

London's Community Forum on Racism

A Community Forum on Racism was held at the South London Neighbourhood Resource Centre On September 17, 2016. This forum was organized by the London Diversity and Race Relations Advisory Committee, now known as the Diversity Inclusion and Anti-Oppression Advisory Committee (DIAAC), with the support of the City of London, the Mayor's Office, the Centre for Research on Health Equity and Social Inclusion (CRHESI), and the Canadian Labour Congress.

The need for the forum arose in response to several high-profile incidents of racism that had taken place in the city over the past several months. As an advisory committee, DIAAC had been speaking out publically against racism in the community, but collectively, committee members felt that this was not enough. It was recognized there was a need in the community to create a space to bring people together, to name the racism that exists in London, and to work towards tangible actions to begin addressing it.

The objectives of the forum were:

1. To increase people's understanding of how to identify racism
2. How to interrupt racism, and
3. How to start thinking about actions everyone can take (individually and systemically) to make London safer and more inclusive.

To start the day in a good way, and in honour of the Indigenous lands the community gathered on, Elder Liz Akiwenzie led participants in a traditional sunrise ceremony. Throughout the ceremony, the elder spoke of the importance of balance in our community and love for each other. She shared this through teachings that spoke to the traditional roles and responsibilities of men and women, and also spoke to water and fire teachings as representations of energy and balance needed in our communities to heal.

After Mayor Brown's opening remarks, we began the event with a panel made up of several high-profile community members including Chief Leslee White-Eye of Chippewas of the Thames First Nation, Saleha Khan, the City's newly appointed Diversity and Inclusion Officer, Leroy Hibbert of LUSO Community Services, and Lorraine McNeil, a professor at Fanshawe College.

A video of the panel discussion produced by the Centre for Research on Healthy Equity and Social Inclusion (CRHESI) can be viewed here: <http://crhesi.uwo.ca/videos/lcfr/>

The panel discussion was followed by facilitated conversations at each table with the objective of encouraging community members to unpack challenging concepts related to racism like power, privilege, and how they can interrupt racism when they see it. The length of time for these discussions was shorter than originally planned, after several of the panel discussions went longer than anticipated. The following questions were provided to the groups for discussion:

Facilitated table Questions:

1. What is racism?

a. Does reverse racism exist? Why or why not?

2. Case Study 1: You are at a social function, and a friend says "I'm not a racist, BUT I would never date a Black person." How do you respond?

Case Study 2: You are waiting in line at a retail store. A young First Nations girl is at the register using her status card to make a tax-exempt purchase. The store clerk is unfamiliar with how to process the card, and the line has slowed down. The person in front of you becomes disgruntled by the wait, and tells the young girl she is a "freeloader off his tax dollars," and to "go back to the rez." How do you respond?

a. Should racism be interrupted? Why? How?

b. What are some barriers to interrupting racism?

3. What are other ways of being a good ally?

a. What are some actions Londoners can take as a community to interrupt individual and systemic racism?

Below is a summary of key themes that came out of these questions and the discussion at the table. They have been organized according to the forum's objectives

What is Racism

Prejudice

Racism is rooted in generalizations and stereotypes about how people behave, dress and move through the world.

Involves Power

Racism also involves power and this is a defining feature that differentiates racism from prejudice; having systemic power and privilege over an oppressed and underrepresented group.

Reverse Racism

The concept of reverse racism is problematic once you begin to account for power and privilege. Prejudice against a dominant group/culture is limited because they still hold the bulk of individual and systemic power.

Systemic Racism

There is a systemic element to racism. Structures and policies contained within our institutions, organizations, and businesses serve to discriminate people based on race.

How to Interrupt Racism

Individually

Key themes about how to interrupt racism at an individual level included: education, open conversation with community members, and learning how to safely confront racism.

Institutionally

Similarly, themes like education of institution staff in areas like anti-bias, and anti-racism training were raised. Also noted were public education campaigns including Edmonton's #makeitawkward campaign, which encouraged community members to embrace the awkwardness of calling out bigotry by friends, family and colleagues.

Barriers

Participants also explored what barriers might stop them from interrupting racism when they see it. Community members shared concerns of not feeling safe, inadvertently escalating situations, being restricted by power dynamics (challenging racism by a boss/employer/police officer), and a sense that many are conditioned to accept micro-aggressions.

How do we move London forward to address racism and make a more inclusive City

Several themes emerged as groups began to identify actions for how to address racism individually and systemically in the City of London. Participants noted that there is no simple solution or answer, and that there needs to be an ongoing commitment to this work. There is a need for joint commitment of government, institutions, businesses, and community members to co-create an anti-racism strategy.

This strategy must acknowledge the racism that exists in the community, acknowledge the lived experiences of racism in London without requiring additional proof, and centre on racialized people's experiences.

Participants also noted the need for ongoing education for all Londoners, including government employees, institutions and businesses focussing on anti-racism, anti-bias training and the role of allyship. .

Lastly, there was a call to create space for people of colour in leadership roles and in positions of power across the city.

Beyond the Forum: Next Steps

- Kitchen Table Conversation Guide available
<https://www.dropbox.com/s/b61tcjwk24cit4q/Kitchen%20Table%20Conversation%20Guide.pdf?dl=0>
- Video of the Panel <http://crhesi.uwo.ca/videos/lcfr/>
- Pillar Nonprofit, Family Services Thames Valley and Mojdeh Cox present a workshop on Power and Privilege for leaders in the nonprofit sector: December 5th, 2016
- Twitter Chat: Hosted by Mojdeh Cox @womenincolour, on December 14th, 2016. Participate by following #racismforum

Recommendations to the City of London

1. Co-create, in partnership with community, an anti-racism strategy that identifies and addresses individual and systemic racism and oppression in the City of London.
2. Complete and implement the Community Diversity and Inclusion Plan
3. Provide funding and resources to host an annual Community Forum on Racism
4. Advocate to the London Police Services Board to end the practice of street checks (also known as carding) in the City of London.
5. Implement recommendations to council in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission
6. Continue to support the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM), Diverse Voices for Change Project in London, and its goal to increase the representation of racialized, newcomer and Indigenous women on advisory committees boards and commissions.

With thanks to our volunteers and partners

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Video

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City of London

Mayor Matt Brown
 Mayor's Office Staff
 Kate Graham

Panelists

Chief Leslee White-Eye
 Saleha Khan
 Leroy Hibbert
 Lorraine McNeil

Sunrise Ceremony

Liz Akiwenzie

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