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CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES
MANITOBA

They have stood by me: Supporting Refugee Families in Winnipeg

By Lindsay Larios

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Table of Contents

- 1** Executive Summary
- 3** Introduction
- 4** Understanding Canada's Refugee System
- 6** Refugee Demographics in Manitoba
- 7** Refugee Policy Changes
- 9** Recent Studies on Refugee Settlement Barriers
 - Securing Adequate Housing
 - Accessing Health Care
 - Education and Employment
 - Challenges for Women
- 12** The Family Centre of Winnipeg
- 14** Methodology
- 16** Approach to Service Delivery
 - Flexibility in Services: *"We meet each client's unique needs."*
 - Working in Collaboration: *"Helping other organizations see it from a different lens..."*
 - Building Relationships: *"I trust her with all my heart."*
- 21** Responding to Needs
 - Daycare and Parenting Supports: *"The most important thing is children."*
 - Housing: *"How do you think you will find a house with all these children?"*
 - Everyday Necessities: *"Everything was so expensive."*
 - Language and Documentation: *"See this letter? What they want?"*

27 Understanding Challenges and Moving Forward

Program Capacity and Need: *“I always recommend them, go to The Family Centre.”*

Continuing Difficulties: *“It’s hard, but we do it.”*

Systemic Challenges: *“We have a long way to go, but I’d like to believe we’re going to get there.”*

31 Recommendations

Recommendations for The Family Centre of Winnipeg

Recommendations for Collateral Social Service Organizations

Recommendations for Policy Makers

35 Conclusion

37 References

Executive Summary

The Family Centre of Winnipeg approached the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives–Manitoba (CCPA-MB) to do a qualitative study on their *Family Supports for Refugees Program* to better understand the needs and challenges of settled refugee families in Winnipeg, to examine how this program fits into the larger context of refugee supports available, and to obtain data from which to make policy recommendations. To achieve the stated purposes for this study a combination of focus groups involving The Family Centre staff and staff from collateral organizations and personal interviews with refugee clients were used.

As more newcomer families make Winnipeg their home, The Family Centre has endeavoured to address the unique needs of this population. The *Family Supports for Refugees Program* evolved alongside the pilot project, the *Enhanced Settlement Supports Program* also implemented by The Family Centre, in order to provide complementary service and support to refugee families facing multiple barriers or challenges. While there are many organizations that run settlement and other programs designed to help newcomers, few are able to offer the intensive and ongoing support that some refugee families need in order to successfully integrate into Canadian society

and build a safe and prosperous life. The Family Centre uses support coordinators to work closely with families, helping to identify their needs and connect them to the appropriate resources, while providing support throughout the process. The impact of the *Family Supports for Refugees Program* on clients has been significant.

The *Family Supports for Refugees Program* provides extensive support services using a unique client-centred model. The program is set up to be flexible in the services it can provide and is able to adjust those services to its clients' needs, taking on a number of different roles. Collateral organizations clearly describe this approach as valuable to the community, as they look to the *Family Supports for Refugees Program* to refer clients who have needs outside what their organization can address. Refugee clients appreciate having a centralized location where they know they can get information and help relating to any issue they are confronted with.

A large part of the work that the support coordinators do involves collaboration and consultation with other organizations and resources in the community, with the end goal of surrounding the family with supports by using a multi-disciplinary team. Using this approach was said

by collateral organizations to add a lot of value to the work that all organizations involved can do. The support coordinators are good at networking and bringing supports and resources together to help the family. These organizations also feel supported by the *Family Supports for Refugees Program* when they need guidance working with high needs families and complex refugee family issues.

This kind of flexibility and focus on client needs is especially important when working with a client base that struggles with multiple issues, like the refugee families who have been in Canada for a number of years but are still struggling with language and literacy, navigating social systems, and trauma-related mental health issues that make up the majority of the program's clients. The Family Centre staff and members from other collateral organizations concur that, when working with high needs families, spending more time with them and providing more extensive supports and services makes a huge difference in the family's ability to successfully integrate into Canadian society.

The *Family Supports for Refugees Program* was identified by The Family Centre staff, community organizations, and clients as an essential part of the work done with refugees in Winnipeg, especially when working with high needs families. At present no other newcomer agency is set up to provide this kind of intensive support to families. Many organizations have come to rely on the relationship they share with the *Family Supports for Refugees Program* in working with their high needs refugee clients, expressing that they would be at a loss without this program's services.

The primary recommendation that has surfaced through this research, in discussions with staff members and refugee clients, is the importance of maintaining their holistic, client-centred approach to service delivery, with a focus on supportive relationships. The data indicates that it would be beneficial for this approach to be extended as a general service delivery model to be used by all social service organizations working with refugees, with an emphasis on holistic long-term transitional services accessible to all refugees. Additionally, the research indicated that immigration and settlement policy should be better coordinated with other policy areas, such as child care and housing, two areas identified by clients as their greatest concerns, so as to better meet the needs of refugees and newcomers.

This research has demonstrated that many social programs and larger social systems are not always appropriately equipped to provide services to refugees, particularly refugee women and children. Because of this, many in this portion of the population are not getting the services they need to integrate into Canadian life. The *Family Supports for Refugees Program* created by The Family Centre mediates interactions between newcomers and these systems and is able to put things together when they fall apart, while continually challenging social service organizations to do better. This has been demonstrated as a necessary service for many refugee families. The *Family Supports for Refugees Program* is a testament to the progress that can be made when a program is willing to meet clients where they are and be the kind of personal, committed, and holistic support that so many refugee families need.

Introduction

The Family Centre of Winnipeg has been a long-time support for families residing in the inner city and throughout Winnipeg. As more newcomer families make Winnipeg their home, The Family Centre has endeavoured to create programs to address the unique needs of this population. The *Family Supports for Refugees Program* was created to provide support to refugee families facing multiple barriers or challenges. While there are many organizations that run settlement and other programs designed to help newcomers, few are able to offer the intensive and ongoing support that some refugee families need in order to successfully integrate into Canadian society and build safe and prosperous lives for their families. The impact of the *Family Supports for Refugees Program* on their clients has been significant.

The report discusses the unique approach to service delivery used in the program, particularly The Family Centre's commitment to ongoing support beyond the initial settlement period

and the holistic approach taken in service delivery wherein support coordinators strive to work in collaboration with multiple support systems. It highlights the uniqueness of this approach in an otherwise fractured network of support systems and agencies. The report also identifies key struggles that refugee families face in their settlement and continue to struggle with, as well as how clients have come to see the support they have received as integral to their success in these areas.

Many refugee families have identified The Family Centre as an important resource and indicated there is a tremendous need for the services they provide through the *Family Supports for Refugees Program*. The report concludes with recommendations for The Family Centre of Winnipeg and other service providers, as well as policy changes that could be made on the systemic level that could better facilitate settlement for refugees facing significant challenges.

Understanding Canada's Refugee System

Canada's immigration model is a complex system that generates three main streams of immigration: the economic class, the family reunification class, and persons in need of protection or refugee class (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2013). The economic class mostly comprises skilled professionals who desire to relocate to Canada to work and build a life for themselves and their families. They are assessed according to their education, language skills, employment and work experience, the extent to which Canada is in need of their skills, and their overall adaptability. The family reunification class is made up of those who have been sponsored by family members who are already Canadian citizens or permanent residents to come live in Canada. A significant difference between these two classes and the refugee class, especially when considering settlement needs, is that their migration is voluntary, whereas for refugees it is not.

Refugees and persons in need of protection are those that have been forced out of their home countries due to external circumstances that have proven to be a significant threat to their lives and well-being (Canadian Council for Refugees 2008). As outlined by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and

the *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*, these circumstances may include political and economic instability due to war, well-founded fear of persecution due to race, religion, political opinion, and membership in a particular social group, risk of torture or death (1967). A person may be accepted into Canada as a refugee through one of three streams: as a government-assisted refugee (GAR), as a privately sponsored refugee (PSR), or as a refugee claimant (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2013). The program under which a refugee is accepted into the country can have a considerable effect on their status in Canada upon arrival and on opportunities to access settlement services and benefits.

A government-assisted refugee is someone who has been accepted as having refugee status by the UNHCR, or who is considered a special case of humanitarian concern where a person or group has demonstrated a need for protection, and has subsequently been approved by the government to come to live in Canada with permanent residency (Canadian Council for Refugees 2008). The government may provide a transportation loan to cover the costs of migration as well as initial settlement services and benefits for one to three years, depending on the program.

A privately sponsored refugee must also apply from outside of the country and be sponsored by a Canadian citizen or permanent resident. These sponsors are often family members and community or religious organizations. They are responsible for covering migration costs and providing any basic and initial settlement needs for one year after arrival (Canadian Council for Refugees 2008).

