



SOMERSET WEST  
**COMMUNITY**  
**HEALTH**  
CENTRE

# Anti-Racism Community Conversations Project Final Report

Prepared for Somerset West Community Health Centre

by

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## Background

The Somerset West Community Health Centre serves residents living in Ottawa-Centre. Over the past few years, our neighbourhoods and community members have been impacted by overt acts of racism. These include the racist graffiti on the Parkdale United Church and the Ottawa Main Mosque. In addition, it was in one of our neighbourhoods in which Abdirahman Abdi lost his life at the hands of local police officers. These occurrences have sparked calls to action of our centre and partners across the city to address the sadly pervasive racism that exists within our society. In addition, our local community and City are not immune to the global issues that are rooted in racism and hate.

## Acknowledgements

Our research, analysis and community engagement took place on the unceded and unsurrendered territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe Nation. It is important that those of us who are settlers, and those of us who have been forcibly displaced onto Turtle Island, to be careful not to frame colonialism as a past occurrence. Racism and colonialism are current, evolving processes that have tangible effects for generations of Indigenous people alive and yet to come. As a Community Health Centre, we focus on promoting health and wellbeing and it is important for our agency to reflect on and continue to dismantle the pervasive, overt and covert, barriers to health that exist for Indigenous communities, especially for those living in our catchment and accessing our services.

Somerset West Community Health Centre is in deep gratitude to the participants of our local community conversations for their bravery and vulnerability in sharing their lived realities of racism and discrimination. We would like to thank the Honourable Senator



Wanda Thomas-Bernard (Nova Scotia-East Preston) and Elder Barbara Dumont-Hill (First Nations Algonquin, born on the Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg Reserve) for their presence and knowledge-sharing at our culminating event to mark the *International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination* held on March 21, 2019.

We would also like to acknowledge the support of local groups for supporting outreach and engagement efforts and for co-hosting a few of the conversations with us. These groups include; The Door Youth Centre, Ottawa Main Mosque, Islam Care Centre/Muslim Family Services of Ottawa, Yet Keen Seniors Day Centre, Justice for Abdirahman Coalition, Vietnamese Canadian Community of Ottawa and the African Canadian Association of Ottawa.

The members of Somerset West Community Health Centre's Advocacy Committee of the Board and staff; particularly Amina Haggar, Emilie Hayes and Faduma Yusuf have been integral to the success of the short project.

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## Introduction

The Somerset West Community Health Centre (SWCHC) Anti-Racism Community Conversations Project took place between October 2018 and March 2019. Conversations were held in the Muslim, Black and Chinese/Vietnamese communities, a fourth conversation took place with racialized youth, and a fifth with the SWCHC Multicultural Health Navigators.

This report presents the results of the conversations as interpreted and presented by the Project Facilitator, Yusra Osman MSW RSW. In the first section, the goals and scope of the project are summarized. Next, the methodology of the project is laid out. The longest section presents eight themes that emerged from the project's conversations, divided into two categories: "Challenges with Racism" and "Sources of Strength".

The final section outlines the following six recommendations for next steps in anti-racism initiatives in the SWCHC catchment area:

1. Need for Initiatives to Educate Dominant Groups
2. Promoting Critical Allyship
3. Educating Racialized People on their Rights
4. Strong Anti-Racist Policies
5. Initiatives that Target Racism in the School System
6. Practical Strategies and Skills for Front-Line Workers
7. Further Anti-Racism Initiatives Targeting the Challenges of Specific Communities



## Goals and Scope of the Project

The goal of this project was to organize community conversations about race, racialization, and anti-racism in neighbourhoods in West-Central Ottawa/SWCHC catchment area, through various SWCHC ethno-cultural programs and services serving Vietnamese, Cambodian, Chinese, and African and Caribbean communities, as well as through our diverse neighbourhood-based programs and services. The project also engaged community groups, such as those in the Muslim community, in order to organize the conversations.

