



Culturally Appropriate COVID-19 Supports Are Only a Phone Call Away Through the Calgary East Zone Newcomers Collaborative

If English is not your first language, it is not going to be the first language that comes out of your mouth when you are tired or distraught – even if you speak English fluently. So, in times of crisis, having timely access to our multilingual line and cultural brokers is so important. Being able to work collaboratively with tried, tested and true crisis communication lines like 211 allowed us to ensure that we have the best practices and legitimized the need for first-language support, even post-COVID.

The Centre for Newcomers is what's known as a settlement- or immigrant-serving agency. Our primary focus is to assist newcomers with their journey in Canada, including permanent residents, undocumented people, temporary foreign workers, refugees, and others. The other piece of our work is to help the community welcome these newcomers.

Our primary funder, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, created zones in each city and assigned a settlement agency to do the outreach for all newcomers so they wouldn't fall through the cracks. One of the things we were tasked with was to figure out how the 17 agencies can work together for all newcomers in the community, and we've been working with our Calgary East Zone Newcomers Collaborative (CENC) since early 2020 to do this.

This Equity in Action story is distilled from an interview with Anila Lee Yuen, President & CEO of the Centre for Newcomers and Chair of the Calgary East Zone Newcomers Collaborative. The interview took place in September 2021, and its details should be considered within the context of that time period.

Springing into action to provide culturally appropriate support

When the second wave of COVID happened, our Collaborative realized that we needed to have a coordinated and larger-scale response, especially when we heard that the hotspots in Calgary were in the northeast, where most of our constituents live. So, we came up with a plan to mobilize the Calgary East Zone Newcomers Collaborative to assist in the pandemic. We put that plan forward to the City of Calgary, and the mayor then took it to the premier. We're very grateful for the province and the city saying, yeah – do it, and quickly moving the funding along and for the federal government to then step up and say – yes, there's more need right now and here is how we're going to support you, beyond the base funding that they provide us already.

We've been able to move forward with that positive response since December 2020, and we helped nearly 15,000 individuals in the first six months alone. On average, we receive 25 to 30 calls a day on our multilingual line which ActionDignity runs utilizing a model called cultural brokers. We hired community members from the ethnocultural communities who are well known and respected, who understand the needs of the community and who speak those first languages, to answer the phones and to help people in first language. We have a very integrated system through Immigrant Services Calgary and their Gateway database. When someone calls, they get the appropriate language support and the cultural broker enters all their information into the database, and that sends a ping to all the different referrals. So, the Centre for Newcomers will

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get the email alert saying, here's this family, they're from this group, here are their dietary needs, this is how many there are, there are two children under the age of 2 who require diapers, and so on. For people who are isolating or COVID-positive, our turnaround rate is within 24 hours for them to receive their food hamper and they'll get referrals to other organizations to find the best-suited person who speaks their language to help with other needs, like income support or mental health. Then, there's a feedback loop for providers to say, yes, we made the contact, yes, we're offering the service.

We found that 95% of the calls we get, their first need is food security. So, in terms of equity, there is an issue with access to culturally appropriate and comforting food in a dignified way. People experience barriers in getting the food they need. At the Centre for Newcomers, we have a program called EthniCity Catering, which started about 22 years ago as a community kitchen for immigrant women and evolved into a social enterprise. Because we have a commercial kitchen with certified, trained instructors and kitchen helpers, we were asked by the community if we could help with food hampers and help relief cook for some shelters and other groups that weren't able to bring in volunteers. Last year we were able to provide culturally comforting food hampers for 26,000 Calgarians.



Recruiting new partners to address transportation and language barriers

We've advertised with 211 around a city-wide response for all COVID needs. In the first wave, the Centre for Newcomers partnered with Uber to offer rides to people who needed to go get COVID tested, or go to the doctor, or pick up their groceries. Now Uber is partnering with 211 Alberta through the provincial government, and you can call 211 directly or use our multilingual line to get people rides to their vaccinations.

We are very clear that this is a response in the hot zones for COVID. We want to bring down the number of COVID cases in the hot zones, the hot zones happen to be our constituents and our constituent area, so we feel like we're the best suited to do this. We knew we must do so in a way that exemplifies and showcases the dignity of these communities, and that addresses and find ways to put the spotlight on systemic discrimination and issues that have been exacerbated by COVID. Then we started thinking bigger and finding ways to move forward to not only assist in the acute situation, but how to influence policy? How do we then influence practice?

For example, having interpreters that you can call on a telephone line is a good thing as a stop-gap measure. It cannot and never should have been able to take over from real professionals that speak the same first language and understand the cultural nuances to assist a person,

especially when it comes to their health. You want to be able to build a trusting relationship with the practitioner who is helping you, and you can't do that through interpretation. That must be done in first language, so that's one of the things we know needs to change.

Because of COVID, 211 has moved across the country. There's nothing to say that it's going to continue after COVID, but it needs to stay. The wonderful work that the Distress Centre does operating 211 in Calgary needs to continue, as well as our collaboration. Those are best practices that are going to help.

