

AHLA's Journey

“We need leaders who care enough, know enough, have the courage to do enough, and who will persevere until the job is done.” *Dr. David Satcher, 16th U.S. Surgeon General & Founder, Satcher Health Leadership Institute at Morehouse School of Medicine*

This quote from Dr. David Satcher embodies AHLA's leadership and our journey to celebrate diversity, equity, and inclusion at AHLA. Fifteen years ago, our courageous Board recognized that our membership and leaders did not reflect the diversity existing in this country. Simply put, our membership and leaders were mostly white. It is important to note, that our Board cared enough to begin a process to address this situation and they guided us to focus on outreach, inclusion, and training.

In 2006, the Association created an Advisory Council on Racial and Ethnic Diversity with the primary purpose to serve as a resource to AHLA in achieving its goal of increasing the racial and ethnic diversity of the Association's membership and leaders. This Council which ultimately became a Board level Committee established key actions to improve outreach, inclusion and training which continue today.

One of the Advisory Council's first actions were to address the problem that most minority conference attendees would skip the networking receptions and go to their rooms after the conference sessions ended because they felt alone and isolated. They complained that leaders were not approachable and that many seemed to just talk to other leaders. To them, AHLA was a clique and not very inclusive. To address this issue and to try to get the minority attendees to stay and network, the Association created special networking receptions – or RED Receptions to celebrate Racial and Ethnic Diversity (RED). AHLA created these receptions for minority attendees only, which allowed the Board and conference planning committee members to have a unique opportunity to visit with the minority attendees in an exclusive setting. This helped address the problem that many attendees felt lost or invisible in the larger receptions. Over time, attendance grew from ten attendees meeting in the President's suite to many in a hotel conference room. As this program grew and the minority attendees became more comfortable attending the networking receptions, we phased out the special RED receptions and merged them into the larger networking receptions and renamed the receptions the 'Celebrating Diversity and Inclusion' receptions which are now held at every conference.

We consider this one of our successes because our conference receptions are now more diverse and our Board and planning committee leaders have learned the importance of working the room so that all attendees feel welcome and connected.

Unconscious bias and “why diversity matters” training was the Board's next challenge. The Board knew that it was important to lead by example and decided that it would take the training before rolling it out to all leaders. It was also important to start at the beginning because we are a volunteer association and we have no information about what, if any, training our volunteer leaders have had. It became clear with the first round of training that everyone arrived at different levels and some needed to hear the “business case for diversity” before they could begin to work on changing the culture and business practices. The success of the initial round of training prompted us to expand training to all 400 association volunteer leaders and to institute a requirement that all volunteer leaders must take our association training at the beginning of their leadership term. Here, we are meeting people where they are and giving them training and orientation into our inclusive culture.

To further expand on our outreach and training, the Board adopted a set of significant diversity, equity, and inclusion policies and best practices to begin to institutionalize the progress that we have made and to help the larger membership see and feel the commitment the association has made to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The following important actions helped to share our progress and commitment: The Board announced a new D+I commitment statement; developed and disseminated leadership talking points about why diversity matters and how it will improve the Association and the practice of health law; updated the website to incorporate the new D+I commitment statement; published a President's column on D+I initiatives in our monthly magazine and we continue to publish monthly articles; and we updated monthly Call for Volunteers email to include language highlighting the importance of diversity and encouraging all members to become involved in AHLA. We believe that education, training, outreach, and transparency are keys to our transition to a more inclusive organization.

Our journey continues and as long as we continue to have leaders who "care enough, know enough, have the courage to do enough, and who will persevere until the job is done" we will be successful.