COCo
Centre des organismes communautaires
Centre for community organisations

Portes Ouvertes

Anti-Oppression Practice for Community Groups
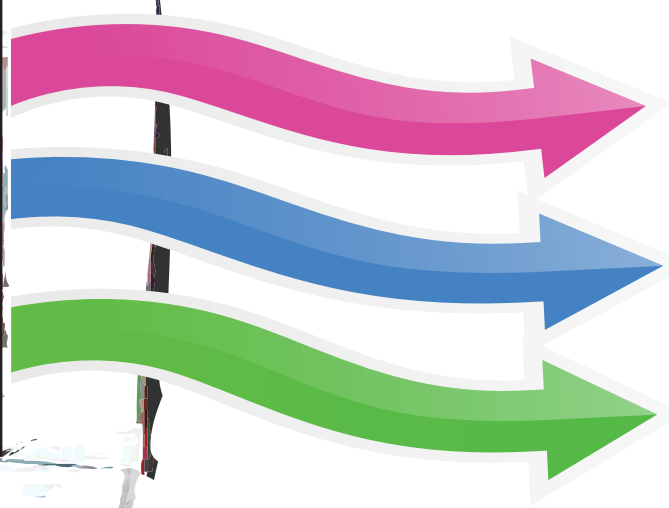
Internal Challenges

External Challenges

Solutions

Introduction

"True participation means that people are valued – not just accommodated or tolerated. People of "undervalued," "marginalized" and "disadvantaged" communities must not only be heard, but must access mechanisms of power and decision-making and take on leadership roles."
(COCo's Anti-Oppression Statement)

Even with the best intentions of creating open and accessible organizations, it can happen that the power dynamics of our structurally unequal society are unintentionally reproduced within our organizations. Sometimes a policy issue, sometimes a communications issue, sometimes a training issue, and sometimes an issue of finding ways to create an open workplace culture, it is clear is that a commitment to Anti-Oppression should be built in at every level of our organizations, and understood as an ongoing learning process.

This document comes out of the workshops that COCo conducted for our 2012-2013 "Portes Ouvertes" project on Anti-Oppression practices in community organizations.

It is not meant to be a comprehensive list of strategies, or a "quick fix"- rather, it provides ideas that participating groups devised regarding challenges to implementing Anti-Oppressive practices within their own organizations in Québec, as well as Strategies and Solutions that they have implemented to make their organizations more open to fostering equality and diversity.

The goal of this document is to help start dialogue on how we build organizations and workplaces where all experiences and voices are welcome, valued and fully able to participate. We would love to hear what you think! What are some of the challenges that your organization has faced in implementing Anti-Oppression? What strategies does your organization employ?
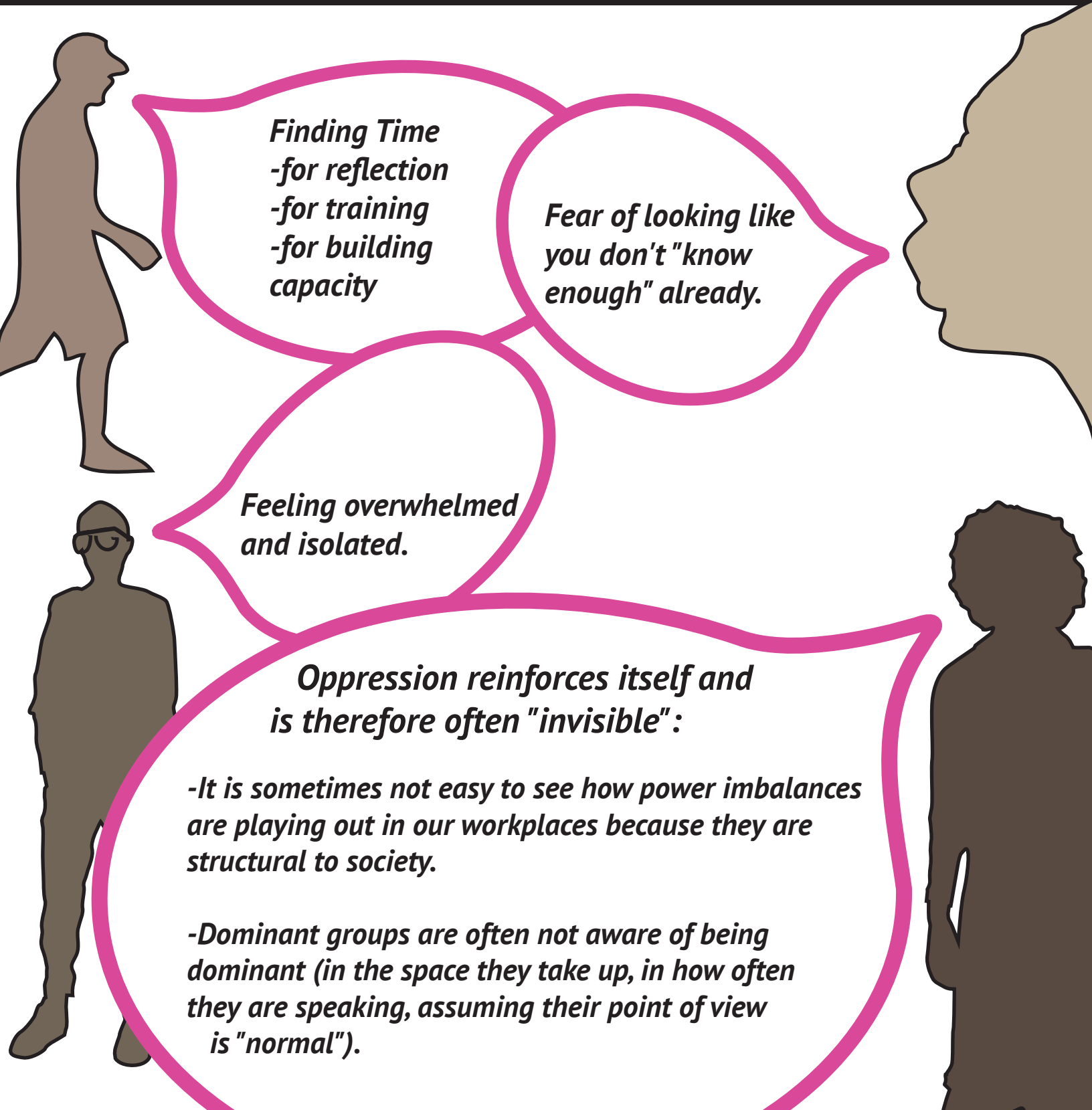
Internal Challenges

