



DEAI Comprehensive Plan

Randolph County Tourism Development Authority

2023 – 2024



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Introduction: Why DEAI?



The goal of the DEAI Comprehensive Plan is to build better practices for our team and provide resources for our industry partners while creating a safe environment for our visitors to explore. We want to make travel welcoming to everyone.

This document provides information on the three pillars of DEAI pertaining to the operations of the Randolph County Tourism Development Authority and its individual departments of marketing the Heart of North Carolina and the visitor services portion of the I-73/74 Visitor Centers. Those three pillars are **Pillar A – Management & Workforce**, **Pillar B – Visitorship**, and **Pillar C – Community Impact** as provided from guidance of Travel Unity.

Founded in 2016, Travel Unity is a 501 (c)(3) with a focus on increasing diversity in travel through individual and community empowerment. Travel Unity's mission is to guide the global tourism industry to become more inclusive and to provide opportunities for underrepresented communities to experience travel as an activity and a career path. Travel Unity assists visitor-facing organizations begin and strengthen their DEI work.

Definitions:

Diversity is defined as a group of people who are different in the same place.

Equity is defined as considering systematic inequalities to ensure everyone in a community has access to the same opportunities and outcomes.

Accessibility means that all people can perceive, understand, navigate, and interact with information and be active, contributing participants.

Inclusion is defined as the practice or policy of providing equal access to opportunities and resources for people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized, such as those having physical or mental disabilities, or belonging to other minority groups.

Pillar A – Management & Workforce

A.1 Leadership Commitment

- How has organizational leadership publicly committed to ongoing DEAI efforts? How can organizational leadership further its public commitment?

The Executive Director announced at a the TDA Board meeting in June 2022 that development and training for DEAI initiatives coursework would begin at the leadership level. The Executive Director will develop an organizational plan to present to TDA Board of Directors and from there facilitate recurring sessions organization wide for full-time and part-time employees. An additional public commitment would be to connect with tourism partners & stakeholders to offer the training sessions as a resource as well. This information will be posted on our website in a respective location for staff members and partners to view.

- *Timeline: We will continue to share messages with our media contacts locally to inform them on updates to our commitment to DEAI development and training within our organization. We have media contacts at our monthly board meetings, we are in constant contact with them on many fronts of our industry changes and growth. (Q1/Q2/Q3/Q4 – 2023 – ongoing)*

- How has organizational leadership internally committed to integrating DEAI into strategic planning? How can organizational leadership further its internal commitment?

During the 2022 annual evaluation of the Executive Director, a goal for the upcoming year was to develop and implement the DEAI plan for the organization – as we do not currently have any document in place. The Executive Director is taking steps early on to develop the plan in this budget year and will set forth dates in a quarterly timeline to educate employees and partners in DEAI standards.

- *Timeline: We have monthly staff & leadership meetings in which the Executive Director will take pieces of the DEAI Plan to present to staff members as an agenda item for this meeting. We hold quarterly staff meetings with our part-time Visitor Center team members, the Executive Director will also take pieces of the DEAI Plant to share with these team members. (Q2/Q3/Q4 – 2022 | Q1/Q2/Q3/Q4 – 2023 – ongoing)*

A.2 Hiring & Pipeline

- How does your organization encourage diverse candidates to apply to open roles? How can your organization further encourage diverse candidates to apply to open roles?

Our hiring process is managed by our County Government Office through an agreement within our contracted services. Our efforts in marketing these vacant positions include social media platforms, digital signage (at our busy roadway intersection), and word of mouth in our small communities. Oftentimes we find success in the acquaintances of our current employees.

- *Timeline: We will continue to work closely with our County Government to improve their recruitment processes for diverse candidates. Commitment to our outreach through word of mouth in our small communities will lend itself to diverse candidates. Timing on this is on an as-needed basis, as we do not have a constant flow of new hires or an open application process. (Q1/Q2/Q3/Q4 - 2023 | ongoing)*

- How does your organization avoid hiring biases in interviews?

Our interview process consists of the same questions for each applicant, depending on the role we are seeking. These questions have been developed and reviewed by our legal team. Interviews are conducted by members of the leadership team, at least TWO per interview. We currently have three members of that team - the Executive Director, Director of Office Administration, and Director of Visitor Services & Information.

- *Timeline: Interview questions will be reviewed annually on an as-needed basis for specific positions. We do not have an open application process and have had some positions with little to no turnover in the past 10 years. (Q1/Q2/Q3/Q4 - 2023 | ongoing)*

- What does your organization do to provide equitable pay and benefits?

We have an annual evaluation of our job grades, descriptions, and benefits. The benefits package is included in our contracted County Government Office services and is not negotiable. However, our job grades/descriptions can be altered for our needs. Each year we budget a merit pay line item for our annual employee evaluations; each employee could increase their salary based on their job performance throughout the year at this time.

- *Timeline: We continue to participate in salary research and analysis studies through industry specific membership organizations such as Southeast Tourism Society. Remaining knowledgeable of trends and market value of positions allows better recruitment when the positions are available. Again, we participate in these studies to prepare for an annual budget or position reclassification as needed. There is no set*

timeline for action – other than the annual review of research provided. (Q1/Q2/Q3/Q4 - 2023 | ongoing)

A.3 Training, Development, & Evaluation

- What is the organization’s process for onboarding new employees?

