ALBERTA SETTLEMENT SECTOR SURVEY

2024

aaisa

ALBERTA ASSOCIATION OF IMMIGRANT SERVING AGENCIES

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Acknowledgement of Territories

This report was authored in "Calgary", the place at the meeting of the Bow and Elbow Rivers, also known as Moh'kin'tsis in Siksikáí'powahsin/ Blackfoot, Wîchispa Oyade in Stoney Nakoda, and Guts'its'i in Tsúùt'ínà Gūnáhà. English was the original language of authorship of this report. We take this opportunity to reflect on the fact that the dominance of English, in Canada and worldwide, stems from racist colonial practices and prejudices that continue to operate today.

AAISA serves diverse people across of the Treaty 4, 6, 7, 8 and 10 regions and all twenty-two districts of the Métis Nation of Alberta. We hope to continue to grow our understanding and relationship with the traditional caretakers of these lands in our roles as signatories to broken treaties.

General Acknowledgement

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Executive Summary

AAISA's 2024 Alberta Sector Survey focused on sketching a picture of the state of play in five key service domains across the province: language, employment, health care, housing, and child care.

Our analysis finds important recurring issues across each of these domains, but we also emphasize that the domains are interconnected and clients who struggle in one area often struggle in the others. We propose language as a node through which these interconnected issues may be effectively tackled, while observing that the imbalance of demand and resources in language services has become especially high.

Among techniques to confront these challenges, agencies emphasized successful partnerships with organizations outside the sector. We celebrate these innovative approaches to service delivery, which can significantly improve the efficiency and effectiveness of services, while also noting that dedicated time and resources are required to reap the considerable benefits of this type of collaboration.

In a new Issue in Highlight segment, we summarize respondents' attitudes toward the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in the settlement sector. Respondents varied significantly in their outlooks toward AI from enthusiasm all the way to profound concern. We summarize the range of positions respondents took toward AI policy and their current uses of the technology.

Introduction

Immigration policy and settlement service provision in Canada saw significant change over the course of 2024. AAISA's 2024 Sector Survey sought to take stock of the issues confronting the sector at the close of this year. For the first time, we constructed the survey around qualitative questions, asking our members to share with us their insights about their concerns in five key service areas based on previous years' findings: language services, employment services, health care, housing, and child care.

We were deeply grateful for the level of dedication members devoted to this inquiry. Our members shared their observations about the direction of newcomer services with extraordinary detail and thoughtfulness. We were delighted to summarize and analyze this rich commentary, and we are glad to now share it with all our members and with funders in the following report.

In 2024, we selected the use of artificial intelligence in the settlement sector as our issue in highlight. While machine learning tools can be highly productive and make processes more efficient, for some observers, concerns about bias and data safety outweigh the possible benefits. In this highlighted section, we summarize what organizations in Alberta told us about their attitudes toward organizational policy around AI implementation and which purposes they plan to use this technology for, if they do.

Methodology

As in prior years, the sector survey was distributed to a mailing list of 97 executive directors or top leaders of 92 settlement organizations. Instructions were to submit one response per organization.

A total of 33 responses were submitted, yielding a response rate of 36%. This represents a decrease from the response rate of 58% in 2023 (45 of 77). All organizations completed the demographics section, but a few did not submit qualitative comments. The number of comments provided for each of our questions centering around a key service domain is reported under the headings below.

A major difference this year was the decision to structure the survey around qualitative questions. Typically, the survey includes mainly quantitative questions. We experimented with this qualitative structure because of our interest this year in eliciting nuanced feedback on key issues, although we were aware that the increased burden on respondents might reduce the response rate.

The five key issues we selected came from survey responses of past years that identified language, employment, and health care as top issues facing newcomers. We also selected two additional key issues: housing and childcare.

Housing emerged as an important issue because of how central housing need has been in the ongoing discussion about affordability in the Canadian economy. What's more, the tightening housing market has been associated in some media venues with an increase in anti-immigration sentiment; emphasis on how much newcomers themselves struggle in the housing market is an important counterbalance to this narrative.

Child care held an interesting place in our analyses in previous years, particularly in 2023. In that year, child care was not a top priority for all respondents, but those respondents who did think of child care considered it one of the most important issues of all.

Highlighting child care in our survey is consistent with a Gender Based Analysis (GBA) Plus approach. Child care is an important responsibility that often falls on women in most world cultures, including Anglo-Canadian culture. As the Women's Centre of Calgary outlines, it's common for burdens primarily held by women to be forgotten, even in a sector where many workers and leaders are female, because of deeper structural tendencies to privilege unisex and male-focused priorities. That means fewer resources and supports for women who are faced with difficulties caring for their children. Improving childcare supports for newcomer women is an important part of ensuring women with children have equal access to resources in all other areas.

AAISA's research team additionally selected AI as an issue in highlight because of the prominence of questions about AI in the media and in professional discourse today. AI promises some improvements to work processes in the settlement world, but it also poses challenges and pitfalls, including moral questions, which the settlement sector should take especially seriously as part of our dedication to equity and dignity for newcomers. We discuss issues specific to AI more extensively, including a summary of discussions regarding use of AI in the settlement sector, in the relevant section below.

