Conceptualizing a Pyramid Model on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) for Non-Profits: Focusing on Access Alliance MHCS

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Access Alliance
Multicultural Health and Community Services
A Celebration of Firsts

35 YEARS

New Beginnings for Newcomers.

Lay Summary

This report considers a composite model for understanding equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) for Community-Based organizations, focusing on Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services. In reviewing academic literature, reports from government bodies and existing EDI frameworks, Access Alliance sought to understand how to best meet the needs of service users, staff and community partners. The pyramid model is created with this insight and framed equity as "our lens of understanding", diversity as "who we are", inclusion as "the intentional actions we are taking" and finally, a sense of belonging as "our goal". This article also seeks to create pillars under each larger section in the pyramid, providing definitions for common understanding and incorporating existing EDI efforts by the organization. The operational components of the model include Gender Health, Sexuality and Health, Refugee Health, Non-status residents' Health, Black Health, Immigrant and Newcomer Health, Race-addressed Health, Age-based Health, etc. Access Alliance values the importance of the Indigenous Health Equity domain as a significant chapter of our EDI Framework. We are making partners with expert organizations, working with them to learn from them and implement their recommendations in our practices.

Introduction

Although non-profit organizations often pride themselves in social awareness and equity, research has suggested that newcomers and visible minorities are not equitably reflected in the non-profit sector, attributing non-profit organizations a responsibility to develop and commit to the implementation of organizational frameworks focused on EDI (Pillar Non-Profit Network, 2019). Organizations need to create inclusion strategies to achieve a sense of belonging successfully (King et al.,2024). While these frameworks and policies are popularized in post-secondary institutions, research makes clear that EDI frameworks have an important place in all organizations (Bernstein et al., 2021). Therefore, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) frameworks have become a measure at organizations that aim to drive a culture shift to limit barriers and inequities (Government of Canada, 2019).

Concepts and definitions

EDI concepts and frameworks are interpreted differently by organizations, government, and community development agencies. In the handbook for the Dimensions Program, created through a partnership between the Canadian federal government and 17 post-secondary institutions across the country, a list of key terms is provided. In this document, equity is defined as "...when the environment allows all to have equal opportunity. It can also be understood as removing systemic barriers and biases, enabling all individuals to have equal opportunity to access and benefit from the program" (Government of Canada, 2019, p.14). This document also defines diversity as "...differences in race, colour, place of origin, religion, immigrant and newcomer status, ethnic origin, ability, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and age" (p.14) as well as inclusion as "...the practice of ensuring that all individuals are valued and respected for their contributions and are equally supported" (p.14). In their research on the impact of EDI in health research Kelly et al., 2022 define these three distinct terms saying: "Equity refers to achieving fair outcomes, recognizing diversity, and addressing inequality through intervention. Diversity refers to the welcoming and embracing of difference, in relation to social demographics as well as a diversity of perspectives and ideas. Inclusion is a critical component of EDI, representing the idea that it is not enough to invite a variety of people into institutions. Inclusion is fostering an environment and culture that is welcoming and supports diverse individuals and/or groups of people and may also require concrete changes (e.g., accommodations to address physical and social barriers to inclusion)" (p.4).

Wolbring & Nguyen make clear that the creation of the frequently used acronyms equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI), diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility (DEIA) and diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) among others, are formed as these concepts cannot stand-alone to guide policy decisions (Wolbring and Nguyen, 2023, p.168). Some conceptualizations of EDI frameworks include "… a variety of interventions usually centered on talent acquisition and retention, training and professional development strategies and processes designed to address implicit bias as well as the physical and psychological climate of safety" (Baijnath et al., 2022, p. 13). As well as "…a policy-focused initiative aimed at addressing the ongoing exclusion of under-represented groups in employment, education, and other institutional contexts" (Kelly et al., 2022, p.3).

Access Alliance Legacy:

As a Toronto-based community organization focused on the healthcare and well-being of newcomers, refugees, and immigrants with precarious residential status, Access Alliance has been informally practicing the concepts of EDI since the inception of the organization. In addition, as the organization works to improve health outcomes, a lot of work has been done in relation to health equity. In particular, in 2019 Access Alliance was directly involved in the formation of a Health Equity Framework with the Alliance for Healthier Communities engaging other Community Health Centres (CHCs) in the province. This framework works as a whistle-blower to decrease discrimination and deprivation because of the social determinants of health and encourages the development of anti-oppressive structures and practices (Alliance for Healthier Communities & Access Alliance, 2019). In addition, Alamgir & Fisher created a brief concept paper in 2015 "Anti-Oppression Practice at Access Alliance and Beyond" that discusses multiple dimensions of anti-oppression and reports on how this framework is embedded into organizational practices. Building off on this legacy, Access Alliance is prepared to create a formal EDI framework containing distinct dimensions (e.g. gender-based, race-based, residency status-based, etc.) for inclusion and a glossary of key terms to establish a common understanding. Access Alliance is committed to using this framework to inform not only the internal practices but also all of our future partnerships and community involvement.

Access Alliance seeks to build off the understanding that diversity needs to be approached from a macro level with consideration of societal influences and prejudices (Shore et al., 2009). To do this, we have created a pyramid model with distinct understandings and ways to conceptualize equity, diversity and inclusion. Using this model, Access Alliance hopes to create a realistic trajectory to building a sense of belonging amongst all of our community members.

