

Diversity, Equity & Inclusion

Policy Brief

Written by Rhianna Scyster, MPP

In collaboration with



Urban
Strategies
Inc.

2026

About 904WARD

904WARD began in 2015 with a small group of friends who came together to talk openly, challenge each other, support each other, and take action together to build a more inclusive Jacksonville.

We are a diverse group made up of people committed to creating a community of inclusion for all. We take pride in mobilizing thousands of volunteers every year to create racial healing and equity.

An inclusive community begins with understanding each other better.



Mission: 904WARD creates racial healing and equity through deep conversations and learning, trusting relationships, and collective action.

Vision: An end to racism in Jacksonville and beyond so all people thrive.

Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI)

Executive Summary

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives are programs and policies designed to address gaps and promote access and opportunity across schools, workplaces, and public institutions. These initiatives are grounded in federal and state anti-discrimination laws, including Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and relevant state civil rights statutes. DEI policies aim to ensure that institutions provide fair treatment and opportunities for individuals from varied backgrounds.

In Florida, DEI programs have become the subject of legislative and administrative attention. Lawmakers have enacted measures restricting or prohibiting certain DEI-related activities in education, , healthcare, government, and local governance. These actions highlight legal and administrative considerations regarding compliance with anti-discrimination obligations, freedom of speech protection, and the allocation of public resources.

From a legal perspective, institutions implementing or responding to DEI initiatives must balance multiple requirements, including adherence to federal and state civil rights laws, respect for constitutional protections, and compliance with administrative guidance or regulations. Decisions about DEI programs can carry implications for potential liability, funding, or oversight.

This brief provides an overview of DEI terminology, the legal frameworks affecting its implementation, and considerations for organizations and communities navigating these policies while remaining compliant with applicable laws.

What DEI Means

Diversity refers to the presence of people with different backgrounds and identities.

Equity promotes fair access to opportunities and outcomes.

Inclusion is the intentional effort to create environments where individuals feel respected, supported, heard, and valued, and where all voices are meaningfully integrated in decision-making that impacts them.

In short, DEI is used as shorthand for practices meant to support fair treatment and full participation. In public discourse, it is best understood as improving fairness without replacing merit or forcing political beliefs.

DEI Initiatives: Legal and Operational Considerations

When designed and implemented with clarity and adherence to applicable laws, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives can have measurable organizational effects. Potential outcomes include enhanced problem-solving, broader perspectives in decision-making, and improved recruitment and retention by appealing to a broad workforce. From a legal standpoint, DEI programs that proactively address bias in hiring, compensation, and promotion can help organizations maintain compliance with federal and state anti-discrimination statutes, including Title VII of the Civil Rights Act and related employment laws, while reducing potential liability.

At the same time, DEI initiatives can present challenges when objectives are poorly defined, data is insufficient, or implementation lacks structure. Legal and operational concerns may arise regarding claims of differential treatment, alleged reverse discrimination, or failure to adhere to employment and anti-discrimination requirements. Programs that rely primarily on mandatory training without clear outcomes may face questions about effectiveness, regulatory compliance, and potential exposure to legal challenges. Additionally, legislative or public scrutiny, particularly in highly politicized environments, can create further administrative and legal considerations for institutions implementing DEI initiatives.

DEI History

DEI ideals grew from America's civil-rights history and anti-discrimination rules. Over time, many workplaces and schools used DEI to widen opportunity, reduce unfair barriers, and build respectful environments. After national events in the early 2020s, many institutions expanded DEI quickly. This also sparked backlash. Critics argued that DEI programs became political, used public funds poorly, or replaced merit with group identity. These concerns are reflected in Executive Orders and recently proposed/passed legislation in Florida.