Demographics

This year's survey focused on qualitative discussion of key issues in the settlement sector, and only certain key demographics were taken. Certain other more detailed demographic statistics can be seen in the sector surveys from 2022 and 2023. We took three basic demographics to contextualize qualitative responses: type of service, service location, and operating budget.

Figure 1. Respondents by type of service offered *(n = 35)*
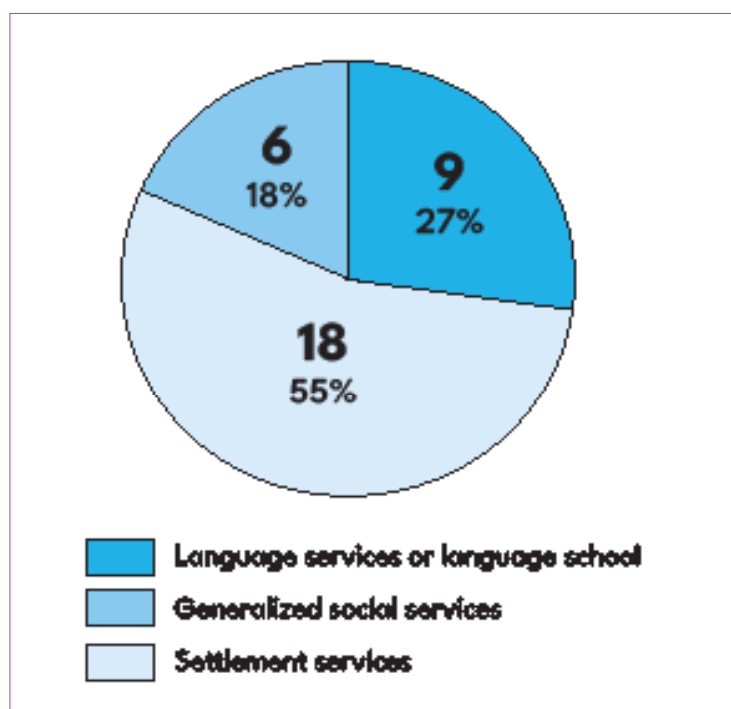
Type of Service

About **half** the respondents to the 2024 Sector Survey were dedicated settlement organizations.

The remaining half was divided between language schools (27%) and organizations offering general social services (18%).

Service Location

Respondent organizations came from across the province, with a good balance of organizations located in cities and in small centres. In the visualization below, organizations may have selected multiple centres as locations of service (e.g., an agency with headquarters in Calgary and additional services in Brooks would have selected both areas).

Figure 2
Distribution of responding organization services across the province

Other areas:
- Lakeland region
- Camrose
- Leduc/Beaumont
- Parkland County
- Jasper
- Rocky View
- Foothills
- Drumheller
- Claresholm
- Alberta-wide

Operating Budgets

Data on operating budgets has the benefit of providing a point of comparison in the year prior to new Contribution Agreements which will be established at the beginning of the fiscal year 2025-26. The results show that the plurality of respondents have a budget between $1 million and $2.9 million, with the next largest category falling between $3 million and $5.9 million.

A few organizations, especially those with larger parent organizations, responded that they had budgets of $18+ million, and a few more responded that they had budgets of <$1 million.

