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Change in a New Direction

The crises of 2020, including the coronavirus pandemic and racial unrest, have accelerated commitments by Charlotte-based employers to address economic inequities, social disparities and racial injustice across the community through actions that deliver long-term change.

“At the same time, a growing number of people are calling for lasting systemic change inside and outside of the workplace. Employees are increasingly raising the bar of employers for opportunities to connect, give back and get involved when social crises arise. Many companies are rising to the challenge by integrating diversity and inclusion (DEI) principles into their community engagement and corporate social responsibility efforts. In doing so, companies and organizations demonstrate an intentional commitment to advancing DEI within their walls and the greater community. A broader diversity, equity and inclusion lens

United Way of Central Carolinas corporate partners, including Bank of America and Atrium Health, understand that DEI should inform internal culture-building strategies, as well as external community engagement programs.

Expanding diverse perspectives and encouraging open dialogue to help employees gain a greater understanding and appreciation for one another is a critical aspect of how Bank of America drives a culture of inclusion, according to Charlotte Bowman, Charlotte market president at Bank of America. In 2020, the company introduced new guides and toolkits to help employees advocate and lead during uncertain times, and hosted conversations with external partners and community members to discuss topics important to teammates and clients.

“Now more than ever, we need to be comfortable with conversations that drive awareness on issues of race and economic mobility and deepen our cultural understanding,” Bowman said.

“Our inclusion learning and development programs combine virtual and in-person discussions to connect employees at all levels across the organization. Since 2014, we have had over 652,000 program completions reaching more than 166,000 employees who voluntarily attended inclusion program sessions.”

Bank of America also remains focused on recruitment and retaining a diverse workforce. The company’s campus recruitment initiatives at over 350 universities around the world and partnerships with over 30 organizations fuel a pipeline of diverse talent.

“The company currently exceeds U.S. EEOC (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission) financial services benchmarks for women and people of color in senior and mid-level categories, Bowman said.

“By disclosing our workforce data, we demonstrate the progress we are making—progress that is driven from the top down by leadership who embrace diversity and inclusion as strategic to our business success,” Bowman said.

“By maintaining this focus, we believe our company will be well-positioned to continue to attract and retain diverse talent, better serve our clients and communities and build meaningful connections among our teammates.”

Another example of an organization making strides with its DEI efforts is Atrium Health. Acknowledging that communities in the Charlotte region and across the nation are in the midst of a significant social justice movement and racial reckoning, a primary focus of Atrium Health’s Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in education and awareness, according to Fernando G. Little, chief diversity officer at Atrium Health, is training and creating leaders with inclusive leadership and implementing a detailed assessment of how inclusive leadership behaviors are driving interviews and selection, compensation and career decisions and overall inclusive team dynamics at the business unit level.

“Early executive leader of Atrium Health will participate in an introspective behavioral learning exercise aimed at offering guidance on responding to current and historical incidents that threaten social and racial justice,” Little said.

“Leaders will have an opportunity to use the information from the inclusive leadership and racial justice education to make informed decisions about their departments and business units,” Little said.

“A broader diversity team will assist with talent management decisions, inclusive purchasing decisions and ensure that we are progressing towards a leadership team and workforce that reflect the communities and patients we serve.”

“Atrium Health acknowledges that structural racism has contributed to the social and health inequities that are prevalent today,” Little said. “We have adopted intentional process and outcome measures related to urgent social needs such as food security, affordable housing and meaningful employment.”

Racial equity learning with United Way

United Way of Central Carolinas’ fight for the education, health and financial stability of every person in our community is inseparable from a fight for racial equity. The organization is committed to leveraging its resources to create communities that are more equitable where everyone is able to achieve their full potential and thrive.

As part of this commitment, United Way of Central Carolina launched the Racial Equity 21-Day Challenge in January 2021—led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. The virtual learning journey aimed to help participants develop more effective social justice habits and set goals to create progress from privilege and leadership.

More than 5,000 individuals participated in the Challenge 240 organizations and businesses joined as supporters. Leading by example, United Way of Central Carolina had 100% staff participation in the effort. Following the Challenge, more than 1,300 people registered for the Racial Equity Virtual Town Hall hosted by United Way of Central Carolina.

