

UKRAINIAN RURAL ALBERTA ATTRACTION PROGRAM (U-RAAP): FINDINGS AND OUTCOMES

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LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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INTRODUCTION

The Ukrainian Rural Alberta Attraction Program (U-RAAP) is a joint initiative between the Alberta Association of Immigrant Serving Agencies (AAISA) and the Calgary Catholic Immigration Society (CCIS). This program was designed to support Ukrainian newcomers in transitioning from urban centers to smaller communities by providing structured assistance in three key areas:

1. Job Placement – Connecting newcomers with employers seeking to fill vacant positions.
2. Relocation Support – Assisting with housing and transportation to ease the transition.
3. Community Integration – Connecting newcomers with local resources, services, and social networks in their new community.

To achieve these goals, AAISA and CCIS implemented a two-stream approach:

- AAISA led employer engagement, building relationships with businesses in need of workers and encouraging them to hire Ukrainian newcomers.
- CCIS managed client attraction, engagement, and assessment, ensuring that each participant was carefully evaluated based on family circumstances, immigration status, skills, and specific needs. The goal was not just job placement but also fostering long-term stability and integration in their new community.

While each organization had a distinct role, collaboration was key in creating a seamless process that connected Ukrainian newcomers with welcoming communities, supportive employers, and stable housing.

Beyond job matching, the program evolved to address broader settlement needs, including interview preparation, housing support, relocation logistics, host family connections, translation services, and access to government benefits. Recognizing that many newcomers were unfamiliar with Canadian workplace expectations, the program also emphasized education and preparation to set them up for long-term success.

Even when rural relocation was not feasible, clients received clear guidance and resources to support their settlement journey elsewhere in Alberta. By matching newcomers to suitable rural communities, with stable employment, and essential housing, the program not only facilitated successful integration but also helped employers address labor shortages.

This report outlines the program's achievements, challenges, and key learnings, highlighting the impact of this collaborative initiative in helping Ukrainian newcomers build new lives in Alberta's smaller communities.

ACTIVITIES BREAKDOWN:

WEB PORTAL

AAISA and CCIS developed an online web portal as the primary tool for collecting interest and registrations from both clients and employers. The portal served as a central resource, providing information about the project and offering a platform for clients, employers, and volunteers to sign up.

As part of AAISA's Employer Engagement activities and CCIS's Client Engagement activities, Ukrainian evacuees and employers were directed to the portal to facilitate their participation in the program.

The portal collected key information from clients, including their skills, work experience, financial situation, and work visa status. Employers provided details on job openings, specific candidate requirements, and the level of support they could offer, such as housing assistance or other resources for newcomers.

All received responses underwent a comprehensive assessment to determine the suitability of employers in offering fair compensation and a supportive work environment, ensuring clients had the opportunity to prosper in their new communities. Similarly, client applications were assessed to determine their ability to address labor shortages in rural areas and their potential for successful integration into the local environment.

If employer requirements or offered wages were deemed insufficient to sustain clients' basic needs, or if there were no suitable candidates with the necessary skill sets, those employers were placed on hold until job opportunities improved or the right candidates were identified. Conversely, clients who were not a strong match for available positions were referred to other relevant service providers for further assistance.

AAISA'S EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

AAISA's employer engagement strategy focused on attracting employers in non-urban areas to consider hiring Ukrainian talent. The initiative supported employers by assisting with client screening, interview scheduling, and client representation, making the hiring process smoother and helping fill job openings with qualified Ukrainian candidates.

Rather than targeting specific sectors from the outset, AAISA prioritized identifying communities with the necessary resources to welcome Ukrainians. These included affordable housing, essential infrastructure, active community engagement, and newcomer-serving providers capable of supporting newcomers.

During the project's first phase, a community screening approach was implemented. Through our network, we engaged municipalities and community stakeholders to assess existing support systems, infrastructure, rental costs, local job markets, and key industries.

To maintain strong relationships, AAISA launched monthly meetings to update and engage stakeholders from rural, small, and mid-sized communities on project progress. These

structured meetings provided a collaborative space for newcomer-serving providers, municipalities, employers, volunteer organizations, and grassroots initiatives to address challenges faced by Ukrainians integrating into Alberta.

Building on the relationships and connections established in the first phase, AAISA launched the second phase of the project, focusing on engaging employers in non-urban communities that had the potential and capacity to welcome Ukrainians. This phase aimed to encourage employers to sign up and participate in the initiative.

