



EQUITY CONSIDERATIONS DURING A PANDEMIC: IMPACTS OF COVID-19



ANGELA
SIMMONDS

Nova Scotia
Barristers' Society

Like so many Nova Scotians, I have been following the press releases, news updates, and commentaries surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. Currently all provinces and territories have declared some sort of state of emergency, restricting social gatherings and shuttering businesses like bars and restaurants. This pandemic has brought into sharp focus the continued inequities between races, classes, genders and ages. We have listened to Dr. Robert Strang, Nova Scotia's chief medical officer, indicate we have a narrow opportunity to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 by practicing social distancing. Nova Scotia defines social distancing as follows: limiting your contact with other people and staying about 2 meters (6 feet) apart. Essentially, social distancing asks us to actively avoid gatherings and large events, and to minimize close contact with others.

The restrictions against gathering will have a particular impact on Black and Indigenous Peoples. We know from the data released on street checks that racialized people, in particular African Nova Scotians, are disproportionately targeted by police in our community. The

Health Association of African Canadians have been conducting weekly webinars to discuss the impacts of COVID-19. Many individuals, including myself, have participated in these conversations and also raised concerns regarding the disparities between African Nova Scotian and Indigenous communities' housing, finances and care resources when compared with more privileged communities. Because of this, these restrictions will likely affect these communities differently.

The behaviour of Black or Brown people is often interpreted as "hazardous or unsafe", which makes individuals more likely to be reported on by neighbours and confronted by authorities. There are also cultural norms, like sharing care of each others' children, looking after elders in our communities, and travelling between Black and Indigenous communities that are differentially impacted by the public health restrictions in place.

In addition, asking individuals to self-isolate can be very complicated for some. It assumes everyone has equal access to space and resources. If you live in a big house and you have a yard with a swing set for your kids to play outside or you have a downstairs area to escape to when you need alone time, practicing social distancing is much easier. If you have a laundry room and aren't reliant on community laundromats, and can afford to keep a freezer full of food because

you can afford hundreds of dollars of groceries at a time, these restrictions are much easier for you to follow.

But the reality of social distancing looks very different for someone in a one-bedroom apartment, in a huge building with limited scenery. Trying to keep your children quiet, with no in-suite laundry space and only a few dollars at a time to buy groceries are just some examples of the ways in which social distancing and limiting your trips out are much more difficult. A month inside for that person looks a whole lot different and is a lot more draining on mental and emotional health.

The reality is that we know those who have lost jobs or had their hours greatly reduced, and the reality is that most people are not in a position to earn no income for months. There are also many service-oriented jobs still requiring employees to attend and with no options for child care in a single parent home this creates additional barriers and stress.

If COVID-19 policies are going to respond to the needs of those individuals impacted the most there must be access to information, equitable access to resources and supports. For example, so many people rely on community food programs like the Dartmouth North Food Centre who support individuals on and off Mi'kmaq communities as well as other marginalized communities. With the Centre closed and not being able to

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respond to community needs, people are struggling. If the first point of access for COVID-19 related concerns is through an online self-assessment screening tool with all libraries closed, this poses a significant barrier for people who do not have access to reliable internet or

may have limited literacy skills. It may be very difficult or impossible to navigate an online assessment tool.

For many in these communities, the climate and conditions placed on people in light of COVID-19 are not new circumstances. Understanding the history of African Nova Scotians

and Mi'kmaq peoples in the midst of this pandemic requires an element of knowledge and critical evaluation of equity and inclusion. Implementation of equitable policies involves those in positions of power continuing to educate themselves and seriously considering the burden those policies are placing on these communities.

SEPARATION IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL DISTANCING



CHRISTINE
DOUCET
MDW Law

A few short weeks ago, my biggest concern as a lawyer/mediator with MDW Law and a parent was whether I would get through the piles of work on my desk and in my inbox before I got on a plane and ready to enjoy a week of much needed March Break rest and relaxation. Many of my colleagues were in the same boat.

A lot has happened since then. Vacations have been cancelled or interrupted. Children are home from school and daycare for the immediate future. March Break camps were cancelled. Libraries, malls, cinemas, pools and rinks are closed, and sport seasons have been cut short.

Today, as lawyers and mediators, we are thinking about things we never thought we would have to worry about. We are focusing on a new reality where the very lifeblood of our business – court appearances, mediations and meetings – have become risky breeding grounds for the novel coronavirus. The management team of my office continues to consider how our business needs to change in this time of uncertainty to continue to meet the needs of our clients. While we don't have all the answers, we have some ideas and we are committed to pivoting and flexing to face the challenges the days ahead will bring.

Immediate Changes

As with most small businesses in Nova Scotia, MDW Law has had to make immediate changes to continue to meet the needs of our clients while protecting the health of our employees. Most meetings have been shifted

to telephone or video conferencing format. Where a face-to-face meeting is absolutely necessary, for example to sign documents, we are using a dedicated large boardroom to allow for distancing. The table is cleaned after each use. From the start, we stopped offering beverages to our clients and magazines have been removed from the reception area.

Clients Need Legal Advice

We know that pressing legal issues cannot be put on pause. We meet new clients seeking advice and direction at all times of the year, sometimes due to planned events but often due to unexpected circumstances. People need reliable and timely information and guidance on their rights and obligations in the event of a separation or if they have sustained an injury in an accident.

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