



The Association for  
**Animal Welfare**  
Advancement



# The State of DEI in Animal Welfare

2024 Diversity, Equity, and  
Inclusion (DEI) Cultural Audit

*Sponsored By*

**Adopt a Pet**



*Analysis report and recommendations  
prepared by MSM Global Consulting, Inc.*



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## Executive Summary

### Purpose of the Survey

Since 2019, the Association for Animal Welfare Advancement has been actively seeking to change the landscape of the animal welfare profession to be more diverse, equitable, and inclusive. Following the first of its kind State of DEI in Animal Welfare Audit in 2021, AAWA has led strategic efforts to bring awareness of DEI gaps, provide extensive learning and development, and equip leaders with resources to advance DEI efforts across the profession.

This recent survey was distributed to:

- Gather insights from across the profession on how animal welfare organizations are currently doing in their efforts to foster DEI.
- Benchmark against data gathered in 2021 State of DEI Audit to identify markers of progress and ongoing issues.
- Provide recommendations for data driven strategies to address animal welfare's DEI needs.

### Who Responded

A total of 1203 individuals completed the survey (this is about half the number of respondents who participated in 2021). The demographic composite of respondents was overwhelmingly White, cisgender female, heterosexual, native English speakers without a disability. However, there were slight increases from 2021 in representation of race/ethnicity, age, disability, gender identity and sexual orientation.

### Summary of Findings

Overall, respondents indicated they have seen progress in terms of the overall commitment to DEI from their organizations and the Association. Moreover, there were higher satisfaction/agreement scores in numerous categories. However, many of the challenges identified in the 2021 Audit persist when it comes to DEI in the animal welfare profession, and perspectives vary by identity, with racially minoritized groups, LGBTQIA+, people with disabilities, and younger respondents indicating lower levels of satisfaction/agreement in a number of categories.

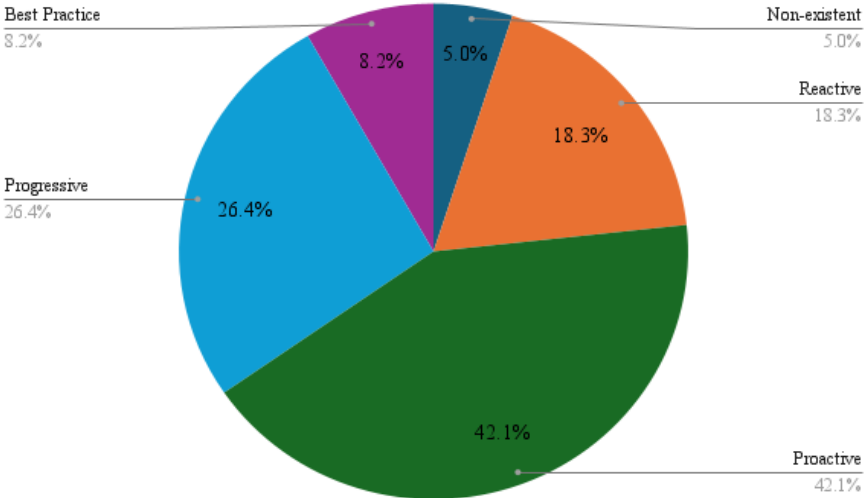
Notable Progress	Persisting Challenges
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Respondents see moderate to significant progress in terms of DEI efforts in their orgs.</li> <li>2. AAWA's DEI efforts have been valuable in supporting the profession.</li> <li>3. Representation of and support for LGBTQ+ staff has increased.</li> <li>4. More people report feeling comfortable talking about DEI at work.</li> <li>5. Employees from different backgrounds interact well together.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Lack of workforce diversity, especially at leadership levels.</li> <li>2. Exclusion, bullying, discrimination and harassment with inadequate accountability.</li> <li>3. Lack of commitment and support for DEI efforts.</li> <li>4. Challenges around equitable employee treatment and development.</li> <li>5. Inconsistencies in terms of inclusive work culture.</li> </ol>

6. Diverse communities participate in services.	6. Inadequate inclusion or support for diverse communities.
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**Progress Since 2021**

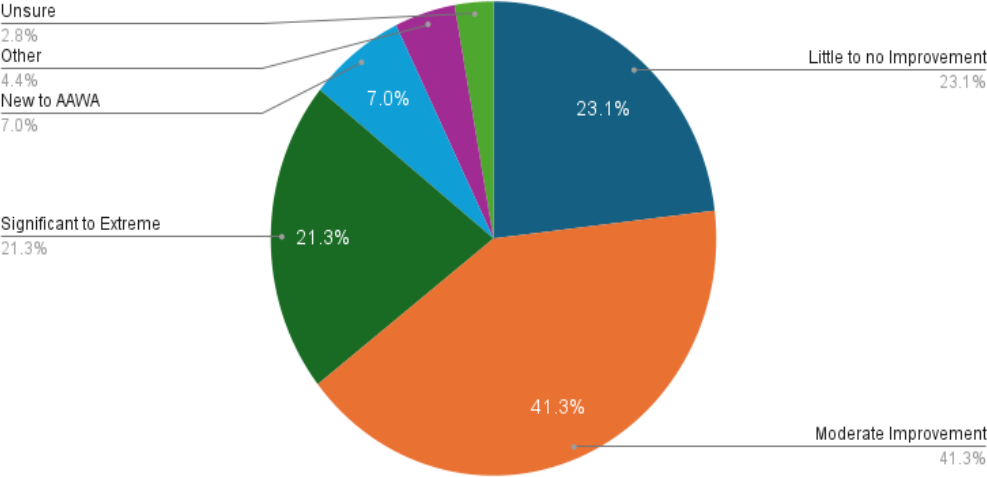
Respondents were asked to indicate where their organizations are in terms of their DEI efforts and progress, and how AAWA has supported these efforts.

