

The Future of Immigrant-Serving Agencies in Ontario: Meeting the Challenges of Hybrid Service Delivery

POLICY PREVIEW

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Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en
sciences humaines du Canada

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INTRODUCTION

In Ontario, the declaration of a global pandemic on March 11, 2020 and subsequent public health measures meant that immigrant-serving agencies (ISAs) had to switch from in-person to online services. We discuss the rapid shift to online delivery of settlement services as SARS CoV-2 took hold, outlining some of the major challenges during the first eighteen months of this transition. The analysis draws on data from a survey of 74 managers and 238 frontline workers from OCASI member agencies that was completed between November 26 and December 23, 2021 and a [presentation of the initial findings](#) on May 5, 2022 along with comments from Ms. Debbie Douglas, Executive Director, OCASI, and Ms. Tara Bedard, Executive Director, Local Immigration Partnership (LIP) Waterloo Region. Reports about the questionnaires, [one for frontline workers](#) and [one for managers](#), and initial data summaries were also consulted.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected many aspects of immigrant-serving agencies but none more than the mode of service delivery. There was a rapid switch to online delivery of services, with 100 percent reporting they had shifted some services online by September 2020. As it became clear that some clients could not be served

online, a hybrid model of delivery, with most services offered online and in-person services offered to especially vulnerable clients and those in the most urgent circumstances was widely adopted. By September 2021, 30.95% of managers said their agencies had increased their capacity to offer services in a hybrid model combining in-person and online delivery. Eighteen months of experience with online and hybrid models of service delivery revealed three notable challenges: the growing complexity of client needs, the difficulties of recruiting, training, and deploying volunteers, and the mismatch between funding practices and the financial support required to sustain the new modes of service delivery.

1. EFFECTS ON CLIENTS

Remote service delivery requires that clients have reliable and adequate access to the internet and an electronic device (laptops, tablets, or smartphones) to participate in virtual programs and appointments. ISAs were able to fund the necessary technology for workers, Some also provided electronic devices to the most vulnerable clients, e.g., refugees. In addition to technology, clients also need sufficient digital literacy to navigate a device and required programs. To meet the needs of newcomers still learning English, online

programs may also have to be provided in multiple languages. According to the Frontline Workers Survey, 78% of staff reported that their organizations had difficulty ensuring that clients had adequate and stable digital access. Clients' difficulties gaining access to online services are especially concerning because the wholesale shift to online services by immigrant-serving agencies required that workers and clients use new platforms and programs. Almost two-thirds of workers, 62%, reported that their organizations had introduced new virtual platforms and 59% reported using new programs to serve clients remotely. While they learned new programs, workers struggled to introduce them to clients. The mismatch between the online services now being offered and clients' digital barriers raises serious concerns about which migrants will be able to access settlement services in the future. How will the most vulnerable who are least likely to have either the technological tools or the digital literacy required for online services be served? Hybrid service models that 67% of workers said were in place by September 2021 are one answer to this question; however, their success depends on sustained community outreach that was disrupted by the pandemic. The survey responses underscore the difficulties of

community outreach during the pandemic with staff reporting that effective outreach had declined.

Even as the total number of clients served by agencies decreased, the number of services delivered to clients was stable or increased slightly. During the pandemic, client needs became more complex, requiring more types of services and more time from workers. The upswing in delivered services even as the number of migrants entering Canada declined points to the many inter-linked challenges facing clients during the pandemic, and it also suggests that there may be unmet needs for services after the pandemic ends. Debbie Douglas and Tara Bedard asked how ISAs will provide such enriched services to clients in the future. Both noted that funding flexibility enabled the success with which ISAs adapted to clients' needs. Specifically, funders did not require that agencies meet rigid client targets negotiated prior to the pandemic. Funds were also made available for the laptops, cellphones, and other equipment that staff needed to work from home.

2. EFFECTS ON STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS

Immigrant-serving agencies rely heavily on volunteers in their operations and service delivery. Volunteering is also an important avenue by which immigrants gain experience in Canadian workplaces, which facilitates their economic, social, and cultural integration. According to Tara Bedard, remote operations are forcing a rethinking of how agencies attract, train, and deploy volunteers. Agencies lost volunteers during the pandemic, with 39% of managers reporting the loss of most volunteers. Agencies faced difficulties in publicizing volunteer opportunities when they transitioned to remote operations, at the same time that the pool of potential volunteers shrank as fewer immigrants were admitted to Canada during the initial months of the pandemic (IRCC 2021). Potential volunteers also had less time to devote to volunteering, given the psychological, social, and economic demands of the pandemic.

