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## **COVID-19 & Queers Crisis & Opportunity**

Since mid-March the province of Ontario has been severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This included a state of emergency being declared for Ontario by Premier Ford. Although all Ontarians are being affected by the pandemic, we are experiencing the effects differently. The lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, transgender, 2-Spirit, queer and intersex (LGBTQ) communities can be impacted in a number of ways.

This information document addresses two approaches to living with COVID-19 as LGBTQ people. The first section outlines a number of challenges we may face as LGBTQ people during this crisis. The second section takes up the consideration of opportunities that can arise out of crises.

### **COVID-19 Crisis**

#### **Health Challenges:**

- Some face health challenges, such as being immuno-compromised, have had their transition process disrupted or have experienced their mental health supports being restricted. The effects of interrupted or deprioritized health and social services can worsen troubling conditions LGBTQs experience during a pandemic
- Maintaining health protocols of physical distancing and hand washing may be difficult for the homeless and/or those without access to clean, safe water supply
- Those infected by the COVID-19 virus may feel particularly vulnerable being out as an LGBTQ person, whether in quarantine or in a health care setting for fear of discrimination

#### **LGBTQ elders:**

- LGBTQ elders may be particularly concerned regarding their health and wellness, because they fear discrimination and harassment within the healthcare system. The devastating impact of COVID-19 on older people can weigh heavily for elders in the LGBTQ communities
- The disproportionate level of death in Ontario Long-Term Care (LTC) centres has highlighted the stark failure of care and support in Ontario Nursing Homes and

LTC centres that are led by for-profit models. Deep structural and transformative change is necessary. (CBC, 24 April 2020)

**Intersectionality:**

- Intersections with many other concerns can have compounding effects for LGBTQ people such as health and (dis)Abilities (immunocompromised, chronically ill, asthmatic), age (specifically the elderly), race and ethnicity (attempts to stigmatize COVID-19 as the "Chinese" or "Asian virus") and Indigenous (ignoring of 2-Spirit approaches to wellbeing)

**Living Conditions:**

- Having to live in shelter-in-place environments can be experienced as unsafe for those living with unsupportive family members or an abusive partner

**Loneliness:**

- Feelings of loneliness can be intensified during a pandemic and particularly for LGBTQ people who are self-isolating and/or in quarantine, living in hostile environments including those in multi-household families, single-led families, and independent individuals resulting in increased stress and anxiety with limited or no access to social supports

**Substance Use:**

- LGBTQs who use alcohol and drugs to relieve stress may experience difficulty in managing their use during the pandemic, either by turning to them more or lacking the resources to access them, including social supports to assist in substance use (Rainbow Health Victoria 2020)

**Economic Challenges:**

- Reduced or lost livelihoods, particularly for those who were precariously employed, have been furloughed or laid off or do sex work due to physical distancing

**LGBTQ community Supports:**

- LGBTQ community service organizations are either closed or operating with drastically reduced services compromising much needed support for vulnerable community members

**Sex:**

- Sex is an important way in which many in the LGBTQ communities exercise our sense of core being with others through authentically expressing our desires. Physical distancing has curtailed this especially for those who seek casual, anonymous, non-monogamous or group sexual relations (Street 2020) or engage in sex work
- There has been a marked disregard for community-led approaches to harm reduction and prevention practices during COVID-19 that is responsive to a range of unique and innovative approaches and needs in LGBTQ communities

that the universal State-led top-down approaches to population regulation obscures

### **Stigmatization:**

- Members of the LGBTQ communities who lived through the early stages of the AIDS crisis will recall how the queer communities (along with drug users, sex workers, Haitians and other people of colour and transgender people) were deemed expendable by unsympathetic governments. The lasting effects of such discriminatory measures resulted in the continued stigmatization of the HIV virus to this day

### **Access to Information and the Internet:**

- Access to up-to-date information and supports through social media can be compromised, especially for those who are impoverished and may not have computing devices and WiFi, further complicated by the closure of libraries

