

Spokane County Sheriff's Office

Cultural Audit

Final Report

October 2021

Eastern Washington University

Office for Diversity, Equity & Inclusion

Introduction, Background, and Purpose

The Spokane County Sheriff's Office (SCSO) and the Spokane branch of the NAACP engaged the services of Eastern Washington University (EWU) as auditors for a cultural audit of the SCSO, pursuant to the memorandum of understanding concluded between the SCSO and the Spokane NAACP in September 2019.

A cultural audit is meant to assess the climate of an organization or institution, offer an idea of the experience of working within it, and gauge the sentiments of its members or employees.

It seeks not only to identify written policies and procedures but to uncover unwritten policies, procedures, and norms that affect the day-to-day experience of the institution or organization's members. It then compares and contrasts the stated vision and goals of the organization with its actual practices to find areas of misalignment or dissonance and, when practicable, offers recommendations to remedy said misalignment.

A cultural audit functions as a snapshot of an organization at that moment in time. It is not a final judgment on the fundamental nature of the organization or the work it does, but rather how the organization is functioning in its current configuration.

EWU convened an audit committee comprised of 12 members, consisting of EWU faculty, staff, and community members.

Michael Reid was selected to be the lead auditor and cultural consultant for the project and worked in conjunction with the central audit committee, composed of Kimberlee Davis, Senior Director for Diversity and Inclusion, and Dr. Shari Clarke, Vice President for Diversity and Senior Diversity Officer.

Dr. Clarke sent a list of questions to the SCSO on September 22, 2020, in order to gain a general understanding of the structure of their organization, as well as their hiring practices and HR practices. The SCSO eventually responded that they were unsure of what the questions that Dr. Clarke had sent meant, citing differences in terminology between the HR departments of public universities and that of civil service employees, and were, therefore, unable to respond. Michael Reid called a face-to-face meeting with the SCSO, select members of which met with him, Kimberlee Davis, and Kurtis Robinson, then President of the Spokane NAACP, on October 21, 2020. At the end of the meeting, clarity appeared to have been achieved as to the intent of the questions that were asked, and indeed one of the members of the SCSO administrative team had come to the meeting prepared with documentation that addressed many of those very questions.

After the documentation was reviewed, the central audit committee met with the larger audit committee to determine the methodology for the survey. It was decided to conduct an anonymous survey via SurveyMonkey, with an option for any SCSO employee who so desired to contact Michael Reid to be interviewed individually. No employees asked to speak to Michael Reid or any member of the audit committee. The survey was shown to and approved by the institutional research board of EWU and was distributed in April 2021.

The original deadline was intended to be April 15th, 2021 but that deadline had to be extended two times because of the poor response rate on the part of SCSO.

The survey was formally concluded on May 31, 2021.

The demographics of the SCSO, per information given to us by the SCSO, at the time of the survey were as follows:

Total number of employees: 287

Male: 240

Female: 46

White: 263

Black: 2

Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander: 1

Hispanic/Latino: 7

Not specified: 7

Methodology

Demographic data for the SCSO was attainable from the HR data provided to the audit committee, but as there had been recent staff turnover, and to get a sense of how that data compared to our response rate, it was decided to conduct both a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the SCSO. A survey consisting of 48 open-ended and six non-open-ended questions was sent out to 258 staff of the SCSO, including all officers and administrative staff.

The survey was sent by Kimberlee Davis via SurveyMonkey to employees' work email. The survey data was accessible only to Michael Reid, Kimberlee Davis, and Dr. Shari Clarke. No members of the SCSO, up to and including the sheriff, had access to the data.

Of those 258, 42 responded, a response rate of 16.27 percent. In addition, not all respondents answered all questions, therefore the sample size per question may in some cases be smaller than the overall sample size.

All results gleaned from this survey must be considered in light of the fact the response rate to the survey was so low.

We suggest analyzing the results as follows:

As it will be exceedingly difficult to extract representative aggregate data from the results of the survey, responses should be viewed as representative not of the general culture of the SCSO, but of a group of employees, or individual employees, within the SCSO.

However, we are also obliged to note that the fact of *the low response rate in and of itself can function as a data point in this instance.*

There were delays, occasionally significant, on the part of both the audit committee and the SCSO during the process. Some of these delays were unavoidable. However, the extremely low response rate to the survey, and some of the reasons for it which were suggested, served not only to delay the process unnecessarily but also act as indications of the culture within the SCSO, which we will speak to in the section “Findings.” We recommend that a body with more investigative authority conduct a similar survey within the next year.

Findings

We have mentioned above that there was a very low response rate (16.27%) to the survey. In conversations with the Sheriff as well as in certain areas of the responses, the following reasons for this were suggested:

1. The survey was too long and/or the questions were too “wordy.” It was suggested that, at 54 questions, the survey was too long and the questions too involved. The audit committee was concerned with conducting a thorough and impartial survey, and did not feel that 54 questions was an inordinately large number, nor did we feel the questions as they were worded to be unreasonably long. Additionally, since a full 53.9% of respondents did not even open the survey, we find it difficult to attribute the low response to its structure.
2. The employees of the SCSO did not feel that we could be impartial due to what they felt was an antagonistic attitude on the part of the Spokane NAACP. We explained to the SCSO several times that the audit committee was independent from the Spokane NAACP and existed solely to conduct a cultural audit, and would report the conclusions of such faithfully and truthfully.
3. Employees of the SCSO felt that comments made by members of the Spokane NAACP in the media and on their personal social media accounts were antagonistic to their work. We have not been able to confirm any instances of such comments, particularly as the monitoring of the social media accounts of people uninvolved with the audit was outside our scope of work.

Themes

While the response rate was very low, some general themes emerged among those that did respond.

Paramilitary atmosphere.

