

**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION  
INITIATIVES AND THE PERCEPTION OF DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION  
INITIATIVES AMONGST FIREFIGHTERS IN THE VIRGINIA BEACH FIRE  
DEPARTMENT**

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## **Abstract**

There is a relationship between organizational diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives and the perception of such initiatives by members of the organization that could create distrust and resistance to change. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover the relationship between DEI initiatives and the perception of DEI initiatives amongst firefighters in the Virginia Beach Fire Department (VBFD). The study aimed to identify trends in perceptions of VBFD firefighters that may help guide the development, delivery, and application of future DEI initiatives in the fire service. Desired outcomes of DEI initiatives within the VBFD were mixed. Some participants agreed with the intent of the DEI initiatives while disagreeing with the implementation. Several participants had specific examples of how the VBFD Inclusion and Diversity statement was not being abided by. Some were unsure of exactly what the DEI initiatives were intended to do or who the DEI initiatives were intended to reach. Most participants were optimistic about the ability of firefighters to change and had seen positive change within the participant's careers. It is important for the fire service to understand that resistance to DEI initiatives and unintended consequences are not unique to other professions. All members of a fire department should be a part of DEI initiative development, understand the intent of any goals, and should be able to see intended outcomes.

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## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

### Background

Workforce diversity can be described as similarities and differences among employees in terms of age, cultural background, physical abilities, race, religion, gender, and sexual orientation (Saxena, 2014). Workforce diversity has shown to increase performance, increase an organization's knowledge and skill base, help in conflict resolution, and improve communication within and outside of the organization (Kathimba & Anyieni, 2018). Kathimba and Anyieni (2018) also found that diverse workforces can increase innovation and productivity and help serve the organization's diverse external customers. Workforce diversity has also shown to be a resiliency factor in uncertain organizational environments, such as the turnover of high-level executives or organizational restructuring (Kim et al., 2020).

According to the US Department of Labor (USDOL) (2021), in 2018, only 4% of paid fire service personnel were women. Evarts and Stein (2020) estimated that 11% of volunteer fire services personnel in 2018 were women. Historically, women comprise about 50% of the US workforce, however, women's representation in the fire service is uniquely low when compared to other occupations with similar demands such as strength, stamina, and danger (Jahnke et al., 2012). For example, women comprised 16% of the enlisted forces and 8% of the officer corps of the US military in 2018, for a total 24% of the total US military workforce (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020). Even in policing, women make up about 13% of total law enforcement officers in the US (Starheim, 2019). While the first paid female firefighter in the US was hired in Arlington, Virginia in 1974, the number of paid female firefighters in departments across the US are still minimal (Connolly, 2019). Additionally, every ethnicity other than non-Hispanic whites, which comprised 80% of the total fire service workforce in 2018, are underrepresented when

compared to national averages (USDL, 2021). Unfortunately, Martin (2019) showed that in an observation of nine Virginia fire departments, the more diverse a community was, the wider the gap was between the workforce and the community.

To help combat the lack of workforce diversity in the United States Fire Service, many labor and local organizations have adopted diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) statements with the intent of recognizing the need for change. The American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) (2009) adopted resolution 7 in 2005, calling for diversity and inclusion of women and people of color at every level of leadership and in every program of the union movement. The International Association of Fire Firefighters (IAFF), as part of the AFL-CIO, has recognized that increasing diversity in a fire department improves overall service to the community. Additionally, the Center for Public Safety Excellence (CPSE) and the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) identified eight critical issues facing the fire service in the next 30 years, one of which was inclusiveness (CPSE, 2020). CPSE and ICMA recognized the need to prioritize recruitment, selection, and promotion of members within organizations that reflected the demographics of the community. Despite these efforts, the National Fire Protection Association issued a report that in 2020, an average of only 4.4% of firefighters were women, 85.0% were white, and only 13.1% were Hispanic or Latino (Fahy et al., 2022).

In 2010, the City of Virginia Beach (CVB) modified the City's Organizational Values to adopt an Inclusion and Diversity Value. The 2017-2022 City Council Goals specifically included the goal of diversifying the public safety workforce to mirror community demographics (CVB, 2017). In 2020, the Virginia Beach Fire Department (VBFD) adopted an Inclusion and Diversity statement to assert that DEI is essential to providing the best service to the community. The

2020-2025 VBFD Strategic Plan even includes a goal of recruiting, hiring, training, and maintaining a highly diverse workforce.

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study could contribute to identifying the relationship between DEI initiatives established by leadership and the perception of DEI initiatives through a firefighter's lens as most institutions have determined that they are not ready to accept various types of diversity and require buy-in and adoption from all levels of the organization (Bacouel-Jentjens & Yang, 2019). Without well thought out policies and support, DEI initiatives may produce unintended consequences including negative goal progress, desirable and undesirable effects on unrelated goals, and improved diversity metrics without real goal progress (Leslie, 2019). Simply having DEI initiatives increases White men's perceptions of unfair treatment and increases sensitivity to anti-White bias (Kaiser et al., 2022). DEI initiatives shape perceptions of anti-White bias even when the White subjects take on third-party, fact-finding roles with no personal interest at stake. When White subjects were presented with affirmations of previously held hierarchal status, there was an increase in perception of anti-White bias (Wellman et al., 2015). Conversely, there was also a decrease in support for Affirmative Action programs. When racial progress was shown as experimentally significant, White subjects who believed that the current hierarchy was legitimate were more likely to report feelings of victimhood and discrimination (Wilkins & Kaiser, 2014).

There is a lack of research within the fire service to demonstrate a relationship between DEI initiatives and increased diversity in the fire service. Current research in the healthcare industry suggests that creating DEI statements that are aspirational, stress autonomy, and express a multicultural message may help efforts to improve diversity and inclusion and may help avoid

the negative effects that such a statement may inadvertently cause (Carnes et al., 2019). Strong, clearly worded diversity statements are viewed as more genuine and authentic within Fortune-500 companies (Davis, 2022). There is also evidence to suggest that initiatives perceived to be more effective make organizations less attractive to applicants and workers, unless there are government mandated quotas, in which case the perceptions are negated (Windscheid et al., 2017). Similar understanding of DEI initiatives in the fire service could lead to better service delivery by improving design and delivery of DEI statements, with the desired effect of improvement in overall demographic makeup.

### **Problem Statement**

The relationship between organizational initiatives and the perception of the initiatives for members of the organization has a potential to create distrust, exclusivity, and resistance to change (Wilkins, 2018). The CVB and VBFD leadership have established DEI as a core organizational value, including the desire for the public safety workforce to mirror community demographics (CVB, 2017; VBFD, 2020). As irrational ideas are associated with resistance to change, the perception from firefighters regarding DEI initiatives that would change and shift existing culture in the fire service could be met with resistance, therefore fostering a culture of distrust between leadership and lower-level members (Bovey & Hede, 2001).

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to discover the relationship between DEI initiatives and the perception of DEI initiatives amongst firefighters in the VBFD. This study aimed to identify trends in perceptions of VBFD firefighters that may help guide the development, delivery, and application of future DEI initiatives in the fire service.

## **Research Questions**

RQ1. How has the adoption of formal DEI initiatives in the VBFD affected the desired outcome of the initiatives?

RQ2. How do demographic majority and minority groups of the VBFD perceive DEI initiatives?

RQ3. What are the policy or procedural changes that VBFD members have perceived to have occurred since the adoption of formal DEI statements?

RQ4. What trends may be identified amongst demographic groups in the VBFD that may be used to better implement DEI initiatives?

RQ5. What attitudes contribute toward acceptance of DEI initiatives by firefighters?

RQ6. How do DEI training initiatives impact the culture of the fire department?