Our Synthesized Model

Sense of Belonging
our goal

Inclusion
the actions we are taking

Diversity
who we are

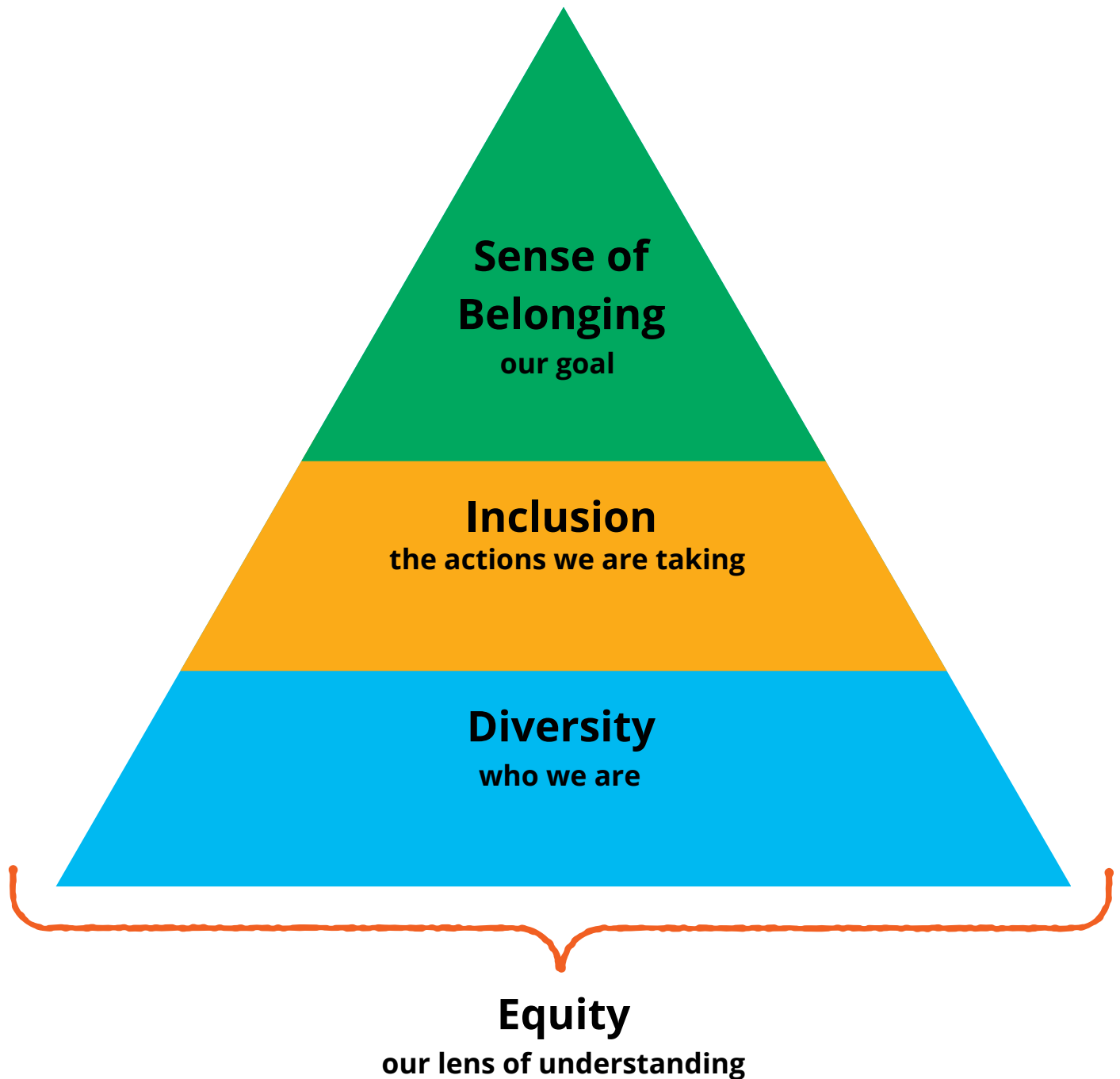**Equity**
our lens of understanding

Figure 1. EDI Pyramid Model

In order to better visualize and understand the components of EDI, we have created a Pyramid Model, which can be seen in Figure 1. This model works on the premise that; equity is the overarching lens that the organization patronizes to inform our understandings, diversity speaks to the existent reality of social differences, and inclusion represents the planned actions being taken by the organization to reach a sense of belonging amongst the employees, clients, and other stakeholders (e.g. Board, research participants, partners, and collaborators). By organizing EDI in this pyramid model, we are better able to visualize what each component represents on an individual level, as well as the integral ways these components are dependent on one another. We believe that the clarity of this model can offer a deeper understanding and subsequently, a deeper commitment to EDI by all of our stakeholders.

