

Sticker a sign of refuge for victims of discrimination

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If you're being harassed or fear for your safety on the street, a new program involving businesses in the Central Okanagan will provide protection.

Safe Harbour is designed primarily for people who are being harassed because of their race, disability or sexual orientation, but it's also for anyone who feels he or she is in trouble.

"The Safe Harbour sticker visibly shows the community that a business or organization is safe and will provide a welcoming environment for someone who feels discrimination and briefly needs a place to go," said program co-ordinator Andrew O'Brien. "It will be there for someone who might need a glass of water or to use a phone or to just sit tight while they get their wits together."

Safe Harbour, modelled after the Block Parents program for children, now has stickers up at 21 locations in the Central Okanagan.

TD Bank was one of the first businesses to get on board. It has stickers up and staff trained at all its locations in Kelowna and on the Westside.

The constituency office of Kelowna-Lake Country MP Ron Cannan has also joined the program. Cannan said it's a service for newcomers, not just in a time of emergency. "I've always been an advocate of community programs, and if someone is in distress, we just felt our office should provide a safe opportunity for them.

"It's an open-door policy. People will come in with problems that have nothing to do with the federal government, but you can try to point them in the right direction. It's a matter of keeping the lines of communications open to people who are new to the community." Locally, the program is sponsored by Kelowna Community Resources. To register, call O'Brien at 763-8058, ext. 227.

You can find out more online at www.safeharbour.ca. The program comes with a short training session for staff.

The provincial government has funded the program with a \$225,000 grant to the Affiliation of Multicultural Societies of B.C.

"Safe Harbour helps build welcoming and inclusive communities by training staff to welcome diversity and help combat racism," said Dave Hayer, parliamentary secretary for multiculturalism.

"Local storefronts publicly announce to their community that they reject discrimination and that they are progressive organizations that proudly embrace the richness and diversity of British Columbia's communities."

The Safe Harbour program began in Nanaimo in 2004. There are now 18 communities involved and more than 200 Safe Harbours in B.C.

O'Brien says joining the Safe Harbour program is good for business.

"Each Safe Harbour is part of a growing network of smart, forward-looking businesses that embrace B.C.'s diversity," he said.

"It's good for people and good for business. It shows that businesses are open to newcomers."