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immigration partnership

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pour l'immigration d'ottawa

Focus Groups with Immigrants Report

August 2010

Copies of this report can be obtained from:

The Ottawa Local Immigration Partnership (OLIP)
219 Argyle Avenue
Ottawa, Ontario, K2P 2H4

Tel: (613) 232-9634
Fax: (613) 232-3660

E-mail: info@olip-plio.ca
www.olip-plio.ca

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Project Team

Dick Stewart

OLIP Council Chair

Jephtée Elysée

OLIP Council Vice-Chair

Caroline Andrew

OLIP Steering Committee Chair

Clara Freire

Organizational Performance
Development,
City of Ottawa

Carl Nicholson

Executive Director, Catholic
Immigration Centre

Hindia Mohamoud

OLIP Project Director

Jill Murphy

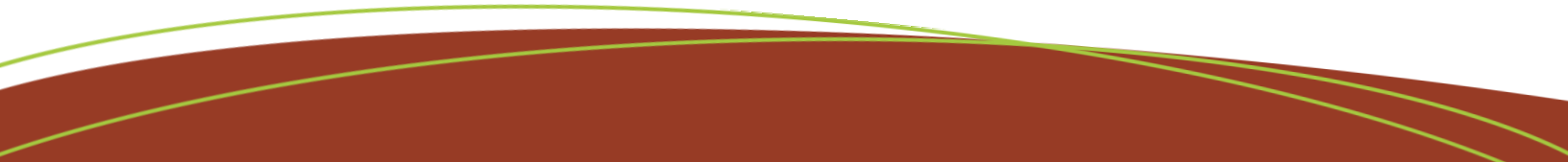
OLIP Outreach and Research
Coordinator

Zoë Mallett

OLIP Administrative Assistant

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I. Introduction

The Ottawa Local Immigration Partnership (OLIP) is an initiative that began in 2009 and is funded by Citizenship and Immigration Canada under the Canada-Ontario Immigration Agreement (COIA). OLIP is one of a number of local immigration partnerships that are active throughout Ontario. Underpinning the establishment of the local immigration partnerships is the recognition of the importance of immigration to the future of Ontario cities and the need for local, coordinated, and collaborative community planning for the attraction, retention and integration of immigrants.

The objectives of OLIP include:

1. Establish a partnership council that brings together all sectors of our community in a strategic planning process.
2. Develop a common understanding of the current reality of immigrants' settlement and integration, challenges and successes, and current solutions. This will be achieved through extensive consultations with immigrants, service providers, and employers.
3. Coordinate and establish linkages with other relevant community planning initiatives.
4. Facilitate the development of a comprehensive, coordinated and collaborative local strategy that will improve the settlement and integration of immigrants in our city. Elements of the strategy will include:
 - Improvements in immigrants' access to an enhanced and coordinated system of settlement and social services
 - Improvements in immigrants' economic integration, including access to the labour market
 - Improvements in community capacity and awareness about immigrants' integration
 - Development of multi-stakeholder partnerships for continued planning, coordination, and sustainability
5. Create a local action plan for the medium-term implementation of the Ottawa Immigrant Settlement and Integration Strategy.
6. Implement the local action plan.

OLIP is lead by the City of Ottawa and the Local Agencies Serving Immigrants¹. Key partners from the following sectors have also been engaged:

- Settlement sector
- Social service providers
- Health service providers
- Education service providers
- Research and training institutions
- Private citizens
- Governments
- Employers
- Community associations
- Collaborative networks and planning groups

Guiding Principles

Underlying the work of OLIP are the following key beliefs:

- Successful settlement and integration of immigrants is essential for our future viability and economic prosperity.
- The collaboration of governments, the private sector, service agencies, health care providers, and the education sector is essential for the successful integration of immigrants.
- There are considerable local strengths and success, on which we must build on in order to fully benefit from immigration.
- OLIP Council partnering institutions are diverse and each partner has a unique and essential contribution to make to the establishment of a seamless and comprehensive system of solutions that support the full integration and inclusion of immigrants.
- The work of the OLIP will model anti-racism, anti-oppression, gender equity, and cultural competency principles.

As indicated in the above objectives, a number of community consultations will inform the development of the Ottawa Immigration Strategy. These consultations include: immigrant settlement organizations; the health, education and social services sector; employers and economic development actors; immigrant and ethno-cultural organizations; and immigrants themselves. This report provides an overview and analysis of four focus groups held with immigrants living in Ottawa.

