Creating safer spaces that foster mutual understanding, respect and growth

The purpose of this practice brief is (1) to introduce the concept of safe space; (2) to examine the importance of safer spaces for the cultivation of a more inclusive community; and (3) to provide support and resources around the creation of safer spaces. EDs/CEOs, managers, frontline staff, consultants, volunteers and community residents can use this practice brief in order to operationalize the commitments in the D&I Charter of Peel.

INTRODUCING THE ISSUE

While the concept of *safe space* is fluid and ever-changing, its presence plays an important role in creating and sustaining vibrant and healthy communities, where a wide range of (visible and invisible) human qualities are acknowledged, respected and given the opportunity to thrive.

Creating safer spaces is important and beneficial for a number of reasons:

- It ensures a diversity of perspectives and voices are heard;
- It grants program and service access to a range of individuals and communities;
- It fosters the development of healthier, happier, more productive, and more sustainable communities;
- It provides individuals with a sense of both physical and psychological safety
- It allows individuals to feel self-expressed and respected by their families, peers, employers, and communities

It is important to ask: **WHO** are you creating safer spaces for; and **HOW** is that space being created? The goal is to create the most inclusive space for everyone – clients, employees, partners, community members, and other stakeholders - with the recognition that the process is evolving and iterative.

'HOW TO': TIPS AND SUGGESTIONS

- **Serve everyone:** Remember that everyone who accesses services deserves to be treated with dignity and respect
- **Engage in active listening:** Listen with all the senses, maintain open communication, ensure client/employee confidentiality, be aware of body language and micro-aggressions
- **Cultivate a welcoming environment:** Ensure that physical space, events, policies, and programs are organized so that everyone feels welcome, comfortable, and included
- **Address community needs**: Incorporate recognition for Indigenous land; offer childcare services when needed; provide diverse food options
- **Acknowledge the importance of design:** Create space that connects with the community that is accessing it (e.g., circular spaces for Indigenous communities; bright/bold colours for children and youth)
- **Think about accessibility:** Make sure spaces are easily accessed by those who wish to use them (e.g., employees, clients, others); ensure adherence to AODA standards

RESOURCES & MORE INFORMATION

- The Safe Space Network
- LGBTQ Safer Spaces – Regional Diversity Roundtable
- Positive Space Coalition of Peel
- Bullying Prevention & Intervention - PDSB
- Cyber Ambassadors Network – Safe City Mississauga
- Inclusive Design and the Duty to Accommodate (Fact Sheet) – OHRC

WHAT IS A SAFE SPACE?

Spaces can take multiple forms:

Physical: A community centre, a school, a neighbourhood

Relational: A support group, a team meeting, a community event

Online: A blog, a chatroom, a social media platform

A *safe space* is a place that makes everyone – regardless of diverse characteristics – feel welcome, comfortable and safe.

It is a place where one feels able to express oneself and one's identity without fear of judgement or discrimination.

A safe space provides a network of support and understanding; it ensures that each person's self-respect and dignity are protected.

IS A SAFE SPACE THE SAME AS A POSITIVE SPACE?

Positive Spaces are spaces that are open to individuals of all sexual and gender identities; where LGBTTIQQ2S (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, Transitioning, Intersex, Queer, Questioning, Two-Spirited) individuals can access services "with dignity and respect and where service providers can work free from discrimination" (Hamilton Health Sciences; OCASI Positive Spaces Initiative).

The term 'safe space' is often used interchangeably with 'positive space'. The D&I Charter Initiative is using the term to refer to both kinds of spaces.