

Refugee Newcomers' Employment Transitions in Rural in Nova Scotia: Policy Insights from Newcomers, Volunteers, and Employers

A report prepared for:

Syria-Antigonish Families Embrace & Pictou County Safe Harbour



by

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Executive Summary

This report summarizes the results of qualitative research designed to explore the employment transition experiences of former refugees resettling in rural areas of Nova Scotia since 2015. Resettled refugees have diverse refugee backgrounds and pre-migration education and work experiences. While eager to work, many immigrants and refugee newcomers learn that making an employment transition will be challenging, especially those who aspire to work in their pre-migration occupation. Many programs have been developed in Canada to help newcomers find employment; however, little is known about access to these programs in rural areas. In Canada, sponsored newcomers receive one year of financial and resettlement assistance on a pathway to independence. Newcomers sponsored by a sponsor group via Canada's Private Sponsorship of Refugee program received assistance from group members. Sponsor group members living in rural areas appreciate that rural resettlement poses additional challenges to newcomers given that employment-related services, training, or educational options are limited and because the range of occupations is narrower than in urban areas. In response to these learnings, volunteers strategize about how to help newcomers with various aspects of finding work. Two rural sponsor groups, Syria-Antigonish Families Embrace (SAFE) and Pictou County Safe Harbour (PCSH), are the community partners for this project. They defined the scope of the project as 1) learning from sponsor group volunteers (SAFE) and 2) learning from refugee newcomers and employers (PCSH) about the facilitators and barriers influencing rural newcomers' employment transitions. SAFE and PCSH requested that the project generate resources for newcomers, sponsor groups, and employers and propose policy recommendations.

The research participants are affiliated with eleven different sponsorship groups in six rural counties of Nova Scotia (Inverness, Antigonish, Pictou, Kings, Lunenburg, and Guysborough). In 2021, we interviewed 30 volunteers, 23 newcomers, and 8 employers.

Data analysis reveals the facilitators and the barriers newcomers experience when they search for employment in their pre-migration type of employment. Individualized support from the resettlement volunteers helps newcomers orient to working in Canada, ranging from how to get workplace safety certificates to writing resumes and cover letters, onboarding, and so on. Volunteers describe using their social networks and local knowledge to help newcomers meet employers and gain information related to getting safety certification, training, Canadian credentials, and so on. Consistent with past research, participants identified limited English language proficiency as a barrier to employment, followed by a lack of credential recognition or avenues to access Canadian credentials. Given the significance of English language proficiency for employment, training programs, and post-secondary admission, participants identified the lack of access to full-time, full-year language courses as a core policy issue, and they encourage the development of training programs that incorporate language learning (i.e., akin to the approach taken in primary education).

This report provides a description of the methodology, a review of past research, summary of project findings, and conclusions. The final sections present resources for newcomers, sponsor groups, and employers and a set of policy recommendations.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	2
Introduction	4
Project Methodology	5
Information about the sponsor groups and newcomers in the sample	6
Literature Review	6
The world refugee crisis and resettlement in Canada	6
Refugee newcomers' economic contributions to Canada	7
Employment facilitators and barriers for resettled refugees	8
Research Results	10
1. Resettlement involves immersive learning for everyone	10
2. Pre-migration education and occupation and post-migration aspirations	11
3. Resettlement volunteers as employment transition mentors and facilitators	11
4. Learning about and accessing English/French language training	12
5. Barriers to learning English/French in rural areas	13
6. Prioritizing English language learning	14
7. Employers' experience and perspectives on hiring newcomers	16
8. Discrimination and workplace issues	17
Conclusion	18
Resources for Refugee Newcomers and Sponsor Group Volunteers	19
Resources for New Sponsorship Groups	20
Resources for Employers	20
Recommendations for Policy Exploration and Development	21
1. Prioritize language learning in the first year of resettlement	21
2. Establish full-time language classes in rural areas of Nova Scotia	21
3. Innovate employment-based immersions to augment language courses	22
4. Address qualification recognition and getting Canadian credentials	22
5. Adapt provincial job search services to address refugee newcomers' needs	23
6. Address poverty-related barriers to employment in rural areas	24
7. Develop rural settlement capacity through knowledge sharing	24
Funding Acknowledgements	26
The Research Team	26
Presentation of Preliminary Results	27
Project Bibliography	29

Refugee Newcomers' Employment Transitions in Rural Areas in Nova Scotia: Information from and for newcomers, volunteers, and employers

Introduction

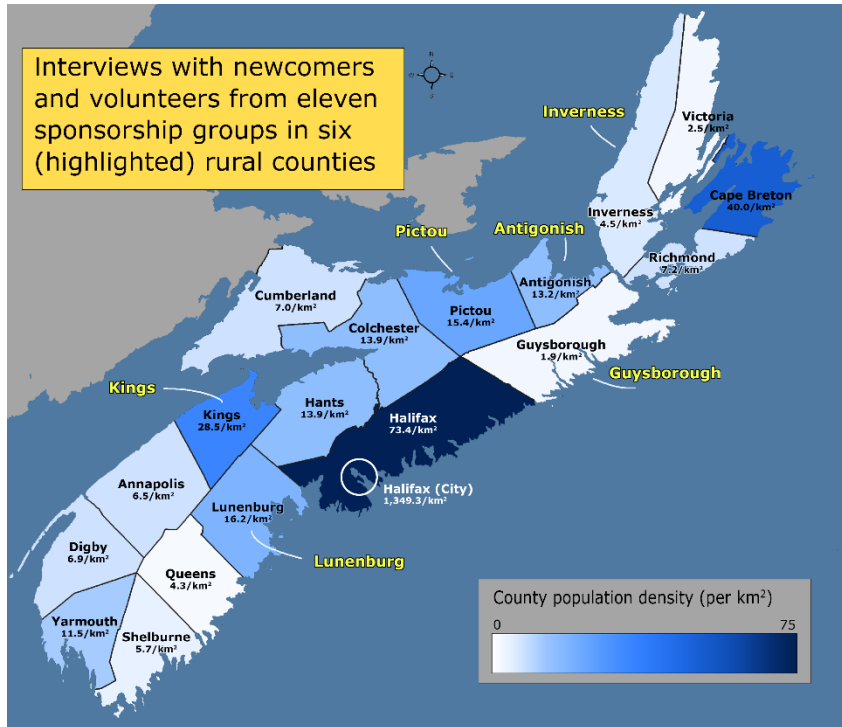
This report presents the findings of two qualitative case studies focused on the employment transition experiences of refugees sponsored and resettled in rural areas of Nova Scotia by community and faith groups. Since 2015, refugee resettlement surged, and Canadians continue to embrace refugee resettlement as a way of providing refugee protection (Hyndman, et al., 2021). The surge came in response to the Syrian refugee crisis. In over 300 communities, new or existing Canadians groups used Canada's Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PRS) program to sponsor and resettle refugee families. PSR groups sponsored 11,000 of the 25,000 Syrian refugees admitted through the federal Syrian Refugee Resettlement Initiative (SRRRI). For the first time since the Vietnamese refugee crisis, resettlement in rural and remote areas increased significantly (Haugen, 2023). Two rural PSR groups in Nova Scotia that continue to sponsor refugees proposed learning about how refugee newcomers transition into rural economies. These groups realize that rural resettlement poses additional challenges to job-seeking newcomers given that employment-related services, training, or educational options are limited in rural areas and because the range of occupations is narrower. In addition, they learned that refugee newcomers and immigrants experience unique challenges, such as access to language courses in rural areas and lack of recognition of employment experience and credentials.

Syria-Antigonish Families Embrace (SAFE), a Sponsorship Agreement Holder (SAH) in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, partnered with Dr. Norine Verberg for a study titled "What Works: The Strategies of Community Volunteers Facilitating the Economic Transitions of Refugee Newcomers Living in Rural Nova Scotia". It was funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Partnership Engage Grant (#892-2020-1059) and Mitacs. Pictou County Safe Harbour (PCSH), a sponsorship group in New Glasgow, Nova Scotia, proposed consulting newcomers and employers as well as volunteers. PCSH partnered with Dr. Verberg on "*Employment Transitions of Refugees: Refugees, Employer, and Sponsorship Group Perspectives in Pictou County*" which was funded by CLARI: Change Lab Action Research Initiative and Mitacs. The Mitacs funding provided research internships for two undergraduate students.

