

The journey to 2025: Five years of  
**building community  
through immigration**



**IMMIGRATION  
PARTNERSHIP**  
WATERLOO REGION



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**Waterloo Region** is located on the Haldimand Tract, land promised to the Six Nations peoples that encompasses six miles on each side of the Grand River. It is the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee, Anishnaabe, and Chonnonton peoples, who continue to care for the land.

We are grateful to learn, live, work and play alongside our Indigenous neighbours as we do the work of welcoming newcomers and building community through immigration.

We are all treaty people.



## A message from Tara Bedard, Executive Director

This year marks the end of Waterloo Region's 5-year immigration strategy and the 15-year anniversary of organizations collaborating through the Immigration Partnership to build community through immigration. The Immigration Partnership Council, the Settle, Work and Belong Steering Groups, our working groups and staff collaborated through a global pandemic, the ups and downs of dramatically shifting immigration policy, significant community growth and more. On the path to 1 million residents, Waterloo Region just surpassed the 700,000 mark with a significant annual population increase.

We have been laser-focused on creating the conditions for immigrants to succeed and contribute to a thriving community for everyone through local capacity building and action. We have also pushed upper levels of government for long-term and cross-sector planning and investment in the community infrastructure needed for immigrants and others to thrive.

The partners and the talented team that supports our collective work have had many challenges and many successes. Awareness and focus on immigration are greater than ever. Community capacity to support immigrant settlement, work and belonging has undoubtedly grown across public, private and non-profit sectors. We have built strong capacity to coordinate large-scale humanitarian responses. New and innovative partnerships and collaborations exist today due to our collaboration. Immigrants and grassroots organizations have a stronger voice in community decision making in part because of this work. The list goes on.

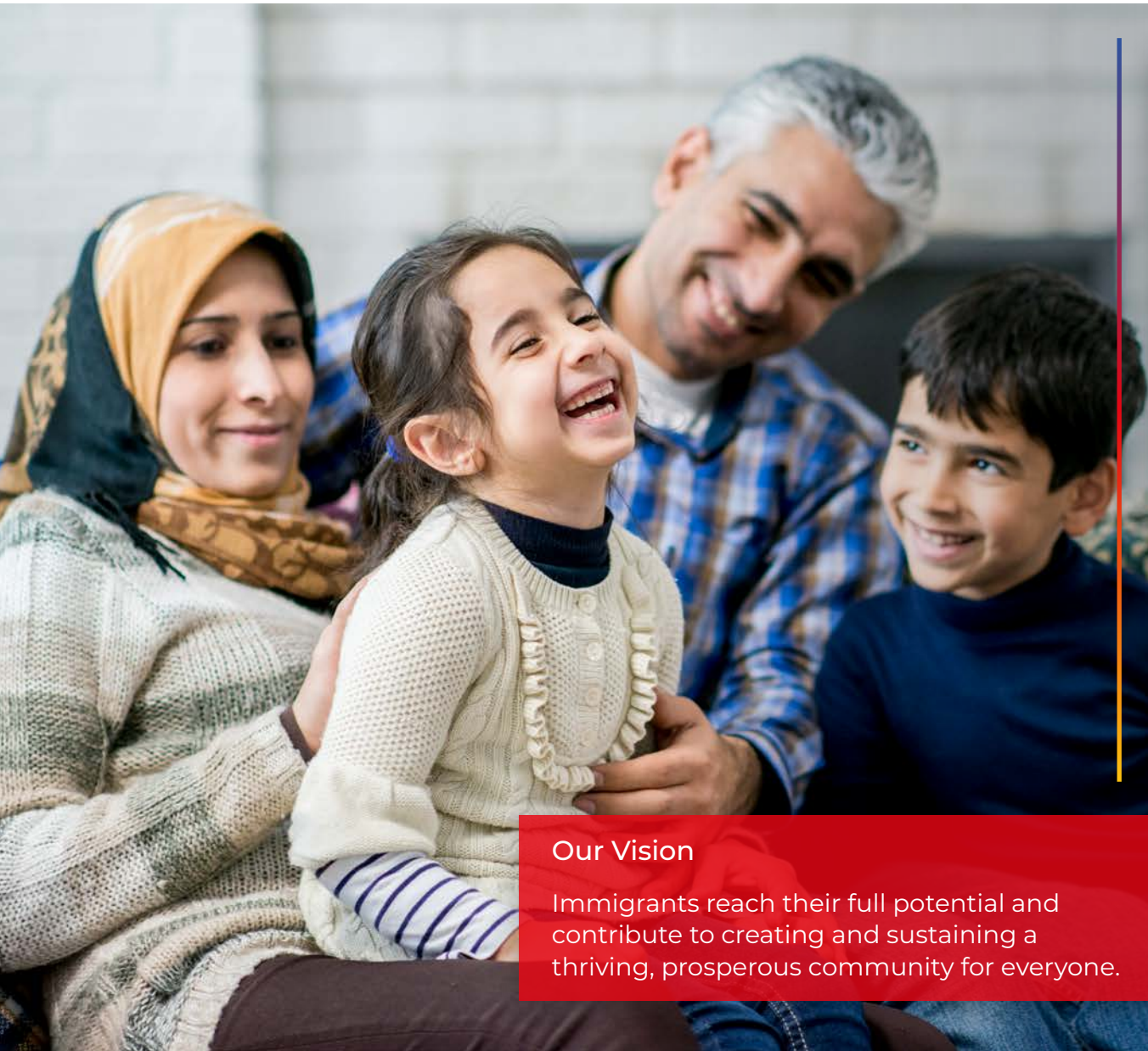
The Immigration Partnership is planning for the future while the environment is again shifting with federal and provincial elections, major immigration policy changes, economic challenges and more. This report is testimony to the incredible foundation from which we will build due to the investment and engagement of many partners and the growing immigrant community who are making Waterloo Region a better place for everyone.

Thank you to everyone who has done this important community building work for the last 15+ years – you truly inspire.



Tara Bedard, Executive Director  
Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership





## About us

The Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership (IP) has served as a catalyst and platform for collaboration across organizations to strengthen community through immigration for 15 years. Through IP more than 70 immigrant and community service, business, municipal, post-secondary, ethno-cultural and other organizations work together to create the conditions for immigrants to succeed.

A Leadership Council and three Steering Groups (Settle, Work, and Belong) lead this work, supported by a dynamic staff team. They embody shared leadership principles and engage in collaborative research, community engagement, public education, advocacy and more.

### Our Vision

Immigrants reach their full potential and contribute to creating and sustaining a thriving, prosperous community for everyone.

### Our Mission

We work together to create the conditions for immigrants to succeed and help build a welcoming, dynamic community.



## Our team

Abiha Syed  
Community Engagement Coordinator  
Belong Steering Group

Dan Vandebelt  
Data Research and Evaluation Lead

Diana Carrillo Joya  
Communications Coordinator

Nora Whittington  
Community Engagement Coordinator  
Work Steering Group

Pauline Peng  
Program Assistant

Saba Shafiq  
Community Engagement Coordinator  
Settle Steering Group

Tara Bedard  
Executive Director

## Immigration Partnership Council

The Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership (IP) Council oversees strategy and governance, champions IP's work in the community, and advocates for change in systems, policy, services and investments. It fosters shared leadership for collective action in Waterloo Region and beyond and amplifies the work of the steering groups.



Not pictured above: Andrea Hopkins

## Members

Dr Ernest Osei (Chair), Community member  
 Brittney Emslie (Vice Chair), KW Multicultural Centre  
 Tracey Hare Connell (Past Chair), The Coaching Co.  
 Charlene Mak (Settle Steering Group Chair), International Student Advisor Group & Wilfrid Laurier University  
 Ian McLean (Work Steering Group Chair), Greater KW Chamber of Commerce  
 Shannon Markle (Belong Steering Group Chair), Cambridge Public Libraries  
 Paulina Rodriguez (Belong Steering Group Co-Chair), City of Waterloo  
 Zohra Wali (Belong Steering Group Co-Chair), City of Cambridge  
 Brian Kamm, United Way Waterloo Region Communities  
 Dauda Raji, House of Friendship  
 Katherine Peterson, YMCA of Three Rivers Immigrant Services  
 Lucia Harrison, KW Multicultural Centre  
 Michael Doroshenko, Community member  
 Murray Gamble, The C3 Group of Companies  
 Peter Sweeney, Region of Waterloo, Commissioner, Community Services  
 Trish Weigel Green, Conestoga College  
 Prof Jenna Henneby, Wilfrid Laurier University & International Migration Research Centre  
 Conal Vaughan, Immigration, Refugees & Citizenship Canada (ex officio)  
 Andrea Hopkins, Ontario Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport (ex officio)

## 2020-25 Alumni

Diana Boston, Volunteer Waterloo Region • Thusany Puvanendran, Waterloo Wellington Local Health Integration Network • Douglas Bartholomew-Saunders, Region of Waterloo Former Commissioner, Community Services • Karen Spencer, Family and Children's Services • Della Lataille-Herdsman, Elaine Ranney and James Bond, Waterloo Region District School Board • Eliseo Martel and Yasir Dildar, Community members • Laura Stoutenburg, Conestoga College • Pari Kareem, YMCA of Three Rivers Immigrant Services • Sonja Erstic, Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration (ex officio) • Stephanie Schreuders, Mennonite Central Committee Ontario • Prof. Margaret Walton Roberts, Wilfrid Laurier University • Janet Stanley, Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport (ex officio) • Anna Schwarz, Reception House

Community impact

Driving change through strategic investments

Research and data for community growth

The Immigrant Survey: a tool for policy and service planning

Growing community awareness, communications and engagement

National impact: a partnership that goes above and beyond



## Our impact

The Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership (IP) is focused on helping build a robust system of local services for immigrants and others, through coordination, collaboration and advocacy.

