Cultural Competency[[1]](#footnote-1)\*

A person-centred approach, as outlined in Operating Principle #1, will necessarily mean that staff are trained to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse and multicultural population of people experiencing homelessness.

As members of an ethnically and culturally diverse society, we have a responsibility to be aware of and sensitive to the various cultures, identities, worldviews and lifestyles that are part of the fabric of modern life. Race, sexual orientation, gender identity, country of origin, and Indigenous heritage are some of the many issues of diversity that we encounter in daily life. Diversity also encompasses, among other factors, a variety of religiously and spiritually based lifestyles, dietary needs, and other cultural preferences. Culture is generally expressed in a shared worldview, as well as in the values, ethics, habits, and practices of a group. It may also include the accumulation of generations of learned behaviours and attitudes.

The culture(s) we belong to shape our attitudes, perceptions of the world, and the way we assign meaning. They often provide context for our social relationships. People from different backgrounds will have been influenced by different forces. The way we see and behave in world may reflect not only cultures of origin, but also the multiple cultures which a person has encountered along the way.

Cultural awareness is the ability to take these considerations into account when we interact with people from backgrounds that may be different than our own. Cultural skills can be categorized along a continuum from awareness to sensitivity to competence:

* Cultural awareness: recognizing basic differences based on ethnic dress and language.
* Cultural sensitivity: knowing that cultural differences and similarities exist without assigning values – i.e. better or worse, right or wrong – to those differences.
* Cultural competence: interacting with people of different backgrounds in a respectful and knowledgeable way using a set of acquired skills.

Cultural competence includes the willingness to seek out the required information so that interventions are not based on personal biases. In the assessment of individual needs and strengths, cultural competence also involves the skill to distinguish between attributes possessed by an individual and those which are characteristic of a person’s culture. All Salvation Army staff working in Emergency Shelters should be encouraged and supported to receive training in cultural competency skills.

Basic to the development of any competence is your own self-assessment and recognition of your attitudes toward difference in behaviour, values and attitudes, including your own biases in these areas. Since everyone is the product of his or her own culture, we need to increase both self-awareness and cross cultural diversity. While we all acknowledge that there is no recipe to follow, certain attitudes help to develop awareness, respect, and understanding. Salvation Army Emergency Shelter staff should be provided with the time and tools to reflect on their own cultural assumptions [see the journaling worksheet for one example], as well as opportunities to discuss that learning with their peers in order to build cultural competency together as a staff group.

 When providing support to people experiencing homelessness, one should be aware that cultural norms can vary across groups. Some examples include:

* Equality: this may be more explicit in law than in practice. For example, there are group differences in the degree to which women are free to make independent decisions. .
* **Freedom of thought and expression**: may be valued in some cultures, but in others children are not taught critical thinking, creativity, unique problem solving, and the question of authority is forbidden.
* **Identification**: may vary from individual obligation to immediate family members or to obligations to the larger group or community. This can shape, for example, housing preferences.
* **Communication**: may vary in terms of who gets to speak for or to someone else.
* **Food**: may vary in its meaning. For example, some groups may consider it a part of communication, a way to establish a relationship, or be a component of ceremony and ritual.
* **Stigma**: certain issues or topics may be stigmatized such as, for example, personal problems such as mental health issues, family dysfunction, and substance use.
* **Health and illness**: the origins, understanding, and means of addressing health and illness may vary across cultures. It may impact the role of, and who is considered, a traditional healer or helper.
* **Acculturation**: may impact how an individual or the group adopts and integrates with a new culture.
* **Time**: may be understood differently. For example, what counts as ‘soon’ or ‘late.’
* **Personal space and physical contact**: appreciation for these varies cross-culturally.

This list is not exhaustive however, and so staff groups are encouraged to take a closer look at the specific cultures they are encountering in light of the dimensions listed above.

## Culture & Oppression

Canada has not been exempt from a long international history of culturally-based violence and oppression. Specifically, the forcible removal of Indigenous children to residential English-only schools in order to assimilate them to Anglo-Saxon customs and ideas, as well as efforts to ban cultural and religious practices on reservations, were forms of cultural suppression and destruction. The result was that multiple generations of Indigenous children did not learn the language, customs, and beliefs of their parents and ancestors, and instead were taught that their heritage was ‘inferior’ to the ‘white man’s.’ Victims of Residential Schools also did not learn how to live in family settings, or how to be children with parents, siblings or members of extended families. They were deprived of essential tools for family making in their own adulthood. The effects continue to be experienced through the process of multigenerational trauma. The repression and attempted annihilation of Indigenous North American cultures was made immensely worse by the physical and sexual abuses committed by many adults toward children in these schools. Awareness of and training in both multigenerational trauma and anti-oppressive practices in social service work for Salvation Army shelter staff is strongly encouraged.

## Culture of Homelessness

There is a culture among those who sleep rough, live on the edge, or move in and out of shelters over many years. Salvation Army staff are encouraged to acknowledge and understand the norms and behaviours and communication styles of their clients which may need to be filtered through this additional cultural lens.

1. \* Adapted from Jeannette Waegemakers Schiff, *Working with Homeless and Vulnerable People: Basic Skills & Practice.* (Chicago: Lyceum Books, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)