SENIORS AND IMMIGRATION

Services and Issues

ABSTRACT

The Calgary Catholic Immigration Society (CCIS) is a non-profit organization that strives to effectively respond to the needs and preoccupations of immigrant seniors. In this article, the authors describe the barriers that this specific population faces – especially linguistic barriers – and the activities undertaken by CCIS to facilitate reciprocal integration. In our opinion, we need to pursue research on immigrant elders to further support the work of service providers.

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Calgary is the fourth highest destination for immigrants and refugees in all of Canada and 20.9% of Calgarians are born outside of Canada (Statistics Canada, 2001). About one-third (31% of individuals aged 45-64 and 37% of individuals 65+) of seniors living in Calgary immigrated to Canada from another country (Statistics Canada, 2001). Most of these immigrant seniors (54%) arrived in Canada when they were between 20 and 39 years of age and grew to be seniors in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2001). As individuals, including seniors, continue to immigrate to Canada, and as our population ages, the number of immigrant seniors in Canada and Calgary will continue to grow. We must respond to these demographics and welcome and effectively serve immigrant seniors.

The Calgary Catholic Immigration Society (CCIS) is one agency that is striving to effectively respond to the needs and concerns of immigrant seniors, and is also supporting other agencies to do the same. CCIS is a non-profit volunteer organization which provides settlement and integration services to all immigrants and refugees in Southern Alberta. With dedication and determination, we work in partnership with the community to help immigrants and refugees settle and become contributing members of Canadian Society.

As part of its mandate, CCIS initiated its Immigrant Seniors Services (ISS) 8 years ago to promote reciprocal integration and access to community services for immigrant seniors. The ISS is funded by the City of Calgary - Family and Community Support Services. CCIS has been providing community leadership in the field of immigrant seniors services through special programs and initiatives, including community development. ISS provides:

- needs assessments;
- case management;
- notary services;
- form completion;
- language services;
- preventive educational workshops for immigrant seniors;
- facilitates reciprocal integration activities and events;
- volunteer services;
- cultural competency enhancement assessment, training, and support;
- identification of immigrant seniors needs through focus groups; and
- voicing immigrant seniors needs and concerns in committees.

Immigrant seniors are at high risk throughout the settlement/immigration process. Through its work with immigrant seniors, ISS has noted some prominent challenges and barriers that this population faces, including:

- culture shock – they have lived in another culture and surroundings for so long that the changes demanded by their new environment may be particularly confusing;
- communication – language, cultural, and informational barriers are common;
- family support – they depend heavily on others, especially younger relatives, for financial, social, and psychological support;
- social support – loss of friends and difficulty making new ones; social support groups and recreational activities may be unfamiliar and are not always culturally appropriate;

• Family changes – family and intergenerational relations are usually stressed due to changes in structure of the family and traditional roles;
• Financial challenges – many are financially disadvantaged because they are under the 10-year family sponsorship agreement that prevents access to many resources; and
• Community resources – immigrant seniors are limited in terms of knowledge of community resources and systems

The above circumstances lead to isolation and alienation of the immigrant senior. Further research is needed to strengthen this information and to enhance understanding and strategies related to the above challenges.

Both seniors and service providers state that language is a major barrier to effective services. In Calgary, nearly 6,000 (7%) individuals aged 65 and over speak neither English nor French (Statistics Canada, 2001). Language barriers decrease immigrant seniors' awareness of services and their ability to understand and benefit from services if they are able to access them. CCIS' Immigrant Seniors Needs Advisory Committee and Seniors Needs Assessment Project state that language barriers prevent them from fully accessing services available for seniors. Women may face even greater language barriers because they have fewer chances to learn English and may not be able to read in their first language. There is a need for English as a Second Language programs specifically for seniors (Calgary Immigrant Seniors Services Society, 1992). Most ESL classes are based on topics that are more appropriate for younger individuals, such as employment. Many immigrant seniors have difficulty attending ESL classes because they are taking care of their grandchildren and/or have difficulty getting transportation to the class. At CCIS, the Seniors Literacy Project facilitates the opportunity for immigrant seniors to access one-on-one English tutoring that is appropriate to their needs with another senior.

There is some interpretation available for service providers working with seniors; however, most seniors and non-profit agencies cannot afford the cost. Free interpretation is available, but only for health related concerns referred through a hospital. There is a need for more affordable and accessible interpretation services for immigrant seniors and those that provide services to them.

