LINKING HOUSING WITH WRAP AROUND SUPPORTS FOR NEWCOMER FAMILIES IN WINNIPEG

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Immigrants and refugees face numerous challenges when navigating the housing market, which are then compounded by inadequate supplies of good-quality affordable housing and social housing in urban centres in Canada. As such, immigrants and refugees are at risk of living in 'core housing need' and, increasingly, are becoming the 'hidden homeless'. These issues are concerning since research shows that housing is foundational to successful settlement. In Winnipeg, Manitoba, the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba Inc. (IRCOM) works to alleviate the stresses that newcomers experience in their early settlement process by providing wrap-around supports within an affordable housing complex. This article highlights the impact of this model on low-income newcomer families by discussing findings from a three-year research project that interviewed current and past residents of IRCOM. By mitigating barriers to both housing and service provision, IRCOM's holistic vision of settlement addresses many issues commonly faced by newcomer families.

La recherche sur le marché du logement apporte de nombreux défis aux immigrants et aux réfugiés, défis qui sont ensuite amplifiés par l'insuffisance de logements abordables et de logements sociaux de qualité dans les centres urbains du Canada. Ainsi, les immigrants et les réfugiés risquent de vivre avec un « besoin impérieux de logement » et, de plus en plus, deviennent des « sans-abri cachés ». Ces problèmes sont préoccupants, car les recherches montrent que le logement est essentiel au succès de l'établissement. À Winnipeg, au Manitoba, l'IRCOM (Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba Inc.) s'efforce de réduire le stress des nouveaux arrivants au début de leur processus d'établissement en fournissant des soutiens intégrés dans un complexe de logements abordables. Cet article met en évidence l'impact de ce modèle sur les familles de nouveaux arrivants à faible revenu en discutant des résultats d'un projet de recherche de trois ans qui a interrogé des résidents actuels et anciens de l'IRCOM. En réduisant les obstacles à la fois au logement et à la fourniture de services, la vision globale de l'établissement mise en œuvre par l'IRCOM s'attaque à de nombreux problèmes auxquels les familles de nouveaux arrivants sont souvent confrontées.

Immigrants and refugees face multiple barriers such as discrimination, language, family size, and low incomes when navigating the housing market in their new communities. These challenges are compounded by the inadequate supplies of good-quality affordable housing and social housing in urban centres in Canada. As such, immigrants and refugees are at risk of living in 'core housing need; and, increasingly, are becoming the 'hidden homeless,' as they share crowded residences and encounter precarious housing. These issues are concerning because research shows that housing is the foundation of settlement and it impacts all other elements of the process (Carter, Polevychok and Osborne 2009; Shier et al. 2014).

Since its inception in 1991, the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba Inc. (IRCOM) has worked to alleviate the stresses that newcomers experience in their early settlement process by providing wrap-around supports within an affordable housing complex. IRCOM aids the settlement process by implementing structures and relationships that allow people to pursue employment, training, and skill-building opportunities that would otherwise be hampered by isolation, lack of awareness, or other barriers. Families can live in IRCOM House for a maximum of three years, gaining knowledge and skills that will lead to their independence.

At IRCOM House, housing and rent subsidies are available through a sponsor management agreement between the Manitoba Housing and Renewal Corporation (MHRC) and IRCOM. Rental rates are based on MHRC's Rent Geared to Income program and are inclusive of heat, electricity, water, fridge, and stove. There is on-site management and regular apartment maintenance available. Residents also have access to a variety of core programs, one-on-one supports, and extensive referrals.

Through a three-year project funded by the Winnipeg Foundation and the Manitoba Research Alliance and held at the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Manitoba, the author explored IRCOM's model to highlight the impacts of obtaining affordable housing with wrap-around supports on the settlement process for newcomer families. The project found that immigrants face unique housing needs and, as seen in Table 1, are more likely to have core housing needs than non-immigrants.

Using a community-based research approach, qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews with current and past residents of IRCOM over a three-year period to investigate what those needs include.