RQ7. Why are firefighters resistant to change?

## **Summary**

Greater workforce diversity has been shown to improve productivity, innovation, and overall service delivery (Kathimba & Anyieni, 2018). The United States Fire Service is not as diverse as other similarly occupations (Jahnke et al., 2012; Council on Foreign Relations, 2020; Starheim, 2019). To combat the lack of workforce diversity, fire departments inside and outside of the U.S. have adopted DEI initiatives and statements to varying degrees of success (Fredin, 2022; Bendersky, 2018). The CVB and the VBFD have formally adopted mission values, goals, statements, and initiatives related to DEI (CVB, 2017; VBFD, 2020). This study looked to discover if there is a relationship to the adoption of these DEI initiatives and the perception of what the initiatives are by the members of the VBFD. Chapter two provides a literature review of current research in relation to this topic. Chapter three details methodology and research design

for this study. Chapter four discusses the results of the study, while Chapter five discusses conclusions and recommendations for the fire service based on the results.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

Phenomenological studies seek to discover realities by studying lived experiences, perceptions, and feelings of participants about a particular phenomenon, in this case diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. After providing a brief history of DEI in the U.S., this literature review will focus on three primary areas. The importance of workforce diversity outlines how DEI can make an organization better, the current state of workforce diversity in the fire service looks at the experiences and realities of minority groups in the fire service, and how DEI initiatives have been perceived within other organizations and communities is examined to better understand how initiatives may be perceived by members of the fire service in the future.

### **Existing Literature**

In 1954, the US Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* that the “separate but equal” doctrine was unconstitutional. In 1961, President John F. Kennedy issued an executive order that used the term affirmative action for the first time and advised federal contractors to ensure applicants are treated equally without regard to race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. In essence, affirmative action should create an environment where equal employment opportunity (EEO) exists for everyone. In 1964, the Civil Rights Act rendered discrimination illegal in the workplace and was amended by the Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972 (Schumann, 2006).

In 1900, one in eight people was described as non-white, and by 2000, the ratio was one in four. In 2016, about 40% of the U.S. population was of a race other than white. By 2045, it is projected that whites will be outnumbered by minority groups. Like many other organizations,

the fire service has struggled to maintain a workforce that is reflective of changing community demographics (Martin, 2019).

Currently, the VBFD employs about 520 uniformed members. Of those 520 people, there are two Black captains, two female captains, one Black battalion chief, one female assistant chief, and one female deputy chief. The department is 85% white and 88% male, compared to the CVB demographics of 61% white and 49% male.

### **Importance of Workforce Diversity**

Diverse organizations help attract and retain talented employees; improve customer-oriented processes; improve creativity, problem-solving ability, and innovation; and increase employee satisfaction (Seliverstova & Pierog, 2021). Seliverstova and Pierog (2021) also showed that if a company is run primarily by a single ethnic group, innovation decreases, and worse decisions are made. Diversity is associated with greater goal clarity, and clarifying organizational goals positively affect job satisfaction (Stazyk et al., 2021)

Clinicians from underrepresented racial and ethnic backgrounds in health care sectors are more likely to work in underserved communities, resulting in improved access to care, patient satisfaction, and outcomes (Rudman et al., 2022). Rudman et al. (2022) demonstrated that treatments, communication, and patient perceptions of the care they receive are all improved when clinicians and patients share similar race and gender profiles. Diversity and cultural competence in medicine have also been considered important in improvement of patient safety (Rudeman et al., 2022).

### **Workforce Diversity in the Fire Service**

Crews with mixed genders have shown greater collaboration, increased creative solutions, and heightened sensitivity (Bear & Woolley, 2011). Women can be more

compassionate and better communicators than their male counterparts by improving relations with patients on medical calls (Schermerhorn-Collins, 2017). Gender effects on safety behaviors have shown that female firefighters improve the overall safety on emergency calls (Khan et al., 2017). The research found women make safer decisions on the fire ground because they are less likely to take unnecessary risks as their male counterparts. Khan et al. (2017) also described that due to having smaller stature, women use better biomechanics to accomplish tasks on the fire ground instead of using brute force.

Many reasons have been suggested for small numbers of recruitment and retention of women firefighters including higher rates of on-the-job injury and incurring of chronic injuries when compared to men (Hollerbach et al., 2020), worksite harassment (Hulett et al., 2008), and the potential for impacting reproductive health (Berkman et al., 1999). In a study of 1,773 women firefighters, discrimination and harassment, negative physical and mental outcomes of workplace experiences, low levels of job satisfaction, and negative impacts on family and home stress were all found to be prevalent (Jahnke et al., 2019). 37.5% of women firefighters reported experiencing verbal harassment, 12.9% reported written harassment, 16.9% reported hazing, 37.4% reported uninvited sexual advances, and 5.1% reported assaults. Women who experienced discrimination and harassment reported over 40% more poor health days within the last 30 days and exhibited signs of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

In the public service realm, greater organizational ethnic diversity improves an organization's integrity and creates an improved ethical climate (Hong, 2015). Additionally, Hong (2015) found that ethnic diversity is associated with lower corruption rates and better citizen attitudes in relation to fair treatment. Research on the English fire service supported the

idea that the presence of more female and minority ethnic firefighters is associated with greater organizational effectiveness (Andrews et al., 2014).

Ethnic minority status has been attributed to a greater risk of unfavorable body composition and more poor physical health days amongst ethnic minority firefighters (Poston et al., 2014). Minority firefighters in white-dominated communities reported a higher physician reported prevalence of depression compared to minority firefighters in minority-dominated communities. Poston et al. (2014) also found that discrimination has been linked to health disparities and negative impacts on minority firefighter health, safety, and retention.

In a study examining factors that determine the make-up of police and fire departments, O'Brien (2003) reviewed factors including ethnicity of the mayor, affirmative action policy, EEO complaints, EEO-black council members, suburban/independent/location of the city, minority populations, failure rates of recruits, and the percentage of public employees in a union. O'Brien (2003) concluded that the use of both affirmative action policy and numeric goals never increased minority firefighter employment and decreased Native American employment.

Varone (2014) proposed that fire departments invite legal liabilities when lacking workforce diversity. Varone offered statistics to support the claim. First, a fire department is nine times more likely to be sued by a subordinate than by the customer base. Second, a fire chief is 12 times more likely to be sued by a subordinate than by a customer. Third, a chief officer is seven times more likely to be sued by a subordinate or colleague than by a customer. Fourth, a company officer is five times more likely to be sued by a subordinate or colleague than by a customer. Finally, a firefighter is 1.5 times more likely to be sued by a colleague than by a customer. Workforce diversity and inclusion decreases complaints and grievances and should be a primary focus for any fire department (Varone, 2014).

## **DEI Initiatives**

While many organizations attempt to implement diversity programs, Dobbin et al. (2011) argued that organizations that lack workforce diversity are no more likely to adopt diversity programs than organizations that do have workforce diversity. Pro-diversity industry and cultures are what promote diversity programs. Even if there is a pro-diversity culture and leadership within an organization, a more inclusive environment is not a guaranteed (Samdanis & Özbilgin, 2020).

Rabl et al. (2020) discovered a relationship between an employee's perception of an organization's integration and learning approach to diversity and the employee's perception of organizational ethical virtue. The higher the employee places value in diversity themselves, the more effective a diversity initiative became, leading to a stronger view that the organization was ethically virtuous. Rabl et al. suggested that there must be a fit between an employee's perception of the organization's approach to diversity and the employee's personal value on diversity for inclusion to provide a positive employee behavior.

