

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



LESSONS FROM THE INFLUX

HOW EDMONTON WELCOMED REFUGEES FROM SYRIA...

and What We Are
Learning as They Strive
to Put Down Roots



Edmonton Chamber of Voluntary Organizations



DUE TO ITS SHEER SIZE, THIS INFLUX PROVIDES AN OPPORTUNITY TO EXPLORE SYSTEMIC CHANGES THAT COULD MAKE LIFE BETTER FOR OUR NEW NEIGHBOURS FROM SYRIA—AND FOR OTHER WAVES OF NEWCOMERS SURE TO COME.

FRONT COVER PHOTO: EDMONTONIANS WELCOME REFUGEES AT THE EDMONTON INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT, MAY 30, 2018.

PHOTO THIS PAGE: THE ISLAMIC FAMILY AND SOCIAL SERVICES ASSOCIATION WELCOMES NEW EDMONTONIANS AT THE EDMONTON INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT, MAY 30, 2018.

Photos provided by the Islamic Family and Social Services Association.

In a typical year, refugees arrive in Edmonton by the hundreds. During the height of the influx of refugees fleeing war in Syria, more than two thousand came—hundreds in just a few months. Because the influx outstripped the capacity of any one organization, new and stronger collaborations took shape. Volunteers also helped ease the difficult journey of resettlement. Even so, everyone involved is keenly aware that not all newly arrived Syrians are receiving the support they need to take root, flourish and contribute to this community.

Due to its sheer size and speed, this influx provides an opportunity to explore systemic changes that could make life better for our new neighbours from Syria—and for other waves of newcomers sure to come. This participant-informed study set out to do exactly that, while also chronicling promising practices. Based on multiple interviews and reports, the unabridged study contains a chronology of the welcoming, a review of key coordinating bodies, a summary of settlement successes and gaps and suggested priorities for systemic change. This summary focuses on systemic change and gaps in services, providing some of the most-often-heard suggestions for change.

AREAS RIPE FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE

1

Inter-agency Coordination

Despite remarkable growth in collaboration as a way of managing the surge of incoming Syrians, gaps, overlaps and service inequities persist.

- **Promising Practice**

New umbrella bodies such as the Syrian Crisis Stakeholder Sessions, the Edmonton Local Immigration Partnership (ELIP), the Coalition on Social Inclusion (COSI) and the Newcomer Mapping Network encouraged greater collaboration.

- **Priorities for Change**

- » Review and align coordinating bodies and provide sustainable funding for their work.
- » Map available service and program strengths, and reward greater collaboration.

2

Client-centred Service

A shift from funder to client priorities would heighten the likelihood that refugees (including those with particular challenges and trauma) receive appropriate support.

- **Promising Practice**

Natural leaders who have lived the refugee experience are employed by several agencies to serve as cultural navigators, helping newcomers access services, bond with others from their culture and bridge to the wider community.

- **Priorities for Change**

- » Reorient systems and services to be more client-centred and asset-based—and create ways to share those best practices.
- » Fund more cultural navigators to walk with newcomers, and use their insights about client strengths and needs to shape programming and advocacy.

3 Volunteer Mobilization

Frontline agencies lament the fact that they were not able to use many of the Edmontonians who contacted them, eager to volunteer in the welcome effort. Frustration ensued, and opportunities to tap the groundswell of empathy were lost.

- **Promising Practice**
Grassroots groups such as Edmonton Refugee Volunteers (ERF) formed and used social media extensively to match volunteers with Syrian newcomers and related needs.
- **Priorities for Change**
 - » Enhance collaboration among existing volunteer coordinators and explore ways to streamline community-wide volunteer recruitment, screening and referrals.
 - » Make savvy use of technology for volunteer registration, vetting and matching.

4 Comprehensive Tracking & Support

No one in the community has access to a comprehensive list of refugee arrivals and their status, making it harder to identify those who may be going unserved.

