

### Enabling Full Participation and Engagement of All through Equitable Access to Information, Services, Opportunities

The purpose of this practice brief is (1) to introduce the concept of equitable access to information, services, and opportunities; (2) to examine the importance of ensuring equitable access for enabling full participation and engagement of community members; and (3) to provide strategies for ensuring equitable access. 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

Research in Canada suggests that economic and social inequalities across the country are increasing. According to Statistics Canada, 20% of the country's richest families take almost 70% of the country's wealth; and racialized Canadians are three-times more likely than non-racialized Canadians to live in poverty. Because wealth is correlated with social mobility, many individuals and families are not accessing the information, services, and opportunities that would enable them to succeed. Despite important federal and provincial legislation that aims to protect vulnerable Canadians, there are numerous barriers faced by diverse communities in accessing information, opportunities, and services. As such, it is important that organizations/institutions in every sector ensure that their programs, services and policies are giving equitable access to all community members.

**Equitable Access** means that all people receive the information they need, and have the opportunity to engage, to obtain appropriate services, and to succeed and thrive at work and in the public sphere. It does *not* mean that everyone receives the same number of services and opportunities; rather, it is "the fair and just distribution of resources", based on community need (National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health, 2011).

Ensuring equitable access to information, services, and opportunities is beneficial for a number of reasons:

- It helps to mitigate inequities resulting from differences in the social and economic conditions of Canadians (by providing appropriate services, creating engagement opportunities and reducing barriers to access)
- It is more efficient and cost-effective – by being responsive and working to reduce disparities, organizations/institutions can save money spent on short term initiatives; as a result of a long-term investment in equitable access, communities become healthier, happier and more prosperous
- It catalyzes more impactful social innovation by facilitating critical thinking, generating creative solutions, enabling resource coordination, and engaging diverse residents in a variety of initiatives and at multiple levels

It is important to ask: **WHAT** are some strategies for ensuring equitable access to information, services and opportunities? There are multiple ways to reduce barriers faced by diverse communities; in employing these strategies (and more) it is important to remember that ensuring equitable access enables engagement and participation of all community members, ultimately benefitting everyone.

#### 'HOW TO': TIPS AND SUGGESTIONS

- **Center Approachability, Accessibility and Affordability:** In designing programs, services, and policies, think about the ability of diverse individuals and communities to be able to engage and participate fully (e.g., ensuring that diverse perspectives are valued, service representatives are approachable, spaces are welcoming and accessible, and information, opportunities and services are accessible and affordable)
- **Understand Relevant Social and Cultural Contexts:** Pay attention to the context(s) you are working in and who your clients are or aren't; think about what equitable access means for diverse communities
- **Authentically Engage Stakeholder Groups :** Engage critical stakeholders in an inclusive and equitable manner and collaborative process to develop and implement plans and policies to ensure equitable access to information, services and opportunities (at both micro and macro levels)
- **Collect and Analyze Data:** Identify relevant equitable access metrics, collect and analyze data to determine the root cause (s) of any equity gaps, and regularly communicate findings to a variety of audiences; when appropriate always include third party perspectives
- **Center Equity in Strategic Planning and Evaluation:** Ensure that equitable access is central to ongoing strategic planning and evaluation work

#### RESOURCES & MORE INFORMATION

- Practice Brief 2.1: Ensuring Equitable and Inclusive Community Services
- Access to Health Services as a Social Determinant of First Nations, Inuit and Metis Health (NCCA)
- CMA Position Statement: Ensuring Equitable Access to Care

#### EQUITABLE ACCESS: A COMPLEX PICTURE

Many factors cause barriers to access. These include (but are not limited to):

- Physical
- Geographical
- Psychological
- Financial
- Cultural/Linguistic
- Resource-based

These barriers have two interconnected dimensions: the demand for information, services, and opportunities, and their supply.

**Demand** is most often concerned with individual/community level barriers to access (e.g., somebody is unable to access a library or healthcare facility owing to geographic isolation, or high-cost of transportation). Barriers related to demand must *always* be understood as complex and multifaceted.

**Supply** is systemic in nature (e.g., there is a lack of needs-based planning in a certain community where there are demographic changes but no shift in service delivery, resulting in non-responsive services; there are no translated materials available in a community because there has previously never been a need).

In enabling the full participation and engagement of all by ensuring equitable access to information, services and opportunities, it is important to remember to focus efforts locally (e.g., by developing policies and designing programs that center equity) as well as finding creative ways to address the systemic inequities that create many barriers to access. This will ensure that the Charter's vision of ensuring a thriving community is realized.

