



# Exploring the pathways to social isolation: A community-based study with Syrian refugee parents and older adults in Waterloo Region

March 31, 2017- Final Report



CENTRE FOR  
COMMUNITY  
BASED RESEARCH

This project was led by the Centre for Community Based Research, and funded by Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). Several organizations in Waterloo Region helped to guide this project by participating on the Steering Committee: the Waterloo Region District School Board, Muslim Social Services, Reception House Waterloo Region, the Kitchener-Waterloo Multicultural Centre, and the University of Waterloo.



**Immigration, Refugees  
and Citizenship Canada**

**Immigration, Réfugiés  
et Citoyenneté Canada**

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**MUSLIM SOCIAL SERVICES**



**Reception House**  
Waterloo Region



## Contents

1	Introduction .....	4
1.1	Research purpose and objectives.....	4
1.2	Main research questions .....	4
2	Research Methodology .....	5
2.1	Community-based research .....	5
2.2	Three phases .....	5
2.3	Project team.....	5
2.4	Methods of data collection and analysis .....	6
2.4.1	Focus groups .....	7
2.4.2	interviews .....	7
2.4.3	Description of participants .....	8
2.4.4	Document review .....	8
2.4.5	Data analysis.....	9
2.4.6	Community celebration.....	9
3	Background Information.....	9
3.1	Syrian refugees by the numbers.....	9
3.2	Refugee services/supports in Waterloo Region .....	10
3.3	Background on social innovation.....	11
4	Research Findings.....	11
4.1	Successes.....	11
4.2	Barriers.....	13
4.2.1	Family reunification.....	13
4.2.2	Learning English.....	14
4.2.3	Financial Issues.....	14
4.2.4	System navigation .....	15
4.2.5	Navigating new family roles and dynamics.....	16
4.2.6	Employment training + finding work .....	16
4.2.7	Discrimination, access to familiar and affordable foods, and other challenges .....	17
4.2.8	Mental health .....	17
4.3	Proposed solutions.....	18

4.3.1	Solutions from study participants.....	18
4.3.2	Values and principles for new, innovative programs.....	20
5	Next Steps .....	21
5.1	Suggested Models and Interventions .....	21
5.1.1	Neighbourhood Involvement and Support.....	21
5.1.2	Skills Training and Employment Support .....	22
5.1.3	Mental health Support .....	23
5.1.4	Other issues to address .....	24
5.2	Knowledge Mobilization .....	24
5.3	Lessons Learned about the Research Process .....	24
6	Conclusion .....	25
7	References.....	26
8	Appendices.....	29



# 1 INTRODUCTION

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## 1.1 RESEARCH PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this project was to develop and conduct action-oriented, user-driven, participatory research on how to reduce social isolation for Syrian refugee parents who stay at home with their children, and for Syrian refugee older adults. In this study, social isolation was defined as a state in which individuals have an absence or a very small number of meaningful kin and non-kin relationships (Gierveld & Tilburg, 2016). Persons in this situation are at greater risk of experiencing loneliness as well as poor mental and physical health (Gierveld & Tilburg, 2016; Wilkinson & Marmot, 2003).

We believe that Syrian refugee parents and older adults are well positioned to conduct research on issues that matter to them. With the right type of support, training, and coaching they can work collaboratively with other researchers to explore the issues that they are facing in Canada, and then determine the solutions that are most likely to lead to improved experiences and outcomes. They can also gather insights from service provider organizations and other community and religious leaders. To this end, our study had four main objectives:

- To provide the opportunity for Syrian refugee parents and older adults to identify barriers and challenges (as well as facilitators and enablers) related to Syrian integration in the community.
- To provide the opportunity for service provider organizations and religious/community leaders to reflect on issues of social isolation and social integration for the Syrian community as a whole.
- To support Syrian parents and older adults to conduct, analyze and present research with other researchers.
- To develop recommendations for solutions to reduce social isolation among Syrian refugee parents and older adults.

## 1.2 MAIN RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The main research questions were as follows:

1. What are the issues (barriers, challenges) that Syrian refugee parents who stay at home with their children, as well as older adults, face in Canada?
2. What are the values and principles that need to be in place to guide new interventions and appropriate supports?
3. What are the best and most concrete ways to reduce social isolation among Syrian refugee parents who stay at home with their children, as well as Syrian refugee older adults?

