



**Valley Mountain Regional Center  
Equity Initiatives and the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee  
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**Overview**

The Valley Mountain Regional Center (VMRC) Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Committee, formerly our Cultural and Linguistic Competence Committee, began on October 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> in 2019 with a two-day conference with 50 individual staff, board members and community partners. We analyzed our current environment in which VMRC is part of and relationships with all our stakeholders and began to envision what it would take to become a responsive culturally and linguistically competent organization to all parts of our community.

The event was followed by an internal organization of the VMRC Cultural and Linguistic Competence Committee (CLCC). This was done by asking the staff in attendance during the two-day event if they would like to volunteer to be on this committee to advance the ideas discussed during the event. We asked for volunteers to be intentional not to put pressure to join and to ensure the committee was populated by committed individuals. The committee went through an extended journey learning and relearning what it means to be a Culturally and Linguistically Competent organization and what we could do to put us on this path. The experience was intellectually challenging and sometimes an academic exercise. Other times it was raw and emotional and deeply personal, but never did we cross the line of disrespect committing to work through the moments when an individual's personal and biased experiences and perspectives clashed with another person's personal and biased experiences. A few of the take-aways from our initial work include:

- We can't change everything at once - it needs acceptance and cooperation from all, within the agency and outside the agency.
- Change might take steps – each step leads us closer to our target destination.
- Change might take time – patience and understanding are needed.
- Change is a longer process; we realize that change is a constant process that we need to be doing.

- We as a group need to continue making changes and we continue to see change as a team and working together we can produce solutions.

In the middle of all this serious interpersonal and systemic work we were faced with a global pandemic that none of us had any equivalent reference for and after the murder of George Floyd we were forced to look at ourselves and each other in ways that have been suppressed for many of us for many years. We wrote to our colleagues in an internal blog about our feelings in reaction to the events of the day like protest rallies, riots, counter protests, and what it means and how it feels to be a person of color in our communities across our region. Our committee also made a brave decision to publish essays and reactions in our public newsletter in support of people in our community who may be struggling with these same personal emotions and to let them know they are supported and not alone.

The committee was also given the opportunity to participate in an incredible leadership training experience from October 2020 through February 2021 provided by Georgetown University and facilitated by Ellen Kagen, GUCCHD Leadership Program. We decided we would maintain the internal group in the trainings, one, because it was required to attend all training dates and two, because we felt we still needed more work as a team before we could influence the change we wanted to see inside and outside of our organization. In looking back the downside of this approach was that as we recruit and bring in the community partners and board members and more staff, they will not be familiar with the learning models we learned but the upside is that it really was helpful in strengthening us as a team. Given that we anticipate much resistance to our change management work we will be implementing, strengthening our team and increasing the bond of our resolve to endure was very important to our future success.

Our committee is now a committed group who engages easily in meaningful observations on race, race relations, culture, language, and written communication access, and continues to challenge ourselves to create an organization where everyone feels welcome and belongs. Our committee is the foundational strength and support for all the work of our DEI Manager, and Cultural Specialist and not only provides the organization and community with a perspective and a “lens” of cultural and linguistic competence, but we are actively engaged in the work of various initiatives, projects and activities to advance institutional change that will be long term and permanent.

The committee is in the hub of several initiatives, and we either are causing them to occur, joining an existing effort to ensure it meets the Cultural and Linguistics standards, or is being worked on by our DEI Manager and Cultural Specialist, in which case the committee serves as a support and resource to ensure they are both successful in their roles. These initiatives are described below and include the purpose and link to our Cultural and Linguistic Competence journey, how the committee interfaces with it, who will need to be recruited to participate, and plans for the future. In keeping with the free flowing and dynamic nature of this work we also anticipate some of these initiatives to grow, some to shrink, some to go away, and others yet to be created.

To kick off the initiative broadly the committee hosted an overview presentation to all the staff of VMRC, including an initial presentation of implicit bias, and then will follow this with a presentation webinar to our community. The purpose of these presentations will be to inform everyone about this effort and to recruit a few more employees and community stakeholders to participate as members of our committee.