When discussing how to enhance their services for immigrant seniors, service providers insist that little can be done without interpretation and translation. At an ISS presentation on immigrant seniors, 100% of Outreach Workers seniors' identified a need for assistance with finding accessible and free/low-cost interpretation. There is some interpretation available for service providers working with seniors; however, most seniors and non-profit agencies cannot afford the cost. Free interpretation is available, but only for health related concerns referred through a hospital. There is a need for more affordable and accessible interpretation services for immigrant seniors and those that provide services to them. ISS is beginning to develop strategies to assist seniors' service providers in accessing such interpretation.

Through ongoing focus groups held with CCIS' Immigrant Seniors Needs Advisory Committee and the Seniors Needs Assessment Project in 2004, immigrant seniors also frequently identified the following needs: language, housing, health/medical, safety, financial/pension, education, elder abuse, and recreation and leisure activities.

ISS promotes reciprocal integration. In order for immigrant seniors to integrate into Canadian society, immigrant seniors, mainstream seniors, and service providers must make an effort to learn about each other and interact with each other. It is not up to just one of these groups to completely change themselves to adapt to the others' needs. When each side makes an effort, all individuals involved feel respected, appreciated, and welcome. Full integration takes place only when everyone remains open, respectful, flexible, and works together to make society better for all.

ISS works with mainstream seniors' centres and clubs and ethnocultural seniors and seniors groups to facilitate reciprocal integration events for seniors. This gives seniors the chance to learn about each other and interact in a friendly, social, informal environment. One example is the Multicultural Fiesta, held every year in partnership with the Golden Age Club, a seniors' centre. ISS volunteers contact and invite individuals within their communities to this event. Immigrant and mainstream seniors come together and enjoy cultural performances and various potluck dishes. Participants report feeling more open to and comfortable with seniors of other cultural backgrounds.

Another focus of ISS is diversity enhancement. Effectively serving immigrant seniors can seem difficult and overwhelming. Diversity Services help services to analyze their systemic barriers, enhance what is already in place, and develop strategies to make their organizations more accessible and inclusive for immigrant seniors. Everyone has made some efforts, and we assist groups to build and expand on these strengths, not create something new, add more work, or completely change their group. ISS provides individualized training in a variety of areas to mainstream senior services to enhance their knowledge and skills relating to serving immigrant seniors. To facilitate reciprocal integration, there are three target groups for this process: Seniors' Centres' Board Members, Outreach workers/service providers, and senior members of Seniors' Centres or Clubs.

CCIS researches the needs and issues of immigrant seniors, including the Seniors Needs Assessment Project, undertaken by the agency in 2004, a report of which will be

made available to the public in early 2005. It is anticipated that the data collected in this project will be of great benefit to the immigrant seniors and service providers of the Calgary community. To further support the work of service providers, more research with immigrant seniors needs to be done. We cannot serve immigrant seniors without first knowing immigrant seniors. Demographics are available on immigrants and seniors, but it is challenging to find current data on immigrant seniors, especially on immigrant seniors and age, gender, income, ability to speak English and/or French, and cultural background and/or country of origin. Service providers are often willing to serve immigrant seniors, but then face the barrier of not knowing how to do so. Best practices of outreaching and effectively serving immigrant seniors (beyond interpretation and translation) are needed to encourage and guide seniors' services. A greater understanding of how immigrant seniors make a positive contribution could make immigrant seniors feel more valued and welcome, and could enhance society's understanding of and openness to this population.

Canada's demographics are changing, and service providers are striving to respond effectively to the needs and concerns of diverse groups, including immigrant seniors. However, they could benefit from additional funding and support as they continue to enhance their knowledge and services. There is a need to recognize the value of immigrant seniors and their contributions, and to increase funding and programs available to serve them across Canada. Calgary Catholic Immigration Society and its Immigrant Seniors Services will continue to listen to, voice, and serve the needs of immigrant seniors and encourage and support seniors' services to do the same.

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Diversité canadienne / Canadian Diversity

The Association for Canadian Studies produced a special issue of Canadian Diversity/Diversité canadienne (Vol. 3:1, Winter 2004) on the subject of Intersections of Diversity. It was guest edited by Anneke Rummens (University of Toronto) and includes seventeen articles by researchers, policy makers and non-governmental organizations. These explore the implications of intersections using practical examples and discuss how a failure to think through or consider the consequences of intersections leads to inequitable policy and program outcomes. To order a copy of the magazine, please contact either the Association for Canadian Studies (Allison.Anderson@acs-aec.ca) or the Metropolis Project (francois.bertrand@cic.gc.ca).