EMPLOYMENT PATHWAYS FOR REFUGEES: AN APPROACH FOR OVERCOMING BARRIERS FOR GOVERNMENT-ASSISTED REFUGEES IN ONTARIO

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This paper builds on the literature presented in Employment Pathways for Refugees, Part 1 and offers a programmatic approach to overcome barriers faced by refugees when seeking employment. Refugees have unique profiles and needs that differentiate them from other newcomers and therefore require informed program and service responses to support their settlement and integration. Results from the Employment Pathways prototype, which took place in four Government-Assisted Refugees resettlement communities to address employment barriers, will be shared.

CLIENT SUPPORT SERVICES PROGRAM IN ONTARIO

Each year an average of 2,000 Government-Assisted Refugees (GARs) are resettled to Ontario. These refugees are supported throughout their first year of settlement by the Client Support Services (CSS) program. CSS is a holistic, client centered case management program, which is coordinated across Ontario to address the resettlement needs of (GARs) by: facilitating the development of client capacity to navigate services independently through case management; and increase awareness in receiving communities of the GAR population while supporting sustainably responsive interventions to GAR needs through community capacity building. The CSS Regional Program Network is comprised of six program delivery organizations which include:

- Hamilton - Wesley Urban Ministries
- Kitchener - Reception House Waterloo Region; London – Cross Cultural Learner Centre
- Ottawa - Catholic Centre for Immigrants;

- Toronto - COSTI Immigrant Services

- Windsor - Multicultural Council of Windsor and Essex County, and is coordinated by the YMCA of Greater Toronto.

CSS Case Workers are trained to support GARs through an empowerment approach, focusing on client strengths to guide their settlement path, aiming to develop clients' self-sufficiency to navigate services independently. Client's needs are assessed regularly to ensure Case Workers are providing appropriate and timely referrals, while facilitating access to these referrals through service navigation, accompaniment support and community capacity building. As a coordinated program, CSS conducts comprehensive monitoring of GAR needs and trends, offering timely and innovative programmatic responses through a collective impact lens.

PRE-MIGRATION EXPERIENCES OF GOVERNMENT-ASSISTED REFUGEES IN ONTARIO

Pre-migration factors such as language skills, previous education, work skills and previous living conditions can affect the overall settlement and integration of GARs into their local communities. GARs with low English language skills, low literacy levels in their primary language, and/or have lived in rural settings or refugee camps are more likely to experience barriers and difficulty accessing and navigating services in their communities and are found to benefit from tailored supports to access services (Kappel Ramji 2009, Hynie 2014; Hii & Dossal 2009, Hynie, Korn and Tao 2014).

The CSS program uses a centralized database that captures demographic information, needs, service outputs and outcomes of GARs as they receive case management support in their first year in Canada. Drawing from data collected in the CSS Regional Database from 2013 – 2015, a total of 6,910 GAR clients were received across the Ontario equating to over 2,000 clients and 900 cases each year. A case constitutes a family structure comprising of singles, or family units. About 54% of the cases served in CSS are singles and 46% include families that range from two to nine (or more) individuals; the bulk of cases have two to six family members. A total of 51% of clients served were 25 years old and over, 25% were youth between the ages of 13-24 and 24% are children between the ages of 0-12 (Raphael 2016).

GARs that are served in the CSS program have diverse profiles that reflect their pre-migration experiences coming from, at times, conflict areas and various protracted refugee situations. The countries of origin of GARs resettled to Ontario reflect the federal government's resettlement commitments. Between 2013-2015, the largest resettled refugee group in Ontario is of Iraqi origin comprising 47% of the population. The remaining 53% of the current population served in CSS are of Iranian origin (13%), Somali origin (7%), Syrian origin (6%), Bhutanese origin (6%), as well as other groups from Asia and Africa[1]. he majority of GARs in the last three years arrived from urban locations (72%). The remaining 26% of GARs come from rural settings (11%) and refugee camps (11%)[2] (Raphael 2016). GARs may face challenges transitioning to urban settings and for those with prolonged time in refugee camps may have greater challenges becoming self-sufficient in the Canadian context because of the limited agency and opportunities in refugee camps (Hynie, Korn and Tao 2016, Harell-Bond 2000, Shakya *et al.* 2014).

The education profiles of GAR clients differ. At program intake, 41% of GARs over the age of 18 indicated having less than a high school diploma and 14% having no formal education prior to arriving in Canada. In comparison to those with little or no educational background, 20% indicated having completed their high school diplomas and 22% indicated having completed post-secondary or higher education prior to arriving in Canada. The majority of GARs served in the CSS program also reported having low levels of English language and French language fluency. When examining the self-identified language levels of GARs over the age of 18, 47% of GARs state having no English language skills, while 48% having some English language skills, and only 5% identify as fluent in English (Raphael 2016). Limited English language proficiency is connected to difficulties in refugee and immigrant settlement and integration (Schellenberg and Maheux 2007, Yu, Oullette and Warmington 2007, Strang and Ager 2010).

