



# PROVINCIAL ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVE BRIEF

NOVEMBER 2022 - AUGUST 2023

## PURPOSE

This brief is a compilation of experiences identified over the 2022-2023 Provincial Engagement Initiative (PEI) participation term across three regional committees in Calgary, Edmonton, and Small Centres, as well as the Groupe de Travail Provincial (GTP). From November 2022 – August 2023, PEI discussions were anchored around local experiences and perspectives on shared provincial-level issues to ensure regional context was represented within the projects that AAISA (Alberta Association of Immigrant Serving Agencies) 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 vision for the PEI is to *jointly build a cohesive, diverse, and welcoming settlement and integration ecosystem that actively meets the needs and supports the goals of every newcomer* (Alberta Association of Immigrant Serving Agencies, 2021).

The goals of this brief are to further guide discussions of importance in PEI meetings, mobilize key knowledge with agencies/partners, and contextualize recommendations and actions to support PEI agencies.

## STANDING ISSUES: KEY TRENDS AND THEMES

### SETTLEMENT AND INTEGRATION SERVICE DELIVERY

The process of providing settlement services is complex and nuanced. There exist uncertain and intersecting newcomer vulnerabilities affecting settlement and integration outcomes (e.g., health, employment, etc.) (Palii & Finlay, 2021). 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
- LGBTQ+ individuals
- Survivors of torture
- Clients who are ineligible for IRCC (Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada) funded services
- Racialized newcomers
- Individuals with complex medical needs

The following subsections will highlight some of the unique vulnerabilities experienced by these clients in the context of different service areas within the settlement and integration sector as highlighted by PEI participants. It is important to note that for this edition of the brief, both Afghan and Ukrainian newcomers were identified and highlighted throughout all emerging themes below.

## LANGUAGE

NOVEMBER 2022

To begin, expanded waitlists and wait times for language assessments materialized as a common and reoccurring theme for all PEI committees, regardless of the client's language level. There has also been a noted increase in demand (Malbeuf, 2022), and hence longer wait times, for language instruction and classes at all levels (e.g., waitlists quoted at over and above 100 individuals). Participants offered potential reasons for both trends, including:

- Lowered staffing levels and hence fewer classes offered due to reduced funding (see small centres example below on referrals to urban language assessment services)
- Increased demand due to a stream of refugee arrivals
- Complexities with completing virtual language assessments, not limited to:
  - Logistics monitoring either group or individual test takers
  - Consistency with and validity of assessment methods
  - Home distractions during assessments
  - Increased time resources and burnout for assessors
  - Lack of access to and organization of language artifacts
  - Post-assessment work, difficulty with learning reflections
- Return to preferred in-person programs being offered.

LINC (Language for Instruction for Newcomers to Canada) providers have encountered backlogs followed by a sudden rush of demand (e.g., due to COVID-19 or delayed refugee



charter arrivals) that has been incompatible with their available resources. In combination with the newly released Canadian immigration levels reports, some agencies predict that this trend will continue in the foreseeable future. And despite this increased demand, there is a reported lack of outreach to clients eligible for free language classes (e.g., Ukrainian arrivals). Indirectly, some agencies emphasized these delays in accessing language classes can cause challenges for clients gaining employment. Holistically, because of diverting funding to increase class sizes and reduce waitlists, other programs and services for newcomers will be impacted/affected.

Agencies reported client referrals (e.g., newcomers without documentation) from LINC providers regarding clients with complex challenges including but not limited to:

- Lack of formal education
- Obtaining healthcare
- Disability
- Stigma/misinformation around disabilities/rights and supports.

As a tactic to ease the stress or waitlists for clients, many agencies provide referrals to other service delivery agencies. From the perspective of small centre participants, language assessments used to be conducted in rural areas, but now a reliance on city-based programs has caused issues, such as being subjected to urban program schedules and giving clients limited flexibility for appointment times.

Moving on to language class attendance, while some clients have reached high language levels and are finding employment, other challenges in written communication persist (i.e., acceptable language skills for employers differ between verbal and written communication for varying reasons, such as which medium is more needed for a position). For example, there was an observed trend of clients leaving enrolled language programs once they found employment (e.g., many entry level work positions have a CLB level 4 minimum). These clients are still in need of language training but are forced to prioritize employment. Agencies have reported that Ukrainian nationals are urgently seeking work because of limited funds provided to Ukrainians upon arrival (e.g., one-time federal financial support).

It was clear to PEI participants that newcomer parents, particularly mothers, are currently most affected by the mode of service delivery (i.e., in-person, online, or hybrid), competency with technology tools, and increased child illness along with stricter health protocols (Immigration, Refugee, and Citizenship Canada, 2021). As an example, provided in PEI Small Centres, single mothers are consistently left with the responsibility of childcare and family settlement concerns. Additionally, despite newcomer women with children generally preferring virtual language classes (i.e., for reasons such as childcare), a reluctance has been reported to access services as the COVID-19 pandemic runs on because of increased



technological expectations. Agencies work to continue supporting clients with barriers accessing language classes by offering alternative class times, providing technical support, and lending out equipment. Finally, seniors were highlighted as a client group struggling to access transportation services (e.g., for education and health care), especially with the coming Winter season.

