2024

DIGITAL LITERACY GAPS IN THE NEWCOMER SERVING SECTOR

prepared by

TSLIP NEWCOMER SERVICES COLLABORATION WORKING GROUP

LIP LOCAL IMMIGRATION PARTNERSHIP
TORONTO SOUTH

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The work of the Toronto South Local Immigration Partnership (TSLIP) takes place on land that has been the site of human activity since time immemorial. It is the traditional territories of the Wendat, Anishinaabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and most recently, The Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation.

Ontario is covered by 46 treaties and other agreements and is home to many Indigenous Nations from across Turtle Island, including the Inuit and the Metis. These treaties and other agreements, including the One Dish with One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, are agreements to peaceably share and care for the land and its resources. Other Indigenous Nations, Europeans, and newcomers, were invited into this covenant in the spirit of respect, peace, and friendship.

We are all treaty people. Many of TSLIP's staff and the community partners we engage with have come here as settlers, immigrants, newcomers in this generation or generations past. We are mindful of broken covenants and we strive to make this right, with the land and with each other.

As we discuss social service programming gaps impacting newcomers, it is critical to remember that Indigenous communities experience related yet unique social inequities. The roots of these challenges are distinct but intertwined.

TSLIP strives to meaningfully confront its own position within colonial legacies. Acknowledging the relationships between the migration of displaced peoples to this land, settler colonialism, and what is called Canada's Settlement sector is a necessary step in repairing harm.

We also recognize there are limitations to exercising anti-racism while being positioned within colonial systems and structures. We continue to facilitate spaces of collective learning and action while taking direction from Indigenous communities towards honest and renewed relationships.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In response to the COVID-19 global pandemic, the newcomer serving sector rapidly transitioned much of its programming and services to online formats. Delivering services via online platforms and by phone became a critical necessity. This created new accessibility issues for newcomers and technology use while also reinforcing preexisting ones. Since 2020, grassroots organizations have played a more integral role in supporting newcomers with technology needs after stepping up to address significant service and support deficits experienced during the initial phase of the pandemic and numerous lockdowns. Agencies that serve newcomers also started collaborating with these hyperlocal and grassroots groups, seeking innovative ways to connect with newcomers remotely. Considerable efforts were made to assist the sector in adapting to remote operations and to tackle the digital divide exacerbated by the pandemic.

Recently, the Toronto South Local Immigration Partnership's (TSLIP) Newcomer Services Collaboration Working Group flagged digital literacy as a critical area requiring greater focus and support from newcomer serving stakeholders as well as funders. This report, including its recommendations, draws from the insights of Working Group members with extensive direct experience in serving newcomers. They have noted ongoing deficiencies in the support for enhancing digital literacy since 2020.

Digital literacy encompasses a broad array of skills necessary to effectively and safely utilize technology, such as problem-solving, protecting sensitive information, assessing the credibility of sources, and confidently navigating various digital platforms and technologies. As hybrid service models become standard in community and institutional settings, barriers have intensified for those lacking digital access or skills (particularly older individuals, less technologically skilled newcomers, and those with limited language proficiency) often making it challenging for them to access essential government and social services.

This report provides an overview of continuing challenges and gaps identified by TSLIP's Newcomer Services Collaboration Working Group, expanding on previous documentation in past reports produced on similar topics. With a spotlight on the Toronto South area, this report presents the current state of digital literacy programming and its related gaps, highlights effective practices, and offers recommendations to meet these needs for both service providers and funders within the newcomer serving sector.

This project, was a collaborative effort led by several community partners from TSLIP's Newcomer Services Collaboration Working Group. The Working Group began with an extensive literature review of articles, publications, and research papers focused on bolstering digital literacy among newcomer, low income, youth and marginalized groups. It included studies and promising practices from community initiatives in providing training and creating more accessible digital literacy across Canada.

Recommendations from the research:

- Dedicated resources/funding for more personalized and successive newcomer digital literacy programming with complementary support to access up-to-date devices, software, and internet hotspots. Funding should include hiring of instructors and supporting the development of intake/assessment processes

- Increased opportunities for public-private partnerships to help bridge digital literacy learning and access gaps

- Open eligibility for all newcomers regardless of status to access newcomer services including digital literacy programming

- Dedicated funding and opportunities for professional development/training around digital literacy, upskilling, and using devices for community members supporting newcomers and staff in the newcomer serving sector

- Create centralized digital literacy programming and services that newcomer serving organizations can partner with (ex. through public libraries or school boards) to increase access to programming, develop curricula, and access device lending

