



PROVINCIAL ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVE BRIEF

AUGUST 2024

PURPOSE

This brief compiles experiences identified during the 2023-2024 Provincial Engagement Initiative (PEI) participation term across three regional committees in Calgary, Edmonton, and Small Centres, as well as the Groupe de Travail Provincial (GTP) committee. Throughout the term, PEI discussions focused on local experiences and perspectives related to shared provincial-level issues. The first and second quarters emphasized these local insights, while the third and fourth quarters highlighted the importance of effective resource sharing and collaboration, extending beyond the settlement sector to include all stakeholders who engage with newcomers daily. PEI aims to strengthen a collective voice for settlement in Alberta, identify systems-level challenges, and share information to facilitate collaboration, research, advocacy, and engagement across the sector. Furthermore, PEI meetings provided opportunities for agencies to guide and support AAISA's efforts in realizing a provincial vision for newcomer settlement and integration. The vision for the PEI is to *jointly build a cohesive, diverse, and welcoming settlement and integration ecosystem that actively meets the needs and supports the goals of every newcomer* (Alberta Association of Immigrant Serving Agencies, 2021).

The outcomes of this brief are to further guide discussions of importance in PEI meetings, mobilize key knowledge with agencies/partners, and contextualize recommendations and actions to support PEI agencies.

STANDING ISSUES: KEY TRENDS AND THEMES

SETTLEMENT AND INTEGRATION SERVICE DELIVERY

Delivering settlement and integration services involves numerous nuances and complexities. Beyond multifaceted issues, there exists a limited number of case studies intended to exemplify best practices in delivering human services for newcomers. Amongst these, reports on best



practices often want for comprehensiveness, with minimal actionable information due to the absence of structural details (Sharma, 2016). Uncertain and intersecting newcomer vulnerabilities additionally affect settlement and integration outcomes (e.g., health, employment, etc.) (Palii & Finlay, 2021).

Through discussions over the 2023-2024 participation term, the PEI has included the following groups in its working, but by no means exhaustive, definition of vulnerable clients:

- Women
- Older adults
- Individuals with low literacy
- Youth (ages 16-24)
- Individuals with cognitive and/or physical disabilities
- LGBTQ+ individuals
- Survivors of torture
- Clients who are ineligible for IRCC (Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada) funded services
- Racialized newcomers
- Individuals with complex medical needs

The subsequent sections will highlight distinct vulnerabilities encountered by clients within various service areas in the settlement and integration sector, as emphasized by PEI participants.

LANGUAGE

NOVEMBER 2023

In the 2023-2024 PEI cycle, the recurring challenge of language assessment waitlists impeded service delivery providers, particularly in consideration of the rising influx of newcomer arrivals to Canada. As increasing demand for language resources continue to place pressure on all PEI committees, collaboration amongst the immigration and settlement sector is crucial to improve outcomes for clients. Further collaborative efforts emerge amongst the sector as a response to this demand. Initiatives to combat gaps in language services include, but are not limited to:

- Partnerships with local libraries for access to a diverse range of language resources (e.g., conversation groups).
- Community Adult Learning Programs to support students who not eligible for IRCC funding.
- Co-funding amongst service delivery providers.
- Accessible booking tools for community partners and clients to book language support.
- Online language assessment services and referral systems to effectively place students in language classes optimal for their proficiency.
- Exploration of discussion circles offered in French.

Challenges faced by newcomers can be multifaceted and have significant consequences for economic, social, and psychological wellness (Special to Western News, 2022). One organization highlighted clients can face multiple issues beyond language barriers which language instructors often discover. These challenges may include ongoing literacy issues or learning disabilities which staff may not possess the necessary qualifications to address adequately. Instructors have been encouraged to communicate these nuanced challenges to other staff members, facilitating appropriate and effective support for clients and fostering a collaborative approach.

FEBRUARY 2024

Official language proficiency can be one of the biggest fundamental barriers for newcomers (Business Council of Alberta, 2024). Secondary needs may present themselves as newcomers access language services (e.g., mental health, employment, housing, etc.), revealing the complexities of needs. In this quarter, participants shared about strategies and best practices around holistic support in which services centre on the client's wellbeing and necessities.

Barriers to providing support to clients as secondary needs arise may include, but are not limited to:

- Limited funding in relation to demand (i.e., insufficient funding affects organizational capacity).
- Language comprehension limitations (e.g., clients may qualify for services based on secondary needs requirements, but do not meet CLB requirements).
- Overworked staff and teachers.
- Cultural barriers affecting access to services (e.g., not utilizing childcare programs due to cultural preferences).
- Complexities surrounding access to mental health support services (e.g., limited interpretation offerings, clients being referred far from area of residence, etc.).

When discussing these barriers, access to mental health support was a highlighted challenge. Although mental health services for newcomers may be available, language barriers continue to persist. Cultural factors may further contribute to the barrier of accessing these supports. With limited funding and capacity, many Service Provider Organizations (SPOs) depend on the diversity of language proficiency amongst staff, volunteers, and ESL speakers. Although no sustainable solution currently addresses this gap, the focus remains on facilitating comfortable opportunities for clients to express themselves despite any language differences.