¹ LASI is a coalition of nine immigrant service agencies: LASI World Skills; Catholic Immigration Centre; Immigrant Women Services Ottawa; Conseil Économique et Social d'Ottawa Carleton; Jewish Family Services; Somali Centre for Family Services; Lebanese and Arab Social Services Agency; Ottawa Chinese Community Service Centre; and, Ottawa Community Immigrant Services Organization.

II. Process and Methodology

As part of a series of community consultations, OLIP held four two-hour focus groups with Ottawa immigrants on March 18th and 19th 2010. Two focus groups were held in English and two in French, with one group in each language for women only. This allowed a space for immigrant women to express themselves freely in a comfortable environment, and provided an opportunity to elicit information that may be specific to or more pronounced for female immigrants.

OLIP intended to host focus groups of no more than 12 participants each, so as to maintain an environment where each participant would have the opportunity to contribute. Recruitment for focus groups was done through OLIP's networks, including local settlement agencies. Recruitment was also done through posters distributed in a number of Ottawa neighbourhoods, in public spaces such as libraries and grocery stores. The response to the invitation to attend focus groups was significant. The eligibility criteria for each focus group was that participants must have been born outside of Canada, and, for reasons related to consent, that they must be over 18 years of age². Each participant was required to sign a consent form that detailed the process and the voluntary and confidential nature of their participation.

The purpose of the focus groups was to obtain information on the settlement and integration experiences of immigrants in Ottawa. The questions posed to the participants related to three themes:

1. Services - Identifying Levels of Satisfaction and Critical Gaps
2. Ottawa as a Welcoming Community - Enablers of Settlement and Integration
3. Immigrants' Contribution to Ottawa - Community Participation

With regard to the first theme, participants were asked questions related to their expectations for services both prior to arrival in Canada and Ottawa, their actual experience with accessing services both prior to and after arrival in Ottawa, and what worked well and what did not.

In relation to the second theme, participants were asked to reflect upon what makes a city welcoming, what about Ottawa was welcoming both prior to and after their arrival, and what Ottawa could do to become a more welcoming community for immigrants.

Finally, in terms of immigrants' contributions to Ottawa, participants were asked to discuss what community contribution means to them, what factors enabled and/or inhibited their contribution as community members in Ottawa, and what Ottawa as a city could do to improve immigrants' contributions. Participants were also offered the chance to share additional reflections on their settlement and integration experiences in Ottawa.

² OLIP recognizes that immigrant youth have a unique and important perspective on settlement and integration, and that this perspective was not captured during these focus groups. This remains an area for future exploration.

III. Participant Demographics

In addition to the focus group discussions, participants were asked to fill out a brief and anonymous demographic survey. 32 participants completed the survey, 14 were men, 18 were women, 14 were Francophone and 18 were Anglophone. The survey asked participants to indicate the following:

1. Their age according to category (Figure 1)
2. The immigration category under which they came to Canada (Figure 2)
3. Whether or not they are currently employed (Figure 3)
4. If employed, what is their job
5. Their highest level of training or education (Figure 4)
6. The area(s) in which they have been educated or trained

