

Building Solidarity: Reaffirming CAP's connection with the Black Community

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Cascade AIDS Project (CAP) has a long and storied history with the African American community in Portland, Oregon. There have been ups, downs, wins, losses, and a mutual desire to reconnect. CAP has decided to take steps toward reconnection and this plan provides guidance on rebuilding that connection with the black community in Portland.

This plan and the recommendations in it are based on observations, feedback, and experiences over the course of the consulting project. This included: interviews with three black former staff members, participation in the African Americans Reach and Teach Health Ministry (AARTH) training, providing implicit bias and microaggressions training and the training debrief, use of the Intercultural Development Index (IDI), specifically high-level takeaways from 30 individual IDI interviews with staff and board and 4 IDI group sessions, two focus groups with black community members, other conversations and interviews with community members, participation in the African-American Services Team meetings, review of Human Resources (HR) policy, procedure, and practice, and meetings with staff, managers, and board.

The terms “Black” and “African American” are used somewhat interchangeably in this document. It should be noted that these terms are not the same. While African American is the most socially acceptable, PC term, it often only refers to people of African descent within the continental United States with slavery in their familial history or sometimes to more recent American immigrants from Africa. Black, however, is more of a political term that more fully encompasses the experience of otherness that people of African descent experience around the world because of systemic white supremacy. Black is a term often used within the community to refer to self and others and is not limited by geography.

Because it is the most socially acceptable and “respectable” term, African American is widely used and often shows up in official names and spaces. I would argue that African American is still the preferred term for use by white identified folks, with the understanding that not all people of African descent are American.

In a similar vein, this document references the “Black/African-American Community.” But it is important to note that the black community is not monolithic or a single entity. While there may be a similar experience of blackness, black people still live at the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, size, religion, politics, etc., and have widely varying experiences because of that. The recommendations and approaches in the document are meant to take that in to account and may be more appropriate for some segments over others but still appeal to a wide variety of black communities.

Major Themes

Over the course of the project, three major themes rose to the surface:

- ***Transparent Communication***
Both community members and staff noted a lack of transparency or communication around CAPs involvement with the black community. From the community, there were still old wounds

about past interactions with CAP, specifically what happened with the Brother to Brother program. While the reality is that nothing nefarious happened, because CAP could not or did not communicate with the community about the transition of that program and its staff to CAP's prevue, rumor and stories were there to fill in the gaps.

From the staff perspective, there is not enough communication about the black community, or why CAP is focused on them, or if there is an overarching plan. From their perspective, they see disjointed and disconnected trainings or events with little follow-up, and it is not clear to them how they connect back to day-to-day operations or potential changes in operations.

- ***Building a Presence in the Community***

Many involved in providing feedback on this project noted CAP's lack of presence in the black community. This came up in particular in the focus groups. Both groups felt that CAP was not involved in enough community events and could be more present in specific community spaces where black people are.

- Consultant note: CAP is actually present at many of the events noted (Good in the Hood, for example), or their presence in some places is challenging (some local churches). While I question and push back on some of this feedback, it may be more a matter of showing up differently than before (see recommendations).

- ***Staff that "Look Like Us"***

While the staff at CAP is reasonably diverse, there has been a noticeable, public ebb and flow of black staff at the organization. Particularly among those who are community-facing. Community members feel the sting of losing a staff contact who they had built a strong relationship with. Staff within the organization are strongly aware of the lack of African-American staff. Over the course of this project, CAP lost three black-identified staff. While this may have made sense or was positive for those individuals, the pattern leaves a strong impression on everyone else.

Recommendations

Considering the themes, these recommendations are meant to bring black folks from the margins to the center of their own story around HIV in the community. CAP must increase representation of black people among staff, board, and volunteers. This will not be easy and will take time, but it is a necessary and worthwhile step toward equity.

- ***Acknowledging the past, where appropriate***

A critical step to healing with certain parts of the black community is to acknowledge the past and make apologies where appropriate. It's important to note that CAP has done this in the past, but CAP must continue to do this in the future. This can and will take on a lot of different forms, but one overarching theme is that CAP must approach the black community with humility that acknowledges missteps from the past. Other possible opportunities to acknowledge the past are

- Listening sessions with community members
- A written statement for the website or an editorial in the Skanner or Observer
- Mediated, healing focused conversations with those most closely impacted
- Incorporating verbal or written acknowledgements when communicating with or about the black community

- ***Community based approaches***

As noted above, having a presence in the community is of critical importance. While CAP has built its presence in the community over the past few years, community members are clamoring for more. This could present resource challenges for CAP, but creativity and prioritization could help balance that. Some ideas to build CAP's presence in the black community are

- Hire more black outreach staff, in particular people with roots in the local Portland community. The MAI African American Services Navigator position could be a great opportunity for this.
- Involve or inform Real Talk participants in community events. They seemed unaware of the extent to which CAP was out in the community, and they could be great ambassadors for CAP
- Consider doing testing or having information tables in spaces where there are lots of black people but are not events (examples might include, parks, bars/restaurants, barber or beauty shops, libraries, and friendly churches)
- Continue to build partnerships with historically black serving organizations (Urban League, NAACP, etc.)
- Utilize Tyler TerMeer more at outreach events so that he is more visible as a leader
- Continue to build and strengthen relationships between Tyler and CAP and other community leaders.