Considering this, PEI participants emphasized the need for strong partnerships amongst SPOs to provide services for secondary needs and smooth continuation of care for clients. Although there is a preference for in-house service availability, where that is not feasible, external referrals are crucial for streamlining the settlement process. Optimizing resource sharing amongst the sector (i.e., between differing regions and program-specific services) contributes to the overall efficiency



of the settlement sector by facilitating prompt and accurate referrals, ensuring client needs are met effectively.

A potential strategy for implementing a more holistic approach may be the implementation of a settlement support team for both internal and external clients. This could be done via training, course programs, and micro-credentialing amongst staff on topics that would contribute to increased safety for clients (e.g., psychological first aid, family and domestic violence education, etc.).

MAY 2024

To manage and optimize the waitlist process for English Language programs, several strategies have been implemented by SPOs. Approaches involve, but are not limited to:

- Leveraging Community Adult Learning Programs (CALPs) to organize English classes on an as-needed basis.
- Negotiating changes within existing IRCC projects and reallocating resources towards Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) classes.
- Placing learners in comparable English language level classes to enhance skills and access to services.
- Referring clients to local centres and community supports offering supplementary services to support learners holistically.
- Innovative solutions aimed at accommodating diverse learner schedules and preferences (e.g., evening and online classes).

Identified bottleneck trends include fluctuating waitlists for different CLB levels and for online versus in-person learning, depending on the season. Proposed strategies to address these challenges include personalized action plans for students facing difficulties in progressing, voluntary literacy classes for waitlisted students, and the recruitment of qualified volunteers to augment program capacities. SPOs also have utilized drop-in classes with childcare support to aim to increase accessibility for learners with familial responsibilities.

Despite ongoing challenges in managing large waitlists, efforts have been made to engage waitlisted learners through future course previews, online learning options, and campus resource centres. Notably, LINC providers have observed clients with learning disabilities face challenges, prompting strategies like specialized class placements, one-on-one support sessions with retired teachers or volunteers, and referrals for formal diagnosis.

For Francophone agencies, influencing the waitlist process for English courses is limited, although some agencies have received provincial funding to offer English classes tailored for quick integration into the job market.

AUGUST 2024



Service provider organizations (SPOs) are employing various technological solutions to enhance language learning experience for newcomers. One effective strategy includes hosting English conversation classes and clubs tailored to varying English proficiency levels, although maintaining consistent attendance can be challenging. Additionally, SPOs offer ESL classes for individuals who do not qualify for LINC and leverage language learning applications, with Duolingo being notably popular among newcomers.

There is a common assumption all learners possess adequate digital literacy to engage with technology. This gap must be acknowledged and addressed to ensure equitable access to resources. Providing targeted support and training in digital literacy will empower newcomers to navigate these tools confidently, fostering their ability to thrive in an increasingly digital landscape. Successful strategies include:

- Programs promoting independence among learners, utilizing online resources while recognizing literacy variances based on clients' backgrounds.
- Partnerships with local libraries to facilitate language sessions, though repeated attendance can be difficult to achieve.

Despite these advancements, several important observations highlight the complexities of implementing technology effectively. Many digital tools contain hidden cultural biases that can hinder clients' learning experiences. Additionally, accessing digital learning resources in languages other than English, especially French, remains a significant challenge. While there is enthusiasm for incorporating Artificial Intelligence-powered solutions to create interactive and personalized learning experiences, concerns about over-reliance on technology persist, particularly among clients with limited digital literacy or a preference for in-person interactions.

To address cultural sensitivity in language instruction, SPOs emphasize the importance of intercultural humility and awareness within their programs. This ensures language instruction is tailored to the unique needs of both urban and rural clients. Moreover, establishing trust through online counselling projects is effective in providing linguistic support, further enhancing the learning experience. While technology offers promising avenues for language learning, a balanced approach integrating personal interaction and cultural inclusivity remains essential.

EMPLOYMENT

NOVEMBER 2023

As access to language services remains a challenge, language barriers can create complex hurdles extending into employment. Students participating in LINC language classes may face obstacles in accessing employment support due to conflicting time commitments. Consequently, individuals may encounter difficulties independently navigating information about available supports and resources. Beyond these, further gaps remain prevalent amongst newcomer employment due to reasons, such as:

- Funding availability contingent upon newcomer status and staffing shortages.
- Lack of cultural consideration within the Western job-seeking approach (e.g., nuances like variations in resume writing across non-Western countries are often overlooked by NGOs and governmental organizations).
- Emphasis on urban-centric approaches neglecting unique needs of the rural employment experience.
- Limited capacity for service delivery providers resulting in difficulty providing bridging programs (e.g., mentorships, job-shadowing, etc.), particularly in small centres.
- Government support programs indirectly constraining long-term planning for clients (e.g., accessing income support could disqualify newcomers from pursuing familial sponsorship opportunities).
- Lack of recognition for foreign credentials despite measures existing to consider these qualifications (e.g., employer skepticism).
- Prioritization of Canadian work experience or exposure to the Canadian labour market acting as a barrier for newcomers securing employment.
- Failure to recognize newcomers with disabilities can face accessibility challenges when using employment programs.