Figure 1: Age of Participants

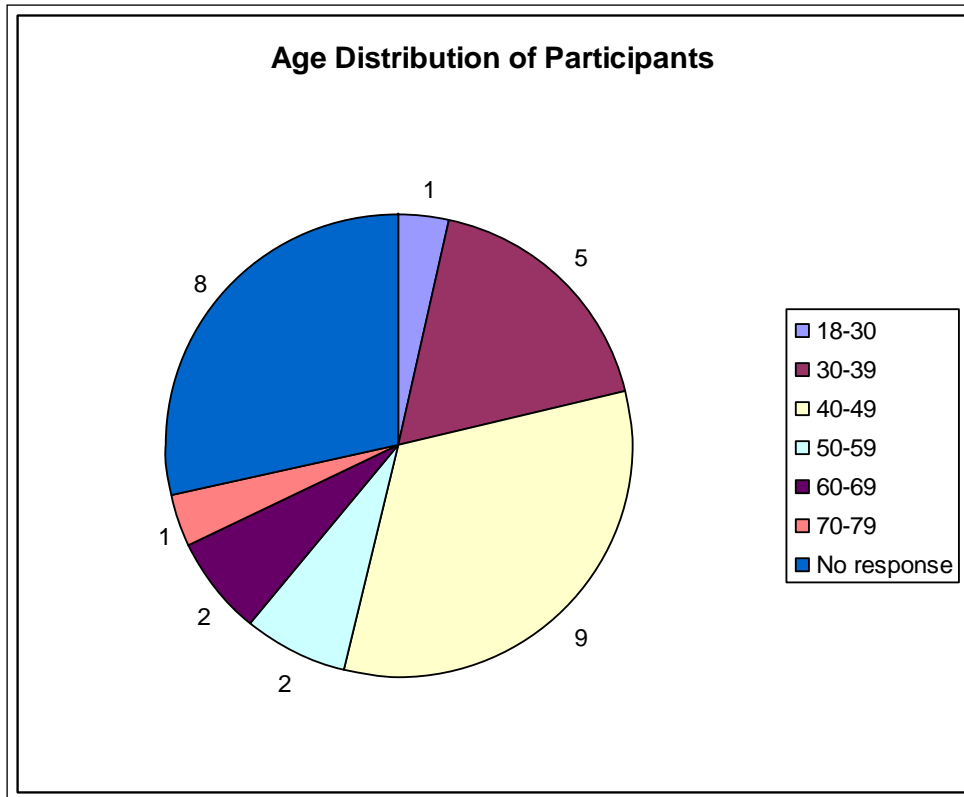


Figure 2: Immigration Status upon Arrival

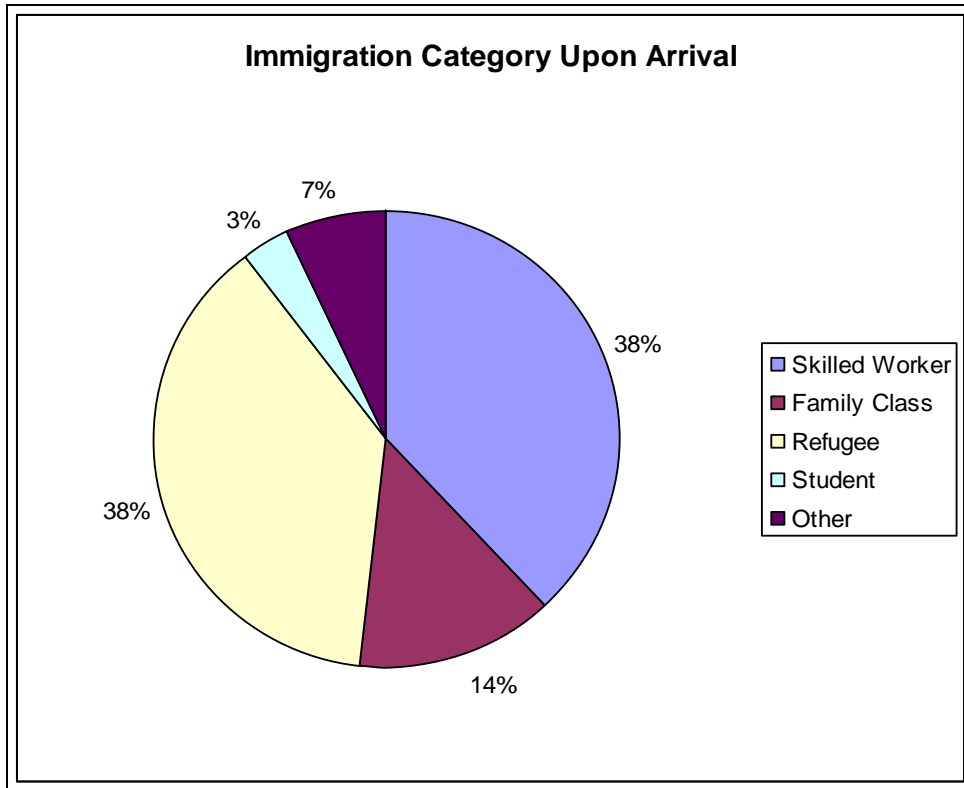


