



Background

In this document we provide a summary of the community forum that took place in the Niagara Region on May 9, 2013 where 28 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), Silmi Abdullah & Tamar Witelson (Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children –METRAC), and Jennifer Pothier (ED, Niagara North Community Legal Assistance).
- A community panel included presentations by Jocy Tomas and Terry Olayta (First Ontario Alliance of Caregivers Canada), Alexis Barrillas (United Food and Agricultural Workers) and Daiva Kelertas (Settlement Counselor at Fort Erie Multicultural Centre).
- 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 Niagara Region Forum, the forum focused on legal training on immigration, violence against immigrant women, the live-in caregiver program and marginalization of Temporary Foreign Workers (TFW). The forum also focused on creating solutions in order to support individuals with precarious status that include increase in networking, face-to-face training and mitigating gaps in knowledge due to frequent policy changes.

1. Legal Immigration Knowledge

The lack of immigration knowledge or immigrant rights contributes to confusion amongst service providers and individuals who have precarious status. This has been a consistent theme for each of the community forums we have held in the Kitchener/Waterloo Region, Windsor, and the Niagara region. Attendees in Niagara focused on cases where landlords take advantage of international students or temporary immigrants who do not fully understand their rights as tenants. In one case, an international student was informed of possible removal from Canada, should they not pay for rent. In addition, attendees in Niagara noted confusion amongst service providers with regard to who is eligible for social assistance depending on their status. Overall, forum attendees expressed concern that gaps in legal information are creating confusion that is detrimental for immigrants and impedes service providers' capacity to support immigrants' rights.

2. Violence Against Immigrant Women

During the presentation by METRAC on the new conditional permanent residence for sponsored spouses, Niagara forum attendees raised concerns regarding the extent of the paperwork that is required for individuals who seek an exemption from the two year conditional status due to abuse (E.g. pictures, police reports). Forum attendees also discussed how the new regulation may compromise the safety of women should their partners learn that they have applied for such an exemption from Citizenship and Immigration Canada. It was suggested that because the changes to sponsorship are relatively new, there is a need to collect information on how these changes are impacting newcomers who are given conditional status.

3. Live-in-caregivers and Temporary Foreign Workers

Our community panel included a presentation by Jocy Tomas and Terry Olayta from The First Ontario Alliance of Caregivers Canada, who are grassroots advocates for live-in-caregivers. They have been successful in engaging many conversations with community members and politicians in attempts to bring awareness to exploitation that occurs in this sector. Although they are not federally funded, and have limited resources, they have been effective in lobbying Minister Kenney on issues facing live-in-caregivers. They have been attempting to bring awareness of the social and health costs that live-in-caregivers bear, in the temporary foreign worker program. In one example, they shared how a live-in-caregiver, who fell ill with cancer, was unable to work and struggled to care for herself. Her temporary foreign work permit had lapsed due to her illness and this also left her without health insurance. One of Jocy and Terry's strategies is to advocate for live-in-caregiving to be classified as "high-skilled" work, as many international caregivers have undergraduate and graduate education and are required to perform skilled tasks when caring for children, the elderly or people with disabilities.

Alexes Barrillas from the United Food and Agricultural Workers shared that there has been an increase in Temporary Foreign Workers (TFW), that now surpass Permanent Residents accepted into Canada. This increase has resulted in more exploitation for this population, especially for women. Although there are less female TFW, these women are nevertheless exposed to greater levels of violence and exploitation. Many women are sexually abused and there have been cases of confinement. As a result of these exploitations, there are organizations that have created committees that work strictly with women and children, as this population tends to be the most vulnerable.

4. Immigration in the Niagara Region

Despite the reported 70% decline in-land refugee applications across Canada since January 2013, forum attendees noted that there has been an increase in refugees entering Canada at the Niagara border from last year. With an increase in refugees arriving in the Niagara region, it was noted that providing refugees with a place to stay has been challenging. In particular, there is a range in shelter services that are available in communities in the region. It was suggested that some communities have no emergency shelters and have a history of being unwelcoming to people who are homeless (e.g. Niagara Falls), while other communities that do have family shelters (e.g. Welland) are not known to refugees who are entering Canada. There was some discussion of forum attendees' frustration that refugees entering Canada are likely to head to Toronto (which is more well-known to immigrants), but where shelters and support services are already full and often inadequate spaces for families seeking refuge.

Excerpt from Kitchener-Waterloo Community Forum

"We don't have any conferences anymore. We don't have any more training's. It used to be that we kept in touch, had meeting...but *now* it's really essential. If we don't do that, we're going to die. I've been doing this for 7 years but I feel like I just started"

-Niagara Region Forum Attendee,

5. Insufficient Training leading to Knowledge Gap

A common theme in all Ontario Forums has been a concern for the rapid policy changes and funding cut-backs. People from across Ontario have spoken about the knowledge gap that has been created with respect to immigration and refugee policy changes. Forum attendees also note the need to strategize with existing organizations to create stronger networks. This in turn will help community member's access services, especially those with precarious immigration status. Additionally, further workshops and trainings are essential so that everyone working with this population has access to current and up to date information.

6. Recommendations for Continued Collaboration and Coordination

- Forum attendees wish to create stronger networks in order to best support their clients. Understanding how each organization supports individuals with precarious status will allow them to provide accurate and necessary referrals to their clients. This will also allow for service providers and organizations to understand where the gaps in services exist.
- Attendees noted that gaps in services include: enhancing organizations hours of operation, improving interpretation services and reducing fees, enhancing ESL training, creating new policies in school system for students with precarious status.
- Having racially diverse service providers in organizations, and not limited to multicultural centers, is essential. Attendees highlighted the importance of having clients meet with staff of their own ethnicity and/or race and how this connection is often immeasurable.
- Creating stronger community awareness of the lived experiences of immigrants, refugees and individuals with precarious status. Changing the stigma and rhetoric will allow for stronger community awareness and subsequent support from the community.
- Despite budget cuts, organization must strategize how to continue providing trainings for service providers in order to ensure that accurate and up to date information is being distributed.

- Attendees noted the importance of face-to-face training, in order to continue networking with one another.
- Attendees wish for changes in government policies to be clearer and more accessible to service providers. It also appears that gaps in knowledge are occurring due to vague and often inaccurate information on behalf of government officials. Creating an improved and more efficient system for service providers to access information would be ideal.

7. In Conclusion

Attendees at the Niagara Region Forum reinforced a need for accessible, up to date and accurate policy information. Attendees were concerned that when information about recent policy changes are not reaching service providers, this subsequently translates to information not reaching their clients. Attendees noted that there is a need to begin networking with larger organizations within the larger Niagara region in order to work together to support marginalized community members. The Niagara Region Forum provided a space for service providers to connect with one another, which due to budget cuts, had not occurred in some time. The forum created the opportunity for individuals to strategize what their next steps should be in order to continue towards improving access to services for individuals with precarious immigration status.

The Migrant Mothers Project will resume hosting community forums beginning in the Fall of 2013 in Ottawa, Montreal, and Vancouver. 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