

Champions of Inclusion

Diversity is paramount at AIR as it works to address community needs

BY ADRIENE MARSHALL

FOR THE AMERICAN INSTITUTES FOR Research (AIR), a nonprofit whose work centers on behavioral, educational and social science studies, diversity and inclusion is a key element to its mission of improving life.

“The idea is for us to embrace different cultural backgrounds and abilities across all the dimensions of diversity, such as race, age, gender and sexual orientation,” says Karen B. Francis, Ph.D., interim director of diversity and inclusion and chair of AIR’s Diversity and Inclusion Council. “This is important not only in how we engage with our colleagues and staff, but also in how we perform research and technical assistance in the field.”

In addition to its headquarters in Washington, D.C., AIR has U.S. offices in California, Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, South Carolina, Texas and Virginia. “A large percentage of our staff work remotely from home offices,” Francis says. “We also have project-based offices in El Salvador, Ethiopia, Haiti, Honduras and Zambia.”

The journey toward greater diversity and inclusion has steadily evolved over the course of the organization’s 70-year history, according to Francis. Much of this work is

funneled through AIR’s D&I council. Formed in 2014, the council is made up of staff members from all the various functions and roles within the organization, as well as AIR President and CEO David Myers, Francis herself and the chairpersons of the company’s employee resource groups (ERGs).

“We have a robust strategy for D&I that is directly connected to four pillars: a positive work

environment; cultural competence; identity and reputation; and growth and sustainability.”

To achieve these goals, AIR has modified its policies, onboarding procedure and communications so that employees understand the company’s commitment to D&I from the first day they arrive. “The company also has recently launched a training program for all employees on unconscious bias,” she adds. “With this training, we are hoping to foster a holistic understanding of diversity across the company.”

AIR’s ERGs are Access, which is inclusive for people with disabilities; AIR Asians in Motion; AIR BLAAC (Black, Latino, African-American, African and Caribbean) Diaspora Network; CREW (Collaborative Remote Employee Workforce); AIR Pride, for employees who identify along the full spectrum of sexual orientation; AIR Viva, for the Hispanic, Latino and Chicano population; and AIR Stars and Stripes, its newest ERG, which focuses on military veterans.

Each ERG has an executive sponsor from the organization’s senior leadership, Francis points out. “We are extremely proud of our ERGs. They are instrumental in developing resources and tools that we use across the organization as we move toward becoming a culturally competent and inclusive work environment,” she says. “We encourage staff to join more than one ERG as a way to promote cross-learning and engagement.”

Several staff have expressed interest in the creation of an ERG for women.

“Many of our female employees are interested in networking with other women and finding support around issues that affect women in the workplace such as work/life balance, career advancement, and child care,” Francis explains. Working with staff

members, the council hopes to charter the woman-focused ERG this year. “We want to make sure that we are leveraging the talent, perspectives, intellect and contributions of our diverse workforce. It’s important for us to create an environment that is accepting of these varying viewpoints. That’s what makes us stronger.”

The organization also strives to translate its D&I principles to its work in the field. According to Francis, AIR is currently working on several external projects that focus on women’s health.

“For example, for the past several years, we have partnered with Johns Hopkins University under a National Institutes of Health grant to be the evaluator for the Prime Time Sister Circles,” she says. “This is a 12-week community-based intervention program to improve health outcomes for African-American women ages 40 to 75. It addresses health risk factors for these women, namely unmanaged stress, lack of exercise, unhealthy nutritional choices, lack of information or misinformation about major illnesses and the failure to prioritize and take steps to manage their health. This program has been implemented in quite a number of communities across the country.”

In another initiative, AIR is working with the Planned Parenthood Federation of America on an HIV community education and prevention program for black and Hispanic women.

“The quality that allows us to be effective in our research and the delivery of technical assistance in the field is our ability to look at our work from a lens that is informed by diverse perspectives and to understand the importance of inclusion guided by the principles of cultural and linguistic competence,” Francis says. ■



Karen B. Francis

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