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DIVERSITY, EQUITY & INCLUSION OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE

Niagara Region

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Executive Summary

The Niagara Region[1] and the 12 Local Area Municipalities joined the Coalition of Inclusive Municipalities in 2020 and are currently working towards developing a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Action Plan. To inform the Action Plan, data was analyzed from 28 focus groups with 110 Niagara Region staff members, and 82 community members, 1670 staff surveys, and 1599 community surveys. This report details opportunities for change discussed in all of the data sources summarized into seven themes:

1. **Inclusive workplace culture, leadership, and accountability -** Have strong leadership that models DEI values and make decisions with input from diverse staff members
    o   Keep leaders and staff accountable
    o   Invest in capacity and resources for staff to implement DEI work
    o   Create a safe and inclusive workplace for open discussions and provide accommodations where needed
    o   Celebrate diversity through informing staff and community members of significant cultural and religious dates
    o   Increase diversity in elected leadership through reducing barriers and providing mentorship
2. **Training** - Provide applicable training with multiple modes and opportunities for reflection and application
    o   Make DEI training mandatory for all staff
    o   Have specific DEI training for leaders and elected officials
    o   Provide DEI related resources to staff and community members
    o   Connect training with the broader DEI Action Plan
3. **Recruitment, Hiring, and Promotion** – Increase the diversity of applicant pools, candidates hired and promoted into leadership positions
    o   Implement strategies to expand diversity of applicant pool
    o   Provide more or targeted co-op opportunities and student intern positions
    o   Practice concealed hiring
    o   Examine job qualification requirements to reduce unintended barriers and consider different types of knowledge and lived experience
    o   Incorporate diversity-related questions into interviews
    o   Have more inclusive onboarding practices
    o   Encourage mentorship with leaders from minority backgrounds
4. **Policy** - Create and revise policies considering DEI
    o   Consider religious accommodations

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[1] Note: Niagara Region with a capital R refers to the Regional Municipality of Niagara as an organization, while Niagara region without a capital R refers to the geographical area of Niagara.

       ○ Have policies regarding collecting or changing personal information, particularly for individuals who are transgender

5. **Reporting incidents of bias, discrimination, or harassment –** Improve processes and responses regarding reporting incidents
   - Review or revise complaint and reporting processes for staff and community members
   - Improve responses to reports made
   - Provide better support for complainants

6. **Inclusive planning and evaluation** – Use a rigorous process that incorporates lived experience, community partners, and data collection to plan and evaluate programs and services
   - Practice inclusive planning incorporating people with lived experience
   - Improve collaboration with community organizations
   - Integrate disaggregated data into planning and evaluation

7. **Access to services** – Improve access to and communication about services for all community members
   - Have inclusive promotion of current programs and services
   - Make it easier to for community members to provide feedback
   - Improve public education on DEI topics
   - Provide relevant and accessible programs and services
   - Have clear signage throughout the Region
   - Create safe spaces for community members
   - Continue efforts for coordinated transportation, including paratransit
   - Improve access to health care for marginalized groups
   - Support police to improve their responses to DEI related incidents
   - Continue efforts towards providing more affordable housing and supporting people experiencing homelessness

Conclusion

This information will be combined with the Environmental Scan, Niagara Region Staff DEI Experiences Report, and Community DEI Experiences Report to inform the creation of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Action Plan. The Action Plan will be created with input from internal staff, the Niagara Region Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Advisory Committee, as well as other community members.

1.0 Introduction

On September 18, 2020, Niagara Region and the 12 Local Area Municipalities joined the Coalition of Inclusive Municipalities. In response to joining the Coalition, the Region agreed to develop a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Action Plan. One of the steps to create the plan is to gather data from Regional staff and community members in order to get a diverse range of perspectives regarding the current barriers, successes, and recommended opportunities moving forward. To accomplish this, focus groups were conducted with staff and community members from June to August 2021, a staff survey was conducted from September 20 to October 8, 2021 and a community survey was conducted from November 12 to December 2, 2021.

These focus groups and surveys provided data on staff and community experiences of discrimination, incident reporting, and training relevant to DEI. This report compliments the Environmental Scan Summary, the Staff Experiences Report, and the Community DEI Experiences Report. While those three reports provided information about best practices and the current state, this report is focused on opportunities for change moving forward based on seven key themes arising from the research. All of these data sources mentioned above will be used to inform the creation of the DEI Action Plan.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Sample

2.1.1 Focus Group Participants

A total of 28 focus groups were conducted, 17 with Niagara Region staff members, and 11 with community members. A total of 110 Regional staff and 82 community members participated in the focus groups. See tables one and two, which describe the topic area and total participants for staff and community members.

Staff participants volunteered to participate in the focus groups and identified which groups they could participate in based on demographics or their department. DEI staff allocated participants to focus groups based on demographics as well as availability. Community member focus group participants were chosen due to either having lived experience as part of the category, or being a staff member that works with community members from that category. Each focus group was centered on a specific diversity category, however, individuals participating in one focus group may also identify as members of other diversity categories. Participants were encouraged to share how other aspects of identity have also impacted their experiences even if it was not the specific topic of the focus group that they attended.

Table 1: Regional Staff Focus Group Participants

Diversity category	Number of focus groups	Number of participants
Race/Ethnicity	1	7
Born Outside of Canada	1	5
Gender	1	6
2SLGBTQQIA+	1	5
Disabilities	1	3
Religious/Spiritual Affiliation	1	5
Francophone	1	4
Department/Division Based	10	75
TOTAL	**17**	**110**

Table 2: Community Member Focus Group Participants

Diversity category	Number of focus groups	Number of participants
Race/Ethnicity	1	6
Born Outside of Canada	1	5
Gender	1	9
2SLGBTQQIA+	1	7
Disabilities	2	20
Individuals Experiencing Homelessness	1	5
Francophone	1	5
Low Income	1	12
Older Adults	1	6
All	1	7
TOTAL	**11**	**82**

2.1.3 Staff Survey Participants

The 2021 Niagara Region Welcoming and Inclusive Workplace Survey was launched on September 20, 2021 by TalentMap, to 3884 employees. The survey was closed on October 8, 2021. The survey was voluntary and confidential, a total of 1670 surveys were completed, a 43% overall response rate. See the Staff DEI Experiences Report for a full breakdown of the participant demographics.

2.1.4 Community Survey Participants

The Community DEI Survey was available online from November 12 to December 1, 2021. The survey had a total of 2304 responses, after removing response sets with less than six responses and illegitimate responses to questions asked, a total of 1599 surveys were included in analysis. See the Community DEI Experiences Report for a full breakdown of the participant demographics.

2.2 Data Collection

2.2.1 Focus Group Data Collection

Focus groups were conducted either through Zoom or in-person. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all efforts were made to conduct the focus groups online in order to ensure that relevant public health and safety measures were followed. Accommodations were made to ensure that individuals that required a laptop to participate were able to access one. Focus groups lasted between 30-90 minutes in length. Each of the focus groups had a designated facilitator and administrative support.

2.2.2 Staff Survey Data Collection

The survey was promoted by email and through internal staff newsletters to encourage participation. The survey was expected to take approximately ten minutes to complete. All staff were sent a personal link to take the survey. This allowed the company hired to administer the survey, TalentMap, to determine what responses came from specific departments and divisions. All collected data was provided to the DEI staff in aggregated form, which could be filtered and sorted through multiple variables of interest to view trends. Data was not revealed in samples of less than five people to protect anonymity and remove the potential for identification of individuals.

2.2.3 Community Survey Data Collection

The survey could be accessed using any computer or mobile device. It was checked for accessibility and could be used with a screen reader or other assistive devices. When the survey closed, an initial report was provided by Alchemer using a web platform, as well as the data provided in Excel.

The survey was promoted through a DEI List serve, outreach to a diverse selection of community organizations that serve different categories of Niagara residents in all 12 Local Area Municipalities. The link for the survey was promoted through social media and with the use of paid advertising through Facebook. A media release outlined the importance of the survey, which received coverage in multiple local news outlets. Posters and post cards were created in French and English and distributed across the region.

2.2.3 Data Confidentiality

Niagara Region and DEI staff are committed to maintaining confidentiality at each stage of the data collection process. Focus group participants signed a consent form which outlined important information surrounding the focus group including what participants consented to by being part of the focus groups, how confidentiality would be maintained before, during and after the focus groups, how the information would be used to inform future direction, and other privacy considerations. Consent was also explicitly asked for prior to survey participation. All survey responses were confidential. Only DEI staff have access to focus group and survey data in a restricted access, secure shared folder. DEI staff are committed to ensuring that no names, or any other self-identifying information from the focus groups will be used in any reports, references, presentations or material shared with anyone outside of the DEI staff.

2.3 Analysis

2.3.1 Focus Group Data Analysis

DEI staff analyzed the data using the qualitative analysis software NVivo, version 12. Analysis of interview data was primarily inductive, and transcripts were reviewed with material pulled out for further analysis, beginning with open coding, which became more focused and resulted in categorical coding. A coding framework was developed by DEI staff. Data was coded with further categories created when necessary. There was a total of 81 different codes. Throughout the presentation of qualitative material, names were removed, and potentially identifying details about individuals' identities were omitted to ensure confidentiality. The rest of the document uses selected interview quotes, with context added where necessary.

2.3.2 Staff Survey Data Analysis

The analysis of the staff survey data included descriptive statistical analysis, disaggregated proportions, and heat maps. These all involved calculating the percentage of people that answered each question. For the disaggregated results, responses based on demographic data was compared to organizational averages or other like responses in the same demographic category. The heat maps were used for a set of seven DEI related statements which participants were asked to state their level of agreement with on a five point Likert scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". These responses were averaged and then compared to the organizational average based on various demographic categories.

2.3.3 Community Survey Data Analysis

Survey data was cleaned for duplicate responses and adjusted to a format that is compatible with SPSS. Questions that provided an 'other' option were analyzed thematically with additional categories added to the quantitative data where applicable. Quantitative analysis was completed using IBM SPSS Statistics 27, primarily using frequency and cross tabulation functions. Qualitative analysis of open ended responses was conducted using thematic analysis, comparing the themes identified within the survey, or in comparison to previous research conducted by the Niagara Region DEI team.

3.0 Opportunities for Change

Through the analysis of the staff and community focus groups, as well as the staff and community surveys, this section is divided into seven themes:

1. Inclusive workplace culture, leadership, and accountability
2. Training
3. Recruitment, hiring, and promotion
4. Policy
5. Reporting incidents of bias, discrimination, or harassment
6. Inclusive planning and evalution
7. Access to services

Each section provides an explanation of the key subthemes within each theme, using narrative summaries and direct quotes from participants.

3.1 Inclusive Workplace Culture, Leadership, and Accountability

Ensuring an inclusive workplace culture with leadership and accountability is foundational to see a cultural shift throughout the organization. It involves many different components including leadership setting the tone, ensuring employees and elected officials are held accountable, investing in DEI resources, creating safe and inclusive spaces, and increasing diversity in elected leadership.

3.1.1 Leadership

Participants highlighted that tangible and widespread changes will only occur if they are adopted at a structural level. Leaders must buy-in and there must be an effort to embed an equity lens throughout all of the Region's services and programs. Some of the participants reinforced the idea that Regional Council and Senior leadership sets the tone for the organization, and community more broadly. Many participants highlighted that it is

especially important to hold Regional Council accountable for their words and actions. As representatives of Niagara, their actions and comments carry greater weight.

> *"We can participate in all kinds of training and resources but unless we have committed leadership in the region, then all of these trainings are not going to go far enough."* Community member

Many participants expressed that it is the role of the manager to establish a safe space and encourage staff to have ongoing dialogues about DEI issues. Managers should lead by example, through actions such as asking about pronouns during the onboarding process, or showing allyship through putting up rainbow triangles in their offices and taking the time to educate themselves on barriers faced by the 2SLGBTQQIA+ community. Managers play an important role in listening to current barriers related to DEI of their staff and responding appropriately. Managers need to take complaints seriously and cannot minimize the severity of any concerns brought forward. They should take sufficient time to listen to complaints, and respond accordingly.

Many participants expressed that managers should receive appropriate training and encourage their staff to participate in training opportunities related to DEI. Managers can affect how seriously their employees engage in DEI learning, and can facilitate this process by treating DEI work as more or equally important to other tasks. Participants highlighted the importance of being allocated dedicated time to engage in training sessions and the need to embed reflexive practices and conversations into learning after these sessions.

