

SETTLEMENT AGENCIES IN ALBERTA BLAZING THE TRAIL FOR LGBTQ+ NEWCOMERS

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) individuals experience distinctive challenges when they flee oppression in their home countries and seek protection elsewhere. According to ILGA World's most recent [report on state-sponsored homophobia](#), 40% of the world, or 78 countries, still criminalize people on the basis of their sexual orientation, with five of these countries applying the death penalty for this "crime". The quest for safety becomes even more difficult for LGBTQ+ people when only 37 countries recognize their claims as legitimate grounds for protection; Canada is one of them.

Canada is widely known for recognizing refugee claims and resettling refugees on the basis of persecution due to sexual orientation and gender identity and expression (SOGIE). However, Canada was not always as open and welcoming and at one point in history prohibited LGBTQ+ people from entering the country. As societal norms and values changed, the end of 20th century brought the country to the forefront of the advancement and protection of LGBTQ+ rights.

Social transformation went to such extent that in 1991 Canada became one of the first Western nations to approve refugee status due to persecution based on sexual orientation, and by 1994 it officially recognized sexual minorities as a classification of refugee status. Ever since, the country has been a leader in recognizing refugee claims on the basis of SOGIE and resettling LGBTQ+ refugees. This is corroborated by the [data](#) on asylum claims in Canada between 2013 and 2015, wherein 2 371, or 13% of 18 221 observed asylum claims, were based on SOGIE.

MODEST BEGINNINGS, HISTORIC OUTCOMES

To be [accepted as a refugee](#) and receive permanent residence status, LGBTQ+ individuals claiming refugee protection in Canada have to demonstrate, before the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) of Canada, that they have a justifiable fear of persecution because of their sexual orientation and gender identity and expression. They also have to demonstrate that their home country is unable or unwilling to protect them. However, claiming asylum as an LGBTQ+ individual can be a perplexing and disheartening process.

When preparing their refugee claims, individual testimony may be the only evidence of their sexual orientation and gender identity and expression, and any additional evidence might not be accessible. Moreover, many individuals have had to hide their SOGIE in their home countries due to the fear of persecution or previous experiences of violence or discrimination and may therefore be hesitant to discuss their SOGIE before the IRB. To overcome this barrier and to ensure fair treatment of LGBTQ+ refugee claimants, the IRB has implemented a Guideline that promotes greater understanding of cases involving LGBTQ+ refugee claimants. The document establishes guiding principles for decision-makers in adjudicating cases involving SOGIE claimants and addresses the particular challenges individuals with diverse SOGIE may face in presenting their cases.

Nonetheless, LGBTQ+ individuals do not have to go through this process alone. Across Canada, newcomer serving agencies and their community partners have been providing customized programs and services to help integration and settlement of LGBTQ+ newcomers, including the provision of legal support, and two settlement agencies have blazed the trail in Alberta. It is worth mentioning that the province is seeing an increase in the number of sexual minority refugee claimants, specifically gay and transgender identifying refugees, which makes the work of those two agencies even more pertinent.

Settlement Practitioner Sara Buczynski modestly shared the beginnings of the now well-established and renowned Rainbow Refuge Program at Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers (EMCN). “In 2015, two staff from EMCN and CSS organized an informal lunch breakout session to discuss LGBTQ+ needs at an AAISA Conference in Edmonton which was surprisingly, and encouragingly, well attended by colleagues from across the region and representatives from all three levels of government.” At that point it was clear that the time had come to address the needs of this population, especially with the strong interest and support demonstrated within the settlement and integration sector.

Before the idea came to its realization, EMCN was quietly providing informal support for LGBTQ+ clients. One of the most important shifts was an internal decision and commitment to better serve this population. Thus, in May 2017, the Rainbow Refuge: LGBTQ Refugee Support & Welcome Network was formed and support for serving LGBTQ+ newcomers started to grow. Perhaps not a widely known fact, but EMCN was the first settlement agency to openly march in a Pride Parade in Alberta with the group just a month after its launch.