Refugee claimants are those who make their refugee claim upon arrival in Canada or after having lived in Canada and in the wake of new conflict in their home country realize it is unsafe

for them to return. Refugee claimants reside in the country until the status of their refugeehood is determined by the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB). During this interim period, their tentative status in Canada limits their ability to access certain services and benefits. Once approved, government programs are available to assist with settlement issues; however due to long wait times, many have already been living in Canada for a number of years by the time a decision is made on their case (Canadian Council for Refugees 2008)

Refugee Demographics in Manitoba

Due to a provincial government strategy to increase immigration, the number of newcomers settling in Manitoba has increased by about 11,000 over the last 10 years. Although immigration levels have not reached the high numbers of Canada's more densely populated provinces, this increase represents a significant shift in the demographic of the city of Winnipeg, Manitoba's largest urban centre, which became home to nearly 78 percent of the 15,809 newcomers to Manitoba in 2010 (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2013). While there has been a provincial focus on attracting skilled workers, or economic immigrants, through the Manitoba Provincial Nominee Program, newcomers also arrive as part of family reunification programs and as refugees in need of protection.

Refugees made up 6.5 percent of newcomers to Manitoba in 2010, and roughly 1,000 people annually for the last 10 years (Citizenship and Immigration Canada). Of these about half immigrated as GARS and half as PSRS, with the smallest portion coming as refugee claimants. The Manitoba refugee population comes from a diverse number of countries of origin, with the highest numbers from Bhutan, Somalia, Iraq, Myanmar, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, and South Africa (Manitoba Labour and Immigration 2011). The personal backgrounds of these refugees are also diverse, ranging from skilled professionals to those from mostly rural settings and having experience in refugee camps.

Refugee Policy Changes

The demographics of refugees accepted into Canada has changed considerably since the passing of the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA)* by the Canadian government in 2002. Among other things, this legislation designated refugees as a distinct category of newcomer whose eligibility to come to Canada was based on their need for protection rather than their ability to integrate (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2013). While refugees prior to 2002 were never formally subjected to the same eligibility requirements as other immigrants, those selected to come to Canada were often those determined to be most able to integrate within one to two years, therefore unofficially imposing many of the same requirements on them as for economic immigrants (Sherrell 2011). The result was that Canada's refugees were often young, English-speaking, and educated while many of the most vulnerable refugees were left in dangerous situations and refugee camps for long periods of time.

The implementation of the *IRPA* entailed a more humanitarian refugee selection process, which requires, in part, that those in the direst need of protection come first. This post-*IRPA* shift means that increased portions of refugees

coming to Canada are considered 'high needs' and are facing multiple barriers to settlement (Alboim & Cohl 2012). Those arriving are more likely to be coping with significant challenges, such as inproficiency in English, illiteracy in their first language, limited or no formal education, significant physical and mental health issues, having large or single parent families, and having spent time in refugee camps or similar states of displacement. For example, of refugee families interviewed in Edmonton who had spent up to 15 years in a refugee camp environment, all lacked urban experience and all of the women interviewed were illiterate in their own language (Houston 2005). A Winnipeg study revealed that about one third of refugees school-aged or older reported having no formal education and over half had not graduated secondary school (Carter & Osborne 2009). Lack of literacy skills and the presence of trauma-related mental health issues associated with time spent in refugee camps or similar states of displacement compound the difficulties many newcomers already face. These complex issues require enhanced supports that are beyond the capacity of many settlement programs. While the immigration policy had changed and the characteristics of

the refugee population changed, the provision of services did not.

Through Citizenship and Immigration Canada's Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP), GARS are eligible for support services at settlement, as well as income support at local social assistance rates for up to a year. Studies, including Citizenship and Immigration Canada's own evaluation, have shown that the funding and services provided through the RAP often do not adequately address the needs experienced by GARS (Alboim & Cohl 2012; Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2013). Alboim and Cohl found that "most GARS are not self-sufficient

when their eligibility for income support under the RAP ends" (2012, p. 37). Privately sponsored refugees and refugee claimants are not eligible for assistance through RAP, or have very limited access.

Refugees who are categorized as special needs, for example those suffering trauma due to violence or torture, those with mental disabilities, those suffering effects of systemic discrimination, and those with large families, may apply for assistance under the Joint Assistance Sponsorship Program. This program provides joint government and private sponsorship for two years (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2013).

Recent Studies on Refugee Settlement Barriers

Although the number of reports on refugee issues in Winnipeg is limited, there have been a number of studies that indicate that refugee and newcomer families face significant challenges with housing, healthcare, employment, and education, in addition to the unique situations experienced by of refugee women.

Securing Adequate Housing

One major concern is the ability of refugees to secure stable housing. The housing context of Winnipeg presents a number of issues to anyone looking to rent, with availability and affordability of housing options being two key areas of concern. In 2011, Winnipeg reported an extremely low rental vacancy rate of 1.0 percent, which indicates a significant shortage in available units throughout the city (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation 2011). In their study, Carter and Osborne explain how securing housing for newcomer families can be particularly challenging given their larger family size, in contrast to typical Canadian families (2009). Larger rental units with three or four bedrooms only make up 1.1 percent

of the available rental units in Winnipeg (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation 2011). A study conducted by Alper et al. (2012) also focused on the housing crisis in Winnipeg and refugee families, citing 37 percent of all tenant households in Winnipeg are paying over 30 percent of their income on rent, indicating significant issues of affordability (City of Winnipeg, 2006).

Both studies indicate that due to these issues many refugee families are drawn to the inner city areas of Winnipeg, where housing is often less costly, though more often inadequately maintained. Refugee families described dealing with vermin, inadequate heating and ventilation, and other needed repairs (Alper et al. 2012). In a report by Carter and Enns, about 25 percent of refugee families interviewed felt that their inner city rental unit was unsafe and contributing to health problems, 25 percent said they did not feel safe in their neighbourhoods and close to 70 percent of the refugee families interviewed indicated that they wanted to move out of the inner city (2009).

While settlement centres, like Welcome Place¹ and Immigrant and Refugee Community Or-

¹ Welcome Place, or Manitoba Interfaith Immigration Council Inc., is Manitoba's primary settlement agency, providing a variety of programs and services to refugees in the initial stages of their settlement.

ganization of Manitoba (IRCOM),² offer transitional housing services to recent refugees, many families continue to struggle with these housing issues after the initial stages of settlement.

Accessing Health Care

Access to health care is another area of concern for refugees. A study conducted by the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority (WRHA) found that newcomer populations “do not experience equitable access or treatment”, resulting in the “potential to exacerbate social disparities and contribute to lower health status” (2010, pp.4-5). Refugees coming to Canada often have unique health needs due to experiences of persecution in their country of origin or extended stays in refugee camps, making them increasingly vulnerable to physical and mental trauma.

According to McKeary and Newbold, a significant barrier that prevents many refugees from accessing health care is the inability to communicate properly with their health care professionals (2010). Newcomers who are just starting to learn English are often not able to communicate clearly with their doctors, which can lead to misunderstandings resulting in major health impacts for patients. The cost of hiring an interpreter is not covered by all provincial healthcare plans. The WRHA does provide access to interpreters in Winnipeg, but in many smaller urban settings access to an appropriate interpreter is hard to secure.

Furthermore, there is not enough focus placed on cultural competency when providing patients with care (McKeary & Newbold 2010). Providing culturally competent care to refugees requires doctors to spend more time with each patient. This, in addition to language barriers and navigating complicated healthcare refugee insurance plans, makes treating refugee patients more complicated for doctors. As a result, it is difficult for

many refugees to find doctors willing to accept them as patients and they are more likely to frequent walk-in clinics. Refugees themselves are often confused about the eligibility requirements for certain coverage and programs, preventing them from accessing the appropriate coverage.

Recent cuts to the Interim Federal Health program, effective June 30, 2012, place further restrictions on refugee access to healthcare coverage. The Interim Federal Health Program provides temporary healthcare to refugees and refugee claimants who have no other health coverage and limited resources (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2013). Cuts will affect coverage on essential prescription medication, vision and dental care, mobile devices, prenatal care and child health check-ups, and mental health treatment. Inability and failure to address refugee health issues early upon arrival can have a detrimental effect on a newcomer’s long-term health and ability to integrate in mainstream Canadian society (Immigration Matters to Canada Coalition 2012; Winnipeg Regional Health Authority 2010).

Education and Employment

Finding adequate employment and gaining the necessary education for employment eligibility are major barriers to well-being and integration for refugee families. In a longitudinal study conducted by Schellenberg and Maheux on behalf of Statistics Canada, finding adequate employment was cited by 46.1 percent of newcomer participants as the area in which they encountered the most difficulty (2007). Newcomers are eager to find employment in their new country so they can start providing for their families, paying off government transportation loans, and for many, sending money to family still in their home country.

