



STORY OF IMPACT: HOW SISA IS HELPING REFUGEES IN MEDICINE HAT

Nestled along the lively South Saskatchewan River and boasting an enviable 330 days of sunshine per year, it is no wonder that Medicine Hat is becoming home to a growing number of immigrants who are choosing to put down roots in this part of Alberta.

Although newcomers comprise just about 8.5% of the total population in this sunny city, they have been the main source of population juvenilization, accounting for 43.4% of total population growth in 2018 (Invest Medicine Hat, 2019). Apart from positive demographic outcomes, newcomers are also making remarkable economic contributions in Medicine Hat by filling employment gaps in the food and beverage manufacturing sector, and in the accommodation and food services sector. Interestingly enough, 22% of newcomers in Medicine Hat work in the nursing home and residential care sector (Government of Canada, 2020); a sector that was hit the hardest by COVID-19 and at the same time is in urgent need of workers.

When it comes to the categories of most recent immigrants in Medicine Hat, almost 55% arrived through various economic programs, 28.4% were joined with their families through sponsorship, and 16.4% are refugees (Statistics Canada, 2017). The latter is compelling as the number of refugees that are destined to Medicine Hat is significantly higher than the provincial average of 9%. The numbers shouldn't be surprising as Medicine Hat is one of six communities in Alberta that offer the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) which provides essential supports to refugees.

GOING ABOVE AND BEYOND

Before we dive into community efforts to welcome and support refugees in Medicine Hat, let's give a bit of a background on who refugees are and why such broad support is of utmost importance.

A refugee is a person who is outside their home country and who has a well-founded fear of persecution, for reasons such as: race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion (UNHCR, 2020). Unlike other newcomers who choose to settle permanently in another country, refugees are forced to flee their home country. The individuals



that complete the complex process of obtaining refugee status before arriving to Canada are considered permanent residents upon arrival.

When refugees reach their destination in Canada, they are eligible to access income support and assistance for a range of immediate essential services through the RAP program. The only agency in Medicine Hat that provides such exhaustive support is Saamis Immigration Services Association (SISA).

The SISA settlement team is oftentimes the first helpful person refugees meet at the airport right upon landing. After initial meeting and paperwork, the team is able to provide wraparound services, including provision of temporary housing and ongoing support for integration. Intensive RAP programming is available within the first 4-6 weeks in Canada. Information and orientation sessions are explained by trained interpreters (when required) regarding:

- Banking and budgeting
- Housing and initially setting up the household
- Health & dental care
- Transportation
- Education
- Legal system
- Life skills coaching
- Booking assessments for English classes and Canadian Language Benchmark (CLB) level tests
- Assistance with paperwork and Canadian documentation
- Referrals to other organizations and supports in the community

With the COVID-19 pandemic finding its way to Medicine Hat, the SISA team had to put their heads together and switch most of their services and programs from in-person to virtual delivery. Sounds simple and easy? Not so fast. Imagine an individual who can communicate only in their mother tongue, has no permanent shelter, nor a family doctor, nor a job on a horizon, nor any community connections whatsoever. This is where organizations like SISA come in.

NEWCOMERS' HUB

SISA has been assisting in the resettlement, settlement, and integration of immigrants and refugees in Medicine Hat for impressive 32 years. Albertans are known for coming together within a blink of an eye when life gets tough and using innovative approaches to help those in need, and SISA is



no different. It all started in 1988 when a group of enthusiastic individuals noticed a gap in settlement services for newcomers. Soon after, they decided to come together and make a positive change in the integration of newcomers to the city.

In the past three decades, SISA grew into 24 passionate employees assisting newcomers in all aspects of settlement - from full-time language instruction classes and employment supports, to having support workers in the school system for newcomer families. Even through the pandemic SISA did not waver, as this ambitious and determined group continues to provide supports to the newcomers in their city. SISA's Manager of Settlement, Marie-Claude Scahill, told us that staff's mutual support and close collaboration with community partners ensured that no client falls through cracks.

