



Immigration Settlement Services and Gaps in Fort McMurray, Wood Buffalo region, Alberta

This community report is part of the "Immigration Settlement Services and Gaps in CIC's Western Region" study.

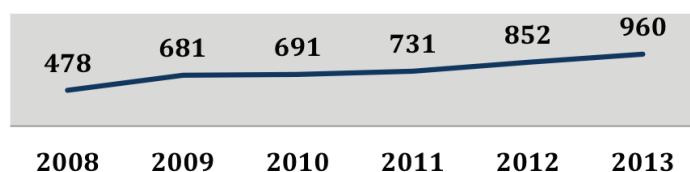


Population (2011): 72,944 residents in urban service area and 43,463 in rural service area.

Source: www.woodbuffalo.ab.ca, Municipal census, 2012

Permanent Resident Landings Wood Buffalo 2008-2013

Source: Citizenship and Immigration Canada



Data sources: 5 Service Providing Organizations (SPOs) receiving funding from CIC, Provincial, NGO, private, and various other sources.

- Findings validated locally

SETTLEMENT SERVICES



Top services offered

Fort McMurray has a relatively developed settlement service sector with all services listed (see appendix A) being offered by the participant organizations or someone in the community.



Key gaps identified

- Suitable language training for adults
- Affordable/temporary housing
- Services specifically tailored to women and seniors
- Legal services
- Inadequate financial support and personnel / training at SPOs
- Childcare



Barriers to access services

- English language proficiency
- Lack of childcare
- Ineligibility for services among some newcomers
- Transportation difficulties
- Lack of knowledge about existing services



Top services needed

- Improved language training
- Affordable and flexible childcare
- Services for women and seniors
- Social integration programs
- Credential assessment and referrals



Services needed by newcomers ineligible for CIC funded services

Needs assessment, language training, housing, community information and orientation, legal support, childcare, health services.

PARTNERSHIPS



Fort McMurray has a very well developed and diverse service provider partnership network. The most commonly identified partnerships exist with schools/school boards, umbrella organizations, settlement service providers (SPOs), civil society groups, municipal offices, universities/research networks, public library, and language training providers. Welcoming activities are mainly conducted in partnership.

INTEGRATION IN COMMUNITY



Fort McMurray is an affluent community with a vibrant labour market that attracts many newcomers seeking employment. The primary integrative barriers faced by newcomers are related to English language proficiency, a high cost of living and gaining access to affordable housing and child care. Gaining Canadian work experience and foreign credential recognition are seen as the main barriers to economic integration.

IMMIGRATION SETTLEMENT SERVICES AND GAPS IN CIC'S WESTERN REGION: Fort McMurray, Wood Buffalo, Alberta

Introduction

The purpose of this project is to better understand the settlement and integration services available to newcomers and to explore the service gaps and opportunities in Fort McMurray, Alberta and 28 other rural communities across Western Canada. This research offers a current snapshot of Fort McMurray by providing information gathered from a sample of local service providers. It is not a comprehensive review of all settlement services in Fort McMurray. Data was collected in October and November 2014 from five organizations that serve newcomers in Fort McMurray through a telephone survey completed by a representative from each organization. Four of the organizations receive funding from CIC and the province, one from private and NGOs funding. In addition, two received funding from a variety of other funding sources. Three survey respondents participated in a feedback session on the primary survey findings via teleconference held in December 2014.

Background

Fort McMurray is located in the regional municipality of Wood Buffalo and is representative of one of the fastest growing economies in Canada. Wood Buffalo was formed as a result of the amalgamation of the City of Fort McMurray Improvement District No. 143 on April 1, 1995. Containing a number of remote rural communities and five First Nations, Wood Buffalo is a diverse and challenging environment for service providers to operate in. Due primarily to oil and gas development, the community has more than doubled in size since 1999. The Wood Buffalo region has a diverse population of roughly 74,631 permanent residents and an additional 41,476 non-permanent residents (shadow and project accommodated people). Since 2008, 4,393 newcomers have moved to the region: this represents 6.0% of the total population in the area. Not surprisingly, all of the service provider organizations reported a rapid increase in clients over the past five years.

Community Settlement Concerns

Almost all the respondents felt that the number of newcomers settling in Wood Buffalo had significantly increased in the last five years putting a strain on

necessary services. As indicated by participants during the feedback session, the opening of the International Airport in 2013 has increased primary migration. In addition, a large number of migrants make their way to the city shortly after arrival in major municipal centres such as Edmonton. Typically thought of as a hub for secondary migration, in reality Fort McMurray is increasingly a site for primary migration – speaking to the need for greater support from CIC.

As indicated during the follow-up consultation, the majority of the participants felt settlement for certain groups of newcomers was especially difficult. In particular, women, seniors and foreign temporary workers lack access to essential services. There was an identified lack of accommodation for Francophones, largely because Alberta is not a bilingual province.

While access to labour, especially entry level jobs, is not an issue for newcomers, rapid economic growth has generated other challenges such as a high cost of living, associated financial difficulties, and poor access to affordable housing, temporary housing and childcare. More highly skilled newcomers struggle with a lack of recognition of non-Canadian work experience and credentials. In order to alleviate some of these issues participants identified the need for low cost skill training, lower cost legal services and improved accessing of foreign credentials during follow-up consultations. In short, despite the rapid growth in population and newcomers, available services do not match the needs of the community. Increasingly the level of demand on SPOs reflects what is commonly found in larger urban centres.