- Increased information sharing for grassroots and newcomer serving organizations to build, replicate, and complement promising practices around digital literacy supports
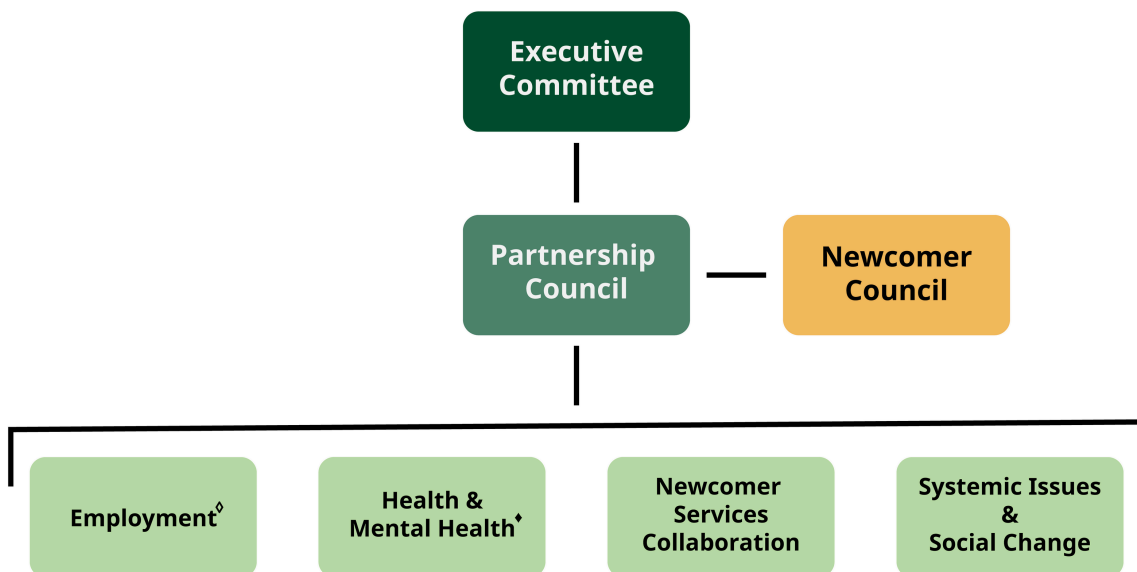
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INTRODUCTION

who are we?

The Toronto South Local Immigration Partnership (TSLIP) is a community collaboration bringing together stakeholders located in Toronto South to develop local settlement strategies that coordinate and enhance service delivery to newcomers while promoting innovation and efficient use of resources. We were formed in April 2012 and are one of five Local Immigration Partnerships (LIPs) in Toronto and one of 88 LIPs throughout Canada. TSLIP is funded by Immigration Refugee Citizenship Canada (IRCC) and is a consortium of three partner organizations: The Neighbourhood Group Community Services (TNG), WoodGreen Community Services, and the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture (CCVT). Our partnership continues to grow to include diverse stakeholders dedicated to supporting all newcomers in different ways. We currently have 69 members.

Toronto South LIP Organizational Structure

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◊ *created in 2022 as part of **TSLIP's Strategic Plan 2021 - 2025***
♦ *the former Social Inclusion Working Group has merged with the Health & Mental Health Working Group as part of **TSLIP's Strategic Plan 2021 - 2025***

TSLIP's objectives are:
- To improve the social and economic integration outcomes of vulnerable newcomer populations through the creation and implementation of settlement strategies and action plans
- To involve newcomers, settlement service organizations, employers and other neighbourhood stakeholders in processes to create, promote and implement the settlement strategies
- To serve as a valuable resource for the Toronto South community, facilitating access to information and resources and fostering partnership building and collaboration
- To ensure that our stakeholders' on the ground experience is conveyed to relevant decision-makers

TSLIP has four Working Groups: Newcomer Services Collaboration, Health and Mental Health, Employment, and Systemic Issues and Social Change. Each working group brings together partner representatives, including newcomer serving agencies, grassroots organizations, and institutions supporting newcomers in some capacity. An Executive Committee, Partnership Council, and Newcomer Council serve as core advisory bodies and drive TSLIP's strategy and projects.

The following project was developed by TSLIP's Newcomer Services Collaboration Working Group which looks to address issues affecting access to services for newcomers. It works collaboratively to build service provider capacity, identify and remove barriers, and ensure better service coordination.

background + context

As an emergency response to the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic, the newcomer serving sector was forced to shift as much of their programming and services online as possible. While this shift had been necessary to ensure service provision could continue, the scale of the transition and the urgency with which it took place also highlighted structural and operational challenges that many service providers face in delivering adequate care and services to newcomers. The compounding impact on newcomers included an increased digital divide and has been documented through various reports and research since the onset of the pandemic (Ekmekcioglu et al., 2022; Lockhart and Andrey, 2024).

In the early days of the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, grassroots and community-based groups mobilized to fill in massive service and support gaps. Local newcomer serving agencies also began to partner with such groups and explore their own innovative ways to reach newcomers online and by phone where possible. While this shift to serve newcomers remotely emerged out of necessity and urgency, it has become a critical aspect of the present and future of the newcomer serving sector.

