



PROVINCIAL ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVE BRIEF

NOVEMBER 2023

PURPOSE

This brief compiles experiences identified during the 2023-2024 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) committee. In November 2023, PEI discussions centered on local experiences and perspectives regarding shared provincial-level issues. The aim of PEI is to strengthen a collective voice for settlement in Alberta, identify systems-level challenges, and share information to facilitate collaboration, research, advocacy, and engagement across the sector. Furthermore, PEI meetings provided opportunities for agencies to guide and support AAISA's efforts in realizing 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). Outcomes 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

Delivering settlement and integration services involves numerous nuances and complexities. Beyond multifaceted issues, there exists a limited number of case studies intended to exemplify best practices in delivering human services for newcomers. Amongst these, reports on best practices often want for comprehensiveness, with minimal actionable information due to the absence of structural details (Sharma, 2016). Uncertain and intersecting newcomer vulnerabilities additionally affect settlement and integration outcomes (e.g., health, employment, etc.) (Palii & Finlay, 2021).

Through discussions over the 2023-2024 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 subsequent sections will highlight distinct vulnerabilities encountered by clients within various service areas in the settlement and integration sector, as emphasized by PEI participants.

LANGUAGE

NOVEMBER 2023

In the 2023-2024 PEI cycle, the recurring challenge of language assessment waitlists impeded service delivery providers, particularly in consideration of the rising influx of newcomer arrivals to Canada. As increasing demand for language resources continue to place pressure on all PEI committees, collaboration amongst the immigration and settlement sector is crucial to improve outcomes for clients. Further collaborative efforts emerge amongst the sector as a response to this demand. Initiatives to combat gaps in language services include, but are not limited to:

- Partnerships with local libraries for access to a diverse range of language resources (e.g., conversation groups).
- Community Adult Learning Programs to support students who not eligible for IRCC funding.
- Co-funding amongst service delivery providers.
- Accessible booking tools for community partners and clients to book language support.
- Online language assessment services and referral systems to effectively place students in language classes optimal for their proficiency.
- Exploration of discussion circles offered in French.



Challenges faced by newcomers can be multifaceted and have significant consequences for economic, social, and psychological wellness (Special to Western News, 2022). One organization highlighted clients can face multiple issues beyond language barriers which language instructors often discover. These challenges may include ongoing literacy issues or learning disabilities which staff may not possess the necessary qualifications to address adequately. Instructors have been encouraged to communicate these nuanced challenges to other staff members, facilitating appropriate and effective support for clients and fostering a collaborative approach.

EMPLOYMENT

NOVEMBER 2023

As access to language services remains a challenge, language barriers can create complex hurdles extending into employment. Students participating in LINC language classes may face obstacles in accessing employment support due to conflicting time commitments. Consequently, individuals may encounter difficulties independently navigating information about available supports and resources. Beyond these, further gaps remain prevalent amongst newcomer employment due to reasons, such as:

- Funding availability contingent upon newcomer status and staffing shortages.
- Lack of cultural consideration within the Western job-seeking approach (e.g., nuances like variations in resume writing across non-Western countries are often overlooked by NGOs and governmental organizations).
- Emphasis on urban-centric approaches neglecting unique needs of the rural employment experience.
- Limited capacity for service delivery providers resulting in difficulty providing bridging programs (e.g., mentorships, job-shadowing, etc.), particularly in small centres.
- Government support programs indirectly constraining long-term planning for clients (e.g., accessing income support could disqualify newcomers from pursuing familial sponsorship opportunities).
- Lack of recognition for foreign credentials despite measures existing to consider these qualifications (e.g., employer skepticism).
- Prioritization of Canadian work experience or exposure to the Canadian labour market acting as a barrier for newcomers securing employment.
- Failure to recognize newcomers with disabilities can face accessibility challenges when using employment programs.

Participants highlighted clients experiencing discouragement when unable to secure employment in their respective fields, demonstrating a lack of training for newcomers to



access adequate work aligned with their qualifications. There is a growing demand for settlement agencies to offer comprehensive employment services (e.g., readiness workshops, programs familiarizing newcomers with the realities of the Canadian labour market, job-shadowing initiatives in areas of interest, volunteering opportunities for exposure to the job market, etc.). Educating clients about the Canadian job-seeking and employment culture would enhance awareness and understanding. Implementing initiatives to address this gap could be highly beneficial for newcomers.

