

# NEWCOMERS WITH DISABILITIES FORUM

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

**Accessibility:** the process of removing barriers to create an inclusive environment for all

**Accommodation:** the process of removing barriers, upon request, for an individual with a disability

**NBP:** Network Building Project

**NWD or NwD:** Newcomers with Disabilities

**PwD:** People with Disabilities

**PWD:** Provincial Disability Benefits

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## NEWCOMERS WITH DISABILITIES FORUM EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Newcomers with Disabilities Forum brought together disability and newcomer organizations to address the following question: **“How can we work better as a disability service community to improve services for newcomers with disabilities?”**

Opening remarks focused on ways each of us can work towards being more accessible and inclusive toward newcomers with disabilities simply by changing our perspective. To focus the discussion, a presentation outlined the major challenges faced by newcomers with disabilities. Based on an online survey and five focus groups conducted prior to the forum, the following issues were identified:

[BARRIERS TO ACQUIRING INFORMATION](#)  
[NEED FOR ONE NAVIGATOR](#)  
[INADEQUATE SERVICES](#)

[CHANGE GOVERNMENT POLICY](#)  
[ROLE OF VOLUNTEERS](#)  
[NWD HELPING EACH OTHER](#)

A panel of experts representing disability organizations, newcomer organizations and focus group participants commented on issues discussed during the presentation, as follows:

[SYSTEM IS BROKEN](#)  
[VALUE OF PEER SUPPORT AND NETWORKING](#)  
[ROLE OF NEIGHBOURHOOD HOUSES](#)  
[DEVELOPING A WELCOME GUIDE](#)

[ANNUAL FACE-TO-FACE CONVERSATIONS](#)  
[CONSOLIDATION OF SERVICES](#)  
[COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT EVENTS](#)

Forum participants were asked to consider practical solutions to the identified problems. A facilitated discussion and breakout sessions resulted in the following recommendations:

### COLLABORATION BETWEEN ORGANIZATIONS

1. [UMBRELLA NETWORK](#)
2. [CENTRALIZED KNOWLEDGE HUB](#)
3. [JOINT TRAINING FOR NAVIGATORS](#)
4. [USE EXISTING RESOURCES](#)

### GOVERNMENT FUNDING

5. [CROSS-SECTORAL FUNDING](#)
6. [SMALL-SCALE PILOT PROJECTS](#)
7. [DISABILITY LENS](#)
8. [FUNDING PROPOSALS](#)
9. [HOLISTIC WRAPAROUND SERVICES](#)

### GOVERNMENT POLICY

10. [CHANGE POLICIES ON PWD BENEFITS](#)
11. [NEEDS BASED CRITERIA](#)
12. [DECISION MAKERS IN THE ROOM](#)

### [BENEFITS OF ENHANCING SERVICES TO PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES, INCLUDING NEWCOMERS](#)

Closing remarks reflected a hope for continuing the conversation, developing a network and seeing the forum recommendations reflected in government policy.

The Network Building Project presents:

## NEWCOMERS WITH DISABILITIES FORUM

On November 9, 2022, 91 participants -- 48 in person and 43 online -- gathered in downtown Vancouver to address the question: "How can we work better as a disability service community to improve services for newcomers with disabilities?" Newcomers were defined as all immigrants, refugees and migrants to Canada, whether they arrived yesterday or 20 years ago.

The Newcomers with Disabilities Forum was presented as part of the Network Building Project, a collaborative initiative co-led by the Disability Foundation and Disability Alliance BC, and co-sponsored by MOSAIC. To identify the major challenges facing newcomers with disabilities, a survey was circulated and five online focus groups, with an average attendance of five participants per group, were conducted prior to the forum in English, Farsi, Mandarin and Arabic.

At the forum, data from the survey and focus groups were presented and participants asked to consider actionable solutions to the problems identified. A facilitated discussion and breakout brainstorming sessions, led by a moderator and panel of experts, followed the presentation. Recommendations were made in three areas: improved collaboration between disability and newcomer organizations, changes in government funding and changes in government policy.

