

York South-Weston Local Immigration Partnership

Report from Eleven Focus Groups with Ethno-Specific Newcomers: African, Caribbean, South Asian and West Asian, East-Asian, and Hispanic

Executive Summary:

Findings:

Newcomers Experience the Settlement Process with Difficulty:

Overwhelmingly newcomers in the focus groups reported facing major difficulties in the settlement process. Participants reported problems at almost every point during their settlement process from ineligibility for services, to not finding employment due to their non-Canadian experience, to accessing healthcare, and worrying levels of perceived discrimination.

The Importance of Community Resources

Along with ethno-specific resources, participants used resources that were available in the community. They used services ranging from religious centres and libraries, to schools and community centres, in general. When faced with being referred or having to go to other agencies participants reported frustration at the number of visits. Some participants reported the lack of government published documents in their first language.

The Importance of Ethno-Specific Centres and Organizations

Some participants also reported using ethno-specific centres and organizations for a range of services, from information services to language provision. On the other hand, others lamented a lack of services for their particular ethnic group.

*Both **Community Resources** and **Ethno-specific centres and organizations** were reported in this way by all the focus groups. The findings below represent a high level of reporting, by three or more of the ethno-specific groups.*

Ineligibility

Participants reported ineligibility for services greatly hampered their ability to settle. Problems ranged from not being able to access healthcare, to not being eligible for employment.

Professional Concerns

Participants reported that they found it difficult to gain employment due to the fact that they did not have Canadian work experience. Others expressed concern at the lack of acceptance of their professional credentials. There is no settlement without employment.

Informal and Formal Networks

Throughout the settlement process many participants reported relying upon informal networks of friends and family for requirements such as information about settlement services and help in general.

Participants also engaged regularly with more formal information networks, such as news media, government offices like CIC, and organizations like the YMCA.

(In)Equality and (Un)Fairness

Participants reported mixed feelings about the perceived level of fairness and equality experienced during the settlement process. Discrimination from fellow newcomers was also reported.

Service Quality and Availability

Newcomers are looking for basic need services such as housing, food, and health. They are also looking for education, career services and help with the immigration process. Participants reported requesting services such as gaining a passport, SIN and bank statements, along with advice on claiming taxes. Participants reported both positive or negative experiences about the quality and availability of services they received

Communication with service providers was raised as an issue with some participants.

Recommendations:

Ethno-specific organizations deserve better settlement funding to help newcomers more effectively and to ensure choice in service delivery.

The connection between informal and emerging community resources, the service-users and other organizations involved in settlement services needs to be strengthened. The capacity of the NPO system needs additional resources in order to assist with issues arising from discrimination, and to helping integrate newcomers into local communities.

Additional initiatives to ease the route of newcomer to becoming employed and a part of the economy are required.

Agencies can consider utilizing informal networks when undertaking outreach activities. And when newcomers arrive to weak networks, funders and providers should consider efforts to strengthen ethno-specific ties.

Educational interventions or cultural competency initiatives are needed with some service providers. Careful and thorough understanding of the need for cultural competency, perhaps via more focused research in this area, is required.

Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Canada Border Services and local service providers should link more closely to ensure timely and accurate information gets to newcomers as soon as they arrive in Toronto.

Service delivery systems serving newcomers should prioritize serving newcomers on the basis of the need for settlement as opposed to immigration and citizenship status. This requires funders such as CIC and the Ontario Ministry of Health to loosen eligibility requirements.

The Project:

The York South –Weston Local Immigration Partnership (YSWLIP) is comprised of 24 settlement, employment, language training and social service organizations serving immigrants in the York South-Weston community. Faith and labour representatives also contribute to the partnership.

The project's objectives:

- To strengthen local awareness and capacity to successfully integrate immigrants
- To improve access to and coordination of immigrant integration services
- To improve labour market outcomes for immigrants

In May of 2010 the YSWLIP received funding from Citizenship and Immigration Canada to consult with service providers, employers and newcomers in the local catchment area in order to identify possibilities for collective and systemic improvements to the delivery system.

