

Meeting Minutes:

Cultural and Ethnic Communities Leadership Council

Date: February 20, 2026

Minutes prepared by: DHS Community Relations Staff

Location: Webex and International Institute of Minnesota (Hybrid)

Attendance

- **CECLC Members:** Alex Abraha, Lolita Davis Carter, Julie Churcher, Chris Green, Chris Guy, Tonia Lofton, Dr. Richard Oni, Farhia Said, Wayne Somes, Nelly Torori, Shawn Sorrell, Paul Slack, Micaela Schuneman, Kiora Matthews
- **State Agency Staff:** Adrien Carretero, Nate Carter, Assistant Commissioner De Anna Conover, Angie DeLille, Shelly Diaz, Tamir Elnabarawy, Deputy Commissioner Nikki Farago, Helen Ghebre, Alyssa Hawks, Sophia Mai, Ashley Oolman, Shavana Talbert, Haile Tegegne, Steven Wilson, Crate Darden,
- **Public Attendees:** Abebe Dashew, Foua-Choua Khang, Mai Thor, Alfred Solis, Pa Chua Vang, Jo Dee

Agenda:

- 12:00 **Lunch & Community Networking / Webex Opens**
- 1:00 **Open Public Meeting and Land Acknowledgement**
- 1:05 **Introductions, Welcome & Check-in Activity [Breakout Sessions]**
 - Introduce new community members and guests
 - How have you lived one of the Guiding Principles this week?
- 1:20 **Review and Approve Meeting Agenda and Minutes**
- 1:25 **Community Celebrations & Shout Outs; Community Connections & Resources**
- 1:30 **DHS Updates: Deputy Commissioner Nikki Farago Farewell Remarks & Transition**
- 1:40 **Federal Updates: Tamir Elnabarawy, DHS Federal Relations Director**
- 2:00 **DHS Transitions: DeAnna Conover, Assistant Commissioner for Office of Employee Culture**
- 2:30 **Break**
- 2:50 **Workgroup Updates & Priorities**
 - **Equitable Outcomes Workgroup - Alex**
 - Desired Outcome #1
 - Desired Outcome #2
 - **Topics and Issues Workgroup**
 - Desired Outcome #3 (ongoing)
 - CECLC Community Outreach Strategy
 - **Legislative Workgroup**
 - Desired Outcome #3

4:00

Adjourn Full Council Meeting

Welcome, Land Acknowledgement, and Introductions

Alex Abraha called the meeting to order, and Chris Green read a land acknowledgement.

Abraha led meeting participants in introductions and initiated breakout sessions.

Decisions Made

Review and approve January minutes and February meeting agenda:

- Motion to approve meeting agenda and December minutes: Alex Abraha
- Second: Micaela Schuneman
- The motion passed

Community Celebrations and Shoutouts

Alex Abraha opened the floor for members to share.

- Many community members are experiencing stress, fear and grief due to current events.
 - The Council's commitment to antiracism requires naming the actions and policies that are jeopardizing the safety of community members.
 - It is important to recognize the ways that communities are demonstrating resilience by organizing against these actions and caring for each other to foster safety and belonging.
- CECLC members are invited to attend State of Minnesota Tribal State Relations Training; Helen Ghebre or Lola Muhammad can provide information about complimentary registration for upcoming sessions.
- Event: [100 Black Men of the Twin Cities Solidarity Breakfast Tickets, Friday, Feb 27 from 8 am to 10 am](#)
- CECLC members are encouraged to consider how to expand the Council's engagement efforts with organizations and individuals in the community and share suggestions with the Council.
- This will help further the DHS and CECLC goal of sharing resources and information as widely as possible.
- Wayne Somes, DHS Tribal Relations Specialist Lead, discussed his work teaching Ojibwe language and encouraged CECLC members to attend public Ojibwe cultural events and celebrations in their local areas.

DHS Updates

- DHS Deputy Commissioner Nikki Farago announced her departure from DHS and shared remarks about her appreciation for the work of the CECLC and DHS staff.
- Farago presented certificates of appreciation to Chris Green and Shawn Sorrell for their service as outgoing CECLC Co-Chairs.

Federal Updates

Tamir Elnabarawy, DHS Director of Federal Relations, shared federal updates.

- The federal Department of Health and Human Services was funded through October 1, 2026, in a recent appropriations bill.
 - The bill included increases to funding for several programs: Mental Health Block Grant; Substance Use Prevention, Treatment, and Recovery Services Block Grant; State Opioid Response grants; ACL family caregiver programs; HCBS and senior nutrition.
 - There was level funding for adult protective services and aging grants to states.
 - The bill decreased funding for refugee assistance by \$1.6 billion.
- The Presidential FY27 budget request has not yet been released; it is typically released in late February.
 - Budget requests are not legally binding; they kick off the appropriations process by outlining the administration's budget priorities.
 - The FY26 budget request proposed consolidating several HHS functions into a new Administration for a Healthy America and eliminating funding for refugee support, transitional / medical services, and CSBG.
 - The FY26 budget request proposed consolidating several functions into a new Behavioral Health Innovation Block Grant and the replacement of the Commodity Supplemental Food Program with MAHA Food Boxes.
- In March, federal appropriators will begin crafting bills for FY27.
 - In the period leading up to this, appropriators often look to constituents for input on what to include in appropriations.
 - CECLC is encouraged to discuss appropriation needs for Minnesota communities and share input with both federal and state legislators.
 - Elnabarawy offered to meet with a CECLC workgroup as needed to discuss priorities.
 - There may be potential opportunities for earmarks for mental health and/or substance abuse programs; the submission deadline for requests is generally March 31.
 - Submission instructions have not yet been released.
 - Both political parties have begun meeting to discuss legislative priorities, and health care continues to be a focus of both parties.
 - There has been increased focus on the possibility of passing another reconciliation bill, which would likely focus on health care.
 - There is currently no reconciliation bill in development, and there are differing views within the U.S. House, Senate and Executive Branch.
 - There will likely be more clarity within the next month regarding whether a reconciliation bill will be proposed.

