

A Good Neighbor

An Interview with Sonya Robinson, MSM, CLU, Vice President and Chief Diversity Officer, State Farm

EDITORS' NOTES Sonya Robinson assumed her current responsibilities in 2023 and oversees efforts to drive more diversity, inclusion, and belonging as a core talent and business imperative at State Farm. She began her career as an Auto claim representative with State Farm immediately following college in 1992 before becoming a Fire claim representative the next year. Her first opportunity in Agency came in 1995, as an agency field specialist in Hickory, North Carolina.



Sonya Robinson

Fueled by her desire to help customers, in 1999 she became one of the first State Farm agents to open an emerging market agency in Charlotte, North Carolina, where she provided insurance and financial products to underserved multi-cultural communities. Over the next decade, Robinson held various Agency field leadership roles culminating in her appointment as Area Vice President in 2015 where she was responsible for the strategic vision and profitable growth across 12 states. Robinson earned a bachelor's degree in Political Science and Criminal Justice from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and her CLU designation (2010). In 2015, she earned her MSM from the American College. She is currently pursuing an Executive MBA at W.P. Carey School of Business - Arizona State University. Robinson serves on the State Farm Federal Political Action Committee Board; the Phoenix Teach for America Board; Elon Universities' Black Life Advisory Council; and, most recently, the newly established State Farm Diversity & Inclusion Governance Council. She is also a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Inc., the Phoenix Urban League, and The Links, Incorporated.

COMPANY BRIEF For 100 years, the mission of State Farm (statefarm.com) has been and continues to be to help people manage the risks of everyday life, recover from the unexpected, and realize their dreams. State Farm and its affiliates are the largest providers of auto and home insurance in the United States. Its more than 19,400 agents and over 60,000 employees serve over 87 million policies and accounts – which includes auto, fire, life, health, commercial policies and financial services accounts. Commercial auto insurance, along with coverage for renters,

business owners, boats and motorcycles, is available. State Farm Mutual Automobile Insurance Company is the parent of the State Farm family of companies. State Farm is ranked #42 on the 2022 Fortune 500 list of largest companies.

How do you define the role of Chief Diversity Officer and how important is it for the role to be engaged in business strategy?

As I see it, the CDO role is not about the person in the role. I am a vehicle to help further create a workplace known for inclusiveness, opportunity, and personal development where everyone can thrive and do their best work. D&I at State Farm is bigger than any one of us – it's about all of us.

D&I is a business imperative – it does not exist separate of the business and is a critical piece of our business success.

Will you provide an overview of State Farm's diversity and inclusion strategy?

We embrace diversity and inclusion because it's simply the right thing to do. It's also critical to our business. D&I better positions us to provide remarkable service to our customers; attract, engage and retain employees; and grow State Farm.

One of the things we are trying to accomplish as a company is to advance our level of diversity and inclusion maturity by working toward these goals:

- Embed diversity and inclusion into all aspects of the business
- Promote workforce diversity at all levels
- Model organizational inclusion in everything we do

Our approach to D&I has evolved over the years and it brings together representatives from across the organization and is an industry-leading best in practice.

In 2020, we added the Diversity and Inclusion Governance Council to our structure. This Governance Council focuses on our overall strategy and results, and infuses increased leadership accountability into our overall diversity and inclusion structure.

We are members of the CEO Action for Diversity & Inclusion coalition, and our CEO joined other CEOs in a commitment to advance diversity and inclusion within the workplace.

How engrained is diversity and inclusion in State Farm's culture and values?

Diversity and inclusion is not new for us. The office of Diversity & Inclusion has been around for more than two decades.

Our Diversity & Inclusion Framework includes four core components: Workplace, Marketplace, Community, and Supplier Diversity. This framework is built on our Good Neighbor philosophy. Conducting our business like a good neighbor is central to everything we do. It is the unifying principle by which we demonstrate that we value relationships – within the workplace and marketplace, across the communities in which we live and work,

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and with the diverse suppliers and customers with whom we do business.

In 2020, we formalized the position of Chief Diversity Officer. It's a role I am honored and privileged to have as I help the organization demonstrate that good neighbor spirit both within our walls and throughout the country.

How important is it for State Farm to build a diverse workforce that mirrors the diversity of the communities it serves?

We are an organization of over 60,000 employees and 19,400 independent contractor agents – so it is critical. Our people have a wide range of ideas, perspectives, backgrounds, and skills which not only makes State Farm stronger – it also builds trust, respect, and understanding with the people we serve.