### **Booklet Project**

The Booklet Project is a project to describe services to families of various cultural backgrounds. The purpose is to increase trust and understanding of the full scope of the services provided in developmental services and the reason for the services. Some families have expressed a feeling that VMRC is withholding information about important services their children need, so while not all services are appropriate for each person, we will describe the parameters and purpose for each service in a plain language culturally appropriate format. Some details include:

- Booklets will be in Spanish and Hmong.
- It will provide vocabulary related to Regional Center Services.
- Booklet will be given to families who are receiving service with the regional center or are applying for regional center services.
- We want families to have better understanding on what Services the Regional Center provides and have a better understanding on what the vocabulary use by the Regional Center means.
- Knowing that some people don't learn well from reading, we will create video and audio products to enhance the learning.

This is a Cultural Specialist initiative that will require extensive assistance from the committee, community, staff, and several other stakeholders. The first draft is targeted for June 2021.

### **Translators and Interpreters Project**

Families who speak one language and require an interpreter and or those who read in one language and require a translator often report the conversion from the English language to another language is often not accurate. The problem is commonly associated with the professional jargon and terms of art in developmental services. Some words and terms are just titles that have deeper meanings such as "person-centered thinking" or "competitive integrated employment" but literal translation can miss the intent and literal interpretation can sometimes be even further from the original meaning. This initiative intends to train the translators and interpreters on the history, philosophy, and terminology within developmental services. The training will cover:

- Regional Center Services
- Generic Services
- Vocabulary
- Clarifying roles during an IPP/IFSP meeting.

This is a Cultural Specialist initiative that will require extensive assistance from the committee, community, staff, and several other stakeholders. This project is funded by

DDS as part of the disparities grant initiative and has specific timelines set forth in the state initiative.

### **Strategic Planning**

Valley Mountain Regional Center is currently involved in a strategic planning process to work on the goals and priorities of the regional center and our community system of developmental services. One of the focuses of the strategic plan is to Improve Organizational Culture. The CLC committee has several members serving on the strategic plan workgroup and has established an outcome called “Embrace Diversity” and the activity it has agreed to pursue is to “ensure our Cultural and Linguistic Competence Committee makes sure our training and policies and messages are viewed through a Culturally and or Linguistically Competent "Lens". The principles will be to:

- Seek first to understand - Mutual Respect and Understanding
- Competing values of different groups should not make one side feel like they don't belong.
- Do not let the need for efficiency and production violate the need for building trust and acceptance.

This is an initiative managed by the Organizational Culture Focus Group from the Strategic Planning Committee and includes in its membership several members from the CLC committee. The plan draft was finalized and approved by the end of June 2021 the first results data will be reported on in February 2023.

### **Employee Networks**

This committee is working on building Employee Networks for staff who represent marginalized ethnic groups or who share an interest in promoting and recognizing cultural groups. This is to assist with empowering and validating staff, who can then assist the agency with communicating with individuals and families on a cultural level, targeting the underrepresented communities to gain trust and, long-term, potentially assisting Human Resources with recruitment efforts to attract an applicant pool of individuals more representative of our consumer population. This network could develop hoc or be ongoing but would be led by a chairperson selected by the CLC committee and would link back to the committee to for contiguity between the CLC and the network. The umbrella Employee Networks group will:

- Identify recognition dates and cultural celebrations.
- Encourage and recruit Employee Network groups focused on a cultural group or interest groups with their own culture.
- We intend for these groups to serve as support and comradery for employees with common backgrounds and interests.
- We intend for these groups to encourage discussion and enhanced engagement on topics that inform and celebrate VMRC's diversity.

This is an initiative managed by the Employee Networks group which is a subgroup of the CLC Committee and will be chaired by CLC committee member, Neidra Clayton. Some challenges the group will need to address will be to ensure the interest groups

are consistent with the work of the CLC and to address the “All Lives Matter” response that some people have when one group’s value and appreciation is highlighted. The committee will meet at least quarterly to review and assess its progress.

### **Provider Outreach:**

Our Resource Development Department will work with providers to ensure culturally competent developmental services. Our Cultural Specialist will assist the department to develop a list of competencies providers can pursue in their efforts to provide person-centered culturally competent services to all our consumers and create a strategic outreach approach to diverse communities to attract potential providers from all communities. Markers along the way include monthly updates to the VMRC Executive Director from the Cultural Specialist, participation in the Coalition of Local Area Service Provider events and trainings, and ongoing support to both divisions of the Community Services Department. The cultural specialist will now provide review and recommendation to the resource development team regarding the requests for Health and Safety waivers when the provider is serving our Hispanic consumers. Also, our Deaf Access Liaison will provide the same consultation and recommendations when the consumer is hard of hearing or deaf+.

