

**Diversity Practice Paper**

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Senator Jennifer McClellan is a senator in the General Assembly of Virginia, serving District 9 of Virginia. District 9 of Virginia consists of Charles City County, part of Henrico County, part of Richmond City, and part of Hanover County. This wide range of constituents makes up a population of about 211,030 Virginians, as of the 2020 U.S. Census Bureau. Of this population, 46.3% are male, 53.7% are female, 39.7% are White, 49.3% are Black, 2.5% are Asian, 0.6% are Native American, and 4.8% are Hispanic (“Virginia State Senate District 9,” 2020). Senator McClellan’s office works to serve these constituents through passing legislation on various topics that will positively impact them and address problems. Some of these topics that Senator McClellan focuses her attention on are education, healthcare, the criminal justice system, housing, employment, and much more. Of these various fields and the widespread population, there are many diversity, equity, and inclusion issues that are present that should be properly addressed.

Due to the vast number of communities and types of people that make up District 9, it is nearly impossible to isolate one single diversity issue as being a top priority. As a legislator, Senator McClellan is tasked with winning small victories each session through the passage of legislation that positively addresses these various diversity, equity, and inclusion issues. In Senator McClellan’s office, staff members are tasked with working the micro, mezzo, and macro-level to address these issues. It is also important for these staff members to be competent in various diversity concepts that aid in understanding the different ways constituents may be oppressed or discriminated against. In terms of diversity, equity, and inclusion, Senator McClellan’s office works on passing legislation and utilizing power to amplify the voices of the oppressed. Some diversity and inclusion topics include a lot of inmate work and aid to improving

the criminal justice system, increasing access to healthcare and housing, and ensuring higher education opportunities for the school districts. Oftentimes, race has a large impact on access to all of these things, and institutional racism causes barriers that must be fixed in order to ensure equal opportunity for constituents to pursue a happy and fulfilling life.

For the purposes of this essay, legislation on the impact of race, specifically African-Americans, on the criminal justice system and access to quality education will be references to address diversity, equity, and inclusion issues within District 9. In terms of the criminal justice system, Senator McClellan introduced two bills to the General Assembly during the 2022 session. The first is Senate Bill 475, known as “Counsel at First Appearance,” which requires that all defendants faced with a criminal charge are given an attorney during their first appearance in Court. Previously, only a few jurisdictions required defendants to be given counsel. Unfortunately, this bill did not pass the Senate side during session and was tabled for further discussion at a later date. There are currently an overwhelming majority of black individuals who are convicted of crimes and sent to prison or jails in Virginia. In the United States, black men make up 13% of the population, and 35% of that male population are incarcerated. Further, one in five black people are expected to experience incarceration in their lifetime, compared to one in twenty-nine white people in the United States (Vera Institute of Justice, 2019). It is widely known that the black population is underserved in many ways and oftentimes come from communities that are underfunded, due to the overwhelming population of black incarcerated individuals, this bill was necessary to ensure that this community would receive fair trials and proper representation, no matter the financial situation of the individual. It is unfortunate that the bill did not pass because passing legislation like this and advocating for these vulnerable populations is how this agency advocates for social justice to address the issues.

Another bill Senator McClellan introduced and passed relates to the youths of Virginia and their access to a positive life. Senate Bill 485, otherwise known as the “Delinquency Prevention and Youth Development Act,” addresses the concerns of the concept known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” While this act was previously passed in 1979, it has not received adequate funding since 2008 in order to carry out its services (“Senate Jennifer McClellan’s 2022 Legislative Agenda,” 2022). This funding would allow for preventative services to be offered to vulnerable youths in order to avoid involvement in the criminal justice system. Due to so many youths of color not having the ample amount of resources to support their education and proper home life, this act is necessary to put preventative measures in place to ensure they do not end up a part of the statistic so many youths of color experience.

Another priority that addresses diversity and inclusion issues in Senator McClellan’s district is access to quality education. According to Kenyona Walker, a Senior Program Manager at the Ohio State University, black students face an influx of negative educational experiences that predominantly white communities do not. This includes predominately Black schools not having qualified teachers, less access to college-ready coursework, a higher likelihood of suspension, less funds, and other microaggressions that impact the learning environment (Walker, 2022). To address this issue, Senator McClellan’s office introduced Senate Bill 490, requiring a Standards of Quality (SOQ) to be implemented to set minimum levels of staffing and increase support for at-risk programs (“Senate Jennifer McClellan’s 2022 Legislative Agenda,” 2022). She also introduced various school construction bills to improve the schools’ infrastructure and create a more positive learning environment. These bills are important advocacy bills to promote social justice and equal opportunity because of the study previously mentioned that states predominately Black schools receive less support than that of white

schools. It also addresses the “school-to-prison pipeline” that so many black students face through prevention services and greater attention brought to the needs of these communities.

In this agency, one addresses these issues and advocates for change in many different ways and mediums. As a Senator, Senator McClellan is in a position of great power to make large impacts on the communities of Virginia. McClellan’s office does this through advocacy work, using power to amplify the voices of vulnerable populations, and creating legislation that positively addresses the various diversity, equity, and inclusion issues at hand. Alongside Senator McClellan, staff members work to remain culturally competent in these fields to know the real impacts of legislation and identify unintended consequences that could arise from legislation being introduced. At the micro-level, Senator McClellan’s office offers one on one constituent services and meetings, such as letters of support for those eligible for parole. At the mezzo level, the office holds town hall meetings for constituents to directly congregate and voice their concerns or opinions. At the macro level, Senator McClellan’s office creates powerful and impactful legislation that has an effect on Virginians across the Commonwealth.

In conclusion, there are diversity and inclusion issues in every aspect of society. The General Assembly is in a position where it can greatly impact these issues and communities in a very positive and negative way. In order to properly look at these issues within the communities, competence is one of the most important values to utilize. It is important to be culturally competent to understand the consequences and impacts behind the legislation. It is also important to note that while the General Assembly may seem like a predominately macro-environment, it is the collectivity of micro, mezzo, and macro levels to adequately address the needs of the people and create positive change in Virginia.

## References

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