### OPENING REMARKS

Hugo Velazquez, Senior Manager of Community Outreach, Advocacy and Migrant Worker Programs, MOSAIC

MOSAIC created the accessibility for newcomers program to start a conversation and advocate for the rights of people with disabilities. This work is highly emotional, personal, and can get very complicated. MOSAIC wants to plant a seed in settlement agencies to consider people with disabilities: understanding their barriers and finding solutions to overcome them. Each of us can make a change and work towards being more accessible, inclusive, and ensure we are doing all we can for folks with disabilities to better their lives and overall outcomes.

### PRESENTATION: DATA COLLECTED FROM NEWCOMERS WITH DISABILITIES

Adrienne Fitch, Project Coordinator, Network Building Project

### BARRIERS TO ACQUIRING INFORMATION

The key barrier identified by newcomers with disabilities was a general lack of awareness about existing disability services on the part of settlement workers, newcomer organizations and even disability organizations themselves. When contacting agencies for specific services and help, focus group participants often faced rejection, evasiveness and a lack of quality referrals. For example, they reported being given a list of organizations and told to Google the information themselves, which many found difficult in the face of language and cultural barriers. The information barrier is

compounded by the lack of training given to settlement workers regarding disability services. To overcome this barrier, one focus group recommended establishing a consolidated referral network serving the entire disability service community.

#### NEED FOR ONE NAVIGATOR

Rather than being expected to conduct their own research and “jump through hoops” to access services, focus group participants overwhelmingly preferred to work with a single navigator, a person who does all the necessary research and legwork. They also identified a need for better follow-up and advocacy from disability organizations, particularly in the area of applying for disability benefits, and for greater availability of interpreting services.

#### INADEQUATE SERVICES

The greatest number of service gaps identified by focus groups fell into the categories of services for the blind, mental health, caring for family members and long waits for medical and disability services. Blind participants reported constant rejection and disappointment when seeking help with shopping, cooking, cleaning, paperwork and accompaniment in public. Lack of coverage for counseling and talk therapy, as well as a fear of being medicated or locked up without consent, were identified by participants with mental health diagnoses. The severe lack of trained caregivers due to the Covid pandemic, as well as the difficulty in affording increasing caregiver costs, were identified by participants caring for family members at home. Long waits for specialized medical services, repair of adaptive equipment and accessible housing were also identified.

#### CHANGE GOVERNMENT POLICY

Focus group participants’ recommendations for changes in government policy mostly addressed eligibility for services and applying for disability benefits. They reported being turned down for services based on age, length of time in Canada and immigration status, and many found eligibility criteria to be arbitrary and unfair. Applying for disability benefits was also identified as an overwhelming, difficult and expensive process with unfair eligibility criteria. Disability benefits themselves, and the policies governing them, were also considered inadequate and even discriminatory.

#### ROLE OF VOLUNTEERS

Focus group participants acknowledged that some volunteers need adequate training, depending on the disability being served. More important than specific training, however, was the need for volunteers to either be paid or to take their role seriously. Newcomers with disabilities do not want to be made to feel the volunteer is doing them a huge favour and do not want to hear, “I’m busy this week, maybe I can help you next week.” Participants who have had trouble finding reliable volunteers said they hoped to find a way to connect with established volunteer networks.

#### NWD HELPING EACH OTHER

Focus group participants expressed a surprising amount of motivation and enthusiasm to help other newcomers with disabilities through skill sharing, mentoring and networking, especially once they are settled and have access to employment and housing. They also acknowledged a need for organizational support for such initiatives, due to the difficulty of setting up programs on their own.

Also identified was a need for help, once they arrive in Canada, to connect with their own communities and find other newcomers with a common language and culture.

## COMMENTS FROM PANEL OF EXPERTS

### SYSTEM IS BROKEN

Working for a disability organization, it is easy for us to assume we know all about these issues. But when you hear it reported back, you realize one of the biggest things the disability and settlement sectors have in common are the shortcomings of services: the wait lists, nonsensical eligibility criteria, the lack of services available. How do we provide information that equips people to better navigate the system when the system itself is a bit broken?

