

FOCUS GROUP NARRATIVE REPORT



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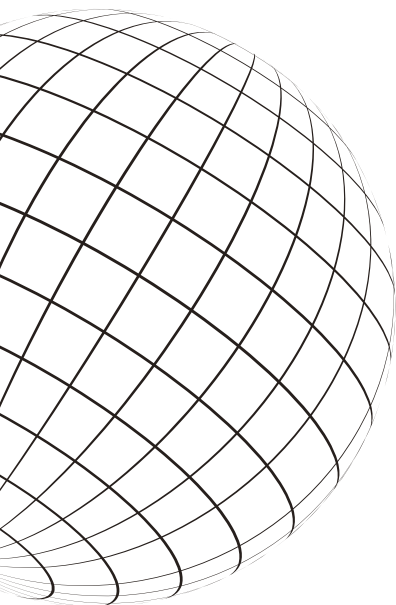
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As part of the second phase of the ACS-WES project Envisioning the Future of the Immigrant-Serving Sector, four focus groups were conducted with experts in the settlement sector. Through our newcomer and service providing organization (SPO) surveys, we uncovered key challenges within the sector from the perspective of settlement agencies and their clients. The focus groups centered around finding solutions to these key challenges faced by clients and service providers, which have been exacerbated by the onset of COVID-19.

The topics of solution-focussed discussion included Building Capacity in the Settlement Sector; Knowledge Sharing, Collaboration and Employment-related Partnerships; Improving Attraction and Accessibility of Settlement Services; and, Funding models for the Settlement Sector. These focus groups will inform the next phase of our project, in which we will further explore solutions for the sector with a broader range of stakeholders by conducting key informant interviews.

The main solutions & recommendations for Building Capacity in the Settlement Sector are:

- **Fostering collaboration between settlement agencies** through affiliation with umbrella organizations; providing cross-training through conferences & e-learning; fostering community partnerships; partnering on joint calls for proposals
- **Improving IT infrastructure, as well as providing digitally literacy training for newcomers;** allocating additional funding to increasing internet access/bandwidth; digital technology lending library programs for newcomers; professional development seminars on emerging technologies in the workplace for SPOs
- **Standardization of informal feedback protocol** through creating a repository for all informal feedback to be stored; developing evaluative metrics for informal feedback
- **Increasing professional development opportunities and initiatives** including cross-training; consistent up-skilling and professional development seminars; professional designation opportunities
- **Harnessing informal networking opportunities** by encouraging informal personal connections between agencies through organizing meetings, conferences, focus group discussions
- **Expanding service delivery to rural and vulnerable communities** through putting a focus on expanding successful programs to rural communities; fostering outreach to vulnerable newcomer communities
- **Improving evaluation protocol;** improving data collection practices; effective use of all information collected on intake forms; developing and adapting programs based on evaluations; using data to improve services
- **Engaging newcomers' voices in program development and evaluation**
- **Building on opportunities created through COVID-19 challenges;** including novel partnerships initially created out of necessity; creative solutions to pandemic-related challenges; greater interaction/communication with other organizations



- Creating a central knowledge hub for data sharing and referrals through employing a standardized needs assessment for every newcomer within a shared database; measuring outcomes and outputs achieved throughout the settlement process; collating that information to evaluate efficiency and effectiveness; collating newcomer data from the federal, provincial and municipal databases within one platform for all service providers; the creation of a 'centre of excellence' in which organizations with greater research capacity conduct analysis and disseminate information across the sector to enable smaller organizations with lesser capacity to obtain knowledge
- Centralizing referrals throughout all SPO regions

The main solutions & recommendations for Knowledge Sharing, Collaboration and Employment-related Partnerships are:

- Bridging knowledge gaps through networking and partnerships
- Cultivating reciprocally beneficial partnerships with employers through working closely with industry associations and keeping employers' needs in mind; working with employers to adjust their leadership, teams and supervisors to work with culturally diverse communities to build better inclusive recruitment practices; assisting employers in helping newcomers succeed within their position; constant communication about employment opportunities and roles that need to be filled which predetermine potential avenues of employment; upskilling newcomer talent to fit the needs of employers regionally
- Harness Labour Market Information and integrate LMI into settlement provision to improve service delivery



The main solutions & recommendations for Improving Attraction and Accessibility of Settlement Services are:

- Collaboration with a variety of settlement agencies, community organizations and private institutions to circulate information about available services; circulate information through word of mouth through ethnic community partnerships; providing promotional materials to libraries and religious institutions; tailored ethnocultural services; multilingual services, community engagement programs, and youth settlement services; recruit volunteers/community-based support from cultural communities
- Harnessing the use of social media and other technology/digital tools to increase awareness such as WhatsApp, Facebook groups, online ethnocultural newsletters, virtual fairs, YouTube
- Harnessing the use of informal newcomer networks for distributing information about available services through anecdotal testimonies within their communities; creation of WhatsApp groups for specific communities, such as Arabic-speaking communities; organizing a volunteer network to be spokespersons for their community
- Utilizing a culturally aware/sensitive approach to service delivery such as providing mental health services in newcomers' native language
- Implementing pre-arrival service provision to expedite the settlement process through preparing the newcomer before they arrive, ensuring they are aware of the credential recognition process, managing expectations with employment/labour market information, housing, etc.
- If the agency is unable to provide pre-arrival services, providing information tailored to the newcomer as soon as they land
- Generating holistic wrap-around services such as for employment services, also providing CV building, affordable childcare and transportation, housing, etc.
- Connecting and engaging with newcomers throughout the settlement journey; keeping the newcomers' perspective in mind, equitable communication structures between SPOs and their clients
- Connect newcomers with Canadians through youth programs to connect newcomer youths with Canadian youths; adult mentorships
- Decentralizing services where applicable, creating a hybrid approach; centralizing the assessment process but having various agencies with different services to choose from

The main solutions & recommendations for Funding models for the Settlement Sector are:

