



Hamilton Immigration  
Partnership Council



# Exploring Hamilton's Informal Settlement Network

— APRIL 2019 —

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# Foreword

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Immigrants arrive and find their way in Hamilton thanks to the concerted efforts of many individuals, groups, organizations, and institutions. This oft-hidden array of supports came to the fore in late 2015 when Hamilton began to receive hundreds of refugees fleeing war in Syria. With initiatives such as the Mayor’s Advisory Committee on Syrian Newcomers, Hamilton witnessed the gathering and leveraging of partners from local government, service provider organizations, not-for-profit organizations, educational institutions, faith-based groups, ethnocultural associations, and individuals—all of whom worked together to welcome newcomers into our community.

Immigrant-serving agencies have long relied on frontline workers with various cultural and linguistic skills, and lived experiences, to deliver services to the newly-arrived. These frontline “cultural brokers” have also played a key role in making connections between formal and informal spaces thus resulting in stronger partnerships and better access to services for newcomers. In recent years, new examples of community groups have emerged to support newcomers—including student associations, young professional groups, advocacy groups, and even online groups—to help newcomers to establish friendships and a sense of belonging.

Over the past decade, the Hamilton Immigration Partnership Council (HIPC) has had an ongoing interest in connecting with the informal settlement network, which is comprised of groups and organizations that provide support to newcomers but do not received federal funding to do so. Building on observations from the Syrian resettlement period and supported by a special grant from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), HIPC commissioned a skilled local researcher to take on this task. In the following report, PhD candidate Huyen Dam presents highlights from 32 insightful interviews that help us to better understand the activities and objectives of those providing informal services and supports in the community. We believe that this is the most extensive research of its kind ever conducted in Hamilton.

Based on the findings from this research project, we note the variety of support that is being provided by various informal groups in our community and the challenges they encounter in meeting newcomer needs. More importantly, the systemic barriers and existing gaps that prevent newcomers from effective integration identified in this report will tell us how we can target our strategic objectives and operationalize priorities in the coming years.

We look forward to an ongoing dialogue that includes funded and unfunded service providers working towards mutual recognition and common goals.

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# Acknowledgments

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The opinions expressed, and findings gathered herein do not reflect the official views of IRCC.

## Participating Informal Groups:

Afro Canadian Caribbean Association Hamilton	Iraqi-Canadian Association of Hamilton
Association Canadienne-Française de l'Ontario	Les Francophones Hamilton
Barakah Box	Russian Group of Hamilton
Beasley Neighbourhood Association	McMaster International Exchange
Columbian Refugee Association	New Generation Youth Centre
Emergency Support Committee for Refugees	Open Homes
Empowerment Squared	Power to Change (McMaster U. Chapter)
Fraternity Hispanic Association	Riverdale Community
Global Hamilton Connect	Sikh Community
Hamilton Community Food Centre	Somali Women of Hamilton
Hamilton Downtown Mosque	Sudanese Canadian League of Hamilton
Hamilton Mountain Mosque	Sudanese Women's Group
Immanuel Christian Reformed Church	Temple Anshe Sholom Hamilton
Intercultural Community Kitchen	World University Service of Canada (McMaster U. Chapter)
International Association for Refugees Canada	

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# Executive Summary

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Settlement support for newcomers are fastened by different actors and networks across Hamilton, Ontario, including those supports that are provided by the informal settlement network. In this project, the informal network refers to those local, well-established and often voluntary groups and organizations that act as the first point of contact offering guidance and access to their networks. Through interviews with 32 individuals, representing 29 groups/organizations operating in this space, this research explored the supports provided, and the challenges encountered in meeting newcomer needs. This research also identified systemic barriers and existing gaps that prevented newcomers from reaching their goals.

The aim of this research is to shed light upon, and to affirm the current work of the informal settlement network in Hamilton. Overall, the numerous supports provided to newcomers through informal groups are grassroots and relational. Because the informal network operated outside of rigid funding constraints, the provision of support is centred on friendship thus establishing a sense of belonging for newcomers. Informal groups facilitated community connection, skills sharing, provided volunteering opportunities, and helped newcomers integrate into their surroundings amongst other things.

The formal sector serves all immigrants; however, the informal sector was able to meet the demands of specific subcategories with unique needs. Informal groups also worked to empower newcomers and contributed to their immediate and long-term success in Canada. This research identified various specific targeted actions along these lines, including helping women combat isolation, empowering youth to overcome stigma and oppressive cultural norms, and enabling newcomers to achieve education and economic success. The focus on combatting race-based issues has also led groups to take up advocacy work to equip newcomer communities with information and resources, particularly around legal issues.

Informal groups were challenged by a number of barriers when working with newcomers. These barriers exist at various socio-ecological scales. Racism imposed systemic challenges that made it hard to help newcomers navigate local systems. Those working in the informal space also encountered needs that exceeded their capacity to assist, because challenges were complex, and solutions not easily identifiable.

Access to housing was seen as the biggest challenge to newcomer settlement and integration in Hamilton. Housing impacted all groups of newcomers, including economic-class immigrants, refugees, refugee claimants, international students, exchange students, and settling immigrants. Employment barriers continue to restrict newcomers from upward social mobility, and this directly impacted their access to housing.

Given these findings, the call to action for HIPC should focus on supporting newcomer communities by way of supporting informal groups. The work of welcoming communities and promoting diversity should strive towards the implementation of meaningful actions whereby newcomers, and their needs, are reflected in the community space.