The rural focus of the study is intentional. Refugees resettled by government receive one year of financial and settlement assistance from service provider organizations in urban areas. Refugees who are sponsored by groups using the Private Sponsorship of Refugee program are settled in the community of the sponsor group and receive one year of financial and settlement assistance from the sponsor group. All newcomers come as Permanent Residents and have access to social programs designed for Canadians or for immigrants. Providing resettlement assistance in rural areas and smaller towns and cities comes with some additional challenges given that there are fewer services available to newcomers (Bruce, 2007; Fang et al, 2019; Stalker & Fine, 2014). As shown in the findings, while the work of sponsor groups helps newcomers connect to the local community, access to English language classes continues to be raised as an issue by sponsor groups and newcomers.

Project Methodology

The project employed qualitative research methods (Miles, Huber, and Saldana, 2020). The interview questions consulted participants about their insights into the facilitators, challenges, and barriers newcomers encounter when they work to establish themselves in the local economy. Data collection began after receiving ethics approval from the St. Francis Xavier University Research Ethics Board.



SAMPLE:

We interviewed:

30 resettlement volunteers
23 newcomers
8 employers

Participants have affiliation with 11 sponsor groups in 6 rural counties.

The number of groups per county is as follows:

- 1 group in Kings County
- 2 groups in Lunenburg
- 1 group in Guysborough
- 1 group in Inverness
- 3 group in Antigonish
- 3 group in Pictou

This study focused on the experiences of mostly privately sponsored refugee newcomers resettling in rural areas. We interviewed 30 resettlement volunteers and 23 newcomers from eleven sponsor groups located in 6 rural counties (Antigonish, Pictou, Inverness, Guysborough, Kings, and Lunenburg) of Nova Scotia, as well as 8 employers in 4 of the 6 rural counties. Most interviews were on Zoom or telephone to address distance or COVID-19 pandemic response measures. Jordan MacDonald conducted interviews with volunteers. Kenzie MacNeil interviewed employers. Newcomers were interviewed by all members of the research team. Some newcomer interviews were conducted in Arabic by Aghyad Al Zhouri and in French by Carrigan Martell. Data collection started with volunteers in February 2021, and newcomers and employers in May 2021. Data collection ended in November 2021.

The project partners requested that the study generate resources for newcomers, sponsor group volunteers, and employers, as well as identifying policy recommendations. Guided by topics raised by participants, we reviewed research reports, government websites, and service-provider and/or government developed online resources. For instance, we completed an environmental scan of services available in Nova Scotia for job seekers, immigrants seeking English language courses in rural areas, and programs designed for refugee and immigrant job-seekers.

Information about the sponsor groups and newcomers in the sample

Volunteers shared that their sponsor groups formed at the height of the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015. The eleven rural sponsor groups whose members participated in this study used the cost-sharing Blended Visa Office Referral (BVOR) program in 2015-16 (McNally, 2020). At the time of data collection (2021), the eleven groups had sponsored forty-six refugee families (about ½ were BVOR sponsorships) and some groups also assisted three Government Assisted Refugee (GAR) families that requested relocation near family. Eight groups were awaiting the arrival of other families. Each group started by sponsoring one or two large lone or two parent families with dependent children in January and February of 2016. In 2016, nine groups sponsored families from Syria and two groups sponsored newcomers from two African nations. Overtime, three groups in three counties dissolved, and eight groups in five counties continue to sponsor refugees. Some groups that continue sponsorship decided to sponsor only Syrians (to build a Syrian community; bring families together), but most groups also welcomed newcomers from several African and/or Middle East nations since 2016. Some groups now only sponsor family members of previously sponsored families, though some groups continue BVOR sponsorship as well as “naming” newcomers (for family reunification or identified refugees). SAFE became a rural Sponsorship Agreement Holder in 2017, and has facilitated sponsorships by faith groups, community groups, and Groups of Five from rural areas in mostly North Eastern Nova Scotia.

Some newcomers experienced a lifetime of displacement, where others were displaced for three to six years. Most families had 3 to 5 children; some had very young children; others had middle- and high-school aged children. Some families came with a dependent older adult or adult offspring. Learning about employment aspirations occurred early, once groups helped children and youth settle in school, facilitated adults’ English language classes, and helped adults with more immediate settlement assistance (e.g., set up bank accounts, applying for health cards, get medical and dental appointments, etc.).

Literature Review

The World Refugee Crisis and Refugee Resettlement in Canada

The United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR) defines a refugee as “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion” and “have crossed an international border to find safety in another country” (UNHCR Canada, 2021a). At the end of 2020, over 84.2 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced from their homes due to violence, persecution, or human rights abuses. Over 20.7 million displaced people registered as refugees with the UNHCR: 68% fled from Syria, Venezuela, Afghanistan, South Sudan, and Myanmar. Most refugees find asylum in a nearby country. The top five “temporary” asylum countries are Turkey, Colombia, Pakistan, Uganda, and Germany (UNHCR Canada, 2021b). Many nations offer resettlement as a durable solution for refugees, yet less than 1% of refugees are admitted by a host nation through a humanitarian resettlement pathway.

Canada signed the UNHCR's 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 protocols in 1969, the same year it included provisions for private sponsorship of refugees in the Immigration Act (Cameron, 2020). In 1978, Canada launched the Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) program as a complementary refugee resettlement running alongside the GAR program. The PSR program permits community and faith groups to apply to sponsor and resettle refugees. Both government and privately sponsored refugees are admitted to Canada as Permanent Residents with one year of financial and resettlement assistance. The language "newcomer" is used to reflect that the status of refugee is terminated once a person is welcomed as a permanent resident. PSRs receive assistance from their sponsor group and GARs receive assistance from federally funded non-profit service provider agencies (Cameron, 2020). Because PSR groups often sponsor refugees who are the relatives of previously sponsored refugees, the government introduced programs to encourage sponsor groups to sponsor and resettle highly vulnerable refugees (i.e., BVOR and the Joint Sponsorship Assistance programs), by reducing the financial cost to sponsor groups. During the SRRI, 17% of BVOR sponsorships in Canada were arranged by sponsor groups in the small province Nova Scotia.

Since 1980, Canada has welcomed over 1,088,015 refugees (UNHCR Canada, 2021), with more than 325,000 of these newcomers sponsored and settled by PSR groups as BVORs or PSRs. The SRRI of 2015-16 saw a huge increase in private refugee resettlement across the country with hundreds of new PSR groups forming in more than 300 communities. This includes the largest rural uptake in refugee resettlement since the Vietnamese refugee resettlement campaign in the early 1980s. Research suggests that rural communities have a great deal of capacity to assist newcomers, but that some smaller rural and remote communities may lack key services or certain kinds of employment opportunities (Alboim, 2016; Haugen, 2018; McNally, 2020).

Refugee Newcomers' Economic Contributions to Canada

Research indicates that refugees resettled in Canada make significant contributions to the economy through employment and entrepreneurship. Resettled refugees may take longer to transition into the economy than "economic immigrants", yet they are eager to work, hold employment across a range of occupations, and many achieve comparable earnings over time or establish successful, sometimes flourishing businesses. According to the UNHCR (2021):

- The unemployment rate of former refugees is about 9% compared to 6% for Canadian-born workers. Refugees who have been in Canada 30+ years have a 6% unemployment rate.
- Within five years of arrival, most refugees have earnings comparable to Canadian-born or immigrant peers. Over time, what refugees pay in taxes overcomes the value of public benefits they received.
- Over half of refugees work in high skilled jobs, one-fifth work in careers requiring post-secondary education, and a third work in jobs requiring a high-school level of education.
- Refugees who settled in rural or small towns are more likely to stay than other immigrants. Refugees with young families addresses concerns about aging rural communities.
- Refugee newcomers are more entrepreneurial than their Canadian-born peers.

