Immigration in 5 Rural Manitoba Communities with a Focus on Refugees:

Portage la Prairie Case Study

August 2016
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Introduction

In November 2015, a national resettlement initiative was undertaken to resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees across Canada. Since November 4th, 2015 the Government of Canada has welcomed more than 29,700 Syrian refugees (August 1st, 2016) and the commitment to resettling more refugees to Canada is continuing in 2016. More than 1000 Syrian refugees have resettled in Manitoba and, of those, 90 have settled outside of Winnipeg, in rural communities and small centres. This research project was initiated out of this experience and is funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) through Manitoba Association of Newcomer Serving Organizations (MANSO).

The purpose of the project is to learn from the current experiences in five rural communities in Manitoba and examine the settlement and community capacity of these smaller centres to resettle refugees. Selected communities are those who have received newcomers and have recently received refugees or have an active plan in place for the arrival of refugees.

This research project builds on the 2015 “Immigration Settlement Services and Gaps in CIC’s Western region” study conducted by the Rural Development institute (RDI) and Immigration Research West (IRW). It offered a snapshot of the immigration settlement services sector in 29 selected rural communities across the western provinces (British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba) and in the three territories (Yukon, Northwest Territories, Nunavut).

Research Method

This study follows the same method as the 2015 study. Five communities were selected that are distributed geographically and represent a sample of the provinces’ smaller cities. The five cases are: Dauphin, Portage la Prairie, Boissevain-Killarney, Steinbach-Kleefeld and Morden-Winkler-Altona-Carman.

In the five communities, data were collected through 30 telephone interviews with a senior official of the Service Provider Organizations (SPOs) or a representative of the Refugee Sponsorship Group. The sample of participating service providers included both SPOs that have a primary mandate to serve newcomers (funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada or other sources) and community organizations supporting newcomers in some capacity. This research did not include newcomers or refugees and as such the findings are based solely on the opinions and perceptions of SPOs and refugee sponsorship groups’ representatives.

Once data were collected, a draft report was compiled for each community. Each was shared with the research participants and other local stakeholders. Their feedback was incorporated and reports finalized.

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3 Similarly as in the Ashton et al. (2015) study, the term “community” is conceptualized in geographic terms as either a “local community” that consists of a single municipality, or a “regional community,” comprising two or more neighboring municipalities and/or areas that are not incorporated as municipalities.
4 Winnipeg is excluded from the study together with the communities participated in the Ashton et al. (2015) study with the exception of Dauphin, due to its recent experience with refugee resettlement (15 individuals as of August 8, 2016).
Portage la Prairie Case Study

The Portage la Prairie case is a snapshot of perceptions from six participants. Organization representatives reported receiving funding for their operations from provincial, private, IRCC and other federal sources as well as the city of Portage la Prairie. Four participants and two additional stakeholders provided feedback to finalize the report.

Community Context

Portage la Prairie (Portage) is the fourth largest city in Manitoba with a population of 12,996 (2011)\(^5\). It is located in Southern Manitoba between the province’s two major centres (Winnipeg and Brandon). Portage is a major service centre for the Central Plains region of Manitoba containing regional government offices, retail and distribution services\(^6\).

According to IRCC\(^7\) and confirmed by the research participants there hasn’t been an arrival of refugees in the community yet (four out of six participants said refugees hadn’t arrived in the community and the other two were unsure). However, five of the six participants (one participant was unsure) confirmed that there is an active plan in place for refugees to arrive in the community before the end of 2016. They are expecting two families from Syria (total of 10 individuals) under the Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) and Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) Programs (BVOR mentioned by three participants and PSR mentioned by two).

Settlement in the Community

Participants’ opinions were divided when asked how difficult or easy it is for newcomers (including refugees) to settle in Portage. Three participants perceived newcomer settlement as somewhat difficult and three as somewhat easy. An existing SPO network in the community and partnerships among various organizations assist newcomers to have their needs met. Additionally, settlement is usually easier for those newcomers whose cultural group is present in the community, but often these groups are not present in Portage.

The main concerns participants identified, which made settlement more challenging for newcomers in the community were finding affordable housing, mental health issues and finding mental health support, low English language skills, and acceptance by locals. Two participants mentioned that there needs to be education for both newcomers and local residents, so more exposure to each other’s culture is possible.

