



Emergency Planning Report for Possible Increase in Refugee Claimants in BC post COVID-19

Prepared on behalf of
MAP BC and MAP FV membership
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Section 1.0

Executive Summary

Executive Summary

Refugee claimants, post-COVID-19 pandemic and possible increase

The world has been turned upside down since the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Its impact was felt in Canada in March 2020 and has continued for over a year and a half. The turmoil that we've seen applies to refugee claimants, refugees and anyone dealing with forced migration. Issues around testing, access to vaccines and variants continue to challenge everyone. That's why constructing an emergency response plan is difficult – there is a great deal of uncertainty about the number of refugee claimants who may come to BC, when and how they will arrive, and of government plans – both Federal and Provincial. It is very difficult to predict what might happen and when.

This report outlines some of the issues faced by the refugee claimant serving sector and what challenges and gaps in resources it faces. It outlines some of the big issues around coordination and communication, as well as housing, food provision and translation – and some longer-term impacts such as employment, transportation and ESL provision.

Key areas covered in this report

This report covers many key areas, outlining challenges, as well as recommendations for both refugee claimant serving agencies and for Governments and Government agencies. In summary the report shows:

Coordination

Coordination is vital to an effective response and to ensure resources are adequately distributed and duplication is limited. MAP does not have capacity to resource this level of coordination and therefore would look to the Government to fund a coordination role – either directly or through an experienced agency. *Recommendations to agencies included nominating an emergency coordinator within each agency and mapping available resources. Recommendations to Government included funding an emergency coordinator position, working with MAP closely to understand issues and resources and looking at how BC CHARMS could support and emergency response.*

Communication

The importance of a good and robust communication system in an emergency response should not be understated. Couple with the challenge around coordination, good communication can create a truly effective response. There are also issues to consider around communication to communities and the general public as well as to the media. *Recommendations to agencies included nominating a specific communications person, consider media training and preparation to work with MAP. Recommendations to Government included designating a key media relations person, funding agencies across the province to assist with communications and utilizing existing emergency response systems.*

Housing

Housing will prove very challenging if there is a large increase in refugee claimants coming to Canada. Already scarce resources will be further stretched unless there is significant community support and support from the Government. *Recommendations for agencies included working with local community, faith and diaspora groups to identify emergency housing and work in training groups to prepare for an increase. Agencies are also encouraged to sign up to BC CHARMS when it is launched as well as creating a grassroots network of housing workers. Recommendation to Government included continued funding of housing initiatives, the creation of an emergency fund, seeing refugee claimants as a distinct user group with specific needs and the implementation of a refugee claimant reception centre.*

Settlement and Orientation

Settlement and orientation services are key to helping refugee claimants begin to navigate and build their new lives in Canada. Thanks to the excellent work of many agencies across the province of BC, there is a strong and diverse range of settlement and orientation support to refugee claimants. However, this could easily be overwhelmed by a large increase in numbers. *Recommendations to agencies included training “general” settlement volunteers and considering how providing service to groups could streamline service provision. Recommendations to Government included considering emergency funding to recruit additional settlement workers, as well as negotiating Stream A and B funding beyond its current life space to enable agencies plan and adapt to the post-COVID landscape.*

Donations

We are very thankful that British Columbia is an incredibly generous community and supports many of the non-profits that provide housing, support, services and more to refugee claimants. Each agency has its own way of both generating support and finding the donations they need. It’s often done in very personal ways and through personal connections. *Recommendations to agencies included planning what might be needed with a large increase in the number of asylum seekers needing support, making lists and considering researching options for storage and stock piling, as well as how agencies will coordinate across the province. There were no specific recommendations for Government agencies, other than the general encouragement that Government would support agencies during the response in a collaborative way.*

Legal Support

Currently, the legal landscape is limited to those with expertise and the necessary credentials and experience. There are very few in house legal resources at agencies and therefore the majority of legal support is given to refugee claimants via referrals. Given that legal resources are already limited, and cases are triaged for Legal Aid lawyers, a further strain would be put on the system and refugee claimants could end up without representation – or have limited quality representation because refugee lawyers would be “spread too thin”. *There were no recommendations for agencies as this is a specialist area limited to legal experts, but a resource gap identified was the lack of a complete list of Legal Aid lawyers that could be utilized by agencies and refugee claimants. Recommendations for Government included the request for stable, sustainable and long-term funding for Legal Aid to avoid the stoppage of service we’ve seen in the past, and the consideration of funding other legal support services for refugee claimants – such as legal clinics and legal advocacy groups.*

Food

The challenge around food and nutrition would be with volume, storage and distribution of food. If there is a large number of people in a short amount of time, this would challenge the system to make sure emergency food was distributed quickly. Many agencies stated that they had connections to the food industry, or provided some sort of food support to refugee claimants on arrival in BC. It was one of the areas of the survey that provoked a widespread response – both in terms of need and provision. *Recommendations for agencies included educating their local food banks and distributors about the very specific needs and barriers for refugee claimants, as well as coordinating with food banks etc., to remove systemic barriers around eligibility and the provision of identity documents.*

Translation / Interpretation

Official translation and interpretation services may become stretched depending on the numbers arriving and when they arrive. As with many other support services, a sudden increase in numbers will find settlement workers and agencies stretched, and difficulties with translation and interpretation could slow the provision of service down and the ability of refugee claimants to get their documents translated in a timely manner. *Recommendations to agencies included the documentation of the language abilities of their staff, and utilizing local community, faith and diaspora groups for volunteer recruitment. Recommendations for Government included additional financial*

resource to cover some translation costs which can be expensive for non-profits that have limited incomes and Government information should be provided in a greater number of languages – especially around important health and safety messages

Education

There could be multiple challenges with a sudden increase in the number of refugee claimants – schools systems can be very cumbersome to navigate and this could be amplified if a lot of the families don't speak English or have additional educational needs. Many schools are at capacity and so there's the issue of transit to schools outside of catchment areas. *There were no specific recommendations to agencies, but like many areas they should begin to recruit volunteers and education mentors from the local community, faith and diaspora groups. Recommendations to Government included the consideration of recruiting more SWIS workers/support workers in school districts with specialist knowledge of refugee claimants and their specific needs.*

General Health

Given the limited services available, the challenges of the COVID19 pandemic, and the slow processing of refugee claimants, which limits access to IFHP services, a sudden increase in the number of people seeking refugee protection in BC would have the potential to overwhelm services, substantially increase wait times and severely challenge health care providers in an already stretched system. *Again, there were no specific recommendations for agencies in this specialist area, but recommendations to Government and health authorities included the creation and implementation of an awareness campaign, webinars and encouragement for service providers to register with IFHP, along with expanding the number and availability of community health centres.*

Mental Health

Given the demands on already restricted services and support, there is likely to be an increase in waiting times for available counsellors and mental health support. Given that many refugee claimants are dealing with some level of loss, trauma or mental health challenge, a substantial increase could have a severe impact on people who are already vulnerable. This was an area where the survey highlighted several gaps. Things that were mentioned included the lack of mental health supports that are LGBTQI competent, culturally appropriate and trauma informed as well as the lack of accessible free services – all of which can have a long term impact. Long wait lists and limited IFHP coverage were also mentioned by several agencies. *There were no specific recommendations for agencies, due to the specialist nature of this area, but recommendations to Government included extending IFHP coverage to a wider range of sessions and also for extended periods, as well as making mental health supports free of charge without expiry date for refugee claimants*

Technology

Challenges in the realm of technology, cellphones etc., would be in areas such as refugee claimants' lack of access, lack of digital literacy as well as the cost and barriers to both hardware and internet access. About 50% of the agencies who responded to the survey provide some sort of technological support to refugee claimants including offering refurbished or loaner laptops and cellphones. Additionally, some agencies give digital literacy help/advice/workshops to refugee claimants to help them navigate the challenges of technology. *Recommendations to agencies included improving their websites to make the mobile friendly, connecting with stores to gain access to refurbished products, advocacy to get telecom providers to create more low-cost services, engaging with the private sector to give free SIM cards to newly arrived refugee claimants and recruiting volunteers to help with training. Recommendations for Government included the provision of funding to create videos that demonstrate the technology with subtitles for people to access and the creation of a central database of services offered to refugee claimants and provide ongoing support for maintenance and updates.*

Section 2.0

Background

Background

COVID-19 pandemic

On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak a public health emergency of international concern. On March 11, 2020, the WHO officially declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic. Less than a week later on March 16, 2020, Canada announced it was closing its borders to non-Canadians, apart from Americans and a few other exceptions.

The spread of coronavirus has been rapid and unprecedented. By August 5, 2021, there have been nearly 21 million people infected and over 4.2 million deaths from coronavirus globally. While vaccines have somewhat ameliorated the situation in wealth countries, poorer countries have suffered due to lack of health care and lack of access to vaccines.

Global statistics and refugee migration

At the March 2021 MAP meeting, the UNHCR Canada made a presentation outlining the impact of the pandemic on refugees and people seeking refugee protection around the world.