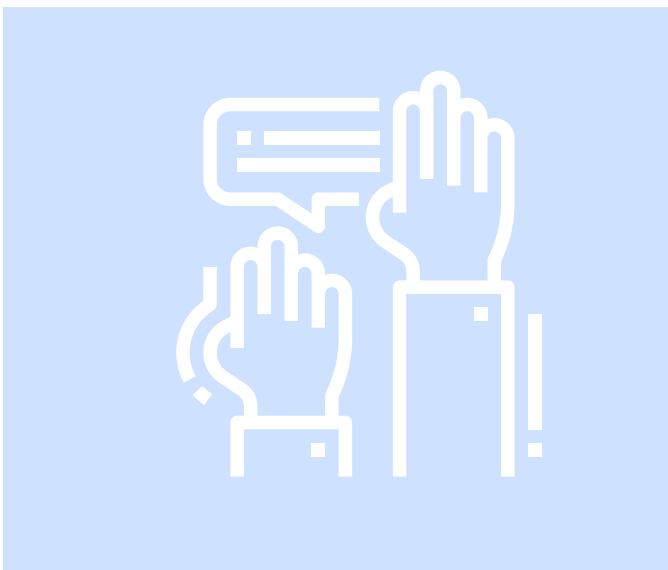
- Diversifying funding through a multitude of private institutions including banks, private foundations, universities and other educational institutions, community connections; leveraging nontraditional funding models with IRCC funding
- Engaging private organizations in social finance/social enterprise including social development initiatives, private social enterprises (e.g social impact funds, PeaceGeeks, Windmill Microlending)
- Integrating the use of outcomes-based funding models where appropriate such as for employment-related outcomes to move away from charity-based funding models and towards sustainable social enterprises; implementing rate card systems
- Increasing employment outcomes through provincial training grants, paid internships, and bridging programs, as well as mentorship programs
- Continued communicative relationship with the IRCC and other funders/partnerships through scheduled quarterly or semi-annual in-person meetings as well as regular reporting
- Implement and advocate for the use of long-term funding agreements to encourage sustainable programming and continuity
- Scaling up small, innovative, successful projects to larger organizations after they have been proven effective, rather than creating large-scale programs that cannot be down-scaled for smaller rural communities



METHODOLOGY



The four focus groups were conducted between September 14-17 2021 and ranged in size from 6 to 10 participants. In total, 34 participants attended one of four 90 minute sessions. No attendees were permitted to participate in more than one focus group. Participants received a \$50 honoraria for their engagement. The focus groups were conducted over Zoom with one of our project team members as a facilitator for each. All participants belonged to a newcomer settlement service providing organization in an array of professional capacities. Some participants were newcomers as well as settlement service workers. The participants were selected through a number of applicants due to their knowledge of and/or experience with the topics covered, as well as to maintain diversification of region, size, and longevity of organization.



Participants were regionally dispersed across Canada from settlement agencies located in Nova Scotia, Manitoba, Alberta, British Columbia, Ontario, Saskatchewan, Prince Edward Island, and Québec. The size of participants' settlement organizations ranged from 1-250+ employees. As an introduction, each participant was asked to introduce themselves, their organization and reason for joining the selected focus group.

BUILDING CAPACITY IN THE SETTLEMENT SECTOR FOCUS GROUP

Summary of participant demographics & question framing

The Building Capacity in the Settlement Sector focus group was conducted on September 17 2021. The focus group involved nine participants from NS, MB, AB, BC, ON and SK. The participants were asked about internal capacity building within the sector, IRCC funding agreement structures and implications on capacity, organizational infrastructure, the concept of equitable employment contracts, and program design and evaluation. Participants were also asked questions regarding the digital transformation of remote service delivery throughout the pandemic, the implications of the changing demographics of newcomers as the country plans to welcome over 90,000 essential workers and international graduates on service delivery, as well as the correlation between partnerships and innovation. They were also asked an ice-breaker question: “What keeps you up at night?”

MAIN FINDINGS

The most highly discussed subject matter centred around collaboration between settlement agencies, as well as among multilingual agencies (24.7% of references). Respondents discussed the need for efficient and constant communication between agencies, particularly in regards to the lack of communication and partnership between Anglophone and Francophone agencies as well as urban and rural centres. Settlement workers attributed this to agencies working in ‘silos’ as well as the duplication of services which result in a waste of resources that could be combined. Furthermore, certain IRCC agreements prohibit Anglophone service providers from serving newcomers in French, and vice-versa. One participant noted, “Where is the systemic recognition of these tools when they do exist?”.



Solutions to issues that many service providers encounter have been discovered, however organizations are not sharing transformative resolutions. For example, one participant discussed the 'digital tech lending library' at Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia (ISANS) as a solution to the lack of available technologies for newcomers. The digital tech lending library is a program developed to lend newcomers digital tools, such as tablets, for use. However, this program has not been replicated across settlement agencies nationwide to address the issue of digital inaccessibility.

Participants also expressed frustration that high-level decision makers are not engaging in knowledge-sharing or innovative tools when planning national programs.



IT/digital infrastructure and accessibility for newcomers and service providers was another highly discussed subject (16.9% of references). It was also very top-of-mind, as it was the most discussed issue at the forefront of the discussion during the ice-breaking period. Participants expressed concern with available technologies for use at their organization, as well as availability of technologies for use by newcomers. As identified, the need for adequate technology has increased exponentially prior to and following the advent of the pandemic. Educational, employment-related, and government services moved online, however many service providers discussed a lack of necessary digital infrastructure to adequately support the transition to remote provision. Furthermore, many vulnerable clients such as refugees struggled with digital literacy and access. Rural communities have also particularly struggled with the remote transition in areas where internet access is not always available, and previously the majority of services were conducted in-person using paperwork. Lastly, participants noted that in some cases the transition to remote delivery caused anxiety and distress due to a lack of social contact.

Another largely discussed topic was the **lack of funding for desired program development, initiatives, and for specific populations**. A participant noted that they desired to see program development for preschool newcomer children and their parents, as the SWIS (Settlement Worker in Schools) program only begins at kindergarten. However, the 0-5 child age range is a critical time of development for young children and their families. The participant expressed that they had voiced interest to the IRCC for a program of this nature, however it was not considered for funding by the IRCC. .

Northeast Newcomer Services is entirely provincially funded and receives no funding from the IRCC. Due to not having funding from the IRCC, they are unable to partner with program initiatives such as SWIS. The participant from this organization also stated that they do not have employment programming or community connections. They also echoed the sentiment that there should be programming for preschool aged children and their families, particularly for newcomers without knowledge of maternity and paternity benefits/leave, as well as where their children can attend preschool, etc.