A FOCUS ON DIGITAL LITERACY

Much work was done to support the newcomer serving sector through its initial transition to remote work and addressing the digital divide during the COVID-19 pandemic. As shown by this report, that work continues several years later. In September 2020, TSLIP's own Systemic Issues and Social Change Working Group developed _Access to Technology: For Service Providers and Newcomers during COVID-19_, a report that provided insights on how newcomers were impacted by this early transition. The findings and recommendations included in that report, and other similar reports, have all given much due attention to this shift to hybrid service delivery, which we have come to know more than four years since the onset of the pandemic, is here to stay.

While access to technology and transitioning the sector to hybrid service delivery has received considerable attention since the pandemic, the Newcomer Services Collaboration Working Group noted digital literacy has often been an afterthought and identified it as an area of concern in need of increased attention and action by organizations and funders alike. This report and its recommendations emerged from the concerns expressed by Working Group members who have firsthand experience in serving newcomers and who felt that calls for increased digital literacy supports since 2020 have by large fallen short.

Digital literacy is multifaceted and includes competencies in a wide range of skills and capabilities relating to technology. According to the Ontario Ministry of Education,

> Digital literacy involves the ability to solve problems using technology in a safe, legal, and ethically responsible manner. With the ever-expanding role of digitalization and big data in the modern world, digital literacy also means having strong data literacy skills and the ability to engage with emerging technologies. Digitally literate students recognize the rights and responsibilities, as well as the opportunities, that come with living, learning, and working in an interconnected digital world (2024).

Additionally, it also "includes the ability to protect sensitive information, evaluate credible sources, and understand the complexities of how online data is stored and used" (Andrey and Abdelaal, 2022).

In our increasingly digitally oriented world, "a foundational level of digital literacy is critical for social, civic, and economic participation" (Huynh and Malli, 2020) for all. As with any population sample of society, comfort, skill, and knowledge of the different aspects within digital literacy among newcomers will vary. However, newcomers experience unique barriers and challenges before, during, and following their arrival in Canada which means the impacts of lower digital literacy are often compounded for newcomers, particularly those who are from "older age groups, lower-skilled newcomers, and newcomers with low language competencies. Low language competency paired with low digital literacy [is] viewed as a double barrier and a significant challenge, especially when technology is used as a means for teaching or enhancing language skills (PeaceGeeks, 2021). As hybrid services have become normalized across most community and institutional spaces, "it has become increasingly difficult for people [without digital access and digital literacy] to engage with government and various essential services" (Mundie, 2022). Furthermore, increased comfort with technology is essential to empowering newcomers and enhancing their self-efficacy, confidence, happiness, and overall well-being (Campana and Lui, 2020).

Despite the clear need for digital literacy skills among newcomers and the increased dependency on technology for all, several challenges and gaps remain for newcomer serving organizations and community groups in providing adequate programming and support to service users. The work done by the Newcomer Services Collaboration Working Group highlighted in the sections below builds on prior research and provides a snapshot of some of the persisting issues and gaps needing attention. Past research conducted by the YMCA of the National Capital Region's Wired: Evaluation Settlement Online initiative showed the importance of digital literacy supports for newcomers to be able to access hybrid services since the onset of the pandemic. Of the newcomers surveyed, 70.8% indicated they were of need of digital literacy training to be able to access services offered by service providers. 87.7% of newcomer serving sector staff who were also surveyed confirmed this need (Wired: Evaluating Settlement Online, 2023).

Some of the previously highlighted barriers newcomers face in accessing digital literacy supports include a lack of technology, software, and internet access, a physical distance from locations that may offer free access to these devices and/or programming, and a lack of childcare to that would allow increased access for newcomers to participate in these programs (Huynh and Malli, 2020).

Additionally, service providers and community groups supporting newcomers with digital literacy themselves experience challenges such as a lack of funding and resources, a lack of a comprehensive and coordinated sector-wide approach to professional development, ambiguity in organizational mandates for providing digital literacy training, and the need for ongoing staff professional development and resources for its sustainability (Campana and Lui, 2020).

As the sections below highlight, since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and the subsequent shift to online and hybrid service delivery in the newcomer serving sector, many of these issues relating to digital literacy programming continue to persist. In 2024, we are left wondering what has been and will be implemented from these past recommendations and reports? What are the specific and nuanced challenges that continue to limit the ability of newcomers to access digital literacy supports and for organizations to offer this programming to their service users?

This report attempts to provide some insight into the current landscape, spotlight promising practices, and put forward recommendations to service providers and funders of the newcomer serving sector.

DIGITAL LITERACY GAPS IN THE NEWCOMER SERVING SECTOR

The work being done during and after the COVID-19 pandemic in supporting Canada's newcomer serving sector in its transition to hybrid service delivery models was critical and timely in ensuring services remained accessible for newcomers. As anticipated, there were many challenges in this transition that spurred innovation out of necessity across the newcomer serving spectrum of care and support, from the grassroots to the institutional.