While these statistics tell an important story about the valuable contributions newcomers make in the economy, research identifies barriers that limit refugees' upward occupational mobility.

Employment Facilitators and Barriers for Resettled Refugees

Research indicates that finding employment is a challenging experience for refugees offered resettlement in a western nation and that many refugees are unable to find work that matches their credentials, aspirations, and abilities (Disney, et al., 2021; Grondin, 2005; Lee, et al., 2020). Disney, et al. (2021) found that employment is one of the most influential areas of a refugee's resettlement experience. Lumley-Sapanski (2021) argues that the American system of giving newcomers three months of support leaves newcomers in a "survival job trap" where they are underemployed. Based on a review of international research, Lee, et al. (2020) conclude that many resettled refugees experience a 'ceiling' in the host country context.

In Canada and abroad, how well former refugees transition into the economy is influenced by their pre-migration education and work experience as well as their language proficiency, credential recognition, and economic outlook in the host country at time of arrival. Other variables include their refugee experiences (e.g., injury and or trauma) and personal factors such as age, gender, sexuality, race, and having dependents (Hynie and Changoor, 2016; McGregor, 2017; Wilkinson and Garcea, 2017).

The present research provides insight into three specific post-migration variables that influence employment transitions: *language proficiency, credential recognition, and social capital*.

Refugees accept offers of resettlement to escape dangerous, precarious conditions in a country of asylum. With less than one percent of refugees offered resettlement, refugees who accept to be resettled soon learn that they face significant resettlement challenges. Newcomers identify learning the host language as exceptionally challenging (Grondin, 2005). With reference to employment, knowledge of the "official language", especially in occupations requiring strong language proficiency, will influence the types and quality of employment newcomers can secure post-migration (Lam, 2019; Grondin, 2005). We know little about the factors that facilitate language learning, though Drolet and Moorthi (2018) found that refugees resettled in cities often live in ethnic enclaves, which can impede language learning and interactions with members of the host population. As well, Tip, et al. (2019) found that contact with community members helps language learning as well as promoting the well-being of newcomers.

Many immigrants and former refugees learn that their pre-migration education or occupational qualifications and credentials *are not recognized* (Brousseau, 2020; Elgersma, 2012; Hawthorne, 2012; Sweetman et al., 2015), and that accessing these credentials will require getting post-secondary education and perhaps an apprenticeship. Many immigrants with unrecognized credentials experience underemployment as captured by media stories of taxi drivers who had practiced medicine prior to displacement (Disney, et al., 2021). Accessing degrees, diplomas, or certificates in the host country requires meeting language requirements and making a large financial investment: this comes with challenges for adults with limited host language skills and or dependent family members.

Past research reveals the importance of *social capital* for helping immigrants and refugee newcomers integrate into the economy (Pittaway, et al., 2016; Drolet & Moorthi, 2018; Haugen, 2023). To explain occupational attainment, economic theory focuses on human capital, defined

as a person's skills, educational, and occupational credentials. Today, attention is given to the concept of *social capital* which refers to how well one is embedded in the social fabric of their community as measured by the diversity of one's local connections, networks, knowledge, and resources. Different kinds of social capital provide people with different kinds of resources. The three types of social capital are bonding, bridging, and linking. *Bonding social capital* refers to relationships with one's family and ethnic group members. This type of social capital provides interpersonal resources such as childcare, emotional support, and mentorship. *Bridging social capital* refers to relationships developed *across* ethnic groups and in a variety of social domains such as schools, work, clubs, and leisure. These are characterized as horizontal connections. *Linking social capital* refers to relationships with people in positions of authority, therefore vertical connections that give individuals or groups access to social power, status, and personal and occupational advancement opportunities (Pittaway, et al, 2016).

Social capital has received attention from refugee resettlement researchers because at least some aspects of social capital are local and place-based. As Pittaway, et al. (2016) note, "The refugee experience creates a unique context for social capital, because of the particular impact of the refugee journey on social connections, networks and social norms such as trust and social reciprocity. War and displacement break social networks and fragment families and communities, while persecution and trauma dissolve existing social bonds, cohesive factors and norms, often leading to high levels of distrust of outsiders or authorities. (p. 403). It is crucial for immigrants and resettled refugees to gain social capital to help them learn "how things work" in the place of resettlement, including insights into workplace norms and culture and employment-related knowledge. Steinbach (2007) found that government assisted newcomers in Quebec have few avenues to meet Canadians and develop social relationships. One participant described his social isolation as a "handicap" to integration.

Research highlighting social capital has emerged in studies comparing the economic integration of government sponsored refugees and privately sponsored refugees. There is evidence that privately sponsored refugees make quicker and more durable short-term transitions into the economy (Kaida et al., 2020). As well, analysis of national longitudinal data shows that highly vulnerable refugees who are resettled by sponsor groups have better economic integration in the longer-term than government assisted newcomers (Kaida, 2020). Scholars recently turned their attention to studying Canada's PSR program. In a "preliminary investigation into private refugee sponsors," Macklin and colleagues (2018, 45) note that "Formal eligibility to participate in private sponsorship requires access to funds and sufficiently robust social networks to form a sustainable sponsorship group. Functionally, performance of the myriad tasks associated with newcomer settlement and integration also demands time, flexibility, and a range of interpersonal and intercultural skills. It also requires a willingness to leverage social capital in the form of connections, information and 'know how' on behalf of the sponsored refugees." Their observation is reflected in emerging research showing that PSR volunteers tend to leverage their local experiences and networks to help newcomers access and build local social capital (Drolet and Moorthi, 2018; Hanley, et al., 2018; Schmidtke, 2018). This makes sense given that PSR groups emerge *within* a local community or faith setting, hence among networked individuals. As shown in the results section, resettlement volunteers describe using their social capital to facilitate newcomers' employment transitions.

Research Results

1. Resettlement Involves Immersive Learning for Everyone

A key finding is that refugee resettlement is an immersive learning journey for newcomers and sponsor group volunteers. Only a few volunteers had prior experience using the PSR program, and due to the “rapid” settlement set out by the federal SRRI, volunteers had an intensely fast and intensive experience preparing to welcome newcomers and facilitating the resettlement of large families, most of whom did not comprehend English when they arrived. Although new sponsor groups used training services (e.g., <https://www.rstp.ca/en/>), volunteers describe helping newcomers as “a *learning curve for everyone involved*”. Volunteers describe realizing the magnitude of newcomers’ journeys, and the many challenges that lie ahead for them.

Sponsor groups have volunteers from all walks of life with diverse networks and skills. Since few volunteers interviewed for this study had experience with refugee resettlement or economic integration facilitation, they describe engaging in what Lave and Wenger (1991) call “situated learning” (see also: Ohlsson, 2017). For example, having learned that a newcomer requires a specific workplace safety certificate, volunteers work with the person wanting to acquire the certification by explaining the registration and testing processes, perhaps facilitating training, or whatever makes sense for that individual. As shown below, volunteers described their role as empowering newcomers, seeing themselves as mentors who introduce and orient newcomers to various service organizations (e.g., Antigonish Guysborough Immigrant Support Program, Nova Scotia Works, Y-Reach), employers, unions, colleges and universities and so on, and then stay involved as navigators. Doing so enables what Lloyd (2015) calls “information resilience in the resettlement landscape.” It also describes helping newcomers build their local social capital.

