

July 19, 2020

Board of Directors, Volunteer Leaders, and Staff
American Veterinary Medical Association
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A Call to Address Systemic Racism in Veterinary Medicine

The most recent acts of violence against Black women, men, and non-gender binary individuals in the US have brought the country to a tipping point. Aided in part by the standstill afforded by the worldwide SARS-COV-2 pandemic, the many forms in which systemic racism manifests itself in our society are being laid bare for all to see. Various sectors are forced to face their own long-standing cultures and practices which have perpetuated systemic racism among their membership—and veterinary medicine is no exception.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 which outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin in the workforce, followed by Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 which outlawed discrimination based on sex in the education system, set the stage for a remarkable rise in White women in veterinary medicine. Considering the success of White women in a profession previously dominated by White men until the mid-1980s, the stubbornly slow, and at times entirely lacking, rise in Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) population in veterinary medicine and its leadership, sends a sobering message as to who the veterinary profession represents.

Veterinary medicine's ongoing lack of diversity, equity, and inclusivity, has been discussed ad nauseum over the last few decades, drawing much attention well beyond the field itself. Today, the problem is long past recognition and, as a result, the letter will not dwell on a fact well understood by the majority of the profession. Instead, we write this letter as a call to action, to underscore the necessity for the leaders in this profession to act swiftly and effectively to remedy these problems.

By way of this call to action, we believe it is necessary to recognize important events in recent veterinary history regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). In 2011, then AVMA President, Dr. Larry M. Kornegay published a commentary in JAVMA making the "business case for diversity and inclusion" in veterinary practice. Nearly a decade later, the profession remains, in many ways, reluctant to take the lead. Additionally, it has been 14 years since the release of the report and recommendations of the 2005-2006 AVMA Diversity Task Force. Yet veterinary professionals and students are still echoing many of the same concerns, such as lack of representation in leadership and the profession as a whole. It is also worth noting that two out of three of the Diversity Task Force recommendations were never implemented. In addition, the AVMA 20/20 Vision Commission noted in their 2011 report that the AVMA would remain the

nation's leader in advancing veterinary medicine, in part, by "contributing to the growth and health of the veterinary profession, including ensuring that membership in the profession reflects the full spectrum of Americans" as well as "functioning in a manner that promotes high trust, broad participation, and commitment among its diverse membership and other key stakeholders." The Commission also identified 11 key dimensions in which the AVMA needed to transform by year 2020 including:

- "Reflected the changing demographic, ethnic and generational differences of society and actively engaged more women in leadership roles;
- Governed, operated and made decisions and policies in a transparent, inclusive, and more democratized manner;
- Created a special culture that is collaborative, customer-focused, forward-leaning, innovative, nimble, and inclusive"

To date, the AVMA has yet to deliver on these actionables.

Two different AVMA positions were created since the Diversity Task Force report: the Associate Director for International and Diversity Initiatives in 2012, followed by the Director of Wellbeing, Inclusion and Diversity Initiatives position in 2017. The positions have two things in common, both have "diversity" in their title, yet neither has DEI as a primary focus. Both positions have put in a lot of hard work and dedication into various initiatives over the years on DEI; however, the persistence of ongoing challenges in the profession suggest that this may not be enough, and a re-strategization is warranted. History has shown us that DEI can no longer be paired with other important initiatives by design or it will be eclipsed. A 20% or 50% focus on DEI in a given position is simply not enough to create transformational change in our profession. Additionally, the embedding of DEI within wellbeing initiatives has led to serious inconsistencies in efforts. In a clear example, the 2017 AVMA Annual Report lists the word "diversity" 20 times, while the word "diversity" did not appear once in the 2018 Annual Report.

With the advent of technology, the world has been changing rapidly. Some of the most pressing issues of our time such as climate change and disease spread have proved to be extremely challenging to resolve and require extensive collaboration between people and organizations worldwide. Veterinary medicine has always been at the forefront of the One Health Initiative, yet by remaining so homogenous, it has categorically failed in ensuring that its professionals are culturally competent and ready to tackle these global challenges. More importantly, addressing the lack of DEI in veterinary medicine is more than an effort to give our profession an invaluable edge, it is the right thing to do.