The Project was led by the Project Facilitator who was responsible for the following tasks:

- Creating a timeline of project implementation (October 2018 to March 2019)
- Contributing to developing and implementing a promotion and outreach plan to recruiting participants and volunteers from specific cultural/racial groups
- Designing and implementing five community-based workshops/conversations between October 2018-March 2019, including recruitment of volunteers from specific cultural/racial groups to contribute to workshop content and co-facilitation
- Supporting of coordinating supports for participants (childcare, emotional supports, interpretation)
- Transcribing and sharing the stories of participants, the barriers to inclusive communities, and possible solutions to address these barriers.
- Coordinating, planning and promoting the culminating event in March 2019
- Creating data collection tools and collecting data for project evaluation
- Writing a brief final report with recommended next steps



## Methodology

- A. The methodology of the project was characterized by participatory community workshops in which 12-20 community members from each participating community shared their insights in response to questions posed by the Project Facilitator.
- B. Where the size of the group and certain factors (such as language) warranted it, the participatory community workshops were sometimes subdivided into smaller focus groups in order to better record the thoughts and answers of each participant.
- C. An important aspect of participatory community workshops were the provision of various supports to remove barriers to participation, including childcare, language interpretation, and emotional/mental health supports.
- D. In collaboration with SWCHC staff, the list of participating communities with the catchment area was specified based on the timeframe, the availability of residents to participate, and the capacity of the Project team. The groups organized were as follows:
  - a. Chinese and Vietnamese residents (mainly from seniors programs, with translation in Cantonese, Mandarin, and Vietnamese)
  - b. Black residents
  - c. Muslim residents
  - d. Racialized youth
  - e. Multicultural Health Navigators
- E. After the creation of an outreach and promotional plan with SWCHC staff, the Project Facilitator promoted each workshop and recruited participants from each respective



community using existing structures and trusted resources to recruit, for example youth groups, Chinese/Vietnamese seniors groups, Islam Care Centre, Muslim Family Services of Ottawa, and the Ottawa Muslim Association mosque.

- F. The Project Facilitator created questions and a workshop format tailored to each community, with significant input from SWCHC volunteers and staff from each respective community.
- G. Throughout the project, data was collected on number and age of participants, as well as feedback from participants, in order to assess the project's effectiveness and impact.
- H. After the completion of the workshops, the Project Facilitator engaged with residents from each community in preparation for the culminating event in order to ensure and encourage the participation of residents.
- I. In March 2019, the highly successful and very well-attended culminating event was held with representation from each community.
- J. After evaluating and analyzing the notes/minutes of each community workshops, the present report was finalized.



## Results/Outcomes

The five community conversations held as part of the project, as mentioned above, included one each in the Muslim, Black and Chinese/Vietnamese communities, a fourth conversation with racialized youth, and a fifth with the SWCHC Multicultural Health Navigators. What follows are eight themes that emerged from the project's conversations. These unique insights come from the residents of the SWCHC catchment area and provide a unique insight into the experiences of racialized communities and workers in the neighbourhoods of West-Central Ottawa. They are divided into two broad categories: five themes make up the first part, "Challenges with Racism" and three themes constitute the second part, "Sources of Strength". The latter section emphasizes that despite the challenges underscored in the conversations, West-Central Ottawa's communities see themselves as strong, hopeful, proud, and resilient.

### Challenges

#### *I. Hopelessness/ Lack of Trust*

Some conversation participants noted a lack of trust in the services available to them, and a feeling of hopelessness as a result of the persistence of racism. Some Muslim community participants noted a lack of trust or hope in police support specifically in dealing with Islamophobia. Several Muslim participants felt initiatives like Neighbourhood Watch had the effect of surveilling Muslims, racialized people, and new immigrants, rather than addressing their community's concerns with crime generally, and hate crime specifically. Black community conversation participants reported feelings of hopelessness about racism and anti-black violence, including one participant who noted that some young Black people had decided "We don't want to ever have children because we don't want to have to bury them early". Racialized youth participants reported a lack of faith or trust in the ability of governments to



solve the problems they face. One youth participant felt that the “City of Ottawa can’t do anything”.