This is not to say that Regional Council and leaders should be making decisions without input from others, especially staff and community members with lived experience. One participant cautioned against leaders taking their own interpretation of DEI suggestions and implementing it from a top down fashion.

> *"Those suggestions no longer look like what they were intended to be. I can tell it was derived from the idea but it's not what was necessarily intended or possibly misses the point. And I think that comes from folks actioning those pieces when they don't have that identity experience, right? So things can get lost in translation there."* Regional staff

Instead, those with the power to impact change and those currently facing barriers must work together to co-develop solutions. Participants see value in different levels of government, different levels of the organization, and community partners working together to address barriers. Participants stressed the importance of increased collaboration among all the Local Area Municipalities ensuring that all Local Municipalities work together to

resolve issues. While the Region should be leading diversity work in Niagara, participants recognize that the Region alone does not have the resources, expertise or capacity to be all things to all people. Other service providers in Niagara should be highlighted and leveraged in order to maximize effectiveness in order to address the complexity of diversity issues in Niagara. Participants recognize that broader structural changes will take time, perhaps generations, to be fully realized. Diverse leadership is important in all organizations ranging from schools, to workplaces, recreational and youth sports organizations, social agencies, and community boards. This can help ensure that initiatives are rolled out with a structured and connected approach.

3.1.2 Accountability

A key element of improving DEI at an organizational level is ensuring accountability for staff. This includes making sure that leaders are embodying and incorporating DEI principles into their work, setting tangible goals, and collecting and utilizing data to measure and monitor results.

Data collection is viewed as an important part of this process in order to track success over time and ultimately eliminate a toxic and discriminatory culture in Niagara. Leaders must be particularly held accountable for their words and actions. Participants felt strongly that equity issues need to be a priority for current and future council. Niagara community members have a role to play in ensuring that this occurs through voting for candidates who recognize the importance of equity issues, and demonstrate a concerted effort in addressing them.

Participants highlighted that improving DEI practices is a continuous process requiring constant adjustments based on analyzing data, and incorporating community and staff feedback. Data should be collected periodically through surveys, focus groups, interviews and other mediums. Staff participants highlighted the importance of making the outcomes of data collection accessible to various staff and community members. It is important that DEI planning is intentional, with benchmarks and deliverables along the way. As one participant put it,

> *"We have to encourage an output driven culture as it relates to DEI…You can't argue the outputs if it's there for everybody to see."* Community member

Participants expressed collecting baseline information, establishing realistic goals for different intervals, setting out a clear plan to achieve those goals, and then tracking progress over time. DEI staff should constantly be looking for feedback and ways to improve. This feedback and measurement should include both quantitative and qualitative

data, to capture change over time and include the human element that helps people connect to the change.

Community survey participants believe that there needs to be increased punishment, disciplinary measures, and accountability for individuals that discriminate against others. This includes strengthening applicable legislation regarding discrimination and enforcing this legislation. Transparency is an integral part of this process. Greater investment in DEI resources (finances, staff time, and dedicated staff positions) is important to participants, particularly within Niagara Region's major decision-making tables (Niagara Regional Council, Niagara Regional Police Service, etc.). These positions should not just be performative, but rather, must lead to tangible changes.

3.1.3 Investing in Necessary Resources

Participants highlighted that accountability requires investing in the appropriate resources such as finances, staff time, and dedicated staff positions into DEI initiatives. Participants felt strongly that the Region should do everything reasonable to maximize the success and continuity of DEI initiatives.

> *"So I think if the Region is really serious about making a change, then we have to commit resources to it, we can't say, 'Oh, you know what this is the amount of resources we have. And we're just going to shoehorn whatever you guys want to do. If it fits fine, if it doesn't, good luck'. Right? Then it looks like we don't really care about it."* Regional staff

There should be concerted support from the Region in ensuring the success of marginalized groups in the broader Niagara community. One notable way to do this is providing funding/monetary support for businesses owned and led by women, people of colour, and other marginalized groups.

Participants highlighted that investing in resources should include monetary investment and external resources. The expectation should not be for marginalized groups to take on extra work at the side of their desk to fulfill work outside of their capacity and skillset.

> *"Investing in outside people who are specialists and are experts in the knowledge content that we need, and having them come in and facilitate these workshops and discussions."* Regional staff

Without the necessary resources, participants expressed concern about long-term sustainability and buy-in. Staff noted that there have been other dedicated teams and initiatives related to diversity at Niagara Region previously such as in Public Health and

the corporate RED team, but that those initiatives eventually folded. However, participants expressed optimism about long term impact this time around, with dedicated personnel in place.

> "*We now have someone leading this as their job. I think we have a better chance of keeping it sustainable and keeping it in front of people's minds. I think it's a big step to have a team together that's working on it.*" Regional staff

3.1.5 Creating Safe and Inclusive Work Spaces

In order to create an inclusive workplace, issues of bias and discrimination need to be addressed. Current practice and recommended changes include creating a safe space for open discussion, adapting and removing people from the situation, and providing accommodations for individuals.

Creating safe spaces within teams can go a long way for building inclusion and are potentially a less formal way to address issues as they arise, rather than requiring official reports. Elements of a safe space that were discussed by focus group participants include embracing difference, establishing a personal connection, being consistent with responses to staff, having opportunities for clear and regular communication, getting issues out in the open and discussing them in a safe manner. Others include practicing pronunciation of people's names, leading by example, working towards concrete actions as a team, and engaging in reflexive practice through regular check-ins with the team. Some staff appreciated when their manager had an "open door" approach that welcomed honest discussions and through which were able to provide emotional support.

DEI needs to be integrated into regular staff and community interactions. This means speaking to and treating colleagues and clients with respect and examining personal biases. Participants discussed how workplace culture can impact not only how much DEI is valued at the organization but can also impact how work is carried out, which is essential in seeing tangible changes in the organization.

In some situations, staff have adapted and made changes to address bias and discrimination. Staff would prefer that offenders receive education, or that the issues are addressed with the whole team, not needing to single out the offender, but with the desire to see change occur and not have the issue ignored.

It was recommended that accommodations be made to support staff to ensure their full participation in work whenever possible. Being able to work from home during the COVID pandemic was considered to be a blessing for some focus group participants, who recognized that the flexibility offered, and the lack of triggers in their controlled environment led to fewer sick days and higher levels of productivity. They expressed the

desire to maintain this flexibility as much as possible post COVID-19. Niagara Region works with all staff to provide accommodations where possible, balancing the needs of employees with position requirements and job context.

Staff noted that some individuals, especially those with invisible disabilities may be hesitant to speak with their managers about getting accommodations, or they have had negative experiences in the past where they felt their medical conditions were not taken seriously. To address those aspects, managers can reach out the Human Resources to receive information and support so they know how to appropriately respond and process accommodation requests from employees.

Clear communication can help ensure buy-in and participation among staff and community members and reinforce values of DEI by keeping staff and community members informed about current initiatives.

> *"Being confident to celebrate those* [DEI initiatives that we are already doing and doing well] *because I think that helps people feel safe and build that culture of inclusion when we celebrate things that we are doing."* Regional staff

Participants expressed a desire for more effective communication about diversity initiatives and opportunities both internally for staff and externally for community members. Participants acknowledged that the Region can benefit from using communication tools like social media, internal emails, and staff newsletters, as well as other communication methods such as posters and word of mouth.

3.1.7 Significant Dates

One way to work towards creating an inclusive workplace culture is to understand and acknowledge significant cultural or religious dates. There were five key ideas of how to acknowledge and celebrate such days.

1) Have a calendar of significant dates to help staff plan around important dates.
2) Inform staff and community members of the dates
3) Organize events or education sessions around the day
4) Accommodations for staff to take religious holidays off from work
5) Diverse groups should be acknowledged and thanked throughout the year, this avoids tokenism and shows the value of a diverse work force

Communications can include regular emails and newsletters, social media messages, messages from the Chair or CAO, or posters put up around the organization, especially in outer offices. They can provide teachings about the event and why it is significant,

messages of celebration, thank-you or acknowledgement of staff from that particular group. Messages should be authentic, and if recited verbally, the speaker should practice saying words in other languages to ensure proper pronunciation. The Region could ask for volunteers from staff or the community to provide input on the messages. Staff or community members belonging to different groups associated with the special dates could be highlighted. For example, staff that celebrate Diwali could be spotlighted and they should have the platform to highlight the importance of Diwali and any associated cultural and familial traditions. The messages could include links to additional websites, videos, or other resources.

Events could include food, such as having a potluck within a department, division, or team (outside of COVID), or inviting caterers that could bring authentic food into the cafeteria for particular dates. Such events could be used as opportunities for fundraisers around a certain related cause or for general diversity-related work through the Region.

3.1.8 Increasing Diversity in Elected Leadership

Examining current processes to identify obstacles encountered in the race for elected office was ranked as the highest priority by 42% of the community survey participants, when asked to rank four options for "ways to address barriers to leadership roles faced by people with diverse lived experiences". See Appendix A for the full list of ranked priorities. Community members strongly expressed the need for diverse lived experience on regional and local level councils. It is important that for those with diverse lived experience but perhaps a lack of practical experience with governmental councils receive the appropriate support. For example, these individuals should be provided training and mentorship opportunities in order that they can build the necessary leadership skills. Going beyond optics was important so that individuals with diverse lived experience have more opportunities to provide their suggestions, which are considered and lead to changes.

Participants highlighted that more should be done to address discrimination and harassment towards minority groups when campaigning for elected leadership positions.

> *"Many local women politicians are subjected to vile and vitriolic comments and threats on social media if they dare express opinions."* Community member

Threats and hate towards anyone should not be tolerated and although participants focused the above comment on non-straight white men, that demographic has still received threats and has been the target of recent protests and vandalism, which is not acceptable in any format.

Participants felt that allies in leadership positions with privilege had a particularly important role to play in speaking out against forms of exclusion. A couple of participants importantly noted that a broader review of barriers in entering leadership positions would be worthwhile to address systemic issues.

> *"Barriers exist not only in processes for running for elected positions but also within the position/responsibilities themselves and institutional policies/practices, attitudes and culture."* Community member

Participants provided an important reminder that advisory committees and elected positions are only part of the equation and emphasized the need to redefine leadership roles and/or create new ones so that there are more of them.

> "*Create positions such as 'experts' 'advocates' or 'ombudspersons' and have these be leadership positions for example."* Community member

Participants cautioned an approach where minority groups become burdened and overwhelmed by attempting to do everything themselves without support from others. It is important that barriers towards participation are addressed by going to where individuals with lived experience are rather than having them come to you.

> *"It is not fair to expect people with diverse lived experiences to have to do all of the legwork to have their voice heard. Go to them instead of forcing them to go to you. These types of roles also pose significant risks to psychological (and even physical) safety, result in lost income for time off work, are costly (campaigning, child care, transportation, etc.) and are overall very inaccessible for those with lived experiences."* Community member

While participants expressed strong support for identifying obstacles encountered in the race for elected office, many viewed it only as an important starting point of continual conversations. As one participant puts it,

> *"I believe reviewing processes is always a good starting point; however, there needs to be conversation with those who are not coming forward to participate in the various elected roles in Niagara. What keeps them from entering the process?"* Community member

Some participants expressed belief that encouraging, supporting, and inspiring individuals from minority groups to participate in regional and city council would be worthwhile.

"Encourage people who represent different social groups to participate in the regional and city council. Right now there are not lots of minority groups being represented, such as race." Community member

Different strategies were proposed to potentially reduce barriers for participation in elected leadership positions. Many of them centered on addressing barriers related to low-income.

"Provide funding for low-income candidates to run campaigns. Running for office should never be limited to the rich." Community member

"Increase the pay of elected officials so marginalized community members can participate in the democratic process. You can't participate in local government if you don't have food or rent money." Community member

"If there exists any type of "fee" to run for elected officials, eliminate that. That's the cost of democracy." Community member

Providing mentoring opportunities targeting people with people with diverse lived experiences received the second most support relating to "ways to address barriers to leadership roles faced by people with diverse lived experiences". Participants emphasized the need to provide mentorship and opportunities to under-represented communities to support them. It is important that mentors be committed, qualified, and ideally also have diverse lived experiences. Participants conceded that it may be difficult to find individuals that meet all these criteria. One participant highlighted that mentorship would be beneficial to support underrepresented groups in electoral office.

