

# CAPACITY BUILDING THROUGH THE COVID-19 LENS:

HARNESSING INNOVATION AND MOBILIZING  
BEST PRACTICES

**FOCUS AREA: COMMUNITY RECEPTION &  
INTEGRATION**

## COVID-19 CONTEXT

The pandemic has created unique challenges for fostering the community reception and integration for newcomers. Newcomers play an essential role in Canada's unique cultural fabric. While many other countries closed their borders to newcomers, Canada increased target admissions and created alternative pathways for newcomers to receive permanent resident status. Despite this tremendous push to ensure newcomers continue to be integrated into the broader Canadian society, settlement and integration services faced significant and intersecting challenges in connecting with newcomers in an online environment. Although settlement and integration agencies have worked diligently and adapted swiftly during the transition to virtual programming, **social connections are often lost or diminished in the virtual realm.**

Community integration can be described in four main categories (Canadian Index for Measuring Integration, 2020):

- Economic (e.g., wages, unemployment rate. Non-official language at work, subsidized housing, etc.)
- Social (e.g., having close friends living in the same community, sense of belonging to local community, sense of belonging to the province and country, victim of discrimination)
- Civic and Democratic Participation (e.g., involvement in organizations, unpaid volunteer work, voted in last election)
- Health (e.g., having a medical doctor, self-perceived life stress, self-perceived unmet health care needs, satisfaction with life)

COVID-19 has negatively impacted the four categories associated with the Canadian Index for Measuring Integration, as the limitations to social gatherings, stay at home orders, and the fears associated with contracting the COVID-19 virus have greatly impacted the **mental**



**health, employment safety and security, access to healthcare and face-to-face community engagement** of both service providers and newcomers.

Many **small centres** have identified a need for attracting and retaining newcomers to contribute to the vibrance, diversity, and productivity of their localities and aspire to do so by building strong community relations with newcomers and the existing population. While social segregation is always a barrier to community integration and rural renewal, COVID-19 has added additional layers of complexity. Within geographic or residential areas, groups can be segregated by race or ethnicity, resulting in segregation dictated by the wills and values of the people involved who choose to live together, as well as their economic standing (Henry et al., 2021). With COVID-19 restrictions greatly eliminating face-to-face interactions, newcomers have had limited opportunities to build social connections within their communities to strengthen social capital and integrate. This further promotes social segregation which thereby inhibits community integration.

## **VULNERABLE POPULATIONS:**

**Newcomer women** have been disproportionately negatively impacted by the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, women have shown to have higher expectations of balancing personal and professional demands (Gerstel, 2000). From being responsible for childcare and cleaning, as well as participating in language courses and finding formal employment to contribute to household income, women have experienced unique setbacks that have exacerbated existing gender related inequalities since the onset of the pandemic.

**Refugee youth** have been identified as another vulnerable group during the pandemic, experiencing increased negative mental health and educational setbacks. From high stress levels to a lack of support system that would normally be accessible through face-to-face interactions, refugee youth have suffered from a decrease in academic and language development, technological access, and digital literacy (Canadian Council for Refugees, 2020).

The COVID-19 context has also created a remanence of **Anti-Asian sentiment** where viruses and diseases were unjustly blamed on Asian Canadian populations, creating a social environment of xenophobia and exclusion which resulted in an increase of discriminatory acts such as **microaggressions** and physical injury (Angus Reid Institute, 2020).

**Newcomers who do not hold permanent resident status** have always faced unique vulnerabilities, many of which have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Many settlement and integration services are offered exclusively to permanent residents, excluding newcomers with more precarious status, including many Temporary Foreign Workers (TFWs), many of whom experienced COVID-19 outbreaks in their workplaces.

Please note that underlined terms throughout the backgrounder can be found in the **Glossary**.

## PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

### CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

#### Organizational level:

- The nearly immediate restrictions to in-person programming forced many community integration related programs to be converted to an online approach or cancelled entirely which has decreased the ability to foster community and social connections
- Limited opportunities for outreach and promotion of newcomer services
  - Outreach has traditionally been done face-to-face to promote in-person connection between newcomers and the existing community. In-person engagement has been identified as a positive method of building trust and relationship building within the community, while the transition to online service delivery has greatly impeded the ability to promote services available for newcomer integration