Figure 3: Employment Status of Participants

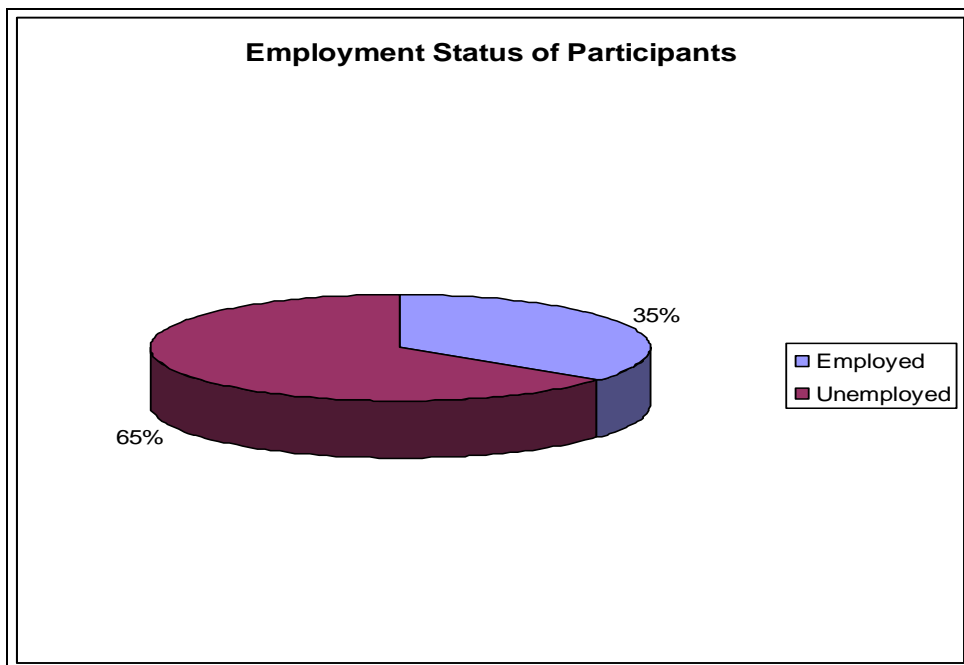
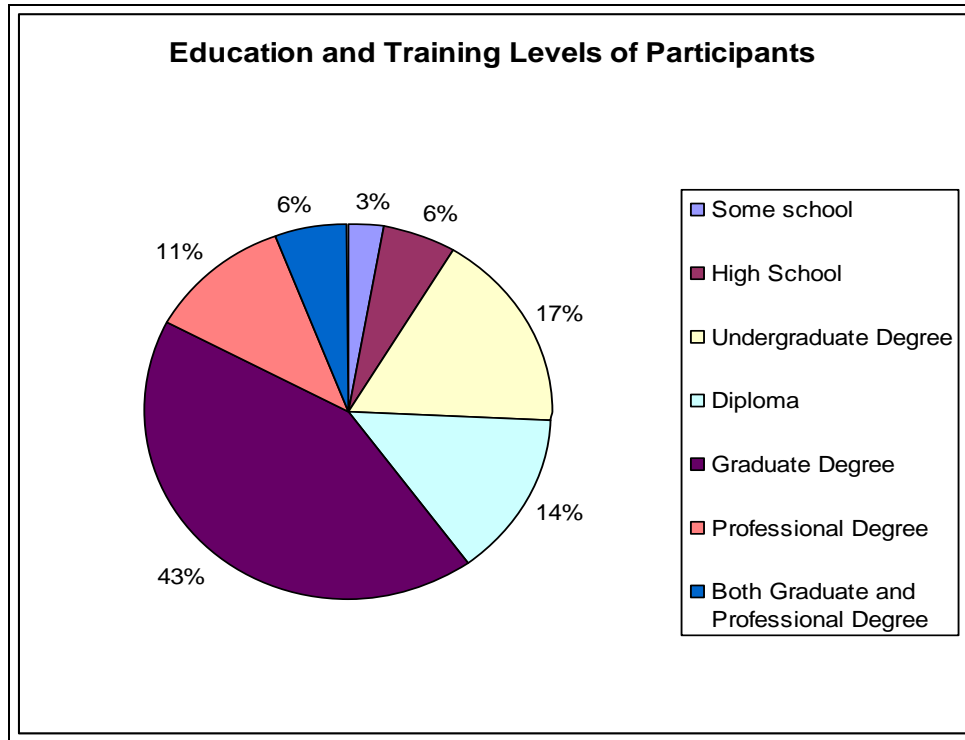