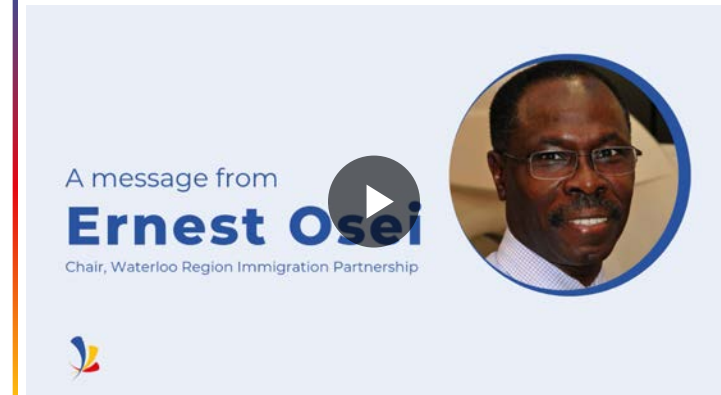
## Community impact

The Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership (IP) is focused on helping build a robust system of local services for immigrants and others, through coordination, collaboration and advocacy. In the last five years the IP Council and Steering Groups had notable successes in influencing investment in local organizations. The IP Council added its voice to calls for federal and provincial investment in affordable housing, health care expansion, economic development and job creation and more to support the region's fast-growing population.

The IP Council successfully advocated with Ontario Health to sustain and top up a \$150,000 annual investment in local medical interpretation services first launched in 2018 by the then-Local Health Integration Network and the KW Multicultural Centre.

Due in part to collaboration with Federal partners, investment in local immigrant services grew significantly over the past five years. Looking to the future, IP supported more than 40 community partners in preparation for the 2025-2030 federal settlement call for proposals. This work allowed organizations to come together, predict community needs, and strengthen applications for increased federal funding to support the region's growing immigrant population. As a result, five new organizations were successful in securing federal immigration funding starting in 2025. These wins help ensure that everyone in our community can thrive.

## A message from Ernest Osei, IP Chair



“

IP is not only a central hub for system navigation, they use their expertise to support and influence collaborative responses to arising issues in this sub-sector. IP is a leader in the work to support newcomers to settle, work and belong in this region. IP has been a lead for major resettlement initiatives to ensure that efforts are coordinated. Sitting on the local initiatives and some national initiatives related to recent mass resettlements, I have seen first-hand that value add that our IP has had on the coordination and forward thinking about potential needs.

2024 Partner Survey participant”



Immigration Partnership Council meeting, September 2024.



Sitting on the local initiatives and some national initiatives related to recent mass resettlements, I have seen first-hand that value add that our IP has had on the coordination and forward thinking about potential needs. Other communities across Canada have commented on the quality of the work here in Waterloo Region for which IP is a lead.

2024 Partner Survey participant



## Large scale refugee resettlement coordination

Providing safe haven to refugees is a pillar of Canadian humanitarian tradition and immigration policy. Waterloo Region is one of few designated resettlement communities for government assisted refugees, welcomes many privately sponsored refugees and refugee claimants. The Immigration Partnership Refugee Task Force was reinitiated in 2021 as Canada initiated large scale refugee responses to multiple global conflicts. The Immigration Partnership has provided strategic oversight of efforts by partners welcoming and supporting thousands of Afghans, Ukrainian and other refugees and refugee claimants. Through the Task Force, co-chaired by the KW Multicultural Centre and Region of Waterloo, immigrant and refugee serving organizations have collaborated with housing, education, health and public health, volunteer and other community organizations to wrap services around the families who arrived, with many positive outcomes:

- Families were able to access multiple organizations' services in one place through collaborative events.
- On-site health clinics were offered at transitional housing sites to triage health care needs and provide care, in partnership with refugee health clinics and other health partners.
- Families were supported to access rent subsidies through housing and settlement partners.
- School board and settlement partners worked to ensure children are enrolled in school as quickly as possible.

Supporting refugees is in our DNA in Waterloo Region – this work will continue.

## Driving change through strategic investments

In the midst of the Syrian refugee crisis and resettlement in 2016, the Immigration Partnership (IP) established a Fund at the now Waterloo Region Community Foundation. The Immigration Partnership Fund for Immigrant and Refugee Initiatives has since been a place for residents to make donations supporting local initiatives for immigrants and refugees. Starting in 2022, with the announcements of large refugee arrivals from Afghanistan and Ukraine the IP Council stewarded significant donations to the Fund.

At the same time, in partnership the Region of Waterloo's Equity Fund, the IP Council prioritized investments aimed at enhancing the economic wellbeing of immigrants in the region.

Through these Funds, more than \$1,164,000 was invested in 28 local initiatives supporting the settlement, economic wellbeing, and sense of belonging for refugees and other newcomers in Waterloo Region.

Learn more about these initiatives: [Fund Impact Report 2023-2024](#)

### Recipients for the Fund for Immigrant and Refugee Initiatives

Ukrainian initiatives	Amount
Woolwich Community Health Centre	\$25,000
Church of the Transfiguration	\$20,000
Ukrainian Canadian Congress	\$5,000
Ukrainian Orthodox Church of St. Sophia	\$5,000

Other initiatives	Amount
Kitchener Downtown Community Health Centre	\$20,000
Muslim Social Services Kitchener-Waterloo	\$20,000
The Working Centre	\$19,040
Kitchener-Waterloo Multicultural Centre	\$15,000
Reception House Waterloo Region	\$15,000
Canadian Arab Women's Association	\$10,000
Nigerians in the Region of Waterloo (NIROW)	\$10,000



Participants at a Family Support Club event hosted by the Church of the Transfiguration.

## Recipients for the Fund for Immigrant Economic Wellbeing

Adventure4Change International	\$72,245
Centre for Family Medicine Family Health Team	\$71,975
KW Working Centre for the Unemployed	\$71,975
Nigerians in the Region of Waterloo (NIROW)	\$71,975
Reception House Waterloo Region	\$71,975
Workforce Planning Board of Waterloo Wellington Dufferin	\$71,975
Kinbridge Community Association	\$69,959
Bring on the Sunshine	\$66,937
Muslim Social Services Kitchener-Waterloo	\$65,000
Kitchener-Waterloo Multicultural Centre	\$64,000
YWCA of Kitchener-Waterloo	\$55,209
The AIDS Committee of Cambridge, Kitchener, Waterloo	\$55,000
Canadian Arab Women's Association	\$50,000
Business and Education Partnership of Waterloo Region	\$40,000
Waterloo Region Grassroots Response to the Ukrainian Crisis	\$32,000
Ontario Learning Development Foundation	\$28,935
Canadian Aweil Youth Association	\$23,340
Project UP (Uleash Potential)	\$17,500



Project UP participants engaging in a creative activity.

## Help build community through immigration!

Donations to the Immigration Partnership Fund for Immigrant and Refugee Initiatives can be made at any time.

Visit [wrcf.ca/immigrationpartnership](http://wrcf.ca/immigrationpartnership).

## Research and data for community growth

Immigration Partnership (IP) provides valuable insights and data to inform community and organizational planning and action across Waterloo Region. Supported by an Evaluation Advisory Committee, the Immigration Partnership leveraged significant data to build capacity for change in awareness and services and opportunities for immigrants in the region.

### Evaluation Advisory Committee:

Prof Margaret Walton Roberts, Prof Jenna Hennebry, Prof Kim Rygiel and Neil Amber, Wilfrid Laurier University and Balsillie School of International Affairs/ International Migration Research Centre

Eliseo Martell, Grand River Community Health Centre

Yasir Dildar, Monitoring and Impact Measurement, Mennonite Economic Development Associates

Mohamed Bille Hassan, Camino Wellbeing + Mental Health

Daniela Seskar-Hencic, University of Waterloo

In collaboration with Waterloo Region Public Health, the Immigration Partnership (IP) prepared the [Waterloo Region Immigration Profile 2024](#) using data from Statistics Canada, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), and other sources. This research, alongside university partnerships, has provided insights to support strategic, investment, and service planning decisions for the growing and changing population. IP data and insights informed many community strategic plans, partner strategies and service plans, and other groups. This work has influenced Ontario Health Team plans, municipal plans, shelter proposals, employer presentations, and settlement partner service and many other things.

