CRISIS RESPONSE AND COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS:

ONE AGENCY'S STRATEGY FOR SUPPORTING NEWCOMERS THROUGH THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Like other settlement agencies across the country, the Calgary Catholic Immigration Society (CCIS) provides a spectrum of services to help immigrants and refugees integrate into our workplaces, schools and communities, and to succeed in their new lives in Canada. From temporary accommodations for Government Assisted Refugees in our reception house, to settlement and therapeutic counselling, to language learning and employment training in our classrooms, these services have historically been delivered in-person and within the context of the vibrant sense of community we have built among our staff and clients in our various service locations.

Because of the nature of our work, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented settlement agencies with an unprecedented set of challenges. Most organizations within the sector have been tasked with transitioning their services to online platforms, while those that operate reception houses and serve high-needs populations have had to swiftly develop new safety protocol to continue service delivery while minimizing risk to their staff and clients.

The sector has benefitted greatly from the flexibility and support shown by our government funders, who have recognized the unique challenges posed to settlement agencies and prioritized the continuation of services for our clientele. Another unique advantage for the sector is the fact that many agencies, including CCIS, have organizational leaders and a large number of staff members who came to Canada as immigrants and refugees themselves. Many of these individuals, as well as our clients, have experienced crises and navigated times of uncertainty and, as a result, have honed their resilience and their ability to adapt.

Like settlement agencies across the country, the primary concern for CCIS over the past few months has been mitigating the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the newcomer population, especially those who are most vulnerable. This has meant ensuring that newcomers have access to the information, resources and services they need to protect their health and safety, as well as providing them with a much-needed sense of community and belonging in a situation that has left many in isolation.

Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada data shows that close to 43,000 newcomers arrived in Calgary over the past two years. As a direct result of global events and resettlement efforts on the part of the Federal Government, a growing number of these newcomers have been refugees. Since 2018,

CCIS has served close to 700 Government Assisted Refugees; a number of these individuals and families have experienced trauma and, because of cultural factors, language barriers, and complex mental and physical health issues, have been categorized as *high needs*.

For many of these recently arrived immigrants and refugees in the Calgary area, the COVID-19 pandemic has had significant repercussions. Hiring freezes, layoffs, school and daycare closures, and restrictions on in-person services at financial institutions and government and registry offices, for example, have stalled and disrupted many newcomers' settlement and integration processes. For those with limited supportive networks, the pandemic has exacerbated feelings of disconnection and disengagement from Canadian society, while also presenting the challenge of falling ill and undergoing isolation without external help from friends and family.

To continue supporting these newcomers, CCIS moved our settlement, community development and integration, and employment programs and services online. This approach not only ensured that our clients could continue learning English, enhancing their skills, conducting their employment searches and furthering their settlement and integration processes, but provided them with a much-needed sense of community and connection to our staff members, community volunteers and other newcomers.

At the outset of the pandemic, CCIS recognized that the challenges would be even greater for high-needs newcomers, including many refugees. We questioned how our clients with significant cultural and linguistic barriers would access and understand up-to-date pandemic information and directives for protecting their health and safety. We were concerned about their ability to advocate for themselves in unsafe workplaces; to access relevant resources, benefits and services; and to acquire food and medication. We also knew the devastating effects that quarantine procedures and social distancing would have on newcomers struggling with family violence, as well as individuals whose traumatic experiences are rooted in imprisonment and isolation.

In response to these concerns, CCIS compiled a list of close to 500 newcomer families that we considered to be at risk. These families included refugees, single mothers, individuals with disabilities and complex health needs, those suffering from trauma or experiencing family violence, those facing language and cultural barriers and those struggling with financial stability and food security.

In collaboration with other agencies and community partners, CCIS has developed a detailed protocol and a Crisis Response Team to identify and address the needs of these families on a case-by-case basis, ensuring that they have access to vital information, resources and culturally sensitive support. Through a centralized intake, the Crisis Response Team has been conducting individual assessments and creating coordinated service plans to address newcomers' immediate needs through direct resources, community referrals and logistical supports in the areas of family violence, mental wellness, health, housing and food security.

To effectively address the needs of our vulnerable newcomer families, CCIS had to continuously innovate and adapt; this included establishing new community partnerships, transforming our daycare into a Calgary Food Bank Community Depot (and working with local distributors to supplement food hampers with Halal products); mobilizing the many volunteer groups who came forward to lend a hand; and moving our multilingual and multidisciplinary staff members across divisions and service locations to where their skill sets and language proficiencies were needed most.

CCIS also replicated the Crisis Response Team Protocol through our Foothills Community Immigrant Services (FCIS) and Brooks and County Immigration Services (BCIS) offices to support the high numbers of newcomers, including many refugees, who have been settling in the rural communities of Brooks, Okotoks and High River. These supports were imperative in late April when the meat packing plants in Brooks and High River became the sites of large-scale COVID-19 outbreaks. In addition to providing Crisis Response Team services to workers who were affected, our rural offices contacted newcomers in smaller centres across Southern Alberta to make sure they understood, and had the necessary resources to comply with, COVID-19 health directives.

In addition to serving immigrants and refugees, CCIS also provides information and support to foreign nationals in possession of study permits, work permits and post-graduate open work permits, as well their dependents, through our Community Support Services program. Since March 2018, Calgary has welcomed over 18,000 work permit holders. Temporary Foreign Workers have been especially hard hit by the pandemic not only because many have lost their jobs, but also because this population tends to work in high-risk environments such as long-term care facilities and meat processing plants. International students have also been facing stressors such as decreased financial support from their families back home. Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, CCIS' Community Support Services team has been fielding questions from foreign nationals and outreaching to their clients across Southern Alberta to ensure that they understand health directives and are able to access essential resources such as food, medication, health services and emotional support.

CCIS has been serving immigrants and refugees in Calgary and Southern Alberta for close to 40 years, and the COVID-19 crisis has presented one of the most remarkable challenges in our organization's long history. We are proud, however, that we have successfully modified and adapted our service delivery while establishing new emergency and safety protocols. We

have also been heartened to see how service providers, community partners, government funders and volunteers have come together to protect the health and safety of the most vulnerable newcomers in our community.

We recognize that ours is one of many stories, from across Canada's settlement sector, of agencies innovating, adapting and growing their service delivery to meet this challenge and to guide their clients through these unprecedented circumstances. As a next step, we look forward to opportunities for the sector to share experiences, lessons learned and best practices that will help us face similar challenges in the future. As we reflect on the response of the settlement sector to the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the most important achievements will unquestionably be the work done to ensure that, despite social distancing and isolation measures, newcomers to Canada maintained a sense of community and connection, and knew that they were not alone.