"Mentor these individuals from the beginning to the end! Don't leave them hanging in the middle of an election when they're starting to receive pushback and hate. Make sure they have the resources to support their campaign (financially or otherwise), so that they have a fair shot. Pair them with a mentor who has successfully pursued a political campaign, so that they have guidance throughout." Community member

Participants emphasized that those who share their expertise and time should be appropriately compensated for it.

3.2 Training

Participants were asked to rank five options for opportunities for change relating to "ways to educate the public about barriers faced by people with diverse lived experiences and how to reduce the barriers" from most to least important. The highest ranked idea was

improve access for education for employees/employers on addressing discrimination, with 33% of participants ranking this the most important.

Training was the most referenced way to address DEI related issues in staff and community focus groups. Discussion areas in this section involved what types or modes of training are recommended, when and how often training should occur, potential content for trainings, who should take trainings, additional DEI resources, and critical factors that lead to successful trainings.

3.2.1 Types or Modes of Training

Focus group participants suggested multiple modes of training, which could be put together to form a structured program, or continue to be offered as options to staff. Specific content could be presented virtually through on-line modules, YouTube videos, podcasts, or in-person with facilitators either from the organization, or externally. The in-person trainings could involve aspects of experiential learning with hands-on opportunities to engage with different people or locations. Examples of this are paramedics taking shifts at the Supervised Consumption Site, or the police going to visit the Hindu Samaj.

> *"We now have paramedics, like our newer trainees… spending some time at the consumption and treatment site. Spending some time working directly with* [the] *street outreach and homeless population so they're seeing them in a different context, rather than just when they show up to a 911 call."* Regional staff

Participants stressed that training should continue after the end of the course and lead to further discussions. The discussions could be formal, such as through planned events or lunch and learns, or informal in nature, occurring between staff or staff and managers in a more relaxed manner. Focus group participants recommended discussions occur between various levels of staff, such as between senior leaders and front line staff who could provide some insight into experiences of front line staff. Similarly, it is recommended to engage with people with lived experience and listen to their stories to expand understanding from a different perspective.

Incorporating reflexive practice is one example that came up from discussions. Reflexive practice involves reviewing situations and debriefing from them, considering how you felt, what was said, and thinking about whether improvements could be made in a similar situation moving forward. This allows staff the time to think about current situations that are likely to occur again and work towards improving interactions.

> *"It's not a one-time module, it's a continuous process. There should be reflexive practice embedded into this module like… let's follow up afterwards with the team.*

What can we do to improve our programs, what can we do to improve the client experience?" Regional staff

Reflexive practice helps training participants absorb the training materials better and provides opportunities to turn the information learned at the training into practical changes in their daily work.

"The Indigenous cultural safety training … I did a few years back… was heavy into the reflection piece and [it] *really helps you think about that unconscious bias that you might have."* Regional staff

3.2.2 Frequency of Trainings

The majority of focus group participants were in support of mandatory training for all staff. They equated it to WHIMS, CPR, or other mandatory trainings that must be kept up to date (at least once every one or two years). Most participants suggested having diversity-related training incorporated into onboarding or orientation. Supporters of mandatory training explained how people who are already interested and working to become more inclusive are often the staff that will take optional diversity-related courses.

"I think when it's an optional module only people who really care about it, do it, and often the people [that] *actually need some foundational education on these terms will never open it, will never complete it or they will complete it by sharing answers with their friends."* Regional Staff

Some suggested that training should be team or division specific and implemented at that level so that the content is particularly relevant to the staff, while others thought the training should be the same for all staff.

"And I think if we just tailored to maybe each team or like each division and it's working with each manager, … and maybe someone from each team also who then, you know, attends the sessions. I mean… otherwise it's just an echo chamber, the same people who care about the stuff showing up to the same meetings. And you need to find a way to bring in everyone, or bring this information to everyone that's accessible and relevant to them." Regional Staff

There were some staff and community members that cautioned against mandatory training, citing that it may lead to resentment, just ticking a box, or people just getting a certificate and then going back to the same actions. Some participants believe that by forcing individuals to engage in mandatory training will have little effect on leading to broad, sustainable changes. It is important to find a balance so that staff don't simply feel

forced to take training but that the necessary training still occur. Providing sufficient opportunities or a culture shift so that it is seen as something that is desirable for everyone is believed to be worthwhile.

> "*It's really hard to force people to take training like mandatory inclusion training, it doesn't go very well. It's about finding and building that culture so that everyone sees this is valuable… like how do you build that culture so it's [DEI] is valued and people don't see it as the compliance hammer.*" Regional Staff

3.2.3 Potential Training Content

Some participants mentioned that there should be education and dialogues about broader, complex phenomenon like white privilege, while other participants emphasized the importance of education and dialogues about issues specific to the Region such as overt or subtle experiences of discrimination of Regional employees. The following is a list of recommended content provided by focus group and survey participants.

- Indigenous Cultural Safety
- Cultural Safety
- Anti-Black Racism
- Anti-Indigenous Racism
- Gender Diversity
- Intercultural Communication
- Anti-oppressive Practice
- Unconscious Bias
- Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Foundations
- Anti-Bias training
- Mental Health Training
- Bullying in the Workplace
- Building Empathy

- Harassment and other exclusive behaviours
- Education about different kinds of discrimination
- Using Inclusive Language
- Different religions or cultures
- Gender Based Analysis Plus (GBA+)
- Human Rights
- Age Friendly Training
- 2SLGBTQQIA+
- Difficult conversations
- Addictions and Supervised Injection Sites
- Reporting Discrimination
- Disabilities and Accommodations

Community members recommended a greater push by the Region to ensure AODA compliance. Participants felt that individuals belonging to minority groups should be involved in the development of training opportunities. Participants would like the community to be more engaged, perhaps through inviting charismatic speakers and leaders when running community events.

"I think if people had more opportunities to hear real life experiences, or to interact with people 'different' from themselves, there may be better understanding."
Community member

"Make the city council work with the homeless population by doing a soup kitchen made and served by city council members 3 days… so that they see the true issues and actually do something to make a difference to our most vulnerable population!"
Community member

Regardless of the type of training, interaction among diverse community members is important to share stories, listen to each other's stories, and improving understanding and empathy. In educating all ages, participants stressed the need to develop and conduct programs run by diverse educators with strong knowledge and lived experience.

3.2.4 Training Participants

Most staff focus group participants advocated that all staff take training. It was particularly stressed that leadership should be the first to receive training on these topics. Participants acknowledged that it was often those in leadership and managerial positions that need the most education on diversity issues. Participants emphasized the importance of educating elected officials that lead the Region so as to promote policies and actions that lead to inclusion of all Niagara community members. Elected officials should be held accountable for their actions and words and should not be able to keep their positions if they contribute to a culture of exclusion. It was important for participants that education for leaders in Niagara be an ongoing process. One participant suggested that ongoing dialogues between elected officials and community members can be a particularly important form of education that can lead to important learning and likely result in tangible changes.

Furthermore, it was felt that front line staff interacting with the public should take relevant trainings. Managers should be trained to be able to support their staff and have difficult discussions to hold staff accountable to certain standards of interaction. Several participants also emphasized the importance for Regional Council to engage in regular diversity training.

It was also suggested that training be supported through Unions at the Region, completed by contractors hired by the Region, and that training be available for organizations in the community, or for the public.

3.2.5 Provide DEI Resources

Participants listed multiple resources that they would find helpful to supplement training sessions. They recommended the resources be available on the Vine, or other easy to

access locations, as well as being made aware of the resources through emails or other means. Some staff suggested developing resources to education team members about culture competence or resources to address commonly asked questions that people may be shy to ask. A related suggestion was to have a place where people can submit questions anonymously and answers could go out in a newsletter or through the Vine.

Staff requested access to important DEI related documents, and easier access to information. Disseminating the information to all the Regional locations, may require mail outs or posters in the locations outside of headquarters. Including staff input on the content of such information would ensure the content is relevant and action oriented.

Improve community members' access to anti-discrimination information was ranked as the second priority among participants in the survey in terms of ways to educate the public about barriers faced by people with diverse lived experiences. Participants emphasized the importance for community members to access anti-discrimination information. They highlighted that leveraging partnerships with local partners and organizations in Niagara would be beneficial to reach different demographics such as those in different age ranges. Participants particularly noted the importance of providing information in a variety of settings such as the YMCA, Community Centers etc. in order to reach different individuals in Niagara and provide information and education to all.

Participants also highlighted the need for all community members to be able to access resources and educational opportunities. There may be barriers for members of the community such as individuals with disabilities, immigrants, mothers (particularly single mothers), and low-income individuals to attend and fully participate in educational opportunities, and therefore accommodations need to be made.

Community members noted that a regional website would be important in order to compile all useful education and resources to be shared with everyone.

> *"A regional website that has free seminars, worksheets, educational resources… would be awesome."* Community member

Providing and promoting anti-discrimination resources was ranked as the 3rd priority among participants in the survey. Participants noted that there is no shortage of information or resources across social media, news, business organizations etc. The challenge then becomes sharing timely and trustworthy resources widely and effectively in a way that reduces accessibility barriers. It is important that resources and information shared with community and staff are shared from reputable source to avoid sharing misinformation. Many of the comments related to this focused on the accessibility of information. One participant noted the value of leveraging social media to make posts

about different community members and organizations doing important diversity work in Niagara, and how others might get involved.

3.2.6 Critical Success Factors for Training

Regardless of the content, participants, or when training is conducted, there are a few critical success factors that Regional staff and community members discussed. These include ensuring that training is presented in a positive light rather than punitive, and that training have specific learning outcomes, target specific staff, and is applicable to specific contexts relevant to their work. For example, a training session might be developed for in how to provide culturally-appropriate care for newcomers, as one example. Participants cautioned against training that further creates division between different individuals, groups, or pockets of the Region. In no circumstance should participants be ridiculed for not knowing as much as other folks that attend training sessions. Instead, training participants should be free to ask difficult questions and grow in their own learning and knowledge. This will ensure that individuals will be encouraged to attend other training sessions in future.

A mix of formal and informal learning opportunities was recommended by participants. Individuals want education opportunities to not be overly academic, but instead, have real-world examples and be part of larger training program. Participants stressed that education and training should not just be about checking a box but instead, should focus on shifting mindset. Participants are optimistic that the right training will open the space for real dialogue and communication to happen.

It is necessary that training is provided before telling the public that you have a safe space. A structured approach that integrates training into a broader DEI strategy is important. This will involve periodically building a course catalogue on different diversity topics. Staff feedback regarding training sessions should be continually sought in order to monitor progress and ensure that there can be continuous improvement. Finally, ensure that there is leadership support. When there is buy-in, support, and modeling from leaders, the rest of staff are more likely to desire change and embrace DEI principles.

3.3 Recruitment, Hiring and Promotion

Recruitment, hiring, and promotion practices, in participants' views, are one of most effective ways to see an organizational shift in culture in the long-term. Community survey participants highlighted the importance of normalizing individuals with diverse lived experiences in various roles at Niagara Region, which would go a long way in addressing equity issues. It is important that there is greater encouragement to hire diverse individuals

to work in all jobs within Niagara, particularly in public-facing roles such as those in media relations, the police force, as educators, and other Regional service-provider roles.

Participants recognize the need to reduce barriers in employment. They felt strongly that the Region needs to lead by example in this process by increasing diversity in hiring and promotion, and encouraging other organizations in Niagara to do the same.

> *"Have visible minorities on the front lines, including wheelchair users. It's about visibility! Condition people to accept visible minorities!!!!"* Community member

3.3.1 Recruitment and Hiring Practices

Participants would like to see hiring policies reviewed and modified to ensure that an equity lens is applied to them. Leaders involved in hiring decisions expressed wanting more guidance on inclusive recruitment in order to have the tools to reduce barriers throughout the hiring process. Participants noted that the Region could benefit from re-strategizing recruitment and making sure that the Region is able to attract a broader pool of candidates that studied outside of the Region. Participants expressed a sentiment that the Region could benefit from looking to hire individuals from areas that are more diverse, such as the Greater Toronto Area.