How do you engage your employees in State Farm's diversity efforts?

Everyone at State Farm has the responsibility to exemplify inclusive behavior in every relationship. Whether at work, in the community, or with our customers and diverse suppliers. We strive to make the world a better place.

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Last year, we shared an expectation that all employees and leaders have a diversity and inclusion performance goal. We did this to emphasize individual responsibility and accountability towards achieving a diverse and inclusive environment. Simply put, we want to build a greater sense of belonging for all employees and to do that, we have several ways we engage with our people.

First, we have 12 employee resource groups (ERGs) that represent multiple demographic groups. Over 20 percent of employees are a member of an ERG, and we've seen a 30 percent increase in ERG membership over the past year. Our ERGs are top notch – I am a member of three ERGs. They serve as valuable resources to help an employee grow and develop and are another way to be involved in leadership.

Our ERGs have also helped us have conversations with our people. Over the last

several years, people have carried tremendous burdens – they've had to learn a new way of working and navigate a pandemic all while seeing societal changes. Everyone has an experience in society that shapes who they are and when we can help others understand those realities – we all become better.

We also lean into ERG Incubators which bring together a diverse group of people to share ideas and perspectives to help in our business.

We've launched a series of employee videos called “Stories Worth Sharing” that allow people to learn from and understand the lived experiences of others. We also have ongoing dialogue with employees on various challenging topics through what we're calling “Conversations Worth Having.”

We have also better equipped leaders so they can engage in meaningful conversations with their teams as a way to strengthen connections and relationships. There is an on-going expectation for our leaders to continue to encourage employees within their departments to use the D&I tools and resources available to them and to continue open dialogue.

Is it critical to have metrics in place to track the impact of State Farm's diversity and inclusion efforts?

Yes, metrics are important – they are something “tangible” that illustrates our progress or identifies a gap we might have as an organization. I think of them as mile-markers. They help guide us, letting us know how close or how far away we are from achieving a goal.

But it's more than metrics. It's also hearing personally from people around the organization and in our communities about how they are or were individually impacted in a positive way as a result of our intention steps to help people be their best.

How valuable has it been to have the commitment of State Farm's senior management in its diversity and inclusion efforts?

One of the first things I did when I was named CDO was set up time – one-on-one and in small groups – with senior leaders at State Farm. I've been overwhelmed by the passion they have, personally and professionally, for D&I. Their support is critical not only

to advance the work, but to demonstrate to all leaders and employees that diversity and inclusion is a priority for State Farm.

Do you feel that there are strong opportunities for women in leadership roles in the industry?

I do, but there is room for more representation – for women as a whole and, in particular, for women of color. We each have a role in helping remove barriers so more women have a seat at the table.

Women leaders don't start in the C-suite, and when I think about my career journey, I think about the importance of connectivity. When I first started out, I thought if you just keep your head down and get results, someone will tap you on the shoulder and give you a promotion. I learned that's not how it works. Results are table stakes. To get noticed, you have to do more – you have to connect, you have to raise your hand for tough projects, and you have to constantly think about how to make yourself competitive. I think men just do this naturally. It's so important for women and minorities to be intentional in their strategy.

But I think there are several things we can do to help bolster that talent pipeline. If you see someone who is demonstrating leadership in their role, connect with them. Talk about their career goals and aspirations and offer to help them. Connect them with people who can help their business experience, someone who can help build their personal brand and excel in their current role.

I would also suggest that simply because a woman is not in a formal leadership role, she is not a leader. Quite the contrary – some of the most influential women in my life did not have a “manager” title. The strongest women I know are in my family. One of my grandmothers was a teacher and one of my grandmothers worked in the school cafeteria. They were influential in their community and they were influential in their church because people respected them, and they had a followership. That's leadership. We can all be leaders, no matter our role or title.

I am the result of a community of women who demonstrated through their actions how empathy, support, and strength can make others better.

When we create and nurture inclusive environments, people – women – feel empowered to not only be themselves, but they'll be more open to sharing perspectives and their experiences. Then, everyone wins.

You have spent over 30 years at State Farm. What has made the experience so special for you?

Easy – it's our people. I have the privilege of being part of a very special organization. We're there for people in their best and worst moments and everyone at State Farm works together with a common purpose of lifting others up.

Throughout my career, there have been so many people who have supported and encouraged me to step out of my comfort zone and be who I am today. Their confidence in me and my leadership has given me the courage to achieve goals I never thought possible when I started at State Farm. ●