## 2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

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### 2.1 COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH

This study used a community-based research (CBR) approach that engages diverse partners in the co-creation and co-mobilization of knowledge. CBR aims to advance a collective understanding of societal issues and to inform the development of responsive policy and practice. CBR is community-situated, collaborative and action-oriented such that the research process and results are useful to community members in making positive societal changes (Ochocka and Janzen, 2014). This approach is defined as “a research approach that involves active participation of stakeholders, those whose lives are affected by the issue being studied, in all phases of research for the purpose of producing useful results to make positive changes” (Nelson, Ochocka, Griffin, & Lord, 1998, p.12). CBR provides training and mentoring opportunities for community members, and places a high value on experiential knowledge (Ochocka, Nelson & Janzen, 2005).

### 2.2 THREE PHASES

This research study was exploratory and inductive in nature. The research process was organized into three phases, each building on the previous phase.

*Phase I – Laying the foundation (January):* During this initial phase, we focused on organizing people and tasks. We established and held our first Steering Committee meeting. We also hired and trained a team of Community Researchers and held four Research Team meetings to plan research tasks and clarify roles and responsibilities. During Phase I, the focus group protocols and a document review template were developed and initial outreach was made to community partners for participant recruitment.

*Phase II – Information Gathering (February):* During phase II, all primary and secondary data was gathered. Focus groups and individual interviews were held in Arabic and/or English with Syrian refugee parents, older adults, and service providers. A document review was also conducted.

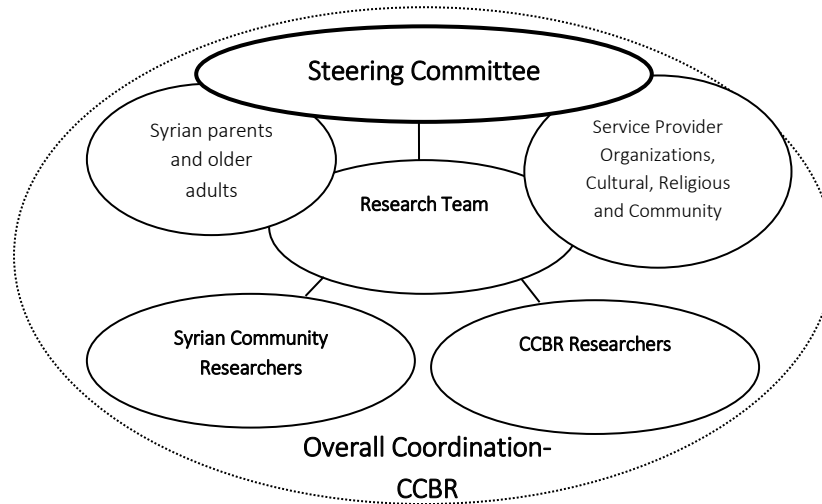
*Phases III – Analysis, Feedback and Action (March):* During the final research phase, the Research Team focused on validating research findings, prioritizing innovative interventions, and developing strategies for community mobilization. Data analysis was completed and a draft report was developed and reviewed by the Steering Committee. A large community celebration was organized in partnership with the Region of Waterloo and Reception House Waterloo Region, where research participants and interested others provided feedback on research findings and contributed their insight towards developing and social innovations and project recommendations.

### 2.3 PROJECT TEAM

The Centre for Community Based Research (CCBR) took the lead role in providing overall project coordination and support for this study, as well as the joint study exploring experiences of Syrian refugee youth. CCBR regularly builds capacity among community groups so they are equipped to successfully complete research projects. To this end, CCBR provided ongoing support, coaching and training to the

Research Team and the Steering Committee throughout the project duration. **Figure 1** illustrates the way in which the project team was organized.

**Figure 1:** Project Structure



The main role of the **Research Team** was to conduct research with excellence. Our Research Team consisted of 11 people: two Project Leads (one for the parent/older adult study, and one for the youth study), one Project Coordinator (coordinating both studies simultaneously), two Lead Community Researchers (one for the parent/older adult study, and one for the youth study), four additional Community Researchers (two for each study), and two Research Assistants (students on placement at CCBR; one undergraduate and one graduate-level). All members of the Research Team were trained in CBR, with an emphasis on how to conduct focus groups and individual interviews with Syrian newcomers, and how to summarize focus group/interview data. All Community Researchers were fluent in both English and Arabic, and two of the Community Researchers hired for this project were Syrian refugee parents (one mother, one father). A picture of the Research Team is provided in **Appendix A**.

