

Ensuring Equity-Based Pandemic Preparedness Municipal Government Strengths



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Introduction

Equity-based pandemic preparedness recognizes that responses to health crisis can worsen existing social, economic, and health inequities, as well as create new ones.¹ However, this doesn't have to be the case. A team-based approach – including all sectors of government and civil society – can provide a robust response to pandemics and protect against inequitable outcomes. In sports, every player must excel in their role while also working in harmony with teammates. Similarly, effective pandemic response demands collaboration across sectors, communities and levels of government. Just as sports teams develop strategies by learning from past games and assessing both team capacity and conditions, preparing for a pandemic requires a balance of detailed planning and adaptability – as well as a great deal of practice working together.

As the level of governance that has the greatest impact on the day-to-day activities of residents, municipal governments have a key role to play in pandemic preparedness and response. This research brief outlines practical strategies municipal actors are particularly well placed to advance, such as ensuring economic security, addressing intimate partner violence, and defending against racism and discrimination. Municipalities can mobilize community networks, engage marginalized populations in decision-making, and ensuring access to services. By leveraging their location knowledge and expertise, municipalities can help create a more resilient and equitable pandemic response, ensuring that no community is left behind.

Methodology

This brief is prepared as a supplement to 'The Pandemic Preparedness Playbook: Ensuring an Equity-Based Response.' The playbook was developed through a three-stage process. First, an extensive literature review of Canada's pandemic response was conducted, prioritizing studies with intersectional or equity-focused approaches to identify common themes, recommendations, and gaps. Second, a policy document analysis examined equity considerations across socioeconomic, health, public safety, and travel domains. Lastly, key informant interviews with federal policy actors and civil society organizations provided insights that were integrated to ensure the research captured lived experiences from the COVID-19 pandemic response.



The why and what of equity-based pandemic response?

- Canadian organizations are recognized as leaders in advancing equity-based pandemic interventions, including within pandemic response.^{3,4}
- However, the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated how, even when such initiatives are mobilized, pandemic response can worsen preexisting socioeconomic vulnerabilities related to gender, race, class, and age, impacting access to resources such as education and income, and influencing health outcomes.⁵
- Equity-based pandemic preparedness aims to build on learnings during COVID, to inform tailored pandemic response that meets the needs those most at risk, fostering a more resilient and equitable crisis response system.
- In doing so it applies an intersectional approach that recognizes social positions related to gender, race, age, etc. as inherently related and reflective of overlapping systems of oppression.^{6,7}

Priorities within the team

Like sports teams that practice more than they play, pandemic preparedness requires constant strategy development and learning to ensure readiness when a crisis hits. Based on our research, three priority areas for municipal actors were identified to address the secondary effects of pandemics:

1. Ensure Economic Security for All

Responses to infectious disease outbreaks often disrupt the economy due to isolation, quarantine, and physical distancing, which in turn leads to decreased employment and income-earning opportunities.⁷

These disruptions particularly affect those already experiencing economic inequality such as women and newcomers.⁸ Municipal governments can mitigate these effects through targeted interventions:

Strategies:

- In addition to income support, ensure priority populations have access to necessities. For example, by subsidizing grocery delivery services for those who don't have private transportation and establishing food distribution centers in central locations like schools and community centers.
- Develop a plan to ensure those experiencing housing insecurity are not displaced during a pandemic, such as rent relief initiatives or subsidies.
- Create a list of languages specific to the municipality into which information on income support initiatives will need to be translated and plan how best to disseminate information to different local communities (i.e. by radio, social media, community partners etc.).

2. Prevent Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

Public health crises can lead to heightened intimate partner violence (IPV), particularly among women and gender-diverse people.⁹ Municipal governments are uniquely positioned to support IPV prevention and response.

Strategies:

- Collaborate with local organizations specializing in IPV to strengthen response systems through clear communication and existing partnerships.
- Allocate emergency funds for IPV service providers, particularly those serving vulnerable populations like Indigenous women and girls.
- Develop policies to ensure childcare facilities remain open and safe, with specific measures to support families experiencing conflict.

3. Defend Against Racism and Discrimination

Pandemics often heighten social tension and discrimination, with marginalized groups frequently scapegoated for the spread of disease¹⁰ Municipalities play a key role in preventing and responding to racism and related violence.

Strategies

- Establish resources for law enforcement and community organizations to respond to hate crimes during public health emergencies.
- Ensure that social measures take racialized populations into account and proactively work with community leaders to prevent discrimination.
- Implement cultural safety initiatives, including staff training, creating inclusive spaces, and setting protocols to address racism swiftly.

Working as a Team

Just as in sports, where each player must excel in their role while collaborating with teammates, effective pandemic response requires strong partnerships among government, public health and community rightsholders. Municipal actors can prioritize equity-focused collaboration by ensuring that responses are inclusive and consultative.

A. Understand the Context

Pandemic preparedness requires a deep understanding of the historical and cultural contexts of diverse populations within the province. Recognizing systemic inequities and cultural norms is key to crafting responsive strategies. In Canada, this includes addressing the lasting impacts of colonization and integrating cultural safety and humility into preparedness efforts. Collecting and analyzing data on social and economic inequities across the province will allow for more tailored and effective responses.

B. Engage with Diverse Perspectives

Engaging with diverse communities during a health crisis can be challenging due to the need for swift action. Municipal leaders, however, can leverage established community networks and relationships to develop inclusive, evidence-based policies. This means collaborating with non-profit, private, and public sectors to ensure that lived experiences, particularly of marginalized groups, are incorporated into pandemic preparedness and response plans.

C. Align with Broader Equity Goals

Pandemic response efforts should go beyond immediate needs and align with long-term equity objectives. Municipal governments can integrate pandemic preparedness into existing initiatives such as GBA+, Reconciliation, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) goals. This holistic approach ensures that broader equity aims are embedded in emergency strategies, fostering more inclusive and resilient responses.

D. Culturally Competent Communication

Clear, effective communication is critical during a pandemic, and messages must be culturally tailored to resonate with all communities. Municipal actors are well-positioned to understand the cultural needs within their jurisdictions and can lead efforts to create communication strategies that ensure public health messages are accessible, inclusive, and understood by all populations.

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