WORKING WITH VULNERABLE POPULATIONS: BEST PRACTICES, INNOVATION AND IMPACT

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This paper will share experiences of Government assisted refugees (GAR) who access the Client Support Services (CSS) program in Ontario, and will focus on best practices and outcomes from the CSS case management model for GARs and an overview of the regional collaborative coordination model; a snapshot of GAR youth experience through youth voice; and results from the CSS Impact Evaluation study.

In 2013 the Canadian government set targets to resettle approximately 13,500 refugees from abroad through three main categories: Privately Sponsored Refugees (6,300), Government Assisted Refugees (7,100) and Visa office Referred (200) (CIC, 2013). These refugee groups are resettled in provinces across Canada. Government assisted refugees are a unique group within the broader category of refugees, as they receive financial support through the Resettlement Assistance Program from the Canadian government and social support from the local settlement sector in their communities of resettlement.

Ontario continues to receive the highest number of Government assisted refugees (GARs) that are resettled to Canada, averaging about 2, 000 people each year since 2007. GARs are selected for resettlement to Canada overseas based on need for protection identified by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and Canadian Visa offices. The demographics of the GAR population in Ontario over the past few years reflected Canada's commitment to resettling specific groups of refugee populations. The current countries of origin for the GAR population in Ontario are Iraq, Iran, Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Bhutan, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Uganda, Eritrea and Myanmar. As is typically found in newcomer populations that are not selected through the Economic streams of the Canadian immigration system, GARs have reportedly low levels of language proficiency in both official languages: 51% identifying no English proficiency, and 90% with no French proficiency (CSS, 2013). Education prior to arrival in Canada remains limited and 38% of GARs over 18 years of age that indicate having achieved up to grade 11, while 22% have graduated high school (CSS, 2013). A significant number identify as having no education (22%). An increased number of GARs are arriving having attended or completed post-secondary education (19%) (CSS, 2013). The number of refugees migrating from refugee camps (18%) has dropped from previous years, and the majority of GARs are being resettled from urban areas (65%) in countries of asylum (CSS, 2013). Children and youth, aged 0-24, constitute over 50% of the GAR population last year in Ontario (CSS, 2013).

Upon arrival a large proportion of needs identified by GAR clients are related to health and medical needs, and in many cases these needs require immediate and ongoing support. Many of the GARs come from protracted refugee situations in countries of asylum that may reflect non-industrialized and non-Western environments, and as a result may lack the experience to navigate within Canadian systems including the areas of health, education and social services. All of these factors can contribute to various barriers that are faced by the refugee population and that impede their successful integration into their new communities.

In Canada, Government assisted refugees (GARs) received income support through the Resettlement Assistance Program, which provides means for basic needs in Canada on a monthly basis for the GARs' first 12 months in Canada. The first two weeks after arrival, GARs are whisked through the overwhelming process of initial orientation, life skills, finding permanent housing and piles of paperwork, from opening a bank account to registering children in school. Unique to Ontario, once permanent housing has been achieved, GARs are seamlessly referred to the Client Support Services (CSS) program. CSS provides essential supports for a more positive settlement experience in Canada and currently this program serves 100% of GARs destined to Ontario communities.

Beginning as a pilot in 2006, the CSS program has evolved into an innovative coordinated service delivery model that thrives on a strengths-based and client centered case management approach while building the capacity of the resettlement communities to better welcome and serve diverse refugee needs. Using a standardized model and mobile case workers, social support is monitored and tracked through: an initial needs assessment; regular check-ins; an exit interview; and a range of supports such as accompaniment to medical appointments and home visits. CSS operates in the six resettlement communities across Southern Ontario in both large and small urban centers: Toronto, COSTI Immigrant Services; Ottawa, Catholic Centre for Immigrants; London, Cross-Cultural Learner Center; Kitchener, Reception House Kitchener/Waterloo Region; Hamilton, Wesley Urban Ministries; and Windsor, Multicultural Council of Windsor/Essex County. The CSS program is coordinated by the YMCA of Greater Toronto, which provides support and competency development while implementing program standards through facilitation of knowledge sharing between program sites.

The Client Support Services (CSS) model fosters partnership development and maintenance within the settlement sector on several levels, which in turn cultivates successful integration for the Government assisted refugee (GAR) population in Ontario. The regional program's success has been achieved through the core partnership between the six CSS delivery agencies and YMCA of Greater Toronto as the coordinator. Each CSS operation site works hard to initiate and strengthen local partnerships within the settlement sector and more broadly with other human services that GAR clients will access. The partnerships between CSS case workers and GAR clients is an ongoing and an essential function of the CSS program, as this relationship develops over time and works to give the client choice as they obtain the tools, knowledge and independence to navigate within the Canadian systems. However, there is always room to further enhance partnerships and improve GAR integration experiences.

As noted, the GAR youth population (13-24 years old) make-up on average one third of GARs in Ontario, yearly since 2007 (Hynie, 2014). This substantial group of GARs face a myriad of challenges and barriers similar to other newcomer populations such as: linguistic barriers, dealing with challenges of being in a new cultural environment, intergenerational conflict, systemic barriers to employment and risk of systemic discrimination (Anisef & Kilbride, n.d; Shakya et al, 2010), challenges navigating and understanding available settlement and youth services (Anisef, 2007), loneliness, isolation, social exclusion (Beiser, 1999), fulfilling Ontario Ministry of Education community service volunteer requirements for high school graduation (Chaung 2010), and lack of recognition of prior learning experience (Anisef & Kilbride, n.d). Refugee youth also experience financial constraints based on low-income, either within their family or as a single. They have not chosen to migrate; there may be ongoing conflict in their country of origin and they may experience prolonged family separation. Education might be halted or restricted for periods of time and these youth may have experienced traumatic

situations and are experiencing pre-migration, migration and post-migration stress all contributing to integration challenges.

