

As Canada searches for solutions to Islamophobia, Muslims offer answers

Getting to the root of hate is a shared responsibility, community leaders say

BY MEGAN DELAIRE OURWINDSOR.CA

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A vigil in memory of the London Muslim family that was attacked was held at Pickering City Hall on June 13, hosted by the D
By vigil in memory of Muslim family

More Muslims have been killed in targeted hate crimes in Canada than any other G7 country in the past five years, says the National Canadian Council of Muslims.

Just last month, four members of a Muslim family from London, Ont. were fatally run down in what police are calling a “planned, premeditated act, motivated by hate.”

On July 22, Canada held a national summit to discuss ways to address Islamophobia’s root causes.

As the federal government considers its next steps, some of Ontario’s Muslim leaders are weighing in on what needs to be done in this province.

IN EDUCATION

During a recent funding announcement on anti-Islamophobia curriculum, the executive director of the Muslim Association of Canada talked about the impact of discrimination on Muslim youth, who make up half of Ontario’s Muslim population.

“Research has shown Islamophobia in Ontario’s public schools has resulted in a feeling of isolation and alienation of Muslim students who are growing up apologetic and fearful to express their faith,” said Sharaf Sharafeldin, calling on the province to fund anti-Islamophobia initiatives in the public school system, protect Muslim youth, and help break the cycle of learned racism.

“Tackling Islamophobia in Ontario’s education system should include anti-Islamophobia awareness, policies and curricular resources to support the educators in teaching against Islamophobia in classrooms.”

IN HEALTH CARE

Earlier this year, Eram Chhogala, a Muslim emergency and trauma nurse at Scarborough Health Network, launched a support group for front-line health-care workers.

In her years of nursing, she said she’s witnessed firsthand subtle ways religious and racial prejudice manifests in health care.

“There have been people who have asked questions about why they request (religious accommodations), but I think the important thing for a lot of health-care professional is to become culturally competent and culturally accommodating,” she said.



Eram Chhogala is an emergency and trauma nurse based in Toronto. - Eram Chhogala photo

According to Cancer Care Ontario, people who face barriers to equitable health care — like immigrants, racialized women, low-income women, and trans-identifying individuals — tend to have lower cancer screening rates, which puts them at a higher risk of being diagnosed with the illness at a later, less treatable stage. The organization identifies health-care professionals' bias as a barrier to equitable health care.

Chhogala says the province needs to work with the health-care and education sectors to remove health-care worker bias.

“Health-care professionals are told to understand and respect everybody based on their culture, their religion and to become more culturally competent,” she said.

“But cultural competency is not very heavily focused in curriculum, so I think that’s something we should incorporate into the education system. But I think it’s also something people should do on their own.”

IN INDIVIDUALS

Imam Sikander Hashmi, an Ottawa-based writer, teacher and Imam, believes progress will come when each person recognizes and works to dismantle their own prejudices.

“Legislation, structural improvements, systemic improvements, I think all of those things are really important, but I like to think about what the root cause is, because you can legislate it all you want, but at the end of the day, hate is a problem of hearts and minds,” he said.

“We all have a role to play, and at a really basic level we need to have an actual conversation on hate.”



Sikander Hashmi is an Imam, community leader, writer and teacher based in Ottawa. - Sikander Hashmi photo

While some may never change their minds, Hashmi believes most of those who have espoused intolerant views can be reached.

“I think it’s really important for us and everyone else who values justice and fairness to try to really work on the group that is ignorant,” he said.

“Because if we can immunize them to hatred by educating them, it takes away the fuel from the fire of hatred.”

Hashmi also said it’s important everyone understand that Islamophobic or hate-motivated attacks are traumatic experiences and said it’s important to “acknowledge the hurt and what that person is experiencing, reassuring them we are there for them and they’re not alone.”

Lastly, he encourages anyone who has fallen victim to a hate crime to report it to authorities and organizations like NCCM as data on hate crimes can help identify trends and inform policies to prevent them.

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Megan DeLaire

Megan DeLaire is a former reporter with toronto.com. She has worked in print and digital newsrooms in Ottawa and Toronto since graduating with honours from the journalism program jointly offered by the University of Ottawa and Algonquin College in 2014.