The report describes a breakdown of each section of the pyramid. These components have been chosen based on academic literature on EDI and tailored to the strategic directions of Access Alliance that works with immigrants, refugees, and their communities, which have been made vulnerable by systemic barriers and poverty. These sections are also highly informed by the Ontario Health Equity, Inclusion, Diversity and Anti-Racism Framework, the Black Health Plan and the First Nation, Inuit, Metis and Urban Indigenous health framework.
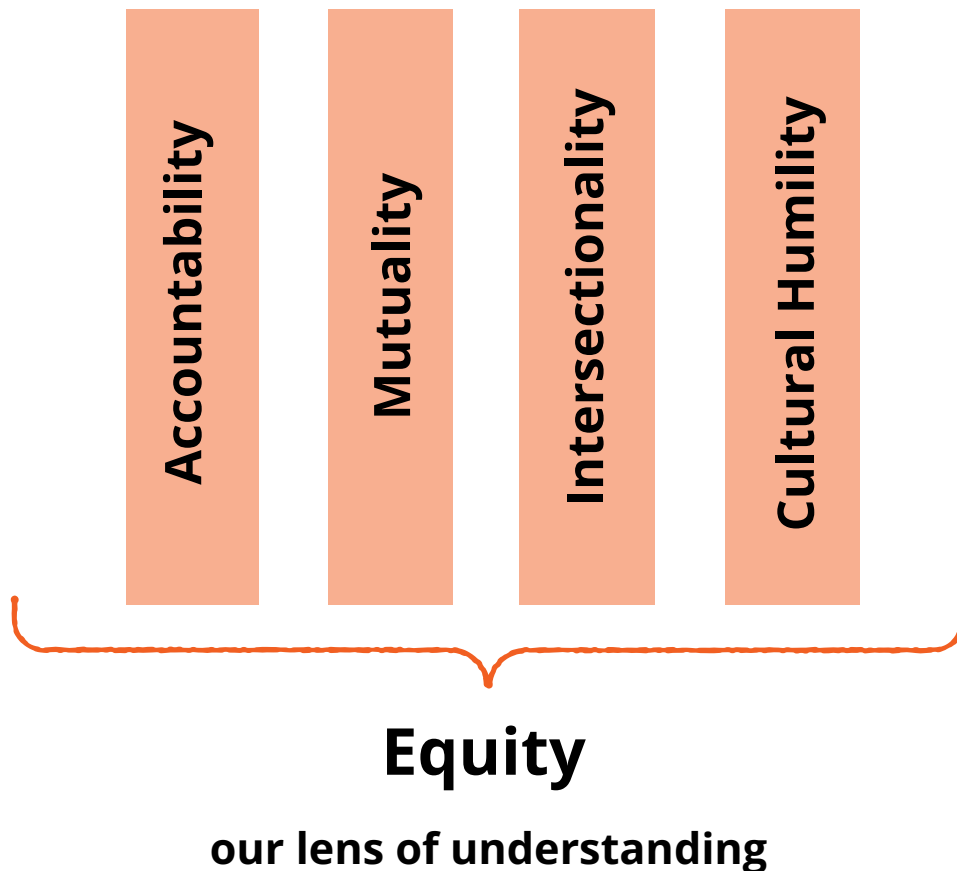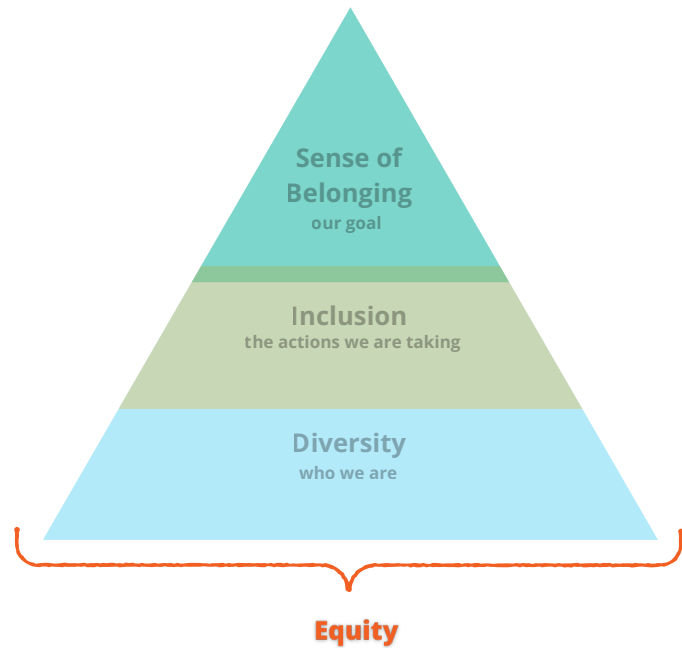
Equity

our lens of understanding

"An equity emphasis seeks to render justice by deeply considering structural factors that benefit some social groups/communities and harm other social groups/communities. Sometimes justice demands, for the purpose of equity, an unequal response" (Racial Equity Tools, 2022).

By using equity as a lens, Access Alliance aims to underline our entire framework with an understanding of the structural inequities faced by marginalized communities. To inform this lens and our subsequent response we pull from diverse concepts related to EDI. These theories and models have inspired the formation of our equity pillars, which include accountability, mutuality, intersectionality, and cultural humility.

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who we are

Equity

Accountability

Mutuality

Intersectionality

Cultural Humility

Equity

our lens of understanding

Accountability

"Being a primary value at Access Alliance, accountability is added as an integral pillar within the equity section of our EDI framework. The organization follows the understanding of accountability as taking responsibility for our actions and striving to be transparent about how decisions are made and how resources are allocated (Ontario Health, 2022). Much of the research on EDI recognizes accountability as a necessary measure for inclusion practices (Ontario Health, 2022). We would like to widen this understanding and have accountability underpin how we understand and approach our responsibilities as an organization. Going into partnerships, we recognize that we are accountable to the communities that we serve and that we plan to mitigate potential harms before they occur.

