

Citizenship and Immigration Canada Regional Settlement

Under Canada's Constitution, responsibility for immigration is shared among the federal, provincial and territorial governments. Traditionally, provinces and territories have entered into comprehensive agreements with the federal government (Citizenship and Immigration Canada or CIC) that cover a wide range of immigration issues.

Additionally, various provinces and territories have secured agreements that cover more specific issues, in response to their respective needs. For example, provinces such as British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland and Labrador, the Northwest Territories and Yukon have signed Provincial Nominee agreements, which allow them to nominate immigrants to meet specific labour market needs.

In both cases, a central element necessary to fulfill these agreements were the local settlement offices that were supported and/or staffed by CIC. These offices were crucial to performing the work necessary to carry out the agreements and ensured that the provincial and territorial immigration departments were aligned in encouraging and informing newcomers of the possibilities and opportunities that existed in mid-size urban municipalities across the country outside of the larger metropolitan centres. These offices also dealt with complex immigration issues including assisting new immigrants, refugees, international students and temporary workers in filling out applications and in providing information on citizenship and immigration programs offered by the federal government. Additionally, the in-person services also helped with citizenship testing, permanent resident card pickups and immigration interviews abroad. These offices also acted as a resource for employers looking to recruit from abroad.

Budget 2012 outlined significant reductions in the funding necessary to operate these regional settlement offices and programs. The CIC budget experienced a cut of \$29.8 million in 2012-13 and as a result, nineteen CIC offices were closed or consolidated.¹ Services have been relocated to central offices or have moved online. The impact of these closures continues to be felt in local communities with the absence of localized, stand-alone service staff to assist newcomers. This has also resulted in newcomers or local businesses having to travel to access settlement services at centrally managed locations which may be hundreds of kilometres from their city. Clients accessing services online or through the phone have also raised concerns about lengthy hold and wait times for newcomer inquiries. Post-secondary institutions across the country have also been impacted who traditionally referred international students to local CIC offices for the ease of accessing services.

Despite assurances from the federal government that this consolidation has increased efficiency and assisted in the creation of common service standards, the new model continues to affect the ability of mid-sized urban municipalities to attract and retain skilled immigrants. Potential migrants are drawn to communities that offer the services they need such as immigration and settlement services.

These cuts have been especially detrimental to northern and rural parts of the country that are looking to immigration to grow their populations and fill vacant positions in their local economies. Decisions around settlement and immigration funding ratios should also take into account the unique characteristics some of these communities face including their geography, dispersed populations and large land masses.

Following the closures, there have been gains in immigration funding over the years. Settlement allocations have increased from less than \$200 million in 2005-2006 to almost \$600 million in 2012-2013 to support settlement needs in provinces and territories outside Quebec. As of June 2015, CIC released its new settlement program priorities. As of this launch, all programs and territories except Quebec will have federally funded settlement services managed through the federal department. The new settlement program priorities emphasize an increase in funding for pre-arrival services to better prepare newcomers for their arrival and settlement in Canada. In April 2015, \$24 million in funding was announced to expand pre-arrival services. There have also been increases in supports for Immigrant

¹ The offices that were closed include BC (Nanaimo, Prince George, Kelowna, Victoria), Alberta (Lethbridge), Saskatchewan (Regina), ON (Thunder Bay, Barrie, Oshawa, Sudbury, Sault St. Marie and Kingston), Quebec (Gatineau, Sherbrooke, Trois Rivières, Quebec), New Brunswick (Saint John, Moncton) and Prince Edward Island (Charlottetown).

Employment Councils and Local Immigration Partnerships (LIP) designed to tackle economic immigration and assist communities in becoming more welcoming.

These allocation increases, although needed, do not specifically address strategies for rural and smaller communities or the lack of access of these communities to in-person immigration services once newcomers arrive to Canada that were lost with the local CIC office closures. There are some services that only the CIC offices were able to provide that have now moved online or have become consolidated. Years after the closures, local MP offices and service providers are continuing to receive calls and visits from newcomers about complex immigration issues and applications that could typically have been addressed by a local CIC staff person. Some newcomers are not receiving the level of service they need through the call centre or the CIC website and seek access to in-person immigration experts.

The federal government maintains that CIC has been moving diligently towards an increasingly integrated, modernized, and centralized working environment; they point to technology allowing CIC to process applicants anywhere and in a more effective manner. The chamber network however is calling on the government to conduct a cost-benefit analysis of re-offering these services in communities that experienced closures. Different models should be looked at such as training staff at existing federal service buildings in immigration services or hiring additional staff to deal with newcomer needs. For instance, the federal government recently announced the expansion of its existing Service Canada offices in a number of communities across Canada to offer certain passport services. Although these are not full-fledged passport offices, it is still a step in the right direction. A similar approach may be possible for immigration services.

Recently, in January 2015 a new immigration system was introduced- Express Entry- which has changed the immigration landscape in the country. The Express Entry system encourages foreign nationals to apply for Canadian permanent residency under a new regime that matches their specific skills sets to employer demand in the country. This new online application system aims to match employers with candidates prior to their arrival to Canada. With these changes, economic immigrants coming to different regions of Canada will continue to need access to local CIC services to assist their transition and to help retain those newcomers in various regions of the country, rather than just the more urban centres.

These new changes as well as Canada's overall immigration policy should be taken with a vision and strategy aimed at increasing immigration to rural and smaller cities across the country that are often not the destination of choice for newcomers. According to a CIC newsletter, in recent years, "...more than a quarter of residents in metropolitan areas have been immigrants, a figure that plummets to only five percent in small towns."² Canada's three largest cities- Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver, together accounted for nearly two-thirds of the immigrant population of Canada. In contrast, only one-third of Canada's population lived in these cities, showing a disparity in immigrant and non-immigrant populations between urban and rural areas.³ A strategy needs to be put in place beyond the Provincial Nominee Program alone to attract newcomers to rural and smaller communities to reverse dwindling population trends, strengthen local economic and address labour shortages.

In the end, the Canadian immigration experience has unfairly relied on the large, urban centres that dot the county; predisposed by their possession of an international airport with CIC and Customs services. In these places, vibrant newcomer settlement services are operating outside direct CIC contribution. More important, they demonstrate large existing immigrant bases that can support newcomers.

Recommendations

That the federal government:

² CIC News, "Small Canadian Towns Hoping to Attract New Immigrants to Canada," *Canadian Immigration Newsletter*. September 2014, <http://www.cicnews.com/2014/09/small-canadian-towns-hoping-attract-immigrants-canada-093763.html>.

³ Ibid.

1. Conduct a cost-benefit analysis of offering immigration services in local communities that faced CIC closures. This analysis should include different options such as transferring in experienced staff to local communities to be able to take on this role, hiring CIC service staff at existing government buildings to assisting newcomers or re-opening select or target offices based on the results of the research. .
2. Ensure that there is a regional strategy to apply fairly the resources required to meet settlement needs for newcomers in all regions of the country.
3. Take action to include a national vision and strategy aimed at increasing immigration to rural and smaller cities across the country by 2017.