Fluency in English is necessary for employment in Canada, which can present a huge bar-

² The Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba offers transitional housing to newcomer families along with a number of different settlement-related classes and programs for both adults and children.

rier for many newcomers, especially refugees. The first step for many is to participate in English language learning classes. Lack of recognition of foreign credentials presents another major barrier to employment (Magro & Ghorayshi 2011). Many Canadian professional bodies do not recognize foreign qualifications and require extensive retraining, so it is often difficult for newcomers to enter into their professional field upon arrival to Canada. Canadian work experience is also presented as a necessity for many jobs, which is difficult for newcomers. Retraining and furthering their education is not always a realistic option for many families, as one participant describes “survival in an unfamiliar culture took precedence over educational and career goals”(p. 8). Financial hardship forces newcomers to take on ‘second sector jobs’ in factories or service industries with unfavourable working conditions, part time hours, and low pay.

Refugee youth and children also experience unique barriers to education, as outlined in a study conducted by Kanu on African refugee students in Manitoba (2009). Many students in this study were struggling with poverty and working full time in addition to completing their high school education. They struggled with loneliness due to loss of family, experiences of racism, limited proficiency in English, mental health issues resulting from traumatic migration experiences, lack of psychological counseling, and academic gaps due to disrupted schooling. A combination of these factors has historical-

ly led to high dropout rates among newcomer youth. These youth are then left with very limited employment options.

Challenges for Women

A study exploring the unique challenges faced by refugee women when settling in Winnipeg found that refugee families struggled with social service programs that failed to adequately support them in their settlement needs as well as difficulty adjusting to the social norms of Canadian society (Mackinnon, Stephens, & Salah 2006). Families found that the relationship between men and women is very different in Canada compared to their African home countries and this creates tension between spouses as women take on new roles and become aware of their rights in Canada. Refugee women described feeling respected as people and were empowered by the rights they had under Canadian law.

For some this meant they were finally able to break free from abusive relationships that they had previously felt trapped in. Refugee women who have chosen to leave their husbands face a myriad of other social and economic challenges, including social stigma and isolation from their cultural community and bearing a larger financial burden as they endeavour to support themselves and their children. Refugee single mothers are then left to cope with the challenges of settling a family in a new country on their own, while trying to adapt to a new culture and way of family life.

The Family Centre of Winnipeg

The Family Centre of Winnipeg offers a range of services aimed at supporting families through a variety of different programs and initiatives. The *Family Supports for Refugees Program* is focused on addressing the needs of refugee and newcomer families facing multiple barriers and who need additional support settling into life in Manitoba. The program was initially created in 2008 in response to the concerns of staff trying to secure daycare and provide in-home supports for families, especially single refugee mothers, who were identifying many other needs but unable to locate anyone to provide that support. The Manitoba government, with Citizenship and Immigration Canada Innovation Funding, funded The Family Centre in 2011 to implement the *Enhanced Settlement Supports Program* as a two-year pilot project providing intensive case management support to high needs refugees within their first two years of arrival to Canada. At this time, the *Family Supports for Refugees Program* also evolved to provide case management and ongoing intensive support to families outside the scope of the pilot *Enhanced Settlement Supports Program*. Both programs follow a client-centred approach and work in collaboration with other organizations and systems to assist families.

The services provided by the *Family Supports for Refugees Program* include assessment, planning, service coordination, supportive counseling, and advocacy. Each family is assigned a support coordinator who works with them, connecting them to helpful organizations and resources and mediating their interactions with other systems in areas such as healthcare, mental health, education, child protection, the legal system, employment, finance and housing. A large part of the coordinator's role is to work with newcomers in these unfamiliar systems and help the systems work with clients in unique circumstances. The program also provides the services of in-home family support and education workers who come into the clients' homes and help with household tasks, childcare, and teaching Canadian parenting and household management skills.

The *Family Supports for Refugees Program* is geared toward refugee families that may have received settlement supports upon arrival to Manitoba, but continue to face a variety of challenges and require an ongoing support system. As of March 2012, the Family Centre reports having served 58 families over the course of the previous year, in addition providing short-term service, information, and referrals to 110 families. At that

time there were 32 open files (The Family Centre of Winnipeg 2012). Clients come from a variety of different cultural backgrounds and speak a number of different languages. Countries of origin for clients in 2011 included Afghanistan, Burundi, Columbia, Myanmar, Kosovo, Somalia, and Sudan, with highest numbers from Congo, Eritrea, and Ethiopia. Many also indicated they had taken refuge in other countries before migrating to

Canada. The most common countries of refuge for clients were Kenya, South Africa, Sudan, and Uganda, among many others. Of the 58 families, the majority of clients are government-assisted or privately sponsored refugees who have been in Canada since 2008 or earlier. Family types consisted of both one-parent and two-parent families, most with one to three children, but some with as many as seven to nine children.

Methodology

The Family Centre of Winnipeg approached the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Manitoba (CCPA-MB) for the purpose of having us conduct a study with their clients, staff, and collateral agencies on their *Family Supports for Refugees Program*. The intent was to better understand the needs of refugees in Winnipeg, the extent to which this program addresses those needs, and how the program can develop in order to meet those needs better. The research was done through a series of focus groups and personal interviews. Ethics approval for this project was granted through the Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence Research Ethics Committee.

Two focus groups were held and facilitated by CCPA-MB researchers using open-ended questions with the intent of initiating conversation among the participants. Both focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed.

The first focus group included five staff members from The Family Centre, who were selected because of their understanding of the successes and challenges of the *Family Supports for Refugees Program* and its general operation. Stakeholders from collateral agencies and organizations that have connected with the program in their work with clients were contacted for the second

focus group. This group included seven representatives of collateral organizations spanning a variety of service areas including health, mental health, disability, domestic violence, counseling, housing, and immigrant and refugee settlement services. This group was able to provide a perspective from their experience connecting with program clients and staff.

To better understand the settlement needs of refugees in Winnipeg and the services provided by The Family Centre, a CCPA-MB researcher conducted 11 interviews with individual clients of the *Family Supports for Refugees Program*. The Family Centre arranged interpreters for a number of interviews when the client chose to participate in a language other than English. Each interview was recorded and transcribed, with the exception of one during which the interviewee expressed she did not want to be recorded and interviewer took written notes.

Interviewees were all parents, including four mothers from two-parent families, one father from a two-parent family, and six single-parent mothers. Interviewees had been in Canada for various amounts of time ranging from less than a year to 10 years, arriving from countries of origin including Afghanistan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Dem-

ocratic Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Myanmar, Nigeria, Somalia, and Sudan. A number of clients had arrived in Canada only after prolonged stays in refugee camps, for instance, one family spent 10 years in South Africa, another reported a nine year stay in Kenya, and others spent time in Sudan and Libya. Most clients interviewed were either government-assisted refugees or privately sponsored refugees, one was a refugee claimant, and one a sponsored immigrant. Despite the unique circumstances of each client, there were many similarities in the challenges they encountered adjusting to life in Canada.

A CCPA-MB research analyzed the transcripts from the focus groups and interviews, picking out reoccurring themes relating to The Family Centre's approach to service delivery, the kinds of issues refugee clients most often faced as barriers and the kind of help they were able to receive, and the continuing challenges faced by service providers and refugee clients as they build lives in Winnipeg. Particular attention was paid to the stories refugees told about the barriers they had identified while transitioning into a new society, recognizing them as the experts on their own experience.

Approach to Service Delivery

Within the context of Winnipeg immigrant and refugee services, The Family Centre's *Family Supports for Refugees Program* provides extensive support services using a unique client-centred approach in their work with high needs refugee families. As expressed in both the personal interviews and the focus groups, the features of the program's approach to service delivery that had the greatest impact on clients and collateral organizations were the flexibility of support coordinators in providing services, their drive to work in collaboration with other organizations to best meet the needs of clients, and the emphasis placed on building strong trusting relationships with clients.

Flexibility in Services: “We meet each client’s unique needs.”

Flexibility in services refers both to the *Family Supports for Refugees Program's* openness to clients in a variety of stages of settlement and to the range of needs they are willing to address with the client.

Social service agencies are generally restricted by their policies and mandates and often are not able to extend themselves beyond those regulations. For example, settlement services tend to

focus on providing comprehensive service during the first year after arrival but then may taper off. Other services address specific needs like housing or employment and are not equipped to handle peripheral issues. Furthermore, eligibility for some programs may be restricted to GARS.

In contrast, the *Family Supports for Refugees Program* is set up to be more flexible in the services it can provide and staff are able to adjust those services to their clients' needs, taking on a number of different roles and interacting with a number of different systems. As one staff member from a collateral organization described,

“The things that [The Family Centre] can do, that we can't do, are just amazing. I mean, they've got lots of my clients connected to in-home supports, to childcare, to lots of one-on-one supports; so they've really been very helpful.”