### VALUE OF PEER SUPPORT AND NETWORKING

I want to talk about the value of peer-to-peer support because that's the core of what we do. We match a family that's looking for support with our group of volunteers and another family that can connect with them and help them navigate things. Honestly, the huge value of that is just the emotional support in being able to connect with another family who gets it, who's been there. Everyone who works with us has a family member with a disability. My teenage son has a rare genetic disorder and when he was born, it was rare, no one knew anything about it. We didn't get a lot of information from doctors so I figured out quickly that the people who were going to support me were going to be other families who had been through the same thing, a few steps ahead of me along that path. They empowered me when I felt terrified and lost. Trying to understand how the system worked was not easy, so finding other families was sort of the best way to get real information. There are things that doctors or social workers will not tell you but families will give you the real skinny of how it works, how they were able to do some work-arounds to qualify for a program. There is really a lot of value in that and probably one of our best ways to build community and guide each other.

### ROLE OF NEIGHBOURHOOD HOUSES

I've been working in the settlement sector for many decades and worked 17 years in Neighbourhood Houses doing settlement work and other things. Neighbourhood Houses are really great places to convene, connect people with community and help instill a sense of belonging for everybody. It's really important to identify the gaps and problems, and in this room and in the virtual room we have a lot of assets in terms of knowledge, relationships and potential networks. What you are doing here is bringing that together so we can make a difference and I think all of us have great ideas around policy changes. I hear a lot in the research and focus groups around the power of connecting with community and volunteerism. All of these things are happening in Neighbourhood Houses so I think there's a role here for these organizations. I lead the consortium of Neighbourhood Houses in Vancouver and we do have resources over the next eight months to do trainings, bring awareness and start developing more of these types of conversations. So that's something we could totally explore.

### DEVELOPING A WELCOME GUIDE

When the Syrian refugee crisis was happening, we were getting calls at least once a week on our info line service from community-sponsored refugee teams saying, "Where do we find accessible housing? We have a refugee, a newcomer using a wheelchair, walker or crutches who can't find accessible housing." My staff talked about it with a combination of humour and frustration because if anyone

knew about accessible housing, we wanted to know too; there just wasn't any! We desperately wanted to be able to help those teams welcome the refugees and their families and help them connect and integrate into the community. But we couldn't solve that, and we began to realize quickly that we didn't know enough to give knowledgeable help to newcomers, even though we had newcomers in our program.

Soon after that, a colleague button-holed me at our adaptive camp and said, "Do you know there are newcomers with disabilities?" I said yes, we have all these people calling us and we don't know what to say. "Well, I am one, and I am also a translator." She basically just opened my eyes to the enormous gap between settlement workers and disability community workers, each specializing in their own areas. We discussed ways to make the process she herself had traversed a little bit more friendly, to share the knowledge our peer support communities had already learned by navigating the system, and to make information available to people dealing with language and cultural barriers when our organization does not have a lot of translated services. So that became a four-year odyssey to create the welcome guide for people with disabilities, which is soon to be released in January 2023.

Along the way, we realized we needed to focus on areas of our own expertise, so this welcome guide is for newcomers with mobility and physical disabilities. But our hope is that anyone can take it, replace the content and make it work for their own community. What I learned is that our organization needed to improve our knowledge of the settlement system. The social worker who runs our info line service amazes me constantly by how much she knows, but if you're not working in it daily, you don't have all of the context. This newcomer guide is informed by all the things we learned. We made a strategic decision that we couldn't solve the equity or structural problems. So we wanted to try and fill the knowledge gap for settlement workers and newcomers with disabilities, and give the context that the other welcome guides aren't capable of offering to people with disabilities.

#### ANNUAL FACE-TO-FACE CONVERSATIONS

We need to raise awareness and that comes with gathering together maybe once a year, getting representatives from each organization to meet face-to-face and have discussions like we are doing today. That makes it real for me. I can go back and cascade information, create a network, have an on-line platform for people to visit. But what happens when they come into the doors of the organization? We need to have that knowledge of what's out there, and that only comes by meeting together whether annually or whatever we feel the need may be. Not only does it spark conversation but also kind of troubleshoots some of the issues we are seeing throughout the year. That is usually where we hit our roadblocks: we have great ideas, get an online platform, documents and resources, and we're all gung ho but after three or four months no one is using it. We need that boost of meeting once a year.