Figure 3. Respondents by operating budget *(n = 35)*
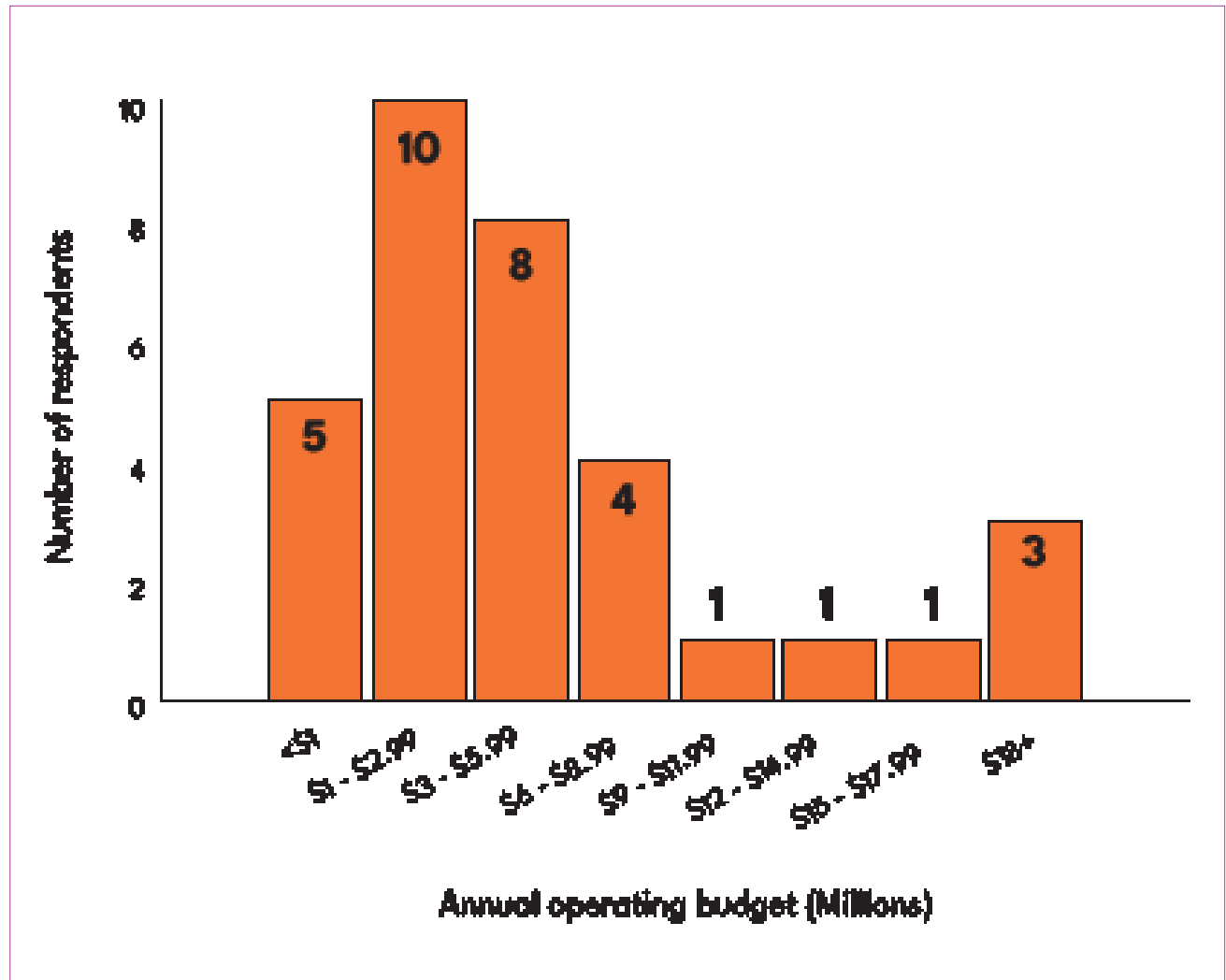
Qualitative Findings
In Five Highlighted Service Domains

AAISA's 2024 Sector Survey focused on five service domains: language services, employment services, health care, housing services, and child care. We chose these domains because we heard from our members in previous years that these were among the most pressing issues our sector would need to address in order to provide comprehensive services to newcomers.

In each service domain, we collected information about how many organizations offered services in that area. Figure 4 shows the results.

Figure 4. Respondent service offerings
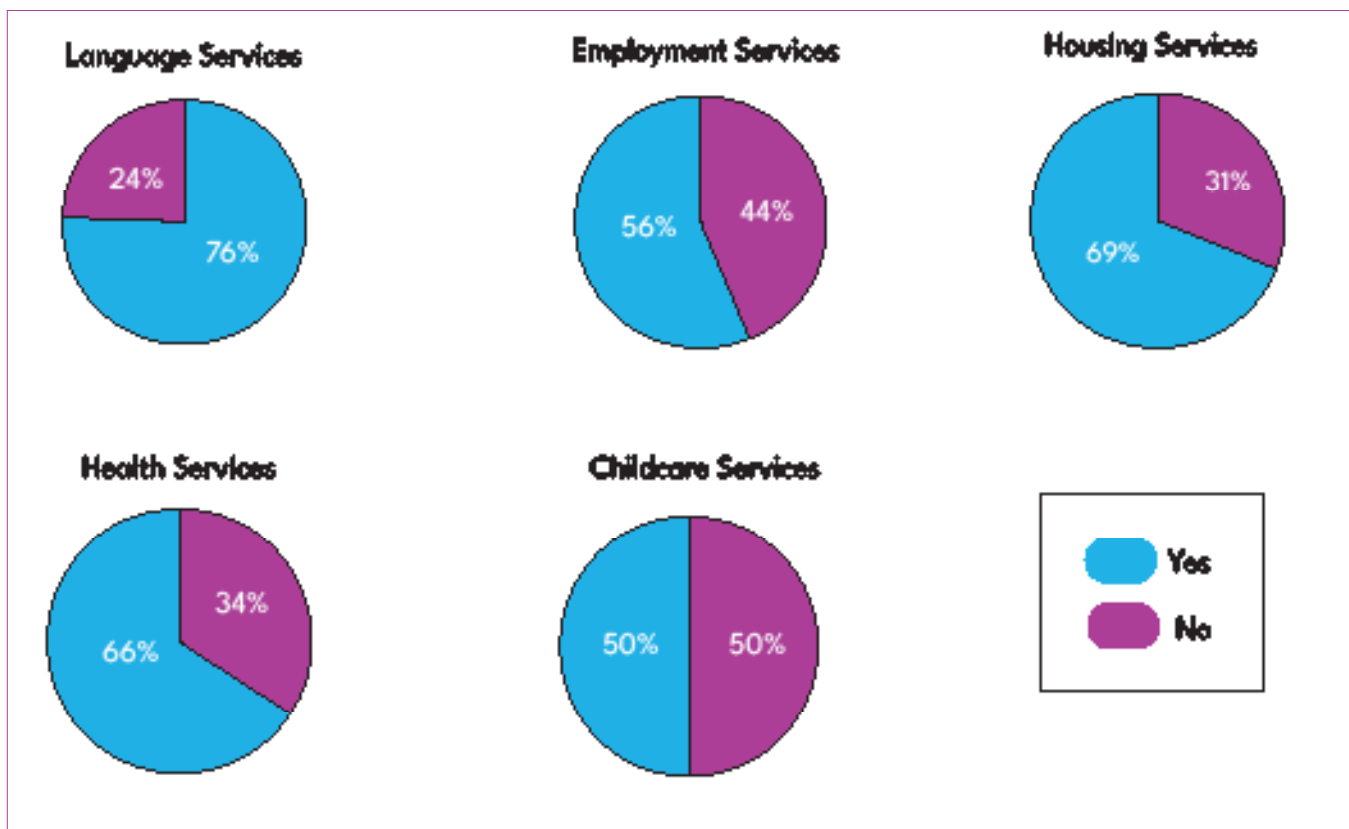
Below, in each relevant section, we report how many respondents stated that they offered each service and how many left substantive comments. Respondents were able to select to comment even if they did not offer the service.