“

Our recent collaboration with the Waterloo Immigration Partnership on an Immigrant Survey project was an unqualified success. The on-staff research expertise and cost-sharing arrangements were crucial in completing this important project within our budget. By sharing the initial fixed investment of time and resources among multiple partners, we were able to increase the project's scope and tailor reporting to local needs. This collaborative approach not only enhances the efficient use of our funding but also aligns perfectly with the overall goals of the wider immigration partnership program. Such projects foster a collaborative spirit and demonstrate that working together is far more resource-efficient than operating in regional silos. This partnership has shown that collaboration not only makes projects more efficient but also makes them possible.

”

Leen Al-Habash, PhD, Project Manager at Guelph Wellington Local Immigration Partnership

IP also contributed to significant immigration data and community-driven research capacity building across Canada, through presentations, collaboration, training and advice to more than Local Immigration Partnerships (LIP) in more than 80 communities across Canada. IP staff co-lead the National Local Immigration Partnership Secretariat (NLS) Research Working Group and played a key role in developing the NLS [LIP Research Introductory Guide](#), benefiting over 80 LIPs nationwide. IP developed and led roll out of an Immigrant Survey with nine other communities and worked closely with the Community Data Program to improve data availability across Canada.

In partnership with Hamilton and St. Thomas-Elgin LIPs, IP co-developed the [GBA Plus Toolkit for LIPs](#), a key resource for LIPs across Canada. Additionally, IP created and shared tools to analyze immigrant census data and track permanent resident arrivals at the community level, and our work on measuring welcoming was showcased at numerous national and regional conferences.

IP advanced a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the International Migration Research Centre (IMRC) at Wilfrid Laurier University (WLU)/Balsillie School to foster joint research and knowledge mobilization. Our university research collaborations included a study on immigrant youth and family well-being with researchers in Montreal, Ottawa, and Waterloo in collaboration with the Children and Youth Planning Table (CYPT), and a presentation at the McGill-Pegasus Institute on collaborative interpretation. Additionally, in partnership with WLU and KW4 OHT, we developed the [Interpretation Environmental Scan in 2021](#), a resource that continues to guide service planning.

Reports from previous years are available at [Resources and Publications - Immigration Waterloo Region](#)

“

The Immigration Partnership is an excellent example of a collaborative that works. The needs of new immigrants are diverse and complex. To meet these needs there are many organizations providing excellent programs and services. IP is not only a central hub for system navigation, they use their expertise to support and influence collaborative responses to arising issues in this sub-sector. IP is a leader in the work to support newcomers to settle, work and belong in this region. IP has been a lead for major resettlement initiatives to ensure that efforts are coordinated.

”

2024 Partner Survey participant

## The Immigrant Survey: A tool for policy and service planning

The Immigration Partnership (IP) developed and conducted the biannual Immigrant Survey in 2019, 2021 and 2023. The 2023 survey provided nearly 1,700 immigrants, refugees, international students, and others the opportunity to help shape local, provincial, and federal policy, services, and investments.

### What participants said

■ 2019 ■ 2021 ■ 2023

Felt that Waterloo Region community was quite welcoming (rated 8 to 10)



Had a strong sense of belonging (Very or somewhat)



Were quite isolated (A great deal or quite a bit)



Experienced discrimination



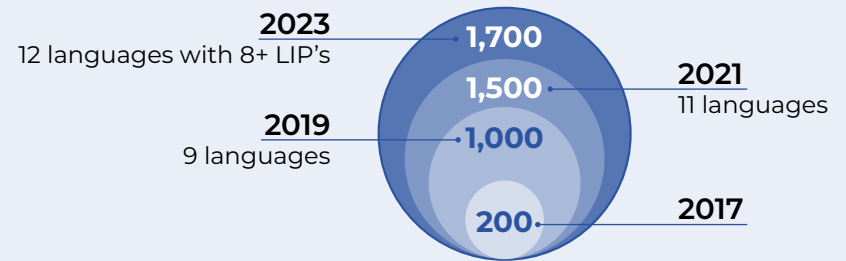
Were in housing that was suitable and affordable



Indicated they were not in a job that was at the same level as their skills and experience

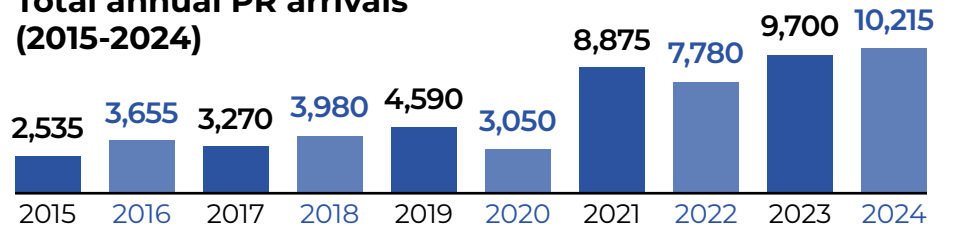


### Number of survey participants



In 2024, **10,215 new permanent residents arrived** in WR: IRCC data, 2024. This averaged just over **850 new permanent residents each month**.

### Total annual PR arrivals (2015-2024)



In 2024 IP shared an aggregate data summary report, a methodology report, and seven snapshots.



## Growing community awareness, communications and engagement

Over the past five years, the Immigration Partnership (IP) has increased awareness of both the Partnership and immigration experiences in Waterloo Region through consistent communications across diverse media channels. We've leveraged new tools and networks to highlight the significant contributions of immigrants.



In 2023, we introduced a refreshed brand identity for the Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership, reflecting our commitment to innovation and collaboration.

### IP in the Media - 2024

- [New survey looks at immigrant experience in Waterloo region](#) - CBC.ca
- [More than 27,000 immigrants arrived in Waterloo Region within last five years](#) - CTV News
- [Regional councillor claims food bank 'overwhelmed' with students, seeks report](#) - CTV News
- ['We're not coping' — Councillors want more data on impact of international students, refugees](#) - therecord.com
- [Cambridge saw biggest local change in immigrants seeking permanent residency in 2022](#) - CambridgeToday.ca
- [Waterloo Region releases 2024 immigration profile highlighting growth and diversity](#) - Region of Waterloo
- [Forward Together: Symposium focuses on improving wellbeing of community](#) - Region of Waterloo

### Our growth

#### Website visitors



#### Curated Immigration Weekly e-newsletter

**UP 630** subscribers from 2021

Over **250** issues  
**53%** open rate

#### Followers on social media



## National impact: A partnership that goes above and beyond

For the past 5 years, Immigration Partnership (IP) staff and partners have contributed to national discussions on immigration and worked with Local Immigration Partnerships (LIPs) across Canada to help build their capacity to support immigration. Waterloo Region experience has helped other communities with immigration data collection and analysis, disaggregated data approaches, Immigrant Survey development and implementation, interpretation resources, partner engagement, employer engagement and capacity building, mass refugee arrival response coordination, collaboration with settlement partners, building community welcoming and belonging, and much more.

Pathways to Prosperity (P2P) is an annual national immigration conference for federal and provincial immigration ministries, municipalities, national and regional settlement and community organizations, and academic institutions. Its mission is to strengthen immigration policy and services and promote welcoming communities, fostering collaboration and driving solutions to support immigrants across Canada. For the past four years, IP staff and partners have shared Waterloo Region's successes through workshops and presentations, influencing best practices across Canada. Some of the workshops and presentations have included:

- Measuring Newcomer Needs and Outcomes
- Building Collaboration with Business and Economic Development Partners
- Navigating Growth: From Small Beginnings to Growing Impact
- Building Bridges: Launching a One-Stop Talent Hub



Tara Bedard from the Immigration Partnership as part of the discussion panel at the Pathways to Prosperity Conference in Vancouver, November 2024.



Settle



Work



Belong

## Settle Steering Group

The Settle Steering Group (SSG) works together to support the community integration of immigrants by addressing transitional hurdles faced when arriving in Waterloo Region.



Not pictured above: Alana Banton, Kristine Marchetti, Sandra Kuppek, Brenda Okoree, Carolyn Beukeboom, Eliseo Martell, Lily Adams, Marian Rozman, Natasha Hergott, Siba Al-Khadour



## A message from Charlene Mak, Settle Steering Group Chair

The Settle Steering Group (SSG) has focused on key areas such as housing, migrant worker support, international student integration, and language learning. These efforts reflect the Immigration Partnership's and its partners' commitment to fostering inclusivity, improving the settlement experience, and enhancing the well-being of immigrants in our region.