# Introduction

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When immigrants arrive to a new city or place, they often look to their personal and community networks to help them settle. These informal networks provide direct support to newcomers and help them to access and navigate the formal service system. The **informal settlement network** is defined here as those local, well-established and often voluntary groups and organizations that act as the first point of contact offering guidance and access to their networks. Previous HIPC research has identified the informal settlement network by the following groupings (see **Wayland 2010**)<sup>1</sup>:

- Faith-based Groups
- Ethnocultural Groups/Associations
- Community Centres
- Voluntary Organizations
- Student Associations
- Young Professional Groups
- Political Organizations
- Ethnocultural Businesses
- Stores and Business Organizations
- Ethnic Media

It has long been understood that the informal settlement network helps to strengthen and support the efforts of the formal settlement serving agencies. The challenge in Hamilton, Ontario, and in most immigrant-receiving cities, has been to strengthen the bridges between the informal network and formal settlement sector to ensure that all newcomers' diverse needs are met. Over the years, the need to engage and understand the work of various informal groups has become critical in order to understand the channels of support that leads newcomers to full integration.

To this end, HIPC undertook research to learn more about the work of the informal network in Hamilton. The aim of this research was to:

1. Affirm the work and contributions of the informal network in supporting newcomers;
2. Increase awareness of newcomer settlement and integration experiences across the community;
3. Develop sustainable connections and partnerships between the formal and informal support/service providers in Hamilton; and
4. Improve coordination of service delivery and newcomer access to services.

The key findings from this qualitative research project will complement existing information on service provision in Hamilton. It will add evidence to the work of the formal settlement serving agencies who rely on data to make critical service decisions for refugees and newcomers. The findings and recommendations from this project will also help to guide HIPC's future actions to ensure it is meeting the group's **strategic objectives** which are as follows:

1. Newcomers are supported through strong community partnerships;
2. Hamilton is a responsive, welcoming and inclusive community; and
3. HIPC is a leader in immigration research and knowledge-sharing.

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<sup>1</sup> Wayland, S. 2010. Hamilton's Informal Settlement Sector. Hamilton Immigration Partnership Council.  
[http://hamiltonimmigration.ca/sites/default/files/docs/hamiltons\\_informal\\_settlement\\_sector.pdf](http://hamiltonimmigration.ca/sites/default/files/docs/hamiltons_informal_settlement_sector.pdf)

# Research Methods

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## Recruitment & Data Collection

Recruitment strategies focused on groups and organizations who do not receive federal funding to provide settlement services. Recruitment emails were sent to HIPC partners and public announcements were made via HIPC Twitter, Facebook, and monthly e-newsletters. Snowball sampling was used thereafter to recruit study participants. Data collection began in October 2018 and was completed in March 2019. Interviews were semi-structured, audio recorded, and transcribed verbatim. See [Appendix A: Interview Questionnaire](#) for more details.

## Study Sample

In total, 32 research participants took part in the study, representing 29 different informal groups and organizations in Hamilton. See [Table 1](#) for details. Some research participants represented more than one informal group, and some spoke from the perspective of previous involvement. Many of the research participants were either currently or recently, employed in the formal settlement sector.

**Table 1:** Study Sample (n=32)

Community Centres	n = 6
Ethnocultural Groups/Associations	n = 10
Faith-Based Groups/Associations	n = 7
Student Groups/Associations	n = 3
Voluntary Groups/Associations	n = 6

Research participants included founding members of informal groups or organizations, volunteers, or paid employees. All groups operated on charitable donations. Some groups worked outside of a governance structure while others had a governing board. Some informal groups worked from rented spaces, while others met in places of worship, community centres, the university campus, or in the members' homes.

## Data Analysis, Member Checking & Participant Feedback

Each transcript was coded for emerging themes. The preliminary findings were discussed with HIPC's Research and Evaluation Committee, which allowed for peer-debriefing to ensure rigour in interview analysis ([Baxter & Eyles 1997](#))<sup>2</sup>. On February 27, 2019 a community feedback meeting was held to validate the research findings with the research participants. The trustworthiness of the analytic categories was confirmed by 13 research participants. The meeting also allowed participants to provide feedback on recommendations and future actions, which are captured in this report.

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<sup>2</sup> Baxter, J. and J. Eyles. 1997. Evaluating qualitative research in social geography: Establishing 'rigour' in interview analysis. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 22(4): 505–525.



# Findings

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The following section outlines the key findings that emerged from the research interviews. For brevity, only selected quotes are used to highlight the themes and sub-themes. Some of the quotes have been anonymized to ensure privacy/confidentiality.

## 1.0 What We Do to Help Newcomers

Hamilton immigrants are very diverse; they represent different categories, countries, languages, and education levels. While the formal sector serves all immigrants, the informal sector is able to meet the demands of specific subcategories with unique needs.

For many informal groups, motivation to help newcomers was influenced by several factors. Many have had their own lived-experience of immigration and could personally connect to the experience of isolation and challenges encountered in settlement. Supporting newcomers was seeing oneself as being part of the solution for others, creating belonging, and strengthening the community as a whole:

For people when they immigrate to Canada, they leave all of their friends and family. When they come to Canada, they just feel so alone here.

**-Russian Group of Hamilton**

## 1.1 Mobilizing the Receiving Community

The scale and visibility of the Syrian refugee crisis had an impact on settlement locally. The influx of new arrivals in 2015 and 2016 caused people to take note of immigration issues and to act on them. Groups with long histories of welcoming newcomers and supporting diaspora communities in Canada, began to mobilize their respective communities to action. For example, **Temple Anshe Sholom Hamilton** pulled volunteers together to provide language support for children and youth in Hamilton. Various initiatives to mobilize, coach, and equip the community to engage with refugees were led by groups that had developed expertise over the years:

We did a lot of work in 2015 and 2016 with the GARs [government assisted refugees], coming alongside with the friendship and support [...] churches were also coming to us and saying, 'we noticed that there are refugees in our community and we are drawn to do something but we don't know what to do. Can you help us understand how we can potentially get involved?'