This is an extract of some of the information they presented:

- 33% fewer asylum claims worldwide than the same period in 2019
- 15% fewer internal displacements
- 400,000 people were recognized as refugees

Borders and restrictions

- 31 countries have no COVID-related restrictions
- 81 countries where restrictions on access to territory apply with exceptions for asylum-seekers
- 57 countries where access to territory is denied
- 26 countries where access to territory data is pending

The UNHCR also described COVID-19's influence as a threat multiplier that can be seen across the world:

- Forcing already struggling refugees and displaced communities into deeper poverty, including in the Middle East and North Africa, where 1.1 million Syrian refugees and internally displaced Iraqis were pushed into poverty due to COVID-19.
- Reducing incomes and job opportunities for those in the informal economy, where incomes are projected to drop by 82% in countries where most forcibly displaced populations are located.
- Putting refugee and displaced women and girls at risk of increased violence.
- Reducing access to education for 90% of refugee children, with older girls particularly at risk of dropping out of school permanently.
- Driving refugees to take dangerous sea crossings, such as those from Lebanon, Libya, Venezuela, and Bangladesh, and putting them in the dangerous hands of smugglers and traffickers.

- Forcing tens of thousands of refugees and IDPs to return home prematurely to places like Syria and Venezuela, in many cases back to conflict and danger.
- Preventing those fleeing conflict and persecution from accessing safe haven due to border closures in 144 countries, over 60 of which have made no exemptions for those seeking asylum.

Vaccine access

The UNHCR is encouraged by the fact that 153 States have adopted vaccination strategies that include refugees. Yet, in many parts of the world, actual immunization remains a challenge, largely due to the unequal availability of vaccines and the capacity of health systems.

The World Health Organization has stated that 1 in 4 people have received vaccine in wealthy countries, but only 1 in 500 in the rest of the world. (April 2020).

Some 85% of the world's refugees are hosted in low- and middle-income countries, which face financial challenges and fragile health systems. These nations, which continue to generously host the bulk of refugees, need more support to address the urgent health needs both of their nationals and refugees, including with COVID-19 vaccines.

Motivation for discussion

Given all of the information outlined above, the MAP Executive took the decision to conduct some planning around what would happen in the case of a large number of refugee claimants coming to BC. Given that it was one of several possibilities following the pandemic, and the one that would tax the refugee claimant serving sector the most, MAP set two of its regular monthly meetings aside – March and April 2021 – to discuss a response and what the gaps, challenges and possible methods for expansion would be.

Section 3.0

Considerations and Limitations

Considerations and Limitations

Considerations

In our emergency planning MAP took the following considerations after consulting with an experienced emergency planner with the Canadian Red Cross and receiving advice from the UNHCR in Canada:

- Our planning should not be based on “worst case scenario”
- All planning would be dependent on federal, provincial, and municipal governments
- Planning needs to be completed because, in an emergency situation, a lot of decisions need to be made quickly
- We need to identify gaps, challenges and resources available

Limitations

The limitations the MAP Executive has identified in this planning exercise are:

- We cannot predict the future or the path of the COVID19 pandemic
- We do not know how many refugee claimants will come or from what part of the world
- Not all agencies were able or willing to take part in the planning process and information gathering
- We do not know what emergency funding would become available
- We are dependent on what the federal government will do around border reopening and travel
- We also are limited in a planning a response because we are dependent on Public Health Orders
- MAP is a collective network and not an incorporated entity, therefore it cannot enforce any plans on member agencies
- Each agency is independent and will plan its own response accordingly
- MAP has one part-time contractor to provide support and coordination to MAP. Emergency coordination and communication would need to be considered outside of the remit of the MAP Executive Coordinator
- The MAP Co-Chairs are volunteer positions and are both time and resource limited

Section 4.0

Methodology

Methodology

Guided discussion

At the MAP meeting in March 2021, the Executive took the membership through an emergency planning exercise, laying out steps that would be needed to create an emergency response plan. The seven steps, which were outlined by Richard Belcham, MAP Co-Chair and Barry Growe, former Disaster Services Manager with the Canadian Red Cross were as follows:

1. Determine the service goal (see assumption below)
2. Determine how many will be served by each agency
3. Map resources and identify gaps – shelter/housing
4. Map resources and identify gaps – services
5. Determine coordination and coordination functions
6. Understand and plan at a local level
7. Response plan created – funding submissions

Assumption for planning purposes

Following discussion among members it was proposed that, for planning purposes only, an assumption should be made on what agencies might expect if there was a sudden or sustained increase in the numbers of refugee claimants coming to BC. It was suggested that the “worst case scenario” isn’t adopted, but one that would be a challenge to agencies.

Therefore, the following assumption was adopted to help agencies understand what might be needed:

- For planning purposes only, MAP assumes that there will be double the number of refugee claimants than pre-COVID levels, over the course of a year – greater numbers in first six months. And so MAP’s suggested service delivery goal for plan is for 6,000 refugee claimants to BC over 12 months (100% increase) and 4,000 of them will be in the first six months

It was emphasized that this is for planning purposes only and is dependent on numerous factors outside MAP’s control and that of the Federal and Provincial Governments.

Online survey

Following the March MAP meeting an online survey was issued to all MAP members. MAP received 28 responses from agencies across the province but mainly within Metro Vancouver and the Lower Mainland. Although the response was less than was hoped, it still provided good results and data for analysis and recommendations outlined in this report.

Sharing of initial results and discussion

At the April 2021 MAP meeting, the initial results of the survey were shared and discussed – both in the full meeting and in break groups. This ensured questions were answered, information received was correct, and gave

the membership opportunity to respond and affirm the answers to the survey. Additional points were collected and noted and are included in this report.

Creation of report

After the two MAP meetings and electronic survey, this report has been created to capture all the responses and discussions.

The purpose of the report is to map the services and supports available to refugee claimants, as well as identify gaps, examine where services can be expanded in the community in response to an emergency, and to identify actions and resources needed.

The report was completed in August 2021.

Section 5.0

Survey Findings

5.1 Coordination

Overview

Coordination in responding to a sudden increase in the arrival of refugee claimants is vital. In this case, there needs to be coordination of various related organizations and agencies to achieve the goal/target of an effective response to housing, supporting and settling refugee claimants across the Province. MAP is an excellent discussion forum and place for networking, but it would not be able to provide the necessary coordination in the case of a public emergency.

MAP is able to offer a central hub for pre-emergency discussion focusing on prevention, mitigation and preparedness to maximize an effective response. There are no set principles or rigid techniques for coordination in an emergency situation because each situation is unique in its own way. But, coordination is the most vital piece in the puzzle.

Current Provision

There is currently no provision for an emergency coordinator in the refugee claimant serving sector. MAP does provide information and opportunities for discussion and planning, but the formal role of Emergency Planning Coordinator does not exist.

Challenges with sudden increase

Any response to a sudden increase would naturally depend on the volume and location of those coming to BC. The likelihood is that any initial increase in numbers would happen in Metro Vancouver, later coming to the lower mainland and beyond. The challenge presented by a sudden increase would be the lack of a central coordinator who would be able to be a central information point, have an overview of the situation, be able to allocate and move resources and would be able to access emergency funding.

The void left by not having an emergency coordinator would mean that agencies would respond in any way that they see fit – possibly leading to duplication of service provision. There would also be a possibility that valuable and limited resources would be wasted, or sent to the wrong place at the wrong time. It would also be very difficult for the provincial or federal government – and associated agencies - to respond with resources if there was no central coordinator.

Community Expansion

Due to the skills required and the need for a central point of coordination – as well as experience in emergency planning – it's unlikely that this function could be served through community volunteers.

Gaps Identified

There is a current gap of a lack of an experienced emergency coordinator. If an emergency were to happen today, the sector is not well equipped to provide a coordinated and careful response. Agencies are scattered across the province with only informal communication and coordination networks established. They would look to MAP and the BC Provincial Government to provide leadership and coordination in an emergency situation.

In order to respond effectively – using all the supports and systems identified in the following sections of this report – a central coordinator, with adequate resourcing and tools, is probably the single biggest gap identified by MAP members agencies. It would be very difficult to respond effectively without central coordination.

Resources Needed

- MAP would look to the Government – either Provincial or Federal – to provide funding for emergency coordination. This could be either directly funded or through an existing emergency management agency

Recommendations for Agencies

- Prepare to work with an emergency coordinator by mapping resources available
- Nominate a specific person/role with agency to provide two-way communication and coordination between the central emergency response unit and agency

Recommendations for Government bodies

- Consider funding an emergency coordinator position in plenty of time to allow pre-planning
- Consider partnering with existing emergency coordination agency to provide coordination function
- Work with MAP to understand issues and resources available
- Work with BC CHARMS team to understand how system could be utilized or expanded in case of emergency response

5.2 Communication

Overview

In the emergency situation that's outlined in this report, there are several aspects to communication. Firstly, there is the importance of intra-agency communication and referrals to ensure refugee claimants are able to access the services and support they need. There is also communication needed between any central emergency coordinator and agencies. And there will also be the need for community communication – to enable agencies to expand their offerings and services throughout each neighbourhood.