## *II. Frustration and Negative Health Effects*

Many conversation participants noted the frustration and negative health effects that come as a result of experiencing racism. Many participants in the Muslim community conversation felt frustrated and exasperated by the persistence of Islamophobia. Participants felt there was an increase in recent years in Islamophobia/anti-Muslim bigotry in day to day life, including public transportation, schools, workplaces, mainstream and social media, and other areas. Black community participants note going to work feeling anxiety and stress about the possibility of a new incident of racism occurring. These same participants noted that racism creates an everyday burden and serious negative health outcomes. Several participants in the Chinese/Vietnamese community conversation felt exhausted by the effects of racism. They went on to say: “We cannot sleep. We try to find ways to cope but are unable. This leads us to mental health problems”. Another Chinese/Vietnamese community participant noted “We develop depression due to the cumulative effect of discrimination. It drives us crazy”.

From the perspective of Multicultural Health Navigators, the health effects of racism are often very direct: they noted that clients from racialized or newcomer communities often face discrimination in accessing health services, in receiving clear medical advice, and even in the kinds and quality of medication they are prescribed. Many racialized youth participants noted that they often feel angry about their experiences of racism.

## *III. General Systemic Barriers*

Participants in all conversations emphasized systemic barriers and lack of access to



resources. Participants in the Chinese/Vietnamese community conversation noted that there is a significant lack of resources to address language barriers, creating more isolation and exclusion for those who do not speak English. One Muslim community participant who works as a cultural interpreter notes that medical and social work staff are often more abrupt and less supportive towards clients who do not speak English. Several multicultural health navigators also noted that centre administrators can often be rude or impatient when clients have a certain accent or face language barriers.

Other participants in the Muslim community were hopeful that improvements could be made to the well-being of their community if their children and youth could have better access to resources such as employment opportunities. Youth noted that only sometimes do they feel comfortable telling youth program workers about the racism they experience.

#### *IV. Barriers Specific to the Education System*

Black community participants especially noted chronic discrimination in public schools and universities, including ethnic grading, automatic streaming into applied-level classes, being discouraged from academic success, and being suspected of cheating after receiving high grades.

Racialized youth from both Black and Chinese/Vietnamese communities noted many experiences of encountering racism in schools or having it directed at them by teachers. All youth participants stated that they do not feel comfortable telling a teacher if they or their friends experience racism. Muslim community participants noticed their youth are being forced to “chose” one side of their identity over the other, and that they often face Islamophobia and other pressures in school.

#### *V. Personal Encounter and Microaggressions*

A challenge that all communities underscored was racism encountered in personal



interactions and microaggressions. Muslim community participants noted the common experience of being called terrorists by strangers. One participant related the experience of a man throwing items at Muslim worshippers on their way to dawn prayers. Elders from the Chinese/Vietnamese community repeatedly noted public transit as a space of aggressive and racist encounters. Black community participants noted many microaggressions in their daily lives, including the ubiquitous question “Where are you from?” always asked of them but not of the non-Black people around them. According to Multicultural Health Navigators, personal interactions between racialized seniors and service providers can often be negatively affected by the intersection of both ageism and racism, resulting in hostile responses by service providers towards seniors.

## Sources of Strength

### *I. Resilience*

All communities took pride in their own resilience in the face of racism. Chinese/Vietnamese community members noted as a source of strength the importance of frequenting cultural centres to speak in their first language and reduce isolation. Participants in the Black community conversation repeatedly celebrated the resilience and strength of the Black community in the face of an uphill battle against systemic racism. Other Black community participants emphasized the hope they have in the power of community and solidarity to combat racism. Racialized youth emphasized creativity in their ideas to fight racism: learning about other cultures, critical learning for teachers, confronting racist actions/comments, and civic engagement. Muslim community conversation participants noted the resilience that comes from and is encouraged by taking action: coming together as a community, taking a stand for human rights, and building a better future for the next generation. Participants in Chinese/Vietnamese community conversation felt that despite challenges, they were hopeful that Canada is a place where members of their community could fulfill their full potential.



