

Making A Promise of Inclusion

Introduction

The *PEI Community Promise of Inclusion* was created on United Nations Day, October 24, 1998, at a forum attended by Islanders from communities across the province. The Promise celebrates the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and uses principles of inclusion set forth by the Declaration. Article 1 of the Declaration states that: “*All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.*”

The strength of a community lies in the people who live and work there. The spirit of community is strong in Prince Edward Island. On any given weekend, there are benefit concerts, dances and bingos held in small communities to assist people who are in need due to loss or illness. Islanders will readily offer their support for a community project. The Dream Park at Elliott River School in Cornwall, PEI, for

The Caledon Institute is collaborating with the National Crime Prevention Centre's Community Mobilization Program to create the Crime Prevention series. The goal of this series is to document initiatives that build safe communities. The series seeks to enhance public awareness of and support for community-based partnerships on crime prevention through social development.

example, brought together hundreds of volunteers to create a wheelchair-accessible play area for children.

A Strong Volunteer Base

The Island boasts a strong volunteer base. Volunteers are involved in a wide range of activities, including tutoring adults who have low literacy, coaching minor hockey, delivering hot meals and providing support for young offenders.

Islanders are known for their generosity for local, national and international causes. This goodwill has helped raise funds for hospital equipment and has provided relief for victims of natural disasters, such as the devastation caused by the ice storm in the St. Lawrence Valley in 1997, and for those left homeless by the fury of Hurricane Mitch in Central America in 1998.

The Need for Inclusive Practices

Despite the strength of community involvement in Prince Edward Island, there are still many Islanders who feel left out. These individuals are isolated and, for various reasons, are unable to participate meaningfully in community life. Among this group are young people, single mothers, persons with

disabilities, visible minorities, seniors and families disadvantaged by poverty.

We know that feelings of loneliness and exclusion can lead to acts of violence and other criminal activity. The recent incidents in high schools in Colorado, Alberta and Georgia are a testament to the most horrific outcomes of exclusion. Prince Edward Island is certainly not immune to these types of events, but like the small community of Taber, Alberta, our citizens seem to believe that nothing like that could happen here. However, in the weeks following the Colorado, Alberta and Georgia incidents, local schools received bomb threats and students were overheard plotting attacks in their schools.

We expect governments to provide leadership and commit resources to programs and services that keep our communities safe, and to ensure that the basic needs of all community members are met. We also expect governments to enforce laws that are in the best interest of their citizens.

But the spirit of community cannot be legislated or governed through policies and laws. *It is the connections that we make with our neighbours, co-workers, friends and family, and the ability to care, that determine the strength of a community. Adopting inclusion as a principle of community development is a way of ensuring that our communities and neighbourhoods are safe places to live.*

Inclusion: What Does it Mean?

In the spring of 1998, a small group of women began to meet to discuss what inclusion meant to them. These women represented community groups including the PEI Literacy Alliance, the PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women and the PEI Association for Community Living. Together, they formed the PEI Community Promise Working Group.

At first, efforts to bring more people into the working group were not successful. Community members generally supported the idea of the Promise, but many people felt they could not spare the time needed to make the Promise a reality. Members of the

Working Group realized that if the idea of a PEI Community Promise of Inclusion were going to take hold, they would have to work hard to make it happen.

Community Consultations

During September and October 1998, six community consultation meetings were held at locations across the province, including one meeting in the Francophone region of Evangeline. It was at these meetings that the community had the chance to hear about the diverse initiatives being undertaken across the province. One family, for example, held a community supper to raise money to help pay the cost of the daughter's postsecondary education. Another community created a clubhouse and organized a variety of activities for youth. One young man spoke about how his participation in a community literacy program has given him the confidence to attend public meetings and share in the discussions.

We also heard what it was like to feel excluded and about some of the barriers to feeling 'belonged' in a community. Sometimes, the obstacle was simply a matter of not having transportation to attend community events. In other cases, it was more complex: Some people felt they had been labelled because they were poor or had a disability or were unable to read. Labelling has a profound effect on feelings of self-worth and social status within a community.

