

SHARING SETTLEMENT AND INTEGRATION PRACTICES THAT WORK THE LAND OF DREAMS FARM

Calgary Catholic Immigration Society (CCIS)
Calgary, Alberta

Area of Practice:

- Immigrant-Indigenous Relations
- Promoting Physical and Mental Health

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

The Calgary Catholic Immigration Society (CCIS) has been offering settlement and integration support to newcomers for 40 years. It delivers close to 100 diverse programs and services out of 26 locations across Southern Alberta. Its integrated services have been designed to address newcomers' basic needs, as well as support their mental health, safety and security, emotional well-being, and social integration. CCIS delivers services under four divisions: Resettlement and Integration; Community Development and Integration; Family and Children; and Business, Employment and Training. Its mission is to empower immigrants and refugees to transition into their new lives in Southern Alberta with a sense of dignity, belonging, and self-worth.

Between 2015 and 2017, CCIS welcomed many Yazidi refugees who came to Calgary as part of the Federal Government's Survivors of Da'esh Program, as well as many Syrian refugees. Many of these refugees come from agricultural backgrounds. CCIS developed the concept of the Land of Dreams Farm (LOD) in response to research on the importance of community building in the long-term settlement of vulnerable newcomers, coupled with research on the positive impact of spending time in nature on sufferers of PTSD. CCIS felt that Syrian and Yazidi newcomers would benefit from opportunities to leave their new urban environments and revisit farming practices. As a result, the LOD project came to be an agriculture-based newcomer integration program that provides plots of farmland to immigrant and refugee families where they can spend time in nature, grow food, and connect with the local Indigenous community.

OVERVIEW OF THE PROGRAM

Name:

The Land of Dreams Farm (LOD)

Description:

The Land of Dreams Farm is located on 8 hectares of Treaty 7 land just outside Calgary. The farm provides plots of land to immigrant and refugee families and matches them with local mentors who teach them regenerative farming practices. The farm provides its clients, many of whom have experienced a high degree of trauma, with opportunities to spend time in nature, connect with new land, and grow food in community. In partnership with Miskanawah, a local Indigenous organization, the farm has also become a place where clients can connect directly with the Indigenous community to support their healing processes and to learn about the history of the land. Each year, with the guidance of Indigenous Elders, the LOD hosts several events and activities designed to build bridges between CCIS' clients and the Indigenous community. Examples include Spirit Doll-Making Workshops, Circle Teachings, and Purification Ceremonies led by Indigenous Elders. Up until 2023, the LOD was only accessible to full-time clients of CCIS. However, with the introduction of community plots on the farmland, a full-time commitment to CCIS from participants is no longer needed to plant and harvest in the summer.

Goal(s):

The LOD aims to support the settlement, integration and well-being of immigrant and refugee families. It is designed to encourage opportunities to foster healing and wellness by building community, forging relationships with local Indigenous communities, and growing food in the Canadian context.

Target Client Group(s):

The target client group includes immigrant and refugee families in Calgary, including youth and children.

Delivery Partners:

CCIS partnered with the following organizations: Miskanawah, Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT), Portail de L'Immigrant Association (PIA), Centre Accueil Nouveaux Arrivants Francophone (CANAF), The University of Calgary, Invoke Coaching, YYC Growers and Distributors, Reach YYC Children & Family Services, Asgard Solar Inc., Blackbird Healing Arts Collective, Highland Regenerative Farm, and various ethnocultural community associations.

Human Resources:

The project's team consists of four team members, two Indigenous Elders, and volunteers. There is a project manager, who acts as both the lead coordinator for on-site activities and the primary educator in regenerative agriculture practices. The project manager is supported by an assistant who oversees the design and implementation of hands-on farming activities. The project also has a coordinator who helps with participant recruitment, developing relationships with other immigrant-serving agencies, fund development and design workshops. An on-site research coordinator oversees the volunteers and farm maintenance, develops relationships with participants, as well as research tools for data collection. Through the partnership with Miskanawah, two elders preside over ceremonies, interact with the newcomers, and provide spiritual leadership and guidance for farm operations. Additional staff include approximately 100 volunteers who provide support across multiple areas such as farm activities (beekeeping, rewilding, etc.) and program facilitation.

