

REFERRAL IN ALBERTA'S SETTLEMENT AND INTEGRATION SECTOR

BACKGROUND – MARCH 2021

INTRODUCTION

This backgrounder undertakes a preliminary exploration of the referral system in Alberta's settlement and integration sector. In the context of service delivery, referral processes are central to ensuring that newcomer clients are connected with appropriate programming and service offerings to support their settlement, integration, and overall wellbeing. Such processes are influenced by a variety of factors and inherent complexity, and therefore the starting point of bringing about improvements to referrals is to understand these influences.

Beginning with an examination of the general context in which the referral of newcomer clients from one agency to another occurs, this document then turns to broadly describing approaches to referral and major challenges within this system. These contents are informed by agency interviews, conducted as part of AAISA's stakeholder engagement on priorities for the Government of Alberta's Alberta Settlement and Integration Program (ASIP). Through this process, 31 agencies across six municipalities engaged in individual interviews with AAISA staff. These interviews provided foundational information on the state of partnerships and agency referrals across Alberta that parallels the content of discussions throughout AAISA's engagement initiatives since their inception in 2016. The insight provided by these sources has relevance to strengthening and systematizing the system of referrals in Alberta and for understanding both areas of strength and gaps where additional supports may be required.

CONTEXT OF REFERRAL

While both referrals and partnerships are characteristic of the operations of agencies across Alberta's settlement and integration sector, there is significant variation in the form and structure these activities take on. Both partnerships and referrals experience variation in the level of formalization and coordination involved, ranging from those formalized by an agreement or Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to those existing on an ad hoc basis or based on individual staff members' awareness or relationships.

Agencies reported several factors that were of influence in the form client referrals take on. Location was cited as influential, with agencies participating in ASIP interviews often rating their

knowledge of services in their own local context highly, while rating knowledge of services outside of their municipalities and at the provincial level much lower. Location in proximity to other service providers was referenced as a factor supporting strong referrals. These findings point to the utility of expanding partnerships that seek to build awareness of services beyond those that are closely situated and outside of local contexts. This may be of additional use in supporting clients who move to different municipalities for purposes such as employment or proximity to family, friends, and their ethnocultural community.

Beyond geographical location, ASIP interview participants highlighted the correlation between the number of years of experience in the settlement and integration sector and effective referrals. This was stressed at both the level of an agency's staff members and the agency itself. Agencies and staff working in the sector for a longer duration were reported to have extensive knowledge of other services. Additionally, many ASIP interview participants cited the influence of the personal relationships their staff members had with those at other agencies in producing effective referrals. Such relationships allow staff to reach out directly to agencies to confirm service availability and appropriateness. To maintain this capacity within agencies, practices that enable agencies to retain staff, support professionalization, and maintain organizational stability, are integral to the strength of referral processes and networks. It is also critical to establish mechanisms within agencies to understand processes of referral and support training and knowledge transfer among staff.

APPROACHES TO REFERRAL

METHODS OF REFERRAL

A variety of methods of referral were reported by ASIP interview participants, both in terms of how they engaged with other agencies and with their own internal processes. Of those methods cited, supported referrals, also described as a "warm hand-off", was indicated to be a best practice and contributor to effective referral. This approach involves a staff member accompanying a client to the agency they are being referred to, with some agencies citing that their staff attend an introductory meeting between the client and the referred service. While recognizing the effectiveness of such referrals, some agencies cited being unable to engage in such approaches due to limitations in capacity, as this approach is labour intensive on the part of staff at the referral agency.

Other forms of referral include connecting with agencies over the phone, the use of referral forms, the use of email and specific referral email accounts, as well as brochures. Often, referral using these methods was described as informal or ad hoc.

FORMAL APPROACHES



ASIP interview participants referenced that formalized referral agreements or MOUs were used to delineate specific referral processes between participating agencies. Such formal approaches may occur between two agencies or involve multiple agencies. While recognized as beneficial, the process of developing such agreements was cited as labour intensive and time consuming.

