

REALITY CHECK

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION AT WORK

Ambivalence in Maryland Echoes Across the Nation

Last of a series

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It was two decades ago that eight black workers filed a federal complaint over segregated locker rooms and washrooms at a parks maintenance building in Chevy Chase. Job postings were tacked up in the whites-only area.

The building itself was later torn down and an affirmative action program started. But the consequences of the segregated facilities still echo through the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, a sprawling government agency with dozens of work sites and nearly 2,000 employees in Montgomery and Prince George's counties.

Those same echoes are reverberating across the

country. A national survey sponsored by The Washington Post, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University found that Americans are deeply ambivalent about programs from affirmative action to diversity training that are designed to achieve equal opportunity for all races.

In California, the issue boiled up this year when Gov. Pete Wilson (R) sued his own state government to get rid of goals for awarding a certain percentage of construction contracts to firms owned by minorities and women. Montgomery County has grappled with affirmative action, too, when parents of minority children protested restrictions on transfers among public schools. Boston is facing a lawsuit by a white student

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challenging race-based admissions to the city's most prestigious public high school.

The poll found that people's views on affirmative action often are tied up with their core beliefs about the existence of discrimination and the causes of minorities' economic and social problems.

A plurality of 44 percent say they think affirmative action is a "good thing," with African Americans more enthusiastic than whites. Asians and Latinos fall in between. The country also is divided on the value of integration. Blacks and whites surveyed are about evenly split on whether it's acceptable for the races to live, work and go to school separately, if opportunities are equal. Asians and Latinos, however, favor integration more strongly.

Yet most people are not frozen at the ends of the spectrum. A majority of all races, according to the poll, believe that the issue of whites unfairly losing out on jobs to minorities is less important than that of minorities facing discrimination.

At the park and planning agency, an affirmative action hiring program has brought broad changes but not racial tranquillity. Black employees picketed agency headquarters last year, and the commission's own poll of its employees found significant differences in how whites and blacks view the workplace.

The once-segregated rooms at Meadowbrook Yard in Chevy Chase remain a litmus test for views on discrimination and its prevalence. Are the rooms a shameful symbol of a past that has given way to the new integrated workplace? Or are they part of a pattern that took many years to create and will take many years to erase?

Perceptions differ even on the same basic set of facts.

When Harry Neff, who is white, was hired as a Prince George's planner in 1965, he had only one black professional colleague, a man he considered overqualified for the job he held. Eventually, though, his office diversified—smoothly, he thought.

"Once you were there, you were there," said Neff, who is 64 and retired. "It didn't matter who you were."

But minorities didn't always see it that way.

Albert Wang, who came to work in 1969 in another part of the Prince George's planning office, has less pleasant memories.

"When I first started my job, I could hardly talk to white people," said Wang, who was born in Taiwan. "I felt very lonely, because people treated me like an alien. They never experienced anyone with a foreign accent."

At park and planning, as elsewhere in the country, where one stands depends on what one sees. The Post/Kaiser/Harvard poll found that most people who believe racism is a "big problem" in the country think affirmative action is a good thing. Among those who think racism is a small or nonexistent problem, more people think affirmative action is a bad thing, although not a majority.

For Elizabeth M. Hewlett, 40, a New York-born lawyer who heads the planning board in Prince George's County, the segregated facilities at Meadowbrook are seared into her racial memory as an African American. She also brings her personal experience to the table.

She was the first black student in her high school class, and she entered law school as doors were opening to minorities. She is the first woman and first African American to hold her job. She's seen prejudice diminish, but not disappear, making the point that she's been stopped on the road by the police several times in other parts of the country "without any reason."

"All of those incidents have made me see—as plain as the hand in front of my face—the need for affirmative action," she said.

The perception of racism often divides along racial and ethnic lines. Most blacks, and a plurality of Latinos, surveyed say they believe racism is a "big problem" in society today. Whites and Asians are more inclined to say it is "somewhat of a problem."

For Wang, who is 54, "I don't feel the discrimination I did in the '70s and '60s. Now it's much more open, and people are used to the minorities in the government service."

Affirmative action helped create a more comfortable work environment for Wang, and now he has mixed feelings about it. It has made things better, but it also highlights troublesome racial divisions, he said. With only a small pool of black planners to draw from, recruiting is tough, and jobs often have to be kept open for months in hopes of drawing qualified minority applicants, he said.

