Minutes: SISC Working Group
Thursday May 1, 2020 - 2:00 pm to 3:00 pm (Virtual Meeting via Zoom)

Present: Paulina Wyrzykowski (TSLIP - The Neighbourhood Group), Cyril Ayeobore (TDSB), Adriana Pena (TSLIP – WoodGreen Community Services), Corina Carvallo (Skills for Change), Tahir Khan (TNLIP – TNO The Neighbourhood Organization), Acel Clemente (Central YMCA), Timothy Maxwell (Kensington-Bellwoods Community Legal Services), Cindy Kwan (Mothercraft), Pam Cardwell (TWLIP-Job Start), Hafiz Khan (TNO-Toronto), Sheeba Colvine (Toronto North LIP), Isobel Goddard (Warden Woods), Trudy Small (COSTI).

Regrets: Catherine McNeely (University Settlement), Adeena Niazi (AWO), Rakesh Bhardwaj (CultureLink), Valentina Briceno- Strocchia (Urban Matters), Ruth Lee (CARE Center for Internationally Educated Nurses), Kaitlin Murray (JVS Toronto), Nestor Abdon, Nooria Amiri (AWO), Sharifa Sharif (University Settlement), Grace Macdonald (HWTC), Andrew Ssawe (SRCHC), Maimuna Gaye (City of Toronto), Jeanie Son (YSM).

Minutes: Adriana Pena (TSLIP – WoodGreen Community Services).

I= Information   Di=Discussion   Dc=Decision   A=Action

	Agenda Item
I	**Welcome and Introductions** Cindy Kwan from Mothercraft was welcomed to the working group. Cindy is Glory Ressler's replacement.
I	**Results - Needs Assessment Survey: emerging needs in newcomer communities during COVID-19 (Adriana)** • The information was collected with a survey that ran from April 15 to April 22. • 85 surveys were completed by representatives of 51 organizations located throughout the GTA. • Respondents were asked to note specific emergent newcomer needs in 11 categories. • Feedback will be used to inform the LIPs participation in various community response efforts. Top emerging needs: 1. Employment 2. Access to Services 3. Housing 4. Food Security 5. Mental Health 6. Education Themes were also identified within each emerging need category.

1. **Employment**

Job Loss/Financial Strain

- High number of newcomers laid off or concerned they soon will be laid off, loss of hours, loss of secondary part-time work
- Industry-specific layoffs: non-essential, small businesses, self- employed closing rapidly, not always eligible for CERB/ROE
- Many newcomers are experiencing acute financial hardship

Job searching & Access to Resources

- Limited job opportunities. Hiring suspended, interviews on hold, high number of job seekers
- Newcomers have concerns about post-pandemic employment and what the labour market will look like. Lack of childcare resources and quiet spaces are impacting job search and working from home

Mental Health & Safety

- Unsuccessful job searches leading to frustration and depression
- Clients fearful of contracting COVID-19 if they accept essential- service work. E.g. PSWs (Personal support workers)

2. **Access to Services**

Language

- Seniors without language cannot access services/find resources
- Difficulty to call for resources (like Service Canada) without English

Access to Technology

- Difficult to access what Service Providers have to offer without technology, digital literacy, knowledge of navigation of systems
- Limited funds to purchase technology
- Clients used to in-person services are having a hard time adjusting to online supports

Service Availability

- Some fields not appropriate for virtual services (i.e. children with behavioural challenges)
- Clients are unsure about what is available and when, especially for food banks and immigration services

3. **Housing**

Struggling to pay rent

- Inability to pay rent was the highest concern due to unemployment and an already unaffordable rental market
- Landlords unwilling to defer rent

Problems with landlord

- Many reports of landlords unwilling to rent to recently arrived immigrants out of fear of COVID-19
- Landlords not doing regular maintenance and repairs during the pandemic

Other

- Overcrowding: makes physical distancing a challenge or impossible. Shelters lack space for appropriate distancing

4. Food Security
Food security is worse
- Non-status residents who have lost jobs don't have government income programs to rely on for food money

Food Banks
- Large increase in clients asking for information about/referral to food banks. Some lack culturally appropriate food
- Change in hours, location, or simply closing means that some are harder to access

Vulnerable clients
- Some either cannot shop for themselves, or must expose themselves to risk in order to shop (seniors, people with disabilities)
- Some seniors don't have credit cards or cash: hard to pay volunteers to shop. Delivery fees have gone up. Wait times are long

5. Mental Health
Not able to access usual supports that keep people on track
- Not able to go to religious spaces and connect with faith
- Not able to access green spaces. Social isolation

Increased demand, SPOs adapting to keep up
- Newcomers who were receiving counselling before the pandemic have seen an increase in their trauma being triggered
- SPOs not feeling qualified to respond to sudden common need for Mental Health support. Long wait times for access Mental Health support
- Juggling making changes to programing, finding new funding, getting staff in place

Barriers to access
- Cannot access range of support styles that were previously available: e.g. group, in- person supports. Language barriers create greater feeling of isolation