New employees - full-time and part-time – go through a rigorous orientation on the County Government side (an 8-hour day and a 4-hour session) along with a 3-hour session that covers organizational structures closer to our expectations. New employees are also invited to attend monthly board meetings to become familiar with our organization and how it operates. During the probationary period of an employee, they may be invited to attend industry and community meetings to build their own knowledge and network base. Attending industry-related conferences also provides additional on-the-job training and networking within our industry.

- *Timeline: Segments of our organizational structures will include DEAI Plan in upcoming orientations. We have not had a new hire in place since this plan has been written, but effective with the next hire will be included with each orientation. Our department is an independent one that can create such documents as this Plan for use internally. The County Government orientation does not include DEAI/DEI initiatives or information currently. We have sent an email to request a discussion about inclusion of this in the County Government side of employee orientation/onboarding. (Q1/Q2/Q3/Q4 - 2023 | ongoing)*

- What DEAI-related training is provided to new employees?

Our organization currently does not have DEAI training in place – the major reason for this initiative! Our County Government contracted services new employee orientation touches briefly on equal employment opportunities and harassment concerns in the workplace.

The development of this plan is very much needed for our organization and our communities! We will continue to have conversations with our Human Resources office on the need for DEAI training sessions/courses/certifications. Will strive to be a resource for those opportunities as we encounter them.

- *Timeline: Executive Director and leadership team will seek out additional training through industry-related organizations. As mentioned earlier, we will pull pieces from this initial plan as an introduction to training and dive deeper as those sections are complete. This is an ongoing training course and will be assigned monthly and quarterly depending on employee status (full-time/part-time). (Q1/Q2/Q3/Q4 – 2023 – ongoing)*

- How does the organization balance employee roles with opportunities for professional development?

As an organization, we maintain memberships to multiple industry related groups – nationally, statewide, and regionally. These groups offer tons of continuing education opportunities, industry related webinars/podcasts, in person seminars, and even a three-year session for certifications. For other opportunities, we subscribe to a professional development program that allows multiple employees access to fulfill their interests and needs pertaining to their specific roles within our organization – administrative, financial, marketing, social media, customer service, partner relations, leadership growth, etc. We allow employees to have real-life training with influencers that we host – building relationships and following along how they market to their followers is beneficial in how we can creatively market to our visitors.

- *Timeline: With any six-month or annual review, an employee is given goals by their supervisor. This will typically always include continuing education opportunities – via seminars, webinars, in-person training sessions, etc. As professional development opportunities are encountered, they will be shared with appropriate staff members for consideration with workload. (Q1/Q2/Q3/Q4 - 2023 | ongoing)*
- What are your organization’s protocols for employee reviews, including discipline and termination?

Each employee receives an annual review – prior to this review, they are given a SWOT (strengths/weaknesses/opportunities/threats) analysis form to complete on their perspective of their job performance and are also given an opportunity to have input on what goals are set for the upcoming year. Discipline/termination situations are managed through coaching forms for initial issues and later through official documentation through our County Government Human Resources office (again, contracted services).

- *Timeline: We will work with the County Government Human Resources office to develop a process that would consider DEAI lens in the months ahead. Email has been sent to request a meeting to discuss this topic to HR Director from Executive Director (01/26/2023). No guarantee on these updates for the disciplinary process on any timeline, unfortunately. (Q1/Q2 – 2023)*
- How does your organization decide who gets promotions? What is the transition process for employees who are being promoted?

Being such a small organization – and currently rebuilding staffing from COVID budget reductions – we would open a new position to all employees to apply for and be considered for. Once it is offered internally, the position may be advertised externally.

For direct promotions internally, there would be TDA Board approval of a new job classification/grade for the position and then the Executive Director would discuss with the employee the responsibilities and increase in pay/benefits associated with the position. The

transition process would need to include lots of communications as job duties/tasks/responsibilities may change and be shifted to other employees – communications internally and to our partners/stakeholders.

- *Timeline: As an Executive Director, there are certain goals for each employee that would need to be met before promotions to another position are considered. With half of our team being newly hired (within less than six months), we are not a place to consider promotions. We do offer cross training opportunities for those staff members that desire more responsibility and understanding of our organization. We have a trial run for the position of Deputy Clerk to the Board – expect to hire for that position on July 1, 2023. (Q4 – 2023 | Q1/Q2 - 2024)*

A.4 Employee Support

- How does the organization promote work/life balance and wellbeing?

We lean on our County Government contracted services through the Human Resources department – Wellness Administrator contact for seminars, blogs, podcasts, and wellness challenges. We collaborate with our team to ensure that we are not overdoing the job(s) needed on a daily or weekly basis. If an employee works at a weekend event, they are given time off to compensate for their work. With our contracted services, we also maintain the benefits of the County Government, including paid holidays, vacation/sick/wellness/personal day accrual. Also as an added value within our department - our various memberships and sponsorship levels, entertainment and event participation can often be a source of well-being opportunities for employees to take advantage of – Annual North Carolina Zoo Membership, Liberty Showcase Theater Concert/Performance Tickets, RhinoLeap Productions Performance Tickets, Liberty Antiques Festival Event tickets, Admission to Seagrove Pottery Festival Weekend, North Carolina State Food Truck Championship Food Vouchers, etc. During staff meetings, the leadership team continually checks in with employees as a group and individually to seek out their opinions on the wellness benefits – what works/what does not and what they are interested in experiencing/seeing from the wellness programming offered.