Bank of America joined the effort as an Equity Champion and presented across the breadth of the Challenge with 1,200 employees in the Charlotte market and beyond actively participating. After receiving praise, encouragement and support from employees participating in the Challenge, Bank of America found it important to add a shared experience discussion opportunity. Bowman said.

“In response, we formed discussion group sessions to create a space for teammates to come together and reflect on what they learned,” Bowman said. “After one of the sessions an employee remarked that it was one of the most meaningful conversations she’d had in her nine years with the company.”

Atrium Health joined the effort as an Equity Ally Sponsor of the Challenge with over 600 teammates engaging in the learning journey. The Challenge helped to shape a greater sense of community and understanding across the health system, sparked collective discussion and generated sustained energy behind a personal and organizational call to action, Little said.

“The activity helped to channel a lot of emotion to a productive purpose. Teammates were energized and again asking for more context, education, data and understanding,” Little said. “This curiosity we’ll lead to positive change.”

A commitment to equality, positive change

Beyond office walls, Bank of America made several new commitments in 2020 that build upon the company’s longstanding focus to advance racial equality and economic opportunity, both nationally and locally. Nationally, the company committed $1 billion to a four-year initiative to create opportunities for people and communities of color and focused on health and healthcare, jobs-smart, small business support and affordable housing.

Locally, the company’s commitment includes working with Central Piedmont Community College on a $1 million jobs initiative to help students of color successfully complete the education and training necessary to enter the workforce and embark on a path to success.

“Bank of America joined the effort as an Equity Champion and presenting sponsor of the Challenge with 1,100 employees working to bring about change in a New Direction, Little said.

“We are expecting positive change. If our expectations are positive, our behaviors and actions will align accordingly,” Little said.

“We know that our work will not be easy, but we also recognize that meaningful work produces the type of energy and curiosity that will lead to positive change.”

As part of this commitment, United Way of Central Carolinas is led by an equity champion team, which includes Atrium Health’s leadership team and workforce that reflect the communities we serve.

“Atrium Health acknowledges that structural racism has contributed to the social and health inequities that are prevalent today,” Little said. “We have adopted intentional process and outcome measures related to urgent social needs such as food security, affordable housing and meaningful employment.”

Bowman said. “In partnership with the Charlotte region’s corporate community and local government leadership, we’ll continue to work to ensure that Charlotte’s development programs target specific hiring needs to create a clearly defined career pathway to future employment.”

Across Atrium Health’s footprint, its Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion expects 2021 to be a year of impact and accountability as the health system continues efforts to remove barriers, enhance equity and keep its mission to improve health, elevate hope and advance healing for all at the forefront of everything it does.

For example, Atrium Health has committed $10 million to addressing affordable housing in the region. In 2021, the health system will place 50 teammates in new homes through its KHER program, as well as work with partners like the housing authority, Habitat for Humanity and others, to develop a robust plan for expanded housing opportunities.

Threading a diversity agenda into the organization, Atrium Health’s goal is to be an “impact partner” with its leaders and teammates as they make evidence-based decisions to advance diversity, equity and inclusion.

“Without a productive purpose, the activity will not be just about talking. United Health, we are fully dedicated to the power of a movement that together, we can make this world a better place by respecting our differences and celebrating the ties that bind us.”
Giving Back in a Virtual, Socially Distanced World

When United Way of Central Carolinas decided to host its first-ever Racial Equity 21-Day Challenge, it chose the kickoff date as Monday, January 18, 2021—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day.

Since the holiday is recognized as a nationwide day of service, United Way incorporated service opportunities into the Challenge by organizing virtual and socially distanced donation drives to collect children’s books by Black authors, socks and hygiene items and non-perishable food, which were distributed to nonprofits serving the Charlotte region. Companies found creative ways to support the donation drive—in one case, even before the Challenge began.

Charlotte region. Atrium Health’s partnership with United Way of Central Carolinas spans over multiple decades, including support through employee giving campaigns and volunteer engagement activities.

Teammate volunteerism through the Atrium Health Serve program has been a vital part of the health system’s community engagement culture for many years. Through volunteerism, Atrium Health is able to strengthen its partnerships with numerous community-focused nonprofits throughout the Charlotte area and surrounding counties.

The health system understands the valuable contributions of these organizations and works in close partnership to support local communities, according to Lois Ingland, VP of community engagement and corporate responsibility at Atrium Health.

“Atrium Health is proud to report that our teammates volunteer nearly 4,000 families through the Angel Tree program.

