

# A NOTE FROM OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR

African American Initiative Update - SPRING 2019

## SUMMARY STATEMENT

Alameda County Behavioral Health (ACBH) is actively pursuing the opportunity to create systemic change in how we examine and address disparities within communities we serve. Our commitment is to transform lives by reenergizing our efforts to truly address consumer needs within our systems of care. ACBH is committed to creating a structure that develops and monitors quantifiable changes that are embedded in the cultural framework of the communities that we impact. Such changes will move us toward more efficient and effective responses to persons in need.

***“[We are] creating systemic change in how we examine and address disparities within communities we serve.”***

*- Carol F. Burton, ACBH Interim Director*

## WHAT BROUGHT US HERE

The 2011 African American Utilization Report reflected the discrepancies in mental health and substance abuse services for Alameda County's African American community. The report made recommendations for system transformation to effectively serve the African American population in Alameda County. Recommendations included recognizing the impact of historical trauma across the African American community and exploring solutions to instill a belief and trust in the effectiveness of the County system of care.

In Alameda County there is a disproportionate number of African Americans accessing mental health services relative to their overall composition in the County. In Fiscal Year 2016-2017, ACBH data shows African Americans made up 19 percent of all Medi-Cal beneficiaries,

yet comprised 32 percent of those who utilized the behavioral health system—mainly in the most restrictive settings like jails, emergency hospitals and crisis stabilization facilities. This disproportionality is compounded by the fact there are insufficient services to adequately address the mental health needs of African Americans in a culturally congruent and affirming manner.

ACBH is assessing which recommendations have been implemented and which are in progress. We are encouraged by the individuals and departments who have updated their protocols and increased outreach to address the needs of the African American community. However, our efforts have not been sufficient to address the disparities or to improve behavioral health outcomes overall.

## WHAT WE DISCOVERED

In 2019, the Office of the Director hosted two days of facilitated meetings with the African American Capacity Building, Utilization and Outcomes Committee, executive leadership, and other important voices within the department. We discovered the following regarding ACBH's responses to African American mental health needs in Alameda County:

- there is more happening than we knew;
- some individuals and units have been working without systemic support;
- efforts have not been sufficiently tracked or measured for effectiveness;
- there is no overarching plan with specific strategies;
- we have been working in silos; and
- overall, we have a lot of work to accomplish... but we can do it as a team.

Additional discussion focused on communication, defining goals, and making progress in services to African American consumers.

***“...we must remain steadfast in the quest to identify and implement culturally affirming services in systems that have historically and inappropriately served African Americans.”***

*- Javarre Wilson, MPH  
Office of Ethnic Services*

***“This initiative calls for a ‘sense of urgency’ from our shared, collective group.”***

*- Dr. Aaron Chapman  
ACBH Medical Director & Advocate*

## COMMUNICATION

Together, we learned that many ACBH staff were unaware and lack knowledge of existing efforts to serve African American consumers across the department. We further identified that communication both internally and externally is absent in most cases and inadequate at best. The absence of communication about what ACBH is doing to address disparities within the African American Community has fostered more distrust, suspiciousness, and a belief that ACBH does not care about the community.

## ACBH PROGRESS

Internal progress toward achieving any of the recommendations included in the 2011 African American Utilization Report were difficult to assess, despite best internal efforts. Certain questions still remain: Has ACBH met needs identified in 2011? Are systems in place to ensure progress? Is leadership committed, in every unit, to make these goals a reality?

ACBH needs to have stronger infrastructure to ensure that we are holding all initiatives with integrity. Initiatives must be strategically created to better support identified groups who are experiencing disparities. This means that if African American consumers are showing great need, then great attention will be given to this population.

## NEXT STEPS

To cement our commitment to systemic transformational change, the Office of the Director will lead the efforts to launch a new African American Strategies Initiative! With the skill, care, and urgency of our talented leadership and staff we know that ACBH will make a difference in the lives of so many African American consumers that can use and benefit from our services. Initial launch steps will include:

### STEP 1

#### STRATEGIC WORKGROUP

The Office of the Director will assemble a group of internal (and eventually external) stakeholders to bring all of our resources together and clearly identify strategic steps to move forward. The composition of this voluntary workgroup will include various roles throughout the department demonstrating a cross-representation of interests and skill sets. The use of a focused workgroup will pull from best-practices used to implement strategic and culturally-astute programming as ACBH has done successfully with other targeted groups. All new approaches will serve as further shared learning as we support our various consumers throughout our network of care.

### STEP 2

#### INITIATIVE PORTFOLIO

African American Strategies Initiative is included in the Project Office Portfolio (POP), a communications, tracking and reporting hub of information, operated through the Office of the Director. This initiative along with other important projects will be monitored and tracked for accountability and transparency. You will soon receive updates on all of the projects and how ACBH leadership is driving this important work.

### STEP 3

#### STAFFING AND PARTNERSHIP

To coordinate these efforts, the Office of the Director will have a shared, but dedicated Project Manager to facilitate movement and organize tasks. This staff will join our team by the new fiscal year. This role will work closely in partnership with the Office of Ethnic Service and Operational Units to support internal coordination of services and tracking.

### STEP 4

#### DOCUMENTATION AND TRACKING

The Office of the Director will work in partnership with the Deputy Director and operational leadership to identify strategic objectives to serve the needs of African American consumers in their respective units.

### STEP 5

#### COMMUNICATION

ACBH is working to improve its overall communication. For this initiative a communication team is developing to help to share progress and increase transparency.

Before the end of this fiscal year, we will need your help to collect information through online surveys, focus groups, and newsletter ideas. Your input is vital. We know that our staff, at all levels, in so many positions, have their pulse on what will work and what can be better to help African American consumers with behavioral health needs.

Be sure to keep an eye out for input requests and updates. Please forward any questions about the African American Initiative and the upcoming launch steps to the Office of the Director at [bhcsdirector@acgov.org](mailto:bhcsdirector@acgov.org).

***“There are reasons that we need to focus on the African American community... who face unique factors that other groups aren’t facing, such as historical oppression rooted in centuries of slavery, inequity around access to health care, over- and mis-diagnosis of psychotic disorders, and relatedly incorrect medication prescribing. We need measured, actual, small successes...that can lead to greater outcomes. There is a crisis in the African American community around receiving quality and cultural appropriate health services, and behavioral health is no exception. As with any crisis we need to act accordingly and swiftly.”***

- James Wagner, LMFT/LPCC ACBH Deputy Director