PROVINCIAL ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVE BRIEF
NOVEMBER 2020 - MAY 2021

PURPOSE

This brief is a compilation of shared experiences identified over the 2020/21 Provincial Engagement Initiative (PEI) participation term across three regional committees in Calgary, Edmonton, and Small Centres from November 2020 - May 2021. PEI discussions are anchored around local experiences and perspectives on shared provincial-level issues to ensure local context is represented within the projects AAISA undertakes related to broader issues, gaps, and trends in Alberta. PEI meetings also foster opportunities for agencies to guide and support AAISA's work in service of a provincial vision for newcomer settlement and integration. The following trends relating to service adaptation and access amidst the COVID-19 pandemic were highlighted across all three regional committees.

STANDING ISSUES: KEY TRENDS AND THEMES

VULNERABLE CLIENTS

Along with the richness and wealth of differing backgrounds and ways of being that newcomers bring forth, there exists uncertain and varying outcomes (e.g., health, employment, etc.) for newcomers, with many vulnerabilities amplified further throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Through discussions over this most recent participation term, the PEI has included the following groups in its working, but by no means exhaustive, definition of vulnerable clients:

- Women
- Older adults
- Individuals with low literacy
- Youth (Ages 16- 24)
- Individuals with cognitive and/or physical disabilities
- LGBTQ2+ individuals
- Survivors of torture
- Individuals' ineligible for Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) funded services
- Racialized newcomer groups
- Individuals with complex medical needs

This period marked a steep learning curve for newcomer clients when programs and services were transitioned completely or partially to digital modes. Those with developing English and digital literacy skills have worked tirelessly and consistently to wade through new systems and platforms, as well as acquire needed technology to be active recipients of opportunities and service delivery.

LANGUAGE

Many PEI agencies identified clients have scrambled to find physical space and available time to take part in online language services due to changing COVID-19 restrictions. Identified challenges for clients wishing to take part in language services included:

- Erratic adjustments to childcare and school schedules. Many agencies reported a higher uptake amongst newcomer women for online language services. The impact of varying childcare provision for clients with families has impacted their ability to participate in these programs.
- Access to reliable technology such as hardware and internet bandwidth
- Multiple family members sharing devices for school and work needs
- Program participation while juggling concurrent work commitments

This has resulted in overall variations of enrollment, attendance, and engagement with hybrid and online language classes. Agencies have responded to these challenges through strategies such as:

- Implementing childcare supports for clients (e.g., free care during blended class options, piloting multi-agency collaborative mobile childcare to client homes, and research on innovative childcare models for the future)
- Seeking increased funding for translation supports, either with funders or in collaboration with other newcomer organizations, as well as using online translation platforms
- Specialized tutoring for youth newcomers

EMPLOYMENT

With drastic changes to Alberta's economy resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, several newcomer clients have had work hours reduced, lost employment entirely, or are working simultaneous jobs. Additionally, general delays in administrative processing (e.g., extended time frames for refugee claimant work permit renewals) resulted in stagnated job opportunities for clients. A key challenge highlighted by several PEI agencies was widespread confusion for clients attempting to access employment and COVID-19 financial benefits. This confusion resulted in agencies investing additional resources to provide increased assistance to clients in navigating COVID-19 emergency benefits systems. Barriers highlighted were around:

- Availability of services in client's preferred language or translation supports
- Technology and platform requirements to access services (e.g., document submission requiring specific software licenses)
- Ongoing adaptations and adjustments within the provincial and federal government systems themselves as the COVID-19 pandemic progressed (e.g., benefits eligibility, administrative process changes, etc.)

With job recruitment and onboarding now moving primarily to virtual pathways, PEI participants highlighted that newcomer clients experienced difficulties in navigating the labour market not only in a new country, but with emerging and unwritten 'rules' for online job networking and recruitment. PEI agencies emphasized that employment opportunities within some industries have dwindled (e.g., airlines, casinos and gaming, leisure facilities, restaurants, etc.), while others are growing and thriving (e.g., insurance, health care, real estate investment, etc.) (Haydon & Kumar, 2020). In addition, it was noted there has been an increase in highly skilled clients accessing employment supports than prior to the onset of the pandemic. Many agencies expressed the COVID-19 pandemic has made it uniquely difficult for newcomers and service providers alike to determine where employment opportunities exist, and for newcomer applicants to remain desirable and competitive given this new landscape. Many agencies offering employment services have initiated or strengthened collaborations with employers in areas such as work placements, skill building, and knowledge sharing on employment topics related to inclusion and anti-racism. This has proved vital in ensuring employers see the value of newcomers as prospective employees and keeping them and inclusivity top of mind in their hiring processes and decisions.

