

# CITY OF ERIE, PENNSYLVANIA FIRE DEPARTMENT

CULTURAL DIVERSITY, IMPLICIT BIAS AND  
COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIP BUILDING TRAINING

## SUMMARY BRIEF AND RECOMMENDATIONS 2020



**Joseph Schember, Mayor**

City of Erie  
626 State Street,  
Erie, PA 16501  
Phone: 814.870.1200

**Training Dates**

March 2 -12, 2020  
July 13-14, 2020

**Joseph Walko, Chief**

City of Erie Fire Department  
626 State Street, Room 509  
Erie, PA 16501  
Phone: 814.870.1400

**BUILD OPPORTUNITY. RESTORE HOPE. TRANSFORM ERIE.**

# CITY OF ERIE, PENNSYLVANIA FIRE DEPARTMENT

## CULTURAL DIVERSITY, IMPLICIT BIAS, AND COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIP BUILDING TRAINING

### EXECUTIVE BRIEF

Of the 126 employees of the Erie Fire Department 105 (83%) participated in Cultural Diversity, Implicit Bias, and Community Relationship Building Training in March and July 2020. Demographic data finds the fire department almost complete male (97%) and white (99%) with the average tenure of service, 14.71 years.

The pedagogy and methodology used to conduct this training employed a multimedia, experiential approach (lecture, small group discussions, video clips and simulation exercises) to created dual roles (each group member occupied the status of instructor and learner) for both the trainer and group participants.

The majority of the training participants (92%) reported the training very effective/effective. Moreover, 87% of the firefighters found this training helpful. The results indicate that in all ten competency areas most firefighters reported they were *moderately certain* or *certain* "I can perform" the task." Two significant areas where firefighters reported confidence were:

1. *Participate in activities that will increase diversity and inclusion.* (79)
2. *Work effectively in settings with people who are culturally different.* (83)

Findings indicate a fire department in need of greater racial and gender diversity. Nonetheless, most firefighters reported an openness, comfort, and desire to diversify the department. SWOT analysis results of the training with recommendations to city administrators and leaders within the fire department are included at the end of this brief.

### INTRODUCTION

Nationally, the United States has experienced major demographic changes. In 1980, 80 percent of the nation's population was white; in 2014, the proportion had decreased to 63 percent and it is projected, by 2050 to decline to 44 percent. Those demographic shifts are also visible in Erie. Presently, New Americans represent almost 20 percent of the estimated 95,508<sup>1</sup> residents living in Erie. This trend is projected to continue well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

To address these demographic shifts Mayor Joseph Sember has articulated his mission for Erie: Build Opportunity, Restore Hope, Transform Erie. The vision for Erie is guided by the conviction that Erie is *Community of Choice*<sup>2</sup>. The five composites of Erie's vision are:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/eriestate/pst045219>

<sup>2</sup> <https://cityof.erie.pa.us/>

***We celebrate our:***

1. Diverse cultures
2. Welcoming vibrant neighborhoods
3. World-class downtown and Bayfront
4. Schools of excellence
5. Abundance of family-sustaining jobs.

The city is in the process to achieve certification of “Welcoming City” status from Welcoming America. This training is part of the city's effort to fulfil one of the requirements for certification. This training will **satisfy** the Safe Communities Requirements:

- SC1: "A program(s) exists to train public safety staff on working with diverse populations."
- SC2: "A partnership program(s) is in place to strengthen relationships and promote regular communication between law and code enforcement agencies and the immigrant community."

Presently our nation and the City of Erie are consumed with a worldwide coronavirus pandemic, and issues focused on systemic racism, healthcare disparities, rising unemployment and social and economic justice. The recent deaths of George Floyd, Breona Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery have captured America’s consciousness and forced us into a critical re-examination of professional and personal positions on racial and ethnic diversity, equity and inclusion and anti-heteronormative and anti-misogynist attitudes.

According to the Pew Research Center (2019)<sup>3</sup> most Americans recognize the increased diversity in our nation and are generally satisfied with the racial and ethnic mix in their communities and schools. These individuals acknowledge that workforce diversity is good. However, significantly less people are in favor of using race or ethnicity as a criteria for employment selection. The major impediment is the perception that racial or ethnic minorities will receive unfair advantages.

