



## Chapter 2: Equity and Program Culture

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### Chapter Overview

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Explain why equity is at the center of JTED Programs.
- List the core values that serve as the program's foundation.
- Center the core values in your program's culture.
- Identify the relevant laws that support equity.

The [Job Training and Economic Development Act](#) (JTED) is focused on connecting local workforce needs with job training and placement for disadvantaged, low-wage, and low-skilled workers. This chapter will explore how workforce programs can foster an equity-focused program culture that empowers these customs to engage fully, develop professionally, and contribute to local economic development by responding to the workforce needs of local industries.

## Equity-focused Program Culture

**Culture** is a pattern of basic shared assumptions learned by a group (Schein, 2010). A program's culture, or program environment, is the pattern of beliefs, values, rituals, relationships, and practices shared by JTED grantees and their customers. Program culture is critical to effective service delivery and customer outcomes.

JETD employs an **equity-focused program culture** to support its targeted populations. The term **equity** is often used in conjunction with other terms like equality, belonging, or inclusion. Despite the colloquial use of these terms, equity has a specific definition relevant to JTED.

**Equity** recognizes that each person has different circumstances and that resources should be allocated relevant to those circumstances, to help create equal opportunities. This is different from **equality**, which requires each individual or group to be given the same resources, irrespective of their individual circumstances.

While the general principle of equality in workforce programs is well-intended, an equity-focused program culture is very different from an equality focus. Here are a few ways the two terms differ:

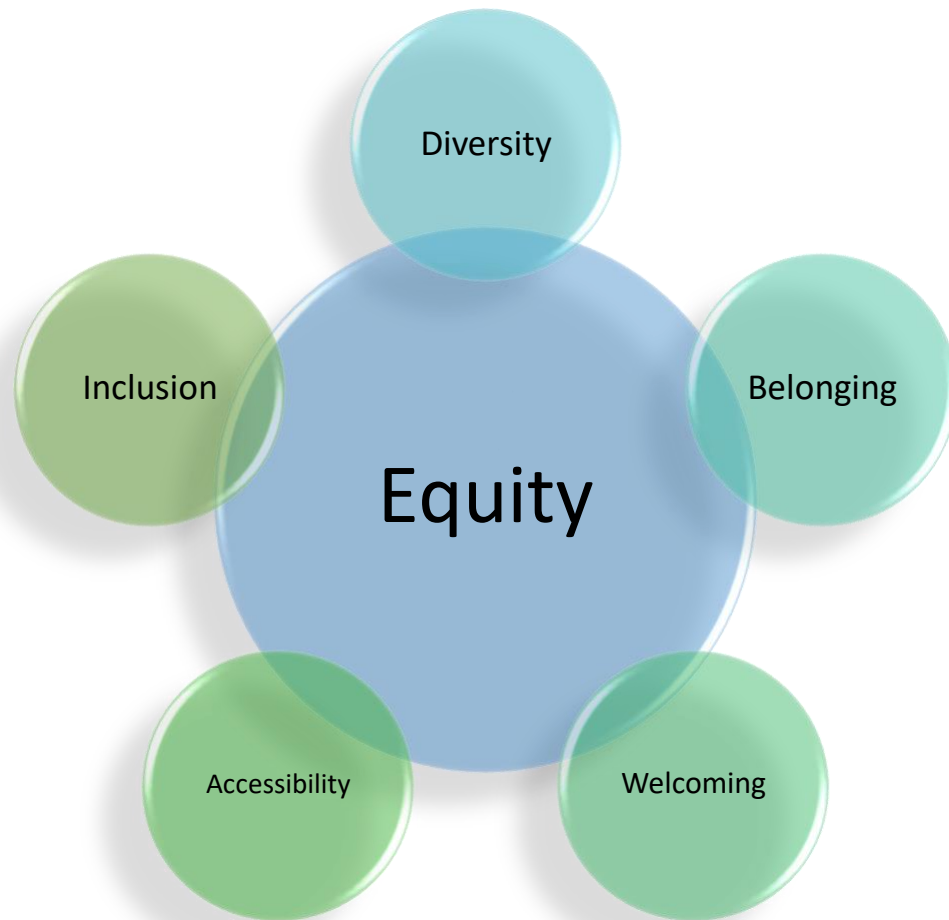
Equality	Equity
All customers have access to the same resources	Customers are provided with the resources they need to succeed
Assumes what is required to be successful	Does not make assumptions
Tells!	Asks!

