



MEMO

To: Colchester Selectboard
From: Aaron Frank, Town Manager
Date: October 25, 2022
Re: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity Efforts

This memo shares some of the Town's ongoing efforts in the areas of diversity, equity and inclusion. As the Town Manager, my primary role in town government is overseeing the provision of municipal services and capital projects approved by votes of the town residents. It is especially important for town staff, as public servants providing municipal services, to carefully consider these topics and impacts as we serve members of our community. As a result, we may realize that when we do serve people of color and other marginalized people, some special consideration may be necessary to serve all equitably. Below are some of our efforts relating to diversity, equity and inclusivity.

All Town Departments: Throughout the fall of 2021, all town staff and chairs of all town boards and commissions completed racial, equity, and inclusivity trainings. All Fire and Rescue staff attended health care equity trainings. The trainings were conducted by Dr. Maria (Mercedes) Avila, Assistant Professor of Pediatrics and Adjunct Professor of Nursing at UVM Medical Center. Dr. Avila addressed the issues of diversity, inclusion and social justice from a professional perspective, while providing real world examples. Dr. Avila is published and recognized in the areas of cultural competency, diversity and leadership. Her approach is one that supports services, such as those offered by the Town, but which recognizes we can do a better job serving all of our community through education and the understanding of others with different backgrounds and perspectives. Additionally, Dr. Avila's three and a half-hour health equity session went more in-depth regarding language-access and was targeted for Fire and Rescue personnel to help understand how to provide equitable health care during emergency responses. All of these trainings built on the training conducted during the summer of 2020 for Town staff on diversity, racial justice, implicit and explicit bias, and privilege. Recently as well, selected Town staff in Town Hall have been trained to use a mobile translation service in order to provide live translation to community members who need to access the Town's services but do not have English as their primary language.

Economic Diversity: Your Town staff recognize housing access is an important subject for many communities and have consistently evaluated housing supply and needs in Colchester. Census data shows Colchester has a high percentage of low-income residents compared to other communities in Chittenden County, has one of the highest home ownership rates among the lower-income communities, and has the third lowest median income among homeowners. This data encourages your Town staff to maintain a sustainable tax rate to continue Colchester's affordability for all community members.

According to a 2021 Study, Colchester is one of the more affordable places to live among the eight core towns in Chittenden County. It has a significant supply of “affordable” housing units (those with values of under \$300,000), and indeed, the largest supply of “very affordable” units (those with values of under \$200,000) among all of the core communities. Census data shows that residents of Colchester pay less of their income on housing on average than do residents of any of the other core communities. Costs for renters in Colchester (on average) are among the lowest in the region.

Town staff have attended meetings, drafted letters, and advocated for and received \$650,000, to assist the Champlain Housing Trust in building 36 mixed-income multi-family housing units serving about 72 people at 245 Severance Road, on the southeast quadrant of Severance Corners. This leverages a total of \$12,000,000 in funding for 24 affordable apartments for households below 60% of median household income, three apartments affordable to below 80%, and nine market rate apartments. There is also a proposal for nearly 600 units of varied housing types in the northeast quadrant of Severance Corners.

As a staff, and with the Selectboard, we try to keep the municipal services tax rate low which helps maintain Colchester as a more affordable place to own a home within inner Chittenden County. This effort to maintain a relatively low municipal services tax rate serves to limit the amount of services provided to the community. In 2011 and 2014, the voters reinforced their wishes to restrain municipal services through “no votes” on the municipal services budget.

This restraint serves to help keep municipal services taxes and the costs of renting or owning a home more affordable than many neighboring communities. At the same time, it constrains funding and limits the amount of services that can be provided to people in need.