#### CONSOLIDATION OF SERVICES

I think the biggest issue and challenge is getting people motivated to navigate the systems, eventually on their own but they need a lot of help at first. I encounter a lot of people who are born and raised here and they still don't have a clue as to how to navigate disability services. It is really challenging, and not because of man-made barriers. I think it is a lack of coordination, a lack of consolidation of services for people who already have a lot of barriers in their personal life. I think this forum is a great way to bring us together to talk about this challenge. The same synergy we have gathered today could

benefit the wider circle of people, not just newcomers but anyone who has a disability and faces barriers to accessing education, social services, entertainment, anything they want to enjoy a full life.

#### COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT EVENTS

My comment is to the point made earlier about the loneliness and isolation experienced by newcomers with disabilities and their need for community engagement. There are many opportunities to work together with groups who specialize in peer support. We do fun, interesting, in-person events. We need to learn from you about how best to welcome, support and make meaningful experiences for newcomers, along with the folks with disabilities who want to share their knowledge and learn from others. There are probably many peer support groups that would love to be better at supporting newcomers by having those fun, engaging, isolation-breaking events that build connections and, hopefully, help newcomers find a supportive community here.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS - FACILITATED DISCUSSION AND BRAINSTORMING SESSIONS

##### COLLABORATION BETWEEN ORGANIZATIONS

###### *Action #1: UMBRELLA NETWORK*

- The disability sector does not have an umbrella organization, which is why the Network Building Project was created. Start by providing a contact list so that forum participants can connect and continue the conversation.
- Work to establish an umbrella network for disability organizations along the lines of AMSSA and the Vancouver Local Immigration Partnership (VLIP). This would help us collaborate to promote inclusion, share insights, trouble shoot issues, avoid duplication and increase opportunities for mutual learning and support.
- Distribute regular newsletters to highlight various activities.

###### *Action #2: CENTRALIZED KNOWLEDGE HUB*

- Disability sector workers are already stretched for time in providing information upon request while still doing their jobs.
- Establish a cross-sectoral, centralized online platform or knowledge hub for accessing resources with links to all non-profit and for-profit organizations working with disabilities.
- Include an internal map of all organizations, or internal online portal for all organizations to register.
- Ensure the platform is completely accessible and available in all languages.
- City of Vancouver website should be the main hub as most immigrants and family members would search that site before any other; then create subcategories.

(Note: A list of resources available to the disability community has not been included in this report. Developing and circulating such a list is part of the recommendation made in Action #2: Centralized Knowledge Hub).

### *Action 3: JOINT TRAINING FOR NAVIGATORS*

- A website of disability resources, even accessible and translated, is not enough. Newcomers with disabilities want individualized support, or navigators, helping them in person.
- Have a specialist or point person at each settlement agency, who is connected to disability organizations, support newcomers with disabilities to navigate various issues.
- Have joint training sessions (training the trainer) with cross-sector feedback on new initiatives.
- Have an equal number of disability and settlement workers review each case from both perspectives to find a common outcome.
- Have a pool of translators and interpreters that is non-profit and free for community members to access.

### *Action 4: USE EXISTING RESOURCES*

- Use existing resources to connect newcomers with disabilities with volunteers, other families, and services.
- Find ways to ensure the effective use and promotion of platforms such as BC211 and iVolunteer.
- Piggyback on what is already happening in terms of collaboration between sectors and bring services together so people don't have to choose between options. No need to reinvent the wheel and do time-consuming legwork if resources are already available.
- Conduct an environmental scan to identify existing resources.

## GOVERNMENT FUNDING

### *Action 5: CROSS-SECTORAL FUNDING*

- Provide incentives to allow a more collaborative approach when applying for funding rather than have organizations fight each other for the same amount of money.
- Funding requirements should take intersecting barriers into account.
- Form cross-sectoral relationships and advocacy teams, with disabled representatives from each agency, to promote cross-sectoral funding for newcomers with disabilities.
- Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) gives funding to provincial organizations, and Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) gives federal funding. ESDC has been reaching out to disability organizations across Canada to look at improvements in services and to provide funding for various projects.
- Capitalize on ESDC's desire to improve navigation of services to organizations across Canada and incorporate newcomers' needs into these services.