Members provided highly specific and useful feedback about operations and funding in each of these areas. We will begin by reviewing that feedback for each type of service individually, and conclude by working through some of the important ways that these needs are intertwined.

We have included direct quotes from the survey responses where they are illuminating and where they don't identify the respondent individually. These responses have been lightly edited for grammar only, without altering their meaning or word choice.

Language Service

Our survey requested comments on language teaching as well as translation/interpretation services. A total of 25 organizations stated that they offered language services, and 21 respondents left substantive comments.

A standout, frequently repeated concern came from an issue that has been longstanding in the Albertan settlement sector for several years: the **waitlists that have been steadily growing** for language classes. Respondents told us, as they have previously expressed to us and to funders, that their waitlists for LINC classes had grown far beyond what would have been considered reasonable only a few years ago:

> *Clients come in frustrated, upset and angry and our front line staff have to deal with them on a regular basis... We currently have [about a dozen] classes and over 300 on the waiting list – that is more than we have in actual classes. We do refer applicants to our CALP, but it too has a waitlist even with an offering of [about ten] EAL classes.*
>
> ———————
>
> *Our urban language services have seen the number of registrations quadrupled in FY 2023-2024. We received about 600 registrations for classes.*
>
> ———————
>
> *Wait time for LINC and CALP [is a challenge, with] 200+ on our waiting list.*
>
> ———————
>
> *The main challenges are waiting lists. Some students in our literacy program can wait up to two years for language services.*

There are a number of possible short-term solutions to this issue which have already been approached by funders: permitting over-enrollment of classes, for example. But over-enrollment, while it may techni-

cally reduce waitlist numbers, is an unsustainable strain on organizations. The sector already faces issues with retaining employees, both the specialized language instructors who make up the system and the administrative staff who make the system run. The recent increase in demand is not the only issue—the sector in general has a limited ability to offer secure, stable long-term employment to these skilled workers. In AAISA's 2023 Sector Survey, four out of five organizations that were forced to rely on part-time labour were language organizations.

> *We need dedicated staff for our language services to process students' intake, assessments and referrals to appropriately provide services.*
>
> *The funding model for LINC Instructors is unfair. Due to the precarious nature of instructor contracts, many teachers work at more than one location, are not paid for all the preparation required. I would like to see professionalization of the sector that offers fair wages and benefits to all LINC employees, including instructors.*
>
> *[In hiring, we face] competition for instructors with the school systems who are also short of teachers and substitutes for public schools.*
>
> *[We face] difficulty in hiring, retaining, or finding qualified instructors in smaller cities.*
>
> *The greatest challenge for us as a service provider is staff retention. Without competitive wages and comprehensive benefits for our staff we see many excellent employees leaving us for greener pastures. Since Covid this problem has grown. Employees in general are seeking better paying jobs with more flexibility and benefits. Not having access to these options leaves us constantly working on recruitment.*

Several organizations noted a need among their clients for various types of classes that they were not able to offer. A model based on strictly funding particular levels of LINC limited their ability to respond to student needs and teach effectively. Since the survey was released, LINC levels 5 and 6 are no longer funded, which is likely to exacerbate the issues described.

> *We have been able to offer two literacy classes for CLB 1L learners. However, we have had literacy students for so long, they are now in higher level classes. It would be greatly beneficial to have official CLB 2L and CLB 3L classes.*
>
> *For us the need for LINC level 5 & 6 has been a challenge. Our students are not able to naturally progress into other services within our agency, for example Employment Services, because we are not funded to offer LINC classes past level 4.*
>
> *Our organization is only funded to provide up to LINC Level 4; however, Level 5 proficiency is required for some training and bridging programs. This can interrupt or limit clients' progression from language learning to employment-based training.*

We serve many non/low literacy students, and for many the strict PBLA classroom setting is perhaps not the best format to learn English. More practical and real-life language training will bring more benefit.

