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Building inclusive organizations

An interview with Raquel Saraswati, AFSC's senior director of diversity, equity, and inclusion

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CREATING INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

Q: Why is AFSC working to ensure diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)?

A: At AFSC, this work is an essential part of carrying out our mission with integrity and in keeping with our values. Racism, white supremacy, xenophobia, homophobia and transphobia, anti-Muslim hate, antisemitism, and other forms of hatred and oppression are violent and lead to violence. We cannot really meet the needs of our communities without fostering meaningful inclusivity and challenging the root causes of oppression that lead to suffering.

My office is currently working on a review of AFSC from an inclusion lens, which includes both a comprehensive evaluation of AFSC's current culture, policies, and practices and an assessment of its history.

I have thus far engaged staff in hundreds of hours of conversation regarding their experiences in and impressions of AFSC. I am supporting staff in integrating DEI into their work. And I'm collaborating with staff and board members on specific projects. That includes re-envisioning AFSC's anti-oppression toolkit; revising our existing policy on sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse; and advancing language justice to make our environment all the more accessible to our international communities.

Q: What are the challenges you face in your role?

A: The challenges we face in this work also happen to be our greatest strengths. AFSC operates in over a dozen countries and across the United States. We are also an "organization of organizers," with the most brilliant, dedicated, and deeply thoughtful staff, partners, and volunteers. Balancing many priorities and needs across so many contexts is a challenge I could not be more blessed to assume. I am proud and excited to say that my office is doing this work from a truly global perspective and does not hesitate to stand, always, with the most marginalized among us.

Q: What does it take to create more inclusive, accountable, and just policies and practices?

Transformative DEI work is about relationships. It's about the real, difficult, and sometimes emotional work of not just seeing the divine complexity in others, but also seeing it in ourselves. Before diversity trainings and guides, it's important to explore the intersectional attributes, beliefs, and behaviors we bring to the workplace and our communities. That helps establish deeper bonds, ease conflicts where they exist, and create deeper opportunities for engagement.

It must also be said: This is trauma work. Oppression is traumatic. Undoing it is important, arduous work. At AFSC, we consider it sacred work. While it is not easy or simple, it must be done from a place of great love, of great joy, of great tenderness.

When you do this work, you engage policies, legalities, numbers, and data, yes. But people also share with you their most intimate, vulnerable, frustrated, and real stories—both from the workplace and their personal lives. So, it is also heart work. We don't do this work because oppression is bad: We do it because all people are worthy of respect, safety, and freedom.

Q: What can people or organizations expect when they work to center DEI?

It has been my experience that such a commitment is met with great enthusiasm—followed by a period of reckoning, resistance, and challenging negotiations. Because organizations are made up of people who hold and carry different levels of power and privilege, every organization experiences

this process. The only difference is how they navigate it. What choices do they make? Are they able to move from the space of tension and make it to a place of transformative change?

When we talk about ending oppression, the real conversation is about who holds power, and what our relationship is to power. If we're talking about gender justice, Black liberation, ending poverty, ending ableism, or any other cause, the central question is: *If I am sincere in ending oppression, what privileges do I have that might change or be eliminated if my vision of a better world were to come true? How have I personally benefited from the way things are?*

This is not an easy conversation. As you begin these conversations in the workplace, understand that there will be tension. Those leading these conversations will receive an overwhelming amount of feedback from all sides. While there will be beautiful moments of overwhelming solidarity, there will also be concerted efforts to inhibit progress—even from otherwise “progressive” people who have benefited from the status quo.

There will be periods of adjustment, but if you remain committed to why you are centering DEI, you will see tremendous improvements in staff wellness, organizational health, and you will ensure your organization's relevance in the broader world.

Q: What guidance would you offer groups working on DEI?

A: As Dr. Muna Abdi says, “it's not inclusion if you invite people into a space you are unwilling to change.” Be honest and transparent about your commitment to DEI and about where you are in your process. If you are sincere about creating a healthier workplace and an organization that engages its communities with true consideration and care, you must resource the work. You must also be committed to listening to the expert you've hired to lead you in this work—*especially* when it is challenging or uncomfortable to do so.

