remember that they are asking others to work with you and that this is a gift.

**Others want to know if they can trust you:** We all want to know if we can trust each other. This is even more important when you are working in a culture other than your own. It may be that others who have gone before you have done something to undermine trust. This is not your fault, but it is important for you to know and understand; it is also something with which you will need to deal when you work in and with that group or community. In many cultures, showing up on time, dressing appropriately, and doing what you say you are going to do are all

ways to gain trust. The problem is that “on time” and “dressing appropriately” may mean different things to different people. If you are invited to something, go, if you are offered food, eat it, if you encounter silence take a moment to think about it, and accept it. Let others in the group break the silence. These actions help build trust. Trust building is many actions over time, and trust leads to mutual respect.

**Listen, listen, and then listen some more:** As we learn about diversity and work to become more competent in and with diverse groups, we need to listen. This is especially true when facilitating workshops in diverse communities. For example, if someone comments during an activity that they are disrespected by health professionals, do not ignore the comment. Rather, allow them to explain, then acknowledge their feelings, show empathy, and offer to talk more with them at the break or after the session. You may not be able to solve their problem but letting them know you heard and empathize with them can go a long way. You may also be able to offer them other resources where they can find assistance.

As we listen, we often make assumptions based on our own experiences. In other instances, we are afraid to show our ignorance or afraid that if we ask it will lead to something more complicated or to other problems. Avoiding potentially uncomfortable discussions says a lot about you and your programs. It can cause difficulties and misunderstandings, especially when working with a culture other than your own. The best thing to do if you do not understand, or even if you think you understand, is to ask. This is what it means to be culturally humble. Going back to our workshop example then, a Leader might ask, “Could you tell me more about being disrespected?” This is how we learn. Remember, we do not have to fix the problem or apologize unless we did something wrong, but we do need to acknowledge that this is their reality and take time to listen.

**Avoid Stereotypes:** While there is some truth in some stereotypes, there are also many exceptions and misconceptions. Please note that in this write-up we say nothing about one group of people being like this and another group of people being like that. Remember, just because people share some common characteristics (race, ethnicity, language, etc.) this does not mean they are all the same. Where we often get into trouble is when we use stereotypes and act or say something like: “That is OK, we know that \_\_\_\_\_ are always late.” Or “\_\_\_\_\_ are so emotional.” A rule of thumb to help avoid stereotyping is to never assign any attribute to a whole group.

**How do I know if things are going wrong?** Some clues that help us know if things are not on track or going well are the following. People who used to call you back or keep in touch do not follow-up or respond to you. People do not show up at meetings. In a group meeting or workshop, everyone is silent. Participants do not

show up to the second session. Everyone looks bored. You just have a “feeling” or sense something is not right.

One of the mistakes that people often make when these things happen is to make excuses for them and say that these folks are busy, or maybe just not motivated. These are assumptions; therefore, when these things happen, rather than assuming you know, it is more useful to look at yourself and ask what might have happened and if there is anything you can do to correct it. If you do not know what happened, ask. This is where your community partners can be very helpful. Do not be afraid to hear hard truths and accept these for what they are, an attempt to make things better.

**What to do if things go wrong:** Find out what is happening right away. Reach out and ask your partners or the participants who did not show up again why they did not return. What happened? Then listen. At first there may be silence but eventually you will begin to learn what is happening. Maybe they felt disrespected, maybe a cultural norm was unintentionally broken, maybe a participant said something inappropriate to another participant, maybe someone talked when they should have been listening. Also, ask what you can do to fix whatever the problem might be and listen to their ideas. What not to do is make excuses.

**You made a mistake. Now what?** This discussion assumes that the intent was good, or the mistake was unintentional. As soon as you are aware that you made a mistake or someone points out a mistake, the best thing to do is to admit the mistake, and say you were wrong. “What I just said was racist, I am so sorry.” Do not give excuses. Do not try to fix it. It may be that someone will make an excuse for you. You can thank them and say that you just were not thinking. But nevertheless, what you said was harmful to others and still inappropriate. If this happens one time, you will probably be able to resume your plans, and you may have gained some respect by being honest, taking responsibility for your mistake, and apologizing for it.

### **A special note when working with immigrants (migrants)**

There are many people who are living and working in the United States and other countries, some for many, many years, who do not have their “documents” (work permits, passports, social security, or national identity numbers) that are common for most citizens. These people are not documented or undocumented. (This is the correct term rather than referring to them as “illegal”.) These people also have special problems. If they lack social security numbers, they may not be able to accept payment by check. They may fear that if they give you any identifying information it may endanger themselves and their families. You must take this into

consideration when asking for registration or other information. Just because someone lacks documents does not mean that they lack education or are criminals. It means that conditions in their own countries were such that, at great risk, they left for a better life for themselves and their families. Most of our forefathers came to the United States under similar conditions, or worse they were brought here as slaves.

If you choose to serve an immigrant population, always keep in mind that asking them even basic information may put them in danger or they may perceive that giving you the information is dangerous. This may affect whether they participate in the programs or use the services and resources you are offering.

### **A note about Latinx populations**

This is a very diverse population with people coming from more than 20 countries. Spanish may or may not be their first language. For example, in Southern Mexico and most of Peru and Bolivia Spanish is often the second or third language. If a family has lived in the U.S. for generations or maybe even originated in states such as Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, and California, people may or may not speak Spanish or their strongest language may be English. Many Spanish speakers in the U.S. do not read or write Spanish. This may be because their first language is English or that they had very little formal education. Even though spoken Spanish differs a bit between or within a country, Spanish is generally understood by those from all the different countries and experiences. If you are translating something, use broadcast Spanish. This is the Spanish used by news broadcasters and is generally understood by all Spanish speakers.

Food differs not only between countries of origin but even within countries. Just think of the differences between the Pacific Northwest and Louisiana. Some folks have corn as a basic staple while others have flour, rice and beans, or potatoes. Race also differs because the Latinx populations may identify as white, indigenous, black (Afro), or even Asian. Holidays and celebrations differ depending on the country of origin. And while football (soccer) is played in all Latinx countries the same is not true for other sports.

All this is to say that people from the many different Spanish-speaking countries are as diverse as those from English-speaking countries. To serve your Latinx community you must learn more about this community and honor their diversity.