This training will help participants examine issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. The objectives of the training were as follows: After completing this training, participants will be able to:

- Define implicit bias.
- Describe various forms of privilege.
- Define power and identify three sources of power.
- Recognize individual and institutional discrimination.
- Establish epistemic trust in relationships.
- Build relationships within a community.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2019/05/08/americans-see-advantages-and-challenges-in-countrys-growing-racial-and-ethnic-diversity/>

## PEDAGOGY AND METHODOLOGY

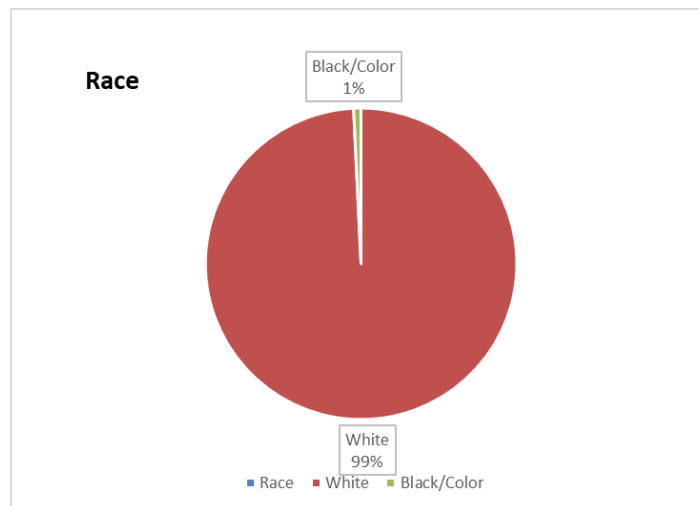
The trainings, four hours in duration, were held on two consecutive weeks. From March 2-5, 2020 trainings were held at the North Base, 208 West 12<sup>th</sup> Street. The following week, March 9-12, trainings were held at the South Base, 3507 Peach Street. During the second week, training was interrupted (March 11-12, 2020) due to COVID 19 restrictions. These trainings were subsequently held and completed on July 13-14, 2020.

The pedagogical approach chosen for this training created a partnership with and among, the instructor and the training participants. This means both instructor and student will serve as teacher and student. This framework required each participant to assume personal responsibility for intelligent dialogue, to respectfully challenge or confront each other, and to offer courageous attempts toward introspective reflection(s) and acceptance of differences. The methodology for instruction used a multimedia approach that incorporated lecture, group discussion, exercises and role plays (simulation exercises), videos, and question and answer brainstorming.

## DEMOGRAPHICS OF ERIE FIRE DEPARTMENT<sup>4</sup>

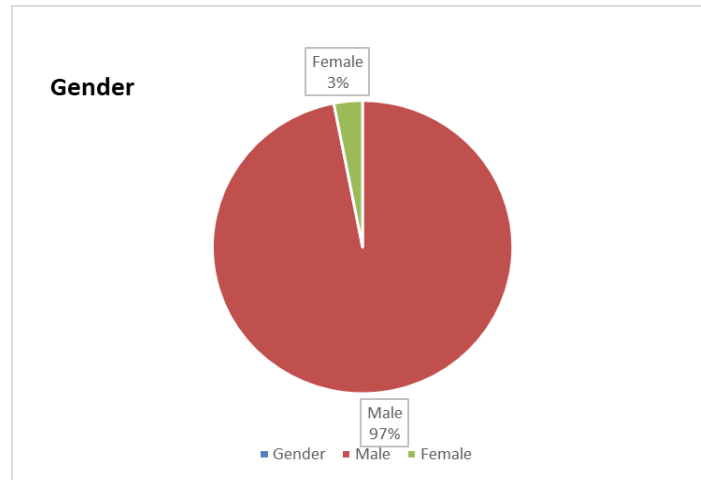
One obvious area of needed improvement within the Erie Fire Department is the racial composition. The Erie Fire Department is composed of 99% white (129/130 white) and 97% males (126/130). The average length of service is 15 years (14.71). The range of service has a high of 43 years and low of 6 months. One third of the department (34%) has 20 or more years of service. Conversely, one quarter of the force (25%) has less than one year of service.