### **Cultural Events**

We have hosted three VMRC Cultural Fairs since 2017 and these events have become an important outreach event for our regional center and our community. Although we have had to cancel our last two Cultural Fairs because of the COVID-19 pandemic, we are scheduled to bring back our signature this year on October 29, 2022. This year we did not receive funding from the DDS as we did in years past to organize this event but we the help of staff, and community volunteers and through the sponsorship of many community partners and service providers we anticipate this will be our biggest fair yet. We changed the name of the event to the Disability Resource Fair, and we have combined a health fair and mobility expo into the fold of the larger event.

These events go a long way in providing us with the opportunity to showcase all the services provided in our community and for people with disabilities and families to meet them and ask questions. While we changed the name, we still plan on showing and celebrating the diversity of our agency and our community throughout the region by hosting a variety of cultural entertainers, artists and dancers and food vendors to enhance the experience as everyone networks and gets to learn about each other. In addition to hosting our own event we have a history of being active participants and supporters of well over 100 events a year throughout our region and we also have every intention of re-engaging in these activities even more in 2023 as the community safety allows.

### **Focus Groups**

Our Cultural Specialist identified community groups in our area to address a set of questions related to the spending disparity in areas for certain groups. We have identified a disparity in spending for Hispanics in the transition age range and one large disparity in the 10 – 12-year-old range. We will ask groups of families with family

members with disabilities in these two age groups to gather privately without our interference and to report back to us their findings. In 2021 we asked the group leaders to facilitate these conversations and report back. Some of the issues we have learned so far:

1. Most of the concerns about the day services for transition aged parents center on now cultural concerns such as criticisms that the activities are dangerous in the community, the things they are learning are not helping them get jobs, and the hours are not fitting with the family's schedules.
2. Identified communication gaps and barriers to groups utilizing services.
3. Hispanic families don't want to use what we have.
4. Families want their kids to stay home with the family.
5. Safety / Control
6. Families don't trust the system or community.
7. Parents don't trust their own adult children to make good and safe decisions.
8. Don't understand the services fully.
9. Language barriers, fears, and miscommunication
10. How do families want services to look?
11. General expectations they have
12. What do siblings want/need to support family members?
13. We don't know what the consumer wants when the family is so strong it's overriding their voice.
14. Misunderstanding of services but also privacy.
15. What does it mean when a family member reaches 18 years old?
16. What do they know or hear about services?
17. What is the plan the family has for the future?

*In 2022 we learned the following from these sessions:*

18. We still need a fact sheet about each of the services. It should include what the service is, how someone qualifies for it, what the other community services are that are like it.
19. Not only do you not talk about services but your SCs do not tell us about events and meetings that VMRC has.
20. I only find out about things happening at VMRC after the fact on Facebook
21. I'm confused about the website there is more information in English than Spanish. Somethings are only in English so we can't read it. It should be equal.
22. I'm thankful that I learned about this group, because of them I learned about all kinds of support and services.
23. I learned about recreation from this group.
24. I love the group of moms they have really helped me.
25. I was told the only way I can get recreation services is to pay for it myself and then I will get paid back later. I can't afford this so I can't get it.
26. My husband just died, and I am under a lot of stress, and I can't afford to pay for services and get reimbursed.
27. It would be nice if we could get support paid for by the regional center, I can't afford it either.
28. The reimbursement really hurts, and it takes 2-3 months to get paid back.