Federal Executive Orders on DEI

At the federal level, several executive orders have restricted or revised the scope of DEI-related programs within federal agencies. Critics of DEI argue that such programs may exceed statutory authority, impose ideological priorities, or create potential legal exposure under employment or civil rights laws. From a legal perspective, these executive actions raise questions regarding the extent of executive authority to direct agency policy, compliance with anti-discrimination statutes, and the administrative law requirements for rulemaking and program implementation:

- **Executive Order 14151:** *“Ending Radical And Wasteful Government DEI Programs And Preferencing”*: This ordered that “to the maximum extent allowed by law,” each federal agency should eliminate all federal DEI, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility (DEI) and “environmental justice” offices and positions, specifically including Chief Diversity Officer positions; equity action plans that were developed in the Biden administration; “‘equity’ actions, initiatives, or programs, ‘equity-related’ grants or contracts; and all DEI or DEIA performance requirements for employees, contractors, or grantees.”
 - In response to this and other Executive Orders 14151, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) issued Memorandum M-25-13, temporarily pausing all agency grant, loan, and other financial assistance programs, effective January 28, 2025 ([Pillsbury Law, 2025](#)).
 - **Executive Order 14170:** *“Reforming the Federal Hiring Process and Restoring Merit to the Government Services”*: Establishes a 120-day deadline for the assistant to the President for domestic policy to develop a federal hiring plan for agency heads that will prioritize merit-based recruitment and prevent the hiring of individuals based on their race, sex, or religion ([Alston and Bird, 2025](#)).
 - **Executive Order 14173:** *“Ending Illegal Discrimination and Restoring Merit-Based Opportunity”*: Emphasizes merit-based opportunity, in addition, it rescinded Executive Order 11246 which was signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965 to incorporate civil rights priorities into the federal contracting process. While 14170 rolls back DEI in the federal government, this order rolls back affirmative action plans for federal contractors and recipients of federal funding ([Pillsbury Law, 2025](#)).
 - **Executive Order 14168:** *“Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government”*: Mandates that federal agencies and employees use a particular definition of sex. Each agency must use the definition in the Executive Order when “interpreting or applying statutes, regulations, or guidance and in all other official agency business, documents, and communications.” Agencies are also required to remove messaging that promotes “gender ideology” ([Alston and Bird, 2025](#)).
- Executive Order 14183:** *“Prioritizing Military Excellence and Readiness”*: Prioritizes military readiness and alters diversity-related practices, particularly prohibiting the recognition of gender identity separate from biological sex for military personnel.

Legal Landscape in Florida

Even before the federal changes outlined above were implemented, Florida enacted legislation restricting or regulating DEI-related programs across education, government, and public institutions. These laws establish limits on how DEI concepts can be incorporated into training, curriculum, and policy require institutions to comply with transparency, reporting, and neutrality standards. From a legal perspective, these measures highlight the balance between state authority regulating public programs and obligations under federal and state anti-discrimination laws. Florida's approach has drawn attention from policymakers in other states, with other states adopting similar legislative frameworks or considering comparable restrictions, demonstrating how state-level regulatory actions can influence broader policy trends across the country. Below are some examples:

Florida HB 7 (2022): Individual Freedom Act ("Stop W.O.K.E.")

Florida HB 7 (2022) is the "Individual Freedom" law. It limits certain concepts in required workplace training and instruction about race and sex. Supporters say it protects individuals from being forced to accept ideals that shame them for their identity ([Florida Senate, 2022](#)).

Local impact examples:

- Employers may change or reduce required training to avoid forbidden concepts
- Schools and districts may revise professional development or lesson guidance to comply.

Florida HB 1557 (2022): Parental Rights in Education

Florida HB 1557 limits classroom instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity in kindergarten through grade 3. It also requires that any instruction for older grades be age-appropriate and sets procedures for parent notification and complaints ([Florida Senate, 2022](#)).

Local impact examples:

- Schools may change lesson plans and how staff respond to sensitive topics in early grades (K – 3).
- Parents may request records and expect clearer communication from schools.

Florida SB 999 (2023) Post Secondary Educational Institutions

Florida SB 999 targets DEI funding and curriculum in higher education. Seen as a companion bill to SB 266 in the limitations of usage of funding for DEI programs and activities ([Florida Senate, 2023](#)).

