

Presentation to City Hall on Proposed Changes to the Recreation Centres.

South Asian Women's Centre thanks the committee for the opportunity to speak on this very important issue. Our focus is on South Asian newcomers, immigrants and refugees who use these facilities.

The City of Toronto identified 21 priority Recreation centers that exist in areas where there is high concentration of immigrants, refugees, and the working poor. Free access to these centres provided youth with the recreation support they needed to meet friends, have their own safe space, and enjoy the facilities recreation opportunities. Presently, these centres run free programs and there is no requirement to provide documentation of income in order to access these services.

The City's proposal to eliminate the 21 centres and move to income testing which exists outside the 21 centres, and is called the "Welcome Policy" is very troubling and raises many questions. The rationale that this move will create equality across the board in the GTA is a myth. It is not an action that will bring communities together but will pit them against each other. At the 21 centres, there is no official registration process, and people provide their addresses. Is it based on this information that the city is determining that there are people outside the catchments that are perhaps taking advantage of free programming? The conclusion that these users are middle class and can pay is pure assumption. There is an assumption that people who reside outside areas like Jane and Finch or Regent Park are middle class. Many are newcomers, immigrants and refugees who are renters and are itinerant moving from one neighbourhood to another depending on work, affordability, transportation, children's schooling etc. Most of them are people of colour.

These are the concerns that SAWC raises:

Most South Asian newcomers who already feel isolated feel a great deal of embarrassment and humiliation in having to prove that one is poor through an income testing process. Many do not even speak the language and based on our experience as a settlement agency will have difficulty filling out the information, which could be inaccurate.

Recreation centres provide kids a safe and happy place to interact with their peers, and to engage in wholesome activity. Most kids are not comfortable bringing their parents to recreation centres. If they are required to bring them in order to qualify for free programming, most will leave.

Many South Asians work two and three jobs to earn a decent income. They are not registered with OW or Social services, but are the working poor, and are surviving to meet their basic needs. If they had to choose between basic needs and recreation services for their kids, meeting basic needs would be their priority.

Many SAWC clients send their kids to Mazaryk Cowan after school to hang out with other kids and play games in a safe environment, a place where they can develop skills. Parents feel a sense of reassurance in the fact that their kids are not engaging in activities like drugs, violence, guns, bullying etc.

These free Rec centres were created in these areas to support these communities, support youth through free programs, which would help reduce violence, isolation, drugs and create strong, healthy neighbourhoods.

In addition, if income generation is what this is about the City will see a drop in attendance, because most immigrant and refugee kids will not be able to afford it.

Finally, Toronto has the proud distinction of being the most multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi racial and multi-lingual city in the country, and I urge the city not to move forward with this proposal as it is divisive, exclusionary and is not really a good source of economic generation.

Recommendations:

Ensure an inclusive process through consultations with communities including the South Asian community which represents a high volume of newcomers, and are users of these facilities.

SAWC is recommending that the city conduct a proper analysis that includes race, class and gender in the context of the lived economic stresses of people of colour.

In keeping with Toronto's proud reputation, ensure these programs are universal, accessible and free for all participants.

Submitted

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