Establishing a Leaders of Color Network:
A Guide for LeadingAge State Partners

SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

In 2021, the LeadingAge LTSS Center @UMass Boston embarked on a study designed to support a key LeadingAge goal: to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the long-term services and supports (LTSS) workplace. During interviews with LTSS Center researchers, leaders of color at LeadingAge member organizations recommended that LeadingAge establish a networking forum to help leaders of color share their experiences and challenges and create a sense of community.

Three key takeaways from interviews with leaders of color were highlighted in *Creating a Diverse, Equitable, and Inclusive Workplace Culture: Perspectives of Leaders of Color*:

1. **Inequities in aging services** make it difficult for people of color to advance into leadership positions in the LTSS field.

2. **Three specific barriers stand in the way of advancement**:
   - Organizational leaders who are not people of color are more likely to rely on their own, often non-diverse networks, when hiring and recruiting.
   - Organizational recruiters tend to automatically dismiss candidates of color who are new to the LTSS field because these candidates do not have a deep knowledge of aging services.
   - Aspiring leaders of color feel pressure to conform to the majority culture within their organizations and to prove themselves when their expertise is questioned.

3. **People of color are most likely to advance** in their careers if they have access to:
   - Supportive and intentional supervisors, mentors, and sponsors.
   - Continuing education.
   - Connections to networks that can help leaders identify promising career opportunities within and outside their current organization.

These research findings led the LeadingAge national office to launch the LeadingAge Leaders of Color Network in 2021. By December 2023, the network had welcomed more than 400 members. Network membership continues to grow steadily.

About the LeadingAge Leaders of Color Network

The Mission and Goals of the LeadingAge Leaders of Color Network
Despite the diversity of its frontline staff, the aging services sector lacks a racially diverse pipeline of managers and leaders. A leaders of color network represents one strategy for transforming the aging services sector by promoting leadership diversity and supporting the advancement of leaders of color.

The LeadingAge Leaders of Color Network is a professional networking group for senior, mid-level, and emerging leaders of color in LeadingAge member organizations. The network is also open to allies—individuals committed to fostering inclusive LTSS work environments where everyone is empowered to thrive.

The LeadingAge Leaders of Color Network is designed to:

- Support and facilitate professional growth, career advancement, and leadership opportunities in the field of aging services for its members.
- Serve as a sounding board for members to share challenges related to race, exchange resources and ideas about mitigating these challenges, and identify new opportunities for advancement.
- Provide a forum for members to exchange resources and ideas and to hear experts discuss topics reflecting the expressed needs and interests of people of color within our field.

The network carries out its mission by:

- Creating a sense of community for leaders of color working in LeadingAge member organizations.
- Helping LeadingAge members recruit and retain leaders of color.
- Engaging leaders of color in the advocacy work of LeadingAge and its state partners.
- Equipping allies with the skills, knowledge, and awareness to create a workplace culture of inclusion that supports the career advancement of leaders of color.
- Serving as a workforce development initiative designed to build the leadership bench strength in LeadingAge member organizations and support the development and retention of the next generation of diverse leaders.

Why Establish a State-Based Network for Leaders of Color?

State leaders of color networks can provide state partner organizations with a valuable opportunity to interact with leaders of color and allies and engage those leaders in state partner activities, including:

- Advocacy work.
- Meeting and conference programming.
- Service on the state partner organization's board and committees.
- Other networking opportunities.

A state-based leaders of color network can give state partner organizations a unique opportunity to establish a community of support for leaders of color as they work and advance in aging services. A state-based network could also help a state partner organization:

- Attract new member organizations striving for leadership diversity.
- Encourage more diverse member engagement.
- Offer leaders of color a member experience that is inclusive and relevant.
- Create additional member value.

About This Guide

This guide outlines how the LeadingAge national office organized the LeadingAge Leaders of Color Network and how that network could serve as a model to help LeadingAge state partners create leaders of color networks within their states. This guide offers recommendations to help you:

- Prepare your state partner organization to establish a network.
- Design and implement the structure of your network.
- Market your network to prospective members.
- Engage leaders of color in the operation of your network.
- Find resources to fund networking activities.

This guide also includes:

- A **Glossary of Terms (Appendix A)** to help your team develop a shared language and better understand DEI issues affecting your state partner organization and your leaders of color network.
- A **Checklist for Launching a State Leaders of Color Network (Appendix B)**, which can help you begin designing and establishing your state's leaders of color network.