Equity recognizes uneven playing fields and seeks to respond to individual needs, instead of providing blanket services to everyone irrespective of their current position, resources, or needs. Equity challenges us to **reduce barriers** (*i.e., barrier reduction services*) while supporting customers on their journey to self-sufficiency. Centering equity means eliminating barriers and leveling the playing field for disadvantaged and underserved groups.

## Defining Core Values

An equity-focused program culture works with the other core values; diversity, inclusion, welcoming, accessibility, and belonging. Welcoming others and making room for differences helps create a dynamic, creative, productive workplace and encourages a comfortable and enjoyable environment for all. Recognizing, embracing, and celebrating difference can foster a safe, supportive, and successful environment for disadvantaged and underserved groups<sup>[1]</sup> who have been and continue to experience discrimination. Programs that embrace an equity focused culture experience better outcome.<sup>[2]</sup>

Program **core values**<sup>[3]</sup> are the core ethics or standards the program is expected to abide by. They serve as a guiding light for program design, actions, and decision-making. They invite grantees to provide a



welcoming and inclusive environment that counters previous negative experiences of underserved groups in the workforce. Below, each of these values are defined.

**Diversity** means honoring the humanity of all people and valuing the unique contributions that different people bring to the table. Diversity includes all of the characteristics that make individuals and groups different. It recognizes everyone and every group as part of the diversity that must be valued. A broad definition includes not only race, ethnicity, and gender—the groups that most often come to mind when the term "diversity" is used—but also age, national origin, religion, disability, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, education, marital status, language, veteran status, and physical appearance. It also involves different ideas, perspectives, and values.

**Inclusion and Welcoming** requires authentically bringing disadvantaged and underserved individuals and/or groups into processes, activities, and decision-making in a way that shares power and influence. To be inclusive means more than having individuals or groups in the room; it means listening and allowing their input to impact decisions. Inclusive and welcoming environments ensure that people are respected and can fully participate and contribute. Organizations that are inclusive and welcoming, proactively leverage diverse perspectives within the group to impact policies, practices, and norms. Inclusive and

welcoming environments benefit everyone and pave the way for empathy, successful communication, and understanding.

**Accessibility** is the degree to which an environment, service, or product is understandable, meaningful, and useable by as many people as possible. The Illinois Department of Human Resources defines accessibility as the degree to which all people, including people with disabilities and people with limited English proficiency, can fully use or participate in services, facilities, and workspaces, as well as communicate effectively.

**Belonging** is the sense that you can bring your whole and authentic self to a group without fear of discrimination or estrangement. Feeling a sense of belonging means that your differences are acknowledged, celebrated, and valued. Belonging is about being able to contribute meaningfully to the group. Belonging has been linked to customer retention, completion, and overall reduction in program attrition.

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<sup>[1]</sup> White House Executive Order 13985 defines "underserved communities" as populations sharing a particular characteristic, as well as geographic communities, that have been systematically denied a full opportunity to participate in aspects of economic, social, and civic life. Namely, these are Black, Latino, and Indigenous and Native American persons, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and other persons of color; members of religious minorities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) persons; persons with disabilities; persons who live in rural areas; and persons otherwise adversely affected by persistent poverty or inequality.

Executive Order 14008 further defines "disadvantaged communities" as including but not limited to those that are, have, or are subject to low income, high and/or persistent poverty, high unemployment and underemployment, discrimination by government entities, linguistic isolation, high housing and transportation cost burdens, distressed neighborhoods, and low access to healthcare, among other adverse challenges.

<sup>[2]</sup> According to research by McKinsey & Company, gender and ethnic/cultural diversity continues to demonstrate a statistically significant correlation with financial performance. Diverse companies experience improved customer orientation, employee satisfaction, and decision-making. Companies performing at the highest levels of success have all developed inclusion and diversity strategies to which they were strongly committed (Hunt, Prince, Dixon-Fyle, & Yee, 2018).