Florida SB 266 (2023): Higher Education Limits on DEI Spending

Florida SB 266 (2023) restricts public colleges and universities from spending state (and in practice, often also federal-administered) funds on certain DEI programs and activities. Florida leaders described the goal as focusing on workforce education and limiting DEI administration ([Florida Senate, 2023](#)).

Local impact examples:

- Universities may close, merge, or rename DEI offices and shift work into student success or compliance roles.
- Some campus training and programs may be changed or ended to match the funding limits.

Florida HB 931 (2023): Ban on “Political Loyalty Tests”

Florida HB 931 (2023) prohibits public colleges from requiring “political loyalty tests” in hiring, admissions, or promotion. This includes required statements that show commitment to certain ideologies, often discussed as DEI statements ([Florida Senate, 2023](#)).

Local impact examples:

- Hiring and admissions processes may remove required DEI statements or belief pledges.
- Schools may focus more on viewpoint diversity and free expression policies.

Local Context: National Impact

As demonstrated above, Florida has enacted several laws that significantly restrict DEI initiatives in public education, higher education, government agencies, and local governments. Supporters of these measures argue they prevent ideological influence, while critics contend, they limit free speech, academic freedom, and local decision-making. Further, all the legislation above was passed prior to any Executive Orders to eliminate DEI programs at a national level, implying that Florida may be acting as a testing ground for national legislative considerations. In addition to the above legislation, since 2025 the following legislative actions have been introduced but have failed to be voted into law in Florida:

- **SB 420** (2025) would have blocked counties and municipalities from adopting DEI-related policies.
- **SB 1701 / HB 731 (2025)** would have restricted DEI funding in medical and higher education institutions and alters admissions requirements.
- **SB 1264** (2025) would have dismantled minority business enterprise programs and replacing them with rural and urban initiatives.
- **SB 466** (2025) would have created governing board and funding for a Black History Museum, though its location has been contested.

How Communities are Responding

Communities across Florida have responded to changes in DEI policy through a range of civic engagement and organizing efforts. Educators, advocacy groups, and community organizations have developed and shared informational materials explaining DEI concepts and addressing common questions through community forums, social media, opinion pieces, and educational workshops.

At the local level, residents have attended school board and municipal meetings to provide public comments and express their perspectives on inclusive practices and local decision-making. Some municipalities have adopted local policies related to workplace practices and educational programming within their jurisdiction.

Cross-sector coalitions have formed to encourage dialogue and collaboration among business leaders, educators, faith communities, and community organizations, creating opportunities for relationship-building across different viewpoints. Legal organizations have filed court challenges to certain state laws, raising constitutional questions related to freedom of speech, equal protection, and local governance. Community members have supported these efforts in various ways, including contributing time, resources, and expertise.

Civic participation has continued beyond election cycles, with individuals attending public meetings, volunteering with community organizations, and engaging in policy discussions at local and state levels.



What Can You Do?

People seeking to better understand legislative priorities and public policy discussions can take several constructive steps:

1. Access Official Legislative Information

Review state and local government websites for bill summaries, meeting agendas, voting records, and policy updates to obtain accurate and current information.

2. Observe Public Meetings

Attend or watch school board, city council, county commission, and legislative sessions to hear discussions and deliberations firsthand.

3. Communicate with Elected Officials

Reach out to representatives through town halls, scheduled meetings, emails, or phone calls to learn about their policy priorities and decision-making processes.

4. Review a Variety of Sources

Consult multiple news outlets, research institutions, and policy analyses to gain a broader understanding of proposed legislation and its potential impacts.

5. Participate in Community Discussions

Join civic groups, public forums, or educational events that provide space for dialogue about local and state policy issues.

6. Learn About the Legislative Process

Build familiarity with how laws are proposed, debated, amended, and enacted to better understand how public policy develops over time.

7. Stay Engaged Year-Round

Maintain awareness of policy developments beyond election periods by following legislative updates and participating in civic activities as appropriate.