Funding:

IRCC is the primary funder for this program. In addition, the LOD has also received funding through the United Way of Calgary and Area. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the program received funding through an Alberta Health Services mental health grant to add further social infrastructure to the project. The LOD has also received support from local corporate and community foundations.

KEY FEATURES THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THIS BEING A PROMISING PRACTICE

Effective:

The LOD allows clients to be outdoors and to grow their own food, which encourages them to connect with nature and their own agrarian backgrounds, positively impacting their well-being. In addition, the LOD holds regular meetings with farm participants to gather feedback and insights about their needs and the program's efficacy. This feedback is important as it is also used to inform the development of the program's activities. The LOD also effectively mitigates barriers to participation by being inclusive to all individuals, and providing transportation, farming supplies and other resources. Moreover, LOD's leadership and CCIS's settlement counsellors play an active role in engaging clients, providing interpretation, and encouraging participation. Finally, besides teaching regenerative agriculture practices, the program also encourages clients to experiment with their own growing techniques to cultivate culturally appropriate foods, maximizing inclusivity.

Efficient:

By focusing on farming and spiritual, social, and mental-health activities, the LOD project addresses multiple goals simultaneously, contributing to its efficiency. This also includes formal and informal

opportunities for socialization and cross-cultural knowledge sharing between the Indigenous community and newcomers. In addition, there is no cost to participate in the LOD project and the land is accessible seven days a week during daylight hours. This accessibility increases the efficiency of the LOD as participants' access is not limited to formal programming and activities organized by CCIS.

Relevant:

Recognizing that many newcomers are from agrarian backgrounds, the LOD provides Calgary-area newcomers with access to and autonomy over a plot of land within city limits to increase their sense of belonging and comfort in their new home. To support a successful harvest for participants, the LOD not only facilitates access to the land, but also provides information about growing in the Alberta context. Furthermore, access to land allows newcomers to practice their culture through utilization of traditional growing techniques.

Sustainable:

To ensure the sustainability of the program, CCIS continues to explore diverse funding opportunities. Different funding streams enable the project to expand and evolve in response to participant feedback and external evaluations. Moreover, CCIS has also secured an extension to the lease on the land used for the project for another 10 years.

Transferable:

The LOD farm is easily replicable with other Indigenous communities, on available farmland or community gardens, across all Canadian provinces and territories. The LOD project can be scaled and adapted to align with the local context and the unique needs of immigrants and refugees that the program wants to target. A project of this kind provides many avenues for engagement, which can increase the transferability and appeal for diverse stakeholders.

Innovative and Forward Thinking:

The LOD project integrates Truth and Reconciliation calls to action into the core of the program and increases opportunities for newcomer and Indigenous communities to form meaningful cross-cultural connections. The project also uniquely leverages the guidance of Indigenous Elders, past agricultural experiences of immigrants and refugees, and the farm's natural setting to foster mental well-being.

Differs in Definable Ways from Other Similar Practices:

The LOD is unique in that it is a land-based project, which at its core believes that the integration of newcomers does not necessarily have to start at the urban level. It leverages newcomers' skills and experiences to shape their own integration journey, especially through regenerative agriculture. Moreover, the diversity of activities that take place at the LOD are also unique – the land is a venue for cross-cultural knowledge sharing and relationship building between Indigenous and newcomer communities, as well as a location for summer camps, volunteer engagement activities and educational workshops.