2. Pre-migration Education and Occupations and Post-Migration Aspirations.

Newcomers had diverse pre-migration skills, education, and occupations, and therefore diverse employment aspirations. Some newcomers had little or no formal schooling, while others had post-secondary degrees or trades certificates combined with years of work experience. With the study inviting employed or employment-seeking newcomers, it is not surprising that most newcomer participants had extensive work experience in their pre-migration occupations, and they were eager to work. Their prior employment ranged from unskilled labour to highly skilled trades or professional occupations. Many Syrian families came from a culture where the male identifies as the family wage earner and the female provides family care, yet for some Syrian couples, both spouses hoped to find work in their pre-migration professional occupations. Except for women who had prior professional employment, most mother-led families sought and found secure low-skill work, some in unionized settings. Most men sought and found employment in the trades or manual labour, though several were underemployed. People with university degrees and professional occupations (e.g., engineers, teachers) hoped to work in their former occupation; however, forced migration meant that several newcomers fled without work-related degrees and certificates. One newcomer who had education documents eventually found part-time professional work, but wants full-time work. Some newcomers with professional occupations and strong English language skills moved to a city where they found employment in their profession. With notable exceptions, many Syrians had little to no

exposure to English pre-migration. Most newcomers from African nations had moderate to strong English and/or French language literacy at arrival.

3. Resettlement Volunteers as Employment Transition Mentor and Facilitators

As noted in the literature review, the PSR program is nearly five decades old, yet researchers are just beginning to examine the work of the volunteers. Hyndman et al (2021) find this is surprising since the program is “fully reliant on the funding and hard work of volunteers who engage in this transnational community of practice at the local level” (p. 4). The study results support past research findings that volunteers help newcomers gain local knowledge and build their local networks, which helps newcomers navigate finding work. For instance, a newcomer who many want to find work in their occupation, whether as a welder, nurse, electrician, teacher, and so on, needs to learn about, and access, required safety certificates or educational requirements and find employment opportunities. Sponsor groups help newcomers to gain information literacy and build relationships pertinent to their occupational pursuits.

The results provide additional insight into the ways that resettlement volunteers facilitate newcomers’ employment transitions. A common theme we heard was that sponsor group volunteers emphasize EAL training as a newcomers’ “first job” when they arrive. Yet with financial support ending after one year, newcomers feel compelled to start looking for jobs, before they have a solid foundation in English. The results related to learning English language skills are reviewed below. Here we summarize what we learned about how volunteers help newcomers navigate finding work.

Resettlement volunteers are the first people newcomers meet. Before asking newcomers about their work experience and employment goals, volunteers help with more immediate aspects of settlement, including helping them settle into their home, register children and youth in school, apply for pertinent documents (such as health cards and the Canada Child Tax Benefit), set up banking, register in EAL courses (if needed), and so on. Soon, conversations about work begin, as does the journey to find work.

Volunteers describe newcomers’ employment transitions as a learning curve for volunteers as well as newcomers. In some counties, participants mentioned receiving excellent assistance from employment services such as Nova Scotia Works, whereas volunteers in other areas felt the provincial employment service program in their community offered few services to support former refugees’ job-search needs, especially for newcomers with limited English language skills. Most volunteers describe consulting their group’s network to gain information to help specific newcomers with specific occupational experiences.

Employers, newcomers, and volunteers describe the many ways volunteers help newcomers start their Canadian employment journey. Volunteers provide one-on-one information on:

- Where and how to do job searches
- How to prepare a resume and write cover letters
- Introduce and help newcomers get workplace certificates (e.g., WHMIS; food handling)
- Contact local employers to explain the skills a particular newcomer has for a job and explain that the newcomer would require English language support
- Attend job interviews for newcomers with limited English comprehension

- Help with onboarding (how to fill out tax forms, etc.)
- Serve as or find a language interpreter to attend a newcomer's job orientation training
- Introduce Canadian workplace norms and culture; problem-solve where issues come up
- Help newcomers get transportation and/or childcare
- Go with newcomers to meetings set up with admissions staff at colleges or universities
- Explaining paycheque deductions (CPP, EI, Income tax)
- Several mentioned contacting ISANS about their wage subsidy program

Providing these kinds of services helps newcomers develop their own local social capital, which includes gaining knowledge about local information and services and developing networks. Both contribute to promoting social and economic integration. Throughout the data set, volunteers describe using their social capital to help newcomers build their own social capital.

- *“Somebody knew somebody that needed a painter, and somebody knew somebody that was looking for people to help in the roofing business. And so really, we're the ones that have connected people to job opportunities.”*
- *“I know a lot of Canadians too, who sometimes they find a job because of a personal connection, right? They know a job exists, or the person who is hiring will give them a little bit more recognition or leeway.”*

One volunteer participant describes how a sponsor group member had group members use their linking social capital to facilitate a newcomer get employment credentials recognized.

- *“[One member] persevered and persevered ... with the Department of Education. We would get other people involved in the community and ask them to call the Department of Education. This (sponsor group member) just persevered and persevered. And now [newcomer] has an interim teaching license and is actually working in the school system, which I think is awesome.”*

Many volunteers approached employers to ask if they would hire a person with limited English skills. For the employers that offered employment, volunteers provided follow-up support. This included attending job interviews and onboarding, and sometimes explaining workplace norms.

4. Learning About and Accessing English/French Language Training

Because most Syrian and some African newcomers had little prior knowledge of English, accessing English language training became a major focus for sponsor groups and newcomers. A major concern raised by volunteers and newcomers is the lack of English language resources in rural areas of Nova Scotia. In a nationally representative sample, immigrants identified learning an “official language” as one of their top two challenges, second only to finding work (Grondin, 2005). Newcomers in the present study raise the same two concerns.

In Canada, immigrants and refugees learn English or French through one of two programs. Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada, or LINC, is a free, full-time language training program for adult immigrants and refugees. LINC is a core piece of Canada's settlement system paid for by Immigration, Refugee, Citizenship Canada (IRCC). LINC is offered in large urban

areas, such as at Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia (ISANS) in Halifax.¹ Since COVID-19, LINC is offered online.² Newcomers to smaller centres learn English through a provincially funded programs called English as an Additional or Second Language, or EAL/ESL. While French as an Additional Language (FAL) programs is offered in French communities, study participants only discussed EAL/ESL courses. In Nova Scotia, outside of Halifax, EAL courses are offered by Y-REACH in small towns and cities located in rural counties.³

When refugees were arriving to rural areas in early 2016, the six rural counties covered by this study did not have local, provincially funded EAL programs. Sponsor groups quickly mobilized to set up *interim* English language courses, while also lobbying for EAL courses in their local communities. Interim courses were taught by EAL trained teachers, and free childcare and transportation was coordinated by sponsor groups. In mid-to-late 2016, Y-REACH language courses were set up in some rural towns and small cities (e.g., Antigonish, New Glasgow).

A key learning for newcomers and sponsor group volunteers is about the significance of the Canadian Language Benchmark (CLB) system. As the name says, the CLB sets language benchmarks for progression through language courses. Volunteers and newcomers discovered that specific CLB benchmarks are set by post-secondary institutions for admissions and by employers for specific jobs. While Nova Scotia Community College (NSCC) accepts various language tests, a CLB Level 8 is required for admissions.⁴ This is a very high level of English language competency, leading some groups to question having only one CLB benchmark for all NSCC programs. University programs have different assessment tools and higher language requirements (e.g., TESL).⁵ It is interesting that newcomers graduating from a Nova Scotia high school did not need to provide proof of CLB level, with many likely starting programs with a lower CLB than mandated to newcomers and immigrants.

We learned that large employers who welcome immigrants (including refugees) to join their staff have developed employee guidelines that specify the required CLB level for each job title in the company. For employers with diverse employment opportunities, a newcomer may start in one job (e.g., janitorial services; food preparation) and move into a preferred occupation (continuing care assistant; nurse) when they reach a specific CLB level and complete any required education programs and/or provincial testing. One small employer wondered why there isn't a CLB tool available to help small employers know what CLB level would be considered suitable for various service sector or trades jobs (many trades have CLB standards).

