

# Everybody's Welcome!

**Jim Sands**, a senior project coordinator at SPARC BC, describes a workbook designed in partnership with the BC Recreation and Parks Association to promote the inclusion of diverse members of the community.

THE DAY EVERYTHING CHANGED things at Forest Hills Community House started out as a celebration. When a group of Central American English language students brought a chicken and wine to celebrate the birthday of a class mate they couldn't coax their fellow students from Bangladesh to take part. While half the class danced, ate, and drank the other half sat silently and watched as their classmates partied.

Finally it was revealed that the celebration was taking place in the middle of Ramadan. The students from Bangladesh were attempting to stay with the class in order to show respect, but could not participate because they were committed to fasting from dawn to dusk.

The incident was a catalyst for changes at Forest Hills, a New York settlement house that serves a community where over 120 distinct languages are spoken. In debriefing after the incident staff instituted a number of changes at the centre. One change was to develop a policy of learning about and celebrating everyone's religious holidays. The policy of embracing the variety of practices lead to improved dialogue and understanding among all users of the facility.

Situations like this illustrate the challenges and rewards that organizations experience when they consciously examine issues of social inclusion. A unique tool is now available to assist

those working on recreation and parks programs, services, and facilities to develop action plans to address inclusion issues. *Everybody's Welcome! A Social Inclusion Approach to Program Planning and Development for Recreation and Parks Services* is a 45-page workbook that provides an outline of the issues associated with social inclusion along with a resource list and exercises.

Developed by SPARC BC in partnership with the BC Recreation and Parks Association (BCRPA), the workbook was introduced last year during province-wide webcast that involved over 60 participants. The workbook along with an audio file and presentation of the webcast are now available on the SPARC BC website.

The workbook is based on an approach to social inclusion developed by the Inclusive Cities Canada (ICC) project, a cross-Canada initiative involving community leaders and municipal politicians aimed at increasing social inclusion across the country. Through a process involving research, focus groups, and discussion among members of local civic panels, ICC developed an understanding of social inclusion based on a number of key elements:

- **Social inclusion is both a process and an outcome.** That is to say that social inclusion is both an ongoing process as organizations

continue to work to create opening environments for all people in the community as well as something with clearly defined and measurable results.

- **Identity takes many forms.** This recognizes that human beings do not fit neatly into distinct categories. Any individual may be made up of a range of identities based on attributes such as age, gender, level of ability or disability, heritage, sexual orientation and immigration status.

- **Social inclusion has multiple dimensions.** Just as identity has many aspects, so too does inclusion. It is not enough to simply build a wheel chair ramp and hope that people will come. A socially inclusive facility will ensure that people are welcome and able to fully participate once they get through the door.

The *Everybody's Welcome!* workbook guides readers through five dimensions of social inclusion developed by the ICC project:

- **Diversity** – How available is the facility, program or service to diverse members of the community. This may include discussion of issues such as physical access for people with disabilities, cultural and language recognition, and support for individuals from all income levels.
- **Human Development** – Once people gain access it is equally important that they are able to participate in programs and services

that support their development.

- **Involvement and engagement** – This involves participation by diverse members of the community in decision making processes including committees, boards of directors, and advisory committees.



- **Relationship to living conditions** – This speaks about the relationship between programs, services and facilities and the surrounding community. For example, is bus service adequate to ensure that everybody can travel to a program in a timely and safe manner.

- **Connection to community services** – This dimension of social inclusion raises the issue of developing effective partnerships with other organizations serving members of the community including social service agencies and gathering places so that people can be supported through collaboration and cooperation between services.

Observers have noted that social inclusion is not simply about bring outsiders into the mainstream culture. It is about negotiating and creating a shared culture together. *Everybody's Welcome!* provides important information to support the first steps on that journey. ■

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For more information visit the SPARC BC website <[www.sparc.bc.ca](http://www.sparc.bc.ca)> or contact Jim Sands <[jsands@sparc.bc.ca](mailto:jsands@sparc.bc.ca)>.