

Refugee Settlement Pilot Project Report

For Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada

By OCASI – Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants

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Background

Many cities across Ontario have welcomed resettled refugees, the vast majority from Syria, in recent years. To fully support new arrivals, the local settlement sector infrastructure needs to be augmented with GAR-, BVOR- and PSR-related resources, training and information. This pilot project set out to identify the unique needs and issues related to providing settlement services to resettled (Syrian) refugees in order to better understand how to help frontline staff work with refugee clients in the immediate and long-term.

Activities

Project activities spanned three main areas:

- 1) Information gathering
- 2) Information provision
- 3) Resource development

Information Gathering

Methodology

Information about the challenges, gaps and needs of frontline settlement workers in Ontario was gathered through focus groups, key informant interviews, LIP meetings, and a province-wide online survey.

➤ **Focus Groups**

Two focus groups were held to gather in-depth information from facilitated discussions.

The first focus group was held on December 5, 2016 with 16 frontline settlement workers representing various settlement organizations in Belleville, Guelph, Hamilton, Kingston, Kitchener-Waterloo, Niagara, Ottawa, Thunder Bay, Toronto and Windsor. The focus group lasted four hours and was preceded and followed up with a short survey to gather demographic information and further information about trainings needs. At the request of participants and in an attempt to continue the conversation, a Refugee Settlement Workers email group was set up.

A second focus group was held on January 30, 2017 with 11 frontline workers and one program manager at a settlement agency in Mississauga (Peel region) to explore to what extent the experiences of frontline settlement workers in other parts of the province resembled that of workers in Peel, which has been receiving a high number of Government-Assisted Refugees (GARs) over the last two years from Syria and other regions. A short survey was sent to participants prior to the meeting.

Detailed notes were taken at each focus group and later analyzed for recurring themes and patterns. Findings from both of the focus groups are discussed further below in this report.

➤ **Interviews**

Information was gathered through key informant interviews with four persons representing two settlement agencies in the Greater Toronto Area, the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI) and the Refugee Sponsorship Training Program (RSTP). The purpose of the interviews was to gather information about the challenges, gaps and needs of frontline settlement workers from others in the sector who work closely with them. Responses obtained from key informants helped shape the framing of the province-wide online survey and the second focus group.

➤ **Online Survey**

An anonymous online survey geared toward frontline settlement workers across Ontario was carried out from mid-January to mid-February 2017. It asked respondents about challenges experienced when working with recently arrived refugee clients, desired training topics, preferred format of professional development opportunities and needed resources. A summary of the results is attached as Appendix A.

➤ **Meetings**

The project's aims and scope were presented at meetings with the Toronto East Quadrant LIP, Kingston Immigration Partnership (KIP) and Southern Ontario Sponsors Group (SOSG). Participants at the LIP and KIP meetings included frontline and management staff from local settlement, health, and housing agencies. The SOSG meeting was attended by 25 representatives of Sponsorship Agreement Holder organizations from southwestern Ontario, many of whom also offer in-house settlement and integration support services. At each meeting, participants were asked about their perspective on settlement service provision to refugee client populations. At the SOSG meeting, preliminary findings from the first focus group and key informant interviews were shared to provide context for the discussion. Information gathered from participants' feedback was used to validate some of the findings and help shape the direction of this project.

Findings

Responses from focus group participants, interviewees and survey respondents illustrate that the challenges experienced by frontline service providers result from a combination of the settlement needs of clients and the barriers, structural limitations and gaps that service providers face.

➤ **Settlement needs of clients**

When asked about the needs of refugee clients, focus group participants explained that they differed depending on clients’:

- level of English **language** proficiency,
- level of **education**, and
- **resettlement stream** (i.e. privately sponsored versus government-sponsored).

Some of the participants indicated that privately sponsored refugees seem to have a higher level of education completed, smaller family sizes and fewer complex medical needs. Among those who were government-assisted, a combination of larger family size, lower educational and literacy levels and high medical needs appear to make the settlement process more challenging.

