Promising Practices for Increasing Diversity Among First Responders

SUMMARY
In 2016, the Chief Evaluation Office (CEO) funded Coffey Consulting to publish the First Responder Workforce Diversity Study, including a final report, program brief, and five site profiles. This exploratory multi-site case study was designed to identify perceived promising practices by the interviewees promising for increasing diversity among first responder workforce for a better understanding of perceived promising recruitment-, hiring-, training-, retention-, and advancement-related practices for improving the diversity of first responders in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Researchers conducted a literature review and exploratory site visits to first responder organizations in Atlanta, GA; San Francisco/Bay Area, CA; Concord, NH and Dallas, TX; and Concord, NH.

This Department of Labor-funded study was a result of the annual process to determine the Department’s research priorities for the upcoming year. It contributes to the labor evidence-base to inform employment and training development programs and policies and addresses Departmental strategic goals and priorities.

KEY TAKEAWAYS
- Organizational and leadership support of diversity was notable across sites. It included a diverse leadership (in terms of both race/ethnicity and gender), an emphasis on diversity as a priority, and open discussions among staff about the importance and meaning of diversity.
- Recruiting was the primary tool used at the sites to increase diversity. Promising recruitment practices include population-specific liaisons, financial incentives for language skills, and targeted messaging.
- Community engagement activities served as both direct and indirect recruitment methods. These activities include partnerships with local schools, colleges, training providers, community organizations, and foundations.
- Sites adjusted hiring practices to ensure a level playing field. These practices include relaxing hiring procedures and requirements that are unduly restrictive and adjusting testing standards to improve equity.
- Sites used specific practices to retain a diverse workforce. They included providing opportunities for promotion and movement between units, offering financial incentives for those who speak multiple languages, and providing a welcoming environment.
- The two police sites identified challenges including high turnover, arduous application processes, low pay, a need for more bilingual staff, maintaining community trust, and retaining younger (millennial) employees.
- One fire site discussed challenges that included high competition for limited openings, recruiting bilingual staff, limited recruitment budgets, and the high cost of training that candidates must often fund themselves.
The Department of Labor’s (DOL) Chief Evaluation Office (CEO) sponsors independent evaluations and research, primarily conducted by external, third-party contractors in accordance with the Department of Labor Evaluation Policy. CEO’s research development process includes extensive technical review at the design, data collection and analysis stage, including: external contractor review and OMB review and approval of data collection methods and instruments per the Paperwork Reduction Act (PRA), Institutional Review Board (IRB) review to ensure studies adhere to the highest ethical standards, review by academic peers (e.g., Technical Working Groups), and inputs from relevant DOL agency and program officials and CEO technical staff. Final reports undergo an additional independent expert technical review and a review for Section 508 compliance prior to publication. The resulting reports represent findings from this independent research and do not represent DOL positions or policies.