



Fostering Inclusion for Newcomers to Ottawa

A CHRA Congress Session Case Study



BC Housing

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INTRODUCTION

This paper, focused on fostering the inclusion of immigrants in Ottawa's housing communities, picks up on themes raised in the 2007 Canadian Housing and Renewal Association (CHRA) paper titled *The Housing Needs of Immigrants and Refugees in Canada*¹. That paper presented 31 recommendations, including the 7 summarized here:

- The immigration category (skilled immigrant, family class, refugee) by which a newcomer enters Canada impacts settlement success, and supports and services should address this reality;
- Strong connections and partnerships between settlement services and housing providers, with emphasis on private landlords, produce better outcomes for newcomers;
- Housing help services need to be effectively promoted;
- The biggest housing-related barrier facing newcomer populations is high cost, made worse by a shortage of subsidized housing options;
- Services needed by immigrants are more effective settlement tools when located near immigrant-intensive housing communities, and when they are available in the newcomers' native languages;
- Expansion of rent-supplement programs can be effective where there are sufficient vacancies in the private rental market to accommodate them;
- Federal and provincial housing funding should encourage landlords to modify some existing homes to accommodate larger newcomer families.

That these recommendations remain relevant is not surprising since more immigrants are arriving now than then, and Canada's landlords are no better equipped to house them. Annual Canadian immigration has increased from 236,753 in 2007 to 257,515 in 2012, with a peak in 2010 of 280,690². Core housing need has also increased from a low of 12.3% in 2007 to 13.5% in 2009³⁴. Together these trends suggest that housing challenges experienced by newcomers to Canada today are comparable to, and possibly more intense than, those experienced by newcomers in 2007.

At the Canadian Housing and Renewal Association's (CHRA) 2013 Annual Congress held in Ottawa, four local leaders spoke to the theme *Fostering Inclusion and Creating Housing Options for Newcomers in Ottawa*. This paper focuses on the work they do to support the economic, social and civic success of newcomers, and the critical role that affordable housing plays in this work. While these brief case studies are Ottawa-focused, the issues raised are pan-Canadian in scope and the lessons apply to cities and towns from coast to coast to coast.

1 Available for download from the CHRA website.

2 Citizenship and Immigration Canada

3 Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, *Canadian Housing Observer*, 2012

4 2009 core housing need statistics are the most recent available.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING DEVELOPMENT FOR NEWCOMERS

Helping newcomers to Canada settling in Ottawa to negotiate the local housing landscape has been a core function of immigrant-serving agencies since their creation, and remains their main housing focus today. Specific services include assistance with:

- local housing market orientation;
- finding and using rental listings;
- landlord relations and resolving landlord-tenant disputes;
- understanding what to look for in a home;
- navigating required paperwork;
- understanding and addressing legal and financial issues;
- establishing credit histories and other financial documents, required by many landlords;
- obtaining reference letters; and
- securing rental agreement co-signers (when necessary).

Clearly Ottawa's immigrant-serving organizations are newcomer advisors, educators and advocates, but some also make direct impacts on Ottawa's housing and shelter landscape. This has been driven by recognition that immigrants have particular housing needs that are not adequately addressed by the mainstream private and non-profit housing markets.

Affordable housing waiting lists are not shrinking and rental housing supply is still not meeting demand. Housing units that are added are rarely designed with enough bedrooms or living space to properly accommodate the larger and extended families common to many immigrant households. By playing a direct role in housing or shelter provision, an immigrant-serving organization is able to tailor development, management and service delivery to meet its clients' specific needs.

The Ottawa Community Immigrant Services Organization Non-Profit Housing Corporation

The Ottawa Community Immigrant Services Organization (OCISO) was created in 1978 to help immigrant newcomers to Ottawa find housing, access services, secure employment and engage in the city's civic and social life. In addition to housing services, OCISO offers immigration counseling, support for Inter Amicos⁵ refugee sponsorship groups, multi-cultural liaison services assisting immigrant children and families to succeed in the school system, English as a second language instruction, and community economic development services that include business development, youth mentorship, and career mentorship within both the private and public sectors. OCISO also champions public education in the areas of anti-racism, anti-oppression and equity, both in schools and in the wider community.

