

# Civil Rights Reviews Show Progress & Opportunities

by Kim Waldman, Compliance Coordinator & Equity Strategist

I recently had the pleasure to meet colleagues in 12 Extension offices while conducting this year's civil rights reviews. All reviews had three main components: 1) auditing documentation, 2) learning about how local context informs efforts to expand access, and 3) collaborating on additional opportunities to reach underserved communities. Through this collegial process, it was inspiring to learn about unique partnerships and creative collaborations—both among Extension educators and with external partners—which exemplify the Wisconsin Idea in action.

Through office presentations, colleagues demonstrated comprehensive knowledge about their communities as well as authentic, intentional efforts to build new relationships and understand underserved communities' needs. They shared examples of how predecessors had planted seeds that grew into trusting relationships and now bear fruit in the form of expanded access. I heard how the ripple effects one educator's relationships can extend to other staff, programs, and geographic areas. Educators described adapting programs to meet specific participants' needs, and explained how they partnered with OAIC to provide more equitable programming.

Perhaps most noteworthy was witnessing the dynamic synergy of collaborative office cultures whose commitment to expanding access is integrated across every aspect of their work. Expanding access is not an afterthought to get a document translated. Nor is it an exercise in organizing files of documentation for a periodic audit. In some offices we visited, regardless of position or task, a commitment to providing equitable access and programming to underserved communities is simply embedded and evident in all that they do.

As you can tell from my reflections above, this year's reviews illustrated that, on the whole, we are headed in the right direction. However, there are still significant opportunities to expand access. It is important to evaluate who you are and are not reaching with your programming and to think critically about why that may be the case. For support in exploring questions like this and to strategize how to reach underserved communities, complete an [OAIC Support Request \(OSR\) form](#). Request a consultation and our team will follow up to schedule a time to meet. There is no cost

and there is no limit to the number of times you can request a consult. We are here to support you and be your partner in equitable programming.

If you are already doing intentional outreach, developing relationships, and/or are reaching underserved communities, it is essential that you document your efforts appropriately. Put yourself in the place of an auditor who is reviewing your civil rights files. Is it clear why a particular document is in your files? Are the dots connected regarding why a specific communication was sent, how it's related to a flyer in your files, and how it's linked to ongoing efforts to develop relationships? USDA/NIFA auditors won't have the benefit of the impactful presentations I heard during my office visits. They will rely primarily on your documentation to substantiate our compliance with non-discrimination laws. It's critical that we improve our documentation so that it clearly tells the story of the work you are doing to expand access and make the Wisconsin Idea a reality.

Watch this space for future tips on managing your civil rights files. In the meantime, don't hesitate to contact me with any specific questions: [kim.waldman@wisc.edu](mailto:kim.waldman@wisc.edu).