In the project's second phase, AAISA focused on engaging employers in non-urban communities with the capacity to welcome Ukrainians. Most promotional efforts were conducted through established channels such as municipalities, employer associations, and newcomer-serving providers rather than cold outreach.

For example, municipalities involved in the Rural Renewal Stream had pre-screened employer networks, making them ideal partners for outreach. These municipalities had experience working with and engaging employers, allowing AAISA to focus on leveraging these existing relationships rather than duplicating efforts.

Additionally, outreach through municipal newsletters and other communication channels proved effective, allowing AAISA to reach targeted employers while also engaging a broader audience. Collaboration with employer associations further contributed to the project's success. A notable example was AAISA's partnership with the Alberta Hotel & Lodging Association, which connected us with multiple hospitality employers across the province and helped maintain a steady inflow of employers throughout the project.

CCIS'S CLIENT ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

CCIS's client engagement process was designed to balance structured support with personalized attention, ensuring Ukrainian newcomers could transition smoothly to rural Alberta. The approach evolved through four interconnected phases, each of which was tailored to address the complexities of relocation and integration.

1. **Client Intake and Profile Development:** The client intake form on the U-RAAP project webpage served as the primary tool for client registration, collecting key information such as professional experience, family status, transferable skills, available licenses and documentation, and career goals.

To enhance the consistency and depth of data collection, the intake form underwent several revisions, including updates to the questionnaire and the addition of new tracking categories. One of the key challenges was assessing clients' long-term career intentions and qualifications. In the early months of the project, it became evident that many clients registered without a clear career plan, making it difficult to provide tailored support. In response, a major transformation took place in September 2024, leading to a complete redesign of the intake form. The revised form became a structured guide, helping clients build their career plans, reassess their experience and skills, and gain deeper insights beyond their resumes.

2. **Interview Facilitation:** Completing the intake form was the first step in the process. Once clients submitted their forms, resumes, and immigration documentation, they participated in a one-on-one interview with a Ukrainian-speaking client liaison. These interviews provided an opportunity to review their skills, experiences, and career goals while also addressing any gaps or questions arising from their intake responses.

Through this assessment process, it became evident that many clients required mental health support. While this need fell outside the project's primary scope, a Ukrainian volunteer with a background in counseling generously stepped in to facilitate online support groups for Ukrainian visa holders. These weekly sessions created a safe space for participants to connect, share experiences, and offer mutual support.

By integrating insights from both the intake forms and personal interviews, CCIS developed a comprehensive understanding of each client's profile and their alignment with the program. This holistic approach enabled the team to move forward with the next step - identifying suitable employers and facilitating job matches.

3. **Job Matching:** If an employer expressed interest in a candidate, the CCIS team facilitated the interview process. In cases where clients had limited English proficiency, CCIS assisted by joining the interview to ensure that the candidate's skills and experiences were effectively communicated, minimizing language barriers.
4. **Relocation and Settlement Support:** If a job offer was extended, CCIS provided comprehensive transition support to help clients relocate and integrate into their new communities. This included:
 - **Housing Assistance** – Supporting clients in finding accommodation through formal housing programs, rental subsidies (if available), or temporary host placements in cases of financial need.
 - **Logistical Support** – Assisting with travel arrangements, including volunteer pickups, transportation coordination, or covering ticket costs for those with limited financial resources.
 - **Community Integration** – Connecting clients with local support networks, whether through existing settlement programs or community-based initiatives, and guiding them on how to access essential services such as school enrollment, daycare, and healthcare.
 - **Ongoing Follow-up** – Once clients settled into their new communities and workplaces, CCIS maintained regular follow-ups to monitor satisfaction and address any emerging challenges, whether related to employment or broader settlement needs.

SUCSESSES

As of January 30, 2025, AAISA has actively engaged employers and stakeholders in non-urban areas, hosting 10 roundtable discussions with an average of 26 participants per session. These efforts successfully promoted the project and established connections with 54 municipalities, locally based service providers, and community organizations.

As a result, 112 employers have been engaged across key industries, including hospitality, agriculture, restaurants, skilled trades, administration, automotive, and healthcare.

On the client side, CCIS has processed 336 client applications, leading to:

- 206 needs assessments conducted
- 213 employment information tools and resources provided
- 128 referrals made to urban employment agencies for clients who preferred not to relocate
- 86 resume and job search support sessions
- 31 interview preparation and practice sessions
- 18 interview translation services provided
- 17 housing placements facilitated for clients in urgent need

Through these efforts, 60 interviews were requested by rural employers, resulting in 18 verbal job offers, creating opportunities for 27 clients to relocate to new communities.