- *Timeline: Each employee has the opportunity accrue and schedule their PTO (personal time off) for their well-being from their initial start date. Time off accrues in greater amounts with service time to our organization. Employees (part-time & full-time) receive weekly and monthly newsletters from our Wellness Coordinator at the County Government Office with resources on nutrition, wellness, activities, mental health, and emotional health. We also schedule monthly pet therapy visits to our three works sites for our employees with the County Government Office. Work/life balance is particularly*

important for productivity and will be top of mind for keeping employees centered each day. (Q1/Q2/Q3/Q4 - 2023 | ongoing)

- What protocols does your organization have to address employee health issues, both physical and mental?

We have resources through our County Government contracted services available to all employees no matter full-time or part-time status. There are special days set aside each quarter for pet therapy, there is a hotline for any emotional/mental services needed, and again, the sick/wellness/personal days that can be used for much needed time off.

The only requirement or protocol in place that is necessary to our operations is communication. The leadership team does not ask details of the absence, just asks that employees communicate their need to be absent for that day/shift.

- *Timeline: This resource is available at any time for employee use; no timeline on the availability. (Q1/Q2/Q3/Q4 - 2023 | ongoing)*

- What are your organization's policies for family leave and work sabbaticals?

We recognize and follow FMLA guidelines through the US Labor Department, once again an advantage of the County Government contracted services.

- *Timeline: Being a quasi-government entity, we follow FMLA guidelines that should not show bias of any sort. This is a continued procedure with our annual contract with our County Government – this process is aligned with County Government Human Resources to maintain any updates to procedures that may occur. (Q1/Q2/Q3/Q4 - 2023 | ongoing)*

- What structures does your organization have for staff to provide feedback to managers/leadership?

Our full-time employees participate in a monthly staff meeting to discuss progress/challenges in work productivity, while our part-time employees have a quarterly staff training session. We conduct an annual staff retreat, in which we all brainstorm and give feedback to the upcoming year ahead and begin developing and delegating tasks/projects/events to oversee among our various departments. There are weekly meetings with contracted employees – Public Relations firm and Advertising firm. Our social media team meets monthly to plan for the next month's marketing projects.

The leadership team is always on site – while we do have the capability of remote work, we have found better productivity being in person and available for team members.

- *Timeline: The Executive Director maintains monthly workflow meetings with newly hired employees to ensure assignments are being prioritized and managed properly – this is a brainstorming session and a one-on-one opportunity for discussions to be had outside of the team setting. This management style works for the employees and leadership – to ensure a positive, encouraging work culture is maintained. Also, monthly team meetings ensure that all team members are aware of events, projects, and individual needs of coworkers. (Q1/Q2/Q3/Q4 - 2023 | ongoing)*

A.5 Offboarding

- What is your offboarding process for employees who voluntarily leave the organization?

Exit interviews are conducted for any employee at their departure – voluntary or involuntary – to ensure we have a pulse on what solidified their decision to leave (pay/schedule/environment/workload, etc.) The Executive Director also sends a handwritten note to the departed employee in appreciation of their time with the organization - each person is a piece of our especially important story for the visitor experience! We maintain relationships with employees after they have departed and continue to check on their successes following their exit from our organization.

- *Timeline: Employees that depart are provided contact information for Executive Director for any feedback, no matter the amount of time from departure. (Q1/Q2/Q3/Q4 - 2023 | ongoing)*

- What channels are open for former employees to share input with the organization, especially around issues related to DEAI?

We maintain records of former employees – emails/phone/addresses – we could contact at any point to send a survey to open a conversation about DEAI. There are also methods of communication through our CONTACT US page on our website; as well as any social media platform that we maintain.

- *Timeline: We have appropriate communication channels in place for a former employee to share input with the organization. As other channels are developed, we will include these in the communication methods available. (Q1/Q2/Q3/Q4 - 2023 | ongoing)*

Pillar B – Visitorship

B.1 Stakeholder Engagement

- Who are your organization’s stakeholders?

Our organization is funded solely through occupancy tax dollar collections from the hotel/motel industry in our County. We are the 11th largest County in North Carolina and have a little over 1,000 hotel rooms. We also collect occupancy tax dollars from bed & breakfast inns, structures on campgrounds, and through Airbnb/VRBO vacation rentals.

- *Timeline: We make monthly site visits to each property to communicate activities at our attractions – this helps them filter information to the visitors and guests they see from the frontline. Their sales are important to our ability to market and promote our destination. Will plan to make additional visits to attraction, restaurant, and shopkeeper partners – joining various committees and boards throughout our communities also helps build these relationships. (Q2/Q3/Q4 - 2023 | ongoing)*

- What is your organization’s plan to engage with and receive input from stakeholders?

We currently work extremely hard to build and maintain relationships with our overnight accommodation managers/sales representatives/frontline staff members. A staff member makes monthly visits to check in with each hotel property to ensure they have the collateral materials and resources needed to provide the absolute best visitor experience. We also check in regarding group needs and serve as a liaison to area businesses/organizations that need room blocks for area meetings/gatherings.