**-International Association for Refugees Canada**

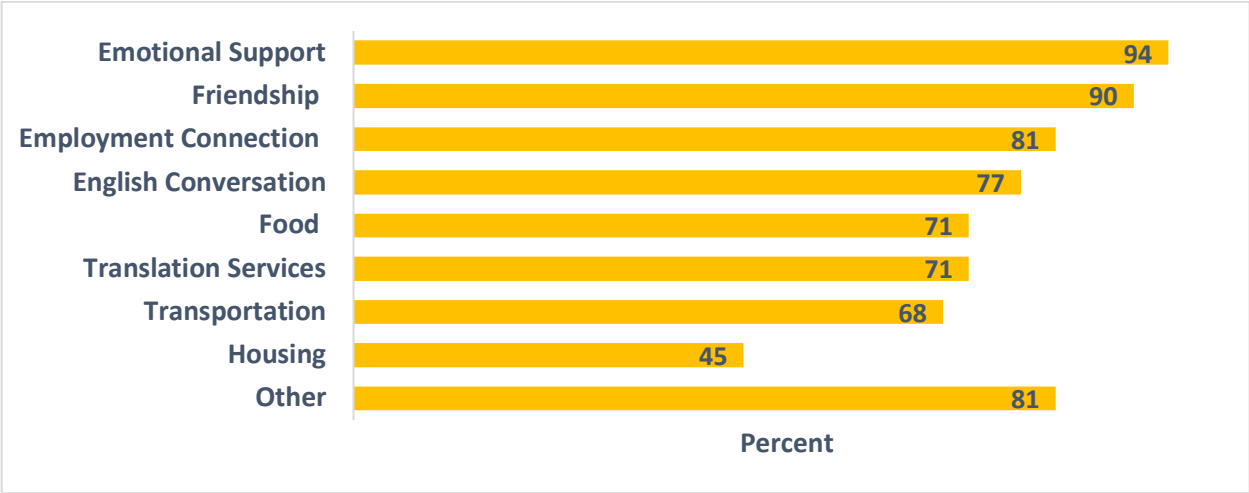
For informal groups, welcoming and supporting newcomers in Canada was viewed as a social responsibility, and this had several advantages. First, the flexibility of individuals and groups to provide support outside the restriction of a client-provider relationship was seen as effective on a personal level. On a system level, informal groups were not limited by the precarity of program funding to meet needs:

One of the long-term goals that I have is to see the volunteer basis of the local Christian community mobilized to serve these needs [...] a lot of these things will end up having to come through relationship instead of a program, at least for the long-term effectiveness.

**-Power to Change (McMaster University Chapter)**

## 1.2 Meeting Practical Needs

Informal groups supported newcomers by meeting their practical needs. As shown in **Figure 1**, the types of support provided by the informal groups include providing: 1) emotional support, 2) friendship, 3) employment connection, 4) English conversation, 5) food, 6) translation services, 7) transportation, 8) housing, and 9) other.



**Figure 1:** Types of Support Provided to Newcomers by Informal Groups in Hamilton, Ontario

The majority of informal groups found friendship (90 percent) and emotional support (94 percent) to be the most common type of support provided because “friendship is the starting point for a lot of what we do” (**International Association for Refugees Canada**). In contrast, the hardest type of support to provide was housing, with only 45 percent of groups providing some form of direct support or assistance, including providing temporary shelter (issues regarding newcomer housing will be further discussed below). Other types of support provided by groups included social activities, volunteering opportunities, professional development, skills building, leadership opportunity, mentorship, immigration support, creating social networks, research, advocacy, civic engagement, and financial support.

Respondents expressed that meeting needs in a culturally appropriate way was important in their work. For example, supporting newcomer food access in light of dietary restrictions was identified as a gap in Hamilton in several interviews. Halal meat options and culturally appropriate food staples were missing in Hamilton, which led to families traveling outside of the Hamilton area to access food banks that offered culturally appropriate food. This led one group to create a local food program specifically for Muslim families in Hamilton:

[Our partner] noticed about 40 families were coming from Hamilton [to access their food bank in Mississauga], because they offer halal meat and it was just an atmosphere where they felt more comfortable in receiving food [...] so we created our food bank about 3 years ago. We see food insecurity as a symptom and not necessarily the core problem at the food bank.

**-Barakah Box**

For groups working with refugee claimants, meeting needs in a time sensitive manner was critical. Group expertise and strong network connections to formal settlement serving agencies

in the legal, health, social assistance, and housing fields were vital to the success of a claimant's chance of becoming a future Canadian:

We personally go with them through the whole process [...] when you come here as a refugee claimant, the first 15 days [...] is crucial; the immigration process, housing, everything [...] and making them wait one day [...] is time that they've lost to meet the lawyer to start processing their case. They have 15 days from the time they crossed the border to submit their claim to immigration. If they meet their lawyer after the 15 days, they will have to present their case by themselves.

**-Columbian Refugee Association**

At least one local group was providing financial assistance to those in need. The Emergency Support Committee for Refugees, established in 1987, have been helping convention refugees repay the federal government for their permanent residency application fee:

A single individual has to pay \$550, a couple has to pay \$1100, and a family of 4 has to pay \$1400. A lot of people didn't have that kind of money. A lot of people had to get credit cards and loans, and people were getting into debt as they were starting their life in Canada, so we started to look for money [...] we started the revolving loan fund. Since then we have been providing interest free long-term loans to convention refugees applying for permanent residence. I think Canada is the only country in the world that charges refugees to apply for permanent residence.

