

SHARING SETTLEMENT AND INTEGRATION PRACTICES THAT WORK REMOTE SOCIAL SUPPORT FOR GOVERNMENT-ASSISTED REFUGEES AND REFUGEE CLAIMANTS

Together Project: A MakeWay Initiative
Greater Toronto Area, Ontario

Area of Practice:
Promoting Welcoming Communities

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

Together Project connects refugees with Canadians or established newcomers to build stronger, more integrated communities. The project began as a grassroots initiative and became a formal project of Tides Canada Initiatives in 2016. In 2020, Tides Canada changed its name to MakeWay Charitable Society. MakeWay aims to provide tools to support philanthropy by offering a unique shared platform that powers social change initiatives across the country.

Since 2017, Together Project has been running the 'Welcome Group Program' to connect volunteers with government-assisted refugees (GARs) for social support. Most of this social support took the form of regular in-person meetings and activities. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck and lockdown measures were put into place, in-person interaction was no longer possible, forcing the program to pivot to remote delivery. The need to find a way to successfully pivot the program to an online format was important at this time as newcomers were socially isolated and susceptible to misinformation about the pandemic and changing services. At the same time, the Together Project was just launching a pilot program to match refugee claimants with volunteers, which had unique priorities to address.

OVERVIEW OF THE PROGRAM

Name (Remote Version):

Remote Social Support for Government-Assisted Refugees and Refugee Claimants

Brief Description of the Program Prior to COVID-19:

The program 'Remote Social Support for GARs and Refugee Claimants' is an adaptation of the Welcome Group Program. The Welcome Group Program has been running since 2017. It matches 'Welcome Groups' of volunteers with GARs and refugee claimants for at least six months to provide social support focused on each household's unique integration priorities (e.g., language learning, service navigation, youth tutoring). Matches are based on a preference matching system. In other words, newcomers and volunteers are matched based on the interests and priorities of newcomers and the experiences, preferences, and characteristics of volunteers. Prior to the pandemic, the program delivery was primarily based on in-person support. Volunteers and newcomers met face-to-face. There was also a small 'virtual' component in that newcomers and volunteers used digital messaging platforms to stay connected between visits and used video calls for language practice.

Description of the Transition to Remote Delivery and Implementation of the Program:

While the practices of the Welcome Group Program itself have not changed much, the pandemic forced the program to pivot to online delivery due to physical distancing requirements. Following a needs assessment of newcomer program participants and volunteers, Together Project generated a plan for 'remote social support' for GARs and refugee claimants. The first iteration of the 'remote social support' program was developed by leaning into technology and communications platforms that could help ensure that the community could remain engaged in supporting its most vulnerable members, reviewing existing best practices for online interaction, and working in close collaboration with newcomers and volunteers.

Since the start of the pandemic, volunteers have been interviewed and trained online. Similarly, newcomer participants have been referred and onboarded to the program remotely (e.g., over the phone). Once matched, volunteers and newcomers are introduced virtually, and build their relationships over the course of their match across a variety of communications platforms (e.g., video and phone calls, instant messaging, etc.). Typically, newcomers and volunteers meet remotely, at least once a week, over the six-month match duration. Some of these meetings are more focused on addressing the newcomer household's unique integration priorities, whereas other meetings are more social in nature to help alleviate the social isolation that newcomers have been experiencing during the pandemic. Together Project staff also continue to support the volunteers through regular monitoring, supervision, and guidance, as well as through the provision of updated resources and information. Together Project has also developed new channels to share information about the pandemic, service updates, and new resources. It distributes this information through monthly newsletters and the official project website (togetherproject.ca).

Goal(s) of the Remote Program and Whether They Differ from the Goals Prior to COVID-19:

The primary goal of the remote program is the same as the goal before the pandemic. The program aims to connect GARs and refugee claimants with volunteers for six months of social and integration support. A secondary goal of the remote program is to provide additional support to volunteers to provide responsible and effective support to newcomers in a virtual environment. Finally, the program also aims to work collaboratively with settlement agency partners and Local Immigration Partnerships to share emergent programs and resources with volunteers to enhance pandemic support for newcomers.