(Members of Rainbow Refuge: LGBTQ Refugee Support & Welcome Network at the Pride Parade in Edmonton, 2018, photo by EMCN)

Just around the same time, a similar initiative was shaping up in Calgary, led by Centre for Newcomers (CFN). What once started as a small group of passionate advocates has now grown into an entity of its own, offering a wide scope of programs and services for all LGBTQ+ newcomers to Calgary, regardless of their immigration status.

“In partnership with LGBTQ+ Refugee Centre Calgary, founded by the End of the Rainbow Foundation, we provide full support regarding claimants' refugee hearing process, supporting documents (like bringing more relevant evidence), mock hearings, we can act as a witness, or be an emotional support to clients at the hearing, too,” Manager of LGBTQ+ Services Boban Stojanovic explained.

The most important part of working with LGBTQ+ clients, Stojanovic highlights, is building trust and regular follow-ups. Buczynski further added that it helps even more to have an LGBTQ+ staff as their relatable life experiences can establish trust and connection with the clients more quickly.

FEAR DOES NOT STOP AT THE BORDER

LGBTQ+ newcomers often experience isolation due to language barriers and the lack of culturally relevant activities and supports within LGBTQ+ community and/or newcomer services. Most of them arrive alone and do not have family support. “With no family, friends, or partners, loneliness is inevitable. Going through hard times, like a refugee hearing, they need a lot of understanding and support. Being separated from loved ones, family, friends, and the whole community and culture is hard,” Stojanovic stressed.

Connecting with ethno-cultural communities comes naturally for many newcomers but the story is quite different for LGBTQ+ newcomers. Previous experiences of discrimination in their home countries often discourages newcomers to connect or come out, with fresh memories of discrimination bringing fear of possible revictimization. “LGBTQ+ refugees and asylum seekers are often dealing with trauma and need connection and support throughout their settlement journey or asylum process. That is why it is important to have LGBTQ+ staff who share experiences and identify with clients to help establish trust and connection,” explains Buczynski.

In addition to the integration process that all newcomers go through, which entails learning a new language, organizational culture, and a new way of life, this group of newcomers is going through additional challenges. “Newcomers are quite expected to connect with their cultural communities. However, for LGBTQ+ newcomers, this is difficult because many cultural communities do not accept homosexuality or trans identities. If they are connected to their cultural communities, they do not disclose sexual orientation,” said Stojanovic, who shared experiences of his clients that are similar to those in Edmonton.

Ethno-cultural communities are not the only ones that LGBTQ+ newcomers shy away from. Due to persecution and/or lack of implementation of existing anti-discrimination laws in their home countries, many of them struggle with trust in institutions. For example, when working with legal organizations the client may be uncomfortable to share a partner's name. To overcome this barrier, the staff at CFN have created a “trust network”, through which they refer a client to a particular service provider. “Many of our clients come from cultures where religion is deeply rooted in their identity. For the first time, they can attend Sundays in the church and be greeted as LGBTQ+, or they can join Muslim prayers groups and be entirely accepted as Muslims and LGBTQ+ people,” shared Stojanovic.

Furthermore, for LGBTQ+ newcomers the integration in the “mainstream LGBTQ+ community” also creates some challenges. Some clients are open to being part of the Canadian LGBTQ+ community, but some are not. Both Stojanovic and Buczynski agree that this is because of their

experience from home countries where they did not develop a sense of belonging to the community due to the lack of support.

PANDEMIC BROUGHT EVERYONE CLOSER

To ensure that LGBTQ+ newcomers feel safe and welcomed and access a variety of supports, CFN and EMCN have designed an array of programs and services to help with their settlement and integration. The supports provided by these agencies range from helping with the Permanent Residency process, work and study permits, job search and career development supports, to basic needs support including housing, food, clothing, and transportation. English language support is also available to all, and even if the clients are ineligible for the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program, they still get connected with volunteers to help them learn the language.

Both CFN and EMCN programs strive to provide opportunities for regular social connection; develop trusting and supportive relationships; build community confidence; create positive memories; quickly identify and address issues and barriers as they arise; provide local and relevant information; and to support newcomers to navigate and feel comfortable in their LGBTQ+ identities within the greater local community.