6. Education
Parents
- Less time to help children learn as they work from home
- Parents lack computer skills, language skills to heavily support their children e-learning from home
- Increased family conflicts with learn-from home

Access to Technology
- Large families are struggling to designate time when there is only 1 device available per family
- Lack of high speed internet, equipment, and funding to purchase technology
- Low language learners are having difficulty requesting online support

	7. **Healthcare:** Barriers to Accessing Healthcare (non-COVID related); Health effects (non-COVID related) - COVID related 8. **Women:** Unsafe to be at home. Physical health and mental wellbeing needs; Multiple roles = compounding sources of stress 9. **Transportation:** Public transit 10. **Seniors:** Isolation, Food Security, Access to Services; Healthcare needs and Language/Technology barriers. 11. **Youth:** Employment, Family, Health, Mental Health and Education **Greatest needs, which cannot be met by organization at the present time:** • Access to technology: (internet, computers) and digital literacy • Income and basics of life: shelter, food security, access to affordable housing, income security • Status and access to services: clients without legal status • Mental health supports (culturally and language appropriate) • Online CLB assessment tools: to assess new language learners The survey answers are summarized in this [document.](#)
DI	**Discussion of needs – based on survey results (Discussion led by Paulina)** Update on ESL Programs: Most IRCC funded programs have transitioned their regular classes to online platforms. However, ESL programs have not transitioned as fast to this new format. This is due to the need to train all instructors on how to utilize the platform and ensure they have enough materials ready. The school boards also want this new method of instruction to be standardized. In the meantime, teachers have reached out to their students and are trying to engage them by email, phone calls and via Zoom. There is the additional challenge that some instructors have no internet access at home or even through their cell phones. Some seniors have the same issue and they rely on these language classes as a form of social contact. United Way (Local Love Fund): The United Way launched a call for proposal via the "Local Love Fund". Some agencies were able to secure funding quite quickly to purchase technology. The United Way provides a response to these applications within 48 hours. As a result of securing funding, some organizations have implemented a computer loan/lending program, e.g. ELT programs and programs for low-income clients. This grant will help clients that have not been able to access online classes because they lack the technology or funds to buy a computer. Digital Literacy: some clients may have access to a device, but they lack the digital literacy skills to attend an online program /class or use the various online platforms (e.g. Zoom, Google classrooms). There is a need for digital literacy training. Some staff are also in need to be trained and upgrade their digital literacy. Peer-to-peer training has proved to work when helping staff with upskilling. There's a need for LINC and ELT programs to offer separate digital literacy classes and basic computer literacy courses. It is difficult for language instructors to teach both the language program and digital literacy skills.

	COVID-19 has pointed out that not everyone has a digital footprint nor have an appropriate level of digital literacy. The government and funders should start giving non-profit organizations money to provide digital literacy and computer skills training for newcomers. Way forward for the group: the mandate of the SISC group is to make an impact on policy issues and take on those policy pieces and systemic wide pieces where the newcomer needs are high. The working group would focus on systemic and policy issues impacting newcomers that would take us over the next five years. However, COVID-19 happened. Instead of creating a 5 year strategic plan (given the current circumstances are so fluid and uncertain), the group will create a 1-year plan focusing on current newcomer needs. The following policy issues were identified as potential topics (for the next year): - Addressing barriers to accessing services remotely (including access to technology, training) - Workers' rights and how newcomers are impacted. This topic could potentially be liked to LINC programs. - Mental health services: how to reduce stigma and how to navigate mental health services. These issues could be addressed by the mental health working group. - Access to food services: some clients don't feel comfortable accessing these services due to stigma. - Inclusion of legal matters into LINC classes/curriculum: - LINC curriculum: there needs to be more legal knowledge provided to newcomers. This would include legal aspects around workers' rights, income maintenance, landlord/tenant rights, among others. All of these topics have an impact on the lives of newcomers. This knowledge needs to be included as part of the LINC curriculum. Some LINC classes work with settlements organizations and bring guest speakers to educate newcomers on various topics. In the next meeting we'll discuss these ideas and the policy issues (resulting from COVID-19) the working group can take on. The group will then identify a maximum of two ideas to be prioritized for the next year. A work plan will be developed for the next 9 months to a year. The next meeting will be scheduled for Thursday May 21st at 2:00 pm.
I	**Update: Canadian Language Benchmark (CLB) Assessment (Acel Clemente-Team Lead, YMCA)** The Canadian Language Benchmark (CLB) assessment validity has been temporarily extended from 12 months to 24 months. This means that clients who were assessed less than 24 months ago or who left class less than 24 months ago are eligible to be referred to current online classes and programs based on their current benchmarks. A new online assessment will be offered from next week. Please also note that at this point, this only applies to clients who have been previously assessed. If you have a client who needs a language assessment (CLB), please send the information to this email or ask the client to email directly: language.test@ymcagta.org. They will be added to the waitlist and contacted once the YMCA is ready to book appointments.