Closing the gender gap in work could add up to \$28 trillion to the annual GDP by 2025 (Woetzel et al., 2015). Moreover, companies in the top quartile for ethnic and racial diversity at the management levels were 35% more likely to experience financial returns above their industry's average (Hunt et al., 2018).

<sup>[3]</sup> <https://www.racialequitytools.org/glossary>

## Professional Development around Equity

JTED recommends grantees integrate the core values into their program to help customers feel safe, participate fully, develop professionally, and reach their fullest potential. **All team members should receive training in each of these core values.**

While DCEO may provide basic equity training, it is the grantees' responsibility to ensure their staff is appropriately and comprehensively trained in these values. This may mean reaching out to an expert for additional professional development.

Below are a few resources to support additional staff training:

- [An Introduction to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion for All State Employees](#), developed by the Illinois Department of Human Rights.
- The [State Employee Participant Guide](#).
- Illinois State Board of Education: [Equity Information and Resources](#)
- Illinois Board of Higher Education: [Illinois Educational Attainment and Equity Dashboards](#).
- Equity in the Center: <https://www.racialequitytools.org/>
- Chicago Jobs Council resources library: <https://www.cjc.net/resources-library>

## How to Foster an Equitable Workforce Program Culture

A commitment to the core values means upholding them in all program elements. It means pursuing policies and practices to support all customers and team members. The questions below should be considered as grantees develop and deliver their program.

- How will an equity focus inform your program goals?
- How will you analyze the impacts of your program on all customers, including disadvantaged and underserved groups, such as persons with barriers due to their lack of education, job training, reliable housing and transportation, legal system involvement, or disability?
- How will you infuse diversity, inclusion and welcoming, accessibility, belonging, and equity into your program's culture?
- How will you avoid potential legal consequences by implementing a comprehensive anti-discrimination, harassment, and bullying policy and developing a reporting and routing process?
- How will you establish partnerships with culturally competent organizations and employers to deliver the program and promote customers' success?

## Empower for Resilience and Self-sufficiency

Program design and implementation must focus not just on program completion, but on helping customers develop the long-term skills that will allow them to build resilience, become self-sufficient, and secure a long-term career. JTED utilizes a human-centered program design with individualized service delivery that leads to upward mobility and quality jobs. Consider the following questions when designing your training program:

- How will the skills taught in each module prepare customers for long-term success in their careers?
- What skills or tools can the program provide to help ensure success in years 1-3+ of the customers' Exit?
- What certifications are offered to make customers marketable candidates for apprenticeships or employment?
- What life skills will customers develop to build resilience and self-sufficiency?
- How will your program provide individualized services, coaching support, and training to empower customers to succeed?
- How will you prioritize customers' future financial stability and economic security through skills training?

### Embrace Difference by Cultivating Cultural Competence

The core values of diversity, inclusion, welcoming, accessibility, and belonging mean more than meeting specific metrics. Staying true to the core values means ensuring that each customer feels that their humanity is honored. It means ensuring that customers feel that they belong in the program and the classroom, their voice is heard, and their differences and unique contributions are valued.

Embracing difference means developing **cultural competence** to effectively deliver program services for different groups of people. Cultural competence is key to embracing differences among racial and ethnic groups, gender identities, rural and urban communities, and other cultures. Cultural competence includes the following elements:

- **Cultural knowledge:** Having a basic understanding that there is diversity in cultures across the population.
- **Cultural awareness:** Being open to the idea of changing cultural attitudes.
- **Cultural humility:** Becoming self-aware of personal and cultural biases.
- **Cultural sensitivity:** Being sensitive to the significant cultural issues faced by others. Knowing that differences exist between cultures but not assigning values to those differences.

Grantees should provide professional development to help staff members develop, not just cultural knowledge and awareness, but also cultural humility and cultural competence when engaging with different groups of people.

Consider the following questions:

- How will the program build cultural competence among staff members?
- How will the program develop cultural humility among staff members?
- How will you encouraging self-reflection and a willingness to learn from others who are different?
- What steps is your program taking to ensure members of the target populations are present, and that their contributions and voices are heard?
- How is your program developing partnerships with culturally competent organizations?
- How is your program creating a sense of inclusion, welcoming, and belonging for people with differences?

- How is the program helping customers build self-confidence and self-efficacy in their differences, which will be valuable as they transition to full employment?

