



MAKING CONNECTIONS

Affinity Group Builds Community among Black/African American Dental Professionals

“As Black/African American dental professionals, we work in very white spaces, spaces that weren’t made for us, and spaces where we’re often expected to assimilate. It’s nice to be in a place where we don’t have to do that, and we can unapologetically be ourselves.” — Dr. Douglass Jackson

QUICK BITES

- Launched in 2022, a WSDA-supported affinity group is building connections among Black/African American dental professionals.
- The group includes dentists, hygienists and dental assistants and is actively seeking new members.
- Current or planned group programs include social and networking opportunities, along with professional development and mentoring opportunities.
- WSDA is interested in building additional affinity groups among historically underrepresented communities over time.

As a clinical professor in the department of Oral Health Sciences at the University of Washington School of Dentistry and the school’s associate dean for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, Dr. Douglass Jackson understands the challenges Black/African American dental students face when they enter the profession in the Northwest. Those challenges are also the impetus for the creation of the Black/African American Dental Professionals Affinity Group, which was launched last year with active support from WSDA.

The idea for the group sprung from a conversation between Lolinda Turner, who was working as Delta Dental of Washington’s program manager for workforce diversity and inclusion at the time, and WSDA executive director Bracken Killpack in June of 2022.

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to let every dental professional who identifies as Black/African American know that this fantastic community is here for them and for all of us.”

“I personally needed a soft place to land as a Black woman in the dental field and as a dental professional,” Turner said. “I had a vision of creating a space for all Black/African American dental professionals in Washington state. Fortunately, Bracken was immediately on board with the idea.”

This was not the first time that creation of such a group had been discussed, but prior efforts had sputtered. Additionally, the

National Dental Association, which provides support to Black dentists across the country, is not very active in Washington, so there was still an opportunity for a WSDA-affiliated group to fill an important need in the state.

Turner and Killpack agree that one important difference between the current group and those less-than-successful previous efforts is that the current program benefits from the work of Natalia Hilal, WSDA’s membership engagement coordinator.

“Bringing Natalia in to help bring my vision to life has been important. She and Bracken have been amazing partners and have been there since the conception of this group. The most essential thing is that they are not only sponsoring our community, but also that they are doing it because it’s the right thing to do. This isn’t about checking the box or tokenizing us ... or doing it for the ‘clout’ as the young folks say,” Turner said.

MEMBER-DRIVEN AGENDA

But Hilal and WSDA clearly play a supportive role in the group’s activities. Its direction comes directly from its members.

“We know that we’ll have the most success listening to what the community wants the group to be when it ‘grows up’ and following that as our North Star,” Jackson said.

So far, the agenda has been a mix of social, networking, and professional development opportunities. Early meetings have included strong social components, such as a kick-off dinner in September of 2022, a social hour conversation with Delta Dental of Washington CEO Mark Mitchke and Arcora Foundation President and CEO Vanetta Abdellatif, and a summer barbecue at Carkeek Park in Seattle.

This approach is paying dividends in terms of building the group. What began as a contact list with a little more than a dozen names is now approaching 50.

The percentage of Black/African American individuals in the dental workforce is lower than the percentage in the state’s population. So the group feels it’s important to reach as many of those Black/African Americans who are practicing as dentists, hygienists, and assistants as possible – as well as growing the number who are in the workforce.

Dr. Marshall Titus, an Everett dentist and another early member, agrees that growing the group’s membership will be the key to its future.

“Our biggest challenge will be sustainability, given how few Black/African American dental professionals work in Washington,” he said.

“Collectively, we are doing our part to let every dental professional who identifies as Black/African American know that this fantastic community is here for them and for all of us,” Turner said.

Jackson agrees: “Word of mouth is the most effective way to grow affinity groups and I think we’re off to a great start. We’ll need to be intentional for how we remove barriers for those wanting to be a part of the group.”

One such barrier is geography. In 2024, the group will be exploring ways to overcome the limits of location and make it easier for dental professionals from outside the central Puget Sound region to be more active in group activities. Another key to growth is reinforcing the message that individuals from all segments of the dental workforce are welcome.

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participants from the entire dental professional workforce.”

“I appreciate that, as a group, we encourage participants from the entire dental professional workforce,” said Titus.

“The strengths, challenges, and opportunities faced at work are different for dentists, hygienists, and assistants. It’s important for us to get them out in the open for everyone to see and to learn from each other. Because there are so few of us, it would be easy to think that our individual experiences are unique and to sit in lonely silence. When we’re together, we see the similarities in our experiences and the loneliness goes away,” Jackson added.

“We are only as strong as our weakest link,” Turner said. “One thing I am beyond proud of is that we all have respect for each other and that we leave our egos at the door. We are one, and we are strong.”



In addition to securing members from all segments of the profession and all corners of the state, the range of group activities is also likely to expand over the coming year.

LOOKING AHEAD

"We are only beginning with the opportunities this group can provide for one another," said Turner, who now serves as director of student success and engagement for the Pacific Northwest School of Dental Medicine being created in Yakima.

"Ultimately, the community's objectives are to have a place where we can support each other as Black/African American dental professionals from all backgrounds. We can share information on community opportunities, events, employment, and mentorship. And we can talk about things that can make other, non-Black/African American communities too uncomfortable to talk about," Turner explained.

Turner said that plans are in the works for continuing education courses, "real talk" conversations on improving work environments through professional growth, and community career fairs and mentoring opportunities to build interest in oral health careers among Black/African American youth.

Everyone involved in the Black/African American Dental Professionals group – from volunteer leaders like Jackson, Turner and Titus, to WSDA staff like Killpack and Hilal – would encourage other historically underrepresented groups to consider the creation of similar affinity groups.

"WSDA strives to have a membership that reflects the diversity of the dental community and a dental community that reflects the diversity of the population at large," Killpack said. "By providing support to affinity groups from historically underrepresented groups, we invest in this objective as well as our mission of supporting dentists in providing optimal oral health care."

LESSONS LEARNED

Jackson offers a clear formula for the success of any new affinity group.

"Build your group to be true to your community. Be inclusive. Be good listeners. Bring your authentic self and others will come, too!" he said.



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"Never think that it's impossible to do," Turner added. "Align yourself with people who see the bigger picture. Most importantly, do not make it about you; make it about the community you are a part of."

In addition to demonstrating a pathway for other communities to form their own affinity groups, Jackson and Turner think the experiences of the Black/African American group can have a broader impact throughout all of WSDA.

"The affinity group may expand WSDA's membership among Black/African American providers, and increasing the diversity of its membership will likely begin to change how WSDA does its business in service to providers and patients," Jackson said. "I have such

appreciation for Lolinda, Natalia, and Bracken for their willingness to try something new and to learn together."

For now, though, the primary focus will remain on serving the members of the group and expanding its membership to other Black/African American dental providers around the state.

"I am beyond proud of these amazing people's commitment to be a part of this group," Turner added. "I now have a 'tribe' in the dental world that sees me and offers me the support I need. These amazing people aren't just colleagues; they are my people!" 

For more information on the Black/African American Dental Professionals affinity group, or to discuss opportunities for starting your own affinity group, contact WSDA's Natalia Hilal at 206-973-5210 or nataliah@wsda.org