There was one main identified strategy to mitigate changes in attendance levels, and that is to clearly state reasons for absences (e.g., illness) in occupancy data rates (Immigration, Refugee, and Citizenship Canada, 2020).

## FEBRUARY 2023

Since language assessment waitlists have been an ongoing trend, responses and strategies from both funders and service providers continues, including:

- Consultation on the re-implementation of rural assessment sites and/or solutions to better support the service of language assessment in rural areas.
- Direct/one-on-one work with assessors on decreasing waitlists (e.g., enforcing attendance policies and accessing already existing funding).
- Advocacy for those in work placements and apprenticeships requiring language assessment to retain employment.
- Supporting professional newcomers preparing for assessments on higher CLB levels.

In language instruction and classes, youth and seniors were highlighted as key groups with unique learning that require specialized language programming. For example, in small centres, formal language learning for youth is scarce or certain indirect barriers impact eligibility for classes (e.g., requirement of permanent housing to access services). In these types of cases, as well as other settlement areas, community groups act as a stop gap for youth language acquisition, or some SPO's offer supplementary programming during school holidays and summer breaks. Alternatively, certain urban based post-secondary institutions are positioned to provide more formalized, tailored languages classes to youth newcomers (e.g., divided learning pathways based on past formal education). Participants highlighted a critical issue for Francophone newcomer students who do not speak English that are approaching high school grades. Specifically, these students must be tested in English to obtain high school diplomas, whereas Francophone students who arrive in the 10th grade receive an exemption. In addition, most post-secondary education is in English and students who speak only French face this drastic reality. Some agencies try to remedy this situation through summer classes in core subjects, with the approach to teach students English as a second language to allow students to adapt more easily.

With seniors, many PEI participants listed both informal (due to not requiring language as a pre-requisite for employment) and formal language instruction options they, or referring partners, offer to older adults, such as:

- Starting conversations circles for all newcomers. Through conversation circles, it was identified that digital literacy is removed as a barrier to effective language learning, and social networks are more effectively built.
- Assisting senior women with low literacy to prepare for language assessments prior to instruction by developing basic reading, writing, and speaking skills.
- Pairing conversational English with an activity (e.g., painting) to provide a relaxed and safe space for learning.
- Offering foundational LINC classes with a focus on social and community integration to assist with English language acquisition.

In general, language instruction participants noted once again increased demand and waitlists for classes (e.g., CLB 7-8), as well as a blended (formal and/or informal, in person and/or online) strategies for quality service provision. For example:

- Innovative approaches to language learning, most notably Community Adult Learning Programs.
- Discussions of expanding class size to reduce waitlists.
- Continued exploration/advocacy of language instruction and assessment for refugee claimants.
- As a response to preferred online language instruction, utilizing learning platforms offering asynchronous courses (e.g., Accèsclic) and hence promotion of learning and daily life balance.

MAY 2023

PEI and GTP sessions in May focused on alternatives to formal/traditional language education and assessments services (e.g., LINC/CLIC), due to increase demand and long waitlists for clients (i.e., for all types of newcomers) with varying types of status and ability. Innovative language services working to bridge these gaps include:

- Community Adult Learning Programs (e.g., foundational literacy).
- Blended/asynchronous modalities (i.e., in-person, online, etc.).
- One-on-one tutoring.
- Specialized funding to open eligibility to all learners, regardless of immigration status.
- Increased advocacy for students who require additional learning outside of eligible programs.
- Conversation circles in various modalities.

- Provision of foundational/beginner English classes either internally, attached to another non-language class (e.g., employment), or in partnership with community agencies.
- Utilizing internal language educators who are also equipped to provide language assessments.
- Online language assessments (e.g., [CLARC](#)).
- Referrals to agencies with more language service capacity, or to fee-based services (e.g., [ECALA](#)).
- Community information exchanges to determine available/alternative language program offerings, managing language assessment waitlists, and assessing additional needs for services (e.g., [Gateway](#)).

However, identified barriers and challenges persist regardless of alternative language opportunities available. First, some CALP instructors do not always have expertise or sufficient training to teach English as a second language (e.g., TESL/TEFL certification vs. Adult Education certification). Some language alternatives close for the summer months, leaving those on waitlists or who are ineligible for LINC/CLIC with a gap in their language learning. Second, there are often competing priorities between language learning and employment (e.g., [CUAET](#) visa holders) or family life, despite an uptake in LINC/CLIC assessments. For example, it was identified there has been public misinformation on obtaining permanent residency (i.e., LINC/CLIC as a required/preferred condition of this immigration status), resulting in an increased demand for immediate enrolment to LINC classes, and pressure to obtain work as soon as possible. Third, while some clients have sufficient language skills which make them ineligible for LINC/CLIC, they still struggle to fully participate in employment or higher education. Fourth, as mentioned earlier, there exists a unique challenge in rural areas where clients experience language assessment delays which are completed in centralized locations.