Partnership and collaboration have been especially crucial for SISA as the pandemic created new challenges. "The SISA team was able to contact and refer more than 100 families to food hamper programs," Scahill described their ad hoc collaboration with the Mustard Seed of Medicine Hat. "Two elementary schools within the public school district started offering food hampers to their students in need, which included six of [SISA's] newcomer families whose children attended those particular schools," she continued praising yet another collaboration.

INNOVATION THRIVES IN CRISIS

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit the community, SISA did not have much time to think and strategize. The focus was solely on newcomers and their wellbeing, especially children and families. As described by Scahill, "Due to COVID-19 restrictions and rules on distancing, the Saamis Community Connections and SWIS teams joined forces and came up with the idea to offer Summer Neighbourhood Days to still keep children and youth engaged over the summer." Scahill highlighted that the project was a combination of virtual and in person activities, targeting youth from six to 18 years of age, focusing on English learning.

Another program whose delivery was affected by the pandemic was the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada program, also known as LINC. Due to COVID-19, SISA was not able to deliver the program in the classroom which was challenging as they deliver LINC classes to clients whose skill level are from pre-literacy to CLB 4. "We are a small centre, which often presents challenges, but this time it worked to our advantage," said Scahill optimistically, excited to share their innovative approach.

"Due to small class sizes, our teachers develop strong communication and mutual respect with their students. This was integral in how we dealt with the sudden closure of the physical LINC



teaching space, because the students were willing to work very diligently to stay engaged in their classes and with their teachers. After much research and discussion, it was decided that we would engage with our students remotely using technology and a platform that the majority of them had access to and were familiar with - Facebook. Each teacher set up a Facebook profile exclusively for LINC Instruction. They then set up their classes as learning groups. We informed the students by telephone, or Facebook if they already subscribed to the General SISA Facebook page and told them our plan for lesson delivery on Facebook. The news spread quickly, and it wasn't long before we had almost 100% of our students enrolled in their class's learning group."

Ultimately, students of all levels learned how to navigate task based on-line interaction. "One would think it would be virtually impossible for Literacy students to be successful with this new style of program delivery, but they learned comparatively more than their counterparts because they were starting with lower level skills, but their digital literacy is presently as good as students in the higher levels," says Scahill, proud of the community success.

Besides language learning, SISA went the extra mile to assist newcomers with their job search and overall employment readiness. Over the years, SISA has worked towards helping newcomers find employment in Medicine Hat through pre-employment work, which includes resume writing, learning about the Canadian job force, how to do an interview in Canada, and how to present yourself at the workplace.

"We put together a neat and innovative practice to host a week-long event called the "Career Readiness and Employability Fair". The last one that we hosted was in April of 2019 and it brought together newcomer clients, adults and employable youth, educational institutes, employers, and places to volunteer all in one space", explained Scahill. SISA planned to host the second annual event in April this year, but due to COVID-19 they have had to postpone it. "We are already brainstorming ideas how to change its delivery method and what other alternative ways are out there to do this event", said Scahill, always ready for innovative solutions.

THE CITY THAT EMBRACES DIVERSITY

In advancing innovative approaches and ideas to overcome challenges, SISA has maintained simplicity and accessibility. Positioned as a one-stop-shop for newcomers to the city, SISA has built a reputation as a credible and trustworthy organization. Perhaps that is exactly the secret to their longevity.

With such passionate staff who selflessly dedicate their time to everyone they meet and greet, it is no wonder why so many newcomers choose Medicine Hat as their new home.



A community with an open heart practically became a slogan for this southern Alberta gem. Praising a small-town feel is no stranger to the city leaders who proudly brag about the community's friendly nature. "Many of us have come from across the country and around the world to make this city our home – and we embrace others who want to do the same", so reads the message on the city's official website (City of Medicine Hat, 2020).

And SISA is certainly leading the way. For over three decades, the organization has been embracing and celebrating diversity in a city of 63,230. One thing is for certain— newcomers who settle in Medicine Hat can rest assured that they have a friendly hand to hold onto while they are bravely building a home and growing their new community.

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