- ***More outreach with women and families***

For many reasons, the focus of attention has been the black MSM community, but women are important leaders for the black community. Building relationships with both community leaders who are women and individual women will be imperative. The statistics around HIV/AIDS in the black community indicate there is much outreach to be done with black women. Specific outreach must also be done with transwomen as they have their own unique experience of the black community. Some possible opportunities are

- Specific events targeted toward women and families
- Specific events targeted toward transwomen
- Intentional relationship building with women community leaders
- Hiring staff from this demographic who might be able to connect better to these groups

- ***Increasing diversity in personal and professional networks***

With the acknowledgement and understanding that "it's who you know" when it comes to procuring talent, the networks of those already involved in the organization are a critical resource. Creating and finding opportunities to include black people in professional networks, especially for leadership and the board, could greatly change the recruitment landscape for CAP. Here are some recommendations

- Individuals should build authentic relationships with people of color to increase the diversity of their networks
- The organization should participate in local networking opportunities like Say Hey! or participate in relevant social media and Facebook groups.
- Encourage use of staff professional networks when doing recruitment and outreach

- ***Consider an organizational commitment to equity***

The work of building stronger relationships with the black community, as well as other marginalized communities, would be strengthened and enhanced by being included in a wider, organizational equity strategy. With an equity strategy in place, these various initiatives could be

aligned and resources could be shared. The organization has a commitment to health equity, but broadening that to a wider commitment around equity in general, with an eye toward racial equity, would be a great step for CAP. Here are some logical initial steps

- Revive and/or combine the relevant committees (AAST, for example) into an Equity Committee tasked with determining and defining CAPs commitment to equity
 - Some committees may continue as their own entities, but could be connected to, send representatives, or feed up to an equity committee, depending on the structure
 - This committee needs to be diverse, inclusive and representational across team and level
 - Consider hiring equity focused staff—be very thoughtful about rightsizing the position, title, scope of authority, departmental alignment, and reporting structure
 - Create an equity plan to guide the organization
 - Research affinity groups, caucus groups, and employee resource groups to see if those might be useful for employees to connect and build support
 - Find (and adapt for CAP) an equity lens that can be applied to decision making, policy and procedure, budgeting, marketing materials, hiring, and other important organizational issues.
- **Training**

Training is a critical and necessary part of an outreach strategy. Training is also connected to a commitment around equity and could be logistically under that umbrella, but it must happen even if the work around equity takes a bit longer to coalesce. Combined with the organizational commitment to trauma informed care, CAP should also consider delving deep into the area of cultural competency, intercultural competency, cultural humility, and intercultural communication. While some training might be appropriate for all staff, there might be approaches or issues that could be tailored to teams, individuals, managers, or specific roles. Here are some suggested areas of ongoing training

- Trauma informed care
- cultural competency, intercultural competency, cultural humility, and intercultural communication
- implicit bias
- microaggressions
- culturally specific and relevant training around specific communities, i.e. the black community
- culturally based conflict (especially for managers)
- white supremacy culture in the workplace
- racial anxiety
- stereotype threat
- local and regional history
- the history around people of color and their connections to the medical system
- de-escalation and customer service

Timeline

Year 1:

- Begin continuous evaluation of policy and procedure with an equity lens
- Begin continuous evaluation of marketing materials to ensure they are inclusive and not exploitative
- Create Equity Committee. Committee should be tasked with:
 - Find and begin using an equity lens
 - Begin work on an equity plan
 - Determine training plan for staff
 - Does this feed into a larger equity plan?
- Consider expanding the IDI process to all staff
- Assess hiring process for bias at all stages—posting, screening, interviews, finalist decision, onboarding
 - Pay special attention to the interview process and specifically include questions around equity and other related topics
 - Notice the diversity of the pool at each stage in the process and notice when diversity is lost—if it is present at all in the beginning.
- Develop a plan for hiring black staff and recruiting black board members, and retaining them
 - Be intentional about outreach to qualified black candidates
 - Provide professional development opportunities
 - Provide growth and leadership opportunities
 - Identify internal AND external mentors for new staff
- Do needs assessment centered on black community
- Re-engage Real Talk group in conversations about outreach to the black community
- Consider more outreach events with community members to hear what they have to say AND share what CAP has been doing

Year 2:

- Continuous evaluation of policy and procedure with an equity lens
- Continuous evaluation of marketing materials to ensure they are inclusive and not exploitative
- Equity Committee continues work
 - Executing equity plan
 - Executing training plan for staff
- Continuous evaluation of hiring process for bias at all stages—posting, screening, interviews, finalist decision, onboarding
 - develop diversity benchmarks for the stages in the hiring process (i.e. a hiring process can't move from screening to interviews unless there are X% people of color, in the pool)
- Continue plan for hiring black staff and recruiting black board members, and retaining them
 - Shift more toward retention strategies
 - Consider affinity groups

- Expand mentoring opportunities
- Consider a staff climate assessment
 - Aggregate and assess data based on different staff groups (managers, people of color, new employees, etc.).
- Continue to consider new and creative ways to outreach to the black community
 - Hopefully with staff that reflects the community
- Deepen community relationships and partnerships
- Consider expanding service options or creating new programs centered on the black community based on needs assessment

Year 3:

- By year three, due to turnover and a commitment to increasing the diversity of senior staff, there should be more people of color in leadership positions in the organization
- Successful implementation of new programs and services
- Consider re-taking the IDI to measure growth
- Continuous evaluation of policy and procedure with an equity lens
- Continuous evaluation of marketing materials to ensure they are inclusive and not exploitative
- Equity Committee continues work
 - Executing equity plan
 - Executing training plan for staff
- Continuous evaluation of hiring process for bias at all stages—posting, screening, interviews, finalist decision, onboarding
- Continue plan for hiring black staff and recruiting black board members, and retaining them
 - Consider and create promotion and leadership opportunities for staff
- Continue to consider new and creative ways to outreach to the black community
- Deepen community relationships and partnerships