### **LGBTQ Communities Blamed for COVID-19:**

- Once again, internationally the LGBTQ communities are being blamed for the coronavirus. Religious and political leaders have a long history of blaming us for natural disasters such as hurricanes, earthquakes and floods to economic downturns. An Israel-based rabbi has stated that the coronavirus is retribution for Pride parades around the world (Kelleher 2020b) and a Ukrainian preacher is claiming the virus is 'God's punishment for same-sex marriage' (Kelleher 2020a). In the US preachers and radio hosts have linked the virus to homosexuality (Greenhalgh 2020) as they have in Iran (Islamic Azad University News Agency 2020) and media news sources in Iraq (Al-Alam 2020). LGBTQs have also been targeted in South Korea via reporting and trace and testing methods linking the spread of the virus to those visiting gay districts with threats of being outed (Kim 2020). Also, 23 individuals were arrested at a youth shelter in Uganda on the pretext of COVID-19 (Human Rights Watch 2020). The spread of such misinformation and the targeting of LGBTQs not only furthers stigmatization but can make us vulnerable to violence due to heightened homophobic and transphobic rhetoric (OHCHR 2020).

### **Crisis = Opportunity**

Opportunity can be seen in different ways. Will the current crisis of this pandemic conflated with racism and classism be the opportunity for the long slow rise of fascism to make a giant leap forward, or will it be the opportunity for democracy to make a clear statement of "No. Never again"? Will society be measured by the power and opulence of the most advantaged or by the strength and wellbeing of the most disadvantaged? What can we learn from this crisis?

We need to be cognizant of the current state-led and top down authoritarian environment we are living in due to the pandemic. We also need to be vigilant about

community informed approaches that will help us all through this crisis and thrive on new opportunities.

We are repeatedly being told, we will need to create a 'new normal' or that we can't go back to life as it was. That need not necessarily be a bad thing. By having to endure this pandemic, an involuntary pause has been placed on all of us, an opportunity to stop and rethink how we lived pre COVID-19 and how we might do things differently upon our return post the pandemic. Of note, in the midst of this pandemic there has been an international groundswell of horrified reaction to police perpetrated anti-Black, anti-Indigenous and racist violence. A highly important social justice concern that necessitates contemplation.

Below is a list of opportunities for consideration that we believe will improve not only the lives of LGBTQ people but society in general:

### **Redressing Anti-Black, Anti-Indigenous and General Racism in Policing during the Pandemic:**

- We are currently witnessing and experiencing an explosion of outrage regarding longstanding anti-Black, Indigenous and general racism exercised by the police in the midst of this pandemic. Activists are advocating for various forms of defunding, disarming or outright abolishment of police services. These calls give rise to opportunities to redeploy police funds to other sectors of our society. Grassroots community-based Black, Indigenous, people of colour, (dis)Ability, ethnic, seniors, poverty, LGBTQ, and other groups would benefit greatly by receiving such funding and furthering our respective social justice issues.

### **Strengthening Sectors Outside of Law Enforcement:**

- Addressing the serious issue of Anti-Black and Indigenous and general racism is not limited to law enforcement. All societal sectors would benefit greatly from utilizing such funds to address their own internal systemic and structural racism and other social justices utilizing the input from community-based social justice groups
- If funds were to be redeployed, the healthcare, social services and education sectors would benefit greatly with increased funding to strengthen our communities during future pandemics and in general

### **Personal Responsibility for Social Justice:**

- Personally, recommitting ourselves to a more caring, social justice-based approach of living with each other as community, in which we work towards the elimination of the isms and phobias that plague those of us who celebrate differences

### **Basic Income:**

- Further exploring the implementation of a basic income as a means to address poverty in this province. Such a system could also poise governments to react more quickly and efficiently to future economic challenges such as pandemics

### **Access to Water:**

- Ensuring access to clean and safe water in all areas of Ontario, with primary focus on implementing the promises of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee Report to supply clean water supplies and better housing for Indigenous Canadians who are vastly disproportionately affected by inadequate housing and lack of access to clean water (Canada 2015)

### **Internet as Human Right:**

- Designating the Internet as a human right and providing free access to WiFi for all, to ensure access to information regardless of ability to pay

### **Re-Imagine Pride:**

- Re-imagining Pride day/week/month celebrations as being for and about and determined by LGBTQ people inclusive of our diversity, our politics, our creativity, without police or corporations

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