Formal approaches also include different forms and tools employed in conversation with clients that support referral processes, such as with referral forms and consent forms.

CHALLENGES

A variety of challenges to effective referral were highlighted throughout the ASIP interviews. The first set of challenges relates to the structure of funding in the sector and how it influences referrals. Agencies are simultaneously in the position of collaborators and competitors; in a fee-for-service context and with competition for finite funds, there is the perception that agencies have held onto clients rather than referring them based on funding needs.

The second set of challenges relates to service availability and breakdowns in the referral process. This may occur when there are limited or non-existent services for a particular need (e.g. mental health), or if a client is turned away from an agency they are referred to for various reasons, such as barriers to connect clients to the right person or program.

A major theme emerging through ASIP interviews is related to service providers not knowing the result of their referral. This relates to both the client level, in whether clients actually attempted to access services at the referred agency, and the agency level, where there is uncertainty on whether a receiving agency provided service to the client or if the referral was appropriate. Follow up on referral is often ad hoc for both agencies involved, due to agency capacity constraints. Further, knowing the result of referral is often reliant on clients reporting back to the referral agency, which is limited.

Another major theme that emerged during interviews was related to issues of confidentiality in referral processes and the variation in how agencies approached this. Determining the type of information that can be disclosed during referral was a key concern for many agencies. Other agencies have established methods to work with clients to enable the sharing of confidential information and for setting parameters on what information can be shared. This aspect of referral can also range from ad hoc approaches to those that are more formalized. Some agencies rely on clients (re)sharing this information directly with the receiving agency, while others do so on behalf of the client face-to-face or over the phone with the referred service provider. Others utilize client consent forms or permission letters from clients to establish what information can be shared.

In addition to emerging through ASIP interviews, these challenges and issues are reflective of those shared through previous AAISA engagement initiatives, including the Helping Immigrants Succeed (HIS) working groups (2016-2018) and the Children and Youth committee (2016-2018),

as well as through engagement with Francophone newcomer serving agencies. This indicates many challenges have been long-standing and have impacts across service-types and geographies.