### Overcome Barriers

A cornerstone of the JTED program is to ensure **equitable access and opportunities** to historically underserved populations, specifically those who have been disadvantaged, are low-wage earners, and low-skilled workers. JTED focuses on building an environment that eliminates or reduces the impact of structural, individual, and situational barriers facing customers. There are many kinds of barriers that customers may face—some more challenging to address than others. Barriers can be multi-faceted and include **trauma, situational poverty, and multigenerational poverty**.

- **Trauma**, according to the Centers for Disease Control, is “a physical, cognitive, and emotional response caused by a traumatic event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced as harmful or life-threatening. Trauma can have lasting effects, particularly if untreated.” Trauma-informed care acknowledges that organizations need to have a full understanding of a customer’s life situation—past and present—to provide effective services. Trauma-informed service delivery recognizes trauma symptoms and responds with understanding and respect.
- **Situational poverty** is a period of being poor caused by situational factors, in contrast with generational poverty. Approaches to addressing situational poverty may include short-term solutions, such as providing money for transportation and childcare to address the unique situation.
- **Multigenerational poverty** is a form of entrenched poverty that can encompass multiple generations of a family. Black Americans are 41% more likely than whites to be in third-generation poverty. Approaches to multigenerational poverty are often very different than approaches to situational poverty. These approaches may be more long-term and multi-faceted and typically focus on system issues, and promoting access to education, skill development, and economic empowerment.

JTED grantees should acknowledge how trauma, as well as situational and multi-generational poverty, may impact a customer’s experience in the program and consider how their approaches to barrier reduction service delivery will address the multi-faceted challenges they may experience. Here are a few questions to consider.

- How is this program reducing barriers for customers in a way that addresses both short and long-term needs of people experiencing situational or multigenerational poverty?
- How does barrier reduction service delivery honor the humanity of each customer and consider their unique needs?
- What staff training is needed to deliver trauma-informed, culturally sensitive barrier reduction services?

### Build a Community of Collaboration

Successful learning is rooted in a safe, welcoming, and collaborative environment. JTED grantees must develop an environment that promotes respect for all customers and staff, practice active listening, and attend to the lived experiences of all customers.

- How are staff and customers taught to listen and collaborate empathetically?
- Are standards for communication defined and taught to customers and staff?
- Are staff and customers offered continued education and professional development on critical topics like trauma or gender-informed services?
- What mechanisms are in place that ensure customers and staff contributions are valued?

### Track Performance Measure

People and programs grow when goals are set, outcomes are measured, and programs are adjusted to promote further success or strengthen weak points. An equity focus should inform all aspects of this process. It is important to remember that goals and outcomes are intended to measure a program's impact and the difference it makes in customers' lives. Tracking and measuring outcomes will help grantees evaluate the extent to which the program is meeting its equity goals and values.

**Note:** See Chapter 1: Introduction, for more information about **performance goals** and **expectations**.

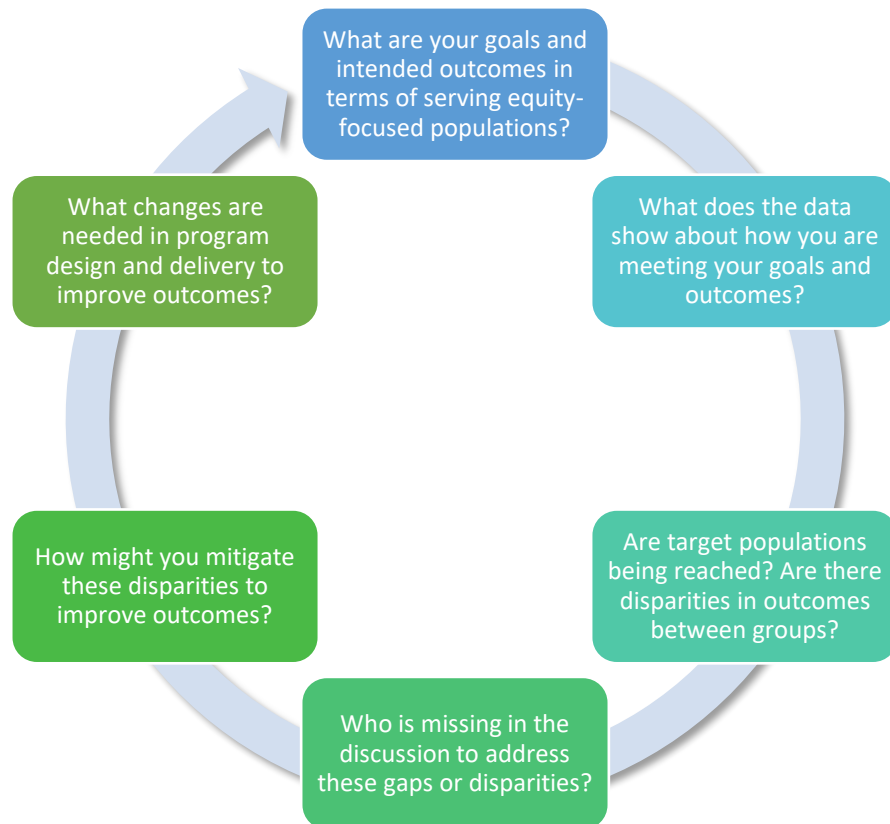
**"If there is not data, it did not happen."**

