

Sustaining Cultural Engagement: Lessons from Santa Clara County Social Services Agency and Opportunities for San Francisco Human Services Agency

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Executive Summary

San Francisco Human Services Agency (SFHSA) has a long history of its employees creating spaces for cultural connection, representation, and community through affinity groups, cultural celebration, and educational programming. Today, this work continues through Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) supported by the Office of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Belonging, and Accessibility (DEIBA). As the agency faces staffing and budget constraints, it is also exploring how these efforts can continue in a realistic, meaningful, and accessible way for staff across the workforce.

This case study examines Santa Clara County Social Services Agency's (SSA) longstanding Diversity Day model and compares it with SFHSA's current ERG structure. While both agencies already use employee-led cultural engagement models supported by a central coordinating team, Santa Clara's approach demonstrates how dedicated funding, protected staff time, and long-term organizational support can help sustain a large, shared agencywide event.

This paper finds that SFHSA already has a strong foundation for cultural engagement. Rather than replacing existing ERG celebrations or replicating Santa Clara's model, there is an opportunity to strengthen coordination, improve participation, and create intentional shared programming across the agency. The paper recommends piloting a small-scale "diversity

festival” approach that complements existing ERG programming while remaining realistic within current operational constraints.

Introduction and Background

San Francisco Human Services Agency (SFHSA) recognizes the importance of employee engagement in building a supportive, connected, and effective workforce. Employee engagement is the level of involvement and enthusiasm employees have toward their work and workplace (Gallup, n.d.). In a social services environment, where staff often navigate high workloads, emotional demands, and complex community needs, opportunities for connection and belonging can also help strengthen workforce well-being and cross-cultural collaboration.

For decades, employees have created affinity spaces and community gatherings with cultural programming and diversity awareness efforts centered around shared identities and experiences. These efforts helped foster community and representation across the agency. However, many of these earlier efforts relied heavily on passionate staff volunteers and informal support systems, making long-term continuity difficult as key individuals exited the agency.

In January 2020, SFHSA formally established the Office of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB), now DEIBA, as part of the agency's broader racial equity efforts (San Francisco Human Services Agency, 2020). This marked an important shift toward a more structured and leadership-supported approach to cultural engagement through Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), agencywide coordination, and programming support.

Today, SFHSA's cultural engagement model shares similarities with Santa Clara County Social Services Agency's (SSA) Diversity Day structure. In both agencies, employees help lead engagement efforts while a central team provides operational support and coordination. At the same time, because SFHSA's engagement efforts are spread across multiple events, groups, and worksites throughout the year, participation challenges can vary based on staff schedules, locations, and operational demands.

As SFHSA enters a period of budget reductions and staffing changes, DEIBA and ERG leaders have begun informal conversations about whether a more coordinated "diversity festival" model could support cultural engagement in a way that remains meaningful, manageable, and sustainable over time.

The question is not whether cultural engagement should continue. Staff clearly value the celebrations and community spaces that already exist. The larger question is how SFHSA can continue supporting this work in a way that remains accessible, coordinated, and realistic within current constraints.

Purpose

This case study explores SSA's Diversity Day model to explore what types of organizational supports help sustain large-scale cultural engagement efforts over time. The purpose is not to recommend replacing the current structure of SFHSA ERGs or adopting Santa Clara's model exactly as it exists. Instead, the goal is to identify practices that may strengthen SFHSA's existing engagement efforts, particularly as the agency considers how to support cultural engagement with fewer resources.

SSA's Diversity Day Overview and History

SSA hosts an annual Diversity Day, a long-standing staff-driven event celebrating cultural heritage, promoting learning, and bringing staff together across the agency. The event has been in place for over 20 years and has grown into a well-established partnership between employee affinity groups, agency leadership, and central support teams.

At its core, the event is designed to create a one-day shared experience and celebrate the many diverse identities represented within the agency through food, cultural performances, storytelling, music, art, trainings, and panel discussions tied to an annual theme (Santa Clara County Social Services Agency, 2024).

Governance and Ownership

A key feature of Diversity Day is its governance structure. Employee Affinity Groups (EAGs) take primary responsibility for planning and executing the event, including selecting vendors, coordinating performers, and shaping the event's overall experience. Agency leadership provides funding and approval support, maintaining a clear stance that the event belongs to employees. The Employee Engagement & Well-Being (EEWB) team serves as the central coordinating body, acting as a bridge between EAGs and leadership. EEWB also helps address logistical and operational needs related to scheduling, staffing, and participation.

Planning and Event Structure

The planning process typically begins in the spring, with meetings increasing as the event approaches. EAGs are responsible for identifying the annual theme, coordinating vendors and programming, and submitting plans within established timelines. Throughout this process, EEWB provides logistical support, helps align efforts across committees, and ensures coordination with broader agency requirements.