A heartfelt thank you to all members of the Settle Steering Group for your dedication and your commitment to advancing these initiatives over the past years.

2024 marks the fifth and final year of the Immigration Partnership's Community Plan. SSG is ready to focus our energies on a refreshed strategy and to take on new challenges. I look forward to the SSG growing stronger, building deeper relationships, and continuing to build trust in the communities we support.

## Partners

Charlene Mak (Chair), International Student Advisor Group and Wilfrid Laurier University

Zeri Zigeta (Advisory Chair), Kinbridge Community Association

Alana Banton, Brittany Bridge, Kristine Marchetti, Nikolett Agoston, Sheryl Mascoll and Vanessa Allen, Region of Waterloo

Almira Hodzic, Julie Vu, Laura Stoutenburg and Natalie Hughes, Conestoga College

Ana Luz Martinez, Brittney Emslie, Eltag Elkhalifa and Tera Dargavel, Kitchener Waterloo Multicultural Centre

Angie Pham, Imtenan Abd-El-Razik and Jennifer Ardon, Waterloo Region Community Legal Services

Anna Schwarz and Babur Mawladin, Reception House Waterloo Region

Asma Alwahsh, Canadian Arab Women Association KW

Ben MacBride-Smith, Michele Breault, Pauleen Payne and Sandra Kuppek, St. Louis Adult Learning and Continuing Education Centre

Brenda Okoree, Kind Minds Family Wellness

Carolyn Beukeboom, The Centre for Family Medicine

Dauda Raji, House of Friendship

Debbie Engel and Emily Gray, Camino Wellbeing + Mental Health

Diana Wiles, Heart of the Region

Donalee McIntyre, City of Cambridge

Duaa Al-Aghar, Muslim Social Services

Eliseo Martell, Community member

Engin Sezen and Jenna Hennebry, Wilfrid Laurier University

Faduma Musse, Somali Canadians Association of Waterloo Region (SCAWR)

Hoda Ghonim, Shore Centre

Isaiah Ritzmann, The Working Centre

Jean De Dieu Basabose, Collège Boréal

Jingling Xue, Kitchener Public Library

Lidia Gomez, English at First

Lily Adams and Marian Rozman, YMCA Three Rivers

Linda Terry, Age Friendly Waterloo Region Network

Mayada Abou Warda, Community HealthCaring Kitchener Waterloo  
 Natasha Hergott, Women's Crisis Services Centre  
 Paula Marshall, Mennonite Central Committee Ontario  
 Priscilla Muzira, AIDS Committee of Cambridge, Kitchener, Waterloo and Area  
 Shelley Campagnola, COMPASS Refugee Centre  
 Siba Al-Khadour, Levant Canada  
 Wisam Osman, Coalition of Muslim Women KW

### Corresponding Members

Crystal Cormier, Community member • Edwina Toope, Starling Community Services  
 • Jingling Xue, Kitchener Public Library • Melissa Ryan, City of Kitchener • Shelley  
 Campagnola, COMPASS Refugee Centre

### 2020-25 Alumni

Lynn Macaulay, Lutherwood • Thusany Puvanendran and Sarah Farwell, Waterloo  
 Wellington Local Health Integration Network • Erin Forde and Jenni Wagler, COMPASS  
 Refugee Centre • Crystal Brown and Lesline Fehr, Conestoga College • Gael Gilbert,  
 Supportive Housing of Waterloo • Jarvis Sparks and Kristen Johnson-Perlock,  
 Kitchener Public Library • Joe-Ann McComb, Kinbridge Neighbourhood Association •  
 Sakina Kirefu-Khan, Grand River Hospital • Sarah Harjee, Centre for Family Medicine  
 • Donalee McIntyre and Yesenia Torres, City of Cambridge • Eda Dede, Sanctuary  
 Refugee Health Centre • Michelle Lee, City of Waterloo • Andrew Ramsaroop, City  
 of Kitchener • Lisa Haskins, Waterloo Region Grassroots Response • Ajirioghene Evi-  
 Cobbinah, Kind Minds Family Wellness • Xiaoshuo Gao, Conestoga College • Nermin  
 Ozdemir, House of Friendship • Kaylee Perez and Shadrach Kamyori, Mennonite  
 Central Committee Ontario • Lynne Griffiths-Fulton, Reception House Waterloo Region  
 • Cyntia Bratan, University of Waterloo • Shannon Down, Waterloo Region Community  
 Legal Services • Abdirisak Ali and Maymuna Mohamed, Somali Canadians Association  
 of Waterloo Region (SCAWR) • Sophia Stanberry, Sherry White, Sanjay Govindaraj,  
 Ed Kaut, Sarah Gilles and Madeline Gritzan, Region of Waterloo



Settlement Steering Group (SSG) partners during the SSG meeting hosted by Kinbridge Community Association in May 2024.

## How we built community

### Stronger services and communication pathways

Leveraging insights from the Immigrant Survey, partner feedback, and other data sources, many community partners collaborated through the Settle Steering Group (SSG) to create accessible services for immigrants in Waterloo Region. The SSG created and maintained several key resources to help local organizations better serve immigrants:

- [Top Languages for Interpretation and Translation Guide](#) - Supports organizations in planning community outreach and service delivery.
- [English Learning Options in Waterloo Review Overview Guide](#) - Helps settlement staff connect immigrants with formal and informal language learning options.
- [Interpretation Best Practices Checklist](#) - Provides recommended interpretation best practices based on research and real-world experience.

These initiatives are part of SSG's broader effort to improve service delivery, which is also reflected in the work of its subgroups. These groups focus on specific areas of immigrant support, driving action to address ongoing challenges and build stronger, more inclusive systems. SSG staff and partners have engaged in numerous planning initiatives aimed at impacting the settlement, integration, and well-being of immigrants and others at a systems level.

“

My organization has staff on all pillars, council, and some of the subcommittees. We see incredible value in being engaged with IP in multiple different ways. The connection to other agencies, sectors, grassroots orgs, community individuals etc. means that the community can all work together to support immigrants and refugees more holistically. I have seen a lot of positive change come from agencies attending steering group meetings, learning about issues, and about changes they can make within their orgs to make things easier for newcomers - even small things, they have a ripple effect.

2024 Partner Survey participant

”

## Solving the housing challenges of immigrants and refugees

Access to housing continues to be a top challenge for immigrants in Waterloo Region. SSGs Immigrant Housing Working Group (IHWG) addressed these challenges through collaboration with developers, government, non-profits, and businesses. Over the years, IHWG members participated in Region of Waterloo and other service planning discussions, influencing solutions for an increasing number of refugee claimants in emergency shelters and more. It played a key role in forming partnerships and planning for targeted housing subsidies to help refugee claimants transition to market accommodations.

Through strong connections to housing action tables, IHWG ensured immigrant experiences were front and centre in community planning. IHWG has shared data on population changes and immigrant experiences with governments, collaborating with service providers to keep resources up to date and address housing challenges. Advocacy efforts focus on securing funding, rent supplements, and promoting housing stability, while also bringing together federal, provincial, and municipal partners for a unified approach to housing issues.

For five years, the IHWG hosted the Newcomer Landlord Award, which honors landlords who go above and beyond, not only by providing affordable housing for immigrants and refugees but also by offering a warm welcome to newcomers making Waterloo Region their home. The award is celebrated annually in November during National Housing Day, hosted by the Region of Waterloo. Since its inception, Immigration Partnership has recognized over 40 exceptional landlords who helped immigrants and refugees find home in Waterloo Region. Four honorees were celebrated in 2024, Ashley Schuitema & David Martin, Manel Miaadi, and Peter Maxwell. Discover their [inspiring stories](#) and watch the [video](#) celebrating their remarkable contributions to fostering a welcoming and supportive community for immigrants and refugees.

Learn about past honorees here: [Awards - Immigration Waterloo Region](#)

## Immigrant Housing Working Group

Abdirisak Ali and Faduma Musse, Somali Canadians Association of Waterloo Region (SCAWR) • Alana Banton, Brittany Bridge, Madeline Gritzan and Vanessa Allen, Region of Waterloo • Aleksandra Petrovic, David Alton and Michelle Knight, Social Development Centre Waterloo Region • Angie Pham and Kristen Thompson, Waterloo Region Community Legal Services • Anna Schwarz and Emma Jennings, Reception House Waterloo Region • Britney Emslie, Kitchener-Waterloo Multicultural Centre • Diana Wiles, Heart of the Region • Lily Adams, YMCA of the Three Rivers • Mark Willcock, Indwell • Natasha Hergott, Women's Crisis Services Centre • Nicole Pereira, Supportive Housing of Waterloo • Steph Goertz, Waterloo Region Grassroots Response to the Ukrainian Crisis



Saba Shafiq and Tara Bedard from IP, alongside the recipients of the Newcomer Landlord Award, at the National Housing Day event, November 2024.



