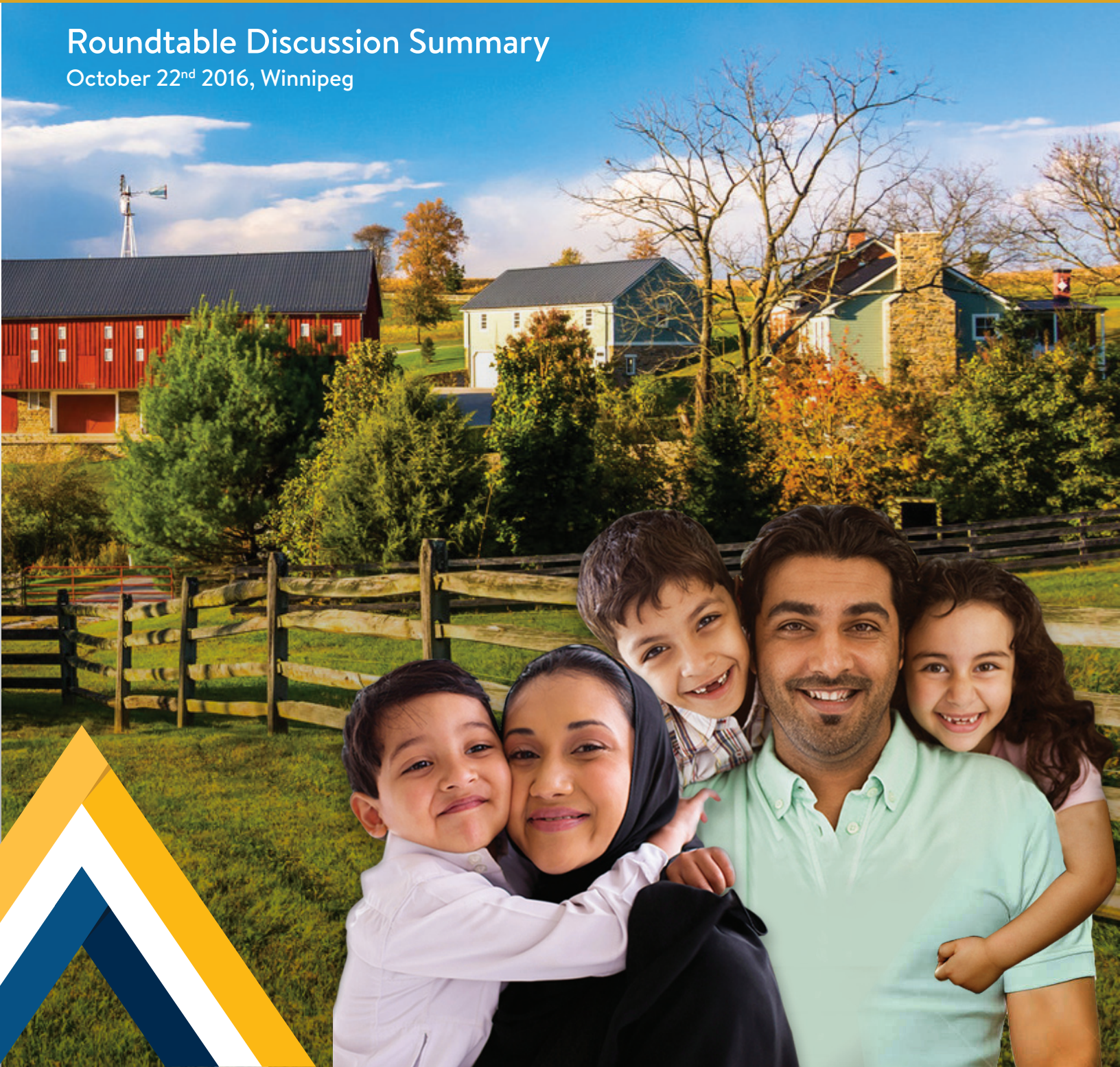


REFUGEES IN MANITOBA: SMALL CENTRE SETTLEMENT

Roundtable Discussion Summary

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Presented by the Rural Development Institute (RDI)
at The Canadian Institute for Identities and Migration (CIIM)
& Immigration Research West (IRW) Regional Symposium:
MIGRATION AND REFUGE IN WESTERN CANADA



Rural Development Institute, Brandon University

Brandon University established the Rural Development Institute in 1989 as an academic research centre and a leading source of information on issues affecting rural communities in Western Canada and elsewhere.

RDI functions as a not-for-profit research and development organization designed to promote, facilitate, coordinate, initiate and conduct multi-disciplinary academic and applied research on rural issues. The Institute provides an interface between academic research efforts and the community by acting as a conduit of rural research information and by facilitating community involvement in rural development. RDI projects are characterized by cooperative and collaborative efforts of multi-stakeholders.