Participants highlighted clients experiencing discouragement when unable to secure employment in their respective fields, demonstrating a lack of training for newcomers to access adequate work aligned with their qualifications. There is a growing demand for settlement agencies to offer comprehensive employment services (e.g., readiness workshops, programs familiarizing newcomers with the realities of the Canadian labour market, job-shadowing initiatives in areas of interest, volunteering opportunities for exposure to the job market, etc.). Educating clients about the Canadian job-seeking and employment culture would enhance awareness and understanding. Implementing initiatives to address this gap could be highly beneficial for newcomers.

FEBRUARY 2024

Many SPOs extend their offerings beyond core programming to cater to secondary needs among their clients. Supplementary services can focus on employment support because employment constitutes the foundation of their clients' needs. Employment services aren't only aimed at job placement, but job retention, which is a key concern for newcomers. SPOs assist newcomers in understanding the Canadian workplace landscape, expectations, and culture, offering post-interview guidance, and facilitating adaptation experiences. Programs can also include digital literacy classes for learners who prefer online instruction and helping newcomers with disabilities in their psychological and/or educational assessments. Services may also encompass:

- Employment readiness programs.
- Role-playing exercises (e.g., mock interviews).
- Career coaching.
- Interpretation certification training.

- Healthcare employment support.
- Career fairs.
- Resume workshops.
- Job search clubs to increase employment skills and connections.
- Assistance in finding financial assistance opportunities.

Certain clients with limited proficiency in English enrol in language courses with the goal of securing employment. However, these clients are undertaking courses on a full-time basis, rendering them unavailable for meetings with job search advisors or other service offerings. To mitigate any delays to their settlement processes, these clients are encouraged to manage both activities part-time which can be complex. This adjustment is meant to facilitate a more efficient integration into the workforce while ensuring they receive necessary support and guidance in their job search endeavours.

An example of extending programs not directly related to employment is providing food bank services to Temporary Foreign Worker (TFW) clients. TFW clients, particularly in smaller centres, navigate many challenges in securing employment and SPOs, therefore offer services outside their core programming to bridge whatever gaps they can with their capacity. Balancing provision of these services with already available resources involves strategic planning, collaboration with partners, and adaptation to changing client needs. Referrals to partner agencies are made to address secondary needs if agencies are unable to offer services in-house. Through these efforts, SPOs strive to maximize impact and support the holistic well-being of the clients and families served.

MAY 2024

Recent changes by IRCC to employment newcomer streams have raised concerns about the impact on service provision. Currently, frontline impacts remain uncertain, with no definitive insights into how these changes will affect employment programs. Notably, new international students and Canadian Experience Class newcomers are excluded from accessing government programs, significantly limiting their ability to utilize available services. For example, despite the Canada-Alberta Job Grant theoretically extending to newcomers with protected status, practical implementation appears to favour Canadian citizens or Permanent Residents (PR). This disparity suggests a potential inequity in access to employment support services among different newcomer groups.

AUGUST 2024

Successful strategies identified in helping newcomers gain recognition for their foreign credentials involve collaboration, education, and innovative approaches tailored to the specific challenges faced by this population. Effective collaboration with employers is critical, which includes initiatives such as workplace inclusion programs to help newcomers navigate language barriers



and integrate into the workforce. Community connection programs have also proven successful, particularly for Ukrainian clients, by linking job seekers with potential employers.

One innovative approach discussed uses competency-based assessments, allowing individuals to showcase their skills without necessarily holding Canadian credentials. Successful strategies include:

- Educating employers about labour market realities and the value of diverse skills.
- Encouraging newcomers to pursue Canadian education equivalency evaluations.
- Facilitating mentorship connections between newcomers and industry professionals.

Despite these efforts, systemic barriers remain, especially in smaller centers where recognizing foreign credentials is exceptionally challenging. Many newcomers face difficulties obtaining official documentation to prove their qualifications, necessitating flexible and innovative solutions from educational and regulatory bodies. Collaborations with post-secondary institutions (e.g., Bow Valley College) have yielded successful outcomes, especially through programs focusing on job readiness and micro-credentialing, which help newcomers adapt to the Canadian job market without extensive retraining.

While several programs have been implemented, ongoing advocacy is crucial to address systemic barriers preventing full credential recognition. Agencies can assist newcomers by directing them to appropriate resources and providing financial support for document translation when possible. There are strong recommendations to highlight the foreign credential recognition process early in the immigration journey, which would help set realistic expectations for newcomers upon arrival. Additionally, utilizing technology to bridge gaps between Canadian requirements and those from newcomers' countries of origin could expedite the recognition process.

Language remains a significant barrier, particularly for Francophone newcomers who may struggle with English proficiency necessary for the credential recognition process. As such, the need for accessible English language courses is urgent. A collaborative approach including continuous dialogue among stakeholders, including regulatory bodies, educational institutions, and service agencies, is essential to create equitable pathways for recognizing the credentials of newcomers.