In a study on the perception of professional climate in health services and policy research, 53.4% of participants did not believe that the current workforce was reflective of the diversity within the community (Chantarat et al., 2022). Most participants had witnessed DEI initiatives in their organizations, however almost 40% of the participants described the DEI initiatives as lacking substance. Current DEI initiatives focused more on planning activities than implementation activities. Only about 44% of participants felt supported in their career development.

Kuntz and Pandaram (2022) questioned whether there are differences in perspectives of DEI initiatives amongst majority and minority groups in health care. Minority groups were found

to have attributed greater personal value to DEI initiatives and viewed the organization as prioritizing the initiatives. The minority groups also experienced a lower sense of belonging within the organization compared to the majority groups. The higher the level of personal and organizational importance given to the DEI initiatives amongst the individuals, the higher the sense of belonging became (Kuntz & Pandaram, 2022).

In business, mandatory DEI training has been linked with lower levels of minority representation in leadership for Black, Latin, and Asian employees of all genders, and white women (Kidder et al., 2004). Kidder et al. attributed this disparity to resistance from existing leadership. Additionally, backlash was observed from organizational equity efforts such as affirmative action policies. When diversity of candidates was mentioned as a reason for hiring or promotion, people tended to rate the qualifications and skills of the candidate from a minority group lower, even if the people were part of the same demographic as the candidate (Dover et al., 2020).

Opposition to DEI initiatives are often stronger from what are considered advantaged groups that benefit from the status quo (Iyer, 2022). DEI initiatives can become undermined by the power held by advantaged groups, resulting in wasted resources, continued inequality, and increased tensions within the organization. Iyer (2022) proposed three types of threats used to explain the advantaged groups' opposition to DEI initiatives: resource threats, symbolic threats, and ingroup morality threats. Resource threats are the perception of losing access to outcomes or opportunities. Symbolic threats are concerns involving the introduction of new values, culture, and expectations that are not in line with previous iterations. Ingroup morality threats are the perceptions about the role that one's own group plays in perpetuating inequalities.

In a study on DEI initiatives in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, Cundiff et al. (2018) found that female targeted initiatives inadvertently created a perception of unwelcoming and bias workplaces. When female targeted initiatives were enacted, both women and men felt less socially fit and comfortable with the company. These women and men became more concerned with being treated negatively or unfairly than if DEI initiatives were framed in a way that included all employees rather than just females.

Gardner and Ryan (2020) found that the perception of self-interest was correlated with the attitudes and support of DEI initiatives. If an advocate of a particular DEI initiative was seen as being a part of the demographic that benefited from the initiative, that advocate was perceived as being self-interested and produced a more negative outcome. If an advocate was not part of the demographic targeted by a DEI initiative, that advocate was seen as more self-less and the result was a more positive outcome from the initiative.

### **Synthesis of the Existing Literature**

The demographics of the U.S. population are rapidly changing. Important reasons for having a diverse workforce that is reflective of the community include improved customer-oriented process; improved creativity, problem-solving ability, and innovation; increased employee satisfaction; improved communication; and improved patient care outcomes. The U.S. fire service is mainly a white, non-Hispanic, male dominated occupation (USDL, 2021). Women and minorities have a history of being underrepresented in the fire service (Jahnke et al., 2012). Women and minority groups have expressed and reported more instances of harassment and depression (Jahnke et al., 2019). Increasing DEI in the U.S. fire service can lead to greater service delivery and customer care (Bear & Woolley, 2011).

Organizations inside and outside of the fire service have initiated policies or initiatives related to DEI. Many of these initiatives are focused on the planning of DEI projects versus the actual implementation of DEI projects (Chantarat et al., 2022). Although minority groups tend to have a greater sense of belonging to organizations that are focused on DEI, actual outcomes of DEI initiatives are mixed (Kuntz & Pandaram, 2022; Chantarat et al., 2022; Kidder et al., 2004). Advantaged groups are still able to affect the effectiveness of DEI initiatives consciously or unconsciously through their reactions to perceived threats (Iyer, 2022).

### **Summary**

The existing literature is clear in that there is a disconnect between the intention of DEI initiatives and the actual implementation of said initiatives. While most people within advantaged groups are sympathetic to the cause of DEI, they are also threatened by what implementation of progressive DEI initiatives would mean for themselves (Iyer, 2022; Gardner & Ryan, 2020). This study looked to uncover the perception of implemented DEI initiatives amongst firefighters in the VBFD and better understand trends in these perceptions. Learning about perceptions in DEI initiatives in firefighters could help with developing better DEI programs and training for more effective implementation.

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

This chapter describes the purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study on the relationship between DEI initiatives and the perception of DEI initiatives amongst firefighters in the VBFD. An overview of the research design, rationale for the qualitative approach, the use of a phenomenological design, and methods of data collection are provided. Finally, ethical considerations are presented to ensure anonymity and limit bias.

### **Research Design**

This study followed a qualitative phenomenological design. Qualitative research is used to generate knowledge about human experience or action (American Psychological Association, 2020). Qualitative research is a way to explore and understand the meaning that individuals or groups give to a social or human issue (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative research is a way to obtain a clearer picture of the research agenda by asking who, what, where, when, and how (Terrell, 2022). A qualitative approach was best suited for this research as it sought to study the experiences and perceptions of members of the VBFD as it relates to DEI initiatives.

### **Phenomenological Research**

Phenomenological research describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Phenomenological studies seek to identify and describe subjective experiences of participants (Schwandt, 2001). The point of view of the subject is emphasized and reported. A phenomenological qualitative approach also focuses on the lived experiences of the participants (Groenewald, 2004). A phenomenological approach was best suited for this research as it sought to identify and describe the lived experiences of members of the VBFD as it relates to DEI initiatives. The researcher

transcribed interviews detailing the perceptions and experiences of VBFD members in relation to DEI initiatives and extracted meaning from said interviews.

### **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

According to Smith (2021), Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) has two primary goals. First, IPA research seeks to look in detail at how someone makes sense of a life experience, in this instance, DEI initiatives disseminated by VBFD leadership. Second, IPA research seeks to give a detailed interpretation of the account of the participant to understand the experience. In an IPA design, the researcher gives insight into how a participant makes sense of a situation in each context (Heron, 1996). The researcher assumes a central role in analysis and interpretation of the participant's experiences (Smith, 2021). In the analysis of data in an IPA study, transcripts are written in as much detail as possible, with the focus shifting between the participants' claims and the researcher's interpretation of the meaning of said claims (Reid et al., 2005).

### **Population and Sample Size**

The VBFD is comprised of 518 uniformed firefighters. The initial survey was sent to all members with the goal of obtaining as many responses as possible. As of 2020, the VBFD was comprised of 88.37% men and 6.40% women. Of the men, 75% were white, 3.88% were mixed race, 3.88% were Hispanic or Latino, 3.10% were black or African American, 1.16% were Asian, 0.78% were native Hawaiian or other pacific, and 0.58% were American Indian or Alaskan native. Of the woman, 5.62% were white, 0.39% were black or African American, 0.19% were Asian, and 0.19% were mixed race. Members of all levels, experience, and time participated in the survey, contributing to a wide perspective on DEI initiatives amongst VBFD members.

After the initial survey, 6 members volunteered for a more in-depth interview to share specific experiences and perceptions involving the VBFD DEI initiatives. Members of all backgrounds, ethnicities, levels of experience, and time were interviewed. Care was taken to select a wide variety of individuals so that as many different experiences were recorded as possible.

### **Instrument(s)**

First, a survey was used to obtain a large amount of qualitative information relating to perceptions of DEI initiatives within the VBFD (see Appendix A). Surveys are often used as a criterion sampling method in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). Surveys are questionnaires used to qualify participants as experiencers of the phenomenon, with closed-ended questions encouraging a short answer. An online data collection tool, Microsoft Forms, was utilized to present the survey to the participants. The online tool allowed for initial analysis of the information and themes were discovered through review and condensation of responses.