Figure 4: Highest Level of Training



For the 35% of participants that were employed at the time of the survey, their jobs were listed as:

- Program leader
- Part time jobs (including demonstrator for anatomy labs, Arabic language instructor, facilitator)
- Accounts payable coordinator
- Teacher
- Anatomy demonstrator
- Nurses aide
- In field of education (*role not specified*)
- Staff member of YMCA Newcomer Information Centre
- Collections agent
- Community economic development
- Community service

Participants indicated that they were trained in the following areas:

- Paediatric medicine and a Masters degree
- Masters in Education and Masters in ESL
- Project management
- Accounting

- Human resources
- Teaching
- Writing
- PhD in Chemistry
- Economics
- Medicine
- Nutrition (trained in home country), tourism and travel (trained in Canada)
- Inorganic and analytical chemistry
- Education
- Master of Business Administration and a Masters in Project Management
- Senior caregiver
- Business law
- Law
- Health
- Administration, management, information and human resources

It is evident from the survey that participants have both a high level of unemployment, and generally have a high level of training and education.

IV. Overview of the Discussions

Services - Identifying Levels of Satisfaction and Critical Gaps

As indicated above, the first theme discussed was related to services for immigrants, the level of satisfaction among participants with these services, and their understanding of critical gaps in the Ottawa service landscape.

Prior to Arrival

When asked what services they accessed prior to arrival in Ottawa, participants focused on information services. A number of participants indicated that they had accessed the Canadian embassy in their country as a source of information. Others also mentioned Internet sources such as Settlement.org and the Citizenship and Immigration Canada website. Several participants also indicated that they relied on family and friends already living in Canada, either as their sole source of information or to compliment sources such as embassies or websites.

Several participants also discussed barriers they encountered in accessing information services prior to arrival. Some participants came from countries, such as Iran, where the relevant websites were blocked and therefore had no access to information prior to immigrating. Notably, none of the participants in the Francophone women's group had accessed information from the Canadian government prior to arrival.

When asked what types of services and/or information they would have like to have had prior to departure to ease the process of immigration, participants indicated a number of areas in which they lacked essential information prior to and upon arrival in Ottawa. For example, there was a lack of knowledge about processes related to finding immediate housing and renting an apartment in Ottawa, which contributed to stress upon arrival. Some participants spoke about their shock when being referred to shelters when they first arrived.

Participants also indicated a lack of understanding upon arrival of the process for opening a Canadian bank account. One participant spoke about the trouble he had accessing his own finances once he arrived in Canada; he experienced a great amount of stress as he had no access to cash despite having significant savings in a non-Canadian account.

Participants were also unaware, prior to arrival, of the three-month waiting period for Ontario health benefits (OHIP), and indicated that they experienced difficulties in managing unexpected expenses for health care, dental care and prescriptions.

Finally, many participants expressed frustration about the gaps between the information they were given (or not given) prior to arrival and the reality they encountered in Ottawa. The majority of this frustration related to the process of finding work. In particular, the participants

(38%) that came as skilled workers felt that they had not been given accurate information about the difficulties related to finding work, including the challenge of credential and skills recognition, the preference for Canadian experience, and the language requirements for jobs in Ottawa. Some participants stated that if they had known the challenges they would face, they would have begun taking steps to upgrade language and credentials prior to arrival in Canada.

In the Francophone sessions, participants also indicated that the information they received about Canada and Ottawa had promoted the bilingualism of the country. Many immigrated with the impression that they could easily live and work in French but found the reality to be quite different.

Upon Arrival

In terms of services that participants either expected to access once they arrived in Ottawa, or which would have eased their transition, participants provided a great deal of feedback. Primarily, the challenges related to healthcare and finding a family doctor were discussed. Participants were surprised by the difficulty they experienced in accessing a doctor. While this is not a problem that is unique to immigrants in Ottawa, it is compounded by the challenge of finding available doctors that are culturally competent and have capacity in the individual's language.

Housing challenges were also discussed. Participants were very surprised by the significant barriers they faced when attempting to secure accommodations. Several participants stated that they had been turned down by landlords or rental companies despite having sufficient funds due to lack of a Canadian co-signer or a Canadian reference. Participants who found agreeable landlords felt that they were the exception to the rule. They felt that services that support immigrants to find housing and to understand the legalities of renting and the rights of tenants were essential.

