

Supporting Government-Assisted Refugees: A Coordinated Service Delivery Model

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One of the main challenges in serving newcomer refugees is providing assistance that facilitates a healthy transition to successful settlement, ideally where the individual becomes a full contributing member of his or her new country. Service-providing organizations in the community provide assistance to a varied group of clients. Together, federally and provincially funded service providers assist undocumented clients, refugee claimants, Convention refugees, landed immigrants, government-assisted and privately sponsored refugees, and citizens. Working with such a variety of people requires organizations to have extensive knowledge of what services exist in the community for them, of how services can be provided in a coordinated manner, and of what services these client groups would qualify for in the community. Each one of these client groups is generally quite large, which, in turn, helps frontline staff with building up familiarity and skills in how to serve their target population. However, not many service providers have had the opportunity to work with government-assisted refugees (GARs) as their number is small (approximately 7,500 GARs arrive each year in Canada) relative to other newcomer groups arriving in Canada (an approximate total of 235, 000 last year). It is, therefore, important that community organizations also acquire familiarity with GARs, the program (Citizenship and Immigration Canada-funded Resettlement Assistance Program, RAP) under which they arrive in Canada, the role of the Government of Canada in assisting them with their resettlement and integration, and the manner in which the community organizations can best serve them.

Canada's Role in the Resettlement Process

Providing protection to refugees is part of Canada's international humanitarian commitment. Canada's Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA) allows foreign nationals to apply for refugee protection while outside Canada. GARs are persons assessed overseas to be people in need of protection and resettlement. They should not be mistaken for refugee claimants.

Canada has two resettlement programs:

- Resettlement Assistance Program
- Private Sponsorship of Refugees

How Are Government-Assisted Refugees Selected?

Previously, GARs were selected on their "ability to establish." However, with changes to IRPA in 2002, GARs are now selected for protection overseas and exempted from their "ability to establish." The current process involves the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) referring cases to Canadian visa offices overseas. Refugees complete an "Application for Permanent Residence." Once they are deemed to be in need of protection, they are assisted with travel to Canada by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Most countries have IOM offices. Where there is no IOM office, the Red Cross assists refugees with their travel arrangements. Loans are provided to cover transportation costs to Canada. GARs entering Canada are matched prior to their arrival and destined to communities where they are expected to settle more easily and where they are more likely to quickly establish links with others, i.e., with individuals of similar backgrounds.

How Many GARs Arrive in Canada Annually?

Canada resettles 7,500 GARs. Ontario receives approximately 2,300, who are destined to six communities in Ontario: Toronto, London, Ottawa, Kitchener, Hamilton, and Windsor.

Current source countries where GARS come from primarily include Afghanistan, Iraq, Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) Karen-speaking community, Colombia, Iran, Somalia, Ethiopia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Burundi.

Characteristics of GARs

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GARs' education, language ability, and work experience greatly vary – from a marked lack of education and literacy in their own language to being qualified professionals such as dentists, lawyers, nurses, and teachers. Those who come from war-torn countries often have significant medical needs, especially, in the area of mental health. Many have typically spent years in refugee camps or lived in rural, non-Western, and non-industrialized environments. Many lack familiarity with technology and systems, possess little or no experience taking care of their personal needs in a Western-industrialized setting, and come with limited or no financial resources. In contrast, there are those who either had prior education/training or managed to educate/train themselves in refugee camps and, within a year of being in Canada, have now integrated well, found jobs in the community, and are even serving GARs themselves.

Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP)

RAP is a financial assistance program. There are two components to the program: reception services and income support.

Reception Services

Reception services include welcoming refugees at the port of entry by the Immigrant Reception and Information Services, which helps clients through the immigration process at the airport, provides warm winter clothing (including jackets, gloves, mittens, boots, and caps) during the winter months (mid-October to mid-April), and also arranges for their transportation to the Reception Centre/House in the city concerned.