**-Emergency Support Committee for Refugees**

### **1.3 Creating Friendship, Belonging & Social Inclusion**

For both permanent and temporary residents, leaving their place of birth and coming to Canada was not only a search for opportunity but a search to establish "home". As a result, many were seeking connection and friendship when they arrived:

At first, we come to Canada in search of opportunities but then we search for home here, that feeling of home.

**-Global Hamilton Connect**

Relationship was fundamental to facilitating community connection, and community connection led to belonging. Various informal groups centred events and activities around friendship, food, cultural heritage and creating spaces of connection:

One of the largest things we do currently is host a monthly dinner for international students. We've had about 135 students come out on a regular basis. The hope is to create a space for them to meet both Canadians and other international students and essentially to have fun, to have a space where they can gather as a community and enjoy some good food.

**-Hamilton International Students**

Creating space for connection was particularly vital for group survival of the Francophone community, especially of those choosing to reside outside of Québec:

Francophone immigrants are coming to Canada [...] They want to give their children the opportunity to experience all of Canada and all it has to offer. Their maternal language might be French, but they see the value in settling in an Anglophone area but still want those

services to be in French and still want their children to speak their own language [...] we need to facilitate their integration because our [Francophone community] depend on it.

**-Association Canadienne-Française de l'Ontario**

Getting newcomers involved in the community outside of the home to improve individual outcomes was a difficult undertaking. For many newcomers, obtaining immediate basic needs such as housing and employment were pressing and stressful. The focus on these needs can take away from the search for avenues of secondary support in the community:

Culturally we only interact with ourselves. We stay home. We don't go out and we don't speak English. And some of us have culture shock so I encourage them to come outside and interact with other communities and learn more about resources that are available.

**-Somali Women of Hamilton**

Friendship and belonging created synergy and allowed learning to take place symbiotically. Tailoring programming and activities around skills sharing and embedding them within a lens of reciprocity added value and helped newcomers to overcome isolation. Newcomers are engaged in a setting that validated them, their values, and their experiences:

We take the approach that we are not teaching people things. We are providing people with the opportunity to really showcase their skills. And I think because of this lens, people feel more comfortable and they feel more empowered to say this is something that I brought from my country. It's a skill and its validating that for people [...] people from various ethnocultural backgrounds are informed by reciprocity and it is a deeply held value within cultural communities. We find that people come to our program, but they are always wanting to give back. They always want to jump into the dish pit and what ends up happening is that as we move them through the volunteer process, they start to orient themselves to the western practices as well.

**-Hamilton Community Food Centre**

I have lots of newcomers who need volunteer hours. They feel very good to work with us to exchange language, recipes, and foods from other cultures [...] to bring people and take them out of isolation, from feeling lonely, it makes me feel really happy to take those people out from their homes. They say, 'we learn more English here than in school.' We practice daily. It's different to use English here than it is in school.

**-Intercultural Community Kitchen**

We have Steel Express, which is our longest running program on urban style of dance. That's one of the programs that bridges the gap of language barrier and for youth who may not engage on a regular basis. Movement is something that does that. Another program that does that is Aux Cord Shuffle. That's a music sharing program. Usually we ask around 3 or 4 questions like, 'what is a song that matches your current mood?' [...] It's pretty cool and informative because people can play music from different cultures, languages, and genres. The conversation can be light and joking or it can be deep and impactful. There's always something that people can learn in those conversations [...] The misconception that people have is when newcomers come to Canada is that this country is going to teach you. That is invalid. A lot of time there are beautiful perspectives and knowledge that they tell us about.

**-New Generation Youth Centre**

In Hamilton, the work of fostering social inclusion benefited from the Neighbourhood Action Strategy (NAS), which had previously employed community developers in 11 high priority

neighbourhoods across Hamilton. Recent changes in funding in 2018 have left communities without an advocate in these neighbourhoods under the NAS program, which newcomer engagement had benefited from:

The removal of a full-time community development worker from the Beasley neighbourhood meant that the Neighbourhood Association had zero capacity to work directly with newcomers.

**-Beasley Neighbourhood Association**

The impact of this is yet to be fully observed, although less inclusion and less belonging amongst newcomer communities in Hamilton is a high probability:

Social inclusion is another need that racialized communities that includes newcomers, because they are often excluded from this social landscape of their community due to the prejudice and racial discrimination [...] we have seen instances where people have been hostile and difficult towards immigrants within their community [...] it's just unwelcoming [...] you participate in the community when you consider it your community; when you have a sense of belonging. If you don't have sense of belonging to begin with, you don't consider your surrounding as your community.

**-Riverdale Community**

## 1.4 Empowering Immigrant Communities

Many informal groups recognized that empowerment was the key for newcomer success in Canada, particularly for women and youth. Many groups were working with newcomers on an individual level to educate, motivate, and guide them to involvement in Canada. Newcomer success was perceived as not only surviving but obtaining a quality of life where newcomers feel whole, are fully participating, and are part of the community:

Their self-esteem has slowed down, and they don't know what to do. It's like they are swimming and swimming and they found a piece of wood and they hold on to it and that is it. They come to the shore and that's it. They sit down. The next step, they don't know what to do. Or they are too tired to take the next step. In that case, talk to them and see what they are good at. Empower them to get educated. Empower them to continue their education. Empower them find a job they are good at to take the next step. This is what we are trying to do on an individual level.

**-Hamilton Mountain Mosque**

Employment mentorship was a critical aspect of empowering newcomers, particularly when qualified newcomers were mismatched with work outside of their field:

We have qualified professional immigrants and they are often mismatched with jobs. There isn't anything wrong with that, it's just not the right match for them. Employment agencies need to have those numbers, so they mismatch people with employment, and this really affects the self-esteem of newcomers because they believe that now they have to work in a factory for the rest of their life. It's having someone who has already experience themselves the same struggle that the newcomer is going through to really encourage them to say what they have studied they are capable of, and they can still use their education. Yes, there may be road blocks along the way but try not to give up [...] I think employment is the number one issue restricting newcomers from fully integrating into Canadian society.