Through their experiences in providing direct service to newcomers of varying status and identities, TSLIP's Newcomer Services Collaboration Working Group identified digital literacy as a project focus for its work beginning in 2023. Digital literacy has become increasingly critical for newcomers to not only be able to access services and participate in their communities and society more generally, but to complete essential requirements for

their settlement process. The pandemic highlighted the urgency of this need as many programs and services transitioned online permanently but complimentary supports around digital literacy for newcomers have lagged.
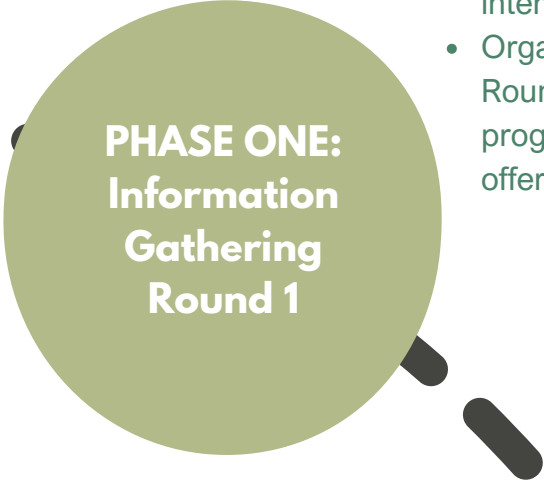
To identify their project scope and goals, the Working Group built upon its own past work of supporting the newcomer serving sector in its shift to hybrid service delivery. They wanted to gather information on the nuanced structural and operational challenges that service providers are and will be facing in hybrid service delivery, specifically as it relates to digital literacy supports for newcomers. That work is summarized in this report and will inform the development of strategies and resources to support service providers in delivering effective digital literacy programming.

The following pages include research and findings of the specific persisting needs and challenges related to digital literacy programming and a set of recommendations for funders, decision makers, community agencies or members supporting newcomers.

methods

This project was completed over a period of one year, between **March 2023 – April 2024**. The Working Group separated its workplan into different phases, with each phase informing the next. The first two phases of this work were dedicated to information gathering. Following the gathering of information, data was analyzed in phase three, before the fourth phase which included drafting this report and our recommendations. The final and ongoing phase will be to disseminate this report and recommendations with relevant decision-making tables and funders.

PHASE ONE: Information Gathering Round 1

- Review past reports relating to digital literacy gaps among staff and newcomer service users, promising practices, and access to internet/technology
- Organize and convene a Digital Literacy Roundtable with partners to discuss what programming/services and supports are being offered and what gaps are persisting

PHASE TWO: Information Gathering Round 2

- Learn about what digital literacy programs and supports being offered by partners for newcomer service users
- Develop and share online survey with partners on digital literacy services/programming
- Share questions from the Digital Literacy Roundtable with partner agencies who did not attend for additional insights

PHASE THREE: Data Analysis

- Analyze data from Digital Literacy Roundtable and TSLIP Partnership Survey on Digital Literacy Programming Gaps
- Compile key findings and data from past reports for literature review

PHASE FOUR: Draft Report + Recommendations

- Create a Working Group Project Subcommittee to draft report and recommendations based on data, key findings, and literature review

PHASE FIVE: Dissemination of Report + Recommendations

- Share report and recommendations with relevant decision-makers and stakeholders
- Seek opportunities to enact changes to how digital literacy programming is funded, designed and offered to newcomers

With this work, TSLIP's Newcomer Services Collaboration Working Group hoped to bring in a range of perspectives and experiences of those offering digital literacy programming to newcomers. One of the ways in which they hoped to do this was through an online survey of TSLIPs member agencies. However, the working group felt it was important to hold a space in which meaningful consultation and conversation could take place and so an in-person Digital Literacy Roundtable was organized as well. An overview of each initiative is discussed below.

digital literacy roundtable: an overview

Broad conversations on the shift to hybrid services have been taking place in our sector since 2020, including those led by TSLIP's Newcomer Services Collaboration Working Group. However, much of this dialogue has mainly centred the experiences of Service Providing Organizations (SPOs) and focused on service delivery models more generally.

On May 4, 2023, TSLIP's Newcomer Services Collaboration Working Group held an in-person Digital Literacy Roundtable bringing together 11 individuals representing newcomer serving sector agencies and local grassroots groups. The goal was to identify persisting gaps and promising practices in meeting the increased need for effective digital literacy services for newcomers in a sector transitioning to hybrid service delivery. Attendees included:

- Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture (CCVT)
- Access Alliance
- Newcomer Women's Services Toronto
- Jumpstart Refugee Talent
- ACCES Employment
- Skills for Change
- Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy (MTML)
- The Neighbourhood Group Community Services (TNG)
- South Asian Community Support Canada

The goal of the Roundtable was to gather nuanced information on specific structural and operational challenges that stakeholders have been experiencing. Organizers also wanted to facilitate knowledge sharing about exciting new work being undertaken around digital literacy, particularly as hybrid service delivery increasingly becomes a fixture in our sector, making the need to ramp up digital literacy programming and supports for newcomers and those that support them all the more urgent.