Target Client Group(s):

The program is offered to GARs and refugee claimants.

Delivery Partners:

COSTI Immigrant Services (Toronto), Crossroads Refugee Clinic at Women's College Hospital, Polycultural Immigrant and Community Services (Mississauga), Peel Multicultural Council (Mississauga)

Human Resources:

The program has two co-directors and a communications and program coordinator, as well as several hundred volunteers per year.

Funding:

Together Project is an initiative of MakeWay Charitable Society. This project was funded in part by the TD Ready Commitment, Cogeco, the Ontario Trillium Foundation, the Mississauga Community Foundation, the McConnell Foundation COVID-19 Emergency Response Fund, the Toronto Foundation and the Community Foundations Canada Emergency Response Fund.

KEY FEATURES THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THIS BEING A PROMISING PRACTICE

Effective:

One of the key features that significantly contributes to the effectiveness of the remote version of the program is that matches are more likely to be based on skillsets and experience and less on location. In this way, the social support can be tailored as closely as possible to the specific priorities of every newcomer. This means that newcomers can be connected with people who speak the same language, with a similar demographic profile and who may have relevant professional or volunteer experience that makes the support more meaningful. In this way, newcomers are more likely to feel understood and heard, and to form a social connection.

Another feature that contributes to the effectiveness of the remote program is that it provides suggestions but does not enforce a particular online platform to make connections. Volunteers and newcomers can find out what works best for them. This flexibility allows for a much more organic experience that is very important to form social connections.

Finally, the use of additional channels to share information with volunteers (monthly newsletters and the official project website) also contributes to the effectiveness of the remote program. In this way, volunteers receive regular information around COVID-19 and affected services, as well as other information (e.g., language practice tools and job training programs) that they can share with their matches.

Efficient:

The remote program is time efficient because the coordination of meetings with hundreds of volunteers and newcomers is easier when these meetings are online and no travel is required. This is also the case for volunteer recruitment, training, onboarding, and matching meetings. Furthermore, the remote program increases the reach of the program. While previously matches had to take into consideration the geographical distance between volunteers and newcomers so that they could meet in-person, the remote version allows for citywide matches. As a result, Together Project was able to recruit more volunteers (e.g., volunteers who live far away or do not have transportation for in-person meetings) and get them involved more quickly. Similarly, newcomers from anywhere in the GTA could join and be matched in a much quicker timeframe, as their geographic location was no longer an impediment.

A general feature that makes the Welcome Group Program efficient is that it matches newcomers with a group of volunteers. The presence of multiple volunteers makes social support more efficient because newcomers have multiple avenues to overcome a challenge or address a priority. For example, volunteers can set up calendars to ensure someone is always available to participate in a regular language practice session. Similarly, when a newcomer poses a question to the group of volunteers on a messaging platform, the question can be answered by the first member of the group who sees it.

Relevant:

The remote program meets the needs of the newcomers. Surveys with newcomers who have participated in the remote program show that they feel more welcome in their communities, less

socially isolated, and better connected to services and resources. The remote program also helps them develop friendships and to feel that they and their families are supported.

Sustainable:

Despite the positive feedback from remote program participants, some volunteers and newcomers still prefer in-person matches, while others prefer the convenience of remote matches. There is not a one-size-fits-all form of program delivery. In the future, Together Project will explore what type of program delivery - remote, hybrid or in-person - is best suited for different newcomer demographics and why. Language fluency and comfort with technology seem to be determining factors in newcomers' preference for online versus in-person social and integration support. These explorations will help adapt future iterations of the program to ensure that each type of newcomer household receives the right kind of support, and that volunteers are provided clear expectations.