Employment

A total of 14 respondents stated that their organization offered employment services. 13 respondents left substantive comments.

Many of the issues that newcomers face in the employment market are well-established. For example, organizations discussed how foreign credential recognition hampers the entry of foreign professionals into the Canadian workplace. A lack of education about newcomer employees among employers is also common, so that employers are often invested in an unnecessary requirement for Canadian work experience. Finally, newcomers often lack an extensive Canadian professional network.

Organizations in the sector pointed to a barrier in confronting these well-known issues: their ability to form specialized partnerships with employers and employment services organizations that serve the particular, unique needs of newcomers. Many respondents stated that this type of indirect, capacity-building work was not easy to find funding for. This type of programming falls under the category of cross-sectoral collaboration efforts, which, as we will review, was a common thread among almost all the programs that respondents cited as innovative and successful in their organizations.

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Employers may feel hesitant to hire newcomers due to a perceived "fear of the unknown," believing they would need to significantly alter their hiring, training, or retention processes or invest substantial resources to support newcomers. However, this concern is often unfounded.

At present, the demand for employment services [in our community] exceeds our capacity... the majority of our employment staff are supported through fundraised dollars. In our experience, it is necessary to have specialized employment supports for newcomers in this community.

One of the main challenges is that we are not funded to provide formal employment services, which limits our capacity to offer comprehensive job placement or long-term career development programs. Instead, we focus on resume building, interview preparation, and job search assistance, while referring clients to specialized employment agencies. However, without dedicated funding, it can be difficult to provide the in-depth support many clients need to overcome the specific barriers they face in the job market, such as language proficiency and lack of Canadian work experience.

Not recognizing foreign credentials (education and/or experience) is the single largest challenge for newcomers to fully utilize their skills. And for employers and local economy it leaves a lot of untapped talents....The receiving party, ie. employers, are not included in [funded settlement services around employment], resulting in low and under employment.

One way to summarize this problem: while resume building, interview prep and other services are certainly helpful, it's often not newcomers who are the limiting component of the employment equation, particularly for newcomers with high credentials. Equally often, it's employers themselves. Mainstream employment services may not be equipped to confront a lack of education among employers about hiring newcomers. The settlement sector is unusually well-positioned to address these actors in efforts to reduce underemployment among newcomers. What's more, programs that partner with employers also help patch the gaps in newcomers' Canadian professional networks. The settlement sector could also turn its efforts to relations with professional associations that might improve access to bridging programs and other foreign credential recognition solutions.

Healthcare and mental health

A total of 16 respondents stated that they offered health care or mental health services, and 14 respondents left substantive comments

The Sector Survey asked for comments from respondents on both physical health care services and mental health services. More organizations focused on mental health, perhaps because resources are less well-established, and because in other ways mental health is still a more contingent and culturally varied factor in well-being. However, one recurring comment on physical health was that navigating Canada's healthcare system was a challenge for many newcomers. And, in particular, health care providers did not always show patience with newcomers or use existing resources to support newcomer care:

> *Even though medical clinics and hospitals have access to the language line, they rarely use it and instead often chose to just speak louder and shorter indicating their frustration with the language barrier. Cultural barriers come into play as medical services do not have the capacity to take the time to ensure that newcomers understand the procedures and norms of Canadian health services which often leads to misunderstanding and additional stress for the patient.*

As for mental health, it's well-established that newcomers may struggle to access mental health services with which they are comfortable. Some respondents focused on a main barrier being a lack of mental health care that is conscious of the challenges associated with immigrating, or that is culturally suitable for newcomers who come from a different context of understanding about emotional well-being. Others focused on the fact that accessing mental health services carries a stigma for many newcomers. Organizations discussed a number of successful programs in the vein of preventative education and stigma prevention workshops.

Several respondents noted that they saw complex cases becoming more common and including health and mental health as main causes.

> *A greater number of clients (over 60%) have family members living with disabilities, mental health and/or chronic illnesses and required significant supports to navigate the health system and services related to these health needs. These complex acute needs takes significant amount of cases management staff hours and often for a prolonged periods. These needs have been the major driver of higher client caseloads ratios for our case management team.*
>
> ———————
>
> *We have been seeing a growing number of extremely complex cases where individuals, and often entire families, require in-depth mental health services and supports.*

We didn't receive comments from respondents that might help to explain why the rate of clients in higher need of intensive wraparound services might have grown. However, given that this is the case, appropriate supports for staff ought to be in place to protect them from burnout. In determining factors like staff-to-client ratio, the complexity of cases is an important factor.

Housing

A total of 10 respondents stated that they offered housing services, and 11 respondents left substantive comments. (The latter number is higher because several respondents wanted to leave comments about housing although they did not offer the service themselves.)

Housing has become one of the most significant issues in economic discussions in the last few years. Arguments against Canada's immigration levels, which have also become more widespread, have focused on insufficient housing as a reason. Yet experts point out that it's an error to ignore how longstanding the insufficiency of low-income housing in Canada really is. What's more, newcomers, especially temporary residents and people in humanitarian admissions categories such as refugee claimants, are among those who suffer most from a tightening housing market.