Interviews were then conducted with the six volunteers. Some guiding questions were used to organize the interview, however room for improvisation and following natural paths was anticipated (Myers & Newman, 2007). The interviews were structured so that the questions guiding the participants helped answer the research questions, but also allowed them to add any personal meaning. Interviews were recorded using an audio recording device and notes were taken by the researcher throughout.

### **Research Process**

The research process was conducted in multiple phases. First, survey questions were developed and vetted through the VBFD DEI committee. This ensured that questions were relevant and useful to the purpose of the study and the department. Microsoft Forms was utilized

to create the survey form and the form was disseminated to the department. Instructions to survey participants outlined the goals of the study, what information was being collected, how it was analyzed, and when to expect results. Volunteers were requested to continue and participate in one-on-one interviews for further information.

The surveys ensured that all interview volunteers had experiences that were willing to be shared revolving around DEI initiatives in the VBFD and the perceptions of said DEI initiatives. Volunteers who did not have relevant experiences were not moved on to the interview process. Participants who qualified for interviews were given informed consent forms (see Appendix B) prior to any interview process occurring. Any questions that the participants had were answered to ensure trust, confidentiality, and anonymity.

Interviews were conducted outside of the work environment in a one-on-one fashion. Interviews were intended to be in an informal setting to increase comfort and willingness to share information and experiences. Interviews were recorded using a digital recording device and notes were taken throughout. Interview questions were predetermined; however, flexibility was given to follow any conversation paths that presented themselves.

After interviews were conducted and all information was gathered, data analysis began. The shared experiences of the participants were analyzed, looking for similarities and trends. The researcher interpreted the experiences of the participants and summarized the information as presented. The results of the study will be shared with the VBFD DEI committee with the intent of spreading knowledge and understanding of current VBFD members on DEI initiatives and help with development of better training related to DEI initiatives in the future.

## **Ethical Considerations**

There were several ethical considerations considered for this study. This study focused on human participants to include high- and low-level employees of the researcher's own organization. Therefore, it was imperative that the researcher have a moral obligation to consider the rights of the participants. The researcher held the privacy and safety of the participants in the highest regards throughout the study through confidentiality, informed consent, honesty, and integrity.

### **Confidentiality**

Confidentiality and anonymity are important for any participant to share perceptions and experiences in an open and honest fashion. The researcher considered it ethically important to establish a relationship built on trust and to respect the participant's anonymity. The more the participant is comfortable with the process, the more impactful and valuable the information given from the participant will be (Odusanya & Bankole, 2020). To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, the participants were identified in this study using alphabets, such as "Participant A". This ensures that information could not be traced back or likened to any individual.

### **Informed Consent and Voluntary Participation**

It was important that all participants gave informed consent and participated voluntarily in this study. Informed consent ensures that participants were made fully aware of the nature of the research, the methods that are used, any intended outcomes, why the participants are necessary for the study, how the work will be distributed, and what the participants' involvement will be (British Educational Research Association, 2018). Additionally, participants are assured anonymity, the right to withdraw without giving reason, the right to remain in good standing, and the right to be informed of any changes to the study that may affect their decision to continue.

Participants giving informed consent will be neither deceived nor coerced during the study (O'Neill, 2017). Participants were given a consent form (see Appendix B) that detailed risks, benefits, confidentiality, and withdrawal from the study.

### **Honesty and Integrity**

The researcher acted with honesty and integrity throughout the study to ensure that the data collection, analysis, methods, and procedures were not altered. The researcher ensured that no false data were included in the data collected and that the presentation and analysis of said data was not partial. Agreements not to disseminate personal information or stories were taken with the upmost sincerity.

### **Summary**

IPA offers flexibility and versatility to understanding people's experiences (Tuffour, 2017). IPA seeks to uncover what a lived experience means to the individual through a process of reflective inquiry (Peat et al., 2019). IPA offers direction on how to approach a phenomenon with guidance for sampling, data collection, and analysis. Therefore, the study of DEI initiatives and the perception of DEI initiatives amongst firefighters in the VBFD was well suited to a qualitative phenomenological study, namely IPA.

Surveys and interviews were utilized to collect information on perceptions of DEI initiatives within the VBFD. This information was interpreted and summarized by the researcher with emphasis on finding similarities and trends. Special care was taken to ensure confidentiality, anonymity, informed consent, and integrity were upheld throughout the study. Since the researcher and participants were all a part of the same organization, there was a real danger of trust being lost between the researcher and participants. Without trust, participants would not share true lived experiences and results would not be relevant to the study at hand.

## **CHAPTER 4: STUDY RESULTS**

### **Introduction**

The interview portion of this study consisted of six separate one-on-one interviews. All individuals participated voluntarily and gave informed consent. Interviews sought to identify how the adoption of formal DEI initiatives in the VBFD have affected the desired outcome of the initiatives, how demographic majority and minority groups of the VBFD perceive DEI, what policy or procedural changes members of the VBFD have perceived to have occurred since the adoption of formal DEI statements, are there any trends that may be identified amongst demographic groups in the VBFD that may be used to better implement DEI initiatives, what attitudes contribute toward acceptance of DEI initiatives in firefighters, how do DEI training initiatives impact the culture of the fire department, and why firefighters generally resistant to change.

### **Demographics of the Participants**

Six willing participants were selected for phase two of the study. Participant demographics were diverse amongst gender, race, and sexual orientation. Minorities in this study were defined as anyone who was non-Caucasian and non-male. For the purposes of confidentiality, participants were labeled as “Participant A” through “F”. All identifying characteristics were removed from answers and quotes given by the participants.

### **Research Results**

#### **Desired Outcomes of DEI Initiatives**

The VBFD Inclusion and Diversity statement (2020) identifies several desired outcomes, including drawing from diverse talent, perspectives, knowledge, insight, and abilities of members; showing value to members by confronting diversity issues and adopting inclusivity;

allowing members to express feedback openly and with respect; identifying and eliminating barriers to success for members; treating members with respect and consideration for individual needs; and maintaining an organizational culture where members are able and willing to discuss differences in a safe and supportive environment. Outcomes amongst the interview participants of the VBFD Inclusion and Diversity statement (2020) were mixed. Participant A shared that “I like the initiative behind (the Inclusion and Diversity statement), the fact that... this is how we’re going to interact, this is what is expected of you as a person, as an employee” but then continued “I feel like sometimes that can take back on people truly opening up to you and... being their true selves after a while.” Participant A was concerned with the longer-term effects of focusing too much on DEI specifically, saying, “If you maintain that for too long, it causes more mental damage to that person than it does help them. By making them feel... big brother is over my back 24-7 instead of building that comradery, that family time.” Participant A also felt that more emphasis should be put on the core values of the department and ensuring that the department is hiring individuals who share those core values, saying:

People that embrace the core values of the department in their personality, they will understand what it’s like to have equal treatment... don’t treat me any better or any less than another person... You can teach a lot in the academy, but you can’t teach values. You either got them or you don’t. And I feel like people now a days just want special treatment and they’re catering more to that.

Participant B agreed with the idea of trying to diversify the department more, but that diversity should not come at the expense of standards:

I agree with trying to be more diverse and attracting more diverse people. I 100% agree with that... I do agree with people being okay at work, but I don’t agree with changing

standards so that they're comfortable. Feel welcome. Feel loved. But to be comfortable to have your hair past your shoulders or to be comfortable for someone else that says well I don't want to tuck my shirt in... Where do we draw the line?

