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## **Creating Space for Worker Voice through the Essential Worker Board Department of Economic Equity and Opportunity, Harris County, Texas**

Essential workers are uniquely positioned to identify and recommend solutions to workplace issues, as they have first-hand insights into hazards and issues workers face on the job. In late 2021, amidst the pandemic and the racial reckoning in the United States, an [Essential Workers Board](#) (HCEWB) was created to advise Harris County's Department of Economic Equity and Opportunity (DEEO) and Commissioners Court on programs and policies to improve the health and economic outcomes of essential workers and the overall public. This board is the first of its kind in the U.S. and has since served as an example for other jurisdictions.

### **Creation of the Board**

In 2020, DEEO began exploring best practices for supporting advisory boards at the local government level with the goal of establishing an entity led by essential workers that could

- evaluate and provide feedback on existing and future development and implementation of programs and policies that address essential workers' rights;
- share information, insights, and lived experiences of essential workers to assist Harris County in identifying areas of concern and developing recommendations to maximize essential workers' right; and
- serve as a public forum for the discussion and exploration of essential workers' rights and community engagement efforts.

As no essential worker specific board existed at the time, DEEO staff looked to other citizen-led entities such as the Citizen Election Committee, Welfare Advisory Board, and Public Health Advisory Committee for insights on how best to design, elect, staff and launch an essential worker focused entity.

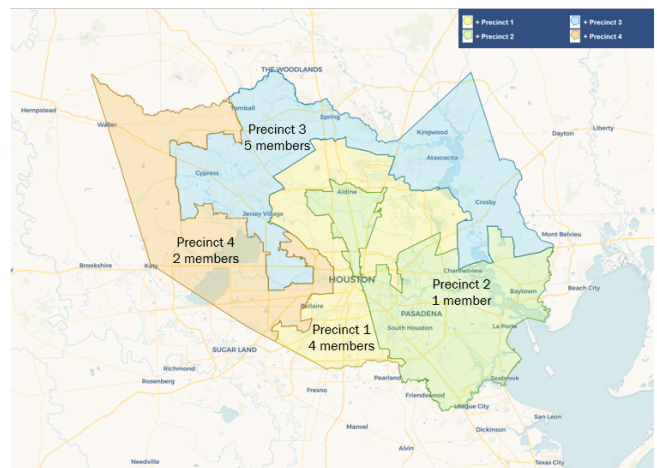
Informed by their research, over the course of 2021, DEEO began to craft the logistical, procedural, & budgetary aspects that would be required to bring the board to life, including bylaws, language interpretation needs, meeting space, stipends, training and capacity building. All of these efforts were framed by a desire to remove potential barriers to participation. DEEO purchased a mobile hotspot and ipad for each member to allow them to participate in meetings

remotely, review materials and maintain email correspondence with other members. DEEO also identified the need for translation and interpretation services, both during board meetings as well as for select meeting materials, as some board members are more confident conversing in their native language. In November of 2021, the Commissioners Court formally approved creation of HCEWB and its bi-laws and in early 2022 the court approved the stipend policy authorizing \$100 per board member per meeting of the full board for up to 6 meetings per year, not to exceed \$600 per member for the year.

With the scaffolding in place, DEEO collaborated with the Commissioners court on the appointment of the initial 5 members of the board in May 2022 and then those members initiated a robust recruitment process in June for the remaining 8 members. The process had two phases, an [application](#)<sup>1</sup> review that resulted in a recommendation and ultimately, final approval by the Commissioners Court.

Geographic distribution, ethnic representation and industry representation were key factors in selecting board members. The current geographic breakdown includes members from each of the precincts and includes 6 Hispanic members, 5 African American members and 1 White member. In addition to geographic and ethnic considerations, board members must:

- Be residents of Harris County
- Have a demonstrated interest in and commitment to serving the community
- Be able to contribute meaningful time and effort to achieving the purpose and objectives of the HCEWB
- Where possible, meet one or more of the following qualifications:
  - Have a demonstrated knowledge of or interest in advocating for protections on the job, including fair wages and benefits and workplace occupational safety and health for Essential Workers
  - Have a demonstrated knowledge of or interest in equitable and inclusive approaches to economic development and the socioeconomic, demographic, and environmental factors that affect the quality of life outcomes of Essential Workers
- Be low-income Essential Workers in Harris County, or have at least 12-months of previous experience as a low-income Essential Worker



The following industries are represented on the board - Construction, Domestic work/Home care, Education/Childcare, Grocery, Convenience, or Drug Store, Healthcare or Public Health, Janitorial, Airport/Transportation and Retail - with representation pending from the Food Services, Hospitality, or Leisure Services industry.