**- Riverdale Community**



Women were at greater risk of being constrained to the home environment and more prone to isolation after their arrival. Their inability to connect and engage in the community can lead to negative, cyclical long-term effects. The noted intersection of gender and class, and its impact on newcomer disposition, has led some groups to focus their efforts on empowering newcomer women in Hamilton. Groups working to bridge these gaps found success when initiatives were taking place alongside these women and accommodating the constraints of their cultural norms, practices, and schedules:

They stay permanent residents. Some of them have been here for 10 years. The husband and the kids get citizenship because the husband go to work, and they go to school, and they learn English and they combine their application with the children. But the wives are not citizen and that made me very angry and that is why invented this program [...] We made it a time where they can be available, like 6 o'clock to 8 o'clock. By that time, they have done everything for their kids [...] I read for them the English-Somali Canadian Citizenship test book [...] and I give them questions. I explain it in Somali. Some of them don't even know how to read Somali because they are illiterate [...] When they come back, if they can answer it, I give them 4 more questions [...] They do the written test first and then it's the oral. If they fail the written, then can pass the oral at least.

**-Somali Women of Hamilton**

Spaces that provided leadership opportunities were also found in Hamilton. Enabling newcomers to uplift themselves was self-empowering and had a community-wide effect:

I think something that doesn't get talked is the ability provide opportunities for people to uplift themselves and empower themselves. A big part our programming is providing opportunity for folks who are participants to become community leaders in this space. It's really important for people to know that they are coming not only because they need something. A lot of folks refer to this space as their home.

**-Hamilton Community Food Centre**

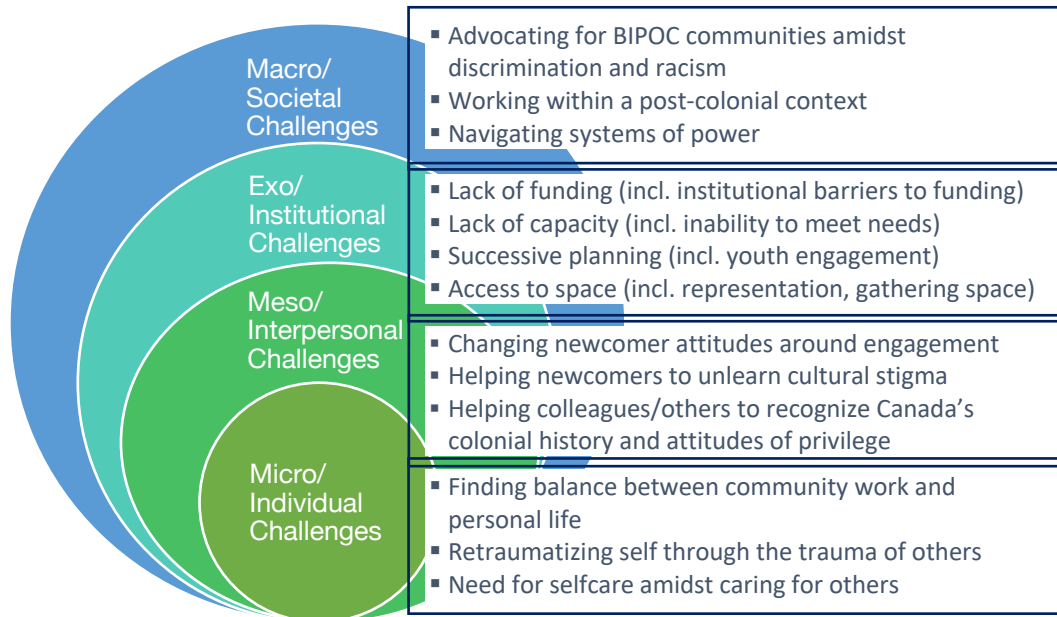
Youth-led groups and youth-led initiatives were also working to empower newcomer youth in Hamilton. Groups like the **New Generation Youth Centre** and **Empowerment Squared** created inclusive and positive spaces for young immigrants. Within these spaces, youth developed leadership and skills through community building activities, mentorship, and teamwork that cultivated empowerment. This was particularly important given a number of race-based issues that had been identified as increasing and negatively impacting Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) communities in Hamilton. As such, part of empowering newcomer communities included education and advocacy to ensure that immigrants were equipped with the tools needed to stay informed on issues such as policing, access to legal aid, and tenant rights (**Beasley Neighbourhood Association; New Generation Youth Centre; Empowerment Squared; and Somali Women of Hamilton**).

We are constantly adjusting our ideas and programming based on the needs of the community [...] how our legal system work and the layered intricacy of that. If you are at school and you get into a fight and English in not your first language, the person that you had the altercation with perhaps will have a better way of weaving the narrative. If the police are involved, you have to be careful [...] fairness and justice is not always the case.

**-New Generation Youth Centre**

## 2.0 What We Find Challenging in this Work

Informal groups faced many challenges in supporting newcomers. As seen in [Figure 2](#), these challenges exist at the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-level, some of which were discussed in the previous sections.



**Figure 2:** A socio-ecological model of factors impacting the informal networks' engagement in supporting newcomers in Hamilton, Ontario

### 2.1 Personal Challenges

Personally speaking, having boundaries—between work life and community life—was difficult for informal groups/individuals, especially given the complex needs of newcomers. For those who were employed in the formal settlement sector as frontline workers, meeting the needs of people on a day-to-day basis was also taxing and triggering:

As a frontline worker who also experiences trauma by colonialism and these things, I think witnessing people's trauma is difficult. Supporting them through the trauma, listening to their story is really difficult. I think a lot of time, BIPOC folks in the country also experience the same thing.

