



Immigrant & Refugee Housing Consultation Report

2016

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Introduction

Immigration Partnership

Immigration Partnership is made up of over 100 community partners representing settlement and community services, municipal government, business and individual community members that collaboratively address organizational, systems and policy issues that affect immigrants and refugees in Waterloo Region. The role of the Partnership is to educate, inform and facilitate, engage, communicate, influence and advocate.

Immigration Partnership Community Action Plan 2014-2016 focuses on housing in strategic direction 4: *reduce housing-related barriers for immigrants and refugees* with an overarching goal of increasing the stock, quality and accessibility of affordable housing. Priority action area 4.1 is to *define and address issues related to accessible and quality housing for immigrants and refugees*.

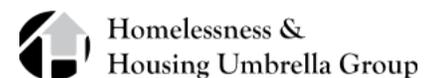
Community Consultation

Immigration Partnership Settle Steering Group in partnership with the Homelessness and Housing Umbrella Group, Supportive Housing of Waterloo and Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation hosted an Immigrant and Refugee Housing Consultation on May 26, 2015 at Stirling Avenue Mennonite Church in Kitchener.

The event was for people with lived experience and front-line service provider staff to address the issues and commitments needed to improve:

- Coordination among services
- Access to and experiences of living in affordable and quality housing

Information was gathered from the perspective of immigrant and refugee community members, local settlement and housing service providers and other service groups, to begin looking at next steps to addressing the issues.



Key Findings

Housing Challenges	Systems	Collaboration	Regional Focus
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language barriers • Unfamiliarity with complex systems and rules (i.e. rights and responsibilities) • Stigma and discrimination • Differences in definition of "family unit" • Lack of credit history, references, co-signer etc. • Finding safe, affordable, and quality housing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complex! • Varying statuses of immigrants creates challenges • Involvement of other systems and service areas working together is key • Housing falls outside the mandate of settlement workers • Need more community development support, education for housing agencies and advocacy for improved policies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need more information about roles and services • Lots of good will, intentional work and informal partnerships • Must continue to develop relationships that lead to formal partnerships • Need better understanding and communication of common struggles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affordable housing is an issue for large families and singles • Communication needs to be in languages people understand • Education needed for both landlords and individuals living in housing • Better collaboration needed to ensure existing housing policies and strategies meet the need of immigrants and refugees

Housing Challenges

Participants discussed the specific challenges experienced by immigrants and refugees to access adequate housing as well as the challenges of organizations that provide housing and/or settlement support in working with immigrants and refugees. Information gathered confirmed that locally, immigrants and refugees experience many challenges in accessing and staying in adequate affordable housing, many of which are similar to those faced by individuals in low-income situations. In addition, a number of challenges specific to immigrants and refugees were identified stemming from immigration status, social and cultural factors, communication and discrimination.

“Faith-based communities identify areas they can “fill the gap”

- Participant

“Inter-agency referrals/word of mouth” - Participant

Lack of Available Housing and Affordability Concerns

Income and employment were further identified as key factors preventing individuals from accessing housing. Participants acknowledged that securing stable employment continues to be a persistent challenge for many people, ultimately affecting their ability to afford housing. Individuals receiving social assistance through the provincially funded Ontario Works program also experience difficulty accessing adequate housing as the cost of rent is often too high and beyond what the Ontario Works shelter allowance provides. Participants identified that due to the poor quality of housing, people are left with no option but to rely on government benefits, such as their Child Tax Benefit, to improve their accommodation. Furthermore, those receiving social assistance may be subject to discrimination for being in receipt of Ontario Works.

There are a considerable number of challenges in accessing and staying in adequate affordable housing experienced by individuals living with low-income that also impact immigrants and refugees living on low incomes. Participants shared that the most prominent contributors to the issue are high rental cost, limited availability, long wait lists and suitability of available housing. High rental cost makes it difficult for individuals to secure affordable housing that is located in a safe and reputable neighbourhood and is close to public transportation. Such housing is generally sustained by current tenants. Additionally, privately owned housing that is affordable and available is often not well maintained or sufficient, landlords are identified as “slum” and systems for repairs are cumbersome and non-reactive. Participants identified that due to the poor quality of housing, people are left with no option but to rely on government benefits, such as their Child Tax Benefit, to improve their accommodation.

Specific to Immigrants and Refugees

Immigration Status

Numerous challenges were identified relating to housing and the immigrant and refugee population. It is critical to acknowledge that access to services is widely impacted, or is perceived to be impacted, by the status of immigrants and refugees. The issue of status forces individuals into categories of eligibility which greatly affect and limit the services offered by service providers.

For the Immigration Partnership, the definition of **immigrants** includes people who immigrated a long time ago or more recently, refugees and refugee claimants, immigrants who are and are not Canadian citizens and all newcomers to Canada who are living in Waterloo Region.

