



Metropolitan Center for Independent Living (Minnesota)

Working with Vocational Rehabilitation Services to Address Non-Employment Issues for Diverse Communities

“It is important that we seek to understand and have an appreciation for world views and for value systems, for how people see themselves. Doing so requires a high degree of cultural nimbleness and diplomacy and always seeking that understanding. When applying independent living philosophy, which has as its assets a deference to the aspirations of people we work with, it works in concert for us to know not only the aspirations of a person, but the culture and language context by which a person makes those aspirations known.” ~ Jesse Bethke Gomez, Executive Director

Organizational Description and Capacity for Diversity, Intersectionality and Cultural Competence

Metropolitan Center for Independent Living (MCIL) was founded in 1981. There are approximately 612,000 people with disabilities in Minnesota, with about 50% residing in the Twin Cities seven-county metropolitan area, which MCIL serves. These counties include Anoka, Carver, Dakota, Hennepin, Ramsey, Scott, and Washington. Demographically, Minnesota is 19% African American/Black, 11% Hispanic/Latino, 5% Asian, and 2% American Indian/Alaskan Native. In the St. Paul Public School System alone, there are 92 spoken languages. With this level of diversity in the city, it is critical for human-service organizations to be culturally and linguistically competent. Racial/ethnic demographics are included in the table on the following page for the service area, consumers, staff, and board.

MCIL embraces the opportunity to serve all people with disabilities who are racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse. Staff represent the community in all job ranks, from leadership to line staff. Additionally, the organization identifies and embraces multiple ways to expand its responsiveness and reach. One of the first ways is by working with a third-party vendor to provide an array of interpreters who can support consumers at MCIL’s offices or partner sites. Second, MCIL has loaned its Braille system to other service organizations, as needed. Third, the enterprise reaches out to organizations serving diverse populations, such as those in African-American, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American communities. These efforts have all been for the goal of fully serving and supporting people with disabilities, often in partnership with other agencies.

Demographics

Diverse Groups: US Census Categories	MCIL's Community (%)* (n = 2,985,405)	MCIL's Consumers (%) (n = 1,321)	MCIL's Staff (%) (n = 77)	MCIL's Board (%) (n = 10)
Caucasian/White alone	90.7 - 66.9	63.0	72.0	90.0
African American/Black alone	1.2 - 11.6	25.0	22.0	
Hispanic/Latino/Latina	3.4 - 7.2	2.0	1.5	10.0
American Indian /Alaskan Native alone	0.6 - 0.8	< 1		
Asian alone	2.7 - 11.6	< 1	3.0	
Other Race				
Two or More Races	1.3 - 2.8	1.0	1.5	
Unknown		5.0		

* If applicable, community demographics represent a range of percentages.

Data were gathered from the U.S. Census for individuals residing in Anoka, Carver, Dakota, Hennepin, Ramsey, Scott, and Washington

MCIL is mindful about working with existing agencies who also serve diverse communities. The agency believes in building mutuality of effort, so that the community itself is empowered to implement successful strategies. Central to this approach is the willingness, ability, and competence that is necessary to understand the nuances of diverse communities. The MCIL Board of Directors has an authentic and deep commitment to diversity and increasing it within the organization, including board membership. The board of directors, executive director, management team, and employees have an appreciation for the Civil Rights Movement and the inalienable rights of all people to pursue life, liberty, and happiness.

Progress Made in Diversity, Intersectionality and Cultural Competence

“We want to deepen our agency’s nimbleness, commitment, and support in ways that are organic, innovative, mindful, and mutual in reaching diverse communities in the seven (7) county area.” ~ Jesse Bethke Gomez, Executive Director

Central to MCIL’s work is the belief that the family system is the basic societal human organizational system in which individuals survive and thrive. Given that foundation, MCIL asks questions such as, “What are the family, other supports and systems in place to support the individual? What are their beliefs about independent living, disability, person centeredness, and aspirations for their future?” By answering these and other questions, MCIL empowers individuals

and their support systems. In addition, the organization embraces independent living philosophy, with the understanding that language and culture are pivotal factors in how people interact with the world around them and navigate through life. Thus, MCIL supports people with the principles of independent living and person-centeredness in making their own choices about their lives and their future.