5. Barriers to learning English/French in rural areas

All newcomers who participated in the study conveyed how difficult it is to learn English, and how challenging it is to access language courses in rural areas. It takes time to become proficient in a new language, especially for those who learned a language with a different

¹ <https://isans.ca/learn-english/>

² <https://isans.ca/program/linc-home-study/>

³ https://www.clarenovascotia.com/images/docs/gouvernance/proces-verbaux/archives/2019-10-16_3.1_YREACH_Presentation.pdf

⁴ <https://www.nsc.ca/admissions/applying/admission-requirements/index.asp#language requirements>

⁵ <https://www.clb-osa.ca/benchmarks/overview>

alphabet than English/French. How well newcomers progress through language courses is influenced by their age and prior literacy and exposure to English. Some newcomers said it took several weeks, or longer, to be registered for language courses (for students who have a similar CLB). Once registered, some newcomers struggled to find transportation or childcare.

Both newcomers and volunteers voiced concerns over the lack of EAL language training services in rural areas. Some newcomers learned that refugees resettled in Halifax can access full-time LINC programs designed to serve learners at specific CLB levels, and that there is no summer recess. By contrast, they realize that Y-REACH program in their rural area is only part-time and it is not offered in the summer months. As one newcomer explains:

“The school, it is named Y-Reach. It does not have many supports to learning too much. Everyday we, we took about two hours, just two hours in the day. After two months we ask our teacher to increase, to get more lessons. She told us Y-Reach can't give more than that because, I don't know, I don't know why. After six-month, the term, it is done, and we have two months or three months holiday for summer.”

In the next quote, a newcomer suggests that the Y-REACH language service in their area does not measure students' CLB level to provide feedback on their progression.

“They should have a program where I get to meet with other people regularly or just have someone who can test me every once a while just to see where I am in English. Because until now I have not had that test so I would like to know if I am progressing or not so I can start achieving my long-time dreams.”

We did not speak with Y-REACH staff to verify this concern.

Some newcomers' language learning access was delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic, yet dealing with pandemic restrictions led to innovations in LINC and EAL learning options. These innovations worked well for newcomers who have Wi-Fi access and a computer, and who have a base in English. Sponsor groups have done a great deal to access quality, used computers for newcomers. Some newcomers felt the in-person setting is most valuable for new learners, yet the online option was a welcome option during the pandemic and for advanced learners.

Because most newcomers had young families with pre-school aged children, some participants identified access to childcare as a barrier to female newcomers taking EAL classes. For those who live outside the communities with Y-Reach programs, transportation was a barrier.

6. Prioritizing English language learning

A theme raised by both volunteers and newcomers is that newcomers must prioritize English language learning. Volunteers noted that some of the newcomers who identify as a primary earner prioritized finding work instead of focusing on learning English. As one volunteer explains:

“They were really pushed to learn English, so attending (EAL) every day was really important, and the women did that. But the men kind of petered out a bit because they were anxious to get jobs.”

Sponsor groups wanted to respect their choice and autonomy, yet over time, sponsor groups came to realize that prioritizing learning English is important to newcomers' employment transition. For newcomers with low English skills, some were able to find work and adapt well. However, some volunteers shared that some newcomers lost jobs because instructions were not followed. Another volunteer explains:

"[...] it's very easy for somebody to go from a language level zero to English level three, and it's really hard to go from a four to an eight. But in terms of getting those higher-level types of positions or working more directly in your field, you have to be very intentional about the language piece."

Newcomers had a lot to say about learning English. At the end of the interview, we asked newcomers "What advice would you give to a newcomer settling in your area?" Almost all newcomers recommend making learning English a priority.

"The best advice I would give is just work harder on the English. It is going to be hard, and it is going to take lots of time from your time, but short pain for long gain. That is the best advice I could tell you."

"I would tell (a newcomer) not to give up and keep working hard on their English, if they do not have English."

The advice shared is: *"if you don't speak English well, decide to make learning English something you work on all the time."* Several newcomers emphasized immersing oneself in learning full-time. One newcomer's sponsor group hired an interpreter for his workplace orientation. After a few days, he said he no longer wanted an interpreter because he believed he needed to actively listen and speak for himself to learn the language and to develop relationships. This individual also used a free online course to learn English words and expressions.⁶ He said he used it every day to practice speaking English, anytime he had a few minutes to spare. Newcomers arriving in 2016 said that because few community members spoke their language in their rural community, that they had a more immersive English language learning experience than newcomers resettled in urban areas as they spent far more time with people who speak their language. A few newcomers spoke about the value of part-time work because they would "hear" how people speak English and learn *"how to speak"* so they would be understood. Some newcomers said they tried to listen mostly to English language television, as well as limit how much they listened to television in their first language.

Some employers highlighted English language skills as a health and safety issue, noting that *"English certainly has to be fairly fluent to be able to work safely within our organization."* Some employers had assurances that WHMIS was done correctly, where the newcomer was trained in the language they understood best. Nonetheless, several employers encouraged that newcomers prioritize learning English language skills. As one employer said, they *"need to provide them with the training to get the language under control, to be able to pick up enough English over a period of time so they can function on their own."*

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCeTVoczn9NOZA9blls3YgUg>

Several employers told us that the newcomer(s) they hired worked very well, and that working helped them develop their language skills. Several newcomers commented that they gained English language skills in their workplace, and that being at work helped them develop relationships as well. More than one employer encouraged the development of workplace mentorship and job shadowing programs that integrate learning English and workplace culture.

7. Employers' Experiences and perspectives on hiring newcomers

Most of the eight employers who participated in the study hired one or two newcomers, some of whom started work with very limited English language skills. One employer hired several newcomers with a range of English skills. Most jobs offered were in the service sector and trades. Most newcomers with limited English language skills had help during the hiring, onboarding, and training processes, either from a volunteer who served as a language coach, a paid interpreter, or a co-worker. Given that in most workplaces, employee training is done orally, having a language coach or interpreter helped the new employee understand what was being explained. Employers found onboarding and orientation support provided by the sponsor groups as valuable, and without it, a few said they would be unlikely to hire someone with very limited English skills. Several employers raised communication as a major issue. Some said there were challenges in assigning work instructions, having to rely on "sign language" and "Google Translate." These same employers also shared that, overtime, newcomers gained more independence and worked well with coworkers and the manager without additional supports.

A few employers raised concerns about bearing additional costs when hiring newcomers with limited English (e.g., should they be less productive or require more supervision). One employer said, "*There probably should be a minimum (language) standard before they approach finding work*". Several employers emphasized the importance of newcomer employees understanding safety training (WHMIS and specific safety certificates for various trades) to protect them and others. In areas of work where employees serve and assist customers or clients one-on-one, some employers require job applicants to confirm having a certain CLB level of English. One employer said that business owners would like to have information on language benchmarks for different kinds of jobs. One employer proposed that on-the-job training include job shadowing to teach newcomers standard ways of interacting with the population they work with. A few employers indicated that it is additional work to train and supervise a newcomer. The employers in this study did not know about the wage subsidy program. They said it would incentivise hiring newcomers.

While most employers said newcomer employees worked very well, some employers reported that some newcomers did not know Canadian workplace norms. Likewise, a few volunteers shared that some newcomers lost jobs due to language barriers (unable to understand work instructions) or not complying with Canadian occupational norms. Most issues were resolved by the manager or sponsor group volunteer explaining workplace norms to newcomers. Employee onboarding can be overwhelming given how much information is shared. As well, some newcomers are not familiar with weather dependent scheduling, statutory holidays, and norms for reporting to work late, leaving throughout the day, or leaving early. Employers and sponsor group onboarding coaches worked to resolve such matters by reviewing company policies during onboarding and throughout the probationary period to ensure comprehension. Based

on this, employee onboarding materials could be written at an elementary reading level or with symbols, where appropriate, although this may be viewed by employers as extra work.

Lack of transportation was raised by newcomers, volunteers, and employers. In rural areas, some refugees lack transportation to hold a job and distances to the workplace are far. Newcomers soon realize that owning a car is a necessity for people living in rural areas (see Perry and Scott, 2021). Towns and small cities have limited public transit options, smaller communities or rural areas have even less or no services. Affording a car and insurance is challenging for newcomer families when they first arrive, and some newcomers have not driven private cars or had a license before resettling in Canada. Getting a driver's license takes time and money. The Prince Edward Island driver training manual is available in multiple languages (including Arabic). Volunteers in Nova Scotia encourage newcomers to use the PEI manual and Google Translate for the Nova Scotia manual. Practice driver training has been provided by volunteers. Where possible, some newcomers walked or rode a bicycle to work, and some PSR groups organize rides.