**Figure 1. Racial Composition of the Erie Fire Department**



<sup>4</sup> Fire Department Employee Data

**Figure 2. Gender Composition of the Erie Fire Department**



## **FINDINGS**

Of the 126 employees of the Erie Fire Department 105 (83%) participated in Cultural Diversity, Implicit Bias, and Community Relationship Building Training in March and July 2020. Demographic data finds the fire department almost complete male (97%) and white (99%). For outsiders this picture can be misleading and intimidating. Initial reaction to the data might suggest cause for concern and some concerns may be justified. Participants reported on two important items:

1. Willing to participate in activities that will increase diversity and inclusion (79)
2. Can work effectively with people who are culturally different (83).

Scores in the range of 80 – 100 indicate the respondents are “certain I can do it.” (See Table 1. Feedback from Training). This is important because one items related to epistemic trust (73), advocacy (69), and using epistemic trust to establish community relationships (69) the respondents indicated “moderately certain I can do it.”

One limitation of this finding may be related to how the concept of epistemic trust was taught and perceived by the training participants. Discussions related to racial difference and understanding race in a historical context remained difficult to talk about in most training sessions. Two important moderating variables associated with trust is time and frequency of interaction

The strength of the Erie Fire Department is their incredible sense of fraternity and family. Clearly there is a discernible culture of social and familial support and an implicit understanding of, “I got your back!” While this may be an expectation for all firefighters, given the day-to-day

demands, risks, and exposure to unpredictable environments and human behaviors, it was reassuring to observe the genuine comradery between seasoned and rookie workers.

The Erie Fire Department and the City of Erie have some significant opportunities for increasing racial and ethnic diversity representation. Overall, both Erie County and Erie City experienced a decrease in population<sup>5</sup>. However, the number of African American, Hispanic/Latinx, and New American populations continues to remain stable or increase. Intentional efforts to identify and train members of these racial and ethnic minorities for careers as professional firefighters appeared warranted.

To create meaningful change in the current culture of “whiteness,” leadership within Erie City administration and the Erie Fire Department must move beyond the black-white binary perception of multiculturalism. The majority of the firefighters; some second or third generation firemen, described their socialization to the profession of firefighting originating from family and friends. Integrating the Erie Fire Department must be intentional and pursued with due diligence. Interviews and impromptu discussions during training sessions uncovered a collectivity of firefighters who embrace racial and ethnic diversity, believe in community service, value professional and ethical conduct and department of duty and are incredibly supportive of one another.

According to trainees, community perception and comprehension regarding the responsibilities, duties and benefits of being employed as an Erie Firefighter are mixed. Many residents, particularly New Americans, are unclear as to the requirements for hire, daily responsibilities, and significant rewards found within the profession. September 11, 2001 galvanized the nation’s attention to the glory and honor bestowed on public servants<sup>6</sup>. However, many who would venerate profession firefighters and other first responders also vehemently voice their resolve not to seek employment as a firefighter.

The City of Erie and the department must design a public campaign to educate the general public regarding the meaning and responsibilities of firefighters. This campaign would create a sense of community solidarity – the sense of oneness and the belief that community problems can be confronted and solved collectively. Individuals and groups within neighborhoods and communities are more likely to collectively intervene and cooperate with municipal representatives responsible for community safety and social control (fire and police departments) when shared expectations are connected with mutual trust and social cohesion are high.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/eriecitypennsylvania>

<sup>6</sup> Cowman, Ferrari, & Liao-Troth (2004). Mediating Effects of Social Support on Firefighters’ Sense of Community and Perceptions of Care. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 32(2), 121-126.

<sup>7</sup> Sampson, R. J., & Raudenbush, S. W. (1999). Systematic social observation of public spaces: A new look at disorder in urban neighborhoods. *American Journal of Sociology*.