A continued theme featured again this quarter is the increasing newcomer arrival numbers, and the uncertainty of how more language programs and services will be available to cater to newcomers needs.

AUGUST 2023

The final PEI and GTP sessions of the year largely discussed coping strategies which agencies have adopted in response to the continued lack of additional funding for language support.

Language assessment waitlists continue to be an issue with the increasing number of newcomer arrivals. PEI participants discussed several approaches agencies have taken, including:

- Prioritization of Ukrainian arrivals and refugee clients.



- Conversation circles in collaboration with municipalities (i.e., through community activities and events).
- Collaborations with local LINC classes.
- Shifting course structures (e.g., exploring various class times).

With an increase in demand for language programs and support, as well as the strain of budget limitations, many clients are unaware of how to access these foundational resources. One identified strategy of a procedural roadmap for clients was discussed, aimed at increasing awareness of wait times for newcomers.

Despite innovative efforts of pilot programs to address the gaps in language support, challenges persist, including:

- Difficulty finding venue spaces for classes to take place.
- High demands contribute to large waitlists.
- A wide range of language proficiencies amongst clients, resulting in differed starting levels.
- Lack of community support (e.g., colleges, academic spaces) for ESL courses due to a declining number of enrolments (Guarin, 2022).

Overall, agencies have developed innovative strategies to cope with the lack of funding for language support, but the question of sustainability remains as newcomer arrival numbers continue to rise.

## **EMPLOYMENT**

NOVEMBER 2022

Increased waitlists for language assessments/instruction and illness for adult newcomers and their children also directly affects newcomer client's employment opportunities (e.g., entry-level roles). It has been considered imperative that having English as a second language is a prerequisite for employment overall (Karas, 2020). However, a unique example appeared in PEI whereby some older adult clients are seeking employment, while those attending language classes are not interested in looking for work positions.

Participants reported the following challenges regarding employment:

- Clients have been affected by economic changes such as increased unemployment rates over the last few years, increased inflation rates, and financial support not keeping pace.
- Many clients are subjected to workplace discrimination, and neither they nor their employers are aware of their employment rights.





- An increase in mental health issues among job seekers because of pressure to secure employment to establish financial stability (e.g., Ukrainian nationals receiving a one-time government payment on arrival and no further financial support).

In the case of youth specifically, PEI agencies that serve youth have noted an increase in the number of youths seeking employment. There has been some observation by agencies that this is because youth with complex family needs are fulfilling the role of primary income earners in their households.

Lastly, it is also noteworthy that agencies have difficulty supporting clients who do not possess literacy skills in their own language, clients with disabilities, and clients who have children with disabilities. Often, these clients end up receiving income support rather than obtaining gainful employment.

Participants in the PEI committee suggested several employment strategies, including but not limited to:

- More knowledge dissemination of related information on employment rights in Alberta to both clients and prospective employers.
- Partnerships and collaborations with other agencies to facilitate work mentorships between new immigrants and their professional counterparts. To make this opportunity more appealing to those who are not currently employed, agencies have set up financial incentives.
- Remove barriers to employment for clients, such as childcare.
- Providing youth with comprehensive employment programs.
- Taking advantage of community employment resources and workshops available. However, it was expressed that these need to be effectively shared with clients/students for successful connections.

## FEBRUARY 2023

Recruitment and retention were key topics of discussion over the last meeting cycle, specifically focusing on the hiring and retention of newcomer employees. Gaps and barriers identified include:

- Interpersonal competencies for high-skilled newcomers are not always sufficiently conveyed in the recruitment process, despite an elevated level of language.
- Insufficient education on Canadian workplace expectations and culture, as well as overall discrimination through required Canadian work experience, results in exclusion of newcomers in the hiring process.





- Ongoing lack of recognition of professional certification of newcomers, which stagnates professional integration and indirectly impacts mental health. This was highlighted specifically in the context of Francophone newcomers (e.g., closure of former Connexion Carrière) and international medical graduates (IMG).

The ways in which participants work with client, employers, and community to overcome these challenges are:

- Specific services bolstering job search skills for newcomers (e.g., resume review, interview training, networking).
- Workforce development for those at a literacy learning level (i.e., combining language and employment services).
- Mentorship supporting career growth (e.g., foreign trained professional paired with a Canadian professional in the same field, entrepreneurship programs, and youth employment development such as Skills Compass).
- Partnerships with targeted employers and related collaborators (e.g., chambers of commerce), identifying challenges and solutions for all relevant parties (e.g., employer training on cultural stereotypes, gaps in employment process, effective onboarding, etc.).
- Engaging local businesses to support newcomer skill development and job placement (e.g., connecting businesses and LINC students).
- Advocacy towards ending required Canadian work experience as a gatekeeper in regulated professions (Singer, 2021).
- Facilitating job shadowing and volunteering to build rapport and provide understanding of the newcomer's desired field/profession in the Canadian context.