Collateral organizations clearly describe this approach as valuable to the community, as they look to the *Family Supports for Refugees Program* to refer clients who have needs beyond what their organization can address. As one interviewee affirmed, “They help with everything.”

This kind of flexibility and focus on client needs is especially important when working with

a client base that faces multiple issues, like the refugee families who have been in Canada for a number of years but are still struggling with language and literacy, navigating social systems, and trauma-related mental health issues. These clients make up the majority of *Family Supports for Refugees*' clients. Explained one support coordinator,

"We meet each family's unique needs. There's not one sort of approach or one product we offer, like where we say, 'well, we do this, but we don't do that'. So we try to be creative and open."

The Family Centre staff and members from other collateral organizations concur that, when working with high needs families, spending more time with them and providing more extensive supports and services makes a huge difference in the family's ability to successfully integrate into Canadian society.

One collateral organization staff member recalled working with The Family Centre staff to help a refugee client suffering from mental health issues triggered by trauma experienced in her home country. She was facing challenges adapting to life in Canada and coping with the trauma, which had a devastating effect on her social interactions and ability to access services. After working extensively over a two-year period with The Family Centre, he described her as stable and doing well.

Because the *Family Supports for Refugees Program* does not limit its client intake to recently arrived refugees and are willing to engage with a broad range of organizations and systems, they are able to help all those facing challenges in a holistic way that encompasses all of their needs.

Working in Collaboration: "Helping other organizations see it from a different lens..."

Working in collaboration with other organizations and connecting clients with resources is a central component of the *Family Supports*

for Refugees Program. This collaborative work involves helping clients navigate systems, networking with organizations to bring resources together for clients, and supporting organizations as they work with newcomer populations.

The *Family Supports for Refugees* support coordinators see their case management role as one that allows them to work with families holistically by getting to know the family, assessing all the major issues, and working with them to access all the appropriate resources. In many cases these are families who, for many different reasons, have fallen through the cracks between the different social systems they have been referred to. Support coordinators are there to ensure clients understand why they are being referred, go through with their appointments, follow up with them to make sure their needs were addressed, and assist clients in making decisions about the options they are presented with and how they can get the most from the services they have access to. Collateral organizations expressed appreciation for this aspect of the program because they know someone is there to help with the referral process.

When needed, support coordinators make a point of accompanying clients to appointments and physically guiding them through different systems, based on the client's needs and priorities. Their practice is to not simply refer clients to other people for services, but also to go with them to make sure their needs were appropriately met. This aspect of accompaniment and doing tasks with clients, rather than simply telling them what to do, helps ease the transition into a new culture with new systems and builds client confidence as their understanding of these systems grows. Through this process, clients are accessing the appropriate resources and also learning from support coordinators how to interact successfully with these systems.

Advocacy is an area emphasized by the support coordinators, with members of collateral agencies affirming the staff to be "incredible advocates for

families.” Because of their relationship with the family and knowledge of community resources, case coordinators often act as mediators, helping both clients and other service providers adjust to a new working situation. Staff members work with other organizations to make sure they understand the perspective of the refugee families they are working with and the issues they face, while also verifying that families understand their rights and responsibilities.

A large part of the work that the support coordinators do involves collaboration and consultation with other organizations and resources in the community, with the end goal of surrounding the family with supports by using a multidisciplinary team. The support coordinators are good at networking and bringing supports and resources together to help the family. Explained a support coordinator,

“I think that the more people can come together to support the family, that the faster the family can get on their feet and the more supported everybody feels. You know, the family is not alone, and one agency, and one person, is not alone struggling”.

Using this approach was said by collateral organizations to add depth and cohesion to the work that all organizations involved can do.

Members of collateral organizations commended the staff of the *Family Supports for Refugees Program* for their openness to consultation and their constant concern with learning and integrating other people’s knowledge, opinion, and expertise into their practice.

These organizations also feel supported by the *Family Supports for Refugees* staff when they need guidance working with high needs families and complex refugee family issues. As one collateral organization member explained,

“The Family Centre offers the families we work with support but they also offer us as staff support; so when we’re dealing with really

complex families we can work together as a multidisciplinary team. And I think that really adds a lot of value to the work that both of our organizations can do.”

Support coordinators noted that not all organizations are well equipped to handle the needs of newcomers, and many are unfamiliar with the complex situations presented by some refugee families. They work hard to build relationships with other agencies and in other systems with which their clients often interact.

This collaborative approach has proven beneficial for the support coordinators and members of collateral organizations as they become aware of the work that each organization can do and ways they can work together to support clients. Because they are so connected to these resources, clients come to view their support coordinator as a source of knowledge and possible connections in addressing any challenge they are facing.

Building Relationships: “I trust her with all my heart.”

Central to the supportive process for the *Family Supports for Refugees Program* are the relationships between staff and clients. The client-centred approach means that staff’s personal interactions with clients are focused on building trust and emphasizing confidentiality, offering emotional support, visiting their homes, and in some cases providing support beyond what is expected.

Forming trusting relationships allow clients to open up more and support coordinators are able to get a better sense of the underlying issues families are struggling with, allowing them to come up with more meaningful solutions, rather than “superficial referrals”. As clients are provided with useful information, not only does that personal sense of trust grow, but also trust in the advice that is offered from The Family Centre. Both The Family Centre support coordinators and collateral organizations testified to the importance of connecting with cli-

ents in a consistent and sensitive way to restore trust and client self-confidence. In-home visits allow staff to get to know the families they are working with and develop a clearer understanding of their daily lives and the issues they face. Members from these organizations commended the support coordinators for their capacity for relationship building, citing that many organizations did not have the time or the staff to devote this kind of intensive quality attention to all of their clients.

In every interview it was evident that clients had developed very strong relationships with their support coordinators. Some interviewees described how past experiences in their home countries and refugee camps in other countries had made them wary of divulging too much information or asking for too much. One mother explained,

“Since back home, because of all the things that happened to me, I couldn’t trust nobody. So I couldn’t even trust her... Then after coming here, I see that our contract was only professional. So now I can trust her with many things.”

The promise of confidentiality and the assurance provided by the professional setting was seen as important to many of the interviewees who were struggling with very personal difficulties. Another mother explained,

“When I talk to them, I feel more comfortable to say what I have on my mind. I know that what I say is not going outside somewhere. They keep it here safe.”

Others described how it was easy for them to trust their support coordinator because they felt immediately welcomed and could feel staff were honest and genuine in their desire to support and help them.

Not only do support coordinators provide information and connect newcomers to resources and services, but for many they are also a source

of great emotional support. When talking about her support coordinator, one mother stated, “Probably she is the only person I can talk to about anything and everything.” A number of interviewees alluded to feeling like children, having to relearn everything over again and how that can be disempowering and overwhelming.

“For single mothers, everything is hard for you,” explained one interviewee who had recently gone through a breakdown in her marriage,

“You don’t have any relative here. Just you and the children. All the problems that you have, you have to face alone. So if you don’t have anybody there to tell you ‘it’s okay, we can help you, can support you’, you can’t stand up. You just get frustrated and lose yourself and lose the kids. But if you have somebody beside you, helping you, take you, saying ‘let’s go see it, let’s go do it’, it’s just like giving you more morale and more energy, that you say back home ‘I can do it’. That’s what they do at The Family Centre.”

A number of refugee women found continuous support with their support coordinators while going through sensitive issues and conflict in their marriages.

Support coordinators recalled providing supports to refugee women who have left their spouses due to issues of domestic violence. These are now single mothers with children who are isolated from their cultural community because of the pressure they feel from that community to reconcile with their husbands, who are struggling to understand the legal system and their rights, and who may be still facing the threat of danger. In a number of cases, support coordinators have been the ones to support these women through this emotional and difficult time because they had no one else there to walk them through the process and provide that emotional support.

Provision of emotional support and supportive counseling from support coordinators extends to all areas of clients’ lives. Interviewees

mentioned feeling worried and frustrated about being stuck in an inadequate job, or not finding daycare in time to enroll in their courses, or tackling a traumatic and difficult illness as examples of times they have gone to their support coordinators for emotional support. One interviewee described how her support coordinator told her “every time you have a problem or need help, call me” (translation). Although sometimes she feels like she calls too much, her support coordinator always tells her not to worry and welcomes the conversation.

Clients said that the personal attention and support they receive makes them feel like family. Interviewees told how their support coordinators would call to check in on them and their families and often go out of their way to help however they can, occasionally even when it is beyond the normal requirements of their job. For example, one interviewee described how her support coordinator would attend appointments with her and provide other assistance even on her day off.

One woman described being overwhelmed by the kindness and concern shown to her fam-

ily when she came in with a family member who did not have proper footwear and the support coordinator made sure she had appropriate winter boots before leaving. This woman explained how since she left her home country, she and her family had spent long periods of time in refugee camps in different countries across Africa. During those stays they experienced much discrimination, from verbal harassment to physical violence, because despite residing there for up to 10 years they were always seen as foreigners and received little assistance. In her interactions with The Family Centre, she felt respected as a person and welcomed as a Canadian as opposed to a foreigner who did not belong. The warm and open relationships she has formed with the staff at The Family Centre have had a lasting impact on her emotional well-being and sense of self.