Systemic racism needs no conductor, and if we do not actively work to remove the barriers in place preventing BIPOC individuals from being part of this profession, we are actively aiding this antiquated system. The process will not be easy, as past initiatives have shown, nor will it be quick. We call for sustained efforts to help our profession truly be open to all who seek it. In order to achieve this, your veterinary diversity organizations and their allies strongly urge the AVMA to implement the actions attached.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Recommendations for the AVMA

- Self-Assessment – Understanding where the organization currently stands in relation to diversity, equity, and inclusion.
 - Perform preliminary internal audit of the association as a whole, by using AAVMC’s Intentional Organization Diversity & Inclusion Efforts Assessment Tool <https://bit.ly/3gHeTTw>
 - Perform preliminary assessment of the association’s event planning protocol by using AAVMC’s Conference/Symposia Diversity & Inclusion Assessment Tool <https://bit.ly/2DsvrAF>
- Accessibility – Ensure equitable process for all members, including BIPOC members, to join and grow within AVMA Leadership.
 - Reduce the duration of terms to allow more flexibility for junior members to rise up the ranks. Current term lengths create barriers to participation as today’s veterinarians are more likely to relocate and less likely to become practice owners. .
 - Reduce the duration of committee and council terms from three (3) years to two (2) years.
 - Reduce the Delegates and Alternate Delegates term from four (4) years to two (2) years.
 - Amend all positions which require a minimum of four (4) consecutive years as delegate for qualification, to two (2) years.
 - Qualifications to serve on the Board of Directors as District Director shall be available to individuals who have been voting members for at least five (5), instead of the current seven (7) consecutive years requirement.
 - Reduce the qualifications for President, President-Elect, and Vice President from at least ten (10) consecutive years, to a minimum of five (5) consecutive years.
 - Continue to provide remote participation option for the majority of committee and board member meetings.
 - Audit and report current individual state veterinary medical associations (VMAs) and allied organization requirements for officer or state delegate nominations and appointments.
 - Amend current requirements for establishing Constituent Allied Veterinary Organizations within the AVMA House of Delegates to provide representation by BIPOC-focused organizations.
 - Review and revise, where necessary, current leadership development opportunities and programs at the local and national level to ensure they uphold each program’s original intended goals.
 - Ensure that recruitment and selection processes are holistic.
 - Require implicit bias training for those involved in selecting program participants.

- Widely promote all AVMA staff employment and volunteer leadership opportunities including nomination periods.
- Accountability and Transparency – Implement processes for which AVMA will be held accountable in regard to diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives.
 - Provide updates on diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in every Annual Report, and make information publicly available on the AVMA website.
 - Create and implement a system for reporting and tracking incidents of discrimination and harassment in the veterinary profession for veterinarians, staff, clients, and students.
 - Publish data periodically (preferably in the AVMA Annual Report) to identify areas of improvement.
 - Forward reports to the appropriate licensing board or institution for follow up.
 - Collect and regularly publish data regarding race and ethnicity of all veterinary organizations, including AVMA staff and volunteers.
 - Provide updated public access to the AVMA volunteer roster with their basic contact information and recent photograph.
 - Establish a regular (minimum annually) meeting between AVMA senior staff leadership, AVMA volunteer leadership and diversity, equity, and inclusion affinity organizational leadership to discuss progress made and challenges faced with respect to diversity, equity, and inclusion in the veterinary profession. Ideally, one meeting should coincide with AVMA convention.
- Expanding Membership – Identify opportunities to create a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive membership.
 - *Require* the “gender” and “ethnicity” questions for all AVMA members while maintaining the “prefer not to answer” option.
 - Ensure that “gender” and “ethnicity” options are inclusive.
 - Use membership data to actively recruit and encourage BIPOC veterinarians and affiliates to join and actively participate in the organization.
- Organizational Commitment – Ensure that AVMA and its leadership is culturally competent and acting in the best interests of *all* of its members.
 - Ensure that all newly elected, appointed, and hired AVMA volunteers and staff align with AVMA’s commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion and recognize that by joining the organization they are also committing to these values.
 - Current AVMA volunteers and staff should also commit to these values.
 - Thoroughly vet existing and potential AVMA sponsors and collaborators to confirm their values and actions relative to diversity, equity, and inclusion align with the Association.
 - Consider investing in new sponsors who uphold these values.
 - Revise the AVMA mission as defined in Article 1, Section 2 of the Bylaws to reflect a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion for its members.