### *Action 6: SMALL-SCALE PILOT PROJECTS*

- Set up small-scale pilot projects to measure the effectiveness of initiatives from this forum, such as the navigator role.
- Initial funding is more likely if it's less money for a shorter term. This would provide a solid base to request more funding and long-term implementations to service deliveries.
- Organizations must work together, be collaborative, prove we can do it and that it is a good idea, and then have it move to a larger-scale option.



#### *Action 7: DISABILITY LENS*

- Newcomers with disabilities are not reflected in the proposals we are submitting for government funding.
- Settlement organizations should be using the disability lens in all of our programs, such as the migrant workers program, employment, settlement and housing. When applying for funding, disability is not considered a priority, and it should be.

#### *Action 8: FUNDING PROPOSALS*

- Find and identify the specific gap (such as a disability resource person).
- Write a proposal that shows you have done the research, and have outlined exactly how much money this proposal will cost. Doing the legwork FOR the funding proposal will greatly increase your chance to receive money.
- Letter writing campaigns still work. Write to your MLA.

#### *Action 9: HOLISTIC WRAPAROUND SERVICES*

- More holistic wraparound services that include mental health and increase accessibility.
- Work with health authorities to create a combined clinic with an Occupational Therapist, social worker, family doctor, peer support, etc. so that everything is put together.
- Start at the source to help people navigate, access services and find support quickly and easily.
- Share our initiatives with newcomer organisations to get feedback, so that as soon as they arrive in the country, newcomers with disabilities have sort of a package of financial supports that follow them until they have an accessible place to live.

### GOVERNMENT POLICY

#### *Action 10: CHANGE POLICIES ON PWD BENEFITS*

- PWD amounts leave people below the poverty line. Housing issues are massive because there's no possible way to find a housing unit for the \$375 shelter amount.
- People with disabilities need greater support financially when language barriers exist, including deaf and hard of hearing folks.
- Reduce the time to wait to apply for benefits once somebody arrives to Canada.
- Eliminate clawback or increase the amount people with disabilities can earn while still receiving benefits.
- Increase benefits and include funding for all medications needed for disability management, not just a certain list of medications and abysmally low amounts.

#### *Action 11: NEEDS BASED CRITERIA*

- Focus on more needs-based rather than diagnosis-based services.
- People who do not have developmental disabilities but still cope with significant physical challenges are poorly supported. Broaden criteria to improve access to caregivers via Community Living BC (CLBC).
- Remove system ageism and factor in the needs of single people who lack personal support systems to help them.
- Most policies need to be revisited and enhanced.

### *Action 12: DECISION MAKERS IN THE ROOM*

- We need the municipal, provincial, territorial, and federal government representatives that can make policy changes all together in the room.
- Communicate to better understand their challenges and barriers.
- Find ways to actually create solutions that are mutually beneficial to government and to individuals, organizations and communities at large.

### BENEFITS OF ENHANCING SERVICES TO PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES, INCLUDING NEWCOMERS

Enhanced support to people with disabilities, including newcomers, will bring the following benefits:

1. Reduced financial burden and stress on health care systems when people with disabilities have sufficient access to care and support
2. Increased participation in local economy for people with disabilities to be employed, run small businesses, pay tax, help others, etc.
3. Increased opportunities for caregivers of people with disabilities to participate in the economy
4. Reduced stress on social welfare systems when people with disabilities have more support and opportunities

### CLOSING REMARKS

Anu Mehta, Moderator

This is the first conversation we have had and I think the most important thing we can do is commit to continue developing our network and the relationships we created here. Then we can come to a point where we can speak with a unified voice to decision makers in government and hopefully, the outcome of today's brainstorming will be reflected in government policy. This gathering was possible because we all share a common vision and goal, and this is only the beginning of a very long and rich dialogue. I hope we will stay in touch, keep communicating, and keep working toward creating a more inclusive society.

This all took an enormous amount of effort to get going, and I would like to thank the Disability Foundation, Disability Alliance BC, MOSAIC and the Network Building Project for bringing us all together. The study shared by Adrienne Fitch was really informative and laid down the framework for this discussion. I want to thank our panel of experts who shared their valuable time and knowledge. I also thank the focus group participants and all our attendees here today, without whom this would not have been made possible. We acknowledge Vancouver Coastal Health and the City of Vancouver for funding the Network Building Project. Thank you.