Respondents provided an excellent survey of the reasons that newcomers may particularly struggle to find housing that suits their needs. Newcomers still face racism in the housing market. The decisions of landlords are even more secretive and unilateral than in, say, the job market, which exacerbates issues of bias. Sometimes this may take the form of rejecting tenants with traits that are not directly linked to their newcomer status, but which newcomers will disproportionately be affected by, such as rejecting large families. In addition, newcomers often have limited Canadian credit history, which is part of how landlords decide to whom they will rent a unit.

Several respondents noted the need for dedicated staff to assist with finding housing, and that case management time was significantly devoted to housing issues:

" *Our staff are spending significant amounts of time assisting clients on all levels dealing with evictions, rent increases, new arrivals looking for permanent housing etc.*

—————————

Challenge: [we have] no redundancy in [our] Housing Coordinator position.

—————————

Demand for [housing] support from our settlement team is higher than their capacity.

—————————

As a settlement SPO, having a designated team who will focus on the relationship building and research in the housing market would go a long way in facilitating appropriate supports for clients.

Child care

A total of 15 organizations stated that they provided child care services, and 14 organizations left substantive comments.

We chose to include child care as one of our five key domains because of its significance in survey findings of previous years. However, the type of significance child care showed was statistically different from language, employment, and health care. While these domains appeared as a top priority across most respondents, child care was a top priority among those who considered it—but not everyone did.

Child care is an especially important issue for women with families, whether they are newcomers or Canadian-born, because women are still often required to take the majority of the responsibility for watching their children. The default expectation, still frequently unexamined including in Canadian culture, is that the father's access to the job market is more important, for example. If child care is unavailable, it can impede the access of mothers to all types of other services.

Several agencies reported a dramatic lack of funding or restrictions in this area in particular:

" *We only have funding that supports one, maybe two children per month.*

—————————

We saw a disturbing trend recently, of how lack of childcare can lead to severe issues, especially for women/mothers. We have seen critical cases of domestic violence cases that were the result of isolation and lack of access to services because the survivors were the only caretaker for small children (including kids with disabilities) and these women were not able to access services or socialize in the community due to no access to childcare services. They were in prolonged pain but were not able to reach out to supports until things explode... The need is immense and many more clients are still unable to access essential services because we are not able to offer childcare.

> *Our CA does not allow for child care or child participation in our programs even though many of our programs are targeted to newcomer women who are isolated and need help integrating into the community.*

The specific challenges that newcomers face in child care services are also not as well-established in the discourse of the sector as for some other services, such as employment. Some of the issues that respondents noted included that, for many reasons which might include trauma, separation anxiety is especially difficult for both parents and children in newcomer families. However, newcomers may not have personal networks established in Canada that allow them to go to a family member or a friend to mind their children, which might help both parties ease into separation. Some newcomer parents may be unfamiliar with Canadian child care norms, or desire child care that is more actively aligned with their culture of origin. Language barriers may prevent parents from communicating their child's needs to caregivers.

Due to all these issues, settlement sector organizations may be well-placed to explore culturally sensitive child care provision that will allow newcomer parents, especially mothers, to pursue supports and resources while also supporting them to manage their family in the way they desire.

Language as a fulcrum issue for newcomers

One thing we might lose by separating these domains too neatly is the interconnecting, complex nature of the varying challenges people face when they move to Canada from abroad. Often, respondents noted issues in one domain that flowed from issues in another. Sometimes, interconnected issues like these can seem overwhelming: situations where every solution depends on the resolution of another situation. In policy studies, these are referred to as "wicked problems".

Still respecting the irreducible complexity of newcomer inclusion, it's worthwhile to weigh the effects of various points of intervention. We noted that across various services, it was especially common to refer to language barriers as a major interconnected challenge for newcomers:

Employment: *"Language issues are a challenge [on the job] and thus safety issues as well."*

Health and mental health: *"The majority of the case management clients [that have health and mental health issues] have significant language barriers, thus requiring ongoing interpretation supports. This challenge is the key driver of clients' prolonged reliance on case management supports."*

Housing: *"Language barriers also pose significant obstacles, as newcomers may struggle to communicate with landlords, read rental agreements, or navigate the bureaucratic process of applying for housing. This can lead to misunderstandings or make it difficult for them to advocate for themselves when issues arise, such as requesting repairs or challenging unfair treatment."*

Childcare: *"Language barriers can also complicate communication between parents and child care providers, making it difficult to discuss important issues such as dietary preferences, health needs, or behavioral concerns."*

Even in the settlement sector, we can sometimes forget just how difficult it is to learn a new language to a functional level. While multilingualism is the norm globally, actively studying a language as an adult to the level expected in the workplace takes years of dedication. Anyone who knows multiple languages can also attest that even advanced learners might still struggle in complex, weighty, or novel situations, and that even advanced learners might find those situations especially mentally and emotionally wearing, compared to native speakers.

In the short term, language waitlists are likely exacerbating all other issues faced by newcomers economically and socially.