Building trusting relationships, providing emotional support, and going out of their way to support clients are key features of the approach taken by the *Family Supports for Refugees Program* to understand the needs of their clients and work with them toward solutions.

Responding to Needs

Refugees face a number of challenges when settling in a new country. Challenges related to accessing daycare so mothers can continue in their education and gain employment, parenting supports, locating adequate and affordable housing, struggling to provide basic necessities for their families, and problems involving language and documentation were all issues that refugee interviewees, support coordinators, and other collateral staff raised. The Family Centre support coordinators are able to advocate and connect their clients to resources to address each of these needs.

Daycare and Parenting Supports: “The most important thing is children.”

All of the clients interviewed were parents, all of whom voiced that caring and providing for their children is one of their top priorities. Many expressed that the most valuable support they receive from their support coordinator is help with their children. This help includes finding daycare so a mother could attend classes or pursue employment, providing an in-home family support worker to help with household tasks and childcare, learning Canadian parenting practices, mediating discussions with the

school and other systems, and advocating on their child’s behalf.

Many of the interviewees indicated that what initially brought them in contact with The Family Centre was their struggle to find daycare for their young children. They experienced difficulty in the application process, particularly filling out the needed forms with limited English literacy, and were frustrated by the extended wait times for daycare openings. The help they received from their support coordinators throughout the application process and in accessing available daycare spots and subsidies were described by mothers as one of the most important services they had received from The Family Centre.

Accessing daycare was a first step for many looking to pursue education, either full time or part time, especially English classes. One mother explained how she was accepted as a full time student in an educational program, but how her attendance was contingent on accessing daycare. She described being very frustrated and overwhelmed until receiving help from The Family Centre. She explained, “Without that daycare, I couldn’t go to school and get a job. So it was a great help.” In addition, because of a lack of relatives or alternative caregivers, attending appoint-

ments, for instance a medical or legal appointment, was difficult without childcare.

The importance of daycare was a recurring theme, especially when talking to single mothers, who emphasized the need for many different reasons. These women felt strongly about their need to learn English and support their families and recognized that it was important both for themselves and their children to not just stay at home everyday, but get into the community and interact with other people and children. Children can be affected by traumatic experiences in their countries of origin or refugee camp, in addition to the difficulties of a big move and adjusting to a new country. One mother described how her young son had become withdrawn and was crying all the time. Being able to interact and play with other children, once he had daycare, made a significant impact on his emotional well-being and ability to adjust.

Many mothers are referred to The Family Centre by their healthcare providers after giving birth. This is most often the case when the mother is the lone caregiver and there are other children in the family to be cared for in addition to the new baby, or when some other family need is identified as not being met, for example inadequate housing or inability to meet basic needs. In these situations, The Family Centre is able to offer supports to the mother, most greatly exemplified by providing the mother with an in-home family support worker who would come into the home a number of times throughout the week to help the mother with household tasks and childcare. Mothers already dealing with the stresses of settling into a new country, in addition to a new baby, benefit greatly from the respite care and other family supports.

Parents also found their support coordinators and in-home family support workers both to be helpful in teaching them about Canadian home life and child raising practices. A number of those interviewed discussed the differences between raising a family in their home countries

in Africa and here in Canada, and how they must be mindful of the different Canadian laws that outline accepted practices of child discipline, for example. One mother described how she did not like the shouting and physical discipline she was brought up with as a child but did not know any other way to raise her children. She found the things she learned from her workers to be very valuable, saying “I have never seen in my life time-out. It is good.”

Newcomer parents not familiar with Canadian parenting practices and expectations may have an increased risk of being involved with Child and Family Services, which can be a damaging experience for many families. Providing parents with this kind of information can have a significant impact on a family’s transition into a new society.

Parents talked about other supports they have received from their support coordinators that have helped them with their children. One mother mentioned her encounter with Child and Family Services. Her support coordinator attended meetings and appointments with her to make sure she understood everything that was being said and required of her. Support coordinators have also visited schools with parents when there is an issue with a child, working with teachers and principals to support the child’s educational needs and help resolve issues with the school. Parents are happy that their older children also feel comfortable coming to The Family Centre when they have a problem. They see the support they receive from The Family Centre as not only helping them, but also providing a support system for their whole family. Parents and children can have smoother interactions with these systems when their support coordinator is there to mediate discussions, help with interpretation needs, and ensure that the child’s needs are not being lost in miscommunication.

Refugee parents described being connected to daycares and parenting supports as an important part of their families being able to inte-

grate into Canadian society. These services allow parents to attend necessary appointments and classes as they build their lives in Canada, while ensuring that refugee children are also getting the support they need.

Housing: “How do you think you will find a house with all these children?”

Many interviewees described their difficulties finding suitable housing for their families. The Family Centre played a large role in supporting families through housing crises, connecting families with housing resources and collaboratively working with those organizations, and advocating for clients when there were other housing-related concerns.

For some refugee clients the crisis level of their housing situation prompted their referral to The Family Centre. One single mother describes living in a hotel with her two children and newborn baby after a particularly difficult delivery. Her hospital social worker put her in contact with The Family Centre who was able to provide in-home supports as well as work in conjunction with New Journey Housing³ to find her and her children a place to live. Another mother described the difficulties of living in a shelter with her family and newborn, after her family had grown beyond the capacity of her sponsor’s ability to house. Similarly, it was her healthcare providers who referred her to The Family Centre, who facilitated meetings with New Journey Housing and helped her and her husband with the Manitoba Housing⁴ application process. Through that process, she developed a strong relationship with her support coordinator, who was able to speak her language. Waiting for an available spot in Manitoba Housing was a taxing experience for the family while they continued

to live in the shelter and her support coordinator was a constant source of emotional support. She explained that while her and her husband were willing to rent privately; they knew that realistically it was not an affordable option for them right now. They had to improve their English before entering the workforce, and in the meantime the amount they were given for housing through government programming, just under \$400, was not enough to cover the costs of the housing needs for their family. Another mother described her emotional distress dealing with escalating conflict with the father of her children and turning to her support coordinator at The Family Centre for help working with Manitoba Housing to move her and her children to a new safe location.

In all of these cases, the families’ ability to settle into life in Winnipeg and integrate into Canadian society was negatively affected by not having a safe place to call home. Finding better housing options gave these families more stability.

Much of the help families received from The Family Centre regarding housing involved connecting them to New Journey Housing and help with the Manitoba Housing application process. Finding adequate housing for a large family in a new place is a daunting task. Help filling out the necessary forms was considered a great help by many. One interviewee explained that applying to Manitoba Housing was necessary for his family because where they had been living was too expensive and did not have the necessary amenities. He was frustrated when the Manitoba Housing application process required two references and one year of rental history, given that he had only been in Canada less than a year and did not have anyone to ask for references. The

³ New Journey Housing is a resource centre which assists newcomers through the process of attaining and retaining affordable housing in Winnipeg.

⁴ Manitoba Housing is a government social housing program that provides a wide array of affordable and subsidized housing options for individuals or families living on low to moderate income.

Family Centre and New Journey Housing were able to provide him with the appropriate references and help with the application.

Many interviewees who came to Winnipeg as GARS reported that they received help with housing from other organizations, like Welcome Place and IRCOM, when they first arrived. Some were pleased with the housing arrangements they had worked out and continue to live there. For others, the housing arrangements made upon arrival were of a more temporary nature, and when moving their family became necessary, they no longer fit the early settlement requirements of these programs. The Family Centre was able to connect these families to organizations like New Journey Housing and provide supports through the process of securing housing. Because these families are connected to organizations that can help with housing, they feel supported through the process and are more likely to stick with it and have a successful end result.

In addition to help find housing, support coordinators often helped with other housing-related issues as well. One mother noticed her children were becoming very sick and having increased difficulty breathing. The support coordinator discovered mould growing on a window. The family had never seen mould like that before and did not realize it would have that effect on their children. Their worker demonstrated how to clean the mould properly with bleach and made sure the children saw a doctor. Another interviewee described a situation where she was overcharged on her hydro bill and sought advice from her support coordinator on how to resolve the issue. Other help was also received for moving, changing addresses, and concerns over an unsafe neighbourhood.

One interviewee described issues with a landlord and tenant's agreement, where the lease they signed specified use of laundry facilities but then they were not permitted to use them. They felt taken advantage of,

“We were paying for it, but we were not provided. Like they took advantage of us, thinking 'cause we were black, or they just came, they don't know the law, you know?”

The family felt stuck because they had already signed the agreement. The Family Centre connected them with New Journey Housing, who was able to advocate on their behalf to get them out of the lease.

