

# TOGETHER PROJECT

[www.togetherproject.ca](http://www.togetherproject.ca) | a project of Tides Canada

## The Welcome Group Program: Lessons in Community Mobilization and Effective Volunteer Support in Refugee Integration

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November 1, 2019

**VOLUNTEER**

[togetherproject.ca](http://togetherproject.ca)  
a project of Tides Canada

Getting settled in a new country  
is a challenge for many refugees.

**AGENDA**

**P2P NATIONAL CONFERENCE 2019  
WORKSHOP**

**PART ONE: HOW IT STARTED**

**PART TWO: WHAT WE LEARNED**

**PART THREE: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE**



## ■ ORIGINS

Founded in 2016 in response to the Syrian refugee crisis, Together Project matches refugee households with volunteer “Welcome Groups” for integration support.

## KEY QUESTIONS

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How can we give everyday citizens an active role in the two-way street of integration?

How can we normalize the act of welcoming refugees?

How can the community mobilize to complement the settlement sector?

## THE WELCOME GROUP PROGRAM

Based on the “Group of 5” Model of private sponsorship, volunteers could work to support the integration of more vulnerable Government-Assisted Refugees.

### Key features:

- Training
- Group matching
- Translation/interpretation support
- Evaluation & iterative learning
- Focus on vulnerability
- Preference matching
- Collaboration with RAP SPOs



## THE WELCOME GROUP MODEL

Matching Government-Assisted  
Refugee Newcomers with  
Volunteer Welcome Groups

WELCOME | Months 1 & 2



### ABOUT THE MANUAL

The goal of this series is to empower volunteers with the most impactful knowledge and tools for volunteering with Government-Assisted Refugee (GAR) newcomers. The first manual in the series is designed to give volunteers a broad, comprehensive overview. It is divided into four sections.

**UNDERSTANDING REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT / SECTION 1** offers a broad overview of the global refugee situation, and explains how refugee newcomers are resettled to Canada. The purpose is to ensure a common understanding of refugee displacement and integration among Welcome Groups.

**YOUR ROLE IN INTEGRATION / SECTION 2** introduces fundamental concepts for voluntary and humanitarian work: *vulnerability, trauma informed care, empowerment, cultural sensitivity, and confidentiality*. The goal is to ensure that volunteers approach their relationships with refugee newcomers in a way that fosters independence and ensures that all people involved experience a healthy, uplifting relationship.

**UNDERSTANDING THE SETTLEMENT SECTOR / SECTION 3** helps Welcome Group volunteers understand how to engage with the broader settlement sector – i.e. the professional agencies and their staff who support refugee newcomers on a day-to-day basis.

**MANAGING EXPECTATIONS / SECTION 4** touches briefly on how Welcome Groups can manage their own expectations, GAR newcomer expectations, and understand the expectations of settlement sector personnel. Managing expectations and understanding the scope of responsibilities can help overcome the chances for volunteer burnout.

**THE WELCOME GROUP MATCHING / SECTION 5** explains the Welcome Group matching process as well as the timelines and expected tasks in the first weeks and months of your new relationship.

Cover Image: Together Project / Tides Canada



**PARTNERS ACROSS ONTARIO**



**CCI  
OTTAWA**

**Thunder Bay**

**Multicultural Association**



*The Fabric of our Community*

**COSTI**



**cclc**

newcomers. diversity. community.

## EXPECTATIONS

- Volunteers would form friendships with refugee newcomers.
- Refugees could use volunteer social networks.
- Matches would progress along a general one-year timeline of settlement.



## ■ HOW DID IT GO?

- Over 100 matches
- Hundreds of volunteers
- Five different cities across Ontario with different partners with different requirements

What could go wrong?

## ■ CHALLENGES

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- Sustaining volunteer interest, activity, and commitment
  - Distance / travel time
  - Language barrier
  - Lack of clarity of objective
  - Miscommunication
  - Personality differences

## ■ THEMES

### Challenging matches:

- Difficulty forming social connection/friendship
- Lack of clarity around objectives/effectiveness
- Limited utility of social networks for most GARs

### Strong matches:

- Clearly defined priorities, often urgent – action needed
- Dynamic, independent, goal-oriented volunteers
- Mutual buy-in

## ■ WHAT WE LEARNED

- Overall, high levels of satisfaction – most expectations were met and both volunteers and newcomers had a positive experience.
- Volunteering frontline is not for everyone – experience improves when expectations are realistic and recruitment is targeted.

## ■ WHAT WE LEARNED

- Friendship can't be expected or enforced, and carries different meanings for different people.
- GARs are typically not ready to capitalize on volunteer social networks.
- Refugee household settlement timelines are very difficult to effectively generalize.

## ■ PIVOT 1: NEWCOMER-DEFINED PRIORITIES

The focus of matches moved away from friendship and general support to specific priorities, as identified by individual households.

Typical areas of focus in matches:

- Language acquisition
- Navigating services (typically healthcare)
- Pathways toward meaningful employment
- Youth (tutoring, extracurricular activities, socializing)

## ■ PIVOT 2: FRIENDSHIP / SOCIAL CONNECTION

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“Friendship” is not essential and can’t be enforced.

Social connection can be built on reliability, trust, and working together towards a mutual goal.

Changes to program:

- Change in language to better manage expectations
- Emphasis on practical, regular support to kick-start relationship
- De-emphasizing social networks.

## ■ PIVOT 3: FLEXIBLE AND FOCUSED

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Aiming for the highest and best use of volunteer time and effort.

Changes to program:

- Shorten formal length of match to 6 months
- Shift focus from settlement to integration
- Cohorts allow for iterative program development



## ■ WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

- Dynamic and flexible resource development and training for volunteers.

## ■ WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

- Exploring partnerships to complement volunteer support – e.g. employment, language, health, etc.

- **WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?**

- Improved evaluation – gathering evidence and capturing stories.

## ■ WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

- Greater community inclusion – find the unexpected allies in building welcoming communities.



**THANK YOU!**  
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