Demand as a fulcrum issue for organizations

Across all these services, several agencies noted that the level of demand they saw in their community put them at the precarious edge of their resources.

We do not predict that the recently reduced Levels Plan numbers will significantly effect the level of demand agencies experience. Permanent Resident admissions will remain close to 2018 levels, and the population that constitutes the biggest expected population change – the as-yet-unexplained expectations for outflow of temporary residents – were never eligible for IRCC-funded services. What's more, many people, especially those in the highest need, still benefit from services many years into their settlement experience.

As anti-immigration sentiment has increased, the role of settlement organizations is more vital than ever. In fact, the Canadian government named Local Immigration Partnerships as a key partner in their new Action Plan on Combatting Hate.

Considering methods to sustainably scale operations will likely continue to be a significant area of innovation for sector leaders in the coming years. One successful strategy in particular that emerged from respondent comments was the cultivation of partnerships outside the sector.

A key strategy: partnerships outside the sector

Agencies shared with us many examples of successful programs in all five service domains. A consistent theme was new ways of thinking about partnerships outside the settlement sector. This type of cross-sectoral collaboration effort can open up new economies of scale and even revenue streams for agencies.

Some partnerships that were reported to us as examples of success include:

- Municipally-funded ELL and digital literacy classes through Community Adult Learning Programs

- Partnerships with local organizations for childcare and transportation services

- Arranging a fee-for-service agreement with a major local employer to provide translation and interpretation services

- Expansive employer outreach to improve relationships leading to job placements

- Partnerships with local vocational colleges to provide training in professional fields with labour shortages

- Interagency committee to meet and discuss clients with complex needs that involve multiple intersecting service organizations

- Maintaining relational networks with landlords and property management organizations to facilitate housing clients

While all these partnerships have created promising opportunities for clients, we want to emphasize here that collaboration is not logistically simple. Collaboration requires not only a will on the part of both organizations to cooperate, but also significant worker hours dedicated to investigating, fostering and maintaining relationships. Appointing particular administrative staff as "collaboration officers" or segmenting out hours in project plans purely to the maintenance of relationships allows agencies to more effectively take advantage of the benefits that this type of program can provide. Resourcing these indirect services can ultimately lead to returns in efficiency and effectiveness of service.

2024 Issue in Highlight:
Artificial Intelligence

For 2024, AAISA selected use of artificial intelligence in the immigration and settlement sector as an issue in highlight. We asked sector leaders to tell us what they perceived as the benefits and drawbacks of AI use in settlement, and to outline whether and how they currently saw AI in use around them in their own organizations.

In our ever-changing world, there can sometimes be a tendency to presume that all new technologies must be better than what came before, and that widespread use of new technologies is inevitable. In reality, of course, technologies often create new problems as well as solving old ones. At technological turning points, we have a responsibility to strategize about how new technologies can and should be used in an ethical way, and to safeguard ourselves against unethical uses.

Outlooks on AI

Some respondents were enthusiastic about AI, often including considerations about the specific places they felt AI was useful as opposed to the places where it might cause concern:

> *[AI is] a very useful tool and should be promoted for all programs.*
>
> *AI is the next phase and it's about time the sector prepares for it. It should always be noted that AI cannot fully replace human beings in service delivery especially when it comes to the emotive domain.*
>
> *I feel that as long as people understand the benefits and limitations of AI and are aware to not put in confidential or secure data, it can be used as a valuable tool to help articulate issues and summarize content.*

Others were more reserved, continuing all the way along a spectrum to respondents who expressed active concern and even fear about how AI might influence the way we interact with the world:

> *Yes, AI has its advantages in certain circumstances but in the social sector, it is more advantageous to have a human environment.*
>
> *All the research I have done makes me terrified of AI being used in any sectors. I have no plans to incorporate the use of AI in my organization. Within a few years, we will be turning all our thinking and planning over to AI! What a scary thought.*

What seems clear all along the spectrum is that strategy, consideration and care are required to try to mitigate possible misuses and even abuses of AI technology.

Some organizations had already begun working on an official AI policy or had even completed one, while others were waiting for more information. As use norms evolve around AI, developing such a policy may prove useful for organizations that currently lack one.

For example, organizations may need to decide where they are comfortable with staff using AI-composed copy. It's worth taking into account that the most well-known failing of AI detecting technologies is in fact their tendency to falsely classify the genuine English writing of non-native speakers as AI. This makes the matter of detecting AI-composed copy in the settlement sector extraordinarily sensitive and raises the possibility of bias against employees with English as an additional language. However, at the same time, the stakes are high in a human-serving sector: the use of AI to give sensitive advice to clients in crisis is one use case that would likely strike many people as inappropriate and callous. Balancing these imperatives is one of the challenges that leaders will be faced with in the coming years as AI continues to become more common.

Uses of AI

At this point, the quintessential use of AI technology seems to be the composition of large amounts of routine written copy. Most leaders who said they use AI are most likely using low-cost tools like ChatGPT. This likely influences the types of uses of AI that are common and feasible in the sector. It's worth noting that generative text is not necessarily where the most promising and worthwhile uses of AI are to be found, but these are the tools that are available without significant custom engineering.