Internal Challenges for Community Organizations Working on Anti-Oppression

Finding Time
-for reflection
-for training
-for building capacity

Fear of looking like you don't "know enough" already.

Feeling overwhelmed and isolated.

Oppression reinforces itself and is therefore often "invisible":

-It is sometimes not easy to see how power imbalances are playing out in our workplaces because they are structural to society.

-Dominant groups are often not aware of being dominant (in the space they take up, in how often they are speaking, assuming their point of view is "normal").

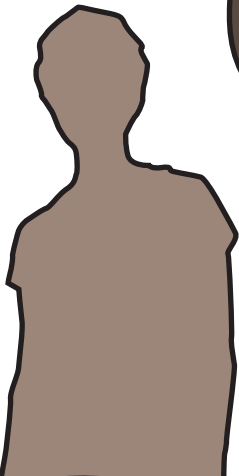# Internal Challenges

Breaking through "mono-culture" in a workplace.

The "Not me" phenomenon

Progressive organizations having a tendency to believe they are "beyond oppression."

Assuming that because your group is (for instance) a feminist organization that you are therefore immune to other types of oppressive or discriminatory behaviour.

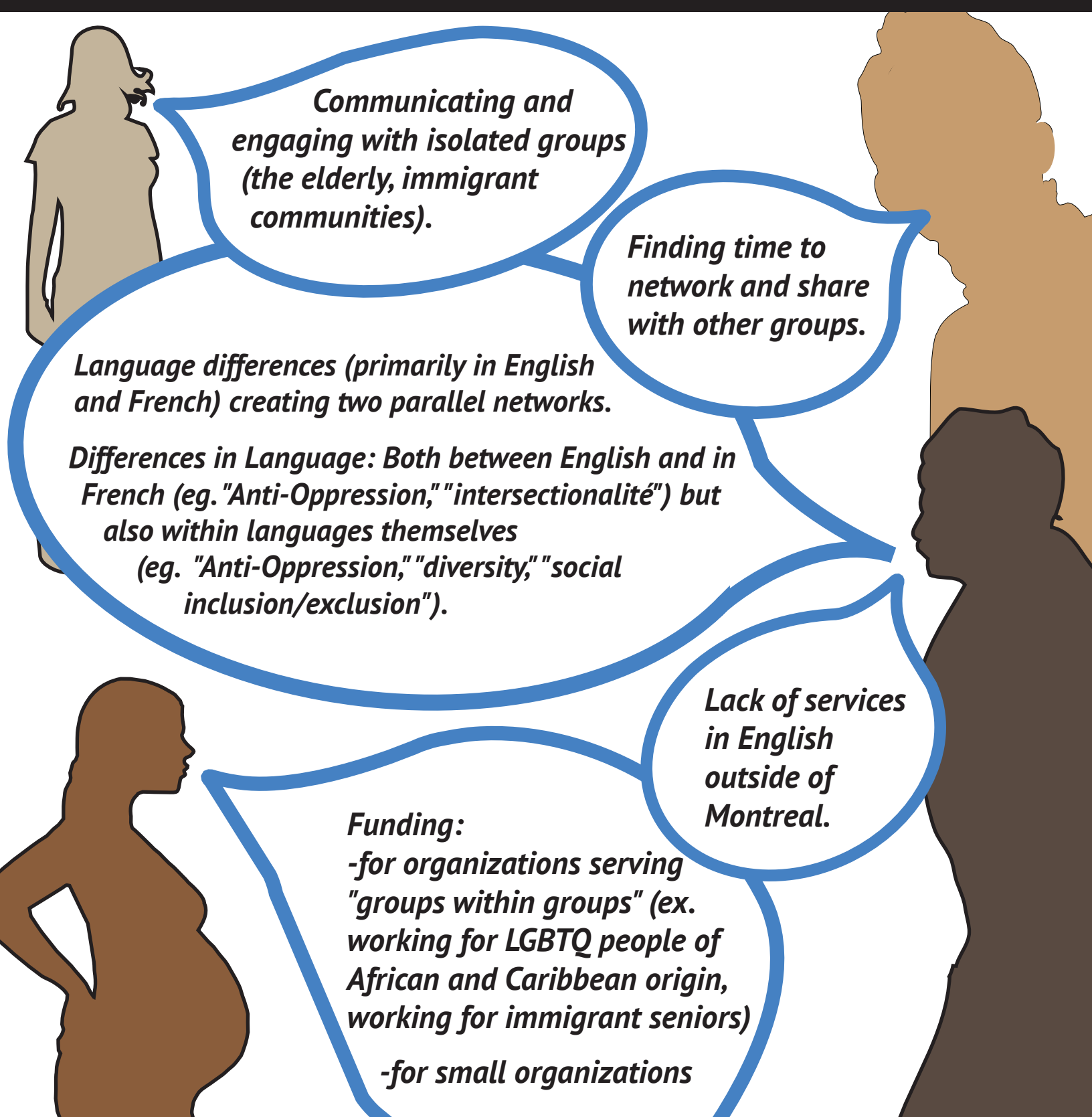Making sure an anti-oppression policy is understood by staff as well as volunteers and contract workers.

Everyone having a different understanding of what Anti-oppression means.

External Challenges

Communicating and engaging with isolated groups (the elderly, immigrant communities).

Finding time to network and share with other groups.

Language differences (primarily in English and French) creating two parallel networks.

Differences in Language: Both between English and in French (eg. "Anti-Oppression," "intersectionalité") but also within languages themselves (eg. "Anti-Oppression," "diversity," "social inclusion/exclusion").

Lack of services in English outside of Montreal.

Funding:
-for organizations serving "groups within groups" (ex. working for LGBTQ people of African and Caribbean origin, working for immigrant seniors)