## Building supports for migrant workers

Waterloo Region's Migrant Worker population has grown. The Settle Steering Group (SSG) formed the Waterloo Region Migrant Workers Coalition (MWC) to improve local supports for migrant workers and others with temporary migration status. MWC collaborates with regional and national partners to strengthen programs, address gaps, share online and other resources, with a focus on housing and rights education. It is advocating for improvements to the Migrant Worker Support Program to expand outreach, strengthen resources, and secure sustainable funding.

The MWC has consulted experts in communities across Ontario to learn from their strategies for supporting migrant workers. In 2024, the Immigration Partnership applied for funding on behalf of the MWC and Waterloo Wellington Community Futures through the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership to improve access to essential services for agri-food workers. Through ongoing collaboration, MWC continues to advance initiatives that improve the lives of migrant workers in the region.

### Waterloo Region Migrant Worker Coalition

Ana Luz Martinez and Britney Emslie, Kitchener-Waterloo Multicultural Centre • Angie Pham, Ashley Schuitema, Cynthia Iheanacho, Evangelynn Chee and Imtenan Abd-El-Razik, Waterloo Region Community Legal Services • Anna Schwarz, Reception House Waterloo Region • Charlene Mak, Janet MacLaughlin and Jenna Hennebry, Wilfrid Laurier University • Cynthia Mora and Eduardo Huesca, Occupational Health Clinic for Ontario Workers • Dauda Raji, House of Friendship • Eliseo Martell, Community member • Joanna Mullen, MCLS • Marian Rozman, YMCA of Three Rivers

## Supporting international students

Waterloo Region experienced fast growth of international students in the last five years. SSGs International Students and Settlement Waterloo Region (ISSWR) group worked to address the key challenges international students face. ISSWR actively monitored public attitudes and policy changes affecting international students and local post-secondary institutions. It helped strengthen collaboration among the region's three post-secondary institutions to address gaps, share best practices and improve the exchange of information between the educational institutions and community organizations.

ISSWR focused on housing, working to improve emergency accommodation options for arriving students and expand long-term housing solutions based on successful models in other regions. ISSWR strengthened international student integration by sharing pre-arrival resources and processes and facilitating peer-to-peer initiatives to help students adjust to life in Canada. The group is now working to address challenges with event coordination and marketing for large orientations, such as Waterloo Fest and Kickoff Fest. Through ongoing collaboration, advocacy for housing solutions, and the development of comprehensive resources, the group is committed to ensuring that international students receive the support they need to thrive in the community.

### International Student Support Group Waterloo Region

Almira Hodzic and Julie Vu, Conestoga College • Charlene Mak, Wilfrid Laurier University • Candace Brown and Cytia Bratan, University of Waterloo





## Expanding language training opportunities in Waterloo Region

SSGs Language Learning Working Group (LLWG) includes partners from formal and informal language learning programs to foster their collaboration and to expand English and French language learning opportunities for newcomers. The LLWG facilitated the exchange of information between partners and identified challenges and collective solutions. It maintained updated resources outlining formal and informal language learning options for newcomers and provided learning opportunities for front-line staff to learn about their programs and help newcomers navigate programs and improve their English and French abilities.

### Language Learning Working Group

Alexandra Gottardo, Wilfrid Laurier University • Anna Schwarz and Lynne Griffiths-Fulton, Reception House Waterloo Region • Ben MacBride-Smith and Pauleen Payne, Waterloo Catholic District School Board • Brittney Emslie, Manal Skaf and Tera Dargavel, Kitchener Waterloo Multicultural Centre • Eliseo Martell, Community member • Jean De Dieu Basabose and Lorraine Hamilton, Collège Boréal • Jingling Xue, Kitchener Public Library • Katherine Peterson, Marian Rozman and Swati Sharma, YMCA of Three Rivers • Laura Stoutenburg and Natalie Hughes, Conestoga College • Lidia Gomez, English at First • Nikolett Agoston and Sheryl Mascoll, Region of Waterloo

## Collaborative professional development - The Brown Bag Lunch Learning Series

For the past five years SSG brought Waterloo Region's main settlement partners together to enhance collaboration, improve referrals, address service barriers, and strengthen communication. Building on this foundation, the Brown Bag Lunch Learning Series launched in 2024 to bridge information gaps on critical topics and empower frontline workers to best supporting newcomers in the region. The Series included four sessions with local leaders sharing information and presentations on a range of key topics. These sessions provided front-line staff with great information and connections, and also celebrated the important role of frontline staff in supporting immigrants and building community.

Post-event surveys showed highly positive feedback, with participants highlighting the informative sessions, relevant topics, and knowledgeable speakers. Many found the information valuable and practical for their work and in supporting immigrant communities.

Explore the session recordings and resources here: [Brown Bag Lunch Learning Series - Immigration Waterloo Region](#)



Tara Bedard, from Immigration Partnership, presenting during the final session of the Brown Bag Lunch Learning Series in December 2024.

**30+** speakers | **450+** attendees

- Session 1** Access to health care and mental health services in Waterloo Region
- Session 2** Access to basic needs in Waterloo Region
- Session 3** Access to services regardless of immigration status in Waterloo Region
- Session 4** Addressing language barriers and employment opportunities in Waterloo Region

## Work Steering Group

The Work Steering Group (WSG) works together to maximize the economic contributions of immigrants by equipping employers with resources to hire and retain immigrant talent and to address immigrant challenges to finding meaningful employment or starting a business.



Not pictured above: Katrina Michielsen



## A message from Ian McLean, Work Steering Group Chair

The Work Steering Group (WSG) had a dynamic year with the development of Workplace and Immigrant Network (WIN). This program created by WSG and launched and hosted by the Workforce Planning Board of Waterloo, Wellington Dufferin one year ago is connecting employers and immigrant talent, offering educational workshops for employers and supporting immigrant talent in the preparation of their resumes and interview skills.

WSG continues to offer opportunities for employers and immigrant job seekers to connect through various events including those in partnership with the Greater KW Chamber and Cambridge Chamber of Commerce. WSG created a group called Proponents for Immigrant Employment which promotes the value of hiring immigrants. The year ended with receiving good news from the Region of Waterloo in the support of a partner program with the Foodbank of Waterloo Region to create a Work Experience Program for entry level immigrant talent.

WSG continues to build momentum with new and changing members at the table. The focus continues to be on the economy and changing hiring trends across the region. This group recognize that the region will grow to one million people in the next 20 years and it is critical that WSG is a partner in preparing for this growth.

## Partners

Ian Mclean, Chair - Greater KW Chamber of Commerce  
 Sheila McIntosh, Vice-Chair - Community member  
 Caroline Nessner, City of Kitchener (SDG)  
 Charlene Hofbauer, Workforce Planning Board of Waterloo Wellington and Dufferin  
 Dominique Charbonneau, City of Waterloo Economic Development  
 Eltag Elkhalfi, KW Multicultural Centre  
 Isabel Vankuik, Scotiabank  
 Jonathan Hendel, Region of Waterloo Economic Development  
 Jordyn Leith, Wilfrid Laurier University  
 Julie Newman, Willow Hall HR  
 Katrina Michielsen, Conestoga College  
 Laura Pearce, City of Cambridge Economic Development  
 Lily Magnus, Kinbridge Community Association  
 Michael Doroshenko, Community member  
 Mohamed Bille Hassan, Camino Wellbeing + Mental Health  
 Natalie Cooper, Region of Waterloo Employment Services  
 Roberto Villamar, Community member  
 Sue Benoit, YourH2R  
 Swati Sharma, YMCA of Three Rivers  
 Tamin Hamidi, Serco

## 2020-25 Alumni

Chris Farrell, Waterloo Region Small Business Centre • John Rose, Resourceful • Sandy Little, City of Waterloo Economic Development  
 • Valeria Bradford, City of Kitchener Economic Development

## How we built community

### Collaborating with industry partners: The key to success

Being in meaningful work is one of the greatest predictors of immigrant success and belonging. It is therefore no surprise that business and economic partnerships are primary to the success of the Immigration Partnership (IP). The Work Steering Group (WSG) is business and economic development focused, comprised of partners from those sectors. Over the last five years, WSG continued meeting regularly, virtually during the pandemic and more recently again in-person, with strong commitment from members. At the onset of the pandemic, the Business and Economic Support Team Waterloo Region (BESTWR) was formed by economic development and business leaders to address the challenges facing local business. IP staff actively participated in its Employment Working Group, which focused supporting employers. Through this engagement, strong relationships were built with regional economic development teams and other key organizations, raising awareness about WSG and the broader IP. What began as a challenging time led to deeper collaboration and stronger relationships that continue today.

WSG's ongoing partnership with regional economic development teams provided valuable insight into current activities and planned strategies, facilitating a dynamic exchange of knowledge about immigration and immigrant talent. This collaboration has been crucial in aligning WSG work with the region's broader economic goals and supporting regional initiatives such as the Region of Waterloo's new economic development and talent strategy.