Transferable:

The remote program could be incorporated or replicated by other organizations as long as they have strong volunteer resources and connections to community organizations for client referrals. Additional factors that are important include the adoption of a user-centric approach to understand the needs of newcomers, the constant tracking of feedback from program participants, the provision of digital resources and support to volunteers, the guidance and structure provided by staff to volunteers, and good database management.

Innovative and Forward Thinking:

The practice is innovative in the sense that it is engaging a rarely tapped pool of virtual volunteers, overcoming geographic barriers that might otherwise prevent a potential volunteer living in downtown Toronto from being able to meaningfully connect with a newcomer family in the suburbs. Additionally, rather than providing a virtual volunteering opportunity that solely focuses on one integration priority, like language or employment, it can act as a form of wraparound support with the added benefit of forming a social bridge between those receiving and those providing the support, especially among difficult-to-reach populations.

Differs in Definable Ways from Other Similar Practices:

There are no other existing programs for refugees that offer the same level of personalized, remote social support. While the settlement sector has adapted its service delivery to cater to the new remote realities, the social component has been harder to shift into a virtual realm. This remote program addresses this gap.

High Client Uptake:

Together Project works with community partners to recruit program participants. Together Project shares specific criteria with these agency partners so that their outreach and client support services teams know what to look for in new clients. Clients are then referred to the program based on need and interest. Together Project has a target to work with approximately 60 households per year. Last year, it worked with almost 100 households.

The pandemic influenced the number of referrals to the program. Initially, with the halt on refugee resettlement, there was a drop in new GAR referrals. However, at the same time, Together Project was starting its refugee claimant pilot program and, as a result, had a large, new group of clients who

had already been referred. In this way, the remote version of the program was still able to reach a large number of newcomers. More recently, this pattern has flipped. As the border has been closed for some time and almost no new refugee claimants are arriving, fewer refugee claimants have been referred to the program. Instead, referrals of GARs have increased again as refugee resettlement has restarted. In terms of volunteers, the remote program has been able to train, onboard and match almost twice as many volunteers compared to the in-person version of the program.

High Client Retention:

Most newcomers participate in the full six months of the remote program, especially if there are clear opportunities for regular contact - like regular language practice sessions, or if a social connection is formed so that the match can simply socialize on a regular basis.

Strong Evidence of Successful Outcomes:

The Together Project conducted three feedback surveys in 2020, one with 9 GARs, one with 15 refugee claimants and one with 51 volunteers. GARs and refugee claimants reported that they made more social connections (89% and 96%), that the volunteers helped them to make progress towards their priorities (100% and 92%), that they were better connected to different community resources and services (100% and 88%), and that they felt more welcome in their community (78% and 77%) as a result of the program. Furthermore, all GARs felt less socially isolated, were satisfied with the program, and found that the volunteers helped them to improve their English. Volunteers reported learning about the challenges that refugee newcomers face when they arrive in Canada (80%) and found that they helped to make someone's transition to life in Canada a bit easier (73%). Also, they made friends (66%) and learned about a different culture (59%). Finally, 61% of volunteers were satisfied with their volunteer experience.

PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT AND EVALUATION STRATEGY

Given that the remote version of the program is an adaptation of the Welcome Group Program rather than a stand-alone program, it is monitored and assessed for success based on the same outcome measures.

The delivery of the program is under constant supervision by Together Project staff. Every match between newcomers and volunteers has a dedicated staff person who can regularly check-in and provide course correction for both newcomers and volunteers. This provides a live feedback loop and serves as an important lever to ensure that the program is making progress towards desired outcomes.

In addition, the program is evaluated internally with feedback surveys conducted among program participants (both newcomers and volunteers) over the course of each match. The survey items are based on the Social Provisions Scale and are administered online. If needed, newcomers have the option to complete the online survey through an interpreter. Together Project also participated in a research study with York University, focusing on how participating in the program affected newcomer social capital, as well as another study with Western University that looked at how participating in the program affected volunteers.

In 2021, Together Project plans to incorporate all volunteers and newcomers into their impact evaluation design as they continue to learn and adapt the program.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Together Project

<https://togetherproject.ca/>