At the Reception Centre, GARs stay for a temporary period. They are welcomed upon arrival; provided a designated room with linen and a tour of the Centre; informed about safety exits procedures and meal times; and assigned to a counsellor. During their stay at the Centre, they are provided with three-full meals a day, mandatory orientation sessions on finance and budgeting, education, health care, housing, community mapping, and transportation. In addition, their immediate emergency health-related needs are assessed. Initial settlement services are also taken care of during their brief stay at the Centre. These involve helping GARs with acquiring their Social Insurance Number and Ontario Health Insurance Plan (OHIP) cards, opening a bank account, finding permanent accommodation, furnishing this accommodation, and ensuring that a phone line is installed. The refugees are also registered at LINC (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada) assessment centres and assisted with finding a daycare for children, if required. This constitutes the typical model of services offered in Toronto and other cities in Ontario such as Hamilton, Kitchener, Windsor, London, and Ottawa.

Before GAR clients leave the Reception Centre, an assessment is conducted to see what additional supports they would need to be able to function comfortably in their new homes. High needs clients who have limited or no literacy in their own first languages or who have little or no experience living in an urban environment are generally recommended to participate in a Life Skills program which provides essential help with basic life and functional skills. Following completion of the Life Skills program, most GARs are referred to the Client Support Services program (see below) for more in-depth, client-centred service support for an extended period of time.

The focus of the Life Skills programs is to assist refugee families adapt to life in their new community through a wide range of supports. They are assisted with information on various Canadian life skills components such as how to use appliances in a safe and appropriate manner, be able to do their own laundry, carefully use domestic and personal cleaning products, and understand the plumbing system. They are further helped with understanding what they need to know and do when they live in high-rise apartment buildings, such as garbage disposal, recycling, use of elevators, use of common areas, and other safety-related issues. Moreover, the refugees are assisted with budgeting and managing the income support that they receive from the Government of Canada. Understanding the practice of Canadian cultural norms in public places is among issues that are discussed with them. The Life Skills program has been vital in facilitating the settlement process for refugees who, often for the first time, have arrived in a country that is very different on many dimensions from what they have been used to.

Income Support

This involves providing income for the basic needs of life and immediate essential services for a period of 12 months –in the case of GARs with special needs, for 24 months. The dollar amount provided mirrors social assistance rates and is for covering the cost of rent, food, transportation as well as other basic costs such as start-up money for household goods, furniture, and clothes for newborn babies. It is important that agencies be aware that the income support provided to GARs is administered by Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC). GARs are

expected to report to CIC on any of a number of changes that take place in their life (during the time they are on income support) which may affect their income. These include a death or a birth in the family, permanently moving out of province, travelling to another country even for a short period of time, separation or divorce, and finding a job. All such developments are required to be reported to CIC. This can be done through a client report form which GARs are provided with.

It is also important to note that GARs can sponsor their immediate family to Canada during a “one year window” period if only they have included their immediate family members on their application for permanent residence form before arriving in Canada.

Health Benefits

GARs are also covered by the Interim Federal Health Program (IFH) and OHIP from day one of their arrival. It is important to review the *IFH Information Handbook* to understand the extent of coverage under the IFH.¹ In addition, when assisting GARs in the area of medical services, it is necessary to review their IFH document to check its expiry date.

Client Support Services Program

Although both RAP and Life Skills deliver preliminary information and resources that high needs GARs require, experience has indicated that the short period of time of support was inadequate in helping them overcome the long and arduous resettlement process into Canadian society. The Client Support Services Program was developed by CIC in 2005 in recognition of the fact that orientation services need to be offered within a sufficient timeframe to help prepare GARs to effectively integrate into their communities. The program aims to support the empowerment and successful settlement, rather than the isolation, of GARs. While the RAP and Life Skills programs are able to meet initial short-term needs, they are insufficient in addressing the vulnerabilities and obstacles that GARs encounter in the ensuing months of this emotionally demanding journey.