In discussion of the influx of international students who IRCC intends to give permanent residence priority, service providers feel as though traditionally international students have been a “mess of a category” due to international students not being eligible for settlement programs. Service providers report attempting to apply for funding for international students and temporary foreign workers, however they have been unsuccessful in being granted with that funding from the IRCC. Some organizations still assist this demographic, however they are not able to report it to IRCC due to their funding arrangements. However, the pandemic has highlighted the importance of retaining international students with Canadian educations as well as temporary foreign workers.

Lack of funding for wraparound services was similarly reported. Funding is granted for specific programs for newcomers to attend, however funding is not granted for newcomer transportation, childcare, or access to technology, to be able to attend sessions.

Another key finding included the need for **physical infrastructure expansion, staff retention, and the mental health and wellbeing of staff**. Multiple participants discussed the need for increased staffing, as well as retention of service providers who leave to pursue more financially rewarding employment.

“Staff retention is a huge piece for us and that kind of goes more with the wages of the settlement sector... you basically become the training ground for government positions or city positions where I lost recently, three staff in three weeks to Island Health and our city of Nanaimo, where their casual staff is earning \$30 an hour. How can you compete as a non-profit sector with that?”

Mental health concerns were also widely noted. Reportedly, service providing organizations have not discussed the need to ensure consistent mental and physical health across the sector, which intertwines with the need for internal capacity building. In order for settlement workers to provide the best services possible, they themselves must be in a healthy position. Settlement workers have long voiced concern that they do not receive enough remuneration for the work they do, which has a negative impact on mental health. Overwork and burn-out are commonly discussed. Settlement workers in this study expressed that they have devoted their lives to improving the sector, however do not feel as though they are paid fairly and are treated as though they are easily replaceable.

Lastly, other notable findings included the need to **standardize informal feedback protocol, for professional development opportunities, uses of informal networking, expanding service delivery to rural and vulnerable newcomer communities, developing evaluation protocol, the need to engage with newcomer voices, the opportunities and challenges of COVID-19, and lastly, the lack of concerns heard by funders/IRCC.** Participants cited a lack of collaboration between the IRCC and the province, mental health concerns not being heard, uncooperation in regards to immigration level concerns, concerns about funding allocation not being heard, as well as voiced challenges with the level of required reporting being ignored. These concerns and opportunities for improvement will be discussed further in the solutions section below.

Solutions & recommendations for building capacity in the settlement sector

In regards to solutions for **collaboration between settlement agencies** and the lack thereof, a participant from the Central Vancouver Island Multicultural Society discussed their organization's affiliation with multicultural organizations across B.C. It was noted that leadership was displayed in ensuring that all settlement organizations in the province are cross-trained across a variety of roles, including training for settlement workers and language trainers through conferences and e-learning. This information is shared through progressive leaders in the settlement community. The participant noted that this could be in part due to provincial funding.

Partnering with organizations through reciprocal support in a collaborative way with community partnerships was another suggested solution to the lack of collaboration between settlement agencies. Collaborating on models of case management and replicating successful programs, as well as assisting smaller agencies with lesser internal capacity with maintenance, is a tremendous use of partnerships that is beneficial for both sides. Furthermore, creating a space for smaller, more rural agencies to have a voice at the table increases innovation. Participants noted that unfortunately, oftentimes urban centres have a monopoly within settlement conversation spaces.



Another participant discussed their organization's connection with other institutions, such as AMSAA (Affiliation of Multicultural Societies and Service Agencies of BC) which provided cultural understanding and competencies, as well as with the SWIS program which provides settlement services through schools. Encouraging partnerships with both of these organizations increases settlement reach and profitability.

Another suggestion discussed was to partner with other agencies to write joint calls for proposals as well as joint amendments. Sharing the existence of partnerships and collaborations with the IRCC makes a strong statement, rather than competing over IRCC resources. The Gateway Program in Calgary uses a database to streamline referral to other partners, decreasing duplication and the number of client intake forms, as well as building relationships with other service providers. Collaboration between agencies to determine their specified client-base, such as agencies that focus on newcomer women with children, youths, or single young adults, also assists in streamlining service provision and avoiding duplication.

At Neepawa and Area Immigrant Settlement Services, the agency collaborated with over 50 different organizations on a variety of projects, one of which partnered with their local Indigenous community. The program involved drum making, discussion of ceremonies and the use of traditional herbs, as well as a variety of other activities to increase cultural awareness and facilitate interaction between newcomers and the Indigenous Peoples of that region.

In terms of solutions to concerns surrounding **IT/digital infrastructure and accessibility**, additional funding and support for internet access/bandwidth as well as identifying and providing support for newcomers who lack access to technology through technical learning libraries or technology lending programs for newcomers could remedy some of the identified barriers. Certain digitally illiterate newcomer populations also need to be provided with technology training sessions. Further tech professional development for service providers to have greater knowledge of and ability to use evolving technologies is another identified solution. This can be orchestrated through professional development seminars on technology and emerging technologies in the workplace.

Standardizing informal feedback protocol is an opportunity to harness anecdotal feedback in smaller communities where casual run-ins occur frequently. A participant in Neepawa, Manitoba, highlighted that they receive more valuable information from informal discussions than from formalized evaluation structures, particularly for smaller centres who have the opportunity to engage in a more personal relationship with newcomers. Another participant noted that they have extensive surveys and feedback forms, as well as anecdotal and immediate feedback, however there aren't many evaluative metrics, so greater framework and guidance in that area would be beneficial.

Many participants also discussed solutions for professional development opportunities. This includes cross-training, consistent up-skilling and professional development seminars, professional designation opportunities, e-learning, and conferences. Participants also agreed that their organizations should have a baseline of professional development opportunity and deliver training to all staff and frontline managers for novel program models.

Informal networking within the sector is another opportunity for improvement. Meetings, conferences, focus group discussions, etc., encourage informal personal connections between agencies which organizations were able to build upon during COVID-19 to assist one another in making the pivot to online learning. A participant attested that the informal connections they created were far more impactful than formal collaboration than they had initially expected. A participant from a rural community discussed getting more information from running into someone in an informal setting than sitting down with them formally or gathering information through a survey.

Expanding service delivery to rural and vulnerable communities was also discussed as a key component to capacity building within the sector, through expanding successful programs in rural areas to smaller rural communities, and to produce greater outreach to more vulnerable newcomer communities.

Improving evaluation protocol through improved data collection was mentioned, utilizing all information collected in intake forms, developing programs based on the information gathered, and using data to improve the services. Furthermore, Engaging newcomers' voices in program development and evaluation should be prioritized.