In addition to the Research Team, a **Steering Committee** was developed to guide the project. The role of the Steering Committee was to ensure that the research was as useful and relevant as possible to the local Syrian community and their systems of supports. The Steering Committee, made up of 19 service providers and refugees, met once a month to provide critical feedback on the study processes and deliverables. Names of all Steering Committee members, as well as a picture, are provided in **Appendix A**.

## 2.4 METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

This project used three methods of data collection (focus groups, interviews, and a document review) to gather insight from multiple perspectives. The combination of methods and stakeholder perspectives not only strengthened the research rigour – offering both depth and breadth of understanding – but also improved data validation and trustworthiness (Patton, 2015). In total, we spoke with **57** individuals through focus groups and interviews.

In Phase III (March 2017), data was analysed by the Research Team. In addition to the three concurrent methods of data collection, we co-hosted a community celebration where we validated and disseminated research findings.

It is important to note that unlike most reports with qualitative data, there are no direct quotes included. All focus groups were conducted in Arabic; given the project's short timeline and limited budget, we did not require the Community Researchers to transcribe and translate the recordings. Findings are based on the notes taken during focus groups as well as in-depth discussions with our Research Team and Steering Committee.

#### 2.4.1 FOCUS GROUPS

We collected primary data through focus groups with a total of **28 Syrian refugee parents with young children** (20 mothers, 8 fathers), **8 Syrian older adults**, and **11 service providers/community leaders**, all in Waterloo Region. A further description of the focus group participants is provided in section 3.4.3.

Our primary recruitment strategy was through the networks of our Research Team and Steering Committee members. We employed non-probability purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling to achieve our goal of 50-82 total participants. All focus groups were conducted in Arabic or English by two members of the Research Team, and lasted between one and two hours. Focus groups were held in community centres, libraries, mosques, cafés, and other convenient community locations.

At the beginning of each focus group, all participants received a copy of the study's Letter of Information and consent form (in Arabic and/or English). For parents and older adults, the consent form was read aloud by the Community Researchers, and signed by participants. In many cases, participants were not comfortable providing a signature and were therefore asked to provide oral consent. Most interviews were digitally recorded, though some participants were also not comfortable with the voice recorder and in those cases, it was not used. At the end of each focus group, participants were provided with an invitation to a community celebration with study results were presented and discussed. Participants were also provided with the contact information for local supports, if needed (e.g., [Muslim Social Services Kitchener Waterloo](#)). The full focus group protocol for parents, older adults, and service providers – including the questions, the sampling criteria, the Letters of Information, and the consent forms, is provided in **Appendix B**.

Community Researchers wrote detailed descriptive and analytical notes during or following each focus group, without including participant names. They also filled out a table for each participant, documenting various demographic variables (see **Appendix C**). All notes (translated into English) and digital recordings were stored on a password-protected computer server at CCBR.

#### 2.4.2 INTERVIEWS

While the Research Team had initially intended to collect all primary data through focus groups, the Community Researchers ended up conducting individual interviews with a total of **10 Syrian refugee parents with young children** (1 mother, 9 fathers). Most of these participants lived nearby the Community Researchers, so it was convenient to visit them and conduct interviews one-on-one. All individual interviews were conducted in Arabic by one Community Researcher in the participants' own homes.

Community Researchers followed the same protocol as stated under section 3.4.1 (focus groups); all participants received the Letter of Information and consent form prior to participating, and were asked to provide oral or written consent. Notes were taken by the Researchers following each interview.



### 2.4.3 DESCRIPTION OF PARTICIPANTS

#### 2.4.3.1 *Parents*

All parents recruited for this study had young children (under the age of 12), were unemployed, and were living in Waterloo Region.

The 21 mothers we spoke with were between the ages of 23 to 44, and had at least two children (with eight mothers having four or more children). All mothers were Muslim, and came from various locations in Syria, including Daraa, Aleppo, Homs, Idlib, Palmyra, Hama, and Damascus. All mothers arrived in Canada between December 2015 and December 2016; 20 were part of the Government Assisted Refugee (GAR) program and one was part of the Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) program.

The 17 fathers that we spoke with were between the ages of 28 to 50, and had at least two children. All fathers were Muslim, and came from various locations in Syria, including Daraa, Damascus, Aleppo, Idlib, and Homs. All fathers arrived in Canada between December 2015 and December 2016; 15 were part of the GAR program and two were part of the BVOR program.