In the women's groups, participants discussed the need for better support through the school system for both children and their parents. They spoke about how schools function very differently in Canada from schools in their countries of origin, and how many parents are unprepared for the expectations placed on them by the Ottawa school system. They also spoke about key differences that children face when first arriving in a new school. For example, there are different expectations related to behaviour and areas of study. One participant gave the example that in her country of origin boys and girls study different topics while in Canada all children follow the same curriculum. They felt that better orientation services were needed to ease the transition. It is important to note that there was some discussion among participants on the subject of the school system. While some participants indicated that it posed a significant challenge, others described having been very well supported by their children's school and considered the school system to be one of the areas where they had received the most support and best service.

The women's focus groups also focused on the issue of nutrition and access to basic needs, such as clothing. Some women discussed the need for orientation to Canadian foods and grocery stores, in particular to help them find affordable and nutritious foods. Others discussed the need for support to find affordable clothing for their families.

When asked about their experiences upon arrival in Ottawa, the participants also talked a great deal about information services. Many stated that, although a great deal of information was provided to them, they often found it to be overwhelming and uncoordinated. Similarly, participants described a lack of coordination as they were referred from one service to another. One participant stated: "I felt like a guinea pig". Participants frequently spoke of the need to better coordinate services and to streamline the information that is provided to new immigrants. Many participants favoured a "one-stop shop" approach to services for immigrants. A number of participants also indicated that information services often took the form of written materials, which lacked the "human element". Many participants felt that there was more value added to their experience from a human connection than from pamphlets and websites.

General Challenges

There were a number of comments that were not related to services, but rather to the general challenges participants faced after arriving in Ottawa. The most commonly cited challenge, common to each group of participants regardless of gender or linguistic background, was access to the labour market. This was true for participants who came as skilled immigrants and those who came as students or refugees. It was also true of those who had training in regulated professions and those who did not.

Related to the discussions about labour market challenges, participants also expressed a sense of frustration about the impression of immigrants within the broader community. Several participants indicated that they felt a lack of understanding by Canadian-born community members about the contributions that immigrants have to offer. One participant stated: "when immigrants arrive, they don't come with empty hands and empty heads".

Ottawa as a Welcoming Community - Enablers of Settlement and Integration

What Makes a Community Welcoming?

Participants were initially asked to reflect on what a welcoming community, in general, means to them. The responses to this question can be grouped under three categories.

The first type of responses related to how diversity within communities makes them more welcoming. Participants spoke about the need for communities to promote multiculturalism and diversity. They also spoke about the availability of events that promote integration and that are accessible for all members of the community. Participants also discussed the importance of

spaces that foster community building. One participant spoke about the important role that her church had played in making her feel welcome in Ottawa.

The second category of responses related to the ability to meet basic needs, especially through gainful and rewarding employment. One participant explained that the persistent lack of access to the labour market often makes immigrants wonder if they should return to their country of origin; other participants stated that one cannot feel welcome while being consistently excluded from accessing jobs that match their experience. One participant stated that “the requirement to retrain is not welcoming”.

Finally, participants spoke about welcoming community in terms of being seen to belong by the general community. Some participants spoke about how they felt that, even after many years, the community still sees them as immigrants and how second generation immigrants are also perceived to be “new”. Some participants stated that welcoming activities are “beside the point” when the society as a whole does not feel that immigrants belong. One participant clarified that immigrants did not expect everything to be “given” by the host society, but that a certain amount of support and openness is essential for a community to be welcoming.

The Ottawa Experience

Participants were asked to describe what about Ottawa in particular made them feel welcome, and what could be improved to make Ottawa a more welcoming community.

The participants cited a number of examples of services or conditions that they felt made Ottawa welcoming. One participant cited the Ottawa Public Library as welcoming, as it provides services in many languages. Another participant stated that when she had been in a shelter when she first arrived, she was made to feel very welcome and was supported in a number of ways. Other participants indicated that the schools and religious institutions had made them feel welcome. A number of participants indicated that they found Ottawa to be welcoming at the level of individual people, saying that it is generally a friendly city. Participants used words such as “polite”, “helpful” and “positive attitude” to describe people living in Ottawa.