**How would you describe where your animal welfare organization is in terms of its DEI efforts?**



**77%** believe their organization is at least proactive in their DEI efforts.

**How would you characterize improvement in terms of DEI in animal welfare overall in comparison to 3 years ago?**



**63%** believe there has been at least moderate improvement in their DEI efforts.

## Actions & Efforts That Have Moved the Needle

What DEI efforts has your organization put into place in the last 2-3 years?	Number of responses
Conducted DEI training for staff	490
Engaged in policy changes to ensure more equitable and inclusive workplace	398
Established a DEI Council/Committee	393
Engaged in policy changes to ensure more equitable and inclusive services to diverse communities	347
Developed a DEI strategic plan and/or DEI goals	333
Conducted an organizational DEI assessment	310
Hired a DEI consultant	252
Developed metrics for evaluating progress toward our DEI goals	157

What AAWA resources have you found most helpful for you and your organization's DEI efforts?	Number of responses
DEI Learning Content on AAWA website	182
DEI Dozen Webinar Series	114
DEI Ambassador Program	112
AAWA annual conference sessions focusing on DEI	81
Unsure/Unaware	70
Leadership Strategies: Making DEI Stick virtual workshop	60
Participate on AAWA DEI Council and/or subcommittees	45
AAWA solutions summit sessions focusing on DEI	29

## Highs and Lows

### Highest Scores

For the following statements, 70 percent or more of overall respondents **agreed or strongly agreed**. Moreover, the 2024 responses were essentially equal or more positive in these categories compared to 2021. We have identified these statements as areas of strength and progress.

	% Agree or Strongly Agree		Change
	2021	2024	+/-
There is an adequate representation of sexual identity diversity in my organization	65%	75%	10%
I believe there is active support for sexual identity diversity in my organization	73%	79%	6%
Employees who are different from the majority of the workforce are treated fairly	77%	77%	0%
I believe leadership in my organization would take appropriate action if someone experienced discrimination or harassment	73%	72%	-1%
My unique knowledge and skills are appreciated	72%	74%	2%
I feel comfortable being my authentic self at work	70%	72%	2%
I feel comfortable talking about diversity at work	66%	71%	5%
Employees from different backgrounds interact well together	78%	80%	2%
Diverse communities participate in my organization's services	68%	72%	4%

The above results reflect several themes from the narrative responses, as indicated in the statements below:

*"I have seen a lot of progress in regard to DEI in our organization the past few years. It's been really exciting, and I love that we feel like a safe and welcoming space for so many LGBTQ+ individuals in particular."*

*"We have made so much progress in this area in animal welfare, let's keep it going!"*

*"I think animal welfare as a whole is making progress. There is still a lot of change still left to be made, but I think as long as there are folks who work to make their org more inclusive and compassionate, we will start filtering out the folks who make those environments feel less inclusive and welcoming."*

### Lowest Scores

We identified the most prominent challenges from the survey analysis as the questions for which 20 percent or more of respondents **disagreed or strongly disagreed**. These are areas of ongoing concern that need to be addressed.

	% Disagree or Strongly Disagree		Change
	2021	2024	+/-
I believe the staff reflects the diversity of our community	45%	40%	-5%
There is an adequate representation of race/ethnic diversity in my organization	52%	48%	-4%
There is an adequate representation of gender diversity in my organization	41%	35%	-6%
There is a clear career development path employees from different backgrounds	28%	24%	-4%
People who engage in behaviors such as bullying harassment are held accountable	23%	22%	-1%
I can voice a contrary opinion without fear of negative consequences	24%	20%	-4%
I feel like I have adequate input into decisions that affect me	24%	23%	-1%

My organization supports all of the communities in our service region equitably	26%	23%	-3%
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*\*In this case, negative change indicates potential improvements in scores as there were a lower number of negative responses to the questions than in 2021.*

The above results reflect several themes from the narrative responses, as indicated in the statements below:

*"I have also seen my fair share of racism directed at people who look like me when in animal welfare spaces -- stuff like...we don't love our animals as much as white people because cruelty is perceived to be a feature of our culture."*

*"We've lost a lot of good staff because of poor managers, at the highest levels, who allow some to behave so poorly that the hostile work environment forced people out."*

*"I've observed several instances where hateful, discriminatory comments based on race, gender, or LGBT identity were made by staff members to other staff members, and the victims, rather than the perpetrators, were held accountable."*

*"I think there is a great deal of fear and resistance surrounding DEI. I think there is some interest and effort when talking about it, however, when having to apply or practice the work it falls short."*

## Respondent Expectations

Respondents indicated the following as important issues to address across the animal welfare profession to make significant progress.