Of the 19 participants who remained for the duration of the study, 12 were women and seven were men. All except one interview participant came to Canada as refugees. On average, participants had been in Canada for 4.9 years at the time of their last interview with the research team and had lived at IRCOM for 29.3 months.

TABLE 1: IMMIGRANTS IN CORE HOUSING NEED IN WINNIPEG, 2016

	All Households
Non-immigrant	10.0%
Immigrant	12.8%
Immigrants arriving between 2011 and May 2016	23.4%

Source: Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (National Household Survey-based housing indicators and data)

The project found that the IRCOM model eases the transition into a new place by providing families with an environment that many participants explained is similar to 'being back home.' There is a vibrancy within IRCOM as families from diverse cultural backgrounds share similar experiences of settlement and support one another in a collectivistic manner. As one interview participant explained, "IRCOM life was amazing. [It] was like a small world in one place. There are so many cultures, so many nationalities, [and] so many different people together." There is a strong sense of community within the building. Interview participants often expressed how lucky they feel to have the opportunity to live in such an inclusive and supportive environment, comparing their experiences to other immigrants and refugees who do not receive such an opportunity.

Aside from the provision of affordable places to live, the cornerstone of IRCOM is its holistic programming and wrap-around supports. In addition to citing affordability as a central benefit of living at IRCOM, interview participants highlight the importance of the programs that are offered, the most often mentioned being the After School Program and Asset Building program. The former provides children and youth with both drop-in and structured programming focused on education, recreation, employment, and social supports. The latter provides adults with financial literacy resources and increases the capacity of low-income households to manage their finances and save money. Being able to attend programs within the building in which one lives also alleviates barriers (such as transportation, child care, and a lack of awareness) that negatively impact service accessibility. Designed to help families as they navigate all aspects of their new home, the programming and supports equip newcomers with the skills and knowledge necessary to settle.

For some participants, leaving IRCOM is dreaded and feared while many others feel prepared to move out. Many families move into social housing because they still find private market rents to be 'a nightmare' or 'too scary.' Other challenges include language barriers, discrimination, social isolation, and loneliness.

Despite the challenges associated with moving from IRCOM, interview participants do feel prepared to navigate the wider community because of the skills and knowledge they have gained. As one participant explained, "[IRCOM] prepared me to stand by own feet." Another participant likened herself to a baby upon arriving in Canada, with little knowledge of her surroundings. IRCOM helped her grow, learn, and gain independence. Many see their time at IRCOM as having provided a 'strong base' upon which they can settle and build a full life. People are aware of their rights as tenants, understand subsidized housing, and gained some financial independence as IRCOM's programs help them to pay back transportation loans and invest in other purchases. When families leave, they enter the housing market in a very different position than they would have if they had done so upon arrival in Canada.

NOT JUST EMPLOYMENT, SETTLEMENT

When assessing settlement, obtaining employment is often emphasized. Focusing on employment, however, ignores the immense achievements newcomers made during their stay at IRCOM. Interview participants pursued language classes, obtained education, volunteered, and set goals for the future. Their children learned English, excelled in school, and made friends. Because they lived in a supportive environment with accessible programs and affordable rents, newcomers could obtain the necessary tools needed to eventually enter the labour market, instead of accepting 'survival jobs,' which far too many newly arrived immigrants and refugees do to meet the necessities of life. Living at IRCOM positively contributed to social inclusion, developed families' independence, and set them on a path toward achieving their goals, which are all important markers of settlement.

Considering the positivity expressed by residents toward their time at IRCOM and the resulting benefits they experience, the IRCOM model and others that integrate housing with wrap-around supports warrant more widespread attention. They could be an intervention to promote settlement in other secondary immigration sites. By mitigating barriers to both housing and service provision, IRCOM's holistic vision of settlement addresses many challenges faced by newcomer families.

Full reports of the project are available online at:
www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/ircom-model

REFERENCES

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