The organization works with schools in North Minneapolis, an urban area predominant in diverse communities where many people live in poverty. The goal of this effort is to provide services to students with disabilities that prepare them for the transition to adulthood in partnership with schools. MCIL has deepened its work in helping young people and their parents from diverse communities prepare for the societal challenges they may be confronted with as they move to independence, full engagement, and participation in the communities of their choosing. The program seeks to help students grow in their decision-making skills and determine what's important in their lives for themselves.

MCIL has long been on the cutting-edge of service delivery. It was recently awarded a Community Civic Engagement grant to support consumers with learning how to become effective advocates for themselves and their communities. MCIL also has Independent Living Vocational Rehabilitation (ILVR) Specialists deployed in 13 metro area Vocational Rehabilitation Services Offices in Workforce Centers under the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development. These individuals work alongside employment counselors to help people stabilize life issues and pursue employment-attainment goals. In this unique relationship between the governmental and nonprofit sectors, MCIL employs interpreters to serve a vast array of consumers. The organization's belief is that there is added value in addressing life issues that are otherwise outside the scope of employment preparation. Providing these services in a linguistically and culturally appropriate manner is equally important.

MCIL has a commitment to utilize technology as a best practice in quality and performance. The organization brought Social Solutions onboard in 2016 and is utilizing its Apricot® software. Using this new client data platform allows MCIL to automate compilation of key data needed for its annual reporting requirements. The organization utilizes aggregate data for its internal metrics to analyze results against key performance indicators. MCIL is well positioned in real-time with pertinent information as a center for independent living (CIL).

Efforts in Local and National Work to Improve Diversity and Cultural Competence

MCIL has partnered with organizations, agencies, and businesses to increase access to services for individuals with disabilities within its geographic service area. It recently participated in a large grass-roots rally at the State Capitol in July 2017, to increase awareness of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and its importance in the state of Minnesota. Its executive director has also worked at the statewide level to address issues of health disparities experienced by communities that are linguistically and culturally diverse. This applies to traditionally marginalized communities, such as African American and American Indian as well as emerging communities, such as those with Somalian immigrants.

MCIL's work has been applauded by consumers as well as by other entities. Its staff members have been recognized by numerous organizations and have represented MCIL in various prominent ways. To name a few, Jesse Bethke Gomez was identified as one of the 100 most influential healthcare leaders in Minnesota (2008–2012). He has also contributed a chapter to the internationally consulted book *Innovative Voices in Education: Engaging Diverse Communities*. In addition, Kelly Krantz, MCIL's Director of Independent Living Services, was selected to participate in the Leadership Institute of Georgetown University National Center for Cultural Competence. These and other achievements underscore the organization's commitment to building cultural competence organizationally, locally, and nationally.

New Directions for Cultural Competency and Diversity

MCIL is committed to diversity, inclusion, and outreach. The enterprise is currently in the midst of strategic planning and seeks to build upon its strong foundation. The agency will continue its ongoing outreach efforts in reaching people with disabilities from the African American, Latino, Hmong, Somalian, and other communities.

On an external level, MCIL is concerned about how people with disabilities are faring. MCIL is concerned with how policies can impact people and is committed to bringing issues to the forefront and improving the lives of individuals with disabilities.

Closing Comments

MCIL views itself as an organization that embraces a culture of learning. It celebrates the hopes and dreams of all people and believes that language and culture are two critical ways in which people understand and interact with the world in which we all live. It approaches relationships with consumers and other organizations in a spirit of mindfulness, holding on to the expectation that MCIL and its staff members will reap the greatest benefit of learning from these interactions.

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