

# Co-creating the future of sheltering

social justice, equity, and the unlearning process

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## Personal development and self-work

Change begins with engaging in self-work and examining your own beliefs, bias, and lived experience and those defense mechanisms that might unconsciously or consciously support systemic or implicit bias.

- 1 Recognize where your own privilege, rank, or power impact your choices.
- 2 Develop the personal mastery to uncover the concealed and fixed thought patterns and assumptions that maintain certain beliefs. "Only embodied learning, in practice and within a group, supports the difficult unlearning that opens space for new understanding."<sup>2</sup> Some of this work should occur at the individual level, others require being in conversation with others.
- 3 Practice deep listening.<sup>3</sup>
- 4 Take personal bias tests to examine your own bias.<sup>4</sup>
- 5 Educate yourself. Don't expect to be educated by your BIPOC friends or peers. It is not the role of BIPOC people to teach you.<sup>5,6</sup>
- 6 How would you define systemic racism?
- 7 Have you personally familiarized yourself with the underserved communities in your city? How did that happen? What came up for you?

## In your organization

- 1 Be bold and uncomfortable. Start conversations. Examine ways to engage. If you are aware of aggressions (commonly termed "micro-aggressions") occurring, stand up for your colleagues.<sup>7</sup>
- 2 Place DEI into the strategic plan for the organization. Create tangible goals.
- 3 Allocate a budget and time for staff to work on DEI initiatives outlined in your goals.
- 4 Examine how you speak about these initiatives and the power structures that may impede the work from occurring.



## What is unlearning?

Unlearning involves breaking down the origins of our thoughts, attitudes, behaviors, feelings, and biases.<sup>1</sup> We have been conditioned by the systems around us to think in certain ways. As we examine these systems more closely, we will unravel how they have impacted our choices and ways of being. For those in positions of power, this can be an unnerving process, as this work, which lies at the heart of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion (DEI), brings into question our very nature of being – how we are benefiting within white dominant systems that have been built on oppression.

“Unlearning involves a level of awareness that cultivates a first-person inquiry to question, examine, identify, and distinguish concealed assumptions that form our relationships with concepts and views. Over a period, such an inquiry ultimately results in the experience of releasing, letting go or altering the relationship to any concept or view.

As it progresses, the unlearning process cultivates an openness for something new to emerge, to be distinguished and realized, and then to be integrated into one's being.”

-Bhavana Learning Group

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Cal Animals Animal Care Conference 2021

**Co-creating the future of sheltering:  
social justice, equity, and the unlearning process**

Jyothi V. Robertson, DVM, DABVP (Shelter Medicine)  
In conversation with James Evans, CEO of CARE



[www.jyo.world](http://www.jyo.world)

# diversity equity inclusion

DEI work is not about changing process and protocols. Protocols and processes can be shifted but if the systems and thoughts that underlay the existing structures are not changed, modifying processes and protocols simply paints an external image that the organization is thinking about DEI, without transformative change and equity.

## Questions to start with:

The following questions serve as starting points in your journey to becoming an equitable organization.

### General Organization Questions

- Do you know the ratio of race and ethnic breakdown of staff and management? Does the ratio match that of the community your organization serves?
- Do you know the race or gender wage gaps among staff and management, if any?
- Are you familiar with environmental racism? Do you know what it looks like in your zip code or area?
- How does diversity show up in your organization?
- Is there a culture of inclusion and belonging that allows diverse voices to be heard?
- Is the board and leadership of your organization diverse and representative of the community?
- Have you created a DEI Charter to reinforce that commitment?
- Does your organization give an honorarium for DEI guest speakers?
- Who is on the front line versus who has a voice?
- Who is making an impact and who is receiving the credit?
- Who is reporting out using their privilege or power or position only to create a further cycle of promotion, power and privilege?
- What steps have you taken to diversify your board so it is equal by 'representation' value and 'donor' value?

