

The Collective Experiences of Women of Color in Utah

RESEARCH SUMMARY

In the spring of 2022, the **Utah Women & Leadership Project** convened 11 community conversations with women of color in Utah. Participants identified among five racial/ethnic lines (Black, Latina, Asian, Pacific Islander, Indigenous), along with New Americans (immigrants and refugees), representing a diverse range of countries of origin and ancestry. Six reports followed, as well as one on background and methods, available [here](#). This report synthesizes the previous six reports to highlight the most widely shared concerns voiced by these courageous women, as well as key action items they collectively identified as critical to their communities.

MOST PRESSING ISSUE: RESOURCES

- 1 Accessible resources
- 2 Culturally competent resources
- 3 Relevant resources

RECURRING THEMES:

- 1 Inclusion
- 2 Belonging

MOST PRESSING ISSUE: RESOURCES

Community members need accessible resources: At or near the top of the list of pressing issues identified all ethnic/racial identities was finding and accessing resources. The most important resources identified were those directed at improving conditions and increasing opportunities, such as housing, childcare, shelter from abuse, mental health and health-care, and jobs and education. Most notably, the need for mental health resources to support the additional, specific, and unique challenges that women of color face was widely expressed. In particular, participants noted a lack of mental health providers representative of the communities they serve. In addition, systems and processes often vary from resource to resource, serving as a barrier to accessing interrelated services that will contribute to the overall wellbeing of individuals and families. Finding ways to consolidate resource access, making it easier to find and utilize needed resources, was specifically identified as a key action item.

Community members are better served when resources and providers are culturally competent: Cultural stigmatization was a shared experience among many participants. As a result, many identified cultural competency among resource providers a high priority. Multilingual services and providers were also seen as a fundamental necessity, though currently insufficiently met. Providers who are representative of the communities they serve is one step toward cultural competency, as well as a means to build trust among those they serve. Black participants, in particular, had experienced racism from providers, which they believe has resulted in their concerns not being taken seriously. Latina participants expressed widespread generational distrust of government, whereas culturally attuned providers can counter this by helping to establish trust and communication. Educators, in particular, were cited as sources of cultural and historic shaming and erasure by many participants, including Black and Indigenous participants. Cultural competency and inclusion training were seen as widely needed among providers and educators and was specifically identified as a key action item.

Resources will be more relevant when communities are part of the planning process: Participants often expressed feeling their voices were not heard and their input had not been gathered, leading to mismatched or inadequate resource provisions. They want to have a voice in how, where, and the nature of the resources they receive to better meet their culturally- and socially-specific needs. Long-term, steady funding is key to sustaining resources to communities and one reason resources are not consistently or adequately available. Strategically funding resources that are relevant and match community needs will lead to increased utilization and improved outcomes. Moreover, Pacific Islander, Black, Latina, and American Indian women spoke most directly about wanting more representation among professionals, role models, and mentors across all kinds of service areas including education, health-care, and among policy-makers. One Indigenous participant underscored a widely expressed sentiment, saying, "Our concerns will never be addressed until somebody legitimately represents all of us in a cabinet position."



RECURRING THEMES: INCLUSION & BELONGING

Community members experience feeling excluded: Overlaid onto each of the resource-related issues were two larger, closely-related themes that cut across all of the issues: inclusion and belonging. The lack of inclusion was an overarching message voiced often and explicitly throughout the community conversations, felt in classrooms, clinics, banks, board rooms, and the halls of government across the state. Whether it is being the person always asked to explain race matters or being the 'one' in the room, feeling tokenized and reduced to one's race or ethnicity is exhausting. It brings up feelings of isolation, as well, impacting mental health and wellbeing. Students at all levels of education struggle with their teachers' inability to discuss or understand race, and too often seem uncomfortable interacting with students of color. These attitudes impact students' ability to succeed. One Black participant said, "While not one class has discussed race, my race is in everything I do. I always have to take it into account that I'm Black...You are forced to feel your Blackness in Utah."

This sense of feeling acutely aware of one's race or ethnicity at all times speaks to the extreme underrepresentation of women of color in various professions and in leadership in the state. This came through when discussing resources. The lack of women of color in decision-making roles leads to the experience of feeling invisible, unseen and unheard. This has led many to conclude that in Utah, cultural and racial histories are glossed over or

superficially addressed in important ways, such as school curricula. Implicitly and explicitly, our participants associated the lack of inclusion of people of color in education with insensitive or inadequate approaches to how race and ethnicity are addressed in services and other areas of life in Utah.

Community members experience feeling that they do not belong:

Greater visibility is inextricably linked to a sense of belonging, but differs from inclusion in that a sense of belonging follows feeling included, of being seen and heard. Participants spoke about the importance of creating community and of establishing groups for gathering and welcoming one another, to celebrate culturally relevant holidays, and to organize for positive social change. Critiques are often perceived to be negative, yet the critiques expressed at the community conversations were overwhelmingly positive. As one attendee put it: "Utah is an incredible place because of the Asian contribution throughout history, whether it was the railroad or mining, our contribution to this history makes Utah what it is today. ...It's time to have the voices of Native Americans, the voices of Black Americans, Latinos, and Asian American in the curriculum in our schools."

RECOMMENDATIONS

The women who participated in UWLP's community conversations courageously shared their experiences and thoughts with us. They provided clear priorities focused most critically around resources. Foremost, consolidation of access to re-

sources was a key action item identified by participants—easier, faster, more efficient access resources is needed. Because resources are often best provided locally, it becomes incumbent upon resource providers within local geographies—city and/or county level—to come together, perhaps even with a convener such as a public health department, to work together to better meet the needs of their local constituencies. In doing so, all communities in need will be better served.

However, access is only a piece of the missing resource puzzle. Participants described experiences with resources as being unwelcoming, shaming, or non-inclusive. A lack of trust was acutely felt by many of our participants. While some resource providers are founded or staffed by those who represent the communities they serve, many in the resource providing community are unfamiliar with those they serve. Cultural competency is one way to bridge lack of familiarity and to create greater inclusion and sense of belonging. Cultural competency helps build trust, signals respect, and brings visibility and inclusion to non-primary cultures. Making cultural competency training, and the closely associated training for unconscious bias, standard practice for resource providers, educators, care providers, the business community, and the state's political leadership would be a step toward making Utah a place where women of color (and their families) will thrive.

KEY ACTION ITEMS FOR RESOURCE PROVIDERS

- Increase visibility of available resources, especially those that address critical needs such as housing, health-care, and safety.
- Improve efficiency of receiving services, and create "one-stop shops" for related or correlated services.
- Build trust and respect by engaging in ongoing cultural competency training.
- Provide multilingual services facilitated by multilingual providers.
- Include community members in determining what, how, when, and where resources will be provided.
- Recruit professionals from or mentor members of the communities you serve. Representation is essential.
- Appoint and support women of color to hold decision-making roles across a variety of sectors and environments.
- Engage in conversations with community members and listen their to collective and individual stories with curiosity and empathy.
- Create opportunities to engage with other cultures and recognize the contributions of others.