Lastly, communication to the public will be vital in gaining support, shattering myths and untruths, as well as the media who will be vital in getting information to the public, outlining the issues and assisting with coordination of resources.

Current Provision

There is currently no central provision in the area of communication and each agency responds in its own unique way – working with local media and local communities. MAP provides a hub for information – circulating weekly bulletins to all member agencies. Agencies currently provide the MAP Executive Coordinator information and those updates, along with other pertinent information, government initiatives and sector-wide information is circulated via email. If this was to be used as part of an emergency response it would need additional resourcing to ensure communication is timely and easy to circulate.

Challenges with sudden increase

There are a number of communication areas which would be challenged by an increase in the numbers of refugee claimants coming to BC – especially if the numbers were great and they arrived in a short amount of time. Key areas that would need to be addressed are:

Central communication with emergency response coordinator

If an emergency response coordinator was appointed, that would ease some of the communication issues, but agencies would need to have clear communication lines and details laid out for them. Expectations would need to be met in terms of full contact details, methods of contact and times available. In an emergency situation it would be vital that communication is streamlined and eliminates duplication or wasted resources.

Inter-agency communication

If there was an increase in numbers, there would also be a subsequent increase in inter-agency referrals. The challenge here would be to ensure that there is little duplication or redundancy in referrals and that refugee claimants themselves don't refer themselves to multiple agencies at once. In the area of housing, the new BC CHARMS system will go some way to ameliorate these issues. It would be important that there is a designated communications person at each agency to manage specific referrals and communication channels.

Community coordination

Community engagement and expansion will be important to deal with the challenges created by a large number of refugee claimants coming to BC. It would also be important to ensure consistent messaging across the province so people get the same information at the same time. Their response could be tailored to their particular area of expertise or location, but they would be responding to the same issues as everyone else. This isn't to centralize messaging, rather consistency so expectations can be managed and the response coordinated and streamlined.

Media communication

Another area that could prove challenging is that of communication with the media. A large number of refugee claimants coming to BC could prove controversial and the media may not “spin” the story in a positive light. Therefore, it would be important that there is a strong and able communicator who can talk through the issues on behalf of the refugee claimant serving sector. They would need to be able to challenge misinformation and misconceptions, explain complex topics in a clear and concise manner and echo the hearts of those that are providing a welcome. Media communication is a skilled and difficult job – especially in a crisis situation – so it’s important that the person selected has both the experience and knowledge necessary.

Additionally, speaking points and lines to take should be issued to all agencies so any media response is consistent and coordinated. It would also be important for agencies who don’t wish to communicate with the media to know where to refer any enquiring journalists.

Community Expansion

In order to mobilize the community to serve refugee claimants in greater numbers, it will be vital to get the word out. This will need to be done in partnership with agencies and communities across the province and so a communication strategy will need to be created and implemented. The area of media and communication with an emergency coordinator will be vital to the success of community response and expansion of existing services and support. Again, key to this will be clear communication around issues, resources and a central emergency response.

Gaps Identified

Several agencies identified gaps around a coordinated approach to communication – whether inter-agency communication or communication with the public and media. There is a lack of expertise in the area of media and PR communications in smaller agencies – who would be reticent in responding to any media requests. Agencies also saw the need for government bodies to play their part in communications – both in helping the public understand the issues around refugee claimants and a sudden increase, as well as in coordinating a public / agency response. There is no formal communications network – and if there was an emergency response situation, agencies would need to streamline communication to avoid duplication or confusion.

Resources Needed

- Funding to create and resource a full and structured communications plan
- Funding to employ media relations / PR advisor
- Funding to create a response information website
- Structured but flexible communications plan that addresses inter-sector communications as well as media and community communications
- Funding to look at feasibility of further developing BC CHARMS into emergency response referral network

Recommendations for Agencies

- Nominate a specific person/role with agency to provide communication between the central emergency response unit and agency, communication with the wider community and volunteers, as well as inter-agency communication
- Decide if your agency will conduct media communications and nominate spokesperson. Consider utilizing media training to equip spokesperson
- Establish clear lines of communication within your agency to prepare for an emergency response

- Be prepared to work with MAP and/or consultants to develop and implement a robust communications and media relations plan

Recommendations for Government bodies

- Consider designating key media relations person to act as spokesperson for government bodies
- Designate single point of contact for emergency coordinator to ensure streamlined communication
- Work with MAP member agencies and media relations/PR consultancy to create communications plan and strategy
- Develop funding strategies to support refugee claimant serving organizations across the province with communications
- Consider funding a feasibility study to examine the possibly expansion of BC CHARMS as emergency response referral system
- Consider utilizing existing emergency response systems for a response to a large number of refugee claimants coming to BC – although this may happen automatically if the increase is considered an emergency.

5.3 Housing

Overview

Housing continues to remain an issue across Vancouver and the Lower Mainland. Although funding has been made available by the Provincial Government for the BC CHARMS system and refurbishment of units, much of the capacity has yet to come on stream. Therefore, pressure remains on the shelter and emergency housing network, as well as the limited number of transition houses dedicated to refugee claimants.

Many of the issues were covered in the 2019 MAP Report: *Towards a Housing Solution for Refugee Claimants in BC: A Plan for Action*. Currently, the pressure isn't being felt because there is a substantial reduction in the number of people seeking refugee protection, but when that changes, and if a sudden increase in people seeking asylum were to occur, the housing system would quickly reach capacity and face issues in housing people. Increased capacity could be found utilizing community groups, faith groups and the creation and utilization of "meanwhile" spaces within Metro Vancouver and the Fraser Valley.

Current Provision

Provision remains where it did pre-COVID19 and so there continue to be limited options available along the housing continuum - emergency shelter, transitional, supportive housing. The real estate market is proving to be a hot button issue politically, and while there is expansion with initiatives to address homelessness by BC Housing, there is limited expansion for dedicated housing for refugee claimants.

Challenges with sudden increase

As with any area of provision for refugee claimants, the challenge would depend on the volume and time of people coming to BC. If it is a gradual increase there will be some benefits in building capacity over time, but if the increase was rapid and large, there would need to be a rapid increase in housing provision too. Considering the housing continuum, emergency housing would be the biggest immediate pressure – utilizing large temporary spaces like gyms or community centres where people could be offered shelter for a short period of time.

However, the numbers would provide challenges for transition housing and eventually market housing. Emergency shelters would be the first to feel the effects of a sudden increase and could act as an "early warning" system, to allow other providers to get up to speed to ensure refugee claimants receive shelter. The BC CHARMS system will also provide data around arrivals to help triage people as necessary.

Community Expansion

Community expansion was viewed by the survey participants as a key way to widen the provision of housing. Ideas were shared where faith groups and other community groups could provide emergency accommodations – such as opening a gym to provide emergency shelter if the increase was sudden and extensive.

Participants also saw value in working with the community to find empty housing units to house asylum seekers. An important element in the expansion of housing in the community is communication of the need for the community to step up in time of crisis. For example, when the Syrian crisis happened communities were willing to open their doors and provide welcome to people in need. Participants felt that this was a crucial way to deal with pressures on the housing system. Other ideas included (depending on the time of year) utilizing empty student accommodation, the development of modular housing and the provision of rental subsidies.

Gaps Identified

Again, many of the gaps in housing are outlined in much greater detail in the 2019 MAP Report: *Towards a Housing Solution for Refugee Claimants in BC: A Plan for Action*. These include the lack of dedicated shelter space for refugee claimants, along with the lack of dedicated space for single, male refugee claimants or large families. It was also outlined in the survey responses how current shelter space can have a detrimental health effect – especially mental health – on refugee claimants. This is because of the unique nature of asylum seekers from a cultural point of view and the additional level of trauma from leaving their home country and sometimes limited language ability.

Resources Needed

- BC CHARMS will be a considerable help in understanding the data behind new arrivals, as well as assisting in placing people into appropriate housing
- There will be a need for strong housing coordination – see section 4.1 Coordination
- Key to expanding housing provision will be educating the public and community organizations as to who refugee claimants are and how they need housing

Recommendations for Agencies

- Work with local community and faith groups to understand where emergency housing could be found quickly
- Transition houses could consider expanding their community-based programs (like Communities of Welcome) and work on training community groups to prepare for a possible increase
- Sign up to the BC CHARMS system, when it is launched, to ensure seamless communication
- Create a network of housing and settlement workers to enable a grassroots communication network and smooth referrals between agencies.

Recommendations for Government bodies

- Continue funding housing initiatives including BC CHARMS
- Consider creating an emergency fund to help provide accommodation in emergency situations – like for extreme weather shelters etc
- Consider refugee claimants as a distinct user group, with specific needs, and work with BC Housing to expand provision of both temporary and low cost housing
- Work with agencies to create a refugee claimant reception centre to provide dedicated emergency shelter, along with access to settlement and housing workers

Other ideas

See 4.2 Communication, but agencies see the importance of education about refugee claimants and the specific issues they face as key to getting people alongside and motivating the community to help with the provision of housing in an emergency.