\(^5\) Statistics Canada 2011 Census


\(^7\) http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/refugees/welcome/map.asp
Table 1 – Settlement Services offered in Portage la Prairie as reported by the six research participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information and Orientation</th>
<th>Literacy and Language Training</th>
<th>Support Services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Needs assessment and referral</td>
<td>• Language training (general)</td>
<td>• Childcare (during service delivery)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Initial reception</td>
<td>• Language assessment</td>
<td>• Transportation (by volunteers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Job specific language training</td>
<td>• Interpretation/translation (in some cases by volunteers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Additional language training through volunteers</td>
<td>• Women, youth and seniors focused programing</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Services for parents and families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Supports to persons with disabilities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Labour Market Access Supports</th>
<th>Community Connections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Assistance finding a job</td>
<td>• Initiatives that foster interactions between newcomers and Canadians (taking newcomers to hockey game, curling league)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Connections with employers</td>
<td>• Mentoring program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Welcoming communities (cultural events, some events through churches)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Settlement Services

The settlement services offered in Portage as mentioned by the six research participants are shown in Table 1 (page 3). In Table 1, within each service category, services are reported in the order of the frequency mentioned by the six participants, with the most commonly reported service listed first in each section and the least commonly reported services listed last. Most of the basic settlement services are offered in the community, however some of them depend on volunteers (e.g. transportation, interpretation). Three participants mentioned crisis counseling is offered in the community, although two participants cited that it is only available outside of the community (newcomers are referred to a Winnipeg facility). Only one participant mentioned that there are services offered just for refugees, however the sponsorship groups offer them on a volunteer basis.

Four out of six participants reported that services need to expand to meet the needs of the current newcomer population, while two felt services are sufficient but expansion will be needed in the future. Services that participants thought need expanding include transportation supports, job specific language training, foreign credential recognition and upgrading skills programs, childcare and integration services. Three participants mentioned that their organizations are short staffed and are unable to dedicate the time and resources needed to provide integration services due to insufficient funding.

Participants were asked whether services needed to change to meet the needs of the newcomer population. Three participants cited a change is needed and two cited a change will be needed in the future. The anticipated refugee arrival will require services to adapt to the unique needs of refugees, and refugee focused programs should be offered in the community. Other examples of new services that need to be offered in the community are: introduction to the education system (for newcomer families with children), job-specific language training offered by the large employers in the community, and the current social services offered need to involve more newcomers.

Community Capacity

Four out of six participants felt that their community has the capacity to attract and retain refugees, while one participant had the opposite opinion and one was unsure. The six participants ranked ten areas of community capacity for assessing the community’s ability to respond to the needs of refugees. The results are listed in Figure 1.

Transportation, childcare, and housing were the three areas of community capacity that scored low. Five of the six participants stated transportation was within the very low (3) to low (2) capacity range, since there is no public transportation available in the community. Currently the need is met by volunteers. Participants reported a few initiatives taking place in the community to address the issue, including a transportation committee (in partnership with SPOs), funding in place for adults to get driver’s licenses, and a borrow-a-bike program. A family resource centre also provides shuttle transportation for newcomers participating in their programs.

Childcare was also within the very low (2) to low (2) capacity range with one participant reporting medium capacity and one high. Daycare spots are scarce and waiting lists are very long. Participants mentioned future plans in place to expand childcare services in the community. Housing was the third area that scored low since low-income housing is not easily available in the community. However, one participant mentioned that two houses are already in place for the two refugee families expected to arrive.

Mental health and receptivity to refugees were two areas of capacity where participants’ opinions were mixed. Regarding mental health, two participants were not aware of any mental health service providers in Portage. Two of the other four participants that were aware of mental health providers in the community questioned how culturally competent the services are, since in the past some newcomer families moved to Winnipeg to access the mental health services they needed.

Regarding receptivity to refugees, participants’ perception is mixed due to different attitudes from different groups of people. While people involved in the arrival and resettlement process of refugees in the community (e.g. sponsorship group, volunteers, SPOs, churches) are very supportive and
welcoming (e.g. high financial support raised for refugees, a large network of volunteers, cultural workshops to increase awareness in the community) there are some negative attitudes expressed publically (e.g social media posts, letter to the sponsorship group). Attitudes towards immigrants, rather than refugees are more positive in the community since the community has seen a benefit in recruiting and retaining immigrants. Nevertheless, there are still some incidents where negative feelings are expressed.

