

SHARING SETTLEMENT AND INTEGRATION PRACTICES THAT WORK WELCOME GROUP PROGRAM

Together Project: A Tides Canada Initiative
Toronto, ON and Thunder Bay, ON

Area of Practice:
Promoting Welcoming Communities

Video:
<https://youtu.be/sUdK2ZfWi7k>

A Pathways to
Prosperity Project

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**PATHWAYS TO
PROSPERITY**
Promoting Welcoming Communities in Canada



**VOIES VERS LA
PROSPÉRITÉ**
Promouvoir des communautés accueillantes au Canada

BACKGROUND ON THE ORGANIZATION AND IMPETUS FOR THE PROGRAM

Together Project is a project on Tides Canada's shared platform, which supports on-the-ground efforts to create uncommon solutions for the common good. Together Project connects refugees with Canadians or established newcomers to build stronger, more integrated communities. Tides Canada is a national Canadian charity dedicated to a healthy environment, social equity, and economic prosperity. Tides Canada's shared platform provides governance, human resources, financial, and grant management for leading environmental and social projects across Canada, allowing projects to more effectively achieve their missions.

The arrival of 25,000 Syrian refugees to Canada generated an outpouring of support from the public marked by a significant increase in the number of volunteers. However, some volunteers encountered barriers to giving their time. The established settlement sector was dealing with a combination of more than double the number of resettled refugees, and "too much help" from volunteers without knowledge or experience supporting refugee newcomers. Focusing on Ontario, Together Project sought to understand how best to collaborate with the settlement sector to build upon successful models of volunteer mobilization as well as identify best practices for volunteer initiatives.

The Together Project began as a grassroots initiative and became a formal project of Tides Canada Initiatives in 2016. Building on Canada's unique Privately Sponsored Refugee (PSR) model, which studies show promotes positive integration outcomes, the Together Project matches volunteer "Welcome Groups" with Government Assisted Refugees (GARs) for settlement and integration support. Research has shown that access to broad social networks and the development of social capital can mitigate social isolation for GARs, as well as foster independence and rapid, durable integration. Involving new volunteer constituencies in refugee integration could also promote positive public discourse on refugees and lead to more welcoming and inclusive communities.

The Together Project sought to meet and support the unique needs of GARs. At the same time, it was determined that oversight was needed to ensure volunteers complemented existing settlement service programming, and worked safely and effectively with the vulnerable population they were supporting. In partnership with COSTI Immigrant Services, the Welcome Group Program was created. Funding was received to pilot the program in four communities across Ontario, and subsequently to strengthen and refine the model.

OVERVIEW OF THE PROGRAM

Name:

The Welcome Group Program

Description:

The Welcome Group Program matches volunteer "Welcome Groups" of five or more volunteers with Government Assisted Refugees for settlement and integration support. It is based in Toronto,

ON, and also operates in Thunder Bay, ON. Welcome Groups typically assist GARs for six months, but may continue to do so for a year or longer on an informal basis, depending on the needs of the refugees. The Welcome Group model seeks to add value to other models of volunteer engagement with Government Assisted Refugees as follows:

- Newcomer-defined goals for the match;
- Group matches of five or more volunteers rather than family-to-family matches;
- Volunteer training and four-part series of training manuals;
- Six months of match support, monitoring, and evaluation;
- Volunteer connection to newcomers' settlement caseworker;
- "Cultural Ambassadors" to provide linguistic and cultural interpretation;
- Regular communication within the match and remote support through WhatsApp;
- Preference matching between volunteers and GAR newcomers, utilizing criteria like geographic proximity, family size, capacity, and other preferences;
- No financial barrier for volunteers who want to participate; and
- Minimal wait time to match volunteers with GAR newcomers (about two months).

Goal(s):

To foster social connections between volunteers and newly arrived GARs in order to support their settlement and integration into the community.

Target Client Group(s):

Newly-arrived Government Assisted Refugees

Delivery Partner(s):

The Welcome Group Program is co-delivered by COSTI Immigrant Services (Toronto, ON) and Thunder Bay Multicultural Association (Thunder Bay, ON). It has also previously been delivered with Catholic Centre for Immigrants (Ottawa, ON) and Cross Cultural Learner Centre (London, ON).

Human Resource(s):

The Welcome Group Program has two co-directors, as well as many volunteers.

Funding:

Government of Ontario

KEY FEATURES THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THIS BEING A PROMISING PRACTICE

Effective:

The Welcome Group Program uses a preference matching system to match groups of volunteers and GARs, utilizing criteria such as geographic proximity, family size, capacity, and other preferences, to ensure a greater likelihood of success. It is client-centered, as GARs define priorities

and goals for the match. Matches involving GARs with low levels of English are also assigned a volunteer Cultural Ambassador, who provides linguistic and cultural interpretation and support.

