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City of Norfolk Takes Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Beyond the Buzz Words.

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When it comes to diversity, equity and inclusion, the city of Norfolk is not only talking the talk but walking the walk — one word and one step at a time.

“This is a topic that should make us uncomfortable because it should make us examine ourselves, it should make us look at historically what happened in our country, the ways we perceive people and the ways we approach our work,” Alea Slappy Wilson said. “And if starts to make us uncomfortable, let’s lean into that discomfort and figure out how we start to do better.”

Before Slappy Wilson took on the newly created role as Norfolk’s diversity, equity and inclusion officer in March 2019, the City Council made it one of their priorities.

“They wanted somebody who would wake up every day looking at the city through a lens of diversity, equity and inclusion,” she said.

She said she spent the first few months examining the current landscape and finding the areas and issues that need systemic changes.

A team was established to take an in-depth look at the city’s human resources, economic growth, infrastructure planning and neighborhood engagement.

Representatives from each area meet with Slappy Wilson twice a month. The city's LGBTQ liaison to the police force also serves on the committee.

"We wanted to make sure we had diversity of employees throughout the city," she said.

Last year, former city manager Doug Smith set a goal to initiate training for the executive leadership team. "A training (program) that really started to look at addressing bias — implicit and unconscious bias — all the types that we don't even recognize," she said.

But while research shows that training itself does not change a city or organization, she said it does make people aware of things they may not have considered before.

And that's exactly what happened when Sharon Harrington, founder of Amediate LLC, facilitated a three-hour training session last fall.

"I have a real concern that diversity and inclusion is the new buzz word or fad," Harrington said. "Unless a real obligation is made with accountability to create methods and tools within a system for long-lasting change, we will be on the same bandwagon in the next generation."

The challenge is to create mindsets where attendees understand the work starts after the training and awareness session, Harrington said. She stressed the real change comes with a commitment to go "beyond the check mark."

And the city of Norfolk is doing just that.

Slappy Wilson said she had an aha moment that made her realize the conversation needed to continue beyond the training. She decided to create a voluntary book club solely for city employees focused on content Harrington incorporated. It meets quarterly with afternoon and evening groups.

The club's first read was "The Person You Mean to Be: How Good People Fight Bias" by Dolly Chugh. Starting with senior leadership, about 30 attendees in the initial two sessions at the Slover Library used the book to engage in honest conversations about the issues of bias, Slappy Wilson said. The library made additional copies available to participants.

Michael Paris, Norfolk's senior business development manager, said the book club is helpful because it gives employees ongoing opportunities to deeply explore diversity, equity and inclusion — both in the privacy of their own homes and in group settings with their peers.

“One big takeaway for me is that each of us have a responsibility to fight bias,” Paris said after reading the book. “We cannot grow unless we challenge our own thinking ... “

In time, Slappy Wilson said she plans to open up the conversations to the city's frontline employees and eventually to residents and businesses, too.

“Our communities, businesses, and country have so much unlocked potential that will only be fully realized once everyone is allowed at the table and made to feel that their participation is truly valued,” Paris said.

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