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**Table 1. Feedback from Training**

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**Evaluation of Implicit Bias, Cultural Diversity, and Community Relationship Building Training**

The items in this section ask you to indicate your level of confidence to perform a variety of tasks associated with cultural diversity. Use the following scale for each:

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cannot do at all		moderately certain I can do					certain I can do			
0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100

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***After the completion of this training how confident are you that you can. . .***

	<b>Average Scores (rd.)</b>
1. Participate in activities that will increase diversity and inclusion.	79
2. Define power.	78
3. Define epistemic trust.	73
4. Serve as an advocate for cultural diversity and inclusion.	69
5. Utilize epistemic trust to develop community relationships.	69
6. Describe privilege.	74
7. Distinguish between individual and institutional discrimination.	76
8. Identify three sources of power.	70
9. Work effectively in settings with people who are culturally different.	83
10. Define implicit bias.	72

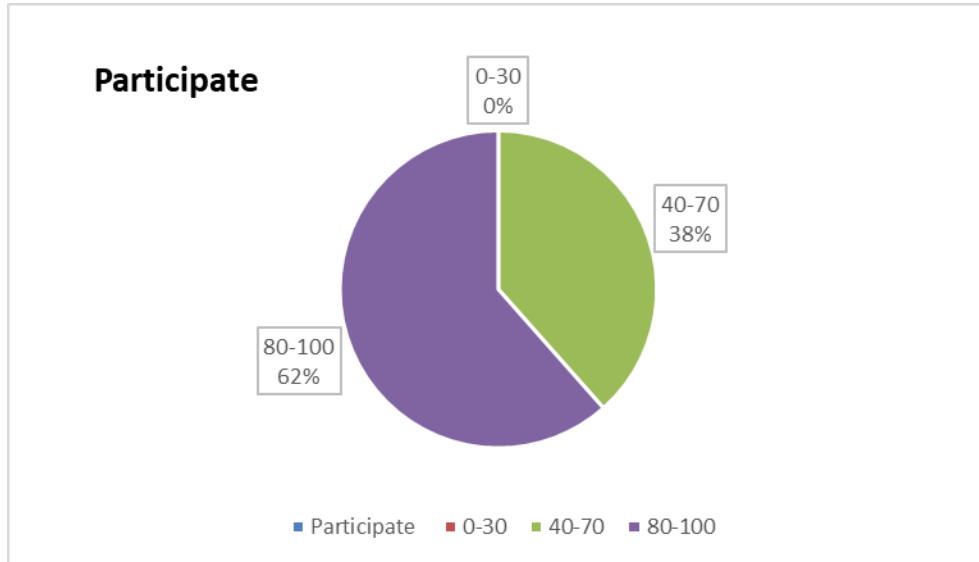
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This implicit bias, cultural diversity and community building relationships training was:

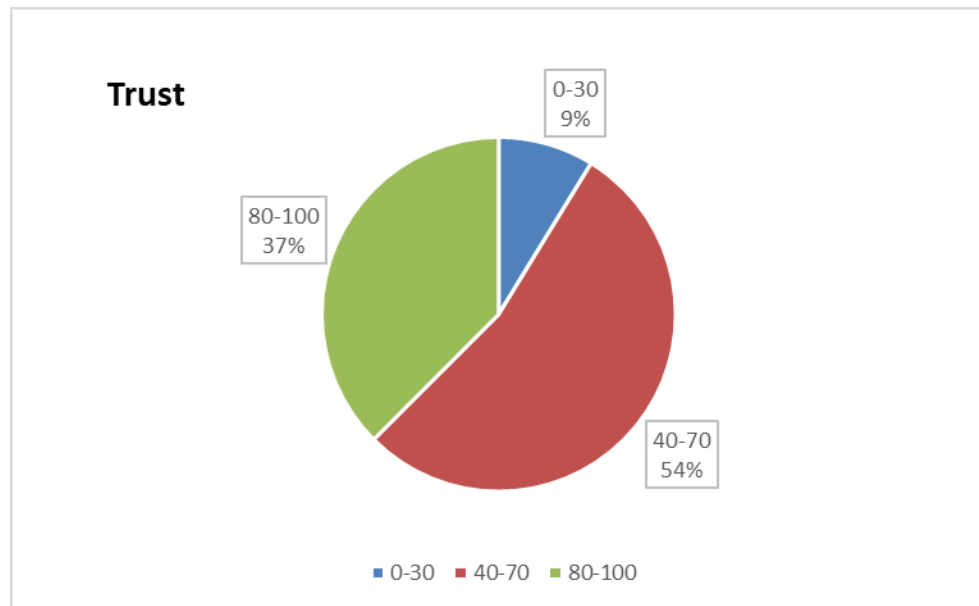
\_\_\_\_\_ very effective    \_\_\_\_\_ effective    \_\_\_\_\_ somewhat effective    \_\_\_\_\_ not effective  
\_\_\_\_\_ very helpful    \_\_\_\_\_ helpful    \_\_\_\_\_ somewhat helpful    \_\_\_\_\_ not helpful



