CAPACITY BUILDING THROUGH THE COVID-19 LENS:

HARNESSING INNOVATION AND MOBILIZING BEST PRACTICES FROM THE PANDEMIC

FOCUS AREA: LANGUAGE

COVID-19 CONTEXT

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has catalyzed a dramatic shift in the delivery of language courses in the settlement and integration sector. To accommodate for public health regulations such as physical distancing measures, many language courses were transitioned towards a virtual programming model. Virtual programming created the capacity for instructors to teach remotely and to offer some classes on a flexible schedule, catering to the diverse needs of students. However, there were many logistical barriers associated with virtual language programming that highlighted the pre-existing vulnerabilities of newcomers prior to the pandemic. For example, there were administrative challenges in shifting to virtual programming models including technological access (e.g., access to internet services, access to appropriate devices designed for virtual learning such as laptops), digital literacy, and a growing concern over cyber security.

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

PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

Organizational level:

- There is **a need for more professional development** to improve staff capacities in adapting to virtual language services (Cummings et al., 2021).
- Despite the transition to online delivery of language course removing the barrier of physically attending face-to-face courses, there continues to be **waitlists** for language courses and initial language assessments due to limited capacity of language instructors and geographic zoning for course registration (AAISA, 2021).

Client level:

- Technological barriers (*e.g., access to appropriate technology such as laptops or Chromebooks, sufficient and affordable internet service, digital literacy, etc.*) (Cummings et al., 2021).
- Appropriate workspaces for clients to engage in course work (*e.g., quiet place to study, balancing stressors in their home lives such as childcare, stresses from sickness and employment, childcare, attending university, inadequate workspaces and family members affected by health or employment issues*) (Liu et al., 2021).
- Low digital literacy has been highly correlated to those with low literacy in their home language creating an intersectional barrier (Cummings et al., 2021).

BEST PRACTICES

Despite the challenges that have arisen from the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations have demonstrated adaptability and exemplified resiliency as seen through:

- Hybrid courses that derive benefits from both virtual programming and in-person delivery (Cummings et al., 2021).
    - Initial intake of language students' preferences and digital literacy levels allows for organizations to properly allocate course resources
    - Self-directed services for students to access based on their individual needs
- Consistent teacher-student engagement and interaction with students (teacher presence) both online and in the classroom (Cummings et al., 2021).
- Laptop lending libraries
    - Agencies that deliver language learning courses have been able to create lending libraries that provide appropriate technological access for students. For the duration of the language courses, students are eligible to borrow a laptop needed to fully participate in language courses virtually.

SAMPLE FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

- What are the barriers related to low literacy and low digital literacy learners in relation to COVID-19?
- What have been the best practices and approaches utilized to combat the barriers associated with low literacy and low digital literacy?
- What have been the best practices in language service delivery that have been more successful through virtual programming over traditional face-to-face delivery?
- How have agencies navigated pre-existing or emergent barriers pertaining to language services amidst the public health context?
- What learnings from the COVID-19 context of language service delivery are worthwhile to leverage into organizational capacity building and professional

development? What approaches across agencies can strengthen the network of language services and develop sector-wide capacity to support newcomers with emergent needs in relation to language?

- What approaches have been developed to ensure effective language 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 language 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, 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.

Hybrid courses: Hybrid courses refers to the practice of engaging a mix of both in-person course delivery as well as the use of virtual programming. It is a thoughtful fusion of face-to-face and online environments to conduct teaching and learning. It is often used interchangeable with terms such as blended learning, mixed-mode or flexible learning. It is usually based on specific needs, capacities, modalities and pedagogies of a particular institution or sector. This term is synonymously with the term blended learning.

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.

REFERENCES

AAISA. 2021. *ASIP Stakeholder Engagement Report*. Alberta Association of Immigrant Serving Agencies. Retrieved from https://aaisa.ca/research/asip-stakeholder-engagement-report/

Bassa Social Innovations. (2021). Enhancing Small Centre Collaboration.

Cummings, J., Sturm, M., & Avarm, A. (2021). Making the Case for Blended Learning in LINC: A Demonstration Research Project. Retrieved June 14, 2021 from http://contact.teslontario.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Jill-Cummings-Matthias-Sturm-Augusta-Avram-1.pdf

Liu, J., Dedoglu, C., & Campana, M., (2021). From Silos to Solutions: Toward Sustainable and Equitable Hybrid Service Delivery in the Immigrant & Refugee-Serving Sector in Canada. Retrieved May 30, 2021 from https://www.amssa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/EN-Settlement-Sector-Technology-Task-Group-final-report-and-recommendations.pdf