SETTLEMENT

NOVEMBER 2023

Finding suitable residence in a secure and welcoming area constitutes a crucial stride toward successful settlement and integration (Wayland, 2007). Housing challenges persist across the entirety of Alberta and numerous newcomers have to navigate these issues. The City of Calgary's 2023 Housing Needs Assessment indicates a rising challenge in housing affordability for a growing number of Calgarians. Government housing supports are available, such as Alberta's Affordable Housing Programs which consist of 4 types of provincially subsidized housing and offer options for Albertans with low income. PEI participants highlighted newcomers may misunderstand the distinctions between assisted, affordable, and market housing, encountering confusion in navigating these varied categories. Frontline staff may face challenges in clarifying these differences effectively to newcomers due to inherent complexities of each housing type. A lack of understanding can amplify difficulties for newcomers in navigating housing support.

Another obstacle for newcomers seeking housing arises from their immigration status. Refugee claimants, with ambiguous status and lacking necessary documents, often face barriers in securing accommodation as landlords find their situation too problematic. Insecure status further compounds difficulties in securing employment and rental housing (Wayland, 2007). Additionally, individuals with permanent residency or confirmed refugee status are also vulnerable to fluctuations in rent prices. Certain immigration statuses limit accessibility to programs that receive federal funding.

Clients experience further service gaps regarding housing, for instance:

- Long waitlists (i.e., ranging from 3-6 months).
- Difficulties obtaining income support after receiving a one-time federal benefit.
- Limited interpretation services and availability.
- Lower income levels and affordability of homeownership or meeting average rental costs.
- Scarce housing options as prices increase in remote Alberta areas.



- Lack of consideration regarding hidden homelessness and acknowledgement within policy.

PEI and GTP participants are diligently working to find solutions and this cycle's discussion yielded the following suggestions:

- Developing a unified strategy for submission to municipalities that illustrates the housing shortage particular to newcomers.
- Providing feedback to government regarding systemic barriers impeding newcomers from promptly securing housing, primarily caused by delays in qualifying for income support, with a particular focus on refugee claimants.
- Exploring government streamlining of housing assistance for newcomers (e.g., implementing a program to aid newcomers in meeting eligibility criteria).

HEALTH CARE

NOVEMBER 2023

As newcomer arrivals to Alberta increased in 2023, and continue in 2024, changes in healthcare delivery largely impact the newcomer experience within the province. With winter approaching, conversations in this quarter focused on the effective support provided by PEI and GTP participants to their clients in terms of winter preparedness. Several collaborations and/or initiatives were mentioned, namely:

- Vaccine navigators to inform individuals about both COVID-19 booster and flu shots.
- Referring clients to winter resources according to their need (e.g., winter clothing drives).
- Programs focusing on mental well-being throughout winter season to reduce isolation and enhance overall health during colder/darker months.
- Workshops, sessions, and activities regarding winter preparedness education and tools to manage the challenges of Alberta winter.

Participants expressed concern that international students are often inadequately prepared for winter, and schools must take proactive measures to educate them more on this matter. The harsh Alberta winter can exacerbate newcomer student struggles. Exploring collaborations with local schools to educate international students on proper winter preparation could be a promising option to address the issue of insufficient readiness and support for these students.



ANTI-DISCRIMINATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS

NOVEMBER 2023

Drawing insights from last term, ongoing inclusion of anti-discrimination and human rights as standing agenda items will focus on ensuring equitable access to services and advocating for clients.

Focus of discussions for this quarter predominantly identified available programs for 2SLGBTQIA+ newcomers. Initiatives mentioned included the following:

- Engagement in anti-racism projects collaborating with local agencies and participating cities.
- A Service Delivery Improvement (SDI) project involving the development of modules on anti-racism, presentations covering intersectionality and white privilege, and establishment of a rural community-based framework.
- Tailored programs with staff specifically trained to address needs of this cohort.
- Ongoing educational events.
- Pilot programs for staff training in equity, diversity, inclusion (EDI) along with anti-racism.
- Exploring ideas of support (i.e., counseling, therapy, referrals, etc.) to strengthen existing programs and services.

