

The impact of the Syrian refugee influx on local systems of support

Disruption leading to innovation



A collaborative research project in Waterloo Region

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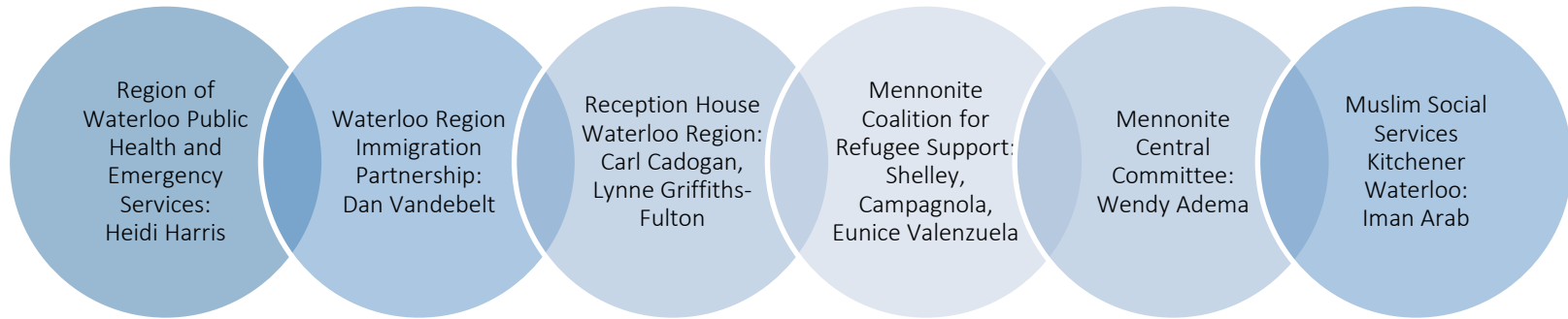


Research partners

Research Team

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Waterloo Region Advisory Committee



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Research purpose

- Using Waterloo as a case study, the purpose of this nine-month project was to collaboratively explore the disruptive impact of the recent Syrian refugee influx on the way local communities support newcomers.
- This was done in order to:
 - determine how local communities innovate to better support refugees
 - determine how public policy can reinforce these innovations



System change lens

VISION

- motivations + values guiding refugee support

STRUCTURE

- players + programs + partnerships + resources in supporting refugees

PROCESS

- practices to lead, plan, equip + evaluate refugee support



Research methods

1. Document review
2. Key informant interviews (6 interviews with 11 individuals)
3. Community survey (38 responses: 10 individuals + 28 groups)
4. Organizational focus groups (3 focus groups + 2 interviews, 14 individuals total)

Total participants = 63 (maybe some overlap)



Vision

Drawing on values that have historically defined the region

- Segments of the community have long been supporting refugees
- Goodwill that emerges when confronted with a humanitarian crisis
- Communities (both established and more recent) who live out their faith
- A collaborative community-building spirit captured in the “barn-raising” narrative

“It’s part of our definition of our community... I don’t think I’ve ever given up the notion that we are a community of doers and responders.. it’s like barn-raising, if somebody needs something, we help them.” (Focus group participant)



Vision

Yet motivated in reaction to a current global refugee crisis

- Media: National and local coverage overwhelmingly favourable to Syrian refugees
- Political synergy: Commitments made by a new federal government supported by provincial and municipal governments
- Crisis aversion: Recognition that a coordinated response was quickly needed to prevent the local support system from becoming overwhelmed

"[The community was motivated by] the media showing the daily struggles of refugees fleeing Syria by boat and the civilian casualties, particularly children (namely Alan Kurdi)." (Survey respondent)

"The other piece that was really important... was the political support. Federal, provincial, regional and municipal politicians came together to work together in a way that I have not seen before." (Focus group participant)



Vision

Leading to an enlarged vision and new collaborative norms for local refugee support