In working with The Family Centre and other housing organizations on these issues, newcomer families learn about their rights as tenants and have more confidence in their interactions with landlords and other household service providers.

From locating and securing adequate housing to issues in home-maintenance and rental contracts, support coordinators well able to successfully help many refugee clients with this important part of settlement. Connecting clients with knowledgeable collateral agencies has been integral to their success when dealing with housing issues.

Everyday Necessities: “Everything was so expensive.”

For refugee families, especially those that are large or single parent, living on a small fixed income and obtaining everyday necessities like food and clothing can be challenging. This is an even more pressing concern for those families with children. The Family Centre has played a large role in connecting their refugee clients to resources and organizations that try to address these needs through donations.

Many client families are still transitioning into life in Canada and have not yet been able to secure employment for a variety of reasons, most often because they were still taking language classes or struggling to find daycare. The social assistance rates are often not enough to financially cover the needs of their families. Interviewees talked about not knowing about

food banks and how their support coordinator introduced them to Winnipeg Harvest⁵, where they were able to access donated food for their families. In addition to food, support coordinators are able to connect their clients to a number of different donated goods including clothing for themselves and their children, such as shoes, snow boots, and snow suits, in addition to beds and other furniture, kitchen dishes, soap, diapers, toys, and school supplies. Many interviewees remembered being overwhelmed by the generosity of The Family Centre staff and the lengths they went to in order for their families to have these things. Being able to access these resources helps ease some of the financial strain experienced by some newcomer families and ensures that their children's food and clothing needs are met.

Those most often accessing these types of donations are refugee claimants and PSRS, who do not have the same access to government financial support and are not provided with the same knowledge on how to access resources. Basic knowledge like where the most inexpensive place to buy food is or how to hook up her phone line, were things that one refugee claimant mother got help with from her support coordinator at The Family Centre. These basic Canadian life skills would have been taught to GARS through their initial settlement agency; however, other refugees do not have the same access to these programs, and therefore are more likely to struggle. The provision of this kind of service is especially important for PSRS and refugee claimants. Interviewees also discussed being provided with bus tickets from The Family Centre and learning about the transit system, which they described as a very valuable resource.

Having adequate food and clothing was a pressing concern for all parents, but especially for single mothers who were not yet able to work. Baby food, formula, and diapers were listed

as considerable costs, as well as concerns over clothing for their constantly growing children, especially in the winter. Children's school and daycare added extra costs. One mother described how there were some groceries that Winnipeg Harvest did not offer but that she had to buy because her children's daycare required them to bring yoghurt and juice, which contributed to her daycare costs.

Accessing basic necessities can be a challenge for some refugee families who are living on a limited income without extensive knowledge of the Canadian way of life. This is especially so for refugee claimants and PSRS who do not have the same supports in their settlement experience as GARS. Furthermore, these shortages are a constant concern for parents trying to provide a better life for their children.

Language and Documentation: “See this letter? What they want?”

In Canadian society where every social system follows the practice of filling out forms and issuing letters, accessing services can be an intimidating feat for someone who is just starting to read and write English. Attending appointments conducted fully in English is also frustrating for clients who have just started learning the language. Support coordinators have assisted their clients in understanding these documents, accompanying them to appointments, and providing interpreters.

Many interviewees said they receive many letters in the mail and struggle to understand them or feel uneasy about their literacy skills and want to make sure they are not missing something. Misinterpreting bills that are mailed to them, letters regarding services and benefits, or legal documents could have dire consequences. They are able to bring these letters to their support coordinators at The Family Centre for help understanding them.

⁵ Winnipeg Harvest is a non-profit community-based organization that is a food distribution and training centre.

Filling out forms and writing letters is a similar problem for many newcomers. Interviewees described how they came to their support coordinators for help filling out income tax forms for Revenue Canada, forms for Employment Insurance Assistance (EIA), and other forms for their children's schools and daycare. Helping newcomers navigate these types of services and systems is a big part of the role of the support coordinator. One mother described receiving news telling her that she would no longer be getting her Child Benefit. Her support coordinator was able to advocate on her behalf and work with her to prepare the proper documents and helped her to write a letter. With this help, she was able to access the Child Benefit once more – money she relied on to help her support her children.

Because the system and language was so unfamiliar, one interviewee explained, she was always afraid to go places, especially for important appointments. When her support coordinator began to attend appointments with her, she found it a big help. She was able to see how her support coordinator talked to people and how the system worked, and now has more confidence to go on her own. Another mother described how her support coordinator would accompany her to court, to make sure she understood everything that was happening, to help explain to others that they have to speak slowly and might have to repeat. Having her support coordinator there as an advocate and support helped her feel more confident in the process and her understanding of what was happening. Support coordinators attending appointments with families with Child and Family Services and with schools was also considered a great help. As a result, newcomers who once felt intimidated and confused by these appointments now felt supported and more confident that the outcomes would benefit their families.

Being able to attend appointments with families is especially helpful when the support coordinator can also act as an interpreter, as a number are able to speak to clients in their own languages. As one mother described,

“At that time, I didn't know English. Everything, everywhere you go, you don't know where you are going. And when somebody says something, you don't understand, but you nod your head like, I understand.”

When she started working with The Family Centre, she said, “everything became easier.”

When they are not able to do the interpreting themselves, support coordinators play a role in scheduling interpreters to attend meetings with families, which is not always an easy task. One mother described her biggest struggle as not having a consistent interpreter for her regular hospital visits. Her support coordinator at The Family Centre was able to work with the hospital to arrange to have an interpreter present for every visit. She described how

“before they set up the interpreter, I had very many appointments, and when I went to my appointment, and if no one interpret for me, I just have to go. Sometimes when friends are available, they help me with interpret. Sometimes no one will be there, and I just have to go home” (translation).

Now she is able to get the consistent medical attention she needs, without the stress of not being able to communicate with her doctor. This has had a major positive impact on her health and her ability to care for her family.

The support interviewees received with understanding letters, filling out forms, and interpretation was seen as invaluable because of how these things affect everything else in their lives.

Understanding Challenges and Moving Forward

Support coordinators and newcomers both emphasized that the need for this program exceeds its current capacity. This need will only continue to grow as refugees still continuously come up against barriers to integration, from a lack of appropriate programming to reliance on systems that are not equipped to address their unique situations.

Program Capacity and Need: “I always recommend them, go to The Family Centre.”

Interviewees often discussed how The Family Centre had given them information and brought them into contact with many other agencies and organizations that they would have otherwise known nothing about. They are quick to recommend the program to others. There is a great need for the services the *Family Supports for Refugees Program* has to offer; yet its capacity at present is limited.

People described the office as a “reference” point or as a “foundation” from which everything started. When someone does not know the city they are in or the opportunities for help that are out there, it is easy to get stuck, they say. Because everything is so different from their home coun-

tries, one mother explained how important it was to have someone to guide her through the different systems and help her make the most beneficial decisions for her family. Many described how it would have been very difficult for them without the help of The Family Centre, that they would have fallen behind, or it would have taken them many years on their own to accomplish what was easy for them with the help of their support coordinators.

Interviewees have recommended The Family Centre to other people when they have a problem that they do not know how to address and found that most people do not know about it. All interviewees expressed the urgent need for programs like this and believe there are many other newcomers who could benefit from these services. There was a consensus among many of those interviewed that The Family Centre should do more to make the public aware of what their services are and draw people in. Unless people are referred, there are few ways for them to know what kind of help is offered at The Family Centre, specifically their *Family Supports for Refugees Program*.

Staff members expressed concerns about the program’s capacity to reach all the vulner-

able refugee families in Winnipeg that could be in need of their support and services. The Family Centre has been struggling with how best to inform people about the program and identify families in need, without overwhelming the program's capacity. There has been no overt advertising of the *Family Supports for Refugees Program*; rather it relies on referrals from other agencies. At present the program is filled to capacity, but has never had to turn clients away or make them wait for services. If the *Family Supports for Refugees Program* experienced a sudden increase in clients, it would not have the resources to continue in the same way and would have to start prioritizing client needs. Support coordinators describe how at some point clients need to transition out of the program to make room for others, but this is a difficult expectation when their issues are still ongoing. As families grow they encounter new issues, and support coordinators expressed concern as to whether this program has the staff capacity to work with families long term while also welcoming new clients into the program, but do not see any other supports out there that can help them in the same way.

Expansion of the program to provide after hours or emergency access services was also identified as a potential way to enhance supports for refugee families, both by clients and *Family Supports for Refugees* staff. Families that are coping with language issues, distrust of authority, and mental health issues, may be hesitant to contact emergency services unless they can be assured it is safe for them. Furthermore, emergency services staff may not have access to all the resources necessary to help refugee families in this situation. Support coordinators believe there could be a role there for some of their services to help mediate services during times of crisis.