**Figure 3.** Participate in activities that will increase diversity and inclusion. One hundred percent of the firefighters reported moderately certainty or certainty they can accomplish this task.

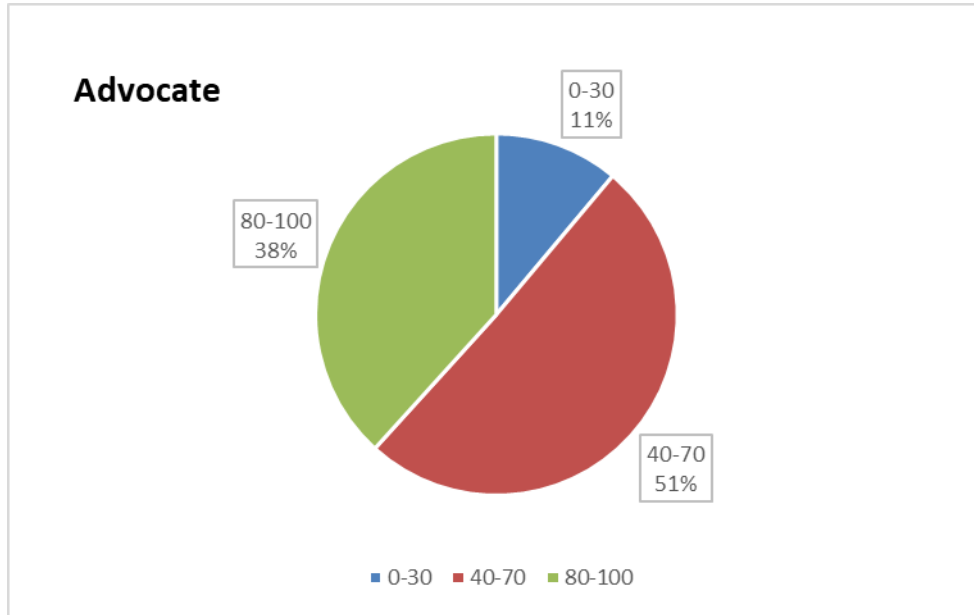


**Figure 4.** Define epistemic trust. Epistemic trust is developed when the learner believes that the educator, parent, or authority figure genuinely cares about their well-being (Fonagy & Allison, 2011).

