

## **For immediate release**

### **New group aims to help LGBTQ+ newcomers in Waterloo Region.**

The Solidarity Alliance, a sub-committee of The Rainbow Community Council, was created in response to stories of LGBTQ+ newcomers experiencing racism, a lack of support for ESL learners or a lack of understanding of the immigration experience and non-Western identities in LGBTQ-identified spaces and events.

Mandi Cowan, an Employment Counsellor and Settlement Worker at the KW Multicultural Centre, founded the group in 2015: “The Solidarity Alliance was inspired by the OCASI Positive Spaces Initiative ([positivespaces.ca](http://positivespaces.ca)). Through a lot of local networking and community conversations it was apparent that LGBTQ+ newcomers were being under-served in Waterloo Region and there was a deep frustration about folks having to go to Toronto for support. The Solidarity Alliance was created to address this gap and to work towards local supports and allies in our community.”

KW Counselling Services, the KW Multicultural Centre, ACCKWA, SPECTRUM and Mennonite Coalition for Refugee Support are co-founding members of the Solidarity Alliance. One of the immediate priorities is to increase membership of those with lived experience, as they are the best qualified to direct activities for LGBTQ+ newcomers. “We are driven by service users and consider lived experience as the most important thing,” says Cowan.

The member agencies are working to improve our own capacity to serve the community better: “The Solidarity Alliance encompasses a commitment of member agencies to actively work on their inclusion of LGBTQ+ newcomers. It is important to start with acknowledging that we all have room for improvement and growth. In order to achieve our mandate, it is essential for member agencies to begin to look internally first and expand our own competency and knowledge base. Beginning with training allows the member agencies to do so, while also extending those opportunities to others in Waterloo Region,” says Cowan.

Another long-term goal is to provide a greater breadth of services for the multicultural LGBTQ+ community. So far, only SPECTRUM and ACCKWA offer specialized services with their “Rainbow Newcomers Group” and outreach services to the African & Caribbean community, respectively. Shane Bauman of SPECTRUM shares, “SPECTRUM has been serving the newcomer community for a little over a year now and we are still trying to figure out how to best offer support to LGBTQ+ refugees and new immigrants. Our biggest role has been to support refugee-claimants who are running from persecution for being LGBTQ+ in their home countries. The stories they have shared with us break my heart.”

Due to the legal environment that refugee claims are determined in, individuals who claim based on gender and sexuality criteria are faced with providing proof that is very personal and sometimes impossible to produce. Claimants may be challenged on a very personal level about aspects of themselves that they have been forced to hide for their whole lives.

**Media Contact:** Mandi Cowan, Georgina de Barros, Victor LeFort  
[solidarityalliancekw@gmail.com](mailto:solidarityalliancekw@gmail.com)