29. It's really a hardship to pay ahead of time, I'm a single mother with a 4-year-old with disabilities. I've been asking about swimming, and I can't even get a response.
30. The older my child gets the harder it is to get Community services.
31. Services are not available in some areas. If VMRC offers services but we can't get it then it doesn't help.
32. When you accept a service it's hard to get because of their low wage, or where we live, or it's just hard work to support my child.
33. The regional center has been a great help to me for my son.
34. I'm one of those families that doesn't know what services are available.
35. I hear about services someone gets in another city but not in my city.
36. A lot of families don't use the service their SC tells them about. Sometimes because of circumstances we are not able to use a service, but we should lose the service, it should not be cancelled.
37. So proud that this group is helping us know what's out there for us.
38. I think the SC should ask the family why they are not using the service.
39. Self-determination is taking too long. It's taking 3 months to get this approved.
40. It would be important to provide more trainings and orientations in Spanish.
41. When VMRC makes a mistake, it takes a long time for this to be corrected. It's like we're being punished for something we didn't do wrong.
42. VMRC should have a satisfaction survey to see how we feel about the service we receive.
43. The mental health for our families/parents - it would be very important if VMRC could help us.
44. If the mothers are not ok the family is not ok and the children are not ok.
45. Emotional support for mothers. We live in a world of stress 24/7 there is so much stress from other agencies as well and it makes it even more stressful and harder if we have stress with VMRC.
46. We are afraid to tell someone about our stress because someone might report them to CPS or something.
47. My son hardly sleeps at night. It's so stressful, I'm always so tired.
48. Does VMRC have a counselor for parents when the family is in a stressful situation. Who would we call for help?
49. People are suffering, is there a department where we can go if we are unable to get help from the SC?
50. Someone needs to guide us to how to get the services that could be given to us.
51. I am a 19-year-old man, it is so hard. There's not much help for Hispanic families in certain areas. We need patience and compassion when you're working with the youth with Autism.
52. Conversations are getting rushed and you're not hearing our voice.
53. I want to make sure DDS listens to us as well and they can change policies that are not helping.
54. The SC did not really know what services were available for my family
55. I know how to navigate the system now and that's the reason I get the services we need.
56. Working with this group is the reason I learned about the services I need.

57. A lot of our mothers don't know what help they can get.
58. More contact with families will encourage families to give more information about what's going on with them.
59. We need a brochure or information sheet about services.
60. SCs are cancelling our service because COVID is gone. It's not gone.
61. The regional center should be going out to review the services
62. Gaby should be in the health advisory every week
63. VMRC should pass out flyers for events in IPP meetings
64. What will be the role of the advocates when the community navigators and the enhanced caseloads start their work.
65. We keep running into families that tell us they don't get any services.

### *Markers along the way*

Our goal is to engage at least 10 focus groups or 50 people to get their input and ideas for meeting the needs of these families. If groups request it, we will meet with them instead of meeting without us present.

### **Supporting Community Based Organization's Projects**

Each year the Department of Developmental Services grants funding to community-based organizations to improve access and equity in service delivery for our catchment area. We are committed to working with each funded project to ensure their success. In addition to these funded projects our community groups are also involved in their own projects that they plan and fund through their own fund-raising activities. We are fully committed to supporting these projects as well, as they are organic developments from our community with local priorities. We also promote their events through our extensive marketing channels and participate as speakers, exhibitors, and supporters of their community events.

Some examples of our collaborations and support include the following:

1. Special Education series of three 3-hour sessions for our staff at VMRC which included a session done Fuerzas Unidas and the Integradoras Collaborative.
2. In-Home Support Services training organized by Fuerzas Unidas, the Special Needs Assistance Parent Group, and Disability Rights California.
3. Vamos a Platicar trainings (Families First Parent Group and UC Davis - Spanish)
4. Virtual orientation on VMRC services and generic resources (La Familia disparity Funds Program)
5. Attend events that are put by Community Base Organization to provide Support such as Cyber Café (ICC)
6. Invite Community Base Organization to get feedback and help connect with our community.

Last year we hosted a webinar for our staff so they can get to know the community-based organizations working in our region and to learn about the purpose of their grants and how they intended to help our community and assist us in helping our consumers and families. CBOs who participated in the webinar was the Hlub Hmong Center, "Learning the Hmong Way", the Integrated Community Collaborative and their



Community Integradora advocacy program, the California Tribal Families Coalition, “Tribal Child Welfare Cases and the Intersection of ICWA and Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities”, The Arc of California’s, Congreso Familiar tablet outreach program, and the Tuolumne Me-Wuk Tribal TANF Services outreach.

### *Markers Along the Way*

- Trust is the key - trust that we all want to help each other and improve their lives in the most culturally congruent way we can.
- We need collaboration with the community, the families, that we want to serve, and get their input.
- We can learn from each other. We are committed to being with our communities listening and engaging and seeking to understand first then to be understood as an organization seeking to help our community.

