



POLICY BRIEF 2024

Cultural Competence in British Columbia Social Services

Oceania Chee

The LEVEL Youth Policy Program takes place on the traditional and unceded territories of the *xʷməθkʷə́yəm* (Musqueam), *Sḵwxwú7mesh* (Squamish) & *səlilwətaʔ* (Tseil-Waututh) Coast Salish peoples.

GRAPHIC DESIGN

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COVER ILLUSTRATION

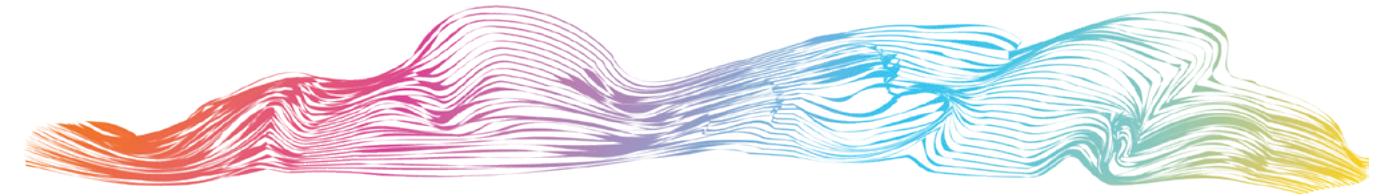
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HEADSHOT PHOTOGRAPHY

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About the LEVEL Initiative

LEVEL is a youth engagement initiative of Vancouver Foundation that aims to address racial inequity. We do this by investing in the leadership capacity of Indigenous, racialized, immigrant, and refugee youth to create more opportunities throughout the non-profit and charitable sector.

Despite being the fastest-growing youth populations in British Columbia, Indigenous, immigrant, and refugee youth don't have the same opportunities as other young people. Race continues to be a factor that hinders their ability to have a say in decisions that impact their lives.

LEVEL empowers these youth by building their capacity to challenge and change those systems that hinder their ability to build a more just world.

LEVEL consists of three pillars of work to advance racial equity

1. LEVEL Youth Policy Program
2. LEVEL Youth Organizing
3. LEVEL BIPOC Granting

About the LEVEL Youth Policy Program (LEVEL YPP)

The LEVEL Youth Policy Program (LEVEL YPP) brings together young people between the ages of 19 and 29 from across British Columbia who identify as being Indigenous or racialized immigrants or refugees. Indigenous and racialized newcomer youth are dispropor-

tionately impacted by certain public policies but are rarely included in the development and implementation of public policy process. The LEVEL YPP aims to provide these youth with equitable training and leadership opportunities to better navigate the public policy landscape, and to develop new tools and skills to influence, shape, and advocate for policy changes that are relevant in their own communities. Having young people directly involved in shaping policies that impact their lives is essential to creating systemic, meaningful change. The LEVEL YPP's training is grounded from and within Indigenous peoples' worldviews, which the program acknowledges, could vary from person-to-person or nation-to-nation. Indigenous worldviews place a large emphasis on connections to the land. This perspective views the land as sacred; where everything and everyone is related and connected; where the quality of the relationships formed are key in life; where what matters is the success and well-being of the community, and where there can be many truths as they are based on individual lived experiences.¹ As such, an important premise of this training is to centre and place a particular focus on the fact that the work that has gone into developing this training, as well as the training itself, has taken and will take place on unceded (never given away/stolen) territories of the *hə́ŋq 'əmin 'ərn*-speaking Musqueam peoples, of the *Halkomelem*-speaking Tseil-Waututh peoples, and of the *sníchim*-speaking *Sḵwx_wú7mesh* (Squamish) peoples.

1. <https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/indigenous-peoples-worldviews-vs-western-worldviews>

Biography

Oceania Chee

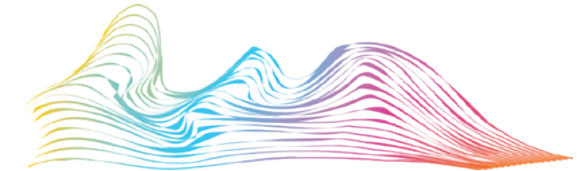


Oceania (they/them) currently lives in "Vancouver," on the unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples. Oceania's identity as a nonbinary immigrant from China and Malaysia informs their deeply-held policy interests in intersectional justice, healthcare access, and food security. They have been named an International Major Entrance Scholar (IMES) at UBC where they are currently pursuing a BA in Political Science. They also work as a disability care attendant for a professor in the Downtown Eastside (DTES), and volunteer their time with Community Canteen, a mutual-aid distributor in Vancouver. Oceania is also a regular contributor to CiTR Radio's Discorder Magazine, a mentee at Centre A's Art Writing Mentorship, and is more recently a knit and crochet garment-maker. In their free time, Oceania can be found watching an old movie, going to a live music show, or taking a long walk through Chinatown.

Executive Summary

Cultural competence—the ability to understand and effectively engage with people from diverse backgrounds—is crucial for ensuring equitable access to social services.

