



For Immediate Release
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Statement from the A/Executive Director of the Manitoba Human Rights Commission on the recent protests and circulation of hate signs, symbols and statements

This past weekend, protestors of public health measures drove and marched across our nation, including our province's capital city Winnipeg. Some of these protestors displayed symbols of hate and intolerance, and yelled vile slurs at onlookers. This happened on a day dedicated to eradicating Islamophobia in memory of the victims of the Québec Islamic Cultural Centre shootings, and shortly following last week's International Holocaust Remembrance Day dedicated to rooting out anti-Semitism in Canada and around the world.

As the institution charged with protecting and promoting human rights in our province, we cannot allow acts like this to go without comment. The law that the Manitoba Human Rights Commission is charged with safeguarding, Manitoba's *Human Rights Code* ("*The Code*"), is based on the idea that all members of the human family are entitled to live their lives in dignity and rights. Unfortunately, we did not see a display of dignity this past weekend. While some protestors claim to act in the name of freedom and rights, what Winnipeg witnessed was the very opposite: symbols and acts that stand diametrically opposed to the values underpinning our *Human Rights Code*.

Over the past two years, the Commission has heard from members of the public who strongly feel that public health measures, like vaccination requirements, masks, physical distancing and capacity limitations, violate their rights under *The Code* and *The Charter of Rights and Freedoms* ("*Charter*"). They submit that measures requiring us to do or act in particular ways violate the right to live free from discrimination, or our *Charter* right to life, liberty and security of person.

The Charter and *The Code* are fundamentally important legal instruments – based on the idea that we are all entitled to fundamental rights. These laws not only establish our rights, but they also recognize our inherent connectedness and shared humanity; that our individual freedom does not exist in a vacuum but rather is bound up in the wellbeing of our society as a whole. This is captured in Section 1 of *The Charter* and sections 13, 14, 15, 16 and 18 of *The Code*. These sections of *The Charter* and *The Code* acknowledge that our rights are subject to reasonable and justifiable limits for the collective good and wellbeing of our society.

The Charter and *The Code* are as much about our responsibilities to one another as they are about rights and entitlements. Responsibilities to our elders, to our children, to those facing poverty and houselessness, to those who cannot easily or equitably access health care services, and other structurally disadvantaged groups who face historical

and ongoing oppression. We should not demand rights for ourselves by infringing upon the rights of others. We also cannot use or perpetuate hate symbols and speech in any context, and we collectively have a responsibility to call out or challenge those who do.

There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has called upon all of us to take extraordinary measures to safeguard the health and well-being of ourselves, our loved ones and our community at large. In a society premised on rights and responsibilities, we should be able to respectfully engage in dialogue and debate about whether the measures we are being asked to take are justifiably necessary and proportionate to the health and safety risks they seek to address.

In order to have these conversations, we must ensure we are acting on the basis of credible sources of information: reliable and peer-reviewed sources of scientific evidence regarding COVID-19, and credible and knowledgeable sources of information regarding our rights and laws in Canada. These conversations require active listening, understanding and empathy – and a focus on what is truly at stake: our collective health and wellbeing.

But in these discussions, let one thing remain clear: there is no room for swastikas, confederate flags, racist name-calling, homophobic and transphobic slurs and other acts of hate alongside human rights. Where these symbols and acts of hate exist, human rights and freedoms perish.

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