### **The VMRC Board of Directors**

In April of 2022, in anticipation of the new board of directors’ year, the president reached out to the board members with the following message for a new board committee called the Diversity, Equity, Belong, and Inclusion committee:

*“Fellow board members, VMRC has been working with Georgetown University for a couple of years working on cultural competence and have moved to the stage of creating what they call their Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) committee. DDS also required all regional centers to undergo Implicit Bias training for some of their staff. As you know we always want to take things to a higher level, so the staff is implementing a full DEI initiative that includes Implicit Bias training and in consultation with Tony I am setting up a board driven initiative with our own committee on Diversity, Equity, Belonging, and Inclusion.”*

VMRC has assigned the DEI Manager to staff this committee as it organizes and develops its own initiatives and activities. We have already received good community interest and five board members will be members of this committee and the president will serve as ex officio. While the committee is awaiting the hiring of the DEI Manager, the committee will provide overall leadership direction for our regional center and our community. If you are interested in serving on this committee, please complete this application. Like with all committees it cannot include a quorum of the board so it will have some limits to the size, and it will include several community representatives and some staff.”

### **A Team of Enhanced Service Coordination**

In 2022 VMRC received funding to create an Enhanced Service Coordination Team. The goal of the Enhanced Team is to help underserved families access regional center services and generic resources. One of the most exciting things about the team is that all our Service Coordinators are bilingual, which gives us the opportunity to communicate directly with families and customers without the delay or additional barrier of an interpreter. Interpreters are wonderful, but they are interpreting what someone is saying, which presents a layer of barriers to communication. This team uses a person-

centered approach to the Individual Program Planning (IPP) process and supports consumers and families to identify barriers to accessing services. This team provides extensive and ongoing training on advocating and accessing regional center and generic services for children and young adults.

The biggest advantage for this team is that their caseload ratios are 1 Service Coordinator to 40 consumers allow them to provide much more time to listening and working with people to get a much deeper understanding of the needs for supports and services for each person they serve. The Service Coordinators meet with their consumers every quarter for regular check-ins to reassess the strategies and implementation of the IPP. This is a voluntary program so consumers and families have to agree to participate and the qualifications for the program are they must be monolingual Spanish speakers with no purchased services or very little services.

### **University of the Pacific (UOP) and Agencywide DEI and Implicit Bias Training**

In July of 2022 VMRC and the Westgate Center for Leadership Development at the University of the Pacific entered into an agreement to conduct a series of training programs on the topic of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion for all 425 employees at the VMRC. Each employee is required to complete 16 hours of training to earn a Certificate of Completion in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion from the university's accredited business school. This training program is broken into 3 Parts and will run from July 2022 to February 2023. The first part included an all day all staff training on July 26, 2022, on-site at the Stockton Agricultural Center and prior to the all staff event we built in a pre-work session to review the Introduction to the DEI background, they took an agencywide survey on the topic, and interviewed in the organization that they didn't know and journaled the observations and reactions.

The all-staff training included experienced university professors who covered the following topics: (1) What is Unconscious Bias? (2) Why DEI is important to organizations? (3) What getting it wrong is costing us. (4) Everyone is needed! Moving from awareness to action. (5) How to consider DEI from an organizational perspective. (6) Step-by-step DEI strategies that have impact.

Following the all-staff training every staff member will participate in six hours of the university's DEI coursework covering these nine topics below:

1. DEI: Why organizational culture and climate matter
2. How to avoid negative and toxic workplace cultures
3. How to be a DEI ally in the workplace
4. Best practices and what works: Benchmarking successful DEI programs
5. How everyone can contribute to creating an inclusive environment
6. Specific steps and tools available to use immediately
7. How to complete a DEI needs assessment from start to finish
8. Setting and evaluating DEI goals
9. Making progress: Moving the DEI needle

The third part of our current contract is a one hour all-staff session to close the loop on the activities so far. Starting in January of 2023, UOP professors will engage all of our staff in pre-work to prepare for the all-staff event that will take place by the end of January. The pre-work will consist of Self-reflection in terms of the content of this program so far and what has stood out most to them and why? We'll also ask them (1) "What action steps do you see yourself completing following this training? (2) How will you hold yourself accountable for completing these? (3) What questions do you have remaining for the instructors?

