

Opinion: Chief Diversity/Racial Equity Officer will provide Oakland County with necessary direction

Oakland County is making its commitment to inclusion and equity 'official' as it searches for its first chief diversity/racial equity officer.

Our county has become increasingly diverse, and the need to reach and serve people from a variety of different backgrounds has increased dramatically in recent years. We must make sure that our residents' government is working for them by serving, employing and protecting all people. We need to make sure there are cultural exploration opportunities and activities that increase our ability as individuals and a community to be receptive of diverse traditions and cultures, too.

That is why, with the support of my fellow commissioners, I helped create the vision that resulted in the creation of a new chief diversity/racial equity officer for Oakland County. With our new county executive's leadership team, this idea has blossomed into practice as they search for the person to fill this role.

Although this is new for the county, we are not the first organization to recognize how important it is to identify and understand the institutional barriers marginalized people and groups face. This position is funded under our new county executive's budget, and we are following the lead of other local counties, school systems, businesses and federal agencies. Oakland County will be following the success of other regional governments like Washtenaw and Kalamazoo counties that have made progress in racial equity, healing and inclusion. Oakland County will also be joining the majority of Fortune 500 companies. All of these organizations have recognized the value of investing in ensuring all individuals receive equal access and opportunities to their programs and services.

As a commissioner elected to a diverse district that contains a predominately African American city, it is crucial to be supportive of this effort on behalf of my constituents. Historically, I have witnessed few African Americans and people of color in decision making positions at Oakland County. The creation of this position will move us toward a more representative workforce internally, not just by creating opportunities in more entry level positions, but in higher level leadership positions as well. Research has proven that diverse workforces have [higher innovation](#), [make better decisions](#) and [attract more talent](#). Without resources dedicated to improving diversity and inclusion, Oakland County would be at a disadvantage. As a commissioner, I have heard from constituents about their unsuccessful efforts to secure employment with the county. I have also heard from some working for the county who have felt they have not had equal opportunity or support for upward mobility. With a dedicated diversity/racial equity officer, I will feel even more confident responding to stories like theirs and knowing Oakland County is proactively addressing these issues.

Improving equity internally will also give us a better model in how we treat and serve our diverse population. Between 2000 and 2010, Oakland County's overall population increased by about 1 percent. The African American population, though, increased by 35 percent and the Asian population by 37 percent. With growing numbers of minority residents, Oakland County needs to be innovative in offering them valuable, relevant and accessible services.

On an even more personal note, I can attest to the difference it makes in the lives of people of color to see themselves in those whose duty it is to help. Unfortunately, many residents must interact with local governments while they are experiencing hardship. For example, a close relative of mine experienced a sexual assault. The process that followed made it even more difficult for her because she had to give her account to people who did not look like her and who might not relate to her. She felt further isolated and violated because she did not have anyone of color to tell her story. By her account, this lack of diversity in the system was a disservice and made a very difficult experience even harder on a survivor of abuse. By making our county workforce more representative of its constituents, we will be able to provide them better support in many areas.

All people deserve equal opportunity. In addition, improvements in diversity and inclusion efforts should also help our local minority businesses and contractors, who are part of the fabric of our communities, have additional opportunities to do business with Oakland County. Our current executive administration reflects these important values and is the most diverse in Oakland County history. Together with Executive Coulter, the Board of Commissioners is working to build a culture of respect, understanding and inclusion in Oakland County.

I hope that under our leadership, the rest of the county and its many departments serving and employing our public will follow suit.

Commissioner Janet Jackson represents Oakland County's District #21 which includes parts of Southfield and Farmington Hills.