

# YWCA High Point Guides Organizations to Incorporate Equity into the Structure of their Leadership



**Who:** YWCA High Point

**Mission:** YWCA High Point is dedicated to eliminating racism, empowering women and promoting peace, justice, freedom and dignity for all.

*HPU AmeriCorps VISTA Natalie Lucas sat down with Heidi Majors, Executive Director of the High Point YWCA, to learn more about how organizations can incorporate equity into the structure of their leadership while empowering women, addressing the pervasiveness of systemic racism, and seeking solutions by partnering with the community they serve*

Community engagement has been a core part of the YWCA's mission since the organization was founded in 1855 to create "Prayer Unions" and housing for women. The organization evolved with the needs of the people it served, and moved into intentional antiracist work in the 1970s. During this time, in the midst of the civil rights movements, the YW adopted a mission statement that revolved around what the leaders referred to as the One Imperative: **"To thrust our collective power towards the elimination of racism, wherever it exists, by any means necessary."**

According to Majors, by the 1980s some YWCAs (including the one in High Point) had fallen away from the core work of eliminating racism. The three-paragraph mission statement that included the One Imperative was reworked in 2004 and the mission statement was shortened to the one we see today: The YWCA is dedicated to eliminating racism, empowering women and promoting peace, justice, freedom and dignity for all.

This charge, handed down from a national organization and shared by more than 200 local affiliates, is the center of all the YWCA does. The YWCA of High Point has been



recognized for working boldly and openly to reduce the impact of racism in local neighborhoods and negate systemic racism by inviting those closest to the work to be key decision makers on their board. It was and continues to be a process that time and experience refine. “For years, we kind of floundered,” Majors explains. “What was that work that we needed to do? We needed to do a lot of education.

We had to really evaluate some of our programs and define their purpose.” One innovation proved transformative for the YW: the intentional seeking out of diverse voices for positions of organizational leadership.

Majors explains, “It’s not okay for me to come in as a leader and say this is how we’re going to serve X,Y,Z. We need to have the community tell us what’s the best way to serve them.”

Formal research methods through the medical system or universities can illuminate broader disparities, but the most efficient solutions to emergent problems can be

difficult to identify from the outside looking in. Instead, community listening makes for effective programming. Heidi gives an example:

“Having surveys and hearing program participants’ thoughts on what is working and what isn’t is a way to incorporate diversity into leadership and decision making. Someone could say, ‘Hey, we’re seeing that there is a high rate of infant mortality



due to not having safe places to sleep,’ and we [as the YW] could do a program on how to have safe sleep, when actually someone just needed a pack and play.”

Without a trusting relationship, an organization could invest precious time and resources into what they assume is needed, while community guidance provides a direct line to solutions. For the record, the YWCA of High Point has an advisory committee of community representatives for every program they provide.

These committees are one manifestation of The YW’s commitment to board diversification since 2010. Other manifestations include a reworking of board donation policies and intentional meeting scheduling. Accessible board membership is the point of leverage that enables organizations to have a diverse board.

If boards want more representative leadership, then every part of how the board functions must be rethought. The typical board structure presents a number of barriers to low-income residents. For instance, they usually occur during the work day, require transportation, don’t offer childcare, and demand a financial commitment. The YW has worked to lower some of these barriers, and continues to regularly re-evaluate its recruitment process in order to create new avenues for the community to access leadership positions.



This representative board is worth the revamped approach, according to Majors. Diverse leadership is important to the YWCA because it places organizational power in close proximity to the issues it sets out to solve. “Early on, beginning around 2010, we really began focusing on putting the voice of the individual that we serve at the table. One way we’ve worked to make this happen is by trying to find board meeting times that work for different individuals - we do recognize that time may be a barrier for some. Other aspects that we focused on is our committee structure. If individuals could not serve within the board, then we’d have them expand to our committee structure, whether that is programmatic, strategic planning, fundraising, finance, or marketing committees.

We expanded to bring individuals outside of our board members into those committees. From there, we really focused on getting diverse people represented on those committees.”

She continues, “Fast forward from 2004 to 2022, and I’m excited to say that all of our programs are structured to have some form of antiracist work within them. This work is really at the center of all we do.” This commitment permeates all decisions made in the organization up to and including making sure the board of directors are both diverse and truly representative as voices for those they serve.

**The YWCA made it clear that a board committed to antiracism must reflect the community, so it made leadership accessible.** This sets the YWCA in High Point apart from the majority of other nonprofits and is a major key to the success of their community engagement.

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