Participant B also shared that bullying was the number one issue in the department. "What I feel like DEI needs to approach... is the bullying. Bullies are rampant in this department." In talking about perceived bullies, participant B said that leadership has said "Oh well that's just so and so, what are we going to do with so and so," and that not enough was being done at the senior leadership level to address bullying.

Participant D had this to say about DEI initiatives:

I think the intent is good, but the process is wrong... I think that, especially in our line of work, merit should be above everything else. And merit is based on how you do your job, how well you do your job. It has very little to do with everything else.

Participant D continued "You cannot force things to be diverse, especially if you build it upon merit" and that "I don't think anyone is being held back because of any (DEI) reasons."

Participant C felt that "equity to me will never be achieved and I don't think it should be a major focus in our department. I feel that we are not a... profession that will ever equally represent everyone." When asked whether they had ever been treated differently due to demographics, participant C gave one positive example in which they were not treated differently than other members and "I truly excelled," and one negative example of treatment in which participant C "felt extremely excluded." Participant C also recounted an introduction with a member of a demographic minority in which the member started with, "Just go ahead and disregard all the rumors you've heard about me because none of them are true." Leadership was a big topic that participant C felt needed to be developed within the department. When asked

what the number one priority for the DEI committee should be, participant C said, “I hate to be a broken record, but I feel like it goes back to leadership and accountability” and that “creating a good leadership, learning environment that (DEI) stuff... phases itself out... Focusing so much on diversity divides.”

Participant E did not feel as though they had a clear understanding of what the VBFD Inclusion and Diversity statement (2020) was about, sharing, “What does (the statement) do for us? What is it supposed to represent?... I don’t know anyone who has benefited from it or hasn’t benefited from it.” When asked about what the DEI committee should focus on, participant E said:

I would find out from them what are the flaws in the department... Do we have an issue in our department that relates to DEI? Plus, I’d want to see what is DEI? What are we doing that we need DEI? What groups need to be represented for that kind of thing? Because I don’t think it applies to everyone or everything... No one has really explained to me what it is, what it does, who it represents, or who needs it.

Participant F felt that DEI was important, saying that “I feel like (DEI) is needed... in the workplace in general.” Participant F shared a story in which citizens would approach participant F at recruiting events saying, “I won’t get in because I’m black or I’m Asian or I’m a woman.’ And I would look at them and ask well why do you say that?” The citizens would reply, “Well look at Virginia Beach. Every time I see guys get off fire trucks or when they go on calls, the majority of the people are white guys.”

### **Demographic Groups, Trends, and Perceptions of DEI Initiatives**

Demographic minority interview participants had varying opinions on DEI initiatives. Several trends emerged. One group, while accepting DEI initiatives, wanted to ensure that

treatment was not changed simply due to demographics. One participant stated “You work harder, you try harder, you’re the first one to step up to things, but that’s not because I was forced to. It’s what I wanted to do. I wanted to be the top of the class.” Another said:

I’d never want anyone, coworkers or any citizens, to ever think I got this job because they needed to check a box... While I think it is good to bring awareness of (DEI) to people, I don’t think it should be as much of a focus as it is in today’s day and age because it takes away from our primary focus.

Other demographic minority interview participants were less accepting of the concept of DEI initiatives. One participant said that the thought of DEI “gives me a little bit of a cringe, to be honest because it makes me feel like people are now going to have to pretend... you don’t get face value.” A different participant said that sometimes “I think this DEI thing is just another crutch, or another way to give excuses to people to do stuff, to do wrong.”

A demographic majority interview participant shared that “When I hear DEI, right out of the gate I’m on the defense... It puts people who fit into the majority demographic to the side. Anything that they do is not good enough.”

### **Perceived Vbfd DEI Policy Changes**

Specific policy changes related to DEI were difficult to identify for most interview participants. When the issue of relaxed grooming standards was addressed, participants were split. Participant A said that “hair – if you want to wear it down, up, whatever, I couldn’t care less... It wouldn’t make a difference to me... As long as it’s not outrageous.” Participant C agreed, saying “the military relaxed their (hair) standards, we’re going to call ourselves a paramilitary organization, so that gives (the organization) the opportunity to do that if we want

to... but still be neat, still be professional.” Participant F had this experience related to relaxed grooming standards:

I was told I don’t have the typical firefighter look, that it’s not professional. So I feel like, DEI is opening eyes to people. Why do you feel that’s not professional? What’s the professional look?... I’m wearing the uniform, my clothes are clean and pressed, boots are shined. I’m coming here to do a job. What makes it unprofessional?

Participant E agreed that relaxing the grooming standards was acceptable, but maybe did not go far enough or was not applied consistently across all demographics:

I think you can relax the hair standards to a degree, but you still have to have a standard. If you’re going to relax the hair standard, well why is a mustache still a standard... No one is saying that your hair should be high and tight all the time, but I think the consensus of the people is that they want consistency. If you’re telling me (people) can grow hair out long, (people) should be able to grow a mustache long.

Participant B shared that “I cannot stand the new grooming standards” and that “I’m here for the public first, and I personally feel... professional appearance comes before comfort.”

Participant D agreed, saying:

The grooming standards are there for a reason because firefighters will push the envelope as far as we possibly can... It has to do with a neatness and professionalism that is just not there when hair is flopping over your eyes or past your ears... Not a fan... And you’re talking to (someone) who had hair past their shoulders in high school.

### **Attitudes and Acceptance of DEI Initiatives**

Most participants had an opinion on perceived standard changes within the fire department that affected perception of DEI initiatives. Participant A began “We shouldn’t adjust

those expectations for somebody else, regardless of gender or whatever... When you make certain benchmarks different for people, it's not equal." When asked specifically if department standards have been lowered, "I feel like in certain aspects, yes."

Participant B described themselves as "brass because that's who I am, not because it was who I had to be." Participant B said that "I feel standards are being forgiven. I don't think standards have changed, but I feel like there are some standards that are being pushed aside."

Participant C shared that "You want the best person for the job. For your safety, for my safety... the citizens that we're going to. (Other departments) lowered standards to get more people in, and it messed them up." When asked if standards have changed specifically due to DEI reason, participant C said, "I think standards have been lowered, and I think it kind of comes from the top."

Participant E gave several examples in which there was a perception that certain individuals had been protected for DEI reasons after being unable to perform what was considered as a basic job function:

Who's right and who's wrong, or what's protected? Because the person who was protected, is still wrong, still can't do the job but they're protected. The person that tried to employ the fact that this person can't do the job was told to pack sand.

Participant F had a more nuanced opinion of changing standards. "Everything is case by case... I see it, I see what (people) are talking about with certain things." Participant F felt as though departments members should do everything that can be done to be encouraging to everyone, and that the department will always have certain individuals who are deemed a problem, saying, "Do I see people out there that probably shouldn't be out in the field? Yeah. I chalk that up with being in any job."

## **DEI Training Initiatives and Fire Department Culture**

Two of the interview participants had opinions on DEI training initiatives, but emphasized the most important thing was if an individual could perform the job and if an individual could be trusted. Participant A shared that:

I feel like we have to have so many of these diversity and inclusion lessons for people because they will... judge a book before they read it, but also, in today's climate, you get so many people who want special treatment... Can you come to work, give a good effort, and I know if I need you, you're going to be there... and you know I'm going to be there if you need me. I have to be able to trust you. I don't care about trivial things (like demographics).

Participant C felt that "I don't need a policy to tell me what's right or wrong" and that:

I hate... when you want to downplay the job to make it easier to get hired, but the job is still the same. If people said... we're going to make people smaller... we're going to make things lighter, we're making buildings not as tall, if you're going to lower the standards, lower the bar, you should lower everything else. Don't just lower the bar to get in the job but raise the bar once you've got the job.

