

OACAS Statement: Working to Combat Stigma during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Recently, the Ontario Human Rights Commission issued its second statement on March 13, 2020 to the province regarding discrimination and bias related to the ongoing outbreak of the coronavirus, also being referred to as COVID-19. The statements highlight the need for increased sensitivity, and the need to ensure that human rights are centered in decision making during the coronavirus outbreak. Individuals and communities who are at risk for increased harassment, stereotyping, bullying and acts of violence due to perceived ideas and notions, fault or blame include Chinese Canadians, and particularly people of Asian descent. However, other marginalized peoples and communities, including First Nations, Indigenous and Métis, those who are impoverished, those with varying disabilities, racialized communities, Jewish people and those who belong to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Two-Spirit and Queer communities may experience heightened vulnerability and discrimination during this crisis.

Stigmatization hurts both those who are experiencing the stigma, as well as those who are behaving discriminatorily by creating anger, fear and uncertainty that is targeted towards individuals and groups versus focusing on the disease – COVID-19, which is causing the pandemic.

Keeping in line with both the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, as well as the Ontario Human Rights Commission, OACAS believes it is essential in times of crisis and uncertainty to work even harder to be more culturally aware, sensitized and act with [cultural humility](#). There is also a need for us to rely on our individual and collective commitment to the values of diversity, equity, inclusion and anti-oppressive practice across the child welfare sector when taking action during this crisis.

The following ideas are provided as a starting point to assist child welfare professionals to better understand and combat stigmatization associated with the coronavirus:

- Discrimination including harassment against any persons or communities related to COVID-19 is prohibited when it involves any of the twenty grounds under the [Ontario Human Rights Code](#), in the areas of services, housing, employment, vocational associations and contracts.
- People—including those of Asian descent—who have not recently been in an area of ongoing spread of COVID-19, or who have been in contact with a person who is a confirmed or suspected case of COVID-19 are not at greater risk of acquiring and spreading COVID-19 than any other Canadian.
- People who have returned from an area with ongoing spread of COVID-19 and self-isolated for 14 days with no symptoms are not to be *presumed* to be infected with the virus.

- Staff returning from affected countries, or who are concerned about family, friends and loved ones in affected regions need to be socially supported. We are all in need of access to services to support mental health and well-being to ensure everyone can get through this world pandemic crisis effectively.
- Whilst different populations are genetically prone to certain diseases, viruses cannot target people from specific populations, ethnicities, or racial backgrounds. And as such, African Canadian, Indigenous and other racialized populations do not have increased or heightened immunity to COVID-19. On the contrary, [research](#) has shown that people sometimes falsely believe that racialized and [Indigenous peoples](#) have a higher tolerance to pain and illness, and as a result receive racial bias in the healthcare systems in Canada. This type of bias means they will need to be well supported to access required COVID-19 testing and medical attention.
- The province of [Ontario has one of the highest incidences of Hate Crimes in Canada](#). Discriminatory incidents that are motivated in any part by bias, prejudice or hate based on race, national or ethnic origin, language, colour, religion, sex, age, mental or physical disability, sexuality identity or expression, or any other similar factor is considered a [Hate Crime](#) under the Criminal Code of Canada, hate propaganda laws and the Ontario Human Rights Code.

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