Female newcomer clients were also identified as facing obstacles with their technological literacy, which is now an asset in accessing employment post COVID-19 pandemic. Although some participants expressed difficulty meeting the higher demand for technological tools and skill provision, others work to minimize barriers through general referrals, practicum/internship/residency placements and interview preparation, career centres, and working to reduce bias and stereotypes with key employers. However, what emerged consistently in discussions during this meeting cycle was the need for more inclusivity and competency by employers regarding newcomers' diverse needs and challenges.

## MAY 2023

For the May meeting cycle, agencies focused on trends/demands of client employment needs and access to related services. This included discussions on:



- On-going and developing partnerships with community employment service providers (e.g., ensuring higher client outcomes despite language, digital literacy, and cultural barriers).
- Balancing internal employment staff capacity with increased client demand (e.g., RAP clients job searching to meet basic needs, core funding uncertainty, referring directly to job ads, etc.).
- Supporting vulnerable clients with additional barriers (e.g., newcomer mothers with conflicting schedule and lack of childcare support or low digital literacy, youth with conflicting career path expectations from family, recognition of foreign training and credentials, those with service eligibility restrictions such as CUEAT visa holders, etc.).
- Innovative and emerging employment initiatives (e.g., hosting employer events where clients are hired on the spot, networking and partnering with other industries and trades to build client competitiveness, new service providers such as the Alberta Workforce Essential Skills Society).

It was identified that there are some client and employer knowledge building/support areas which merit further attention, such as available settlement and integrations services (e.g., bridging programs for career specialization and constant changes in protested professions policy), general Canadian culture and work experience, and DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) and cross-cultural resource development. For a specific example, language remains a barrier to accessing employment, as some employers hesitate to hire qualified newcomers with limited communication/language skills (i.e., discrimination in hiring based on language proficiency).

AUGUST 2023

The last meeting cycle in August discussed programs and services specifically designed to support clients with short-term employment contracts and overall trends surrounding contract work. PEI and GTP participants mentioned several employment strategies for clients, such as:

- Contract work through the Calgary Stampede, in which 80+ clients were employed.
- Practicum placements supporting clients in gaining Canadian Work Experience.
- Collaboration with local employers in small centres (e.g., Grande Prairie).
- Initiatives for small centres (e.g., the Rural Renewal Stream), where several clients were offered permanent positions.

The Rural Renewal Stream is designed to support both the attraction of newcomers to small centres in Alberta and the empowerment of rural economies (Government of Alberta, 2023). PEI participants mentioned local employers are showing interest in this stream and are



seeing an increase in job offers. As the Rural Renewal Stream encourages rural communities to recruit Temporary Foreign Workers (TFW), there is a need to provide employers with more information on the protection of vulnerable newcomers and workers.

In conjunction with challenges obtaining employment, other pressing issues such as housing and inflation continue to be at the forefront for newcomers. GTP participants mentioned an increase in younger immigrants, including young parents and expectant mothers. Many of these clients face growing difficulties with integration (i.e., housing, language, inflation, etc.), which contributes to prolonged unemployment and impacts their mental health.

Although some areas in Alberta report steady employment (i.e., Edmonton) and there is increasing contract work for clients in summer months, challenges and trends mentioned in previous cycles persist and affect newcomer clients on a holistic level.

## SETTLEMENT

NOVEMBER 2022

Housing remains a high settlement need, and it is most vulnerable to challenges (e.g., waitlists, payment delays, and discrimination) for service providers and their clients (Edmonton Chamber of Voluntary Organizations, 2021). Delays and changes to provincial/federal financial support channels (e.g., [Resettlement Assistance Program](#)) leave clients in limbo for housing and widespread support. Further, there are external factors such as discrimination, which create barriers to accessing housing, with property owners unwilling to accommodate tenants who are receiving government funding.

To mitigate some of these barriers, PEI participant agencies have taken the following steps:

- Escalating payment issues to their IRCC officers.
- Working directly with housing management companies.

For some PEI participants, there has been a noted increase in refugees entering through homelessness-serving programs, whereby refugees are then redirected to newcomer-specific information and navigation supports. Homelessness programs have expressed interest in finding more resources and services with which to direct refugee clients.

For general settlement programming and support, PEI participants found that clients resettling (e.g., moving to another geographic location soon after initial settlement) do not want to re-share personal information with a new agency. As a result, there is a need to build trust and understanding on the importance of supplying data/details to facilitate



service/support. An identified example of a possible solution to this sort of challenge (i.e., strengthening the newcomer and settlement provider relationship) is with private sponsorships. For Ukrainian arrivals in small centres, service providing agencies work to build connections between sponsors and practitioners prior to refugees' arrivals. This is with a goal to create an understanding of the role of settlement practitioners and the processes new immigrants must go through, hence using a collaborative approach within community to support immigrants and to meet all their needs (*Connect with settlement support*, n.d.).

It is also important to note that translation services remain a critical need for newcomers arriving in Canada (see the health care section below). Participants emphasized the need for schools to be prepared for emergency translation needs and to have consistent and reliable services in place (e.g., [Access Alliance](#)).