## **Firefighters and Change**

Most interviews conducted alluded to the ability of the fire department or individual firefighters to change over time. Participant A felt that change will occur over time, saying, "I think that it's going to naturally change as time goes on honestly because you're going to have all the older, highly tenured people, they're going to start retiring, and you're getting new blood pushed in." Talking about firefighters and change, participant F said, "We're stuck in our ways."

When asked if people are able to change, participant F gave specific examples of being a part of positive change in the fire department and stated “Yeah, I’ve seen it.”

When asked if participant B felt like the department was open to positive change, participant B said “I do. We have a young department, very young age wise... and tenure for sure... I do think that it’s up for change.” Participant B also felt that the less tenured department members needed strong role models to emulate, sharing “If you don’t have someone, somewhere... corralling that... someone who’s really strong... that says ‘hey man, we’re going to do this.’ Someone who holds that standard.”

Participant C said, “I think it’s not just firefighters, I think it’s people in general because change is unknown. And we want to stick with what we know.” Participant C went on to share a specific example of how department members balked at a process change initially, and then the change normalized, and members were accepting. Participant C agreed with participant B that the department should focus on better leadership, saying “If you have good leadership, you’re going to have good followership. Good leaders attract good followers.”

Participant E said that “I have seen a lot of change over the years, and it’s good change, very good change” and that:

I would say that we’re getting better just because of the generation of people that we have... that you know, they’re not like that. Some people are just going to be who they’re going to be no matter what you do, what you say.

Speaking in terms of leadership and structure, participant E felt that “We need a change, there is no change happening yet, and everyone is still waiting for change” and that “there is no accountability yet and that’s what needs to come in.”

## Summary

Desired outcomes of DEI initiatives within the VBFD were mixed. Some participants agreed with the intent of the DEI initiatives while disagreeing with the implementation. Several participants had specific examples of how the VBFD Inclusion and Diversity statement (2020) was not being abided by. Some were unsure of exactly what the DEI initiatives were intended to do or who the DEI initiatives were intended to reach. There were also mixed reactions amongst demographic groups on the perception of DEI initiatives, with some not agreeing with the concept and others feeling defensive on job performance.

Most of the participants were unable to list any specific policy change that had occurred in the VBFD since the adoption of the VBFD Inclusion and Diversity statement (2020). Most participants were concerned with the idea that standards within the department were being lowered due to DEI initiatives. DEI training was divisive for some of the interview participants. Most participants were optimistic about the ability of firefighters to change and had seen change within the participant's careers.

## **CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Summary of the Results**

Amongst interview participants, the desired outcomes of the VBFD Inclusion and Diversity statement (2020) and other DEI initiatives not fully achieved. Several participants gave specific examples of how some department members were not abiding by the VBFD Inclusion and Diversity statement (2020) and that individuals deemed a problem were not being addressed appropriately. Some participants were unsure of exactly what the DEI initiatives were intended to do or who the DEI initiatives were intended to reach. There were also mixed reactions amongst demographic groups on the perception of DEI initiatives. Some members of certain demographic groups did not agree with the concept of DEI in general. Other members of certain demographic groups felt as though job performance needed to be defended due to the implementation or emphasis on DEI initiatives.

Most participants were unable to list any specific policy change that had occurred in the VBFD since the adoption of the VBFD Inclusion and Diversity statement (2020). Most participants were also concerned with the idea that standards within the department were being lowered due to DEI initiatives. While DEI training initiatives did not garner specific opinions in most participants, some of the interview participants felt that DEI training initiatives were divisive. Most participants were optimistic about the ability of firefighters to change and had seen positive change within the participant's careers.

### **Conclusions Based Upon Results**

It is important for the fire service to understand that resistance to DEI initiatives and unintended consequences are not unique to other professions as described by Bacouel-Jentien and Yang (2019), Carnes et al. (2019), Leslie (2019), Kaiser et al. (2022), Wellman et al. (2015),

and Wilkins (2018). One participant was unsure of what the intent or audience for DEI initiatives or the DEI committee was. Fire departments should be as clear and concise as possible when developing DEI initiatives while taking care not to exclude anyone. Fire departments should ensure that all members are clear on the intent, goals, and intended outcomes of DEI initiatives.

Every interview participant had specific examples on how the VBFD Inclusion and Diversity statement (2020) was not being abided by, even after formal adoption. Some participants specifically cited leadership as a major problem within the VBFD. Participants alluded to senior leadership not setting good examples, not taking problems seriously, and not addressing issues when brought up, formally or informally. Fire departments should ensure that all members of senior leadership agree and abide by any developed DEI initiatives. All formal or informal issues that arise should be addressed immediately and with equal concern.

Demographic trends were difficult to identify due to the small sample size of interview participants. Female groups were split when compared to research by Jahnke et al. (2019), with some participants reporting some form of discrimination while other participants did not. Non-Caucasians were split between feeling that DEI initiatives were important versus DEI initiatives being a hinderance to the mission of the fire service. Demographic majority members were defensive at the thought of DEI initiatives. All participants did not want to be treated any differently regarding station life or job performance. Fire departments should ensure all members of the department are a part of DEI initiative development, understand the intent, and buy in to the concept before implementation.

Most participants were unable to identify any specific policy change that had occurred in the VBFD due to DEI initiatives. Most participants had no specific opinion on DEI initiative training but did have an opinion on changing standards. Most participants felt strongly that

standards should not change due to DEI initiatives. Fire departments should be clear on why policies are changed and present a common message when presenting change. Members should be assured that the mission and ability to perform the mission have not changed.

Most participants identified that fire fighters and/or fire departments can change. Some participants gave specific examples of being involved in positive change. Other participants identified that ideals would change over time with the turnover of department members. Fire departments should not rely on turnover to implement positive changes. Fire departments should embrace a culture of inquiry and discussion when attempting to implement DEI related initiatives.

### **Limitations**

There were several limitations of this research study. First, there were methodological limitations related to the quantity of the data. Due to the small sample size of interview participants, it was difficult to generalize findings over an entire department's worth of people. Performing a quantitative or mixed methods approach may have offered a better overall understanding of the department with survey results. For example, survey results indicated that participants believed that leaders of the department, defined as the rank of Battalion Chief and above, always acted in alignment with the language and message of the statement 12.61% of the time, usually acted in alignment 63.96% of the time, occasionally acted in alignment 18.02% of the time, rarely acted in alignment 4.50% of the time, and never acted in alignment 0.90% of the time. Interview participants gave a different story, indicating that leadership may be a more significant problem within the department in relation to DEI initiatives.

Second, there were ethical limitations related to confidentiality. Specific experiences or stories were left out of the research paper with the intent of keeping confidentiality of the

participants. Being able to include such examples may better paint a picture of the realities of certain demographics within the department. Certain demographic groups were left out of the results entirely due to confidentiality concerns and therefore ended up being excluded from the research paper.

### **Implications and Recommendations to the Field**

Several themes and recommendations from interview participants became apparent during the research process. First, fire departments should clearly identify whether there is a DEI problem within the department's membership. Any problems should be clearly communicated to department personnel with evidence to support why solutions should be found or implemented. Care should be taken not to exclude any member or group of people. It is important to receive buy-in from all groups and levels of the organization. Fire departments should not simply rely on turnover of membership for change to occur; departments should be proactive in identifying problems and addressing them immediately.

Second, fire departments should ensure all members of the department are a part of DEI initiative development, understand the intent of any goals, and are able to see intended outcomes. All members of senior leadership should agree and abide by any developed DEI initiatives. All formal or informal issues that arise should be addressed immediately and with equal concern and as much transparency as possible. Fire departments should be clear on why policies are changed.

