

A SH L A N D T I D I N G S

Diversity helps OHRA better serve community

By Cass Sinclair, June 28, 2021

At Options for Helping Residents of Ashland, we understand that people who experience homelessness or live at or below the poverty line can feel the sting of being “other.”

We have also learned that when poverty or homelessness is combined with minority, racial or gender identification, a person can experience double the bias.

For OHRA, that means we must continuously work to embed equity, diversity and inclusion in our operations. Only by doing so will we achieve the full scope of our mission: to help people on the path from crisis to stability and to remove barriers that prevent any of our guests from achieving a more stable life.

Last year, with that increased awareness, OHRA launched a diversity, equity and inclusion initiative and began to change how we operate.

- Our board and our staff have taken diversity, equity and inclusion training and now are scheduling ongoing trainings.
- We are in conversations with community partners who serve our BIPOC, Latinx and LGBTQ+ community members to understand how to reach and serve these diverse populations in an equitable and inclusive way.
- We work with our community partners who serve the Hispanic community, such as the La Clinica Mobile Health Unit that soon will provide on-site services to shelter guests at the OHRA Center.
- We now have Spanish-speaking staff.
- We are continuously recruiting more diverse staff, board and advisory council members who represent underserved populations to add perspective to our discussions and enrich our understanding of these critical issues.

We know that when our staff is diverse, we can better serve all guests who walk in our front door.

The face that many guests first see belongs to Martha Ruiz. Born into one of the oldest Hispanic families in the state, she has worked in the fruit industry, with medical organizations, the county, and the Phoenix Police Department.

Martha's positivity is infectious. Only if you probe will she tell you she was bullied in school and called names because of her heritage. But she harnesses the empathy it gave her to help OHRA's guests.

"If you haven't had issues in your past, you can't appreciate what they are going through," she says. While they come from diverse backgrounds, the most common trait many guests share is past trauma and/or current crisis. Sometimes this makes a guest testy with Martha, for example, when they pick up their mail at OHRA and a long-awaited check is not there.

"Yes, sometimes they get upset with me, but you just have to be patient," she says. As an example, she tells the story of a woman who broke down in near hysterics and was about to run from the center.

"I asked her to sit with me a minute. 'Let me make you a cup of tea.'" In the amount of time it took the woman to drink the tea, she had regained her composure and was ready again to tackle her journey to stability. "One thing we bring is comfort," says Martha.

Martha loves being the greeter and appointment maker, the mail distributor, the person who helps guests on OHRA's computers. This way, she says, she meets the most people. If guests are Spanish-speaking, she works as a translator with their navigator.

Before the pandemic and the Almeda fire, OHRA was seeing about 20 people a day. Today we see 80-90. Part of the increase is because there are more emergency dollars available, as we were selected to distribute pass-through federal funds from ACCESS of Jackson County. These funds help keep people housed and get people housed if they lost income or health due to COVID.

As an organization, adapting to this rapid growth has been a huge challenge and a great opportunity to serve those most in need. Our precipitous growth has given us an opportunity to increase our emphasis on diversity, equity and inclusion, a necessary and important change for OHRA and our ability to meet our responsibility to serve the diverse community in our valley.

Cass Sinclair is executive director of Options for Helping Residents of Ashland. She is a long-time resident of the Ashland area.