DIVERSE AND CHANGING NEEDS OF GOVERNMENT-ASSISTED REFUGEES

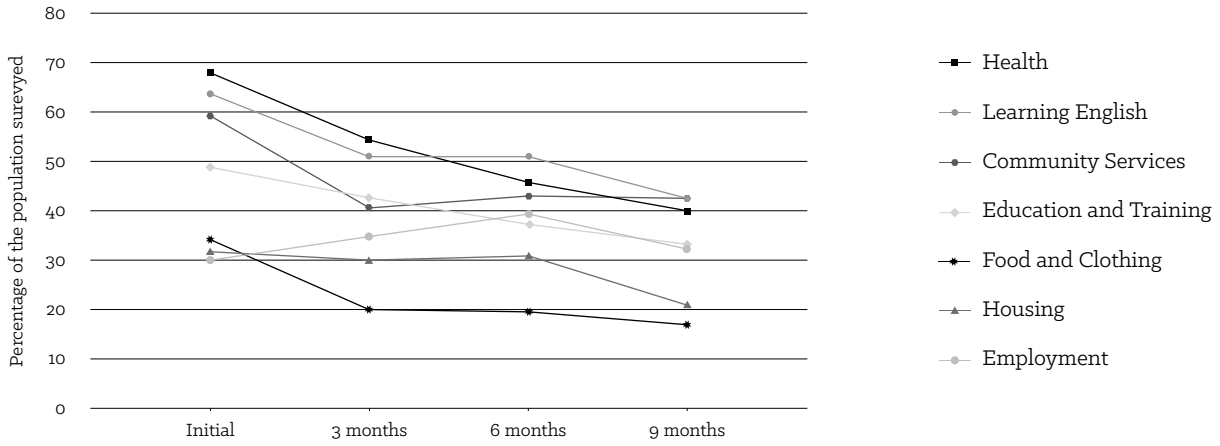
As informed by their diverse profiles, the needs of GARs served in the CSS program vary and change throughout their first year of settlement. The needs of GARs are captured through the CSS needs assessment framework, which is administered to clients throughout their first year in Canada. Finding employment for GARs can be difficult and overwhelming, and, as identified through the assessment framework, GARs have varying and competing initial needs

1 These statistics were collected prior to the Liberal Government's commitment to resettle 25,000 Syrian Refugees which began in November 2015. Those Syrian Refugees that arrived in Canada in November and December 2015 are not reflected in this dataset as they did not receive CSS Services or were not entered into the CSS Regional Database until into 2016.

2 No data collected for remaining 2% of clients surveyed.

that require attention prior to searching for employment. Often GAR cases arrive with complex health needs, which can include acute physical conditions, mental or emotional health issues and family members with physical disabilities or impairments. Although GARs are provided support with obtaining a primary health care provider, health needs can last throughout the year and beyond, and act as continuous barriers to progressing on their settlement path, and more specifically accessing employment and pre-employment services. As shown in Figure 1, learning English and accessing community services are top initial needs that fluctuate throughout the year as GARs learn of the importance of these supports in settling and acquiring employment. Accessing education & training programs, food & clothing banks, and housing services are also competing needs that require ongoing attention and can compete with seeking employment. Despite the competing needs of GARs, obtaining employment, although not an initial need, rises notably throughout their first year as GARs begin to meet their initial needs. Addressing the initial needs of GARs is pertinent to ensure a strong start to searching for employment[3].

FIGURE 1: TRENDS IN GAR (18+) NEEDS IN THEIR 1ST YEAR (2013-2015)



Note: this data represents information of respondents who participated in a needs assessment and not the complete population of GARs served in Ontario.

EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES FOR GOVERNMENT-ASSISTED REFUGEES AFTER FIRST YEAR IN CANADA

The CSS program recognizes that GARs value employment and actively seek employment to subsidize their income (Hynie, 2014). Although the focus of GARs in their first year in Canada is not necessarily to find employment, 56% of GARs reported in their exit interview that finding employment is their top goal. From data collected in the CSS Regional Database at program exit, 21% of GARs over the age of 18 indicated that learning English continues to be a barrier to finding employment and accessing employment programs. Lack of affordable childcare was reported as a barrier to accessing employment services for 8% of men and 15% of women. Complex health concerns are continually reported by 12% of GARs at program exit, which continues to be a barrier to accessing employment and employment programs (Raphael 2016).