SETTLEMENT

NOVEMBER 2023

Finding suitable residence in a secure and welcoming area constitutes a crucial stride toward successful settlement and integration (Wayland, 2007). Housing challenges persist across the entirety of Alberta and numerous newcomers have to navigate these issues. [The City of Calgary's 2023 Housing Needs Assessment](#) indicates a rising challenge in housing affordability for a growing number of Calgarians. Government housing supports are available, such as Alberta's [Affordable Housing Programs](#) which consist of 4 types of provincially subsidized housing and offer options

for Albertans with low income. PEI participants highlighted newcomers may misunderstand the distinctions between assisted, affordable, and market housing, encountering confusion in navigating these varied categories. Frontline staff may face challenges in clarifying these differences effectively to newcomers due to inherent complexities of each housing type. A lack of understanding can amplify difficulties for newcomers in navigating housing support.

Another obstacle for newcomers seeking housing arises from their immigration status. Refugee claimants, with ambiguous status and lacking necessary documents, often face barriers in securing accommodation as landlords find their situation too problematic. Insecure status further compounds difficulties in securing employment and rental housing (Wayland, 2007). Additionally, individuals with permanent residency or confirmed refugee status are also vulnerable to fluctuations in rent prices. Certain immigration statuses limit accessibility to programs that receive federal funding.

Clients experience further service gaps regarding housing, for instance:

- Long waitlists (i.e., ranging from 3-6 months).
- Difficulties obtaining income support after receiving a one-time federal benefit.
- Limited interpretation services and availability.
- Lower income levels and affordability of homeownership or meeting average rental costs.
- Scarce housing options as prices increase in remote Alberta areas.
- Lack of consideration regarding hidden homelessness and acknowledgement within policy.

PEI and GTP participants are diligently working to find solutions and this cycle's discussion yielded the following suggestions:

- Developing a unified strategy for submission to municipalities that illustrates the housing shortage particular to newcomers.
- Providing feedback to government regarding systemic barriers impeding newcomers from promptly securing housing, primarily caused by delays in qualifying for income support, with a particular focus on refugee claimants.
- Exploring government streamlining of housing assistance for newcomers (e.g., implementing a program to aid newcomers in meeting eligibility criteria).

FEBRUARY 2024

When serving clients with settlement-related needs in both urban and smaller centres, numerous challenges and opportunities arise. Common challenges were discussed this quarter, such as:

- Both affordability and availability of housing.
- Difficulty finding a primary physician.
- High-level systemic issues regarding the acknowledgement of certification (i.e., newcomers working entry-level jobs despite overqualified credentials).
- Language barriers.

- Lack of funding and reduced staffing amongst settlement staff, leading to prolonged waitlists, limited capacity, and burnout.

An increase of newcomers through secondary and unplanned migration and refugee claimants has been a common trend for Alberta, well before this quarter. One challenge highlighted in this period included the higher number of asylum seekers with precarious status, making it difficult for them to access essential services and support. This underscores the need for more comprehensive and inclusive policies to address the diverse needs of clients with settlement-related requirements across different regions.

Opportunities exist in providing pre-employment training, collaborating with organizations for comprehensive support, conducting needs assessments, and emphasizing indirect mentorship relationships for smoother settlement services. Mentorship relationships for clients have been valuable in the settlement and integration of clients due to the understanding of career, culture, language, and societal landscape within Canada. Overall, SPOs are committed to facilitating the successful settlement and integration of clients by addressing their diverse needs and promoting a deeper understanding of the Canadian context.

MAY 2024

Recurring challenges and emerging patterns were identified in this quarter, including high costs associated with obtaining immigration advice, compounded by the limited availability of legal services within local communities. Maintaining confidentiality poses another concern, particularly when newcomers rely on informal interpretation services for legal matters. TFWs especially often encounter misinformation or lack of information regarding their legal rights, complicating their settlement process.

Several patterns were observed surrounding legal matters and settlement, such as:

- Increased demand for pro-bono legal consultations in clients' preferred or native language.
- Clients in rural areas being required to travel to urban centres for access to legal services.
- Growing need for legal assistance related to housing and employment issues.
- Challenges faced by TFWs in dealing with premature employment contract terminations.
- Limited availability of formal interpretation services, especially for specific refugee groups (e.g., Rohingya people).

Further obstacles stem from the capacity constraints of Legal Aid services, resulting in lengthy wait times for appointments, particularly concerning immigration hearings where clients may lack representation. Emerging trends highlight an increased need to educate newcomers about tenant rights and eviction procedures amid housing crises. Additionally, ongoing challenges include unfounded employer demands for Canadian work experience and foreign credential recognition, resulting in prolonged processing times and hindering employment prospects for newcomers.



Addressing these complexities, AAISA aims to collaborate with legal experts to develop informative sessions on legal topics for clients, aiming to enhance the understanding and accessibility of legal rights among newcomers facing these complex challenges in settlement.