## FEBRUARY 2023

As this quarter's PEI meetings coincided with tax season, tax programs for clients were discussed. Many participants offer tax clinics or tax-related information sessions (e.g., Canadian tax system) often provided by teachers, settlement staff, or volunteers, either for all newcomers or specific client groups (e.g., Ukrainian arrivals, Francophones, etc.). Participants stressed the importance of supporting newcomers strengthen their fiscal competence. For example, at the financial level, it's insufficient to only offer information to clients about banks; it's necessary to provide information and extend assistance to financial literacy to newcomers such as credit management, accompanying them to the bank, and more.

Other organizations established key referrals or partnerships with other parties to ensure tax education support for clients, such as:

- Tax information sessions in partnership with the Canadian Revenue Agency (CRA)
- Referrals to 211 Alberta and the CRA Community Volunteer Income Program (CVIP)
- Exploring online tax educational and eligibility tools (e.g., [Benefits Wayfinder](#)).

A challenge identified in rural areas is community refusal to offer tax support to temporary residents, due to the lack of simplicity of their tax situations. Some agencies stated that they work continuously to ensure tax education and support is accessible to everyone and are advocating to expand the requirements in the province for clinics to accept temporary residents.

According to participants, Francophone newcomers, particularly seniors, are often excluded from settlement programming such as tax support and social interactions with peers and



have unmet needs in terms of representation and access. Agencies shared potential solutions and current strategies for inclusive and diverse settlement programs, such as:

- Upgrade programs for Anglophone seniors to include Francophone seniors in their activities.
- Active collaborations between Francophone organizations to support each other.

Lastly, GTP participants discussed the issue of disseminating information on settlement programs and services in general. Despite the existence of various settlement and integration services, there is an apparent lack of coordinated channels for disseminating information about these to Francophone newcomers, and as a result few individuals/organizations digest and utilize them.

#### MAY 2023

With summer fast approaching, service providers exchanged youth focused initiatives being offered in house or by referrals into the community. A variety of activities were highlighted (e.g., camps, field trips, sports teams, conferences to build capacity for agencies, leadership/mentorship, ESL for Francophone newcomers, information technologies, etc.), all with the goal to create community connections and quality programs to tailor to newcomer youth needs (e.g., regardless of immigration status, mobility challenges or income barriers).

Also, committees discussed how they work to support clients in developing their own community and settle into Canadian society. Strategies shared include:

- Certification programs (e.g., day care)
- Advisor training and matching (e.g., international medical graduates)
- Life skills support (e.g., income management, cyberbullying, law topics, etc.)
- Community connections programs to fill gaps in social and community integration (e.g., partnerships with ethno-cultural organizations)
- Indigenous-led groups and community-building programs
- Specialized programs for vulnerable clients (e.g., seniors engaging in social belongingness and ensuring financial security, as well as individuals with disabilities enhancing social integration through outdoor activities).

#### AUGUST 2023

PEI and GTP discussions this cycle largely centered around challenges and successes service providers have had serving newcomers arriving in Canada due to a large-scale crisis (e.g., violent conflicts, natural disasters, etc.). Specific challenges include, but are not limited to:

- Lack of capacity resulting in inability to address the influx of clients needing services and support (e.g., staff shortage, limited subject matter expertise, overwhelming workloads, burnout).
- Overwhelming case management model work.
- Lack of standardized process for interviewing LGBTQIA+ clients.
- Increased process complexities with sponsorship.
- Accessibility issues for Ukrainian clients in meeting requirements for resources and funding.
- Issues with newcomer retention amongst workplaces due to various challenges (e.g., language barriers, employer's lack of expertise onboarding newcomers, etc.).
- Increased need for mental health services due to unemployment.

The topic of case management work within the RAP program was described as challenging and has contributed to an increase in workload for staff at both small and medium-sized centres. Both centres identified similar trends in being unable to build a bigger team specific to case management or exclusive to RAP. The lack of expertise in case management has resulted in additional work for staff on top of the RAP services provided and overwhelming workload attempting to keep up with the influx of complex clients in need of services. Settlement in small centres comes with unique challenges, making flexibility amongst staff a necessity.

PEI participants discussed their success of one-on-one meetings with clients to better understand specific needs. This strategy has increased the effectiveness of providing appropriate resources tailored to the client. Despite efforts, inadequate funding for newcomer arrivals fleeing from crisis result in various unmet needs, which is a trend seen by multiple organizations across Alberta. Nearing the end of summer 2023, Ukrainian and Afghan arrivals only continue to increase.

## HEALTH CARE

NOVEMBER 2022

As with the 2021-2022 PEI term, overall access and navigation to health services is highlighted as a theme for discussion. There have been reports that newcomers who do not have access to health navigation information prior to arriving in Canada experience problems accessing relevant health services. Upon arrival in Canada, clients do not have access to family physicians due to a continued shortage of family physicians who are willing to accept new patients, and physicians leaving for large urban centres (*Physician Resource Planning*, n.d.). As an example, newcomer clients with cognitive disabilities experience the following:





- Need to prioritize other pressing settlement needs over their cognitive health.
- Struggle with advocating for needed services to health practitioners.
- Due to an ongoing shortage of overall physicians (Wong, 2022), clients experience hurdles in obtaining cognitive health diagnoses so they can access medical disability support (i.e., adult or child).