This series of focus groups were part of a broad series of consultations undertaken by the York South-Weston Local Immigration Partnership during the summer of 2010 to develop a community-wide understanding of the current service delivery system serving newcomers. Research findings were incorporated into strategic planning by the YSWLIP to address issues and gaps. The planning result was a new vision of a more effective delivery system owned by service providers and users.

This report represents the common themes and findings that emerged across eleven focus groups held with newcomers currently residing in the York South-Weston area during the summer of 2010. Focus groups were delivered by local ethno-specific agencies and held in various languages spoken by newcomers arriving from African, Caribbean, East Asian, Hispanic South and West Asian regions.

Given this profound diversity in language culture and experience the themes emanating from the groups presented differing results. Notwithstanding these divergences it was still possible to generally theme the findings across the five ethno-specific groups.

Purpose of Study:

To find out, from a newcomer perspective,

- how newcomers access services
- what services clients ask for
- barriers newcomers face in accessing services
- gaps in the current service mix available to immigrants and newcomers
- what would improve access and the service mix.

Methodology:

This report is a summary of responses from eleven 2 hour focus groups held during the summer of 2010 in Toronto, especially in the area known as York South-Weston. Dates can be found in Appendix A. Focus groups were held at various locations arranged by the five ethno-specific partners contracted by the YSWLIP to undertake focus groups in various languages.

Geographic Region	Agency Partner	Number of Focus Groups and Language spoken	Numbers of Participants
South and West Asian	Islamic Social Services & Res. Assn.	Three focus groups Tamil, Urdu, Bangladesh Hindi, Punjabi, Arabic	8 20 4 2 2 19
African	Oromo Canadian Community Centre	Two- Amharic and Oromo	30
Caribbean	Broad African Resource Centre	Two-English	28
East-Asian	Vietnamese Women's Association	Two-Vietnamese and English	16
Hispanic	York Hispanic	Two-Spanish	35

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The consulting team and the SPT project supervisor assisted each agency partner to develop a participant recruitment strategy to ensure a representative sample in their focus groups. Demographic information on focus group participants is available upon request.

With input from the YSWLIP workgroups, the consulting team developed the focus group questions. Before ethnic-specific service providers conducted their focus groups, they attended a training session on “how to” run a focus group. During the training, service providers learned ways to prepare for, conduct, and document their focus groups. Included in the training were tips on facilitation as well as guidelines to capture the comments of attendees.

Data Gathering:

In this study researchers used a semi structured interview guide to collect the qualitative data for this report. The focus group instrument consisted of ten questions designed to examine:

- the kinds of services do newcomers seek?
- how newcomers access information about available services?
- barriers faced by newcomers with precarious status?
- whether newcomers fall between the cracks between agencies?
- organizational and community barriers in accessing services

The findings therefore reflect the views of the participants. The interview guide is found in Appendix B.

After the focus group facilitators translated the data when needed into English and provided the consulting team with an electronic transcript.

Data analysis

Facilitators recorded the data on flip chart in front of participants. Facilitators posed the questions and recorded the data in English and the following six languages: Amharic, Spanish, Vietnamese, Tamil, Urdu and Arabic.

Data from the instrument was coded and analyzed thematically to look for patterns and trends in responses.

Findings:

Newcomers Experience the Settlement Process as Difficult:

Overwhelmingly newcomers in the focus groups reported facing major difficulties in the settlement process. Participants reported problems at almost every point during their settlement process from ineligibility for services, to not finding employment due to their non-Canadian experience, to accessing healthcare, and worrying levels of perceived discrimination.

One Family's Story:

This family made up of two newcomer professionals, one a physician and one a university lecturer, both Landed Immigrants of Somali origin, are fighting an uphill struggle for more than 2 years trying to secure employment within their field of education and experience. They told us they wish there was a better way to contribute their knowledge and experience to Canada and provide for their family their daily bread.