DHS Transitions

DHS Assistant Commissioner of Employee Culture De Anna Conover shared updates on DHS organizational structure and ongoing efforts to strengthen diverse talent attraction and retention strategies.

- Ashley Oolman has returned to DHS after serving in the Governor's Office as the Chief Inclusion Officer and will serve within the Office of Employee Culture as Director of Innovation and Impact.
- The DHS Office of Equity and Inclusion has been integrated into the Office of Employee Culture, with the goals of strengthening alignments, eliminating silos and ensuring that culture, equity and engagement work moves forward in a coordinated and sustainable way.
- DHS is currently engaged in significant executive leadership hiring, and has developed strategies for attracting and retaining strong diverse talent in leadership.
 - Conover would like to find opportunities to partner with the CECLC on hiring strategies and welcomes referrals from CECLC members for open positions.
 - The DHS Diversity Recruiting team is working to operationalize these talent attraction and retention strategies.
 - DHS is working to develop more robust networking capabilities through existing employees to identify candidates for leadership positions.
 - There will be many appointed leadership positions for the incoming governor to fill after the current administration ends in December 2026.
- DHS Behavioral Health Administration Contracts Coordinator Alissa Hawks discussed the RFP for Grantees to Access Technical Assistance Navigating Culturally Specific Substance Use and Recovery Programs.
 - Funding for these grants was appropriated during the 2023 legislative session with the goal of addressing some of the barriers experienced by programs which provide culturally specific and responsive care by investing in their capacity to access state resources.
 - \$4 million in funding is available for up to 15 grants; grant contracts will run from July 1, 2026, through June 30, 2027.
 - Eligible applicants must have state or federal recognition as a formal organization or entity (business or nonprofit); apply with a fiscal sponsor; or be a Tribal Nation.
 - Responders must be located within MN or a county bordering on MN and must conduct grant activities within MN.
 - Responders must meet the definition of a culturally specific or culturally responsive SUD services program as defined in MN Statute section 254B.01 subdivision 4a.
 - Three categories of activities are allowable under the terms of the grant:
 - Licensure, MHCP Enrollment and Rate Enhancement
 - Grant Writing and Management (only for programs with annual operating budgets under \$1 million)
 - Technical Assistance and Training
 - Providing direct services is not an allowable activity under the terms of the grant.
 - Grantees will be required to participate in an orientation session and monitoring visit, submit a mid-project and a final report, and complete financial reconciliation.
 - Proposals must be submitted through the online grant management portal by March 12, 2026.
 - Information about the grant and answers to questions that have been received are posted on [DHS's website](#).

Workgroup Updates

- Abraha discussed the importance of CECLC members joining and actively participating in one of the workgroups, as well as serving as a workgroup co-lead on a rotating basis.
- CECLC Co-Chairs and DHS Community Relations staff are available to connect with CECLC members to discuss their roles as Council members, how to prioritize the issues that are important to them, and how to make the most of the Council's opportunities to influence DHS.

Equitable Outcomes Workgroup

- For desired outcome 1, most of the 30-day tasks have been completed, including a retreat review with DHS leadership and the CECLC Co-Chairs to confirm alignment.
 - Within desired outcome 1, the workgroup is considering how to establish an equitable accountability system that ensures eligibility, access, and consistent delivery of housing and health care services across all populations (particularly communities experiencing disparities).
 - The workgroup needs to gain a greater understanding of Medicaid and Medicare accountability, particularly due to recent federal changes.
 - DHS staff are focused on bringing external engagement into this analysis.
 - Efforts around prepayment review and revalidation of providers are significantly impacting DHS resources and small providers.
 - Service recipients will receive communication asking whether they actual received services as stated by providers.
- For desired outcome 2, some of the 30-day tasks are still being identified, and more work needs to be done mapping the current state of DHS equity directors and defining the accountability piece of this outcome.
- A goal of this desired outcome is to increase equity-based funding by 40% by 2026.
 - There is concern that current budget cuts will widen existing disparities and weaken community trust.
- The desired outcomes for this workgroup were developed during the fall 2025 CECLC retreat.

Topics and Issues Workgroup

- Desired outcome 3 is for DHS to expand appropriate and culturally relevant outreach and education efforts to improve program eligibility awareness and responsiveness to policy changes.
- The workgroup received a presentation regarding National CLAS Standards (Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Service Standards) and how to advance health equity, improve quality and help eliminate health care disparities.
 - The presentation focused on furthering these goals by recruiting, promoting, and supporting culturally and linguistically diverse leadership that are responsive to affected populations.
 - It is also important to coach the organization's workforce on an ongoing basis about culturally and linguistically appropriate practices.

- There is an implementation guide for the national standards for culturally and linguistically appropriate services in health care. [National Standards for Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services \(CLAS\) in Health and Health Care](#)

Legislative and Policy Workgroup

- There are openings for one permanent and one interim co-lead for this workgroup.
- The goals of the Legislative and Policy workgroup include learning about issues that are relevant to state legislation, how to ask the right questions, and how to engage in advocacy to ensure the state serves communities in the best possible ways and understands the impact of their actions on communities.
- This workgroup is supporting the Topics and Issues workgroup in their efforts around desired outcome 3, as certain aspects of this desired outcome may require focusing on legislative advocacy.
- CECLC members are invited to join a legislative meeting on April 9, 2026.
- This workgroup is connecting with DHS around effective outreach strategies for different communities.

Meeting adjourned at 3:44 PM