Others stressed the importance of providing co-op and other student placement opportunities; these opportunities can allow minority groups, particularly new immigrants, racialized folks, and young people, to enter into the Region's workforce. More diversity in hiring is important in all roles, particularly in public-facing roles. Regional staff, including those that interact with the community, should be representative of the community they serve. Staff self-identifying from marginalized groups expressed that greater diversity would also beneficial to staff as many currently not feel comfortable in spaces where they do not currently see representation, particularly in cases of reporting.

Community survey participants recognize the importance of hiring and promoting individuals from diverse backgrounds in both the private and public sector. For participants, greater diversity should also include diversity of thought and experiences in addition to demographics. While many recognized the importance of greater diversity, they had different ideas of where the emphasis should be. Some participants highlighted the need for a concealed hiring process in which applicant names and other self-identifying information are unknown to HR and the hiring manager. They believe that this would ensure that the most qualified candidate would be hired.

> *"Two different names, the same experience and time and time again, the name has an effect on who is eventually selected for the job."* Regional Staff

One participant recounted an example from a previous employer where they did not even consider people with names that "*were too hard to pronounce, or email addresses were ridiculous like 'partygirl99' whose resumes were just thrown in the garbage.*" Concealed hiring would take some of those biases out of the process so the hiring manager can focus on the content of the resume and an applicant's experiences rather than other information.

Other participants emphasized the importance of reviewing current hiring and promotion practices in order to identify areas of improvement. Collecting demographic data regularly can help to evaluate progress over time. Tracking and evaluating trends over time can help to identify gaps and develop targeted strategies for teams to address those gaps

> *"Provide full statistical transparency on demographics of all municipal employees at all levels across all service offerings. Make the data real-time and show trends towards fully balanced workforce across demographics. For instance, if the municipal workforce is dominated in certain areas by one demographic an effort should be made to balance that mixture."* Community member

Community members felt strongly that when ensuring greater representation of diversity in leadership positions, it is important to avoid tokenism. Participants did not want to get the impression that greater diversity in leadership would simply be a quota to fill – an action not accompanied with tangible change.

There was strong support among community survey participants for community outreach from the Region. Participants believe that new outreach programs should be introduced that are specifically focused on recruiting more diverse people intergenerationally. One participant suggested that this might involve going to high schools, post-secondary schools to promote working within the Region. Other suggestions include better partnerships with multicultural or newcomer focused organizations, and outreach to provincial networks. Outreach efforts to promote a diverse workforce is thought to be important and will lead to diversity in demographics but also diversity of thought and experiences, where employees can learn from each other.

3.3.2 Changes in Job Requirements

While many community survey participants emphasized the need for greater representation in various positions in Niagara, particularly leadership positions, many participants stressed the importance of hiring the best candidate for the job. The individual that should get the job should have the necessary experience and education. On the other hand, some participants chose to problematize labels of merit and ability, highlighting the need to be wary of the phenomenon of credentialism –in which greater credentials

(education, experience) are increasingly required for roles to the detriment of those who do not have the privilege of acquiring these credentials. The issue of credentialism was also brought up in reference to the experiences of newcomers and immigrants.

> *"Make education equivalence a part of immigration so people capable of the job are not forced to redo their education to work here."* Community member

Similar to this, others stressed that while individuals should be assessed on merits and ability, it is important that there be programs and resources to provide extra support for communities that may be particularly disadvantaged in attaining employment positions (particularly in leadership), which could be extra training, development, and/or mentorship.

Specific qualifications and job requirements are currently required for many roles at the Region. Participants cautioned against the phenomenon of over-qualification in which higher levels of education and experience are sought for particular roles that do not require it. Instead, individuals showed support for considering different kinds of knowledge, including lived experience when identifying the best candidates. Participants noted that education is too often prioritized over other skills and knowledge, which sometimes can come at the expense of overlooking other significant soft skills such as customer service and interpersonal skills.

> *"Having that connection with people from a particular population is something you can't teach in school."* Regional staff

Participants highlighted that reconsidering requirements for particular roles have already occurred in other major local institutions. For example, Brock University recently hired their first ever vice-provost without a PhD because they recognized the value of Indigenous Elder knowledge. Participants acknowledged that this could go a long way in reducing inequalities related to diversity in hiring, as participants attributed many of the existing gaps to larger structural issues surrounding whether individuals are even able to access qualifications or advanced degrees.

3.3.3 Diversity Interview Questions

A couple of staff participants highlighted the importance of embedding diversity questions within the interview process. Some divisions of the Region noted that they have already started doing this when hiring new employees. These questions can be scenario-based questions tailored to the particular role, for example, one question could ask how a service provider might create an inclusive environment for gender or sexual minorities. Niagara Region Senior Services, through Long Term Care currently includes a diversity-related question in their interviews.

In participants' views, embedding DEI should count towards hiring and should affect whether you get the job or not. Many staff participants had previously worked at organizations that already engaged in this practice.

> *"Who do we let in the door in the first place? It's* [ensuring DEI is] *not just a nice to do after you're in the door, it can affect whether you get in this door at all."* Regional staff

> "*It's not outside of the box for us to put in a question of 'how do you maintain a diverse and equitable workplace when you're communicating with members of our community?'"* Regional staff

One manager in the focus groups had not considered the practice before but through the discussion was planning on doing so in the future, noting that they would like to see HR develop some prepared questions that they could draw on.

Participants highlighted that embedding diversity interview questions can be used as an opportunity for education when the individual is eventually onboarded. Based on how a new hire answered a question, staff could use this to educate them about their missions, values, and approach. Overall, individuals showed support for embedding diversity interview questions into the Niagara Region HR processes.

3.3.4 Onboarding

Onboarding was a major focus with regards to increasing diversity and inclusion. Many participants highlighted that education and training surrounding DEI should be made available to new employees as soon as they are welcomed into the organization in orientation. This should include explicit communication/training about expectations regarding conduct and current initiatives to promote DEI. Some participants expressed that they would be in favour of sharing current staff demographic percentages with new hires. Onboarding should highlight the importance of DEI and socialize new staff into upholding an inclusive environment.

Regional employees would like to see more quality "101" resources. In the long term, they envision this being a comprehensively developed resource bank that could provide foundational knowledge in order to start building a shared culture of DEI. Ideally, staff would want each department to develop the resources in order to tailor it to specific professional fields and roles. Participants stressed the importance of developing and integrating resources, education, and training in the onboarding practices, particularly in public-facing roles.

Some areas of the Region, like Long Term Care, expressed that they have already developed their own handbook specific to Long Term Care that includes DEI components. Their handbook is given to new volunteers, and includes information surrounding gender pronouns.

Other participants expressed the need for managers to take a more active role in building a culture of inclusion beginning when new employees are onboarded. Managers can and should play an integral role in making sure new employees feel welcome.

> *"My manager did something very positive. She said to me 'I see you use they/them pronouns. You're the first person in our program to ever use these pronouns. Would you like it if I sent out an e-mail just explaining the use of different pronouns?' She kind of did that pre-empting so that I didn't have to have that conversation. And I found that very helpful, especially the fact that she asked me before she did it. And I think that kind of onboarding was extremely nice.*" Regional staff

Staff expressed that new hires should have a forum to provide feedback about the onboarding process as well as a space to hear from new staff about how they are feeling in their new role, and if they have any suggestions for how they or other employees might better be supported. Once hired, staff expressed that it is important for DEI practices to continue to ensure that staff feel comfortable and safe, while being an employee at the Region. This includes accommodations and work flexibility whenever possible to ensure the full participation of employees.

3.3.5 Inclusive Promotion

Many focus group participants cautioned against an approach that solely looked at improving hiring in place or at the expense of promotion and progression within the organization. Focus group participants problematized organizations and practices that focused only on hiring for diversity and stopped there. These organizations, in their view, completely missed the mark in upholding DEI.

Participants emphasized the importance of ensuring that leaders reflect the diversity of the community they represent. They highlighted that diversity diminishes the higher up an organization you look, thus, participants advised being skeptical of organizations when they report their overall diversity statistics without showing the diversity in leadership and management positions.

There are a few ways to increase diversity in leadership positions and ensure the progression of minority groups within the Niagara Region. The key approach discussed

was through mentorship. Many participants highlighted the importance of mentors in helping guide them. Long-standing and well-respected employees taking people under their wing, answering their questions and supporting them goes a long way, according to participants. In this respect, staff expressed the importance of mentorship programs and advocated for reverse mentorship and access to mentors when being onboarded and throughout their tenure as a Regional employee.

Many of the staff that mentioned the importance of mentorship acknowledge that they were aware of the Region's current mentorship program. They would like to see this program be consistent, year-round and have willing mentors that will dedicate the appropriate time. While some participants mentioned knowing about mentorship programs, they believe that there is room to improve in communicating these opportunities to all employees. While participants are appreciative of the opportunity to be mentored, an effective mentorship program likely requires more individuals from minority groups in leadership positions.

> *"I'd like to hear about a diversity of experiences and how I can maybe navigate that. Right, like you know something you think about as someone who's born outside of Canada. You want a leader that you can speak to and connect with."* Regional staff

The lack of diverse leadership can also affect turnover, some participants admit.

> "*They [people belonging to minority groups] don't feel connected. They don't feel supported. They don't see any growth them for themselves so they end up going back to the city* [Toronto and surrounding areas]*".* Regional staff

It's an unideal and reciprocal predicament in some ways. Lack of diverse groups in leadership positions weakens the effectiveness of mentorship programs, while ineffective mentorship programs can create barriers in reaching leadership positions. In an attempt to resolve this, participants are in favour of talking to diverse employees and encouraging them to be mentors.

> "*And it might be talking to more diverse employees and saying, listen, there is an opportunity. We'd really like you to consider it. Not like a force but maybe just a slight nudge in that direction.*" Regional staff

Closely related to mentorship, participants highlighted the need to create more opportunities for marginalized groups, such as casual positions that can lead to permanent positions. There is belief that progression within the organization can be facilitated by the Region if the right kinds of opportunities are created with the appropriate support.

The progression of minority groups within an organization can also be facilitated through policies and mechanisms that encourage inclusion and allyship. A best practice that has newly emerged is the option to use equity and inclusion for performance measurement of management level employees. In other words, ensuring that leaders and new employees are committed to diversity, equity and inclusion can be facilitated by rewarding individuals for promoting DEI and incentivizing all employees to make a stronger commitment to it. DEI competencies can be considered as part of the promotion process, wherein one aspect of promotion can be focused on evaluating a potential candidate's commitment to championing DEI initiatives through their work. As a result, leaders can help maintain an intergenerational culture of inclusion through built-in succession.[2]

3.4 Policy

When looking at DEI best practices, policy was one of the least referenced across the data sources. This does not mean that creation and review of policy is unimportant, but rather, it can likely be attributed to staff either 1) being unaware of existing policies at Niagara Region that govern workplace conduct and/or 2) not actively thinking about the implications of policy when making suggestions for solutions.

It is important to note that while participants may have not always explicitly referenced policy, many of the solutions highlighted in this document will involve changes in policy including recruitment, hiring and promotion, training, access to services, collaboration and community engagement, and creating an inclusive workplace culture with accountability.

Nonetheless, a number of participants still explicitly referenced policy in focus group discussions. Participants expressed a variety of changes that they would like to see surrounding policy. Notably, many of the recommendations related to policy centered on accommodations for employees. Topics in this area included religious accommodations, collecting or changing personal information, and effectively creating and revising policy.

3.4.1 Religious Accommodations

Discussion surrounding policies often focused on the need for religious accommodations. Individuals would like to see a Regional policy that allows for religious accommodations in which individuals could work during Christian Holidays like Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, and in exchange get time off on a religious day that they celebrate. Managers should do their best to be aware of particularly important religious days and times in order to avoid scheduling important work commitments at a time that conflicts with a religious ritual or celebration. Moreover, managers should be committed to creating a culture where

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[2] City of Guelph. (2019). City of Guelph Employee Diversity and Inclusion Plan. https://guelph.ca/plans-and-strategies/diversity-strategy/

employees feel safe to request accommodations and flexible work schedules. Managers and employees should be able to openly communicate and collaborate to come up with a schedule that works for both of them.