Diversity Day is typically structured as a half-day event that combines learning and celebration. The morning includes a training or panel discussion connected to the annual theme, often

eligible for training credit. The afternoon focuses on cultural booths, performances, food, vendors, and community engagement activities. Community organizations and other county agencies are also invited to participate. The event is intentionally scheduled during Bring Your Child to Work Week to increase visibility and participation.

Budget & Resources

SSA dedicates approximately \$23,000 to \$25,000 annually from the General Fund to support Diversity Day. These funds are used to support key elements of the event, including stipends for cultural performers and costs associated with event logistics and materials, including booth and chair setup, food, handwashing stations, and sound equipment. The availability of consistent funding contributes to the sustainability of Diversity Day and allows for ongoing planning and participation at a predictable scale.

Participation and Engagement

SSA provides practical support for participation. Staff are given protected time to attend the event, and participation is intentionally flexible so employees can attend as workload allows. Like SFHSA, SSA staff are distributed across multiple office locations throughout the county. To help improve access, employees traveling from other worksites may receive travel reimbursement support.

Over time, Diversity Day has also become part of SSA's organizational culture and identity. Committee members described the event as an agency tradition that continued to receive leadership support across different administrations because staff and leadership viewed it as a meaningful part of the employee experience.

Although formal outcome measurements are limited, post-event feedback is gathered primarily through informal channels, including conversations and debriefs with employee committees, which are then used to inform future planning.

Key Takeaways

Overall, SSA's Diversity Day model demonstrates how an employee-led initiative can endure when supported by clear governance, dedicated resources, and intentional coordination. Committee members consistently emphasized that leadership sponsorship, protected planning time, dedicated coordination, and long-term organizational buy-in are what sustain the event over time, not employee passion alone.

Although formal outcome measurements appear limited, the event's longevity and continued participation suggest it remains meaningful to staff and valued within agency culture. Like any

large employee engagement effort, however, the model requires substantial coordination, staffing capacity, and ongoing leadership support.

SFHSA's Cultural Engagement Landscape

Historical Context

Cultural engagement and affinity spaces have existed at SFHSA for decades. Earlier efforts included cultural showcases, employee performances, affinity groups, and diversity awareness programming organized primarily by employees.

However, these efforts operated without formal leadership support and relied heavily on volunteer staff leaders and informal support systems. When key leaders retired or transitioned out of the agency, some groups lost momentum or dissolved entirely. This history demonstrates that employee interest alone is not always enough to maintain long-term engagement efforts without organizational coordination and support.

The establishment of DEIBA in 2020 marked a shift toward a more structured and leadership-supported approach to cultural engagement and ERG coordination, reflecting an important evolution from those earlier models.

Current Structure and Event Programming

Today, SFHSA supports cultural engagement through multiple ERGs coordinated in partnership with DEIBA. ERGs have the autonomy to lead heritage celebrations, community-building events, speakers, and discussion spaces throughout the year. DEIBA plays a supporting role by providing guidance, coordination, and, in some cases, supplemental programming.

Unlike SSA's single large-scale annual event model, SFHSA's engagement efforts are distributed throughout the year across multiple events and groups. This creates ongoing opportunities for engagement, while also allowing ERGs flexibility and ownership over programming.

Balancing Operation and Equity Challenges

At the same time, participation can vary depending on work schedules, staffing coverage, job responsibilities, and location. Staff in administrative roles may have more flexibility to attend events, while frontline or client-facing staff may have less flexibility due to the nature of their work. Employees are also spread across multiple worksites, which can make agencywide participation more difficult.

There are early internal conversations about whether a more coordinated “diversity festival” model could help create stronger agencywide connection while still preserving individual ERG identity and programming.

Budget Climate

SFHSA is operating within a changing resource environment. Budget reductions, limited staff capacity, and the lack of consistently protected time for participation affect staff’s ability to engage. These conditions create pressure to identify sustainable approaches while still maintaining meaningful opportunities for staff connection and representation.

Governance

SFHSA is also continuing to formalize its ERG structure. A formal ERG policy is currently in development with the City Attorney’s Office and Employee and Labor Relations. This effort is intended to clarify roles, expectations, and operational processes that support long-term continuity of ERG activities.

Success and Participation

Although formal impact measurements remain limited, participation trends suggest employee interest in cultural engagement remains strong. ERG membership continues to grow, and staff continue expressing interest in new groups and programming opportunities. The primary challenge is not whether employees value this work but identifying what level of organizational support is sustainable over time.

Analysis of SSA vs. SFHSA

SSA and SFHSA share many similarities. In both agencies, employees help lead cultural engagement efforts while a central coordinating team provides support and structure, reflecting a common approach to balancing employee ownership with organizational support.