Work Steering Group meeting, January 2024.

## Proponents - Champions for Immigrant Employment

The Work Steering Group (WSG) convenes The Proponents - Champions for Immigrant Employment, a collaborative network of organizations committed to strengthening immigrant employment in Waterloo Region. The group includes the KW Multicultural Centre Connectors Program, the YMCA Mentorship Program, the Workforce Planning Board's Workplace & Immigrant Network Waterloo Region (WINWR), Kinbridge Community Association's Newcomer Employment Program, and Reception House Waterloo Region's Refugee Employment Program.

Together, the Proponents are building strong connections with local employers and helping immigrants achieve their employment goals. WSG creates opportunities for this group to build their connections and network with employers at industry and business events throughout the year.

Wherever employers are, the Proponents are there. These collaborations give these partners greater visibility in the business community, stronger support and employer engagement in their programs. Working with this group allows the Immigration Partnership to stay well informed about emerging challenges, ensuring a more effective approach to helping employers hire and retain immigrant talent.



Dave Thomas from KW Multicultural Centre and Marsha Schlueter from YMCA proudly showing their Proponents t-shirts.



"Navigating Conflict in a Diverse Workplace", an event in collaboration with the Workplace & Immigrant Network.

## A catalyst for new initiatives to improve labour market attachment

For the last five years, the Work Steering Group (WSG) has worked hard to develop and launch several initiatives addressing some of the biggest challenges shared by employers and immigrants alike: the lack of a coordinated place to employers and immigrant talent, and Canadian work experience.

Led by Julie Newman, WSG partners and staff conducted years of research, consultation, and partnership-building, and eventually developed a plan. For a one stop talent shop for employers and immigrants. The Workforce Planning Board Waterloo Wellington Dufferin stepped forward to host and launch the initiative, with seed funding through the Immigration Partnership's Immigrant Economic Wellbeing Fund and subsequently Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). The Workplace & Immigrant Network (WIN) launched in September 2023. WIN supports immigrants navigating the Canadian job market and helps employers attract and retain international talent, with significant success since its launch.

In 2024, WIN was presented as a best practice at the Pathways to Prosperity Conference in Vancouver, where Local Immigration Partnerships from around Canada had the opportunity to learn about its history and development. The Workforce Planning Board is planning for WIN's expansion, and WSG continues to provide guidance as its advisory group. WSG and WIN have partnered on several workshops for employers, and this collaboration will continue through 2025.

## Work Experience Program with the Waterloo Region Foodbank

In 2023, the Grand Valley Construction Association (GVCA) introduced the idea for the Work Experience Program to WSG due to identified skills gaps in the construction industry. WSG and GVCA worked together to develop a program concept and engage The Foodbank of Waterloo Region as the host. The program aims to help immigrants in entry-level or trades positions gain Canadian workplace experience. Participants will develop skills in areas such as shipping/receiving, forklift operation, and food handling, increasing their employability and providing valuable connections with employers.

The program will provide four-week paid work opportunities to immigrants, supported by the Region of Waterloo. It highlights the power of community collaboration. The concept was first discussed at a WSG meeting in 2024, where Economic Development staff from the Region of Waterloo expressed interest in supporting it. The program received funding of \$249,000, which was approved by the Regional Council later that year. IP staff then worked with the Foodbank and invited additional partners to move the idea forward. An advisory committee will guide the project, with IP staff representing the Region of Waterloo. The program will launch in 2025.

“

Workplace & Immigrant Network WR has supported over 450 jobseekers and 140 employers with personalized solutions including in-house training, industry and topic focused workshops and networking events in finance, health care and education. This has all been done with the support of 29 local partners. Employer engagement has been growing in finance, non-profits and health care, and small businesses are finding supports for their operations. WINWR is proud to commit itself to being a service navigator for jobseekers and employers to find their right fit support when it is not WINWR.

”

Charlene Hofbauer, Workforce Planning Board Waterloo, Wellington, and Dufferin

## Building connections between employers and immigrant talent

Data shows that personal networks lead to much hiring in Waterloo Region. The Work Steering Group (WSG) has therefore prioritized creating networking opportunities for employers and immigrants over the years.

Each year, WSG hosts the Global Skills Networking Event as part of the Kitchener-Waterloo Multicultural Centre's Global Skills Conference. Now in its 17th year, the event provides a valuable platform for employers and hundreds of internationally trained professionals to connect in person. In 2024, the event saw notable growth, with increased employer participation across diverse sectors and over 250 job seekers in attendance, building their professional networks. Employers reported strong engagement and identified potential hires among attendees. A total of 32 employers participated, showcasing their organizations at exhibit tables, promoting job opportunities, and connecting with candidates.



Global Skills Networking event, March 2024. Immigrant talent connected with Waterloo Region employers and explored job opportunities.

WSG has created many networking opportunities for employers and immigrant talent over the years, most recently partnering with the Greater KW Chamber of Commerce on their [Networking Breakfast Series](#), among other initiatives.

## Promoting the value and economic contribution of immigrants to employers

The Immigration Partnership (IP) has consistently promoted the value immigrants bring to the region's economic landscape. This has been achieved through strategic ad placements in Chamber of Commerce newsletters, directories, social media, and events. IP has actively showcased immigrant talent by collaborating with the Greater KW and Cambridge Chambers of Commerce, sponsoring webinars, community awards, and key events like [Business After 5](#). IP also supported initiatives such as the [Behind the Business podcast](#) and physician recruitment efforts, connecting immigrant professionals with local employers.

WSG staff and partners also contributed to the Greater KW Chamber's DEI committee, sharing ideas and resources, and helping to recruit new members. Through this committee, IP supported the survey of Chamber members to identify best practices and ideas for DEI initiatives.



The Immigration Partnership participated in the Cambridge Business Awards, celebrating local business excellence.

## Providing learning opportunities for employers

The Immigration Partnership (IP) has provided many learning opportunities for hundreds of employers, responding to their expressed needs in being able to better leverage the immigrant talent in the region, along with collaboration with others.

Starting during the pandemic, WSG worked with Local Immigration Partnerships across Southwestern Ontario to offer a series of virtual employer learning workshops. Led by Immploy, based in London, ON, these workshops aimed to help employers across the region build capacity for hiring and retaining immigrants. In 2023, IP and Immploy also hosted a successful in-person workshop for up to 90 employers in Waterloo on “Using Storytelling to Attract Immigrant Talent.”

WSG has also co-hosted numerous employer learning events with local partners including the Workplace Immigrant Network and other members of the Proponents Group, which have provided valuable insights and skills for regional employers as they attract and retain immigrant talent.

## A playbook for recruiting, hiring and retaining immigrant talent

WSG launched the [Waterloo Region Employer Playbook](#), developed in partnership with World Education Services (WES) in early 2023. The Playbook emerged during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic when the need for creative solutions to support immigrant talent became more urgent. In conversation with WES, Waterloo Region was selected as a site to launch this new digital tool, along with Moncton, NB, and Durham Region. The Playbook supports employers in the recruitment, hiring, and retention of immigrant talent.

Through research, employer outreach, and community consultations, the playbook was developed with input from WES, WSG partners and the local community. The Playbook has been shared with regional employers at in-person events. In 2024, WES and WSG launched a campaign to build awareness of the Playbook, continuing to promote the resource to employers throughout the region. This resource is regularly updated by WES, and WSG continues to provide guidance as it evolves, helping bridge the gap between employers and immigrant talent. WES, Immigration Partnership staff and partners have presented the Playbook, its partnership, and development process as a leading practice at several conferences across Canada in in the United States.