A **refugee** is a person who is forced to flee from persecution and who is located outside of their home country.

- **Government Assisted Refugees (GARs)** make a claim and are accepted overseas prior to coming to Canada as a result of extreme hardship in their home country. GARs have permanent resident status and the federal government sponsors them for their initial resettlement for one year.
- **Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSRs)** are also identified overseas, and have permanent resident status but are sponsored by Canadian individuals, groups or organizations.
- **Refugee Claimants** have also fled their country and are in need of protection, but they make their claim upon arriving in Canada. These individuals enter into a legal process with the Canadian government to prove their claim and once approved, can apply for resident status.

Upon arrival, immigrants and refugees are focused on learning the English language, having their credentials assessed in order to find meaningful work, and trying to integrate into a new culture and environment. It is important to note that not all immigrants and refugees face the same challenges and some groups, particularly refugee claimants, are more vulnerable than others. Participants working with refugees shared that GARs often face financial hardship as the 1-year Resettlement Assistance from the Federal Government ends and individuals turn to Ontario Works to meet their basic needs while they are still integrating into the community. For refugee claimants, they are often without access to any financial support upon their initial arrival, therefore making it difficult for them to meet their basic needs. The length of time a refugee claimant will have to wait in order to access financial support will vary and can range from a couple weeks to a few months. In addition, participants highlighted the need to look at the experience of international students and to ensure that this group is not forgotten, especially as they transition into their second year which often means moving out of student residence and needing to find housing within the community

Social and Cultural Factors

Newcomers arrive to Canada with varying degrees of information and expectations surrounding the realities of settlement. They often expect to find meaningful work in their field, great schools and housing in a safe, healthy environment.

Social integration and network development within a community are both essential for the wellbeing of an individual. It is important to acknowledge that many cultural considerations must be taken into account when seeking accommodation and a community setting for immigrants and refugees. It was identified that a high level of diversity within one housing

complex may cause conflict as certain customs and traditions may not be observed by others within the community.

Further, some immigrants and refugees may require larger accommodations as it is customary to include extended family members, such as grandparents and aunts and uncles, as part of their “family unit”. Singles, specifically those with low income, face the challenge of finding adequate shared accommodation due to the fact that many requirements must first be met. For example, singles may require sharing accommodation with someone from the same culture, same religion or the same sex, and so forth, which further limits their housing options.

Moreover, immigrants and refugees generally lack credit history or social supports and networks to act as a reference or co-signer for documents and social supports that are available or do exist are generally not intensive or stable.

Communication

When seeking services, the ability to communicate is critical and cultural differences play a role as immigrants and refugees are often unfamiliar with the complex systems and processes that exist in Canada. Many immigrants and refugees experience difficulty communicating if English is not their first language and individuals arrive to Canada with varying levels of English proficiency. Language barriers affect many forms of communication, such as computer literacy, telephone communication and the ability to read or understand housing agreements. Access to interpretation and translation is a crucial part of successfully navigating systems and services; however, it is not always available. Further, immigrants and refugees may have difficulty understanding tenant rights and may struggle when communicating their needs if they are not yet proficient in communicating in English.

Discrimination

Participants stressed that immigrants and refugees face additional barriers to housing due to discrimination and the stigma attached to their immigration status. Discrimination is further compounded by many factors such as race, ethnicity, language and class. As a result, immigrants and refugees may be denied accommodation strictly based on their status. A focus on providing resources and support to housing providers and landlords may help to promote a better understanding of cultural differences.

Settlement Organizations and Housing Support Services

Participants discussed that settlement organizations and housing support services are confronted with several challenges in helping immigrants and refugees access sustainable housing. Currently, local settlement services are undergoing drastic changes as federal funding continues to decrease; this has resulted in understaffing and a lack of resources in both settlement and housing agencies. Furthermore, the availability of affordable and suitable housing in Waterloo Region is gravely lacking, although the need for housing is prominent. There is a great need for the coordination, collaboration and integration of service providers as well as the development and implementation of a “wrap around” model of service in order for agencies to stay connected with clients.

Systems

Issues specific to housing immigrants and refugees are highlighted in many places, such as within the Immigration Partnership Community Action Plan, Region of Waterloo housing plans and within the Homelessness and Housing Umbrella Group. In exploring systems that currently address housing needs, participants identified that no one group or system can address the challenges independently and that involvement of other systems and service areas working together is key to addressing the needs of immigrants and refugees.

Additionally, participants expressed that there are various entry points for accessing housing supports and while there are some efforts towards the integration of those points, the existing system contributes to confusion for those seeking housing. Discussion also pointed to the complexity of existing systems which can result in people getting bounced between organizations and other systems. Participants emphasized that the housing stability system is very broad and those being serviced is narrow, for example, being limited to those who are at risk of losing housing or those who are homeless while other at risk groups are invisible here.