The primary difference between the two models lies in the level of infrastructure that supports execution. SSA’s model includes:

- dedicated funding
- protected staff time
- long-term coordination support
- centralized planning infrastructure

- practical participation supports, such as travel reimbursement

Together, these elements help create a large-scale agency-wide event that employees across divisions can access more consistently.

Contrastingly, SFHSA's current model is more decentralized. Programming happens throughout the year across multiple ERGs, worksites, and events. This creates flexibility and ongoing opportunities for connection, but it can also lead to uneven participation and heavier coordination burdens on ERG leaders and DEIBA staff.

Another important difference is organizational maturity. While cultural engagement has existed at SFHSA for decades, the current formal ERG structure supported by DEIBA is still relatively new compared to SSA's long-established Diversity Day model. This distinction matters because it demonstrates that cultural engagement itself is not new at SFHSA. What is newer is the agency structure designed to support and sustain the work consistently over time.

With that said, this case study does not conclude that one model is better than the other. A single annual event cannot replace the value of year-round ERG programming and community-building efforts. However, understanding these differences highlights how organizational infrastructure can affect the scale, consistency, and accessibility of engagement efforts across a workforce.

What SFHSA Can Adapt

This case study suggests that SFHSA's opportunity is less about creating entirely new engagement structures and more about strengthening, coordinating, and sustaining the work that already exists. While resource limitations make large-scale expansion difficult, there are still practical ways the agency could build stronger shared experiences and improve long-term support for cultural engagement efforts.

Pilot a Small-Scale Diversity Festival

Rather than replacing current heritage celebrations, SFHSA could test a smaller coordinated event or shared programming period that brings multiple ERGs together.

This pilot could include:

- cultural booths
- performances

- learning sessions for staff who may qualify for professional development or training credit
- speakers
- hybrid or virtual participation options

Starting small would allow the agency to gather feedback and assess feasibility before expanding the model further.

Maintain Existing ERG Programming

Any future shared model should complement current ERG efforts, not replace them. This is important because employees value the visibility, identity, and community built through individual cultural celebrations. Maintaining ERG ownership and voice will be critical to building trust and participation.

Improve Participation Access

Even small operational adjustments could improve participation across the workforce. Possible approaches include:

- designated participation windows
- hybrid or virtual components
- rotating locations
- clearer supervisor guidance around participation

These changes could help reduce barriers for staff working in different roles and locations.

Continuing Strengthening ERG Infrastructure

Formalizing ERG policies, planning processes, and operational guidance can help reduce reliance on individual staff champions and improve long-term continuity.

The agency's current ERG policy development effort aligns closely with this recommendation. This work may become especially important as staffing capacity changes over time.

Considerations and Constraints

Several important considerations would need to be addressed before implementing any expanded engagement model.

Budget limitations, staff capacity, and competing operational demands will affect what is realistic. Any proposed approach will need to remain manageable within current operational conditions.

Policy considerations will also affect implementation, including vendor processes, reimbursement policies, fundraising rules, and the development of a formal ERG governance framework.

Workforce dynamics also remain another important consideration. Differences in staff roles, locations, and schedules will continue to affect participation. While some barriers can be reduced through design and coordination, equitable access will be difficult to achieve without additional resources.

Perception and change management will also be important factors. Because cultural celebrations are closely connected to identity, belonging, and community, some employees may view a more coordinated approach as a reduction of space or recognition for individual groups.

For that reason, clear communication and continued ERG involvement will be essential if future changes are explored, especially in a workforce already experiencing operational and organizational changes. Any shared model should be framed as an addition to existing engagement efforts, not a replacement for them.

Conclusion

Santa Clara County's Diversity Day model demonstrates how staff-driven cultural engagement can grow over time when employees are supported by dedicated funding, coordination, protected staff time, and practical supports such as travel reimbursement, which all contribute to making participation more accessible and consistent across the workforce. The event's longevity reflects not only employee passion but also the infrastructure supporting it.

SFHSA is not starting from scratch. The agency already has many of the core components that support meaningful cultural engagement in place. This includes a long history of employee-led cultural engagement as well as the more recent development of formal ERG-and-DEIBA coordination structures that help support the work more sustainably.

Since employee interest in cultural engagement already exists across the agency, the opportunity moving forward is building on this foundation by improving coordination, expanding access, supporting long-term continuity, and increasing impact.

A phased pilot approach would allow SFHSA to explore what level of shared cultural programming is realistic and meaningful for staff while preserving the identity and value of existing ERG-led efforts.

Rather than replicating SSA's model exactly, SFHSA can build on its existing foundation in a way that reflects the agency's unique structure, workforce needs, and resources while supporting long-term sustainability, inclusivity, and employee connection.

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