-for small organizations

Strategies & Solutions

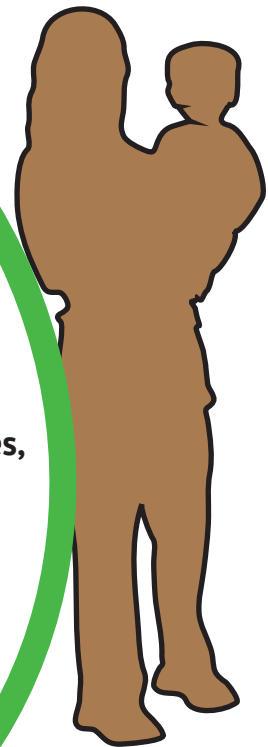**Strategies and Solutions for Community Organizations Working on Anti-Oppression**

Anti-Oppression needs to be build at every level of the organization.

One good analogy is thinking of Anti-Oppression work not as an appendix added on at the end of the book, but as rewriting the introduction to reframe the book's argument.

Stop using "No Time" as an excuse for not creating a more open organization!

Recognize where work needs to be done: Be open about areas we are not familiar with. Aim towards an organizational culture where learning is encouraged. Realize that we understand different issues to varying degrees based on personal experience.

One group mentioned: **"our organization has a lot of experience working with gender diversity and LGBTQ issues, however our staff realized we have much less experience and comfort dealing with racial diversity- so we are in the process of working through this as an organization- a process that might involve training, taking time to openly talk about our staff experiences as white or as people of colour and reworking our hiring policies."**

Strategies & Solutions

Strategies and Solutions for Community Organizations Working on Anti-Oppression

Recognize that everyone is coming to work with individual experiences. Be aware of how your own experiences affect your behaviour and expectations.

We live in a society that is structurally unequal. We are not immune to this and everyone experiences this in particular ways- being aware of this is important. Moving from there- it is important to create an organizational culture that assumes we all have biases- therefore **we need to be able to talk about it!**

Hire **permanent staff** from diverse backgrounds- not just contract workers.