In general, participants emphasized that the lack of English language proficiency and/or literacy in their native language combined with low educational levels posed the biggest settlement hurdle to their clients during their first year in Canada. This was strongly confirmed by the online survey (see Appendix A) for which language was the most commonly cited challenge. Participants expressed concern that with the slow improvement in language proficiency, many resettled refugees have not gained employment and are therefore not self-sufficient a year after their arrival when financial support from the government or sponsorship groups ends. Focus group participants expect a high number of their Syrian GAR and PSR clients to need social assistance to avoid eviction as they transition out of their government or sponsorship assistance.

Lack of English language proficiency also increases dependence on the settlement worker to provide interpretation and escort services, and exacerbates all other settlement challenges such as navigating the health care system, government services and higher education programs, and overcoming social isolation.

In addition to language, education and family size, the following factors were identified by respondents as accentuating refugees’ settlement challenges:

- Late or no information given to GARs about their or their relatives' destination
- Lack of sufficient pre-departure information provided about life in Canada
- Insufficient coordination among IRCC and receiving service providers upon arrival in Canada (particularly for GARs)
- Stigma around mental health
- False information circulating within newcomer communities elevating expectations about the amount of financial and in-kind supports
- Insufficient affordable housing available leading to prolonged stays at hotels or securing housing that clients cannot actually afford
- High medical needs such as chronic diseases, physical disabilities, mental illness, trauma and dental decay
- Lack of awareness about what to expect in Canada and how Canadian systems work
- Tension within the family unit due to children's and women's rights in Canada
- Lack of understanding and support in schools to address students' refugee experience, the effects of trauma, gaps in education and cultural norms
- Large family size

➤ **Barriers, limitations and gaps as experienced by frontline settlement service providers**

Focus group and interview responses illustrate that while the settlement needs of Syrian refugees are not new to service providers, providing assistance became more challenging and resource-consuming when a combination of the following factors was present:

Volume of arrivals

- High volume of Syrian refugees arriving at the same time
- Balancing high caseloads with meeting reporting demands as set out by management and/or funders

Lack of in-depth knowledge about Canadian refugee resettlement streams

Settlement workers who know little about the difference between Canadian resettlement streams find it challenging to adequately support clients or mediate conflicts between clients and their sponsors. Respondents attributed this discomfort to:

- Confusion regarding their clients' rights, entitlements, and type of support received from the government and/or sponsors
- Lack of training about refugee resettlement streams
- Insufficient time to find detailed information and follow program and policy changes

Lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities

Based on information gathered at LIP meetings and through interviews with key informants, settlement workers are often unclear about their role and boundaries when working with PSR and BVOR clients. There is general confusion around the types of supports they are allowed to provide and the level of involvement particularly in potential conflicts between clients and their sponsors. As one key informant put it, “settlement workers are distressed”.

According to a key informant who supports PSRs and BVORs and their sponsors when conflict arises, the majority of calls received are from settlement workers who do not know what to do when their client confides that they have not been receiving financial support, and in some cases, no support at all from their sponsoring group.

Some respondents’ supervisors have been advising staff to not support PSR and BVOR clients out of fear of overstepping boundaries with sponsors.

Limitations on the professional boundaries of settlement workers can also be a challenge in that they are not able to provide the type of assistance that clients often ask for. These include:

- accompanying clients to appointments (mainly for language support)
- making every appointment for the client over the phone
- providing in-depth life skills coaching
- completing forms for clients
- being available to clients after hours
- finding sponsors for clients’ extended family members abroad

Limited best practices and knowledge-sharing opportunities

Focus group, interview and survey participants expressed their desire to share knowledge and experiences on a regular basis with other frontline workers in the sector. For example, those from smaller cities asked how others deal with language issues when there are not enough services available in Arabic to refer clients to. Several RAP settlement counsellors also emphasized that they would like to connect with the RAP counsellors in the next city to compare and contrast their experiences. In general, participants noted that they feel isolated in their work, even when they are located in resource-rich cities. They suggested that there is a need for opportunities to share best practices with others in the sector and learn from one another on a regular basis.

