

How the Department of Veterans Affairs is Advancing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

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The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) plays a critical role in providing comprehensive healthcare, benefits, and support to millions of veterans across the United States. Diversity, equity, and inclusion are essential components of any organization striving to create a supportive and welcoming environment for its employees and clients. Within the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), these principles are especially critical given the diverse demographics of both its workforce and the veteran population it serves.

Executive Order 14035 was signed by President Biden in June of 2021 ([2021-14127.pdf \(govinfo.gov\)](https://www.govinfo.gov/justice/eo/2021-14127.pdf)), which is a federal government-wide initiative to advance the federal workforce by drawing from the diverse nation we serve while being a model employer and promoting equality for all Americans.

In support of this Executive Order, the VA has made significant strides in advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives by implementing several initiatives and programs within its workforce and service delivery. Some include:

- » **Diversity Recruitment and Hiring:** The VA has developed targeted recruitment strategies to attract a diverse pool of applicants for employment opportunities within the organization. This includes outreach to minority-serving institutions, participation in job fairs focused on diverse candidates, and partnerships with community organizations.



- » **Diversity Training and Education:** The VA provides training and education on diversity, equity, and inclusion topics to its employees at all levels. These programs aim to raise awareness of implicit biases, promote cultural competency, and foster inclusive practices in the workplace.
- » **Minority Veteran Outreach:** The VA has launched initiatives to improve outreach and engagement with minority veterans, including those from historically underserved communities. This includes efforts to increase awareness of available benefits and services, as well as targeted outreach

campaigns to address specific health concerns prevalent among certain demographic groups.

- » **Forming Specific Initiatives to Support DEI:** An IDEA task force was created ([IDEA - Office of Resolution Management, Diversity & Inclusion \(ORMDI\) \(va.gov\)](#))

How does a large organization make strides in these areas?

VA is broken into several Administrations and then again into several Offices. Within the Office of Construction Facilities Management (CFM), we have implemented an IDEA (Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Access) Tiger Team. This group was charged by a leader who both listened and cared about what his teams were experiencing. This leader empowered the Tiger Team to take the reins of “stop talking and start doing,” within the capacity that we could make changes. The IDEA Tiger Team consists of construction managers, project managers, administrative assistants, HR staff, and leadership with well versed backgrounds; member age, race, education, and sex all vary.

The VA CFM IDEA Tiger Team Charter has been laid out to support the initiatives of both big VA and the Executive Order by promoting a more diverse and inclusive culture in our organization.

Inclusion Diversity Equity and Access (IDEA) Tiger Team Charter

MISSION

The mission of the IDEA Tiger Team is to cultivate and to grow an inclusive, diverse workforce in an environment that engages employees and motivates them to perform at their highest capacity to meet CFM’s commitment to deliver world class services to our Nation’s Veterans.

VISION

CFM is committed to support the VA vision to create a high-performing workforce while capitalizing on its diversity, embracing inclusion of a diverse, underrepresented, and multi-cultural workforce, and empowering the CFM teams to perform to their highest potential.

IMPLEMENTING GOALS AND PERFORMANCE METRICS

GOAL 1: Create a diverse, all-inclusive, multi-cultural workforce.

GOAL 2: Develop an inclusive workplace and improve minority group participation in leadership roles.

GOAL 3: Provide outstanding facilities to our veterans and their families.

Performance Metrics:

- Increase CFM participation in professional associations of underrepresented demographic groups.
 - » Tiger team members participate in at least one event per year.
 - » Tiger team task force participates in at least one job fair at an underrepresented college or university per year.
- Create a CFM mentor program.
 - » Enroll at least six mentors and 12 mentees to participate in a trial for six months.
- Create a recognition program for CFM employees that support the IDEA principles.

From its inception, the Tiger Team has not only met its goals, but is exceeding them. In addition to the goals and metrics listed, an internship program is currently being developed to attract college graduates just starting their careers.

Though we are making a ton of progress at a local level, disparities still exist, particularly in leadership positions. Continued efforts are needed to recruit, retain, and promote employees from underrepresented groups to ensure a more inclusive and representative workforce. It is apparent that leadership commitment and accountability are essential for driving meaningful change in DEI initiatives. VA must ensure that leaders at all levels are equipped with the skills and knowledge to champion diversity, equity, and inclusion within their teams and across the organization. Within CFM, we have leadership buy-in and therefore can act on our initiatives.

The answer to the question above is simple, one bite at a time. It comes down to individuals taking the initiative to continue to prioritize DEI and fostering a culture of inclusivity, so the VA can better fulfill its mission of serving those who have served our nation. 🐾



About the Author

Jenna is the Regional Director for the Western Region in the Office of Construction & Facilities Management (CFM) for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). She joined the VA as a Resident Engineer on the Denver Replacement VA Medical Center and was later promoted to Senior Resident Engineer to help bridge the gap between the new construction agent, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the VA Medical Center.

Prior to joining VA Construction & Facilities Management, Jenna served nine years as a Construction Manager with the Naval Facilities Engineering Command Southwest, Resident Officer in Charge of Construction at Camp Pendleton, California. In this capacity, Jenna acted as the Senior Construction Manager and managed construction projects in excess of \$120 Million.

Jenna enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1997 and served four years. During her service, she deployed to Southeast Asia on a humanitarian mission and was meritoriously promoted to Sergeant within three years of enlisting. After receiving an Honorable discharge, she attended Woodbury University in California earning a Bachelor of Architecture degree in 2006. She is a Certified Construction Manager (CCM).

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