Authentic commitment from AWO leaders for DEI	Enhance inclusivity for communities	Improve recruitment and retention	Embed DEI into strategy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● True leadership buy-in, not performative</li> <li>● Model inclusion</li> <li>● Follow through with resources and support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Improve access to care</li> <li>● Integrate animal and human welfare</li> <li>● Bridge cultural gaps</li> <li>● Listen to communities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Recruit in underserved communities</li> <li>● Invest in early engagement</li> <li>● Provide career progression pathways</li> <li>● Improve salary and benefits</li> <li>● Support work-life integration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Provide learning and development</li> <li>● Identify metrics for progress</li> <li>● Allocate resources</li> <li>● Share best practices</li> <li>● Implement equitable policies</li> </ul>

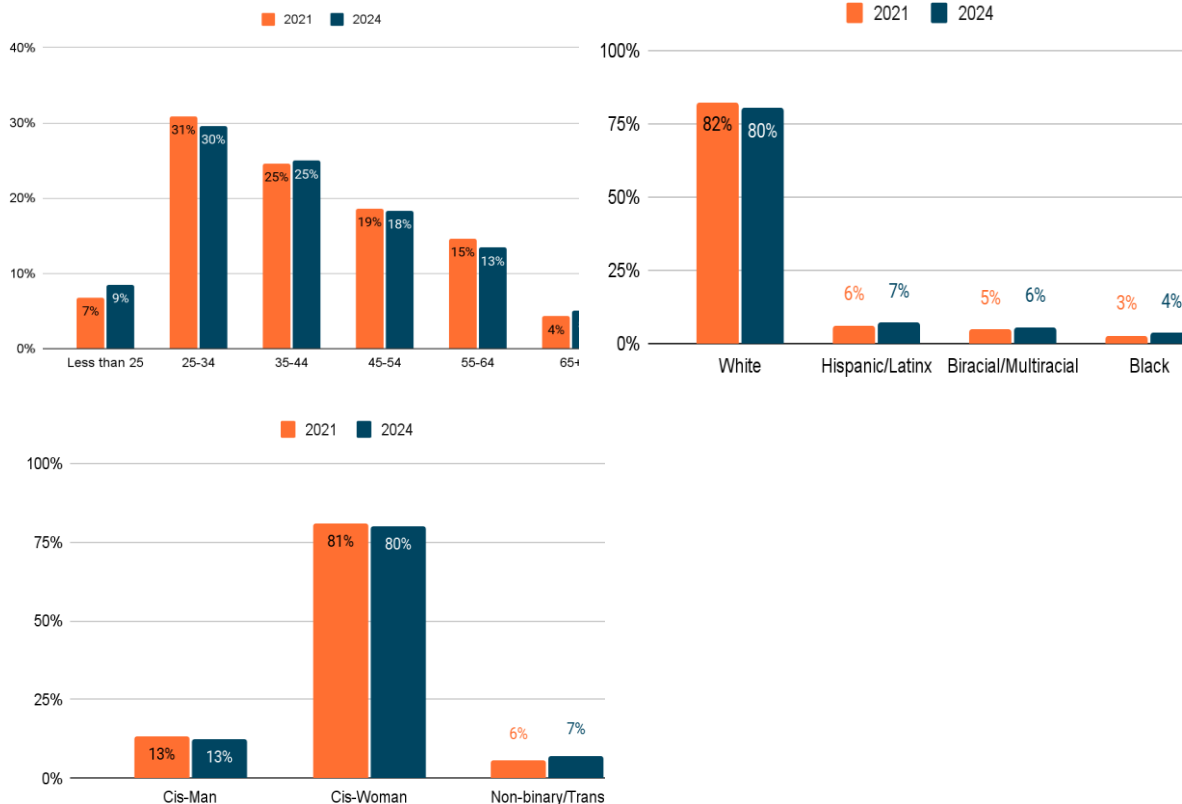




## Detailed Findings

### Demographics of Respondents

The animal welfare field continues to be predominantly White, cisgender, & female. However, there were slight increases in racial, gender, and age diversity among survey respondents.



- **Sexual orientation:** 7% increase in LGBTQ respondents (28% in 2021 to 35% in 2024)
- **Disability:** 8% increase in people with disabilities (12% in 2021 to 21% in 2024)
- **Tenure:** 34% have been in animal welfare five years or less and almost half have been in their AWO five years or less
- **Management:** 53% identify as a supervisor/manager
- **Organization:** 45% work in a private nonprofit organization
- **Salary:** 25% make \$25-50K
- **Region:** 22% are located in the Pacific
- **Service Area:** 57% serve populations over 250,000

## Detailed Findings by Theme

### 1. Lack of workforce diversity, especially at leadership levels

One of the ongoing challenges the animal welfare profession faces is in increasing the diversity of its workforce, particularly in terms of race/ethnicity and gender. As was noted in the demographics section, the profession is predominantly White and female. There is also a lack of representation of people with disabilities and non-native English speakers. Although animal welfare organizations span across many geographic locations with different demographics, there is a significant need to ensure that the profession more accurately reflects the populations it can and should serve.

#### Supporting data

- Only 40% believe the staff reflects the diversity of our community.
- Only 47% agree there is adequate representation of race/ethnic diversity in their organization.
- Only 35% believe there is adequate representation of gender diversity in their organization.

#### Changes over time

Fewer people overall disagreed with the above two statements in 2024 than in 2021, indicating there has been progress in terms of representation of race/ethnic diversity over the last 3 years but still much progress is still needed.

#### Demographic variances

People from racially minoritized identities, people with disabilities, and gender nonbinary people had significantly lower levels of agreement that there is active support for racial, gender, or sexual diversity.

#### Narrative Themes

**Racial and Ethnic Representation:** Many respondents highlight significant gaps in staff diversity and representation within their organizations.