Mutuality

"According to the Government of Canada, in the Dimensions Handbook (2019), mutuality is an important part of EDI frameworks. This is based on the understanding that organizational EDI initiatives are not only for the organization internally but for the betterment of overall implications (Government of Canada, 2019). Tying into the pillar of accountability, Access Alliance will be transparent regarding results and engagement with the community and aim to guide institutional partners regarding best practices.

Intersectionality

"Coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, intersectionality aims to consider the ways that various forms of discrimination and disempowerment interact with one another particularly, as it relates to people who experience systemic vulnerabilities based on multiple of social identity factors (Government of Canada, 2019). For example, a community member attending our Among Friends programming can be both Black and queer. By being a part of multiple equity-seeking groups, this community member's lived experiences with racism and homophobia are compounded. This example helps us consider how individuals with intersecting social identities face unique challenges (Government of Canada, 2019).
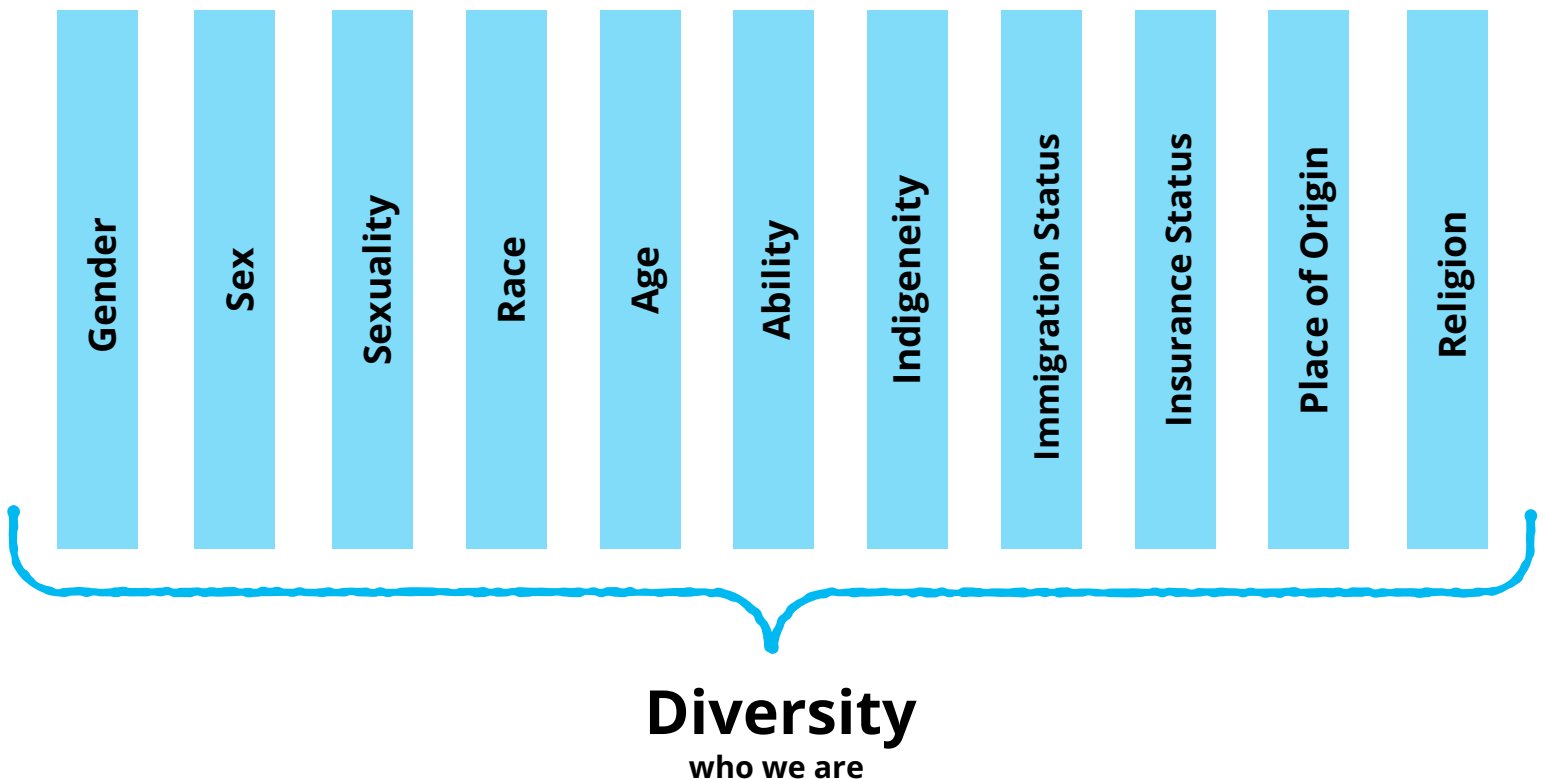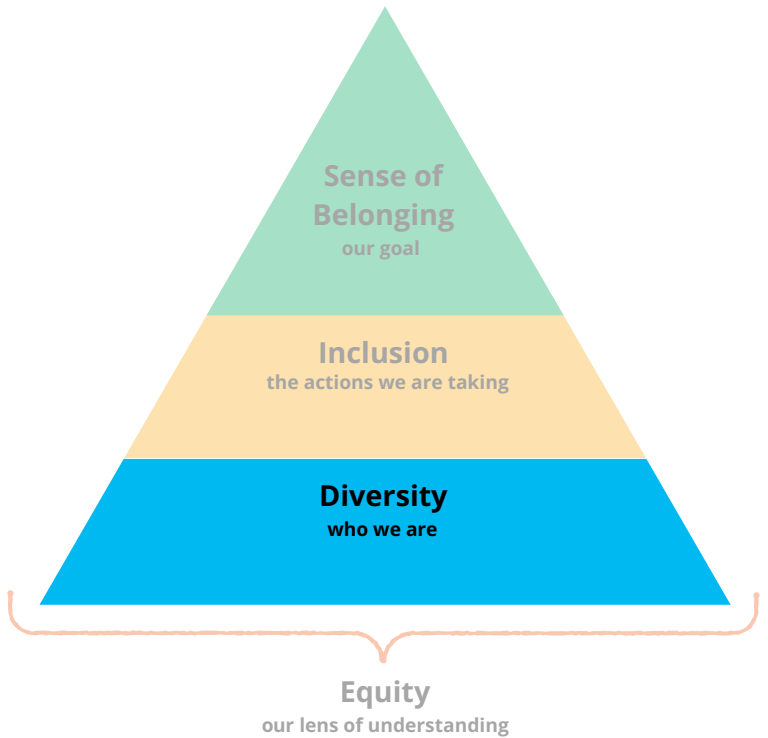
Cultural Humility

