

GUIDING PRACTICES FOR SYSTEMS-LEVEL CHANGE IN HUMAN RIGHTS

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Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all persons is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.

– Alberta Human Rights Act, 2000, p2

Human rights are at the foundation of freedom, justice, peace, and well-being. However, **structurally rooted injustice and systemic discrimination** continues to violate the dignity and equal, inalienable rights of individuals and communities.

The current human rights context including the Black Lives Matter movement and the subsequent calls for policing reform, the rise of anti-Asian discrimination in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the unmarked graves of children who attended Canadian residential schools demonstrate the urgent need to act on the systemic roots of human rights violations. This is true across the globe and in Alberta.

While police reported crime in Canada decreased in the year 2020 for the first time in five years...

police reported hate crime increased by 37%.

Hate crime related to race and ethnicity accounted for the vast majority of the increase (Statistics Canada, 2021).



Structural injustice and systemic discrimination refers to policies and practices that exclude people/groups based on race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability, age, citizenship status, religion, country of origin, etc. These create barriers to opportunities and possibilities for thriving for specific groups of people and communities and not for others. They lead to persistent and preventable inequities in health status, socioeconomic status, educational achievement, and interactions with the criminal justice system, among others. An example of a discriminatory Canadian policy is the mandatory attendance at residential schools under the Indian Act (1920) for Indigenous children.

Human Rights Commissions exist to protect the individual human rights of all people. They also prevent violations through systems-level change. In reality, however, Human Rights Commissions are often mired in individual complaint resolution. This leaves few resources for system-level education and advocacy efforts. This needs to change. To address the structural roots of injustices in the public consciousness – exemplified through movements such as Black Lives Matter, Anti-Asian Discrimination, and Indigenous Rights – Human Rights Commissions must shift from protection to prevention. They must target collective impact and systemic change.

In this document we outline guiding practices to promote advocacy, and ultimately meaningful action that leads to systemic change. They include:

- 1. ENGAGING COMMUNITIES,**
- 2. BUILDING UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND RELATED VIOLATIONS; &**
- 3. COORDINATING ACTION.**

These guiding practices arose from interviews we conducted with Human Rights Commissions and human rights thought leaders across Canada, the United States, New Zealand, and Australia. We also reviewed the literature and publicly available documents relating to Human Rights Commissions.

The purpose of this document is to guide collective action to progress human rights in Alberta, Canada, and beyond.

It is for community organizations and activists, Human Rights Commissions, and decision-makers who strive to improve human rights protections through structural change. Along with the practices, we outline the underlying advocacy asks required to support this work, provide examples of success, and highlight ideas for implementation that we learned through our interviews and literature review. We hope you are inspired to adapt these to fit your organization, context, and scope of influence.

ADVOCACY ASKS

The guiding practices we outline in this document are contingent on first having:

- **Dedicated funding and resources for advocacy and education.**
- **A mandate inclusive of structural change** through, for example, **power of inquiry**, commitments to international human rights legislation (e.g., **United Nations declarations of rights**), and a monitoring of emerging social trends and pressing issues (e.g., white supremacy, poverty).
- **Independence from the government.**

Enacting these changes are key to following the practices we describe below. Refer to the document "Call to Action: Alberta's opportunity to become a leader in addressing systemic human rights issues" for an outline of advocacy asks specific to the AHRC. Adapt these to your local context as appropriate.

Power of inquiry: the ability to call large-scale public inquiries into human rights issues. This can include the ability to gather and verify information, file complaints, create a record of events, recommend redress, hold perpetrators of violations to account, and provide the basis for future actions.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) provides a common standard of achievement for all peoples and nations. It sets out a broad scope of fundamental human rights. The UDHR includes political rights (e.g. life, liberty, free speech and privacy), and economic, social, and cultural rights (social security, health, education). (United Nations, n.d.).

GUIDING PRACTICE 1: ENGAGE COMMUNITIES



Community is driving the work and we are the vehicle.

– Human rights advocate, Canada

Empowerment approaches are most effective – [they] enable marginalized groups to advocate on their own behalf and mobilize their peers.