Please note: Because each state is unique, the structure and activities of your leaders of color network will depend on the needs of your state partner organization and its members.

For More Information

We hope this guide will be a valuable resource for creating and sustaining your state leaders of color network. Members of the program staff in the LeadingAge national office are available to support you in your efforts. If you have any questions, contact Natasha Bryant or Amma Addo.

SECTION 2: GETTING STARTED

Before you attempt to establish a leaders of color network in your state, it's a good idea to determine whether there is enough member interest to support the network.

Have any members expressed interest in starting a state network? If so, follow up with these members to gauge their willingness to join a network. You might also conduct a member survey to identify if there is broad member interest in establishing a state-based leaders of color network.

Once you have confirmed member interest in a network, it's time to ascertain how you will make your network a reality. This section provides information about how LeadingAge started its national network and offers guidance to help you get started.

Structuring Your State Leaders of Color Network

The LeadingAge Leaders of Color Network has several distinct attributes. You might find it necessary to refine this national model as you strive to achieve your state leaders of color network's unique goals. However, a review of these attributes may help you begin your exploration.

Member-Driven
The LeadingAge Leaders of Color Network is co-led by staff of the LeadingAge national office and leaders of color at LeadingAge member organizations. LeadingAge intentionally included all voices—especially the voices of leaders of color and their allies—in developing our network. This helped us gain buy-in and a sense of ownership from prospective members.

Guided by a Leaders of Color Network Advisory Board
A volunteer body of nine to 15 LeadingAge members meets regularly to guide the activities of the LeadingAge Leaders of Color Network. The LeadingAge Leaders of Color Network Advisory Board is led by a chair and vice-chair who work at LeadingAge member organizations. Your state leaders of color network could establish a similar guiding group.

Like the national advisory board, the state guiding group could include volunteer leaders of color and allies from LeadingAge member organizations in your state. Such a group would provide guidance and advice on the state network's goals, programming, and activities.

Engaged in offering resources and education to leaders of color
The LeadingAge Leaders of Color Network hosts in-person events at the LeadingAge Annual Meeting each fall and at the LeadingAge Leadership Summit each spring. The network also sponsors virtual webinars and events throughout the year. To avoid

duplication and manage costs, state leaders of color networks are invited to work with the LeadingAge Leaders of Color Network to plan and promote these events.

Roles and Time Commitments

The following lists identify the tasks LeadingAge staff and volunteers carry out to support the LeadingAge Leaders of Color Network. These lists can help you gauge the time commitment required to launch and grow your state leaders of color network. Remember that your time commitment will depend on the goals of your state network, the capacity of state partner organization staff and network leaders to support the state network, and the frequency of sponsored activities and events.

LeadingAge Staff
- Recruit network members.
- Promote national and state events that connect leaders of color and allies.
- Maintain and update a member database for the network.
- Develop and maintain an advisory board to help guide the network.
- Create guidelines and operating procedures for the LeadingAge Leaders of Color Network Advisory Board.
- Work with the advisory board chair and vice-chair to plan advisory board meetings and network activities.
- Schedule, develop, and implement programs and events based on input from the advisory board.
- Create and disseminate participant surveys and seek feedback from advisory board members to gauge the success of activities and events.
- Communicate with network members to promote programs, events, and other relevant activities.
- Develop metrics to understand the impact of the network, its significant successes, and areas for improvement.

Role of the Advisory Board Chair and Vice-Chair
- Work with the LeadingAge national office staff to develop the network's goals, establish its focus areas, develop activities and events, and set the agenda for advisory board meetings.
- Recruit network members and promote the network through presentations at conferences.
- Lead meetings of the advisory board.
- Develop the agenda for the network's annual planning meeting, which is held to update members about the network's activities, goals, and plans for the upcoming year.

Role of Advisory Board Members
- Provide ideas and suggestions for network programs and activities after identifying the most critical issues facing network members.

- Promote the LeadingAge Leaders of Color Network among LeadingAge members.
- Provide feedback to LeadingAge staff about network events and activities.
- Serve on committees established by the network.
- Collaborate with the LeadingAge national office staff and other network leaders to plan network activities and seek funding for those activities.

Marketing and Outreach

Marketing and outreach were essential tools for launching the LeadingAge Leaders of Color Network. The following strategies might help you attract new members and grow your network:

Emails
You could send targeted emails to leaders and CEOs at member organizations informing them about the network and encouraging them to share the information with leaders of color at their organizations.