While many participants shared their support and initiatives for this group of newcomers, there appears remains a lack of sufficient services for the 2SLGBTQIA+ community in rural Alberta. It is crucial to examine this issue to enhance overall support for newcomers of this cohort.

OTHER EMERGING THEMES AND TRENDS

IMMIGRATION POLICY AND COMMUNITY EVENTS

NOVEMBER 2023

Unique to this quarter, IRCC announced a new humanitarian pathway for Colombian, Haitian, and Venezuelan foreign nationals. Organizations discussed needing additional details regarding Canada's commitment to aid migrants in the Americas, primarily to determine the number expected to arrive in Alberta through this program. There was consensus that more guidance on future pathways is warranted to foster effective support for newcomers going forward.



PLANNED AND UNPLANNED MIGRATION STRATEGIES

NOVEMBER 2023

With ongoing planned and unplanned surges in newcomer arrivals, discussions were held regarding agency preparatory measures. Strategies mentioned were as follows:

- Creating innovative solutions to provide services despite increases of clients (e.g., strategic referrals, enhancement of collaborations to optimize efficiency, etc.).
- Establishing pre-existing contingencies which address unforeseen rises in funding requirements.
- Engaging in transparent discussions with staff to implement restrictions when there is overflow.
- Ensuring the minimization of service duplication by hosting meetings with other agencies focused on fostering collaboration and support.
- Cross-collaboration efforts with small centres of limited capacity.
- Activating teams to respond to unforeseen arrivals and consequent effects, as well as collaboration with community partners to adequately prepare.

Burnout among staff members was said to be exacerbated by the influx of large number of newcomers, which can often negatively impact work culture. Approaches consequently become more reactionary rather than preparatory. Service delivery providers may often find themselves in a cycle of continuous training and re-training due to this approach. Implementing strategic preparatory measures for unforeseen newcomer arrivals could significantly stabilize and sustain approaches within the immigration sector.

CONCLUSION

The period covered in this brief encapsulates some most recent and critical developments marked by a notable rise in newcomers. Participants have demonstrated commendable dedication in addressing challenges posed by unplanned migration. Collaborative efforts continue to intensify, particularly in the face of unmatched resources, underlining the ingenuity of those involved. The pressing need for sustained advocacy and a sense of urgency remains, emphasizing the ongoing importance of addressing the evolving landscape of migration and settlement in Alberta.

AAISA will continue in fostering a collaborative environment where settlement and integration agencies can work together to prioritize information sharing, amplify regional perspectives, and devise innovative approaches to positively impact challenges at the systems level. The information compiled in this brief serves as a guiding framework for the



collective approach employed in realizing the overarching vision underscoring the work of all PEI participants.

REFERENCES

- Alberta Association of Immigrant Serving Agencies. (n.d.). Provincial engagement initiative. Retrieved January 15, 2024, from <https://aaisa.ca/toolkit/provincial-engagement-initiative-2/>
- City of Calgary. (n.d.). Housing needs assessment. Retrieved January 22, 2024, from <https://www.calgary.ca/communities/housing-in-calgary/housing-needs-assessment.html>.
- Government of Alberta. (n.d.). Affordable housing programs. Retrieved January 22, 2024, from <https://www.alberta.ca/affordable-housing-programs>.
- Government of Canada. (n.d.). Canada continues humanitarian effort for people in the Americas. Retrieved January 22, 2024, from <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2023/11/canada-continues-humanitarian-effort-for-people-in-the-americas.html>.
- Palii, I., & Finlay, L. (2021). Vulnerable newcomers. In Western University, *Pathways to Prosperity*. Pathways to Prosperity. Retrieved January 12, 2024, from <http://p2pcanada.ca/library/vulnerable-newcomers-literature-search-and-annotated-bibliography/>
- Sharma, A. (2016). Social services for newcomers to Canada: a systematic review of the evidence on provision, management, and outcomes of available services [Unpublished master's thesis]. McMaster University.
- Special to Western News. (2022). Report explores legal challenges of new immigrants to Canada. Retrieved January 15, 2024, from <https://news.westernu.ca/2022/01/report-explores-legal-challenges-of-new-immigrants-to-canada/>
- Wayland, S. (2007). The housing needs of immigrants and refugees in Canada. Retrieved from https://homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/FinalReport_CHRAImmigrationHousing_June_2007.pdf