Analysis:

Some difficulty might be attributed to the poor economy of the last two years and the proportionate impact on the newest newcomers but other studies and media reports are corroborating that newcomers are not integrating into Canadian society as well as the recent past. Some focus group participants complained about the low level of acceptance in refugee cases so there may be high numbers of refugee claimants within the sample who harbor low chances of permanent settlement. Particular difficulties faced by newcomers may be due to the lack of informal capacity in their informal networks. Questions are raised about whether newcomers are experiencing overt discrimination once they arrive. All groups reported experiencing discrimination in the mainstream workplace and housing markets as well a number of participants raised the issue of being exploited by fellow newcomers or members of their ethnic community.

Sadly whatever the cause, these newcomer groups are not receiving the warm welcome by Canada promised to them in their home countries. Achieving the integration for these groups will take additional effort and resources.

Community Resources

Participants reported that the existence of community resources are of utmost importance to successful settlement. Throughout the entire settlement process, participants reported using services the community had to offer in order to settle. Resources mentioned include schools, libraries, religious and community centres. Participants at the East Asian focus group regularly reported using the Vietnamese Association of Toronto and the Vietnamese Women's Association of Toronto for information and for settlement services in general.

However, participants from the South Asian and West Asian focus groups felt there were not enough community resources available to them. Several participants expressed a desire to have "more active religious centres that offer services".

Furthermore participants reported using community centres and resources as a way of accessing the internet and other news media, where many then also reported finding out about other services.

Cultural and language barriers still exist, in particular with government published documents.

The reputation of agencies was also reported as an important factor when deciding which to choose. Participants noted that the purported “quality of service”, the opinions of friends and family, and the existence of government funding were all important factors in deciding on a service or agency.

When faced with being referred or having to go to other agencies participants reported frustration at the number of visits. Participants rallied with comments such as: “That is not good they should have all the information”, “We don’t go”, “Sometimes we go but sometimes we don’t because we don’t know the exact location.”

Analysis:

Community resources provided in a culturally respectful manner are clearly important to many service-users because of the ease of communication in a first language and likelihood of shared immigration experience on the part of service providers. Resources that are already in the community, such as religious centres, libraries and schools, present a readily available point of contact for service-users. They are places that newcomers are already familiar with, or will certainly become familiar with over time. It is easier to go to these places for services or to find out about services than to go to an agency in an area in which the service user is not familiar.

Notable with South Asian and West Asian focus groups was the expressed desire for religious based services.

For those who reported a desire to have more services emanating from religious centres, it would be incumbent upon funders to fund those ethno-specific organizations that offer settlement services within a religious context. In some instances, religious centres may not realise that they can play an important role in newcomers’ settlement.

While it appears that participants are somewhat successful in accessing services through community resources, the network of which they are a part of will need to be further strengthened. Because schools, libraries, religious centres and community centres are all clearly important to newcomers’ settlement experience, it might be prudent to create local networks of these resources that can interact with newcomers and refer them to other services. It would then also be easier for the more mainstream services providers, to tap into these local community networks and strengthen the communications ties and networks among community resources, making it easier for newcomers to find connected service).

The delivery system needs to do better when transferring clients between agencies. From the comments by newcomers inter-agency referrals may not be happening very effectively.

Ethno-Specific Community Resources

Ethno-specific community organizations appear extremely important to newcomers' settlement experiences. For the majority of participants, these organizations represented a point of contact throughout the entire settlement process. From finding out about services to actually accessing services themselves, and even where they would go should they "have no papers"; newcomers are more likely to access services in their first language if the opportunity presents itself.

For example, results from the Hispanic focus group were generally indicative of the entire sample. Here participants stated using ethno-specific resources to seek services -- to find out about other services, where they went if they didn't have any papers, and where they had had their best experiences. For the East Asian focus group participants having access to ethno-specific resources was also reported as being important throughout the settlement process.

Participants from two of the South and West Asian focus groups noted that they "do not have [their] own community centre" and there was a desire to have the "Mosque give more services". Participants desired strong ethno- and religion-specific centres that offered services. This lack of services is coupled with the lack of community resources in general.

Analysis:

Ethno-specific resources were widely used and desired by those for whom they were available. Newcomers feel comfortable going to centres that cater to their specific cultural and language requirements. Participants also reported feeling that some "counsellors don't have enough cultural orientation or ethnic sensitivity".