Participants also shared a number of suggestions about ways in which Ottawa could improve in order to become more welcoming. Some participants felt that, despite Ottawa being a friendly city, improvements are needed on the “human side”. This could come from improving awareness in the community about different cultures and the assets that immigrants bring. Other participants felt that the staff of a number of the city’s services must be better trained and equipped to serve people from different cultural backgrounds. Finally, the health system in particular was described as a difficult system to navigate, which made a number of participants feel unwelcome. Many described having to be very proactive and persistent in order to navigate the system.

Feedback about Integration

Throughout the discussion about welcoming community, the term “integration” was raised a number of times. Participants made a number of important comments related to integration. For example, when discussing what makes a community welcoming, participants stated that Canada must be better at recognizing the holistic value that immigrants bring with them. One group discussed the pressure to integrate, which they feel often actually means that they must assimilate. This was particularly emphasized in the Francophone groups. The majority of participants felt that Ottawa as a host society needs to improve the recognition of what immigrants bring with them.

Also in relation to integration, participants talked about barriers to the labour market and employment. One participant stated: “you cannot achieve integration without achievement of basic needs”. Participants stated that the host society must allow immigrants to make use of the talents and training that they already have. A number of participants adamantly stated overall that integration cannot happen without workforce integration.

Immigrants’ Contribution to Ottawa - Community Participation

When asked what types of contributions immigrants make to the Ottawa community, employment remained a significant theme. Participants indicated that a major contribution that immigrants can make to Ottawa is to be able to use their skills and talents in the labour market.

A number of participants also indicated that volunteering was an important means of engagement with the community. A number of participants, however, stated that becoming active as a volunteer is not always easy. Some participants indicated that they encountered barriers to volunteering that were similar to finding paid work. Many positions required a CV and an interview, and, in the words of one participant, “doors aren’t always open”. In particular, Francophone participants experienced problems finding volunteer placements due to requirements for them to speak English.

Advocacy and organizing among immigrant communities was also seen as an important means of contributing to the community. A number of participants spoke about the importance of activism for immigrant communities; one participant stated: “if you don’t do it, they won’t do it for you”. Many participants raised the importance of immigrant associations for promoting engagement with the community. They felt that the role of these organizations must be strengthened, and that information about organizations should be more readily available. One participant recommended the creation of a directory of immigrant groups that could be made available to new immigrants.

The discussion also addressed the importance of connecting with people from different backgrounds, and not being limited to ones’ own specific group or community. This was seen as

an important way of building a stronger and more holistic community. Several participants cited the HOST program as an effective means to promote relationship building between established Canadians and new immigrants. Participants also discussed the mutual obligations of immigrants and the Canadian-born population. They stated that immigrants must become involved in their broader communities, give back and take action. At the same time, Canadian-born individuals must realize that they are “delegates” for this country, and must be engaged in welcoming new people.

Finally, participants noted that, in terms of community contributions, refugees face additional limitations on what they can do and become involved in. This must be taken into consideration and proper support should be provided to enable refugees to become active community members.

V. Discussion and Analysis

Each focus group provided detailed input on the three key themes identified by OLIP. A review of the discussion leads to the identification of several gaps and critical areas for moving forward.

Information Services

Participants identified a number of gaps in information services. The information accessed by participants varied prior to arrival, but despite this the majority of participants did not feel that they arrived with adequate awareness in particular areas. The most commonly cited gaps related to housing and accessing housing, health care (including the availability of family doctors) and the wait time for OHIP and banking services. Additionally, many participants indicated a gap in what they understood to be true before arrival and the reality they faced after arriving. While the exact nature and content of information received by participants prior to their arrival in Canada cannot be determined, a majority felt that they had been misled about the challenges related to labour market integration. Those who had immigrated as skilled workers in particular felt that they were not provided with sufficient information about the challenges facing immigrants, despite their education and training, when looking for work. Additionally, as discussed above, Francophone participants immigrated with the impression that Ottawa's bilingualism meant that it was possible to live and work in Ottawa using French but found this not to be the case.

These gaps in information point to the need for providing improved information packages for immigrants prior to their arrival in Canada and Ottawa and improved access to formal or "official" sources of information. Many participants stated that they had relied wholly or in part on advice from friends and family prior to their arrival. A number of participants had not accessed government sources of information, such as embassies or websites, at all. It is important to understand why some immigrants do not access official sources of information and to understand how to ensure that the maximum number of immigrants receive relevant, up to date and accurate information about immigrating to Canada. Better access to quality information prior to arrival will help to ensure that immigrants arrive better prepared and experience less stress upon arrival.

