

DEI Program #2: Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) training and strategies to members of the Freedom of Information (FOI) community to increase/strengthen diversity, equity and inclusion among their ranks.

Challenge: A strong advocacy base among members of the FOI community is required to monitor activity and compliance to state open government laws and policies that provide access to public information. Poor legislation and policies, and violations by government officials, prevent public access and lessens accountability in state and local public institutions.

To strengthen the FOI community — a sector dominated by an aging, historically white male presence — efforts must be made to build the next generation of First Amendment advocates. Increasing and diversifying participation among the members of the FOI community is the solution and must focus on generation, ethnicity, sector (business) and gender.

The National Freedom of Information Coalition (NFOIC) recognizes the important need to help build the next generation of open government and First Amendment advocates to ensure open, transparent, and accessible public institutions and protect First Amendment rights. This includes at the state and local levels coordinated and/or delivered by NFOIC and state open government coalition members.

Solution: Provide DEI training and consultation services to organizations in the FOI community that are interested in and/or struggling to expand and diversify their organizations.

Training by a professional DEI subject matter expert (SME) to FOI organizations will provide a curriculum and strategy to help diversify their boards, staff, programs and external networks. This SME could be a new staff addition to NFOIC, a consultant or agency. Organizations that fall into the different FOI community sectors include journalism, legal, civics, technology, philanthropy, education, government, and special interests, including First Amendment watchdogs.

Training can be done on-site or at collective gatherings such as national, regional or state conferences.

Diversifying the FOI community and building its next generation

This program is one of three identified by NFOIC in its strategic plan to help diversify the Freedom of Information (FOI) community and build the next generation of FOI and First Amendment advocates. Working with an alliance of groups to advance these strategies and with the required resources, NFOIC will provide needed solutions to three challenges for an inclusive democracy using a national grass-tops strategy in conjunction with a “boots on the ground,” grassroots effort in the states to:

1. Empower DEI-represented organizations to effectively access public information from their state and local public institutions.

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2. Increase DEI among established organizations in the FOI community government to increase participation and effectiveness in their role as government watchdogs and FOI stewards.
3. Expand public participation with diverse stakeholders in a national collaboration around FOI challenges to identify and advance legislative and policy transparency reforms.

NFOIC seeks partnerships with national DEI groups and their state chapters, where applicable, representing journalism, media law, civil society, public policy and individual rights organizations to train and equip them with information that strengthens strategies to pursue access and accountability in their public institutions.

NFOIC will integrate new voices into the government transparency world, recognizing that information is critical to empowering disenfranchised groups and new perspectives are essential to healthy civic engagement and democracy. A new collaboration will advance DEI in improving First Amendment rights and state government transparency and accountability.

NFOIC has the capacity to manage these initiatives. For 30 years, NFOIC and its member state FOI coalitions have worked to improve open government laws and increase access among state and local public institutions. A new strategic plan expands that work strengthening relationships with journalists, attorneys, students, and civil society organizations while introducing a broader audience to the FOI community that helps ensure diversity and inclusiveness — as a democracy should be.

Today's challenges to transparency and trust in our public institutions will require solutions promoted through the actions of a populace that represents diversity, equity and inclusion. Yet, the audience identified in today's FOI community contains enormous gaps in representation of ideas, priorities, voices and faces that should be heard and seen. Information is power, and that power should be distributed among all Americans.

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