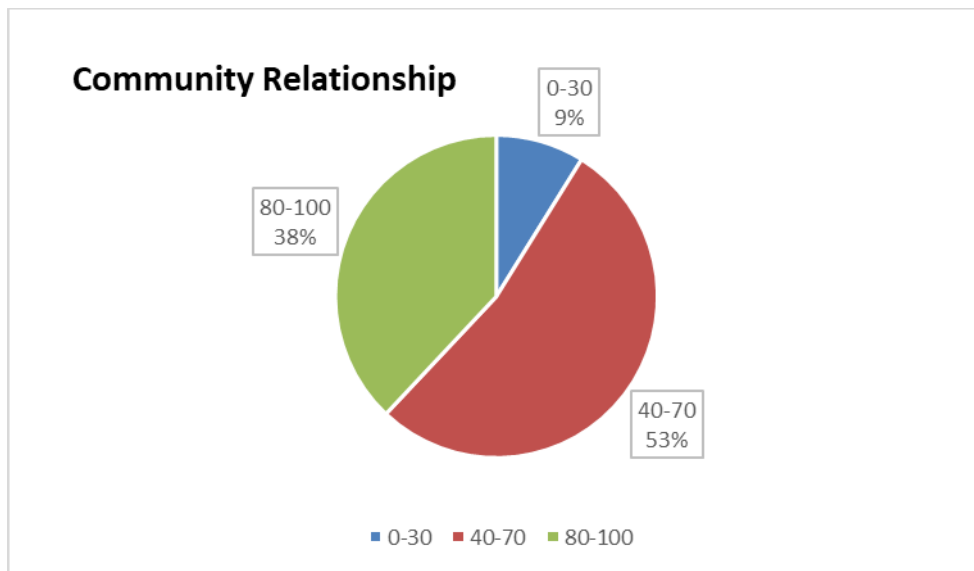




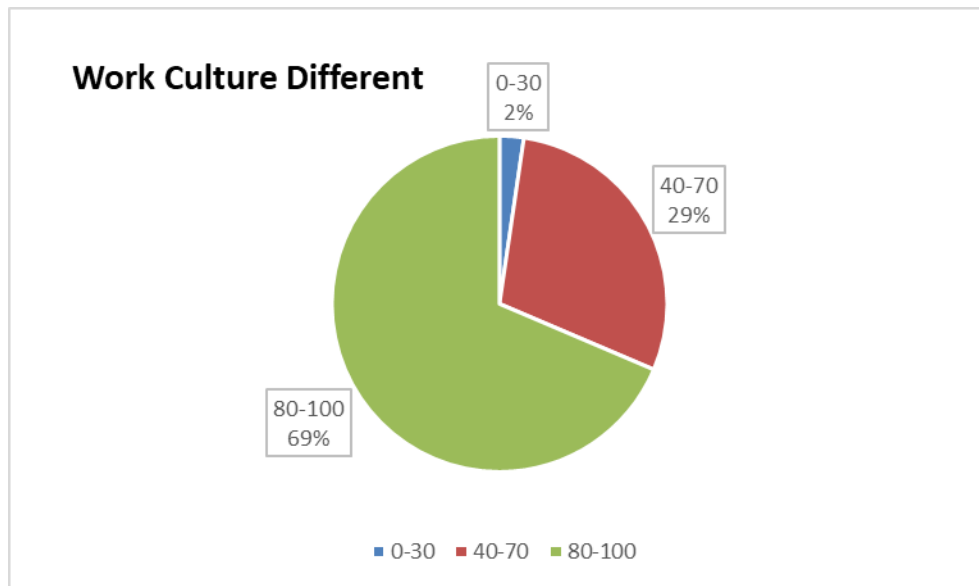
**Figure 5.** Serve as an advocate for cultural diversity and inclusion. Fully 91% of the participants indicated moderate certainty or certainty they can advocate for diversity and inclusion.



**Figure 6.** Utilize epistemic trust to develop community relationships. The central focus and function of the educator therefore is to consider how to adapt the environment to the learner and more importantly, how the educator *must* change their personal paradigm to become concentric with the learner (Fonagy & Allison, 2011).



**Figure 7.** Work effectively in settings with people who are culturally different. Fully 98% of the Erie Fire Department reported a willingness to work with populations who are culturally different.



The majority of the training participants (87%) reported the training very effective/effective. Moreover, 87% of the firefighters found this training very helpful/helpful (See Figures 8 & 9 below).

Review of training evaluations indicate that in all ten areas most firefighters reported they were **moderately certain** or **certain** "I can perform the task."