The data seems to point to the importance of newcomers having ethno-specific community resources available. This is both the case in the *positive* sense in that those who have access to these resources report using them to access services quickly. Yet also in the *negative* sense in that those who do not have access appear to be having a more difficult time in accessing resources and services. It could be argued that a lack of ethno-specific community resources can lead to a more difficult and in some cases negative settlement experience. As far as resources that are available to newcomers this is perhaps the most significant point at which the South and West Asian participants differ from the rest of the sample.

Ineligibility for Services

Most focus group participants were concerned about not being eligible for services at various points in the settlement process. In particular many reported they cannot access healthcare and childcare. As reported by participants in the South and West Asian focus groups, while waiting to "receive OHIP health cards and they had to pay expensive rates for health insurance".

More tellingly is that when asked where people without papers go for service, focus groups participants responded that those people either have to pay for service or go without. Participants reported that ethno-specific organizations do provide some services. One participant suggested that the person "Ask another illegal entry".

Analysis:

All newcomers face issues at one time or another of being ineligible for services and having to wait for eligibility or because of high demand for services. However, government funded programs especially federal programs explicitly prohibit particular classes of newcomers and Canadian citizens. Newcomers with precarious status seem to get some support from ethno-specific and mainstream agencies but are generally left to fend for themselves. For them, access to Health Care and CIC funded settlement services is denied.

The maze of regulations confounds service providers and newcomers alike and impedes successful integration of the emerging workforce in York South-Weston area.

Professional and Work Concerns

Widely reported throughout all the focus groups was the issue of attaining employment. For many, while they were legally entitled to work, they reported that they found it difficult to gain employment due to the fact that they did not have Canadian work experience. For example, as participants in the Caribbean focus group reported, and generally indicative of the sample, was the sense that “there was no acceptance of our credentials; we are made to start all over again”. There is clearly a desire to begin work when newcomers arrive in Canada, yet many feel that they are being hindered from doing this.

Analysis:

The ability to work and earn a living is the most important part of settlement. The fact that participants reported frustration with this issue shows that they desire to work. The workplace is a place where newcomers can learn about Canadian culture and therefore become better acclimatized and acculturated. If it is already difficult to get employed because of the economy, newcomers are at a greater disadvantage simply because of the fact that they are newcomers.

Informal Networks and Formal Networks and Organizations

Many participants noted using both informal and formal networks throughout their settlement process. This was especially the case when seeking information about what services are available. Participants reported using informal social networks, such as friends, family and neighbours to find out about what services agencies offered and, more importantly, the efficacy of these services. Participants from the Caribbean focus groups reported using the “recommendations of friends and family” when making a decision on which service or agency they would use. This sentiment was generally indicative of the entire sample. Only the Hispanic focus group participants reported not using informal social connections in this way. In fact, those participants reported feeling that there was not a strong sense of community amongst Hispanic people. Participants stated that “Latinos don’t help each other” and this was reflected in the use of friends and family not being reported as a source of information during the settlement process.

As well as using informal networks for information regarding services, most participants also reported using formal networks throughout their settlement experience. In particular participants used organizations such as the YMCA assessment centre, and local community groups for information about

services, and how to access services. Using these services is where participants reported having their best experiences. Furthermore, participants reported using dominant media, such as newspapers, television and the internet to find out about settlement services available from both the government and other sectors. For example, participants at the African focus group noted using “CIC, Service Canada and social services” to find out about services and to access services.

However, amongst the South Asian and West Asian focus group participants, knowledge was mixed regarding the use of formal information networks. Among the three focus groups held, only participants in one group showed good knowledge of information networks, including the OMNI TV channel and ethno-specific newspapers. Yet participants in the other two reported having poor knowledge of such media, using only “friends and family” and “newspapers”. Only a minority of the sample of the South Asian and West Asian focus groups reported using agencies that they could name

Analysis:

Most participants were knowledgeable of information networks, both formal and informal. However this level of knowledge differed across the sample depending on ethnic group. Access to information about services and services themselves is in some way dependent upon the networks a newcomer is already exposed to. And in some way the helpfulness of the network is dependent upon the ethno-specific group one belongs to. For instance the Hispanic group participants reported that informal networks were poor due to there being a poor sense of community. Participants from the South Asian and West Asian groups reported similar sentiments and preferred more formal networks for information and services.