AUGUST 2024

Local governments play a crucial role in enhancing settlement services for newcomers, particularly regarding affordable housing initiatives. Observations from various municipalities indicate while efforts are being made, significant gaps remain. For instance, one city has focussed on equity, diversity, and inclusion, yet the support from their city council has been less tangible. In another region of the province, challenges include a lack of data on settlement clients, which hindered appropriate service provision during emergencies, and difficulties in the recognition of foreign credentials.

Collaboration and coordination among local councils, settlement agencies, and various levels of government are crucial for effectively addressing newcomers' specific needs. Improved communication can ensure services are adequately funded and accessible, facilitating better integration for newcomers. There is increasing recognition of need for aggressive advocacy for rent caps and financial support for low-income individuals, especially during their first year in Canada. Local governments must consider both the availability of affordable housing, and the challenges posed by rising rent costs without corresponding income support.

Furthermore, engaging communities through designated newcomer orientation sessions and encouraging businesses to adopt culturally sensitive practices can significantly ease integration. Improving translation services and providing resources in multiple languages are essential for helping newcomers navigate safety and community services effectively.

The lack of affordable housing has resulted in dire situations for newcomers. Cases shared show that in most extreme circumstances when clients have nowhere to go, they feel safer in, and therefore choose, public areas rather than shelters. This underscores the necessity for local governments to ensure shelters meet the basic needs of their occupants, providing safe and dignified environments.

Finally, innovative housing solutions have been proposed, including the rehabilitation of abandoned buildings into affordable housing and the conversion of unsold new homes into accessible options for newcomers. Government grants or tax incentives for builders could also stimulate the development of affordable housing.

A comprehensive approach involving local governments, settlement agencies, and community organizations is essential for addressing the housing crisis and improving settlement services for newcomers. Enhanced coordination and innovative housing solutions will be key in meeting the growing demands of newcomer populations.

HEALTH CARE

NOVEMBER 2023

As newcomer arrivals to Alberta increased in 2023, and continue in 2024, changes in healthcare delivery largely impact the newcomer experience within the province. With winter approaching, conversations in this quarter focused on the effective support provided by PEI and GTP participants to their clients in terms of winter preparedness. Several collaborations and/or initiatives were mentioned, namely:

- Vaccine navigators to inform individuals about both COVID-19 booster and flu shots.
- Referring clients to winter resources according to their need (e.g., winter clothing drives).
- Programs focusing on mental well-being throughout winter season to reduce isolation and enhance overall health during colder/darker months.
- Workshops, sessions, and activities regarding winter preparedness education and tools to manage the challenges of Alberta winter.

Participants expressed concern that international students are often inadequately prepared for winter, and schools must take proactive measures to educate them more on this matter. The harsh Alberta winter can exacerbate newcomer student struggles. Exploring collaborations with local schools to educate international students on proper winter preparation could be a promising option to address the issue of insufficient readiness and support for these students.

FEBRUARY 2024

Supporting mental health of newcomers where they feel emotionally ready, safe, and comfortable to seek supports is crucial for service providers to implement, so clients do not feel pressured to move beyond their level of comfort (Alberta Association of Immigrant Serving Agencies, 2023). Strategies to effectively encourage clients to utilize available mental health resources and programs include, but are not limited to:

- Discussing mental health to facilitate access to resources (e.g., workshops).
- Providing space and time for clients to contemplate the significance of mental health resources and ensure they are emotionally ready to access them.
- Analyzing whether resources offered acknowledge cultural differences and nuances.
- Implementing different language to describe the physical symptoms of mental health.
- Conducting needs assessments.
- Embedding mental health resources within teaching curriculum where feasible.

Changing language around mental health terms has been successful for service providers in breaking the barrier of stigma and client hesitancy. Some clients exhibit hesitation when confronted with terms such as ‘mental health.’ Opting to rename topics like ‘mental health’ to ‘stress management’ may resonate better with clients who have not had previous exposure to these conversations. Depending on various factors, clients may struggle to distinguish between mental



health and mental illness, leading to reluctance in engaging with workshops or resources due to stigma. Considering this, alternative terms could appeal to a broader audience and alleviate stigma surrounding mental health discussions. This approach aims to make resources more accessible and inclusive, irrespective of perceived mental health status.

MAY 2024

In supporting newcomers with disability diagnoses and applications to Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH), SPOs discussed utilizing established physician networks to expedite newcomers' access to medical assessments and appropriate referrals. However, obstacles may hinder this process, such as the complexity of appealing negative AISH decisions, which requires routing complex procedures. Furthermore, the scarcity of practicing physicians in rural areas affects both the quality and pace of AISH applications, contributing to lengthy wait times for necessary neuropsychiatric assessments.

SPOs assist newcomers throughout the AISH application process, including support for appealing negative decisions, though achieving positive outcomes can be particularly challenging for clients with invisible disabilities. Obtaining a disability diagnosis poses further complexities due to diagnostic wait times and differing professional perspectives regarding what qualifies as a disability, which can impact support for AISH applications (e.g., HIV diagnoses). Healthcare access remains problematic for newcomers with conditions like HIV who also lack provincial coverage, impacting their ability to obtain necessary diagnoses and medications. Additionally, some newcomers may be unaware of AISH or Persons with Developmental Disabilities (PDD) resources or may choose not to pursue an official diagnosis, potentially reducing application rates.

