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# Public Education and Partnership

## Commission Initiatives to Build Welcoming Communities and Combat Racism and Discrimination in Alberta

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While the majority of adults responding to a survey in Alberta reported that they felt that human rights are well protected in the province,<sup>1</sup> we know that others feel excluded, marginalized, experience discrimination and are not able to fully contribute (Cooper and Bartlett 2006). There is growing diversity in Alberta communities and human rights issues are becoming increasingly complex. Resolving and settling human rights complaints is one important pillar of the work of a human rights commission. As, or arguably more important, is the work done through education and in the community to address these issues. Just as understanding and collaboration around prevention issues are the stepping stones to creating workplaces that are free of injury, they are key to creating organizations and communities that are free of discrimination, welcoming to immigrants and members of diverse groups, and where everyone feels that they belong.

This article provides an overview of some of the educational programs and partnership initiatives that the Alberta Human Rights and Citizenship Commission<sup>2</sup> has undertaken with the goal of fostering equality, reducing discrimination and helping to build welcoming and inclusive communities and workplaces for all Albertans. Its programs go beyond education about human rights law, to include working with communities, organizations and other partners

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<sup>1</sup> In 2006-07, 88.1% of respondents reported that they believed human rights were well protected in Alberta (Alberta Finance and Enterprise 2008: 69).

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<sup>2</sup> The Alberta Human Rights and Citizenship Commission is an independent commission of the Government of Alberta reporting through the Ministry of Culture and Community Spirit. Its mandate is to foster equality and reduce discrimination. It provides public information and education programs, and helps Albertans resolve human rights complaints. The Commission undertakes educational and community initiatives with financial support from Alberta's Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Education Fund. The Education Fund provides financial assistance to organizations and public institutions, and to the Commission, for educational initiatives that foster equality, promote fairness and encourage inclusion in the community, and support the reduction of discrimination and barriers to full participation in society for all Albertans.

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on initiatives that advance the goal of full civic engagement.<sup>3</sup> It does so within a community development framework that is reflected in community input, involvement, cooperation and collaboration that are characteristic of many of its programs and initiatives. These initiatives are also informed by the “pathways to change” model that is being used by an increasing number of equality-seeking organizations in Alberta to guide their work in developing outcome-oriented projects and strategies to effect positive changes leading to full civic engagement (Cooper 2007).

Because of the continuing high volume of employment-related inquiries and complaints, and because of the significant percentage of complainants citing discrimination on the grounds of disability and gender, as well as race, colour, ancestry and place of origin,<sup>4</sup> much of the Commission's educational efforts are focused on strategies designed to reduce discrimination in employment and build respectful and inclusive workplaces. A 2002 survey of over 560 Alberta employers (Howard Research and Instructional Systems Inc. 2002) showed that while employers believed respecting human rights was good for business, they wanted to learn more about the legal responsibilities for human rights, how to resolve human rights complaints within their own organizations and which strategies help build more inclusive workplaces. These findings led the Commission to expand its program of educational resources to include more comprehensive and in-depth resources on topics identified through the survey.

<sup>3</sup> Cooper (2007: 1) defines “full civic engagement” to mean “that groups and individuals, regardless of their membership in a diversity group, fully participate in, benefit from, and exercise influence in all aspects of society without encountering discrimination, racism, or other barriers, either discrete or system.”

<sup>4</sup> In 2007-2008, 82% of complaints opened cited section 7, the area of employment practices, and 16% of the grounds cited involved race, colour, ancestry, and place of origin (Alberta Human Rights and Citizenship Commission 2008).

Topics addressed have included the duty to accommodate, human rights in the hospitality industry, and resolving human rights issues through mediation in the workplace.

Accessibility is an important consideration for human rights commissions. One recent initiative supports adults that have traditionally been difficult to reach: adults whose English literacy skills are weak, including immigrants and adults for whom English is a second language. In partnership with Alberta Advanced Education and an advisory group drawn from the community, the Commission produced a newspaper-style publication called *Human Rights in Alberta* that explains the protection offered under Alberta's human rights legislation, and the work of the Commission. It features plain language, photo-stories and art to help make the information easy to understand for all Albertans, irrespective of their literacy level. This is the first publication of its kind on this topic in Canada, that we are aware of. An accompanying guide for teachers and tutors includes suggestions for discussion topics, references to related resources on human rights, and reading and writing exercises to use with students. An audio version has also been produced so that individuals can listen as they read along. Sixty thousand copies of the publication have been distributed among settlement agencies, ESL programs, literacy programs and other community organizations and programs across the province. As others have become aware of the publication and its easy-to-read and attractive format, it has found new audiences outside of those for whom it was designed.