The Working Group turned to the National Crime Prevention Centre for assistance in addressing these issues. A grant was received through the Centre's Community Mobilization Fund for a forum to bring together community representatives from across the Island. Collectively, they would draft the PEI Community Promise of Inclusion.

The Forum

The forum took place on October 23 and 24, 1998, at a children's camp located outside Charlottetown. We did not want cost to be a barrier to attendance so we set a registration fee of \$20. The

The PEI Community Promise

Who We Are

The PEI Community Promise of Inclusion was created on October 24, 1998, on United Nations Day, at a forum attended by men and women from across Prince Edward Island, using the principles set forth by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Here in Prince Edward Island the spirit of community is alive, yet there are those who feel left out. Recognizing this, some Islanders came together at the forum to create and commit ourselves to a Promise of Inclusion. We offer this promise to all Islanders so that together we can promote, preserve and nurture the spirit of community.

What is the Promise?

We promise to strengthen our communities by helping all of us feel like we belong. We know that this is a long-term commitment and that its fulfilment will benefit all of us as well as future generations.

We believe that by committing to this *Promise of Inclusion*, we are pledging ourselves to:

- accept our differences
- believe in each person's ability to make choices and achieve personal growth
- share what we have and who we are
- promote equality and respect the dignity of all people
- take personal and community responsibility
- tell our stories and enable the stories of others to be heard
- ask for what we need and ask others what they need
- have the social supports needed to feel safe and secure
- remember that we are all in this together.

Community is where you feel welcomed and appreciated.

fee was waived for low-income individuals. More than 60 people attended, representing 23 community organizations.¹ The location, accommodation and food got rave reviews.

In the tradition of the Island *ceilidh*, Friday evening was a celebration of community through storytelling, music and singing. A local author explained that research into the history of his community resulted in the writing of a play that brought neighbours together to perform in the roles of their ancestors. We also heard about one town's dedication to its annual Christmas Parade. This particular town has suffered greatly over the past five years due to the decline of the East Coast fisheries. Despite the economic hardship of many families in the area, the

parade is a rallying point that has helped keep the spirit of community strong.

During the forum, we began the tasks of defining inclusion and identifying the barriers which contribute to feelings of isolation. Working in small groups with facilitators who donated their time, participants had no difficulty identifying many examples and barriers to exclusion.

After lunch, participants were asked to list important elements of a Promise of Inclusion. The flipcharts were full of ideas. The list finally was narrowed to the most important themes that should be included in the Promise.

By the end of the forum, participants had reached agreement on the content of the pledge. An editorial group was given the task of writing the Promise based on the consensus reached at the forum. By the end of February 1999, the PEI Community Promise of Inclusion had become reality.

Promoting the Promise

Our goal is that by this time next year, the PEI Community Promise of Inclusion will be adopted by many communities across Prince Edward Island. Plaques bearing the Promise will be awarded to communities that adopt the pledge. The plaques will be displayed in public areas so that they can be viewed by all community members. The plaques will serve as a reminder and affirmation of the commitment that has been made to inclusion.

Several public readings of the Promise already have been held. During the next year, we will be seeking community events at which to promote the Promise and to make presentations of the plaques. The people who attended the forum also have made a commitment to promote the Promise in their respective communities.

In making a commitment to inclusion, we are making a commitment to ourselves and to our children. The PEI Promise of Inclusion is about living

together in the communities where we can feel welcomed and appreciated.

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Endnote

1. Groups represented at the drafting of the PEI Community Promise of Inclusion were: the Carousel Family Resource Centre; PEI People First; Southern Kings & Eastern Queen's Community Consultative Group; PEI Women's Festival Committee; PEI Literacy Alliance; PEI Human Rights Commission; East Prince Transition and Support Services; Community Health Promotion Network Atlantic; Community Legal Information Association Inc; PEI Federation of Labour; PEI Newcomers Association; PEI Council of the Disabled; PEI Citizen Advocacy; Adventure Group; PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women; Canadian Mental Health Association – PEI Division; Fitzroy Centre Self-Help Clubhouse; Charlottetown Community Choir; Tremploy Inc.; National Action Committee on the Status of Women; Souris Christmas Parade Committee; Canadian National Institute for the Blind; and the PEI Association for Community Living.

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