RAP service-providing organizations (SPOs) have reported challenges in serving GAR clients. First, case workers were overloaded with highly complex cases and lacked adequate time and resources to deal with them effectively. Second, RAP was not tailored to the needs of diverse clientele, including youth who require age-appropriate programs and services. Third, few resources were dedicated to identifying and serving GARs’ extensive health needs, including post-traumatic stress disorder, which further delays resettlement. Fourth, services were not always in line with the process of adaptation. Finally, there were no means of tracking client settlement outcomes.

These findings are consistent with a study conducted in 2005 by Toronto’s COSTI Reception Centre, which measured the employment, economic, and social integration levels of 120 GARs leaving the Centre over a one-and-a-half-year period. The study revealed that 58 percent were unemployed who cited health problems, trauma, and difficulties adjusting to a new country; 30 percent found employment mainly in low-paying, survival jobs; and the remaining 12 percent could not be traced. Furthermore, all respondents requested further assistance to help them deal with their complex needs.

Recognizing the need for greater support for GARs, a call for proposal was issued by CIC to deliver a pilot project of long-term support interventions of up to one year for GARs receiving the RAP income support. The YMCA of Greater Toronto spearheaded the Case Management Pilot Project (CMP) in July 2005 to provide long-term monitoring and support to 70 GARs and their families for a minimum of one year. The project helped GARs to develop and achieve short- and long-term settlement goals, developed a case management model that responded to their needs, and encouraged GARs to access services and become involved in their communities. Promising practices were also tested: e.g., diverse case management techniques (in-person visits, e-mail, telephone, and group meetings), GAR information sessions and workshops, connecting GARs to volunteer opportunities, mentoring for GAR youth, continuous evaluation of programs and services, and regular tracking of client progress and outcomes.

After the CMP’s two-year run, a decision was made by CIC in 2006 to continue delivering long-term support to GARs through the Client Support Services (CSS) Pilot Project. By incorporating elements derived from the CMP, the CSS aims to enhance RAP and facilitate better transition to settlement and community services for GARs, follow-up and track client progress by assessing needs on an ongoing basis, work with GARs in a mobile and desk-

¹ Available online at: <<http://www.fasadmin.com/>>.

free environment, test innovative project models tailored to each community's needs, and identify core program components and document good practices.

CSS Project Model and Partners

In 2007, the rollout of the Ontario CSS project was underway with the YMCA of Greater Toronto as the Project Coordinator working with the six RAP SPOs in Ontario, all of which developed their own project models based on the unique needs of their specific communities and GAR profiles served. Hamilton's Settlement and Integration Services Organization delivers the *Life Coaching and Personal Mentoring Program*, which highlights the role of the life coach in motivating and assisting GARs to learn new skills, develop and achieve personal goals, and manage life changes. The Kitchener-Waterloo Reception Centre's *Newcomers Integration Program* emphasizes the collaboration and networking of different community agencies and partners, and connects GARs to programs and services resulting from these networks. The Multicultural Council of Windsor and Essex County's *Better Access to Services in the Community Program* focuses on building a systematic, client-oriented, and accessible support structure with an emphasis on health, mental health, and emotional and employment services. Ottawa's Catholic Immigration Centre offers the *Community Integration Support Program*, which provides support tailored to clients' learning abilities, includes a highly developed health network to attend to GAR health needs, and emphasizes the reiteration of RAP information. Toronto's COSTI Immigrant Services delivers the *Client Support Services* project, which serves the largest geographic community in Ontario, and focuses on the use of customized GAR needs assessments and non-traditional resources by coordinating with existing services in the community. In April 2008, London's Cross Cultural Learner Centre joined the CSS project with the *Partners in Caring: A Community Response to Refugee Trauma* model, which stresses collaboration with community partners to create an interdisciplinary health access and advocacy program.

Although different project models are delivered by all six sites, they all espouse a client-centred model featuring an intensive and systematic coordinated approach. The models operate under a client-centred framework that stresses self-sufficiency through education, respecting a client's right to self-determination, recognizing the client's resilience and survival capacity, and promoting integration into Canadian society through autonomy, efficacy, and community relatedness.