(In)Equality and (Un)Fairness

Participants reported mixed experiences regarding how fair and or equitable they felt their settlement process had been. This finding differed across ethnicity.

Whilst participants who spoke to this subject did report feeling freer and more secure (especially in the case of the South and West Asian sample with participants listing “freedom” as one of their best experiences), perceived discrimination or ethnic insensitivity was also reported. Participants in the South and West Asian focus group reported that people wanted to “cheat newcomers” and some reported there being “cultural related challenges [concerning] ethnic colour”. Issues of inequality and cultural acclimatization were also reported amongst the Caribbean focus groups.

Furthermore, members of three focus groups felt as though they were being exploited by members of their own community and not getting much in the way of community support. One reported that “People cheat newcomers and (take advantage of) their vulnerability”.

Analysis:

Reporting of any perceived injustice is troubling. Three groups reported having either poor intra-ethnic relations and a lack of informal social connections, or having a lack of community resources, respectively. Strengthening community resources and educating newcomers as to their labour rights may assist in this issue.

Ensuring a fair and equal settlement process is, however, perhaps more complex than engendering a sense of community. That certain participants felt there was a lack of cultural sensitivity suggests that better understanding is required amongst those who interact with newcomers professionally.

Service Quality and Availability

Broadly speaking, newcomers are looking for services for basic needs such as housing, food, and health. They are also looking for education, career services and help with the immigration process. Participants reported requesting services such as gaining a passport, SIN and bank statements, along with advice on claiming taxes.

Newcomers rely on organizations that are within the community such as churches, schools, ethno-specific organizations and local politicians such as MPs. This is the case when respondents spoke about their sources of information, how they learned about the services, where they would go if they didn't have any "papers", and what informed their method of choosing a specific service or organization.

A majority of focus group participants hoped or expected that services delivered would bring about "a positive result". Participants desired services that were accurate, in the appropriate language, and wanted many services in one place and which were delivered with empathy and in a timely manner.

Participants at the South Asian and West Asian focus groups were of the opinion that there was a "gap in communication" between their port of entry - the airport - and the first service that they encountered with the information out of date and the service unavailable. Some participants suggested that the "Immigration Officer should provide immediate help".

Another issue regarding service delivery was communication with service providers. Many participants reported problems brought about due to a "language barrier." For instance, in the case of the South Asian and West Asian focus groups, participants encountered problems because there is a lack of service provision in their languages.

Analysis:

There appear to be what can be described as "hard" and "soft" expectations regarding service delivery. A positive result may result through more tangible, "hard", components such as accurate services delivered in an appropriate language. A positive result may also be brought about by other less tangible means, "soft approaches", such as empathy or cultural sensitivity. Both require understanding the newcomer who is accessing the service in terms of social, economic and cultural requirements.

Conclusion:

It appears that experience of a quick and easy settlement process vary depending on the ethno-specific group. Type of ethnicity also informs the types of services newcomers seek. Amongst the Caribbean, East Asian and African communities, more advanced services such as professional credentialing and documentation administration were required. These groups also reported using both informal and formal information networks extensively to access and to find out about services. Furthermore these groups reported having well established community resources such as religious centres and informal social connections at hand.

On the other hand, Hispanic, South Asian and West Asian groups did not report the same level of advantage in these areas. This disadvantage is also compounded by the perceived level of equality and fairness throughout the settlement process amongst these two groups.

Although there appears to be a link between the knowledge, availability and quality of community resources and one's ethno-specific group, it is difficult to assert that there is a causal link amongst this delineation. However, knowledge of services and community resources in and of themselves are clearly important aspects of the settlement experience. Informal networks play a big role in linking newcomers to services and service providers would be wise to capitalize on those networks. The delivery system needs to fill in the cracks between agencies as clients move from service provider to service provider.

That certain participants report wanting services delivered by community resources such as religious centres indicates that this might be a valuable change.