In British Columbia (BC), where 34% of the population identifies as an ethnic or cultural minority, there is a notable lack of cultural sensitivity in the social services sector. This gap leads to significant barriers in accessing essential services such as food security and healthcare. These shortcomings in larger organizations push smaller, community-based organizations to address these gaps—but with limited resources. Additionally, marginalized communities face systemic barriers in mental-health care and addiction treatment due to a lack of culturally competent services and pervasive stereotypes. To address these issues, it is vital for provincial policies to emphasize cultural competence, improve language access, and ensure that marginalized groups receive equitable care. Effective policy frameworks must reflect the province's cultural diversity and strive for inclusive and accessible social services for all residents.



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Background

THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Generally defined as the ability to understand and effectively engage with people from diverse backgrounds, cultural competence is, by nature, multifaceted, but its theoretical underpinnings of humility and sensitivity can be implemented in a wide variety of circumstances. For example, a 2021 report on cultural considerations in addiction treatment advises that healthcare providers adopt an “open” attitude with an “other-oriented” outlook, but this proposal and its recommendations will show that individual changes in behavior only represent one route of cultural competence. Lack of consideration of cultural competence creates further friction and exacerbates existing forms of discrimination when accessing social services.

Cultural competence, sensitivity, and humility in BC’s social-services sector is severely lacking, creating significant access and knowledge-based barriers to essential needs, such as food security and healthcare. Its importance is underscored by the fact that, as of 2021,

34.4% of BC’s population, and more than half of the Metro Vancouver population, identifies as an ethnic/cultural minority, bringing with it distinct cultural mores and values that the social services sector has yet to address.

THE ISSUE

One prominent example of BC’s failure to act is in the field of translation. Here, Metro Vancouver provides a clear case study of being an extremely linguistically diverse area. For example, despite the Greater Vancouver Food Bank (GVFB) nominally serving as the primary food bank for Metro Vancouver, the organization has failed to take steps in the direction of greater language access for the many Chinatown residents who rely on services such as theirs. In the healthcare sector, Rose Jen shared in an interview that healthcare authorities are reliant on outside translation agencies for crucial interpretive work, rather than developing these programs for themselves. This particular reliance leads to irregular standards of translation in situations where these standards are critical.



Lack of consideration of cultural competence creates further friction and exacerbates existing forms of discrimination when accessing social services.



The failure within larger organizations, such as in the examples above, to account for the need for improved cultural access leads to two main consequences. First, smaller and more specific nonprofits pick up the slack. In lieu of proper language access at the GVFB, Yarrow Society currently runs a grocery delivery program for Chinese seniors in Vancouver’s Chinatown, providing culturally relevant produce from local grocers. The Metro Vancouver Muslim Food Bank serves a similar purpose for Muslim and Arab clients in need of halal food. While the work these organizations do is important, their relative lack of funding and reach cannot be ignored. Failures in cultural competence in larger organizations lead to strain on smaller organizations who may not be as organizationally or financially equipped to deal with the need.



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In a chat regarding the lack of culturally competent care spaces for South Asian people, Jshandeep Jassal at Solid State Co-op noted in an interview that many South Asian women simply do not receive the mental-health assistance they need due to a lack of cultural

Vancouver Chinatown. Photo by Kyle Lawrence, Wikimedia Commons.

vulnerability, risking the perpetuation of generational traumas. Furthermore, when some South Asian women do make the step to pursue mental-health care, they risk stigmatizing and further stereotyping their own culture when speaking about culturally-specific issues.

Rose Jen at Vancouver Coastal Health (VCH) noted a similar inequivalence in interpretive work in healthcare, with potentially broad consequences. For instance, there is no direct translation of the words “palliative care” or “hospice” in Farsi, meaning that any Farsi-speaking patient faces an undue amount of friction in receiving this form of care.

Another consequence stemming from this lack of access is that many in need simply fall through the cracks. This is an especially dire situation in the healthcare sector. More research must be conducted on this cohort in BC, however, Gainsbury’s 2016 meta-analysis finds that culturally and linguistically diverse groups are more at risk of falling into addiction, as well as being less likely to receive and complete treatment programs. Particularly relevant to the BC context is the intersection between addiction and the Indigenous population. The BC Government’s 2023 “In Plain Sight” report finds that patients with

Indigenous status seeking care face stereotyping and racism from healthcare providers at a higher rate than others. Healthcare providers may deem them “less worthy of care” and more likely to be pre-disposed towards “drug-seeking” behaviors. Indigenous patients are also regularly profiled for alcohol and drug addiction, face discrimination and, if female, violence when seeking care. Racism and stereotyping prevent those who desperately need care from accessing it, a cycle that is exacerbated by the inaction of colonial institutions that otherwise claim to be acting to mitigate these issues.

In order to solve these issues on a provincial level, policy should be implemented with the goal of leveling the standard of care received by marginalized and non-marginalized groups, with an emphasis on increasing accessibility—whether in the form of language, geography, or cultural sensitivity. Cultural competence is important because equal access to social services is important, and this must be reflected in the policies put forth. At the same time, any framework developed for structural implementation must acknowledge and accommodate the great diversity of cultural practices throughout the province of British Columbia.