Several respondents repeatedly used the word paramilitary to describe the culture of the SCSO. The culture is largely seen to be hierarchical, with strict adherence to a chain of command, though many respondents also pointed to an “open door” policy that allowed them to bring concerns to their superiors

at any moment. It is important to note that not all respondents who used the word paramilitary felt that it was necessarily a negative thing.

“Top-down” leadership.

Leadership was often described as being top-down. It was mentioned that those who speak out often regret it later. The word “dictatorial” was also used to describe the sheriff’s leadership style. One respondent described the leadership style as “servant leadership,” while another described it as “autocratic.”

Poor communication.

Several respondents said that communication was poor in the SCSO. What communication does go out seems to go out through roll calls and emails, but not all communication goes to all affected parties in a timely manner. One respondent said that communication about the internal workings of the SCSO was lacking, including those parts that allow high-performing individuals to not suffer consequences for small policy violations, eventually empowering them to commit larger policy violations.

Lack of agreement as to what diversity is and its importance.

In reviewing the responses, there were certain threads that became apparent about views toward diversity within the SCSO.

1. *Not diverse, but neither is Spokane.* This group felt that the department wasn’t particularly diverse, but that it may be representative of the county, since the county skews very heavily white.
2. *Not even as diverse as Spokane.* This group felt that the department skewed very heavily white, even when compared to the demographics of the county in general. Many of these respondents, even if offering a generally favorable comment, recognized the office’s need to do better.
3. *What is diversity?* Some responses indicated that respondents chose to interpret the question “How diverse is the Spokane County Sheriff’s Department? Is it representative of the population of Spokane County?” to mean something other than ethnic diversity and claimed that the department was diverse because different members had different worldviews.
4. *Why diversity?* It became clear that there was a section of the SCSO that didn’t believe that diversity was a particularly important goal for the SCSO to pursue, with some responses saying a focus on diversity would be divisive.

Culture of fear.

A significant minority of respondents indicated that a culture of fear pervades the SCSO. Examples included fear of retaliation for speaking out against offenses committed by co-workers either directly to the respondent or witnessed by the respondent, and fear of the power and influence of those in authority and those in their favor. Many of this subset of respondents identified what they framed as acts of

favoritism from higher-ranking members to those in lower ranks who were recognized as being in the same clique as the higher-ranking member.

Dichotomy of the Representations of the SCSO.

One overarching theme that kept appearing in the responses across questions was the idea, never articulated as such, but obvious when looking at the disparity in responses even with a small sample size, that there are functionally two sheriff’s offices.

One representation shows a well-run organization, not perfect but exceedingly open, communicative, and strictly adherent to policy (indeed, some responses seemed to be quoting the policy manual directly).

This represents a sheriff’s department where communication is clear and concise, ethical standards and practices are upheld almost uniformly and any deviation therefrom is dealt with swiftly and decisively, work-life balance is actively supported, and employees feel valued and respected.

There is, however, another representation of the SCSO. In this one, employees feel marginalized, disrespected, and devalued. Work is not distributed equally, there are established cliques and in-groups, and favorable treatment is dispensed to those who are either higher in rank or find themselves in the good graces of those higher in rank.

In the first SCSO, discrimination either does not exist, or is dealt with harshly and immediately. In the second SCSO discrimination not only exists, but leads to direct negative, even retaliatory treatment against those who experience or report it.

We’ve broken down this discrepancy into two columns in an attempt to show the conflicting nature of these “two SCSOs”

Organizational aspect	SCSO #1	SCSO #2
Communication	Open, clear, honest, at times lacking but always transparent, perhaps regimented.	Unclear, lacking, perhaps deliberately withholding.
Leadership	Regimented but open to ideas, clear, policy and law-based, empowering, “servant leadership.”	Capricious, hierarchical, hypocritical, vindictive, autocratic.
Inclusivity	Inclusive, open, strictly following law and policy, zero tolerance of discrimination.	Not inclusive and unconcerned about remedying that situation, discriminatory, retaliatory.
Appreciation	Appreciative, grateful, every member and their contributions are valued and acknowledged.	Ungrateful, unappreciative, employees are interchangeable and easily replaced, ideas are dismissed, only “favorites” get

		recognition, office is more concerned with public perception than employee well-being.
Work-life balance	Supportive, “family first,” boundaries are appropriate, work-life balance is fantastic.	Dependent entirely on supervisor, no balance or boundaries, short-staffed, personal phones are used as work phones, no internal support, those higher in rank do far less work than those lower in rank.

Recommendations

As mentioned elsewhere, due to the small sample size it is very difficult to draw conclusions, positive, negative, or neutral, about the culture of the Spokane County sheriff's office. The extremely small sample size does not lend itself to firm conclusions and to say otherwise would be misleading. That having been said, the nature of some of the comments that were received, plus the difficulties faced by the audit committee in obtaining cooperation and compliance from the SCSO, can be taken to be indicative of the culture of the office in broad terms. While it is apparent that at least some members of the SCSO feel quite comfortable and at home in the department, a non-zero percentage of employees feel not only quite the opposite, but, *in extremis*, feel actively threatened or marginalized. We do not have enough data to be able to ascertain whether the employees who feel that way are members of historically underrepresented groups, but given the nature of some of the comments it would not be surprising to find that being the case.

It is important for the Spokane County Sheriff's Office to humbly take these negative observations from employees seriously, and use that information as an opportunity to better serve the employees. The Spokane County Sheriff's Office should critically assess their processes and procedures, both spoken and unspoken, to ensure an environment that encourages authentic feedback from their employees. The Spokane County Sheriff's Office should devise a Diversity Strategic Plan with actionable items to create a culture of inclusion that educates all of their workforce and acknowledges the challenges their employees from underrepresented groups face inside and outside of work.