What do equitable goals and outcomes look like? JTED is focused on increasing opportunities for its targeted populations, communities, and industries. Equitable goals and outcomes focus on individuals who are unemployed, under-employed, and under-represented.

**Note:** See Chapter 1: Introduction, for more information about **targeted** and **priority populations**.

Tracking and measuring outcomes will help grantees evaluate the extent to which the program is meeting its goals. Measuring outcomes can be used to evaluate what is and is not working and identify any disparities in outcomes among different groups. Strategies can be adjusted to address these disparities. The diagram below shows how grantees can set goals and outcomes, track how outcomes are met, and adjust program design and delivery to ensure equitable outcomes.





JTED Grant Mangers, Program Managers, and Monitors will work with grantee to review their goals and outcomes, monitor progress, analyze the data to identify any equity concerns, and help develop strategies to address any disparities.

How will equitable outcomes be tracked and measured?

JTED requires and recommends several assessments, plans, and reports to help track and measure success. Equity should be embedded in all of these processes. Here are a few examples of how equitable outcomes could be measured and evaluated in the program.

Equity question	Tracked and measured by . . .
Is the program reaching target populations, communities, and industries?	Targets will be tracked in the Reporting System. Grantees will enter participation, completion, and placement metrics into the Reporting System.
Is the program inclusive of people of different races, ethnicities, genders, abilities, and cultures?	Grantees will enter demographic information for all customers in the Reporting System.
Do customers feel included and welcomed in the program?	Customers may be asked to complete surveys and/or exit interviews.
Is the program providing services to remove barriers to completion and success?	The Reporting System will track service needs and service delivery. Data will be analyzed to see how these barrier reduction services are associated with customer outcomes.
Are customers provided with the skills they need to build a career and succeed?	The Reporting System will track long-term outcomes. Grantees will collect information about placement, retention, and gather feedback from employers and customers.
Are program materials, curriculum, and services accessible?	Curriculum will be reviewed by the Grant Managers, Program Managers, and Monitors to ensure that curriculum and services are accessible. Custom outreach materials developed by the grantee will be reviewed by the Grant Manager.

## Equity Values in Action

The recommendations below apply to the above questions and should provide Program Administrators with specific guidance about how to center equity in their processes. Many of these recommendations apply across one or more program components. Remember, to be truly equity-focused, the principles must be applied to both staff and customers.

### Policies, Procedures, and Processes

1. Develop a set of written policies, procedures, and processes for your organization that address the core values.
2. Ensure all policies, procedures, and processes are in writing and aligned with the core values. These must be used as a reference to ensure that you follow your intentions and can also be used for accountability.
3. In each program discussion, ask what equity value considerations need to be addressed. Consider appointing someone to advocate for the core values in discussions until this becomes a habit and equity is embedded in your program.

4. Develop a conflict resolution policy. These topics can sometimes get complicated. Expect that people may get offended, and you may offend, even if unintentional. Have ways to recover from such events in a constructive, team-centered way.
5. Consider forming an equity-focus team with representation from staff and customers to assess performance, respond to concerns, and make recommendations for improvement.
6. Listen fully to customer feedback regarding their experiences, even if you have observed the situation differently.
7. Identify concrete metrics for measuring and continuously improving diversity, inclusion and welcoming, accessibility, belonging, and equity.