#### Client level:

- With outreach transitioned to an online format, many newcomers have fallen through the gaps to access services that community integration agencies are seeking to promote. Often, newcomers arrive to Alberta without sufficient technological access and the digital literacy required to even learn about the online services available exclusively to them. Unintentional apathy to community reception and integration programs and services stagnates social capital within the community and results in a lower quality of life for newcomers. The impacts of decreased community integration can be seen through (Canadian Index Measuring Integration, 2020):
  - Lower physical and mental health
  - Challenges building and/or maintaining meaningful friendships
  - Higher unemployment rates
  - Decreased feeling of belonging in the community
- Newcomers have faced barriers with translation required in components necessary to settlement and integration (e.g., *accessing a translator to attend medical appointments with them, booking COVID-19 tests/vaccines, transition for school aged children to attend school online*).
- School aged children struggling to maintain the same quality of education when transitioned to the virtual realm due to stay at home orders
  - Both parents and students have struggled with technological access, language barriers, and balancing of home demands to create successful learning environments for students to participate in virtual schooling
  - In some cases, these barriers have resulted in students no longer participating in formal education during the pandemic

## BEST PRACTICES

- Pop up COVID-19 vaccination clinics
  - Many newcomer-serving agencies partnered with Alberta Health Services and local governments to create vaccination clinics in neighbourhoods with higher proportions of newcomers.
  - These clinics were designed to remove as many barriers as possible to ensure newcomers in Albertan Local Geographic Areas with higher rates of COVID-19 infection were able to access the COVID-19 vaccines. The barriers removed include:
    - Hosting the clinics on weekends in attempt to prevent the need to take time off work
    - Pop up facilities were chosen in well known community centers that were easily accessible through public transportation
    - Offering free transportation through rideshare partnerships (e.g., Uber)
    - Offering translators in several languages
  - In-person vaccination clinics removed the barriers of signing up for a vaccine appointment (e.g., *waiting for extended periods of time to get through the 811 line, calling multiple pharmacies to find availability, digital literacy needed to navigate booking a vaccine appointment online, identifying locations of immunization facilities or pharmacies that are not local, etc.*)
- Partnerships between newcomer serving organizations to create culturally competent food hampers for immigrants
- Conversation Circles
  - Created with the intention of practicing speaking English with volunteers but also acts as a method of outreach to inform newcomers of local community resources available to them
- Shifting towards a virtual mentoring program for children and youth to foster a social emotion capacities
  - These mentorship programs can be paired with virtual tutoring services to support the transition to virtual learning for students during the pandemic

## SAMPLE FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

- What are the barriers to connecting newcomers to the community amidst COVID-19?
- What patterns have been observed in relation to racism and discrimination experienced based on misconceptions around COVID-19?
- What are the interventions implemented to increase community connections during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What have been the best practices and approaches utilized to increase community connections during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- How have agencies navigated pre-existing or emergent barriers pertaining to community integration amidst the public health context?

- What learnings from the COVID-19 context of community reception and integration are worthwhile to leverage into organizational capacity building and professional development?
- What emerging practices have transformed service delivery and are most effective for supporting newcomers' community integration in the context of COVID-19 and its long-term impacts?
- What approaches across agencies can strengthen the network of community reception and integration services and develop sector-wide capacity to support newcomers with these emergent needs in relation to community reception and integration?
- What approaches have been developed to ensure effective community reception and integration service delivery to newcomers with complex needs or those who have traditionally been underserved?
- What specific issues have emerged from COVID-19 that have prompted you and your partner agencies to develop collaborative responses pertaining to community reception and integration services?

## GLOSSARY

**Digital literacy:** Having the ability to define, access, manage, understand, integrate, communicate, evaluate and create information safely and appropriately through digital technologies for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship. It includes competencies that are variously referred to as computer literacy, Information Communications Technology (ICT) literacy, information literacy and media literacy. It entails the ability to identify and use technology confidently, creatively, and critically to meet the demands and challenges of living, learning and working in a digital society. It extends beyond simple digital consumption behaviour and into digital fluency.

**Microaggression:** A comment or action that subtly and often unconsciously or unintentionally expresses a prejudice attitude toward a member of a marginalized group (such as a racial minority).

**Examples include:**

- *Being asked "Where were you born?"*
- *Being told they "Speak good English" to someone with an accent*
- *Imitating/impersonating someone of a different ethnicity*

**Small Centre:** All territory lying outside of the Calgary and Edmonton metropolitan areas.

**Technological access:** Access to the physical capacities to technology. A lack of technological access can include the infrastructure needed for internet access (particularly prevalent in rural areas or small centres), lack of access to internet due to financial limitations, insufficient devices to participate in virtual programming (e.g., sharing laptops within a household with children needing to participate in virtual schooling and parents



needing the device for virtual programming, relying on cellphones rather than a laptop/Chromebook/tablet).

**Virtual programming:** Virtual programming is a form of distanced learning that is conducted completely over the Internet. It refers to newcomer and direct service agencies participating in courses virtually, through the internet and without the need of attending in-person courses. It can be performed both asynchronously or synchronously, depending on the instructor and/or course. This term can be used synonymously with remote learning.

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