SETTLEMENT

Research shows that during disasters such as a pandemic, domestic violence and mental health decline will increase over time (Makwana 2019). Despite this, PEI agencies have experienced varying rates of demand for domestic violence and mental health supports from newcomers. Some agencies noted increased requests for these types of programming (e.g., male clients experiencing social isolation), while some say requests have decreased. Agencies speculated that with everyone grounded at home, seeking crisis support has become more difficult overall. Some PEI participants also supposed that crisis needs will possibly increase once health restrictions ease and mobility from the home increases. Regardless, agencies have reported noticeable mental health effects on clients losing family members overseas (e.g., due to the pandemic or regional conflicts). PEI agencies identified responding to these trends with initiatives such as:

- Free mental health projects and activities for both clients and staff (e.g., conversation circles.)
- Providing referrals and connections with community mental health resources

- In collaboration with other organizations, updating and providing advocacy with Alberta Health Services as mental health needs change during the COVID-19 pandemic

In addition, several agencies have noted that many front-line staff are often insufficiently trained in trauma informed practices to support clients during the pandemic and lack access themselves to mental health supports. Taken in conjunction, these factors ultimately put staff at greater risk for vicarious trauma and burnout. PEI agencies identified the need for further mental health support and research on vicarious trauma for front-line staff during this time. In addition, participants also noted an increased need for improved emergency mental health team support for newcomers (e.g., non-threatening and culturally sensitive approaches for police/mental health worker collaborations). Some agencies have created newcomer specific information and tools for healthcare workers, as well as developing stronger partnerships with local law enforcement to address these challenges and support more inclusive, informed communities.

UTILIZING DATA AND TECHNOLOGY TO IMPROVE SERVICE DELIVERY

Similar needs for quick thinking and adaptation have occurred for settlement and integration agencies in response to changing circumstances with the COVID-19 pandemic. Not only have PEI agencies mobilized services and tools tailored to clients into the virtual sphere but have encountered and overcome indirect and unforeseen obstacles. Client digital literacy was needed not only in newcomers accessing settlement and integration services, but also for wraparound services essential to client success (e.g., government, post-secondary, employment etc.). Despite these challenges, agencies have initiated and solidified deliberate strategies to focus on current and emerging challenges when it comes to technology needs.

LANGUAGE

In the early stages of the pandemic, PEI participants found themselves contending with promptly placing needed technology into the hands of clients to access language services, while also providing hands-on support for increased competence and confidence using virtual systems. Newcomers were not only gaining a new language, already quite a feat, but through new and unfamiliar ways/modes. Language service providers joined their clients on the learning curve, transferring content and translating skill to the digital sphere. Additionally, it was identified language assessment processes increased in length due to moving online, and work continued to ensure academic honesty while adhering to this new delivery mode.

Overall, agencies efficiently and promptly implemented supports to mitigate emerging language barriers such as:

- Digital literacy assessments, preparation, and tool provision (e.g., visual, recorded, and written guides/packages, intro courses/lessons to platforms, interactive virtual spaces for learning, practice, and coaching, etc.)
- Flexing class times and offering recordings or blended learning to increase retention
- Provision of technology hardware/devices (e.g., laptops)
- Reduced internet rates through telecom subsidies

Many agencies expressed the hope and preference for more stabilized programming as soon as fall 2021, as COVID-19 cases decrease and health restrictions ease. Related to this goal, agencies have undertaken efforts to increase vaccination awareness and information and referral support for clients (e.g., campaigns in multiple languages, transportation resources, supporting those without status, etc.).

EMPLOYMENT

Employer engagement and job recruitment preparation continue to be top need requests for many agencies, with unique needs emerging in relation to employment as many services and jobs move to the virtual sphere. Furthermore, many PEI agencies indicated re-allocating various internal resources to support clients, including:

- Dedicated staff to engage key employers and increase job placements (e.g., advocacy for rapid COVID-19 testing and changes to workplace policies, researching and networking with emerging sectors seeking employees, providing and supporting intercultural competency training, etc.)
- Providing digital literacy assessments and training
- Intensive and hands-on virtual job application, and virtual interview preparation and coaching

OTHER EMERGING THEMES AND TRENDS

Two additional areas discussed by PEI agencies are worth noting. First, it was suggested by many agencies that current federal funding job requirements for Case Managers rely heavily on formal post-secondary education, while minimizing critical lived experience and applied skills. Many felt giving more weight to work experience would increase and diversify the available pool of staff supporting newcomers.