Roundtable attendees were provided with an overview of this project by TSLIP and its Newcomer Services Collaboration Working Group members before a presentation by Ambreen Ahmed, Managing Director of Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy (MTML). Following the presentation, the facilitators of the Roundtable provided questions to lead a

discussion exploring innovation, needs, challenges, and recommendations around digital literacy for newcomers and those who support them. The findings of the Roundtable are highlighted on page 12.

partnership survey: an overview

Building on the Digital Literacy Roundtable, the Newcomer Services Collaboration Working Group created an online survey for TSLIP's partners. The survey, *Understanding the Gaps in Digital Literacy Programming for the Newcomer Serving Sector*, was created to reach a broader sample of stakeholders, particularly those representing grassroots groups, organizations, and institutions serving newcomers that were unable to attend our in-person Roundtable. The goals of the partnership survey were aligned with those of the Digital Literacy Roundtable, but it was also designed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data from respondents.

To garner nuanced insights into the experiences of organizations with providing digital literacy supports for newcomers, the survey included open-ended questions and was shared with staff at different positions in their organizations (e.g. directors/senior management, middle management/coordinators, frontline staff, etc.). The Working Group launched the survey in September 2023, and it remained open for six weeks. During this period, the TSLIP team and Newcomer Services Collaboration Working Group conducted multiple rounds of both mass and targeted outreach to stakeholders who serve newcomers of various identities and status, including organizations which may not be currently engaged with TSLIP.

Findings from the survey are summarized on page 15.

limitations

As with many other parts of our lives, virtual spaces have become much more frequently utilized in the newcomer serving sector. In-person meetings and events have become less common given the convenience and relative ease of organizing a virtual meeting with breakouts. In some instances, virtual spaces can increase accessibility and reach and in others, they can create new barriers or exacerbate existing ones.

However, in the spirit of creating a space for deeper discussion, the Working Group chose to hold the Roundtable in-person. While the aim was to facilitate data collection through robust discussion and collaboration in ways virtual meetings often cannot, the decision to host the event in-person came with its own limitations.

Virtual meeting spaces often help avoid the schedule conflicts that any length of commute to a physical space may pose for attendees wanting to participate. Hosting an in-person session also meant that we would have fewer individuals and their respective organizations present. Not all those who were invited were able to attend the session, resulting in a reduced number of voices whose experiences could inform the discussion.

A complete and fully informed picture of the current digital literacy programming gaps for the newcomer serving sector would require that the experiences of all newcomers be reflected, in addition to those who support newcomers. This report is missing that critical piece and thus only provides limited insight into those newcomer experiences indirectly and through the perspectives of newcomer serving sector staff.

There are inherent limitations to engaging newcomers directly in larger scale research, including staff capacity and budget, and in this case the decision was made to prioritize institutional perspectives on their own and their service users' needs and challenges.

While TSLIP does have a Newcomer Council that is compensated for their involvement, the limited sample size of TSLIP's Newcomer Council would not have been able to provide accurate insights to the barriers and challenges of all newcomers with regards to digital literacy. Therefore, the Working Group decided to focus this project on the newcomer serving sector and the persisting challenges they are experiencing with funding, designing, implementing, and evaluating digital literacy services for newcomers.

findings: digital literacy roundtable

The following is a highlight of key qualitative data from the May 2023 Digital Literacy Roundtable and is arranged under two broad thematic headings:

- **Challenges and Barriers in Providing Digital Literacy Support**
- **Promising Practices in Digital Literacy Support**

Participants also held a discussion on recommendations for the sector and funders to improve digital literacy access and programming which are reflected in the Recommendations section of this report.

Challenges and Barriers in Providing Digital Literacy Support

- Newcomers, including those with higher language levels, are finding that websites and portals essential for their settlement (e.g. IRCC, World Education Services, etc.) are difficult to use

- Difficulties in applying for funding as grassroots organizations (e.g. eligibility criteria, competition with larger and more established organizations, trusteeship considerations)
- Persisting accessibility barriers (e.g. for seniors and/or folks with disabilities)
- Funder restrictions on who is eligible to access programs/who organizations can design programming for (e.g. international students, refugees, those who may no longer be considered newcomers) leave many without options for digital literacy training and support
- Newcomer service users have expressed they are unable to afford internet or are unable to travel to agency/institutional locations that offer computer and reliable internet access
- Limited access to reliable computers or other digital devices
- Limited pre-existing digital literacy skills among organizations to deliver quality digital literacy programming
- Limited capacity of organizations to provide culturally sensitive digital programming
- Digital literacy needs are constantly changing due to rapidly advancing technology