8. Discrimination and workplace issues

We asked newcomers if they experienced discrimination at their place of work. One African descent newcomer experienced blatant racism. The newcomer brought it to the attention of the manager. The newcomer indicated the manager was very supportive and took steps to formally address the issue with staff and clients at a special meeting. An employer from a larger workplace that hires immigrants and former refugees indicated that they are proactive about creating a welcoming, inclusive workplace, saying that employers have the responsibility to have a plan of action to address racist behaviour. Links to resources ISANS developed for employers who hire immigrants and refugees are provided in the resources section. Other newcomers expressed feeling that their workplace was welcoming.

Beyond mentioning introducing workplace norms (see above), a few volunteers and employers shared that some newcomers fear financial exploitation at work. Some refugees experienced financial exploitation in the country of asylum where they lived as refugees. One newcomer mentioned that he and his sons worked all day in Lebanon, and then received only a token amount of pay, being told that they deserve little because they were not Lebanese. Some resettled newcomers worry this will happen in Canada. An employer suggested that sponsor groups address trust issues, saying *"When they came, there was like zero trust. They seemed to think that we were in it for something."* Volunteers said that some newcomers were told by other newcomers about being paid higher hourly wages, and this led them to question being offered minimum wage: it contributed to a sense of mistrust. Volunteers said they explained why people earn different hourly wages, and encouraged newcomers to work toward the higher paying jobs over time. In addition to wage concerns, newcomers did not know about standard payroll deductions (CPP, EI, etc.), which volunteers explained.

Cultural learning was raised by newcomers and employers in ways that reflect the concept two-way integration, where both newcomers and host community members learn each other's culture and acknowledge them in respectful ways. For example, some employers discussed their own cultural learning, such as Muslim faith holidays, which they addressed in scheduling.

Conclusion

Consistent with past research, including nationally representative studies, lack of proficiency in an official language and credential recognition emerged as key barriers to finding employment in one's pre-migration occupation. These barriers are challenging to overcome given the lack of access to language classes in rural areas, as well as the lack of knowledge about the Canadian Language Benchmark system for measuring official language proficiency, and its relevance for qualifying for specific jobs and accessing specific post-secondary programs or adult employment training programs. Most newcomers who participated in this study are employed full-time, and while many have employment they regard as secure and rewarding, several describe being underemployed. This includes newcomers who had professional employment pre-migration, but are employed in low-wage, service sector jobs, or can only access part-time professional work. Younger adults are succeeding in college and university programs and feel optimistic about their job prospects.

Both volunteers and newcomers identify disparities between English language courses and settlement services offered in rural and urban parts of the province. Based on what they have learned, several participants recommend that learning English should be a resettlement priority (i.e., introduce the CBL early and explain its connection to post-secondary programs and employment; offer full-time language courses with no summer recess).

Rural communities continue to welcome immigrants and refugees. The federal government established Local Immigration Partnerships (LIP) in rural areas to facilitate stakeholder communication. Reaching out to the LIP in your area is recommended to sponsor groups, newcomers, and employers interested in the development of policy and programs for rural settlement. Potential policy discussion themes emerging from this study include:

- Ensure that EAL/FAL is prioritized in resettlement, with immediate and full-time access
- Address transportation and childcare as barriers to attending EAL/FAL training programs
- Exploring including job-shadowing in EAL/FAL programs
- Continue developing work-related themes in EAL/FAL programs to include information on Canadian health and safety certificates, workplace norms, CLB for jobs/training, etc.
- Develop tools for employers, such as plain language onboarding resources; helping them to identify CLB levels for different types of jobs
- Expand wage-subsidy programs in rural areas (it has started in some areas)

This project contributes to an ongoing and vital discussion about the integration of refugee newcomers. It rests on the position that integration is a collective effort, one where the welcoming society provides services to facilitate newcomers' social, economic, and political transitions. There is much good work to build on, yet this and other studies highlight three key variables that require further attention: access to language courses; credential/qualification recognition; and addressing poverty-related barriers to employment (transportation, childcare, and housing). They could be addressed through further innovations around bridging language learning and employment and/or education, which are tied to credential and qualification recognition. Creativity and innovation could also improve access to transportation, childcare and affordable housing in rural areas.

Resources for Refugee Newcomers and Sponsor Group Volunteers

The resources in this section are related to learning English (or French). Newcomers who are not yet fluent in English are recommended to focus on learning English.

Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) has many resources

Some volunteers suggest that newcomers be introduced to the CLB system early, even pre-arrival, because some occupations require applicants to have a specific CLB level and some post-secondary schools have a specific CLB prerequisite for admission to their programs.

- This link is to resources developed for newcomers to Canada presented by a LINC teacher: <https://www.language.ca/resources/expertise/for-language-learners/>
- This *Arabic language* document explains a person's CLB assessment report in Arabic: <https://www.language.ca/product/understanding-your-canadian-language-benchmarks-placement-test-clbpt-assessment-report-arabic-pdf-e/>
- This link is to resources developed for volunteers working with refugees: <https://www.language.ca/for-volunteers-working-with-refugees/>
- Online CLB self-assessment: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=botVmQaR-uk>

These are other videos introducing the CLB that give examples of CLB levels for specific jobs.

- This video was designed for prospective immigrants to Canada (note that refugees come under a different immigrant stream): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L-YzucZ8jN4>
- This video is part of a language program. It explains the kinds of jobs a person can expect to have with various CLB levels. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CNWiVtbX-mw>

LINC courses at ISANS include LINC Home Study

Most refugee newcomers in rural areas access English as a Second/Additional Language courses. There is limited access to language learning courses, so some newcomers have been accessing LINC courses online, especially since the pandemic. Here is an intro to LINC at home.

- LINC courses: <https://isans.ca/learn-english/> & <https://isans.ca/program/linc-home-study/>

Learn English Live 24/7

A few newcomers recommend using *Learn English Live 24/7* daily to learn and practice English words and expressions. *Learn English Live 24/7* is a free self-help program for learning conversational English. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCeTVoczn9NOZA9blls3YgUg>

Canadian Orientation Abroad Workbook

The Canadian Orientation Abroad Workbook is a valuable resource available in several languages. Although this resource is designed for pre-arrival immigrants, newcomers will find it a useful resource as well. Information on learning an official language and credential recognition is in the Education chapter. <https://publications.iom.int/books/canadian-orientation-abroad-participant-workbook>

Arabic language VIDEOS developed for refugees with information about living in Canada

- For refugees coming to Canada/ اللاجئين القادمين الى كندا: https://youtu.be/K9458QA_KYA
- For refugees already resettled in Canada: اللاجئين الجدد في كندا: <https://youtu.be/2Z1L9h7ewj0>

Resources for New Sponsorship Groups

People who are considering using the Private Sponsorship of Refugee Program to sponsor and resettle refugees can find extensive program information on the Government of Canada website. These are resources participants shared or we accessed online.