Over the years this has evolved into monthly site visits, we have moved away from a monthly, then quarterly, Hotel Managers Meeting – current conditions do not allow for the time needed for these types of opportunities.

Currently we offer an annual familiarization tour for our partners, elected officials, and staff members to network with each other during our ‘See for Yourself’ FAM tour. This tour offers each participant an opportunity to experience our attractions like a visitor – it is so much easier to tell a visitor about an attraction, restaurant, shop, event, if you have the experience yourself. This is an annual project that the entire TDA team works on to offer the best hospitality in the region – the team lead is the Tourism Marketing Coordinator.

- *Timeline: Staff members are developing a newsletter, partner relations based, that will be sent to our tourism partners on a quarterly basis. Newsletters will include highlights of our organization’s activities, suggestions on how partners can interact, network, and*

get involved with our efforts, examples of media hosting, and overall industry details.
(Q1/Q2/Q3/Q4 – 2023 | ongoing)

- What is your organization’s process for analyzing stakeholder input?

With a new staff member in place to make those monthly hotel site visits and to communicate with our stakeholders, we will plan to implement a survey to be completed in person. This will allow us to hear from our stakeholders about what works for their visitors and what does not work. We have altered our development of brochures/maps based on what the visitor says to the frontline staff members of our hotels – this is not a foreign method of gathering data...just need to hit the ground running again on a process!

- *Timeline: These are ongoing conversations and will be evaluated on an annual basis as those projects tend to be developed in our fiscal budget year. Will also interact with these hotel partners to find out what type of DEAI resources they may have to share in comparison to our findings. (Q2/Q3 – 2023 | ongoing)*

- What plans have you made based on stakeholder engagement?

We have altered our development of brochures/maps based on what the visitor says to the frontline staff members of our hotels – this is not a foreign method of gathering data...just need to hit the ground running again on a process!

We have altered our meeting schedule and timeline to also include a monthly lunch time with our stakeholders and industry partners to build those relationships organically.

- *Timeline: Continued efforts to improve our communications and offerings to our stakeholders to ensure they feel heard and seen in our marketing strategies. The creation of a Partners Newsletter with features of our activities and industry related activities has been launched in Q1 of 2023. This will be quarterly communication to our partners from our Marketing Team. (Q1/Q2/Q3/Q4 - 2023 | ongoing)*

B.2 Communications

Precampaign:

- What are the demographics of your current market segments? What is your organization doing to attract diverse audiences in those segments?

Currently, we have outreach within driving distance to larger metropolitan areas of our state (1.5-2 hours away); we also have a military market that we reach out to quarterly with marketing efforts. We are making every effort to include faces that represent our community in our advertising and marketing platforms. We have invited and hosted travel writers from the

LGBTQ community to explore and share their experience with their audiences and continue to build on those relationships.

- *Timeline: Advertising and promotions are in the works for these communities. Conversations with publications focused on military, LGBTQ communities, Spanish speaking communities, and Black communities are ongoing. (Q3/Q4 – 2022 | Q1/Q2/Q3/Q4 – 2023 | ongoing)*

- What potential audiences are you considering reaching out to? What can your organization do to attract diverse audiences to those audiences?

We would like to increase outreach to Spanish speaking residents of our state, to invite multigenerational groups to experience our family-friendly assets. By seeking out advertising methods in publications that circulate in Spanish speaking communities and seek out a spokesperson from our own Spanish speaking communities to share how they explore their hometown.

- *Timeline: We will have a Spanish speaking family included in our travel guide production for 2023. This is a former intern of our organization that is so very willing to help any way she can. We will begin work with a social media agency in February that will be able to place posts on our platform in Spanish – hopefully attracting this diverse audience to our area. (Q3/Q4 – 2022 | ongoing - current)*

- How can you increase the diversity of representation within your organization’s media collateral?

We are making every effort to include faces that represent our community in our advertising and marketing platforms. We communicate with our tourism partners who their visitors are and what needs they are meeting – how they are meeting the needs of the visitors they see. Taking advantage of key events that may invite a variety of visitors at one time by being present and sharing our tourism invitation/message face-to-face.

- *Timeline: Continuing to monitor social media platforms and have conversations with our community members on events that create diverse, unique experiences for residents and visitors. Building upon relationships that we have currently and growing our outreach is a goal for this upcoming year – through participation on committees/boards, etc. (Q1/Q2/Q3/Q4 - 2023 | ongoing)*

- What have you seen in the marketing/PR of comparable organizations as analyzed and evaluated through the prism of DEAI?

Many TDAs include more diverse people shots on their websites and in advertising (if they use people shots). They have tried to uncover their minority stories and promote them to the media. Our PR pro led a statewide tourism discussion on diversity and inclusion in 2021. The diversity of restaurants and inclusion of minority-owned businesses in FAM tour schedules were also discussed as key elements of our efforts during that event.

- *Timeline: We have continued efforts moving each day for diversity in our website, advertising, and media hosting opportunities. Considering a dedicated campaign in Q2/Q3 and beyond as we plan for 2024. (Q2/Q3/Q4 - 2023 | ongoing)*

Campaign Planning:

- How are DEAI concepts considered in your campaign strategies and goals?