5.4 Settlement and Orientation

Overview

Settlement and orientation services are key to helping refugee claimants begin to navigate and build their new lives in Canada. Key to their success is the ability to access services and support – and by implication the knowledge of where to find that support. It sometimes takes a little while for a newly arrived asylum seeker to find support – but when they do, it certainly makes a big difference to them. One of the challenges faced in the sector is that service provision is diverse and varies by agency, so people aren't always sure who to turn to for support. However, when they do they become loyal to that agency / settlement worker and therefore know where to go to for support when required.

Current Provision

Thanks to the excellent work of many agencies across the province of BC, there is a strong and diverse range of settlement and orientation support to refugee claimants. Through BCSIS Stream A and Stream B funding, there is a good network of settlement workers and affiliated services to give support to refugee claimants, which is augmented and expanded through the great work done by Neighbourhood Houses, SWIS worker teams, Clinic SDH workers, and small agencies who are vital in providing sound settlement advice and support. However, services can be stretched when numbers are high, and the limited resources can be a challenge to provide depth in service. Service and support are provided to refugee claimants through settlement and outreach workers and is augmented by community volunteers. Support is from arrival right through to Permanent Residence. Support is provided in all kinds of areas – from big issues to small details to help folks settle. Key to the provision is a strong network for referrals.

Challenges with sudden increase

The challenge of a sudden increase in refugee claimants would be the strain on the system and the settlement workers themselves. There is a natural constraint in the number of settlement workers and the number of clients they can work with at any one time. Depending on the numbers and timing, settlement workers will face different challenges, and much will be affected by the speed of processing, where the refugee claimants are based, what languages they speak and what supports they need. Settlement workers are naturally adaptable people who respond well in a crisis, but they will need to be well supported by their agencies. Another challenge will be if settlement workers need to be trained quickly in order to serve a sudden increase – and the resources and funding needed to do this in a timely way.

Community Expansion

Many agencies reported that settlement workers could be supported by the utilization of volunteers in the community to provide settlement work that is less specialist – for example, opening bank accounts, navigating transit, completing documentation etc. Faith groups and community groups often look for volunteering opportunities and some settlement work would provide good opportunities to create “buddies” for refugee claimants to help them navigate their first weeks and months in British Columbia.

Gaps Identified

There weren't too many specific gaps identified – but some specific things were mentioned by the survey respondents. These included a lack of self-service online tools – including how to find service and support when people first arrive. There were also challenges identified around settlement workers getting access to IRB and IRCC documentation.

Resources Needed

- A website that is a “one-stop” for refugee claimants to find support – not just settlement, but find access to all the other important things to help them get started
- A designated funding stream for additional settlement workers when necessary – so agencies can quickly get approved funding to employ people and get them trained and into service in a timely way

Recommendations for Agencies

- Work with local community and faith groups to recruit and train “general” settlement volunteers
- Consider how “group sessions” could create efficiencies in settlement work when there are greater numbers of people to serve

Recommendations for Government bodies

- Consider funding a refugee claimant-focused website for initial orientation and to help refugee claimants access services quickly after arrival
- Consider emergency funding for recruitment of additional settlement workers so that they can be trained and in place as arrivals increase
- Negotiate Stream A and B funding beyond its current life span to enable agencies to plan and adapt to the changing landscape post-COVID.

Other ideas

For areas outside of Metro Vancouver, one or two dedicated resource centres for refugee claimants

5.5 Donations

Overview

We are very thankful that British Columbia is an incredibly generous community and supports many of the non-profits that provide housing, support, services and more to refugee claimants. It's incredible to watch and was seen in action during the time when BC was welcoming many thousands of people from Syria back in 2015. There is a strong base of faith and community groups who will spring into action when called upon.

Current Provision

Each agency has its own way of both generating support and finding the donations they need. It's often done in very personal ways and through personal connections. Many of the donations are sourced "as needed" and, due to limited storage, tend to respond to specific needs at the time. Some agencies have relationships with companies that provide their products for reduced prices or free, others have donation drives to collect when they need. The support is received in multiple ways – financially and also with the donation of clothing, furniture, technology, gift cards, toys, hygiene products, food and more.

Challenges with sudden increase

Although the agencies who completed the survey were positive about the community's ability to step up if there was a sudden increase in refugee claimants coming to BC, they foresaw challenges in the storage and distribution of donated items and the ability to coordinate everything on both sides of the equation: needs and donors.

Community Expansion

Agencies were confident that they would be able to ask their communities to help them provide donated goods and financial support for refugee claimants if there was a crisis situation. They believe that individuals, community groups, faith groups and businesses would be prepared to help out – but education was important so they know who they're giving to, and how that support is being reached. It was also important that donors know their donations are going to directly help refugee claimants, rather than just going towards administrative or operational costs.

Gaps Identified

There weren't many gaps identified, because the sector relies on donations already and sees that could expand if needed. However, one gap was identified – with the purpose of avoiding duplication and wastage – and that was the need for centralized lists of needs and donors. This would enable coordination across the Province and allow transparency and coordination to streamline the process of getting what's needed to the people who need it.

Resources Needed

- A centralized list of needs and donors to coordinate donations and avoid duplication and waste of resources. Ideally, this would be online and easy to access and update

Recommendations for Agencies

- Begin to plan what might be needed with a large increase in the number of asylum seekers needing support from your agency. Make lists and consider researching options for storage and stock piling
- Work with other agencies in your geographic areas to coordinate donation responses
- Work with donation partners to understand what would be available and match the donors with the response lists created
- Create lists of potential donors and what agencies could request from them

Recommendations for Government bodies

- There were no specific recommendations for Government agencies, other than the general encouragement that Government would support agencies during the response.
- The COVID19 pandemic demonstrated how the Government can support front-line agencies from a financial perspective, but also through good and effective coordination of resources. This collaborative approach will be important in the provision of goods and finances in a scenario where there is a sudden increase in refugee claimants

Other ideas

One agency suggested coordinating with local schools to create donation drives as a way of engaging school-aged kids with the issues around refugees, as well as providing welcome baskets or similar for newly arrived people.

5.6 Legal Support

Overview

Legal support for refugee claimants is provided via Legal Aid BC, private lawyers, legal advocates and legal clinics. In addition, refugee hearing preparation is underpinned by the pioneering READY Tours (and accompanying documentation and website). While the resources are limited, and refugee claimants are not always successful in gaining legal representation, there is usually some kind of legal support available to them.

Current Provision

As mentioned above, the legal landscape is limited to those with expertise and the necessary credentials and experience. There are very few in house legal resources at agencies and therefore the majority of legal support is given to refugee claimants via referrals. Sometimes – due to limited resources and time allotted to refugee claimant lawyers for each case – the onus is on the refugee claimant to do more legal work themselves. Obviously, this can be a challenge if they have limited knowledge of the legal system or are limited in terms of understanding and English-speaking ability.

Challenges with sudden increase

Given that legal resources are already limited, and cases are triaged for Legal Aid lawyers, a further strain would be put on the system and refugee claimants could end up without representation – or have limited quality representation because refugee lawyers would be “spread too thin”. The free legal clinics or legal advocacy programs in BC are also very limited and could be overwhelmed if the increase in demand was large and/or sustained.

Community Expansion

Given the specialist nature of legal support, community expansion provides very limited opportunities. However, some agencies expressed that there might be more resources made available through the utilization of the UBC Law Students Legal Advice Program, the provision of more community-based legal aid workshops and the recruitment of more pro-bono lawyers.

Gaps Identified

Agencies identified gaps in coverage for those who are not eligible for legal aid, for appeals and PRRA, and H&C applications, as well as language barriers. They also expressed concern around the gaps in SOGIESC persecution expertise as well as trans competent services. There were also geographic challenges there bring no refugee claimant lawyers outside Metro Vancouver. Other concerns included challenges in legal support because of limited or restricted legal aid funding.

Resources Needed

- A complete list of Legal Aid lawyers that could be utilized by agencies and refugee claimants
- Additional legal aid lawyers outside of Metro Vancouver – especially in outlying areas such as the Fraser Valley
- Additional legal clinics and legal support that could be provided for free or low cost to refugee claimants

Recommendations for Agencies

- There were no recommendations for agencies as this is a specialist area limited to legal experts

Recommendations for Government bodies

- Consider stable, sustainable and long-term funding for Legal Aid to avoid the stoppage of service we've seen in the past
- Consider funding other legal support services for refugee claimants – such as legal clinics and legal advocacy groups

Other ideas

A campaign to recruit more pro-bono lawyers could be created

5.7 Food and nutrition

Overview

Many agencies stated that they had connections to the food industry, or provided some sort of food support to refugee claimants on arrival in BC. It was one of the areas of the survey that provoked a widespread response – both in terms of need and provision. Refugee claimants often survive on very low incomes – either with low paid jobs or on income assistance. Given these limited incomes, anything that can enable them to spread their income a little further is needed and valued. Food support is one of these vital ways of extending limited income a little further.