Refugee Settlement Training Program (RSTP)

Funded by [Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada](#) (IRCC) and administered by [Catholic Crosscultural Services \(CCS\)](#), “the RSTP is a program designed to support the Sponsorship Agreement Holders (SAHs) of Canada, their Constituent Groups, Groups of Five and Community Sponsors on a national level (excl. Quebec). The objective of the RSTP is to address their information and on-going training needs as well as the initial information needs of sponsored refugees.” (<https://www.rstp.ca/en/about-the-rstp/>). Contact information for the Regional RSTPs is here: <https://www.rstp.ca/en/contact-us/>

Pathways to Partnerships (P2P)

P2P consult stakeholders involved in settlement to learn about and share their innovations and best practices. Some resources focus on helping refugees transition into employment. This link takes you to the P2P video library. <http://p2pcanada.ca/promising-practices/category/sharing-settlement-and-integration-practices-that-work/>

Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks

Volunteers who wanted to help newcomers navigate learning English (or French) found the resources at the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks provided helpful valuable information about the CLB, and how it connects to newcomers planning for work or education: <https://www.language.ca/for-volunteers-working-with-refugees/>

Resources for Employers

Resources from ISANS: Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia

- **Onboarding Newcomers:** A Toolkit for Nova Scotian Employers. Immigrant Services of Nova Scotia. https://isans.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/OnboardingNewcomersToolkit_Final_web.pdf
- **Wage Subsidy program:** <https://isans.ca/program/wage-subsidy-for-refugees/>
- **Employer Programs and Support:** <https://isans.ca/category/employer-support/>

Information for Employers on the wage subsidy program for Atlantic Canada businesses

- <https://atlanticcanadabusinessgrants.com/wage-subsidy/access-ability/>

Recommendation for Policy Exploration and Development to Facilitate the Employment Transitions of Adult Refugee Newcomers

1. Prioritize language learning in the first year of resettlement

English and or French language courses are available to immigrants and refugees, yet many resettlement volunteers were surprised that refugee newcomer language assessment and learning is not prioritized in resettlement policy. Consistent with past research, volunteers discovered that many former refugees feel vulnerable if they are not attached to the labour market, especially those who identify as the sole family wage earner. Thus, many newcomers prioritized finding employment before they achieve a level of English/French needed to understand work instructions. Some volunteers and employers raised occupational health and safety concerns related to low levels of language competency; some participants noted that job losses happened due to communication barriers. Combined with this, both volunteers and newcomers reported knowing little about the federal Canadian Language Benchmark system, how it relates to employment and post-secondary education, and “best practice” recommendations related to newcomers’ official language learning for PSR groups.

1.1 Recommendations for policy exploration for IRCC

- Work with provincial immigration ministries to improve information literacy for newcomers around the CLB and LINC/EAL, and share resources with newcomers at or pre-arrival. This could be done through the creation of Fact Sheets or an orientation kit for newcomers *in several languages* modeled after the *Canadian Orientation Abroad Workbook*. As well, modify the Canadian Orientation Abroad Workbook to have information on learning an official language as a separate chapter or in a section called Adult Education. <https://publications.iom.int/books/canadian-orientation-abroad-participant-workbook> The fact sheets should explain the link between the CLB and specific jobs and post-secondary access (i.e., show examples of jobs one can hold down at CLB 1, 2, 3, 4, etc. and give examples of the CLB requirements for sample college and university programs).
- Share information developed for refugee newcomers with PSR sponsor groups to help them support the language learning of adult newcomers.
- Review the language learning policies and practices of other immigrant and refugee welcoming nations to learn whether early, full-time host language courses facilitate host language acquisition and economic integration.
- Explore mandating participation in language courses until a newcomer reaches a recommended Canadian Language Benchmark (CLB).
- Why is English Important: <https://www.globalopp.ca/moving-to-canada/why-is-learning-english-so-important-for-your-immigration-journey-to-canada>

2. Establish full-time language classes in rural areas of Nova Scotia

The lack of access to full-time, year-round languages classes in rural areas was identified as a problem by volunteers and newcomers in all six rural areas. Some newcomers suggested that the lack of access to full-time language learning in rural areas is an equity issue, after having learned that refugees sent to Halifax can access to full-time LINC programs, while rural newcomers can access only part-time EAL courses. Newcomers complained of:

- Insufficient number of hours (e.g., 2 hours 3-5 days a week depending on the area)
- Courses are not offered during summer months
- Sometimes students with different CLB levels are in the same language course
- Challenges in accessing language courses due to lack of childcare and/or transportation.

2.1 Recommendations for the Province of Nova Scotia

- Establish full-time language classes for refugee newcomers starting soon after arrival.
- Conduct program evaluations to address equity in rural language course delivery.
- Address barriers to accessing language programs (transportation and childcare).

3. Innovate employment-based immersions to augment language courses

Several newcomers and volunteers noted that having a job can help newcomers develop their English language skills, as well as learning about Canadian workplace cultures and norms. Employers also observed that newcomers' language skills improved at the workplace. Some newcomers wished there was more content about working in Canada in language courses. In 2016, some sponsor groups understood organized language classes full-time (five days a week, 9:00 am – 2:00 pm), and for newcomers who wanted employment, they helped them find part-time manual work schedule at times other than during English classes. Both volunteers and newcomers said that working with locals was another way to learn English. Newcomers were emphatic about the value of immersive employment-based language learning opportunities. We recommend the expansion or integration of newcomer-specific activities into existing mentorship, work experience, professional development, and connector programs.

3.1 Recommendations

- Further develop curriculum content of LINC and EAL classes to include information literacy around workplace culture, job search methods and strategies, how to do a job interview, employment norms, safety training, acquiring trade certification, and so on.
- Diversify language learning programs to include paid or unpaid workplace immersions.
- Encourage paid part-time employment at times that do not interfere with language class to encourage language learning through immersion in a Canadian workplace setting.
- Have ISANS and rural LIPS explore developing onsite workplace language supports.

4. Address the qualification recognition and getting Canadian credentials

Volunteers and newcomers noted newcomers' pre-migration qualifications are not recognized, and getting Canadian credentials prove challenging or impossible. Newcomer participants who learned that they need Canadian education or certification explained the barriers to acquiring Canadian credentials. One volunteer wondered whether a newcomer's employment history (i.e., level of skill in the person's trade, occupation, and profession) could be assessed soon after arrival (or pre-arrival), and accompanied by guidance on what needs to be done to either have them recognized or what they must do to get Canadian certificates or education. Some volunteers said that the language requirement for admission to NSCC programs is a barrier to getting Canadian credentials. These concerns have been addressed in several studies (Elgersma, 2012; Hawthorne, 2012; Sweetman et al, 2015), including a recent federal report (Brousseau,

2020). These reports explain that there are different processes in the provinces and territories, as well as for each trade and profession, for assessing an immigrant's pre-migration credentials. Although the evaluation of qualifications is a provincial and territorial jurisdiction, the federal government has initiatives to facilitate immigrant qualification recognition.

4.1 Recommendations

- Explore developing a system to assess newcomers' pre-migration employment credentials that would give them an entry point into Canadian training that recognizes skill levels.
- This may involve having the NS Department of Labour Skills and Advanced Education collaborate with trades organizations to develop a method to identify and measure newcomers' occupational qualification and skill level. Explore how newcomer's individual occupation and skill level can be assessed to facilitate entry into the trade or occupation, or into job training or community college programs that align with that person's skill set.
- Have the NS Departments of Advanced Education and Labour Skills and Immigration explore ways to integrate language learning into adult education and job training programs. This could include providing CLB guidelines so newcomers can track their CLB progress.
- Have the NS Department of Advanced Education consult with Nova Scotia community colleges and universities around developing programs for newcomers with pre-migration education and employment experiences (e.g., potentially introduce testing for placement into programs that recognize pre-migration education or trades credentials for refugees who cannot access documents due to forced displacement).
- Address barriers to accessing post-secondary education, including language barriers, transportation, and childcare.

4.2 Recent studies of foreign qualification recognition

- Brosseau, L. (2020). Recognition of Foreign Qualifications of Immigrants. Library of Parliament. Ottawa, Canada. Publication Number: 2020-86-E.
https://lop.parl.ca/sites/PublicWebsite/default/en_CA/ResearchPublications/202086E
- Elgersma, S. (2021). Recognition of the foreign qualifications of immigrants: Reconnaissance des qualifications professionnelles acquises à l'étranger des immigrants. *Policy Commons*.
<https://policycommons.net/artifacts/1190120/recognition-of-the-foreign-qualifications-of-immigrants/1743246/>
- Hawthorne, L. (2007). "Foreign credential recognition and assessment: An Introduction." *Canadian Issues*, 3-13.
- Sweetman, A., McDonald, J. T., & Hawthorne, L. (2015). "Occupational regulation and foreign qualification recognition." *Canadian Public Policy*, 41(1), S1–S13.