Human Resources: Trainings on workplace inclusion and collaboration, covering concepts that can be applied internally and externally, have been conducted regularly to emphasize positive communication and respect in the workplace. Specifically, last September, a training was delivered on-site by Kerin Stackpole, Esq., SPHR, to multiple workgroups relating to communication and respect in the workplace. Topics that were covered in this training included being aware of differences between oneself and other team members, such as differences in communication styles, and methods to improve communication and respect between staff.

The Town has also made a conscious effort to increase the breadth and scope of sources targeted to attract and recruit talent from a more diverse demographic to fill open positions. This has included expanding searches geographically to more nationwide searches and regional searches, including ads targeted in and out of state, and using job boards, such as diversity.com, blackjobs.com, hispanicjobs.com, and workforce50.com, that are aimed at reaching women, older populations, minorities, and people of color. Additionally, Town staff posts on a variety of college boards and targets a variety of areas of study to appeal to different backgrounds and perspectives when in the recruitment process.

Parks & Recreation: On June 16, 2022, full-time and seasonal day camp staff completed their two-hour, yearly training covering microaggressions, what messages they can send, and how to intervene in situations when microaggressions appear. Microaggressions are the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership (from *Diversity in the Classroom, UCLA Diversity & Faculty Development*, 2014). The first part of this important training addressed how to recognize microaggressions and how to identify the message they may be sending. The second part of the training included “Interrupting Bias: Calling Out vs. Calling In,” adapted from the Oregon Center for Educational Equity: *What Did You Just Say? Responses to Racist Comments Collected from the Field*. Through this second part, trainees learned the

difference between when it is appropriate to “Call Out” and let someone know that their words or actions are unacceptable and will not be tolerated in order to prevent further harm versus “Calling In” and asking reflective questions after recognizing an opportunity to explore deeper, make meaning together, and find a mutual sense of understanding across differences.

Economic Development: On September 22, 2022, Economic Development Director Kathi O’Reilly attended the Vermont Council on World Affairs’ full-day event celebrating the [International Day of Peace](#) around the UN's 2022 theme of *End Racism, Build Peace*.

The first event was a Zoom book talk with author and George Washington University Professor Carla Koppell who has worked in every region of the world to advance global development and build peace. Her book, *Untapped Power* is about leveraging diversity and inclusion for conflict and development. Her book was developed as part of a larger project to increase the focus on diversity. Some of the topics discussed were the movement for youth inclusion, which is not one discussed very often. The Zoom meeting had participants from all over the world, and the moderator was in Warsaw, Poland working on the Ukrainian issues.

Soon after, a Zoom panel discussion was held on Diversity and Leadership in International Affairs. Panelists included [Hadeil Ali](#), Deputy Director of the Diversity and Leadership in International Affairs Project, where she is responsible for supporting all DEI initiatives at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). She was accompanied by [Naz Subah](#), a Program Coordinator with the Diversity and Leadership in International Affairs Project at the CSIS. The discussion included organizational credibility, such as how to have ethical leadership within an organization and how that is relevant to the culture of the company. Imposter syndrome, unconscious bias, employee resources groups, and certain terminology regarding these topics and how it differs in areas of the world were also discussed.

Planning & Zoning: Throughout the year, Planning and Zoning Director Cathyann LaRose, who is certified through the American Planning Association, has attended several planning-related, diversity webinars, including *Trail Blazing a Path to Equity* and *Neighborhood Empowerment for Equity and Inclusion Through Planning*.

Beginning January 1, 2022, AICP members were required to obtain two new mandatory credits in addition to Law and Ethics. One of the new mandatory credits is [Equity](#), which will help planners build their skillsets in an area that is of pressing and lasting concern to communities across the country. Per the American Planning Association, “Planners have a special responsibility to serve the public interest, expand choice and opportunity for all persons, and to plan for the needs of the disadvantaged. The equity mandatory credit provides the opportunity for planners to expand their equity toolkit, leading to more equitable outcomes in communities.”