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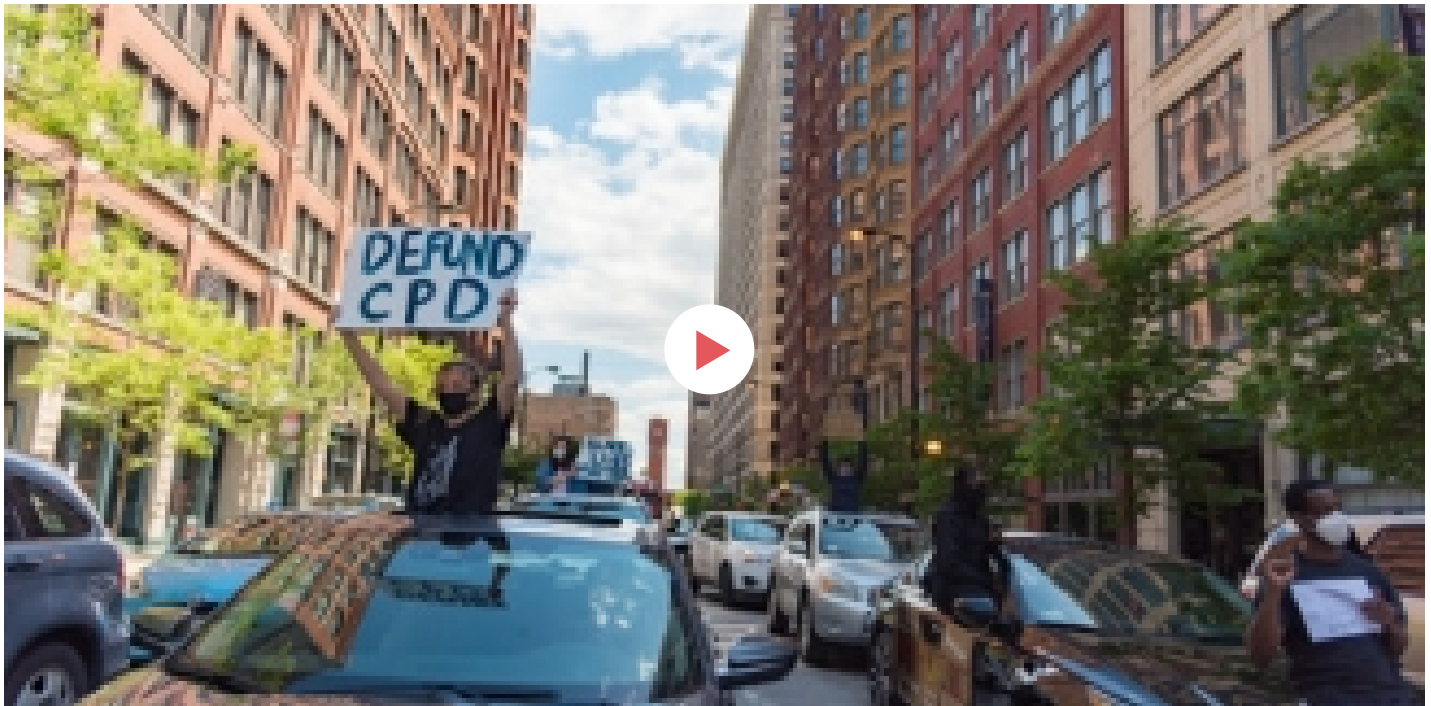
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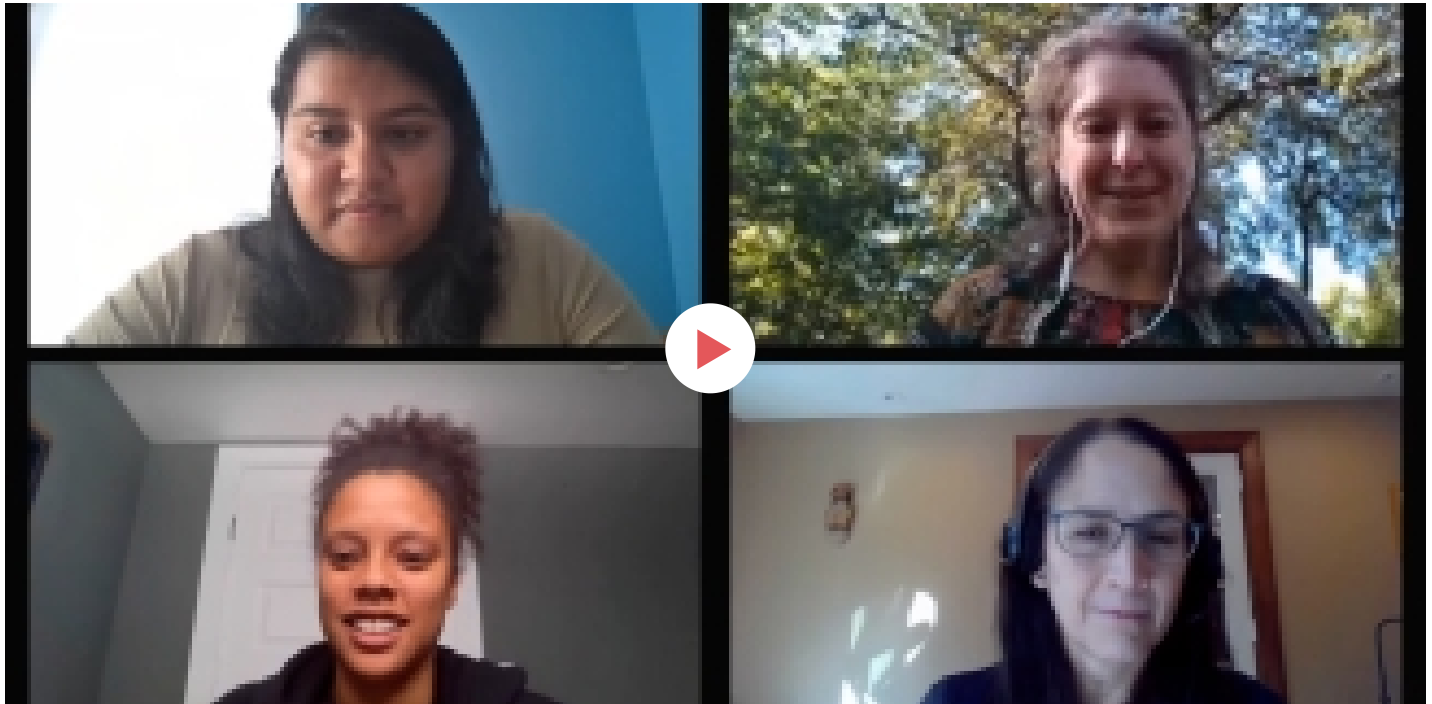
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