

# SHARING SETTLEMENT AND INTEGRATION PRACTICES THAT WORK BRIDGING BARRIERS TO NEWCOMER MENTAL HEALTH

Niagara Folk Arts Multicultural Centre  
Niagara Region, Ontario

## **Area of Practice:**

Settlement Services and Supports that Contribute to the Physical and Mental Well Being of Newcomer Individuals and Families

## **Video:**

<https://youtu.be/KMhfDg9ObNg>

A Pathways to  
Prosperity Project

June 2021

Funded by:



Immigration, Refugees  
and Citizenship Canada

Financé par :

Immigration, Réfugiés  
et Citoyenneté Canada



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**

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The Niagara Folk Arts Multicultural Centre is a charitable not-for-profit organization that was incorporated as the Folk Arts Council of St. Catharines in 1970. Its mandate is to support and assist the ethnocultural and newcomer community in Niagara. The Niagara Folk Arts Multicultural Centre offers a full range of settlement services with staff speaking 14 languages and over 120 program volunteers. The Niagara Folk Arts Multicultural Centre acts as an anchor and common point of reference for other service providers and takes the lead on many initiatives such as setting standards of service, outcome measurement, the collection of information and statistics, and promoting collaboration.

In 2018, the Niagara Folk Arts Multicultural Centre launched a mental health pilot project. The project started by conducting extensive research to identify gaps and barriers regarding the provision of mental health services to newcomers, as well as potential solutions. Among other activities, the research component of the project included an environmental scan consisting of interviews and focus groups with newcomers and surveys with mental health organizations in the community. The results of the environmental scan revealed extremely low rates of mental health service utilization/access by the newcomer population and identified several barriers explaining this finding. To address this issue, the Niagara Folk Arts Multicultural Centre developed the program 'Bridging Barriers to Newcomer Mental Health'.

In 2020, within the first three weeks of COVID-19 lockdown measures, the Niagara Folk Arts Multicultural Centre experienced a 30% spike in requests for mental health services. Also, in the first 3 months of the pandemic, the mental health services provided to youth aged 13-24 increased by 50%. The Niagara Folk Arts Multicultural Centre responded to the increased need for mental health support by pivoting their one-on-one counselling sessions online, and by developing an asynchronous and anonymous chatline as well as educational videos in 4 languages addressing the main concerns presented by clients seeking support.

The combination of these factors – the need to address the barriers that newcomers face when accessing mainstream mental health services and to provide initial mental health support, and the increased demand for mental health support during the pandemic – are the main factors that led to the development of the program.

## **OVERVIEW OF THE PROGRAM**

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**Name:**

Bridging Barriers to Newcomer Mental Health

**Description:**

Bridging Barriers to Newcomer Mental Health is a program designed to bridge the barriers that newcomers experience when accessing mental health services within the Niagara region, to provide mental health relief to eligible newcomers who are experiencing unique challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and to serve as a gateway for clients to access long-term or medical mental health attention if needed. The program is made up of five components: (virtual) one-on-one

counselling in the clients' first languages (with interpreters for languages other than Spanish, English, Arabic or Mandarin; up to four sessions), an anonymous chatline, group sessions (including an art therapy program), anti-stigma education, and an educational video series entitled "From Someone Like Me...For Someone Like Me." The educational video series enabled mental health counsellors as well as staff with lived experience to deliver messages to clients about the importance of seeking mental health support and the impact that it can have on their settlement journey. Importantly, these videos are offered in Spanish, Arabic and Mandarin.

**Goal(s):**

The program aims to bridge the barriers newcomers face when accessing mental health support. In particular, it aims to assist newcomers to overcome these barriers, to cope with mental health challenges and to ultimately create resiliency and improve health and well-being. Finally, the program also aims to address the increased need for mental health support during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Target Client Group(s):**

Mental health services are offered to newcomers including permanent residents, landed immigrants, individuals who intend-to-land, individuals with approved permanent residence applications, convention refugees and live-in caregivers. The chatline and the educational video series are available to all newcomers regardless of their status.

**Delivery Partners:**

The program has partnered with many organizations in the settlement and health sector.

**Human Resources:**

The program is managed and coordinated by the Mental Health Coordinator/Health System Navigator who is also responsible for client case management and referrals. In addition, the program is delivered by mental health support workers (a registered social worker and a psychotherapist), a social work intern and a community connections coordinator.

**Funding:**

The program is funded by Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), and United Way Niagara.

**KEY FEATURES THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THIS BEING A PROMISING PRACTICE**

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**Effective:**

Several factors contribute to the program's effectiveness. These factors include the fact that the program is available in clients' first language, has a built-in anti-stigma campaign, offers culturally informed social support activities, and is offered in a community space. The fact that the program is offered in clients' first languages makes it much easier for them to express mental health concerns. The anti-stigma campaign, which includes presentations, orientations and educational videos, has had a significant impact on client uptake, breaking barriers and normalizing conversations about mental health. The addition of culturally informed social support activities allows clients to feel less isolated and gives them the opportunity to build connections. Also, the fact that the program is offered at a settlement agency makes newcomers more likely to access the program as they are

already familiar and comfortable with the staff at the agency. This is especially relevant given that some clients worry or are afraid of accessing mental health services in a more formal medical setting.

In addition to these factors, the program was able to pivot to virtual counselling soon after the pandemic began. This has enabled the program to respond to the increased demand for mental health services at this time. The launch of the chatline also proved to be very effective as it allows clients to anonymously discuss and address mental health concerns with a certified counsellor. In this way, the chatline provides a safe space for clients who first want to contemplate the idea of seeing a counsellor.