### Intake Processes Questions

- Where do the animals come from and why? What are the underlying root causes of people surrendering their animals or stray animals? Are there ways to keep pets in homes even when "home" is not the traditional sense of a "home"? What judgments and biases come up when interacting with people struggling to keep their pets?
- When accepting owner surrenders, are resources offered to keep the pet with their family? Are there feelings that people shouldn't have pets if they don't have X, Y, Z (fill in the blank: a traditional home, money, fenced yard, etc.)? Why do we have these beliefs? What are the underlying systems that led to these disparities (ex. redlining)?
- Are we treating a person experiencing homelessness with a pet with the same respect and dignity as we would a high-end donor / do we spend as much time with them / listening to their needs?
- Are you waiving the fees for people who want to adopt but cannot afford high adoption fees?

### Acknowledgments:

Thank you to input from the following individuals

- Brendalyn King
- Jennifer Jenkins
- Geraldine D'Silva
- Mueni Rudd
- Jasmine Johnson
- Robin Vincent

### Sources:

- <sup>1</sup> <https://www.bhavanalearning.com/art-of-unlearning-part-3-practice-changing-our-view/>
- <sup>2</sup> Zampella, T. (2020). *A Pedagogical Inquiry- Challenges in Unlearning Systemic Bias*.
- <sup>3</sup> <https://www.mindful.org/deep-listening/>
- <sup>4</sup> Implicit Association Tests from Project Implicit can be found at [implicit.harvard.edu](http://implicit.harvard.edu).
- <sup>5</sup> King, R. (2018). *Mindful of race: Transforming racism from the inside out*.
- <sup>6</sup> <https://www.shelterstrategies.com/systemic-inequity>
- <sup>7</sup> <https://ruthking.net/services/ra-gdp/>

## Adoption Processes Questions

- Are there restrictions placed that keep people from obtaining an animal from your shelter (own/rent, fence/no fence, children/no children, etc.)? If people do not obtain pets from your shelter, where will they go instead to get their pets? Is this an opportunity to build a relationship with a family and give them support to build a relationship with a pet?
- Are there underlying assumptions through these processes? What is the underlying fear that leads to placing these restrictions? Have you examined what bias exists and how the existing structures support this bias?
- Are there questions like the following on the adoption forms and what is their purpose? What are the hidden fears underlying these questions that need to be addressed?
  - Home ownership, renting
  - Fence/yard type
  - Work status
  - Vet relationship
  - Type of pet food
  - Proximity to shelter
  - Children
  - Resident status

## Marketing, Human Resources, Development Questions

- How does your organization highlight their activities and programs?
  - Do program materials show BIPOC individuals receiving services from white individuals? Are BIPOC staff highlighted providing services to white individuals? What feeling is generated by these images? Do they perpetuate bias?
  - How is “rescuing” portrayed? Does the language used create power dynamics between the source shelter and destination shelter? Are there underlying assumptions about income, ability, quality of care, and appropriateness? Is there a “white savior” mentality?
- Are financial resources/funds allocated to support organizations run by BIPOC leaders or focused on DEI initiatives?
- Is HR driving your DEI initiatives or your staff?
- How are financial resources directed into HR related to DEI funding or otherwise?
- Does your organization’s website and core values state your commitment to DEI efforts?
- Are your collateral, website and other communication materials bilingual?
- Do the images used in your communications represent the people you serve – your annual report, website, flyers, rack cards, social media, etc.?

## Programs, Field Services, Community Engagement Questions

- How are your animal control officers communicating out in the field? What are the questions they are asking? What is their tone? Do they represent the community? Are they sharing information? What are the reasons for which they are giving out citations?
- How is your community engagement team engaging with the community? What are the questions they are asking? What is their tone? Do they represent the community? Are they sharing information?
- What do your educational programs look like? What are the questions they are asking? What is their tone? Do they represent the community? Are they sharing information?
- Are your summer camps, career camps offered in underserved communities and offered free to those who cannot afford it?
- Are your programs relying heavily on technology alone or offered with another option for those lacking access to technology?
- Are we providing career camps to only people who already know what an animal shelter is, or are we sharing information about animal shelters to those who don’t normally engage with shelters?

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