“

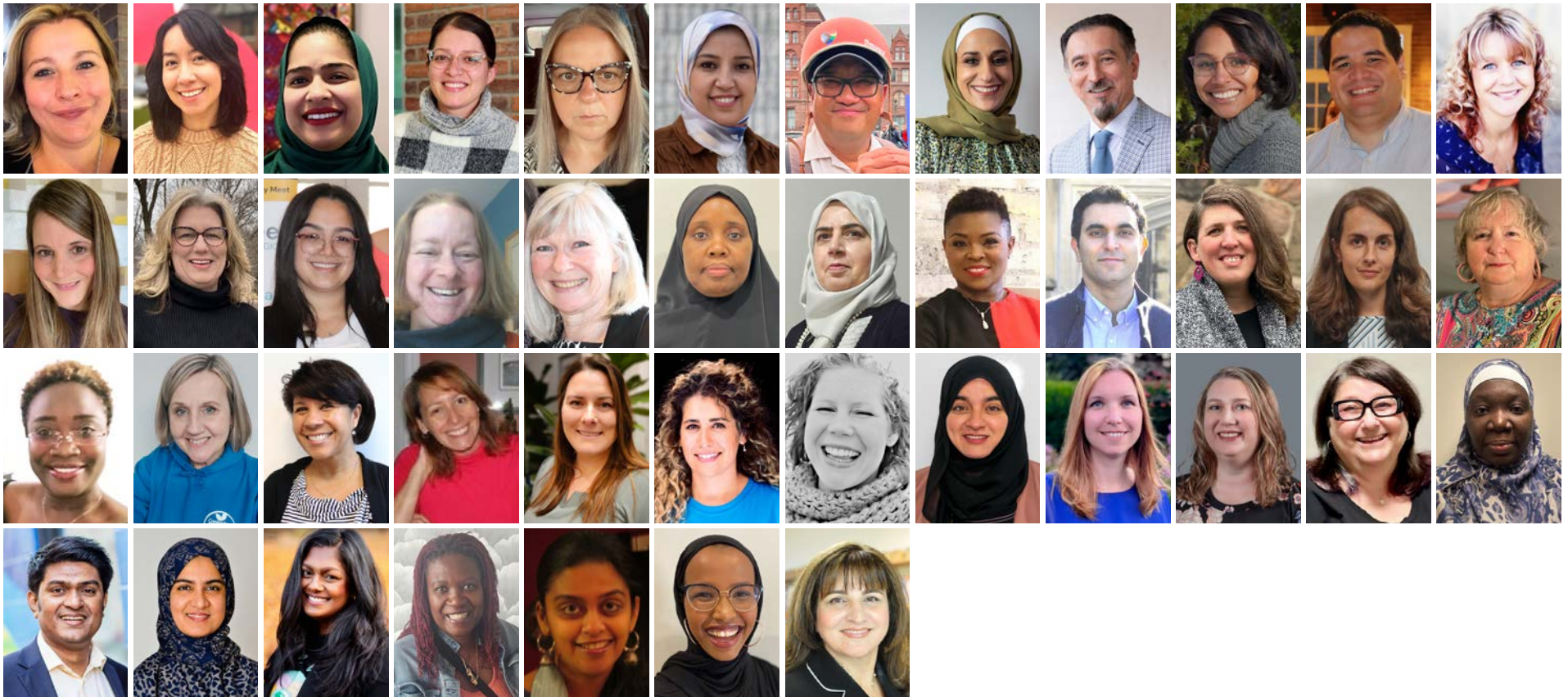
It is extremely important to be prepared and to get connected to resources which have access to immigrant and refugee talent. The Waterloo Region Employer Playbook is a useful tool that can assist with that.

”

Mehrzad (Merz) Salkhordeh,  
CEO, dB Noise Reduction

# Belong Steering Group

The Belong Steering Group (BSG) works together to unleash the vibrant and diverse community contributions of immigrants by addressing long-term challenges to developing a strong sense of belonging in Waterloo Region.



Not pictured above: Jennifer Sullivan



## A message from Shannon Markle, Settle Steering Group Chair

In the past five years the Belong Steering Group (BSG) has continued to focus on initiatives that promote public education and social inclusion in our community. Through projects like the Waterloo Regional Migration Film Festival, Multicultural Connections, and the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination we bring together not-for-profit organizations, grass roots ethno-cultural groups and community members, and work collectively to create a community that is warm and welcoming. In 2023 we were excited to add Welcoming Week as a regional wide community initiative, featuring an exciting roster of events that express welcome and belonging to our new neighbours. With a thriving membership of over 30 passionate and committed member organizations, the BSG brings together folks that make our region stronger, kinder and more successful for all.

## Members

Shannon Markle (Chair), Cambridge Public Libraries  
 Paulina Rodriguez (Co-Vice Chair), City of Waterloo  
 Zohra Wali (Co-Vice Chair), City of Cambridge  
 Ana Lagos and Brittney Emslie, KW Multicultural Centre  
 Abby Cooper, Hearts Open for Everyone  
 Ali Aminaei Chatroudi, Jennifer Sullivan, Marina Dotzert and Mary Dowhaniuk, City of Kitchener  
 Alex Allen, Hospice WR  
 Anna Schwarz, Babur Mawladin and Pari Karem, Reception House Waterloo Region  
 Aoussaf Arrout and Marwa Gebeil, Kinbridge Community Centre  
 Arcy Canumay, Sustainable WR Travel Wise  
 Asma AlWahsh, Canadian Arab Women's Association  
 Cameron Tai, Daniela Montoya and Emily Vincent, Volunteer WR  
 Cheryl Faria, Nikolett Agoston and Sheryl Mascoll, Region of Waterloo Children's Services  
 Cheryl Grove, Julia Nosova and Umi Mohammed, Region of Waterloo  
 Corie Schweertman, Conestoga College  
 Emily Jaarsma, Greenway-Chaplin Community Centre  
 Fadhilah Balogun, CCORIC member, African Women Alliance of Waterloo Region  
 Fauzia Wafai, Kokui Appiah and Mifrah Abid, Community members  
 Fidelia Ukueje, Nigerians in the Region of Waterloo (NIROW) and Region of Waterloo  
 Julia Gingrich, Waterloo Public Libraries  
 Kathilee Porter, ELLA  
 Lisa Leachman, Cambridge Food Bank  
 Lisset Jacinto, YMCA of Three Rivers – Cambridge  
 Marie-Pierre Daoust, Conseil Scolaire Catholique Mon Avenir  
 Ravit Lechter, Waterloo Region Jewish Community Council  
 Rihanat El-Alawa, Waterloo Region District School Board  
 Saifullah Muhammad, Rohingya Centre  
 Sarah Shafiq, Coalition of Muslim Women Kitchener - Waterloo  
 Teena Paul, Camino Wellbeing + Mental Health

## 2020-25 Alumni

Chris Hussey, Helen Loftin, Katy Boose, Heather Montgomery and Aracy Selvakamur, Reception House • Hoda Ghonim, SHORE Centre • Jonathan Moyer and Nazy Pazoki Zadeh, House of Friendship • Julie Sudds, Jaskirat Gill and Paige Monck-Whipp, Waterloo Region Police Service • Lee Ann Wetzel, Muriel Vandepol, Fauzia Baig Kristen Bustamante and Sophia Stanberry, Region of Waterloo • Marina Dotzert and Marla Pender, City of Kitchener • Melissa Strachan, Aisha Wovenu and Jessica Thier, Carizon • Sue Weare, Vanessa Lopak, Olga Vigil Letang and Yesenia Torres, City of Cambridge • Chaitali Maybhate, Cambridge Self-Help Food Bank • Jim Bowman, Niran Akintunde and Pam Albrecht, City of Waterloo • Katie Hill, Sustainable Waterloo Region • Sarah Shafiq and Brice Balmer, Interfaith Grand River • Aleksandra Petrovic and Suzan Koujan, Canadian Arab Women's Association • Kelly Kipfer, Waterloo Public Libraries • Stephen Lavigne, KW Art Gallery • Diane Boston, Volunteer WR • Amy Slack, Cambridge Food Bank • Alam Zafor, Rohingya Centre • Emily Gray, Camino Wellbeing + Mental Health • Heather Van Patter and Renu Bhandari, Focus for Ethnic Women • Gabrielle Laurin, Conseil Scolaire Viamonde • Allie Fallis, Region of Waterloo Libraries • Ajirioghene Evi-Cobbinah, Kind Minds Family Wellness

## How we built community

### Supporting Municipalities and Public Sector Partners to Strengthen Immigrant Welcoming, Inclusion, and Engagement

Over the past five years, the Belong Steering Group (BSG) has worked closely with municipal and other public sector partners to enhance immigrant welcoming, inclusion, and engagement. Through resource sharing, networking, and fostering key connections, BSG has contributed to significant improvements in service delivery and outreach. Efforts have included the expansion of language interpretation services in municipal settings and targeted initiatives that engage diverse cultural communities, such as collaboration with Public Health to reach new immigrant groups.

In recent years, BSG has continued to work with and support area municipalities in planning and hosting events aimed at providing newcomers with vital resources and information, such as health and wellness initiatives. Ongoing meetings in regional communities have reinforced local relationships, ensuring continued collaboration and progress in fostering a sense of belonging and inclusion for immigrants and refugees.

### Advancing Truth and Reconciliation

As part of its commitment to truth and reconciliation, the Immigration Partnership has provided learning opportunities for staff and partners to deepen understanding of Indigenous history, perspectives, and practices. A customized Indigenous Training program, developed by local Indigenous leaders, incorporated Indigenous pedagogy and personal reflection.

Participants explored foundational information about Indigenous history, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action, and the connections and intersections between the experiences of Indigenous Peoples and newcomer communities. The Immigration Partnership continues to incorporate Indigenous learning components in its events and initiatives, reinforcing its commitment to education, bridging knowledge gaps and action in support of Truth and Reconciliation.

