

# Diversity and Inclusion Listening Sessions Report

City of Opelika, AL

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December 2020

## **Introduction**

The population of the United States is becoming more diverse every day. The concept of diversity encompasses acceptance, respect and value. Individuals should be accepted for their uniqueness, respected for their talents and valued for their significant contributions to the world. The dimensions of diversity include race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, physical abilities, religious beliefs, experience, political thoughts and other ideologies. Simply stated, the purpose of diversity is about moving beyond simple tolerance to fully embracing and celebrating the rich presence of diversity throughout our society. Therefore, diversity is not only the mixture of backgrounds and competences, but also a way of valuing and utilizing people's competences, experiences and perspectives to improve the effectiveness of a group, organization or community.

## **Process and Method**

Due to racial unrest during the spring and summer of 2020 in the United States, as well as wanting to learn more about the thoughts and sentiments of residents in Opelika regarding diversity and inclusion, the City of Opelika contracted the services of Leadership Empowerment Strategies, LLC to facilitate five (5) diversity and inclusion listening sessions. A listening session was held for each ward/district. The meetings occurred on the following dates:

- Ward 4 – Tuesday, October 13
- Ward 2 – Thursday, October 15
- Ward 1 – Tuesday, October 27
- Ward 3 – Thursday, October 29
- Ward 5 – Thursday, November 5

All meetings were held at the Municipal Court Building in Opelika from 5 PM to 7 PM. All meetings followed the same format/agenda:

- Welcome and Introductions
- Overview of Diversity and Inclusion
- Survey
- Presentation on Diversity and Inclusion
- Facilitated Group Discussion
- Closing Comments
- Adjournment

At each meeting, participants were asked to complete a survey and participated in a structured, facilitated discussion. The development of the survey and discussion questions, utilized evidence-based principles and best practices focusing on diversity, community engagement and effective facilitation. The survey consisted of fourteen (14) questions. The

first seven questions were seeking information on the thoughts and sentiments of participants regarding diversity and race relations in Opelika. The last seven questions gathered valuable demographic data. All submitted surveys were anonymous, meaning that no personally identifiable information was captured. The facilitated discussion involved approximately six (6) primary questions with necessary follow-up questions from the moderator. The discussion was structured to provoke a true conversation regarding the feelings of residents in Opelika about the current climate related to diversity and race. Individuals also participated in the meetings online by submitting comments and questions via the City's YouTube channel.

### **Observations and Results**

Seventy (70) surveys were collected from participants (Ward 1 = 18 surveys collected; Ward 2 – 17 surveys collected; Ward 3 – 10 surveys collected; Ward 4 – 18 surveys collected; Ward 5 – 7 surveys collected). Below is a breakdown of the responses from participants.

Participants were asked to rate **race relations** within Opelika, using a scale from one to ten (1 – being poor and 10 – being excellent). The results are as follows:

- **Overall – 5.8**
- Blacks – 5.2
- Whites – 6.8

Participants were asked to rate their **interactions** with Opelika officials and employees (customer service, police, fire, public works, etc.), using a scale from one to ten (1 – being poor and 10 – being excellent). The results are as follows:

- **Overall – 7.3**
- Blacks – 6.3
- Whites – 9.3

Using a scale from one to ten (1 – being poor and 10 – being excellent), participants were asked to rate how well does Opelika **promote and celebrate diversity**. The results are as follows:

- **Overall – 5.4**
- Blacks – 4.8
- Whites – 6.5

Participants were asked if public departments and boards for Opelika should **reflect the demographic representation** of the City's population. The results are as follows:

- Nearly 72% of all respondents – Yes
- 10% of all respondents – No

On a scale from one to ten (1 – being no commitment and 10 – being extremely committed), participants were asked to rate the City's (Opelika) level of **commitment to diversity and inclusion**. The results are as follows:

- **Overall – 6**
- Blacks – 4.9
- Whites – 7.7

Some **primary concerns** revealed from the **surveys** relating to diversity and inclusion in Opelika are included below.

- There is not enough diversity, inclusion and representation of minority groups within the local government.
- Communication and messaging efforts are not directed towards minorities; lack of outreach to minority communities.
- Hiring practices and jobs within the City continue to be a problem; the City government is not reflective of the diversity throughout the community.
- There is a lack of diversity in education.
- Trust is a big problem; minority groups have a difficult time trusting City officials; relationship building with underrepresented groups is needed.
- Upkeep of roads and trash pick-up is not the same for all communities; feel that minority groups are treated unfairly; all individuals and communities should be treated equally and fairly.
- Need to change the hearts and minds of people related to diversity and race relations.
- The City needs to do more to address poverty in minority neighborhoods throughout Opelika.

For the facilitated discussion, the moderator posed thought provoking questions to residents to engage them in a serious conversation about diversity and inclusion in the United States and within the City of Opelika. During the discussions, most residents acknowledge a difference in the treatment of Blacks and Whites in America. According to participants' comments, the mistreatment of Blacks stems from slavery and continues today. Most also admit things have improved over time, but there is still a lot of work to do. Moreover, many agreed that Blacks and other minority groups (Hispanics, Native Americans, Asians, LGBTQ and others) have been treated unfairly due to stereotypes and that real change must start in the hearts and minds of each individual.