As we look forward to upcoming marketing strategies, we hope to share the stories of our community members and their business. Those businesses with unique stories or a unique experience, a dish of food that you cannot find anywhere else. We will consider accessibility for the visitor – are additional accommodations made that sets certain businesses apart from others? Adding the face of a business owner creates a distinctive touch that displays our hospitality.

We will also seek out travel media from diverse communities to experience our area and share with their followers. We want to think of ways to explore DEAI initiatives at our Visitor Center locations as well – may consider ‘quiet hours’ (we have video with music/narration that can be muted) for those in need of a pleasing environment to take a break from driving and tight quarters in their vehicle. Will plan to role play with our Visitor Center team during their quarterly staff training sessions of what scenarios they have encountered – how were they managed?

- *Timeline: Accessibility is huge for our organization. We recently hosted a blind writer with her guide dog for three days of experiences in our area. (Q3 – 2022 | current - ongoing)*

- What is your plan to highlight diverse communities in your marketing beyond designated days/months of national recognition?

With our social media team and our advertising/marketing team, we will work together to highlight and focus on minority owned businesses to share the message every day, rather than holding those stories for only designated days. We had remarkable success with a Black owned business post on Father’s Day/Juneteenth recently – as we also focused on the owner’s relationship with his customers.

- *Timeline: Recently interviewed member of Hispanic community for a post to kick off National Hispanic Heritage Month, have done additional research on other ways we can celebrate this community throughout the year. Promotion of multicultural activities and events will be a priority in the months ahead as we have goals of growing our audience and visitorship. (Q3 – 2022 | current - ongoing)*

Campaign Execution:

- What processes are there to manage campaign adjustments if there are DEAI-related concerns? Who oversees these processes?

The Executive Director will meet with Public Relations firm and advertising/marketing team to adjust as needed to address DEAI-related issues. We will function as deemed appropriate and to represent our organization in line with our mission and vision. The Executive Director will make decisions on the result of this process as the appointed leader by a board of directors.

- *Timeline: This is an ongoing process to implement diversity and accessibility opportunities in our marketing and promotions efforts. Will continue to have a voice on certain boards to bring awareness to these critical issues. The Executive Director has joined the local United Way Board of Directors for a three-year term to better understand how our industry and organization can help all communities within our area and beyond (Jan 2023). (Q1/Q2/Q3/Q4 - 2023 | ongoing)*

Post-Campaign:

- How do you analyze and evaluate campaign successes and shortfalls through a DEAI lens?

Moving forward with analyzing and evaluating campaigns, we will need to lean on our partners for feedback – who are they servicing, has this demographic changed, improved, or declined? We may also create surveys for an intercept study at specific events that we have focused targeted demographic marketing on.

- *Timeline: Will plan to create an intercept study at events in the upcoming year to evaluate needs. These studies will be performed at various street festivals, our visitor center locations, area hotels – when staffing is available. (Q2/Q3 – 2023 | ongoing)*

- What methods do you have for members of the media to engage with an official representative of your organization?

Members of the media that contact our organization will be in touch with the Executive Director or Public Relations firm for any needs with partner relations, tourism assets, or special

events related to TDA program of work. Our Public Relations firm is actively pitching our story to diverse media partners locally, regionally, statewide, and nationwide for opportunities to host and experience our area.

- *Timeline: Our Public Relations firm is actively seeking opportunities for our marketing efforts and media relations relationships. She has attended a Hispanic PR roundtable through her professional development organizations and included those writers to our press release lists. Currently following several diverse and minority influencers on Instagram, initial interactions could lead to forming those relationships to bring those media contacts to our area. (Q1/Q2/Q3/Q4 - 2023 | ongoing)*

B.3 Welcoming & Fulfilling Experiences

Before Visit:

- How does your organization train staff and volunteers to address visitor issues (taking DEAI into account)?

By developing this DEAI Comprehensive Plan we will add another layer to our extensive Customer Service Training opportunities.

As an organization, we maintain memberships to multiple industry related groups – nationally, statewide, and regionally. These groups offer tons of continuing education opportunities, industry related webinars/podcasts, in person seminars, and even a three-year session for certifications. For other opportunities, we subscribe to a professional development program that allows multiple employees access to fulfill their interests and needs pertaining to their specific roles within our organization – administrative, financial, marketing, social media, customer service, partner relations, leadership growth, etc.

- *Timeline: Training will be implemented during initial orientation processes as mentioned above – this typically occurs within the first two weeks of the hire date. Additional opportunities for training and education will come from quarterly meetings and webinars/seminars specific to goals set forth during annual evaluation periods. (Q1/Q2/Q3/Q4 - 2023 | ongoing)*

- What methods are there for visitors to engage with an official representative of the organization and address concerns in advance of their visit?

Fortunately, we operate TWO Visitor Centers that see approximately 65,000 visitors annually – they are open six days a week to welcome visitors from across the United States! We also have a marketing office located in the County seat for easy access to visitors in our area. We

maintain customer service response times of under 24 hours with this staffing structure. If a staff member is uncertain of an answer for a visitor, there is always someone available to assist with a response.

Our social team is active in communicating event details and tourism asset changes to hours/admission, etc. This team is very responsive to questions/comments on posts. Our marketing team consistently watches activity on Google Business pages across three locations and responds to each review.