In addition to the overall settlement needs discussed above, access to interpretation supports when accessing health services appeared to be an ongoing barrier for clients. For context, public health providers are required to provide contracted phone interpretation, however community settlement and integration providers report that is not the reality due to a lack of knowledge among health staff about in-house interpretation services available. As a result, service providers are requested to supply interpreters, but they do not have the capacity to do so. Additionally, privately run health service providers are under no obligation to provide interpretation services resulting in increased barriers for newcomers from accessing interpretation services. As a result, clients lose trust in health care providers in both scenarios.

Mental health remains a top priority for PEI participants, as their clients are still a group of individuals at greater risk of mental health challenges (Simich et al., 2006). Unsurprisingly, mental health is of significant concern for Afghan and Ukrainian clients dealing with crises and trauma. However, despite the obvious need, barriers to obtaining effective and prompt mental health support are present (e.g., programs offered in clients' first language and where cost is covered by either Alberta Works or the Interim Federal Health program).

The following solutions and strategies were discussed by PEI participants:

- Relying on services that can travel remotely or provide health staff for clients facing barriers such as no Alberta Health Care coverage (e.g., Canada Homecare Group.)
- The use of central community access points/wraparound services.
- Utilizing in-house services available in different languages.
- Exploring free/low-cost mental health supports in Alberta available in various languages.

FEBRUARY 2023

Following up on previous discussions regarding accessible translation support in health care facilities, connections with Alberta Health Services (AHS) resulted in accessing and tapping into feedback channels for their language and interpretation services. More developments on this to come as the working relationship with AHS continues, and feedback on newcomers effectively accessing health services is shared continuously and reciprocally.



In response to the overall trials for newcomers, including:

- professional shortages such as access to doctors and dentists,
- increased requests for mental health support while combatting mental health stigma,
- and access to health in first languages,

participants also shared what their organizations do directly or indirectly to monitor both physical and mental well-being of their clients. Many strategies and solutions were identified, not limited to:

- Mental wellbeing
  - Targeted services for mental health (e.g., counselling, outreach, and education), with established and/or developing focus on cross-cultural perspectives (e.g., [Centre for Refugee Resilience](#), refugee youth and women).
  - Innovative and creative support groups (e.g., [Sewing for Peace](#) and healing circles).
  - Referring internal learners/clients to mental wellness services onsite as appropriate.
  - Ethically tracking and utilizing client data to effectively pair clients with health professionals as need arises.
- Physical wellbeing
  - Working with medical professional associations to identify accessible medical services (e.g., determining dentists who provide publicly funded direct billing).
  - Utilizing tools which allow newcomers to access doctors in their geographic area, but also importantly who speaks their language (e.g., [Primary Care Networks](#)).

For both health domains, participants expressed promise in strategic partnerships to increase access and connectivity for newcomer, clients, resulting in a collaborative community of care. Examples of this include the Gateway program in Calgary, and agencies working with AHS on tailored language supports for newcomers).

MAY 2023

Current and trending health care needs were examined, including if/how they were affecting service capacity, and any measures taken to adapt. For example, for both rural and urban agencies, participants noted an increase in clients with pre-existing complex health care needs, both physical and mental (e.g., pre-arrival trauma). For small centres specifically, this is paired with an on-going deficiency of general practitioner physicians and long wait times for walk-in clinics. Also, Francophone serving participants notes that occasionally they must



accompany they French-speaking clients to medical facilities due to the language barrier and lack of translation support (for more on this, see discussion on access to AHS interpretation and translation services in earlier portions of this brief).

Participants stated they are relying on referrals to professional mental health services as needed but are also working to build up skill and knowledge internally to support both clients and frontline staff with mental health concerns (e.g., in-house social workers). One organization did note that their team has observed racial discrimination in the workplace putting a strain on clients and their mental health. Therefore, it was expressed that education and training to newcomers ensures incidents of workplace discrimination are addressed.

### AUGUST 2023

Complex health care needs are being seen by PEI and GTP participants across the province. In this cycle, formal reporting of these needs to funders was discussed. Two major themes identified by service providers were the lack of clarity regarding data, and the inaccuracies of data collection on the complexities of newcomer health cases.

The lack of data clarity on what is necessary/required to be shared (e.g., severe cases of medical needs) was a common theme amongst small centre participants. Programming and services deficient for highly complex medical needs within small centres is becoming more evident amidst little funding and increased newcomer arrivals. Participants expressed the desire for a more concrete framework from the Government of Canada to address the gaps prevalent due to a lack of clarity regarding data collection.

Participants agreed data currently collected are non-reflective of the challenges newcomers face, especially in relation to health (i.e., physical, mental, etc.). With scarcity of data, it becomes increasingly difficult to assess unmet needs and gaps within service provider systems to effectively cater to clients. Complex needs (e.g., multiple disabilities), often accompanied by trauma, regardless of status continuing presence in numbers.

