

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY STAFF

OVERVIEW

THE EQUAL OPPORTUNITY STAFF (EOS) provides leadership in planning, developing, and coordinating implementation of the intent of federal nondiscrimination laws and the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) equal opportunity policy. EOS is the focal point for all civil rights and equal employment opportunity requirements in the agency. The staff provides overall assistance to the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) Director and all program units in the agency, including 1862, 1890, and 1994 land-grant institutions partners. The EOS staff ensures that programs and activities are planned and conducted in a nondiscriminatory manner. The staff formulates policies and provides policy direction and technical guidance for a comprehensive equal opportunity program within the agency.

Ensuring that business is done in a manner that all employees treat customers and co-workers fairly, equitably, with dignity, and respect

Creating a culture of accountability to maximize equal employment opportunity and civil rights performance

Promoting an inclusive work place that values cultural differences and diversity, and leverages them for greater productivity

PROGRAM COMPLIANCE REVIEWS

Civil rights compliance reviews are the heart of the system of determining how well benefits and services are delivered by NIFA’s recipients in compliance with Title VI. The reviews are used to make recommendations for policy changes and to improve program delivery to all. Onsite compliance reviews are conducted annually in approximately 10 states, including some 40 Extension counties and state Extension offices.

THE REVIEW PROCESS:

- increases awareness of managerial responsibilities;
- complements informal visits and conference between staff;
- improves understanding of the need for documentation;
- provides a basis for improving personnel and program management and provides data to measure progress;
- avoids problems of investigation/complaints associated with noncompliance;
- enables recipient employees to be more knowledgeable of laws, rules, and regulations, and how they apply to programming efforts; and
- identifies areas where recipient institutions can strengthen civil rights and equal opportunity.

DEPARTMENTAL REGULATIONS EMBODY TWO CONCEPTS:

- *Nondiscrimination* requires the elimination of all existing discriminatory conditions, whether purposeful or inadvertent. NIFA consistently and carefully examines all of its employment and program practices and program policies to be sure that they do not, if implemented as stated, operate to the detriment of any person on the grounds of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, or sexual orientation. The agency also ensures that the practices of those responsible in matters of program and employment decisions, including all supervisors, are non-discriminatory.
- *Affirmative Action* requires the agency to do more than ensure program and employment neutrality with regard to race, color, religion, sex, age, disability, and national origin. As the phrase implies, affirmative action requires NIFA staff to make additional efforts to seek and increase program participation of underrepresented groups, and to recruit, employ, and promote qualified members of groups formerly excluded, even if that exclusion cannot be traced to particular discriminatory actions on the part of the agency. All NIFA employees are obligated by civil rights regulations to conduct programs in such a manner that does not directly or by implication support, encourage, or condone discrimination; or permit economic barriers or social inhibitions to limit program participation because of race, color, national origin, sex, age, disability, or sexual orientation.

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY STAFF (CONT'D)

MAJOR INITIATIVES

POLICY GUIDANCE AND PROGRAM EVALUATION

provides development and oversight of civil rights policy implementation within the agency. This function also provides impact analysis on a full range of agency policies, practices, and programs; assists in the development of strategic plans to help individual units achieve a diverse work force; and addresses the needs of program recipients, assuring equal opportunity in all aspects of its programs and services without regard to race, color, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, religion, or disability.

PLAN DEVELOPMENT AND EVALUATION

provides a comprehensive reporting plan cycle that agency units can use to create reports that will help in the development of a comprehensive civil rights program. These reports include the Civil Rights Implementation Plan, the Annual Report on Age Discrimination, The Federal Equal Opportunity Recruitment Program, the EEO Accomplishment Report and Plan, the Disabled Veterans Affirmative Action Plan, the Affirmative Action Plan for Individuals with Disabilities, and the No Fear Act Report.

DATA ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION

provides for developing and maintaining accurate and comprehensive statistical data for both employment and program areas and interfaces with USDA database systems. This function is critical to determine inequities in the delivery of program benefits and employment decisions

COMPLAINT MANAGEMENT AND COUNSELING

manages both the Title VII Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) Administrative Complaint process and the Title VI program complaint case load for the agency. Staff advise complainants on complaint processing procedures and guidelines; provide agency-wide and limited departmental EEO counseling services to employees and applicants; resolve complaints of discrimination at the lowest possible level; provide technical assistance to NIFA staff regarding EEO/Civil Rights issues and concerns; and function as primary liaisons with the dispute resolution staff, if necessary, through adjudication and decision. They also develop a tracking system for all complaints in order to assist agencies in addressing systematic problems.

SPECIAL EMPHASIS PROGRAMS

provide for the development and implementation of all special emphasis programs. These programs focus on the impact of policies, practices, and procedures on target populations and are not in any way limited to celebrations of specific heritage or awareness months.

TITLE VI COMPLIANCE REVIEW AND STATUTORY GUIDANCE

provides for a partnership relationship between USDA and land-grant universities to help those institutions assure compliance with the specific obligations of nondiscrimination and affirmative action associated with the planning, designing, and implementation of educational programs and activities. The Civil Rights staff monitors a comprehensive civil rights compliance review program for all of the recipient institutions, to include on-site reviews and audits, program data analysis and evaluation, civil rights compliance reports, policy and statutory guidance, and civil rights training.

TITLE VII COMPLIANCE REVIEW AND STATUTORY GUIDANCE

manages and conducts ongoing comprehensive compliance reviews of employment practices and programs in the agency. In general, this function provides for statutory and regulatory guidance in the implementation of Title VII.

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AND OUTREACH

provides technical assistance to the Human Resources Development Division in order to assure the delivery of broad-based civil rights training that meets the specific needs of agency employees. These training programs include civil rights orientation programs for new employees; ongoing civil rights training for employees, supervisors, and managers; sexual harassment prevention training; training in cultural diversity at all levels of the organization; and training in any issue area that arises, such as sexual orientation awareness training. This function also provides significant and sustained outreach to communities that are underrepresented in employment and underserved in program areas. This function provides technical assistance to state land-grant partners charged with direct delivery of federally assisted programs.

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