This concept involves a commitment to self-reflection and lifelong inquiry –
an understanding of cultural biases one may hold, and a sensitivity to the culture of others (Yeager & Bauer-Wu, 2013). This concept underpins the theory of Cultural Relativism against the popular concept of Universalism to respect the unique norms of any culture (Katherine Brouker, 2019) which argues all values and norms are universal among humans, rather advocates an ethnocentric approach to respect all values created by respective culture.

Diversity

who we are

At Access Alliance, we recognize that diversity is an unarguable reality. Diversity reflects the differences between our staff, clients, and the larger community. In particular, the differences often reflected in diversity practices include ones based on gender, sexuality, race, age, Indigeneity, ability, and sex (Wolbring & Nguyen, 2023). As an organization with a focus on newcomers and refugees, it is also essential for us to include immigration and insurance status, place of origin, and religion in our considerations of diversity.

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Equity
our lens of understanding

Gender

Sex

Sexuality

Race

Age

Ability

Indigeneity

Immigration Status

Insurance Status

Place of Origin

Religion

Diversity

who we are

Intersectionality, an equity pillar defined above, also frames our understanding of differences between people and one's ability to hold multiple overlapping identities. Acknowledging that diversity between people exists, allows us to best understand differing experiences with varying inequities including racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, colonialism, settler-colonialism and xenophobia. The Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion (2023) provides carefully considered definitions for these inequities:

Racism

A form of oppression based on the social construct of race. This can include individual racism, institutional racism and systemic racism.

Sexism

Belief in the superiority of men and masculinity over women and femininity.

Homophobia

A form of oppression caused by fear or hatred against 2SLGBTQIA+ people. Like racism, it can present in many forms including, systemic, interpersonal and internalized.

Transphobia

A form of oppression caused by fear or hatred of Trans people. This can look like offensive commentary, exclusion from employment, misgendering, harassment and violence.

Ableism

A form of oppression affecting people with disabilities on the basis that they are less "valuable" or able to contribute less. Ableism can lead to exclusion, harassment and violence as well as limited opportunities.

Colonialism

When one nation conquers another through the practice of domination and occupies land to conquer, subjugate and exploit the people and territory.

Settler- Colonialism

The long-term and ongoing occupation of Indigenous land by non-Indigenous settler populations. Results in cultural domination and erasure of Indigenous culture, language, spirituality and identity.

Xenophobia

A form of oppression based on the fear or hatred of people perceived to be "foreign". This can lead to harassment, exclusion, and other forms of discrimination

An in-depth understanding of these inequities allows us to frame inclusion practices to ensure that all people feel safe, respected, valued and equally supported (Wolbring & Nguyen, 2023). Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion (2023) also described that all of these inequities can take multiple forms including:

Stereotypes

A form of oppression caused by fear or hatred of Trans people. This can look like offensive commentary, exclusion from employment, misgendering, harassment and violence.

Harassment

Unwelcome comments made towards an individual based on constitutionally protected grounds that are meant to cause offence or humiliation.

Microagressions

Small interactions with marginalized groups that expose implicit or explicit biases. These can have negative effects on a person's well-being and a general sense of belonging.

Bullying

Behaviors that are repetitive and involve degrading, humiliating, threatening or otherwise hostile actions aimed at causing harm to the victim.

Discrimination

Intentional or unintentional unfair treatment concerning a wide range of factors including housing, education, healthcare, employment etc. based on the differences seen in the diversity pillar model above.

