# SETTLEMENT INFORMATION IN A GROUP CHAT: TURNING A POPULAR MODE OF COMMUNICATION INTO A POWERFUL TOOL FOR INTEGRATION

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**Many newcomers struggle to find information to help navigate their first months and years in Canada. Refugee 613's Digital Messaging for Settlement and Integration (DMSI) project has explored the benefits of addressing this challenge by offering newcomers free, easy and fast access to settlement information in their own language and customized to their needs, via off-the-shelf apps on their smartphones. This article discusses the learning from the latest DMSI pilot, the Afghan Digital Service, which uses a private, moderated group on Telegram to provide key settlement information to more than 700 Afghan newcomers.**

A woman found a shelter in her community to support her as she left a violent partner. A refugee family in a financial crisis reconnected with the settlement agency that held their file. A mother learned about culturally-relevant mental health services for her troubled son. And a man discovered a training program that led to a job in a lucrative new field.

What these stories have in common is they all happened because these newcomers to Canada belong to a simple, cost-effective and moderated group chat on Telegram, run by Refugee 613.

The Afghan Digital Service (ADS) is a pilot designed to explore the question: can you effectively supplement one-on-one case management for refugee newcomers from the same language group, spread across Canada, by having settlement workers answering basic questions and making referrals via a private group on a digital messaging app? One year in, in

spite of some challenges with promotion, the evidence is pointing strongly to Yes. Clients report that the ADS has not only made it easier and more convenient for them to find key information, but it has increased their uptake of services and improved their ability to navigate life in Canada on their own.

IRCC spends more than $134 million on information and orientation services. It's one of the biggest areas of funded service, and highly popular with clients. Settlement information exists on countless government and agency web sites and in workshops, webinars and guides. And yet, many newcomers still struggle to get the information they need, when they need it, in a format that's accessible. So they turn to family and friends, often sharing advice and information in community group chats on WhatsApp, Facebook or other platforms. According to MTM Newcomers, an annual survey of newcomer media habits, the majority of newcomers have access to a smartphone and they are "more likely to use a smartphone than any other device to perform searches" (Media Technology Monitor, 2023).

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These online groups are often incredibly powerful and important resources. But when Refugee 613 noticed that Syrian refugee newcomers to Ottawa were often getting incorrect or misleading advice in informal WhatsApp groups, we started our own, complimentary group on WhatsApp (later migrating to Telegram in response to client preference). The model offered a professionally-moderated space for members to ask basic settlement-related questions in Arabic during regular business hours, and get referrals and advice for navigating services. The group grew to 500 members at its peak.

According to an evaluation in 2018, 85% of members used the group at least once a day. 81% of members used the group to gather information about government services, and 78% of members used the group to obtain information related to immigration and refugee status in Canada. They reported that the group helped them save time and money and navigate the settlement system. They appreciated it as a centralized source of information that answered their questions quickly and efficiently. Five years later, the group lives on, now moderated by volunteers trained by Refugee 613.

Recognizing the information needs of Afghan newcomers arriving in 2021, Refugee 613 proposed a pilot to IRCC to see whether this success could be replicated at the national level. The Telegram group name translates to Refugee 613 - Information for Life in Canada. Clients can post an inquiry at any time of day and get an answer the same day—often within the hour—for common questions ("Can you please tell me who in Vancouver can help me get my university degree assessed?), and no later than 48 hours for more complicated ones that require some research. They're also able to ask sensitive questions via private message or voice note. Before joining, clients must agree to abide by formal Community Guidelines on behavior and safety, and have the option to shield their name and phone number from the rest of the group to protect their privacy.

Refugee 613 staff compile and share several new posts about life in Canada every week, ranging from detailed explainers about credit and debit cards to simple summaries of new national dental benefits or special measures for Afghan resettlement, translated into both Dari and Pashto with additional context where needed, and links to learn more. Moderators also share notices about settlement-sector events in various cities, including workshops, training programs and language classes.

Since the formal launch in March, 2022, moderators have answered more than 2,000 inquiries, made more than 1,000 referrals to service providers and posted more than 900 separate pieces of new content. In a recent unpublished survey, a majority of clients said their ability to find settlement information improved once they joined the group and the percentage rating their knowledge of services as "Good" jumped from 8% before joining, to 43% after.

Anecdotally, refugee clients report that trauma and the overwhelm of the journey make it difficult to retain what they learn in traditional orientation sessions delivered on arrival, after which it can be a struggle to get questions answered by overworked case managers. We've learned that meeting this newcomer audience where they are – on their phones – helps to reduce frustration, close gaps and enhance traditional service delivery. It gives clients easy access to a trusted, up-to-date resource for answers to FAQs in their own languages, enabling them to learn at their own pace, and turn to other settlement services for more complex or specific needs.

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As of February, 2023, the group has 725 members in seven provinces, reaching an estimated 3,600 beneficiaries (as clients share what they learn in the group with an average of five other people) and growing by an average of 10 clients each week. Still, that is just a fraction of the 28,000 Afghans who have arrived in Canada since 2021, which highlights the pilot's greatest challenge. While some settlement staff have

embraced the service and see it as a trusted partner in supporting their clients, many others are wary of the digital model and do not refer clients to it or, worse, actively discourage their clients from joining. As a result, the majority of members say they found the group through family and friends. The service also has not yet overcome a digital gender divide: men make up the majority of members in the Telegram group, reflecting the reality that in many Afghan households, only the men have access to a smartphone.

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Other challenges are outside our scope, but speak to wider issues around digital settlement information. We have learned that while digital messaging can help people find information sources more easily, it cannot make up for weak user experience with those sources. Regardless of their level of digital skills, clients often report struggling to navigate online resources not designed with the newcomer user in mind.

Refugees and newcomers need innovative solutions to settlement information needs, tools that go beyond the conventional service delivery models. Refugee 613's experience has shown that moderated digital messaging groups can be safe, effective and efficient tools. They do not replace the need for case workers and user-friendly web sites, but they support those with language barriers and increase their ability to independently find and use the information they need to make decisions about their life in Canada.