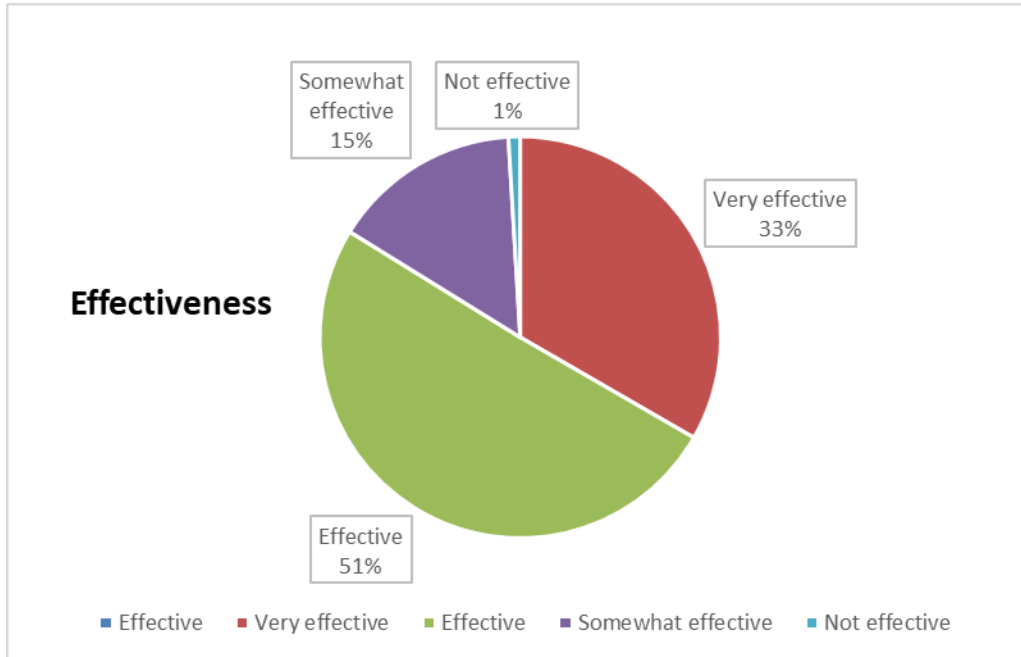
Participants reported on two significant items

1. *Participate in activities that will increase diversity and inclusion.* (100)
2. *Work effectively in settings with people who are culturally different.* (98)

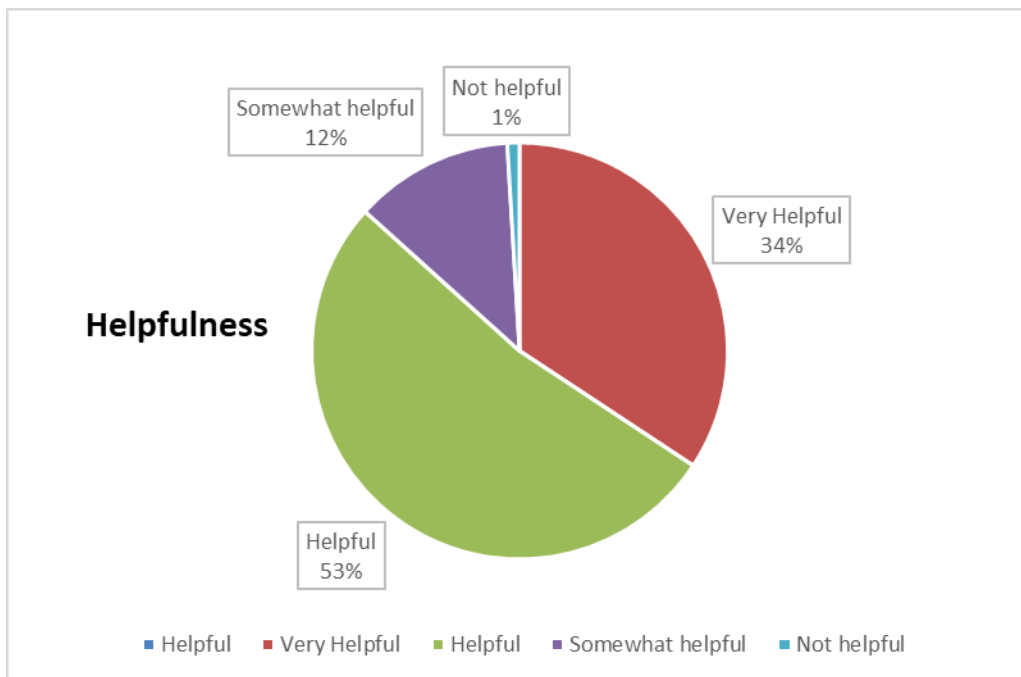
*"Seldom is attention paid to the person's behavior in more than one setting or to the way in which relations between settings can affect what happens within them. Rarest of all is the recognition that environmental events and conditions outside any immediate setting containing the person can have a profound influence on behavior and development within that setting"*