The Interim Federal Health program provides a temporary coverage of health care benefits to specific newcomer groups (i.e., resettled refugees, refugee claimants) who are ineligible for provincial or territorial health insurance. Despite this policy, challenges arise amongst local clinics who do not accept this insurance program due to wariness or ignorance. Overall, collaborations with community organizations to meet client needs and complex cases have been successful, but this cycle's discussion reached a consensus that data reporting to funders requires a more concrete process to better reflect newcomer health challenges.

## ANTI-DISCRIMINATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS

NOVEMBER 2022

Following careful consideration of the PEI 2021-2022 Term Evaluation survey results, and evaluating minutes and briefs from the previous term, a new standing item on anti-discrimination and human rights was added to explore fair access to services and advocacy for clients.

There have been several strategies proposed in this area by PEI committee, as well as emerging research (AMSSA, 2016) including, but not limited to:

- An examination of language choice in meetings and materials (e.g., use of the word stakeholder and its roots in colonialism).
- The use of visuals and symbols to welcome and support LGBTQ+ clients.
- Ensure programs are adapted to meet the needs of clients (e.g., medical challenges, blended service delivery, etc.).
- Providing continued advocacy, such as ongoing education for clients accessing and navigating complex health systems (e.g., disability specialists and supports).

FEBRUARY 2023

More robust discussions took place in February 2023 about discrimination and protecting the rights and freedoms for newcomers. Firstly, it was highlighted that discrimination, as shared by clients and service providers, can be both vague/hard to identify, systemic, or direct/overt. Examples shared in PEI meetings include:

- Pay disparity and employment assignments.
- Barriers accessing public services (i.e., bureaucracy, red tape, and inaccessible language).
- Youth newcomers facing discrimination in schools and in less diverse communities.
- Discriminatory behaviour from clients directed at staff.
- Lack of any disability services offered in French for Francophones.
- Differential treatment of newcomers based on country of origin (i.e., expressed at individual, community, provincial, and national levels).
- Overall safety for newcomer women in public and in their homes.

Participants shared numerous and conscientious approaches to foster allyship and safe spaces for clients and staff, including:



- Advocacy to funders in capturing/analyzing key data on vulnerable groups of newcomers (e.g., those with disabilities).
- Bring targeted issues to relevant authorities and specialist services.
- Recruiting and retaining empathetic and culturally sensitive staff (e.g., educators).
- Training and support for identifying and dealing with racism and discrimination, both for clients and staff (e.g., [Alberta Human Rights Commission](#) information and reporting).
- Macro research on related topics (e.g., anti-racism mitigation and education).
- Distinct symbols and gestures to demonstrate safety of space in organizations.
- Ongoing exploration and advocacy of affordable and/or regional language and translation services.

One point of note which continues to arise in PEI meetings (and certainly beyond) is the need for formal services and support for both refugee claimants and Temporary Foreign Workers (TFW) (CCIS et al., 2022). Questions arise regularly on what essential programs these newcomers are eligible for, particularly if they are working towards permanent residency status.

Finally, in the context of schools, education-mandated participants stressed the importance of differentiating between discrimination and discipline. For example, a school principal giving justified disciplinary actions to students can be perceived as discrimination by students. This poses a serious challenge since it is not easy to teach students to identify discrimination in an environment in which they are subordinates to people who can discriminate against them. Secondly, the staff and the administrative bodies must learn to do their work in a way that is fair, inclusive, and that would not be mistaken for discrimination.

MAY 2023

This meeting cycle concentrated on emergent projects either internally or in the community to support diverse groups. Examples include:

- Collaborations to develop anti-racism frameworks and training (e.g., [Centre for Race and Culture](#), [Alberta Rural Network](#), [City of Calgary](#)).
- Support of integrating black youth into family settings.
- Conducting anti-racism programming in schools as responsiveness and willingness of school divisions allow.
- Investigating and sharing of relevant advocacy groups (e.g., [Barrier Free Alberta](#)) and anti-racism resources (e.g., [Act2EndRacism](#)).
- Escalating new research and projects to regional/national tables (e.g., [National LIP Secretariat](#)) to further conversations and strengthen action and information sharing on a national scale.



AUGUST 2023

Several proposals to support clients with discrimination were discussed this meeting cycle, including:

- A focus on bolstering community connections and anti-racist programs.
- Adding anti-racism education for BIPOC programs.
- The expansion of community development programs with a priority on anti-discrimination work.
- Evaluating referral programs and the development of specialized data capture.
- Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) training for both staff and members within organizations.

PEI and GTP participants agreed conversations on anti-racism, anti-discrimination, and belonging need to continue in response to the growing negative sentiment on immigration. It was also expressed that strategies for better integration of newcomers and anti-racism initiatives should be at the forefront of budget considerations to effectively support clients.