The CSS regional reports consistently identify Government assisted refugee (GAR) youth as: motivated, leaders, enthusiastic, wanting to make a better life here, taking advantage of resources available, having time, underserved, brave, strong, and happy. These words speak to the resilience of the GAR population and feelings of hopefulness; despite the multitude of challenges they must overcome to achieve integration in Canada.

In 2013/14 the Client Support Services (CSS) program was funded by Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) to commission an Impact Evaluation of the CSS program. York Institute for Health Research Evaluation Unit was selected to carry out the project. The evaluation aims to assess the social well being of GAR clients who would have accessed the CSS program during their first year in Canada and to connect their perceived integration to the outcomes of the CSS program. Through surveys, focus groups and key informant interviews, past CSS GAR clients have been in Canada between less than six years were asked about various aspects of their current lives in Canada, focusing on: active participation in community, feeling welcomed in Canada, ability to use health and human services and evidence of long term integration (e.g., achieving citizenship, labour market participation) through the lens of Ager and Strang's (2008) social integration model (cf. Hynie 2013). The evaluation reveals the interconnectedness of the different aspects of functional integration (e.g., housing, employment) social connections (relationships within and between communities) and sense of belonging, and how these aspects of integration are also facilitated and supported by institutional adaptation to GAR needs, language and culture, and safety and security. The evaluation provides a snapshot of GARs' integration in Ontario.

Preliminary findings from the impact evaluation supports the current understanding of the CSS model as a family focused case management model. When we look at the GAR youth data (16 – 30 years old, using a broader age range for youth to reflect the more variable path to adult roles that refugees face, Kazak-Clark, 2013) there are some areas that require further attention to better support the successful integration of youth. Clear gaps are identified for older youth aged 22-25, as the findings show this population is underserved relative to their younger peers in areas of education (achieving high school and attending post-secondary education), and struggle more in language learning and avenues to make new friends and feel connected in Canada. These gaps are consistent with trends in the CSS program reporting and findings from the 2013 CSS community consultations with GAR youth in Ontario.

It is evident that the younger a GAR client arrives in Canada the more quickly they will acquire language proficiency in either of Canada's official languages. We note that language capacity is at the core of GAR integration and this is no different for youth, as language affects all other components of life in Canada such as employment, education and connecting with the broader Canadian population. Youth respondents identify that there is a lack of direct contact with CSS case workers, as case workers primarily work with the head of family when serving GARs, thereby limiting direct support youth receive from CSS case workers. Youth that arrive and attend high school have greater access to employment and volunteering opportunities, language learning environments and avenues of connectedness and have facilitated access to higher education. It is apparent that school is an important vehicle on the path to integration for youth. Consistently the results show that youth 20 to 25 are not achieving the same level of understanding of their communities relative to older and younger youth when looking at their knowledge of where to find educational, cultural and social services and, at least in terms of health, in their comfort using them (Hynie, 2014).

Positive youth engagement is a key function to apply when working with and supporting any youth population. Positive youth engagement can result in acquisition of personal and social assets in the domains of physical, intellectual, psychological and emotional, and social development, which are all vehicles to greater well-being and future success (Cohen & McDonough, 2012). Noted in the field of youth engagement, there are four features that underscore the success of programs taking a positive youth development approach: build strong relationships between youth and non-family adults; ensure youth have agency and engagement in decision-making and program design to influence their communities; promote skill building across physical, emotional, intellectual, psychological, and social domains; and clearly state high expectations for youth (Cohen & McDonough, 2012). The CSS program is moving towards improving youth engagement, and applying a positive youth engagement approach.

Serving the GAR youth population remains a persistent need identified by Client Support Services (CSS) case workers across the region, as is echoed in the CSS Impact Evaluation (2014). Citizenship and Immigration Canada has recognized this need, and steps have been taken to strengthen the capacity of the CSS sites to serve and meet the needs of GAR youth clients, implementing youth case workers at some sites and supporting a CSS regional Staff Youth Network. Most recently, through the leadership of the YMCA CSS Coordination team, CSS has established a Provincial Youth Advisory Council (YAC). The CSS YAC is comprised of two GAR youth representatives from the six CSS communities, and CSS staff. The core function of the YAC is 2-fold:

- Facilitate GAR youth in their confidence, skill and leadership development by creating a space where they are safe and supported to give their perspective and experience to help improve the CSS program in serving youth; and

- Welcome new GAR youth to Canada and support their integration to their new communities by creating resources that can help them navigate through their new lives in Canada. Although only completing the first pilot year, this group of youth has demonstrated that youth are hungry for engagement opportunities and are committed to giving back to the communities that supported their resettlement and the future resettlement of GAR youth that will arrive in Canada.

Challenges for GAR youth are multifaceted and require action from the CSS program, as CSS case workers need to increase capacity to serve youth clients, especially over the age of 19, and who are not accessing school. Within the broader settlement and community, services and resources need to become more aware and inclusive of refugee youth needs.

Continued improvement for refugee resettlement outcomes is needed, especially for youth. Efforts must be made to clearly understand the barriers for this population through further investigation and research. Policies and program development must be based on evidence that engages the youth voice. Currently there is a lack of information and understanding of this promising group of newcomers in Canada, their needs, gaps and what are effective programs to better support their resettlement outcomes. While steps are being taken to address these gaps, like the Client Support Services Youth Advisory Council, there needs to be more concerted efforts on the part of government and the settlement sector to engage youth and understand their needs. Refugee youth are motivated and looking for paths to integration, but currently they do not have many to choose from.

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