*(Urie Bronfenbrenner).*

**Figure 8.** Effectiveness of this implicit bias, cultural diversity and community building relationships training: 84% of respondents reported the training was very effective/effective.



**Figure 9.** Helpfulness of this implicit bias, cultural diversity and community building relationships training: 87% of respondents reported the training was very helpful/helpful.



## Comments:

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### QUALITATIVE DATA - COMMENTS

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Below is the written feedback; verbatim, from the training participants:

1. Great class; makes you stop and think.
2. EFD does do outreach programs in several community areas. Many ethnic/school and outside groups. Contact the inspection division to schedule events for EFD to attend. Each event is emailed to Michael Outlaw by the inspection division.
3. Thank you! I enjoyed the class.
4. I felt video # 1 was a tough transition (Video clip – Crash). Class seemed to shut down a little. Maybe start with a slightly less dramatic example. Excellent instructor – Good class overall.
5. Very knowledgeable; hope change on all sides is possible.
6. Great presentation; very insightful!
7. Great training – shows areas we all can improve in and be a better individual.
8. Course could be better described as Communication/Cultural Training. Good class though.
9. Thought provoking!
10. Well done!

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are respectfully submitted to Joseph Schember, Mayor, City of Erie and Joseph Walko, Chief, Erie Fire Department for your review and implementation:

### *Hiring*

- In the discussion phase of training; the Erie Fire Department demonstrated earnest, extended and repeated efforts to recruit ethnic and racial minorities. Developing programs such as PAL and Police Explorers; were suggested specifically to familiarize middle and high school children and their parents/legal guardians to the profession of firefighting.

### *Internal*

- Create reward and recognition rituals within the department and at each firehouse. Though firefighters repeatedly stated they don't work for recognition, research strongly suggests that job satisfaction, psychological sense of community, and care-giver stress are important mediating variables of employment tenure.

- Cultural diversity presentations must become regular and include aspects of history, beliefs, accomplishments and worldviews of other marginalized and historically oppressed groups. Regular exposure to different cultures can assist current firefighters in becoming sensitive to potential cultural bias, adjust their worldviews and understand the nuances communication and language access.

### ***External***

- Greater use of social media and traditional forms of mass media to share testimonials regarding the tremendous work of Erie firefighters.
- Start community programs such as Adopt-a- Firehouse through Erie County Neighborhood Watch Council and other civically engaged community groups.
- Establish an uncompensated position (role and responsibilities) of chaplaincy with Catholic, Protestant, and as necessary, other clergy or religious authority.

### ***Community Relationship Building***

- Establish partnerships with organizations such as the U. S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI)/International Institute of Erie, Multicultural Community Resource Center (MCRC), Quality of Life Learning Center, Sisters of St. Joseph Neighborhood Network, St. Benedict Academy, Erie Asian Pacific American Association (APAA), and City of Erie, New American Council, and City of Erie, New Americans Liaison and the Community Liaison to acquaint the residents with the culture and day-to-day responsibilities of the Erie Fire Department.
- Small group education sessions between New American groups and firefighters at neighborhood firehouses. This would be facilitated by Niken Astari Carpenter, New American Liaison, City of Erie.
- Develop language plan and policy for the City of Erie. Invest in translation apps such as iTranslate Voice, Google Translate, or TripLingo. These applications can be used with firefighters and 911 dispatchers. Invest in anatomically correct dolls/action figures with pictures and phrases in multiple languages that ask, “What hurts?” or “Where does it hurt?”
- Regular and frequent inclusion in cultural events in neighborhoods where firehouses are located.

Respectfully Submitted,

Parris J. Baker, PhD, MSSA - Gannon University