In addition to recruitment and training difficulties, deploying volunteers virtually has been challenging. With in-person service delivery, volunteers and staff speaking different languages were often available on short notice to attend meetings

with clients who were more at ease speaking in their own languages. Finding someone with the required language competency who can assist spontaneously with interpretation and translation in online meetings is a challenge. In the first eighteen months of the pandemic, the logistics of providing interpretation and translation were more demanding in an online environment, there were fewer volunteers with the needed language skills, and coordinating interpretation and translation required more administrative work. Managers are already concerned about staff, with 85.1% of respondents identifying the mental health and wellbeing of staff as an organizational priority in the year preceding the survey. In this context, managers are unlikely to ask frontline staff to take on the additional work required to train and coordinate volunteers in a digital setting, raising questions about the future of volunteer contributions to immigrant-serving agencies and the availability of valuable volunteer experience for immigrants themselves.

Volunteers could also experience digital barriers that limit their involvement with ISAs. For volunteers who are not yet fully comfortable with written English,

volunteering with online services can be more challenging than volunteering in person. In a digital setting, volunteer activities often require digital literacy and fluency in written English, whereas with in-person services, volunteers may use oral language skills to engage in translation and other activities. Despite its challenges, a digital setting may enhance the benefits of volunteer activities. In a study of blended learning, Cummings, Sturm and Avram (March 2020) showed that the use of digital tools improved newcomers' English language skills and increased students' familiarity with digital resources, facilitating their job searches and access to a wide range of services.

3. IMPACT ON AGENCY FUNDING

A third issue that arose from the transition to hybrid services relates to funding. The declines in revenue noted in the first six months of the pandemic largely ended between September 2020 and September 2021 with only 11.5% of managers reporting the loss of continuing funding during this period. Nevertheless, managers were concerned about funding the new models of service delivery that emerged during the pandemic.

Revenue sources shifted during the pandemic resulting in more reliance on government funding. Between September 2020 and September 2021, 48% of agency managers reported a loss of revenue from user fees and fundraising. These are often some of the most flexible revenue sources allowing agencies to provide services and activities that are not eligible for government funding. The loss of these revenue sources may have contributed to renewed and new collaborations with 61.5% of managers indicating that they had developed new partnerships to continue delivering programs and services between September 2020 and September 2021.

At the same time, key funders such as Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) enabled agencies to move services online and adopt COVID-19 health measures. As mentioned earlier, funding was largely maintained and equally important, client targets were relaxed allowing agencies to offer more services to a smaller number of clients.

The shift to online services also altered the geography of service delivery with important implications for funding. Service catchment areas that usually cover nearby

neighborhoods and municipalities have expanded outwards. Approximately two-thirds of managers said their agencies were now serving more clients outside their local geographical area. Since much government funding is based on the residential locations of immigrants, the expansion of individual agency's service areas raises important issues about funding allocation and potential competition for clients.

Going forward, it is important to consider how funding programs and requirements can be modified to allow agencies to continue to be flexible and adaptable, providing services where they are most needed, to the clients who need them the most. In addition to ensuring funds can be deployed and repurposed easily and quickly to meet the evolving needs, monitoring and accountability metrics will also need to evolve. For example, Tara Bedard suggested the possibility of new billing codes specific to online service delivery. Now that agencies are providing more services outside their local catchment areas, is there a mechanism for agencies to coordinate their services to ensure that there is minimal overlap or duplication of efforts and reduce the potential for competition?

CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATIONS

The discussion ended with questions about how the hard-won lessons from the pandemic can be institutionalized to enhance the operations of immigrant-serving agencies and improve immigrant integration going forward. Among their recommendations, two stand out.

Debbie Douglas called for maintaining flexible and stable funding from municipal, provincial, and federal governments, along with the reduction in bureaucratic rules and reporting requirements. This happened during the pandemic and it enabled organizations to meet client needs effectively. Noting that funders acknowledged the expertise of immigrant-serving agencies and enabled organizational change during the pandemic, she recommended that there be no return to a pre-pandemic 'normal.' Rather, immigrant-serving agencies and their funders should assess pandemic practices and aim to retain and enhance those that are beneficial to the agencies and ultimately enhance immigrant integration. The concern remains, however, that government funders will revert to past practices that intensify their control over immigrant-serving agencies, as a first step to imposing

austerity measures designed to address pandemic driven deficits.

From the perspective of Local Immigration Partnerships (LIPs), Tara Bedard recommended maintaining the collaborative decision-making processes that developed during the pandemic. The survey findings underscore the success with which the sector pivoted to online services, maintained in-person services for the most vulnerable, and engaged in heightened collaboration. They demonstrate the value of maintaining and strengthening collaborations among all levels of government and sectors. She emphasized that the pandemic has shown that the effectiveness of immigrant-serving agencies is enhanced by working closely with partners from many different sectors such as housing providers, employers, school boards, and faith organization. Funding practices that enable and promote the collaborations that emerged during the pandemic will ensure the improved efficacy and success of immigrant-serving agencies in the future. While collaboration has always been part of immigrant-serving agencies' operations, competitive funding models have limited agencies' efforts to extend and deepen collaborative

relationships. The necessity to unite to address the pandemic combined with the moves away from competitive funding , fostered new robust collaborations.

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