Word of Mouth
Consider asking leaders of color and allies to spread the word about the state leaders of color network to people they think would be interested in joining.

Promotion
You could promote the state leaders of color network:
- In newsletters or other mechanisms used to communicate with members, including the state partner organization's website.
- When visiting member communities or hosting events for members of your state partner organization.
- When speaking with diversity, equity, and inclusion committees at member organizations.
- During network activities and events described on page 10.

Member Data

Reaching out regularly to network members is an excellent way to strengthen a leaders of color network. State networks could collect and manage members' contact information or ask the LeadingAge national office to assist.

The LeadingAge national office maintains a database of all members who have joined the LeadingAge Leaders of Color Network. Data collected on members includes:

- Name.
- Organization.
- Title.

- Email address.
- Mailing address.
- Whether the member identifies as a leader of color or an ally.
- The member's affiliation type (provider member, student, or state partner staff).

When a new member joins the LeadingAge Leaders of Color Network, staff in the national office will inform the state partner and encourage the member to join their state's leaders of color network.

SECTION 3: LEADER ENGAGEMENT

There are two things to keep in mind as you work to engage leaders in your leaders of color network:

Creating a Safe Space
Network leaders must do their best to ensure prospective members view the state leaders of color network as a safe space for community building and engagement. We have found that a network is most successful when it provides an environment for honestly discussing challenges with other leaders of color and allies, identifying possible solutions, and hearing about the successes and failures of others.

Please note: Prospective members of the state-based leaders of color network may want to inform their organizations' leadership teams and supervisors about their desire to participate in the network. Checking in with supervisors is advisable since the network is a LeadingAge member activity and not a private activity of the leader of color.

Conserving Financial Resources
Launching a state leaders of color network does not have to be expensive. The LeadingAge national office is available to help states select cost-effective options for launching their networks. For example, you could bring leaders of color together for the first time by hosting a virtual reception for leaders who may already be part of the LeadingAge Leaders of Color Network.

Activities of Your Leaders of Color Network

When developing your state leaders of color network, consider what events and activities you will sponsor, how often those events and activities will occur, and where they will occur. In addition, be sure to connect with leaders of color networks in other states to share information, ideas, and resources.

Before planning events and activities, consider surveying current and prospective network members to identify activities and topics that interest them. You might ask leaders the following questions about their preferences:

- What issues would you like network events to address?
- Do you prefer attending network events during state partner-sponsored meetings, or would you rather attend events outside those meetings?
- How often would you attend network meetings outside of regularly scheduled state partner organization meetings?
- Do you prefer virtual or in-person meetings?
- Do you prefer social or educational events?
- Would you be interested in being mentored by another leader of color?
- Would you consider serving as a mentor?

Sample Activities

In-Person Events
Consider hosting and promoting events for leaders of color and allies at state meetings. These events might include receptions, networking opportunities, educational programs, and conference booths. We suggest gathering contact information from event participants and encouraging attendees to share information about the state leaders of color network with colleagues and other leaders of color.

Virtual Events
You might want to plan virtual webinars and events that are open to all LeadingAge members in your state. Consider adding registrants to the state leaders of color network database.

Activities During State Meetings
State meetings are a great place to host events for your leaders of color network. You might plan:

- **Social events**, including happy hours, coffee chats, breakfasts, or receptions. Events could be informal or feature a mix of formal presentations by guest speakers and informal networking opportunities.
- **Educational events**, including panel discussions featuring fellow network members or outside speakers.
- **Planning meetings** featuring discussions about network activities.
- **Booths in conference exhibit halls**, which can help you connect and engage with new leaders of color and allies.

Activities Outside of State Meetings
There are a host of ways to connect with network members outside of state meetings, including:

- **Video calls** featuring open discussion of a specified topic or a more structured presentation.
- **Virtual webinars** featuring educational presentations by guest speakers or subject-matter experts.
- **In-person social gatherings** that build a sense of community among network members.
- **Ongoing member engagement** that occurs through members' participation in advocacy work, task forces, committees, and boards. This ongoing engagement might also include creating a pool of diverse mentors who could support the professional development and advancement of proteges by sponsoring them for training opportunities and work assignments.

Funding for Activities and Events

Sponsoring activities and events for your state leaders of color network might cost money. How will your network cover this cost? Here are three options to consider:

1. The state partner organization could absorb the cost.
2. You could raise funds to support the event.
3. You could secure a sponsorship from a business or provider member.

