



PROVINCIAL ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVE BRIEF

FEBRUARY 2024

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 the second quarter occurring February 2024, 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.

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Official language proficiency can be one of the biggest fundamental barriers for newcomers (Business Council of Alberta, 2024). Secondary needs may present themselves as newcomers access language services (e.g., mental health, employment, housing, etc.), revealing the complexities of needs. In this quarter, participants shared about strategies and best practices around holistic support in which services centre on the client's wellbeing and necessities.

Barriers to providing support to clients as secondary needs arise may include, but are not limited to:

- Limited funding in relation to demand (i.e., insufficient funding affects organizational capacity).
- Language comprehension limitations (e.g., clients may qualify for services based on secondary needs requirements, but do not meet CLB requirements).
- Overworked staff and teachers.
- Cultural barriers affecting access to services (e.g., not utilizing childcare programs due to cultural preferences).
- Complexities surrounding access to mental health support services (e.g., limited interpretation offerings, clients being referred far from area of residence, etc.).

When discussing these barriers, access to mental health support was a highlighted challenge. Although mental health services for newcomers may be available, language barriers continue to persist. Cultural factors may further contribute to the barrier of accessing these supports. With limited funding and capacity, many SPOs depend on the diversity of language proficiency amongst staff, volunteers, and ESL speakers. Although no sustainable solution currently addresses this gap, the focus remains on facilitating comfortable opportunities for clients to express themselves despite any language differences.

Considering this, PEI participants emphasized the need for strong partnerships amongst SPOs to provide services for secondary needs and smooth continuation of care for clients. Although there is a preference for in-house service availability, where that is not feasible, external referrals are crucial for streamlining the settlement process. Optimizing resource sharing amongst the sector (i.e., between differing regions and program-specific services) contributes to the overall efficiency

of the settlement sector by facilitating prompt and accurate referrals, ensuring client needs are met effectively.

A potential strategy for implementing a more holistic approach may be the implementation of a settlement support team for both internal and external clients. This could be done via training, course programs, and micro-credentialing amongst staff on topics that would contribute to increased safety for clients (e.g., psychological first aid, family and domestic violence education, etc.).

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.

FEBRUARY 2024

Many SPOs extend their offerings beyond core programming to cater to secondary needs among their clients. Supplementary services can focus on employment support because employment constitutes the foundation of their clients' needs. Employment services aren't only aimed at job placement, but job retention, which is a key concern for newcomers. SPOs assist newcomers in understanding the Canadian workplace landscape, expectations, and culture, offering post-interview guidance, and facilitating adaptation experiences. Programs can also include digital literacy classes for learners who prefer online instruction and helping newcomers with disabilities in their psychological and/or educational assessments. Services may also encompass:

- Employment readiness programs.
- Role-playing exercises (e.g., mock interviews).
- Career coaching.
- Interpretation certification training.
- Healthcare employment support.
- Career fairs.
- Resume workshops.
- Job search clubs to increase employment skills and connections.
- Assistance in finding financial assistance opportunities.

Certain clients with limited proficiency in English enrol in language courses with the goal of securing employment. However, these clients are undertaking courses on a full-time basis, rendering them unavailable for meetings with job search advisors or other service offerings. To mitigate any delays to their settlement processes, these clients are encouraged to manage both activities part-time which can be complex. This adjustment is meant to facilitate a more efficient integration into the workforce while ensuring they receive necessary support and guidance in their job search endeavours.

An example of extending programs not directly related to employment is providing food bank services to Temporary Foreign Worker (TFW) clients. TFW clients, particularly in smaller centres, navigate many challenges in securing employment and SPOs, therefore offer services outside their core programming to bridge whatever gaps they can with their capacity. Balancing provision of these services with already available resources involves strategic planning, collaboration with partners, and adaptation to changing client needs. Referrals to partner agencies are made to address secondary needs if agencies are unable to offer services in-house. Through these efforts,



SPOs strive to maximize impact and support the holistic well-being of the clients and families served.

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).

FEBRUARY 2024

When serving clients with settlement-related needs in both urban and smaller centres, numerous challenges and opportunities arise. Common challenges were discussed this quarter, such as:

- Both affordability and availability of housing.
- Difficulty finding a primary physician.
- High-level systemic issues regarding the acknowledgement of certification (i.e., newcomers working entry-level jobs despite overqualified credentials).
- Language barriers.
- Lack of funding and reduced staffing amongst settlement staff, leading to prolonged waitlists, limited capacity, and burnout.

An increase of newcomers through secondary and unplanned migration and refugee claimants has been a common trend for Alberta, well before this quarter. One challenge highlighted in this period included the higher number of asylum seekers with precarious status, making it difficult for them to access essential services and support. This underscores the need for more comprehensive and inclusive policies to address the diverse needs of clients with settlement-related requirements across different regions.

Opportunities exist in providing pre-employment training, collaborating with organizations for comprehensive support, conducting needs assessments, and emphasizing indirect mentorship relationships for smoother settlement services. Mentorship relationships for clients has been valuable in the settlement and integration of clients due to the understanding of career, culture, language, and societal landscape within Canada. Overall, SPOs are committed to facilitating the successful settlement and integration of clients by addressing their diverse needs and promoting a deeper understanding of the Canadian context.

