

# WELCOMING NEW CANADIANS

## Upholding co-op principles by embracing diversity

by Cindy Long

The very first co-operative principle is voluntary and open membership. If co-ops don't keep this concept front and centre, they run the risk of being seen as exclusive clubs. And that's definitely not how the movement wants to be perceived.

It's a fact that communities across the country are experiencing significant growth in the number of new Canadians, with children, looking for affordable housing, jobs and a welcoming community that is accepting and tolerant of difference. How do we encourage diversity in housing co-ops by welcoming and supporting new Canadians? How do we ensure that co-ops function as communities guided by shared values?

New members bring different cultures, beliefs, ideas and traditions with them when they come to Canada. What do we do when those beliefs, ideas or traditions come into conflict with those of members already living in co-ops?

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*Ikram Jama*

Ikram Jama is a program manager for Ottawa Community Immigrant Services Organization. She appreciates the difficult situations that arise when people from diverse backgrounds start to live together in housing co-ops. "It is to be expected that there will be tensions and misunderstandings at the beginning," she says. She also notes that it's essential that co-op board members receive good governance training so they can lead the rest of the community by example, and "be pro-active, anticipate the challenges that can arise and put in place policies and practices that deal with issues of diversity, equity and inclusion."

"Engage positively with diversity rather than react when things are not working well. It is the responsibility of those in leadership positions to educate, to create an environment where everyone feels included." She adds that this kind of work shouldn't happen only when difficulties arise—it must be ongoing, and become a part of the co-op culture.

At Bleecker Street Housing Co-op in downtown Toronto, diversity is a given. "We do a lot of community outreach," says office administrator Ali Parrott. She says respect is the key to welcoming and accepting difference. "Giving people a brand-new-looking unit that's clean and painted garners a lot of respect for the co-op."

Immigration is the Canadian reality. By embracing new Canadians in housing co-operatives, we pave the way to welcome newcomers into a society that respects differences and upholds the co-operative principles.

