

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT THROUGH DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

How do we welcome everyone in Westmoreland County? How do people and businesses grow in our area where our population is declining?

These were the questions on the minds of the 112 attendees at our first Economic Development Through Diversity and Inclusion Conference held at the Fred Rogers Center. The group of invested individuals from local businesses and non-profits spent the morning looking at diversity, equity, and inclusion from a business and economic perspective.

Dr. Debasish Chakraborty, Dean of the School of Business at Seton Hill University, started the session with explaining what diversity means. It is not just about race and religion...it means capitalizing on varying life experiences. He explained that life experiences are what makes us unique and that individuals and businesses grow when we incorporate those unique perspectives into our daily lives. Simply put, "Diversity matters and it matters decisively". Dr. Chakraborty went on to explain that the "data is clear; The economics is clear". An increase in the consumer base means an increase in the workforce. An increase in workforce means stronger economic development. We need young people here to drive economics. Dr. Chakraborty presented statistics of studies and research that showed that companies lose trillions of dollars due to discrimination.

Panel speakers that represented businesses in our county discussed their take on how diversity drives business. Mike Storms, Director of Operations from Elliott Group, started off by saying "It's the right thing to do if you really want to be great!" Our panelist from Independence Health System, Michelle Lewis and Ellen Katter, piggybacked on that by stating that their mission to "deliver culturally sensitive care" has to be a standard that they don't deviate from. Ellen Whittingham, from Kennametal, reminded us that it comes down to employee engagement. She says "It can't just be structural; it has to be a behavior change." We don't just want to "check the box".

If you sat through the first two sessions of the morning and still didn't understand the importance of the topic, the last session of the day was one that allowed attendees to feel the results through the stories of our youth panel. Three young members of our community explained the lack of diversity in our area and why young people are departing. Lack of diversity in schools, lack of education about cultural differences, and absence of places for young people of diverse backgrounds to visit in our county were some of the concerns discussed. When asked what people and businesses can do to help the initiative, all three of the panelists agreed that becoming "culturally cognitive" through experiences and education is of utmost importance.

The May session dove into the "WHY" this is important. The hope is that the next session will dive deeper into the "HOW" to educate the community and "HOW" to accomplish incorporating these principals into one's personal and business practices.