



# PROMISING PRACTICES FOR **Increasing Diversity Among First Responders**

Prepared for U.S. Department of Labor, Chief Evaluation Office

## Program Brief

### PREPARED BY



Bethesda, Maryland



### AUTHORS

Abby Miller, Sue Clery, Samantha Richardson, and Amelia Topper, *Coffey Consulting, LLC*

Stephanie Cronen, Samantha Lilly, Emma Hinkens, and Michelle Yin, *American Institutes for Research (AIR)*

This project has been funded, either wholly or in part, with federal funds from the U.S. Department of Labor under Coffey Consulting, LLC's MOBIS Contract GS-10F-0176P, DOL BPA DOLQ129633242, Task Order DOL OPS-15-U-00189. The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Labor, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement of same by the U.S. Government.



## Introduction

First responder fields—including law enforcement, firefighting, and emergency management services (EMS)—serve a crucial role in the safety and well-being of communities around the country. Public citizens and officials have placed a renewed focus on improving agencies' relations with their local communities by ensuring that first responders reflect the populations they serve. The potential benefits of increasing diversity and moving toward greater representation could also provide more secure and rewarding employment opportunities to historically underrepresented populations, thus having implications for local economic and workforce development. To that end, the U.S. Department of Labor's (DOL) Chief Evaluation Office contracted with Coffey Consulting, LLC (Coffey) to conduct an exploratory study to identify promising practices that first responder agencies and organizations can leverage to increase the diversity of their workforces.

The full study (available at <https://www.dol.gov/asp/evaluation/CompletedStudies.htm>) details findings from a literature review and exploratory site visits to five communities. The following five sites were selected based on both the extent to which their first responder workforce is representative of the local population, and their use of practices that align with the human resources literature as being effective for developing a diverse workforce:

- Atlanta Police Department (APD)
- BAY EMT, Oakland, CA
- Camp Fully Involved (CFI), Concord, NH
- Dallas Police Department (DPD)
- San Francisco Fire Department (SFFD)

A number of practices along the employment pipeline, from outreach and recruitment to the retention and advancement among those hired, were identified at the sites. In addition to promising practices, a number of challenges were identified to further diversifying first responders, including a negative public image of first responders in the community, low pay, and restrictive selection and hiring processes.

This brief focuses on potentially promising practices identified by the study that local agencies implement, and which can be implemented with little or no expense beyond agencies' regular budgets (for a comprehensive overview of all findings please refer to the final report). The practices fall into four major categories: cultivating a culture of diversity, redirecting resources toward a targeted approach, ensuring fairness and equality in the hiring process, and reaching a diverse pipeline through community partnerships. These practices often are used together, anchored by an overarching commitment to representing and serving the local community.

It should be noted that community engagement, identified as a promising practice for recruitment, has the potential to not only lead to diversity, but also could be a result of diversity: The more diverse first responders are, the more likely they may be to engage with diverse local populations, and the greater the engagement, the more likely to attract diverse citizens as employees.

## What First Responder Departments Do to Increase Diversity: Promising Findings

### 1. Leadership: Cultivate a culture of diversity

- **Diversity dialogue and language:** The literature review and information obtained in our site visits indicated that departmental leadership sets the tone for an organizational culture of diversity by facilitating open dialogue with staff about the importance of diversity. In addition, leadership sets specific and measurable goals for increasing the diversity of staff in a strategic plan and reinforces the importance of representing the community through its mission statement. Both the Atlanta Police Department (APD) and the Dallas Police Department (DPD), visited for this study, provide examples of agencies that include diversity language and goals in their strategic plans.
- **Diversity support:** Departmental leadership at the sites visited encourage and provide support for population-specific employee support groups to help increase inclusion of underrepresented groups. For example, the San Francisco Fire Department (SFFD) Chief meets regularly with representatives of female, African American, Asian, and veteran employee groups. Not only do these groups support the department's diversity goals across a range of outreach and recruitment efforts, but they also operate on a purely volunteer basis, allowing SFFD to do more with fewer resources.

- **Diverse leaders:** Local leaders at the departments visited also set the tone for diversity by hiring qualified diverse staff in leadership ranks to serve as role models. At the three departments visited for this study (APD, DPD, and SFFD), officers and firefighters from traditionally underrepresented groups serve in prominent and visible roles. This can send the message to prospective and current staff with diverse backgrounds that they too can serve in these positions.

## 2. Recruitment: Redirect resources towards a targeted approach

- **Community liaisons:** The police sites visited hire population-specific liaisons with underrepresented characteristics or backgrounds (i.e., Hispanic, LGBT) to reach out to members of the community.
- **Targeted messaging:** Departments visited for this study tailor their messaging and recruiting materials to underserved groups, for example, by featuring female or African American employees in uniform on recruiting pamphlets and posters, thus sending the message to these groups that policing, firefighting, and rescue are real possibilities for people they may see as similar to themselves. The departments also provide recruitment materials in Spanish or other common languages spoken by segments of the local population whom they wish to recruit.