In 1991 OCISO created an independent organization called OCISO Non-Profit Housing Corporation (OCISO NHC). While it is a separate entity, it was created by OCISO with a mandate to improve the housing options available to newcomers by developing housing ideally suited to their needs, and there is a requirement that one board position be permanently filled by a member of OCISO's management team.

⁵ The Inter Amicos program advises and assists groups of 5 or more adults to sponsor a refugee. The sponsor group must accept responsibility for all living costs.

OCISO NHC opened 55 Hilda St., a 62-unit project which was unusual in Ottawa for containing seven 5-bedroom units, in 1994. This remained OCISO NHC's lone project for 17 years until 349-A Presland Rd. was purchased, renovated and opened in 2011. Eleven of the building's 64 units contain 4 bedrooms. Now just two years later OCISO NHC has begun construction of 140 Den Haag, a 73-unit development that will add 10 more 4-bedroom townhomes and 7 3-bedroom units to further serve the needs of Ottawa's low-income immigrant families⁶.

Members of the OCISO and OCISO NHC management and development teams⁷ shared some thoughts about their work:

An Important but Modest Tool - While developing housing tailored to newcomers' needs is important, the scale to date has not begun to address demand. Helping newcomers access private rental housing remains the predominant focus.

Governance Matters - When OCISO saw the opportunity in 1991 to add affordable immigrant-tailored housing to Ottawa's portfolio it realized that being a developer and landlord lay outside its scope and capacity. It made the decision to create a separate organization whose focus would be solely on the developer/landlord role, maintaining just one formal governance link between it and OCISO NHC (the dedicated board seat). While this solution may not fit every situation, it does point to the importance of considering which governance approach best fits an immigrant-serving organization's capacities and goals before it undertakes development.

More Family Housing Needed - A very large portion of Ottawa's social and affordable housing community is comprised of immigrants. As stated above, many immigrant families are larger than the Canadian average, yet few affordable housing units contain three or more bedrooms. When relying on market housing, immigrants often settle for inadequate or unaffordable units for lack of viable alternatives. Given the growing importance of immigration to Canadian economic policy, this disparity requires the attention of affordable housing policy-makers, funders and developers.

ACCELERATING NEWCOMER INCLUSION AND SUCCESS

Panelists spoke about the importance of accelerating the pace of newcomer success and inclusion in Ottawa's social, economic and civic life. The interventions and supports required to promote accelerated newcomer inclusion are numerous and vary case-by-case, but all agree that access to employment appropriate to the newcomer's skills and training, and access to safe, affordable housing and related supports, underpin success. Below the work of an organization that helps the most vulnerable newcomers meet their immediate shelter, needs while intensively focusing on helping them regain independence and build successful lives in Canada, is highlighted.

⁶ OCISO NHC's subsidized units are rented through the city's central waiting list, and are not reserved specifically for newcomers.

⁷ OCISO contributors were Leslie Emory, acting executive director, and Wali Farah, LINC Program manager. 140 Den Haag development consultant Peter Trotscha of Sound Advice Consulting Cooperative contributed on behalf of OCISO NHC.

Catholic Centre for Immigrants

The Catholic Centre for Immigrants⁸ (CCI) is an Ottawa-based non-profit that opened its doors in 1960, and like OCISO it helps newcomers to Canada settling in Ottawa begin their new lives. CCI offers a wide range of housing supports, including all of those attributed to immigrant-serving agencies above. CCI also operates Maison Sophia House⁹, which since opening in 1988 has provided Ottawa's only immigrant-specific emergency residential service. Up to 96 residents may occupy Maison Sophia House at any given time, and though there is no fixed time limit on a person's residency, urgency is a defining characteristic of CCI's work. As a result, most residents are moved into long-term housing within 3-4 weeks.