Resource deficiencies

Respondents stated that managing day-to-day activities has become more challenging for a number of reasons; some of which relate to:

- A sudden increase in caseload without adjustments to internal resources in the wake of Syrian refugee resettlement

- Syrian refugees' needs being often high (larger families, lack of English/French proficiency, interrupted education, chronic health issues, mental health needs) requiring more time and assistance
- Not enough Arabic-speaking settlement counsellors leading to a risk of burn-out as workers skip their breaks, work longer hours and "go above and beyond" to meet their clients' needs
- Clients seeking assistance for matters that are mainly related to language barriers (i.e. Arabic-speaking settlement workers being used as interpreters)
- Waitlists for LINC/ESL programs and LINC/ESL programs that are offered at times that does not work for clients or that do not offer child care
- Lack of free or low-cost mental health services in Arabic
- Organizational pressures to meet monthly statistical targets
- The time it takes to report client service in multiple databases

Insufficient service coordination and collaboration across sectors

Focus group participants emphasized that there are many lessons to be learned from the first wave of resettled Syrian refugees who arrived in early 2016. Many expressed frustration about the chaos that ensued as service providers across sectors failed to share information and collaborate proactively to meet the needs of the newcomers. In the absence of a shared client database network, settlement counsellors conduct client need assessments, asking the same questions as other service providers. As well, they are often not aware which services a client has already accessed or when a client is going to several settlement service agencies in the area. Respondents expressed that it can be frustrating when a client visits multiple settlement service providers as it duplicates service provision, potentially wastes valuable time and gives the impression that clients do not trust the information or expertise provided.

In addition, participants pointed out that:

- There are no Arabic-language mental health services and services for adults with cognitive disabilities
- Sharing information across sectors is typically challenging due to rigid information-sharing policies based on privacy protection grounds
- Many clients are still denied the 3-month wait-period exemption when registering for OHIP (requiring intervention)
- The waitlist for Arabic-language family counselling is long
- Mistakes in spelling of names and dates of birth on official documents affect access to government services

Information Provision

Throughout this project, information was shared through outreach, during meetings, via an email distribution list and in response to email inquiries from settlement workers. The majority

of questions pertained to specific resources for resettled refugees and income tax filing. Other disseminated information included upcoming training and professional development opportunities. As a result of the first focus group's lively discussion and expressed desire to remain connected, information and resources on various settlement and public service topics were shared with subscribers of the Refugee Settlement Workers email group. A subscriber said: "Thank you [...] for this great resource. Greatly appreciate your communication with the group."

An interest in staying connected also emerged from the online survey with 80 of the 182 respondents indicating they were keen to be informed about the project's findings and resulting recommendations.

In order to respond to settlement sector practitioners with inquiries or information needs related to their work with refugee clients, an online resource library (outlined below) and accompanying contact form were set up and promoted in early February. The expectation is that OCASI will act as a centralized resource for settlement workers serving refugee clients.

Resource Development

To help settlement workers serving refugee clients easily access relevant resources, a centralized hub called "[Working with Refugees](#)" was created on WelcomeOntario.ca. The online library brings together existing resources in the following categories:

- Children & Youth
- Financial Assistance
- General
- Health
- PSR Program
- Professional Development

Among the resources is multilingual information, including key documents from the Refugee Sponsorship Training Program translated for this project into Arabic, Armenian, Kurdish (Kurmanji and Sorani) and Tigrinya.

The hub also features a contact form through which settlement workers can request information or suggest additional resources.

During the first three weeks after its launch, the hub garnered 793 pageviews from 478 unique visitors.