> *"I think one policy that would be great is … allowing people to take a day off to observe their cultural or religious celebration, which currently doesn't happen. So I celebrate Iranian New Year which is in March. And I always have to take that off as a vacation day. And I don't celebrate Christmas and I get Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, Boxing Day off. And we don't really do anything for those days. I would love to be able to take time off* [for Iranian New Year] *and not have to worry about like a training happening on that day that I can't miss."* Regional staff

3.4.2 Collecting or Changing Personal Information

The creation and review of policy should center on making sure employees feel included and accommodated by workplace processes. This includes reviewing processes and software, to ensure that they are simplified and clearly communicated. In instances where regulatory practices or the Region is required to collect and keep a non-preferred name (for tax purposes for example), these reasons should be clearly communicated. When collecting personal information such as in job applications, participants also highlighted that this must take place with an equity lens, ensuring that all groups are represented and accounted for. Participants highlighted that best practice could be leaving things open-ended when possible when individuals are asked demographic questions so that they can self-identify with the language they want to use.

> *"And then a review of internal processes…in HR we take a lot of personal information things relating to sexuality and gender and finances and a lot of uncomfortable situations. So making sure that in our processes, we're not asking somebody to identify within the boundaries that we've set, but instead, leaving it as an open ended question for them to then identify the way they do."* Regional staff

Policies are in place at the Region to protect personal information. These should be transparent and clearly described so that diverse staff feel comfortable disclosing sensitive personal information and there are safe guards to protect the confidential information. This is particularly important for people who are gender diverse, transgender, or have had previous negative experiences regarding demographic data collection.

3.4.3 Effectively Creating and Revising Policy

The creation and review of policies need to be appropriate to the current context, appropriately responding to time, place, and space. Ensuring that appropriate changes occur related to access and accommodations that fit the current context is significant.

Participants believe that this can occur through consultation with internal and external individuals and recipients of the service to understand how a policy is working for them.

Discussion surrounding policy changes centered on supporting the inclusion of minority groups in employment and other engagement opportunities within Niagara such as Regional Advisory Committees, accessing Regional services and being employed as a Regional employee. Others highlighted concerns related to the pandemic, specifically the work from home policy. Participants warned against leaving the decision of whether or not an employee was able to work from home simply to the discretion of managers. The work from home policy, and policies more generally, must apply an equity lens and ensure that new and revised policies take into account the diverse needs of staff and community members, while balancing business needs and services delivery context.

> *"So I think the work from home policy, whatever it looks like in its final version needs to have something so it's not solely out of manager's discretion. If my manager wasn't the way he is, I could have someone who's very difficult who wouldn't allow work from home because he doesn't understand my disabilities. So I think that needs to be thought of, that it can't be left just to someone's discretion, like there has to be a way for you to actually get the accommodations you need without kind of putting you on the spot."* Regional staff

For some participants, it was not about revising the policy per se but instead more about communications around existing policies. Some participants expressed belief that colleagues may not actually know what the existing policies are that govern workplace conduct, have forgotten them, and/or have become too comfortable despite them. Reminders about workplace policies that exist, what they might involve, and the consequences when they are disregarded are thought to benefit employees.

> *"And if you are found in violation of these [policies], you know, there will be further discussions and [it] doesn't have to be anything negative, just a positive friendly reminder that we're working for everybody. And I think from working [in] social media I've seen people post things that are wild. Right? And I think it's just because they have forgotten that they're also representing the organization and they just need a quick recap on some of our policies."* Regional staff

Several participants highlighted that policies alone are not enough and that policy must be combined with action and accountability. With this, participants highlighted that many organizations already have or are in the process of creating an equity policy, yet can continue the same discriminatory practices despite or at times, perhaps even under the guise, of said policy. Community members echoed similar sentiments, and in addition, reinforced the need to go beyond policies and ensure that policy translates into action.

"*So the issue here, especially when you start to talk about Niagara Region is not putting the policies in place. It is about the action that goes beyond that. So it's nice to have – you need the policies, don't get me wrong. But that's not the end game at all, because there are actions that get taken under the cover of policies that can still be discriminatory.*" Community member

Moving forward, DEI staff can play an integral role in reviewing policies and engaging directly with groups making policy decisions, in addition to engaging with those impacted by specific policies.

3.5 Reporting Incidents of Bias, Discrimination, or Harassment

Numerous recommendations came from staff and community members in how to improve processes of reporting incidents of bias, discrimination, or harassment that are experienced or witnessed. In addition to the processes and policies for reporting, the responses and support provided for the people reporting are also important.

3.5.1 Reporting Processes and Policies

In the community survey, **"Make it easier to report incidents of discrimination"** was ranked as the most important way to report, resolve, and inform the community about incidents of racism or discrimination by 21% of respondents. Participants stressed the importance of accountability and consequences for individuals that participate in discriminatory acts. There should be a transparent, timely, and straightforward process that should be communicated widely. Participants felt strongly that there needed to be greater communication about how to report discrimination and that the process should be easy, and simple to complete. There should be a variety of different ways to report, which will allow individuals to report in the way that they feel most comfortable. One individual noted that anonymous website forms or applications would likely encourage greater allyship as individuals could feel more comfortable reporting incidents that they have witnessed. It is important that individuals that have experienced discrimination and report should be centered in the reporting process, having the chance to speak and be heard.

Staff focus group participants discussed the need for a formal reporting process. Even though there is a formal complaint process and policy in place at the Region, most focus group participants were not aware of the details. In the staff survey, only 64% of staff were confident that they knew how to report an incident of discrimination or harassment at the Region.

3.5.2 Responding to Reports of Bias, Discrimination or Harassment

Equally important to the process for reporting, is the response those reports receive. The main considerations here are who is responding to the report and whether they have the knowledge and experience to respond appropriately. It is important that participants with lived experience are involved in addressing reporting process in some respect, whether that be an increase of individuals with lived experience in HR, or the creation of a separate board that helps to deal with or support complaints brought forward.

Participants see the value in having an independent organization that would take pressure off of the police. This would be an impartial body at the Regional level that is able to hold all sectors accountable. This team should be multifaceted and diverse – following up with incidences of racism and discrimination. This team should support individuals who choose to report, ensuring that the onus does not fall exclusively on them. Currently, there is no independent organization in Niagara, related to the Niagara Region Police Service (NRPS) or external to the NRPS. The NRPS has an Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Unit that currently reviews and follows up with incidents involving allegations of racism and/or discrimination. The Service welcomes open and collaborative communication along with any suggestions, ideas and/or actions that will assist in serving diverse communities.

Participants stressed that a top-down approach in addressing reports is not always ideal but that every community member in Niagara has a role to play in calling out discrimination in all its forms. They see the value in dealing with instances informally, at times, such as a genuine conversation with the individual that committed the discriminatory act.

Niagara Region employees identified that they want HR to play a major role in holding employees accountable in the reporting process by ensuring that there are repercussions for acts of discrimination, while ensuring that those making a complaint do not face repercussions and their identity be kept confidential.

Some departments in the organization mentioned that there used to be Ethics Committees, which they were unsure of whether they were still were in operation, but thought they might be a good group to support this work, or address specific situations. Participants raised similar ideas to be adopted more broadly within the organization. One participant noted that it would be prudent for the Region to have a designated ambassador, with lived experience of discrimination or diversity, to properly address incidents surrounding reporting of bias, discrimination and harassment in order to ensure that there is a dependable and consistent individual that staff can trust in the process.

Some participants would like their complaints to be taken seriously, as they felt past complaints had been dismissed or ignored. One participant raised that a complaint being

taken seriously does not necessarily mean that the reporting process needs to be more punitive. Rather, the reporting process just needs to have greater transparency and necessitate some learning and education.

> *"Reporting to me, it means that somebody else is going to get in trouble for what they said or did. And often, it's somebody that we enjoy working with most of the time but they said something stupid. And maybe in reporting, we can look at making it truly a culture of inclusivity at the Region? And make it so that those reports aren't necessarily punitive, but, you know, building inclusion. That person may need to do some more training on, you know [on] particular topics and understand how comments make others feel or something like that."* Regional staff

Participants felt that it was particularly important that those involved in the reporting process also receive the appropriate education, including the police.

> "*Ensure that the people responsible for responding to complaints/reports of discrimination have the adequate training to investigate such complaints and have a good understand of the protected grounds. I also think having policies, following best practices is very important."* Community member

Participants expressed that they see value in having police responding to and collaborating in some instances of discrimination, particularly wherein violence is a factor (e.g. assault), but otherwise believe that responding to non-violent discrimination would likely benefit from being dealt with by a third party of educators and experts in diversity, equity and inclusion (operating outside the police institution). The NRPS continues to be committed to addressing hate/bias reported incidents within Niagara. While hate crimes dropped in 2020 to 2019 (down to 10 from 11), these incidents continue to be causes for concern that disproportionately victimize Black, East-Asian, Islamic, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ communities. The NRPS recognizes the seriousness of these offences which often have far-reaching effects that extend beyond an individual and impact entire communities. They are committed to addressing and reducing these incidents through international events, community educational programs, hate crime training, and increased reporting.

Participants noted struggles when reporting experiences of discrimination in the community. Individuals were critical of police departments for not responding to experiences of discrimination in a timely manner, thus creating the impression that the individuals and cases being reported were not a priority for police.

Further, there is a belief that a lot of the main targets of discrimination (racialized groups, individuals struggling with addiction etc.) are also likely to be wary of the police, thus leading to doubt that having police as central in the reporting process would be effective.

Participants noted that many day-to-day instances of discrimination will not likely involve police because discrimination does not always involve breaking the law. For this reason, community members will likely be the ones experiencing, witnessing and addressing discriminatory acts. Thus, they believe training opportunities and resources for all community members regarding how to respond to discrimination would be worthwhile, stressing the importance of community relationships.

> *"The appropriate person to resolve the complaint is likely the owner of the business, the owner of the housing, the director of public service. They need training and support to address the issues and move them ahead. Only rarely are these police matters."* Community member

> *"The police can't be looking at everything 24/7, we as a community need to work on our community and relationships within our community".* Community member

3.5.3 Support for Person Reporting

Participants agreed that support for the person reporting an incident they experienced or witnessed is crucial for addressing discrimination and creating a safe environment so that if the person experiences something in the future they will feel equally confident to report again. The second most important way community survey respondents suggested how to report, resolve and inform the community about incidents of racism or discrimination was, "Improve access to legal clinics, human rights commission or other supports for people who experience racism and discrimination". This was ranked the most important idea by 20% of respondents.

One survey participant noted that they would like to see greater in-house support at the Region for individuals when dealing with an experience of discrimination. Ideally, this individual or group of people would have a legal background and be able to support people with every stage of the reporting process. This will help individuals effectively address different types of discrimination.

Overall, participants highlighted that they want to see more support for victims of discrimination, specifically migrant workers. They recognized that there is a lot of trauma that can come about from being discriminated against and thus access to a variety supports (most notably mental health) is of utmost importance.

Support for people reporting incidents also includes making sure that people know how to report incidents that they experience or witness, as well as understanding what is considered discrimination. Participants believe that there may be a current lack of

understanding about what is considered discrimination. Some acts may not be viewed as discrimination in a traditional sense but contribute to a culture of exclusion and thus greater education can be useful to address this. This education should also provide knowledge to the public on resources available to report discrimination.

> *"Educate the public on resources available to report discrimination. I didn't report what I saw because I didn't know I could."* Community member

3.6 Inclusive Planning and Evaluation

3.6.1 Inclusive Planning

Participants were asked to rank five options for opportunities for change relating to "ways for municipalities to improve the design of programs and services to address barriers to community participation faced by people with diverse lived experiences" from most to least important. The highest ranked idea was increasing the involvement of people with lived experiences in planning events and programs, with 34% of participants ranking this the most important.

Participants felt strongly that individuals with lived experience need to be involved in the planning of events and programs. Ideally, individuals with diverse lived experience should be among the decision and policy makers. If not the case, those with lived experience should be involved at every stage of this process.

> *"Ensuring that any projects promoting these topics are led by people who are directly affected and really have their voices lead and be represented."*
> *Funding for diversity champions - I love that idea."* Community member

There are currently multiple lived experience advisory groups related to multiple aspects of the Region, they include the Public Health Lived Experience Advisory Network (LEAN), for people with lived experience of low income, Public Health Youth Advisory Committee, Mental Health Client Advisory Committee, Housing and Homelessness Action Plan (HHAP) Lived Experience Advisory Committee, Seniors Family Council, and the Niagara Region Housing Tenant Advisory Committee (TAC).

