



# Dauphin County's Diversity Initiatives

*A Best Practices Approach in the Understanding of Differences*

By Dr. Hector Richard Ortiz





**A** best practices approach to implementing a diversity initiative is rooted in the financial and social resources that an organization brings to the table. Any business must realize that fostering a diverse workforce is an economic necessity. Diversity functions as a professional development tool by both attracting and retaining talented employees. Therefore a multi-faceted workforce is appealing not only to potential employees, but also to potential customers.

Dauphin County Human Services is an inclusive organization that represents all aspects of society and values the differences in its membership by recognizing that this diversity adds value to the organization, its mission, and the quality of its programs and services. Therefore, Dauphin County promotes and exercises respect of cultural and ethnic diversity by creating a county wide workforce that is culturally competent, sensitive, and inclusive in our practices, professional development, and customer service in order to reduce disparities and increase the level of cultural competence in Dauphin County.

Thanks to the leadership of Dauphin County Commissioners Jeff Haste, Nick DiFrancesco, and George P. Hartwick, III, a clear model for promoting diversity has been established with the creation of initiatives such as the Cultural

Celebration Task Force, Diversity and Poverty Forums, and the Integrated Human Services Plan-Cultural Competence Committee. These initiatives provide useful guidance for increasing diversity awareness and fostering career opportunities.

Under the direction of Commissioner Hartwick and Dauphin County Human Services Director Peter Vriens, an Integrated Human Services Plan (IHSP) was developed to unite county officials, employees, consumers, partners, and community members with one vision that included the many cross-systems initiatives that already existed within the county. The IHSP highlights the value of creating, supporting, and developing cultural competence and sensitivity, and an appreciation of differences and multiculturalism.

The mission of the IHSP Cultural Competence Committee is to facilitate inclusion with the exchanging of ideas, best practices, and solutions that promote and create sensitivity and enhances ongoing meaningful intercultural communication through education, professional development, and acknowledgment of differences in Dauphin County.

Additionally, Dauphin County conducts Poverty and Diversity Forums, which are multi-disciplinary initiatives that facilitate awareness and understanding of differences.

Interactive dialogues and action plans are generated within these forums to better understand under-served communities. These forums were created to increase awareness and share information related to social, cultural, economic, and spiritual diversity.

#### POVERTY FORUM

The Dauphin County Poverty Forum, at more than 30 years running, is the longest-ongoing collaborative meeting in the area. The forum fosters resource and information sharing, as well as a better understanding of the economic differences in our community. The Dauphin County Poverty Forum meets the second Thursday of each month, excluding the months of July and August, at the Dodge City Restaurant at 1037 Paxton Street in Harrisburg.

#### DIVERSITY FORUM

The Diversity Network Forum is a monthly breakfast and discussion on issues specific to diversity. Since 2008, when the first forum was held with more than 100 residents and community leaders in attendance, thoughtful, open dialogue concerning diversity in the workplace and day-to-day life has been encouraged. Exploring cultural differences fosters social sensitivity and cross-cultural communication





in this increasingly diverse region. Diversity forums are held the third Thursday of every month at CMU, the Case Management Unit, located on 1100 South Cameron Street.

#### DIVERSITY FORUM ADVISORY PANEL

For the third year in a row, Dauphin County will host a community-wide diversity conference to facilitate discussion and understanding. The Diversity Forum Advisory Panel, a community and interagency committee, aims to stimulate dialogue and encourage mutual understanding through the conference and other action plans. This year the one-day Dauphin County Diversity Conference is slated for May 14, 2010, at Harrisburg Area Community College (HACC). Included are workshops on cultural diversity, physical and mental challenges, and spiritual differences. Similarly, an Annual Multicultural Celebrations and Joyful Traditions luncheon is held on the third Thursday of December every year to celebrate the holidays from different cultures and religions.

#### CERTIFIED POVERTY TRAININGS TEAM

A “train the trainer” initiative was established by Dauphin County Human Services agencies to promote the understanding of poverty and social-economic differences in

this area. Trainings have been held regularly for employees as well as business and community partners. In 2008, Dauphin County trainers facilitated “Understanding Poverty” workshops for 247 staff members from county agencies and the Harrisburg School District. In 2009, we replicated this training for 214 community partners. With these trainings, Dauphin County hopes to create awareness and a better understanding of the culture of poverty to achieve better services for all citizens.

#### DAUPHIN COUNTY CULTURAL CELEBRATION TASK FORCE

Recognizing that differences should unite rather than divide us, Dauphin County Commissioners created the Dauphin County Cultural Celebration Task Force in 2005 to honor, promote, and draw strength from our diversity. The Task Force, which includes a diverse group of county employees, aims to assist in the development of plans, initiatives, and special events to raise awareness and foster an understanding of the various ethnicities, cultures, and religions represented throughout the community. Special events are varied and include activities marking Hispanic Heritage Month and Black History Month.

The Cultural Celebration Task Force is increasingly becoming known for planning Dauphin County’s annual Cultural Celebration Street Festival to celebrate the unique

qualities found within our community and to encourage people to experience new foods, music, and customs. This year, the evening festival will be held on August 6 and will feature events such as music, dance groups, and ethnically diverse foods at the corner of Front and Market Streets in downtown Harrisburg. In conjunction with the festival, the Task Force will encourage area students to think about diversity with an essay contest. In 2009, 244 grade school students submitted thoughtful and inspiring essays. Dauphin County Commissioners strive to make this community a better place in which to live, work, and play by celebrating our rich traditions and customs.

Dauphin County leaders understand that diversity is essential for the growth of the community. Because of their practical determination and thoughtful foresight, the future looks very bright for South Central Pennsylvania. ❁

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