Efficient:

The Welcome Group Program complements services in the community, such as settlement services and Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC). It relies on a team of volunteers to provide resources and supports to GARs that are beyond the remit of settlement professionals.

Relevant:

The Welcome Group Program is responsive to the particular needs of GARs; initially, it was developed to meet the needs of large, predominantly Syrian families with low levels of English but has since been adapted to serve GAR families from other countries. The program is constantly being updated based on learnings and evidence from previous matches.

Sustainable:

The Welcome Group Program works in partnership with settlement organizations, which provide client referrals and/or deliver the program. It is open to GARs from any country of origin, and may be expanded to serve other client groups, such as protected persons. Staff have invested time, effort and resources into ensuring that volunteers – the key ingredient in the program’s success – have a positive and rewarding experience.

Transferable:

The Welcome Group Program has been delivered in four different-sized communities across Ontario. It could be delivered in any large or small centre with strong volunteer resources and a settlement / community organization for client referrals.

Innovative and Forward Thinking:

The Welcome Group Program is informed by the people that it is serving. As part of the intake process, GARs are asked to indicate their specific needs, challenges, goals, preferences, and interests, and are matched with a group of volunteers accordingly. It also incorporates communications technology, such as WhatsApp and other applications, to maintain direct lines of communication between clients, volunteers, and program staff.

Differs in Definable Ways from Other Similar Practices:

The Welcome Group Program builds on Canada’s private sponsorship model, but focuses on matching GARs with groups of volunteers, with each match focusing on the unique settlement and integration priorities of a GAR household. There is no financial requirement, so community members who cannot afford to commit to private sponsorship can still become involved in supporting refugees at a deep level. Extensive training is provided to volunteers on the resettlement process, managing expectations, trauma-informed care, cultural humility, and empowerment (versus charity). Matches are constantly being monitored and evaluated to ensure that they are working for clients and volunteers.

High Client Uptake:

The Welcome Group Program draws in clients through referrals from settlement / community organizations. It takes about two months for GAR clients to be matched with a group of volunteers.

High Client Retention:

The Welcome Group Program focuses on quality (versus quantity) of matches. Most Welcome Groups continue to support the GARs with whom they are matched for at least six months. The program does allow for flexibility as circumstances may change for GAR families and/or Welcome Groups. For example, some challenges may be addressed more quickly than others and Welcome Groups may request a new / additional match that better suits their capacity.

Strong Evidence of Successful Outcomes:

In the summer of 2018, an interim survey was conducted with 10 GAR families (representing 83% of active matches) and 22 Welcome Group volunteers (representing 100% of active matches). 90% of GAR households reported feeling their challenges were being addressed through Welcome Group support. 70% reported feeling better connected to Canadians through meeting their Welcome Group. 80% reported that their Welcome Group was helpful in making them feel more independent. In addition, 90% of Welcome Group volunteers reported having learned more about refugee integration through their match.

PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT AND EVALUATION STRATEGY

The Welcome Group Program is monitored and evaluated on an ongoing basis. Matches are monitored through WhatsApp to ensure volunteers remain engaged and responsive to GARs. Exit surveys and interviews are conducted with all GAR clients, matched volunteers, and cultural ambassadors. Input is also collected from interpreters, local settlement / community partners, and academics. Findings are compiled and reviewed, and used to strengthen and refine the program model.

The Welcome Group Program has engaged in the Innoweave Impact and Strategic Clarity module in order to further define the impact that it aims to achieve, how it will be achieved, and how success will be measured. Key recommendations, decisions and conclusions are as follows:

- Whereas Together Project began as a volunteer initiative to assist with GAR newcomer settlement, evidence suggests that there is an equal if not greater need for volunteer engagement in GAR newcomer integration.
- While “social connections” typically includes social bonds, social bridges and social links, Together Project’s intended outcome is primarily focused on the “two-way street of refugee integration” thereby implying a greater focus on social bridges and social links and a lesser focus on social bonds.
- Both Government-Assisted Refugees and volunteers benefit from a clear understanding of “newcomer-defined goals” by which to measure the success of the match.
- It is important to frame “newcomer defined goals” within categories of functional integration like education, employment, health and language acquisition.
- Together Project has a unique opportunity to increase positive public discourse on volunteer engagement with refugee integration through story-telling and research.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Together Project: Website

<https://togetherproject.ca>

Together Project: Reports

<https://togetherproject.ca/research/#reports>

Together Project: Contact

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