In terms of the opportunities created through COVID-19 challenges, one participant noted that they became more creative in terms of partnerships born out of necessity. COVID-19 also allowed some service providers to obtain new grants, one of which was able to assist international students.

“ I really realized that I think the COVID has actually brought the other side of humanity to us that suddenly we realize that you don't want to be alone doing certain things that you start again, being more creative, reaching out to other organizations to see what they do. And at the same time, it's them reaching out. You know, this is what we have. Would you be interested in that?”

Similarly, other participants discussed informal personal connections between agencies that were able to blossom through the pandemic due to reciprocal necessity, and ultimately became more impactful than formal collaboration.

BEST PRACTICES IN KNOWLEDGE SHARING AND COLLABORATION FOCUS GROUP

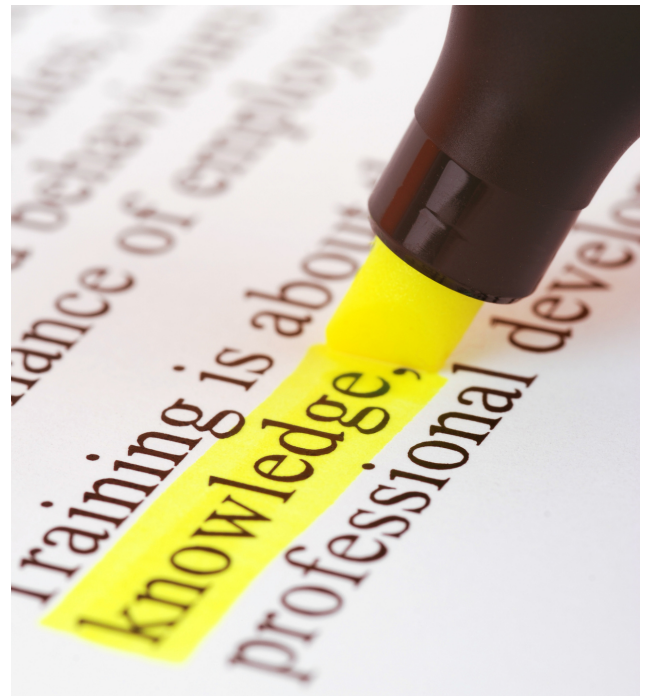
Summary of participant demographics & question framing

The Best practices in knowledge sharing and collaboration focus group was conducted on September 15 2021. The focus group involved six participants from AB, ON and SK. The participants were asked about the concept of knowledge sharing within the sector, why it is important, and how SPOs can better work together with other stakeholders to deliver settlement services more efficiently and seamlessly. Participants were also asked what kinds of partnerships they can nurture to improve client employment outcomes, and how they can ensure that knowledge about best practices are shared in a regular, accessible and sustainable way.

MAIN FINDINGS

In terms of discussion objectives for the focus group, the two main identifiable objectives from participants were **learning about collaboration activities and overall knowledge sharing**. Overall, participants were extremely interested in learning about how to collaborate more effectively and learn from other service providers around Canada they do not already have partnerships with. Participants discussed being interested in seeing how knowledge is shared and transferred across the sector, as well as for the potential of further networking and sharing of best practices.

One of the key discussions surrounded **current models for effective collaboration**. Partnership with employers and partnership with SPOs and umbrella networks were most highly referenced in this category (29% of references).



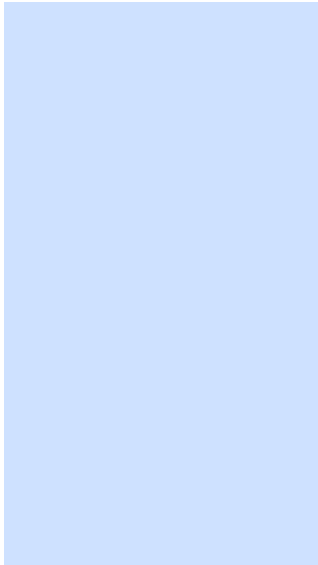
Creating local partnerships with industries and employers to share best practices and labour market information, as well as collaborating with employers to refer newcomers they employ to SPOs for affordable housing, for example, are great examples of best practices in collaboration. Immigrant Services Calgary (ISC) builds partnerships with employers for internships/experience programs to assist newcomers with gaining Canadian work experience. At the World Skills Employment centre in Ontario, they also connect with various health organizations to assist newcomers to gain experience and employment in the health sector. Mentorship and knowledge sharing is another beneficial collaboration SPOs facilitate between employers and newcomers, through focus groups and meetings which educate newcomers through the process of acquiring employment in that field.

Northumberland Settlement Services in Ontario share a major collaboration with the New Canadians Centre, in which the settlement worker relies on their services for referrals, translation forms, and employment. Utilizing a variety of different organizations' strengths to provide services for those in need assists newcomers in accessing a variety of services. Similarly, the Calgary Local Immigration Partnership works with the city and different organizations to provide and refer specific settlement services, as well as to communicate novel strategies and models among different organizations. Local immigration partnerships (LIPs) were heavily referenced in this section as a partnership model that enables the transference of new program development, communication, collaboration, and **increased knowledge sharing**.

SAISA (Saskatchewan Association of Immigrant Settlement and Integration Agencies) is an umbrella organization which connects SPOs through networking and resource sharing. This umbrella organization also uses the CTS (client tracking system) which assists in data collection and reporting.



Capacity building programs for newcomers, partnerships with government agencies, and referral programs were the next most highly discussed topics. Capacity building programs for newcomers involve building employment and language skills among newcomers, as well as credential/licensure recognition. At World Skills Employment Centre, the service provider noted that many of their clients are surgeons, gynecologists and dentists, among other healthcare professionals, who arrive in the country hoping to practice their profession, however are unable to due to a lack of accreditation. The participant noted that the issue of employment is not the concern--the concern is finding meaningful and fulfilling employment in their field. To combat this, the World Skills Employment Centre makes as many connections as they can with organizations to begin the process of integrating their clients into the Canadian healthcare field. Similarly, Southeast Newcomer Services' is involved with a group of organizations called 'community connections'. This group of organizations collaborate to communicate about the different services they offer and events, to refer clients and settlement professionals through word of mouth.



