



Background

Since 2008, there have been numerous changes to citizenship and immigration policy which impact access to services and safety for immigrants in Canada. Policy changes include: restrictions on refugee determination and access to health care; changes to family sponsorship for parents, grandparents and spouses; an increase in temporary foreign workers, and an increase in the detention and deportation of immigrants who have a precarious migratory status.

Considering this dynamic political environment, the Migrant Mothers Project has been organizing half-day community forums across Ontario, to better understand how community based organizations and advocacy groups in different regions of the province are working with immigrants.

In this document we provide a summary of the community forum that took place in Kitchener-Waterloo (KW) on February 13, 2013 where 23 people engaged in dialogue about the challenges service providers face when supporting immigrants and recommendations for improving service delivery. Forum attendees included educators, front-line workers, management and volunteers who work in the areas of immigration and refugee settlement, immigration law, child protection/children's aid, health care services, adult education, anti-violence against women services, community development and language assistance.

The forum agenda included:

- A legal panel on immigration policy presented by Rupaleem Bhuyan (University of Toronto), Joanna Hayes (METRAC Legal Information Coordinator), and Jennifer Roggemann (Immigration Lawyer, Kitchener-Waterloo).
- A community panel included presentations by Ana Luz Martinez (Director, Settlement Programs, Kitchener-Waterloo Multicultural Centre) and Eunice Valenzuela (Executive Director of the Mennonite Coalition for Refugee Support).
- A facilitated discussion explored the following questions:
 - 1) How have recent & proposed changes to immigration policy shaped your work?
 - 2) How are you currently working with women with precarious status? What are your top priorities/concerns at this time?
 - 3) What challenges are there for frontline workers in supporting immigrants with precarious status?

Discussion Themes

While many topics emerged at the KW Forum, the forum focused on immigration consequences due to involvement in the criminal justice system, confusion with regard to health benefits for refugees under the new regulations, and specific challenges when working with international students. Some key themes that arose in the KW forum include:

1. Immigration Consequences & the Threat of Deportation

Forum participants shared several examples where an individual faced immigration consequences (i.e. they lost status or were detained/deported) as a result of seeking services or getting involved with the criminal justice system. For example, forum attendees noted cases where any involvement in the criminal justice system could trigger deportation proceedings, even if the individual was not found guilty of a criminal offense, or if the offense was a minor infraction.

Immigration consequences included:

- Being reported to immigration when perceived to be speaking English poorly
- Receiving a deportation order from Canada Border Service Agency after being charged with or being convicted of a “serious”
- Losing status after sponsor (e.g. spouse/partner) is charged with a criminal offense
- Losing status as an international student after under-performing in university course work;
- Losing status as a temporary foreign worker, after taking a leave of absence due to mental health issues and/or stress;

Forum attendees noted that deportation affects a circle of people in the deported person’s life including the sponsored spouse or partner/, children, and other family members. In cases of partner violence, the threat of deportation can put women and children at risk of further violence if seeking help from the police is considered to be too risky (in terms of immigration consequences), or when deportation forces a woman and her children to return to the country where their abuser resides.

2. Access to Education and Employment

Forum attendees expressed concern that people with precarious status have difficulty accessing education as well as employment. Forum attendees provided examples of international students who must navigate a complex network of visas and visa requirements, often without sufficient information and preparation. Participants speculated that international students may not be properly informed by their advisors and there may be cultural differences with regard to managing finances in the family. Many international students work in order to send money to their families back home, but find that they are not allowed to work immediately (or at all), and the cost of studying is much higher than expected. Taking on employment outside what is authorized by the international student visa, can jeopardize one’s status in Canada.

Elementary and secondary schools in the region also vary if and how they register students who have a temporary status or are non-status. Some schools block registration to families with precarious status entirely, leaving children without access to education. Participants shared that they have been unsuccessful thus far in advocating for children’s access to school.

