

SHARING SETTLEMENT AND INTEGRATION PRACTICES THAT WORK EMPLOYMENT FIRST: WORKPLACE SKILLS FOR REFUGEES

Calgary Catholic Immigration Society
Calgary, AB

Area of Practice:

Services and Supports for Vulnerable Immigrant Groups

Video:

<https://youtu.be/wp13ao1Jf9s>

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

Calgary Catholic Immigration Society (CCIS) is a non-profit organization based in Calgary, AB. Founded in 1981, it provides settlement and integration services to immigrants and refugees in Calgary and surrounding areas. These services are enriched by the engagement of different stakeholders, including local, provincial and federal government agencies, public and private funders, community partners, and dedicated volunteers. Through these supportive partnerships, CCIS works to build welcoming communities and ensure that newcomers to Alberta are positioned to thrive in Canadian society.

Since 2014, Calgary has seen a significant increase in the number of refugee arrivals, many of whom face multiple, complex barriers to employment. CCIS noticed two distinct groups within its high-needs refugee client base: privately sponsored refugees, who usually receive minimal financial support and are most interested in immediate employment rather than employment preparation training, and government assisted refugees, who are often reluctant to give up their financial supports and feel nervous about transitioning into employment. The Employment First: Workplace Skills for Refugees program was developed to meet the needs of both groups and support increased labour market participation of high-needs refugees, including refugee women.

OVERVIEW OF THE PROGRAM

Name:

Employment First: Workplace Skills for Refugees

Description:

The Employment First: Workplace Skills for Refugees program combines job placement, skills training, workplace training, and mentorship support for high-needs refugees. It targets four industries – healthcare, hospitality, manufacturing and agriculture – as they offer opportunities for further training, upward mobility, and long-term careers. At the outset of the program, participants are matched with employment opportunities in one of the four targeted industries. During the first six weeks of their employment, participants attend workplace skills enhancement and mentorship sessions, which are delivered on an as-needed basis and customized based on input from consultations with participants and work experience supervisors. During these group and one-on-one sessions, participants are invited to share their on-the-job experiences, ask questions about any challenges they may be facing, and receive customized mentorship support. The sessions focus on enhancing participants' workplace skills, intercultural competencies, and understanding of Canadian workplace culture. This approach allows participants to begin generating income immediately, to become immersed in Canadian workplace culture, and to receive skills enhancement and coaching support that assists in retaining employment and growing their careers at the same time.

Goal(s):

The goals of the Employment First: Workplace Skills for Refugees program are: to support the increased participation of high-needs refugees in the local workforce; to connect refugees with

immediate employment in roles and industries that provide financial stability and opportunities for learning and career growth; to provide high-needs refugees with the necessary essential skills training, employability training and mentorship to retain employment, adapt to the Canadian workplace, and succeed on the job; to enhance refugees' self-confidence and self-sufficiency through work experience, skills enhancement, and mentorship support; to engage employers in hiring refugees and providing customized, on-the-job essential skills and employability skills training; to support employers in addressing their recruitment and retention needs; and to develop and pilot an employment-first training model for high-needs refugees that can be replicated or expanded across Canada.

Target Client Group(s):

Government assisted refugees and privately sponsored refugees who are facing multiple barriers to employment, including limited English language skills, formal education or work experience. Participants must meet the Canadian Language Benchmark (CLB) Level 3 or higher.

Delivery Partner(s):

The Employment First: Workplace Skills for Refugees program works closely with employers from the local health care, hospitality, manufacturing and agriculture industries.

Human Resource(s):

The Employment First: Workplace Skills for Refugees program is delivered by a team of three staff, including one program coordinator, one employment outreach liaison, and one facilitator / mentor.

Funding:

The Employment First: Workplace Skills for Refugees program is funded by Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) through their National Essential Skills Initiative.

KEY FEATURES THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THIS BEING A PROMISING PRACTICE

Effective:

The Employment First: Workplace Skills for Refugees program uses CCIS' Enhancing Refugees Economic Outcomes curriculum, which was developed to address the unique learning needs of refugee clients. The curriculum focuses on providing learners with the necessary life skills and employability skills, as defined by the Conference Board of Canada, and the essential skills required to adapt to Canadian culture, integrate into the Canadian workplace, excel on the job, and become engaged members of the community. The program also focuses on recruiting employers who are not only interested in hiring refugees to address their workforce needs, but who are also willing to learn about the refugee experience, who are committed to providing high-needs refugees with customized training, mentorship support and skill building opportunities to help them succeed on the job, and who are keen to utilize CCIS' support to create inclusive, supportive and trauma-informed work environments. This involvement helps position participants for success and ensures that refugees secure and retain meaningful employment.

Efficient:

Three key features of the Employment First: Workplace Skills for Refugees program contribute to its efficiency. Each month, large-scale information sessions are delivered to approximately 30 refugee clients, allowing program staff to conduct a program orientation and initial screening with a large number of clients at one time. Monthly hiring fairs are also organized and attended by approximately 40 participants and 1-5 employers, which result in approximately 32 work placements and allow employers to fill multiple positions with pre-screened candidates at the same time. Employers also receive a wage subsidy of 24 hours per week from Employment and Social Development Canada, an incentive that has helped to engage a high number of employers in a relatively short timeframe. These features have led to several stable and sustainable employer partnerships that enable the continuous and efficient transition of refugee clients into work opportunities.