When we gather the staff together the UOP instructors will answer questions gathered from participants, the best practices for long-term growth / DEI program continuation, and the conclusion of program.

*A few more details about our DEI program with UOP:*

- The university utilized all instruction and technology resources available on campus to provide some of the staff to participate online. The six-hour follow-up sessions were all online and the all-staff training was done in combination of online and in person.
- Pre and post assessments of all participants were used for benchmarking.
- Certificates will be provided to everyone that completes the 16 hours of training
- While limited, there is time with instructors between sessions to discuss specific issues and challenges.
- Recordings of all sessions so participants can make up missed sessions and for additional review.

### **The Language and Cultural Competence Initiative ([Approved Plan](#))**

One of the most significant developments in the state's approach to achieving an equitable and inclusive and accessible community system for all people with developmental disabilities and their families is the new Language Access and Cultural Competence (LACC) initiative. The state, through DDS, has committed \$16.7 million dollars to help all the regional centers improve the consumer and family experience "and to facilitate more consistent access to information and services for multi-lingual, monolingual, and diverse cultural groups."

#### *Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Manager*

Valley Mountain Regional Center has committed to an initial LACC plan for this initiative that will include the hiring of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Manager who will be the main lead on this effort and the position will be housed in the Director's office, supervised by the Executive Director, and supported by the Special Assistant to the Director, the Cultural Specialist and the entire leadership team and the members of the VMRC DEI Committee.

The DEI Manager will coordinate with community organizers (supporting the effort under contract) who will help develop relationships with VMRC and our targeted communities. The Manager will learn about the needs of the targeted communities to develop an effective implementation plan for working with each of the communities. The DEI

Manager will conduct community access surveys and other tools to gather data and a deeper understanding of the preferences for various communities and help decide how to measure success and progress in our efforts. The DEI Manager will continue our community focus groups and other engagements and will conduct regular, semi-annual reporting on the outcomes and lessons learned as we go through this part of our journey and adjust the plan based on the learnings and data obtained from the communities.

The plan also includes the following highlights:

#### *Spanish Language Access Specialist*

Since the Spanish language is by far the most prominent, other than English, in our region, we will be hiring a Spanish Language Access Specialist (SLAS) who will be available for immediate translation and interpretation of all written and verbal communications with our community including social media postings, in-house video communications (Screen Fluence) and coordination of communications with our website translation service. This will enable concurrent posting of information, interpretation for public meetings and community events and enable us to increase our interactions with the Spanish language community.

#### *Listening Sessions*

VMRC will contract with local community organizers to serve as our “Community Consultants” and they will work with the DEI Manager to create surveys targeted to specific diverse community segments and recruit a planning group that represents the communities identified and mirrors the diversity of these communities. The surveys will be distributed to consumers and families identified as speaking the target language, leaders in these communities, and organizations which serve these communities.

#### *Collaboration with Central Valley Regional Center*

VMRC will be collaborating with our nearest sister regional to the south and east of us in the Central Valley. Our plan is to work together to provide parent trainings, and outreach events in the common targeted Hispanic and Asian communities. We intend to locate many of our joint efforts in regions close to each other’s border cities and counties (i.e., Merced, Turlock, etc.).

#### *Listening Session (Focus session)*

We plan to increase our efforts with focus groups, increasing to 10 focus groups targeting a more diverse variety of community groups. In addition, in the past our focus groups were only funded for staff time, but we have learned that location and environment and atmosphere are very important in gaining quality of engagement from participants. These 10 focus groups will also include rented community venues (equipment, tables, chairs, etc.), stipends for each registered participant, food, and any printable material on each language being targeted (Spanish, Cambodian, Tagalog, and Vietnamese, African American).

### **Partners in Policymaking**

Partners in Policymaking is a well established advocacy training program developed by the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities (MGCDD) in 1987. Since it's beginning the program has trained more than 27,000 self-advocates and parents of children with developmental disabilities across this country and internationally. The MGCDD writes that the program "teaches people with disabilities and family members the power of advocacy to positively change the way people with disabilities are supported, viewed, taught, live and work. Advocates have changed the nature of support and services for people with disabilities in areas such as education, employment, civil rights, and community living." The focus of this program, the largest of its kind in the world, is on being partners the community system for people with developmental disabilities. The partnership expands from in partnership with legislators and local politicians, to administration, regional center, and education officials, to community groups and educators and providers.