- *Timeline:* This effort is current and ongoing. Our leadership team is committed to continued training and education to make the visitor experience even better than before.

Visit:

- With physical footprint: How do you take DEAI into account during the “welcoming interaction”?

Visitor Centers - Welcoming a visitor with a warm greeting and ‘reading the room’ for their response – giving space for conversation to develop and then engage the sales message of our area. Phone conversations – We ask lots of questions pertaining to what kind of experience the visitor hopes to encounter while in our area, this helps us determine which partners are prepared to accommodate for the best experience – whether it is with accessible ramps, quiet hours of operation, food sensitivities, etc. We want to guide the visitor on the right path.

- *Timeline:* Continued training on how to greet and welcome all visitors will occur during quarterly staff training and be evaluated on an annual basis with review period of employee. **(Q1/Q2/Q3/Q4 2023 | Current – ongoing)**

- Without physical footprint: How do you analyze the “welcoming interaction” of partners/suppliers?

We hope to serve as a resource for those businesses/partners that do not have a corporate office giving opportunities for training/educational sessions. Annual Customer Service Training for all our tourism businesses is a must that allows them to interact and network and not feel so alone in this industry.

We monitor the social media and consumer review sites for any outstanding (good or bad) reviews left by visitors and residents.

- *Timeline:* Continuing to have open communications with our tourism partners – this helps us evaluate the experiences of guests and visitors. Offering training specific to DEAI initiatives on an annual basis for those partners will keep those lines of communication open. **(Current – ongoing | Annual Training Q2 - 2023)**

- With physical footprint: How are visitor needs during the stay addressed by the organization through the prism of DEAI?

We ask lots of questions pertaining to what kind of experience the visitor hopes to encounter while in our area, this helps us determine which partners are prepared to accommodate for the best experience – whether it is with accessible ramps, quiet hours of operation, food sensitivities, etc. We want to guide the visitor on the right path. We follow up with those that we have contact information for – tour groups, sporting events, business meetings, weddings, etc. – just to ensure that all needs were met.

- *Timeline: Research is underway for an accessibility blog to post on our website as a quick resource for visitors, team members, and our partners. We recently lost the staff member that was working on this project. It will be assigned to the new hire as one of their research topics for this specific blog. Once we have rehailed our website, we will have a dedicated page to accessibility information for visitors and residents to access.*
(Q1 – 2023)

- Without physical footprint: What procedures are there to intake visitor needs/concerns of the stay (especially those related to DEAI) and to address partners/suppliers?

We hope to serve as a resource for those businesses/partners that do not have a corporate office giving opportunities for training/educational sessions. Annual Customer Service Training for all our tourism businesses is a must that allows them to interact and network and not feel so alone in this industry.

We may consider adding a quick reference link to all communications with our partners for accessibility resources for visitors during their stay.

- *Timeline: Provide access to the accessibility blog to our partners once it is published through mass communication or newsletter. This newsletter newly launched in Q1 2023; will place accessibility blog into Q2.* **(Q2 – 2023)**

- With physical footprint: How is the visitor experience and built environment assessed through the prism of DEAI?

We take all feedback into consideration – observe while we are with a tour group *did the group have difficulty accessing the restroom at this attraction, or did they have issues hearing the presenter in a large auditorium, etc.? * Always look to improve in each circumstance of a visitor's experience.

- *Timeline: Ensure communications after the visit are complete – with any needs that were met being addressed and improved upon. (Q1/Q2/Q3/Q4 - 2023 | ongoing)*
- Without physical footprint: How are send-offs of partners/suppliers analyzed through the prism of DEAI?

Communication, if available, to the partner of their observations – offer suggestions and resources for a quick turnaround and acknowledgement of issues at hand.

- *Timeline: Check in with the host partner to see if there were any issues with the visitor experience – how can we help this time and next time? (Q1/Q2/Q3/Q4 - 2023 | ongoing)*
- With physical footprint: How do you structure visitor send-offs and empower relevant staff to provide an opportunity to address individual needs?

Boosting opportunities for education in customer service and allowing those staff members to truly see how much it means to individuals to have attention in a delicate manner to their circumstance.

- *Timeline: To be included in the Annual Customer Service training – extended session with DEAI emphasis for our partners and team members. (Q1 – 2023)*

After Visit:

- What are your channels for visitor feedback?

Our three locations within our organization each have Google Business pages, social media platforms, and contact information on our website. Visitors to our Visitor Centers are asked to sign a digital guest registry that allows them to offer feedback of their experience with our staff members or during their stay in our area.

- *Timeline: Feedback on these platforms is responded to by staff members within 24-36 hours (depending on entry day). (Q1/Q2/Q3/Q4 - 2023 | ongoing)*

- How do you process visitor feedback?

We can respond to the social media platforms and Google Business pages; response time typically ranges within 24 - 36 hours. The guest registry feedback is pulled monthly and shared with our board members and staff members periodically.

- *Timeline: Feedback is used to help us determine what improvements need to be made on our end for the visitor/guest experience. (Q1/Q2/Q3/Q4 - 2023 | ongoing)*

- What are some examples of changes your organization has made based on visitor feedback?