- Require, at minimum, annual diversity, equity, and inclusion training for new and continuing AVMA staff and volunteers.
- Investment – Provide financial and structural commitments from the AVMA to improve the state of diversity, equity, and inclusion in veterinary medicine.
 - Establish a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Council with appropriate funding and staffing for lasting success.
 - Recruit and hire a Director of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion solely responsible for diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. The position should be filled by a qualified specialist with an educational background in diversity, equity, and inclusion leadership. This position should report directly to the AVMA Chief Executive Officer, and all reports of initiatives by the position shall be made available to the Board of Directors.
 - Director of Wellbeing, Inclusion and Diversity Initiatives position shall, as a result, be redesignated as Director of Wellbeing.
 - Provide dedicated funds for representatives of veterinary associations focused on race, ethnicity and culture to actively participate in AVMA’s Veterinary Leadership Conference and other AVMA-sponsored events and programming.
 - Employ evidence-based practices in creating AVMA events (ie., continuing education) that are diverse and inclusive in content and presenters.
 - Develop and implement diversity, equity, and inclusion guidelines in the Committee on Veterinary Technician Education and Activities (CVTEA) Accreditation Policy and Procedures.
 - Invest in annual training of Council on Education (COE) and CVTEA site visitors, ensuring that diversity, equity, and inclusion content such as unconscious bias, is included.
 - Training should also assist site visitors in identifying deficiencies in diversity, equity, and inclusion with respect to accreditation standards.
 - Research and publish disparities in salary, practice ownership, career tracts, faculty positions, and similar features of the veterinary profession as it pertains to race, ethnicity, and other intersectionalities. Utilize the data to guide AVMA diversity, equity, and inclusion programming and initiatives.
 - Fund additional research to advance matters involving race and ethnicity within the veterinary profession, including barriers to care in underserved communities of color, racial/ethnic disparities in public health, barriers to entry into the profession, etc.
- Outreach and Engagement – Advance lasting diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives between veterinary partners at the AVMA, state VMAs, constituent allied veterinary organizations, academic institutions, veterinary practices and associates (all stakeholders).
 - Discontinue the promotion of diversity, equity, and inclusion as a subset of Wellbeing.
 - Ex: Advertise “Diversity and Inclusion in Veterinary Medicine” as a separate page under “Resources and Tools”, and not under the “Wellbeing” tab.

- Develop and promote diversity, equity, and inclusion tools and resources for practice management as in depth as the resources currently available for Wellbeing in the workplace.
- Provide alternative language options on the AVMA website for non-English speakers, beginning with Spanish.
- Review scholarship requirements to make them more accessible to students with significant financial needs.
- Design recruitment programs targeting Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), and Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs).
- Create, fund and implement outreach mentorship programs aimed at opening the pipeline for individuals underrepresented in veterinary medicine (URVMs).
- Provide dedicated resources, including funding, to support veterinarians and organizations seeking to provide mentorship and outreach to URVMs.

We recognize that some of the actions listed above may not fall solely under the purview of the AVMA; however, we trust that the AVMA leadership will work in close partnership with veterinary organizations and institutions to implement the actionables. It is also our hope that these actionables will be shared widely and implemented by everyone in the veterinary community -- organizations, industry, businesses and academic institutions.

This call to action was made possible thanks to the survey responses of nearly 400 anonymous contributors throughout the veterinary profession, as well as the work of many individuals and institutions preceding us who have dedicated their time, knowledge and resources to see change in our profession.

Thank you for providing a space for us to voice our concerns and present our actionables. We hope that this effort is the beginning of transformational change within veterinary medicine, and we look forward to working together with the AVMA to move our profession forward.

Respectfully,

Association of Asian Veterinary Medical Professionals (AAVMP)
BlackDVM Network
Latinx Veterinary Medical Association (LVMA)
Multicultural Veterinary Medical Association (MCVMA)
National Association for Black Veterinarians (NABV)
Native American Veterinary Association (NAVA)
Pride Veterinary Medical Community (PrideVMC)
Pride Student Veterinary Medical Community (PrideSVMC)
Veterinarians as One for an Inclusive Community for Empowerment (VOICE)
Women's Veterinary Leadership Development Initiative (WVLDI)



& the Native American Veterinary Association