Community and Social Services

A number of service gaps that effected participants upon their arrival in Ottawa can also be identified. These include the three-month wait time for OHIP, the shortage of family doctors, and lack of support when navigating Canadian financial institutions, including setting up a bank account and obtaining a credit card. The challenges point to the need for improved information prior to arrival, as discussed above, and for greater support once in Ottawa.

Another significant challenge, discussed by a majority of participants, was the barriers related to accessing housing. This ranged from overt discrimination by landlords to requirements for Canadian co-signers and references when renting apartments. This indicates a need for greater

support for immigrants to understand their rights as tenants and to empower them to negotiate with landlords based on their legal rights. It also points to the need for the community, including housing advocacy groups, to work with landlords to create better awareness about immigrants in order to mitigate such challenges in the future.

Additionally, as indicated in the women's focus groups, parents and children require support from the school system. Interestingly, while some immigrants noted that they faced barriers associated with a lack of support from the school system, others indicated that they had a positive experience with service providers. Additionally, whereas there does not seem to be a clear division between Francophone and Anglophone immigrants in terms of experiences with the school system, differing experiences that appear to be related to what schools their children attended and when were noted. It is also important to note that the participants who had positive experiences did not name specific programs (such as the Multicultural Liaison Officer Program). This might indicate that a specific program was not in place, or might simply indicate a lack of familiarity with the name of the program. The positive experience noted by some participants demonstrates that there is an existing community capacity in an area of significant need that could be extended to meet the needs of a greater number of immigrant families. More understanding of best practices is needed in order to enhance successful approaches.

Coordination of Services

When discussing both information services and broader community and social services, participants emphasized the need for improved coordination. A number of participants, in particular in the Francophone focus groups, indicated that the lack of coordination and difficulty of navigating the "system" led them to increasingly rely on friends and family. They also discussed the disadvantages of relying on friends and family as, despite the best intentions, information is not always reliable. Many participants suggested a "one-stop shop" approach to services and a streamlined approach to distributing information.

Public Awareness

Throughout the discussion, in particular in the context of Ottawa as a welcoming community, participants spoke a number of times about the lack of understanding they faced from Canadian-born individuals. The need to raise awareness about immigrants and the assets and talents they bring was mentioned frequently. This went beyond the need to promote cultural awareness and multiculturalism, although this was certainly part of the discussion. It spoke to a need to increase the understanding, in a deep and meaningful way, that immigrants are part of our community, that they belong and that they have much to offer. It points to the need to create awareness among the general population about immigrants as a community asset and as community builders.

Employment

The issue of barriers to finding gainful and appropriate employment faced by immigrants was a common and urgent theme throughout each discussion. This challenge has obvious implications for the participants' lives that go beyond socio-economic factors, impacting their health and well-being. It is also evident from the discussions that the challenges faced in finding employment have created disillusionment, frustration, and cynicism regarding Ottawa as a welcoming community. As detailed above, employment was at the forefront of discussions related to general challenges faced by immigrants in Ottawa, integration, and immigrants' community contribution. In the demographic survey, 65% of participants indicated that they were unemployed while 66% had either an undergraduate, graduate or professional degree.

It is also clear that, despite the negative impacts that this significant challenge has had on many participants, including to their self-esteem and sense of belonging in Ottawa, participants are extremely persistent and resourceful. While it is important to acknowledge and champion this resourcefulness, we must also seriously question why a significant portion of Ottawa's population is currently living in a situation where they are, essentially, struggling to survive through their own perseverance and menial jobs. This has economic, social and ethical implications.

It is evident that Ottawa must take significant steps towards improving this situation. A number of participants indicated that without access to gainful employment, there is no integration. This has serious implications not just for immigrants themselves but for Ottawa as a community. It is clear that this issue must be addressed as a priority for the community as a whole.

VI. Conclusion

The focus groups with immigrants raised a number of significant issues that will require coordinated planning and community commitment. As discussed above, the results obtained from these focus groups will be drawn upon, along with the results of additional community consultations, to inform the Ottawa Immigration Strategy and action plan.