There is a belief that outreach initiatives that improve understanding and encourage dialogue between upper management/Regional Council and the community would be beneficial in order to better understand the barriers that individuals with lived experience are facing. It is important for individuals with decision-making power to keep an open mind. This means a willingness to admit that perhaps there are more effective ways than what has been done previously.

"Have people with lived experience review the programs and services. Actually listen to what they have to say and actually implement what is suggested… you need to open your mind to their perspective without any judgement. You have to be prepared to say, we aren't getting this right and need to find a different approach." Community member

It is important that as many diverse voices are brought to the table as possible, as participants warned against some people coming forward attempting to represent an entire community of people. One participant suggested that part of this is opening up opportunities by asking "*who would like to participate?*" as well as reaching out to specific people and saying "*I would like you to participate.*"

Participants see the value in sustained collaborations with the community with some commending the Region's commitment to involve community members through committees and consultations. However, participants believe that more can be done in ensuring access to be able to participate in these opportunities. No matter who is providing advice, individuals with lived experience should be compensated for their knowledge, experiences, and time.

"*People who have experienced discrimination are the best equipped to combat [discrimination] but it often not feasible for them to participate. Paying for transportation, childcare, turbo sticks for internet access (for virtual meetings) etc., scheduling meetings outside of work hours, meeting in locations other than city buildings, etc. are all tangible ways to engage these populations in a meaningful way.*" Community member

Ensuring that affected community members participate throughout the planning, implementation, and evaluation stages of a project improves the effectiveness, relevancy, and ultimately the uptake of the program. There are various resources and information available to ensure community participation in all stages of a project such as the guide developed by the Tamarack Institute on engaging people with lived/living experience.[3]

The Region can also benefit by looking at other communities to see what types of improvements that have been successfully implemented. Some participants specifically mentioned that tailored programs need to be available for people of colour, Indigenous communities, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ communities. There is a belief that more events specifically targeting and engaging the Older Adult population would be particularly

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[3] Homer, A. (2019). 10: Engaging people with lived/living experience. Tamarack Institute. https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/library/ten-2019

worthwhile as there is a concern that this population has become further isolated, particularly due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Engaging youth was also of particular importance to participants. One participant suggested that providing fun activities for youth leaders that have shown interest in addressing equity issues would be worthwhile in order to inspire youth to potentially choose a career that seeks to address equity issues.

> *"Engage citizens in program creation and evaluation... for example, the region's Youth Advisory Committee for 13-19 year olds that recommends having 'leadership experience' is unrealistic and exclusionary. If you want to engage youth when designing services/programs for youth, do not expect 13 year olds to have leadership experience or volunteer their time. Meet them in schools, run focus groups in parks/playgrounds."* Community member

To support in creating culturally appropriate services and resources in appropriate languages, staff can partner with local organizations, such as the multicultural centres in St. Catharines, Welland, and Fort Erie, or the local post-secondary schools. Other relevant cultural groups, libraries, and museums can also support this work. Local Indigenous organizations can be contacted through the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion team at the Region to ensure programs are culturally relevant or working in partnership with the urban Indigenous population, or the territorial First Nations.

3.6.2 Collaborate with Community Organizations

Participants noted that the Region does not need to re-invent the wheel but can develop initiatives in collaboration with various community members and groups, particularly minority groups. Individuals with lived experience should also be part of the collaboration process when reviewing and evaluating programs in order to identify current gaps and areas for improvement. Working with local organizations, building community partnerships, and leveraging resources and expertise in the community can be an effective way to collaborate with individuals with lived experiences.

It is important to follow the lead of the community organizations and members. The Region cannot assume that they have all the answers. Ensure that diverse voices, particularly of services users are included and taken seriously in terms of decision making.

> *"I think, going in with the dialogue of how we can help you versus what we want from you would go a long way. … as in we're going to go do something for you because you need our help, and we're going to fix this for you. And instead it's just, 'we know that you have an amazing community. We want to connect with you.*

We've got lots of services and opportunities but, as a community, what are some gaps and barriers you're dealing with that maybe we can support you with?'" Regional staff

Multiple groups emphasized the importance of Regional staff reaching out and going to the location where people are located to engage with them there rather than expecting them to come to you. Community engagement and collaboration takes time, which does not always work within a Western corporate timeframe.

"For the mosque that I'm connected to they have a Facebook page…even just going when you know there's prayer times, there's prayer times five times a day. Just going and introducing yourself goes a long way." Regional Staff

"I think we could do a lot better taking the time to go get to know them, get to hear about what's going on in their communities their priorities. And then from there, start to build the conversation versus us… parachuting in and saying this is what I need from you, now do this for me." Regional staff

It was clear in both the Regional staff and the Community member focus groups with Francophone participants, that they feel excluded. They are eager to participate, and although it may be time consuming, it is worth the effort to engage with members of the Francophone community.

"Parity is a really good idea, giving them a voice. It's a … very self sufficient community right? So they're very engaged community wise … so something as simple as a committee … [could] bring us all together for [a] common goal…. Something as simple as even just connecting with the French school principals and get[ting] *their input as to what barriers they're seeing with Public Health and our services in terms of the French and get their perspective on it."* Regional staff

Some communities already have established relationships with some Regional Departments, which can be broadened to span across the organization. Other communities currently have less formal relationships that still need to be established, such as relationships with religious organizations, ethnocultural organizations, and Francophone leaders in Niagara.

3.6.3 Integrating DEI Data Into Planning

While "collecting more data on people accessing services" was ranked as the lowest priority of options relating to how municipalities can improve the design of programs and

services, participant comments suggested that individuals recognized the importance of continued data collection.

The importance of collecting demographic data from service users was only discussed in four of the focus groups. Collecting data is important for a few reasons. First, being able to collect demographic data about service users allows staff to be able to understand and know who is attending their programs. Knowing who is attending programs can help staff know if various groups are represented or experiencing barriers to attend. This can support planning programs, as well as reporting and demonstrating that the programs have reached their intended audiences.

> *"It is incredibly, incredibly important that given what EDI* [DEI] *really is that as much as you apply measurement and metrics. … It's really important for us to really stratify as much as we can right? We want to know the gender, we want to know the age because these things are really important for us to be able to cater to each one of those levels"* Community Member

> *"So let's think about what it is we need to be looking at from an equity and a diversity perspective. Let's start collecting identifying data, let's start collecting data, let's start analyzing data, and let's start making it public. And go beyond Regional Council, and get it out there, get it into the community and let people know what it is this region is doing and how effectively it's happening, or not."* Community Member

It is important that the data collected can be disaggregated and reported in such a way that differences between groups can be analyzed and discussed, and successes communicated clearly with the public.

Some community survey participants see the value in collecting demographic representation of those accessing particular services in order to identify how well or how frequently services are being utilized in different communities. This is beneficial to help identify current gaps in access for minority groups.

It was important for participants that data should only be collected for significant purposes and this purpose should be clearly communicated. It should be clear that the goal of data collection is identifying current barriers in accessing services in order to address and improve them. Maintaining strict confidentiality during all stages of the data collection process was important to participants. Participants felt that knowing who had access to the data and who was responsible for analyzing the data would help with transparency and make them feel more comfortable participating and sharing information. Data collection should feel safe, unbiased, and must result in tangible changes.

"*Data is useless without any real strategies that are designed to address discrimination.*" Community member

Participants recognized that while collecting quantitative data is important, it cannot fully capture the complexity of experiences that staff and community members are facing on its own. Collecting qualitative data is thus equally important to understand the full context.

"But remember, not just [collecting] quantitative data. It is the qualitative, anecdotal, and experiential data that is so important in these situations to truly understand the barriers that different people and communities are faxing. Listening to what people experience, believing their truths, and listening to that they need and providing that support." Community member

Transparency of data is crucial for participants as the absence of data reproduces the status quo and makes barriers that are not experienced by dominant groups invisible. This allows inaction to continue. The availability of data is crucial to reduce barriers for minority groups and providing them timely and culturally-relevant services.

"*The gatekeeping of data and information allows these issues to go unchecked while people in power have a 'legitimate' means to deny their existence because of the absence of data…information is power. A survey aimed at understanding/combatting discrimination must share its results/data publicly in order to be truly anti-discriminatory and to help those who do that work.*" Community member

3.7 Access to Services

It is essential that Regional services are inclusive and accessible by all community members. Barriers to participation should be minimized in order to provide equitable opportunities for diverse populations. Six ways to reduce barriers were identified: provide relevant and accessible services; have clear signage; create a safe space; ensure clear communication of programs and services, have clear and accessible feedback channels; and consider anti-stigma campaigns or changes in media representation. Recommendations were provided relating to four specific service areas: transportation, health care, police, and affordable housing.

3.7.1 Provide Relevant and Accessible Programs and Services

Community survey participants were provided six options for opportunities for change relating to "ways to improve access to municipal services" and asked to rank them from most to least important. The highest ranked idea was ensuring that services are available

regardless of income level, with 55% of participants ranking this as the most important, the highest percentage across all questions.

Providing the same service through a variety of means is important to participants. While participants recognize that not everyone will have technology to access services online, other participants stressed the significance of online services in reducing barriers for many community members, including individuals with disabilities or low-income.

> "*Ensure that services are available in an accessible way online so folks aren't required to access services in person which may cause barriers for folks with mobility issues or low income individuals who may need to take transit or have services only available during business or working hours. Online services allow users to access at their own time and us much more accessible for everyone.*" Community member

When running events or providing services online, ensuring accessibility is important. When planning, it is important to think about the ways individuals might be excluded from participating and how to address those barriers, such as providing virtual meetings with closed captioning. To address barriers related to technology, municipalities can collaborate with User Experience (UX) designers to understand where communication breakdowns may happen and work together to find effective solutions.

Participants highlighted that barriers exist for individuals in accessing technology altogether. It was important for participants to have access to reliable computers and technology. One participant noted that opening more community centres with access to more computers in various neighbourhoods in Niagara would be beneficial, a practice that the participant notes other municipalities (e.g. Toronto) have done.

Providing options for service delivery such as in-person, over the phone, or paper options increases opportunities for people who have limited access to internet, data, or computers, for people who struggle with technology, or those who have different physical abilities. One idea that was presented was having a dedicated phone line for older adults to call and get support to navigate the services offered.

> "*This should be a hotline or something, some seniors they don't know how to navigate. They just call right there is some kind of phone number or hotline or something that people can call, and they get the right department connected not jumping from one place to another.*" Community member

There may be barriers in navigating Regional services as the process can sometimes be complex and frustrating. There was a feeling that more needs to be done in order to bridge

the gap between community members and government services. Many participants stressed the importance of providing services and programs to reduce barriers for community members, providing a variety of specific suggestions.

> *"Create recreational activities that are inclusive of youth and adults with developmental disabilities, sensory sensitivities and behavioral concerns and safe for them (quiet, individualized attention, trained professionals involved in coaching, etc"* Community member

> *"More community garden programs."* Community member

> *"Sound signal lights for visually impaired pedestrians and elderly."* Community member

Some participants had specific suggestions for how to better reduce barriers in accessing programs and events including providing funding for low-income participants to access various programs/events and ensuring support staff are available for programs/events so that those with disabilities can fully participate.

Accessibility also includes considering important significant dates, and hours of operation to ensure that the participants are able to attend the scheduled programs. Providing opportunities for multiple services to be provided at a central location is helpful for people who struggle with transportation. This includes considering where the program participants are already going and seeing if new or revised programs can be delivered in the same location, or creating a hub model of delivery, with multiple services in a central location.

The mode of program or promotion delivery is important as well. Programs should be in accessible locations, which means locations that are both easy to travel to (considering public transportation), as well as buildings being physically accessible, from the parking lot, to the doorways, to the bathrooms.

> *"Make sure all municipal facilities are fully physically accessible to all: curb cuts, lifts, ramps, doorways & halls wide enough for mobility devices, etc. Have options other than telephone/audio for communication and appointments."* Community member

> *"More inclusive design in architecture/building layout"* Community member

> *"ACCESSIBILITIY-- all services should be barrier free (buttons on ALL doors must be working, every place should have ramps that are up to code, bathrooms should be 100% barrier free)."* Community member

"My brand new apartment building isn't wheelchair friendly. My neighbour can't even leave without assistance. This was approved by the city." Community member

Participants believe that most employers in Niagara are willing to do what they can to reduce barriers wherever possible, and all that may be needed is some education.

