

Migrant workers: precarious and unsupported

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A Canada-wide Study on Access to Services for Migrant Workers

Introduction

Like other newcomers to Canada, migrant workers often lack access to information and face language barriers. They may be isolated, particularly if they are agricultural or food processing workers. Migrant workers in the low-skilled streams are particularly vulnerable due to their temporary status, their dependence on a single employer for their work permit, and gaps in the enforcement of contracts and of the rules and regulations of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) and Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP). Instances of exploitation and abuse have been well-documented.

Many in the settlement sector have commented that migrant workers would benefit greatly from access to the full range of settlement services, including information, referral, individual counselling, and language training. Access to services could help make them less vulnerable to abuse. Access to support in the form of information on rights, legal counselling, referrals for temporary housing, and advocacy is also necessary for workers to successfully access justice and seek recourse for abuse, especially since in some cases individuals who complain about working conditions are dismissed by their employer, thereby becoming unemployed and often homeless.

Project background

The National Settlement Council (NSC) is a forum for dialogue, collaboration, consultation, planning and information sharing between the settlement sector and Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (formerly Citizenship and Immigration Canada) on settlement policy and programming designed to enhance newcomer settlement outcomes. Within the NSC, non-governmental representatives of the settlement sector meet together to exchange information, coordinate, and develop recommendations to present to the government representatives on the NSC. The settlement sector is represented by the provincial and regional settlement umbrellas, the Yukon representative, the CCR, CISSA-ACSEI (Canadian Immigrant Settlement Sector Alliance) and the Sponsorship Agreement Holders Association, among others. Due to the rapidly changing immigration policy landscape, and the recent overhaul of the TFWP, the topic of migrant workers has been under discussion at NSC meetings. In the 2014 *Settlement Sector Briefing Note* prepared by the Council's settlement sector representatives, the sector recommended expanding eligibility for the National Settlement Program to vulnerable newcomer populations including Temporary Foreign Workers.

In order to have more information on which to base any recommendations concerning migrant worker access to the services of the National Settlement Program, the settlement sector representatives that sit on the NSC formed a task group at its May 2014 meeting. The task group is made up of the Affiliation of Multicultural Societies and Service Agencies of BC (AMSSA), the Alberta Association of Immigrant Serving Agencies (AAISA), the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI), and the Canadian Council for Refugees (CCR), which provides leadership.



Conseil canadien pour les réfugiés
Canadian Council for Refugees



The task group undertook a research project with the following objectives:

- Ascertain the roles of settlement agencies and other NGOs in delivering settlement and other community services to migrant workers.
- Gather data on how migrant workers are or aren't being served across Canada, including best practices and gaps.
- Highlight the perspectives and expertise of those on the front lines of settlement work across Canada.
- Gather information on the settlement sector's perspectives regarding service provision for migrant workers, filling in gaps with information from other organizations who provide services to TFWs.
- Develop recommendations based on the gaps identified in survey responses.

Note: this project sought the input and feedback of front-line workers in settlement and other community organizations who work with newcomers including migrant workers. This group of respondents was chosen because of the access of the umbrella organizations carrying out the research, and because of the service-provision focus of the study. The authors recognize the importance of raising the voices of migrant workers, and acknowledge the work being done by migrant workers themselves, and by community organizations and academic researchers to support this.

Methodology

A survey was developed by the task group to gather information on NGO perspectives on services for TFWs. The questions in the survey ascertained the geographic location of the organization including whether it is rural or urban, identified the type of organization, and asked questions focused on the following topics:

- TFW access to the services offered by the organization
- Perceived challenges for TFWs and perceived service gaps
- Funding to offer services for TFWs
- Perceptions regarding the role of NGOs vis à vis migrant workers

The task group decided it was important to survey not only settlement agencies, but also other NGOs that work with newcomers. This is because in many regions settlement agencies are not funded to provide any services to migrant workers, so in order to get a balanced picture of service provision across the country it is important to gather input from the non-settlement organizations who are offering the services, often on a volunteer basis. Such organizations include grassroots migrant worker support groups, legal clinics, labour/workers' rights organizations, and others.

The survey was distributed to settlement service providing organizations that are members of the CCR or one of the provincial settlement umbrellas. Some organizations surveyed also forwarded the survey on to other organizations they felt were relevant, such as educational institutions offering language training for newcomers. The non-settlement NGOs were reached through the CCR's networks related to its campaign on migrant

worker rights. We received 167 unique, relevant responses from groups and organizations across the country, and many respondents gave detailed responses.

The project outcomes include this backgrounder, and a report with an executive summary for each of the provinces (the Atlantic Provinces are grouped into a region), a combined report for the Territories, and a national report. In these reports we complemented the information from the 167 survey responses with the previous research of CCR and others on migrant workers in Canada.

While the survey distributed to service providers referred only to “TFWs”, and this is the term used by many respondents, other respondents included Seasonal Agricultural Workers in their responses, so the focus of the study was expanded to workers in any of the temporary labour migration programs that are used to fill low-skill/low wage positions.

The task group acknowledges that this study is not exhaustive. There are groups and organizations that play an important role in providing support to migrant workers from which we did not receive a response to the survey. We did not seek input from the Occupational Health Clinics which in some provinces provide services to migrant workers. There are also no doubt groups working with migrant workers that we are unaware of. While we do not claim that the numbers are scientifically complete and we acknowledge that there may be gaps in the data collected, we believe that thanks to the high response rate, the results are indicative of trends in realities on the ground.