

Phase 2 of FRP Canada's *Welcome Here* Project

A Summary Report of Lessons Learned

Introduction

The Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs *Welcome Here* Project has consisted of two phases, carried out between 2007 and 2010. Building on the *Welcome Here Resource Kit* developed in Phase 1 of the project, Phase 2 focused on ways to create more welcoming family resource programs for immigrant families. Extracts from the Phase 2 report, entitled *More Lessons Learned*, are presented here. The report combines the responses from an online member survey and six focus groups that were facilitated in three regions in Canada with both immigrant families and practitioners. The complete report is available at www.welcomehere.ca.

FRP Canada online member survey

As part of Phase 2 of the *Welcome Here* project, FRP Canada conducted an online member survey to gather input on current practices concerning services to immigrant and refugee families, as well as to obtain information about practitioners' resource and training needs. The survey was set up using online software, and the link was sent to all FRP Canada member organizations in November 2008. The survey consisted of multiple-choice questions, with the option of adding comments, feedback and suggestions. Care was taken to maintain anonymity of the respondents in order to solicit open feedback. The survey was completed by 104 member organizations.

Approximately 58% of the respondents to FRP Canada's member survey said that many immigrant and refugee families

have settled in their community in the last ten years. One in five said that over three-quarters of the families visiting their program were either immigrants or refugees who have arrived in the last decade. By contrast, almost a third of the respondents answered that fewer than 10% of their participants were in this category. This reflects the fact that immigration is concentrated in certain communities, and not distributed evenly across the country.

Survey respondents reported serving immigrant and refugee families who speak a wide variety of languages. One centre noted that clients of its umbrella organization speak over 100 different languages. The five languages (besides English and French) that were most frequently reported by survey respondents are Spanish, Chinese, Arabic, Farsi (Persian) and Punjabi.

The member survey asked respondents to identify the programs and services that are most frequently accessed by new immigrant and refugee families. The most commonly used programs and services are community information and referral, parenting programs, childcare services and referrals, and volunteer opportunities.

Based on the responses from the member survey, it is evident that immigrants to Canada are settling in both large and small communities across Canada. Community-based organizations, including family resource programs, are faced with the challenge of meeting the needs of new immigrant families and providing programs and services that assist with the successful integration of newcomers into Canadian communities.

FRP Canada focus groups

Between September and December 2008, six focus groups were conducted. The *Welcome Here* team worked in collaboration with the CHANCES Family Centre in Charlottetown to conduct two focus groups, one with immigrant families (14 participants) and one with practitioners who work with immigrant families (15 participants). In North Vancouver, the project team collaborated with the North Shore Neighbourhood House, again conducting two focus groups: one with immigrant parents (25 participants) and the other with practitioners working with immigrant families (23 participants). Similarly, in Ottawa two focus groups were organized in close collaboration with Immigrant Women Service; there were 12 participants in the group for families and 19 in the group for practitioners.

Using a combination of techniques, such as questionnaires, group activities and open discussions, facilitators created an open and safe space for an exchange around three main themes: feelings, building community relationships, and program and training needs.

When asked what makes them feel welcome in a community, newcomer families specifically mention a positive orientation to cultural diversity, including the attitude of staff members and a display of pictures of people from different origins. They also appreciate ready access to child care and programs related to gaining employment. Access to interpreters and to information published in their home language also makes them feel welcome.

Participants in the focus groups for new immigrant families identify the following challenges and needs related to being a new immigrant family in the community:

- Availability and cost of childcare
- Difficulty understanding the needs of young children
- Feelings of being overwhelmed
- Lack of access to information
- Lack of clear information for newcomer families
- Lack of extended family support
- Language and communication barriers
- Securing employment and uncertainty about the future

The practitioners who participated in the focus groups identified the following challenges in working with immigrant families:

- Accessing interpretation and translation services
- Inability to provide services on weekends
- Inability to reach new immigrant families
- Lack of community partnerships
- Lack of information
- Lack of simple resources
- Lack of space and funding

It is interesting to note the similar responses given by immigrant families and by practitioners concerning the challenges they encounter. Both groups identified lack of access to information, lack of clear and simple resources, lack of space, and barriers to language and communication. The focus groups were also asked to develop a “welcome plan.” In the process, it became clear that the desires of immigrant families correspond to what practitioners also feel will create welcoming communities. Access to information, training and support services, translation services, mentorship programs, and a physical environment that celebrates cultural diversity emerge as key components in creating a welcoming community.

Conclusion

The results from both the focus groups and member survey provide valuable information for family support practitioners working with new immigrant families. This information can be used for programming purposes or for guidance in creating solutions to overcome the identified barriers and challenges.

Although there is much work to be done to build welcoming communities, it is evident that family resource programs are doing their best to respond to the needs of immigrant families through the provision of diverse programs and services that both reflect the communities they serve and respond to their needs. Family resource programs continue to build upon the strengths of their participants and create welcoming spaces where families have the opportunity to provide mutual support to one another and to actively participate in community life.

This article presents extracts from *More Lessons Learned: Welcoming Newcomer Families in Family Resource Programs* (2009), published by the Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs (FRP Canada) reporting on Phase 2 of its *Welcome Here* project. Written by Ratna Nadkarni, Kim Hetherington and Magdalene Cooman-Maxwell, the booklet is available from FRP Canada and can also be downloaded from www.welcomehere.ca.