3. Structural and Community Barriers to Services Delivery

Forum attendees discussed the ability to form a relationship of trust with im/migrants as an important factor in providing services. Many factors have an impact on trust, such as immigration status, mobility, health and mental health, and individual and organizational practices. Trust is important for establishing the first contact between services and individuals with precarious status, and on an ongoing basis as services are provided. Some strategies for increasing trust included: self-disclosure (even if very limited) from the service provider, establishing services at different times and strategic locations (i.e. the community library), and working in collaboration with other service providers who have established trust within immigrant communities.

Forum attendees noted that structural barriers within and between community based organizations may contribute to ineffective partnerships; these include financial constraints of services and individuals with precarious status and limited opportunity to receive training on new immigration policies.

Excerpt from Kitchener-Waterloo Community Forum

“Recently I was working with a woman who needed a doctor. I thought, I’ll send her to the community health centre, they will be able to help her, great, and they sent her back. So I sent her to (a drop-in health program for homeless people) and they said, sorry, she’s not homeless. And we’re all here right now, I’ll share this with you, I went to each and every service in this community and everyone turned her away for a different reason. We have to be able to do better.” (Refugee Settlement Worker)

4. Confusion and Misinformation of Immigration Policies

Participants also noted that when calling Citizenship and Immigration Canada for information related to a specific case, it is necessary to call multiple times and each call may yield a different answer. Forum attendees expressed concerns that misunderstanding a rule (i.e. new regulations for conditional sponsorship for spouses) could lead to deportation, either directly or through a missed opportunity to advocate for an individual. There was also concern that even an informational call could inadvertently put their clients at risk for deportation.

New regulations for Interim Federal Health for refugees represented one area where confusion and misinformation is impacting access to health care. Forum attendees discussed the challenge of memorizing numerous rules and regulations and the difficulty of keeping up to date with policy changes in an environment where program funding and resources for staff training have been cut. For instance, forum attendees were unsure how to interpret the complicated rules for accessing to healthcare, especially when different health clinics in the region have different eligibility criteria (i.e. uninsured, homeless, etc.).

5. Community Strengths in Kitchener-Waterloo

Forum attendees employed a community lens to explore barriers and challenges related to immigration policy changes. Many forum attendees noted that the KW community forum included both new and familiar faces; some folks worked closely with one another while others were meeting for the first time. Forum attendees talked about the need to collaborate more, now that funding cuts and cuts to immigrant and refugee benefits could create more barriers to accessing services. To illustrate, one refugee settlement worker made an appeal to forum attendees to work together to address the confusion over health care coverage and to channel existing resources in the community to support refugee families who are denied health care coverage.

6. Conclusion

Viewing national immigration policies through a local lens can have the effect of making immigration a local issue and humanizing im/migrants. The discussion of specific case examples functioned in a similar way to illustrate the connections between individual suffering, immigration policy, and approaches to service delivery.

At this stage, participants noted there is still much to learn about the changes in immigration policy and how they are impacting immigrants' access to education, employment, health care, and social services. This forum raised many questions with regard to the relationship between the criminal justice system and Canada Border Service Agency, what resources are available in the community that can meet the needs of immigrants and refugees, and how organizations can better coordinate their work with immigrants. The complex interplay between cuts in public spending further reduce the capacity of organizations to serve immigrants with precarious status.

7. Recommendations for Continued Collaboration and Coordination

- Forum attendees stated there is a need for more collaboration and coordination among programs and services that work with immigrants. Some attendees had recently attended a presentation by Maytree Foundation. However, there is a need for more forums that address specific issues related to social services, housing and legal assistance.
- The cuts to legal aid pose a significant challenge there is an ongoing need to secure legal representation for immigrants and refugees. Community organizations are bracing themselves for additional funding cuts and called for policy advocacy to secure legal aid.
- Service providers remain confused about who is eligible for publically funded health care. There is a need for streamlined information that explains what benefits people are entitled to, depending on their immigration status and circumstances. This includes, information on the immigration consequences and vulnerability to losing status for people with different forms of precarious status.

The Migrant Mothers Project is also hosting forums in Windsor, Niagara, and Ottawa. For more information about our community forums please contact Project Coordinator, Bethany Osborne at migrantmothersproject@gmail.com

You can also visit us at www.migrantmothersproject.com