In addition to these trainings, Cathyann has expanded her department’s knowledge of these topics through the readings [5 Practical Zoning Hacks for Missing Middle Housing](#) by Kati Woock and *Modernize Planning and Zoning Practices to Improve Affordability and Equity* by Bret Kreast, AICP, that discuss housing diversity and density in communities of all sizes.

Burnham Memorial Library: Along with attending Town-wide trainings, library staff have purchased many physical books over the past year that relate to diversity and inclusion. When looking at items to purchase for the collection, they included not only items that discuss racial inequity or gender identity, but also authors and publishers who represent a variety of ethnicities, orientations, and cultural backgrounds. For example, certain fiction books were purchased for the collection because they are written by Latinx authors and tell stories unique to their culture. Also, the director applied for and received about \$2,750 in grant funds to purchase hi-lo books for teens and Wonderbooks for youth of all ages. These items are specifically

marketed to students who struggle with reading, though the Wonderbooks are appealing to everyone.

Along with collection-specific efforts, the library also programs events that are diverse and inclusive. In April of 2018, the Burnham hosted a Drag Queen Story Hour. Close to one hundred people attended the program where local drag queens read stories to children about inclusion and self-love. The program concluded with each child making their own crown—demonstrating the power of dress up.

Recently, Young Adult Librarian Meg Malone attended a webinar presented by authors Ryan La Sala and Aiden Thomas where topics of gender identity representation in YA and how to expand queer stories outside the typical genre box were discussed. Library Director Kelly McCagg also met with Jamilah Vogel, Colchester schools' Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Coordinator, to set up diversity training for library staff in regards to LGBTQIA+ issues.

Colchester Police Department: The Colchester Police Department has taken part in a variety of trainings that incorporated diversity and inclusion. Twenty-four staff members, both sworn and non-sworn, have completed two and a half hours of Structural Competency & Cultural Humility to address disparities and inequities, eight staff members participated in two-hour Cultural Diversity and Cultural Brokers Trainings, three employees attended an eight-hour training on Cultural Diversity, and Lieutenant Pete Hull completed sixteen hours total of trainings through the Clifton Strengths Workshop and Cultural Diversity Competency Workshop.

Other inclusion efforts that the department has taken include Drug Impairment training for the cultural brokers, having Dr. Avila as a panelist for the hiring of the new Evidence Technician position, using Dr. Avila's Cultural Brokers for Translation Services, and continuing to engage with diverse parts of our community with regards to the Police Department open house. Additionally, in recent years and still today, Colchester Police have expanded their community justice efforts to provide more supportive services to all populations in the community.

One part of these efforts includes working with the Essex Community Justice Center (ECJC) in partnership with the Town of Essex and the State Department of Corrections. ECJC provides restorative justice programming with a focus on crime prevention, conflict resolution, and meeting the needs of those affected by crime. Different programs include Community Restorative Justice Panels, Community Dialogue Education, and the Circle of and Accountability Program (COSA), which helps those recently released from incarceration to successfully re-enter society. Additionally, through a Pre-Charge program, the Colchester Police Department can refer cases to Restorative Justice Panels instead of court. These panels are facilitated by trained community volunteers and serve as a proven and cost-effective means to addressing low-level offenses. Through a series of conversations, the panel process holds those responsible for crime accountable for their actions and provides an important opportunity for those affected by crime to share their stories and identify needs for repair.

Another part of these efforts involves the Colchester Police Department's work with the Howard Center. Work with the Howard Center began in 2018 through their Community Outreach Program that created a supportive presence in municipalities. The Howard Center hired, trained, and supervised staff to serve as Community Outreach Specialists to serve the communities involved in the program. Currently the program has expanded to include nine Chittenden County communities. In collaboration with local law enforcement and service providers, the Howard Center Outreach Specialists work to coordinate support for individuals who have mental health, substance use, housing, or other social service needs. This collaboration has enhanced the general well-being of local communities like Colchester and allowed the municipalities' police resources to focus on persons who have committed crimes.