

CAPACITY BUILDING THROUGH THE COVID-19 LENS:

HARNESSING INNOVATION AND MOBILIZING BEST PRACTICES

SUMMARY BRIEF

The COVID-19 pandemic has created unique challenges for settlement and integration agencies in the delivery of language, employment, and community reception and integration services. The transition to virtual programming has been an adaptive technique utilized by service providers in accommodation with public health orders. While both newcomers and settlement service providers have at times felt a diminished social connection to one another during this shift in service delivery, newcomer-serving agencies have co-created and shared best practices to meet the needs of newcomers across the province, many of which have led to key innovations and new 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 the two rounds of focus groups hosted in the September and October of 2021, and January 2022, as well as outline areas identified for resource development for Phase II of this project. The professional development resources will be created with the intention of institutionalizing the emergent innovative best practices into the settlement and integration sector. These resources can be leveraged for organizations seeking to learn and implement virtual programming into their service delivery models.

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

KEY FINDINGS

LANGUAGE

Language learning is an integral newcomer service that can act as the foundation to the fruitful settlement and integration of newcomers. Traditionally, most language learning has been conducted in classrooms in an in-person setting with a language instructor. However, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, language service delivery providers shifted to a primarily virtual classroom nearly overnight.

Language instructors have adapted swiftly to the virtual programming environment, implementing the use of **physical handouts (step-by-step guides)** to increase digital literacy, **utilizing popular social media platforms (WhatsApp and Facebook)** for conversation circles, and **device lending libraries (laptops and Chromebooks)** to increase technological access. Language service providers curated **care packages (toolboxes and work kits)** that were delivered to newcomers' homes to increase a sense of connection with language learning students and to create a break from being fully reliant on on-screen activities for language learning. **Pre-recording training videos and workshops** allowed for language service providers to provide **asynchronous** access to courses. The implementation of hybrid courses has allowed for **increased flexibility in course work delivery and testing**, and the **development of technological literacy skills**.

For a more detailed discussion on the findings identified from the first language focus group please click [here](#).

For a more detailed discussion on the findings identified from the second language focus group please click [here](#).

EMPLOYMENT

Employment services assist newcomers in recognizing their potential and translating previous education and experiences into the Canadian workplace setting. Employment service providers have seen great strides in their outreach efforts with the implementation of virtual programming. The utilization of **virtual networking events, job fairs, and mentorship** has allowed newcomers to build their professional network across the country, rather than being restricted to geographic constraints. **Virtual experiential opportunities** such as volunteering, building on-the-job skills, practical skill development, and providing paid internships has been leveraged to expand the employable skillset of newcomers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Employment service providers have been keen to provide **up-to-date skills training**, encapsulating digital literacy, language, and soft skills for both service providers and newcomers. The **on-going skills assessments** allows for employment service providers to seek opportunities for professional development, such as through bridging programs.

For a more detailed discussion on the findings identified from the first employment focus group please click [here](#).

For a more detailed discussion on the findings identified from the second employment focus group please click [here](#).

COMMUNITY RECEPTION AND INTEGRATION

The sense of belonging is an integral human need that is accessible through successful community reception and integration services. Community reception and integration services allow for newcomers to increase their understanding of the social capital available to them, as well as resources that can increase overall wellness. Community reception and integration service providers have been able to offer **virtual counselling sessions** for newcomers, in both group and one-on-one formats where newcomers are able to build and foster their personal connection with service providers, whilst sharing their lived experiences and their dynamic needs. The **uptake of social media** by service providers has been utilized to host conversation circles, information dissemination, and to provide service updates. **Translation services** have adapted to provide virtual access to plain language and first language supports. Community reception and integration service providers have maintained **on-going and regular check-ins** with newcomers to ensure a sense of community and relationship building in the world of virtual programming.

For a more detailed discussion on the findings identified from the first community reception and integration focus group please click [here](#).

For a more detailed discussion on the findings identified from the second community reception and integration focus group please click [here](#).

OVERARCHING FINDINGS CHALLENGES

The swift transition to virtual programming has created emergent difficulties for settlement and integration service providers. There has been a growing need for **IT support** and an **increased demand for flexible funding** to support **digital transformations** of service delivery. Operating in the virtual environment has also brought increased **difficulties for service providers to “unplug” at the end of a workday**. As a result, the boundaries between personal-time and worktime have been sometimes become blurred which has led to concerns surrounding burnout.

The vast reduction of in-person services has contributed to an increase of social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic. The nature of settlement and integration services involves a high degree of interpersonal relationship building that encapsulates understanding and interpreting many communication cues such as non-verbal body language that can easily get lost in the virtual sphere. Although eager to incorporate an increase of virtual service delivery, both newcomers and service

delivery providers have highlighted that the connection fostered by in-person services is irreplaceable in many circumstances.

The challenges of connecting through the virtual space are further exacerbated when observing the digital divide. Inaccessibility to affordable internet services, appropriate digital devices (e.g. Laptops for language learning rather than relying on cellphones to access language course content), the lack of technological infrastructure in small centres (internet and phone lines), and limited digital literacy skills are a few of the key barriers that have made vulnerable client groups difficult to reach.