Residents are typically newly-arrived sponsored refugees, and immigrants not new to Canada but who are experiencing family, financial or other issues that have triggered a housing crisis. While staying at Maison Sophia House they benefit from wrap-around services including nutritious meals, orientation workshops on life in Canada, housing search support, services orientation and referrals, and basic English language instruction. Maison Sophia House and the Ralph Chiodo Family Immigrant Reception Centre, operated by COSTI Immigrant Services in Toronto, are the only Canadian immigrant-serving shelter facilities that take privately-sponsored, group-sponsored and city-referred clients, in addition to the federal government-sponsored refugees that other comparable facilities accept.

Maison Sophia House is also distinguished by its provision of child-centred programming (35-40% of residents are children) and the operation of a wellness centre that conducts unusually in-depth health assessments of all residents. The assessments include numerous tests, a comprehensive medical history, dietary analysis, screening for diseases and conditions common to the resident's place of origin, assessment of the resident's understanding of, attitudes toward, and use of the healthcare system, and a mental health assessment. A report is produced and is made available online to the resident's doctor(s).

Carl Nicholson, CCI's executive director, shared some thoughts and lessons learned in 25 years of operating Mason Sophia House:

Housing Crises Require More Than Housing Solutions - Housing is often the "presenting issue" that brings immigrants to seek the services of settlement agencies, but it is usually a symptom of a set of issues that includes low or lost income, family conflict, or medical crises. Housing, or re-housing, is part of the solution, but long-term success depends on addressing the other issues as well.

Intensive Supports Pay Long-term Dividends - While no one chooses to live in a shelter or emergency housing, the intensive support system wrapped around tenants does give residents a long-term advantage they would not have had without staying at Maison Sophia House. In addition to resident-only services like the in-depth medical assessment, the close relationships

⁸ Formerly the Catholic Immigration Centre (CIC)

⁹ Previously known as Maison Thérèse Dallaire

developed with councilors, which includes one year of regular follow-up for high-need clients, can continue to be an important part of the network that supports a newcomer's successful Canadian journey.

More Family Shelter Services Needed - Most shelter facilities currently target single men, or women fleeing violence, but this does not address the full spectrum of need. Family shelter, the most common form required by immigrants, is one important gap.

Start Small - The need for shelter and transitional housing services addressing immigrants' needs far outstrips supply, but potential service providers should ensure that local demand exists before moving forward. Careful research is needed, including projection of future demand, before investing in developing infrastructure and services. Should the business case for moving forward be sound, it is wise to start small and scale up over time. In most cases the best starting point is to build a local constituency of supporters and partners that includes shelter providers, non-profit housing providers and private landlords, not to develop a facility like Maison Sophia House.

Is Service Integration the Future? - With over 20% of the Canadian population now comprised of immigrants, and higher concentrations in many urban centres, it may be time to place a greater emphasis on better addressing newcomer needs within mainstream service frameworks (including shelters and housing communities) rather than expanding immigrant-specific services. This is an important policy discussion in the context of Canada's shifting demographic, economic and labour trends.

THE PARTNERSHIP IMPERATIVE

One of the strongest threads running through the panelists' messages is the importance of strategic partnerships. Fostering newcomer inclusion is a multi-faceted undertaking requiring the involvement of numerous people and service providers, and outcomes are best when the services are provided in or near newcomer-intensive housing communities. The panelists discussed several examples of effective multi-agency partnership.

Ottawa Community Housing

Ottawa Community Housing (OCH) is Ottawa's largest social housing provider, with a portfolio of 14,783 units providing homes for 32,000 people in 160 distinct housing communities¹⁰. OCH offers no services specifically for immigrants, but since a very large portion of its tenants are immigrants, supporting newcomer success is a significant focus of its work. OCH supports the development of tenant associations and groups, tenant social committees and other tenant-led initiatives that contribute to tenant and community success. OCH has found that tenants who feel a sense of ownership of, and engage in, their communities are much more likely to respect property and housing assets, obey rules and regulations, and be generally better neighbours than would otherwise be the case. OCH also actively supports a range of community service agencies working in its communities.

¹⁰ The figures for the number of people housed, and the number of distinct housing communities are approximate.