(Social distance picnic in Edmonton, Summer 2020, photo by EMCN)

Stojanovic's and Buczynski's teams go above and beyond to ensure that LGBTQ+ newcomers feel safe, welcomed, and fully integrated in their new communities. Their clients have the opportunity to get together for Halloween or Christmas parties, go to museums, field trips, and join other socializing opportunities, which have been switched to virtual spaces this year due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Members have often referred to the group as their "family" and the only place they feel safe to be themselves and ask questions about issues they are experiencing or information that they need", proudly shares Buczynski, adding that the group in Edmonton has been meeting every Friday continuously since May 2017.

High retention and positive social and psychological outcomes would not be possible if it were not for regular follow-up and connection throughout the client's immigration and settlement journey. The latter could not be more relevant this year, with many services and programs being moved to a virtual space. But not even a pandemic managed to slow down Edmonton and Calgary teams.

As recent reports have exposed, the LGBTQ+ community has been disproportionately affected by COVID-19, and are affected by extreme isolation and a lack of access to resources, social support, and connection. "Increased stressors have all compounded and been harder to navigate throughout the pandemic," Buczynski reminds us of the harsh reality that affected some populations more than others. To overcome this, a team in Edmonton has created a WhatsApp group for members to connect daily, communicate, and share information. And it seems that the transition to a virtual space is exceeding their expectations!

The staff at EMCN have been able to maintain and even deepen their existing connections thanks to being well established and having strong, ongoing, and regular connection with group members. "We only missed one week between shutdown and getting going on Zoom and have done cooking classes, virtually attended events, hosted wellness activities, and offered COVID related information sessions to keep spirits up while people have to social distance," Buczynski shared excitedly their innovative approach that is yielding superb results.

BROAD COMMUNITY IMPACT

Before the LGBTQ+ programs formed in both cities, there were no groups of this kind in Alberta. Through these programs, CFN and EMCN have played a key role in making concrete changes that better support not only LGBTQ+ but all newcomers. "It has been heartwarming to see that the mainstream community would like to be supportive of LGBTQ+ newcomers, and many times when they hear the meaningful and significant impact policy changes that can be made there is a

surprising amount that can be done that benefits not only LGBTQ+ newcomers but all newcomers,” says Buczynski, not hiding her enthusiasm and overall joy with the excellent outcomes of this program.

Apart from being active in their local communities, Stojanovic mentioned that CFN also provides internal and external training and education to ensure that the settlement sector is well informed on the complex realities that the LGBTQ+ clients face. Both EMCN and CFN maintain a strong presence in grassroots, local, regional, and federal events and conversations to keep the discourse alive and bring more positive changes to the lives of all newcomers. And the data goes in their favour.

Programs in Calgary and Edmonton started with only a few members and are now counting over 150 in their respective collectives. Furthermore, prior to the work of CFN and EMCN, LGBTQ+ refugee claimants had a very low acceptance rate in both cities, in their hearings before the IRB. With the social, emotional, and logistical supports that the agencies offer, claimants now have a 97% success rate, as Stojanovic and Buczynski proudly shared. Increased awareness among the community members of the complex realities of LGBTQ+ newcomers, as well as the noticeable shifts in ethno-cultural communities, and overall increase in acceptance, helped Edmonton and Calgary gain the status of friendly cities for LGBTQ+ newcomers. And the trend seems to be crossing the limits of Alberta’s two largest cities.

Even though they currently do not offer specific programs and services for LGBTQ+ newcomers, small centres in Alberta are fostering supportive, accepting communities for LGBTQ+ persons. Individuals and organizations in Banff, Jasper, Red Deer, and Lethbridge join forces each year to host annual pride marches. Medicine Hat and Grande Prairie organize a week full of pride festivities, whereas Lloydminster, Fort McMurray and Taber celebrate LGBTQ+ affirming events and advocacy throughout the year, be it in person or virtually.

Successful collaboration between individuals and organizations around different Pride events and festivities in small centres can be seen as a springboard for new initiatives suited to local contexts and needs of LGBTQ+ newcomers. As the spontaneous get-together over lunch at AAISA’s Conference in 2015 demonstrated, there is no doubt that the interest to expand programming for LGBTQ+ newcomers already exists. Just like CFN and EMCN created “networks of trust” in their respective communities, settlement agencies in small centres have a unique opportunity to build on the existing foundation and spur a domino effect.

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