Current Provision

From the survey results it would appear that many agencies provide food support across BC including the creation and distribution of emergency hampers, grocery cards, regular food hampers, vouchers, grocery basics in transitional houses, partnerships with food companies and shelter provided meals. There were no geographic discrepancies in the responses – it seems that nearly every agency has some sort of provision for food support.

Challenges with sudden increase

Like many of the sections of this document, the challenge would be with volume, storage and distribution of food. If there is a large number of people in a short amount of time, this would challenge the system to make sure emergency food was distributed quickly. Use could be made of local food banks and partnerships with agencies to allow refugee claimants to get support with food. For efficiency, the distribution of grocery gift cards would enable refugee claimants themselves to access the food they like. Agencies would need to be prepared for a “spike” in demand and work with their partners on food provision. Given challenges with supply chains, there could be a delay between the demand and the provision.

Community Expansion

Many agencies believe that community expansion in the area of food support would be easily achievable. Ideas included conducting food drives, working with partners to provide grocery gift cards, as well as community kitchens and community and faith groups providing emergency food – both in terms of hampers and emergency meal provision at temporary shelters etc.

Gaps Identified

Gaps identified in the survey included the fact that community meals from agencies are often just once in a while and there may not be options for individuals who have dietary restrictions. Additionally, it was stated that food banks can be difficult to access for those that rely on public transportation or have disabilities. Claimants may have challenges getting registered at a food bank due to lack of identification and again, there may be lack of options for those with dietary restrictions.

Resources Needed

- No particular resources were identified as needed, but a central coordination role may assist in food distribution to those most in need.

Recommendations for Agencies

- As in many areas, agencies should consider educating their local food banks and distributors about the very specific needs and barriers for refugee claimants.
- Agencies could work with food banks etc., to remove systemic barriers around eligibility and the provision of identity documents.

Recommendations for Government bodies

- There were no specific recommendations for Government bodies – other than the general request for greater funding of some of the food schemes which rely on donations and community partnerships.

Other ideas

There were several ideas suggested by MAP agencies which included agencies creating partnerships with local grocery stores and coffee shops, setting a low barrier schemes for grocers/farmers to create “food box” distribution to refugee claimant families, and “bulk purchase” schemes to allow groups of families to buy staple items at reduced prices and then divide among the group.

5.8 ELL Learning Support

Overview

Roughly half of the agencies who responded to the survey offer some kind of ELL Learning support. The ability of refugee claimants to obtain meaningful work, grow their education and skills, as well as navigate the complex refugee claim system is very much dependent on their use of English. Agencies all understand the importance of having ELL learning opportunities – either in house or via referral.

Current Provision

The survey results showed that around 50% of agencies responding offer some kind of ELL learning support – either through conversation circles, group lessons or one-on-one tuition. However, the majority of support offered is through conversation circles (many of which have moved online during the pandemic). There is limited structured ELL lessons and programs, although some agencies have majored on ELL provision as part of their core mandate and have invested both time and money in creating curriculum and resources. Some of the curricula are dedicated towards Canadian culture.

Challenges with sudden increase

There is already demand on the ELL learning support schemes offered and a sudden increase might exacerbate the difficulties in service provision – challenging volunteer teams to add more opportunities for English language learners. Challenges were also expressed in getting technology to people who want to attend meetings that are held virtually during the pandemic.

Community Expansion

Like the food programs, many agencies suggested that ELL would be a good area for community expansion – with lots of opportunities for volunteers to get involved. There was a desire to have more community-based conversation circles, and that's something which would benefit both the learners and the community because it would open dialogue.

Gaps Identified

One agency stated that having more financial resources would help to create a standardized curriculum. Other gaps that agencies identified were those around childcare and ELL support for refugee claimant women. The gaps specifically were around childcare to enable refugee claimant women to access classes and conversation circles. They further stated that a gap of not having centralized staffing solutions for an agency's childcare needs made the provision of ELL classes and other support services limited for parents. Some agencies cited a lack of classroom space as an issue when physical ELL classes return post-pandemic, as well as a lack of summer programs.

Online ELL supports – while useful and appreciated – are sometimes difficult to access due to the lack of technology that refugee claimants have. So a gap identified is access to technology and the resources to close that specific gap. (see Section 4.15 of this report).

Additionally, agencies identified other gaps including a lack of structured learning support (like the Vancouver School Board Adult Education Program), connections to ELL professional schools for scholarships for refugees

claimants and having an IRCC funded program available to refugee claimants – like the LINC program for permanent residents.

Resources Needed

- Some resources around the provision of technology were noted
- Childcare was raised as a strong need for refugee claimant parents - true for many areas of support
- A LINC type program or coordinated curriculum for refugee claimants is desirable
- Summer programs
- Additional classroom space for some agencies

Recommendations for Agencies

- Agencies should consider building a database of ELL volunteers to assist with an increased demand in ELL opportunities
- Agencies could consider the provision of ELL opportunities in various formats – physical and virtual – to provide choice
- The provision of childcare is a continuing issue and consideration could be given to coordinating between agencies to see how these gaps could be addressed

Recommendations for Government bodies

- There were no specific recommendations for Government bodies – other than the general request for greater funding of ELL provision and the consideration of either opening up the LINC scheme or creating an alternative that could be utilized by refugee claimants.

Other ideas

There were no other ideas expressed outside of those outlined above.

5.9 Translation and Interpretation

Overview

About 50% of agencies responding to the survey offer some kind of translation or interpretation service – whether in an ad hoc manner thanks to their multi-lingual staff, or through a formal service offering. The languages offered are diverse and wide ranging, reflecting the huge variety of languages spoken by refugee claimants coming to BC. All agencies see translation and interpretation as key services – and will often refer to other agencies for this service.

Current Provision

Along with the ubiquitous Google Translate app as an option, agencies use a variety of methods to communicate with refugee claimants. These include settlement workers who provide service in their native languages, along with the use of volunteers and various paid services, including those provided over the phone, via MOSAIC or ISS of BC, provincial language services and private translation services. Along with the excellent READY Tour translator list, the ICBC “official translator” document also provides a list of language translators across BC. Additionally, many agencies use volunteers or former clients with other languages if available.

Challenges with sudden increase

Official translation and interpretation services may become stretched depending on the numbers arriving and when they arrive. As with many other support services, a sudden increase in numbers will find settlement workers and agencies stretched, and difficulties with translation and interpretation could slow the provision of service down and the ability of refugee claimants to get their documents translated in a timely manner. An additional challenge highlighted would be the increased costs if there was a spike in demand. This would be hard for agencies to absorb.

Community Expansion

Again, this is another area that could be well supported by the community. Recruiting volunteers with the ability to translate and interpret would be vital to underpinning “official” sources. Several agencies suggested reaching out to faith and community groups, particularly where there has been a diasporic spread, for example with people from Iran who live in North Vancouver, or Punjabi speaking people in the Fraser Valley.

Gaps Identified

Some of the gaps identified were those around inter-agency referrals (when the receiving agency doesn’t have translation or other language support), costs, access to telephone translation and lists of qualified translators.

One thing the pandemic has highlighted is the gap in translation of official health, safety and vaccination documentation.

Resources Needed

- Lists of settlement workers across the province and the languages they speak
- Translated versions of health notices to be provided in a wider selection of languages
- Lower cost translation services for refugee claimants
- Financial support for use of translation and interpretation services

Recommendations for Agencies

- Agencies should document the language abilities of their staff
- Utilized local community, faith and diaspora groups for volunteer recruitment

Recommendations for Government bodies

- Agencies look to the Government for additional financial resource to cover some translation costs which can be expensive for non-profits that have limited incomes
- Government information should be provided in a greater number of languages – especially around important health and safety messages

Other ideas

One agency has prepared a “How to Simplify Your Language” guide, which they would be happy to share.

5.10 Employment support

Overview

Although employment often comes after the first stage of initial settlement and orientation it is important for refugee claimants. Employment is key to accessing stable housing, as well as providing income for the family, starting building community connections, as well as establishing a sense of normality.

Current Provision

Approximately half the agencies responding to the survey offer some kind of support for employment. The support offered includes resume review, employment readiness workshops, one-on-one training, interview practice, ELL around jobs, introductions to Canadian workplace culture, certified courses (e.g. First Aid) and more. Many agencies make referrals to existing employment programs.

Challenges with sudden increase

If there were to be a sudden increase in the numbers of people coming to BC as refugee claimants, the challenges to employment support programs wouldn't be felt immediately. This is due to the delay between arrival and receiving a work permit to enable people to work. People could begin their employment readiness journey by attending programs or classes – either in person or via Zoom. Zoom enables the capacity of some of the employment readiness classes to be expanded, but is dependent on the refugee claimants' access to technology.

Community Expansion

Community expansion could be provided by volunteer employment mentors to help people navigate the Canadian employment landscape. Some opportunities could be found within faith and community networks. There are several community-based programs to provide clothing for people looking for work or starting a new career which would be open to supporting refugee claimants.