The stringent application process for AISH and the prolonged medical diagnostic journey disrupt the continuity of support for clients with disabilities, highlighting ongoing issues in providing comprehensive care and advocacy for newcomers navigating these complex healthcare support systems. AAISA is collaborating closely with the Government of Alberta to discuss the AISH process and to convey the sector's feedback to them.

AUGUST 2024

Improving health literacy among newcomers requires a multifaceted approach acknowledging their unique challenges and backgrounds. One prevalent issue is the assumption newcomers have a limited understanding of healthcare systems, which can lead to infantilization by medical professionals. To counter this, efforts should focus on helping newcomers adapt to Canadian systems and climate. One such example is educating individuals from tropical countries about seasonal changes and health implications can empower them to manage their health better.

Strategies enhancing health literacy include, but are not limited to:

- Develop educational content that highlights differences in the Canadian healthcare system and climate.



- Host community health fairs with various health agencies to provide newcomers with information on available resources.
- Encourage health clinics to utilize language lines for improved access to care.
- Implement health navigators to facilitate communication and understanding of healthcare services.
- Organize presentations by healthcare professionals to educate newcomers on specific health topics.
- Promote collaboration between healthcare providers and Alberta Health Services (AHS) to ensure comprehensive support for newcomers.

Additionally, health literacy initiatives must be culturally sensitive, offering information in multiple languages and using relatable examples. Technology can enhance these efforts but should be complemented by in-person support, particularly for those with limited digital skills. The introduction of a dedicated health phone line for specific cultural communities can further normalize health discussions and provide tailored resources. Finally, creating video reenactments to illustrate what newcomers can expect during medical appointments can significantly enhance their comfort and understanding of the healthcare process. Collaborative and culturally aware approaches are essential to improve health literacy among newcomers.

ANTI-DISCRIMINATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS

NOVEMBER 2023

Drawing insights from last term, ongoing inclusion of anti-discrimination and human rights as standing agenda items will focus on ensuring equitable access to services and advocating for clients.

Focus of discussions for this quarter predominantly identified available programs for 2SLGBTQIA+ newcomers. Initiatives mentioned included the following:

- Engagement in anti-racism projects collaborating with local agencies and participating cities.
- A Service Delivery Improvement (SDI) project involving the development of modules on anti-racism, presentations covering intersectionality and white privilege, and establishment of a rural community-based framework.
- Tailored programs with staff specifically trained to address needs of this cohort.
- Ongoing educational events.
- Pilot programs for staff training in equity, diversity, inclusion (EDI) along with anti-racism.
- Exploring ideas of support (i.e., counseling, therapy, referrals, etc.) to strengthen existing programs and services.



While many participants shared their support and initiatives for this group of newcomers, there appears to remain a lack of sufficient services for the 2SLGBTQIA+ community in rural Alberta. It is crucial to examine this issue to enhance overall support for newcomers of this cohort.

FEBRUARY 2024

EDI strategies help to create a safe environment for organizations, staff, and clients. This can be done through several means, such as mitigating unconscious biases and committing to trainings on inclusive leadership competencies (Toronto Metropolitan University, n.d.). Strategies discussed this quarter that have proven to be successful for implementing EDI strategies within organizations included:

- Direct connections with local employers.
- Workshop series including anti-discrimination, anti-racism, and awareness topics (e.g., Black History Month and Indigenous Elder History).
- Conducting an equity audit to pursue greater alignment with EDI practices.
- Enhancing accessibility for learners with cognitive or learning disabilities.
- Implementing revisions to organizational software platforms (e.g., Moodle).

Building relationships with local employers has demonstrated opportunities for support programs and practicum placements for newcomers. Connecting with company human resources allows SPOs to invite employers into meaningful implementation of systems change rather than adopting EDI initiatives merely to maintain their reputation. Integrating these strategies and recommendations into organizations for the betterment of multi-level systems, including the organization itself, its staff, newcomers, and the integration and settlement sector at large.

MAY 2024

EDI within services provided by SPOs encompass a range of initiatives and perspectives aimed at fostering a welcoming and supportive environment. Some organizations mentioned the development of comprehensive EDI resources, including educational materials on the journey to equity, leadership training sessions focused on tangible actions, and frontline staff training on EDI values. An emphasis on ongoing policy reviews to embed EDI and gender-based inclusion principles throughout operations was also mentioned, complemented by culturally inclusive events celebrating diversity amongst and for clients.

Challenges persist in smaller and rural centres where awareness and integration of EDI concepts may be less prevalent. Recognizing this gap, some agencies prioritize capacity building to simplify and promote understanding of equity principles within their work plans. There is an aim to equip organizations with practical tools to effectively implement these concepts within all facets of work on a daily basis, acknowledging the additional mental workload this may place on already busy staff.

