

Engaging with Alberta's Aboriginal Community on Human Rights

Aboriginal people in Canada have faced racism and discrimination for generations and continue to experience acts of hate and bias. According to the Canadian Human Rights Commission *Report on Equity Rights of Aboriginal People*, “there is a higher proportion of hate crime reported by victimized Aboriginal adults compared to victimized non-Aboriginal adults.”¹ In Alberta, as in the rest of the country, a disproportionate number of Aboriginal people are affected by racism, as well as hate and bias incidents and crimes.²

In 2013 there have been allegations that RCMP in Alberta discriminated against Aboriginal people in three separate incidents where four Aboriginal people were shot by Mounties. Members of the Aboriginal community are speaking out with concerns about the relationship between Aboriginal people and the RCMP and are seeking to improve this relationship.³ As well, the international community continues to give special attention to the human rights situations of indigenous peoples around the world, including here in Canada. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, James Anaya, visited Canada in October, 2013 to examine the overall human rights situations of indigenous peoples in Canada to ensure that the rights of our Aboriginal people are respected and valued. His [report](#), issued in July, 2014 concluded that the numerous initiatives that had been taken at the federal, and provincial/territorial levels to address the problems faced by indigenous peoples were insufficient.

Alberta's Aboriginal people

Through research and anecdotal evidence, we know that Aboriginal people persistently experience racism and discrimination in communities across our province and continue to be victims of hate and bias incidents and crimes. As part of Alberta's Social Policy Framework consultations, Aboriginal Albertans expressed frustration and disappointment at what they described as ongoing racism and discrimination towards them as Aboriginal peoples, both at the individual level (e.g., interactions with non-Aboriginal people on the street) and at the societal level (i.e., in the way services and supports are structured and in how governments interact with Aboriginal communities).⁴ According to a 2011 survey conducted by Racism Free Edmonton, 59% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that Aboriginal residents of Edmonton frequently face discrimination.⁵ And in 2009, almost one-third of Aboriginal people in Calgary reported being concerned about discrimination, compared to only 13 per cent of the city's total adult population.⁶

Shifting our focus

Like many human rights commissions, much of our education work at the Alberta Human Rights Commission has traditionally concentrated on building awareness and understanding of human rights. We provide information on the role and function of the Commission, Commission processes for making a complaint and the interpretation and application of the *Alberta Human Rights Act*. While raising awareness and increasing understanding are important precursors to change, they may not be sufficient in and of themselves to change behaviour and create a culture of human rights. Our traditional educational efforts remain important; however, we are placing greater emphasis on meaningfully engaging with communities, businesses, governments and organizations in order to more effectively influence social change. The role of the Commission has moved from funder and administrator to include being a convener, promoter and partner. The focus of these efforts is on building relationships and moving forward on a shared, complementary agenda.

Engaging with Alberta's Aboriginal community

The Commission tracks complaints made by Aboriginal people in the areas of employment practices, services and tenancy. Between 2008 and 2013, less than half of one percent of complaints accepted by the Commission were made by Aboriginal people in the areas of employment, services and tenancy based on the grounds of race, colour, ancestry, place of origin and native spirituality.⁷ Yet from working in the community, we know that issues of racism and discrimination continue to exist and that the need to take action to address these issues is high.

Because of the nature, depth and pervasiveness of discrimination against Aboriginal peoples, special approaches are needed. Alberta's Aboriginal people are not an ethno-cultural group, and their needs are not reflected in multicultural theory or practice.⁸ However, caution must be exercised to ensure that Aboriginal peoples' unique heritage and cultures are respected and preserved.⁸ For any social change to be effective, it must involve and be led by those most affected by the issue.

Enhancing relationships

Based on research and consultations, the Commission has taken a holistic approach to engaging with Alberta's Aboriginal community. We have focused on building relationships through outreach efforts. For example, we have provided funding through the Human Rights Education

and Multiculturalism Fund to non-profit organizations working within Aboriginal communities across the province to develop human rights knowledge, provide support for building capacity to effectively address racism and discrimination, and build understanding within these communities. The trust gained through this work has built and strengthened relationships, which has created new opportunities between the Aboriginal community and the Commission, the province and other levels of government. Through one of the funded projects, the Aboriginal Council of Lethbridge has become a main stakeholder of the Lethbridge Coalition of Municipalities Against Racism and Discrimination (CMARD) Committee, which was tasked with developing and implementing the City of Lethbridge's *Building Bridges: A Welcoming and Inclusive Lethbridge* Community Action Plan 2011-2021. The Council's input expanded the focus of the action plan to include, not only racism and discrimination against Aboriginal people, but also other areas of marginalization, all of which create barriers to full participation in the rights, benefits, responsibilities and obligations of life in the community. The Aboriginal Council of Lethbridge and the Lethbridge CMARD Committee are now inextricably linked in their work. Working in tandem, their efforts are well coordinated and have broadened out to the whole community, increasing their reach and impact.

Multiplying our impact

Investing in building strong, trusting relationships is key to establishing a solid foundation for coalitions and networks that will bring about systemic change. It is important that we focus on creating flexible and robust networks of collaboration that are both sustainable and innovative. As such, we are shifting our focus to a collaborative or networked approach to working on human rights issues, with distributed governance, where roles and responsibilities are diffused, so that no one organization takes sole responsibility or control. Traditionally, organizations have worked in isolation, pursuing their goals independently. But complex, large-scale problems require a coordinated, structured and collaborative approach. The Collective Impact approach recognizes that the complex issues the social sector is trying to impact are well beyond the scope of any one organization or sector and results when diverse organizations from different sectors commit to a common agenda in order to solve a complex social issue.¹⁰

Using the collaborative model, the Commission has convened meetings of agencies working on Alberta Aboriginal human right issues to review human rights complaint processes, explore human rights education options, identify funding alternatives and find ways to ensure Aboriginal peoples across the province have consistent and improved access to human rights services and information.