In addition, you might pursue some creative strategies for covering the cost of events. For example:

- A business sponsor might host networking events by covering the cost of food. In return, you could offer the sponsor opportunities to speak during the event.
- The state partner organization could ask the keynote speaker at a state gathering to meet separately with leaders of color for a more intimate conversation.
- A network member could host an in-person event at their community. The dining services department at the member's community could provide food and beverages for the event.
- A state partner organization could launch its leaders of color network during a state meeting or a virtual gathering.

State partner organizations might consider offering scholarships to help leaders of color attend state meetings. This practice would increase in-person participation in state meetings among leaders of color and increase the diversity of meeting participants. The scholarship could cover the cost of meeting registration and possibly the member's travel expenses.

SECTION 4: LESSONS WE'VE LEARNED

LeadingAge's national office staff and Leaders of Color Network Advisory Board members have learned many lessons while launching and sustaining the LeadingAge Leaders of Color Network. Here are a few lessons that may help you as you launch a state leaders of color network:

Engage Leaders in Planning
We invited leaders of color to help us plan and develop the LeadingAge Leaders of Color Network.

Be Inclusive
The LeadingAge Leaders of Color Network is open to all LeadingAge members, including leaders of color and allies. LeadingAge acknowledges all types of diversity, but we chose to focus the work of the LeadingAge Leaders of Color Network on supporting and expanding the racial and ethnic diversity of LTSS leaders. We chose this focus to better mirror the racial and ethnic diversity of frontline caregivers in most LeadingAge member organizations.

Reach out to the C-Suite
We continue to create awareness about the LeadingAge Leaders of Color Network among CEOs and C-suite executives in LeadingAge member organizations. Our goal is to encourage these executives to tell leaders of color at their organizations about the network and encourage those leaders to join the network and participate in network activities. We also encourage CEOs and other C-suite executives to become allies and sponsors.

Take Advantage of State Meetings
While working with our state partners to establish state-based leaders of color networks, we discovered the advantages of holding state network events at state meetings, especially during the state network's launch phase. This approach has helped state partners market the activities they sponsor for leaders of color and encourage more leaders of color to participate in those activities.

Be a Creative Advertiser
We use as many mechanisms as possible to advertise network events. Many of the leaders of color we wanted to reach did not receive mailings from LeadingAge. That's why our dissemination plan called for contacting CEOs and other executives directly to inform them about the network's events. We encouraged these executives to share information about the network with leaders of color in their organizations.

Highlight Your Diversity
Our communications materials feature photographs and clipart that reflect the diversity of members in the LeadingAge Leaders of Color Network.

Appendix A:
Glossary of Terms

The following glossary defines standard terms related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). While not comprehensive, the glossary is a starting point for conversing about DEI topics. We hope it will help your team develop a shared language and better understand DEI issues affecting your state partner organization and your leaders of color network.

Ally: Individuals or groups actively supporting and advocating for the rights, dignity, and well-being of marginalized or underrepresented communities. Allies leverage their privilege, resources, and influence to challenge and dismantle systemic barriers, discrimination, and injustice. True allyship goes beyond mere expressions of solidarity and requires continuous self-education, empathy, and a commitment to amplifying marginalized voices. Allies actively listen, learn, and engage in constructive dialogue. They foster inclusive environments where everyone is empowered to thrive. Importantly, being an ally is an ongoing process that involves introspection, humility, and a dedication to fostering positive social change.[1]

Assimilation: The process by which an individual member of a minority group gradually adopts characteristics of the majority culture and becomes a member of that culture.

Belonging: The security and support a member of a minority group feels when they live or work in an environment imbued with a sense of acceptance, inclusion, and identity.

Bias: Prejudice in favor of or against a thing, person, or group when that thing, person, or group is compared—usually unfairly or negatively—with someone or something else.

Cultural competence: The ability of an individual or organization to understand how inequity can be and has been perpetuated and to use that knowledge to disrupt inequitable practices; the ability to function effectively and empathetically as an individual or as an organization within the context of the cultural beliefs, behaviors, and needs presented by another's culture.

Diversity: The representation of multiple racial- and ethnic-identity groups and cultures in an organization.

Equity: Fairness in treatment and outcomes. Equity provides individuals the support they need to address the varying barriers expressed by different racial and ethnic groups. Equity cannot be achieved without diversity and inclusion.[2]

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[1] Nzinga Shaw, Attack the Glass, LLC
[2] Extension Foundation, 2021

Inclusion: A culture of belonging that values and respects all people's unique backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences. Inclusive organizations offer space for people to share their perspectives authentically, ensuring that the voices of all matter and are included in the decision-making process.[2]

Intersectionality: The theory that different aspects of our identity intersect to create various life experiences and impact inequality. This means that aspects of your identity, such as your gender, race, or class, create different experiences of privilege and oppression.

