

TOGETHER PROJECT

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The Welcome Group Program: Social Connections to Support Refugee Integration

VOLUNTEER

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Getting settled in a new country
is a challenge.

Anna Hill, Together Project Co-Director
Pathways to Prosperity - 1 November 2019

WELCOMING COMMUNITIES

-We want to understand how the Welcome Group Program fits into the broader collective goal of building Welcoming Communities.

-A number of Local Immigration Partnerships have been doing important work on defining and building Welcoming Communities.

-In a 2010 report, Dr. Victoria Esses and her team defined *17 Characteristics of a Welcoming Community*.

-Our Welcome Group program addresses 5 of the 17 characteristics.



SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

As per the *Characteristics of a Welcoming Community 2010* report, volunteer engagement in building refugee social connections can help support:

1. Fostering of Social Capital
2. Positive attitudes towards Immigrants, Cultural Diversity and the Presence of Newcomers in the Community
3. Social Engagement Opportunities
4. Opportunities for Use of Public Space and Recreation Facilities
5. Favourable Media Coverage and Representation



FOSTERING REFUGEE SOCIAL CAPITAL

-In 2018, in partnership with Environics, the Toronto Foundation released the Toronto Social Capital Study.

-The Toronto Social Capital Study 2018 looked at measuring the social capital of Toronto residents in terms of three key metrics: 1) social trust, 2) social networks and 3) civic connection.

-We are using these same metrics to measure the impact of our Welcome Group Program on fostering social capital for GARs.

-Michaela Hynie of York University is the principal investigator for this project.



POSITIVE ATTITUDES TOWARDS REFUGEES - CONTACT THEORY

The Contact Hypothesis suggests that under appropriate conditions contact between two different groups, can reduce prejudice. The facilitating conditions of Contact Theory are as follows:

1. Equal status
2. Common goals
3. Intergroup cooperation
4. Support of authorities, law or customs



SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES -

Social engagement opportunities for refugees and volunteers can help:

- build trust so that refugees feel more comfortable reaching out to volunteers in times of stress
- familiarize volunteers with refugees' talents and abilities
- create opportunities for informal language learning, expanding social networks, using transit and exploring local neighbourhoods.
- Metrics include the Social Provisions Scale.



NEWCOMER COMMUNITY EVENTS IN PUBLIC SPACE

-In addition to our Welcome Group matching program, we also host newcomer community events in public space.

-Since 2017, we have worked with about 20 partners to host over 30 community events for refugee newcomers across Toronto.

-Toronto's mayor, John Tory, gave the keynote address at our Newcomer Picnic in 2018.



FAVOURABLE MEDIA COVERAGE AND REPRESENTATION

-Example favourable media coverage of newcomers and volunteers working together to build more Welcoming Communities is a *Learn to Curl* event hosted in partnership with the Royal Canadian Curling Club. In 2017, it received global media coverage.

-As well, we have been able to engage CBC radio, TV and online in positive media coverage about volunteer engagement in refugee integration.



POSITIVE SOCIAL MEDIA STORYTELLING

- But the majority of newly arrived refugees are not ready to participate in media or social media storytelling due to language and other barriers.
- Instead, we interview our volunteers so they can share their experience of building social connections to support refugee integration on social media.
- We have a new blog on our website where we share these stories
[@togetherproject.ca/blog](https://togetherproject.ca/blog).



INTERVIEW WITH ZEIN - WELCOME GROUP VOLUNTEER

“During my time with the Welcome Group, I started off thinking about the impact I hoped to make on the lives of this newcomer family. What I did not expect was how my life was about to be transformed after getting to know this incredibly intelligent, brave and compassionate family in return. This has been one of my most inspirational experiences. If you come into it with an open heart and an open mind, you will truly receive as much as you give.”



INTERVIEW WITH MOHAMMED - WELCOME GROUP VOLUNTEER

“Within my community, I encourage people to volunteer to help newcomers’ settle and integrate. I talk about how rewarding my volunteer work has been and I try to inspire others to welcome newcomers to Canada. My advice is to see the whole experience as a learning opportunity. When people come from another part of the world, they have something to share with you. You can learn a lot from them.”



PARTICIPATING IN A GLOBAL DIALOGUE

-Although we are a community initiative that works outside of the traditional settlement sector, we try to actively participate in national and global dialogues about volunteer engagement in refugee integration.

-In countries where millions of refugees are under temporary protection, there is almost no strategy for refugee integration, resulting in entrenched generations of poverty, lack of social cohesion and social unrest.



REFUGEE INTEGRATION AND LOCAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The Refugee Company and A Beautiful Mess Restaurant
in Amsterdam.

Uber Den Tellerand in Munich, Berlin and other cities

Life Food Entrepreneur Center in Istanbul, Turkey

StARS Project in Cairo, Egypt

Justice Center Hong Kong

Migration and Asylum Project in New Delhi, India

HayataDestek in Ankara and Istanbul





THANK YOU!

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