CAPACITY BUILDING THROUGH THE COVID-19 LENS:

HARNESSING INNOVATION AND MOBILIZING BEST PRACTICES

FOCUS AREA: COMMUNITY RECEPTION & INTEGRATION

IN BRIEF

The COVID-19 pandemic has created unique challenges for settlement and integration agencies as they seek to foster welcoming, inclusive, communities that support the long-term integration of the newcomers they serve. While the transition to <u>virtual programming</u> has often diminished newcomers' social connections to the community, the pivot in services has also necessitated many swift adaptations and innovations by settlement and integration agencies which have engendered new best practices and opportunities for shared capacity building.

The Capacity Building Through the COVID-19 Lens Project seeks to capture and mobilize these best practices through key focus areas. This brief seeks to summarize the key findings of this first community reception and integration focus group hosted in October 2021, as well as highlight points of further inquiry that will direct the discussion of the second focus group scheduled to commence in January 2022.

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

KEY FINDINGS

BEST PRACTICES
RACISM AND XENOPHOBIA

The approaches agencies utilized to **address racism and xenophobia** amidst the public health context for both communities at large, as well as clients, include:

- Stimulating community outreach by **partnering with external organizations** (e.g., local police services, school boards, agencies dedicated to serving vulnerable groups) to increase social capital
- Virtual diversity and inclusivity trainings for staff and clients. This includes enacting zero tolerance racism policies and anti-racism campaigns.
- **Virtual counselling and crisis support** being available for newcomers
- Providing **first and plain language supports** to newcomers

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

The interventions and best practices implemented to **increase community connections and intercultural understandings** during the COVID-19 pandemic include:
- Increased **technological access** through laptop lending programs and provide **digital literacy** sessions for volunteers and newcomers to have the skillset to participate in community related programming in the virtual world
- Virtual **conversation circles utilizing social media platforms** that are familiar to newcomers (e.g., WhatsApp or Facebook)
- **Virtual presentations and group sessions** that target special interest areas for newcomer client needs
- **One-on-one supports** and **personalized mentorship programs** hosted on platforms that are well known by newcomers such as Microsoft Teams and WhatsApp.
- Collaboration with other newcomer serving organizations to **share resources** and increase social capital
- Providing **in-person and hybrid youth programming** that provides social interactions and teaches basic life skills for youth (e.g., cooking lessons, photography, community gardening, hiking)
- **Tailored programming** for vulnerable groups in person (one –on-one and in groups)

The best practices for **referrals between agencies** as well as tracking and measuring the success of their referrals include:
- Regular **check-ins with agencies and clients** (warm hand offs and follow ups either through virtual connections or in-person check ins)
- Referral forms that **track the progress** and outcomes of newcomers after a referral is created

Agencies have adapted their **community outreach programming** to the virtual world through:
- Virtual group sessions with community partners
- One-on-one virtual coaching
- Utilizing **social media platforms** that newcomers are already familiar with a (e.g., WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram)

ACCESS TO SERVICES

The approaches have agencies utilized to **increase to translation and interpretation services** for newcomers despite limited in person interaction include:

- Offering **translation services in house or accessing third party language services** (e.g., Language Line)
- Utilizing **social media platforms** that newcomers are already familiar with and connect with daily (e.g., WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram)
- Plain and first language documents
- One-on-one counselling

The interventions and best practices implemented to **increase access to essential newcomer services** (e.g., healthcare, vaccination clinics, supports for children and youth engaging in online schooling, childcare, banking, etc.) include:

- Increasing <u>technological access</u> (e.g., Laptop lending programs, grants that supply personal cellphones to newcomers)
- **Partnering with other community agencies and SPOs** to share resources within the sector and increase social capital
- Regular **check ins with newcomer clients** to maintain positive relationships, building trust and creating a sense of community
- Plain and first language resources

Agencies have been able to **connect with newcomers who are facing mental health challenges** to receive culturally aware and/or trauma informed care through:

- Cross cultural counselling
- Virtual one-on-one counselling
- **Partnering with other community agencies and SPOs** to share resources within the sector and increase social capital

NEXT STEPS

For the next community reception and integration service delivery focus group scheduled for January 2022, AAISA seeks to further refine the findings from the first focus group session and discuss the desired implementation of past learnings into organizational capacity building and professional development resources for the sector.

POSITIVE FEEDBACK REFLECTING THE TRANSITION OF IN PERSON TO VIRTUAL PROGRAM DELIVERY

The positive feedback received from both newcomers and community reception and integration service providers include an increase in opportunities for **intercultural learnings and**

understandings. Despite the reduction to in person community outreach events, community integration agencies have received positive feedback in the implementation of both **virtual and hybrid** program opportunities (e.g., cooking classes, conversation circles) as it allows for flexibility in scheduling yet creates opportunity for personal connections to be formed within the community. The utilization of **social media platforms** has pushed agencies to increase their digital understandings and connect with newcomers in a less formal manner. By creating a **social media presence**, settlement and integration agencies have **increased access to information for newcomers** and fostered an informal dialogue for newcomers. An overarching theme identified in this first focus group was that newcomer serving agencies have identified **strong positive outcomes from partnering with broader community organizations** (e.g., Police services, school boards, agencies dedicated to serving vulnerable groups, etc.) as it increases social capital. Developing these strong relationships has also created a foundation for warm hand offs during referral processes and continual check-ins on newcomer progress.

KEY THEMES IDENTIFIED FOR FURTHER INQUIRY

Racism and Xenophobia

- Discussion on how to strengthen relationships between newcomer-serving agencies and broader community organizations to create an inclusive community and safe spaces for newcomers in a virtual environment (e.g., community outreach through social media)

Community Connections

- Discussion on which aspects of <u>virtual programming</u> can meaningfully increase community connections (e.g., success has been seen from agencies who have created a social media presence, creating real time interactions with newcomers and increasing access to information through plain language posts)
- Discussion on social media usage
  - o Are agencies interested in a professional development resource that encapsulates guidelines on how to create a social media presence, best practices in communicating using these informal platforms?
- Discussion on how to balance minimal screen time with <u>virtual programming</u> for children and youth CNC (Care for Newcomer Children)
  - o Elaborating on the need to establish guidelines for <u>virtual programming</u> that can encapsulate:
    - Relationship building with staff/parents and staff/kids
    - Toolkit contents (age-appropriate activities, limiting screen time)

- Engaging children and youth when there are no caregivers in the home to help assist in <u>virtual programming</u>
- Need for professional development for service delivery providers (<u>digital literacy</u>, remote delivery and curriculum development, data entry)

Access to Services

- Discussion on how agencies are able to create and maintain partnerships with community organizations (serving the broader community and/or newcomer serving) to collaborate with one another and co-create resources for newcomers to increase social capital.

GLOSSARY

<u>**Digital literacy:**</u> 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.

<u>**Technological access:**</u> 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).

<u>**Virtual programming:**</u> 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 <u>remote learning</u>.