## Building public support for immigration, addressing racism and fostering belonging

Each year, many of the BSGs initiatives focus on public engagement to build support for immigration, address racism and foster community belonging for all in Waterloo Region. BSG also led the way towards the 2020 adoption of the [Immigration Partnership's Anti-Racism Commitment](#), which provides a foundation for all of the Partnership's work.

### March 21: The International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination

Led by BSG, the Immigration Partnership commemorates this important day annually, as a reminder of our collective responsibility to dismantle barriers and promote inclusion. Over the years, BSG has hosted annual events providing a platform for community-wide discussions and learning to advance racial equity. In 2024, this event focused on empowering organizations in Waterloo Region to create safe, inclusive workplaces free of racism and oppression. Dozens of participants explored strategies for dismantling systemic barriers and fostering equitable workplaces. The Centre for Community-Based Research also delivered an insightful presentation on digital equity and equity in the settlement sector. Through these events, BSG creates connections and amplifies local leadership to work toward a Waterloo Region where every individual feels valued, included, and truly belongs.



Panel discussion on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, held on March 21.

## #RacialEquityWRCampaign

BSG launched its #RacialEquityWR campaign in 2021 to encourage regional accountability for addressing racism. It began as a social media campaign and morphed into a lawn sign campaign, involving the whole community with residents sharing their support for racial equity. Since that time, BSG has hosted a variety of events, workshops, and panel discussions, engaging hundreds of community members in important conversations to advance racial equity on topics ranging from lived experiences of discrimination, anti-racist action, to strategies for supporting youth equity. Through this work, BSG curated anti-racism learning resources for partners and residents, which are widely available and accessed. This is one of the many ways BSG and IP continues to act against all kinds of hate.

## Waterloo Region Migration Film Festival

Since 2017, the Immigration Partnership, led by the BSG, and many partner organizations host the Waterloo Region Migration Film Festival (WRMFF). The Film Festival is a public engagement and education initiative, which invites residents to learn about different experiences of migration and have important conversations about migration, belonging and community cohesion. Each year, WRMFF showcases new films showing the challenges and opportunities of migration. It celebrates the contributions migrants make to their new communities and enhances understanding of the barriers newcomers overcome as they settle into our region. Storytelling is one of the most effective ways to address societal issues, and the WRMFF leverages different stories to bring attention to critical community matters and promote meaningful dialogue, mutual understanding and relatedness.

## Waterloo Region Migration Film Festival (2020-2024)

Total Films Showcased: **37**

Total Screenings: **70**

Total Participants: **+1,500**

Collaborating Partners: **+25**

## About the image and artist behind the campaign

The #RacialEquityWR campaign image, All Colours Are Beautiful, was created by the local Chilean-Canadian artist Pamela Rojas.



Pamela is also the artist behind the image and unique art pieces presented to recipients of the Newcomer Landlord Award.



Staff from the Ken Seiling Museum opening the wrap-up event of the Waterloo Region Migration Film Festival.



A Romanian Cultural Centre representative at the Multicultural Connections event showcasing the culture through traditional dress and artwork.

## Building Multicultural Capacity and Connections

Through a series of events and discussion over the last five years, BSG worked to strengthen ties to ethno-cultural leaders and groups in Waterloo Region and create opportunities to enhance their capacity for community leadership and change. Through a series of interactive, virtual roundtable discussions, the BSG created spaces for dialogue, learning, and connection among ethnocultural communities. Hundreds of participants shared knowledge and experience with each other to build capacity for reducing social isolation, grant writing, intercultural communication, and learning Indigenous perspectives. Collaboration with municipal and community partners made these events stronger and fostered capacity-building among local ethno-cultural leaders.

Since 2022, Multicultural Connections has been an annual event hosted in partnership with the KW Multicultural Centre, bringing together ethnocultural groups, immigrants, refugees, and community organizations to foster inclusion and social connectedness in Waterloo Region. The 2024 event, **Embracing Diversity: Narratives of Belonging**, centred ethnocultural organizations and their amazing community building efforts, Indigenous learning, a Human Library, and youth-led empowerment activities.

## Welcoming Week

Successful integration is a two-way street: the more welcoming communities are, the more newcomers feel at home and contribute locally. Welcoming Week is an international initiative taking place annually in September to recognize and celebrate the people, places, and values that help everyone feel welcome and foster a sense of belonging in their community, no matter where they come from. It also highlights the important work of immigrant settlement organizations, raising awareness about their work and the significant role they play in our communities.

BSG introduced Welcoming Week celebrations in Waterloo Region in 2022, and since then, regional partners have held a steadily increasing number of events to celebrate and build community welcoming. These events have included citizenship ceremonies, community picnics, cultural festivals, informational sessions, educational opportunities and more.



New Canadians taking the Oath of Citizenship at a Citizenship Ceremony hosted in collaboration with the City of Waterloo during Welcoming Week in September 2024.

## Welcome Week at a glance

2022 **15** events **14** partners

2023 **18** events **17** partners

2024 **20** events **15** partners

Around **600** participants annually.

## About Citizenship Ceremonies

During Welcoming Week 2024, Immigration Partnership and the City of Waterloo hosted a Citizenship Ceremony on behalf of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). We were honored to host the Honourable Immigration Minister Marc Miller, as well as regional Mayors, MPs, and Councillors to welcome the region's newest citizens. BSG partners have hosted numerous citizenship ceremonies over the years, including the Ken Seiling Museum (2023), Idea Exchange, and the City of Waterloo (2024). These Citizenship Ceremonies are a special moment of inclusion, reflecting the growing sense of belonging in our community and the significance of becoming Canadian.

## Forward Together: Activating Change, Amplifying Belonging Conference, November 2024

In 2024, BSG took a big step forward in its work to build belonging for all in Waterloo Region with the Forward Together Conference, focused on enhancing community well-being and belonging through collaborative action. Hosted in partnership with the Children and Youth Planning Table of Waterloo Region, the Community Safety and Wellbeing Plan, and the Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership, this inspiring event brought together over 240 diverse community members, leaders, experts, and youth over two days. Exceptional keynote speakers, breakout workshops, and panel discussions explored topics related to Truth and Reconciliation, combatting hate, building belonging without othering, belonging in polarizing times, building belonging at work, cultural community power, language inclusion, intimate partner violence, social resilience and much more. The conference discussions provided a platform for sharing insights, strengthening relationships, and driving collective action. It contributed to ongoing local Truth and Reconciliation efforts, empowering participants to take meaningful steps toward a more inclusive and equitable community.

[Forward Together: Symposium focuses on improving the wellbeing of community - Region of Waterloo](#)



Fauzia Baig and Tara Bedard presenting at the “Forward Together: Activating Change, Amplifying Belonging” conference.

“

We’re excited that the Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership and Community Safety and Wellbeing Plan are coming together with us for this year’s annual conference. Time and time again through our work at the CYPT, we’ve seen that we’re stronger as a collective. This intergenerational event will help unite us to take actions that prioritize the well-being of our communities, and in particular, all children and youth.”

Alison Pearson, Manager of the Children and Youth Planning Table of Waterloo Region

”

## 2024 Evaluation of Immigration Partnership's ongoing work, impact and future focus

Findings from the [IP Partner Survey](#) conducted in October 2024 – **44 respondents**.

### Partners continue to feel the Immigration Partnership (IP) is having a positive impact in Waterloo Region (WR):

- 86%** of respondents felt that IP is focused on the community's critical issues
- 71%** of respondents felt that IP is a catalyst for effective changes
- 67%** of respondents felt that overall, we are achieving the IP Mission
- 36%** of respondents felt that WR has become more welcoming of immigrants
- 57%** of respondents felt that across our community, immigration and engaging/supporting immigrants is increasingly seen as a priority in planning and implementing policies, services and systems.

### Partners believe the most significant impacts of the Immigration Partnership for them or their organization are:

- 65%** Increased collaboration and more effective referrals
- 38%** Greater understanding of community needs and research
- 35%** Better overall newcomer support in Waterloo Region
- 23%** Stronger programming and services for newcomers
- 23%** Effective public events
- 15%** More support for funding applications
- 4%** Collective advocacy
- 4%** Opportunities for personal growth

### In the future, partners want the Immigration Partnership to focus on:

-  Education and skill development
-  Advocacy for policy and investment changes related to immigration, housing, health care, and infrastructure
-  Housing
-  Helping the community appreciate the value and necessity of immigrants to our region
-  Employment outcomes and support
-  Integration / coordination of services
-  Health and wellness of newcomers
-  Language services

## Reflecting on 2024, what was the most impactful outcome of our work through the Immigration Partnership?



Reflections on the impact we've made together

Thank you to our funders and community partners

# Thank you to our funders and partners

## Funders:



## Partners:





# IMMIGRATION PARTNERSHIP

WATERLOO REGION

Funded by:



Immigration, Refugees  
and Citizenship Canada

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Join us in building community through immigration

@ImmigrationWR   

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