The Institute has diverse research affiliations, and multiple community and government linkages related to its rural development mandate. RDI disseminates information to a variety of constituents and stakeholders and makes research information and results widely available to the public either in printed form or by means of public lectures, seminars, workshops and conferences.

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In the summer of 2016, Brandon University's Rural Development Institute conducted a study to explore the capacity of 5 rural Manitoba communities to settle immigrants with an emphasis on the capacity to resettle refugees.¹ Through interviews with Service Provider Organizations, Sponsorship groups, and other community stakeholders involved in immigrant settlement and refugee resettlement, a picture emerged of their capacity to meet the needs of refugees. Research participants provided detailed information regarding several aspects of settlement including: employment, health, education, support services. Overall, research participants felt confident that their communities had the capacity to settle refugees despite challenges present. Key successes expressed by participants were the strong partnerships between Service Provider Organizations and Sponsorship Groups and strong volunteer networks. Key challenges mentioned included lack of public transportation, limited interpretation services, and the lack of clear timelines for refugee arrival.

Following dissemination of the study results, a panel and roundtable discussion was facilitated at the CIIM IRW Regional Symposium in October 2016 in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The panel included: Bequie Lake of Manitoba Association of Newcomer Serving Organizations (MANSO); Liz Robinson, Manitoba Education and Training, Manitoba Government; Laurie Sawatzky, Regional Connections Winkler; Lori Wilkinson, Immigration Research West of the University of Manitoba. The co-chairs were Eleni Galatsanou and Bill Ashton from RDI.

Panelists were asked their opinions on how their organizations were addressing the challenges and opportunities for resettling refugees outside of Manitoba's urban centre, Winnipeg; their impression of rural communities capacity to resettle and retain refugees; what the unique needs of refugees resettling in rural areas are; and from a national perspective, what have been the challenges facing refugee resettlement and how these challenges may be addressed. This report summarizes their responses and highlights of the discussion that took place.

¹ Ashton, W., Galatsanou, E., Cronkrite, M., and Pettigrew, R. (2016). Immigration in 5 Rural Manitoba Communities with a focus on refugees. Rural Development Institute, Brandon University. Brandon, MB
See: <https://www.brandonu.ca/rdi/publication/immigration-in-5-rural-manitoba-communities-with-a-focus-on-refugees/>

How our Panelists' Organizations have Addressed Challenges and Opportunities for Refugee Resettlement in Rural Areas

Each of our panelists was asked how her organization is addressing the challenges and opportunities for resettling refugees outside of Winnipeg. Bequie Lake talked about how MANSO is addressing challenges in several ways. Information sharing between various groups, such as all levels of government, sponsorship groups, SPOs, and social service agencies is an important part of MANSO's work. For example, a newcomer prevention initiative has been created to prevent refugee child apprehension; this involved communicating the impact of refugee resettlement with Child and Family Services. MANSO is distributing information to share trends, successes, and challenges, and communicating the impact of refugee resettlement. MANSO has also hired refugee-focused staff members (with some funding received from the Provincial Government), who act as a resource for stakeholders involved in refugee resettlement.

In order to prepare the broad community of Winkler-Morden-Altona-Carmen for refugee resettlement, Regional Connections added childcare services within their SPO, which helped to make sure that schools and Public Health were prepared to synchronize services, and provided diversity and intercultural training for volunteers. From the perspective of a settlement service provider in rural Manitoba, Laurie Sawatzky, Executive Director of Regional Connection, highlighted the importance of volunteers in rural communities during refugee resettlement as well as pre-arrival preparation between stakeholders. Altona welcomed five families, a total 45 people, in a very short time. Sawatzky noted that the close knit nature of the community made it easier to work with sponsorship groups where everyone knows everyone else. Build A Village, a private sponsorship group, has welcomed over 200 people to Altona over past 10 years, which provides a lot of expertise in the community. However, it is extremely important that volunteers and sponsorship groups are aware of the resources available through SPOs in the community, so refugees continue to receive the services their need in the long-run.

Liz Robinson, representing Manitoba Education and Training, noted that the Provincial government is interested in growing the population to meet labour market needs and working with rural communities to do so. Manitoba Education and Training initiatives aim to build up settlement programs in rural communities, including supporting SPOs in communities that are not familiar with refugee resettlement except through private sponsorship. Refugee resettlement can be a challenge for rural community due to the high numbers and tight timeframes for refugee arrival, in addition to the unique needs of Syrian refugees (e.g. large size of families, trauma). To support these communities, the Provincial Government has offered coordination and support of resettlement efforts, as well as mobilizing government departments and the settlement sector to work together to provide the best response to refugee arrival. Communication and information sharing has always been a priority for the department and continues to be. The Provincial Government is addressing the language barriers by building interpreter capacity in the province, and making interpreter services more available to refugees outside of Winnipeg.