Collaborative efforts with municipalities highlight initiatives like workplace inclusivity charters, setting criteria such as training provisions, inclusive policies, facilities for diverse needs (e.g.,



breastfeeding and prayer), and accessibility for individuals with disabilities. Despite strides in theoretical understanding through training sessions, the challenge lies in translating this knowledge into tangible, felt inclusivity across organizational culture and client interactions. Ongoing efforts are needed to bridge awareness gaps in less urbanized areas and to ensure equity practices are not only understood, but effectively implemented to create genuinely inclusive environments for both staff and clients alike.

OTHER EMERGING THEMES AND TRENDS

BILINGUAL SERVICE DELIVERY

FEBRUARY 2024

Challenges continue with bilingual service delivery, such as:

- Limited availability and accessibility of Francophone agencies and services in rural areas.
- Little information and resources available in French for individuals within proximity to newcomers (e.g., sponsors of privately sponsored refugees).
- Differing and inconsistent translation of materials due to unreliable support within the translation process.
- Discrepancies between newcomer expectations of a bilingual country and the reality of bilingual practice within Alberta.

One Francophone agency highlighted that many individuals from Central African countries are being privately sponsored as refugees by people residing in Alberta. Therefore, assisting sponsors in obtaining information about sponsoring French-speaking refugees may help address the notable discrepancy between newcomer expectations and Alberta's landscape for bilingual practice. Support offered could include offering workshops, documents, and resource materials in French.

Taking these barriers into consideration, there is a dire need for connections with Francophone agencies to bridge gaps and increase access for clients to Francophone services. French-speaking communities can offer mental, social, and communal support for newcomers. An awareness of Francophone agency offerings is crucial for addressing the challenges French-speaking newcomers may encounter when arriving in both urban and rural centres within Alberta.

MAY 2024

When serving Francophone clients, SPOs face capacity limitations in Francophone services, with limited staffing and resources in many regions. Referrals to Francophone SPOs, particularly in rural areas, often prove difficult due to these constraints, leading clients to be redirected back to Anglophone services. Understanding the scope and roles of different Francophone agencies is another challenge, compounded by a lack of funding impacting the effectiveness of client referrals and follow-ups. Despite clients' interest in improving English alongside French, there's a growing



preference for English services, especially among Francophone newcomers from Africa who perceive greater job market opportunities with English proficiency. Additionally, some Francophone clients are guided towards fields different from their professional backgrounds, reflecting evolving employment trends and linguistic dynamics in settlement processes. Addressing these challenges requires strategic resource allocation and continued collaboration efforts to support Francophone newcomers effectively.

AUGUST 2024

To strengthen Francophone connections and ensure successful outcomes for newcomers, attendees identified several key supports that AAISA and Réseau en immigration francophone de L'Alberta (RIFA) can provide. These include:

- Offering more information on the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP).
- Hosting sessions to share details about services offered by both Anglophone and Francophone agencies, bridging knowledge gaps and fostering collaboration.
- Exploration of collaborations using Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs).
- Refining referral processes and collaboration in regions with limited Francophone services.
- Providing detailed information about available services in French and creating clear referral pathways.

Important observations reveal some Francophone clients may prefer services in English, and there is an emerging need for agencies to be aware of these individual preferences/requests. Many French-speaking clients consider themselves bilingual, which may lead them to access English resources instead of seeking out French services. Additionally, newcomers often prioritize the proximity of agencies to their homes and may not always be aware of the benefits of bilingualism in Alberta.

A significant challenge noted by participants is the ongoing need to share accurate information amidst frequent sector changes. Building trust and increasing the visibility of Francophone organizations among Anglophone counterparts is essential for facilitating client referrals. Participants suggested organizing conferences or meetings for sector representatives to meet, either virtually or in person, to strengthen connections.

Furthermore, collecting information on Francophone newcomers in Alberta would guide the development of services tailored to their needs. A collaborative approach emphasizing communication, professional development, and culturally sensitive practices will enhance support provided to Francophone newcomers in the province.

These targeted discussions, as well as strategic collaboration between AAISA and RIFA, presents a significant opportunity to enhance our collective ability to meet the diverse needs of clients effectively. This holistic commitment to collaboration underscores PEI's objective of providing comprehensive support and fostering inclusivity within the settlement sector.



IMMIGRATION POLICY

NOVEMBER 2023

Unique to this quarter, IRCC announced a new humanitarian pathway for Colombian, Haitian, and Venezuelan foreign nationals. Organizations discussed needing additional details regarding Canada's commitment to aid migrants in the Americas, primarily to determine the number expected to arrive in Alberta through this program. There was consensus that more guidance on future pathways is warranted to foster effective support for newcomers going forward.

FEBRUARY 2024

Updates for this quarter included IRCC's announcement decreasing the number of new international student permits issued for 2024. There was no further discussion on the announcement, though this change may affect future PEI conversations.