– Human rights advocate

PRIORITIZE LIVED EXPERIENCES

Meaningfully engage structurally excluded **communities** to determine priorities for human rights actions and advocacy. Community members are human rights holders. As such, they are essential to the advocacy process. Listen to their lived experiences of inequity and discrimination. Hear their stories of strength, resilience, and excellence. Communities can identify concerns and potential partners, provide guidance on contextually appropriate actions, communicate findings, and advocate for change (Knuckey et al., 2020). Amplify their voices and concerns. Understand how they are impacted by inequities and discrimination. Leverage existing community strengths and resources. Act in accordance with their priorities.

Community: "A group of people with diverse characteristics who are linked by social ties, share common perspectives, and engage in joint action in geographical locations or settings" (MacQueen et al, 2001, p. 1929)

BUILD PARTNERSHIPS FOR CHANGE

To promote meaningful engagement between rights holders – including communities – and advocates:

- Use forums, working groups, and coalitions.
- Facilitate dialogue, peer-to-peer learning, and knowledge co-production (Knuckey et al., 2020).
- Address power dynamics and differentials (Knuckey et al., 2020).
- Allocate time and resources for reflective practices. These can include reflecting on, writing, and sharing learning from advocacy work and lived experiences (Knuckey et al., 2020).
- Create policies on the role and treatment of rights holders. Include common principles and standards to commit to, provide training in, and demonstrate implementation and accountability (Knuckey et al., 2020).
- Build capacity among rights holders (Knuckey et al., 2020).
- Adopt the principle of “nothing about us without us” – an explicit commitment to engaging communities in human rights activities that pertain to them.

GUIDING PRACTICE 1: ENGAGE COMMUNITIES

There are many examples of **community engagement activities** from across Canada that have resulted in human rights recommendations. These include: the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action (2012), the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls final report (2019), and Equal in Dignity and Rights report in Alberta (The Alberta Human Rights Review Panel, 1994). Indigenous advisory circles are one example of how human rights organizations are partnering with Indigenous communities to take steps towards decolonization.



SPOTLIGHT ON COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN ACTION: COALITIONS CREATING EQUITY

In 2017 the AHRC commissioned *Your Voice: Advancing Human Rights in Alberta* (2017). The report summarizes what was learned through engagement between the Alberta Human Rights Commission and communities throughout Alberta. The Coalitions Creating Equity (CCE) initiative arose in response. It received funding from the AHRC. The CCE established coalitions in five municipalities across Alberta that supported community-led work, collaboration, and resource sharing.

The most notable initiative was the Response Model for Hate Incidents in Alberta, funded by the Human Rights Education and Multiculturalism Fund (note: the fund was dissolved in 2019).

The Response Model is a mechanism for responding to hate motivated incidents, and was informed by a province-wide community engagement (*Coalitions Creating Equity*, 2020). For more information on the CCE and the Response Model initiative, visit the initiative website at <http://coalitionscreatingequity.ca/>.

GUIDING PRACTICE 2: BUILD UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN RIGHTS & RELATED VIOLATIONS



Education is shifting culture... shifting how we treat each other, how we build empathy and compassion for each other, how to overcome the racism we have grown up with.

– Human rights advocate, Canada

MONITOR TRENDS IN SYSTEMATIC HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES

Conduct research to understand trends in systematic human rights violations. Identify emerging and persistent issues. Observe patterns across individual complaints that have similar origins of inequity and discrimination. Use the findings to set priorities and guide education and advocacy efforts. Share this information to build awareness and, ultimately, action. Monitor changes over time to understand if advocacy efforts and education are having the desired impact.

EDUCATE INDIVIDUALS AND POPULATIONS

Build awareness, understanding, and empathy through education. These are precursors to changes in human rights.

Education can support structural and systems change through increasing understanding about how local history, laws, and social norms are connected to racism and discrimination. Ensure education activities are culturally and contextually appropriate. Engage communities in the development and implementation of education activities.

Population-level education activities can support a widespread understanding of human rights. It can highlight how to respect human rights and shift deeply embedded attitudes and beliefs.