## OTHER EMERGING THEMES AND TRENDS

### BILINGUAL SERVICE DELIVERY

FEBRUARY 2023

As a re-cap, IRCC's Francophone Immigration Strategy aims to ensure an increase in French-speaking immigrants (outside of Québec), Francophone newcomers are supported in their integration and retention, as well as a stronger Francophone community (IRCC, 2019).

Related to this work, much back-and-forth discussion and engagement took place in the last few months with an aim to strengthen information, referral, and collaborations between Anglophone and Francophone service providers, including:

- Environmental scans and research on available services, which include French-language providers.
- Formalizing information and referral pathways for French newcomers to the Francophone community (e.g., [available service maps](#), and maximizing use of general resource services like [211 Alberta](#) and [Helpseeker](#)).
- Creation and sharing of strategy and educational tools that support competency in serving Francophone newcomers (ex: webinars, courses, and [RIF](#) forums which highlight the needs/challenges/approaches to Francophone settlement).



MAY 2023

Francophone service providers (i.e., GTP) shared progress on research examining Francophone clients and the unique experiences they face in their settlement and integration journey (e.g., analysis of Francophone access to the labor market, as well as skewed access to housing). Work is also underway, to supports an integrated approach in facilitating communication between organizations which offer services to newcomers, as well as the collaboration between Francophone and Anglophone services.

One unique issue highlighted in Francophone committee meetings that is important to note, is that not all service providers have access to iCARE data in Alberta. As a result, the Réseau d'immigration Francophone d'Alberta (RIFA) is working to determine a way to access key data while honouring client privacy.

AUGUST 2023

Challenges persist amongst Francophone clients, including, but not limited to:

- Referrals to service agencies outside of/far from their area of residency.
- Difficulty finding operations support in translating essential documents for clients from English to French.
- Interpretation challenges due to varying French dialects (e.g., Haitian Creole).

Flagging emerging trends with service delivery catchment and jurisdictional boundaries will continue to assist in addressing Francophone clients being referred to service agencies far from their area of residence.

## LESSONS LEARNED

Reviewing themes and discussions from the entire term for PEI/GTP committees, several poignant and evident key messages become visible, not limited to:

- Increased volumes of arrivals, both planned but more often unplanned, consistently leads to increased pressure on settlement and integration service delivery systems. This is demonstrated for all types of services (e.g., language, employment, RAP, etc.) and are often impacted by chain reaction. This is also identical with an increased number of clients with complex needs (e.g., physical and/or mental health, large/multi-generational family units, literacy, etc.).
- Newcomers of course, face similar challenges as native-born Albertans/Canadians (e.g., housing, inflation/cost of living, systems navigation, etc.) but overwhelmingly

experience added pressures and by-product challenges (e.g., mental health effects, language barriers, discrimination, etc.).

- Continued similarities, but also contrasts/divides along the settlement and integration provision spectrum (e.g., urban and rural, as well as Francophone and Anglophone).
- The general push for hybrid service delivery serves individuals differently depending on ability, life circumstance, and type of support requested/offered (e.g., age, accessibility, skill, simple vs. complex services, etc.)
- There exist instances demonstrating evident issues of general inequity for newcomers:
  - Services and systems are in a developing stage, if present at all, for equity recognition and implementation. For example, people cannot learn and settle if work needs to come first (e.g., Ukrainians). Also, there are still large groups of individuals who fall through the gaps/cracks (e.g., Temporary Foreign Workers and Refugee Claimants).
  - An equity mindset at an operations level takes resources, as well as emerging support required from funders (e.g., time, treasure, and talent).
- Strategic/effective collaborations and referrals are now a necessity, not something nice to have. Service duplication and competition for funding is no longer sustainable, agencies now must go into community to have clients fully served, and even multiplying outcomes through one service/program.
- The need for information, navigation support, and transparency is not just for clients, but those who serve them directly and indirectly (e.g., newcomer agencies, non-settlement and integration organizations, employers, etc.).
- Research, data, and outcomes appear as the language between funders and agencies, so moving forward concerted effort will be placed on how it can be used for sustainability, transformation, and innovation.

## NEXT STEPS AND CONCLUSION

The period covered in this brief includes recent and pressing developments with incoming Afghan refugees and Ukrainian arrivals, continued evolution of service provision in the later phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, and exponential immigration admission levels. Key service providers in the newcomer sector remain diligent, collaborative, and responsive to emerging needs and challenges faced by newcomers across the province. This mindset is critical moving forward as Alberta transitions into a new phase of population growth,





diversity, and continued innovation for the settlement and integration sector. Importantly, as funding cycles for many participants move into a new and uncertain fiscal year, discussions regarding strategies and priorities will continue to be critical for sector sustainability and enhancement for the next few years. **We encourage agencies to use this brief, and any information included, as a strategic tool for any funding or collaboration opportunities which arise in your work.**

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 to positively affect systems-level challenges. **The information gathered over the past year serves as a guide, for AAISA as well as the sector, to sustain the collective approach used in achieving the greater vision underscoring all the work of the PEI committees, for the 2023-2024 term and beyond.**

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