The remaining areas of capacity scored relatively high. Participants feel the services offered by SPOs in the community are somewhat sufficient, but funding is limited together with professional development opportunities for SPOs’ staff and service delivery often rely on volunteers. Health care services are provided by well-trained staff who are experienced with newcomers, as well other resources are in place (e.g. interpreters for appointments with the doctors). Schools are sufficient, however there is room for improvement (additional financial support to create programs for refugee students is needed). Regarding employment in the community, participants said there is a broad range of opportunities especially for entry-level positions. For professional and highly qualified newcomers having their credentials recognized and finding employment that matches their skills and qualifications remains challenging.

### Partnerships and Agency Capacity

All six participants reported their organizations were engaged in partnerships with other community organizations. Partnerships were identified with a great variety of stakeholders such as, schools, other SPOs, health and mental health services, Child and Family Services, churches, local businesses and the Chamber of Commerce, the City of Portage la Prairie, recreation opportunities for children, and other resource centres in the community.

Participants also shared their opinion regarding what types of local partnerships are needed in the community in order to better respond to the needs of refugees (regardless of whether the partnerships are already in place or not). Health and mental health authorities, the City and local municipality, education, employers, and community justice office are needed the most. One participant mentioned a partnership group that existed in the past in the community and included representatives from Child and Family Services, the justice system, healthcare services, local churches, education, and public housing. This partnership group needs to reform to enable organizations to share resources and communicate the needs of refugees. Most of the partnerships needed appear to be in place in Portage, however they are somewhat informal.
The participants were also asked about their own agency’s or organization’s capacity to meet the needs of newcomers, including refugees in the community. Five participants ranked their organizational capacity on a set of activities (Figure 2). Fewer participants answered these questions, as they were most intended for SPOs and did not always apply well to sponsorship groups or other community stakeholders who were not formally funded for their support of newcomers.

More improvement is needed in coordination and communication among the SPOs to identify refugee needs and adapt services to meet unique needs. Additional efforts should be made to mobilize the community so the community is better prepared for the refugee arrival. Participants highlighted the need for training opportunities for SPOs’ staff to increase their cultural awareness in relation to refugees (e.g. understanding the importance of refugees keeping their first language) and gain a better understanding of the issues surrounding them. Currently all specialized supports for refugees are in Winnipeg and staff’s experience in providing services to refugees and welcoming them in the community is only gained on the job. Additional training is needed for staff to facilitate services using interpreters and better coordination with the volunteer group of interpreters.

### Conclusion

Portage is preparing for refugee arrival, as two refugee families are anticipated to settle in the community in the near future. The various service providers in the community have limited previous experience resettling refugees. Although the basic settlement services are already offered in the community, there is a call for more support for SPOs and other organizations to prepare for the refugee arrival. SPOs’ staff need training opportunities to increase their understanding around the unique needs of refugees and adapt their service delivery in order to meet those needs.

In Portage the strong partnership network that is already in place, could be more formal in order to share resources and collectively communicate the needs of refugees. Additional efforts should be made to mobilize the community, increase public awareness about refugees, and work towards advancing the community’s capacity to welcome them.
Special thanks to the members of the Project Advisory Panel for their input and assistance: Bequie Lake, Teresa Burke, Laurie Sawatzky & Cathy Dowd Manitoba Association of Newcomer Serving Organizations (MANSO); Lori Wilkinson, Immigration Research West (IRW) and University of Manitoba; Liz Robinson, Manitoba Government; John Biles & Benjamin Walker Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC).

Terms:

**Newcomers**: Includes all immigrants, permanent residents, refugees, refugee claimants, temporary foreign workers, and international students that have been in Canada for 1 day to 5 years.

**Refugees**: Includes all Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSRs), Government-Assisted Refugees (GARs), Refugees under the Blended Visa Office-Referred Program (BVORs) and refugee claimants. A refugee is different from an immigrant, in that an immigrant is a person who chooses to settle permanently in another country. Refugees are forced to flee (IRCC, 2016)

**Community**: A municipality, district, region or other geographic area consisting of population clusters.

**Stakeholder**: Any group, organization, or enterprise that has newcomers and/or refugees as the primary or secondary clientele.