Gaps Identified

Gaps listed by agencies included the lack of knowledge of workplace rights by refugee claimants, the need for mentorship of refugee claimants, technology training for youth, support for women, credential recognition and limited transit to workplaces.

Resources Needed

- Guide and/or list of employment services available to refugee claimants
- Mentors for refugee claimants – both for entry-level jobs and career planning
- Access to technology and training with technology for young people

Recommendations for Agencies

- Agencies should document all employment services available to refugee claimants to produce a guide to what's available.
- Begin to recruit volunteers and employment mentors from the local community, faith and diaspora groups

Recommendations for Government bodies

- Government – Federal and Provincial – should look at how to use the talent of refugee claimants and streamline/improve the credential recognition process in order to get people to the work they were doing in their home countries.
- Provide access to technology for refugee claimants so they can access zoom courses and more

Other ideas

One agency suggested looking at making student loans available for refugee claimants so they can access training to improve their employment prospects.

5.11 Education support

Overview

Education support in this category covers both childhood education and some access for adult education. Many refugee claimants will come as families and so settlement agencies are often involved in getting children into local schools, as well as liaising with SWIS workers to get the children settled. For adult refugee claimants, education is often seen as a safe and familiar way to settle and are keen to upgrade their credentials and are sometimes disheartened by the barriers to entry for refugee claimants – given they are considered international students by many of the institutions and therefore the cost is prohibitive.

Current Provision

The majority of agencies responding to the survey offer some kind of educational support. The support offered includes work with SWIS workers and giving support for school registration.

Challenges with sudden increase

There could be multiple challenges with a sudden increase in the number of refugee claimants – schools systems can be very cumbersome to navigate and this could be amplified if a lot of the families don't speak English or have additional educational needs. Many schools are at capacity and so there's the issue of transit to schools outside of catchment areas. Some school districts in outlying areas are unfamiliar with the particular needs of refugee claimants and so the increased bureaucracy with an increased number would prove challenging. Of course, there would also be the additional challenge on schools to provide education and educational/ELL support to refugee claimant children – especially if the increase was sudden and great. There isn't much spare capacity in the school system.

Community Expansion

Volunteers are once again key to expanding the support for refugee claimants – in lieu of recruiting more SWIS workers with a focus on refugee claimants. Several agencies suggested using volunteers to assist refugee claimants with navigating the school system and getting children registered in school. One agency, for example, has recruited former high school teachers to assist registering children for school. Another agency expanded their ELL support by recruiting volunteer ELL teachers who are specialized in teaching children, as well as recruiting volunteer tutors. Other agencies suggested meeting the various needs by creating after school clubs and helping parents access more vocational training and education.

Gaps Identified

Gaps listed by agencies included managing the fear felt by refugee claimants of the school system, teenagers needing more support, along with collaboration and partnerships with education institutions. Credential recognition was once again highlighted as a key gap and area of concern.

Resources Needed

Agencies didn't specify particular needs in this area, other than increasing funding when necessary to deal with additional demand.

Recommendations for Agencies

- No specific recommendation for agencies, but like many areas begin to recruit volunteers and education mentors from the local community, faith and diaspora groups

Recommendations for Government bodies

- Consider recruiting more SWIS workers / support workers in school districts with specialist knowledge of refugee claimants and their specific needs

Other ideas

None suggested.

5.12 Health support

Overview

Multiple challenges exist for refugee claimants who want to access health care. While there is some provision with the Interim Federal Health Program, it's not as easy to access as MSP coverage in BC. Many physicians are unaware how to provide care under IFHP and most refugee claimants do not understand how the system works – creating their own barriers to access. Additionally, the delay in processing initial claims and the substantial gap between arrival and receiving a Refugee Claimant ID, along with IFHP coverage, is creating a class of people with little or no access to health care. This can be an additional financial burden on the refugee claimant or the settlement agency supporting them. Access to healthcare is vital for all and currently refugee claimants find it difficult to get the help they need. There are also issues around translation and interpretation for non-speakers of English. Refugee claimants also don't necessarily understand the limitations of IFHP but seek both dental and vision care through the system.

Current Provision

The majority of agencies do not offer health care directly but refer to the few refugee claimant serving health agencies. Health care agencies, such as the Umbrella Multicultural Health Coop, are set up to help refugee claimants and are doing amazing work for them. But these clinics are both limited in number and capacity – as well as geographic spread – and therefore are at risk of limited capacity, extended waiting times and more.

Challenges with sudden increase

Given the limited services available, the challenges of the COVID19 pandemic, and the slow processing of refugee claimants, which limits access to IFHP services, a sudden increase in the number of people seeking refugee protection in BC would have the potential to overwhelm services, substantially increase wait times and severely challenge health care providers in an already stretched system. One of the other challenges would be the potential of new arrivals to bring different strains of the COVID virus. Research has shown newcomers face additional barriers with registration and information, are also distrustful of giving their ID to health provides and can also be more hesitant to get vaccinated. Therefore, a challenge could be an increase in illness among new arrivals and an unvaccinated population of refugee claimants.

Community Expansion

Community expansion would be difficult for the provision of medical and health related services – given funding restraints and expertise. However, volunteers could be recruited to accompany people to health appointments. Other provision which could be expanded would be services like Umbrella Co-Op, New Canadian Clinic, REACH Community services, Divisions of Family Practice etc.

Gaps Identified

Some agencies identified that many service providers are not registered or aware of IFHP and refugee claimants are not able to easily access care. One agency suggested that trans people navigating health care also faced compounded barriers and discrimination, particularly around their identities and respect to their pronouns and names. This means many of them will not seek out healthcare in a timely manner when needed.

Medical interpretation was identified as a huge gap for newcomers as the provincial service is inadequate and it is not culturally responsive. Cross Cultural Health Brokers is one model that provides advocacy and support during appointments in a culturally responsive way.

Another gap outlined was the lack of vision and dental care included in provincial benefits, as well as benefits for other services like physiotherapy or counselling. While there are some lower-cost dental services they typically only provide basic care and people with serious dental issues may not be able to get the service they need. There are also no programs to assist with costs for dentures and hearing aids.

Finally, agencies identified the often long delay between arrival and getting IFH coverage - so medical and emergency bills can quickly mount up. Additionally, there is also the issue of pregnant moms who give birth before MSP coverage kicks in and they are left with large bills that they are not able to pay. Also identified was a lack of female doctors and specific cultural awareness about refugee claimants.

Lastly, gaps identified by agencies included the lack of IME doctors/clinics in the Fraser Valley. The closest is in Surrey or Downtown Vancouver.

Resources Needed

- An exhaustive list of medical service providers that support RCs and IFHP needs to be put in place to facilitate quick referrals.

Recommendations for Agencies

- No specific recommendation for agencies

Recommendations for Government bodies

- Consider executing an awareness campaign, webinars and encouragement for service providers to register with IFHP.
- Expanding the number and availability of community health centres

Other ideas

None suggested.

5.13 Mental Health support

Overview

Access to mental health support, trauma counselling and other services continues to be stretched. There are very limited resources available in BC and waiting lists can be long. The specific needs of refugee claimants are not always understood by counselling services and resources and funding is limited. VAST and VCST provide leadership in these areas and have continued to pioneer support for refugee claimants – however, like many organizations their resources are limited and sometimes stretched.

Current Provision

The majority of agencies responding to the survey provide no direct mental health services but refer to specialists such as VAST, VCST and other mental health and wellness providers. There is some funding for trauma counselling through Stream B but that is also limited. Some organizations – such as DIVERSEcity in Surrey – offer various services including referrals for addictions counselling, family counselling and concurrent disorder programs which are trauma informed, violence prevention and intervention services for women and children and outreach services focused on substance use, concurrent disorders and violence prevention. Several agencies also make referrals to Foundry Services for youth.

Challenges with sudden increase

Given the demands on already restricted services and support, there is likely to be an increase in waiting times for available counsellors and mental health support. Given that many refugee claimants are dealing with some level of loss, trauma or mental health challenge, a substantial increase could have a severe impact on people who are already vulnerable.

Community Expansion

For specialist services such as these it would be difficult to expand provision with community support. Agencies once again offered suggestions around expansion through volunteering – especially in the areas of translation and interpretation – but recognized the constraints due to the sensitivity and cultural appropriateness.

Gaps Identified

This was an area where the survey highlighted several gaps. Things that were mentioned included the lack of mental health supports that are LGBTQI competent, culturally appropriate and trauma informed as well as the lack of accessible free services – all of which can have a long term impact. Long wait lists were also mentioned by several agencies.

Additionally, it was stated that IFHP only covers a limited number of sessions for a limited period of time – and often by the time a newcomer is ready to receive therapy they no longer have coverage.

A repeated issue which came up both in the survey and subsequent discussions was the lack of clinical, culturally responsive mental health supports along with crisis support. Often staff do not have places to refer clients who are in need of mental health supports. Many online services do not have language interpretation and individualized one-to-one psychological support are rare, although several agencies mentioned the success with refugee claimants having access to group support at VAST, REACH clinic and the i-Belong program.