- This was not business as usual; something unprecedented needed to be done
- This was something bigger than any one group could handle; collaboration was essential
- A recognition that methodical planning was not possible; mistakes were going to be made
- A “yes we can” attitude that foregrounded the importance of supporting refugees, and minimized negative attitudes towards refugees

“The collaborative leadership by the Regional government and the community agencies has been the key. [That has been] the one thing that has made this a success over the last year and changed the way different stakeholders engage with the resettlement of refugees.” (Key Informant)



Structure

Rapidly organizing a refugee support structure that built on past efforts and relationships

- Drawing on the emergency pandemic response structure that the Regional government had developed during the SARS crisis
- Leveraging the infrastructure and expertise of the Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership (WRIP) and its active members
- Recognizing the central role of Reception House Waterloo Region in local refugee support

“The [structure] started as an emergency plan. We drew on the Region’s pandemic plan that also requires a broad community response. The refugee plan draws on this for inspiration.” (Key Informant)



Structure

While foregrounding a commitment to a community-based approach

- Resisting the urge to declare an emergency response that would have been directed by a limited number of experts
- Rather creating a “community-owned” structure that actively engaged and coordinated the many existing and new supporters of refugees
- A structure that was flexible enough to adapt to a dynamic local context (e.g., pace of refugee arrivals; number and types of supporters)

To create something distinctively new for the moment

- The Waterloo Region Refugee Resettlement Preparedness Plan embedded within the Regional government and affirmed by community leaders

“What I liked was that it was a community response [with everyone] working together. No one organization owns it. No one was on their own... [There was] creative, interesting, and balanced leadership.” (Key Informant)