High Client Uptake:

A recruitment pathway for participants is through their settlement counsellors at CCIS. The LOD has benefitted from CCIS staff members' understanding of their clients' needs and commitment to the project. Counsellors relay farm information to their clients and also volunteer their time and efforts

to farm maintenance and activities. The LOD also leverages connections with other programs within CCIS and other immigrant-serving organizations to raise awareness of the availability of programming and plots on the farm. Since the LOD's inception in 2019, over 1,500 clients have participated in the project. There has been a high uptake among Calgary's ethnocultural communities who attract other participants through word of mouth. Participation is especially high amongst members of Calgary's Yazidi, Congolese, Senegalese, Cameroonian, Ethiopian, Mexican, Guyanese, Iranian, Afghan, Vietnamese, Bhutanese and Nepalese communities, among others.

High Client Retention:

A key factor in client retention is the commitment of CCIS staff. The CCIS team engages clients, provides interpretation, and encourages sustained participation in the project. These interactions also provide a feedback loop that contributes to continuous service delivery improvements. Additionally, the LOD provides winter programming to bridge into the spring growing season. Engaging participants through gardening workshops over the winter helps reduce disengagement during the off-season. Furthermore, seed starting workshops also help participants to be prepared for the planting season and re-infuses enthusiasm for upcoming activities at the farm.

Strong Evidence of Successful Outcomes:

CCIS engages a third-party evaluator, Habitus Collective, to conduct mixed method evaluations of the LOD project. Qualitative data are collected through interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and reviews of participant feedback. Habitus Collective's 2022 evaluation report assessing the LOD indicated generally positive responses on each of their three main performance indicators: participation and social engagement, cross-cultural knowledge exchange, and access to land and produce. Examples of positive testimonials for participation and engagement include "We have a place to gather and working together is fun" and "Kids can play in open space without concerns of going on the highway." A testimonial for positive cross-cultural knowledge exchange includes "I like the creation story of the First Nation and the cooking lesson of the black nightshade." Lastly, a testimonial for greater access to land and produce includes "They are able to take their knowledge and convert it into something that works here." Overall, the third-party evaluation report concludes that the LOD is successful in 1) overcoming barriers to participation and creating a welcoming and inclusive environment; 2) providing access to the land and information to grow food; 3) facilitating cross-cultural learning and relationships; and 4) maintaining participants' interest in the farm year-round by providing winter programming.

PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT AND EVALUATION STRATEGY

CCIS continuously develops and submits narrative, statistical, and financial reports to its funders outlining the activities on the farm, project expenses, the involvement of project partners, and the numbers of clients who are accessing events and activities on the farm. CCIS collects qualitative participant feedback during regular meetings with farm participants and after the Harvest Feast Event. Participants are asked about their experience, what the farm means to them, their sense of belonging and social connections, and what improvements they would like to see on the farm. This feedback has been used to improve the program. In fact, based on participant feedback, the program has evolved from providing only farm activities to participants to a more holistic practice that includes a focus on spiritual, social, and mental-health focused activities. Moreover, improvements are constantly being made to mitigate factors that are reported to discourage participation.

In addition, CCIS has been contracting Habitus Collective to conduct annual third-party evaluations of the LOD project. The program's performance indicators include participation and social engagement, level of cross-cultural knowledge exchange, and access to land and produce. For these reports, Habitus Collective collects qualitative data from various sources. This includes interviews with CCIS and LOD staff, which focus on their experiences on the farm as well as the perceived strengths and challenges of the farm. Habitus Collective also conducts interviews and focus groups with farm participants and engages in participant observation during site visits. The interviews and focus groups with farm participants focus on their experience, including how they learned about the farm, how they accessed the farm, their type and frequency of involvement on the farm, the impact on their relationships, cross-cultural knowledge gained and mental health, what they liked the most about the farm, and any perceived areas for improvement. During site visits, the third-party evaluator assesses the type of activities that participants are engaged in; how they interact with each other, the land and Indigenous individuals; and whether there are any differences depending on demographic factors. Finally, the third-party evaluator also reviews participants' feedback collected by CCIS.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Calgary Catholic Immigration Society (CCIS)

<https://www.ccisab.ca/>

The Land of Dreams Farm

<https://www.ccisab.ca/services/urban-farming.html>