Promising Practices in Digital Literacy Support

Access Alliance
- Has developed a digital equity screening protocol tool to apply during intake and other points of care, helping to assess newcomer digital literacy skills and needs for support
- Ongoing digital equity needs of service users are recorded and considered at different points of care
- Has partnered with Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy (MTML)
- Internal tablet/laptop loan program
- Digital literacy capacity building for staff, including cyber security training; on-site digital literacy training for service users
- Developed a "Standard Guide for Incorporating Remote Program and Service Provision into a Multi-modality Service Delivery Approach"

South Asian Community Support Canada
- As a grassroots organization, sought collaboration with larger organizations (The Neighbourhood Group Community Services) to facilitate greater access to funding and administrative supports

The Neighbourhood Group Community Services (TNG)
- Offering pre-employment module-based digital foundations program (Fair Chance Skills Development)

Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy (MTML)
- Offers online resources and walkthroughs on developing Smartphone Skills
- Developed a Digital Literacy Library, a collection of resources and tools for instructors to use to enhance digital literacy learning

- MTML has <u>mapped digital literacy programs</u> offered by community organizations that support underrepresented groups in Toronto and York regions

Newcomer Women Services
- Digital literacy coaches provide one-on-one training with newcomer service users
- Developed partnerships with Human IT and Contact North for digital literacy support, including access to laptops

WoodGreen Community Services
- Dedicated digital literacy Newcomer Programs & Services staff member with relevant credentials and experience. Receives WoodGreen-wide referrals
- Offers one-on-one appointments and group sessions for digital literacy programming

Other Resources and Promising Practices for Digital Literacy Support
- <u>ABC Life Literacy Skills Hub</u> offers free courses on developing various life skills including <u>digital literacy</u>
- <u>Alpha Plus</u> works to advance adult technology learning and enhance digital literacy systems. A resource library for administrators and educators is available on their <u>website</u>
- <u>The Learning Enrichment Foundation</u> offers a <u>Digital Skills Support program</u> to help newcomers build their digital literacy through personalized skill development coaching
- LEF's <u>Improving Remote Service Delivery: A Toolkit for Settlement Service Provider Organizations</u> includes a template/prototype of a Digital Skills Assessment that SPOs can adopt
- <u>Ontario Digital Literacy Action Network</u> (ODLAN) offers a directory of existing digital literacy and access services along with their own resources on how the digital divide is impacting 2SLGBTQIA+ communities
- <u>New Circles Community Services</u> provides "Digital Fluency" training for all program participants on various platforms and apps and a Laptop Lending Library with preloaded software and platforms needed to access its hybrid programs and services.
- <u>Study Pages</u> offers free tutoring on various academic subjects, software, and technology for students and professionals of various age groups
- <u>Toronto Public Library</u> (TPL) offers internet hotspots and access to computers at its branches
- <u>Library Settlement Partnerships</u> (LSP) connect newcomers to agencies that may provide digital literacy support for newcomers
- <u>Tech Soup</u> provides computers, software, and online platform subscriptions at a discount for non-profits. They also offer <u>digital literacy trainings</u> for staff at non-profits
- YMCA National Capital Region's <u>Wired: Evaluating Settlement Online (WESO) Quality Assessment Toolkit for Hybrid Settlement Services</u> supports organizations in assessing the quality and effectiveness of their hybrid service delivery and provides guidance on improvements
- A supplementary guide to the toolkit, <u>Appendix III - Digital Skills Training: Client Handbook</u> offers a three-part curriculum for newcomer service users (Internet Basics, Email Basics, and Video Conferencing)

findings: partnership survey

The following are highlights of key qualitative and quantitative data from the *Understanding the Gaps in Digital Literacy Programming for the Newcomer Serving Sector Survey* created and disseminated by TSLIP's Newcomer Services Collaboration Working Group in Fall 2023. Like the Roundtable earlier in the same year, the survey looked to gain nuanced insights into whether and how newcomer serving organizations and community groups are offering digital literacy support and, if not, the reasons as to why they are not providing this type of support.

The Working Group targeted a range of respondents at various levels of organizations serving newcomers, grassroots groups, and community leaders in outreach efforts. In total, there were **44** respondents to the survey. Of those, **11.4%** were Executive Staff (Executive Directors, Senior Management, etc.), **22.7%** were Program Directors or Managers, **47.7%** were Coordinators or Frontline Workers. **18.2%** selected "Other" and identified themselves as Outreach Assistants, Team Leads, Settlement Workers, and Faculty.

65.1% of all respondents said they currently provide digital literacy programming to newcomers, while **34.9%** said they did not.