Relevant:

Over the past five years, Calgary has seen a significant increase in the number of refugee arrivals, including Yazidi refugees who have experienced severe violence and trauma and are considered to be one of the highest-need refugee populations ever to resettle in Canada. To secure and retain meaningful employment, most high-needs refugees require essential skills and employability skills training, but have difficulty accessing and/or completing these programs. The Employment First: Workplace Skills for Refugees program provides an opportunity for high-needs refugees to generate income immediately, to become immersed in Canadian workplace culture, and to establish a sense of belonging while receiving skills enhancement and coaching to assist in retaining employment and growing their careers.

Sustainable:

Employer engagement is the foundation of the Employment First: Workplace Skills for Refugees program. Since its inception, employer interest has been very high. As the program continues to gain traction within the Calgary business community, employers will be willing to support the ongoing delivery of the program.

Transferable:

The Employment First: Workplace Skills for Refugees program could be replicated in other communities across Canada. Organizations serving high-needs refugee clients could implement the program by researching the leading industries seeking to fill a high number of entry-level positions in their community and establishing supportive employer partnerships in those sectors.

Innovative and Forward Thinking:

The Employment First: Workplace Skills for Refugees program uses an innovative employer engagement model. It engages employers by helping them to address their workforce needs, and at the same time involves them in the overall settlement and integration of refugees. It focuses on employer partners who are willing to learn about the refugee experience and utilize CCIS' support to create customized on-the-job training and inclusive, supportive and trauma-informed work environments where refugees can learn and thrive. This approach provides employers with a stable workforce and creates conditions for refugees to succeed on the job, retain long-term employment, and build lifelong careers.

Differs in Definable Ways from Other Similar Practices:

The Employment First: Workplace Skills for Refugees program takes an alternative approach to employment supports by placing participants in a job at the start of the program. This model enables refugees to experience the benefits of employment earlier in their settlement and be surrounded by a network of support to ensure their success, as well as gain financial stability without missing an opportunity to learn about the Canadian workplace and gain the skills needed to achieve long-term success. Refugees with limited formal education have the opportunity to “learn by doing” and to apply and build their skills in an authentic workplace setting.

High Client Uptake:

CCIS is the primary provider of the Resettlement Assistance Program for government assisted refugees in the Calgary area. It is also a Sponsorship Agreement Holder, in partnership with the Calgary Diocese, and is responsible for supporting 80% of privately sponsored refugees who are resettled in the Calgary area. As a result, a high number of refugees are aware of the services provided by CCIS upon their arrival. Since the Employment First: Workplace Skills for Refugees program was launched in February 2019, CCIS has received over 500 inquiries from interested clients.

High Client Retention:

The Employment First: Workplace Skills for Refugees program has a high client retention rate because participants begin earning income from the start of the program. In addition to alleviating some financial concerns, the program ensures their full participation and retention through the provision of 360° support. Employers are offered customized support to ensure that participants’ needs, questions and concerns are addressed and to mediate any cultural misunderstandings that may arise. CCIS and employers work together to identify and mitigate issues that may impact participants’ performance on the job, their ability to complete the training, or their prospects for long-term job retention.

Strong Evidence of Successful Outcomes:

The Employment First: Workplace Skills for Refugees program monitors and tracks progress using several internal assessment and measurement tools. The data show that the program is creating positive outcomes for high-needs refugees in the Calgary area. As of June 30, 2019, 64 clients have completed their work experience placements, representing a client retention rate of 100%, and 57 clients, or 89%, are now employed in full-time positions.

PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT AND EVALUATION STRATEGY

CCIS uses the following tools to monitor and track progress and measure achievement of the program’s results:

- **Communications and Math Employment Readiness Assessment (CAMERA):** A pre- and post-program workplace skills assessment for low-skilled workers developed by Pathways to Possibilities. It uses authentic workplace materials and tasks to measure participants’ essential skills for the workplace in areas of listening, reading, writing, numeracy, and document use. The

system captures gains in essential skills from levels 1-3 and provides results using plain language.

- **Databases:** CCIS registers participants in the funder's Grants and Contributions Online Services (GCOS) system and uses its own internal database to track the number of participants who receive placements, complete training, and secure permanent employment.
- **Participant Self-Evaluation:** CCIS has developed plain language evaluation forms for participants to complete at the end of their six-week placement, which ask simple questions about workplace skills and level of confidence gained during the program.
- **Facilitator / Mentor Evaluation:** CCIS has developed bi-weekly evaluation forms for program facilitators / mentors to document participants' completion of workplace skills enhancement session activities and progress during group and individual sessions.
- **Employer Evaluation:** CCIS has developed bi-weekly evaluation forms for host employers to assess participants' job performance, including demonstration of essential skills, employability skills, and workplace competencies. It also invites qualitative feedback.
- **Participant Survey:** CCIS has developed a bi-weekly survey to determine if participants are being supported by their host employer. The results are recorded by the program facilitator and reported at the end of each six-week placement.
- **Program Evaluation:** Employer evaluation forms rate satisfaction with the program's efficacy in addressing employer recruitment and retention needs. Participant evaluations rate satisfaction with the program content, structure, and staff support. Both evaluation forms invite written comments and recommendations for improving program delivery.
- **Performance Indicator Table:** The program utilizes a tool developed by Employment and Social Development Canada for projects that fall under its National Essential Skills Initiative to collect information about participant numbers, essential skills gains, improved well-being, employment outcomes, and improved business outcomes of partnering employers.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

CCIS

<https://www.ccisab.ca>

CCIS Employment First: Workplace Skills for Refugees

<https://www.ccisab.ca/index.php/refugees/employment-first.html>