Inclusion

the actions we are taking

Access Alliance recognizes that diversity alone is not enough and that inclusion involves the intentional actions the organization is taking to reduce discrimination and inequity (Bernstein et al., 2021). These actions include ensuring that all individuals feel respected, valued and equally supported (Government of Canada, 2019). In reflecting on the necessary steps to sustainable inclusion, Access Alliance considers the action-based frameworks of Anti-Oppression, Anti-Colonialism and Anti-Racism mentioned by the Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion (2023):

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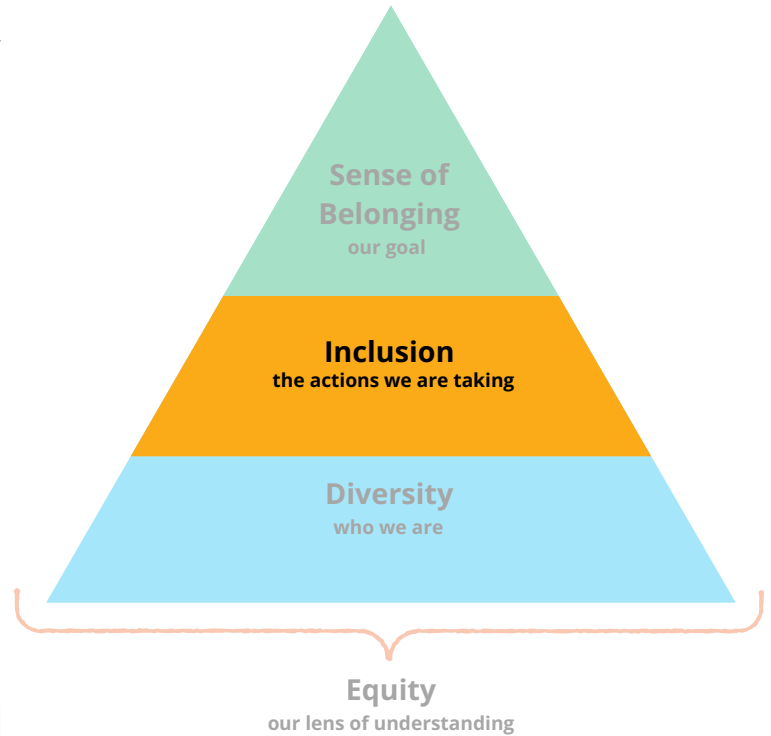
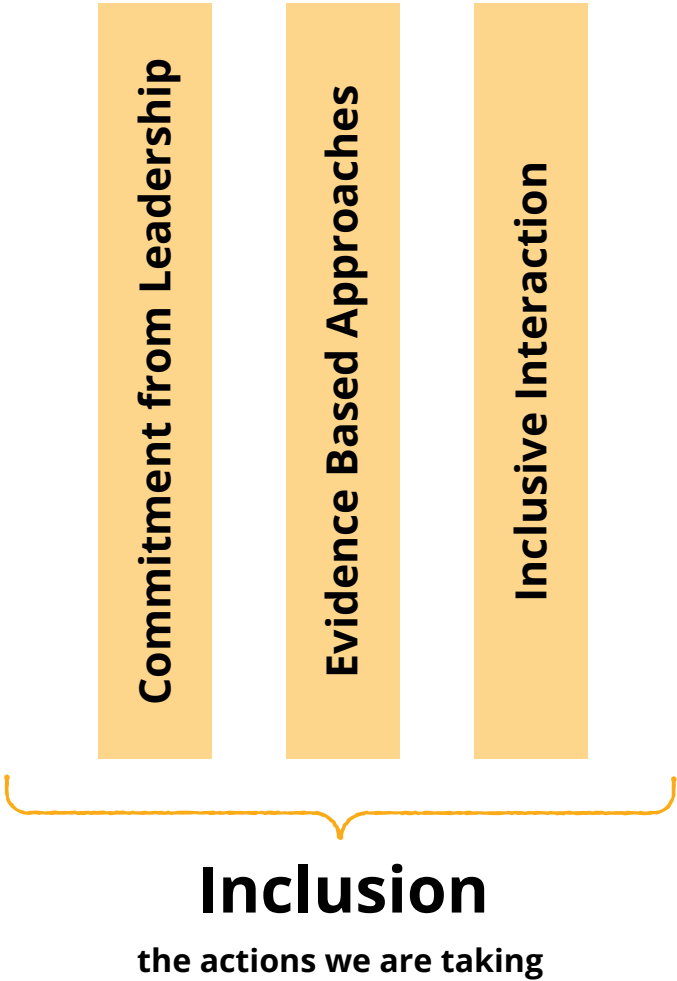| **Anti-Oppression**	Proactive strategies and action items that work to challenge inequity and injustice.
Anti- Colonialism	Proactive strategies and action items that work to dismantle power imbalances for people who have experienced/continue to experience oppression because of colonialism.
Anti- Racism	Proactive strategies and action items that work to eliminate all forms of racism.

Building on the aforementioned action-based frameworks, government recommendations, research articles as well as pre-existing EDI frameworks, Access Alliance created a broad set of steps aimed at informing the progression of EDI as an organizational matrix. Creating these broad goals will allow for the collaborative development of more concrete steps to inclusion while allowing room for the continuous growth of the organization. The creation of these steps also follows the Ontario Health Equity, Inclusion, Diversity and Anti-Racism Framework's areas of action including, 'Address Racism' and 'Reduce Disparities' (Ontario Health, 2022).