Create an environment where everyone feels empowered and able to contribute to decision-making, and that their input is valued. Be creative! Find ways to **ensure all staff voices are heard.**

Real diversity on the board should reflect your membership and those who use the services you provide.
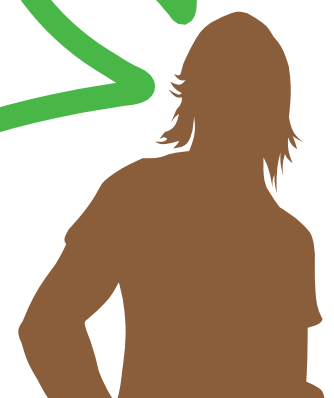
Use **accessible language** to approach volunteers and potential hires.

Learn models of communication that promote active listening and respect.

One group noted: **"While working with teenage volunteers in our organization, the "Anti-Oppression" training was not sinking in. However, focusing on non-violent communication was a concrete way for them to engage with how they treat others."**

Be open to learning from others about their experiences and hearing their individual stories- they might challenge stereotypes you didn't know you had.

Strategies & Solutions

Strategies and Solutions for Community Organizations Working on Anti-Oppression

Develop strategies that expand your recruitment at hiring practices.

Recognize that working with diversity can take more time. Reconsider 'efficiency' as the only marker of a successful work environment.

It is difficult to overcome prejudices held by everyone in the group: **Prejudices won't be overcome unless the group is willing to look at them.**

Find ways to hear multiple voices from marginalized groups: remember that even if you are familiar with some aspects you don't "know it all" (eg. watching videos, going to workshops and other events).

Display diverse communities signs and symbols in solidarity.

Recognize that Anti-Oppression is an ongoing process, and that it is a very BIG process: It will take time and it deserves time.

Ask your team to live in the "discomfort" of difference- it can be an opportunity to grow.

Let yourself be challenged by others and stay open to relationships at work that may have conflict.
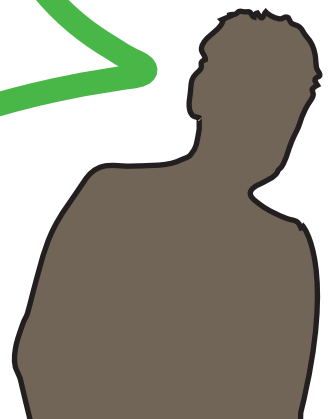
Strategies & Solutions

Strategies and Solutions for Community Organizations Working on Anti-Oppression

There is a tendency within organizations to hire people who "fit in." Think carefully through what this means in terms of **fostering diversity on your staff and board.**

Recognize the realities that marginalized groups face and recognize people as individuals, not just as members of a group.

When the changes and challenges we still have to meet feel overwhelming- **Remember how far we have come-** think back to the conversations we were having even five or ten years ago!

Offer proper remuneration.

Assume you are already dealing with diversity- you just might not be aware that you are.

A member from one organization noted: **"I often hear from other organizations that they do not have gay or lesbian people who use their services. I tell them 'if you have twenty people who come to your organization, there is a good chance that you are already dealing with gay or lesbian people- your organization needs to ask itself why those people are perhaps not comfortable coming out within your space."**

Take ownership of your own organization and responsibility for it being an open place.
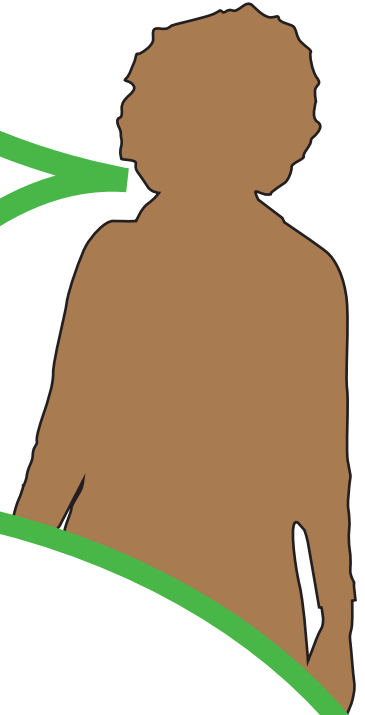
Strategies & Solutions

Strategies and Solutions for Community Organizations Working on Anti-Oppression

Recognize how socio-economic privilege plays out in hiring. Requiring a college or graduate degree, for instance, can potentially be a barrier to hiring from the communities in which you work.

Allow for flexibility in scheduling (eg. For families with young children, people with disabilities).

Start with yourself as a place of change.

Create conditions where people are not tokenized. One person from a marginalized group can often have a lot of pressure put on them to answer for how the entire community feels.

Remember that WE are the system (and we have the power to change it).