Clients and collateral staff both testified that the services and delivery model used by the *Family Supports for Refugees Program* are the most appropriate for working with refugees. Currently an influx of clients could alter the nature of this

model, as intensive long term services would no longer be possible given the limited number of staff. Expanding the program would allow more newcomers to access these services, while offering the same level of support to all.

Continuing Difficulties: “It’s hard, but we do it.”

All interviewees saw the help and support they received from The Family Centre as an invaluable asset as they build their lives in Canada. Despite this, there are still some issues that families continue to struggle with on a day-to-day basis including accessing childcare, supporting their older children, and building a social network.

For a number of mothers that were interviewed, childcare was still an ongoing issue. Many had access to The Family Centre’s in-home support worker for three to four hour periods twice a week, but felt this was not enough, especially for those wanting to use this time to take English language classes. Gaining more access to childcare was a priority for many, whether through increased frequency of in-home support worker visits or full time daycare. One mother described how her husband worked and attended school throughout the week, while she stayed at home to take care of their children. She expressed an ardent desire to go back to school to improve her English, but does not have full time childcare available to her at this time. She described feeling isolated not knowing the language and not being able to interact with others, stating “I’m so tired of being at home all the time. It’s kind of depressing”. Another mother expressed how a greater flexibility in the times the in-home support worker could come would be helpful, for example being able to schedule time in the evenings and on weekends. She described having to work during the week, with evenings and weekends the only time available to take classes, but having trouble accessing childcare during these times. Interviewees understood that scheduled time with in-home support workers is limited

because the staff itself is limited; however, many believed that there was a need for an increased number of in-home support workers.

Collateral organization members described how employment and language learning programs are not easily accessible to mothers, who make up a large percentage of the refugee population; rather they are geared toward single individuals with no children. With this focus, they appear to have a high success rate, but do not in reality target those who are most in need of such services. Similar to statements from the interviewees, in their experience, what most restricts mothers from accessing these services is a lack of childcare.

While all interviewees communicated the great extent with which The Family Centre was able to help with the needs of their children, one mother expressed concern over accessing supports for her older children. She indicated that while her younger children seemed to be doing well, her oldest was struggling in school and with his peer group and did not feel there was as much support out there for newcomer youth. Many parents shared her sentiment, saying that school was a difficult place for newcomer youth who are struggling with the language and have little experience with formal education.

Members from collateral organizations also expressed newcomer youth school drop-out rates as a continuing concern. In their experience, some families come to rely on older children to interpret for them during appointments and meetings because they have picked up the language faster, so class attendance is not always the priority. As a result they do not always have the same family support for their education. Access to interpreters continues to be a big challenge for some families and service providers.

Clients that were interviewed also expressed an interest in developing ways to connect with each other. A few suggested that The Family Centre could organize gatherings for their newcomer clients to come and socialize, and also to

come together for supportive purposes. As one single mother explained, “It is not easy to make friends”, and wondered if support coordinators could bring together newcomers in such a way that they could get to know one another, share food, and practice their English. Another suggestion was put forward that newcomers who are struggling with the same problems could come together to talk about it, like a support group, facilitated by support coordinators, where they could share information and talk about solutions. Underlying these ideas are feelings of isolation in a new and different place, far away from the support and company of family and friends.

The Family Centre continues to work with clients and bring together resources from other organizations to help them find solutions that address the needs of their families. As the family grows, new issues emerge, and refugee families must adjust to these new challenges often while still dealing with the difficult process of settling in a new country.

Systemic Challenges: “We have a long way to go, but I’d like to believe we’re going to get there.”

Both the support coordinators from The Family Centre and members from collateral organizations alluded to the many systemic challenges that they come up against when working with newcomers. The health and mental health systems, the justice and legal systems, and employment support and language learning programs consistently overlook the unique needs of refugees, especially those relating to language and cultural competency and sensitivity.

For non-English speakers, language is the first barrier they encounter and it continues to present itself as a problem in every interaction with any system or program. The Family Centre and collateral staff members emphasized that many or most systems do not have experience with and are not prepared for non-English speaking clients. While access to interpreters is sometimes

available, there is a lack of trained and skilled interpreters, especially for uncommon dialects. As a result there can be a lot of miscommunication between service providers in these systems and newcomers. For example, the healthcare and mental health systems both struggle with assessment when there is a language barrier. One staff member from The Family Centre described a situation in which a refugee family's young son was diagnosed with autism, but his parents clearly did not know what that meant, for there was no word in their language to describe this condition. They were expected to go through the assessment process, orientation, read the information they were given, and make a decision on his treatment plan. For two years they tried to function in this system with no supports, until The Family Centre got involved as was able to identify the problem. The impact of this miscommunication was devastating to this boy's health and treatment. More language supports in these systems are essential to meeting the needs of newcomers. Furthermore, the paperwork and documentation in all systems, like this boy's family were expected to review, present a major obstacle for those who lack literacy in English.

For those who continue to be affected by the trauma of war and have become conditioned to distrust government systems through their experiences in other countries, any interaction with these systems can lead to extreme anxiety. For example, appointments with legal officials in the justice system, doctors in the healthcare system, or interactions with police officers or government officials can all reactivate trauma. One interviewee described being very intimidated and confused during her encounters with Child and Family Services and social assistance services. Often there are not cross-cultural supports in place in these systems to help mediate these delicate situations. As a result refugees might be less likely to follow through with appointments and access the appropriate services.

Support coordinators continue to engage with other systems and organizations to address these difficulties. Dealing with different languages and cultures, in addition to potential trauma, are not situations our social systems are designed to handle. Given this, the services provided by support coordinators to mediate these interactions are heavily relied upon by many refugee families.

Recommendations

A number of recommendations emerged from the data collected in the personal interviews with refugee clients and the focus groups with The Family Centre staff and staff members from collateral organizations. These recommendations are directed to The Family Centre of Winnipeg, collateral social service organizations and systems, and policy makers.

Recommendations for The Family Centre of Winnipeg

1. Maintain the holistic approach utilized by the *Family Supports for Refugees Program*

The research indicated that the holistic, client-centered approach to service delivery with a focus on supportive relationships has had a major positive impact on the lives of refugee clients. As discussed in the interviews, having a person, such as a support coordinator, that they can trust with major life issues and who is knowledgeable enough to connect them to whatever resources they need is a valuable service that refugees cannot access from any other agency in the same way. Collateral staff confirmed that this is the best approach to providing services to refugees. Maintaining these key features of

the program is an important goal when moving forward.

2. Promote public awareness of programs to reach those in need

The *Family Supports for Refugees Program* gains clients primarily through referrals from collateral organizations and other agencies. The research indicated that there are a significant number of newcomers who could benefit from the program but are unaware of it. Refugee clients have taken the initiative to tell other newcomers about the program and bring them to The Family Centre. Given the program's success and impact on the lives of refugees, The Family Centre could take on a greater role in making other agencies and the general public more aware of the *Family Supports for Refugees Program*, so that knowledge of the program does not depend solely on collateral organizations and previous clients. The initiative support coordinators have already taken in sharing information with their collaterals and potential collaterals is a positive step in expanding their client base. Accepting an increased number of clients may require increasing the number of support coordinators and in-home family support workers.

3. Increase access to services on evenings and weekends

The research indicated that extended hours for access to support coordinators and to in-home family support workers would be beneficial to clients and consistent with the program's holistic approach to service delivery. This need was specified in a number of interviews, especially those with single mothers. They find that if they have classes or appointments in the evening or on weekends, their childcare options are very limited and it often prevents them from attending. Additionally, staff questioned whether other systems, such as health and justice, are adequately prepared to deal with after-hours crisis situations involving newcomers and believe evening and weekend access to a support coordinator would be beneficial in such situations. Currently some support coordinators are already assisting clients outside of their regular working hours. This indicates that there is a need for support from this program during those hours. The *Family Supports for Refugees Program* does not currently have the capacity to meet this need fully, for it would require an increase in staff.

4. Finding a place for conversation and community

Interviewees indicated that while the program connected them to a variety of resources, it does not connect them with other people who share their experiences. The research indicated that clients believe there is a role for The Family Centre in bringing together refugee clients for conversation circles, discussions on parenting, and socializing. Interviewees, especially single mothers, talked about feeling isolated in their homes with little connection to their community or those around them and found it troubling and depressing. Whether The Family Centre itself facilitates these groups or works collaboratively with other organizations to connect their clients with community groups like this that al-

ready exist, the *Family Supports for Refugee Program* could find a way to bring together otherwise isolated refugees, especially single mothers

5. Establish The Family Centre as a place for fathers too

The majority of clients in the *Family Supports for Refugees Program* are mothers. The research brought to attention the desire of fathers to access programs and provide support for their families, as well. One interviewee observed that the staff were all female and felt that fathers may feel more comfortable accessing help from The Family Centre if there were more men on staff.