Core Functions of Client-Centred Approach

Eight main core functions of working with high needs GARs are defined in the CSS project:

- 1) The intake interview collects the client's personal history (i.e., health issues, living conditions, and traumatic experiences), education and work skills, and family composition;
- 2) The needs assessment identifies the client's needs and abilities and explores social and community networks to assist and support the client;
- 3) The short and long-term settlement plan identifies the client's settlement goals, meets urgent and general needs, and promotes life skills;
- 4) Ongoing supportive counselling, interpretation and translation, escort to appointments, and referrals to relevant services and programs help GARs fulfill their needs and goals;
- 5) Collaboration of SPOs and other community agencies and institutions encourages the sharing of information and resources and promotes advocacy and awareness of GAR issues;
- 6) Regular client assessments ensure that all needs have been identified and services have been accessed appropriately;
- 7) Client evaluations and assessment of client outcomes measure the effectiveness of the settlement plan and activities; and
- 8) Exit interviews and follow-up conducted for up to 12 months after completing the one-year CSS program ensure that GARs achieve positive settlement outcomes.

As the CSS Coordinator, the YMCA assumes responsibility in supporting project delivery by documenting emerging trends and challenges, keeping track of community partnerships and project activities, and identifying best practices. The YMCA also engages in tracking and reporting of project information and progress through the CSS Online Case Management System – which tracks client progress, monitors follow-ups, and collects statistical data to monitor trends and outcomes – and monthly and year-end reports – which document needs and gaps, client profiles, IFH issues, and GAR health/medical needs from each site. Finally, in order to bridge relations and awareness among the six project sites, relevant resources, information, and best practices are shared through regular telephone and e-mail contact, annual group meetings, professional development workshops, and visits to project sites.

CSS Findings: Needs and Gaps

With the CSS operating well into its second year, needs and gaps that pose challenges to the project continue to be identified. The 2007-2008 CSS year-end statistical report revealed the following preliminary findings:

- Physical and emotional health comprised the top average client need at 36 percent. With an average of 23 percent requiring medical exams and 20 percent having acute conditions or mental/emotional ailments, difficulties arose in finding family physicians and affordable counsellors who provide language-specific services. Furthermore, many doctors and pharmacists do not accept the IFH, due to their unfamiliarity with the program or to the lengthy wait times for reimbursement.
- With a majority of clients speaking little to no English and an average of nearly 50 percent having no formal education, LINC and ESL classes are not geared to learners who may be illiterate in their first language. English learning may also be hampered by GAR health problems or a lack of child care support for GAR women with small children.
- Due to a lack of skilled and qualified interpreters, particularly for less common languages, language barriers may prevent GARs from receiving pertinent resettlement information and services.

Good Practices

In spite of the gaps and challenges, several promising practices have been demonstrated in facilitating successful resettlement. For instance, to integrate GAR youth into their communities, mentoring programs have been developed to provide them with age-appropriate and positive guidance, and referrals to recreational activities. As well, youth leadership programs and volunteer opportunities have allowed them to gain independence and self-assurance. To improve English learning initiatives, partnerships have been formed with LINC centres to track client progress and class attendance. The ESL for Mothers and Infants program was created to give women with young children the chance to attend classes. Programs such as conversation circles and Host allow GARs to improve their English outside a traditional classroom setting. To improve the health of GARs, advocacy, outreach, and education work has been undertaken among local doctors, dentists, and pharmacists. Networks established with health clinics and health service providers have also allowed GARs to access specific services and programs.

Although RAP/Life Skills and the CSS are separate programs with different delivery components, they share a common goal in ensuring that GARs settle successfully into their communities. With the changing composition of GARs arriving in Canada, this goal can only be accomplished through the support and collaboration of all three programs. RAP orientation cannot be introduced appropriately to GARs without the personal support and guidance provided by Life Skills, which, in turn, cannot be accomplished without long-term assistance and follow-up by the CSS. Most importantly, these three programs combined have shown that current GARs, who once lived in some of the most precarious and dangerous situations overseas, can empower themselves to live as confident and contributing members of Canadian society.