Immigrant Services Calgary also uses a **standardized assessment** to refer clients to different SPOs, promote knowledge sharing between agencies, and collect data. This promotion of collaboration between agencies has also resulted in developing partnerships and trust, as well as exchanging letters of support for funding purposes from the public sector and private enterprises. Some beneficial **partnerships with government agencies** involve a provincial partnership that allocates funding for driver training education (which is most impactful in rural communities), as well as collaboration with Service Canada in which newcomers are referred to SPOs after obtaining a SIN for further settlement needs.

A participant discussed the notion of **building internal pilot models for best practices**. Immigrant Services Calgary is in the process of piloting and testing a structural model within their organization to capture the knowledge and experience of settlement workers, as well as capture best practices, so that new staff can build on those learnings to enable greater productivity and efficiency.



While discussing the impact of current practices, the majority of participants were interested in **better employment opportunities for newcomers**. It is important to engage employers in these conversations while finding the best fit for both newcomers and employers seeking employees. Engaging newcomers through online modules, temporary placements, and workshops assists the newcomer with gaining Canadian experience and connecting them to the industry they are interested in working in. As previously mentioned, settlement workers identified that finding any employment is not always the issue, the difficulty is finding adequate and fulfilling employment opportunities in accordance with the newcomer's previous education and experience.

Knowledge sharing through assessing the most successful programs of each organization and duplicating or referring to other programs/organizations was also discussed as an ideal model to share expertise and offer better services. Receiving regular updates within the sector through email subscriptions as well as checking a regularly updated website enables service providers to find the information they need. Overall, an increase in referrals and support among SPOs has been desired.

Solutions & recommendations for best practices in knowledge sharing and collaboration

Overall, creating a central knowledge hub for data sharing and referrals was the most highly recommended suggestion (47.6% of recommendation references). ISC noted that the Gateway program is trying to do just that: Employ a standardized needs assessment for every newcomer within a shared database, measure outcomes and outputs achieved throughout the settlement journey, and lastly, collate that information to evaluate efficiency and effectiveness. Data from the federal, provincial and municipal levels should be collated within one platform in order to develop a newcomer knowledge hub. An issue cited by a participant who works with Immigrant Services Calgary is that clients are not followed longitudinally throughout their settlement journey. In order for that change to occur, the government and policy makers need to be presented with corroborating data that proves it is important to continue research and data collection on the newcomer settlement journey. A participant suggested a 'centre of excellence' in which organizations with greater research capacity may be able to conduct analysis and disseminate information across the sector to enable smaller organizations with lesser capacity to obtain the same knowledge as other SPOs across Canada.

It was noted that when the Metropolis network was funded by the IRCC with regional centres of excellence, there was a rich system of sharing knowledge and research in the areas of immigration, settlement and diversity, however following budget constraints, this initiative no longer exists. Since the dissolution of that initiative, the participant noted that they are not aware of any active network with the same capacity to reach its stakeholders in that capacity with sustained contact other than the annual national Metropolis Canada Conference which convenes once a year. Having a national platform wherein agencies can come together to share experiences, learn from one another and utilize referral processes in a more structured manner throughout the year will assist in strengthening collaboration. Centralizing referrals and bridging knowledge gaps will assist with funding and regional program development.

In order to cultivate partnerships with employers, a participant from ISC discussed building personal connections while working with industry associations and keeping employers' needs in mind throughout the process. ISC invites employers to present their organizations to their clients and work towards a mutually beneficial relationship. It is also important to work with employers to adjust their leadership, teams and supervisors to work with culturally diverse communities, to build better inclusive recruitment practices, and assist employers in helping newcomers succeed within their position. Constant communication about employment opportunities and roles that need to be filled is needed, particularly during times of large influxes of newcomers, to predetermine potential avenues of employment. Upskilling newcomer talent to fit the needs of employers regionally is another example of where labour market information can be used to inform newcomers seeking employment, however SPOs could harness LMI more effectively to improve service delivery.

EXPLORING FUNDING MODELS FOR THE SETTLEMENT SECTOR FOCUS GROUP

Summary of participant demographics & question framing

The Exploring funding models for the settlement sector focus group was conducted on September 14 2021. The focus group involved ten participants from NS, MB, AB, BC and ON. The participants were asked about the structure of IRCC funding agreements, reporting requirements, as well as their opinions on whether funding agreements should focus on measuring outputs versus outcomes. The purpose was also to discuss how the sector can reimagine funding mechanisms and models through the private sector, including social finance and social enterprise, to benefit service providers so that they are more sustainable and able to operate with greater capacity.

MAIN FINDINGS

The most highly discussed topic centred around restrictive and short-term funding agreements resulting in less innovation and sustainability (30.6% of references). Participants cited a lack of sustainability within the sector due to strict funding agreements. This is in part due to the precarious nature of not knowing whether or not a program will continue to receive funding. While the IRCC has switched to five-year funding agreements, the agreements still need to be negotiated each year. The IRCC has ultimate control over deciding which projects receive funding, and many participants felt as though sometimes the IRCC is out of touch with the needs of local communities. “They sit and make decisions from the ivory tower in Ottawa”.

The Regional Municipality of York reported that the last funding cycle cut back significantly on employment services due to many newcomers entering Canada through express entry. Immigrants of this class are often expected to be workforce ready, however frequently still struggle to find adequate employment due to barriers such as lack of credential recognition, the re-licensure process, underemployment, as well as lack of childcare and/or transportation.



A lack of core funding impacts internal capacity, and in turn, service providers' ability for innovation and sustainability. Some organizations rely on a multitude of grants and contribution agreements, and each employee and organization depends on a fraction of each source of funding to manage internally. Similarly, a youth program at ISC funded by the IRCC was not able to provide any field trips for the youths due to the funding for the program not covering any transportation costs. Other costs, such as honoraria, or building closer relationships with the Indigenous communities through contact and hospitality, are not covered by funding. In order to engage newcomers, South Okanagan Immigrant and Community Services (SOICS) provides an honoraria when they conduct newcomer consultations, create a newcomer council, and encourage civic engagement. However, these funds to support newcomers contributing their time are not covered by funding.

The challenge of innovation within the sector is also largely due to funding agreements not allowing things to evolve to be different. Agencies must strictly adhere to the funding agreement, inhibiting them from innovating as the program transpires. There are also restrictions in terms of the amount of funding they're permitted to have for different components of the organization. For example, one participant commented that they are only permitted to use 15% of IRCC funding for administration costs.

“Putting an onus on us to constantly fight for funding from various sources, from various models, really takes away from the work that we actually do”.