Recommendations for Collateral Social Service Organizations

6. Promote social services and programs in a way that is more accessible to newcomers

Refugees interviewed often stated that without The Family Centre they would not have knowledge about the many other services and organizations available. Refugees who have been in Canada for a number of years and are no longer in contact with a settlement agency often have no way of knowing what kind of services are available to them. A large part of what the *Family Supports for Refugees Program* does is connect people to these services. The research indicated that there is a need for organizations to advertise their services in a way that better reaches newcomers.

7. Develop education and employment programs geared toward mothers

The research indicated that mothers' access to education and employment programs are limited due to an inability to access daycare for their children. This need is especially pressing for those mothers who are not connected to community or other supports and those with very limited English language skills and formal education who would benefit most from full time

classes. Without childcare and the ability to access these classes, these women will not be able to gain employment and support their families independently, nor will they be able to actively engage in their community or with their children as they integrate into Canadian society. Better integration of education and employment programs with childcare policy and programs would allow mothers better access to these services, which would have a significant impact on their ability to integrate.

8. Increase access to appropriate interpreters

Newcomers continue to regularly struggle with accessing appropriate interpreters in systems like healthcare, education, and justice, which can have a devastating impact on the outcome of these interactions. Many of the interviewees have had negative experiences in these systems due to language issues that could have easily been avoided had there been an interpreter provided to them. Staff from The Family Centre and collateral organizations note there is a lack of interpreters available in Winnipeg, especially for more obscure dialects. Increased training programs for interpreters and greater accessibility in all systems would have a significant impact on service delivery for refugees who do not speak English.

9. Improve cultural competency and awareness of refugee issues

Support coordinators continue to support clients through systems that are not culturally aware or sensitive to the unique issues facing refugees, for example trauma-related mental health issues. Cultural competency and sensitivity needs to be a focus for these systems as the newcomer population continues to grow in Manitoba and the needs of clients become more diverse. Increased education and training, with an emphasis on working with clients impacted by war, persecution, and trauma, for staff members

in health, education, and justice systems could help improve these interactions.

Recommendations for Policy Makers

10. Create a more holistic model of service delivery for refugees

The support coordinators in the *Family Supports for Refugee Program* work to bring all relevant organizations together to support a refugee family collaboratively. As reported by collateral organizations and clients, this approach has been very beneficial for all involved. It ensures that the appropriate referrals are being made and followed through on, and promotes communication. The Family Centre can only reach a small sector of the refugee population and more needs to be done to ensure that service delivery is being done holistically on a large scale. The research showed that the basic settlement services provided to refugees are not enough for some families. A more intensive, long term model of support is more effective as refugee families try to settle into a new way of life.

11. Extend settlement programs to provide long term transitional services

The research indicated that there are many refugee families in Winnipeg who continue to struggle with their transition into Canadian life despite their initial support from settlement services. Those who live with trauma and trauma-related mental health issues need more time to heal from the events they experienced prior to coming to Canada. Settlement programs must accommodate the needs of the population they are serving by providing intensive long term supports for those families who, for a variety of reasons, may need a longer period of time to adapt and integrate.

12. Increase of awareness and access to settlement and support services for privately sponsored refugees and refugee claimants

The research indicated that privately sponsored refugees and refugee claimants do not have the

same connections as GARS to organizations and programs that can help. This issue emerged in the discussion with collateral staff members as well as the client interviews. For those who arrived as privately sponsored refugees, even their sponsors often did not have a clear sense of what programs were available to them, and sometimes discouraged them from seeking help. Privately sponsored refugees, along with their sponsors, need increased awareness of services and support programs they can access. Furthermore, refugee claimants need increased access to the appropriate supports through this critical transition.

13. Provide stable long term funding for programs

A government commitment to stable long-term funding for the *Family Supports for Refugee Program* would enable long-term planning and stability in program development and delivery, including providing support coordinators with greater job security. Such a commitment would allow the program to expand to fit the emerging needs of refugee clients, while maintaining their high quality of service delivery.

14. Develop strategy to address daycare shortages

The primary concern for the interviewees was accessing daycare and parenting supports. Implementing a strategy to address childcare availability, affordability, accessibility in Manitoba would have a major impact on parents, especially those refugee parents who need full-time English classes in order to eventually enter the

workforce. Parents also shared the positive impact accessing daycare has had on their children, who benefit from the regular schedule and interaction with other children. Because childcare has such a large impact on some families' ability to integrate into a new society, there is a need to better coordinate the immigration strategy with the childcare strategy, such that parents, especially mothers, can participate fully in settlement and integration programs.

15. Invest in affordable housing options for newcomers

The problem of finding affordable housing was an issue that emerged in the research numerous times and is consistent with previous studies on this issue. Refugees are more likely to be limited financially, as they attend classes needed for employment, work part-time, low-wage jobs, or deal with the limitations of being a single caregiver. When the majority of their income goes to housing, it leaves very little to cover the costs of other basic family needs and they come to rely on donations. Other families cannot find housing at all and have prolonged stays in shelters. These are not conditions that lead to successful settlement. For refugee families to integrate into Canadian society, they need to be able to access affordable housing to provide a safe and stable environment for their children. As the number of newcomers coming into the province increases, there is a need to better coordinate this immigration strategy with the housing strategy, such that settlement is not negatively impacted by limited accessibility to basic housing needs.

Conclusion

In discussing the overall goals of the *Family Supports for Refugees Program*, one staff member explained:

“As their interactions with surrounding systems start to work, communication happens, problems are solved, and things are restored, the whole kind of system becomes stronger, and that, to me, reaches our ultimate goal, which is helping people integrate. That’s what we want to see, strong people, strong families, accessing their communities in healthy ways and living hopeful [lives] as Canadians.”

This report has documented The Family Centre’s efforts to create a program that, through collaborative work with other community organizations, assists newcomers in putting those pieces in place to realize this goal for themselves and their families. Refugees confirm that with the help they have received through this program their families are getting stronger and healthier, and they have come to see this goal of leading successful lives in Canada as something that is now within their grasp.

Some of the unique features of the *Family Supports for Refugees Program* that have made it so successful are its approach to service delivery,

its ability to respond to a diverse range of needs, and its willingness to self-evaluate the impact of the work they are doing and look for ways to challenge themselves and the systems they work with to do better for their clients.

They have made an effort to adopt an approach to service delivery that fits with the needs of refugee clients, including flexibility in the services they are able to provide, who is eligible, and how long they qualify, working collaboratively with other organizations so that clients have access to a multitude of appropriate resources, and focusing on building trusting relationships to better understand the unique circumstances of each client and how best to support them.

The settlement needs and barriers refugees face are diverse, even those who have been in Canada for a number of years. Support coordinators have

- provided services for children, including access to daycare and parenting supports,
- worked collaboratively to connect clients with housing resources and advocate on their behalf to secure housing,
- assisted with access to basic necessities for clients’ families,

- helped familiarize clients with the basics of Canadian life,
- assisted with overcoming language barriers by connecting them with interpreters, and
- helped with documentation, forms, and letter writing.

While these are the needs that surfaced most often in the interviews, individuals also identified countless other. Many of these issues relate to lack of appropriate programming, though some have roots in larger systemic issues. To ensure that it is supporting refugees in the best way possible, the program remains open to evolving with the needs of those it is trying to help, despite a limited program capacity.

The *Family Supports for Refugees Program* was identified by The Family Centre staff and community organizations as an essential part of the work done with refugees in Winnipeg, especially when working with high needs families. At present no other newcomer agency is set up to provide this kind of intensive support to families. Many organizations have come to rely on the relationship they share with the *Family Supports for Refugees Program* in working with their high needs refugee clients, expressing that they would be at a loss without this program's services. One collateral organization staff member stated,

“I would be very worried if this program stopped. I don't know what we would do. We use them so much.”

This research has demonstrated that many social programs and larger social systems are not appropriately equipped to provide services to refugees, particularly refugee women and children. Because of this, these many in this portion of the population are not getting the services they need to integrate into Canadian life. The *Family Supports for Refugees Program* created by The Family Centre mediates interactions between newcomers and these systems and is able to put things together when they fall apart, while continually challenging social service organizations to do better. This has been demonstrated as a necessary service for many refugee families. The *Family Supports for Refugees Program* is a testament to the progress that can be made when a program is willing to meet clients where they are and be the kind of personal, committed, and holistic support that so many refugee families need.

* * * * *

“You see, I'm hoping that when my children grow up, they will be able to help other people as I've been helped... I want them to grow up to be able to support other people as I've been supported. The way I have received support, I want them to grow into that system. I say thank you. I appreciate The Family Centre for being supportive of me. I am very grateful... I think what I'm feeling is I came here as nobody, I have nothing, and they helped me. And that is what they are doing to help everybody” (translation).

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