Resources Needed

- Formal trauma informed training for all staff and team
- A list of available mental health services including available first language supports for refugee claimants
- Case workers to help with cultural and language support

Recommendations for Agencies

- No specific recommendation for agencies

Recommendations for Government bodies

- Consider extending IFHP coverage to a wider range of sessions and also for extended periods
- Consider making mental health supports free of charge without expiry date for refugee claimants

Other ideas

There are so many layers of issues around mental health and the general systems of services, but one agency suggested that as a start, there could be changes to services that are covered by provincial health benefits and if mental health supports were included, it would provide more access to people who are in need.

5.14 Transportation

Overview

Transit and public transportation are an issue across the province – but for asylum seekers who are outside of Metro Vancouver the problem is exacerbated by distance and cost of travel.

The fact that Vancouver acts as a magnet (with the IRCC, IRB and CBSA offices located there), presents challenges were there to be an increase in numbers of people seeking refugee protection. Although the experience of refugee claimants could be improved by settling them outside of Vancouver, transportation is a major hurdle to success.

Current Provision

Of the 28 agencies who responded to the survey, 15 provide some sort of support with transportation, including transit passes, lifts to appointments etc.

Challenges predicated by COVID-19 has reduced the numbers of volunteers interacting with agencies that provide transportation help.

Challenges with sudden increase

From a transportation perspective, this would depend on volume and location of those coming to BC. If they arrived in metro Vancouver, there is the public transit network which is likely to be able manage the increase in demand. However, the issues increase after arrival – moving people to emergency or transition housing (especially if this was outside the boundaries of public transit), getting them to appointments in the City, and travelling for employment or settlement services.

Community Expansion

If agencies needed to expand their support using their local community, many looked towards volunteers from faith-based groups, an existing bank of volunteers, increasing the provision of funded transit passes in Metro Vancouver and fundraising in the community for provision of transit passes etc.

Gaps Identified

Some of the gaps people saw in the realm of transportation included lack of volunteers due to COVID (although this would be mitigated once the pandemic has passed, borders reopen and transport restrictions are eased),

Many respondents identified an overall lack of public transportation services for vulnerable populations. Most community programs depend on volunteers who may be able to drive people, but typically require advanced booking, sometimes up to a week ahead of time. Other services are still not affordable as they charge by the hour (\$20-30) and require minimum booking times.

People on regular income assistance do not have access to reduced bus passes. Translink also does not offer interpretation if someone needs to call for bus information.

Additionally, a member highlighted that public transit isn't always accessible or safe for those who present as Queer or Trans, Black, Muslim, or People of Colour.

In the Fraser Valley, members identified the cost of business insurance on volunteers' cars as well as the difficulty accessing Vancouver via public transit as options are limited - especially at weekends and holidays.

One of the biggest gaps will be to move people between their point of arrival and accommodations or appointments – whether shelter, transitional housing or to the IRCC or CBSA. This is particularly true if there are many people arriving at once.

Resources Needed

- Funding to ensure a continuous supply of bus tickets for claimants to be able to attend essential in person appointments.

Recommendations for Agencies

- Prepare to recruit volunteers for driving and transport as required
- Fundraise to purchase transit passes
- Create networks with other community transport initiatives in your area

Recommendations for Government bodies

- Create a scheme for discounted transit passes for refugee claimants on income assistance
- Consider funding an emergency shuttle bus as required if the number of people arriving is substantial
- Continue providing services in a virtual arena e.g. virtual IRB hearings, alternatives to detention and telephone CBSA reporting etc.
- Consider providing service “satellite” offices in other locations e.g. Surrey, Fraser Valley

Other ideas

Consider funding or fundraising for an emergency shuttle bus if the number of people arriving require a lot of transport.

5.15 Technology support

Overview

Given the wholesale switch to the provision of online service and support thanks to the start of the pandemic in March 2020, the need for refugee claimants access to technology and IT support is paramount. Agencies were able to provide technology through some emergency grant funding at the start of the pandemic, and that certainly helped initially. Some tech companies are willing to work with agencies to provide equipment and support to newcomers, but that can be patchy across BC, with not everyone able to access the necessary computers. Another area that refugee claimants and newcomers suffer with is the cost of getting wifi. While there are free hotspots in places like libraries, fast internet at home is expensive.

One effect of the pandemic has been the move online of refugee claimant hearings, etc., and this has been appreciated by many people who can now partake from their homes, which solves issues around childcare and more. It is certainly something that agencies felt should be kept as an option moving forward.

Current Provision

About 50% of the agencies responding provide some sort of technological support to refugee claimants including offering refurbished or loaner laptops and cellphones. Additionally, some agencies give digital literacy help/advice/workshops to refugee claimants to help them navigate the challenges of technology – especially during the pandemic.

Challenges with sudden increase

Like many of the other areas covered by this report, much would depend on the number and frequency of people's arrivals. If people were housed in emergency group situations, then communal computers could be shared. But if the arrivals are more spread out – both in terms of time and geographically – then the challenge would be ensuring access to technology in a more extended way. Challenges would be about lack of access, lack of digital literacy as well as the cost and barriers to both hardware and internet access.

Community Expansion

There are several options for community expansion. Agencies would look to receive more laptops/computers (either new or refurbished) from the community. The issues around digital literacy would also have to be considered and existing programs, supported by volunteers, would need to expand to include refugee claimants. Simple instruction videos or handouts, in various languages, could be created to help people with digital literacy and access to online services.

Gaps Identified

There were several gaps identified by agencies including access to stable, affordable internet connections and the high cost of cellphone coverage and data which is especially challenging as the internet is vital in staying connected during the pandemic. Agencies also noted that old devices that are not always effective or efficient for modern technologies. Currently there are not always laptops or phones to connect to drop ins, applying for immigration processes, or for jobs and some family members need training on how to use technology.

Other gaps identified were the lack of a “one-stop” website for orientation for refugee claimants. Currently, there is no single website that can help navigate a refugee claimant’s early days in British Columbia.

Additionally, it was noted that there isn’t a central directory of services provided to refugee claimants that can be used as a resource for settlement workers. Referrals tend to be through word of mouth and knowledge of the settlement worker themselves, rather than a central database to access.

Resources Needed

One key point raised by an agency was that in a time when most of the communication is happening online, it is essential to ensure that every newcomer has access to information and is well technologically equipped. An extra resource in the form of designated funding for BCSIS program in order to help the individuals and families with kids in need is essential.

Recommendations for Agencies

- Agencies are recommended to improve and/or change their website to ensure they’re mobile-friendly
- Agencies should consider connecting with stores that recycle electronics to access older items that still function
- Agencies should continue advocacy with umbrella groups to connect with telecom providers to provide more low-cost service to vulnerable populations.
- Agencies should always keep in mind the gap between technology ownership and use/knowledge
- Agencies – either individually or as a collective – can engage private sector telecommunication companies in partnerships to give refugee claimants access to free SIM cards and reasonably priced monthly plans.
- Consider recruiting and training volunteers to mentor newcomers on how to use cell phones, laptops etc.

Recommendations for Government bodies

- Government should consider funding to create videos that demonstrate the technology with subtitles for people to access.
- Government should consider funding to both set up a central database of services offered to refugee claimants and provide ongoing support for maintenance and updates

NOTE: funding has been provided to set up a refugee claimant focused website through the BC CHARMS funding and work on it is scheduled to commence in September 2021.

Other ideas

Other ideas were suggested in the technological arena for implementation post pandemic. These included the creation of a laptop room for free use with high speed internet in a centrally located agency, or a “lounge” with internet access where people can come and hang out, as well as access technology and wifi.

Section 6.0

Consolidated Lists of Resources Needed and Recommendations

6.1 Consolidated list of resources needed

Resources identified in the survey as being needed are as follows:

Coordination

- MAP would look to the Government – either Provincial or Federal – to provide funding for emergency coordination. This could be either directly funded or through an existing emergency management agency

Communication

- Funding to create and resource a full and structured communications plan
- Funding to employ media relations / PR advisor
- Funding to create a response information website
- Structured but flexible communications plan that addresses inter-sector communications as well as media and community communications
- Funding to look at feasibility of further developing BC CHARMS into emergency response referral network

Housing

- BC CHARMS will be a considerable help in understanding the data behind new arrivals, as well as assisting in placing people into appropriate housing
- There will be a need for strong housing coordination – see section 4.1 Coordination
- Key to expanding housing provision will be educating the public and community organizations as to who refugee claimants are and how they need housing

Settlement and Orientation Services

- A website that is a “one-stop” for refugee claimants to find support – not just settlement, but find access to all the other important things to help them get started
- A designated funding stream for additional settlement workers when necessary – so agencies can quickly get approved funding to employ people and get them trained and into service in a timely way

Donations

- A centralized list of needs and donors to coordinate donations and avoid duplication and waste of resources. Ideally, this would be online and easy to access and update

Legal Support

- A complete list of Legal Aid lawyers that could be utilized by agencies and refugee claimants
- Additional legal aid lawyers outside of Metro Vancouver – especially in outlying areas such as the Fraser Valley
- Additional legal clinics and legal support that could be provided for free or low cost to refugee claimants

Food

- No particular resources were identified as needed, but a central coordination role may assist in food distribution to those most in need.

