

CAPACITY BUILDING THROUGH THE COVID-19 LENS:

HARNESSING INNOVATION AND MOBILIZING BEST PRACTICES FROM THE PANDEMIC

FOCUS AREA: EMPLOYMENT

COVID-19 CONTEXT

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the existing employment vulnerabilities and barriers experienced by newcomers in Alberta. With stay-at-home orders being enacted for work forces with the ability to do so, industries that were deemed essential to be performed in-person grew to be increasingly precarious. Newcomers are over over-represented in precarious industries such as healthcare, transportation, factory work, agriculture, meat packing, and cleaning services. Furthermore, it is also noted that a large proportion of these workers have their status in Canada tied to these industries through their work visas which creates an environment for the industries to grow more precarious (*e.g., limited bargaining power, increasing vulnerability to unfair treatment, abuse, and exploitation*) (Matilla-Santander et al., 2021).

The precarious nature of these employment relationships extends past newcomers who work in these industries and impacts their families and communities as well. Often, newcomers live in multi-generational homes where social distancing or quarantining is not a feasible option (*e.g., sharing living spaces, being reliant on one another for basic needs such as income or childcare, etc.*). Taken in combination, these factors make many newcomers more susceptible and at greater risk of contracting and spreading COVID-19 (Matilla-Santander et al., 2021).

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

PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

Organizational level:

- There have been challenges with database transitions (physical papers to digitizing)
 - There is a heightened focus in ensuring the security of sensitive information and enhancing **cyber security** (Liu et al., 2021).
- There are **gaps in small centres** for employment opportunities for newcomers (Esses et al., 2021).
 - There is a growing need to **attract and retain newcomers to small centres and rural areas** as newcomers revitalize these populations that may be decreasing otherwise
- Many small centres struggle with **fragmented service delivery** and sufficient access to employment resources (Esses et al., 2021).
 - Many small centers lack an abundance and variety of employment services available for newcomers that larger urban centres tend to have (e.g., *interpretation and translation, support for workplace integration for newcomers with disabilities, industry specific mentorship or bridging programs that utilize the existing skills and experiences newcomers possess to prevent underemployment, etc*).

Client level:

- Newcomers now face significant **technological barriers** to obtaining employment. Digital literacy, appropriate technological access, and sufficient internet service is imperative to securing employment. From navigating online job databases due to a lack of in-person career fairs, virtual job interviews, and the need to work entirely remotely at many jobs, these pre-existing technological barriers in both access and competencies play a crucial role in employment. (Liu et al., 2021).
- Challenges for newcomers to obtain **relevant work experience** (e.g. *Accessing bridging programs and/or meaningful mentorships*) (AAISA, 2021).
- Barriers with translation and **acceptance of foreign credentials** (AAISA, 2021).
- With the closures of schools and childcare facilities due to public health orders and COVID-19 outbreaks, as well as the general fear of increasing risk of COVID-19 infection, newcomers have had a unique challenge in **accessing affordable and readily available childcare**. Without sufficient access to childcare, newcomers are unable to allocate their limited resources into job searches or fully participate in the workforce (AAISA, 2021).
- **Language barriers** are another set of existing vulnerabilities within the newcomer community. Working proficiency in English or access to translators and interpreters are a vital component to entering the labour market (AAISA, 2021).

- Prominent COVID-19 outbreaks in precarious industries have created a **fear of engaging in front line work** for newcomers. Although eager to find steady employment, newcomers are often fearful of putting themselves and their families at risk of contracting COVID-19 through front line jobs (AAISA, 2020).

BEST PRACTICES

- Direct partnerships with employers (private sector) to connect the needs of the economy and pair them with newcomers (Thevenot, 2021).
 - This **demand-based approach** has shown to create positive results as organizations are better able to connect newcomers with existing transferrable skills to the industries in demand (Thevenot, 2021).
- Industry specific professional development resources (AAISA, 2020).
 - The creation of resources that are specifically catered to the different needs of various industries as well as building resilience for newcomers to create success in employment
- Creating a **synchronous understanding of expectations** for both newcomers and service providers around job readiness (AAISA, 2021).
 - Ensuring that settlement service providers are able to determine the appropriate skills and knowledge newcomers need to join the labour force and properly assist in obtaining these skills and knowledge (e.g., *Understanding of Canadian workplace culture and norms, resume standards, interviewing practices, expectations for attendance, etc.*)

SAMPLE FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

- What are the barriers related to networking and mentorship opportunities for newcomers in relation to COVID-19?
- What have been the best practices and approaches utilized to combat the barriers associated with creating networking and mentorship opportunities?
- What are the industry specific challenges and opportunities seen during the COVID-19 context?
- How have agencies navigated pre-existing or emergent barriers within the employment services subsector of settlement amidst the public health context?
- What approaches across agencies can strengthen the network of employment services and develop sector-wide capacity to support newcomers with emergent employment challenges?
- What approaches have been developed to ensure effective employment service delivery to newcomers with complex needs or those who have traditionally been underserved?
- How have agencies supported newcomers to build resiliency surrounding the challenges associated with technological barriers and digital literacy?
- What employment services have worked particularly well in an online environment?

- What specific issues have emerged from COVID-19 that have prompted you and your partner agencies to develop collaborative responses pertaining to employment?
- What learnings from the COVID-19 context of employment service delivery are worthwhile to leverage into organizational capacity building and professional development?

GLOSSARY

Job readiness: Involves an awareness of one's strengths and areas for growth. This can involve having a working language proficiency and an understanding of work culture to fully participate in employment.

Precarious industries: Precarious work refers to the industries and employment opportunities that have disproportionately high vulnerabilities for newcomers. These vulnerabilities can include increased exposure to contracting COVID-19 and unstable or inconsistent working hours. It is synonymous with the term precarious employment.

Examples: Front line service workers, positions that do not offer Work-From-Home opportunities or employment opportunities that do not allow for paid sick leave

Specific industries observed during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Healthcare, transportation, factory workers, meat packing, agricultural workers, cleaning services

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).

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