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.

FEBRUARY 2024

Supporting mental health of newcomers where they feel emotionally ready, safe, and comfortable to seek supports is crucial for service providers to implement, so clients do not feel pressured to move beyond their level of comfort (Alberta Association of Immigrant Serving Agencies, 2023). Strategies to effectively encourage clients to utilize available mental health resources and programs include, but are not limited to:

- Discussing mental health to facilitate access to resources (e.g., workshops).
- Providing space and time for clients to contemplate the significance of mental health resources and ensure they are emotionally ready to access them.
- Analyzing whether resources offered acknowledge cultural differences and nuances.
- Implementing different language to describe the physical symptoms of mental health.
- Conducting needs assessments.
- Embedding mental health resources within teaching curriculum where feasible.

Changing language around mental health terms has been successful for service providers in breaking the barrier of stigma and client hesitancy. Some clients exhibit hesitation when confronted with terms such as 'mental health.' Opting to rename topics like 'mental health' to 'stress management' may resonate better with clients who have not had previous exposure to these conversations. Depending on various factors, clients may struggle to distinguish between mental health and mental illness, leading to reluctance in engaging with workshops or resources due to



stigma. Considering this, alternative terms could appeal to a broader audience and alleviate stigma surrounding mental health discussions. This approach aims to make resources more accessible and inclusive, irrespective of perceived mental health status.

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.

FEBRUARY 2024

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) strategies help to create a safe environment for organizations, staff, and clients. This can be done through several means, such as mitigating unconscious biases and committing to trainings on inclusive leadership competencies (Toronto Metropolitan University, n.d.). Strategies discussed this quarter that have proven to be successful for implementing EDI strategies within organizations included:

- Direct connections with local employers.
- Workshop series including anti-discrimination, anti-racism, and awareness topics (e.g., Black History Month and Indigenous Elder History).



- Conducting an equity audit to pursue greater alignment with EDI practices.
- Enhancing accessibility for learners with cognitive or learning disabilities.
- Implementing revisions to organizational software platforms (e.g., Moodle).

Building relationships with local employers has demonstrated opportunities for support programs and practicum placements for newcomers. Connecting with company human resources allows SPOs to invite employers into meaningful implementation of systems change rather than adopting EDI initiatives merely to maintain their reputation. Integrating these strategies and recommendations into organizations for the betterment of multi-level systems, including the organization itself, its staff, newcomers, and the integration and settlement sector at large.

OTHER EMERGING THEMES AND TRENDS

BILINGUAL SERVICE DELIVERY

FEBRUARY 2024

Challenges continue with bilingual service delivery, such as:

- Limited availability and accessibility of Francophone agencies and services in rural areas.
- Little information and resources available in French for individuals within proximity to newcomers (e.g., sponsors of privately sponsored refugees).
- Differing and inconsistent translation of materials due to unreliable support within the translation process.
- Discrepancies between newcomer expectations of a bilingual country and the reality of bilingual practice within Alberta.

One Francophone agency highlighted that many individuals from Central African countries are being privately sponsored as refugees by people residing in Alberta. Therefore, assisting sponsors in obtaining information about sponsoring French-speaking refugees may help address the notable discrepancy between newcomer expectations and Alberta's landscape for bilingual practice. Support offered could include offering workshops, documents, and resource materials in French.

Taking these barriers into consideration, there is a dire need for connections with Francophone agencies to bridge gaps and increase access for clients to Francophone services. French-speaking communities can offer mental, social, and communal support for newcomers. An awareness of Francophone agency offerings is crucial for addressing the challenges French-speaking newcomers may encounter when arriving in both urban and rural centres within Alberta.

IMMIGRATION POLICY

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.

FEBRUARY 2024

Updates for this quarter included IRCC's announcement decreasing the number of new international student permits issued for 2024. There was no further discussion on the announcement, though this change may affect future PEI conversations.

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.

HYBRID SERVICE DELIVERY

FEBRUARY 2024



Hybrid service delivery has become increasingly prevalent since the COVID-19 pandemic and can help organizations create more accessible choices for their clients (Migrant Worker Hub, 2021). Virtual service delivery can be an asset, particularly for group meetings and programs, allowing for broader client reach, easier follow-ups, cost reductions, and filling the gap where transportation may be a barrier. Several key points surrounding the hybrid model include:

- Success of hybrid delivery depends on newcomer needs, preference, and circumstance.
- SPOs may not have the capacity for delivering services in various modes (e.g., scheduling challenges).
- In-person attendance may be necessary in some cases to effectively convey information.
- Challenges persist in providing virtual services to youth (i.e., difficulties offering a service to multiple youth simultaneously).

Overall, participants recognize the benefits of virtual service delivery but also acknowledge the continued importance of in-person services, depending on circumstance.

CONCLUSION

The period covered in this brief encapsulates some most recent and critical developments marked by a notable rise in newcomers. As highlighted throughout this quarter, resource sharing and collaboration continues to be pivotal in prioritizing the needs of clients and implementing a more holistic approach within service delivery.

AAISA continues to be diligent about 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.

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