Even though several clients did not gain employment in rural areas, they still benefited from learning essential skills such as job searching, resume building or improvement, and job interview preparation. Additionally, 21 clients secured employment in Edmonton and Calgary. While these placements were outside the program's primary focus on rural and mid-sized community relocations, they highlight the program's effectiveness in helping clients overcome employment barriers and successfully enter the workforce.

CHALLENGES

Despite well-structured processes, some challenges could not be resolved through procedural improvements alone.

CANDIDATE JOB OFFER DECLINES

One of the biggest challenges we faced was candidates declining job offers after successfully securing employment in their desired field. Even when wages met expectations, housing was available, employers were committed, and community support was in place, some candidates still chose not to proceed at the final stage. These last-minute refusals strain relationships with employers and create inefficiencies in time management. Evaluating a candidate's willingness and urgency to relocate was a key focus during the application and interview process, and even when candidates express strong intentions, their final decision remains unpredictable. In some cases, they reconsider at the last moment, making it difficult to ensure consistent placement success.

HIGH EXPECTATIONS VS. READINESS

Another major challenge was managing the gap between client expectations and their actual readiness to compete in the Canadian workforce. Many newcomers had strong careers in Ukraine or Europe before the war, but upon arriving in Canada, they faced significant barriers such as language limitations, unrecognized credentials, and the need to take survival jobs. Despite these realities, some clients remained unwilling to accept roles that did not perfectly align with their previous experience. Other clients applied for rural job opportunities solely for the promise of higher wages, with no real commitment to relocating or integrating into a smaller community. To address these issues, we refined our application and screening process to help set realistic expectations early on. However, shifting mindsets remained an ongoing challenge.

MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT PERMANENT RESIDENCY

Many Ukrainian newcomers mistakenly believe that moving to a rural community will automatically improve their chances of obtaining permanent residency. While rural programs can be beneficial in certain cases, relocation alone does not necessarily speed up or simplify the process. Some clients with stable urban jobs were willing to leave their positions for unrelated roles in rural areas, assuming it would provide a fast-track to permanent residency. However, Alberta's Rural Renewal Stream remains highly competitive, with strict requirements - such as English proficiency, stable employment, and recognized educational credentials - that are nearly identical to other immigration streams. Additionally, reduced quotas and application backlogs have made the process even more challenging.

RELOCATION CHALLENGES FROM URBAN CENTERS

The majority of our clients were based in Calgary and Edmonton and were often tied to lease agreements. Many found themselves unable to break their leases in time to meet employers' hiring deadlines, leading to missed opportunities. This mismatch between employer timelines and client relocation feasibility created ongoing difficulties in job placements. To address this, we explored creative solutions such as arranging temporary housing, securing host families, or facilitating phased relocations where one family member moved first while others remained in their rental unit until the lease expired.

UNSUSTAINABLE WAGES

Some employers sought to fill positions that offered wages that were too low to sustain a basic standard of living. While jobs that provided housing and food – such as those in hospitality – were sometimes viable, they were typically only suitable for single individuals. A core priority of our program was ensuring Ukrainians could build stable, long-term lives in their new communities. As a result, we did not match clients with jobs where wages were clearly insufficient to support their cost of living.

LOW ENGLISH PROFICIENCY

Many of our clients arrived in Alberta under the special policy for displaced Ukrainians, which did not require a specific level of English proficiency. As a result, a significant portion of our candidate pool struggled with English, limiting their ability to compete for jobs that required workplace communication or safety-related training. Alberta's language support system was not equipped to provide immediate solutions. Federally funded language programs had long waitlists, and most classes were held during working hours – making them inaccessible to those balancing jobs or childcare responsibilities. This lack of accessible language training significantly hindered our clients' ability to improve their skills and secure employment opportunities within our employer network.

LESSONS LEARNED

One of the key observations from this project is how different client arrival contexts impact job matching. In CCIS's initial project, most clients were newly arriving in Alberta without established ties to any community. However, in this project, the majority had already settled – primarily in Calgary and Edmonton – and had been living there for some time.

While having local experience and familiarity with the job market can be beneficial, we found that connecting clients with employers was actually easier before they arrived in Canada. The main reason was flexibility. Clients who had not yet arrived had no commitments such as leases, family ties, or school registrations, making relocation much simpler. They were also more willing to move as soon as they landed.

In contrast, many of our current clients have already built lives in their communities, making relocation more complex. Even when strong job matches were available, hesitation and uncertainty often delayed decisions or led to declined offers.

EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT

There is a strong demand from rural employers to hire Ukrainians, particularly in high-demand sectors like hospitality, trades, and agriculture. However, there is a stark contrast between the types of available positions.

Most employers either seek entry-level workers for labor and service jobs requiring minimal language skills – typically offering lower wages – or highly skilled candidates with local accreditation and strong English proficiency. The latter roles are difficult to fill locally, while mid-level jobs with moderate requirements remain highly competitive. This reality often made it challenging to attract employers willing to hire Ukrainian candidates.

To bridge these gaps, we advocated for housing solutions for lower-wage jobs and worked to demonstrate that a client's skills were sufficient despite lacking local certification. Our role was to highlight the challenges Ukrainians faced due to the war while finding creative ways to showcase their abilities, even if they were not yet fluent in English or fully accredited.

Encouragingly, our employer outreach and final survey confirmed that rural employers are open to hiring candidates who demonstrate dedication, experience, and commitment—even when some qualifications are missing.

CLIENT ENGAGEMENT

Our client pool fell into two distinct categories:

1. Those facing significant employment barriers, such as limited English proficiency, lack of experience, or ineffective job search strategies.
2. Experienced professionals unable to transition into the Canadian job market due to language barriers, lack of credential recognition, or industry competitiveness.

Both groups struggled to secure employment and required extensive support from our team. Only a small percentage of clients were already employed when they joined the program, and those who were mostly sought higher wages or clearer pathways to permanent residency - neither of which were direct priorities of this initiative.

One of the most significant barriers was English proficiency. Employers, particularly in roles with safety requirements, often had non-negotiable language expectations. Even for entry-level jobs, basic workplace communication was essential. Since most clients were recent newcomers, many lacked the English skills required for available positions.

To address this, we actively advocated for clients, facilitated interviews, and prepared candidates, even those with limited English. In some cases, we used translation software or paired clients with stronger English speakers to support their on-the-job learning. However, advocating on this issue was time-intensive and only feasible when clients were transparent about their language skills and committed to improving them.

CLIENT COMMITMENT

The most successful candidates in our program were those who:

1. Were genuinely interested in a rural lifestyle and understood what living in a smaller community entailed.
2. Had an urgent need for employment.

Many clients applied because they were unable to find work in an urban community, believed they could secure jobs more easily in rural areas, or thought relocation would improve their chances of gaining permanent residency.

Although we refined our intake forms and interview process to assess commitment, many clients later declined job offers, withdrew applications, or became unresponsive. Predicting long-term dedication remains challenging, as interest in relocation can shift over time. Ultimately, there is no guarantee that a client will follow through when an opportunity arises.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Ukrainian Rural Alberta Attraction Program has established a strong foundation for connecting Ukrainian newcomers with rural opportunities. To build on this momentum and effectively address the challenges and successes identified, the following section provides some key recommendations based on the results of the project, which are broken down for newcomer-serving organizations, and the federal and provincial government.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NEWCOMER-SERVING PROVIDERS:

1. **Strengthen Pre-Arrival Preparation:** Pre-arrival preparation is not just about moving from abroad – interprovincial migration can be just as important. Our experience shows that clients often have unrealistic expectations about different provinces, assuming, for example, that Alberta offers easier job opportunities in certain sectors. While this can be both true and false, similar misconceptions exist when moving from urban to rural areas. The realities of rural life in Alberta may differ significantly from what Ukrainians have experienced in Ukraine or Europe. Proactive engagement with newcomers before their arrival, provincial relocation, or urban-to-rural transition is critical for managing expectations and reducing relocation hesitancy.
2. **Incentivize Employer Participation:** Rural employers require targeted support to effectively hire and retain newcomers. Many rural employers are not familiar with the nuances of newcomers' backgrounds and the context of their arrival. Traditional screening methods often overlook cultural differences and may unfairly dismiss highly talented candidates with strong portfolios and skills. These individuals are sometimes rejected for not having Canadian experience, being perceived as overqualified or underqualified, or lacking sufficient English proficiency.

In our work with rural employers, we found that our conversations were more personalized, which allowed us to present a broader picture of client profiles. In many

cases, this approach led to interviews that would not have happened otherwise. It's important to be transparent with employers, while also demonstrating a client's experience from a different perspective. For example, while a newcomer's English may not be perfect, showing the progress they've made in a short period highlights their dedication to improvement – an invaluable trait for many employers.

3. **Prioritize Client Assessments and Commitment:** One of the top priorities in the application intake process should be centered around understanding the client's commitment and their short- and long-term plans. To successfully integrate into a smaller community, newcomers must have a clear and comprehensive understanding of what it's like to live in a rural area.

