



The Future of Blood Donation: Why Diversifying the Donor Base Matters and How Every Organization Can Start

Original Session at ADRP Annual Conference 2026

Original Speakers: May Dobbins & Erica Newhard, Vitalant

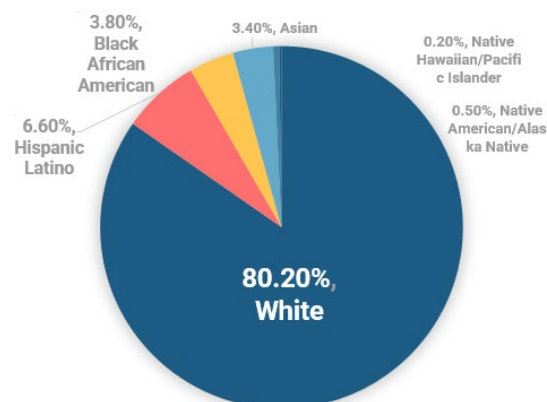
Introduction

Imagine a patient with sickle cell disease waiting for a transfusion — not just any blood, but closely matched blood. Now consider that 80% of the current donor base is white, while the patients who most urgently need genetically compatible donations are disproportionately from communities vastly underrepresented in that pool. This isn't a future crisis. It's today's reality.

At the 2026 ADRP Annual Conference in Minneapolis, Vitalant's May Dobbins, Sr. Corporate Director of Belonging & HR Transformation, and Erica Newhard, Sr. Director of Marketing, delivered a compelling case: donor base diversity isn't just an equity initiative — it's a sustainability imperative.

The numbers tell a sobering story. As traditional donor segments shrink and patient populations grow more diverse, organizations that fail to broaden their outreach are essentially building on a crumbling foundation. Vitalant's own journey — from pre-2020 localized efforts through their nationally scaled Strength of Us campaign — demonstrates what intentional, culturally grounded strategy looks like in practice.

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The donor demographic breakdown pie chart (80% white, 6.6% Hispanic/Latino, 3.8% Black/African American) — a striking visual that anchors the urgency of the conversation.





The Strength of Us campaign is particularly instructive. Rather than generic outreach, it frames blood donation as an act of community resilience within the Black/African American community, drawing on shared cultural identity and language. It's sophisticated, authentic, and — critically — it works precisely because it was built with the community, not simply directed at it.

Strength of Us Campaign

But Dobbins and Newhard were equally emphatic about an often-overlooked truth: external authenticity begins internally. Organizations cannot credibly engage underrepresented communities if their own culture doesn't reflect belonging. Employee Resource Groups, listening sessions, and culturally responsive staff training aren't HR niceties — they're the infrastructure that makes community trust possible.



- Unifies and inspires Black donors through shared strength
- Frames blood donation as community resilience
- "Us" signals shared Black identity and experience
- Reinforces community ownership and empathy
- Culturally affirmed through music like Kendrick Lamar's "Not Like Us" and clothing brand "For Us, By Us"

For ADRP members wondering where to begin, the presenters offered a refreshingly pragmatic framework: start small, be intentional, and start now. Audit your website's language. Review whether your marketing imagery reflects the communities you serve. Partner with trusted local advisors. Launch Spanish-language content. Identify one action deployable within 30 days.

The path to a more resilient, equitable blood supply doesn't require a massive budget — it requires commitment, consistency, and the courage to ask hard questions about who your donor base currently serves and who it's leaving behind.

The future of blood donation depends on all of us expanding the definition of "us."