PLANNED AND UNPLANNED MIGRATION STRATEGIES

NOVEMBER 2023

With ongoing planned and unplanned surges in newcomer arrivals, discussions were held regarding agency preparatory measures. Strategies mentioned were as follows:

- Creating innovative solutions to provide services despite increases of clients (e.g., strategic referrals, enhancement of collaborations to optimize efficiency, etc.).
- Establishing pre-existing contingencies which address unforeseen rises in funding requirements.
- Engaging in transparent discussions with staff to implement restrictions when there is overflow.
- Ensuring the minimization of service duplication by hosting meetings with other agencies focused on fostering collaboration and support.
- Cross-collaboration efforts with small centres of limited capacity.
- Activating teams to respond to unforeseen arrivals and consequent effects, as well as collaboration with community partners to adequately prepare.

Burnout among staff members was said to be exacerbated by the influx of large number of newcomers, which can often negatively impact work culture. Approaches consequently become more reactionary rather than preparatory. Service delivery providers may often find themselves in a cycle of continuous training and re-training due to this approach. Implementing strategic preparatory measures for unforeseen newcomer arrivals could significantly stabilize and sustain approaches within the immigration sector.



HYBRID SERVICE DELIVERY

FEBRUARY 2024

Hybrid service delivery has become increasingly prevalent since the COVID-19 pandemic and can help organizations create more accessible choices for their clients (Migrant Worker Hub, 2021). Virtual service delivery can be an asset, particularly for group meetings and programs, allowing for broader client reach, easier follow-ups, cost reductions, and filling the gap where transportation may be a barrier. Several key points surrounding the hybrid model include:

- Success of hybrid delivery depends on newcomer needs, preference, and circumstance.
- SPOs may not have the capacity for delivering services in various modes (e.g., scheduling challenges).
- In-person attendance may be necessary in some cases to effectively convey information.
- Challenges persist in providing virtual services to youth (i.e., difficulties offering a service to multiple youth simultaneously).

Overall, participants recognize the benefits of virtual service delivery but also acknowledge the continued importance of in-person services, depending on circumstance.

LESSONS LEARNED

The following lessons learned from the 2023-2024 PEI cycle highlight key insights and challenges faced by service providers, stakeholders, and newcomers, providing a roadmap for improving settlement and integration efforts across Alberta:

- Effective settlement and integration require collaboration among stakeholders to address shared provincial challenges. This collaborative framework helps address sector-wide issues like resource sharing and newcomer needs.
- The rising demand for language services underscores the need for innovative and collaborative solutions to tackle issues such as long waitlists, limited access to language instruction, and digital literacy gaps.
- Agencies must adopt holistic support strategies that integrate mental health services into broader settlement services and ensure clients feel safe to access these resources.
- Newcomers face challenges in navigating the Canadian labour market due to cultural differences, a lack of recognition of foreign credentials, and limited employment supports. Collaborative approaches like mentorship programs and competency-based assessments are critical for improving employment outcomes.
- Affordable housing shortages remain a significant barrier to newcomer settlement, especially in urban centers. Policy advocacy, increased government support, and innovative housing solutions are essential.
- Enhanced education on health services, digital and language support, and cultural sensitivity in healthcare delivery is crucial.

- EDI practices are essential for creating safe and supportive environments for newcomers, staff, and organizations. A focus in rural areas, where awareness and resources are limited, may prove beneficial.
- Strengthened collaboration between Francophone and Anglophone agencies is needed to bridge gaps in services and ensure equitable access to services, particularly in rural areas.
- While technology can improve service delivery, digital literacy remains a barrier for some newcomers. The balance between technological solutions and in-person interaction is vital to meet diverse client needs.
- Systemic barriers, such as the non-recognition of foreign credentials and limited access to government programs, require ongoing advocacy and policy reform to ensure newcomers can successfully integrate into Canadian society.
- The constant influx of newcomers, including unplanned arrivals, highlights the need for service delivery organizations to adopt proactive measures to avoid burnout and ensure efficient service delivery.

These lessons learned emphasize the need for a multi-layered, collaborative, and inclusive approach to settlement services, that recognizes the diverse and evolving needs of Alberta's newcomer population.

NEXT STEPS AND CONCLUSION

As AAISA's PEI moves forward, it is essential to build on the collaborative framework established throughout the 2023-2024 participation term. Priorities mentioned in this term include strengthening partnerships among service provider organizations (SPOs), local governments, and stakeholders to address systemic challenges, particularly in housing, employment, and language services. Efforts should focus on enhancing resource sharing, expanding support for vulnerable newcomer groups, and developing innovative strategies to improve access to critical services such as mental health and legal aid. Additionally, continued advocacy at the provincial and national levels is crucial to address funding limitations and policy barriers, such as credential recognition and access to government programs. The commitment to EDI must remain at the forefront, with increased attention to bilingual service delivery and the specific needs of rural and Francophone newcomers. By leveraging these lessons and maintaining a collective focus on creating a welcoming and inclusive settlement ecosystem, Alberta can continue to improve the integration experience for all newcomers, ensuring their long-term success and well-being.

AAISA remains committed to cultivating a collaborative environment where settlement and integration agencies collaborate to prioritize information sharing, amplify regional perspectives, and develop innovative approaches to address systemic challenges effectively. The insights gathered in this report serve as a foundational framework for the collective efforts toward the overarching vision guiding all participants in the settlement sector.

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