- **Promising Practice**
The Edmonton Emergency Relief Services, which served both Syrian refugees and Fort McMurray fire evacuees, uses a unified cross-agency tracking system to help ensure equitable service. It also uses WhatsApp Messenger to speed frontline communication.
- **Priorities for Change**
 - » Re-evaluate the inbuilt differences between government-assisted and privately sponsored refugees with a goal of serving all newcomers equitably and well.
 - » Create a system that consistently alerts frontline agencies of the needs of refugees they are equipped to serve while respecting privacy concerns.
 - » Ensure that all sponsors know about and can easily access supports and services.
 - » Provide a refugee hotline in the dominant language(s) of arriving newcomers.

5 Countering Racism

Lurking beneath the warm welcome for Syrian refugees are signs of racism: A shouted “Go back home.” A schoolyard slur or fistfight. A hateful poster. Such actions are unlikely to fade away, given the global shift against those who are “not us.”

- **Promising Practice**
The province funded workshops that made an impact by inviting service providers and individual citizens to put themselves in refugees’ shoes and hear their stories.
- **Priorities for Change**
 - » Develop and use municipal, provincial and federal anti-racism strategies informed by best practices as well as the lived experiences of multicultural residents.
 - » Revise school and workplace learning to equip all ages to identify and combat racism.

6 Community Inclusion

While friendly and welcoming, Canadians seem reluctant to draw newcomers into their networks, Syrians say. They hunger to begin weaving into the daily fabric of Edmonton life.

- **Promising Practice**
The Duggan Community League intentionally integrates refugees with roots in Bhutan who settle in the neighbourhood—and in return has gained active new members.
- **Priorities for Change**
 - » Broaden the definition of settlement success to include integration into community life.
 - » Offer incentives for community leagues, athletic groups, faith groups, Abundant Communities Edmonton and other enterprises to embrace newcomers.

SETTLEMENT CHALLENGES

1 Poverty

Many families struggle to pay even basic housing and food costs, let alone repay the federal loan many take out for passage to Canada.

- **Promising Practice**
The federal government forgave travel loans for some Syrian families.
- **Priorities for Change**
 - » Provide a livable level of support for refugees, in and beyond year one.
 - » Forgive existing travel loans and replace the loan program with grants.

2 Language Training

During the Syrian influx, long wait lists developed for language instruction programs, and many mothers stayed home from classes to care for young children.

- **Promising Practice**
Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) funded additional language learning capacity as well as childcare, and eventually added funding to help families access community-based childcare.
- **Priorities for Change**
 - » Map existing programs, coordinate availability and fill gaps, including gaps in adult literacy, employment readiness, mentored work and childcare.
 - » Strive for cultural diversity and contextual learning in language classes.

3 Employment

Syrians with language and credentialing barriers struggle to find employment.

- **Promising Practice**
The Edmonton Region Immigrant Employment Council (ERIEC) hosted an event encouraging business leaders to hire Syrian refugees and launched a toolkit for doing that.
- **Priorities for Change**
 - » Provide incentives for hiring and mentoring newcomers.
 - » Improve foreign credential recognition.
 - » Create a skills profile of our newcomer population, and help those workers to network.
 - » Foster a welcoming environment within workplaces, unions and service providers.

4 Housing

Many Syrian families were settled in housing they cannot afford to rent long-term and have trouble finding more affordable places that are in safe neighbourhoods and cockroach-free.

- **Promising Practice**
A committee of newcomers, policymakers and service providers has received a grant from Homeward Trust to seek long-term housing solutions for newcomers.
- **Priorities for Change**
 - » Ensure that rent takes up no more than 30% of newcomers' income.
 - » Deliver cultural awareness seminars for landlords and provide culturally sensitive tenant support to newcomers, including information on rights and responsibilities.

5 Health

Many Syrians arrived in Edmonton with a backlog of health concerns and had trouble finding doctors with the expertise and time to explore their complex needs in language they understand.

- **Promising Practice**

Through the peak of the Syrian influx, government-assisted refugees received their initial intake and screening at a New Canadians Clinic, a partnership operated by Catholic Social Services. Alberta Health Services has since disbanded the clinic.

