

Police launch anti-hate campaign across 400 YRT buses



By Brock Weir

Hate crimes are on the rise in York Region, but many instances simply go unreported.

Rather than make eye contact with their fellow commuters, transit riders often avert their eyes to on-bus advertisements and York Regional Police and York Region Transit are hoping hundreds of new advertisements now rolling out encourage people to step forward and step up to make hate crimes and hate bias things of the past and to celebrate the rich diversity of the Region.

"We live in a microcosm of the world here," said York Regional Police Chief Eric Jolliffe. "York Region is probably the most diverse community in Canada. For us, it is very important to work in partnership and to be proactive with all the communities we serve to ensure everyone feels welcome and safe. It is about education, awareness and prevention. Part of this is for people to understand that some of these actions like the painting of the swastika or painting 'Go home!' on a Mosque are hateful and they are not acceptable.

"We live together in a very safe community and we want to keep it that way. Because we police in a very diverse community, we want to be proactive and ensure that our community is very aware and comfortable reporting incidents to us."

It is important, said Jolliffe, to "continually build trust and confidence in our communities" because some people who make their way to York Region might come from countries where relationships between citizens and police can be fraught.

"Part of our goal is to make sure we open those lines of communication to ensure our community trusts the work we do." Over 400 ads are now on the move across all York Region municipalities.

Last year alone, York Regional Police responded to 107 reports of hate crimes. 43 of these were targeted to the Jewish community, 18 were against the Black community, 10 against the LGBTQ community, and four targeting the Muslim community.

"We track hate incidents as well because, at some point, people who continue this type of derogatory or offensive behaviour cross the line into criminality and it is important for us to know who those people are," said Inspector Ricky Veerappan of the YRP's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Bureau.

"It is about keeping our communities safe and secure but, at the same time, celebrating the diversity we have, recognizing that hate crimes are extremely offensive and we should all be offended when any community is targeted. Hate crimes are a criminal offence that target core human identity like race, ethnicity, culture, and religious beliefs. Those are core values of any community.

"Hate crimes have that ripple effect where if one person is targeted, an entire community is victimized because they all share that

same core identity.?

In investigating these incidents, the YRP bills its responders as part of the 'Diversity, Equity and Inclusion' bureau. It puts a 'positive angle' on the work these officers do, said Inspector Veerappan, and it is 'taking people away from the very nasty side of some of the historical animosity, global conflict and sectarian violence' seen around the world 'moving us in a more positive direction so we can build capacity and, really, a better understanding of our friends and our neighbours in our York Region communities.'

The York Regional Police's centralized hate crime unit also monitors the local impact of global events, according to Jolliffe, with officers liaising with numerous community partners outside of the police, including school boards, to foster community safety.

'We want to encourage members of the public to report hate to York Regional Police,' said Jolliffe. 'Hate crime and hate incidents affect all citizens and their feelings of safety and security which have no place in York Region. We continue to be proactively engaged with many of our community partners to combat and eradicate hate in all its ugly forms while prosecuting hate crimes to the fullest extent of the law.'