We are also involved with the provincial network of police services, government and civil society organizations that work to address hate and bias crimes and incidents in Alberta. The Alberta Hate Crimes Committee is a unique collaboration that involves multiple sectors, including governments, organizations and communities. This initiative builds strategic alliances and promotes shared responsibility amongst these groups. By working together we are decreasing prejudice and empower citizens to take action.

Human Rights Education and Multiculturalism Fund

In Alberta, the Human Rights Education and Multiculturalism Fund, which is administered by the Commission, enables us to provide grants to non-profit organizations that implement projects that foster equality and reduce discrimination or remove organizational barriers to full participation in society. A number of funded projects support Aboriginal organizations in Alberta to develop grassroots strategies to address human rights within the Aboriginal community and build relations within communities.

The Fund supported the Urban Society for Aboriginal Youth to publish a special edition of *New Tribe Magazine* entitled Rights Write that focused on discrimination, equality and human rights issues impacting Aboriginal communities in Alberta. In an introductory greeting to the magazine, the Chief of the Commission and Tribunals outlined the need for individuals and groups to work together to counter racism and discrimination, so that each individual and community feels empowered to take action and advocate for equality, fairness and rights.

A number of funded projects are underway that will support the work of Aboriginal organizations in Alberta. The Pathways to Change resource, which outlines six strategies for social and policy change and how to impact it, is being adapted to be more culturally representative and appropriate for the work the Aboriginal community is doing within their community and with other non-Aboriginal partners. Other human rights training tools and resources are also being reviewed and updated using both non-Aboriginal and traditional lenses to lead to fuller participation of Aboriginal people in workplaces and communities.

Another initiative in development will examine stereotypes that many newcomers develop about Aboriginal people and use this information to initiate dialogues between the Aboriginal community, newcomers and ethnocultural communities. This Edmonton-based project will provide opportunities to explore similar histories and experiences to gain greater understanding and appreciation of one another. The goal is to dispel myths and eliminate

stereotypes that may lead to discrimination among these groups of people and improve relations between them.

Looking forward

The Alberta Human Rights Commission will continue to engage with our partners across the province to further support and enhance human rights efforts through collaborative networks. By taking action to promote human rights and counter racism and discrimination, together we are better able to build respectful, inclusive and safe communities and a culture of peace, where everyone has an equal opportunity to contribute to and participate in the economic, social, cultural and political life of the province.

This article was originally published in the [Canadian Association of Statutory Human Rights Agencies \(CASHRA\) website](#). It has been modified for publication on the Commission website.

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Footnotes

- ¹ Canadian Human Rights Commission. (n.d.) *Report on Equity Rights of Aboriginal People*. Retrieved from http://www.chrc-ccdp.gc.ca/sites/default/files/equality_aboriginal_report.pdf
- ² Blood, P., Pogorzelski, R., & Weiss, J. (2012). *Aboriginal Diversity Support Program: Aboriginal People, Racism and Discrimination*. Alberta: Aboriginal Council of Alberta. Retrieved from <http://www.albertahumanrights.ab.ca/documents/bibliography/Aboriginal-Diversity-Support-Program.pdf>
- ³ *Shootings have relationship between Aboriginal people and RCMP on edge in Alberta*. Narr. Keith Laboucan. *National News*. Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN). 21 Aug. 2013. Retrieved from <http://aptn.ca/pages/news/2013/08/21/shootings-have-relationship-between-aboriginal-people-and-rcmp-on-edge-in-alberta/>
- ⁴ Government of Alberta. (2013, January). *Summing Up: Aboriginal Albertans' Perspectives for a Social Policy Framework*. Retrieved from http://socialpolicyframework.alberta.ca/files/documents/2013-01-10_summing_up_aboriginal.pdf
- ⁵ The City of Edmonton: Racism Free Edmonton. (2011). *Experiences and perceptions of discrimination in Edmonton: A survey of Edmonton residents*. Retrieved from http://racismfreedmonton.ca/sitewyze/files/RFE-Survey_Findings_2012_v3_Web.pdf
- ⁶ City of Calgary Community and Neighbourhood Services. (2011). *Volume 3 Calgary and Region Social Outlook 2011-2016*. Retrieved from http://www.calgary.ca/CSPS/CNS/Documents/social_outlook_2011-2016.pdf
- ⁷ Not all complaints made to the Alberta Human Rights Commission are accepted. Human rights complaint forms are reviewed to determine if they can be accepted as complaints under the *Alberta Human Rights Act*. Complaints must fall within the Commission's jurisdiction, demonstrate reasonable grounds and be made within one year after the alleged incident of discrimination.
- ⁸ Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Education Fund. (2007, February). *Creating Inclusive Communities: Framework for the Future 2007-2012*. Alberta: Alberta Tourism, Parks, Recreation and Culture.

⁹ Bartlett, D., & Cooper, M. (2006, July). *Creating Inclusive Communities: Stakeholder Consultation: What We Heard*. Alberta: Alberta Tourism, Parks, Recreation and Culture.

¹⁰ Tamarack: An Institute for Community Engagement. (n.d.) *Making Collective Impact Work*. Retrieved from <http://tamarackcommunity.ca>