Inconsistencies in funding models was another key issue. A participant noted that there is a lack of job security and consistency for settlement workers due to funding agreements and program-based funding not covering pensions, long-term employment, or steady salary.



Another highly explored topic involved funding agreements not encompassing all newcomers in need. Client eligibility is a concern, as certain agencies are directed to only serve certain demographics such as Canadian citizens and permanent residents. International students are a direct example of such, as they are often ineligible for employment services. Some clients are between statuses when they arrive, such as not yet obtaining PR or refugee status, and this makes it difficult for SPOs to assist them within their funding and reporting requirements. Some of the most vulnerable populations may be the most difficult to secure funding for as they may be the least employable. Smaller, local rural initiatives are also less likely to be funded, which causes further gaps in newcomer success. Greater funding is allocated to larger urban settlement areas, while smaller service providers feel overlooked and underfunded. A participant stated that they do not feel as though funding models are based on needs assessments of the communities.

Settlement workers also expressed that a **lack of government support after bringing newcomers and refugees into the country exists**. A participant noted that as far as they are aware, the housing debate is absent from immigration planning policy discussion. Post-pandemic, the cost of housing has continued to rise in areas that had previously been affordable. There is a disconnect between government emphasis in bringing refugees and other non-economic newcomers into Canada without proper support, such as affordable housing. Several participants discussed the IRCC being concerned with “counting the numbers” without long-term settlement plans and strategic communication with the service providers.

“There is a bit of a disconnect between the policy side and the operational side of our system when it comes to funding settlement services”

Particularly post-COVID, there is a lack of affordable housing. Participants felt as though there is a lack of communication between municipalities, provincial and federal governments.

Lack of government support ties in with **communications gaps and needs that are expressed through reporting not being acknowledged by the IRCC**. The most efficient way to express needs as funded agencies is to do so through reporting, however some participants feel as though their concerns are not heard through reporting and they do not have direct lines of communication. The reports are often not enough for the government to have a full understanding of program needs and activities.

Several respondents also critiqued the fact that IRCC funding models focus on outputs rather than impact and outcomes and meeting targets, rather than modernizing, innovating, and measuring long-term successes. ‘Counting the numbers’ is particularly unhelpful for rural settlement agencies who do not have large numbers, in which case the quality of settlement support should be the primary focus. Similarly, one participant of a large, rural agency felt as though they were penalized for not having enough clients. However, particularly during the pandemic, less clients were able to travel to in-person sessions, find child care, etc.

Solutions & recommendations for funding models in the settlement sector

While discussing solutions for improving the issue of restrictive and short-term funding models decreasing innovation and sustainability, participants discussed the need to diversify funding. Using an amalgamation of banks, municipalities, private foundations, universities, etc, diversifying funds through a variety of private institutions can supplement program development and infrastructure, however is typically not enough to create or sustain a program. A participant from Centre for Newcomers reported that to advance innovative and collaborative efforts, nontraditional funding models need to be leveraged with IRCC funding. For example, the agency has used seed funding from the IRCC to create a program, leveraged other funding sources (such as the City of Calgary or United Way) to build on the core funding granted by IRCC. Innovation may be built through the use of a combination of public and private funding, community connections, post-secondary institutions, and other stakeholders/partners.

Engaging private organizations in social finance/social enterprise was the second most referenced topic (13.3%). This includes funding from local banks, universities, social development initiatives, and other private social enterprises. Immigrant Services Calgary has been successful in securing a loan through a program called UCEED Social Impact Fund which is organized through the University of Calgary and Innovate Calgary. PeaceGeeks is another notable organization who provides funding for charitable organizations.

A participant noted that **outcomes-based funding models** can also be beneficial for certain programs. In their opinion, these were most suited to employment-related outcomes. For example, through these models, the organization is paid if the client finds work, or is employed for a minimum period of time. However, they noted that programs such as these may be perceived as risky, as clients' performance is not necessarily reflective of the agency's work. Despite such risk, this type of innovative funding forces organizations to move away from the mindset of operating like a charity, to moving towards a sustainable social enterprise.



Incorporating this shift in thinking within the settlement sector is not necessarily a negative, as the settlement sector may provide free services for immigrants who are paying for the same service out-of-pocket. One example of this would be international students paying for-profit agencies such as Devant for services they could access freely at SPOs. However, because these SPOs often do not have the marketing capacity to promote this type of work, they do not receive the same credit. "It's a mindset thing. I think we do the work and sometimes we don't give ourselves enough credit for it[...] And the for-profit business is doing exactly the same stuff that we're doing, and thriving."

Provincial training grants, paid internships, and bridging programs are other ways to **increase employment outcomes**. Successful bridging programs in Ontario should be replicated for other provinces, such as in British Columbia. A participant suggested that in their opinion, bridging programs and mentorship are the most successful models. Employers who have the capacity to provide paid internships and apprenticeship programs, such as banks and the IT sector, should be explored for the possibility of engagement and collaboration.

To **establish continued communicative relationship with the IRCC/funders**, a participant from the Centre for Newcomers stated that they have scheduled quarterly or semi-annual meetings with the funder to come in person, observe and witness their program in action. The participant found that this had a hugely beneficial impact on how they understood the program, and allowed the funder to generate a first hand opinion on the operation, efficiency and necessity of the program.



The **use of long-term funding agreements** has been extremely beneficial, as service providers are able to spend less time on writing reports, and instead are able to use that time to focus on service provision. Previously, SOICS confirmed that they would write monthly and quarterly reports. Longer funding agreements now allow SOICS to create an annual report. Sustainable programming and continuity are not possible with short-term funding agreements. Longer-term agreements enable stability and investment.

Scaling up small, innovative, successful projects to larger organizations after they have been proven effective, rather than attempting new large-scale projects, was another suggestion by participants. This is far more effective than creating large-scale projects that cannot be down-scaled for smaller rural communities. SOICS is currently working on a collaborative project with the city of Penticton which is similar to the provincial nominee program. SOICS is collaborating with the city to identify economic and social priorities before choosing applicants to pursue employment. The program focuses on bridging community and newcomer needs municipally.

IMPROVING ATTRACTION AND ACCESSIBILITY OF SETTLEMENT SERVICES FOCUS GROUP

Summary of participant demographics & question framing

The Improving attraction and accessibility of settlement services focus group was conducted on September 14 2021. The focus group involved nine participants from PEI, QC, AB, BC and ON. The participants were asked about how we can increase awareness of available settlement services to vulnerable groups who are under-served throughout the process of their settlement journey, from pre-arrival to post-arrival. Participants were also asked how service providers can increase accessibility of settlement services to populations in rural communities and for those who are not digitally literate, as well as for others who face specific barriers.