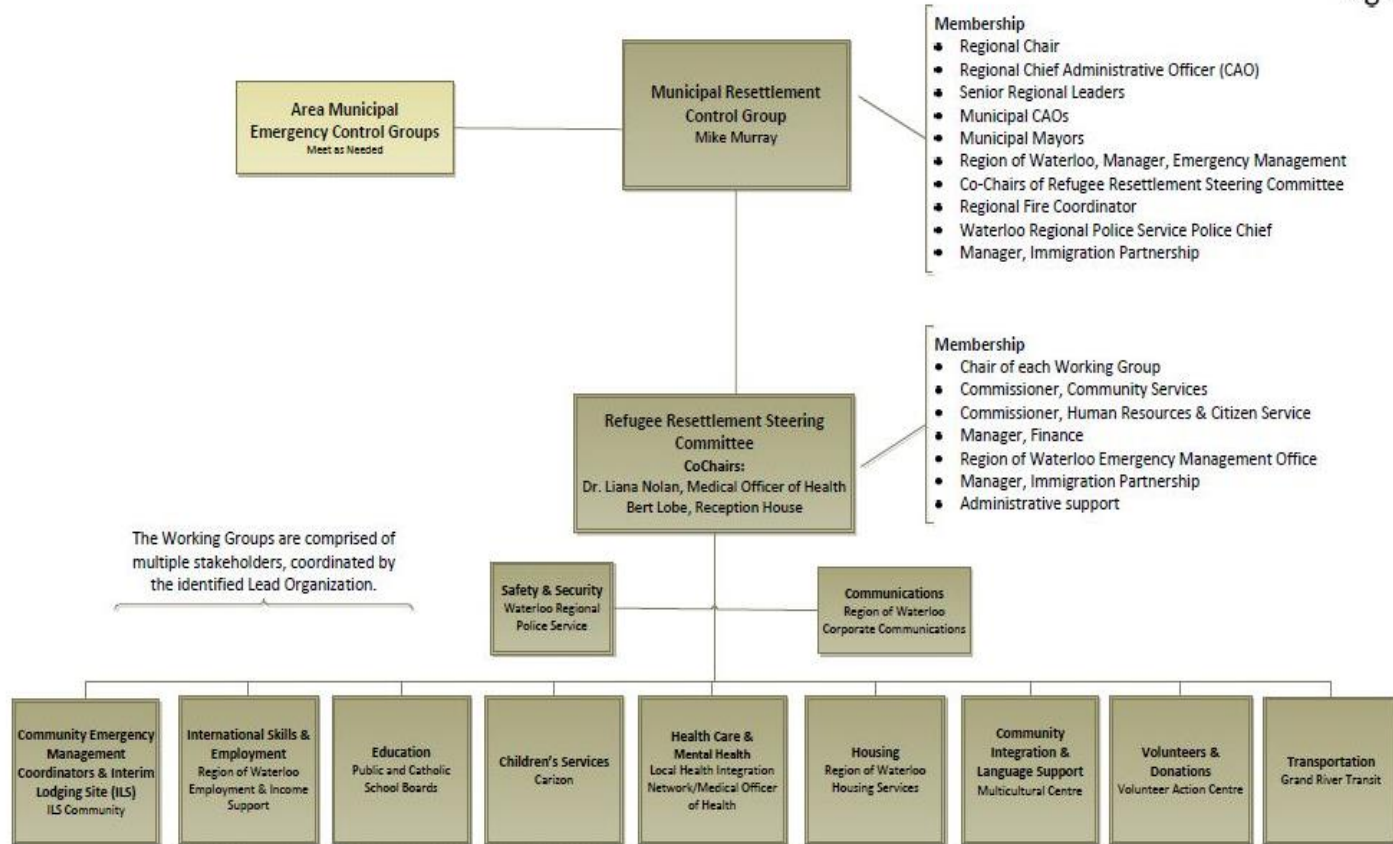
Structure

Waterloo Region Syrian Refugee Resettlement Preparedness Plan

12/7/2015



Region of Waterloo





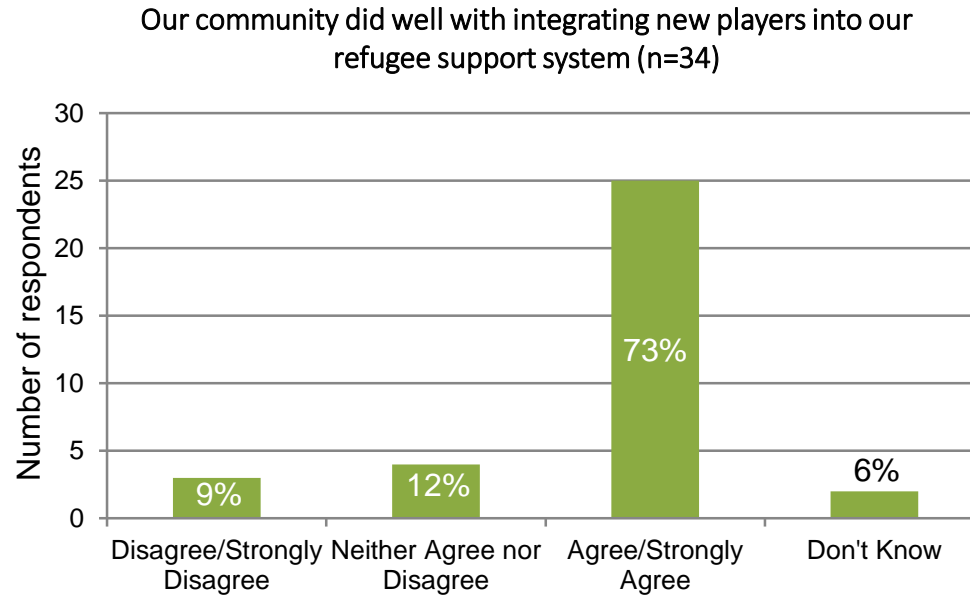
Process

- **Designating leadership:** Gaining agreement on who is leading what early on (when no one had clear authority to lead)
- **Collaborative planning:** Increasing cooperation among local leaders across sectors (often in the absence of Federal directives and communication)
- **Coordinating communications:** Multi-strategy flow of (sometimes limited) information to decrease confusion and duplication (e.g., www.WRwelcomesrefugees.ca, WRIP bulletins, local media)
- **Leveraging local relationships and resources:** Building on existing trusted relationships was key to initially develop a rapid response. Citizens and organizations were stepping up to offer financial supports (e.g., the Immigration Partnership Fund for Syrian Newcomers)
- **Stripping of bureaucracy:** Working toward a common goal even if it meant doing things outside of normal procedures