Before the pandemic we had a ‘self-serve’ computer kiosk for guest registration – we now have bookmarks that the visitor can take with them to scan a code to give their feedback. We also remain cognizant of social distancing and bring our business outside when the weather permits at our Visitor Centers.

- *Timeline: This may be the new normal for visitor relations at our Visitor Centers due to the pandemic and the trauma that many visitors have endured due to COVID. We have made it work and will continue. Continue to remain in contact with our State Welcome Center teams to see what trends they may see on the horizon to implement improved customer service and feedback reports. (Q1/Q2/Q3/Q4 - 2023 | ongoing)*

- How does your organization advocate on behalf of visitors to government entities, stakeholders, and/or other institutions?

Our organization maintains relationships with our state legislators, County officials, and officials of each of our nine municipalities. Our staff members serve on several boards throughout the County that have tourism related business – this also allows interaction with several of those elected officials. Presentations are made annually to our County officials of Annual Reports and Annual Marketing Plans are delivered to the County officials. We have a County official liaison as a part of our TDA Board structure as well, to keep lines of communication open and consistent.

We work closely with our Chambers of Commerce (we have FIVE in our County), and we also partner well with our County Economic Development Commission to share quality of life messages to potential businesses – industrial and small business plans.

- *Timeline: Serving in a position as an organization marketing for nine municipalities and a county, we are accustomed to actively advocating on the visitor experience to our government officials. Our government officials understand the economic impact of visiting our destinations, and we want to continue to educate and inform people in the best ways we know how. Develop a multimedia marketing link to showcase how our visitors are ‘seeing’ our area – to share with our municipalities. (Q1/Q2/Q3/Q4 - 2023 | ongoing)*

B.4 Partner Engagement

- Who oversees managing partner relationships? How does this fit into their overall role?

Our entire organization is responsible for partner relationships – though levels of that responsibility vary. With nine municipalities and several partners, we must divide and conquer. Currently we have two senior staff members that are the most responsible for partner relations, we are in the process of acclimating new hires in this process. Our business structure is to network with ALL businesses that are tourism related – shopping, dining, attractions, events, etc.

- *Timeline: Each team member has a responsibility to our organization to create partner relationships – this starts on day one of employment and grows exponentially throughout the tenure of the team member. Assign members of our team to specific areas of our partners to dedicate and build relationships – maybe one staff member takes on restaurants or another takes on one of the nine municipalities. (Q1/Q2/Q3/Q4 - 2023 | ongoing)*

- How does the organization evaluate the success of a partner relationship?

The communication between our organization and our partners is so valuable. Some partners are much better on email than a phone call, while others want to have a face-to-face meeting over a text message. We have a lot to analyze when building and maintaining these partner relationships.

We really understand and know the success of the partner relationship when it comes to hosting our travel media – when it comes time to show off our partners and get a response of participation and willingness to understand what our mission is for our community.

Once our partners become advocates for themselves and their neighbors – that shows us a successful bridge was created, whether we introduced the two partners or not...the two entities understand the strength of togetherness.

- *Timeline: As methods of marketing and promotions change – and personnel changes occur throughout our industry – we continue to evaluate daily how our relationships are maintained. Build those relationships with more face-to-face encounters and opportunities to expand our results with true visitor interactions. (Q1/Q2/Q3/Q4 - 2023 | ongoing)*

Pillar C – Community Impact

C.1 Local Environment

- What does your organization do to avoid negative environmental impact?

Our two visitor centers are LEEDS certified, built in 2010. We have recycled bins at each of our three locations for paper/cardboard/acceptable plastics. When traveling as a group, we carpool – even across the County to a meeting in a neighboring municipality. Working closely with our Outdoor Trails Coordinator and Outdoor program with our state officials, we also share messages of sustainable practices while visiting through the Leave No Trace campaign on our social media platforms and on our website. Being home to the World’s Largest Natural Habitat Zoo, we also have messaging used for conservation and green practices daily for visitors – not only during their visit!

- *Timeline: We can encourage additional low waste at home and in the workplace with plastic and paper usage. Continuing to encourage low waste, reduction of paper use, plastic, energy, and water are implemented in daily activities throughout the office structure and at home. (Q3/Q4 – 2022 | ongoing)*

C.2 Local Employment & Contractors

- How does your organization encourage work-based learning for students? Include initiatives for K-12 and college & universities.

We have a paid high school and paid college internship program. Our county school system has a Tourism & Hospitality Academy which tracks high school students into our industry, we serve on the Advisory Council and offer feedback in mock interview processes, judge senior projects, and job shadowing. We also work closely with one of our neighboring Universities that has a Sustainable Hospitality Program, but judging projects, mentoring students, and presenting industry topics as a panelist.

Collaborating closely with our school systems is especially important to our organization – we send ‘new teacher bags’ to each school system at the beginning of each school year for distribution to educate about our services.

- *Timeline: Outreach and representation with these school systems is strong. Would be more effective with more team members involved – inclusion of that will be soon. (Q2/Q3 – 2023)*

- What is your organization’s protocol for collaborating with contractors/vendors owned by locals and/or legally protected groups?