Many organizations that indicated they actively used AI as a matter of course cited this type of generative text task as the central use case in which they deployed the technology. Examples include:

- Writing emails
- Composing narrative portions of case notes
- Composing grant applications
- Creation of lesson plans and content for language teaching

Organizations also used AI for other purposes, such as:

- Automation and streamlining of various types of rote work
- Uses for translation and interpretation
- Brainstorming ideas for new programming

As some organizations pointed out, settlement sector organizations are unlikely to have the funds, at this point when AI technology is still relatively new, to design tools that respond directly to sector-specific problems.

Clients using AI

Our main question was about how respondents themselves were using AI in their organizations. However, many respondents also took the time to reflect on how clients themselves use or might be expected to use AI while interacting with services.

For example, respondents noted that it wouldn't be fair to make any services reliant on the ability to use AI when digital literacy is already a concern for some newcomers, especially refugees.

Language providers also reported that some clients were using AI to fill in language assessments, which pollutes the ability of the assessor to determine the person's real language level. (At the same time, it's worth taking into account once again the inaccuracy of AI detecting technologies with non-native English writing.)

Concerns about AI

The two key concerns respondents noted around use of AI include the possibilities of bias and data privacy breaches. Both of these issues are worth discussing in more detail.

It's a well-established fact that AI can produce results that echo the human prejudices embedded in the data on which it was trained. Although experts attempt to adjust popular AI models to prevent them from repeating racist, anti-immigrant, sexist, homophobic, or ableist statements, or statements that are offensive in other ways, issues will certainly continue to slip through.

What's more, when AI is used to infer meaning from input, rather than simply to produce text or other output, its reliance on the biased totality of human training data may not be immediately obvious to the eye. For example, if an AI were asked to determine whether a client on a waitlist was likely to attend language classes regularly once she was invited, it might end up making its determination based on the client's race or country of origin, or another sensitive characteristic, depending on information in the data it received. It might not ever make explicit that this was its mechanism of decision, so an organization that used an AI algorithm this way would be unknowingly embedding presumptions in their processes that are offensive to human ethics.

Data privacy is also a murky problem in the new world of AI. Copyright and privacy harm lawsuits are just beginning to proliferate around the right to control whether a person's data is used to train AI, and where their input goes once the private companies that design AI tools process it. When ChatGPT first shot up in popularity, this was an untried area of technology law. Generally, AI developers took the approach that it was better to ask for forgiveness than permission. That means that developers are still dealing under unclear legal requirements about how data should be used and stored.

On top of the moral questions this raises, several respondents extended this question to the economic question of data rights. In the digital economy, AI companies are only one group among many which

convert user data into profit by various means. Settlement sector leaders are rightfully uneasy about the ethics of feeding client data into a for-profit tool without knowing exactly how that data will be used to generate private capital.

This is not merely a question of ideological principle: the private capital of tech entrepreneurs will not necessarily be used for pro-immigrant ends. Indeed, several of the most prominent tech entrepreneurs in the world have avowedly anti-immigrant politics or associate with those who do. Since the survey was issued, Elon Musk became a key part of abhorrent racist deportation policies in the US government. Peter Thiel's company, Palantir, has been a central part of US deportation and family separation at the border with Mexico, and he privately funded anti-immigration political candidates.

Humans, of course, can also make serious errors. Humans can also be biased, including unconsciously. Humans can accidentally or purposefully leak client data—at least an AI isn't likely to disclose his client's medical information at the bar!

At this point, perhaps the biggest difference is that we don't have nearly as much information as we do for humans about the ways that AI is likely to be biased and to endanger client data, which also means that we may not be able to safeguard against AI harms as effectively as we can human harms. What's more, we now live in a world in which many tech moguls contributing to and benefiting from AI tools are decidedly aligned with anti-immigrant regimes.

We also aren't used to talking about technology in the workplace in a way that can capture the philosophical and even existential concerns that lie at the heart of much considered opposition to AI. This means that many questions about AI that deserve serious contemplation are not frequently raised in professional discourse; they might even be considered inappropriate. For example, if a report is written by AI, and summarized by another AI, why should that report have been written at all? Isn't there something depressing and alienating about a system which produces reports that nobody writes or reads? Who would benefit from social norms that require meaningless labour? Could this shift help us wake up to how we could use our time in a more fulfilling way, or encourage us to be more profoundly human in our professional lives? Or will it only further discourage our genuine engagement with each other?

Conclusion

In 2024, AAISA designed the annual Sector Survey in an effort to encourage substantial, nuanced commentary from a wide variety of organizations about the state of major services offered by the settlement sector.

Many observers of immigration policy in Canada and around the world see mounting challenges in the short- and long-term. Technological, social, and economic issues, as well as conflict and climate, all impact how people move around the globe and how their well-being is nourished when they arrive in new destinations. Even as we prepare for challenges in 2025, collaboration and information-sharing can help us make sense of the changing landscape.

In our plan for future years, we continue to consider further opportunities to interpret the world of settlement, including more personal and focused engagements, to understand how the sector survey can be used to explore data and narratives that matter to our members and funders.

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