"Educate businesses on how to make buildings, washrooms wheelchair accessible. I mentioned to a business that if they added a grab bar in their washroom it would greatly assist people and would make their large washroom accessible. People don't understand what needs to be done and many are happy to make minor changes once they know what needs to be done." Community member

Accessibility considerations should be communicated in event promotion, so that individuals with disabilities do not have to ask whether various accessibility considerations will be provided in order to attend and fully participate in an event.

"*Accessibility!!! Have accessibility info on all event promotion (ie. indicate where ramps are, accessible bathrooms, ensure that people with disabilities can enter the building in the first place!!)"* Community member
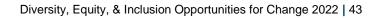
Accessibility also includes providing gender neutral bathroom options, including pronouns on name tags or email signatures, or having an appropriate dress code.

"I think that, looking at facilities and how we can physically make them more equitable and accessible could be really useful. Especially for trans people, there's so much that goes into just physically being present, dress code, bathrooms, name tag, everything that can be a huge barrier to coming in to work." Regional staff

Accessibility considerations are also important in ensuring that community members have equal access to fully participate in recreation activities as their fellow community members.

3.7.2 Have Clear Signage

"Have clear signage so that everyone can move around the community, including the use of Braille or other language on the signs" received the 3rd highest support among participants when asked to rank "how to improve municipal services". Participants highlighted that proper signage is a requirement under AODA, however, proper signage does not always occur.

Participants noted the importance of braille for those with disabilities related to sight but noted that braille is not likely helpful on signs because those who have severe loss of sight will likely not know that there is a sign to read it. Thus, alternative strategies needed to be explored to address this. Barriers were also raised for disabilities related to hearing. Often, individuals with disabilities related to hearing do not have an effective way of informing service providers of their disability, thus one participant, noted the need to establish universal signage that would reduce barriers in communicating their disabilities.
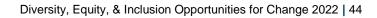
Some participants noted that it would ideal if all signs are available in many different languages but many noted that it would be difficult, costly, and perhaps unrealistic. One participant noted that ensuring that signage includes images in addition to words can help improve understanding and overcome some barriers related to language.

To increase literacy among new immigrants, there should be more advertising and investment in free English as a Second Language (ESL) training, such as programs provided by Niagara Folk Arts. Many noted the need for the continued importance of the Region to provide services in various languages, such as providing Spanish translation services for migrant workers. There was some criticism of current translation services, particularly that services offered in French are inadequate.

Additionally, some participants noted that leveraging new technology solutions like geo-mapping, geo-gating and phone interfaces could be beneficial in reducing barriers for individuals with disabilities, assisting in services and navigation. Participants felt strongly that any planning, implementation and review of related changes should involve collaboration with community members.

3.7.3 Create Safe Spaces

Regardless of how well a program is planned, if participants don't feel safe in that space, they will not participate. Making a space safe includes ensuring that staff have the education to support different people and accept differences. This will take time and should involve reflexive practice and informal discussions. The space should include posters, photos and symbols that depict various individuals and groups or show allyship. This includes making sure that diverse participants are represented in the pictures, and that the language is relevant. Have staff ask about pronouns when beginning a conversation with someone and being cognizant of other key words that may be unknowingly exclusive. Participants also raised that including pronouns in e-mail signature and communications could create a more inclusive environment for gender minorities, particularly those gender transitioning.

One suggestion of how to make a space more inclusive is to have cross-group interactions, such as multi-generational groups, mixed cultures, genders, or sexualities. Having group activities where people can get to know people they wouldn't normally interact with can provide opportunities to break down barriers between groups and open up conversation possibilities.

3.7.4 Ensure Clear Communication

Many participants praised programs or opportunities the Region is providing, however they also commented that those same programs were not widely known. Many of the populations that would benefit from particular programs were unaware of those programs. Participants suggested a few ways to improve the promotion of current programs. These suggestions included providing clear information about the steps the process could take (for instance, clear communication about how to report an incident of discrimination), and ensuring communication is available in appropriate languages, literacy levels, and formats that are accessible by potential participants.

Promotion of the services available in the region and clear instructions on how to access them should be prioritized.

> *"Informing communities of the opportunities that are available to them. In my area, many people do not even know about food drives or food banks that they desperately need and are there. People are breaking into houses to steal food. And the food drives and food banks that are available are only open during a short amount of time when people are at work not earning enough to support the increasingly extreme high cost of living."* Community member

Participants felt that in some cases it would be worthwhile for Regional services to advertise to specific communities. There is a belief that this could go a long way towards inclusion and access to various services.

> *"I would also add that municipal services should be advertised to communities of different genders, religions, cultures, etc. The reason you may not see participation from diverse communities is because we are not going to them and inviting them to dance!"* Community member

Current translation opportunities such as those being used by Niagara Parents, should be promoted more widely, especially among new immigrants. Similarly posters, websites, and other promotional materials should be available in the languages that participants speak. Diverse individuals should be represented in communications materials, videos, photos, and so on, both as service providers and service users.

Having a more user friendly website that is easier to navigate was discussed in multiple focus groups. It was discussed most often in regards to older adults, but also from a new immigrant perspective, with an intersectional gender lens, and from a language perspective from both Francophone and ethnocultural focus groups.

Participants believe that media and social media can be leveraged effectively to promote diversity, equity and inclusion. They believe that having a social media presence particularly focused on diversity in Niagara would be worthwhile. Mass media should also be leveraged to promote diversity in Niagara and celebrate the differences present within the Niagara community. The Region also has a central role to play in monitoring communications and ensuring that various forums, pages and groups are not promoting hate or divisiveness within Niagara.

Having resources like the Regional website, posters, and other promotional material available in multiple languages will ensure a broader reach for information about specific services. Promoting the translation services available through Customer Service or online through the Public Health chat would also be beneficial.

Promotion should consider current context and locations where potential participants live, as well as how individuals in Niagara that do not have internet access find out about programs that are available. Using outreach models, providing hard copies or paper forms, and going to places where people gather, such as libraries or food banks, can provide opportunities to connect with people who are not connected electronically. One community member highlighted the importance of sharing resources such as Regional packages with newcomers. This should be available in various languages to give them important information about different services and programs in Niagara.

3.7.5 Feedback Channels

In conjunction with providing more information to people about Regional services, it is also important to provide opportunities for people to provide feedback about the services they receive. This could be done through providing clear feedback channels for residents to complain, ask questions, or provide positive messages. Some options include suggestion boxes in locations such as Regional Housing Community houses, in Long Term Care homes, or at community events. Feedback could also occur electronically through the website, which is currently available, but perhaps needs to be more widely advertised so the public knows where and how to provide feedback. The Region should clearly communicate how community feedback is being used by staff to ensure that community members feel heard, which will encourage buy-in and future feedback. The website could also include an inclusivity statement and actively seek feedback.

"Putting in our website a statement, you know there's a big gap, that you know we're working towards and we're not perfect, and if you have feedback and how we can improve, please submit it over here." Regional Staff

3.7.6 Anti-Stigma Campaigns

Multiple focus groups' participants discussed the idea of the Region supporting or launching anti-stigma or public education campaigns. Topics of the campaigns could include information about various ability or disability levels, understanding addictions and safe injection sites, needing allies from outside the cultural group, or 2SLGBTQQIA+ awareness. These campaigns should provide both quantitative statistics, as well as qualitative stories that can connect with the public.

The three options in the community survey relating to public campaigns were all the lowest ranking options within their related questions. Rather than anti-stigma campaigns, participants believe that it would be more worthwhile to have Senior Leaders, Managers, and other well-respected people in the Niagara community make firm statements condemning bias, and sharing education and resources with the broader community.

Participants who were in favour of campaigns noted that they should be focused on specific topics, such as mental health, addiction, or domestic violence. Participants expressed that campaigns can be successful if they effectively communicate stories in which people can relate to and understand one another. There is a belief that showing individuals in situations that they can picture themselves in could help them better identify with the experiences of marginalized individuals, leading to empathy and action. Participants expressed that this could be beneficial as some noted a current disconnect of privileged folks in the Region with the experiences of marginalized folks.

Some participants commented that rather than running specific anti-discriminatory campaigns, making changes in commercials or marketing materials would help to normalize diverse people in the community.

"Marketing campaigns including visible and invisible disabilities. Normalize a wide range of abilities on the human spectrum. Disabilities are a normal part of the human experience." Community member

"*When thinking of commercials or marketing materials, make a point have diversity in the people. Subtle changes [rather] than blatant anti-[stigma] campaigns.*" Community member

While increasing the number of local intercultural events did not receive a lot of support from survey participants, comments revealed that many participants recognize the value of local intercultural events. Participants expressed that community celebrations to promote diversity would be worthwhile and could range in size from larger-scale events to smaller events. These events should be promoted in print, television, and social media. They recommend that events be coordinated Region-wide not just within one Niagara community in order to benefit promotion and attendance, ensuring that all community members in Niagara have the opportunity to participate. Participants want to see events and programs that bring people from different backgrounds together, in order to give individuals the opportunity to celebrate differences and connect over similarities. Participants stressed that it is important that individuals belonging to a particular ethnic/cultural group are involved in the planning and implementation of an event so as to accurately represent one's culture and promote inclusion.
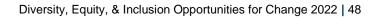
3.7.7 Transportation

Survey participants ranked improving transit as the second most important way to improve access to municipal services. There were a few specific recommendations relating to transportation in Niagara, including coordination, accessibility, and cross-regional services. Some participants recognized that some of the suggestions were incorporated already, while others needed to be expanded.

> *"I would love to see our paratransit systems, connected and coordinated so we can travel beyond the boundaries of our communities."* Community member

Public transportation should continue be coordinated throughout the Region, allowing users to be able to travel across municipal boundaries when needed. Public transportation should continue to be accessible, in all seasons. Participants praised Paratransit in specific municipalities, but desired more coordination across the region.

In the winter, the bus stops need to be cleared of snow, particularly to provide access for people using mobility devices, or care givers with strollers. The hours and routes should be examined to ensure that they are inclusive of all groups. Providing transportation that is cost effective, reliable and grants access across Niagara at any point in the day is important, especially considering the increase in population of Niagara. Many criticized the current availability and frequency of buses. The availability and frequency of buses is particularly important to access services or attend events. Some participants noted that bus services shut off at inconvenient times and that there is a lack of public transit services close to services/events.

Participants recognize that problems related to public transit disproportionately burden individuals with disabilities, and individuals with low-income who are more likely to rely on public transit to get around the city.

In addition to reduce barriers for individuals with disabilities and low-income, participants recognize the benefits of improved public transit for all. There is a belief that improving public transit is also important for climate change, with improved transit, individuals might be more likely to use it in lieu of driving.

3.7.8 Health Care

In the community survey, health care was ranked the second most important area of focus for DEI work. Participants highlighted the importance of creating and improving services related to addictions, long-term care, mental health, and homelessness. The need for collaboration to address these issues was emphasized, including the need for increased support for non-profit organizations engaging in this work. One participant highlighted the importance of dental care, which is currently a privilege and can be a barrier in accessing employment.

Participants recognize that various circumstances can lead to barriers related to low-income and housing including the need to address issues related to mental health and drug addiction. More needs to be done to address the opioid crisis and support those with mental health disabilities, as well as their families. Individuals may be dealing with mental health struggles and/or drug addiction without awareness from those around them, thus participants stressed the importance of empathy and patience for fellow community members and colleagues. Colleagues have a role to play in supporting their fellow colleagues including reporting instances of exclusion.

There was a belief that a large focus needs to be on improving access to mental health support in Niagara including "*free or heavily-subsidized access to counsellors.*" Individuals are in support of group therapy, increased phone supports, safe spaces, addiction counselling, and mindfulness/calming programs. Services should be offered in various languages whenever possible.