Immigration Research West (IRW) of University of Manitoba has assisted in refugee resettlement by assisting SPOs locating data for funding applications, and by providing research reports and an empirical understanding of refugee resettlement. IRW has also responded to international inquiries about refugee resettlement data in Canada. Dr. Lori Wilkinson of IRW noted that University of Manitoba faculty, staff, and students have sponsored 6 refugees, providing education, room and board for 4 years. Wilkinson highlighted the importance of educating the community about refugees to dispel stereotypes. At the University of Manitoba this is accomplished through classes, student groups, public speeches, and events in the community.

Small Centre Capacity to Resettle and Retain Refugees

When asked to describe their impressions on rural communities' capacity to resettle and retain refugees, panelists described on one hand the challenge of limited resources, and on the other hand the creative resourcefulness and welcoming nature of rural Manitoba communities. Robinson noted the need for specialized services in these communities in order to retain refugees, with a goal of ensuring retention and also welcoming more refugees to rural areas.

Panelists pointed out the tremendous diversity in capacity between the five rural communities examined as part of the 2016 study. Even within the Winkler-Morden-Altona-Carmen community there are differences. The biggest challenge for rural communities is offering specialized services for refugees. For example, it is difficult to address literacy needs or provide English language training for refugees with no English language comprehension in communities with limited language classes. Many communities have English as a Second Language (ESL) and employment programs, however they are only focused on economic immigrants with high or intermediate ESL levels.

A need for mental health services that are culturally competent was also echoed by the panelists. Mental health services may be available in the community, but SPOs may have limited experience with war-trauma, the refugee experience or even working with an interpreter. Robinson noted that rural communities do have creative solutions to refugee needs, but there is a need to build capacities around service provision and specialized services. Particularly, there is a challenge to address how programs are funded and organized, which requires creative solutions.

Despite limited resources, the capacity of small communities to resettle refugees is increased by the strength of the social connections that exist, the ability to mobilize available resources, as well as available housing. Housing was noted as a strength across the province as "No refugee was ever put in a hotel in Manitoba" Wilkinson said. Relative to other provinces Manitoba has had a high capacity to meet housing needs; however, now capacity may have been reached, Wilkinson explained.

Internationally, there has been negative receptivity in Germany and Hungary, where there is movement to promote negative receptivity. In the prairies, positive receptivity towards refugees is a strength. Wilkinson highlights the welcoming nature of the Altona community: Nationally, the highest number of sponsorships is in Altona, where the population grew by 1%; no other community in Canada has come close to that. In addition, in Manitoba, refugees are more likely to be working in the field that they were trained, which is positive for both personal and financial well-being. There is a better chance in working in your field in a smaller centre, Wilkinson noted.

Addressing Needs of Refugees Resettling in Rural Areas

Refugee resettlement in rural areas is causing unique challenges as indicated by the panelists. Interpretation services, access to public transportation, mental health services, childcare, employment are some of the main needs of refugees that need to be met to ensure a successful settlement process.

Interpretation services are not accessible in most of rural communities. For example, in the Winkler-Morden-Altona-Carmen community, the rural community with the largest number of refugee arrivals, there is only one interpreter available who speaks Russian and High German. The cultural differences are more difficult to address with limited ethno-cultural groups existing in rural communities. In addition, some refugees may have lost their cultural ties from years in refugee camps. The panel highlighted the presence or lack of ethno-cultural and faith-based groups as an indicator of community capacity to meet the needs of refugees. The resulting challenge is how to engage refugees with their own community groups and faith-based practices in small towns where those groups may not exist.

In almost all rural communities there is no public transportation available. This results in isolation for refugee families or dependence on volunteers for their transportation. Groups in rural communities have been advocating to city and town councils for public transportation in order to address this need. The panelists noted that urban transportation models may not translate to rural communities. However, there is a program in Winnipeg through Manitoba Public Insurance where newcomers receive support in getting a driver's license, which may be beneficial to expand into rural communities.

Childcare was also discussed as a high need in rural communities. Generally, childcare spots are at a premium in rural Manitoba and some families will require one parent to stay home while the other parent works. Providing adequate childcare should be part of the community response in rural communities.

Sawatzky highlighted the need to address general population growth in rural communities, indicating that Winkler experienced 18.9% growth and the neighbouring rural municipality, 30% growth. Dr. Ashton noted that a 6% population growth can put a community at risk of crisis regarding services and capacity.