Like many social housing providers, OCH is required to house individuals and families who come with complex needs and challenges, which can manifest themselves in a variety of ways. Many tenants, including newcomers, enter OCH communities from shelters, transitional housing and support-attached accommodation. To improve the likelihood of those tenants successfully settling into their new homes and positively contributing to their new communities, OCH has developed partnerships with a number of the organizations who previously housed and/or supported the tenants. These partner organizations include all of the city's immigrant settlement organizations, the City of Ottawa's Housing Branch, Ottawa Salus Corporation¹¹, Options Bytown¹², the Canadian Mental Health Association, the John Howard Society, Harmony House¹³, the Community Care Access Centre¹⁴, Montfort Renaissance¹⁵ and Veterans Affairs Canada.

These partnerships range in form from very loose to contractual, and from OCH facilitating the partner's access but not becoming directly involved in interventions, to multi-partner interventions in which OCH is directly involved. In some cases OCH provides on-site programming and/or office space (eg. OCH provides Options Bytown with 10 resource centre spaces), and in cases where buildings house concentrations of high-need tenants, OCH may coordinate the services of multiple partners to program activities and supports that address a wide array of tenant and community needs.

Brian Gilligan, OCH's executive director of community development, shared some thoughts on the keys to partnership success in OCH communities:

Clear Mutual Benefit - With or without the tenant supports that OCH partners provide, OCH would house high-need tenants. The tenant support work OCH partners take on increases the likelihood of successful tenancies and healthy communities, making OCH's investment in maintaining or contributing to the partnerships worthwhile. Conversely, OCH provides housing for, and access to, the partners' clients, which is critical to the partners fulfilling their mandates.

Commitment to Community - The partnerships that OCH nurtures are based on a shared commitment to building safe, healthy communities. Healthy communities provide people with opportunities to have positive social interaction, participate in activities, feel at home and avoid feelings of isolation. Coming together as service providers to build healthier communities for all residents, not just the service providers' direct clients, is a more efficient use of resources and produces better client outcomes.

Teamwork - Often issues arise requiring rapid intervention, so it is critical that the partners have the familiarity, mutual respect and ability to quickly collaborate and act. The more OCH and the partner act as a team, the better the client outcomes.

11 Housing and supporting people with mental illness.

12 Housing people with a range of housing challenges, including mental illness, HIV/AIDS, substance abuse issues or a history of homelessness.

13 A second stage shelter for women fleeing violence.

14 Supporting seniors to help them age in place by reducing their emergency room use.

15 Francophone organization supporting people with mental illness, dementia and addiction issues.

Flexibility - Partnerships are as different as the organizations that enter into them and the clients they serve. OCH assesses the value every partner brings to its communities, their needs and their requirements, and develops unique arrangements for each one. Imposing a narrow set of requirements or expectations on every partner relationship would limit the range of services and supports it could facilitate for its tenants, and would compromise its effectiveness.

Ottawa Community Immigrant Services Organization

Ottawa Community Immigrant Services Organization (OCISO) enjoys an effective and long-standing partnership with Housing Help, a non-profit that assists Ottawa's homeless and those at risk of homelessness to access and maintain affordable housing. The partnership sees Housing Help outreach workers placed at two of OCISO's four office locations twice a week. When a newcomer makes contact with OCISO, having Housing Help workers onsite triggers a quicker and easier service response for the client, increasing the likelihood that appropriate housing will be quickly secured.

Elwira Felczak, OCISO's settlement and integration manager, identifies two keys to the partnership's success:

Win-Win - Before the Housing Help partnership, OCISO helped newcomers access suitable and affordable housing, but given that it was just one of their service areas they worked with a limited toolkit. Housing Help staff focus exclusively on solving housing issues, and therefore can more effectively assist clients, giving OCISO case workers more time and resources to help newcomers in other ways. Conversely, OCISO enhances Housing Help's success by extending its service reach.

Clarity - From an organizational perspective, a key to the partnership's success is that the partners' roles are crystal clear with minimal overlap. While there are interactions between clients' experiences of employment, housing and domestic issues, the service response to the housing access issues that Housing Help addresses is quite distinct. This minimizes the confusion and conflict that less clearly delineated partnerships can produce.