- **Priorities for Change**

- » Reinststate a dedicated clinic for new Canadians and fund it at a level that ensures specialized, culturally sensitive, holistic service and timely referrals for every refugee.
- » Shift to a billing system that encourages physicians to spend sufficient time to understand and serve newcomers with complex needs and/or language barriers.
- » Make interpreters available for all appointments where language is a barrier.
- » Expand outreach and inter-sectoral collaboration, so health needs do not go unnoticed.

6 Mental Health

Mental health needs rooted in past traumas and present anxieties are going unmet due to a dearth of available mental health specialists, particularly in Arabic.

- **Promising Practice**

Natural leaders from Syria receive training and then lead groups of newcomers in reflecting on their experiences using ADAPT (Adaptation and Development After Persecution and Trauma), a model that shows promise as a tool for psychosocial healing.

- **Priorities for Change**

- » Include community-informed mental health in centralized health service for newcomers.
- » Employ a trauma-informed lens in settlement services and in broader society.
- » Routinely screen the mental health of incoming refugees.
- » Expand culturally appropriate therapy, both for individuals and in groups.

7 Family Discord

For newcomers, unfamiliar gender roles, discipline practices and social norms can result in conflict within and beyond families. Many families from Syria are deterred from receiving timely support by long waiting lists for family therapists, and by cost concerns.

- **Promising Practice**

Some schools and public libraries have on-site advocates who are greatly helping youth and their families bridge to their new culture.

- **Priorities for Change**

- » Ensure timely access to culturally appropriate crisis response that attends to the circumstances behind family discord.
- » Expand preventive programs and resources on intergenerational family wellness.
- » Divide settlement dollars among family members rather than providing one lump sum.

8 Education

Large clusters of Syrian students enrolled in schools that did not have budgets and staffing to provide separate classrooms for English language learners. The situation is especially critical for teens, who risk not completing high school before age 19, when their funding stops.

- **Promising Practice**

An elementary school with a large number of Syrian students, some of whom were struggling to integrate, began a coffee club that offers strategies for meeting the challenges mothers identify as they straddle cultures.

- **Priorities for Change**

- » Ensure all schools are equipped to meet the linguistic and integration needs of incoming students and provide holistic support to them and their families in collaboration with surrounding settlement agencies.
- » Take academic level into account when placing students.
- » Expand out-of-school opportunities to learn English.
- » Remove or raise the age cap for students to complete high school tuition-free.
- » Create paths for newcomer high school students to combine learning and work.

TO CONCLUDE

“We’ve welcomed waves of refugees before, yet it seems we were inventing systems as we went along. Shouldn’t there be a better way?” That lament surfaced regularly in interviews regarding Edmonton’s welcome of Syrian refugees.

The energy and attention attracted by the influx from Syria offers an opportunity for Edmontonians to co-create a better way. A more holistic, coordinated, client-centred way. The expertise is here, and in fact has expanded as a result of the scramble to serve our new Syrian neighbours. We have tested innovative ways to collaborate. We have gained greater capacity. We have experienced the value of meeting clients where they’re at. We have seen leaders emerge within and beyond the newcomer community. Our challenge now is to build on that momentum.

In the words of a Canadian Council for Refugees report following a 2017 consultation in Edmonton, “In seeking the best possible outcomes for newcomers, the choice facing settlement agencies is not whether to change but how.” That same choice faces us all. As a community, we need to ensure that all refugees receive a level of support that equips them to put down healthy roots so that they can flourish and contribute, as so many are eager to do.

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DOZENS OF SYRIAN YOUTH WHO WERE EXHIBITING SIGNIFICANT TRAUMA SYMPTOMS AT SCHOOL PARTICIPATED IN AN EQUINE ASSISTED PSYCHOTHERAPY PROGRAM COORDINATED BY THE EDMONTON MENNONITE CENTRE FOR NEWCOMERS IN PARTNERSHIP WITH REMUDA HORSEMANSHIP AND BLARNEY STONES.

**READ THE FULL REPORT
ONLINE AT**
www.ecvo.ca/reports

For more information, email info@ecvo.ca



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