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Calamities Bring People Together: A shared experience by Ethnocultural Council of Manitoba

More than twenty different ethnic organizations came together in 2018 to form the ECCM. It is a forum to celebrate diversity, sharing different cultures, experiences and promoting equality. It also serves to help the different membership communities come together to help each other in difficult times.

“Many Council members have already faced incredible hardships, war and famine are just two. They know disasters can bring people together. Calamities like COVID-19 attack human systems of interdependence and this is where the fight is. People have to be there to help and be flexible to adapt. Prayers are important but so is humour and singing.” Perla Javata, ECCM Co-chair

Community leaders came together to discuss:

- Confusion and difficult burdens after the closure of schools, for parents to support their children to continue to learn, such as
 - Parents who don't not have access to computers and the internet
 - Parents who do not speak English or French
 - Parents worrying their children will fall more behind because past troubles mean they might already not be at grade level
- Concern for the mental wellbeing for seniors, single parents, youth and those who already have trauma
- Alarm by the heightened racist rhetoric being directed toward the Chinese and people of Asian backgrounds
- Concern for increased disconnection with teens who were already caught between the culture at home and adjusting to Canadian culture
- Financial uncertainty, anxiety and the effect on the mental health of those whose source of income have been disrupted
- Concern for the confusion some are feeling as the information on both the best medical advice and on government aid changes so rapidly. It is difficult enough for those not fluent in French or English to follow.
- Lack of access to the extras needed like hand sanitizers and masks or again the most recent information on how to use them.
- Concern that many people who work in homes, health care are paid at minimum wage and the work they are doing is critical.

- Lack of recognition from government systems of the important role Ethnocultural organizations play in the community as they are best able to reach out to the people who are not easily reached.

As a response to the pandemic, the Ethnocultural Council of Manitoba translated the social distancing practices and the state of emergency declaration into videos in a variety of different ethnic languages. The Council prepared and distributed factsheets on income, mental health, parental support and resources for families to respond to education needs.

The documents and videos are available for members on the following site:

- Facebook - <https://www.facebook.com/EthnoManitoba/>
- Ethnocultural Council website - <https://ethnomanitoba.ca/>
- Immigration Partnership Website - <https://www.ipwinnipeg.org/ipw-response-to-covid-19>
- Social Planning Council of Winnipeg website - <https://spcw.mb.ca/>

At this challenging and rapidly changing time in human history, more virtual socialization and collectiveness is needed. The Council has challenged its members to remain connected and be more creative in meeting the needs of individuals, families and communities.

The Council is ready to work with both the provincial and municipal governments on tangible ways they can reach out to our member communities here in Winnipeg and across the province. It calls on the Manitoba government to replicate what the Ontario government did to hand out wireless iPads with free data plans to students to continue with online learning.

It is also here to work with the traditional media so their coverage of the pandemic is as informed and inclusive as possible.

“Although social distancing guidelines seem to be at odds with established ways of responding to the needs of the people during a crisis, from the Ethnocultural Council leaders’ perspective, the COVID-19 pandemic will not weaken the bonds of human socialization and collectiveness, rather it will strengthen them. By acting together, supporting each other and practicing social distancing now to keep our communities, our families and ourselves safe, we can emerge from this challenge Stronger Together.” Shakila Atayee, Co-chair ECCM.

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