"We should recruit more blacks, but there are practical difficulties in getting competent black planners on the staff," he said. "I'm all for [affirmative action], but it's time to reevaluate it."

If the affirmative action program went away, some people don't think much would change because of the agency's strong commitment to hire minorities.

"I think it would change somewhat, but not radically," said Myron Goldberg, who was a divi-

sion chief in Montgomery County's parks department before retiring two years ago. One reason, he said: "I personally don't think there is discrimination for the most part."

Hewlett's experience tells her otherwise. If affirmative action goals were withdrawn, "I think [discrimination] would bounce back partly to what it was," she said. "We've covered a lot of ground. To a certain extent, it would come to a standstill."

The agency's work force has changed dramatically since the 1970s. Now, a third of its employees are members of minority groups, up from one-quarter in the 1980s. Some of its most visible leaders are African American. Only 27 percent of recent hires are "non-minority" men, but the commission still has not met all its hiring goals.

Affirmative action does not stop at the door of the personnel office. Many employers, including park and planning, have begun matching new employees of all colors with experienced ones to learn the unwritten rules of the workplace. They've sponsored "diversity training" workshops intended to help people from different races or cultures work together.

One reason for those workshops is that there is a gulf in how the races view each other, even to the root causes of racial inequality. African Americans

believe that the biggest reason for the inequality between blacks and whites, is discrimination, according to the poll. The major reason cited in the survey by most whites for African American problems: break-up of the black family.

At the park and planning agency, the workshops are voluntary, except for managers.

"There are people out there who are not necessarily biased . . . but who feel the constant talk is an intrusion," said Robert Marriott, who was Montgomery County planning chief from 1991 until June. "They felt they were being labeled. . . I don't know whether we did the right thing or not. We tried not to create a crisis, because that can be self-fulfilling."



BY JUANA ARIAS—THE WASHINGTON POST

Phil Seibel, left, James Henry Cowling and Paul D. Young, maintenance workers for the Montgomery County parks department, relax at the site of the formerly segregated Meadowbrook facility.

To supporters' dismay, much of the national debate on affirmative action lately has hinged on concerns that whites have been hurt by it.

The Post/Kaiser/Harvard poll showed that most whites believe discrimination against minorities is a bigger problem than whites losing out on jobs "due to unfair preferences in hiring or promotion." But a substantial minority of whites—37 percent—believe that unfair preferences are a bigger problem than discrimination.

Regina McNeill has gotten phone calls from some of those frustrated white employees, but she has little patience with them. A member of the Prince George's County Planning Board, McNeill, who is white, recalls with bitterness her own experience as a New York telephone company employee in the 1960s, training men for jobs she was not allowed to hold.

"People feel like: 'I've served here 34 years and I didn't get that promotion,'" she said, her voice mocking the whine of an aggrieved employee. "Some of those who screamed the loudest were the least qualified."

Goldberg, though, thinks affirmative action can create pressure to lower standards.

"I have always been a believer that the most qualified person should be hired," he said. "When there is an attempt to ensure that the person is a minority over a non-minority, no matter what the qualifications are, that disturbs me."

Affirmative action, he said, "has the potential of creating that situation."

Hewlett said the agency doesn't hire unqualified minorities but agreed that the aggressive hiring program has led to some racial tensions.

"There are problems here and there," Hewlett said. "I don't want to close my eyes to them. I'd like people to be comfortable and proud of their differences so that no one feels ostracized in any way.

"I've been in situations where I've felt different," she said, "and it's not comfortable."

**LEROY PLOWDEN, 29, AFRICAN AMERICAN
ROOFER, PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY**

"We're able to do anything, any

job, like anybody else. Life

gives you lemons—make

lemonade."

**JOEL JOHNSON, 53, WHITE
TRADE ASSOCIATION EXECUTIVE,
ALEXANDRIA**

"I see blacks who made it on their

own. I see others who blame the

system for everything. And

somewhere in between

is the truth."

LOCAL VOICES

DICK BUSHWAY, 46, WHITE
FEDERAL WORKER, LOUDOUN COUNTY

**“There are a lot of [minority]
people out there who want to do
good and, if given opportunities,
can do good. Government has
a role to play.”**

JEAN LEE, 71, ASIAN AMERICAN RETIRED
DIETITIAN, NORTHERN VIRGINIA

**“We didn’t have affirmative action
when I was young, and we didn’t
seem to suffer. I am impatient with
people who cry, ‘It’s not fair.’
People make their own luck.”**