The steps to inclusion at Access Alliance include Commitment from leadership, Evidence-based approaches and Inclusive interaction.

Commitment from Leadership

· Much of the research regarding EDI in nonprofit organizations, as well as toolkits developed for the creation of EDI frameworks emphasize the importance of commitment from organizational leadership. Mullin et al. discuss the importance of equity-informed leadership in organizational efforts to strengthen inclusion and address racism (Mullin et al.,2021). Ensuring that leaders possess a thorough understanding of EDI can improve talent retention, patient care and levels of innovation (Mullin et al., 2021). According to Mullin et al (2021), most leadership frameworks are aligned on the five core competencies (i) upholding justice and fairness, (ii) being open-minded, flexible, and being able to manage change, (iii) uplifting organizational staff, (iv) create as well as enact a high level of excellence, and (v) demonstrate accountability. These guides create a common understanding of EDI in the organization, approaching decision-making in a way that considers EDI, incorporating diverse points of view, building a deeper understanding of inequity, creating pathways for the inclusion of diverse leaders, and finally monitoring the long-term goals of EDI while taking responsibility for potential failures and sharing successes (Mullin et al., 2021). Overall, leaders set the tone for engagement with EDI principles including through leading by example, offering support and necessary resources (Government of Canada, 2019).

Commitment from Leadership | **Evidence Based Approaches** | **Inclusive Interaction**

Inclusion
the actions we are taking

Evidence Based Approaches

With regard to the best approaches to implementing EDI, there is consensus amongst scholars and institutional bodies that the use of evidence-based approaches is important. According to Bernstein et al. (2021), the use of general research regarding EDI ·implementation, and internal demographic data collection are essential in generating effective change that benefits equity. By applying research-based, evidence to insight regarding existing policies and programming at Access Alliance EDI practices can best reflect the needs of organizational staff, clients and partners (Bernstein et al., 2021). Internal data collection can help with inclusion through the identification of current inequitable policies and drawing light on the shortcomings of existing EDI practices (Bernstein et al., 2021). Federal and provincial frameworks regarding equity and inclusion also underscore the importance of evidence-based approaches. The Dimensions framework asserts that organizations need to rely on quantitative and qualitative data to inform decision-making regarding steps to inclusion (Government of Canada, 2019). Additionally, Ontario Health's Equity, Inclusion and Anti-Racism Framework includes multiple areas of action focused on evidence-based approaches. These action areas include "Collect, Report and Use Equity Data" as well as "Report and Evaluate to Drive Improvement" (Ontario Health, 2022). To date, Access Alliance has engaged in evidence-based EDI approaches through the Employment Diversity Survey, our dedication to program evaluation, as well as resource development and knowledge translation.
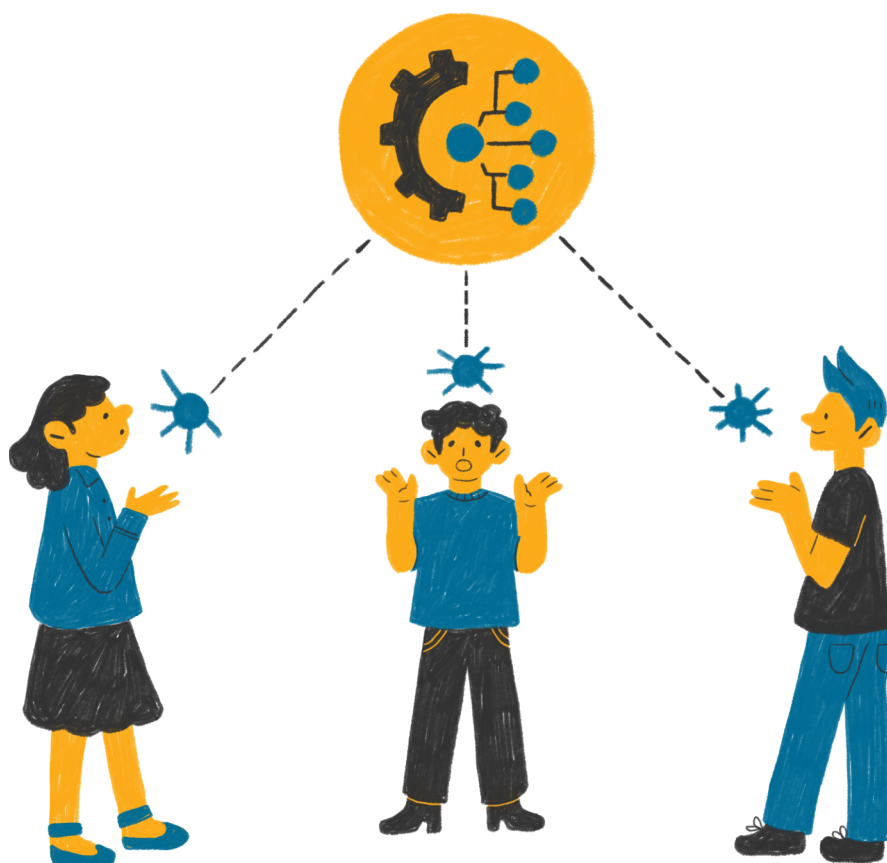
Inclusive Interaction