Recommendations

Canada's response to the conflict in Syria has led to a high number of refugee arrivals in a short timeframe. This, combined with the high needs of many of the refugees, has highlighted system and resource gaps affecting the settlement process. Based on our findings for this project, OCASI has developed recommendations in the following three areas:

- 1) Community of Practice
- 2) Training priorities
- 3) System improvements

➤ Community of Practice

Settlement workers need a go-to place where they can easily find relevant, up-to-date resources. They also need opportunities to share best practices and have peer support. A Community of Practice in the form of a centralized online hub will ensure standardized information and encourage uniform practices across the sector, in addition to being simpler to maintain. Specifically, the centralized online resource hub should feature the following:

- Key information about refugee resettlement such as:
 - Differences between PSRs, BVORs, GARs
 - Roles and responsibilities of settlement workers and sponsors
 - Information about disputes and breakdowns, and conflict resolution guidelines
 - Information on the IRCC reporting mechanism
- Standard multilingual handout on what settlement agencies do ([potential description](#))
- Information in a variety of formats: videos, fact sheets, recorded webinars
- The latest sector news, jobs, requests for proposals and events
- Ongoing professional development opportunities* with more in-person dialogue and information-sharing opportunities, including best practices:
 - For RAP service provider organizations in Ontario
 - For settlement workers (including RAP) and sponsors

*See Training Priorities below and Appendix A for recommended topics and delivery formats.

OCASI is well placed to manage a centralized hub, drawing on our sector and technical expertise. We envision an enhanced SettlementAtWork.Org, already the go-to site for settlement workers in Ontario, refreshed and expanded to include the elements outlined

above. Knowledge and information gaps highlighted by the recent arrival of a high number of refugees show that the time is ripe for a settlement sector Community of Practice, in Ontario and beyond. As one online survey respondent said, we need a “peer support network with other settlement workers in other parts of Canada”.

➤ **Training Priorities**

Based on information gathered through various channels, we recommend ongoing professional development opportunities for settlement workers to ensure they have the latest information and resources to deliver effective, efficient settlement services. As outlined in the online survey results in Appendix A, the overwhelming preference is for in-person professional development. Although costly to arrange frequently, in-person training allows settlement workers to update their skills and knowledge while connecting with colleagues, an opportunity to practise self-care and ward off isolation and burn-out from a heavy workload. Indeed, the well-being of settlement workers impacts the quality of service they provide to clients. A combination of in-person and other training formats would balance settlement workers’ preference and well-being with financial constraints. Regarding topics for training, the following priorities emerged from our research:

- Canadian resettlement streams (PSR, BVOR, GAR) including types of support and responsibilities of parties involved, for frontline workers as well as management
- Handling refugee sponsorship disputes and breakdowns
- New immigration regulations and policies
- Serving clients with mental health issues
- Avoiding burnout
- Understanding and helping clients access government services

Additional training topics requested by settlement workers are outlined in Appendix A.

➤ **System Improvements**

Over the course of our information gathering, it became clear that increased coordination and information sharing is needed not just in the settlement sector but also with all service agencies relevant to newcomer settlement. Underlining this is the fact that close to one quarter of the online survey respondents identified themselves as serving refugees in capacities such as Ontario Works case manager, health care worker or employment counsellor. It is clear that many other professionals complement the role of settlement workers in integrating refugees into communities across Ontario and Canada. Increased cross-sectoral collaboration and

information sharing will enable clients to seamlessly access efficiently delivered services. We recommend capitalizing on and enhancing Local Immigration Partnerships to increase the sharing of up-to-date information with service providers across sectors. Additionally, our research yielded the following recommended improvements:

- IRCC coordination with Canada Revenue Agency (CRA), Service Canada/Ontario
- Interpreter services for IRCC or CRA (like Legal Aid)
- Enabling settlement workers to assist their clients by allowing public services (IRCC, CRA, OHIP, etc.) to ask the client for consent over the phone including with an interpreter and over speaker-phone
- More accessible reporting mechanism at IRCC than a general email inbox (phone line in Arabic and other languages)
- Reopening local IRCC offices to the public to assist with PSR forms and inquiries, or allocating resources to settlement service providers to offer services that used to be delivered at local IRCC offices (e.g. help filling out forms)
- More clearly defined settlement worker role to include advocacy as that is a reality of what they do
- More resources for settlement service providers to respond to the Syrian refugee resettlement efforts of the federal government and Canadian sponsorship groups:
 - Proportionate number of Arabic-speaking settlement workers
 - Funding for trained community interpreters who can assist clients with purely language assistance
 - Resources pre-planned and distributed to match arrivals
- More detailed, multilingual pre-departure orientation information from IRCC, provided consistently and shared with settlement service providers
- Increased coordination of services upon arrival at hotels (mainly for GARs)
- Elimination of the transportation loan for all resettled refugees