This Partners program is one of the first of its kind because most of the participants are monolingual Spanish speaking mothers. All the Partners receive all the materials translated and every session is interpreted from English to Spanish and some from Spanish to English. As of the date of this report our program is just over halfway completed, and students have all worked very hard and have been challenged to think beyond their personal stories towards the needs of our whole community. They have been exposed to thought leaders from across the country and throughout the state on topics such as the History of Disability, Inclusive Education, Service Coordination, Case Management, Self-Determination and Self-Directed Services, Person-Centered Thinking and Planning, Employment Options, Support Living and a Home of Your Own, Community Organizing and Advocacy, Meeting Public Officials, Your Vision for the System and Your Family, State legislation, Federal Legislation, Parliamentary Procedures, Serving on Boards, Assistive Technology, Positive Behavioral Supports, Media Skills, and finally a graduation ceremony. At the end of these training the students will begin work on systems change project, or apply for boards or commissions or councils, or start up community groups focused on systems change, or some other project important to them.

### **Person-Centered Thinking**

In 2017 VMRC contracted with a trainer to provide staff with cultural competency training and training regarding person centered thinking. This was our first exposure to the concepts in cultural competency and in looking back it was our first lesson in how competency in this space is ongoing and how a one-time training could not possibly achieve organization competence in this area. However, one other approach we took early on was to focus agencywide on Person-Centered Thinking. While most of our experienced staff was familiar with this way of thinking and many were even aware of the statutory mandates to conduct our work in this framework or mindset, the practical outcome at the time was not a Person-Centered Plan as we know it today.

For over a year we contracted with Michael Smull, and his company, Support Development Associates, LLC., to train every employee in the organization on the principles of Person-Centered Thinking and taught everyone about how this benefited

our consumers and contributed to a more respectful and strategic process for organizational continuous improvement. This was hard for our all the non-case management employees to see the relevance to their administrative jobs and it was met with significant resistance from those sections of the organization but we pushed forward and trained four certified trainers who have since provided 3-5 trainings a year for our community and our staff. Person-Centered Thinking training was a great beginning for cultural competence because it forced us to look at each individual and their personal and cultural preferences and to plan with them with a focus on what brought them joy, what was important to them.

### **The work with the North Bay Regional Center (NBRC)**

We will continue our work in VMRC and expand out to our entire organization and community and we have committed to seek the comradery of our colleagues at North Bay Regional Center who are on a similar journey to cultural and linguistic competence. We will meet quarterly to check in with each other in confidence to discuss the successes and the bumps in the road as each of our groups work to expand our influence throughout our organizations and communities and work to remove the separations between the two parts.

### **Where We're Going**

- Long-term and ongoing change.
- Staying current with marginalized groups within our staff and the individuals we serve.
- Remain inclusive of ALL Groups.
- Maintain communication with Senior leaders who can institute and promote change, especially if policy change is needed.
- Staying healthy overall as an agency.
- Change will take time and is a constant process.
- We need to really understand that change will not happen in a day.

### **Lessons Learned**

Being comfortable with uncomfortable conversations

In our work together we have learned that being culturally competent is a state not a place. A place is concrete and once there you are simply there. A state is a way of being, something achieved through continuous intentional thinking and feeling. We have often commented to each how Cultural Competence is an ongoing journey and once we realized this it freed us to ok with striving instead of achieving. Our efforts around becoming linguistically competent, though still difficult, can be more easily achieved through actions such as ensuring language access to written materials and other forms of access accommodations such as braille, auditory devices, and simply speaking and writing in a style that is plain and understood by all people.

Our language can tell us how close we are to being “of the community” because even though we speak of our intentions to connect, there is a subtle difference between connecting to our community and connecting with our community. As we continue this path, we are helping each other by ensuring our language communicates belonging within our organization and within our communities. We don’t and can’t have all the answers and we are open to taking a closer look and identified agency shortfalls related to areas of disparity. We are learning from families that service quality and relevance is not the same for each culture because they define it differently.