When asked to give details on the digital literacy programming offered to newcomers, several respondents highlighted digital skills classes and workshops including those focused on "basics such as Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, Forms, Outlook, OneDrive, and Zoom." One respondent also mentioned specific attention to "accessibility features such as Immersive Reader. Another respondent indicated their organization also supports with "Networking, cloud computing and virtualization, python programming, Internet of Things (IofT), Artifical Intelligence (AI), Digital Transformation and Social Media interaction." Other respondents mentioned the following:

- Digital literacy workshops for seniors
- Tutorials on using computers that are available for newcomers to use on site
- Indirect opportunities to gain digital literacy proficiency by offering online Zoom workshops, peer 2 peer chats for LGBTQ+ newcomers, immigrants, and refugees
- Using smartphones, tablets, and apps such as WhatsApp
- An eight-week basic program for newcomer women covering computer basics as well as cyber security for women

Many organizations said they were not offering digital literacy programming due to a lack of resources/funding. Others provided additional reasons:

- Lack of or uncertainty of demand/need among service users and staff; need to conduct a "comprehensive assessment of our clients' needs"
- Digital literacy programming is offered to service users and staff as needed but not on an ongoing basis

- Digital literacy programming is currently being developed
- Low referrals to access their digital literacy programs from agencies serving newcomers
- Uncertainty as to why they are not offering this type of programming to newcomers
- Offering computer tutoring but not specific to newcomers

Newcomer serving organization staff were also asked to "check all that apply" from a list of digital literacy training their organizations may have provided them as professional development or reskilling opportunities. **18.8%** had not been provided any digital literacy training. **37.5%** received support on how to fill out e-forms, **21.9%** received training on using e-signatures, **62.5%** were trained on new apps, software, and platforms, while **50.0%** received or accessed online facilitation skills training. **21.9%** of respondents also shared other types of support they received such as using a smartphone, social media integration, and cloud computing. One respondent mentioned that digital literacy "is an expectation during the recruitment process" and that "staff take training as needed."

As a follow up, **40.6%** of respondents indicated they were not aware of the digital literacy training opportunities and resources (internal and/or external) that are available to their organization's staff. For those receiving communication regarding digital literacy training opportunities and resources for staff, it is primarily done through email (**89.5%**), followed by staff meetings (**63.2%**), newsletters (**42.1%**), and during new staff onboarding (**36.8%**).

Eligibility criteria also impacts the ability of organizations to provide programming, including digital literacy supports, to all newcomers (e.g. Convention Refugees, refugee claimants and asylum seekers, people who are undocumented, migrant workers, international students, permanent residents, citizens). Respondents were asked how parameters of their funding agreements may limit their digital literacy programming availability. **37.5%** indicated their programming has limitations based on status. **56.3%** said they can serve all newcomers regardless of status, including international students. **2 respondents** were unsure about eligibility related to status. Based on the qualitative data collected, many programs are only able to provide programming to permanent residents and Convention Refugees. Others specified they are unable to serve international students and people who are undocumented.

It is important to note that this survey was being shared with partners ahead of Immigration Refugee Citizenship Canada's (IRCC) Call for Proposals. Given that a hybrid service delivery future was being anticipated across the newcomer serving sector, digital literacy was expected to be a critical component of program funding. TSLIP's Newcomer Services Collaboration Working Group was interested in gaining insights on current and prospective projects relating digital literacy programming among respondents, including those funded by IRCC or looking to submit a proposal.

The survey asked respondents if their "organization received funding to provide digital literacy services or programming (either directly or indirectly- e.g. by offering training, device lending, etc.) in [their] current contribution agreement with IRCC and/or other funders." **21.9%** responded "Yes" while another **21.9%** responded "No, we did not have this in our last funding proposal." **6.3%** said they proposed this type of programming, but their proposal was unsuccessful. However, it is interesting to note that **50.0%** of respondents indicated they were "Not Sure."

As a follow up, **37.5%** of respondents said they planned to add digital literacy programming for newcomers to their next funding proposal to IRCC or other funders. **62.5%** said they were unsure. Some of the types of programming and supports survey respondents are looking to propose included:

- More one-on-one support and workshops on digital literacy for newcomers
- Basic, intermediate, and advanced computing, artificial intelligence (AI), social media interaction
- Digital skills for the workforce and self-employment focused training including social media for business and graphic design (menus, price lists, business cards, brochures, etc.)

When asked about any other gaps or challenges they had experienced or observed in providing digital literacy support to newcomers, respondents highlighted:

- Internet access and connectivity/low bandwidth (home internet and mobile data)
- Limited resources among service providers and newcomers to afford/access software, devices and other necessary hardware
- Language barriers, including language specific to computer and device terminologies; most platforms are only English based
- Difficulties creating rapport, engagement, and discussion in virtual learning settings
- Limited digital literacy capacity among settlement workers and other sector staff
- Persisting requests for digital literacy support among newcomers have been related to employment/job search (ex. basic Microsoft Office and other platforms widely used in office settings), applying for jobs, creating accounts on Indeed and LinkedIn.
- LINC students often report issues joining online classes via virtual platforms such as Zoom or MS Teams, using email, receiving attachments from teachers and not knowing how to respond, and troubleshooting technical problems on their own.
- Specific digital accessibility barriers for newcomers and staff relating to Canadian Citizenship tests and applications including: converting files to PDF, printing or connecting to a printer, scanning/taking pictures of their passports and other documents, resizing documents to specific requirements.