**Note:** *The development of organizational policies, procedures, and processes require specific subject matter expertise. If this expertise does not exist within your organization, consider contracting with a qualified consultant to provide support.*

### Staffing

1. Ensure ALL program staff are trained in diversity, inclusion and welcoming, accessibility, belonging, and equity. Explain why this is important. Work to gain buy-in from all staff.
2. Recruit staff, especially mentors and coaches, from target communities who share or have similar experiences with potential customers.
3. Ensure ALL program staff behaviors align with the core values and practices.

### Recruitment

1. Make sure that external-facing materials (online and in print) show people who are diverse and representative of the populations you are serving.
2. Ensure program rules, guidelines, and policies do not inadvertently marginalize a group (for instance, “you must be able to lift 100 pounds to apply for the program”).
3. Make all program requirements easily accessible.
4. Actively outreach to your targeted populations, communities, and industries. Refrain from expecting them to just show up if they have historically been underrepresented. Leverage trusted partners, including staff from similar backgrounds and community leaders.
5. Nurture the program’s existing diversity. Word of mouth is a very powerful tool.

### Intake

1. Ensure access to barrier reduction services are equitable by going through the [needs assessment](#) and [intake questionnaire](#) thoroughly. Invite them to identify what additional supports they need to be successful.
2. Take the time to learn who the customers are and how they self-identify.
3. Identify and leverage strengths in diverse customers and build on those strengths. Consciously acknowledge all sexes, genders, and ethnicities. Positively affirm contributions and inquire about relevant personal experiences.
4. Use supportive communication that frames customers as future members of a professional community, not just a customer in a program. This is especially important for customers who belong to groups that have historically been underrepresented in the workforce.

5. Validate customers' self-worth, inherent ability, and creativity to help counter "imposter syndrome" and respond positively and affirmatively to their internal questions, "Am I supposed to be here?" "Do I fit in here?" "Can I be successful here?" "Do I belong here?"

### Training

1. Encourage customers to incorporate their current knowledge and utilize their lived experiences and expertise to achieve personal success.
2. Recognize, welcome, and elevate customers contributions in the classroom, worksite, and program environment.
3. Develop genuine and quality relationships between and among all levels of staff and program customers. Encourage mutual trust.
4. Show customers how their cultural values, current knowledge, and experiences are transferable and reflected in the workforce.
5. Intentionally communicate positive cultural and social messages regarding their career choice in the workforce and emphasize the value of customers' contributions to the industry.
6. Be willing to discuss and address difficult/taboo topics to find equitable solutions. Acknowledge in the curriculum, among staff, and on worksites, the environmental and historical factors that impact underrepresented groups.
7. Minimize/eliminate exclusionary practices within the learning environment and on worksites (for example, inequities, negatively singled out individuals, overlooking or ignoring certain individuals, verbally insulting or marginalizing membership in certain groups, or otherwise discounting the value of specific characteristics).
8. Provide additional instruction, coaching, and mentoring as needed to help customers be successful.
9. Explicitly express a commitment to equity in training sessions, instructional materials, curricula, physical spaces, online and print materials (for example, posters and website), and most critically, in practice! This commitment must include the representation of diverse cultures through language, heritage, historical contributions, and current thought leaders.
10. Equitably provide opportunities for learning and growth to help customers develop skills, confidence, and leadership. Certain groups must not be inadvertently singled out (for example, choosing a male to serve as a team leader for all group projects).
11. Tell relatable stories during training. People respond when they feel that their instruction relates to their lives and what they are experiencing.
12. Ensure customers receive both positive and constructive (not negative) feedback. Move beyond mere compliments (i.e., "well done"); share what the customers did well or should have done differently to improve their performance.
13. Provide customers with multiple ways to demonstrate knowledge and skills. Not all forms of learning and means of assessment have been a significant part of everyone's educational background.

### Employer Relationships and Follow-Up Services

1. Assist customers in applying for jobs, helping them frame their unique and sometimes unconventional experiences (for example, volunteer work, creative endeavors, compensated and uncompensated services like lawn care and babysitting) as assets in the job market.