To support organizations in building respectful and inclusive workplaces, the Commission offers a series of six workshop modules on key human rights topics, a program and curriculum that other commissions have looked to as a model. Every year, approximately 3,000 Albertans from a wide range of organizations participate in about 100 different workshops, each customized to their needs. Non-profit organizations that offer programs to immigrant professionals in

order to prepare them to find jobs in their area of expertise are using the program to help educate them about human rights in Alberta workplaces. Partnerships have been developed with a number of large employers to support their efforts to create inclusive work environments, by offering multiple sessions so that all of their staff members can participate. Presentations at post-secondary institutions have helped prepare students entering the workforce. In addition to customized workshops, the Commission also consults with organizations that are developing human rights and inclusion policies.

In order to publicly recognize the work that some employers are doing in building inclusive and respectful workplaces, and to encourage others to do the same, the Commission has partnered with the Alberta Chambers of Commerce in their Alberta Business Awards of Distinction program. Each year, the Commission-sponsored Diversity Leadership Award of Distinction recognizes and honours organizations that embrace diversity in their workforce, encourage respect and inclusion, and work toward eliminating discrimination and barriers to employment. Recipients of this award have included a broad range of organizations, including large oil companies, a small hotel, a post-secondary educational institution and a community-based not-for-profit agency. Showcasing the award finalists and recipients demonstrates the positive impact of diverse and inclusive work environments on attracting and retaining employees, on increasing customer satisfaction and enhancing corporate citizenship.

### **Working with the Coalition of Municipalities Against Racism and Discrimination**

Because racism and discrimination occur in tangible ways in communities where people live and work, the Commission is working with local governments and other partners to align efforts through the Coalition of Municipalities Against Racism and Discrimination (CMARD). The Commission serves on the Canadian Commission for UNESCO's pan-Canadian working group that developed and launched CMARD, the Canadian version of UNESCO's International Coalition of Cities Against Racism. The Alberta Commission was one of the partners and organizers of the coalition's national launch in June 2007 at the Federation of Canadian Municipalities Conference in Calgary.

The Commission has championed and promoted CMARD to potential member municipalities, partners and community organizations involved in combating racism and discrimination from its inception. The Commission has developed an Alberta version of a CMARD information booklet that outlines the ten common commitments and sample actions that municipalities can initiate, provides a model declaration for municipalities to sign when they join the coalition, outlines the legal human rights framework that provides the foundation for CMARD, and explains how municipalities and other organizations and individuals can become involved.

Six Alberta municipalities are currently members of CMARD, the largest number of municipalities that have joined in any of the Western provinces (Brooks, Calgary, Drayton Valley, Edmonton, Lethbridge and the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo) and are making real progress in developing action plans to combat racism and discrimination in their communities. Other municipalities have indicated their interest in joining. The Alberta Urban Municipalities Association (AUMA), the umbrella organization for urban municipalities in Alberta, has endorsed the coalition, and has created a "Welcoming and Inclusive Communities Toolkit" to assist its members in developing strategies to advance their work in this area. Members and partners also participated in a capacity-building session organized by the Commission, in partnership with the Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies (Toronto) and the Simon Wiesenthal Center Museum of Tolerance (Los Angeles).

To improve communication and coordination among all three orders of government and other organizations that are involved in attracting and retaining newcomers to Alberta and combating racism and discrimination, the Commission, the province and the AUMA have launched a three-year "Welcoming and Inclusive Communities" (WIC) partnership. This innovative partnership will establish networks to exchange knowledge and ideas, identify needed tools and resources, and support collaboration across issues and regions. It will include communication and outreach to promote WIC initiatives and resources, serve as a source of information and support for municipalities as they implement their own plans, and encourage municipalities to become more welcoming and inclusive and join

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CMARD. Finally, it will evaluate the progress and outcomes of these efforts.

### **Other initiatives**

Recognizing the potential of television to reach new larger audiences, the Commission partnered with Global TV Alberta and other partners to develop a media-based social marketing initiative that encourages individual Albertans to think about how they could make a difference in building welcoming and inclusive communities. The “Help Make a Difference” initiative consists of a series of 60-second and 30-second public service announcements (PSAs) featuring Albertans from diverse backgrounds speaking about their experiences and perspectives of diversity and human rights. They have had a wide reach among television viewers across Alberta. A Website<sup>5</sup> provides more information about the initiative, offers resources such as a DVD and a complementary teacher’s guide, enables visitors to view the PSAs and learn about steps they can take to build stronger intercultural relations within their own communities. Qualitative research with focus groups including immigrant adults and youth has shown how meaningful these PSAs are to members of ethnoculturally and linguistically diverse communities. This initiative has been a model for other commissions considering how to reach larger audiences.