Overall, respondents gave positive assessments of their organization's transition in offering digital literacy programming to newcomers. **12.5%** rated their transition as Very Good, **50.0%** said it was Good, **21.9%** indicated Satisfactory, and **9.4%** said it was Not Very Good. For the remaining **6.3%** this question was Not Applicable. Qualitative data provided additional insight into these assessments and highlighted the persisting gaps around program funding, device lending initiatives, and uncertainty around ongoing and sustained programming.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following is a list of recommendations for funders and decision-makers relating to digital literacy programming and supports based on findings contained in this report.

1 Dedicated resources/funding for more **personalized** and **successive** newcomer digital literacy programming with complementary support to access **up-to-date devices, software, and internet hotspots**

2 Increased opportunities for **public-private partnerships** to help to bridge digital literacy learning and access gaps

3 **Open eligibility** for all newcomers **regardless of status** to access newcomer services including digital literacy programming

4 Dedicated **professional development** funding and opportunities for digital literacy upskilling and device use tutorials for **staff** in the newcomer serving sector and **community groups** supporting newcomers

5 Create **centralized digital literacy programming and supports** for newcomer serving organizations and community groups supporting newcomers to partner with (ex. through public libraries or school boards) to bolster programming, access device lending, and develop curricula

6 Increased collaborative **knowledge sharing** for and between grassroots and newcomer serving organizations to build, replicate, and complement promising practices around digital literacy support

CONCLUSION

As was mentioned above, representatives from key agencies and grassroots organizations within the newcomer serving sector gathered for a Digital Literacy Roundtable in Spring 2023. At its core, the Roundtable sought to identify persistent gaps within the sector and share promising practices in digital literacy services for newcomers, given the increasing shift towards hybrid service delivery. The Working Group shed light on the work it had been doing over the previous months on Gaps in Digital Literacy Programming and Services. The session held facilitated discussions on innovation, challenges, and recommendations regarding digital literacy, aiming to address specific operational and structural difficulties faced by stakeholders who navigate this sector on an ongoing basis. Insights gathered during the Roundtable sessions complimented the data collected by the Working Group, and served to inform ongoing efforts to enhance digital literacy programming and supports for newcomers and their support networks, crucial for navigating the evolving landscape of hybrid service delivery as it currently stands.

What has come from the totality of this collaborative work is, primarily, the urgency of addressing digital literacy for newcomers in the foreseeable future; a fact that cannot be overstated. The profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on service delivery within the newcomer serving sector has highlighted both the necessity and the challenges of integrating digital platforms into community support systems. This transition has underscored the importance of developing comprehensive digital literacy initiatives to ensure equitable access to essential services and resources.

The insights from TSLIP's Newcomer Services Collaboration Working Group reveal persistent deficiencies in supporting digital literacy among newcomers since the onset of the pandemic. The shift to hybrid and, in some instances, fully remote operations has accentuated the existing digital divide, particularly affecting older individuals, those with limited technological proficiency, and those with language barriers. The need for effective digital navigation skills to access government and social services has increasingly become critical, emphasizing the urgency of targeted interventions to bridge this gap.

What is the work around digital literacy for newcomers that needs to be done from here?

Collaborative efforts involving community-based organizations, grassroots groups, and institutional stakeholders have been crucial to address these challenges. Their continued and proactive engagement has enabled the discovery and development of innovative strategies to continuously connect with newcomers, thereby mitigating barriers posed by limited digital literacy. By leveraging the collective

expertise and resources of these partners, the sector has made significant strides in adapting service delivery models to meet the evolving needs of newcomers in a digital landscape.

Several agencies have demonstrated successful outcomes by implementing tested models that alleviate challenges faced by newcomers in navigating digital spaces. Funders of newcomer programming are also prioritizing initiatives aimed at assisting newcomers in navigating digital environments. For instance, the 2024 IRCC Call for Proposals (CFP) process included plans to extend programming and projects to address broader challenges newcomers encounter with digital processes.

Moving forward, it is imperative for organizations and funders within the newcomer serving sector to prioritize investments in digital literacy programming, including by creating professional development opportunities for frontline staff to improve their digital literacy-- including comprehensive training initiatives that equip frontline staff and newcomers with essential digital skills such as problem-solving, online safety, source evaluation, and platform navigation. Promising initiatives highlighted in the report demonstrate the potential of community-driven solutions in fostering digital inclusion and empowerment. Collaborative efforts documented in this report represent a pivotal step towards addressing the digital divide exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic which continue to persist several years later.

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