- *“Our staff do not reflect the racial diversity of the community around us. I can imagine it's hard to be a BIPOC person in a predominantly white workplace, especially when the policies are built by mostly white folks.”*
- *“Our staff is not representative of our community (racially, primarily)...As a result, our staff is not always prepared to serve diverse communities and fully meet them where they are at.”*

**Gender:** Participants highlight a gender imbalance in the animal welfare field, where women are predominant but often underrepresented in leadership roles (i.e., Glass Escalator). They highlight how women face barriers to advancement, with their contributions frequently undervalued compared to their male counterparts.

- *“The field is very white, very queer, and very female. The few males in our field are put on a pedestal and given more opportunities than their female counterparts.”*
- *“I still think that the majority of the highest positions at my organization are held by men, despite the majority of people in animal welfare being woman.”*

**Geographic Constraints:** Many organizations in less diverse or rural areas face challenges in recruiting and employing a diverse staff due to the limited diversity in their local communities. This lack of diversity in the surrounding population often translates into a less diverse workforce and creates barriers to implementing effective DEI practices.

- *“Our organization is located in a community where the majority of the population are elderly white people. It's hard to be inclusive when the diverse people are simply not there.”*
- *“We work in a predominantly Caucasian community; there's not a lot of diversity so it's hard to recruit.”*

**Lack of Board and Executive Leadership Diversity:** Many respondents call for increased diversity within boards and executive teams, noting that a lack of representation in leadership hinders effective DEI efforts. Participants emphasize that the current lack of representation—particularly in terms of race, socioeconomic status, education, and cultural backgrounds—hinders effective DEI efforts.

- *“Our board of directors is not very diverse, and I would not say that it represents our staffing or our community.”*
- *“The board and senior management are composed of nearly 100% middle-aged white women.”*
- *“Most senior positions are held by white people, mostly women, who may have technical experience but lack DEI training or personal experience.”*

## 2. Exclusion, bullying, discrimination and harassment with inadequate accountability.

Although the results have improved since the 2021 audit, the 2024 survey indicated the prevalence of exclusionary and hostile behaviors toward people of marginalized groups, including incidents of bullying, discrimination and harassment. Respondents have widely varying perspectives on whether there was adequate accountability for creating an inclusive workplace free of discrimination or harassment. Respondents indicated low levels of trust that people are appropriately held accountable for engaging in disrespectful behavior, including discriminatory or harassing acts. However, they had more positive responses to believing leadership would take appropriate action if a person experienced discrimination or harassment.

### Supporting data

- Only 59% agree people who engage in behaviors such as bullying or harassment are held accountable.
- Only 65% agree people who engage in discrimination are held accountable.
- 28% said they have observed discrimination or harassment in my organization.
- 22% have heard people in my organization make jokes about identity groups.
- 15% have been the victim of discrimination or harassment in their organization.

### Changes over time

Although fewer respondents indicated they have observed discrimination or harassment, the number still indicates almost one third of respondents have observed these acts in their organization. The number of people who have directly experienced discrimination or harassment overall didn't change. Although only 15% agreed they have experienced discrimination or

harassment, we would like to see this number lower, particularly when the numbers are broken down by demographic categories.

### Demographic variances

- 35% of people who identify as a race or ethnicity other than White have observed and 20% have experienced discrimination or harassment.
- 40% of people with disabilities have observed discrimination or harassment and 25% have been victims, significantly higher than the overall score.
- 60% of gender nonbinary respondents observed discrimination or harassment and 39% have been victims.
- Respondents age 25-34 and those in the LGBTQIA community were also more likely to have observed discrimination or harassment.
- Gender nonbinary respondents and people with disabilities had lower agreement that people who engage in bullying or harassment are held accountable or that leadership would take appropriate action if someone experienced discrimination or harassment.

### Narrative themes

**LGBTQ+ Exclusion:** In some animal welfare organizations, LGBTQ+ individuals face issues with respect and inclusivity, including verbal harassment and inadequate disciplinary measures.

- *“Some (not all) have comments about sex & gender identities that are not very respectful in what others' identity means to them.”*
- *“Anyone being openly transgender or even simply non-conforming are mocked in certain corners of the organization.”*
- *“Individuals do not respect gender orientation and pronouns and refuse to do better for the person out of respect or equity.”*

**Bullying and Harassment:** Fear of retaliation for speaking out creates a culture that inhibits broader inclusion and transparency. Bullying and harassment related to race, gender, and disability are significant concerns.

- *“We've lost a lot of good staff because of poor managers, at the highest levels, who allow some to behave so poorly that the hostile work environment forced people out.”*
- *“I've observed several instances where hateful, discriminatory comments based on race, gender, or LGBT identity were made by staff members to other staff members, and the victims, rather than the perpetrators, were held accountable.”*
- *“It is very hard to break in here and feel included as a valued member of the org because of the hierarchical culture, the lack of transparency, and the threat of retaliation.”*

## 3. Lack of Commitment and Support for DEI Efforts

The narrative comments indicated challenges around leadership support and accountability for fostering DEI and ensuring a respectful work environment. Primarily, respondents indicated that leadership does not adequately participate in DEI activities or consistently model inclusive behaviors. Additionally, respondents indicated that there is general resistance to DEI efforts that cause efforts to stagnate or create conflict. Some responses in the comments reflected the perspectives of those who are resistant to or skeptical of DEI efforts.

**Leadership Buy-In:** Respondents stress the need for stronger commitment and buy-in from leadership to advance DEI initiatives effectively. Leaders need to be actively involved in modeling DEI behaviors.