#### 2.4.3.2 *Older adults*

The eight older adults we spoke to were between the ages of 55 and 73, lived in Waterloo Region, and were unemployed. All older adults were Muslim, and came from various locations in Syria, including Aleppo, Daraa, Damascus, and Homs. All older adults arrived between December 2015 and January 2017; four arrived through the GAR program, two arrived through the BVOR program, and two arrived through the PSR program.

#### 2.4.3.3 *Service providers*

The 11 service providers we spoke to represented a range of government, NGO, and sponsor group perspectives. We interviewed a range of representatives from organizations that deal exclusively with refugees and refugee claimants and those that deal with newcomers more broadly. Service providers also represented a range of organizations with an established track-record in refugee support vs. newer organizations/groups, and those supporting GAR, PSR, and/or BVOR refugees. We had a range of male and female perspectives.

We recruited participants by sending an email invitation to the Executive Director (or other relevant staff member) of each organization or group involved in supporting Syrian refugees in Waterloo Region (many of which are listed in section 4.2). Each organization was asked to send up to one representative to one of two focus groups held in March at the Kitchener Public Library. All focus groups were held in English. All participants received a copy of the Letter of Information, consent form, and questions ahead of time, and all provided written consent to participate in the study.

### 2.4.4 DOCUMENT REVIEW

To supplement the primary data, we collected secondary data through a document review. This data added breadth of understanding at a national level to help answer the main research questions. Members of the Research Team reviewed scholarly sources (e.g., journal articles) and non-scholarly sources (e.g., agency documents/websites, media reports). Given the recent nature of the Syrian refugee crisis and the typical time lag in producing academic articles, non-scholarly sources provided the bulk of secondary data. Each document was reviewed and summarized according to the main research questions, and an audit trail was kept connecting written summaries with document sources. While this was not an

exhaustive review, it allowed us to triangulate focus group and interview data with other perspectives from across the country.

#### 2.4.5 DATA ANALYSIS

The Community Researchers organized their focus group and interview notes according to the study's main research questions. The Project Coordinator then combined all notes in order to develop main categories and themes based on primary and secondary data sources. The major themes were reviewed by the Research Team and arranged in order of strength. Themes were then verified by Steering Committee members and later by participants at the community celebration. We used triangulation (i.e., involving more than one person in data analysis) to reduce the potential bias that may result when a single person conducts analysis (Patton, 2015).

#### 2.4.6 COMMUNITY CELEBRATION

A community celebration was held on Saturday March 25, 2017, at Kitchener City Hall (1- 5 pm), in collaboration with the Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership and Reception House Waterloo Region. The celebration brought together over 500 people, including Syrian refugees, service providers, and other community members and media. Local service providers and representatives of all four levels of government (federal, provincial, regional, municipal) at the event reflected on the settlement and integration efforts in Waterloo Region over the past year. Several Syrian musical and dance groups performed, and there was free food, activities for children, and information booths from local settlement services.

At the end of the community celebration, the Research Team presented research findings to a subgroup of over 80 people, including Syrian refugee parents, older adults, and service providers, many of whom had participated in a focus group or interview. The community celebration represented an ideal convening moment for study participants and interested others to reflect on study findings and to provide feedback on suggested models and interventions. The invitation developed for the community celebration can be found in **Appendix D**, and a public announcement can be found online [here](#). Pictures from the Community Forum can be found in **Appendix E**, and CCBR's slide presentation from the event can be found online [here](#).

## 3 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

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### 3.1 SYRIAN REFUGEES BY THE NUMBERS

Between November 4, 2015 and January 29, 2017, Canada accepted 40,081 Syrian refugees, with the highest number supported by the GAR program (21,876), followed by the Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) program (14,274) and BVOR program (3,931) (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), 2017). Over 10,000 of these Syrian refugees settled in Ontario (Government of Ontario, 2017), with approximately 1,825 in Waterloo Region (Flanagan, 2017).

### 3.2 REFUGEE SERVICES/SUPPORTS IN WATERLOO REGION

Waterloo Region has long been a settlement community for immigrants and refugees around the globe (Janzen et al. 2012). Nevertheless, the number and pace of Syrian refugee arrivals between December 2015 and January 2017 represented a unique opportunity for Waterloo Region to reconfigure how it supports refugees and other newcomers. In 2015, Waterloo Region released a “Preparedness Plan” to appropriately respond to the influx of Syrian refugees. This plan, provided in **Appendix F**, included several levels of structure, with the Municipal Resettlement Control Group at the top, the Refugee Resettlement Steering Committee below it, and nine Working Groups that each represented a specific sector of services relevant to newcomers: Community Emergency Management and Interim Lodging Site, International Skills and Employment, Education, Children’s Services, Health Care and Mental Health, Housing, Community Integration and Language Support, Volunteer Donations, and Transportation. Within the structure there were also various communication channels, to funnel information through groups and outwards to the community, as well as Safety and Security provided by the Waterloo Regional Police.