Information sharing (e.g. grounds for discrimination, individual rights, duty to uphold rights, avenues for redress) can build individual-level awareness, compassion, improve compliance with human rights legislation, increase awareness, support empowerment, and help people exercise their rights.



GUIDING PRACTICE 2: BUILD UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN RIGHTS & RELATED VIOLATIONS

This can lead to changes in attitudes and actions. There are two primary audiences for individual-level education activities:

- Duty-bearers: People who have responsibilities under human rights laws; and,
- Rights holders: People who are entitled to rights and can make claims.

EDUCATE TO ADVOCATE

Conduct advocacy through education. Understanding existing human rights violations and their impact can inspire people to care and become involved in advocating for change. Advocacy activities are key to making the shift from knowledge to meaningful change. Advocacy efforts call on decision-makers to change policy and legislation

Human rights advocacy is the deliberate process of influencing those in power to improve human rights enforcement and compliance. First, however, people must understand that there is an issue. That is why education is key..



SPOTLIGHT ON BUILDING

UNDERSTANDING: SASKATCHEWAN HRC RESPONDS TO DISCRIMINATION AGAINST RENTERS IN RECEIPT OF PUBLIC ASSISTANCE.

The Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission received multiple complaints of rental discrimination from agencies whose clients receive public assistance. In response, the commission launched an inquiry that led to a comprehensive report on housing discrimination. They partnered with local community organizations, co-conducted public consultations, and established a working group to coordinate responses to housing-related issues. The group now reviews and provides guidance on relevant policies, such as landlord licensing (Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission, 2021).

GUIDING PRACTICE 3: COORDINATE ACTION



Rights holders themselves have an essential role in advocacy, they have to be involved at every stage from initiation right through to implementation.

– Human rights advocate, Canada

Projects are most successful when they are built with a group that represents the community.

– Human rights advocate, Canada

LEVERAGE OPPORTUNITIES FOR COLLECTIVE CHANGE

Convene human rights, community, and other organizations to identify and address priorities and prompt systemic change. Human rights concerns, especially those at a larger systems level, are complex and require collaborative, coordinated action. Activities that facilitate collaborative action include:

- **Establishing leadership.** Convening requires strong leadership – a ‘backbone’ organization. Any organization can fulfil this role, including human rights commissions. Understand which organization is the best fit to lead based on capacity, resources, skills, and interest.

- **Mapping the human rights landscape.** Create a comprehensive map of the relevant stakeholders, representative groups, relevant legislators and decision makers.
- **Building partnerships and collaborative networks.** Include organizations identified through the mapping exercise. Leverage existing trust and relationships to meaningfully engage the relevant players. Establish trust and relationships when necessary. Ensure community organizations and members are represented meaningfully.
- **Developing a strategic approach.** Identify shared priorities, activities that support these, and a plan for collaborative and complimentary actions.
- **Sharing resources, data, and skills.** Train and build capacity among partner organizations, particularly within communities impacted by inequities and discrimination.
- **Tracking progress and success.** Develop shared monitoring and evaluation metrics. These are performance indicators related to the strategic focal area; for example, poverty. Record changes in the budget, policies, and practices that relate. Share the evaluation results broadly.

GUIDING PRACTICE 3: COORDINATE ACTION

BUILD CAPACITY FOR ADVOCACY

Ground human rights actions and advocacy in the wisdom, expertise, and activities of communities who have experienced inequities and discrimination. These are communities who have been systematically excluded within policies and practices. Build capacity within communities to advocate for change that aligns with their needs and priorities. Relationships and co-created, coordinated actions are key to community-driven advocacy.



SPOTLIGHT ON MEANINGFUL COLLABORATION: CALL FOR A NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR THE COLLECTION OF DISAGGREGATED HEALTH DATA

Structurally excluded groups have disproportionately borne the negative impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. In response to these inequities, 11 HRCs across Canada (federal, provincial, and territorial) signed an open letter to the federal Minister of Innovation, Science and Industry.

They called for a national strategy for the collection of disaggregated health data – that is, data that includes social, cultural, and economic characteristics like race, income, and gender. This data will identify inequities in healthcare access that intersect with human rights. Human rights advocates can then advocate for change to address these healthcare and human rights inequities.



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