COVID-19 AND ALBERTA'S SETTLEMENT AND INTEGRATION SECTOR
BACKGROUNDER – OCTOBER 2020

Since March of 2020, agencies across Alberta's settlement and integration sector have responded to the context of public health conditions and brought about considerable adaptations in service delivery to ensure the safety of both clients and staff. From the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, agencies across Alberta transitioned from serving clients directly to serving them through virtual means. As more was learned about the virus and safety measures that enabled in-person service delivery, agencies once again adapted to the changing context to meet service delivery needs and opening their doors to clients.

This background document outlines some of the key areas shared by agencies during the various meetings hosted by AAISA starting in April 2020. The focus of many of these meetings was the adaptation to service delivery and challenges experiences, as well as some of the key vulnerabilities of newcomers in this context. While many agencies were in similar positions early in the pandemic, there is greater diversity in the mix of online and in-person service delivery among agencies at this time. As the new term of AAISA's PEI initiative commences, this topic will remain as a standing issue on the committee agenda to build understanding of the changing context.

KEY ISSUES

Across program types and regions, agencies have consistently expressed that **technology access** and **digital literacy,** as well as service delivery to **low-literacy clients** as areas of the greatest challenge. The pandemic additionally has been seen to **expose and exacerbate many existing vulnerabilities** of newcomers in Alberta. The **interconnections of different service types** and **interdependency of needs** produced a number of **intersecting issues and challenges** for newcomers and service providers. The pandemic also **fostered collaborative efforts among agencies and sectors**, which supported coordination and knowledge development.

TECHNOLOGY AND DIGITAL CAPABILITIES

In the transition to remote work and service delivery, challenges with technology have been one of the most frequent areas flagged for concern. These challenges fall broadly into two categories: challenges at an organizational level and challenges at the client level.

Organizational and service delivery challenges

- In AAISA's 2020 *Annual Settlement and Integration Sector Survey,* most agencies (62%) indicated they needed training or support to increase their agencies technological capacity
- While certain services are more easily transferred to online settings, critical services targeted to low-literacy clients, crisis counselling, and family violence are more challenging when offered online
- Transition to online delivery slowed down many established processes, including client intake and obtaining informed consent
- Many service providers are now responsible for supporting newcomers with digital literacy and technology support, where these previously were not part of their specific program or service offering
- Some agencies have developed additional supports to assist clients with accessing online programs, such as through YouTube videos
- There was an increased need for PD hours among staff, particularly among language instructors to develop the skills necessary for online delivery
- Many agencies were reliant on donations to meet the technology needs of newcomers
- Agencies were particularly challenged to secure enough computers to large families

Client-level challenges

- Clients were challenged by limited access to technology, the cost of technology, and the need to share of devices across family members with competing needs
  - There are many instances of reduced-cost internet and of agencies being able to provide access to computers, but there is the potential for issues to persist beyond the initial pandemic response and for new arrivals
- Digital literacy is an additional challenge that can delay service access, with the potential for long-term implications for settlement, integration, and wellbeing
  - Many service providers have applied the use of platforms many newcomers are familiar with, including WhatsApp and Facebook
  - The period in which newcomers must build their digital literacy has been significantly shortened, whereas previously this was a more mid- to long-term set of skills related to employment readiness and accessing a broader range of services and supports
- Providing printed out copies of assignments, activities, and other supportive documents was a helpful strategy for supporting clients with low literacy or low digital literacy (both adults and youth)

CLIENT VULNERABILITIES

- Low literacy clients were consistently highlighted as a group that faced significant barriers in relation to accessing services, as well as in understanding public health information and safety measures
- The pandemic illustrated challenges with accessing and understanding critical information related to public health and critical financial supports based on language ability and digital literacy
    - Interpretation and translation were critical needs; while some areas were better equipped, other centres had very limited translation and interpretation capacity
    - This gap was apparent among Francophone newcomers, who were reliant on Francophone newcomer serving agencies to translate and interpret information on public health measures and safety practices
    - Though many multilingual resources were made available, navigation and access posed challenges
    - Often agencies played an intermediary role, supporting newcomers' communication and information access across a number of institutions and sectors
- Layoffs have affected many clients across many centres, while the primacy of key employers in certain centres (i.e. hospitality and meat packing) have seen layoffs among newcomers pronounced
    - Agencies provided assistance with EI and CERB applications and navigating the challenges posed by these processes; as changes to federal income supports develop, this will continue to characterize much of the support provided by agencies
- Challenges with basic needs and instances of loss of income, food insecurity, and housing insecurity became prominent, particularly in regions dominated by a single industry
- Temporary Foreign Workers were a category of newcomers that experienced high needs related to information on public health measures and were exposed to work and housing conditions that put them at high-risk of COVID-19
- Newcomer women were a demographic that experienced challenges, due to increased childcare demands that were exacerbated by the closure of schools across the province
- Domestic violence became a key issue, with the pandemic posing challenges in identifying and intervening in such cases
- Challenges for families with disabled children arose with the lack of respite care; this amplified the stress of parents without relief for breaks