From our experience, clients who arrive with a set vision and plan often have misunderstandings about the immigration complexities of moving to a smaller location. They may also have false perceptions about certain sectors and how these will impact their long-term careers. Rather than simply asking clients about their plans, the intake form should be structured to guide them in clarifying their intentions and developing a realistic plan.

At later stages, there should be an additional layer of scenario-based interviews to evaluate the client's understanding of rural life and identify any gaps in their plan. Without this multilayered approach to understanding clients' intentions, situations may arise where even if a job is found and clients are ready to move, it could negatively affect their long-term success and hinder their immigration chances.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOVERNMENT (FEDERAL AND PROVINCIAL):

4. **Expand Accessible Language Training:** Language barriers remain a significant hurdle to employment and integration. Given the context of Ukrainian arrivals – where English was not required for entry visas and permits – many newcomers have had to work while simultaneously improving their English skills.

Through our program, we have specifically supported individuals struggling with integration and job searches, revealing a strong correlation between difficulty finding work and limited English proficiency. The existing language classes offered by the federal and provincial governments are not sufficient to meet demand and have significant backlogs. Even when newcomers secure spots, class schedules are often inconvenient for working families or those with children, forcing many to either study English on their own or deprioritize it in favor of immediate survival.

While this approach may work in the short term, it will inevitably create long-term challenges, particularly when individuals begin pursuing permanent residency pathways or transitioning into higher-paying jobs. Expanding accessible, flexible language training options is essential to ensuring the long-term success of Ukrainian newcomers in Alberta.

5. **Need for Systemic Policy Improvements:** One of the biggest challenges for the Ukrainian workforce in Alberta is that the entire arrival stream was initially built on

a temporary basis. This system essentially granted Ukrainians worker status while the war in Ukraine lasts. However, it was not designed with the expectation that the war would continue for three years, with no clear end in sight.

For many Ukrainians, their work permits are now expiring. While the Government of Canada has introduced special policies to extend work permits, the process can be quite complex. Additionally, there has been a growing trend of Ukrainians encountering issues with extending their Ukrainian passports, further complicating the extension of their in-Canada documentation.

Without a solid foundation and the legal right to work in Canada, it becomes nearly impossible for us to assist clients in finding employment and successfully integrating into Alberta's communities and workforce.

CONCLUSION

The Ukrainian Rural Attraction Program has demonstrated a strong interest from rural and mid-sized employers in hiring Ukrainian talent. Many employers have shown flexibility and a willingness to accommodate the specific and unique needs of these workers. However, while interest exists, multiple support mechanisms must be in place for successful matches and relocation to new communities.

Our program prioritized the most vulnerable Ukrainians – those whose ability to secure employment was critical to their well-being. Despite this focus, numerous challenges prevented immediate workforce entry, including language barriers, lack of Canadian experience and credentials, age, family circumstances, medical conditions, trauma, and mental health concerns. Even with our best efforts, many of these barriers require long-term, sustainable support, which most Ukrainian newcomers, as temporary foreign workers, are ineligible to receive.

A key lesson from our client interactions is that the human element is difficult to predict when designing the process. People's intentions can shift daily. Even when individuals initially expressed strong interest in relocating to smaller communities, we encountered cases where they ultimately declined job offers despite competitive salaries, available housing, and access to necessary community support.

Beyond job placements, one of our program's most significant yet immeasurable successes was the guidance and support provided to every registered client. For those who met eligibility criteria, we conducted interviews and offered practical advice on improving their employment prospects. Even in cases where relocation was not feasible, we helped clients develop long-term career plans and navigate various challenges. This included resume and document preparation, certification pathways, immigration misconceptions, job interview readiness, and mental health support. These efforts will have lasting positive impacts, though the full extent will only become clear over time.

The relationships built with municipalities, employers, grassroots organizations, and volunteer communities form a strong foundation for future initiatives supporting newcomers in small and mid-sized communities. Notably, our ability to engage organizations

outside the traditionally funded settlement sector is crucial for rural-focused programs, where settlement services are far less available compared to urban areas. The connections established through U-RAAP will be invaluable for future initiatives.

Moving forward, sustaining the program will require ongoing collaboration between settlement agencies, government bodies, employers, and grassroots community groups outside traditional funding models. Efforts should focus on refining pre-arrival support, expanding employer incentives, and advocating for immigration policies that provide greater stability for Ukrainian newcomers. Additionally, increased investment in language training and career development resources will be critical to ensuring long-term success.