INNOVATIONS, POSITIVE OUTCOMES AND LEARNINGS

The adaptations in methods of service delivery and innovation in practices has supported newcomer-serving organizations to meaningfully implement virtual programming. Building digital literacy and increasing technological access of both newcomer-serving staff and newcomers has created enormous opportunity to propel the newcomer-serving sector to embrace technology more broadly. The increased incorporation of virtual programming in service delivery has emerged in response to the abrupt onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, having potential to carry over into a post-pandemic world. By institutionalizing these co-created best practices, the transformations that have occurred in response to rapid virtual service delivery can be integrated into future hybrid models of programming.

The development of technological skills within the settlement and integration sector has allowed for a **wider reach** of newcomers served. This has been attributed to the **reduction of barriers** including geographic constraints, concerns regarding COVID-19 transmission, access to reliable transportation, and affordable childcare. Opportunities for increased **one-on-one** connections allowed for the facilitation of virtual conversation circles, **building interpersonal relationships** between newcomers, newcomer-serving staff, and mentors.

Newcomer-serving agencies have shifted towards a **virtual file management** policy, gradually removing the dependence on physical copies of paperwork to be updated and stored. **Virtual referrals** have also been greatly successful, as service providers are able to reach a wider scope of external agencies through email, as well as better track the progress of referrals. By eliminating or reducing the need to physically connect with external agencies to refer clients, service providers have been able to **increase their capacity to provide referrals and monitor updates**. Operating in a hybrid and virtual capacity has stimulated increased opportunities to **convene as a sector**. Virtual networking has allowed for settlement and integration agencies to **better connect with broader community-serving organizations** without geographical constraints, developing interagency partnerships, and facilitating the **co-creation of best practices**.

RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT AND OPPORTUNITIES



The findings identified from the two rounds of focus groups will be leveraged to support the creation of multi-media professional development resources for service delivery providers. These resources will include step-by-step guides, infographics, research briefs, as well as a training video for each focus area. The training videos will be created in alignment with AAISA's certification program, where service providers can institutionalize these emergent best practices. The development of these resources is created with the intent to capture the innovative practices that have arisen in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, to ensure that the adaptations created during this time are carried into the post-pandemic world of settlement and integration service delivery.

LANGUAGE

- Hybrid courses that blend in-person and virtual service delivery models
 - How to implement hybrid learning for language teachers in the form of both traditional and informal learning
 - “How-to” or “start guide” for language teachers to implement hybrid courses
 - Instruction techniques, best practices
 - Best practices and strategies for hybrid learning in the classroom
 - Implementation techniques for the in-person portion of language learning
 - How to prepare students to be successful in both the classroom and virtual portion of hybrid learning
 - Identification of services that have worked particularly well in the virtual environment
- How to increase digital literacy for low-literacy learners
 - Best practices to increase both digital literacy and language literacy in newcomers
 - Strategies to build digital literacy within language learning classrooms

EMPLOYMENT

- Informal online networking
 - How to promote, engage, and facilitate informal networking opportunities for newcomers in a virtual space
 - Envisioning how informal networking can look
 - How to build work-place relevant skills (e.g., communication, digital literacy, identifying strengths from previous experiences to translate into the Canadian workplace context)
 - How service providers can host meaningful online events
 - Examples can include networking events, townhalls, community engagement initiatives designed to build newcomers' professional networks

- On-going skill assessment
 - How to identify emergent skills needed to create successful hybrid working environments
 - Supporting service providers to better understand emergent trends and how to better support clients to obtain and build those necessary digital literacy skills
 - Building an intercultural lens to better understand vulnerable populations
 - Supporting newcomers to better integrate in working in the virtual environment
 - How to improve existing skills in practitioners (communication, outreach, community building, digital literacy)
 - How service providers can assist in building workplace relevant skills for newcomers, fostering job readiness
 - Supporting newcomer clients in entering the world of virtual work
 - Virtual job applications, virtual interviews, and working remotely

COMMUNITY RECEPTION AND INTEGRATION

- Digital transformation of services
 - Translations of information booklets into accessible, culturally appropriate online formats
 - Ways to leverage technology to support community actors to offer and promote services
 - Cultural competency in the virtual space
 - Building community buy-in for settlement via virtual platforms and services
- Social media resources and building social media capacity
 - How to better connect with newcomers through social media
 - Identifying standard practices for social media outreach
 - How to engage the community, promote services, increase reach for vulnerable clients
 - Multi-modal methods of engagement for service providers to reach newcomers
 - Ethical practices in the virtual space
 - Press release standards
 - How to utilize analytics and virtual advertisements
 - Combatting racism and xenophobia
 - Connecting with the broader community to foster positive relationships with the newcomer community

GLOSSARY

Digital divide: The digital divide refers to the economic, educational, and social inequalities between those who have computers and online access and those who do not

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.

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.

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.

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.