## *II. Heritage and Culture as Sources of Pride*

Workshop participants emphasized their heritage and cultures as sources of pride. Often this pride came after struggle and growth. One participant in the youth conversation noted: “I used to be ashamed of speaking my language but now I talk to my friends in Vietnamese. I used to only want to have white friends; now I feel good being friends with other Chinese/Vietnamese people”. In the Muslim community conversation, several participants noted the importance of educating their own community and others about the achievements of Muslims throughout history in order to counteract shame, self-hate and Islamophobia. A Black community member emphasized that they are “proud to be African because of my culture, my history, my heritage, my language. I have a rich culture”.

## *III. Unapologetic Sense of Belonging*

Workshop participants underscored an unapologetic sense of belonging in the social fabric of West-Central Ottawa, and Canadian society as a whole. Participants in the Muslim community conversation felt they should not have to “take off hijab or shave their beard” to belong to the fabric of Canadian society. They felt without hesitation that they could be at once fully Muslim and Canadian. Chinese/Vietnamese community participants felt that children born here should feel fully Canadian despite the fact that they are still being racially discriminated against because, in the words of participants, they are “foreign” looking. One participant in the Black community conversation echoed this sentiment powerfully when they said: “No person of African descent should be apologetic about being on any part of the planet. The planet belongs to all of us and there is more than enough space to accommodate all of us. Do not apologize for being in Canada. Apart from Indigenous people, everyone else migrated here.”



## Recommendations/Next Steps

### 1. Need for Initiatives to Educate Dominant Groups:

An important emphasis in many of the conversations (Black community, Muslim community, Racialized youth, and Multicultural Health Navigators) was the need for initiatives to educate dominant groups. Many participants noted the need for further initiatives that aim to speak to and educate white Canadians about racism and for them to unlearn racist beliefs and behaviours. This is a potential for future directions in anti-racist work in the Ottawa West community. The work of educating dominant groups about the presence of racism remains to be done.

### 2. Promoting Critical Allyship

An important initiative to go hand-in-hand with the need to educate dominant groups are trainings to give white people the tools to both actively challenge racism and to work in solidarity with racialized communities.

### 3. Educating Racialized People on their Rights

Individuals and communities knowing their rights - whether while engaging with law enforcement, school systems or workplaces - provides a sense of grounding, confidence, dignity, and autonomy. Learning the proper channels to navigate these systems is a step towards challenging systemic oppression.



#### **4. Strong Anti-Racist Policies**

Frontline workers, community member, and upper management should work together in order to ensure that solutions to racism are enshrined in strong policies.

#### **5. Initiatives that Target Racism in the School System**

A constant theme throughout this project was the racism inherent to school systems in Canada. Whether young or old, participants shared encounter after encounter of racism in schools. Challenging racism this system in particular means starting with the acknowledgement of this issue and then working towards addressing the root causes. In West-Central Ottawa, anti-racist work should include teachers, principals, guidance counsellors, and school administrators, especially those from dominant groups.

#### **6. Practical Strategies and Skills for Front-Line Workers**

This is especially important amongst service providers, as noted by our Multicultural Health Navigators, who emphasized in their conversation that health care and service providers find it difficult to link discrimination to the specific problems clients face. Issues that stem from racism are often denied or attributed to other factors.

#### **7. Further Anti-Racism Initiatives Targeting the Challenges of Specific Communities**

Not all forms of racism are alike, and communities face specific challenges. Specific initiatives are need to address, for example, linguistic discrimination against those with a mother tongue other than English (as underscored by many seniors from the Chinese/Vietnamese community), anti-Black racism faced by the Black community (particularly in the education system), or the pernicious effects of Islamophobia in the daily lives of Muslims.