Main Challenges During Refugee Resettlement Process in Canada and Areas for Improvement or Change

Panelists indicated several overall challenges to refugee resettlement including receptivity of refugees and maintaining community support, increasing cultural competency, information sharing and timeline planning, pre-arrival services, and effectively balancing the need for language learning and employment.

Information sharing and planning has been challenging across Canada, including the communication of where refugees would be going and where. The number of arrivals in a short period of time, in some cases two days' notice, has been challenging. A more deliberate pace would allow for more time to plan for refugee arrival resettlement. Lake noted that pre-arrival preparation including overseas education is valuable. Overseas education can provide realistic expectations and challenges that refugees will experience upon arriving in Canada. The challenge to providing this pre-arrival information is the urgency to bring refugees here and the pace of arrivals.

Panelists noted that the challenges of racism and Islamophobia are not unique to rural Canadian communities and must be addressed. According to Wilkinson, receptivity of refugees has been positive during recent refugee resettlement but typically after six months interest may start to wane. Over time volunteer engagement goes down and a rise in racism and myths about refugees can occur. Wilkinson highlighted the need of an education campaign to address these challenges including countering messages shared through international media which can affect the mindset of Canadians.

Panelists indicated that there is a need for people who can help educate the population and help people understand that refugees, in the long term, are low cost and in fact a negative cost: refugees will pay more in taxes than they take out of services and will help to build our economy. Community support was indicated as essential to combatting myths and sharing positive stories about refugee resettlement. On behalf of Immigration Research West, Wilkinson noted that there is a hope to conduct surveys of recent Syrian refugee families and their perspectives on the resettlement experience.

Considering how to improve the resettlement experience, the panelists indicated that culturally competent service delivery was an ongoing need across locations. Robinson stated that cultural competency needs to be embedded in the workforce in order to improve refugee resettlement. Also, strategies needed to help refugees adjust to life in Canada while also addressing trauma that has happened prior to their arrival.

Panelists also discussed the challenge of balancing the need to secure employment while also building language skills, indicating that building language prior to gaining employment may not be the only option. Some opportunities have existed where workplace language learning and language supports occurred at the worksite, using the worksite to promote active learning. Laurie Sawatzky explained that five or six worksite language classes exist in the Winkler-Morden-Altona-Carmen community, where a Service Provider Organization-paid instructor teaches ESL classes. As a result of these onsite classes, these workplaces are experiencing higher retention in employment.

Further Discussion

Following the panelists' responses, the attending conference participants were given an opportunity to ask questions. One question emerging was on the topic of retaining refugees in rural communities, specifically whether refugees themselves chose to settle in rural communities versus urban centres. Lake explain that preferences of refugees do not always match where they end up. Privately sponsored refugees more or less do not know where they are going until they get there. Regarding retention, having several refugee families in a community may encourage other families to want to move to the same location.

Employability of refugees was a common theme in the participant questions as well. Sawatzky of Regional Connections noted that in the WMAC community private sponsorship groups have chosen the most vulnerable families, larger families and usually farmers, with the hope that they would be able to start working in agriculture as soon as possible. However due to literacy needs, refugees may need to work part-time to balance language training and employment at first. It was noted that Canada is not inexperienced with settling large refugee families with low skills, Wilkson noted that Canada resettled 25,000 Iraqi families over the course of 2 years in the recent past.

The panelists noted that two cohorts of refugees exist and not all recent refugee families are low skilled, and that many are also highly skilled and educated. For both cohorts of refugees, challenges exist. Currently, there is a provincial conversation about how to provide opportunities for the low skilled refugees to practice language skills, gain employment, and meet labour market needs. Low skilled refugees may be faced with low levels of schooling in their home country's resulting in functional illiteracy in their own language. A challenge for both low and high skilled refugees is that employment records may have huge gaps during their transition from home country, while high skilled refugees may be faced with issues of credential recognition. The Office of the Manitoba Fairness Commissioner is working to lobby professional associations to support credential recognition and working to develop mechanisms that can access and qualify newcomers' certifications – this is individual to each occupation (Robinson).

Conclusion

The general consensus from the panelists was that the recent refugee resettlement has been positive in rural Manitoba, however challenges do exist as well as opportunities to increase community capacity. Areas for improvement included information sharing, language classes and interpretation services, transportation, receptivity, childcare and housing. Panelists noted the unique needs of refugee resettlement in rural communities in comparison to urban centres where more resources may be available including the presence of ethno-cultural and faith-based groups for which refugees can connect.

The strength of community partnerships in rural communities was highlighted as a positive in refugee resettlement, including the creative solutions to challenges where limited resources exist. The challenges of housing, childcare, employment, education, and health needs all influence each other, but by building on current resources and public support refugee resettlement in rural areas can be successful.



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