Recommendations:

Newcomers consistently reported preferring and needing to receive services from ethno-specific service providers. The experiences of newcomers are to a larger extent informed by existing cultural expectations and nuances. An understanding of these complexities is required and a suitably flexible legislative framework should therefore follow. Ethno-specific organizations deserve better settlement funding to help newcomers more effectively and to ensure choice in service delivery.

Strengthening the relationship between mainstream service provision agencies and community resources would also help newcomers find out about services. The connection between these resources, the service-users and other organizations involved in settlement services needs to be strengthened.

Many participants reported that they felt that there was little service continuity between when they arrived in Canada and when they began to settle. Issues arise later in the settlement process when newcomers seek employment and housing. The capacity of the NPO system needs additional resources in order to assist with issues arising from discrimination and to help integrate newcomers into local communities.

Foreign trained professionals reported that lack of acceptance of non-Canadian work and academic experience. They expressed a desire for skills training and language training but trying to find work related to their training and experience left them with the opinion that there is inflexibility on the part

of employers regarding non-Canadian experience. If newcomers are valuable to the Canadian economy then their route to becoming employed and hence becoming a part of that economy needs to be made easier.

Service providers need to capitalize and strengthen the informal networks linked to newcomers. Agencies can consider utilizing informal networks when undertaking outreach activities. And when newcomers arrive to weak networks, funders and providers should consider efforts to strengthen ethno-specific ties.

Participants reported a lack of cultural sensitivity amongst those who interact with newcomers as service providers. Offsetting this will require educational interventions or cultural competency initiatives with service providers. Due to the inherent sensitivity issues abundant with culture, careful and thorough understanding of the issue, perhaps via more focused research in this area, is required.

Poor quality of information and referral at the point of entry (usually at the airport) needs improvement. Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Border Services and local service providers should link more closely to ensure timely and accurate information gets to newcomers as soon as they arrive in Toronto.

Most importantly focus group participants reported being ineligible for many services that prevents them from accessing healthcare, jobs and other services.

Service delivery systems serving newcomers should prioritize serving newcomers on the basis of the need for settlement as opposed to immigration and citizenship status. For instance, language training should be based on proficiency/competency, not immigration status.

Appendix A

July 14 and 21	2 Ethno-specific focus groups held- for the Caribbean community by Broad African Resource Centre	28 people in attendance
July 27	2 Ethno-specific focus groups held by Oromo Canadian Community Association for the African community	30 people in attendance
July 27	2 Ethno-specific focus groups held by the Vietnamese Women's Association of Toronto for the East Asian community	16 people in attendance
July 28	2 Ethno-specific focus groups held by the York Hispanic Centre for the Hispanic community	35 people in attendance
July 27 and	3 Ethno-specific focus groups held by Islamic	55 people in attendance

August 6	Social Services & Resources Association for the South Asian and West Asian communities	
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Appendix B

Focus Group Interview Guide

1. What types of services do you use to help you settle in Canada? (Probe: formally provided services, informally provided services, such as private financial sources, legal assistance for children in prison).
2. What do you ask the people you meet who provide services for you to settle?
3. What do you hope for when you are looking for help? / Wanting to obtain a service (e.g., Probe: friendliness, referrals to other services, cultural awareness of your culture of origin, etc.)
4. How do you choose who to go to when you want information or help? How are your choices different the first time from all subsequent times?
5. From where do you obtain information? (Probe: What about news media, specific to your ethnic community? What about the internet? What about family? What about friends?). How do you use this information? How do you know the accuracy of the information?
6. What do you do if you cannot obtain the information or service you are seeking?
 - a. What do you do if you go one place expecting a specific service and find out that service is not available at the place you are visiting?
 - b. If you have been referred to another social service organization, have you gone? How do you feel going from one place to another?
 - c. Do you return to the first organization? Why or why not?
7. How do you learn about services from different levels of government?
8. If you are or know people who do not have any papers, where do you/they go for help? For example where do you/they go to get health care or help finding employment?
9. What is your best experience in finding help in settling into Canada?
10. What additional challenges do you face that we have not yet spoken about?