Second, because of a mass transition of the settlement and integration sector to digital platforms and service delivery, the corresponding volunteer sector has been subsequently impacted. For example, volunteer roles currently available now require set levels of technological literacy and comfort. Many agencies have highlighted this has influenced how, when, and if volunteers are engaged for support, due to limited staff capacity onboarding and training volunteers in digital literacy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

With ongoing online requirements and rapid development of client and staff digital literacy skills, resources and service delivery continue to morph within the settlement and integration sector, as reflected by the discussions across all PEI committees. The initial and sudden shift to virtual services due to COVID-19 has created unique challenges and opportunities for clients, settlement service providers, umbrellas, and funders. Many PEI agencies have begun to consider and explore how this initial shift to virtual will translate into a post-pandemic world. There appears to be a general desire to formalize a blended service delivery model; fostering increased agency sustainability (i.e., meet exponential demand with available resources) and offering greater and improved access for clients. However, it is important to note other agencies have found the shift to digital programing and services isolating and cumbersome for both clients and staff. Regardless the direction newcomer organizations take with client service delivery, there are key considerations warranting further explanation during the next phases of the COVID-19 pandemic:

HOW WILL SETTLEMENT STAFF WORK AND BE SUPPORTED TO BEST SERVE CLIENTS?

Agencies making formal moves to hybrid services will want to ensure:

- Staff have the needed infrastructure and training to do remote work
- Human resource systems and processes tailored to blended work environments are in place (e.g., critical competencies, retention, performance management, etc.)
- Prevention strategies are in place for newcomer support staff related to vicarious trauma and burnout prevention. This would be the case no matter what model of service delivery, but increased risk may be present if working remotely.

HOW WILL CLIENTS CONTINUE TO OBTAIN BEST OUTCOMES POSSIBLE?

Any major shifts in settlement best practices being delivered would benefit from implementing or developing:

- Updated evaluation frameworks measuring the outcomes of online support with clients to ensure that newcomers still getting what they want/need
- Confidentiality, security, and other ethical considerations of providing settlement and integration services in the online sphere (e.g., counselling, exams, documentation, etc.)

HOW DO KEY STAKEHOLDERS STAY ON THE SAME PAGE AND MOVE TOGETHER DURING THIS TRANSITION?

With impending changes to newcomer admission levels and corresponding processes, agencies, umbrellas, and funders will be presented with challenges and opportunities to adapt to an evolving newcomer landscape. How this looks is currently unfolding, however there is ample and meaningful work already done, or in the works, in anticipation of this shift not limited to:

- Assessments and future planning for the newcomer sector amidst the pandemic. These types of work highlight the need for continued advocacy and collaboration with government systems who serve newcomers, examining factors such as:
  - Will influxes of newcomers impact the quality of services and programs being offered? How can this be mitigated?
  - Where will newcomers settle now, and will admission levels recover evenly across Canada?
  - How do we ensure status quo processes for bringing and settling in newcomers adapts well to a post-pandemic environment? (Clarke & Rose, 2021)
- Exchanges of information and strategic awareness throughout Alberta's settlement and integration sector and all levels of government, with a goal we remain responsive and informed by the developing landscape and act in service of better outcomes for newcomers. Various strategies and recommendations with these types of work include:
  - Increasing knowledge and uptake of newcomer services
  - Developing capacity in community to support the unique needs of newcomers
  - Adapting to evolving newcomer needs, while also reaching diverse clients in varying regions
  - Strengthening connections and outcomes between newcomers and employers within the labour market (Kanbour et al., 2021)

CONCLUSION

The time period covered in this brief has encompassed some of the most concurrent/varied changes to COVID-19 health and community restrictions. Of course, people and programs have not gone unscathed, but key parties in the newcomer sector have remained diligent, collaborative, and responsive to the emerging needs and challenges faced by those we serve. This mindset and commitment are still needed going forward, as Alberta moves into a new phase of the pandemic, and likely a new and innovative chapter for the settlement and integration sector.

As always, AAISA will continue to facilitate a collaborative space where settlement and integration agencies can work together to prioritize information-sharing, elevate regional perspectives, and define innovative approaches positively affecting systems-level challenges. The information gathered above will serve as a guide to the collective approach being used to achieve the greater vision underscoring all the work of the PEI committees.

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