Sustaining momentum for equity-driven approaches

We've proved that it's not too difficult to create a multilingual line with multilingual people. In Alberta we've got 811. Why can't we have actual teams of cultural brokers working for 811? It isn't that expensive in the grand scheme of social return on investment. It isn't that expensive at all to be able to run a line like that or put that technology together. We need to be moving towards cultural brokers on a larger scale. We need to be moving towards professionals that speak first language and including the Indigenous community, and I think that that'll make a huge difference on our indicators of health moving forward.

To provide people services in an equitable manner, in a way that is going to be the easiest for them, you put in the infrastructure and pay people proper wages to be able to do a proper job. Many international medical graduates are not getting jobs in their field. Answering 811 and helping people in their first language is exactly the kind of job that they should be doing. And the thing is, they speak English fluently as well so they can take an English call if specific languages aren't needed. There are no redundancies in this. It's breaking down the barriers of the systemic inequities and racism that we often see. That's why it's systemic, because inadvertently, often, it's just built into the system in such a way and we've all been made to believe that it costs too much, and it doesn't.

Building trust and sharing power to promote collaboration towards a shared goal

When people ask me how I was able to get all those CEOs and organizations together in the Collaborative, my response is that I spent 5 years prior to this connecting socially, for example outside of working hours or over meals, and

just getting to know different people in organizations and building trust relationships. If you spend the time to build relationships with people when there's not a crisis — and get to know people and their personalities, respect the way that they think, the way that they work and the value of everything that they're doing —when a crisis happens, then it's easy to pull together. We were successful because everybody trusted each other and, if they didn't know each other, there was enough trust amongst the other people who did.

The other piece is the decentralization of power and leadership. Somebody must be the Chair, we all get that, it's just the way that our world works. But the Centre for Newcomers has no more power, no more money, no more anything than any of the other organizations. In fact, we don't get the most funding out of this Collaborative because we don't require it. It was really based on equity in terms of who has the skill set to do what and what is needed right now. Based on that, we created a joint budget together and we put in whatever any group said they absolutely need to do the job that they signed up for. There was no questioning one another — which again, speaks to the trust among partners.

LESSONS LEARNED:

- 1** Building trusting relationships with people before there's a crisis and getting to know them and respect how they work will make it easier to pull together when there is a crisis.
- 2** Characteristics of a successful collaborative model include decentralized power and leadership, and funding shared equitably based on what work each organization can do to address community needs.
- 3** Multilingual phone lines staffed by cultural brokers from the communities they're serving proved accessible and effective for newcomers to get needed support during the pandemic. This model should be continued and expanded.
- 4** Having interpreters on a telephone line is only a stop-gap measure. People need to be able to talk directly and build trust with professionals who speak their first language and understand their culture, especially when it comes to their health.

BACKGROUND

Since 1988, the [Centre for Newcomers](#) has been a key resource for immigrants and refugees of all nationalities in Calgary. A social profit organization, the Centre for Newcomers views the integration of newcomers as a two-way process of experience, influence and impact between newcomers and the communities that welcome them.

The [Calgary East Zone Newcomers Collaborative](#) consists of 17 community-serving organizations that welcome newcomers in East Calgary and support them with all needs through the group's collective free services. The zonal approach, created by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada is a community model for inclusion for all newcomers to Calgary. Because of the ongoing pandemic, the Collaborative has created a rapid response specifically to help newcomers and ethnocultural communities with all of their ongoing COVID-related needs.

[ActionDignity](#) is a community-based organization that facilitates the collective voice of Calgary's ethnocultural communities towards full civic participation and integration through collaborative action.

[Immigrant Services Calgary](#) provides a broad range of comprehensive programs and services to facilitate successful settlement and integration of immigrants and refugees in Canada.

[Gateway](#) is a collaborative platform that shares a standardized needs assessment, newcomer personalized planning and referral methodology across different agencies.

[Distress Centre Calgary](#) provides 24-hour crisis support, professional counselling, youth peer support and referrals through 211 and programs at Safe Communities Opportunity and Resource Centre (SORCe) – all at no cost.

[211 Alberta](#) is an essential service that helps Albertans find the right resource or service for whatever issue they need help with, at the right time. 211 is available 24/7 by phone, text and chat. The service is free, confidential and available in over 170 languages over the phone.

[811 Health Link](#) is a telephone service that provides free 24/7 advice and general health information for Albertans. Callers have options to speak to a variety of health care professionals including registered nurses, dietitians, dementia specialists and mental health and rehabilitation clinicians.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, Health Equity, Vulnerable Population, Immigration, Intersectoral Action

To learn more about the initiative described in this story, contact the National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health at nccdh@stfx.ca.

Do you have an idea for an Equity in Action story? If you have heard of other health equity-promoting COVID-19 pandemic response initiatives in Canada that we should share, please let us know.