Conclusion

The impressive effort to resettle a high number of refugees in Canada in a short time is to be congratulated. Although the intensity of the effort highlighted pre-existing gaps and limitations in the settlement sector, solutions are within reach. In order to strengthen the sector and maximize refugee resettlement outcomes, up-to-date information, proportional resources, ongoing professional development and cross-sectoral collaboration are vital. OCASI and other umbrella agencies, together with Local Immigration Partnerships, are well placed to coordinate these solutions, as outlined in the recommendations above.

Appendix A

Refugee Settlement Online Survey Results

Introduction

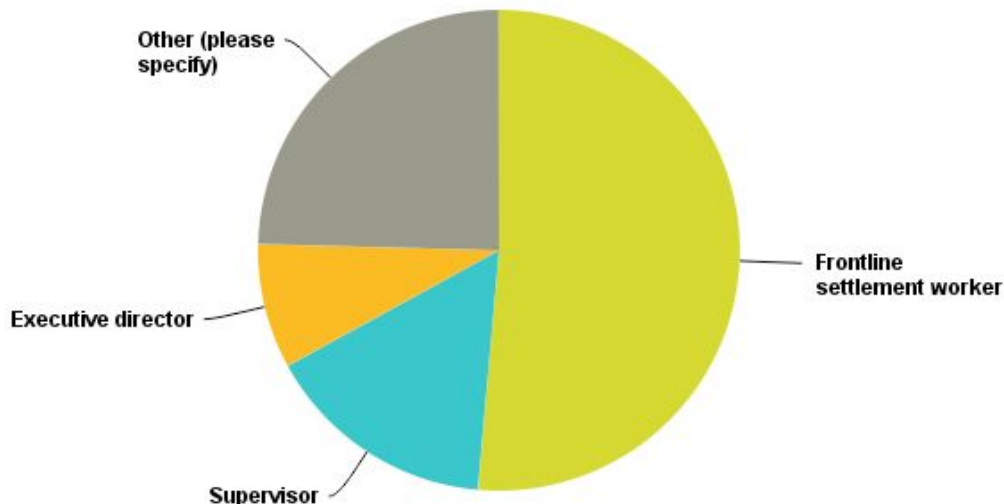
OCASI carried out a short online survey from mid-January to mid-February 2017 geared toward frontline settlement workers serving refugee clients. The **goals** were **1)** to better understand challenges related to serving Syrian and other refugee clients across Ontario and **2)** to identify useful training and resources for frontline settlement workers. The survey was disseminated through the OCASI membership network (222 organizations), OCASI In the Field newsletter, SettlementAtWork.Org, Ontario LIP networks and various social media channels.

Respondents

The survey garnered 182 responses, 51% of which were from settlement workers. The remaining respondents included other settlement sector professionals, Ontario Works case managers, health care workers and employment counsellors. **The variety of respondents speaks to the impact of refugee arrivals on a number of service areas, not just settlement agencies.** Respondents were from across Ontario, the most highly represented regions being the Greater Toronto Area (42%) and Southwestern Ontario (32%).

Q1 What is your role in the settlement sector?