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<sup>1</sup> Applicants use the application to select the board(s) they would like to apply to. They can apply to more than one board using one application.

DEEO program manager Danielle Igbani shared, “as this was a new concept, one of the biggest challenges we had was recruiting. This resulted in an extended period but it was important to the board to have the right people participate. The board wanted to make sure they had a variety of candidates to pick from and that ultimately the makeup represented the community.” Recruitment was completed in July 2023, with the board’s final recommendation having just received approval by the Commissioners Court as of the drafting of this case study.

### **Building Board Capacity**

DEEO supports the board in setting operating norms and building capacity. They create a sense of ownership amongst board members, considering everything from the language members would use to describe the work to the color scheme, and creating empowering experiences so that board members felt comfortable asserting themselves in this new context. “The board exists because of them,” shared Igbani. “We wanted them to feel it was theirs, not ours. This meant thinking carefully about centering the goals of the board and as well as things like what colors were used on slides, trying hard to differentiate board materials from those of DEEO, so it truly felt different.”

DEEO also invested in practical support such as coordinating meeting space, training on the analysis of policy, rules of order, and public comment processes. [Meetings](#) are open to the public and agendas are available in advance of each session. Any public attendee that would like to make a public comment during the allotted time must register by 4 PM on the day before the meeting. Translation and interpretation support are provided. Board meetings are typically held during evening hours at times agreed upon by all members, thus reducing potential barriers for participation.

The board is now positioned to begin focusing on providing feedback and recommendations to DEEO and other appropriate county departments on county programs and policies that recognize and support essential workers. Board members will serve in an advisory capacity to the Commissioners Court on such programs and policies where appropriate. They will have a targeted focus on encouraging and supporting the development and implementation of programs and policies that protect communities, workers, and businesses during public health emergencies and other occupational safety and health hazards and supporting equitable solutions to achieving protections on the job, including fair wages and benefits and occupational safety and health for all essential workers.

### **Lessons Learned Along the Way**

While the board is still in an early stage, the agency has learned a great deal through this process.

#### **Lesson 1: People-centered design is critical**

Essential worker boards engage individuals who may never have served in this capacity before. To foster success, consider practical processes and supports to remove potential barriers such as digital literacy, technology access, a stipend and essential skills. Participants may also need

coaching on public speaking, meeting facilitation, negotiation, note taking, branding and diversity, equity, inclusion training and access considerations. Policy language, data, and even common board procedures may be unfamiliar and time should be allocated to ensure individuals feel both comfortable and empowered. Make sure to build in the necessary resources to provide extensive capacity building both as part of the onboarding process and over time as the board's needs evolve.

### **Lesson 2: Recruiting can be a time consuming process**

The recruitment processes in Harris County extend over 12 months. As the concept was new, it took time to ensure individuals understood what it was and how they could engage. This required many targeted outreach activities, individual conversations and follow up. While information was available online, recruiting for this type of entity is very much a personalized process that requires building trust, empowering people and demonstrating that their voice is valued. The work was too important to hurry through the process or make decisions based on an initial small applicant pool. It may take extra time, but board members felt extending the deadline, re-opening the application, and even extending personalized invitations were important to ensure the county had the right individuals for the job.

### **Lesson 3: Board makeup matters**

For a body such as an essential worker board to be trusted in the community, it is critical to ensure the makeup, in terms of geography, ethnicity, industry experience and other elements unique to the community, are representative of the local area. No two boards will be the same as every community has different considerations and needs. Neglecting to craft a set of requirements which protect the board's makeup can result in a board which lacks community support or is driven by a small set by special interests, undermining its purpose.

### **Vision for the Future**

The road ahead is all about action. Board members are starting to engage directly with policies. "Now that board members have recommended their final member to Commissioners Court, they are looking forward to providing feedback on specific policies, beginning with the Contractor Safety Record Policy," shared Igbani. "The work is nascent but we are very excited about the impact that it will have on future policy making."

### **Resources for Others Interested In Implementing Similar Work**

- [Essential Worker Board](#) - website with materials, background and contact information
- [Bylaws](#) - Essential Worker Board bylaws
- [Application](#) - board application form

### **Contact Information**

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