Nearly 200 teammates on Atrium Health’s Community Engagement Council went straight to work organizing a “porch-drop” donation drive that yielded over 11,600 essential items (masks, wipes, hand sanitizer, toilet paper, etc.) for distribution to homeless, organizing a food drive for the hungry or gathering school supplies for young children, volunteering has a positive impact on communities and those who lend their time and energy to help others.

The coronavirus pandemic undoubtedly has changed the way people are living, working and socializing—as well as volunteering. Amidst lockdowns and social distancing protocols that continue to evolve, organizations, companies and nonprofits are adjusting to the limitations of traditional, in-person volunteer activities.

Across the Charlotte region, Atrium Health and Loaves & Fishes are two organizations playing an important part in coronavirus response by finding innovative ways to safely mobilize volunteers to serve neighbors and communities in need.

Atrium Health Volunteers Make an Impact During COVID-19 Crisis

Volunteers serve a vital role in strengthening communities, assisting neighbors and advancing organizational missions, programs and services. Whether assembling hygiene kits for the homeless, organizing a food drive for the hungry or gathering school supplies for young children, volunteering has a positive impact on communities and those who lend their time and energy to help others.

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Loaves & Fishes Volunteers Provide Food Access During Pandemic

Loaves & Fishes believes that access to nutritious food is a fundamental human right. To help individuals and families meet their basic hunger needs, the nonprofit provides nutritionally balanced groceries through a network of emergency food pantries in Mecklenburg County. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Loaves & Fishes was providing a week’s worth of groceries to over 80,000 people a year through 41 brick and mortar food pantries, according to Executive Director Tina Postel.

In the early weeks of March 2020 when the pandemic began affecting communities across Mecklenburg County, Loaves & Fishes was forced to close every pantry and come up with innovative solutions to serve people in need—including those in quarantine who contracted or were exposed to the virus, or were at high risk of contracting it.

“The impact of COVID-19 on our community was swift and severe,” Postel said. “In early March of last year, we never could have imagined that by month’s end we would be feeding three times the number of people, and in a brand new way.

To meet the increased demand, Loaves & Fishes made changes at every level of its operations. The nonprofit opened 20 drive-thru mobile pantry locations in Mecklenburg County, distributed over 3,000 boxes of emergency food a week and launched a grocery home-delivery program.

Loaves & Fishes was able to quickly implement these changes with over $850,000 in grants awarded through the COVID-19 Response Fund launched by United Way of Central Carolina in partnership with Foundation For The Carolinas. Since 1975, Loaves & Fishes has depended on thousands of volunteers to help feed hungry neighbors in need. However, the nonprofit’s brand new way of providing services did not come without challenges, including limited access to Loaves & Fishes’ greatest resource—its volunteers.

“Serving enough people to fill Bank of America Stadium, half of whom are children, would not be possible without the 4,000 volunteers who run each pantry, take client referrals in our phone center, sort food donations in our warehouse, 4,000 volunteers who run each pantry, take client referrals in our phone center, sort food donations in our warehouse, and severe,” Postel said. “In early March of last year, we never could have imagined that by month’s end we would be feeding three times the number of people, and in a brand new way.

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“Serving enough people to fill Bank of America Stadium, half of whom are children, would not be possible without the 4,000 volunteers who run each pantry, take client referrals in our phone center, sort food donations in our warehouse, or pick up and deliver food to keep pantry shelves fully stocked,” Postel said.

Sue Bruce, marketing and events director at Loaves & Fishes, said with volunteer safety in mind, during the pandemic the nonprofit quickly pulled together resources and a handful of volunteers to begin delivering groceries directly to the doorsteps of homebound individuals and families.

Today, a fleet of 20 volunteers delivers groceries to an average of 75 households per week, while another group of volunteers helps pack fresh produce, meat and dairy to load into volunteers’ cars for delivery.

One such volunteer is Bob Briggs. When he volunteered as a Loaves & Fishes home-delivery driver, he never realized he would come full circle and make his first grocery delivery in a Habitat for Humanity house he helped to build. Briggs continues to bring groceries to the doorsteps of individuals and families in Mecklenburg County, ensuring they have access to nutritious food in their homes.

“Thanks to the efforts of these dedicated volunteers, we will be able to continue the grocery home-delivery program into the future,” Bruce said.