

Creating a safer community

City groups join initiative for stores to offer temporary refuge to anyone facing a racist attack or harassment

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It may not look like much, but the Safe Harbour sticker in a shop window could mean a lot to someone facing discrimination and harassment.

The decal, depicting colourful figures holding hands, is part of a provincial government initiative to make B.C. communities more welcoming to diversity.

The sticker means people facing a racist attack or harassment can use the store or business as a temporary refuge. Staff get training on how to listen and help: they may offer a seat or glass of water and phone numbers to other organizations. They may even interfere with racism or bullying between their own customers.



Inclusiveness: A sign for the Safe Harbour program shows the logo that will be displayed in shop windows in Burnaby to indicate businesses and stores that can be used as a temporary refuge by anyone facing race-related harassment or bullying.

Larry Wright/BURNABY NOW

"It's all about creating a safe community," said Jeanne Fike, executive director of the Burnaby Family Life Institute. Fike's organization is overseeing the Safe Harbour project in Burnaby, while working in partnership with the Burnaby Board of Trade and the South Burnaby Neighbourhood House.

"We're promoting cross-cultural understanding in response to the changing demographics in our community, where more than 50 per cent of our city residents speak English as a second language, and the business community is doing all they can," Fike said.

Fike cited a report, released by the Immigrant Services Society of B.C., which states 1,058 government-assisted refugees, have settled in Burnaby - that's one third of refugees

coming to Metro Vancouver. (Government-assisted refugees are designated as such before they come to Canada. The figure does not include those who arrive and then apply for asylum.)

Local businesses have a special interest in creating safe sanctuaries, and for a good reason, Fike said. While the business community opens its arms to diversity, it could be opening its doors to more employees. That would help address the labour shortage, one of the most pressing problems Burnaby businesses face, Fike added.

"It's just smart business practice to have a greater understanding (of) how to hire culturally diverse employees and how to be more responsive in a culturally diverse community," she said.

Lindsay Marsh works with the Affiliation of Multicultural Societies and Service Agencies of B.C., the umbrella organization coordinating the province-wide Safe Harbour implementation.

Marsh said the concept is a bit like Block Watch.

"It's actually playing off that idea, (but) rather than for households, it's for businesses," she said.

But there is an important difference.

"It's really more about diversity issues. It's really looking at the community from a newcomer's point of view," she added. "(Participants) are standing up for diversity, and when racism and hate happens, they're more prepared to respond."

Participating business owners and employees attend a two-hour training session on how to deal with bullying or harassment, especially when the victim may not speak English as a first language.

Participants do not replace social service workers or offer counselling sessions, but they will be able to get discrimination victims the help they need, often by connecting them to other resources.

The Burnaby Board of Trade is launching the program locally with a workshop for businesses. The session is Tuesday, Oct. 16, at 201 - 4555 Kingsway, at 7 p.m. Call the Burnaby Family Life Institute at 604-659-2205 for information or registration.