Regional Focus

Participants highlighted two specific gaps within the current housing approach and existing programs within Waterloo Region that negatively affect immigrants and refugees. First, the focus on “housing first” within the housing stability system was not seen to benefit immigrants and refugees. Participants stated that with the focus on homelessness, immigrants and refugees are often invisible. Although they may not have a home, immigrants and refugees tend not to access the existing systems (i.e., emergency shelters) in place for those

experiencing homelessness, resulting in them not being recognized as homeless. Furthermore, based on wait list times, more funding tends to be directed to the development of new one bedroom units although there is a need for more 4-5 bedroom units to accommodate the larger family size of some immigrant and refugee families. Second, participants discussed priority status for community housing wait lists and the fact that refugees are not recognized as needing urgent status¹ in Waterloo Region. Additionally, there was discussion about gentrification and the affect it will have on all individuals with low income looking to secure affordable housing in accessible areas near transit, schools, shops and work.

Collaboration

Participants identified a need for better collaboration between those with a primary mandate to support immigrants and refugees and organizations providing housing services. Discussion also included positive examples of intentional work and collaboration within organizations that have a primary mandate to support immigrants and refugees.

Moving Towards Collaboration

Participants emphasized a need for enhanced collaboration between organizations supporting immigrants and refugees and organizations providing housing services. Specifically, a need for further coordination and facilitation of meetings between Region of Waterloo departments, Immigration Partnership, immigrants and refugees and the local settlement sector was identified. Based on their experience, participants shared that improvements could be made in the areas of communication, transparency, responsiveness, information sharing and inclusive practices between organizations. Discussion also included the need for formal, face-to-face communication between service providers; a better understanding of the mandate, protocols and processes of organizations; added opportunities to participate in events and presentations; easier access to information, education and outreach. Moreover, it was recognized that there is a need to identify and engage more stakeholders and allies within the community as well as those with lived experience who have successfully integrated in order to address housing issues and reduce housing-related barriers for immigrants and refugees.

¹ Special priority (people who are victims of domestic violence); Terminally ill priority (people who have a life expectancy of two years or less); Urgent Status (people who are experiencing homelessness, separated families or issue of safety). More information: http://communityservices.regionofwaterloo.ca/en/housing/resources/2027244-v9-Local_Priorities_Presentation.pdf

Current Coordination Efforts

Although it has been established that there is a need for better collaboration between organizations, participants discussed various positive ways in which service providers supporting immigrants and refugees are collaborating and coordinating their efforts. Participants emphasized that service providers are intentionally seeking out organizations and community members to build a working alliance and partnership with. It was also noted that some organizations have created a list of housing providers, are participating in conference meetings with support workers regarding cases where similar challenges are being faced to identify common issues and solutions, and are working to identify the needs and concerns of clients (i.e. safety in housing and location). Organizations are also identifying and directing their clients to agencies as well as following up with agencies to ensure that clients are receiving full support.

Follow-Up Based on Community Input

Immigration Partnership

1. Engage in advocacy for policies and regulations that protect and promote the rights of immigrants and refugees and prevent discrimination (e.g., decrease the need for documentation that spans before entry into the country).
2. Continue to participate in existing housing initiatives and facilitate a joint voice regarding local housing issues for immigrants and refugees.
3. Continue to convene housing information sessions and consultations for the settlement sector, housing support services and immigrants to share information and work to address housing challenges facing immigrants and refugees.
4. Disseminate information to the immigrant and refugee settlement sector regarding opportunities to engage with housing stability sector.
5. Work with Region of Waterloo Housing Services to address Action 7 in their Homelessness to Housing Stability Strategy for Waterloo Region² and Action 3.3 in the Housing Action Plan³.
6. Facilitate discussions between the settlement and housing stability sector to identify best practices in landlord recruitment and retention and consider how this impacts regional practices.

²http://communityservices.regionofwaterloo.ca/en/communityPlanningPartnerships/resources/Attachment_Strategy_2012_PDF.pdf#Attachment_Strategy_2012_PDF.pdf

³http://communityservices.regionofwaterloo.ca/en/housing/resources/2014_Waterloo_Regions_Housing_Action_Plan_with_Appendices.PDF

Settlement Sector

1. Identify representatives to actively participate in housing groups, consultation events and other housing initiatives to provide input on the immigrant experience, to advocate for housing policy and programming that is reflective of the housing needs of immigrants and refugees.
2. Continue to build relationships with housing providers and landlords to address landlord concerns and to provide support on how to work with immigrants and refugees.
3. Encourage leadership among landlords by identifying and highlighting stories of local landlords who rent to immigrants and refugees.