Process

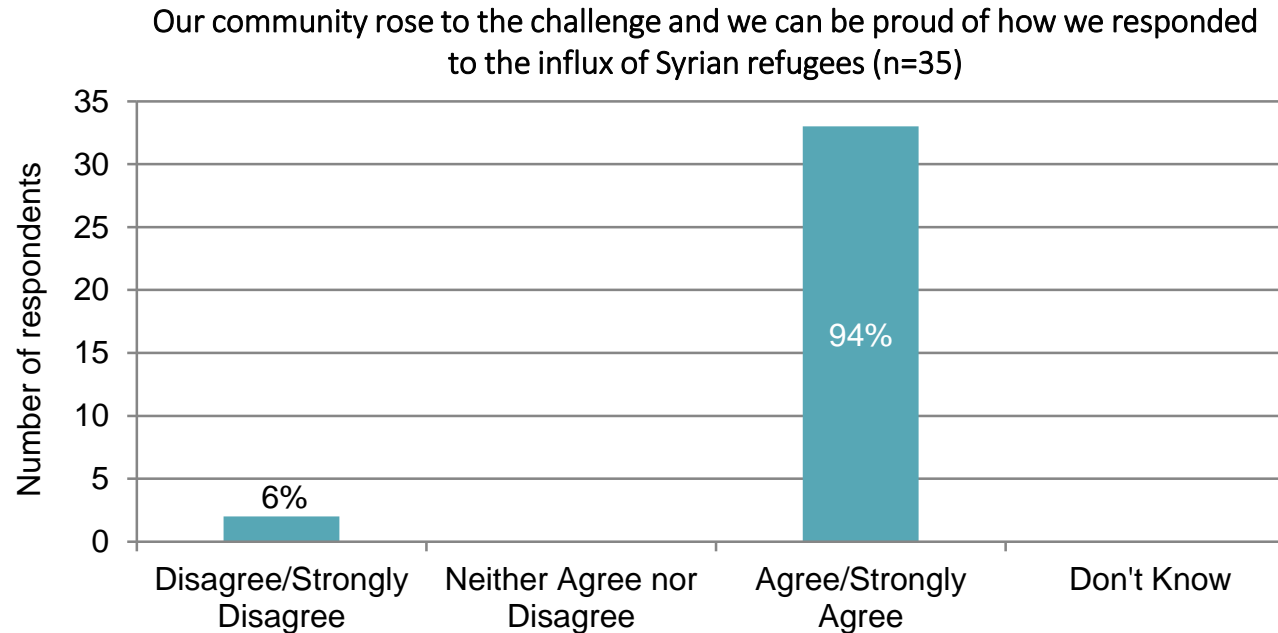
- **Engaging new players:** Trying to connect people and groups into the system of support (e.g., new types of private sponsors, non-settlement organizations)





Impact

- Disruptive yes, but not overwhelming. Generally positive reviews.



We asked survey respondents to describe the community's attitude toward the Syrian refugee influx. Here's what they said...





Impact

Challenges did lead to some negative impact though...

