

## **Our Thoughts on Diversity Fatigue**

In May of 2006, the Denver Center for Crime Victim's Expanding Nonprofit Inclusiveness Initiative (ENII) Committee had their monthly grant meeting to discuss the incorporation of inclusiveness into the blueprint of our agency. During that meeting, one ENII Committee member brought up the issue of "diversity fatigue"—a concern that had been discussed at a local meeting she had recently attended. Although many of the committee members had never heard the term "diversity fatigue," the topic generated much emotional discussion: some members were outraged at the implication that people could be fatigued by diversity initiatives, while others—particularly our members of color—expressed that they commonly feel fatigued at having to constantly educate people about topics such as historical racism, diversity and multiculturalism. Because the topic provoked so much discussion and so much emotion, the committee members decided that it would benefit the committee, as well as other organizations participating in ENII, to write up their thoughts on the issue. This paper summarizes those write-ups.

### **What is Diversity Fatigue?**

Two initial questions asked by committee members when the term "diversity fatigue" was brought up were "what is it?" or "what does it mean?" Though we knew that Webster's defines "fatigue" as "exhaustion and lack of energy from doing something too long," and we even found a definition of the actual term "diversity fatigue" from an on-line dictionary, which defines it as "a form of mental exhaustion brought on by the constant attention required to ensure a workforce or other group is racially or ethnically diverse,"<sup>1</sup> we asked the questions "what is it?" or "what does it mean?" more to understand the implications of such a term. What do employers *mean* when they say that

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<sup>1</sup> Quote taken from Wordspy found at [www.wordspy.com/words/diversityfatigue/asp](http://www.wordspy.com/words/diversityfatigue/asp).

they are suffering from diversity fatigue? Here are some of the responses we received from our committee members in trying to understand what diversity fatigue is and what it means:

1. One member wrote, “diversity fatigue indicates that an effort has been made for an extended period of time to focus on diversity and the company and/or staff is worn out from the attempts, which probably have ended in repeated failure.”
2. Another member wrote that “diversity fatigue” is probably “the exhaustion of diversity from repeated non-effective attention.”
3. A third member wrote in her paper that diversity fatigue “sounds to me like a term coined to describe the frustration that people of color have whenever someone brings up diversity issues.” She goes on to write, “people of color have traditionally been the people who are called on to defend the rights of people who have been marginalized, such as immigrants.”
4. Yet another member wrote that perhaps people “feel fatigue when they have to participate in learning about others—they don’t buy into being open to learning about others and tend not to be inclusive in their work or private life because they feel they are treated inclusively.”
5. A fifth member of our committee wrote, “diversity fatigue is the feeling of being overwhelmed and dragged down by a responsibility to educate others about diversity and multiculturalism.”
6. And another member simply wrote that the term demonstrated that racism is alive and well in the United States in 2007.

## What Are the Implications of the Term Diversity Fatigue?

Sadly, upon researching the topic, the authors of this paper found that the term was coined in an article in *The New York Times* written in 1998, which discussed the American Society of Newspaper Editors' decision to scale back their long-term goal of increasing racial and ethnic diversity in newsrooms in order to reflect the populations they are serving.<sup>2</sup> In other words, diversity fatigue was used by white members of the Board of the American Society of Newspaper Editors to end diversity initiatives aimed at increasing the numbers of people of color in the field of journalism. It appears that it was just too difficult to promote inclusiveness and diversity in the field of journalism. Though our committee members drafted their responses before discovering the original *New York Times* article, their responses intuit that the term reflects a backlash against the idea of equality in numbers—in other words, their responses intuit that there is a backlash against the idea that equality begins by creating environments where those employed (or allowed to participate) reflect the community of people that they are serving. The following are various responses from committee members:

1. “The phrase reminds me of compassion fatigue. In the nonprofit sector, compassion fatigue was a buzz phrase for many years; a fuzzy way of indicating burnout. When someone tries to save the world on a daily basis, they will find themselves quickly fatigued from the constant failures of a misdirected goal. The question is, with compassion fatigue, do you give up or do you re-energize and re-focus your attempts on a more reasonable and achievable goal? Diversity fatigue is taking a pass on a responsibility you just don't want to face anymore. It is a phrase to use if you are consistently taking the wrong approach.”

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<sup>2</sup> New York Times: “Editors Debate: Realism vs. Retreat in Newsroom Diversity.” April 3, 1998.

2. “When I initially heard the term, I was reminded of a recent conversation with colleagues about the use or mis-use of ‘diversity.’ It was described as a meaningless word because of its over use and the lack of real action associated [with] it. I feel as though diversity committees or diversity trainings are so common that people have grown tired of superficially addressing how their organization or company can grow to value and reflect diversity. That superficial effort never really led to established practices or modified perspectives and was whittled down to a once-a-year training or celebration. I felt as though the term was used by those disinterested in putting forth the effort to participate in and promote ‘diversity’ because it felt like yet another layer [of] training as opposed to being used as a development technique and whose effects didn’t seem to make any real impact because true issues went un-addressed or avoided because they were too heavy or complicated.”
3. “I have observed people feeling diversity fatigue when their beliefs or culture were not honored equally in a specific situation (or ever acknowledged). I have observed, from another angle, that I have experienced diversity fatigue when I see the retail market honor a special population during certain times of the year, but don’t practice inclusive hiring methods honoring special populations, or train employees [in] cultural differences to better serve their customer.”
4. “The new concept of diversity fatigue makes me feel like diversity trainings are not reaching the core or deep feelings inside individuals. I believe some diversity training or conferences are being held just for the sake of holding them and the ability for organizations to say they are ‘supporters of diversity.’ At the same time

I feel some individuals who participate in these trainings and/or conferences are either obligated to attend or attend for the reason of perception.”

5. “Individuals who are diversity fatigued either are not in agreement with the ideas behind diversity and/or do not care about diversity or the ideas behind. There may also be some individuals who do believe in diversity but are taking the wrong approach in learning more and/or teaching about diversity which leads into repetitive diversity trainings/conference[s] that are not successful in outcome. Trainings and conferences that discuss the same basic issues that do not touch the deep issues behind inclusiveness which includes diversity and how to approach sensitive issues.”
6. “The only thing such a term tells me is that the people who never actually bought into the benefits of diversity are tired of pretending that they did. I think the term reflects the atmosphere of today’s regressionary political environment. Everywhere I look—on television, radio, classrooms—I see signs that racism is alive, and prospering, here in the United States.”

## **Conclusion**

As one of our members writes: “but who can be worn out by diversity efforts?” Is this not a privileged position to say, We’re fatigued so we’re not trying anymore? Would a company say they are fatigued trying to make money or trying to bring in more customers? If a business were struggling with money problems, they would work day and night to refocus their strategies to get their bottom line looking good. *Fatigue should be temporary. It must be addressed by looking again at what you are trying to accomplish, what tactics are being used, what has worked and not worked, and ways you can be re-*

*energized toward achieving realistic goals.* Fatigue, in these authors' opinions, should not be an excuse to just give up and quit trying. The issue of workforce inclusiveness is just too important.

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