MAIN FINDINGS

Insufficient assistance and information for newcomers was cited as a predominant concern for participants in this focus group. When refugees arrive and enter agencies for the first time, they don't know what to expect, what their rights as a refugee are, how to obtain employment or housing, etc. One participant discussed that newcomers are surprised at how difficult it is to navigate and settle in Canada. They often struggle to find employment based on their foreign experience and credentials. For newcomers who rely on pre-existing contacts, such as friends and family when they arrive, oftentimes the information they are given is outdated or incorrect. Many are unaware of available services. Particularly for newcomers who do not speak French or English, this is extremely difficult. A participant whose partner is an international student has never accessed settlement services because they did not see the value in doing so upon arriving in Canada.



The issue of services not being accessible to all newcomers is key. For international students, universities and colleges are interested in recruiting attendance, however provide no support after graduation. Educational institutions have the funds to assist these students, however they have their own “internal bureaucracies and priorities”. Settlement providers are also not funded to provide services for international students, so a massive settlement gap exists for this demographic as they attempt the transition process without any support.


While utilizing technology and social media is an effective way to reach diverse newcomer populations, **digital literacy and linguistic issues pervade**. More vulnerable newcomers struggle to access social media, email or any online communication. For many refugees that arrive not speaking either official language or speaking very little, communication is a challenge.

Settlement providers also discussed the **need to build capacity**. Some service providers mentioned the need to increase capacity of employment services, from connection with employers to placement. It was also mentioned that while it is extremely beneficial to recruit immigrants as volunteers, those immigrants are also new to Canada and do not have enough information to be placed in roles where they are assisting other newcomers.


Solutions & recommendations for improving attraction and accessibility of the settlement sector

The most discussed remedy to the issue of attraction and accessibility of the settlement sector was the use of **collaboration with other settlement agencies, community organizations and private institutions** (21.1% of references). At CSC Vanier Employment Services, they have connected with larger settlement organizations such as Employment Ontario, the Jewish Centre, the Chinese Community Centre, as well as Refugees 613. They work with all of these organizations to circulate information about employment services through their communities as well as through a WhatsApp group. Similarly, the Centre for Newcomers Calgary is trying to strengthen their partnerships with ethnic cultural communities through over 101 formal partnerships with cultural groups and other service providers. This enables them to effectively reach out to newcomers to ensure that information about their services is spread through word of mouth across an array of ethnic communities. Participants also discussed sending promotional materials to libraries and religious institutions.

PEI Association for Newcomers to Canada also performs a lot of outreach to post-secondary institutions and employers. Their information and sessions on mental health and employment is tailored to specific ethnocultural groups. Similarly, they work with municipal and provincial boards to inform newcomers about upcoming sessions in specific languages. PEI Association for Newcomers to Canada also conducts intake settlement needs assessments, community engagement programs, and youth settlement services. This participant noted that it is important to keep relationships with community organizations and other stakeholders reciprocal so clients can access and be referred to the services they need.



Upon hearing of the government announcement that IRCC will be accepting more international students for PR, the Centre for Newcomers hosted presentations at the University of Calgary for students with information about settlement services they provide. Similarly, upon hearing of the upcoming influx of Afghan refugees, the Centre for Newcomers reached out to their existing Afghan ethnic cultural groups to recruit volunteers from their communities. When they begin to receive refugees, the volunteers will be asked to provide interpretation and peer support to communicate what activities will be organized for them, as well as what services are available to them. This kind of community-based support provides comfort and support in refugees' own first language.



At the World Skills Employment Centre, clients are connected to settlement services in their respective provinces. They provide information about where their clients can obtain mentorship programs, employment support, etc, and try to be the link between pre-arrival and post arrival to provide the correct information for clients to connect with the best fit organization. At the Centre Communautaire Petit Espoir, the most vulnerable populations are identified and immediately transferred to services. They also collaborate with the school board of Laval to provide educational counsellors. The Central Vancouver Island Multicultural Society creates an alliance between agencies in different regions of the island to refer clients to one another, so that client services can be streamlined if the client moves. These agencies also contact each other to brief one another about the services and latest information regarding newcomers and refugees.

Manitoba Start has taken the lead in fostering a collaborative rather than competitive approach. As Manitoba Start is the first point of contact, their role is not to provide settlement, but rather collect data and information on the newcomer. They use their database for their zone referral program, wherein clients are referred to settlement service zones based on their postal code. The Centre for Newcomers, the Centre Communautaire Petit Espoir and CSC Vanier Employment Services have a similar zoning approach wherein clients are referred to specialized services in their region based on their needs. Centre for Newcomers provides information and orientation based on the result of a previous needs assessment conducted by Immigrant Services Calgary.

They have an arrangement with different partners in the area to provide various services which function through submitting joint proposals for funding. In Quebec, the Ministry of Immigration created a centralized online repository of all settlement service providers organized by postal code. A client can enter their postal code and choose an organization within their region that provides the service they seek. Categorizing information by region and services provided is helpful in reducing client confusion.

Participants noted that many clients found them through **social media and other technology/digital tools**, such as WhatsApp, Facebook groups, online guides such as online ethnocultural newsletters, as well as virtual fairs. For some agencies that do not provide pre-arrival services, they are still able to be in contact with newcomers before they arrive and advise them as to what documents and information they need. Community Family Services of Ontario created a YouTube channel which provides information about immigration law and open work permits, as well as general information for newcomers and mental health information. This channel can be accessed from most countries around the world. For vulnerable newcomers who have low digital literacy skills, a participant who works with visible minority newcomer women reported that WhatsApp works best for easy communication. The Afghan refugees can potentially use WhatsApp for communication and information as well if they have access to technology.

As mentioned in another Focus Group, the Centre Communautaire Petit Espoir also provides a digital tech lending library with approximately 30 tablets and 15 computers to rent free of charge for one month at a time. The participant noted that government support and participation would benefit the expansion of this program.