INTERSECTING ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Many challenges experienced by newcomers related to the interconnections between different needs, services, and supports:

- Income support delays produce challenges with landlords
- The impact of delays and limited access to language training on the employment of newcomers is of concern
    - RAP agencies were particularly concerned about the long-term impact on refugees who arrived in January to March 2020
- Changes in the way businesses were running had implications for newcomer employment, which was also seen to have additional influence over programming
    - For example, changes in shifts at the JBS facility in Brooks impacted the scheduling of language programming

COORDINATION AMONG AGENCIES

- Local coalitions and cross-sectoral spaces have been key to efforts in communities across Alberta
- LIPs played a strong coordination role in many municipalities, through hosting regular meetings and coordinating between municipal services and agencies
- Community responses related to COVID-19 in Brooks and High River provided critical support to newcomers
- In some cases, referral among agencies has been challenged by changing circumstances and program adaptation; where referral processes are weak or informal, referring agencies have sometimes lacked adequate information on program availability and service format
    - With COVID-19 coinciding with a new IRCC Contribution Agreement cycle, service providers had to content to with many changes in their service ecosystems simultaneously

PROGRAM SPECIFIC HIGHLIGHTS

In AAISA's *Annual Settlement and Integration Sector Survey*, there was a larger percentage of agencies indicating that they provide itinerant or remote services in 2020, as compared to previous years. This holds even after accounting for the larger sample size from this year. In 2020, 42% of agencies indicated providing itinerant services. This could partly be due to COVID-19.

WAITLISTS

In AAISA's *Annual Settlement and Integration Sector Survey* in 2020, the programming where waitlists were most prominent were as follows:

- While 44% of agencies indicated providing language training in the province, 63% of these agencies indicated currently having waitlists
- 42% of agencies indicated providing employment services (interestingly, mostly located in Calgary), 52% of these agencies indicated having waitlists.
- Only 16% of agencies indicated providing language assessment, but 44% of these agencies having waitlists.

When asked to indicate the reasons for waitlist, 40% of agencies indicated a high demand due to service not being provided elsewhere. This was followed by "other" which focused on two main themes, COVID-19 and social distancing requirements, and lack or limited staff/internal capacity.

LANGUAGE

- Reductions in LINC classes prior to COVID-19 have seen ripple effects on language provision in the context of the pandemic, particularly in some small centres; client preference for in-person offerings interfaces with the reduction in overall offerings and the transition to fully online LINC
- Language assessment was reported as a significant gap early on, and while it has resumed in many cases gaps and challenges remain that pose barriers to clients accessing language training
  - Online assessment is not suitable for all clients, particularly literacy learners
  - Without assessments, language providers were only able to accept returning students into classes
- Changes in childcare needs and other factors shifted demand for evening classes; agencies with many female clients pursued asynchronous learning, due to constraints in childcare
- Current challenges with language programing relates to occupancy rates and whether clients are turned away due to illness or presenting symptoms of COVID-19

NAARS, CASE MANAGEMENT

- Some have offered multiple needs assessments to clients to support monitoring and response to rapidly changing needs
- Agencies described the need for "intensive" case management in many cases
- In many cases, agencies reported that regular direct outreach to clients with complex needs was an effective means of case management, particularly with those who were not as strong in self-advocating

SWIS, YOUTH PROGRAMMING

- Staff in the SWIS program have provided critical supports to newcomer youth and their families in relation to access to technology and online learning, provision of printed school materials, in registration processes for enrolling in school, and with orientation to AHS guidelines
- Critical hours programming was adapted to online formats to engage youth online afterschool
- Summer camp programming was initially a concern but changes in public health measures enabled many agencies to run these programs

MENTAL HEALTH, CRISIS COUNSELLING

- Demand for mental health supports in clients' first language and for crisis counselling was high in many centres
- Crisis counselling is more effective in person, though different approaches to online/remote delivery were able to fill gaps
- Service providers maintained a high level of proactivity in reaching out to clients in relation to these needs

EMPLOYMENT

- In some instances, employers and mentors were cited as expressing trepidation to participate in programming (e.g. job fairs, mentorship) due to the level of uncertainty in both the context of the pandemic and in the broader economy overall
- Other employers have cited struggles to support new hires, which has seen agencies provide additional support in regard to screening and matching clients to positions
- Clients who had been laid off have returned to agencies to engage in additional training
- Virtual employment events and online programming have been popular among many program offerings
- Agencies have focused on building and maintaining relationships with employers and tailoring programming to the types of industries and employment opportunities that are available in the current context (e.g. construction, sales, warehouse work, security, etc.)
- Key barriers to newcomer access to employment include childcare, language barriers, and fear of engaging in front-line work
- Focus of training in many cases has been on job-related safety considerations and measures