Available Settlement Services

Despite the aforementioned limitations Fort McMurray has a relatively developed settlement and integration service sector with all services listed (27 key services – see appendix A) being offered by the participant organizations or someone in the community. Many services were identified as requiring expansion, which is not surprising given the recent growth in the newcomer population in the region. Among the services identified were language training and support, housing, affordable child care, live in care givers for seniors, and assessment and referral.

In regards to newcomers who are ineligible for CIC-funded services, participants indicated that temporary foreign workers (TFW), new and returning naturalized citizens, refugee claimants and international students were all in need of settlement services. The top services most needed by ineligible groups include needs assessment, language training, housing, community information and orientation, legal support, childcare, and health services. Participants indicated that TFWs (recognizing that service needs are less than what is required by permanent residents) and new and returning naturalized Canadian citizens had a greater need for settlement services than other groups.

Tracking and Planning

Two of the participating organizations indicated they had a strategic plan: one had their own plan while the other worked in partnership with another organization. All participating organizations worked with other units in the community to assist in the settlement of newcomers, including other settlement service providers, Francophone community organizations, school boards, ethno-cultural groups, and municipal libraries.

Specific Capacities

The majority of organizations in the regional municipality have reported lacking the financial support to maintain their current level of services. During the follow-up consultation a number of concerns were expressed over existing capacity among SPOs. One identified issue is adequate staffing. In a highly competitive labour market there is high turnover among staff members within service providers. Many staff members experience “burn out” due to the demanding nature of their work and large influx of newcomers.

Almost all participants reported good communication with stakeholders and other service providers in the area. Most, however, reported that although there are programs that support newcomers’ transition and integration into the general community, it is difficult to mobilize the long-term resident community in Fort McMurray to welcome and support newcomers.

Low participation of newcomer women in programs offered by the ISOs is a concern of service providers and is primarily attributed to a lack of access to affordable and part-time childcare. Participants also noted during the follow-up that newcomer women were overrepresented in the municipality’s only women’s shelter, suggesting the need for more services for women suffering domestic abuse and financial distress. Finally, like other regions in Western Canada, service organizations report difficulty meeting the needs of Francophones, for instance in relation to bilingual health care providers.

Partnerships

All survey participants reported being engaged in partnerships with other community organizations and it is evident that Fort McMurray has a very well developed service provider partnership network. Participants indicated that they were in partnership with all 21 possible community partners listed in the survey (see appendix B). The most commonly reported partners were schools/school boards, umbrella organizations, settlement service providers (SPOs), civil society groups, municipal offices, universities/ research networks, public library, and language training providers. The activities conducted in partnership were categorized into three groups; settlement (e.g., getting jobs and housing, daily functioning), integration (e.g., teaching labour rules and human rights), and welcoming (e.g., orientation to community, civic events). In Fort McMurray, integration and welcoming activities were more likely to be conducted in partnership than settlement activities.

However, among the participants significant emphasis was put on the need for an inclusive Settlement Agency Committee or “backbone” agency that could facilitate co-operation and co-ordination of services at the local level. There were notable concerns over duplication of services: the need to tailor services to local challenges; the need to facilitate better information sharing among providers; and a desire to maximize the benefit of limited human and financial resources. In addition, there was consensus that this committee could act as a more effective advocate for agencies among federal, provincial and municipal levels of government, and generally would build trust amongst service providers and government officials. There was particular concern expressed over the role of the municipality in terms of providing support to service providers and an expressed need for greater co-operation with that level of government. Given the level of partnering and number of partnerships that currently exists in Fort McMurray, this community would be a candidate for a LIP.

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Appendix A – List of Possible Services

SETTLEMENT

- Greeting upon arrival/initial reception
- Information and orientation
- Needs assessment and referral
- Interpretation services
- Language assessment
- Language training
- Help finding housing
- Help with daily life (e.g., registering for school, getting a bank account)
- Transportation support

ECONOMIC

- Help finding a job
- Educational upgrading
- Recognition of foreign credentials
- Investment opportunities
- Job-specific language training
- Help setting up a business
- Occupational/business mentorship and networking
- Financial supports

SOCIAL

- Childcare
- Cultural Events
- Recreational services
- Legal support/referral
- Health Services
- Mental Health Services

- Social inclusion/ integration support
- Services for seniors
- Services for women
- Services for youth

Appendix B – Possible Organizational Partnerships

1. School/School Boards
2. Umbrella organizations
3. Newcomers (individuals)
4. Housing services
5. Settlement service providers
6. Health services
7. Municipal offices/EDO
8. Civil society groups
9. Francophone organizations
10. Language training providers
11. Children/Family services
12. Businesses
13. Chambers of Commerce
14. Police Force
15. Universities/Research Networks
16. Ethno-cultural groups
17. Religious organizations
18. Public libraries
19. Foundations
20. Labour market services
21. Other: Province of Quebec and Francophone Secretariat in Edmonton; Health Family Outreach; Santara Safe House.