Finally, members should be assured that the mission and ability to perform the mission have not changed. Performance standards should be available and clear to all members. Any changes to performance standards should be communicated to all members. Fire departments should embrace a culture of inquiry and discussion when attempting to implement DEI related initiatives. It is important for all members to understand that not all members can or will agree

with every change, but that every change does not come at the deficit of another person or standard.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research may benefit from identifying successful ways to implement DEI initiative training within the fire service. Most participants felt that individuals should be capable of identifying right and wrong ways of treating people and do not need specific policies or procedures. Most participants emphasized a focus on the fire department core values and that if core values were abided by DEI specific initiatives would not be needed. If better ways to address DEI training with fire service members can be identified to ensure better understanding or acceptance, DEI initiative outcomes may be more pronounced and fire department core values may be better represented.

### **Conclusion**

Amongst interview participants, the desired outcomes of the VBFD Inclusion and Diversity statement (2020) and other DEI initiatives were not achieved. Some participants were unsure of what the DEI initiatives were intended to do or who the DEI initiatives were intended to reach. There were also mixed reactions amongst demographic groups on the perception of DEI initiatives. Some members of certain demographic groups did not agree with the concept of DEI while other members of certain demographic groups felt as though job performance needed to be defended due to the implementation or emphasis on DEI initiatives.

Most participants were unable to list any specific policy change that had occurred in the VBFD since the adoption of the VBFD Inclusion and Diversity statement (2020). Most participants were also concerned with the idea that standards within the department were being lowered due to DEI initiatives. While DEI training initiatives did not garner specific opinions in

most participants, some of the interview participants felt that DEI training initiatives were divisive. Most participants were optimistic about the ability of firefighters to change and had seen positive change within the participant's careers.

It is important for the fire service to understand that resistance to DEI initiatives and unintended consequences are not unique to other professions. Fire departments should clearly identify whether there is a DEI problem, clearly communicate all problems to the membership, and be proactive in addressing the problems. All members of the department should be a part of DEI initiative development, understand the intent of any goals, and should be able to see intended outcomes. Members should be assured that the mission and ability to perform the mission have not changed. Any changes to performance standards should be communicated to all members. It is important for all members to understand that not all members can or will agree with every change, but that every change does not come at the deficit of another person or standard.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### DEIB Perceptions Survey

1. Prior to this survey, were you aware that the VBFD has a Diversity and Inclusion Statement as part of a Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging initiative?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  
2. When was the last time you read the VBFD Diversity and Inclusion Statement?
  - a. Never
  - b. Within the last week
  - c. Within the last month
  - d. Within the last 6 months
  - e. Within the last year
  - f. Within the last 3 years
  - g. 3 years ago, or longer
  
3. Do you support the language and message of the VBFD Diversity and Inclusion Statement?
  - a. I strongly agree with the language and message of the VBFD Diversity and Inclusion Statement.
  - b. I agree with the language and message of the VBFD Diversity and Inclusion Statement.
  - c. I have no opinion on the language and message of the VBFD Diversity and Inclusion Statement.
  - d. I disagree with the language and message of the VBFD Diversity and Inclusion Statement.
  - e. I strongly disagree with the language and message of the VBFD Diversity and Inclusion Statement.
  
4. Do you believe that VBFD LEADERS (defined as Battalion Chiefs and above) support and agree with the language and message of the VBFD Diversity and Inclusion Statement?
  - a. I believe that VBFD leaders strongly support and agree with the language and message of the VBFD Diversity and Inclusion Statement.
  - b. I believe that VBFD leaders somewhat support and agree with the language and message of the VBFD Diversity and Inclusion Statement.
  - c. I have no opinion on whether VBFD leaders support and agree with the language and message of the VBFD Diversity and Inclusion Statement.
  - d. I believe that VBFD leaders somewhat oppose and disagree with the language and message of the VBFD Diversity and Inclusion Statement.
  - e. I believe that VBFD leaders strongly oppose and disagree with the language and message of the VBFD Diversity and Inclusion Statement.

5. Do you believe that VBFD MEMBERS (defined as Captains and below) support and agree with the language and message of the VBFD Diversity and Inclusion Statement?
  - a. I believe that VBFD members strongly support and agree with the language and message of the VBFD Diversity and Inclusion Statement.
  - b. I believe that VBFD members somewhat support and agree with the language and message of the VBFD Diversity and Inclusion Statement.
  - c. I have no opinion on whether VBFD members support and agree with the language and message of the VBFD Diversity and Inclusion Statement.
  - d. I believe that VBFD members somewhat oppose and disagree with the language and message of the VBFD Diversity and Inclusion Statement.
  - e. I believe that VBFD members strongly oppose and disagree with the language and message of the VBFD Diversity and Inclusion Statement.
  
6. Do you believe that YOU act in alignment with the language and message of the VBFD Diversity and Inclusion Statement?
  - a. I believe that I always act in alignment with the language and message of the VBFD Diversity and Inclusion Statement.
  - b. I believe that I usually act in alignment with the language and message of the VBFD Diversity and Inclusion Statement.
  - c. I believe that I occasionally act in alignment with the language and message of the VBFD Diversity and Inclusion Statement.
  - d. I believe that I rarely act in alignment with the language and message of the VBFD Diversity and Inclusion Statement.
  - e. I believe that I never act in alignment with the language and message of the VBFD Diversity and Inclusion Statement.
  
7. Do you believe that VBFD LEADERS (defined as Battalion Chiefs and above) act in alignment with the language and message of the VBFD Diversity and Inclusion Statement?
  - a. I believe that VBFD leaders always act in alignment with the language and message of the VBFD Diversity and Inclusion Statement.
  - b. I believe that VBFD leaders usually act in alignment with the language and message of the VBFD Diversity and Inclusion Statement.
  - c. I believe that VBFD leaders occasionally act in alignment with the language and message of the VBFD Diversity and Inclusion Statement.
  - d. I believe that VBFD leaders rarely act in alignment with the language and message of the VBFD Diversity and Inclusion Statement.
  - e. I believe that VBFD leaders never act in alignment with the language and message of the VBFD Diversity and Inclusion Statement.
  
8. Do you believe that VBFD MEMBERS (defined as Captains and below) act in alignment with the language and message of the VBFD Diversity and Inclusion Statement?
  - a. I believe that VBFD members always act in alignment with the language and message of the VBFD Diversity and Inclusion Statement.
  - b. I believe that VBFD members usually act in alignment with the language and message of the VBFD Diversity and Inclusion Statement.

- c. I believe that VBFD members occasionally act in alignment with the language and message of the VBFD Diversity and Inclusion Statement.
  - d. I believe that VBFD members rarely act in alignment with the language and message of the VBFD Diversity and Inclusion Statement.
  - e. I believe that VBFD members never act in alignment with the language and message of the VBFD Diversity and Inclusion Statement.
9. How has the VBFD's Diversity and Inclusion Statement effected your perception of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging initiatives?
- a. The statement has given me a positive perception of DEIB initiatives.
  - b. The statement has given me a somewhat positive perception of DEIB initiatives.
  - c. The statement has not changed my perception of DEIB initiatives.
  - d. The statement has given me a somewhat negative perception of DEIB initiatives.
  - e. The statement has given me a negative perception of DEIB initiatives.
10. How have VBFD Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging initiatives affected the service delivery of the VBFD to the community?
- a. The initiatives have had a positive effect on the service delivery of the VBFD to the community.
  - b. The initiatives have had a somewhat positive effect the service delivery of the VBFD to the community.
  - c. The initiatives have had no effect on the service delivery of the VBFD to the community.
  - d. The initiatives have had a somewhat negative effect the service delivery of the VBFD to the community.
  - e. The initiatives have had a negative effect on the service delivery of the VBFD to the community.
11. How have VBFD Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging initiatives affected your day-to-day interactions amongst your coworkers?
- a. The initiatives have greatly improved my day-to-day interactions with coworkers.
  - b. The initiatives have somewhat improved my day-to-day interactions with coworkers.
  - c. The initiatives have had no change on my day-to-day interactions with coworkers.
  - d. The initiatives have somewhat deteriorated my day-to-day interactions with coworkers.
  - e. The initiatives have greatly deteriorated my day-to-day interactions with coworkers.
12. How have VBFD Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging initiatives affected your day-to-day interactions with the community?
- a. The initiatives have greatly improved my day-to-day interactions with the community.
  - b. The initiatives have somewhat improved my day-to-day interactions with the community.