## 3. Hiring: Ensure a level playing field

- **Relaxed restrictions:** First responder departments may lose potentially valuable employees due to restrictive hiring procedures, such as particularly extensive background reviews. Police departments, such as APD, have relaxed the restrictions placed on past traffic offenses and credit records, particularly those that they consider minor or irrelevant to job duties. Departments such as APD instead take a holistic look at applicants and consider the timeframe and magnitude of such minor offenses in relation to the individual's work history and other relevant factors to ensure that they do not miss out on the opportunity to hire qualified candidates.
- **Equitable testing standards:** In addition to the background review, departments lose applicants in various testing phases of the often lengthy hiring process. In some cases, physical or psychometric exams may unnecessarily exclude some candidates from underrepresented groups. Departments such as DPD track data at each point in the hiring process, identify who is being lost and where, and assess whether biases are present in their tests or other processes and make the necessary adjustments. It is critical that departments ensure their hiring processes are fair and equitable.

## 4. Community Engagement: Tap into a diverse pipeline

- **Public forums for interaction:** One way departments such as APD, DPD, and SFFD engage with the community is to offer classes, events, and presentations for citizens, some targeting specific populations in their languages. Departments can also reach youth through athletic clubs and after school activities. These opportunities for regular, informal, and positive interactions help to humanize the profession. They not only allow for direct recruitment through distribution of information about first responder jobs, but also allow citizens to get to know first responders on a personal level. These positive interactions help improve the image of first responders in the community, allowing them to serve as role models for youth who may aspire to pursue first responder careers based on their positive interactions.
- **Relationships with local schools and colleges:** Schools at the K-12 level provide opportunities for departments such as SFFD to make presentations about first responders to students and to help them learn more about the careers. Reaching out to girls or non-White students at young ages may be particularly important, as students may not consider a career as a firefighter, police officer or Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) to be feasible until they actually meet someone to whom they can relate personally. Developing relationships with universities can also provide a forum for presenting information to, and interacting with, students who otherwise might not have considered a first responder career. Both APD and DPD have formed partnerships with local universities, including Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and women's colleges, to reach those populations. Recruiters from DPD make classroom presentations to students of all majors and interact with them informally in common areas on campus, to build relationships and help humanize the profession.
- **Partnerships with training providers:** Third-party training providers, like BAY EMT and Camp Fully Involved (CFI, both visited for this study), provide intensive, hands-on opportunities for female and non-White trainees and potential trainees to learn about and gain an understanding of first responder careers, receive training, prepare for exams, and build a network in the field. First responder departments can form relationships with these training providers to help expand their pipeline by offering opportunities to participants who complete the programs. For example, Bay EMT partners with local fire departments and ambulance providers to provide a direct pipeline into both internships and entry-level jobs.
- **Partnerships with community organizations and foundations:** Since first responder departments do not always have the internal resources needed to offer financial incentives to help recruit new talent, they can further expand their reach in the community by forming partnerships with local organizations and foundations that share

an interest in a diverse first responder force. The APD offers financial incentives to new hires including housing and education benefits through its partnership with the Atlanta Police Foundation. Collaborating with local workforce development boards (WDBs) and American Job Centers (AJCs) is another way to reach out to local job seekers. For example, the APD partners with its local WDB to offer internships to youth.

## Summary and Implications

Many of the practices identified and summarized in this brief are grounded in the human resources literature and in a growing body of research specific to the diversity of first responders. For example, forming community partnerships and tailoring recruitment messages to specific audiences are considered promising practices for recruiting diverse staff, both generally and within first responder fields.<sup>1</sup> Other practices presented here that are supported by the literature include the importance of supportive leadership and organizational values. Some recommendations from the literature specific to first responders, including the establishment of diversity councils and mentoring programs, did not surface during the site visits but are worth exploration in the consideration of practices for replication.

Although some of the activities described herein may require resources beyond a department's annual operating funds, many can also be undertaken on a volunteer basis. Sites visited for this study utilized volunteer opportunities to promote and support diversity within departments. For example, the employee support groups at SFFD representing a range of underrepresented populations operate entirely on a volunteer basis. Staff at the two training sites visited, BAY EMT and CFI, work for the programs on a voluntary basis. At CFI, firefighters volunteer a week of their time to spend on site at the residential camp. These opportunities introduce and prompt a diverse group of individuals to consider a career in the first responder field. Utilizing volunteerism is a valuable approach to leveraging diversity efforts, when financial and other resources are limited.

From the literature review and the site visits conducted for this study, it is clear that some first responder departments are using creative and culturally sensitive strategies to further support diversity and inclusion. Departments and agencies must work toward institutionalizing diversity and inclusion efforts, and these efforts must become a part of the organization's culture and daily business in order to be effective.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.dol.gov/asp/evaluation/CompletedStudies.htm>