Leader of color: Any leader who does not identify as white.

Microaggression: Everyday slights, insults, putdowns, invalidations, and offensive behaviors that people experience in daily interactions with generally well-intentioned individuals who may be unaware they have engaged in demeaning ways.

Stereotype: An oversimplified image or statement applied to a whole group without regard for the individual.

Systemic racism: The aspects of our society's culture, policy, and institutions that create and maintain racial inequality in every facet of life for people of color.

Unconscious bias or implicit bias: Attitudes and stereotypes that influence judgment, decision-making, and behavior in ways that are outside of conscious awareness or control.

Appendix B:
Checklist for Launching a State Leaders of Color Network

LeadingAge state partner organizations can use the LeadingAge Leaders of Color Network as a model for creating and launching their state networks. Alternatively, state organizations can create unique structures and activities for their state leaders of color networks based on the needs of the state partner organization and its members.

In either case, this checklist can help you begin designing and establishing a state-based leaders of color network that best meets the needs of your state partner organization and leaders of color in your state.

Checklist for Launching a State Leaders of Color Network

☐ **Gauge interest:** Determine whether there is enough member interest to support the network. Follow up with members who have expressed an interest in starting a state network to gauge their willingness to join. Conduct a member survey to identify if there is broad member interest in establishing a state-based leaders of color network.

☐ **Assess capacity:** Determine the capacity of state partner staff to manage the network, develop activities, and implement events. The network can be co-led by state partner organization staff and leaders of color. This will help you attain buy-in from the members.

☐ **Set your course:** Develop the mission and goals of the network.

☐ **Choose a governance structure:** Determine whether the network will be guided by a group of volunteer leaders of color and allies who will provide direction and advice regarding the state network's goals, programming, and activities. Define the role of the state leaders of color guiding group and how the group will work with state partner staff.

☐ **Recruit new members:** Create a process to help leaders of color collaborate with state partner staff to launch the network. Consider implementing the following marketing and outreach strategies to attract new members and grow your network:
  o Sending targeted emails to leaders and CEOs at member organizations informing them about the network.
  o Encouraging C-suite executives in member organizations to support team members who want to join and participate in the network. Executives could be encouraged to allow leaders of color to take time away from their duties to attend network events or subsidize their travel to state meetings.
  o Encouraging leaders of color and allies to spread the word about the network.

- Promoting the network in newsletters, member community visits, and on the state partner organization website.

☐ **Secure funding:** Identify and secure resources and funding to support network activities.

☐ **Ask for member input:** Survey current and prospective network members to identify activities and topics that interest them.

☐ **Engage members:** Provide opportunities for leaders of color and allies to network, exchange resources, share ideas, and create a sense of community during in-person and virtual events. Activities might include social and educational events, video calls featuring open discussion of a specified topic, virtual educational webinars, and in-person social gatherings.

☐ **Reach out regularly:** Communicate regularly with network members to promote programs, events, and other relevant activities.

☐ **Collect contact information:** Create and maintain a database of members.

The LeadingAge national office program staff is available to support your efforts. If you have any questions, contact Natasha Bryant or Amma Addo.

About LeadingAge

We represent more than 5,400 nonprofit and mission-driven aging services providers and other organizations that touch millions of lives every day. Alongside our members and 36 partners in 41 states, we use advocacy, education, applied research, and community-building to make America a better place to grow old. Our membership encompasses the entire continuum of aging services, including skilled nursing, assisted living, memory care, affordable housing, retirement communities, adult day programs, community-based services, hospice, and home-based care. We bring together the most inventive minds in the field to lead and innovate solutions that support older adults wherever they call home. For more information visit leadingage.org.

About the LTSS Center

The LeadingAge LTSS Center @UMass Boston conducts research to help our nation address the challenges and seize the opportunities associated with a growing older population. LeadingAge and the University of Massachusetts Boston established the LTSS Center in 2017. We strive to conduct studies and evaluations that will serve as a foundation for government and provider action to improve the quality of care and quality of life for the most vulnerable older Americans. The LTSS Center maintains offices in Washington, DC, and Boston, MA. For more information, visit LTSSCenter.org.