2. Develop relationships with businesses that reflect the diversity of the customers you are serving.
3. Identify mentors in the relevant industries who are from the targeted populations, communities, and industries (such as program alumni) who have shared or similar experiences with potential customers.
4. Provide customers with multiple ways to demonstrate knowledge and skills. Not all forms of learning and means of assessment have been a significant part of everyone's educational background.
5. Proactively work with employers to advocate for fair hiring practices and supportive work environments. If there are policies or practices that are standing in the way of customers getting hired, encourage employers to adjust their practices. Help them see the value in hiring JTED's customers who have completed their training programs.
6. Maintain clear lines of communication with employers to facilitate follow-up and encourage retention after hire. Be clear about your expectations for a supportive work environment and discuss how you can continue to support the customer after they have been hired.

(Conrad, A., Fitzpatrick, K., & Jarr, K.,2020)

## Compliance with Laws that Support Equity

Because JTED programs serve people from different backgrounds, grantees will need to establish policies and practices that ensure that everyone is treated with dignity, decency, and respect. This will include cultivating an environment that is free of discrimination, harassment, bullying, or other emotional or physical harm.

- Discrimination is bias or prejudice resulting in denial of opportunity or unfair treatment when hiring, creating, or applying policies, training, promoting, firing, or laying off employees, or in any other terms and conditions of employment or program participation.
- Harassment can be a wide range of unwelcomed and offensive behaviors. They usually are repetitive but do not have to be.
- Bullying is a persistent pattern of mistreatment from others in the workplace/training environment that causes either physical or emotional harm. It can include such tactics as verbal, nonverbal, psychological, or physical abuse and humiliation.

There are a number of federal laws that protect people from harassment and discrimination. These include:

- **The Equal Pay Act of 1963.** This Act is a United States labor law amending the Fair Labor Standards Act. This Act abolishes wage disparity based on sex. [Read more](#). (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d.)
- **Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.** This Act prohibits discrimination in employment based on race, color, sex, religion, or national origin. [Read more](#). (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d.)
- **Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972.** No person in the United States, based on sex, should be excluded from participating in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to

discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance. [Read more.](#)

- **Illinois Human Rights Act.** State law that prohibits discrimination concerning age (40+), ancestry, arrest record, citizenship status, color, conviction record, disability (physical and mental, familial status, gender identity, marital status, military status, national origin, orders of protection, pregnancy, race, religion, retaliation, sex, sexual harassment, sexual orientation, unfavorable military discharge. [Read more.](#)
- **Americans with Disabilities Act (1990).** This Act prohibits discrimination against physically or mentally challenged people who can perform the job's essential functions. It also requires employers to offer reasonable accommodations to enable those workers to do their jobs. [Read more.](#) (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990).

Grantees are expected to develop policies and practices that demonstrate a commitment to these laws. This may include requiring staff to receive training on these laws, developing and implementing fair labor policies, posting guidelines for professional conduct on sites, ensuring facilities are ADA accessible, and more.

As a part of compliance with these laws, all grantees must have an Anti-discrimination, Harassment, and Bullying Policy in place.

Despite efforts to create a welcoming and inclusive environment, there may still be instances of discrimination, harassment, or bullying among staff and customers. These instances must be proactively addressed in compliance with your Anti-Discrimination, Harassment, and Bullying Policy.

Remember that compliance with these laws and policies will help to demonstrate your commitment to equity and ensure that staff and customers are treated with dignity, decency, and respect.

## Additional resources

Online Equity Resources:

- [An Introduction to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion for All State Employees](#), developed by the Illinois Department of Human Rights.
- Illinois State Board of Education [Equity Information and Resources](#)
- Illinois Board of Higher Education [Illinois Educational Attainment and Equity Dashboards](#).
- Equity in the Center: <https://www.racialequitytools.org/>
- Chicago Jobs Council resources library: <https://www.cjc.net/resources-library>

Resources in the Partner Guide:

- Discrimination, Harassment, and Bullying Policy Template
- Checklist for Addressing Discrimination, Harassment, Bullying Complaints
- Discrimination, Harassment, and Bullying Complaint Form