-Anonymous

People are used to seeing newcomers and racialized people as clients, so this creates division. I have experienced racism and discrimination within my work places because I am out of the norm. The burden is always on my shoulder. My white coworkers, they don't talk about these issues because it's not their issue. I am the one who has to talk about these issues. It takes an emotional toll on me because if I don't who will?

-Anonymous

## 2.2 Cultural Stigma

Interpersonally speaking, recognizing biases and stigma that exist within each culture around social norms (e.g. mental health, gender identities, and sexual orientation) was at times challenging when working with newcomers. The challenge for informal groups was to provide a 'safer' environment to help newcomers identify and unlearn behaviours that were considered as oppressive:

The most challenging thing about doing this work is maintaining boundaries and not compromising our integrity. There are a number of cultures previously before colonialism who were engaging and accepting of trans people and there are also Muslim communities who do have queer communities. We have youth in our space who are queer that are practicing Muslims. It's not saying, 'hey your culture is backward' because that is not the case. Whether you want to acknowledge it or not, there are queer and trans people that look like you. It's not just white people, it's not just other ethnicities [...] 'are we unpacking these concepts in the most accessible way?' People need room and space to make mistakes and grow. In practice we say our space is a 'safer' space [...] it's unfortunate that the learning happens at the cost of others being hurt but when you structure it in a way where people are down for the cause, they can do unlearning.

**-New Generation Youth Centre**

## 2.3 Operational Limits

Operationally speaking, groups cited that the inability to provide support was caused by 1) the lack of funding, and 2) the lack of capacity. When groups were not able to directly meet newcomer needs, redirecting newcomers to service organizations was an easy next step; however, sometimes this was done knowing that newcomers would not receive the support they needed (e.g. particularly in the case of accessing housing services). Witnessing unmet needs was cited as the hardest part of doing this work:

It's not difficult to redirect people to the services that exist. It's when I am confronted with an area where the service is not there, and so then it becomes very complex. Because it's my organization's job to identify where services are lacking, and then to act on it [...] how can we work with the services that are in place? How can we build on that?

**-Association Canadienne-Française de l'Ontario**

It's the inability to provide certain services when you know that people need something. We even know that 20% of the folks that come to us need something, but we don't have the capacity to provide it is probably the most challenging. Especially when it's something that is repeatedly asked for.

**-Barakah Box**

Access to space in the community to gather and meet was a major challenge for newcomers and immigrant communities alike:

Over 50% of the population there are racialized people and if you look at the community centre, 99.9% of staff are white [...] there is this rhetoric that racialized people are not coming. Why should they if you don't understand their needs? [...] When they contact the community centre, they simply say, 'no, we don't have space' [...] if they don't have any community advisor in the planning and scheduling of that centre, I don't think anything will change.

**-Riverdale Community**

## 2.4 Systemic Racism

Systemically speaking, the work of supporting newcomers was confronted by barriers to integration that exist at the macro level. Identifying and challenging attitudes of privilege was shown to help coworkers to “unlearn” in the workplace. This gave coworkers the opportunity to identify systems of privilege and correct taken for granted behaviours:

Helping people to unlearn the western narrative of immigration [...] helping coworkers to understand the impact of some of their language [‘those people’] that are used, which is not nice to refer to any group of people. It’s unintentional but as a result of privilege. They haven’t had to engage in first-hand experience that people in our programs have had so there is a sense of ‘otherness’.

-**Anonymous**

Newcomers navigating systems of power was difficult. The work of advocating for BIPOC communities, which included newcomers, amidst discrimination was particularly challenging when racism was not named (**Anonymous**). Thus, it was important for organizations to engage in self-critique and to be reflective in practice:

Some of the women came up with the idea of an exercise group. When tried to organize the women to apply for funding, it was really difficult [...] we reached the point when we were about to finish the [contract] and the donor agency was the one who was imposing barriers [...] We had an item to buy water bottles for our exercise group, 'oh no, you have to cancel that. We have to lower the budget' [...] it took us a long time to organize the ladies; 6 months [...] it wouldn't have been much for the donors to provide for these water bottles. I don't think they had any experience with women from low income areas [...] It doesn't cost a lot. Just the mats, a trainer, and water bottles. The ladies decided this was not worth it. It wasn't really about the water bottles. We could have given up on the water bottles. The women were really mad about it. There is a need for cultural training.

-**Sudanese Women’s Group**

A group of women reached out to me because they wanted to start a badminton group in the community center but there wasn’t space for them to do that. It’s a great way for women to come out of their houses. It’s good for their mental health, their physical health. Share the space. How hard is it to move around your other programs? On the one hand we are saying people are not coming to us, yet on the other hand, we are discouraging them from coming up with their own solutions.