- *“I would start with real buy-in from the executive team. Most do not attend DEI meetings and when any do, they shoot ideas down.”*
- *“Top-down leadership modeling and buy-in. You can host all the trainings you want but without the organization’s leaders doing some really hard, vulnerable work you aren’t going to see the systemic change you want.”*
- *“We dissolved the staff DEI committee, the consultants we hired felt that executive leadership was not receptive to recommendations, and we did not complete the training/assessment.”*

**Performative DEI Initiatives:** There is frustration over the perceived performative nature of DEI efforts. Respondents highlight a lack of genuine follow-through from leadership after training and a disconnect between stated values and actual practices.

- *“Inability to make real strides against racial discrimination; there is acknowledgement, but it is performative.”*
- *“Follow-through from staff and leadership after trainings. We are trained on these things all the time, but it’s not common to see the training applied.”*

**Resistance and Reluctance to Implementation:** Key issues include a reluctance to adopt new concepts, perceptions of DEI as irrelevant, resistance from leadership, and a lack of prioritization. Additionally, there is hostility and tension related to DEI initiatives, highlighting the need for stronger support and understanding at all organizational levels.

- *“I think there is a great deal of fear and resistance surrounding DEI. I think there is some interest and effort when talking about it, however, when having to apply or practice the work it falls short.”*
- *“One of the biggest gaps in our organization’s DEI efforts is the widespread reluctance to learn and embrace new concepts.”*
- *“While there is not direct retaliation for speaking about racial equity and DEI, there are indirect, passive aggressive forms of defensiveness.”*

**Examples of Skepticism AAWA Survey:** The feedback suggests concerns that DEI initiatives are overshadowing the core mission of animal welfare organizations. Some respondents feel that DEI efforts focus more on social agendas than on hiring qualified staff and prioritizing animal care, revealing underlying biases related to race, class, and gender.

- *“DEI is important, but making it the highest priority at the expense of core services or operations feels like special treatment for certain groups that is unfair to others who are viewed as having an advantage, when in fact challenges are faced by all humans regardless of race, gender, etc.”*
- *“Too often, DEI does mean, ‘Didn’t Earn It.’ We do a disservice to those who have the skills and requirements by hiring anyone based on whether they check the right boxes.”*
- *“Quit talking about DEI. Let’s just be respectful of each other as we do our jobs and promote animal welfare.”*

## 4. Challenges around equitable employee treatment and development

Respondents indicated challenges at every stage of the employment process, including recruitment, fair treatment, professional and career development for people from diverse backgrounds. It is common for nonprofit organizations to struggle with the question of how to retain staff when there are few promotional opportunities. However, considering the historical homogeneity of the animal welfare profession, it is important for organizations to take a more proactive approach to diversifying the workforce at every level and reducing the potential for bias across the employment cycle.

### Supporting data

- Only 58% agree employees from different backgrounds are encouraged to apply for higher positions.
- Only 41% agree there is a clear career development path employees from different backgrounds

### Changes over time

The responses to these questions from the 2024 survey were more positive than in 2021, indicating improvement in these areas. However, these scores indicate significant room for improvement in supporting employees' professional and career development.

### Demographic variances

Individuals who identify as a race other than White, people with disabilities, gender nonbinary, age 25-34, and LGBTQIA+ had significantly lower scores in the following:

- work assignments are fairly delegated
- employees different from the majority are treated fairly
- people who are different from the majority are encouraged to apply for higher positions

### Narrative Comments

**Early Engagement:** This theme highlights the need to introduce animal welfare careers to young people from underserved and diverse communities. It advocates for enhanced educational outreach, scholarships, and entry-level opportunities to build early interest and create pathways into the field.

- *“There also needs to be a larger effort in reaching out to diverse communities at a younger age so that all children are able to grow up understanding and learning about animal welfare from an educational perspective.”*
- *“We need to start early to identify people who might not otherwise know that animal welfare is a career option. Create more opportunities for them to learn about animal welfare as a career and create more programs that introduce them to animal welfare as a career.”*

**Diversity Recruitment Efforts:** Issues include low pay, poor outreach, and lack of representation in job postings. Recommendations include improving recruitment in underserved communities, expanding educational and training opportunities, and adjusting job requirements to accommodate diverse backgrounds.

- *“Our organization's lack of diversity stems from outdated recruitment strategies and insufficient outreach to marginalized communities.”*
- *“We need to reevaluate our job postings to ensure they are inclusive and appealing to a wider range of candidates.”*
- *“Creating a more inclusive hiring process requires rethinking job requirements and considering the diverse experiences candidates bring.”*

**Career Progression:** There is a call for clearer career progression pathways and equitable access to development opportunities.

- *“Most of the 'labor' positions are manned by young and strong individuals who are massively overworked and underpaid, with almost no room for advancement. No real effort for development of their career is made. They burnout and leave or find higher paying positions elsewhere and leave.”*
- *“More opportunities for promotion, apprenticeship programs geared towards people of diverse backgrounds and listen to those few people who come from diverse backgrounds.”*
- *“Our animal care staff members are the most diverse of all our employees and there are no opportunities for them to advance in the organization.”*

**Salary and Benefits:** Many employees face low wages, leading to a workforce predominantly composed of individuals who can afford to work in this field due to additional financial support. This pay imbalance excludes diverse candidates and perpetuates inequities, making it essential to raise wages and ensure that compensation reflects the true value of the work performed.