GARs also experience external barriers to gaining employment similar to skilled newcomers. As found in focus groups conducted with previous GAR clients in the 2014 CSS Program Evaluation, employers are unaware of the skills the GARs have and their ability to work. GARs reported experiencing issues with having their credentials and skills recognized by employers and often lack the "Canadian experience" employers are seeking, which decrease their chances of obtaining employment (Hynie 2014).

Despite the barriers that many GARs face, 12% of GARs over the age of 18 reported they were employed at program exit. Of the 12% employed, 49% reported working in part-time jobs and the other 51% reported working in full time jobs in various occupations in the service and manufacturing sector. About 18% of GARs reported actively seeking employment at program exit and close to 18% are attending post-secondary programs. At the exit interview close to 43% of GARs surveyed indicated they were continuing to attend language classes to improve their English to increase their chances of finding employment (Raphael 2016).

3 Data collected from the CSS Regional Database, 2013-2015.

Although improving language skills and accessing services to meet their initial needs is the focus for GARs in their first year in Canada, many are not able to participate in employment programs and services because they require a certain level of proficiency in English prior to enrollment. These barriers make it especially challenging for GARs with low-English language levels to find employment and integrate successfully into their new communities.

EMPLOYMENT PATHWAYS EVENTS FOR GOVERNMENT-ASSISTED REFUGEES

In response to the identified need for employment opportunities for refugee populations that arrive with a low English language proficiency and low education and labour skill background, the CSS program worked in partnership with the Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship Canada, Policy Innovation division to develop a prototype to meet this service gap. The Employment Pathways event was offered in four CSS communities during March 2015:

- Hamilton – Wesley Urban Ministries
- London – Cross Cultural Learner Centre
- Ottawa – Catholic Centre for Immigrants
- Windsor – Multicultural Council of Windsor and Essex County.

The Employment Pathways for GARs event was modeled after the Career Pathways program for skilled immigrants, which is a sector specific event bringing together newcomer job seekers and employers from the sector for a day of networking and engagement, but adapted to meet the context of the refugee profile demonstrated above.

The overall objectives of the Employment Pathways event were to: build GAR clients capacity to obtain employment despite barriers such as language proficiency and labour skills; and engage employers and employment programs and community services to learn about GARs in their community and the needs and barriers they face to accessing services and employment. Over four days, the Employment Pathways event engaged 135 GARs, 23 employers and a number of settlement and mainstream employment service providers.

The four CSS organizations that participated in the event proposed a unique event format tailored to their community context. Tools and resources to support the client profile were developed such as an event checklist, which included things the participant can do before, during, and after the event to maximize their benefits through participation.

This prototype yielded a number of immediate outcomes for all involved, which was collected through evaluation and post-event discussion. It was clear that stakeholders valued the event and indicated that the event format enhanced and strengthened partnerships, while increasing awareness of refugees in the community. Employers considered the event as a source for recruitment of new employees. Some employers identified ideas to address refugee barriers to employment such as offering language learning on the job and transportation to and from the workplace. Community service providers identified gaps in programs and services offered based on the GAR client demographics and have since adapted service offerings to improve access for GARs.

The refugee participants stated that the event: increased their job searching skills; offered information about job-related training and language supports; and improved their social connections. Many refugee participants planned to follow-up with employers and services they connected with, while some were offered employment.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO CONTINUE DEVELOPING PATHWAYS TO EMPLOYMENT FOR REFUGEES

The Employment Pathways event is a model that could be scaled up and offered in an ongoing sustained program with suggested improvements to increase GAR client and employer outcomes. The following recommendations are important to consider enhancing employment pathways events for refugee job seekers and other vulnerable groups to facilitate their initial entrance into the job search process:

- Work with employers in preparation for future Employment Pathways events; it is essential to ensure they understand the needs and barriers refugees face to employment. Sufficient time is required to cultivate relationships with employers and increase their awareness of refugees and to work with employers to identify what they can do to alleviate some of the barriers and challenges GARs experience when searching for employment and in the workplace
- Ongoing close collaboration with existing employment service supports that can work with GARs to provide pre-employment skill development to prepare them for the event is required. Pre-employment and employment programs should adapt services to engage low-skilled/low-English language level GARs that will facilitate their initial job search and integration into the Canadian Labour market
- GAR participants require more coaching and preparation for the Employment Pathways events;

focusing on how to network with employers and benefit from this type of event to meet their objective of finding employment.

CONCLUSION

Employment is sought by GARs and is an important part of the overall success of their settlement and integration into their communities. GARs have diverse profiles and can experience multiple barriers when accessing employment/ pre-employment programs and finding employment. In addition, GARs have competing initial needs that must be addressed to enable a strong start on their employment path. Tailored services and employment pathways events for low-skilled and low-language GARs are found to be promising methods to addressing some of the barriers GARs experience when accessing the Canadian labour market.

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