- c. The initiatives have had no change on my day-to-day interactions with the community.
  - d. The initiatives have somewhat deteriorated my day-to-day interactions with the community.
  - e. The initiatives have greatly deteriorated my day-to-day interactions with the community.
13. Have you personally had any experiences or interactions with VBFD personnel because of VBFD Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging initiatives?
- a. I have had positive experiences or interactions with VBFD personnel because of the initiatives.
  - b. I have had somewhat positive experiences or interactions with VBFD personnel because of the initiatives.
  - c. The initiatives have not affected my experiences or interactions with VBFD personnel.
  - d. I have had somewhat negative experiences or interactions with VBFD personnel because of the initiatives.
  - e. I have had negative experiences or interactions with VBFD personnel because of the initiatives.
14. Has the VBFD made any policy changes since the implementation of any VBFD Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging initiatives?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Unsure
15. (10A) Please list any policy changes the VBFD has made since the implementation of any VBFD Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging initiatives.
- a. Fillable box
16. How have any policy changes the VBFD has made since the implementation of any VBFD Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging initiatives affected the internal culture of the VBFD?
- a. The initiatives have produced a positive change on internal VBFD culture.
  - b. The initiatives have produced a somewhat positive change on internal VBFD culture.
  - c. The initiatives have produced no change on internal VBFD culture.
  - d. The initiatives have produced a somewhat negative change on internal VBFD culture.
  - e. The initiatives have produced a negative change on internal VBFD culture.
17. How have any policy changes the VBFD has made since the implementation of any VBFD Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging initiatives affected the customer service delivered by VBFD personnel?
- a. The initiatives have had a positive outcome on VBFD customer service delivery.

- b. The initiatives have had a somewhat positive outcome on VBFD customer service delivery.
  - c. The initiatives have had no change on VBFD customer service delivery.
  - d. The initiatives have had a somewhat negative outcome on VBFD customer service delivery.
  - e. The initiatives have had a negative outcome on VBFD customer service delivery.
18. Have you participated in any training specifically involving any VBFD Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging initiatives?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Unsure
19. Why or why not?
- a. Fillable box
20. How has any VBFD Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging initiative training that you have participated in affected your experience of the culture in the VBFD?
- a. The training created a positive outcome in the culture of the VBFD.
  - b. The training created a somewhat positive outcome in the culture of the VBFD.
  - c. The training had no effect on the culture of the VBFD.
  - d. The training created a somewhat negative outcome in the culture of the VBFD.
  - e. The training created a negative outcome in the culture of the VBFD.
  - f. I have not participated in any training involving any VBFD Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging initiatives.
21. Please rate the culture of the VBFD as it relates to Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging.
- a. Sliding Scale, 1 being completely negative, 10 being completely positive.
22. Do you believe that Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging efforts will change the culture of the VBFD for the better?
- a. I believe that Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging efforts will change the culture of the VBFD for the better.
  - b. I believe that Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging efforts have no effect on the culture of the VBFD.
  - c. I believe that Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging efforts will change the culture of the VBFD for the worse.

## Demographics

- 1. What is your gender?
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. Other
  - d. Prefer not to say

2. What is your age?
  - a. 18-20 years old
  - b. 21-25 years old
  - c. 26-30 years old
  - d. 31-35 years old
  - e. 36-40 years old
  - f. 41-45 years old
  - g. 46-50 years old
  - h. 51-55 years old
  - i. 56-60 years old
  - j. 61-65 years old
  - k. Prefer not to say
  
3. Please specify your ethnicity
  - a. Caucasian
  - b. African American
  - c. Latino or Hispanic
  - d. Asian
  - e. Native American
  - f. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
  - g. Two or More
  - h. Other/Unknown
  - i. Prefer not to say
  
4. How long have you worked for the VBFD?
  - a. 0-3 years
  - b. 3-6 years
  - c. 6-9 years
  - d. 9-12 years
  - e. 12-15 years
  - f. 15-20 years
  - g. 20-25 years
  - h. 25+ years
  - i. Prefer not to say
  
5. Are you a uniformed or civilian member of the VBFD?
  - a. Uniformed
  - b. Civilian
  - c. Prefer not to say
  
6. What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed?
  - a. Some High School
  - b. High School
  - c. Bachelor's Degree
  - d. Master's Degree
  - e. Ph.D. or higher

- f. Trade School
- g. Prefer not to say

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this research endeavor.

If you are willing and able to participate in a one-on-one, confidential interview process, please contact me directly at XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Be advised, any interview would be strictly off-duty and not compensated.

## **Appendix B**

### **Academic Research Participation Consent Form**

#### **Identification of Investigators & Purpose of Study**

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Kyle Bosiljevac from the National Fire Academy. This study aims to develop a better understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives and perceptions of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives amongst firefighters. This study will contribute to the researcher's completion of their final project.

#### **Time required**

Participation in this study will require approximately 60-120 minutes your time in one session.

#### **Risks**

The investigator does not perceive more than minimal risks from your involvement in this study (that is, no risks beyond the risks associated with everyday life).

#### **Benefits**

There are no direct benefits to the participant. However, this study's information may benefit the fire service in relation to development, deployment, and follow-up of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives.

**No incentives (financial or otherwise) are associated with participation in this study.**

#### **Confidentiality**

The results of this research will be presented to NFA program faculty and students. The results of this project will be coded in such a way that the respondent's identity will not be attached to the final form of this study. The researcher retains the right to use and publish non-identifiable data. While individual responses are confidential, aggregate data will be presented, representing averages or generalizations about the responses as a whole. All data will be stored in a secure location accessible only to the researcher. Upon completion of the study, all information that matches up individual respondents with their answers (including audio recordings) will be destroyed. Final aggregate results will be made available to participants upon request.

#### **Participation & Withdrawal**

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to choose not to participate. Should you choose to participate, you can withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind.

#### **Questions about the Study**

If you have questions or concerns during the time of your participation in this study, or after its completion or you would like to receive a copy of the final aggregate results of this study, please contact:

**Kyle Bosiljevac**  
Student  
National Fire Academy  
[KBosilje@vbgov.com](mailto:KBosilje@vbgov.com)

**Edward Kensler**  
Training Specialist  
National Fire Academy  
[edward.kenslerjr@fema.dhs.gov](mailto:edward.kenslerjr@fema.dhs.gov)

**Giving of Consent**

I have read this consent form and I understand what is being requested of me as a participant in this study. I freely consent to participate. I have been given satisfactory answers to my questions. The investigator provided me with a copy of this form. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.

I give consent to be audio recorded during my interview. \_\_\_\_\_ (interviewee initials)

<b>Interviewer Signature</b>		<b>Date:</b>	
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<b>Interviewee Signature</b>		<b>Date:</b>	
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