Answered: 179 Skipped: 3



Challenges serving recently arrived refugee clients

The most commonly cited challenge was **language**, including access to **language training** (with child care), **interpreter services** and **Arabic-speaking settlement workers**. **Mental health, housing** (availability, quality, affordability) and managing **expectations** were also frequently mentioned. Other challenges included:

- Complex health needs
- Family separation
- Service navigation (unfamiliarity, gaps in coordination)
- Very heavy workload; high volume of refugees arrived in short time
- Access to employment
- Education - either low education and literacy or credentials not recognized
- Public health - confusion about Syrian birth certificates; issues with vaccinations
- Budget/finances
- Cultural differences
- Lack of French services or French not presented as an option
- Isolation of refugees
- Lack of information prior to arrival - refugees and settlement agencies
- IFHP confusion
- Transportation barriers
- Working with private sponsors - understanding roles with settlement workers

Professional development for frontline settlement workers serving refugees

Respondents were presented with 6 professional development topics, asked to select all topics of interest and given the opportunity to suggest additional topics. They were also asked to rank according to their preference 4 different formats for the delivery of professional development.

I) Professional development topics

The most popular topic, as indicated below, was **serving clients with mental health issues**.

1. Serving clients with mental health issues (65%)
2. Avoiding burnout (57%)
3. Understanding and helping clients access government services (48%)
4. Rights and responsibilities of sponsored refugees and sponsor groups (35%)
5. Differences between refugee resettlement streams (PSRs, GARs, BVORs) (34%)
6. Sponsorship disputes and breakdown (32%)

Suggested additional topics included:

- Tapping into existing resources; accessing health services
- Cultural competency
- Employment and volunteering; empowering clients to improve their skills
- Refresher on immigration system in light of changes
- Advocacy
- Dealing with difficult clients; conflict resolution
- Importance of documentation; case note writing
- Woman abuse education and prevention
- Working with refugees and sponsors; supporting independence in PSRs/BVORs
- Role boundaries; professional standards of practice

II) Professional development format

The overwhelming preference for the delivery of professional development was an **in-person workshop** with 74% of respondents ranking this format as their first choice. Webinars ranked second overall, a facilitated online course ranked third and a self-directed online was by far the least popular format.

Resources needed for settlement workers to better serve refugee clients

Many respondents **reiterated professional development needs** outlined above. Many also highlighted the need for increased access to and coordination of **interpretation**, as well as **Arabic-language information** and up-to-date information in general. Respondents emphasized the need for increased staff resources, with higher wages to improve retention, in order to spend more time providing quality service to clients. There was also interest in creating a peer support network, or **Community of Practice**, with settlement workers from across Canada. The following additional resources were also requested:

- Case scenarios
- Increased protocolization - referral pathways, needs assessment, settlement plan
- Simplified IFHP information
- Simpler, user-friendly forms
- Disability supports for children and elderly people
- Access to resources in both English and French
- Resource development staff role needed for agencies (to stay on top of information)
- Better information management systems feeding into iCARE
- Mental health resources taking into account culture, language
- Greater financial resources, including transportation assistance for appointments
- Services to match arrivals - e.g. appropriate number of LINC child care spaces

Additional feedback

Asked if there was anything else they would like to share, respondents gave the following feedback:

- Happy assisting refugee clients; they need a lot of support
- Very important to practise self-care since settlement workers can easily burn out
- Expected and needed additional resources with high number of refugee arrivals
- Need help advocating for clients with families outside Canada and in danger
- Family reunification should be top priority; separating families impacts settlement
- All levels of government need to recognize secondary migration when disbursing funds
- More training, perhaps mandatory training, for private sponsor groups and expansion of PSR program; ill-informed sponsors create more work for settlement workers
- Public Health should go to schools to give vaccinations to save time and resources (refugees often miss family doctor appointments for vaccines) and avoid suspensions due to vaccines not being up to date
- Explore role of Community Health Workers to help newcomers adapt culturally, access services and build skills
- Need ongoing training on filling out immigration forms since they represent an important part of settlement work
- Refugees don't only interact with settlement workers so need to have training opportunities open to all service providers
- Important to continue bringing Government-Assisted Refugee newcomers to Canada; need new models of volunteer social network support for GARs to help them achieve durable integration at same pace as PSR counterparts
- Share more positive stories throughout network of settlement agencies in Ontario
- Help skilled refugees (trades, farming) gain Canadian experience in their profession while going to LINC classes
- Ensure refugees have opportunity to choose French as first official language of choice; 7% of Syrian refugees have been exposed to French in their home country