City for All Women Initiative and the 2011 Municipal Election

City for All Women Initiative (CAWI) was established in 2004 to research and implement best practices for ensuring that the voices and concerns of women from diverse backgrounds are heard and reflected in Ottawa's municipal decision-making. Since then its members, many of whom are newcomers, have become a strong voice for issues affecting women in the city. In the lead-up to the 2011 municipal election, CAWI engaged its network to identify burning issues that require elected members' attention. Four priority issues were identified and then presented to the wider Coalition to Move Ottawa Forward (CMOF) in a successful effort to have them adopted as shared priorities. The priorities were safe and affordable housing, childcare, recreation and transit.

The work of Ottawa's Coalition to End Homelessness, supported by CAWI and other CMOF members, resulted in the affordable housing priority gaining the strongest traction among election candidates. The campaign ultimately resulted in the addition of \$14 million to the City of Ottawa's annual affordable housing budget.

Suzanne Doerge, CAWI's director, speaks about the role that its diverse network of women played in the campaign's success:

Finding Voices - CAWI's work focuses on training and supporting women, including numerous immigrant women, whose voices are too seldom included in community and municipal decision-making, to be heard. CAWI's participation in the election started in one of its Civic Participation Training courses, in which participants were tasked with engaging their communities in discussions about priority issues that might be addressed by the City of Ottawa.

Joining Voices - Bringing its four key issues to the Coalition to Move Ottawa Forward, and having them adopted, raised the volume on CAWI's advocacy and sent a strong message to candidates that Ottawa's voices for social justice and development were diverse, unified and organized.

One Campaign, Many Fronts - The coalition members were active in their respective communities of influence and engagement, which, due to their diversity, meant that the campaign's messages were repeated everywhere the candidates turned. This is especially true for the housing message. CAWI members provided election information and materials to their communities in six commonly-spoken languages. They also attended and spoke at candidate events, and sent candidates videos featuring women speaking about the lived experiences of how the four issues impact them.

CONCLUSION: AN ILLUSTRATION OF THE POWER OF INCLUSION

The provision of safe, affordable housing is a key support facilitating immigrants' realization of their full potential, and their engagement in community life. OCH, OCISO, OCISO NPH, CCI and CAWI each play different and important roles in ensuring that newcomers' housing experiences contribute positively to building successful lives in Canada.

Every newcomer's journey and outcomes are different, but few examples better illustrate the unbound potential for immigrant inclusion and success than that of Fartuun Adan. CAWI's Suzanne Doerge told Ms. Adan's story during the *Fostering Inclusion and Creating Housing Options for Newcomers* in Ottawa session.

Following her husband's murder in 1996 Fartuun Adan fled Somalia for Ottawa, driven by concern for her children's wellbeing. In Ottawa she raised her three daughters on a low service industry income, despite having Somali nurse's aid training. Subsidized housing helped her make ends meet.

Despite her struggles and intense shyness, Ms. Adan became active in a Somali women's organization, and then took the CAWI civic participation training. She began to speak more frequently about her husband's high-profile role as a Somali political activist, got more involved in her housing community, and eventually found the courage and determination to return to Somalia to found the Sister Somalia program. Sister Somalia helps victims of sexual and domestic violence.

In 2011 Ms. Adan founded the first sexual violence hotline and rape crisis centre in Somalia, and is currently the executive director of the Elman Peace and Human Rights Centre dedicated to reintegrating former child soldiers back into society. In 2013 she was awarded an International Women of Courage Award by the United States Department of State, which was presented by Secretary of State John Kerry and First Lady Michelle Obama. Days afterward she was honoured by Ottawa's Mayor Jim Watson and members of council for her work in Somalia.



The **Canadian Housing and Renewal Association (CHRA)** is the national voice for the full range of affordable housing and homelessness issues and solutions across Canada. We have over 275 members who collectively house and shelter hundreds of thousands of Canadians, and provide housing support to many more. CHRA provides a home for the housing sector and for all who believe that every Canadian should have a decent, adequate and affordable place to call home.

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