Similar to previous focus groups, the use of **informal newcomer networks** was discussed as highly beneficial for distributing information about settlement services, as World Skills Employment Centre has reported they have heard from their clients that most information they gather is through their own communities and anecdotal testimonies. They in turn make recommendations to their communities and gather more clients. Word of mouth is a powerful tool for disseminating information. For example, a settlement provider who is also a newcomer themselves testified that they heard about a settlement agency in their region through a Canadian friend. Whenever a client knows about someone who sponsors someone from outside the country, they tend to relay information about services. Organizations try to utilize that traditional source of media as much as they can access it, particularly for the family class of immigrants.



WhatsApp was mentioned again as an informal newcomer networking tool for distributing information among ethnocultural communities. The Centre for Newcomers piloted WhatsApp groups for South Asians and Arabic-speaking newcomers, and they now intend to replicate the same model for Afghan refugees. The participant stated that it was very effective for their clients to receive and circulate information, and they intend to continue to use this method throughout program implementation. They plan to expand this use to all other first language programs in other communities for pre-arrival services.

Pre-pandemic, in-person outreach through community centres, libraries, and religious institutions were also mentioned. Settlement providing agencies stated that it was important to build that support and trust within those communities, as well as organizing a volunteer network who are committed to outreach and advocate for the service provider.

Utilizing a **culturally sensitive approach** to service delivery is also key for improving attraction of available services. Providing services that take cultural differences into account when planning programs for specific demographics, tailoring sessions, workshops and conversations to these ethnodiverse groups, is an imperative approach to settlement services that make newcomers feel welcome and accepted. Advertising services through ethnic radio stations and newsletters is another key outreach strategy. The Calgary Catholic Immigration Society noted that it's important to provide mental health support in newcomers' native language. Particularly when dealing with newcomers who have experienced trauma, mental health support in their first language is a key priority.



Pre-arrival service provision is the best stage to begin contact with newcomers so that they are aware of all preparations and documents they need before arriving. At Calgary Catholic Immigration Society, a newcomer was able to get in touch with their agency before arriving from Nigeria, and within one week of landing began participating in workshops and volunteering. Within a month the newcomer was employed where they still presently work. Providing newcomers with invitation letters, links and information about life in Canada, as well as where to access more materials or other pre-arrival organizations at this stage, helps streamline the immigration process. At this stage, newcomers can also be given information about the credentialing process so they are aware of what steps they need to take to return to their country of origin profession. If pre-arrival services are not available, providing this **information tailored to the newcomer as soon as they land** is the next best possible action.

Providing **holistic wrap-around services** will assist with attraction and accessibility of newcomers as well. Many participants mentioned a lack of childcare and transportation as a challenge for newcomers to attend workshops and sessions. Providing services that not only provide employment support, but CV building, access to affordable childcare and transportation, provides that support that so many newcomers are lacking. CSC Vanier Employment Services, in partnership with other organizations, has a program called The Path. After the newcomer arrives for employment services, they use a holistic wraparound approach to refer them to other settlement services, including housing, school registration, where to purchase a car, etc. Another participant, through their employer partnerships, was asked to help facilitate the arrival of a temporary foreign worker, for whom they assisted with housing and medical care.

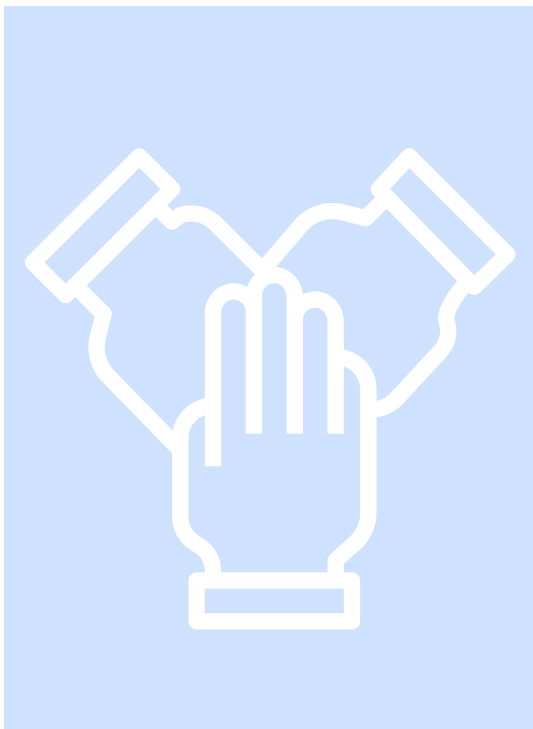
Holistic wrap-around services also include creating a personal relationship to the client. A participant discussed the importance of establishing such relationships, because once they start working with the newcomer, they are more comfortable opening up about their needs. For example, they might begin speaking about work placement, however the newcomer will mention that they need furniture. So the agency can provide them with leads for furniture, or where they can obtain childcare. “A holistic approach is what works best with them where we don’t just refer them, we do the work for them. I think that works great for newcomer women, because they don’t have the skill to connect with someone to get the services [they need]”.

The use of holistic, wraparound services is aligned with **connecting and engaging with newcomers**. Taking a client’s perspective into consideration is a huge component of being able to provide them with the tailored services they need. It is equally important to **connect newcomers with Canadians**. The Central Island Multicultural Society provides youth programs throughout the school year as well as summer camps for newcomers and refugees, to make them feel less isolated and connect them with their Canadian peers. They also work with volunteers on different programs, including connecting Canadians with newcomers and refugees to show them around and introduce them to their new area.

Decentralizing services was an interesting topic brought up by one participant. While the Gateway project, for example, has been extremely successful, the participant brought up the Alberta Health Service as an example of where decentralization may be more beneficial. Previously, there were several health centres across the province. Now that it is centralized, the participant argued that there is greater bureaucracy which is not necessarily good for clients. They suggested a hybrid approach, centralizing the assessment process but having different various agencies with different services to choose from. In doing so, this would increase competition and thus better the quality of services offered.

CONCLUSION

The outcomes of these focus group discussions will inform the next phase of our project which will involve key informant interviews with carefully selected participants to expand on the solutions uncovered. We ultimately intend to pilot projects to address the issues and test solutions and recommendations to improve settlement and economic outcomes. As we have observed, many of the focus groups revealed repetition within suggested solutions. Some of the most highly repeated solutions included fostering collaboration between settlement agencies, other community organizations, and the private sector. Harnessing informal newcomer and informal SPO networks, creating a centralized repository of newcomer data and referrals, diversifying funding, and employment outcomes-focused initiatives were also frequently discussed among separate focus groups. This overlap was anticipated as all aspects of the settlement sector are intertwined and these intersections will be further explored in our final consultation phase.



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