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Proposal

Keeping in mind the unequal standards and undue friction that racialized migrant and Indigenous groups face while seeking social services, I propose the following policy recommendations:

1 Recognize the need for cultural competence at the next annual Social Services Sector Roundtable.

The Social Services Sector Roundtable (SSSRT) is an annual forum between senior provincial government officials and community social-service agencies held to coordinate and discuss issues for the coming year. Placing cultural competence on the agenda will allow government and larger organizations to pick up the slack regarding crucial issues such as language access and cultural sensitivity.

2 Change provincial non-profit grant structures that reflect the imperative need for standardized language access across the social services sector.

While the Multiculturalism Grant specifically applies towards multiculturalism and anti-racism efforts, more provincial grants should provide funding under the condition that the organization adopt adequate language access and interpretive services, particularly for essential services such as food security and healthcare.

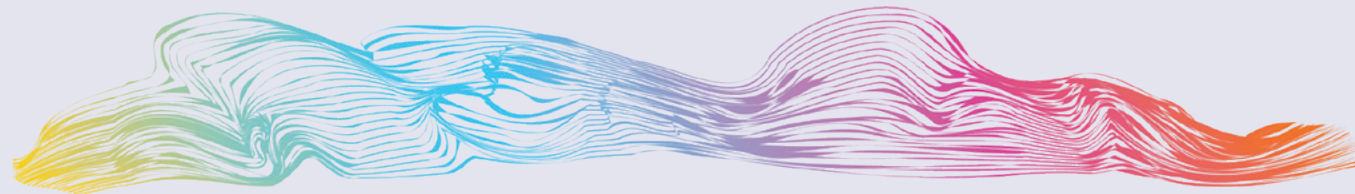
3 Provide more financial support towards initiatives that create space for marginalized groups to receive culturally specific care, as well as recognition of cultural values as unique needs.

As mentioned in the above recommendation, grant structures and funding should reflect the necessity of cultural competence—part of this also includes funding initiatives creating closed spaces for culturally specific care, reducing potential harm caused.

4 Incorporate standardized understanding of anti-racist/multicultural frameworks developed both by migrant and Indigenous advocates into the nonprofit sector.

Programs developed for the furthering of cultural competence and reducing friction in accessing social services (positive examples of these include but are not limited to: the San’yas Anti-Racism Indigenous Cultural Safety Training, the South Asian Anti-Oppressive Training Project at the South Asian Health Research Hub, or the Language Services Program (developed at Vancouver Coastal Health (VCH)) should be implemented as a norm for all social-service providers.

Conclusion



Cultural competence is not merely a conceptual ideal but a practical necessity for ensuring equitable access to social services in BC. There is a pressing need for systemic changes in how social services are delivered. The current gaps in cultural sensitivity and language access create significant barriers for marginalized communities, leading to unequal access to essential services like food security, healthcare, and mental-health support.

As highlighted previously, larger organizations such as the GVFB have failed to adequately meet the needs of Metro Vancouver's diverse population. Their shortcomings in providing language access and culturally competent care have disproportionately burdened smaller, community-based nonprofits that lack the resources to fully address these needs. This situation not only strains these smaller organizations, but also leaves many individuals—in critical need of services—to fall through the cracks.

To address these issues, it is crucial for provincial policies to prioritize cultural competence across the social-services sector. This includes acknowledging the diverse cultural practices of the province's population and implementing

The current gaps in cultural sensitivity and language access create significant barriers for marginalized communities, leading to unequal access to essential services like food security, healthcare, and mental-health support.

measures to improve language access, enhance cultural sensitivity, and ensure equitable care for all residents. By recognizing these needs at the SSSRT, restructuring grant programs, supporting initiatives for culturally specific care, and acknowledging the broad importance of anti-racism work, the province can take meaningful steps toward a more-inclusive and effective social-services framework.

Ultimately, the goal is to build a social services system that reflects and respects the cultural diversity of British Columbia, ensuring that every resident has equal access to the support they need. This approach will not only address immediate gaps but also lay the foundation for a more just and equitable future for all communities in the province.

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I want to thank Rose Jen at Vancouver Coastal Health and Jshandeep Jassal at Solid State Co-op

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Cultural competence is not merely a conceptual ideal but a practical necessity for ensuring equitable access to social services in BC. There is a pressing need for systemic changes in how social services are delivered.

Vancouver Foundation is Community Inspired. We are a community foundation that connects the generosity of donors with the energy, ideas, and time of people in the community. Together, we've been making meaningful and lasting impacts in neighborhoods and communities since 1943. We work with individuals, corporations, and charitable agencies to create permanent endowment funds and then use the income to support thousands of charities. We recognize that communities are complex and that collaboration between multiple stakeholders is needed to help everyone thrive and evolve. Vancouver Foundation brings together donors, non-profits and charities, government, media and academic institutions, local leaders, and passionate individuals to build meaningful and lasting change in the province of British Columbia. We see young people, their voices and experiences as part of that vision to building meaningful change.

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