Participants believe that suicide and self-harm has increased within Niagara, especially among youth. Addressing such a complex and important issue involves many different components including greater supports for parents so that they can adequately support children that are struggling with their mental health. Bullying is believed to be a large factor in contributing to suicide and self-harm among youth, thus, schools play an increasingly important role in identifying and addressing bullying. Some individuals expressed that bullies too often go unpunished which encourages them to continue bullying. There is a

belief that access to greater mental health support is crucial in addressing this "*vicious circle*" by providing mental health support for both bullies and those being bullied.
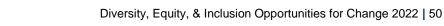
3.7.9 Police

In terms of priorities areas ranked by community survey participants, Police ranked 5th out of six options. The responses to this question were very polarized, with the second most votes for highest priority (n=224, 22%), and the most votes for lowest priority (n=303, 30%). One participant highlighted that they ranked policing as number one on their priorities because they believe there is the most work to be done in that area. Another participant ranked policing last because they believe that with effective services across Niagara, it is likely that the police will be less required to address these issues. Participants believe that there must be more emphasis on proactive and preventative approaches rather than reactive approaches.

Many community survey participants were critical of the police and believe that there needs to be greater accountability for police themselves including greater disciplinary measures for police when they participate in exclusionary acts. Currently, the NRPS is, as are all provincial police services, under the oversight of the Office of the Independent Police Review Director (OIPRD), the Special Investigations Unit (SIU), Part V of the Police Services Act (which governs police discipline) and their own internal and external complaint processes. The Service continues to investigate any allegations bought forward and continues full co-operation with the SIU and OIPRD.

Regarding body worn cameras, NRPS continues to keep apprised of unfolding events in the province regarding body worn cameras and continues to assess the viability of implementing a program in Niagara. They continues to review research in relation to the effectiveness of body-worn camera programs, along with guidance and direction from the Ministry of the Solicitor General in regards to a consistent and unified approach across Ontario. Their members are committed to acting with integrity regardless of whether they are utilizing body worn cameras or not.

Survey participants felt that Niagara Regional Police Services (NRPS) and police departments more generally need to re-evaluate their hiring process to ensure that those who hold discriminatory views are not allowed to be employed as a police officer. Hiring and promoting police officers from minority groups was also important because participants believed that police need to be more representative of the broader Niagara community. This is crucial as it will not only allow for individuals to feel more comfortable reporting but also allow police officers to develop greater rapport with the communities they serve and protect.

Currently, NRPS continues to look at an ongoing assessment of practices. Members of the Recruiting and EDI Units have been attending recruitment events via video (due to the COVID-19 pandemic) to attract individuals from equity seeking groups into policing careers. This includes their presence at more than ten events in 2021 including two South Asian recruiting events, a recruiting event for individuals from the Black community, and two events with newer Canadians through the YMCA of Niagara. Recruitment events included information on both civilian and sworn positions with NRPS in forums that allowed real and perceived concerns about policing to be addressed while demystifying what it means to be a police officer with groups that have not been traditionally represented in the policing community.

NRPS is actively seeking to develop a process whereby new hires to NRPS voluntarily self identify as belonging to equity seeking groups. NRPS understand that in order to best serve their community, they need to reflect their community. They understand that diversity equals strength, and that has been guiding their recruiting practices to ensure we are an employer of choice, attracting a diverse range of applicants, both sworn and civilian. They are committed to identifying candidates who are not only highly qualified but also are not harboring bias or prejudice. From the onset of the recruiting process, the importance of treating all people with dignity and respect is ingrained within their officers.

There was belief that police could benefit from increased education opportunities and that policing education/training should be reformed to include education on race and gender. If the entire police force made a stronger commitment to anti-oppressive training and actions, participants expressed they would then feel less wary of involving police in instances of racism and/or discrimination. Education and training opportunities for police should also focus on training police to better know how to respond to individuals dealing with a mental health crisis.

> *"I am very wary of involving police in instances of racism and/or discrimination until I am convinced the entire force has made a strong commitment to anti-oppressive training and actions."* Community member

In 2021, all NRPS employees, both civilian and sworn officers, participated in mandatory training on Unconscious Bias and Diversity and Inclusion Fundamentals. Additionally, Senior Management members received anti-racism training in October 2021. The NRPS Training Unit incorporates this type of training, including mental health, in it's annual training of sworn members. Throughout a calendar year training opportunities arise and members attend as possible. This includes three sessions a year for a week long Critical Incident Training course that includes staff from the CMHA.

Related to some other comments, participants believed that it was worthwhile to promote diversity, equity and inclusion at Niagara Regional Police, including more dedicated staff resources that focus on addressing diversity issues within the police department.

NRPS recognizes the value of DEI and the need for increased resources to support this work. Accordingly, the Internal Inclusion Committee (IIC) was formed in the fall of 2020 and consists of members from various areas in NRPS, both civilian and sworn. The committee was instrumental in assisting with the creation of Service-wide, on-line mandatory training regarding Diversity and Inclusion Fundamentals and Unconscious Bias. The IIC also formed a Census/Survey sub-committee that conducted a Service wide voluntary survey to establish a baseline of members who self-identify as belonging to an equity seeking group. The survey has recently been completed and results are to be analyzed and utilized for future consideration.

3.7.10 Affordable Housing

Although housing was the lowest ranked area for DEI work, community survey participants expressed the need to address issues related to housing and low-income. Participants felt strongly that there needs to be new, innovative ways to address the housing crisis. Participants were critical of hostile, defensive architecture and strategies that forces unhoused people out of public spaces through coercive means. Providing more low-income housing was important to participants as many noted the long wait times in trying to access low-income housing. Barriers can be exacerbated for individuals with families. Because of the high-cost of living, participants expressed that even middle-class families can struggle and fail to afford important services for themselves and their kids.

The focus group with the Housing and Homelessness Action Plan Advisory Committee provided a number of suggestions for affordable housing. This included the following,

> *"A splash pad at Centennial Park so homeless people could bathe, get wet. Need places to shower, besides Silver Spire. And have storage for people so belongings [are] not stolen. Small businesses supporting people considered unemployable, give them a chance. Every shelter should have a peer support worker."* Community member

Other community members recommended on site services, where people are already comfortable, making sure there are shelters for pets, parking spots for homeless people staying in cars, access to bathrooms, and a safe option, perhaps a fenced in lot. One community member referenced the East Hastings site in Vancouver, a dedicated place for people to sleep on the streets, it had police officers that patrolled the corners, safe

injection sites, and the neighbours didn't complain. However it was torn down, the reasons for which were not clear.

Additional recommendations were for the outreach program to be expanded, and meet people where they are. Provide opportunities for people to adjust to living in a house, build self-confidence, and get back to ordinary interactions with others. It should also be accepted that some people don't want to go into housing programs, as they like living off the land. As such, services should consider that and provide the services where those individuals find shelter and refuge.

4.0 Priority Areas

Community survey participants were asked to rank six areas of work relating to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Niagara. The following table reflects the mean (average) score of all the ranks from 1 to 6, where 1 was highest priority and 6 was lowest priority. The lower the score, the more people ranked that opportunity as more important.

Table 3: DEI Priority Areas

Rank	Opportunity	Mean
1	Employment	3.10
2	Healthcare	3.23
3	Education	3.32
4	Government Services	3.58
5	Police	3.54
6	Housing	3.75

Although Employment received the highest rank of all the options, there was a range of responses. Education received the most number of votes for top priority (n=283, 27%), while 192 people (19%) voted it as lowest priority.

Five additional priority areas were provided by community survey participants:
1. Places of worship, religious centres, and religious schools
2. Public media
3. Community – including businesses and neighbourhoods
4. Accessibility
5. Poverty

5.0 Conclusion

There were seven key thematic areas with opportunities for change that came from staff and community members through focus groups and surveys. Have strong leadership that models DEI values and make decisions with input from diverse staff members. This

includes keeping leaders and staff accountable, invest in capacity and resources for staff to implement DEI work, and create a safe and inclusive workplace for open discussions and providing accommodations where needed. It is also supported by celebrating diversity through education about significant cultural and religious dates, and increasing diversity in elected leadership through reducing barriers and providing mentorship.

Provide applicable training with multiple modes and opportunities for reflection and application, by making DEI training mandatory for all staff, having specific DEI training for leaders and elected officials, providing DEI related resources to staff and community members, and connecting training with the broader DEI Action Plan.

Increase the diversity of applicant pools, candidates hired and promoted into leadership positions. Implement strategies to expand diversity of applicant pool, provide more or targeted co-op opportunities and student intern positions, and practice concealed hiring. Examine job qualification requirements to reduce unintended barriers and consider different types of knowledge and lived experience. Incorporate diversity-related questions into interviews, have more inclusive onboarding practices, and encourage mentorship with leaders from minority backgrounds.

Create and revise policies considering DEI, which consider religious accommodations, and have policies regarding collecting or changing personal information, particularly for individuals who are transgender.

Improve processes and responses regarding reporting incidents of bias, discrimination or harassment. Review or revise complaint and reporting processes for staff and community members, improve responses to reports made, or provide better support for complainants

Use a rigorous process that incorporates lived experience, community partners, and data collection to plan and evaluate programs and services, practice inclusive planning incorporating people with lived experience, improve collaboration with community organizations, and integrate disaggregated data into planning and evaluation

Improve access to and communication about services for all community members. Have inclusive promotion of current programs and services, make it easier to for community members to provide feedback, and improve public education on DEI topics. Provide relevant and accessible programs and services, have clear signage throughout the Region, and create safe spaces for community members. Continue efforts for coordinated transportation, including paratransit. Improve access to health care for marginalized groups. Support police to improve their responses to DEI related incidents. Continue efforts towards providing more affordable housing and supporting people experiencing homelessness.

In addition to these opportunities, survey data revealed the five top priorities (in order) for the Region related to DEI. These opportunities relate to one or more of the identified opportunities above:

- Ensure that services are available regardless of income level
- Identify barriers for people with diverse lived experience in running for elected office
- Make it easier to report incidents of discrimination
- Improve access for education for employees/employers on addressing discrimination
- Increase involvement of people with lived experiences in planning events and programs

This information will be combined with the Environmental Scan, and staff and community experience reports to provide a rich understanding of the current context and opportunities for change. Information gathered will inform the creation of the DEI Action Plan in response to joining the Coalition of Inclusive Municipalities. The Action Plan will be created with input from internal staff, the Niagara Region Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Advisory Committee, as well as other community members.

Appendix A: Ranked Scores for Actions for Change from Community DEI Survey

Table 4: Ranks for Reporting, resolving and informing the community about discrimination

Rank	Opportunity	Mean
1	Make it easier to report incidents of discrimination	2.93
2	Improve access to legal clinics, human rights commission or other supports for people who experience racism and discrimination	3.03
3	Educate the offenders	3.21
4	Have an independent organization that responds to reports of discrimination	3.34
5	Have more a transparent, timely or better process for how police respond to incidents of discrimination	3.54
6	Support for police to respond better to incidents of discrimination	4.11

Table 5: Ranks for ways to improve access to municipal services

Rank	Opportunity	Mean
1	Ensure that services are available regardless of income level	1.89
2	Improve transit	3.17
3	Have clear signage so all people can move around in the community	3.43
4	Increase the number of local intercultural events	3.91
5	Provide more mentorship opportunities	3.97
6	Improve interpreter/translation services	4.15

Table 6: Ranks for ways for municipalities to improve the design of programs and services

Rank	Opportunity	Mean
1	Increase involvement of people with lived experiences in planning events and programs	2.48
2	Review programs and services to identify barriers faced by people with diverse lived experiences	2.50
3	Improve access to resources to support design of barrier free events	2.89
4	Support employers in Niagara to provide anti-discrimination training to their staff	3.05
5	Collect more data who are accessing services	3.70

Table 7: Ranks for ways to address barriers to leadership faced by people with diverse lived experiences

Rank	Opportunity	Mean
1	Review current processes to identify barriers faced in running for elected positions	2.14
2	Provide mentorship opportunities targeted at people with diverse lived experiences	2.39
3	Run a campaign to raise awareness and challenge the lack of diversity in elected leadership roles within Niagara	2.60
4	Run a campaign to raise awareness and challenge the lack of diversity in staff employed in leadership roles within Niagara	2.67

Table 8: Ranks for ways to educate the public about barriers faced by people with diverse lived experiences

Rank	Opportunity	Mean
1	Improve access for education for employees/employers on addressing discrimination	2.57
2	Improve access for community members to information on addressing discrimination	2.63
3	Provide and promote anti-discrimination resources	2.81
4	Provide free workshops for community members to attend	3.22
5	Run an anti-stigma campaign	3.43