

PROVINCIAL ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVE BRIEF

JANUARY 2021

The Alberta Association of Immigrant Serving Agencies' (AAISA) Provincial Engagement Initiative (PEI) consists of 51 settlement and integration agencies across Alberta, which comprise three regional committees for Calgary, Edmonton, and Small Centres. Through this initiative, AAISA seeks to engage agencies in discussions to bring forth regional perspectives surrounding systems-level gaps, needs, and challenges. Ultimately, through these collaborative discussions, PEI seeks to attain its vision to jointly build a cohesive, diverse, and welcoming settlement and integration ecosystem that actively meets the needs and supports the goals of every newcomer.

This brief is a compilation of the shared challenges identified in the first meetings for the 2020/21 participation term which were held in November 2020. Throughout each participation term, PEI discussions are anchored around Standing Issue Items which represent key systems-level needs, gaps, and challenges that have emerged through AAISA's ongoing engagement, research, and policy work. The following challenges relating to service adaptation and access amidst the COVID-19 pandemic were highlighted across all three regional committees.

KEY TRENDS AND CHALLENGES

During the PEI meetings, agencies expressed challenges around three Standing Issue Items: **Vulnerable Clients, Utilizing Data and Technology to Improve Service Delivery, and COVID-19**. The following highlights some of the key challenges and trends that emerged throughout the PEI meetings in relation to the standing issue items.

TECHNOLOGY AND DIGITAL CAPABILITIES

The onset of the pandemic caused services to move to primarily remote and online platforms. This shift to online service delivery created challenges for both agencies and clients alike. Some key challenges shared throughout the three regional PEI committees included:

- Staff quickly needing to learn how to navigate online platforms and effectively utilize these platforms to offer services.
- A reduction in available spaces to provide computer skills training, as to provide classes, agencies had to ensure that there was adequate spacing between clients to be able to follow the COVID-19 protocols as outlined by public health regulations.
- Difficulties with staff working remotely and not having the proper technology and/or training in the use different software to connect with teammates and clients.

- Challenges accessing adequate and timely funding to purchase tablets and laptops for distribution to students.
- Navigating, accessing, and utilizing different learning platforms such as Canvas, Google Classroom, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and others to provide online training continues to pose a challenge to staff and clients.
- Students and staff not having access to appropriate technology to access classes or provide online services.
- Inadequate internet bandwidth to support online delivery of classes and services.

SHARING OF CONFIDENTIAL INFORMATION

Programs and services provided by different agencies require clients to share confidential information such as PR numbers, which is required for reporting to IRCC. With settlement workers either working remotely or not having clients visit their offices due to restrictions, the collection and sharing of confidential information has become a challenge. Some agencies reported challenges either due to clients not having access to technology or staff not using an agency provided cellphone.

Some agencies have used creative ways to collect the information such as:

- Using WhatsApp as information sent via this medium is encrypted.
- In cases where clients can, the information is sent using password encrypted PDF files to protect confidential information.
- Mobilizing knowledge and building trust with clients to ensure that they know who they can safely share their information with and how they can protect themselves.

FAMILY VIOLENCE

Many of the agencies across the three regions expressed their concern about the increase in cases of domestic violence. However, others have highlighted that the numbers have either remained the same or have decreased. Those agencies that showed a reduction had no information to explain why there is a decrease in reported cases. Some hypothesized that the decrease could be related to increased instances where the perpetrator might be present due to COVID-19 restrictions, thereby preventing reporting. Different approaches are being used by agencies to set up safety measures and strategies for clients to alert them of any possible danger that they might be experiencing.

YOUTH PROGRAMS

Youth programs form an integral aspect of the services offered by many settlement and integration agencies across Alberta. The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically changed the provision of youth services across the province. The following represents some key trends highlighted by agencies in the regional PEI committees:

- Challenges in offering programs due to public health restrictions which made SWIS workers unable to go into some schools.
- Difficulty in finding public spaces to offer youth programming due to public health restrictions.

LANGUAGE

Language training is an integral aspect for newcomers to settle in their new lives. With the onset of the pandemic causing classes to move online, the following trends were common across the three regional PEI committees:

- Many agencies cited an increase in students accessing classes, as they find the online offering better suited to their needs. Some agencies have highlighted that their waitlists for classes have also grown since the pandemic.
- Low-literacy students are facing challenges with accessing online programming due to a lack of digital literacy, which is resulting in a decrease in uptake of online classes among CLB 1 and 2 students.
- A pervasive lack of appropriate, accessible, and affordable technology is a significant barrier for many newcomers seeking to access online language training.
- Many agencies noted an increase in women accessing classes online. The assumed linkage to this increase is that virtual language training mitigates the barrier of childcare.

Additionally, the following were innovative and creative methods that agencies used to continue serving clients:

- Using a buddy system where students are asked to attend classes with someone fluent in English to support translation and to help facilitate access to online platforms for classes.
- Some agencies became aware that not only did clients need training, but staff also required digital training to use different learning platforms.
- Using outdated technology also posed a challenge for staff.
- Accessing funding to provide laptops and tablets for students.
- Providing childcare services during classes in the homes of students who have children.
- Using a hybrid model that combines in-class and online language training to help retain students.
- Consistent use of learning platforms so students are not required to continuously learn how to navigate new technologies and software.

EMPLOYMENT

The pandemic and ensuing restrictions have created many new challenges, adaptations, and realities for all facets of employment across the province. Some key trends shared by agencies in the PEI meetings included:

- The flexibility offered by online service delivery allowed more students to take additional shifts at work.
- Delay in work permit approvals for refugee claimants is affecting job access and retention as approvals are taking up to 6 months.
- Continued collaboration with the private sector has led to an increase in job placement for shift and part-time workers.
- Many agencies reported a reduction in the number of referrals received from Alberta Works.
- In some sectors, due to a reduction in working hours and clients having to take on multiple jobs, their ability to access services is affected.
- There has been a drastic increase in uptake of employment services across all three regions.

OTHER

The pandemic has exacerbated the many challenges facing newcomers throughout their settlement journey. During the PEI meetings, some other key issues and challenges highlighted across the regions included:

- Some agencies emphasized that they are seeing an increase in male clients requesting support as they are experiencing social isolation.
- There are concerns about the potential changes in funding due to a decrease in arrivals.
- Agencies expressed broad concern about the implications of another lockdown due to the second wave of the pandemic.
- Agencies experienced challenges supporting newly arrived refugees with mental health needs and disabilities, which can be exacerbated by the quarantine period.
- Working remotely has affected the ability to connect and refer clients to other agencies.

CONCLUSION

Within this new PEI term, AAISA will continue to facilitate a collaborative space where settlement and integration agencies can work together to facilitate information-sharing, elevate regional perspectives, and define innovative approaches that positively affect systems-level challenges. Through these meetings agencies will be able to share the experiences of newcomers to Canada within their respective locale. The information gathered will serve as a guide to the collective approach being used to achieve the greater vision that underscores all of the work of the PEI committees. AAISA is resolute in its effort to ensure that these initiatives continue to engender an opportunity for agencies to continue their support of each other, which in turn serves to benefit the communities we serve.