**Efficient:**

Several factors contribute to the efficiency of the program. A key factor is that the program has a clear case management and referral process that outlines what case managers are able to handle within the organization and what falls outside of the scope of their roles. Also, the program has built collaborative partnerships with multiple stakeholders providing health services in the community who are all very engaged.

In addition, the program has a thorough evaluation plan to collect and assess data to identify trends and be responsive to newcomers' needs. Furthermore, the program is offered at an agency with a broad range of settlement services. In this way, clients are easily able to receive additional services, on top of initial mental health services, for wraparound support.

The Niagara Folk Arts Multicultural Centre regularly invests in training and educational opportunities for staff so that they can best support clients. The organizational culture at Niagara Folk Arts Multicultural Centre is characterized by a focus on equity and inclusion which helps to create an environment in which clients can build trust relationships with staff.

**Relevant:**

The program has received positive feedback from clients. It meets the needs of newcomers by helping them overcome language and other barriers to accessing mental health services and by providing virtual mental health support during the pandemic.

**Sustainable:**

Since the inception of the program, there has been a strong and continuous emphasis on the evaluation of the program. This has allowed the Niagara Folk Arts Multicultural Centre to share evidence of effectiveness with funders and secure continued funding for the program. Furthermore, the program has also focused on building relationships with other community organizations and keeping mainstream mental health services informed about the program and its successes so that these supports can be made available on a wider scale.

**Transferable:**

The program can be replicated by other organizations or related areas of practice by encouraging the implementation of first language services within mental health care. A beneficial factor is also the engagement of internationally trained and BIPOC mental health professionals, as well as those with lived experience as newcomers to serve the newcomer population. It is also important to ensure that staff have the proper training and background to deal with the unique and complex mental health

needs of newcomers and to form trusting relationships. Additional actions that can be replicated include the introduction of culturally informed social support activities, the implementation of anti-stigma campaigns and educational opportunities to increase neighbourhood and community engagement, and the provision of (virtual) one-on-one mental health counselling in settlement agencies.

**Innovative and Forward Thinking:**

The development of the program has been informed by research and available best practices. It outlines a clear pathway for improving the mental health of all newcomers in a trauma-informed, holistic, safe, supportive and cost-effective manner. Furthermore, the program has a strong evaluation plan to identify trends and be responsive to newcomers' needs. For example, the program has uncovered additional challenges faced by clients, such as domestic, family and gender-based violence. The Niagara Folk Arts Multicultural Centre responded to these needs by providing support services addressing these needs and by actively educating their staff on the topic.

**Differs in Definable Ways from Other Similar Practices:**

The program is the only mental health support program for immigrants and refugees in Niagara. The Niagara Folk Arts Multicultural Centre is the only organization that provides services in clients' first language, including the chatline service, as well as culturally-informed activities. The program is also based at a settlement agency which makes it easy to normalize mental health needs and build rapport with newcomer clients.

**High Client Uptake:**

Clients learn about the program in several ways (e.g., intake workers at the Niagara Folk Arts Multicultural Centre, the official program website, social media, partner organizations, ESL classes, word-of-mouth, etc.). The anti-stigma campaigns and presentations have had a significant impact on client uptake by breaking down barriers and normalizing conversations about mental health. Also, first language services have helped clients to overcome the anxiety of talking about emotional issues in a second language and have contributed to the high client intake.

**High Client Retention:**

The program retains clients for the full length of the program. The fact that the program includes social support activities besides the one-on-one counselling sessions has greatly helped to keep clients interested and engaged. Furthermore, the program also addresses accessibility barriers by making virtual services available through a variety of platforms, by offering a child-care program for clients with children so that clients can attend appointments, as well as by providing clients with bus tickets for transportation. In this way, clients are more likely to stay in the program.

**Strong Evidence of Successful Outcomes:**

In the first year of the project, the program served over 400 clients. After pivoting to virtual mental health support services in July 2020, the program continued to successfully engage newcomer clients despite the challenges and barriers they face in accessing mainstream mental health services. The virtual program successfully served 201 clients in one-on-one counselling sessions, 286 clients through the chatline and video series, and 31 clients through the art therapy program. The program's mental health webpage, which is home to all virtual resources, had over 8000 hits as of February

2021. Finally, the program has also received many inquiries from mainstream mental health providers and SPOs to learn more about how they could adopt the program in their own organizations.

## **PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT AND EVALUATION STRATEGY**

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The program has an evaluation plan that is implemented internally with the support of Brock University. It collects data through client interviews, the OCMS system (a client management system) and an internal tracking system that assesses personal and counselling-related data. A wide variety of quantitative and qualitative indicators are assessed. Examples of quantitative indicators include attendance rates, satisfaction surveys, emotion scales (generalized anxiety disorder and depression, GAD7 and PHQ9), and number of referrals. Examples of qualitative indicators include goal setting/achievement, clients' and workers' experience during the one-on-one counselling sessions, a partnership self-assessment tool, journals of clients' experiences, and client feedback. Importantly, the program assesses clients at the beginning of the program and continues to track their progress over time.

## **FOR MORE INFORMATION**

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**Niagara Folk Arts Multicultural Centre: Mental Health Program**

<https://www.folk-arts.ca/programs/mental-health/>

**Mental Health: Lived Experiences of Newcomers**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rxmdPCPn43Y>