We prefer to work locally, for accessibility of workload – it is much easier for our graphic designer (local) to stop by our office with a paper sample from the printer down the road than to wait on the shipment of it from another state. Our Public Relations firm is contracted out of a larger metropolitan area only 1.5 hours away and our Information Systems contractors are located approximately 2 hours away. There are times when we cannot access services local and we do go outside of our area due to costs, but always source local first when possible.

➤ *Timeline: These processes are monitored through our contract control with our County Government. Contracts are evaluated and renewed on an annual basis each March – June time. (Q2/Q3 – annual)*

- What systems are in place to inform locals of job openings and industry career opportunities?

Our job vacancies are through our County Government contracted services; however, we will push the message along through our social media platforms, word of mouth, and our digital signage at our busy roadway intersection. We also offer the digital signage to our partners of job openings; and share their jobs posts through appropriate social media platforms (LinkedIn)

We would like to incorporate a ‘Partners Page’ on our website as a quick resource for their input of vacant job postings.

When it comes to recruitment for specific positions, the Executive Director will post on industry related organizations job boards, as well as contact higher education departments that have tourism/hospitality management programs and degrees for qualified candidates.

➤ *Timeline: Development of a new refreshed/rehauled website will come in 2023 with a Partners Page. This will be an element included. (Q3/Q4 – 2023)*

C.3. Local Engagement

- How does your organization find and include local partners for collaboration and product planning?

Each year we produce an annual travel guide – we connect with those partners during this update and build upon those relationships throughout the year by attending their events, open houses, ribbon cuttings or just in general a visit to gather content for a social media post. Those partners that need a special project or product can also apply for a MAGS (Marketing Assistance Grants Sponsorship) Program. A committee evaluates the MAGS program – made up of staff members and TDA board members with up to \$3,000 annually, all determined by budget year. The group that evaluates the applications and produces the annual travel guide is comprised of employees from our organization and board members of our organization. We cannot

guarantee inclusivity with the groups/organizations/partners that we grant monies to each year.

- *Timeline: Team members will be responsible for additional interactions with local partners to develop products as they need – our MAGS program may increase sponsorship dollars as available with budget. This will be evaluated during our budget planning season in Q2, with implantation following in Q3. (Q2/Q3/Q4 - 2023 | ongoing)*
- How is input from local partners considered when adjusting programming/products?

We listen to feedback from our partners as they distribute the product or participate in the programming. An example of a product adjustment was a large tab map created for the hotels to distribute to visitors – it was simply too large for the visitor to take with them. From there we created a tri-fold map with area information and a driving map on both sides that had much better functionality to it.

We have hosted a ‘See for Yourself’ Tour of our County and invite area partners, elected officials, and staff members to visit our tourism attractions as a visitor – allowing them to network and learn from each other while learning about the places they can sell to extend a visitor’s stay. Following this each year, we hear feedback on where they would like to go next year or if the lunch was too heavy, or if there were too many stops/not enough stops, etc. and we adjust our plan for the next year.

- *Timeline: Continued adjustments occur within budgetary availability to programming and products. We want to be the best resource for our partners. (Q1/Q2/Q3/Q4 - 2023 | ongoing)*
- How does your organization find and include representatives from local community groups and legally protected classes on advisory boards and similar bodies?

Our organization serves in many capacities on various boards/committees/advisory councils throughout the County. We have been able to expand some boards with a diverse matrix to help ensure that representation is made clear for respective organizations, with bylaws and board structure limitations. We find success in networking and being present to let our tourism voice be heard and talking with those that we may not interact with daily but are an important aspect of our community’s makeup.

Our TDA board is appointed by our County Commissioners through state legislation that defines the type of business the board member is affiliated with – there are limitations to our board structure.

- *Timeline: Team members are encouraged to seek out boards/committees that align with our mission as well as meet expectations of our communities that we represent. Begin assigning current team members to areas of interest for our organization as deemed appropriate for our industry. (Q1/Q2/Q3/Q4 - 2023 | ongoing)*

C.4 Local Culture

- What does your organization do to engage with pertinent groups and communities around products that relate to diasporan, local, and/or Indigenous (DLI) cultures?

We need to seek out opportunities to have discussions with the DLI culture groups to determine their needs in a visitor experience.

- *Timeline: Collaborating closely with our counterparts across the state to utilize their resources and provide offerings in a comparable manner to the communities we have not touched. (Q1/Q2/Q3/Q4 - 2023 | ongoing)*

- How does your organization facilitate discussions that are open to the public around products related to DLI cultures?

As we begin to facilitate discussions, we may reach out to school aged groups – high school, community college that have special formed interest groups of DLI.

- *Timeline: As we collaborate with the school systems to represent our organization and mentor those students, also put forth efforts of outreach to the interest groups of DLI. (Q1/Q2 – 2023 – ongoing)*

- How does your organization solicit and process input around programming/products related to DLI cultures?

From discussions and feedback of needs, we will determine how and where to market to the DLI cultures – is print media/social media/radio/tv the best means of communicating events and activities supporting our area?

- *Timeline: Find out where our communities that are underserved by our marketing are looking by having conversations with those groups. Executive Director has joined the United Way Board of Directors in hopes to learn more about the communities that may be underserved and an attempt to build relationships with representatives of those communities to incorporate a visitor experience among their family members and peer group. (Q1/Q2/Q3/Q4 - 2023 | ongoing)*