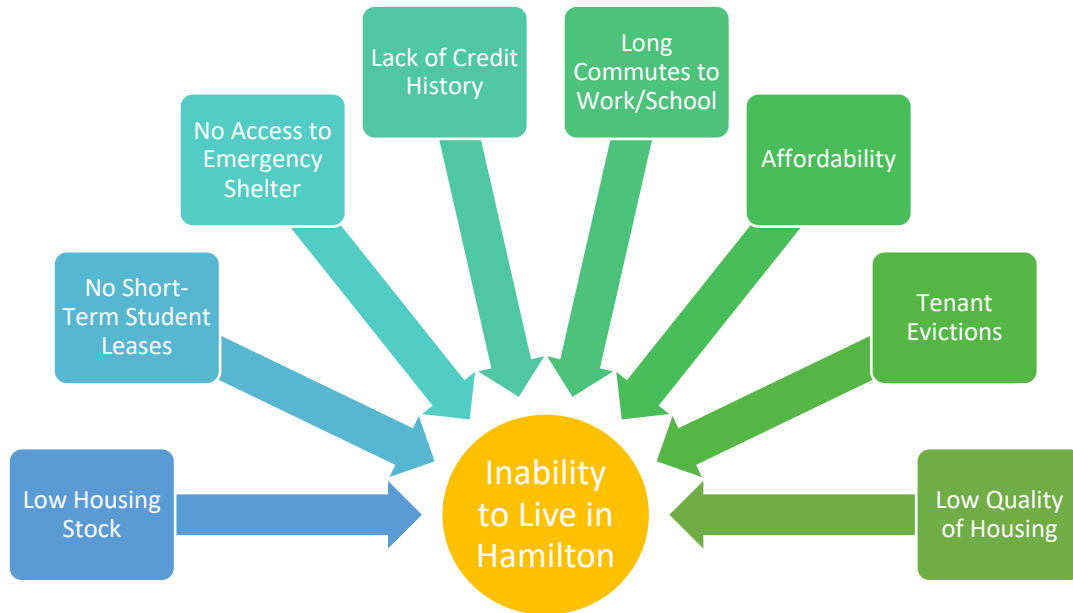
-**Riverdale Community**

Systemically speaking, every institution has its roots in being oppressive in some sort of way and they may not be willing to acknowledge those things [...] and so it may not always be the greatest for queer or trans people. That's one aspect but the other is that we have received feedback and heard from a lot of people about them navigating those systems and not feeling valued as a human being [...] you have to make sure you’re doing the work appropriately. Your staffing should represent the people you are engaging with [...] You have to be self-critiquing, self-reflecting, and wanting to do better all of the time.

- **New Generation Youth Centre**

### 3.0 What We are Seeing as Barriers to Integration in Hamilton

Access to housing was the biggest challenge for newcomers both prior to at and at the time of arrival. The inability to access housing impacted all groups of newcomers, including economic-class immigrants, refugees, refugee claimants, international students, exchange students, and settling immigrants. As displayed in **Figure 3**, barriers to housing was influenced by: 1) low housing stock, 2) no short-term student leases, 3) no access to emergency shelter, 4) lack of credit history, 5) long commutes to work/school, 6) affordability, 7) tenant evictions, and 8) low quality of housing, which taken together led to the inability to live in Hamilton.



**Figure 3:** Barriers to Housing for Newcomers in Hamilton, Ontario

#### 3.1 The Lack of Credit History of Economic Immigrants

Although housing is acknowledged as a Hamilton-wide issue; compounding factors for immigrants led to greater risk for newcomer barriers to housing access. Economic immigrants to Hamilton found difficulties in accessing housing due to their lack of credit history:

Newcomers have a lot of problem finding housing since many landlords won't accept them because they don't have a credit history in Canada, and they don't even have a bank account open yet and so they come to us, and some people come in crisis. They have been here for a week and they don't have a place to live [...] housing is a big issue and we have limited resources to help them in French [...] but we redirect them as best we can to the settlement services available at Centre de santé communautaire Hamilton-Niagara without always having concrete answers for them. I know some newcomers experiencing difficulty with housing have turned to another informal support group (a Facebook page called "Les Francophones Hamilton) for help and in search of landlords willing to accept their application for a rental property.

**-Association Canadienne-Française de l'Ontario**



For other economic immigrants, the pull factor to Hamilton was driven by the cheaper housing market. Relocation to Hamilton resulted in a longer commute to work outside of the city:

Because of the current real-estate situation in Ontario, people cannot afford anything in Toronto [...] a lot of newcomers are moving to here from Toronto [...] You know what the problem is here. They come by the Skilled Workers Program, they have university degree and work experience, but they cannot find a job. Most of the people live in Hamilton but they work in Toronto and Mississauga.

**-Russian Group of Hamilton**

### **3.2 Securing Student Housing for International & Exchange Students**

For international students and exchange students, securing housing before arrival was identified as an issue of concern:

We did a survey with the international students and one of the main practical needs that they had was housing [...] A lot of landlords desire 12-month leases [...] so finding housing before they got here was quite stressful because they didn't know what the place look like, they don't know who the landlord was, they had no feel for it, and there is quite a low supply compared to the demand. And no one is supplying short-term contracts [...] the housing situation for international students is just not the best [...] I think there is a threat there with safety and quality of living.

**-Power to Change (McMaster University Chapter)**

Something that has really been big lately is finding housing. In August and September there were a lot of [exchange students] who were struggling to find places to live. Some people had to go back home because they couldn't find a place to live, or some people got scammed. They had to pay a deposit and they didn't end up having a place to live or the place that they got was really bad and they couldn't get their deposit back.

**-McMaster International Exchange**

### **3.3 Providing Temporary Housing for Refugee Claimants**

In Hamilton, there was a growing need for community-wide dialogue and a collective effort to tackle housing issues. One inter-church group has organized families and individuals to provide short-term stays for refugee claimants in Hamilton:

[...] because of the huge crisis, particularly for the newly arriving refugee [claimants], there are no rooms in the shelters, so we are mobilizing citizens in the community to open up their homes and provide short-term housing for refugee claimants for a few months and to provide other role of support.

**-Open Homes**

### **3.4 Gentrification & Dignified Housing for Newcomers**

Access to affordable housing has been exacerbated by gentrification in Hamilton. This has led to tenant evictions for some groups, particularly impacting those with large families:

The rent is getting high and the landlord is asking them to leave [...] They say they are going to [renovate] the building just to evict them and raise the rent. That's the biggest problem [...] they have big families, so they need 3 bedrooms. Every building now is 2 or 1 bedroom. So where are they going to go? I advised them to go to community legal aid or City Hall or to

David Christopherson's Office [...] there is no maintenance because they want them to get out.