ESL Learning Support

- Some resources around the provision of technology were noted
- Childcare was raised as a strong need for refugee claimant parents - true for many areas of support
- A LINC type program or coordinated curriculum for refugee claimants is desirable
- Summer programs

- Additional classroom space for some agencies

Translation / Interpretation

- Lists of settlement worker across the province and the languages they speak
- Translated versions of health notices to be provided in a wider selection of languages
- Lower cost translation services for refugee claimants
- Financial support for use of translation and interpretation services

Employment

- Guide and/or list of employment services available to refugee claimants
- Mentors for refugee claimants – both for entry-level jobs and career planning
- Access to technology and training with technology for young people

Education

- Agencies didn't specify particular needs in this area, other than increasing funding when necessary to deal with additional demand.

General Health

- An exhaustive list of medical service providers that support RCs and IFHP needs to be put in place to facilitate quick referrals.

Mental Health

- Formal trauma informed training for all staff and team
- A list of available mental health services including available first language supports for refugee claimants
- Case workers to help with cultural and language support

Transport

- Funding to ensure a continuous supply of bus tickets for claimants to be able to attend essential in person appointments

Technology

- One key point raised by an agency was that in a time when most of the communication is happening online, it is essential to ensure that every newcomer has access to information and is well technologically equipped. An extra resource in the form of designated funding for BCSIS program in order to help the individuals and families with kids in need is essential.

6.2 Consolidated list of recommendations for agencies

Recommendations for agencies arising from the survey as being needed are as follows:

Coordination

- Prepare to work with an emergency coordinator by mapping resources available
- Nominate a specific person/role with agency to provide two-way communication and coordination between the central emergency response unit and agency

Communication

- Nominate a specific person/role with agency to provide communication between the central emergency response unit and agency, communication with the wider community and volunteers, as well as inter-agency communication
- Decide if your agency will conduct media communications and nominate spokesperson. Consider utilizing media training to equip spokesperson
- Establish clear lines of communication within your agency to prepare for an emergency response

Housing

- Work with local community and faith groups to understand where emergency housing could be found quickly
- Transition houses could consider expanding their community-based programs (like Communities of Welcome) and work on training community groups to prepare for a possible increase
- Sign up to the BC CHARMS system, when it is launched, to ensure seamless communication
- Create a network of housing and settlement workers to enable a grassroots communication network and smooth referrals between agencies.

Settlement and Orientation Services

- Work with local community and faith groups to recruit and train “general” settlement volunteers
- Consider how “group sessions” could create efficiencies in settlement work when there are greater numbers of people to serve

Donations

- Begin to plan what might be needed with a large increase in the number of asylum seekers needing support from your agency. Make lists and consider researching options for storage and stock piling
- Work with other agencies in your geographic areas to coordinate donation responses
- Work with donation partners to understand what would be available and match the donors with the response lists created
- Create lists of potential donors and what agencies could request from them

Legal Support

- There were no recommendations for agencies as this is a specialist area limited to legal experts

Food

- As in many areas, agencies should consider educating their local food banks and distributors about the very specific needs and barriers for refugee claimants.
- Agencies could work with food banks etc., to remove systemic barriers around eligibility and the provision of identity documents.

ESL Learning Support

- Agencies should consider building a database of ELL volunteers to assist with an increased demand in ELL opportunities
- Agencies could consider the provision of ELL opportunities in various formats – physical and virtual – to provide choice
- The provision of childcare is a continuing issue and consideration could be given to coordinating between agencies to see how these gaps could be addressed

Translation / Interpretation

- Agencies should document the language abilities of their staff
- Utilize local community, faith and diaspora groups for volunteer recruitment

Employment

- Agencies should document all employment services available to refugee claimants to produce a guide to what's available.
- Begin to recruit volunteers and employment mentors from the local community, faith and diaspora groups

Education

- No specific recommendation for agencies, but like many areas begin to recruit volunteers and education mentors from the local community, faith and diaspora groups

General Health

- No specific recommendation for agencies

Mental Health

- No specific recommendation for agencies

Transport

- Prepare to recruit volunteers for driving and transport as required
- Fundraise to purchase transit passes
- Create networks with other community transport initiatives in your area

Technology

- Agencies are recommended to improve and/or change their website to ensure they're mobile-friendly
- Agencies should consider connecting with stores that recycle electronics to access older items that still function
- Agencies should continue advocacy with umbrella groups to connect with telecom providers to provide more low-cost service to vulnerable populations.
- Agencies should always keep in mind the gap between technology ownership and use/knowledge
- Agencies – either individually or as a collective – can engage private sector telecommunication companies in partnerships to give refugee claimants access to free SIM cards and reasonably priced monthly plans
- Consider recruiting and training volunteers to mentor newcomers on how to use cell phones, laptops etc

6.3 Consolidated list of recommendations for government bodies

Recommendations for government bodies arising from the survey as being needed are as follows:

Coordination

- Consider funding an emergency coordinator position in plenty of time to allow pre-planning
- Consider partnering with existing emergency coordination agency to provide coordination function
- Work with MAP to understand issues and resources available
- Work with BC CHARMS team to understand how system could be utilized or expanded in case of emergency response

Communication

- Consider designating key media relations person to act as spokesperson for government bodies
- Designate single point of contact for emergency coordinator to ensure streamlined communication
- Work with MAP member agencies and media relations/PR consultancy to create communications plan and strategy
- Develop funding strategies to support refugee claimant serving organizations across the province with communications
- Consider funding a feasibility study to examine the possibly expansion of BC CHARMS as emergency response referral system
- Consider utilizing existing emergency response systems for an emergency response to a large number of refugee claimants coming to BC

Housing

- Continue funding housing initiatives including BC CHARMS
- Consider creating an emergency fund to help provide accommodation in emergency situations – like for extreme weather shelters etc
- Consider refugee claimants as a distinct user group, with specific needs, and work with BC Housing to expand provision of both temporary and low cost housing
- Work with agencies to create a refugee claimant reception centre to provide dedicated emergency shelter, along with access to settlement and housing workers

Settlement and Orientation Services

- Consider funding a refugee claimant-focused website for initial orientation and to help refugee claimants access services quickly after arrival
- Consider emergency funding for recruitment of additional settlement workers so that they can be trained and in place as arrivals increase
- Negotiate Stream A and B funding beyond its current life span to enable agencies to plan and adapt to the changing landscape post-COVID.

Donations

- There were no specific recommendations for Government agencies, other than the general encouragement that Government would support agencies during the response.
- The COVID19 pandemic demonstrated how the Government can support front-line agencies from a financial perspective, but also through good and effective coordination of resources. This collaborative approach will be important in the provision of goods and finances in a scenario where there is a sudden increase in refugee claimants

Legal Support

- Consider stable, sustainable and long-term funding for Legal Aid to avoid the stoppage of service we've seen in the past
- Consider funding other legal support services for refugee claimants – such as legal clinics and legal advocacy groups

Food

- There were no specific recommendations for Government bodies – other than the general request for greater funding of some of the food schemes which rely on donations and community partnerships.

ESL Learning Support

- There were no specific recommendations for Government bodies – other than the general request for greater funding of ELL provision and the consideration of either opening up the LINC scheme or creating an alternative that could be utilized by refugee claimants.

Translation / Interpretation

- Agencies look to the Government for additional financial resource to cover some translation costs which can be expensive for non-profits that have limited incomes
- Government information should be provided in a greater number of languages – especially around important health and safety messages

Employment

- Government – Federal and Provincial – should look at how to use the talent of refugee claimants and streamline/improve the credential recognition process in order to get people to the work they were doing in their home countries.
- Provide access to technology for refugee claimants so they can access zoom courses and more

Education

- Consider recruiting more SWIS workers / support workers in school districts with specialist knowledge of refugee claimants and their specific needs

General Health

- Consider executing an awareness campaign, webinars and encouragement for services providers to register with IFHP.
- Expanding the number and availability of community health centres

Mental Health

- Consider extending IFHP coverage to a wider range of sessions and also for extended periods
- Consider making mental health supports free of charge without expiry date for refugee claimants

Transport

- Create a scheme for discounted transit passes for refugee claimants on income assistance
- Consider funding an emergency shuttle bus as required if the number of people arriving is substantial
- Continue providing services in a virtual arena e.g. virtual IRB hearings, alternatives to detention and telephone CBSA reporting etc.
- Consider providing service “satellite” offices in other locations e.g. Surrey, Fraser Valley

Technology

- Government should consider funding to create videos that demonstrate the technology with subtitles for people to access.
- Government should consider funding to both set up a central database of services offered to refugee claimants and provide ongoing support for maintenance and updates

NOTE: funding has been provided to set up a refugee claimant focused website through the BC CHARMS funding and work on it is scheduled to commence in September 2021.