5. Adapt provincial job search services to address refugee newcomers' needs

The findings regarding the assistance at Nova Scotia Works, Career Connections, and other provincial employment services were inconsistent. Some found the orientation excellent, where others felt the services did not adequately address the unique circumstances of refugees with limited English proficiency.

5.1 Recommendations

- Explore how Nova Scotia Works Centres and Employment Nova Scotia services can address the unique needs of refugee newcomers.

5.2 Recent study of provincial employment services

- MacDonald, J. (2020). "Community Integration of Non-Profit Organizations: A Study of Nova Scotia's Employment Services Ecosystem." MA Thesis: University of Guelph. <https://hdl.handle.net/10214/21197>

6. Address poverty-related barriers to employment in rural areas

Transportation and childcare were identified as barriers for participants to attend language courses or go to work. For many newcomers, expenses related to car ownership and insurance are further reasons why some newcomers seek to find work rather than take language courses. Sponsor groups have developed several volunteer-based solutions to address that there are either no or limited public transportation options and challenges to getting drivers licences.

6.1 Recommendation

- Explore setting the time of language courses to align with the school day, and use school buses to bring parents to and from language classes while children are in school.
- Explore cooperative models of daycare to encourage newcomers' trust in daycare services while also reducing costs and providing an English (French) language immersion.
- Incentivize carpooling.

7. Develop rural settlement capacity through knowledge sharing

It has been recognized that community members using the Private Sponsorship of Refugees program have contributed to the successful integration of refugee newcomers, and they have contributed to settlement policy (Morris, et al., Rural areas are receiving more immigrants and refugees, especially since the 2015-16 Syrian Refugee Resettlement Initiative. Rural areas across the province are demonstrating capacity to welcome and settle newcomers. Local and regional programs have been established to enhance capacity and address shortcomings in settlement-related services. In addition to the outreach and capacity development done by PSR groups, several organizations (e.g., Antigonish Guysborough Settlement Association, North Shore Local Immigration Partnership, Western and the Pictou Country Regional Enterprise Networks (RENS)) are developing knowledge and innovations to facilitate settlement. Likewise, ISANS has been exploring ways of extending some of its language and workplace programming to rural areas.

7.1 Recommendation

- That rural re/settlement organizations, including PSR groups and SAHs, seek funding to generate knowledge sharing and capacity building exercises focused on rural resettlement, such as hosting a rural refugee resettlement conference to learn from each other and as a means of building rural resettlement capacity.
- Explore developing a Rural Settlement Department at ISANS: Immigrant Settlement Association of Nova Scotia to facilitate knowledge sharing and to develop programming that draws from ISANS history and programs but works well for rural contexts.

7.2 Rural Local Immigration Partnerships (LIPs) and Regional Enterprise Networks (RENs)

- NSRENs <https://nsrens.ca/nova-scotias-regional-enterprise-networks-august-september-update/>
- North Shore Local Immigration Partnership: <https://www.yishfx.ca/lip>
- Cape Breton <https://capebretonpartnership.com/initiatives-services/cape-breton-local-immigration-partnership/>
- Western REN <https://westernren.ca/news/welcome-to-western-nova-scotia-newcomer-guide/>
- For rural locations within HRM: Halifax <https://newinhalifax.ca/about-us/>

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- *“Employment Transitions of Refugees: Refugees, Employer, and Sponsorship Group Perspectives in Pictou County”* was funded by CLARI: Change Lab Action Research Initiative and Mitacs Internship.

The Research Team

Norine Verberg is an Associate Professor of Sociology at St. Francis Xavier University (StFX). Norine began studying refugee resettlement in 2018 with funding from the StFX University Research Council. Her research focuses on community development related to refugee resettlement and the economic integration of refugee newcomers resettling in rural areas of Nova Scotia. Findings have been presented in webinars and conferences, and two papers are under review. Dr. Verberg and Jordan MacDonald recently published “A Meso-Level Analysis of the Revitalization of the WUSC Student Refugee Program at St. Francis Xavier University” in *Refuge*: <https://refuge.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/refuge/article/view/40830/36859>

Jordan MacDonald was the primary Research Assistant on the project while studying Capacity Development and Extension (MSc: Un. of Guelph). While studying at StFX, he served on the StFX WUSC Society which organizes the resettlement of a refugee student annually. Jordan has presented findings at several conferences and is co-author on two papers. Currently, Jordan is employed as the Economic Development Officer at Develop West Prince, Prince Edward Island.

Kenzie MacNeil was a Mitacs Intern on the Pictou Country Safe Harbour project when doing the Bachelor of Education program. Kenzie was involved in all aspect of the study and gave three conference presentations. Kenzie is now an elementary school teacher in Lunenburg County, and she is a volunteer with a local sponsorship group, offering tutoring to refugee students.

Sociology Honours student, **Carrigan Martell** was a Mitacs Intern on the SAFE project. She conducted interviews, data analysis, worked on the environmental scans, and presented at a conference. Carrigan is the Project Coordinator at Naomi Society and Co-chairs the Antigonish Community Health Board. After completing this work, Carrigan became a SAFE volunteer.

Aghyad Al Zhouri joined the research team as a Research Assistant while doing the Engineering Diploma at StFX. He conducted interviews with newcomers who prefer to speak Arabic during the interview. Aghyad is now completing an Engineering degree at Dalhousie University.

Sociology student, **Sarah MacKnight** joined the project after receiving a grant from the Centre for Employment Innovation at StFX to conducted literature reviews and environmental scans. Sarah was a SAFE volunteer her last year at StFX. She is about to begin a Social Work program.

Presentation of preliminary results

Community Webinar

Preliminary results were presented through a webinar. Information on the webinar was shared with participants and community members via email, social media, and group email lists.



Conference presentations

Verberg, N. & J. MacDonald. "Employment Transitions of Refugees by Community-Based Refugee Resettlement Groups in Rural Nova Scotia." Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation Conference, Lethbridge, AB, in-person, June 23, 2023.

Verberg, N. & J. MacDonald. "Community Sponsorship and Two-way Integration in Rural Nova Scotia." Canadian Ethnic Studies Ass'n, Halifax, NS, in-person, Nov. 5, 2022.

MacNeil, K., N. Verberg, & J. MacDonald. "Complex Educational Pathways for Adult Refugees in Rural Nova Scotia." Canadian Ethnic Studies Ass'n, Halifax, NS, in-person, Nov. 5, 2022.

McKnight, S., Verberg, N., & J. MacDonald. "Exploring How Volunteers Help Refugee Newcomers Make Employment Transitions in Rural Nova Scotia." Centre for Employment Innovation Symposium, online, August 16, 2022.

Verberg, N., J. MacDonald, & K. MacNeil. "Social Change Through Community-Based Refugee Resettlement." Migration Cluster: Canadian Sociology Association, Social Sciences and Humanities Congress, online, June 16, 2022.

MacNeil, K., N. Verberg, & J. MacDonald. "Complex Educational Pathways for Refugees Resettled in Rural Nova Scotia." Pathways to and through Post-Secondary Education in Canada Session, Social Sciences and Humanities Congress, online, June 18, 2022.

Verberg, Norine & Jordan MacDonald. "Rural revitalization through refugee economic integration: The role of civil society organizations." Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation, online, September 29, 2021.

Carrigan Martell & Norine Verberg. "Provision of English Language Services to Rural Resettled Refugees Since 2016." Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation, online, Sept. 29, 2021.

Kenzie MacNeil and Norine Verberg. "Education-to-Employment Transitions of Refugees Resettled in Rural Nova Scotia." Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation, online, September 29, 2021.

Verberg, N. and J. MacDonald. "The Economic Transitions of Refugee Resettled in Rural Nova Scotia." Canadian Sociology Association, Humanities and Social Sciences Congress, online, June 3, 2021.

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