- *“Diverse candidates are often deterred by low salaries and inadequate benefits, which don't reflect the value of their contributions.”*
- *“The pay targets mainly those who can afford to take on low pay, which is generally white middle to upper-class women. Many who are passionate about animal welfare cannot sustain a living on the pay of entry-level and must have multiple jobs or leave the field altogether.”*
- *“Inadequate pay is inherently discriminatory, as racial minorities, women, and marginalized communities hold less generational wealth and face greater barriers to achieving equitable income than mainstream communities.”*

## 5. Inconsistencies in terms of inclusive work culture.

Although respondents indicated progress has been made, there are still challenges and inconsistencies in terms of people experiencing inclusion and a sense of belonging and psychological safety in their workplace.

### Supporting data

- 20% of respondents disagreed they can voice a contrary opinion without fear of negative consequences.
- 23% of respondents disagreed they feel they have adequate input into decisions that affect them.
- Only 48% agreed that conflicts among diverse individuals are handled well in my organization.



### Changes over time

The scores did improve slightly, however there is still over a 20% disagreement in terms of being able to voice a contrary opinion and having adequate input into decisions, indicating a need to improve psychological safety for staff.

### Demographic variances

Respondents who identify as a race other than White, people with disabilities, gender nonbinary, and LGBTQIA+ expressed higher levels of disagreement saying they can be their authentic selves at work or can voice contrary opinions without fear of consequences.

## **6. Inadequate inclusion or support for diverse communities.**

Responses indicate ongoing systemic challenges when it comes to serving the diverse needs of communities, particularly those who belong to racially or ethnically diverse identities, people with disabilities, non-native English speakers, low income and un-housed people. Respondents indicated that animal welfare has to overcome a history of inequities and prejudice, create or revamp practices to support all animal owners, and ensure staff are adequately trained to support diverse populations.

### Supporting data

- 63% agree their organization supports all of the communities in our service region equitably
- 65% agree their organization has the resources and capacity to engage with diverse communities
- 53% agree their organization's staff have the skills to address the needs of diverse communities
- 54% agree diverse communities get what they need from my organization
- 62% agree their organization adequately considers the needs of diverse communities when making decisions about our policies, practices, and services

### Changes over time

2024 respondents had higher levels of agreement that their organization's staff have the skills to address diverse community needs, diverse communities get what they need from the organization, and their organization adequately considers the needs of diverse communities when making decisions about our policies, practices, and services. However, these scores still indicate much room for improvement.

### Demographic variances

Respondents who identify as a race other than White, people with disabilities, gender nonbinary, and LGBTQIA+ had rated their organization lower in terms of supporting all of the communities in its service region equitably.

## Narrative comments

**Historical Challenges:** Respondents note that animal welfare organizations have a history of systemic discrimination, particularly against marginalized communities, with policies and practices that have excluded people of color and those with lower incomes. The field's punitive approach and failure to address these historical inequities continue to impact pet ownership and community engagement negatively.

- *“Historical discrimination and animal bond creation animal welfare value and engagement in certain historically marginalized communities.”*
- *“Animal welfare is a historically racist, punitive system. POC and low-income communities are often targeted by leash laws, adoption policies, etc.”*
- *“Historically animal welfare and animal ownership laws have not been favorable to minority groups. Systemic issues continue to contribute to this, and not enough outreach education has not done enough to build trust with these groups.”*

**White Savior Complex:** Organizations often face criticism for perpetuating a "white savior" complex, a term used to describe when white people take on the role of rescuing people from marginalized or racially minoritized groups. It is a critical term that highlights a pattern of denying agency to people of color. This can undermine genuine partnerships with racially diverse communities. This approach can perpetuate systemic racism and classism, reinforcing stereotypes and failing to address the root causes of issues within marginalized communities.

- *“There is a savior complex among a lot of animal welfare. White women 'giving to' local diverse communities, rather than working WITH those communities...”*
- *“White folks need to be honest about whether they want to engage in true transformational work around DEI. There needs to be accountability for the harm that white saviorism, white supremacy, and racism has caused (and continues to cause) BIPOC in the field, as well as those in communities.”*
- *“The staff are emblematic of the 'white women savior' in animal welfare organizations.”*

**Judgmental Attitudes:** The sector is criticized for having judgmental attitudes towards who is considered a "good" pet owner, often influenced by biases related to race, income, and personal situations. Respondents believe there is a strong need for the field to become more open-minded and empathetic, and meet people where they are, rather than sticking to rigid standards about what makes someone a responsible pet owner.

- *“The animal welfare field is very opinionated and judgmental. If we truly want to help our community and animals, we need to be open-minded and embrace DEI.”*
- *“Many organizations are still very biased and judgmental - restrictive policies and attitude that we must protect animals from people”*
- *“As animal welfare professionals need to consider how we can provide resources to help folks keep their pets and interact with all people free of biases in a non-judgmental way.”*

**Unhoused and Under-Resourced Pet Owners:** Organizations struggle to understand and support the needs of unhoused individuals or those with limited financial resources, often displaying bias or lack of empathy.

- *“The biggest gap is a lack of understanding that under-resourced and houseless people still deserve animals. We are so quick to judge everyone's situation that there is no real understanding of each other's side.”*
- *“Showing more sympathy for a dog owned by a homeless person than for the homeless person shouldn't be normal.”*

**Pet Adoptions:** Animal welfare organizations often hinder diverse groups from adopting pets due to biases and outdated practices related to race, financial status, and housing stability.