Understanding the importance of reaching out to youth, the Commission has partnered with educators from other human rights commissions across Canada to develop an interactive, Web-based educational initiative to engage young Canadians in learning and dialogue about human rights to mark the 60th anniversary of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. The initiative offers information about contemporary human rights issues, the work of human rights commissions, the legislative frameworks underlying human rights, practical ideas for youth wanting to promote and protect human rights, and interactive features such as dis-

cussion boards, an online art gallery, and calls to action. The initiative was developed in collaboration with the youth-interest organization TakingITGlobal, which operates an online youth forum, and the Edmonton-based John Humphrey Centre for Peace and Human Rights. The Alberta Commission is proud to have led the committee that developed this initiative.

Because of the intersection of different grounds in discrimination, initiatives that are not specifically targeted to immigrants or members of diverse ethnocultural communities can still be effective in addressing persistent patterns of inequality that affect members of these groups. Mental and physical disabilities make up approximately half of the grounds cited in human rights complaints in Alberta, and affect members of all ethnocultural communities. To support the full participation of students with disabilities in post-secondary education and student life, the Commission partnered with a group of Alberta post-secondary institutions, disability service providers, disability advocates, and students with disabilities to develop a publication called *Accommodating Students with Disabilities in Post-Secondary Institutions* to address their needs for information. This resource is now in widespread use in post-secondary institutions in Alberta, and according to an evaluation of users, it has been helpful in increasing knowledge about the law, influencing students to seek accommodation, raising institutions’ awareness about the duty to accommodate students with disabilities, and supporting policy change within post-secondary institutions.

The Commission has collaborated with provincial departments or other governments to partner with them to produce publications or to provide input into their publications. One very popular publication resulted from a three-way partnership between the Commission, the provincial employment ministry, and the federal government, to provide a “one-window” resource for Albertans looking for information about the impact of pregnancy and adoption on employment benefits and entitlements, and the human rights

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<sup>5</sup> <[www.helpmakeadifference.com](http://www.helpmakeadifference.com)>.

implications of which many are not aware. *Becoming a Parent* has served as a model for partners in at least two other jurisdictions who have adapted it for their own audiences. The Commission has provided input into Alberta Employment and Immigration's publications on diversity and skilled workers, and rights and responsibilities in Alberta workplaces.

The Commission's Website<sup>6</sup> is a key information channel, supporting individual visitors wanting to learn about human rights in Alberta, as well as helping Commission staff respond efficiently to the tens of thousands of inquiries received each year. Because of its importance, the Commission has just completed a multi-year, multi-phased redevelopment that expands the Website so that it better reflects visitors' needs and provides improved access to information on preventing discrimination and building inclusive workplaces and communities. To support stakeholders and interested parties in staying up-to-date on changes in human rights law and in Commission programs and services, the Commission was one of the first such organisations in Canada to publish an electronic newsletter.

The initiatives outlined in this article are only some of the educational and partnership initiatives in which the Commission is involved. There are others which could be further discussed in another article, including involvement in a multi-sectoral partnership to develop a provincial strategy to combat hate crime and bias, and strategies to improve awareness and strengthen relationships with one of Alberta's major urban Aboriginal communities.

Protecting human rights and promoting fairness and access is complex and difficult work across multiple dimensions and with multiple and diverse stakeholders. While much has been accomplished, much still remains to be done. There is the continuing challenge of building awareness among Albertans about the extent and impact of the discrimination and exclusion that some people face in the province; encouraging organizations to move from becoming concerned about human rights only when an

issue arises, taking positive action to build human rights policies into their workplace; engaging organizations and communities in the complex and difficult work of becoming more welcoming and inclusive; supporting municipalities and partners in building their capacity to combat racism and discrimination; and building awareness about human rights and diversity and the work of the Commission. Progress requires a long-term commitment to achieve real change among all those involved in the human rights system. The Commission, the business sector, public institutions, government and community organizations, all have a role to play and share responsibility with individual Albertans in building respectful and inclusive communities where everyone feels like they belong and can participate.

#### About the author

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<sup>6</sup> <[www.albertahumanrights.ab.ca](http://www.albertahumanrights.ab.ca)>.