- Unmet expectations (e.g., finding adequate housing, leveraging goodwill of private sponsors, utilizing the outpour of support)
- Gap between resources required and presenting need
- Creating a system of dependence (newcomers finding it difficult to support themselves)
- Supporting Syrians at the expense of other refugees and refugee claimants
- Personal and system stress caused by resource limitations
- Service provider fatigue and organizational capacity stretched

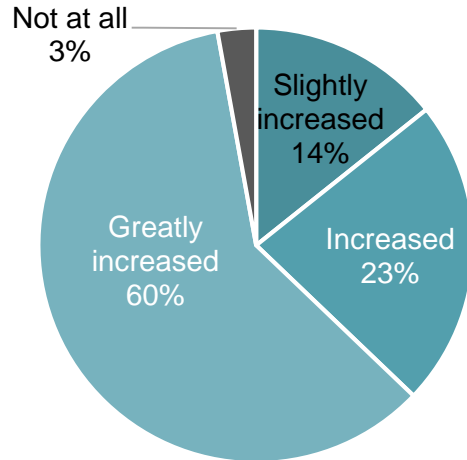
“What we ran into was our community partners were overwhelmed, [and] it became more difficult for us to run our normal approach.” (Focus group participant)

Impact

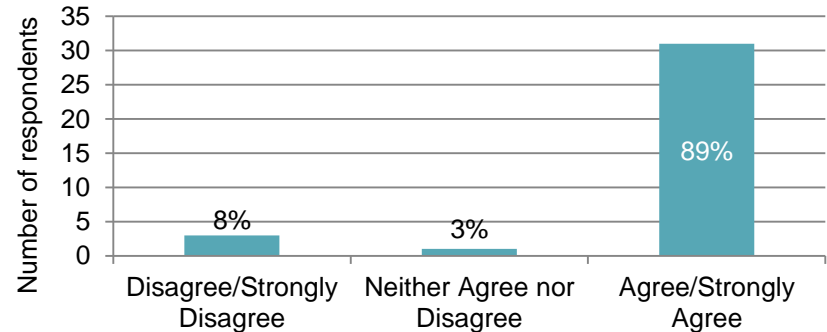
Yet new opportunities also led to significant and unanticipated benefits

- Unleashing of previously untapped resources
- Stronger leadership for supporting refugees
- Increased community and organizational awareness and involvement in refugee issues
- Shift from a resettlement organization(s) to a resettlement community

To what extent did your involvement with refugees increase over the past year? (n=35)



We have stronger refugee support leadership in Waterloo Region as a result of this past year (n=35)





Reflections

Local innovation is negotiated within the broader migration landscape

- Local resettlement innovations don't take place in a vacuum
- The injection of new players in Waterloo Region altered how the typical negotiation occurred and broadened the scope of the response
- The absence of federal and provincial counterparts limits innovation and threatens sustainability



Reflections

A community's historical migration response can be a springboard for innovation

- Vision: Barn-raising narrative that grounded a “yes we can” optimism in the face of challenge
- Structure: Combining the pandemic response and WRIP structures, drawing on their respective strengths and adapting them for the task at hand
- Process: Leveraging the collaborative planning experience of WRIEN and WRIP and applying it specifically to refugee resettlement
- Not framed as an isolated crisis but part of a long-term “production of asylum” in Waterloo Region



Reflections

A “new normal” must be established to sustain innovation

- Sustainability linked to **scale** and **adaptation** within social innovation
- A limited window of opportunity for renewal given retrenched refugee targets
 - Maintain flexible leadership that continues to engage
 - Leverage WRIP in coordinating future refugee resettlement
 - Advocate senior levels of government for policy reinforcements



Policy

Senior levels of government can reinforce local innovation by:

- Reinforcing community ownership of the resettlement process
- Investing in Local Immigration Partnership (LIP) infrastructure
- Building on the strengths of separate refugee programs to provide equitable support to all refugees
- Improving federal resettlement services in support of all refugees
- Ensuring smooth transition towards independence and stability
- Addressing false expectations and negative narratives about refugees
- Evaluating local systems of support to enable evidence-based decision-making
- Recognizing and addressing root causes of global refugees



Contact

For more information:

Please visit the project website www.communitybasedresearch.ca.

Or contact Rich Janzen at rich@communitybasedresearch.ca