Housing Stability Sector

1. Ensure that communication and resources are in languages that immigrants and refugees understand through existing interpretation and translation services.
2. Engage in more advocacy for the rights of immigrant and refugee tenants through the Homelessness and Housing Umbrella Group (HHUG).
3. Develop outreach plans which include connecting with immigrant and refugee populations.
4. Promote a stronger chain of communication between landlords and immigrant and refugee tenants.
5. Acknowledge the specific housing needs of immigrants and refugees and be more engaged in the process of helping immigrants and refugee clients to access affordable housing.

Region of Waterloo

1. Actively engage immigrants, refugees and settlement partners to share their housing experience and participate in housing sector planning and decision making, through membership on committees and workgroups, towards more affordable and inclusionary housing and shorter wait times for community housing.
2. Include information on the local settlement sector and providing housing support to immigrants and refugees in Housing Stability training (i.e., Housing 101) and other workshops.
3. Encourage Region-funded agencies to have outreach plans for engaging immigrants and refugees.

Resources

Waterloo Region Immigration Fact Sheets

- 1) [Immigrant Arrivals](#)
- 2) [Population and Family Composition](#)
- 3) [Language, Interpretation and Translation](#)
- 4) [Employment, Education, and Income](#)
- 5) [Health Status of Immigrants](#)
- 6) [Waterloo Region Immigration Profile](#)

Research

OCASI Report on Settlement and Housing. *The Intersection of Settlement and Housing Services and Policies: Reducing the Risk of Homelessness for Immigrant and Refugee Women.*

[Hidden: Newcomer experiences of homelessness at Fred Victor and The Learning Enrichment Foundation](#)

[The Housing Needs of Immigrants and Refugees in Canada](#)

Appendix

Over 40 participants, including representatives from the following organizations were present:

- The Working Centre
- Region of Waterloo Housing Services
- Homelessness and Housing Umbrella Group
- St. Louis Adult Learning and Continuing Education
- Kitchener Downtown Community Health Centre
- Region of Waterloo Public Health and Emergency Services
- House of Friendship
- Chandler Mowat Community Centre
- Reception House Waterloo Region
- Welcome Home Refugee Housing Community
- YMCA Immigrant Services
- Waterloo Mennonite Brethren Church
- Mennonite Coalition for Refugee Support
- Social Planning Council of Kitchener Waterloo
- Carizon Family and Community Services
- Supportive Housing of Waterloo
- Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation
- MennoHomes
- Waterloo Region Community Legal Services
- Focus for Ethnic Women
- AIDS Committee of Cambridge, Kitchener, Waterloo and Area
- Kitchener-Waterloo Multicultural Centre

A Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation Senior Market Analyst presented recent data on immigrant housing in the Kitchener-Waterloo-Cambridge area and a Social Planning Associate from Region of Waterloo Housing Services shared information about the local housing stability sector and Regional housing programs. Following presentations, participants participated in World Café style discussions focusing on one of four themes: Housing Challenges, Systems, Collaboration and Regional Approach to Housing. The following is an outline of questions that were used to guide discussions:



Housing Challenges

1. What are the biggest challenges in accessing and staying in affordable housing experienced by immigrants and refugees? What are the expectations vs. realities for immigrants and refugees?
2. What challenges do settlement organizations and housing support services face in helping immigrants and refugee's access and stay in housing?
3. What challenges do housing providers face in working effectively with immigrants and refugees?
4. What positive examples of overcoming these challenges locally can we learn from or scale up?

Systems

1. What is the current system for addressing the housing needs of immigrants and refugees? Does one exist?
2. What immigrant-specific barriers have you seen or experienced within the current housing system?
3. What is working well in the current system to address housing needs of immigrants and refugees?
4. Where do we need improvement in the current system to address housing needs of immigrants and refugees?
5. Are efforts to address housing needs in our community inclusive of immigrants and refugees? What can we do to be more inclusive?

Collaboration

1. How do organizations with a primary mandate to support immigrants and refugees and/or ethno-cultural groups currently work with organizations providing housing services and supports?
2. Can organizations with a primary mandate to support immigrants and refugees and organizations providing housing services and supports better support each other? How?
3. Do we need to engage others in order to improve access to accessible, affordable and quality housing for immigrants and refugees? (i.e., important advocates, groups, decision makers). Who and how?

Regional Focus

1. Do the current housing approach and existing programs in the region address needs of immigrants and refugees? If there are gaps, what are they? What do we need more of?
2. How do we accommodate the growing number of new immigrants in Waterloo Region to ensure that there is safe, affordable and quality housing?
3. How do we/can we identify and support people experiencing homelessness, precarious housing or at risk of housing loss to connect with their ethno-cultural communities and available housing programs?
4. Moving forward, what opportunities or actions would you like to see the Immigration Partnership to consider related to housing stability?