- *“Adoption counselors may make assumptions that minorities cannot provide for their pets and decline potential adopters.”*
- *“Less adoption requirements that uphold systematic racism, like vet references, home visits and fenced yards.”*
- *“More respect of BIPOC communities and less coded language about how poor communities aren't good adopters or don't want to volunteer at their local shelter. There is still A LOT of ‘well, the folks in our community just don't want to volunteer or don't adopt from us.’”*

**Disabled Communities:** Calls for improved accommodations for people with physical, intellectual, and mental disabilities to better serve diverse community needs.

- *“I think disabled people are often not accounted for...there are not a lot of accommodations for physically disabled people in animal welfare. Overall, I believe that those of us actually working with the animals are presumed to be abled.”*
- *“Our facility is not handicap compliant in many ways so that portion of our community is excluded based on the outdated design and small area. People with any sort of mobility issue find it hard to navigate.”*
- *“There is a lack of ability to work with neuro diverse employees as well as not bringing in more diversity into the organization.”*
- *“I would like our organization to support its staff with disabilities better, encourage mental health without a stigmatization, and become more neurodivergent friendly/educated.”*

**Non-English-Speaking Communities:** Calls for improved accommodations and more bilingual/multilingual staff to better serve diverse community needs.

- *“I would like to see more bilingual employees so we can better serve non-English speaking communities.”*
- *“The single biggest barrier to serving our community equitably is a lack of Spanish-language speakers on staff and/or accessible by contract for translation services. This impacts internal equity as well as the few Spanish-language speakers we have are tasked with providing translation services for all departments and interactions with the public on top of being expected to complete their actual assigned job tasks without any additional compensation.”*
- *“There is also a lack of people that speak different languages so the brunt of the translating falls on a couple of individuals.”*

**Economic Barriers and Gatekeeping:** High costs associated with veterinary care and other animal services create obstacles. Respondents suggest more affordable care options for community members and describe the need for accessible services for those without personal transportation.

- *“We need to be prepared to go over alternative options with owners for cost-savvy treatments, tiered care, and fixing common behavioral problems.”*
- *“Monetary - we cannot support services to diverse neighborhoods because we cannot fund the staff or the programs for this.”*
- *“I think a big gap is offering services to individuals with low incomes. I think, especially in shelter settings, there is a thought of ‘if you can't afford to care for your pet, you shouldn't have one.’ While I understand that situations differ, I think that as animal lovers who know first-hand how much animals can impact lives for the better, we need to be approaching people with as much compassion as we show the animals.”*

- *“Rescues and even some shelters discriminate against lower-income groups by requiring homeownership, fenced yards, existing relationships with veterinarians, high adoption fees, etc.”*

## MSM Global’s Recommendations

### What can animal welfare organizations do to address these challenges?

Animal welfare organizations are at different stages of development in their DEI efforts, and each organization should customize its approach and priorities depending on the specific needs of its workforce and the communities it serves. However, there are several key strategic components that any organization must have in place to ensure a thriving culture that meets the needs of diverse constituencies. The recommendations listed within each component are suggestions for organizations to consider, but not necessarily a checklist of everything that organizations can or should do.

1. Embed DEI into organizational strategy. Make DEI a part of the organization’s strategic goals, identify specific objectives, actions, metrics. All too often, DEI efforts are addressed in an ad hoc, reactive way, which leads to a great deal of energy and high expectations for change but often loses momentum before any real progress can be made.
  - a. Hire an expert consultant to facilitate a process to integrate DEI principles into the organization’s strategic plan.
  - b. Identify who needs to play an active role in the design and implementation of DEI actions (e.g. leadership, HR, DEI Committee members, Board).
  - c. Identify goals that are SMART (specific, measurable, aligned, realistic, and time-bound).
  - d. Determine individual and collective responsibilities for achieving each goal and key performance indicators to measure progress.
  - e. Evaluate progress on a regular basis and course correct as needed to keep driving change.
2. Leadership commitment and accountability. Leaders must make visible commitments and hold themselves and others accountable for inclusive and respectful organizations for all. Although leaders and executives should not be expected to be experts in DEI, they are the face of the organization and set the tone of the organizational culture and priorities. Trust and confidence will be built or broken by the actions of leaders.
  - a. Add DEI competencies into leadership team’s performance evaluations, with behavioral indicators demonstrating success.
  - b. Use 360 evaluations for leaders and managers to receive regular anonymous feedback from direct reports, peers, and bosses.
  - c. Send regular communications to staff with language and messaging indicating ongoing commitment to DEI.
  - d. Drive the DEI strategy for your organization.
  - e. Participate in DEI learning and development activities alongside staff or separately with other leaders to continue to demonstrate commitment and hone skills.