**-Somali Women of Hamilton**

**Low quality of housing has also led to concerns around dignified housing:**

A lot of the complaints are about the state of the housing that they are in. For example, one person came in and was talking about cockroaches, but they didn't know they were called cockroaches. They are recognizing that the places where they are staying are not dignified [...] A lot of people are underhoused as well so that's a problem in Hamilton [...] so not enough space for people and their family [...] and we get a lot of people in transition.

**-Hamilton Community Food Centre**

While many informal groups have noted the current housing issues and its impact on newcomer communities, employment barriers continue to restrict newcomers and immigrants from upward social mobility, and this has directly impacted their access to housing:

Employment is a barrier that exists for the vast majority of newcomers and immigrants. They are battling with their economic situation, so employment is the biggest barrier to upward social mobility.

**-Riverdale Community**

# Reflections & Recommendations

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## The Value of the Informal Settlement Network

The informal settlement network has an immense positive impact on Canadian immigration. Friendship and trust have allowed informal groups to identify the personal challenges facing newcomers and to find solutions to help them succeed thus creating a ripple effect.

Locally, informal groups add richness to our community and their work in helping newcomers is often unrecognized. This research was able to reach 29 groups/organizations, but groups who are engaged in this work currently, or previously, can be hard to identify. Their benevolence, generosity, dedication, and countless hours of voluntary work has helped many new Canadians find “home” in Hamilton.

## Supporting Newcomers Via Supporting the Informal Settlement Network

Supporting newcomer communities is to support the work of the informal settlement network. Informal groups offer niche support to newcomer communities in ways that the formal settlement sector cannot. Communities supporting the informal settlement network can therefore focus on the following areas:

1. Affirm the work of informal groups in the community;
2. Leverage support for informal groups; and
3. Advocate for the inclusion of newcomers and informal groups in community spaces.

## Next Steps for the Community & HIPC

The informal groups from this research offered several recommendations for future actions to HIPC and the community. As detailed [Table 2](#), these suggestions set HIPC’s strategic objectives of strong community partnerships, an inclusive community, and knowledge-sharing into action.

**Table 2:** Future Actions for HIPC and the Community

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### Future Actions for HIPC

- Provide written acknowledgement and thanks of support to informal groups
- Nominate informal groups for community awards/create a community award
- Share information on funding/facilitate workshops on grant applications
- Source municipal and community space for immigrant communities
- Promote informal groups and group activities via HIPC newsletter
- Collaborate with partners to improve settlement info in user-friendly format
- Advocate for race-based data/conduct research on newcomer inclusion
- Explore community-wide petition for federal and provincial intervention on housing

### Future Actions for the Community

- Celebrate informal group achievements
- Engage in newcomer issues on housing access
- Partner with organizations/initiatives on anti-racism
- Share community space with informal groups and newcomer communities

## Appendix A: Interview Questionnaire

Themes	Questions
<p><b>Newcomer Needs &amp; Pathway to Support</b></p>	<p>Q1. Can you tell me about your group and what do you do in the community to help newcomers?</p> <p>Q2: Do you know about HIPC? What do you know?</p> <p>Q3. Can you describe the people from the community that are coming to you for help?</p> <p>Q4. How do they find you?</p> <p>Q5. What are their needs?</p>
<p><b>Types of Support Provided to Newcomers</b></p>	<p>Q6. How have you helped newcomers?</p> <p><b>Supports Provided:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> Temporary shelter/housing</li> <li><input type="radio"/> English Conversations</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Emotional Support</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Employment opportunity via group or group's network</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Translation</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Transportation</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Friendship</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Food</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Others:</li> </ul> <p>Q7. Which supports have been the easiest to provide? Why?</p> <p>Q8. Which supports have been more difficult to provide? Why?</p>

<p><b>Experience Navigating Settlement Support</b></p>	<p>Q9. Have you helped newcomers connect to the following services?</p> <p><b>Navigation &amp; Access to:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> Housing</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Counselling &amp; Mental Health Services</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Physical Health (e.g. family doctor, dentist and other specialists)</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Language Training (e.g. ESL registration)</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Employment Services</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Legal Services</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Food Banks</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Others:</li> </ul>
<p><b>Connection to Settlement Network</b></p>	<p>Q10. Who else supports you in this, and in what way?</p> <p>Q11. Have you connected with any service agency in Hamilton (e.g. the YMCA, community health centres, food distribution centres?)</p> <p>Q12. How did you learn about them?</p>
<p><b>Experience Supporting Newcomers in Accessing Services</b></p>	<p>Q13. How would you describe your experience in helping newcomers?</p> <p>Q14. What have you learned in your experience helping newcomers?</p> <p>Q15: Do newcomers stay connected to your group long-term? Why or why not?</p> <p>Q16. How do you fund your support service, if at all?</p>
<p><b>Successes in Supporting Newcomers</b></p>	<p>Q17. Where do you feel you are most successful in helping newcomers? Why?</p>
<p><b>Barriers in Supporting Newcomers</b></p>	<p>Q18. What has been the most challenging part in helping newcomers? Why?</p>
<p><b>Recommendations for Improving Support</b></p>	<p>Q19. What would enable you to better help newcomers in the community?</p> <p>Q20. Given that HIPC is a group that helps newcomers and supporters of newcomers to connect, what can HIPC do to improve newcomer connections in our community?</p> <p>Q21: Is there anything you would like to add that we haven't talked about?</p>








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