According to Bernstein et al. (2021), inclusive interaction includes the intentional processes aimed at counteracting anti-inclusive practices. The authors suggest that the structured inclusive practices involved in inclusive interaction create long-term and sustainable inclusion (Bernstein et al., 2021). These practices include intentional actions on the organizational, workgroup and individual levels and emphasize daily/routine commitments to inclusion over occasional diversity training (Bernstein et al., 2021). Inclusive interaction aims to create a cultural change within the organization, this change can be initiated by staff at all levels of the organization (Bernstein et al., 2021). Bernstein at al. include a distinct set of practices including the pursuing of a shared task, mixing different members frequently, collaborating with different members, handling conflict constructively, engaging in interpersonal comfort and self-efficacy and ensuring equal-insider status (2021). These structured approaches to inclusive interaction aim to shift infrequent and superficial engagements between staff into meaningful connections (Bernstein et al., 2021). Various elements of the six factors of inclusive interaction can be seen in many existing EDI frameworks of community-based organizations in Toronto.

Sense of Belonging

our goal

The ultimate reason regarding EDI is to ensure that staff, clients and all stakeholders feel as though they belong at Access Alliance. This sense of belonging is rooted in psychological safety and ensures that everyone feels welcomed, accepted, and even celebrated (Foster-Smith et al., 2023). This sense of security also allows for all engaging with the organization to feel as though they can meaningfully contribute (Mitchell et al., 2024). Building off of inclusion, and belonging asks us to turn to advocacy in publicly supporting a cause to change systems (Foster-Smith et al., 2023). Access Alliance is committed to advocacy as seen through our long-standing commitments to Equitable Access to Healthcare, Economic and Employment Security, Anti-Racism and Anti-Oppression as well as Fair Access to Immigration.

By including a sense of belonging as our ultimate goal, Access Alliance's framework on EDI aligns with the Ontario Health Equity, Inclusion and Anti-Racism Framework on the action items of "Represent and Reflect Ontarians", and "Include and Engage Key Voices".
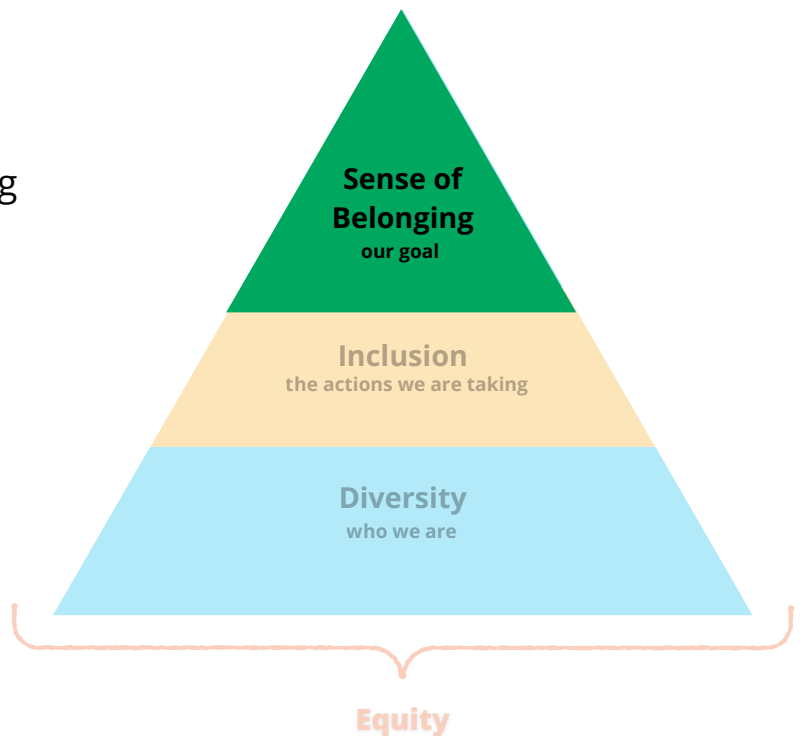
Our Current Practice on EDI

Access Alliance values the importance of the Indigenous Health Equity domain as a significant chapter of our EDI Framework. We are making partners with expert organizations working with them to learn from them and implement their recommendations in our practices. We will continue actively engaging employees by conducting the annual employment diversity survey, and ensuring that knowledge mobilization materials are created to share findings. The organization will also continue our commitment to program evaluation and community-based research that utilizes the expertise of peer researchers. We have identified the following components (not exhaustive) as an EDI approach:

- Gender Health
- Sexuality and Health
- Refugee Health
- Non-status residents' Health
- Black health
- Immigrant and Newcomer Health
- Race-addressed Health
- Age-based Health

Conclusion

In conclusion, we at Access Alliance have made significant strides in redefining and operationalizing Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI). By developing the pyramid model, we hope to engage in a new way to understand and visualize how equity, diversity and inclusion interact with one another. Through this model, as well as key definitions, we hope to create a common understanding of these crucial concepts among all of our staff and stakeholders. Our commitment to applying government recommendations ensures alignment with broader societal standards and reinforces more broadly the importance of EDI practices. However, we recognize the need for more specific steps to translate these frameworks into actionable outcomes, alongside an ongoing commitment from all levels of our staff to sustain these initiatives. This commitment will be vital in ensuring that EDI principles are not only integrated into our internal practices but also reflected in all our external partnerships and community engagements. Through these efforts, we aim to foster a truly inclusive environment where all community members feel as though they belong.

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