3. Learning & development. Leaders and staff should continue to engage in training to develop skills for fostering DEI in their AWOs.
  - a. Incorporate DEI language and skills into all learning and development for AWO (employee orientation, volunteer orientation/training, communications, customer service, etc).
  - b. Hold annual DEI training that takes a constructive and practical approach to demonstrating DEI as a core value of the organization.
  - c. Hold “lunch and learn” informal sessions to explore specific dimensions of identity or issues that are relevant to your organization and the communities it serves (e.g. how to work with tribal communities, supporting refugee populations, addressing the needs of unhoused communities, creating an inclusive workplace for neurodiverse employees).
4. Equitable engagement and services. Regularly assess the needs of communities in their service region and adapt services to meet the needs of underserved communities.
  - a. Work with staff and volunteers to identify all the communities that would benefit from outreach in your area.
  - b. Reach out to local community leaders (places of worship, small businesses, civic organizations) to identify opportunities for partnership and support.
  - c. Reach out to human service organizations in the area to identify opportunities for partnership and support.
  - d. Work with animal control staff to identify ways to build relationships with communities that may perceive law enforcement as a threat.
5. Inclusive work cultures. Regularly assess workplace culture and develop norms to promote fairness, respect, belonging for all.
  - a. Conduct annual employee engagement or satisfaction surveys to determine any areas of concern.
  - b. Work with staff to create a set of norms for communicating respectfully and building a sense of belonging. Post norms for all employees to regularly remind each other of these commitments..
  - c. Train all people leaders on teambuilding, performance management, and inclusive leadership to set them and their employees up for success.
  - d. Swiftly respond to any incidents of discrimination, harassment, bullying, hostile behaviors. Ensure there is a clearly articulated disciplinary process in place and follow it.
  - e. Conduct leadership and staff-wide training on creating a culture of “calling in” to ensure everyone has the skills and knowledge to engage in constructive conversations when people engage in harmful or biased behavior.
6. Recruitment and retention. Leaders and HR managers use a DEI lens for every stage of the employment cycle.
  - a. Review job descriptions to evaluate any potential biases or limitations (e.g. unnecessary educational requirements, number of years experience, criminal record or drug tests, etc).
  - b. Develop a broad list of sites or locations for job posting to diversify the potential candidate pool. Do this before you have a job to post.

- c. Review employment policies to identify potential biases (e.g. dress code or hairstyle, leave policies, etc).
- d. Conduct a compensation and benefits review to identify any opportunities to make positions more attractive and competitive.
- e. Make individual development planning a formal part of every manager/employee relationship.
- f. Conduct “stay” interviews to identify areas of need or concern early and support retention.

## How can the AAWA support the animal welfare profession?

1. **Continue to be a leading voice for the profession.** The AAWA has been a leader in reshaping the way the animal welfare profession thinks about DEI. It has become a trusted source for knowledge and education on DEI issues and should continue to provide guidance and leadership to the field.
  - a. Share the DEI Audit report widely with members and the public.
  - b. Continue to host the AAWA DEI Council.
  - c. Provide continuous communication and messaging about DEI for animal welfare in marketing, newsletters, conferences, and the website.
  - d. Revamp the DEI page of resources and tools in the Learning Center for easy, self-directed learning.
  - e. Add a DEI competency to the CAWA exam.
  - f. Create an assessment for AWOs to use internally to evaluate their DEI efforts.
2. **Prepare the next generation of animal welfare leaders.** Provide programming and resources to equip aspiring leaders, to diversify the pipeline of leaders and ensure ongoing commitment to DEI.
  - a. Launch an Aspiring Leaders Program for select individuals to develop leadership skills early in their careers and prepare them for advancement.
  - b. Implement a mentoring program for aspiring leaders to connect and learn from seasoned leaders.
  - c. Amplify aspiring leaders’ voices and experiences during events (webinars, conferences).
3. **Provide ongoing learning and development.** Continue to provide practical, relevant training and development opportunities for animal welfare professionals on DEI.
  - a. Revamp the DEI Leadership Accelerator for Executives.
  - b. Continue to run the DEI Ambassador 1.0 and 2.0 programs.
  - c. Provide a bank of executive mentors to support animal welfare leaders’ growth and development.
  - d. Provide resources on recruiting and supporting specific identities (neurodiversity, disability, etc).
4. **Support recruitment and retention efforts.** Provide ongoing resources on model practices and build/leverage relationships with institutions to help diversify the field.

- a. Conduct Recruitment & Retention Roundtables with animal welfare professionals and specialists.
  - b. Provide templates for employment policies and practices for AWOs to emulate.
  - c. Partner with professional groups, ed institutions to help broaden the pool of candidates.
  - d. Continue to conduct the Compensation & Benefits Survey.
5. **Promote accountability.** Leverage position in the profession to set expectations and guidelines for ensuring accountability for inclusion and equity.
- a. Work with the AAWA DEI Council to create a position paper on accountability to prevent/respond to discrimination and harassment.
  - b. Work with the HR/Ops Group to develop a set of resources on discrimination and harassment free workplace.
6. **Support equitable engagement and outreach to communities.** Provide resources and guidance to help AWOs provide equitable and inclusive services to traditionally excluded or targeted communities.
- a. Develop resource guides for building trusting relationships with underserved or marginalized communities.
  - b. Collaborate with public health, human service organizations to provide helpful educational resources to AWOs on how to partner with organizations in their localities.

## Conclusion

The AAWA has made immense progress in a short amount of time in its efforts to foster change across the animal welfare profession to support DEI. The first few years required a great deal of effort to raise consciousness of the inequities that exist, create structures for strategically leading change, and to provide a strong foundation of knowledge and skills for animal welfare professionals.

This audit indicates that the AAWA's efforts have made significant impact and helped a large number of AWOs implement their own DEI initiatives in various ways. As the AAWA moves into this next phase of its work, the focus should be on continuing to make DEI a core part of its strategy and communication, to support ongoing learning and development, and to help build a strong pipeline of diverse leaders equipped with the skills to lead the profession in the future. The AAWA also has an opportunity to more proactively support animal welfare professionals in developing stronger outreach and trust with underserved populations through education and resources.

We commend the AAWA on the immense progress to date and feel confident the profession will continue to advance in terms of DEI in the years to come with the AAWA's strong leadership and guidance.