According to the discussions, several commented that the country is divided due to the lack of love and respect for each individual and that things are polarized due to the current heated political climate. Several participants were impacted by the tragic incident that occurred to George Floyd and stated the environment regarding race relations in the U.S. needed to change. Lastly, residents discussed the responsibility of each person to make a positive change and provided several viable solutions to consider for the improvement of diversity and inclusion within the City.

### **Recommendations**

Regarding the information gathered from the listening sessions, there are clearly some concerns pertaining to diversity and inclusion in Opelika. The recommendations below are based on a collection of ideas from participants, research-centered practices and successful

initiatives related to improving diversity and inclusion. The recommendations/suggestions are as follows:

- **Consider hosting more listening sessions** – Nearly all residents that participated in the listening sessions were in agreement that more listening sessions were needed. Residents believed that speaking to each other about difficult issues such as race is a great way to begin to make positive changes. Hosting these sessions in each ward is important. Each meeting will bring attention to that specific ward and this is an opportunity for City officials to connect with local residents in various neighborhoods throughout the City.
- **Work on engaging the youth** – Engaging the youth is needed for the long-term viability of any community. Youth participation at the listening sessions was severely lacking. Hosting sessions and other engaging activities specifically for the youth are encouraged. Other suggestions for the youth include having a youth advisory group, a Junior City Council Program, youth entrepreneurship initiative, mentoring opportunities, youth-centered events and other possible engaging activities.
- **Think about creating a community diversity and inclusion advisory group** – Getting input from different perspectives in the community is an effective community engagement strategy. This will allow City officials to meet regularly with local residents and to discuss important issues related to race relations in the community.
- **Consider revising public boards to support diversity** – Based on the survey results, nearly 72% of participants stated that public boards and departments should be similar to the demographics of the City’s population. Review each board to determine the level of diversity on each. If needed, make the appropriate changes to increase diversity on public boards.
- **Think about developing a diversity report for Opelika** – A diversity report is an opportunity to provide a clear picture of the City’s diversity effort. A diversity report would entail such activities as providing demographic data on City employees, surveying employees, identifying diversity initiatives/programs supported by the City, displaying the City’s recruitment record related to diversity as well as other potential activities. This effort can improve trust and transparency of the local government.
- **Examine the possibility of hiring a Chief Diversity Officer for the City or partner with a company to lead the City’s diversity efforts** – Having someone identified to lead the diversity and inclusion activities for the City is important. This will help to provide leadership to this area and will clearly show local residents that diversity and inclusion are priorities of the City.
- **Consider greater recruitment efforts to produce a more diverse workplace** – Diversity is critically important in the workplace and a diverse organization yields several rewarding benefits. Consider establishing relationships with groups that are connected to minority populations throughout the United States. Create a diversity referral program, where employees and residents from underrepresented

backgrounds are encouraged to apply for jobs offered by the City. Develop a plan and set measurable goals to improve diversity within the local government.

- **Examine the benefits of incentive-based diversity training** – Mandatory training programs related to diversity and inclusion have not always been successful. In some instances, diversity training fails because it leaves some individuals feeling personally attacked. Instead, offer diversity and training programs as an incentive, possibly linked to promotions and pay increases. The purpose of diversity and inclusion training is to make the organization or community better. Incentive-based opportunities can make the organization better by utilizing a different approach. Individuals will want to participate as opposed to being forced to participate. Diversity should be seen as a positive choice.
- **Consider more images of diversity** – Displaying images of diverse groups throughout the City (city buildings, webpage, social media, etc.) is a proven method to make people feel valued and welcomed within the local community. Also consider developing a diversity pledge to be displayed in all City buildings.
- **Work on ways to engage and empower minority communities** – Several participants suggested the City should focus on improving, empowering and engaging minority populations throughout the City. Some successful methods for engaging minority groups include initiating a Minority Leadership Initiative/Program and providing capacity-building opportunities (educational seminars and other training activities) in minority communities.
- **Examine strategies to improve relationships between the police department and minority neighborhoods** – This is paramount to individuals throughout the City. Examine the benefits of initiating a Police Athletic League or something similar in Opelika. These leagues have worked well at improving relationships between minority groups (as well as the youth) and the police in communities in the United States. Consider regularly scheduled conversations and other opportunities for positive interactions.
- **Consider designating an area or space within the City that promotes and celebrates diversity** – Having a public space (park, common area, etc.) dedicated to representing diversity is a way to promote and celebrate diversity on behalf of the City. This effort shows a seriousness and commitment from the City to be a more diverse and inclusive community.

### **Conclusion**

This was a meaningful and worthwhile endeavor by the City. The listening sessions were a step in the right direction to improve diversity, inclusion and race relations in Opelika. As the survey results and discussions revealed, there are clearly some issues related to race within the community. Through this process, residents were able to express themselves in an engaging and welcoming environment. All of the conversations were respectful and all surveys were very insightful. Participants were thankful to the City for hosting the listening sessions and are certainly ready for the next steps. The City started this process but will need the assistance from all residents to be successful. Therefore, let this document serve as

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a call to action for all citizens in Opelika. Each member of the community should do his or her part to improve diversity within the community. Diversity is everyone’s responsibility.

The recommendations provided in this report were done in an effort to help improve diversity and inclusion in Opelika. Leadership Empowerment Strategies, LLC is appreciative to the City for the opportunity and stands ready to assist as needed to help Opelika become a more diverse and inclusive community. This is an opportunity for Opelika to **re-imagine diversity** and to do things differently. To lead the way for other cities to follow.