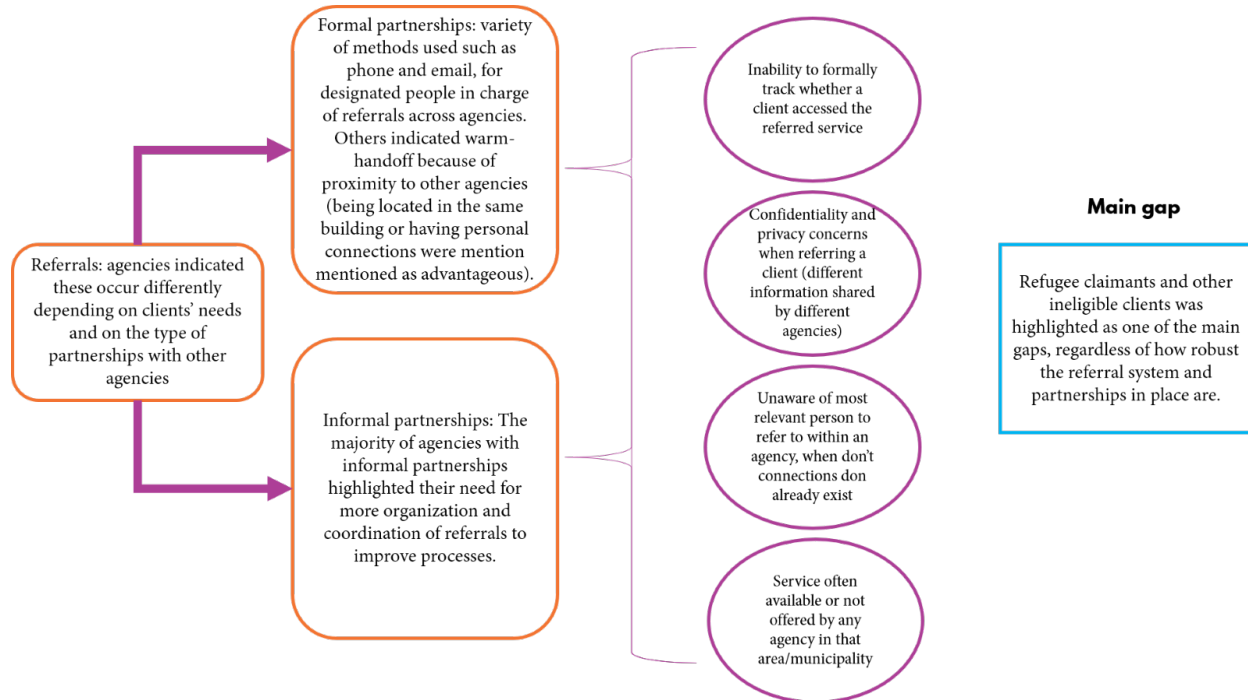


Figure 1. Referral processes, types, and gaps in Alberta's settlement and integration sector

PATHWAYS FORWARD

While the system of referrals in Alberta is highly varied and susceptible to constraints based on broader structures and limitations, there are also many approaches, tools, and collaborative efforts that can support broader development and improvement. In relation to the challenges identified, some ASIP interview participants highlighted the potential of systematizing referral processes across the sector. The interviews also evidenced investment across the sector in building awareness, relationships, and tools to strengthen referral practices. These findings are well aligned with processes that were initiated in Edmonton and Calgary in 2020, related to developing systems approaches to Needs Assessment and Referral, Case Management, and Zonal Outreach. Additionally, agencies in Small Centres have highlighted willingness to share their experiences with referrals in contexts with limited service and resource availability, that may be transferrable to other contexts.

In addition, a variety of suggestions from agencies emerged during ASIP interviews on the types of approaches that could benefit the referral processes at an individual agency level and for the sector at large. These suggestions fall into three broad categories: fostering dialogue and connection, informational resources, and standardized tools and processes.



Suggestions related to fostering dialogue and information sharing were based on the perception that effective referrals rely on personal relationships held by staff and their awareness of the system of services and individual program details. Conferences and meetings, as well as tours or visits to other agencies were cited as useful approaches to this. These opportunities for dialogue were described as more effective at building relationships and knowledge than brochures and websites. Such approaches must extend to front-line staff, rather than being concentrated with management and senior leadership, in order to be influential in relation to referrals. Virtual platforms, which have seen expanded use and familiarity during the COVID-19 pandemic, may be effective supports for this.

Suggestions for sharing of informational resources were also common in ASIP interviews, though with the caveat that information overload can often be counterproductive. One key suggestion was the need for a directory of services that would allow for streamlined access to service information. In 2018, AAISA developed a Service Map for its Toolkit, which was developed initially for the Small Centre context. Expansion of the Service Map to include Calgary and Edmonton, as well as ongoing maintenance and improvement, has been included in AAISA's workplan for the 2021/22 fiscal year. The Toolkit can be accessed at www.aaisa.ca/toolkit.

The last set of suggestions that were shared related to standardizing tools and processes. In addition to fostering such processes to streamline coordination among agencies, it was suggested that providing template protocols, agreements, and forms would support agencies who had limited capacity to develop such tools and processes on their own. This would also contribute to having standardized information and data related to referral.

The three categories of suggestions that could benefit referral processes can also be seen to be mutually reinforcing. Standardized tools and processes are enhanced by information availability and dialogue between agencies, while having relationships, tools, and processes enhances the quality and richness of information on the system of services and programming. In this manner, gains in one area may be seen to have benefit in other aspects of the systems that can support effective and efficient referrals.

While there are nuances particular to certain regions and agencies, this backgrounder has endeavored to provide some foundational context on referral in Alberta's settlement and integration sector. With various processes underway related to changing urban service delivery systems, referrals will continue to be a key topic of conversation across the sector, creating opportunity to build on and enhance existing processes, tools, and relationships in the short-term.