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Downstream Responses to Changing Selection Processes

The North Bay & District Multicultural Centre is the only settlement agency serving the region of Northeastern Ontario from Parry Sound in the south to Hearst in the north, including the regional centres of North Bay and Timmins. Our main office is in North Bay and we have a satellite office in Timmins, a four-hour drive straight north. It takes eight hours to drive from Parry Sound to Hearst, so it is a huge territory, comprising 17 per cent of the land mass of Ontario. Some of the smaller municipalities you may have heard of include Mattawa, Sturgeon Falls, Temiskaming Shores, Kirkland Lake, Iroquois Falls, Hearst, Kapuskasing, and Cochrane.

The population of North Bay is 54,000 and Timmins has a population of 45,000. The catchment area we serve has a population of 240,000.

We have been in existence only six years, so we had no historical view of how a settlement agency is supposed to operate. We had an entrepreneurial nature from the outset and fully appreciated the close relationship between immigration and economic development in Northern Ontario.

In our six years of operation we have seen a regional rise in the number of temporary foreign workers and international students. The number of permanent residents we serve has quadrupled. We are a bilingual agency and the number of francophone newcomers was six per cent of the total last year and so far this year it is five per cent. Actual francophone numbers are higher than last year with five months left to go but the percentage is lower so far due to a significant increase in numbers overall.

We are in our first year of seeing interest in international students at the school board level, as one school board brought in 50 students in September. Some are short-term stays but their long-range plan is to have them stay through high school and encourage them to go on to university or college in North Bay.

Temporary workers are being hired by the many international mining companies we have in the region, plus those companies serving the mining industry. Mining engineers, millwrights, welders and skilled tradespeople are particularly in demand. The health care, government, and service and hospitality sectors are constantly looking for people as well. Immigrant entrepreneurs are arriving and purchasing hotels, convenience stores, gas stations and franchise operations, or starting their own businesses, such as pharmacies.

We have only two settlement counsellors in North Bay and one in Timmins and we are not funded to serve temporary foreign workers or international students. But, as with most settlement agencies, we do not turn people away. When we looked at the numbers of international students we served from Canadore College and Nipissing University in North Bay last year we decided to charge the institutions, not the students, for the service. The college and the university have minimal staff working with international students and they do not have the expertise developed by our settlement counsellors.

The college readily agreed to pay for our services and the university is still thinking about it. Similarly, when one local employer showed up at 4:45 on a Friday afternoon with six welders who are temporary foreign workers in tow, we thought it was time employers paid as well. We now have an agreement with that one employer, who has a dozen temporary foreign workers—11 welders and one engineer from Tunisia and the Philippines. Most of them want to become permanent residents and bring their families to North Bay. We are aware of discussions in Ontario to have our provincial funding include service to international students and temporary foreign workers, but there is nothing in effect at present.

Because we hold the contribution agreement for our Local Immigration Partnership and lead that initiative, we have a broader mandate and more tools at our disposal than some settlement agencies. The LIP in Timmins is led by the Timmins Economic Development Corporation, a key partner of ours.

Seeing the coming changes to the immigration system—economic immigration is expected to increase to 63 per cent of the total in 2014 and the Expression of Interest program is expected to be rolled out by CIC in early 2015—we saw the need to get our entire region mobilized. With the coming changes employers will be driving Canada's immigration program more than they did previously.

While we have been responsible for servicing the huge area I described in fact we haven't been doing a great job outside North Bay and Timmins. Dropping off brochures in a strategic fashion and encouraging social service agencies to have immigrant clients contact us by our toll-free number or Skype has not worked well. We now realize that personal contact is required to engage newcomers.

Just last month we invited municipal economic development officers and chief administrative officers and provincial and federal government funders to attend an immigration symposium in Temiskaming Shores, a scenic city roughly in the middle of our catchment area. Pathways to Prosperity was a sponsor and Meyer Burstein presented at the event. We had 64 people attend. We presented the North Bay and Timmins settlement agency and LIP models and had a panel of two economic development officers, a business owner and the LIP coordinator from neighbouring Renfrew-Lanark districts discuss the immigration issues they are facing.

The economic development officers talked about immigrants purchasing local businesses and settling in their areas but having limited settlement and integration support. The business owner talked about the challenges of finding skilled labour and the LIP coordinator talked about the difficulty of operating a LIP without a supporting settlement agency.

We had a working group meeting two weeks later and we devised a plan to address the issues raised at the symposium.

We are fortunate to have access to both provincial Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation and federal FedNor funding through Industry Canada for economic development activities. The plan involves seeking funding support from those two bodies, plus municipalities, MCI and CIC to do the following:

1. **Provide resources for itinerant settlement counsellors** based at the North Bay and Timmins & District Multicultural Centres to visit participating municipalities to provide settlement and integration services to immigrants. We piloted this strategy with the City of Temiskaming Shores over the past five months and it has been very successful. We will include Renfrew District, which is adjacent to us but not part of our catchment area. It has a population of 101,000, which would increase our reach to a total population of 341,000. The major centres are Deep River, Chalk River, Renfrew, Petawawa and Pembroke.
2. **Provide resources for HR North to expand into the smaller municipalities.** The HR North project is in its incubation period and is not yet sustainable. HR North is a project of our North Bay LIP's Immigrant Employers' Council and is a head-hunting service for purple squirrels—those very difficult to find people with a skill set not normally found locally. It uses the Skills International database of some 15,000 skilled international professionals living in southern Ontario and adds university and college graduates.
3. **Create Immigrant Employers' Councils in each municipality.** This strategy is an amendment of one presented at the immigration forum, when it was suggested that each municipality should have a seat at the LIP table in either North Bay or Timmins. The urgent need is for employers to educate themselves about immigration, the Expression of Interest model, the need to create a welcoming community to retain newcomers and a myriad of other issues revolving around immigrant attraction and retention.
4. **Assist municipalities with immigrant attraction and retention.** This strategy is an amendment of one presented at the immigration forum, when it was suggested that we could assist municipalities in the creation of immigration strategies. Rather than create 40-page reports for each municipality, the project will add practical steps to existing municipal strategic plans to move municipalities' immigration efforts forward in a coherent and mutually enforcing manner. I was speaking with the economic development officer for Kapuskasing last week and he told me their strategic plan was last updated three years ago and immigration was not even on their radar. Assistance will also be provided to implement the identified priorities. Providing municipalities and employers with the knowledge to participate in the forthcoming federal Expression of Interest model will be part of this initiative.

5. **Participate in a region-wide advertising campaign.** A region-wide advertising campaign to both set the stage for creating welcoming communities and providing settlement information to newcomers is seen as a necessary project component. Immigration has not been top-of-mind for smaller Northern Ontario communities. By smaller I mean all those smaller than North Bay, Timmins, Sudbury, Sault Ste. Marie and Thunder Bay.
6. **Research component for replication Canada-wide.** Pathways to Prosperity will assign researchers to follow this project, systematically analyze key components of the project that contribute to success, and produce a research report and evaluation at project's end that will supplement a 'how-to' manual.
7. **'How-to' Manual.** Extensive documentation will be kept throughout the project for both the researcher/project evaluator and the project principals, who will prepare the manual. Photographs will be taken throughout the project for use in both the manual and research report. Communities armed with both the research report and 'how-to' manual will be able to replicate this project. Project principals will be available for free telephone consultation at any time.

This is part of our strategy to address the changing landscape in our region. So far it has verbal support from one major funder and three municipalities and we are optimistic that we will be in the implementation phase in early 2014.