There were two main reasons why the Preparedness Plan was initiated. The first was internal to the municipal government and was driven by emergency first responders who likened the influx of newcomers to a state of emergency. The second was driven by community groups and organizations, who knew that something had to be done prior to the influx of over 1,800 refugees and agreed that no single organization had the capacity or legitimacy to respond on their own. As a result, the regional government, with input from the Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership, drafted the initial Preparedness Plan and floated it by key community groups before putting it into action. Overall, the Preparedness Plan represented a unique balance of municipal governance and community-based involvement, as well as a remarkable blend of new and old players.

A significant number of faith-based and settlement organizations were involved in the Preparedness Plan and provided unique and important services to Syrian children, youth, adults, and seniors in Waterloo Region. Some of the key players included (among others): Reception House Waterloo Region, YMCA Immigrant and Employment Services, Kitchener Waterloo Multicultural Centre, Mennonite Coalition for Refugee Support, Mennonite Central Committee, Muslim Social Services of Kitchener Waterloo, ShamRose for Syrian Culture, Najda Now, Sanctuary Refugee Health Centre, MAC Embrace Syria, and Bring Back Hope. Many other organizations contributed to the successful settlement and integration of Syrian newcomers by providing programming and unique supports. Examples included (among others): Waterloo Region Police Services, the Kitchener Public Library, the Waterloo Public Library, the Working Centre, The Salvation Army, the FoodBank of Waterloo Region, Cambridge Self Help Food Bank, and various universities and faith-based institutions.

In addition to the various formal groups and organizations that played a role in Syrian refugee resettlement this year, a large number of volunteers donated their time and resources as well. The region created a centralized website called [Waterloo Region Welcomes Refugees](#) which helped to distribute information to the public. Moreover, the hashtag #WRwelcomesrefugees was developed to help volunteers and organizations showcase their efforts more broadly on social media, to spur additional donations and support, and to help maintain positive interest among the public.

### 3.3 BACKGROUND ON SOCIAL INNOVATION

We understand that the overarching goal for this project was to gain insights on new and alternative ways of supporting the integration of Syrian refugees in Canada. These ideas and models of innovative inventions should be grounded in the Syrian refugee experience as well as the perspectives of other stakeholders that have been involved in supporting the settlement process of Syrian refugees. We value the Government of Canada's approach of seeking input, engaging new partners, and developing forward-looking strategies to improve settlement program efficiency and newcomer outcomes. Clearly, there is a need for a creative mix of ideas, partners and resources in building adequate solutions and settlement supports for Syrian and other refugees in our country.

The concept of social innovation stresses the novel application of ideas to the betterment of society (Westley, 2008). The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation (2016) defines social innovation as new ideas, products, services, institutions and relationships, offering fresh approaches to overcoming pressing societal challenges. While there may not be consensus on a universal definition for social innovation, there is agreement that a focus on the **transformative systemic change** is what differentiates social innovation from other forms of innovation (Volynets 2015). Social innovation could occur if there is an intentional and strategic engagement of stakeholders who together make sense of the situation and determine its implications for policy and practice (Hankivsky 2012).

Community-based research (CBR) holds strong potential for social innovation. CBR is about the engagement of diverse partners in the co-creation and co-mobilization of knowledge in such a way that advances a joint understanding of societal issues and that informs the development of responsive policy and practice. The expected longer-term goal of CBR is *more societal issues being innovatively addressed through research* (Ochocka & Janzen, 2014). This system-level orientation intersects with the discourse of "social innovation". Globally and locally, a CBR approach is being seen as a catalyst for social innovation, for public policy improvements, for solving complex community issues, and for promoting democracy in which local knowledge is valued in building local solutions. This approach stresses the role of research as not only to create knowledge but to move the knowledge from research to action, through the active involvement of a range of community partners. Also, a CBR approach improves the chances of research findings being used by community members and service providers, and empowers communities by involving people who are marginalized toward collective individual and community changes (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005).

## 4 Research Findings

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### 4.1 SUCCESSES

Almost all Syrian newcomers who participated in this study – the mothers, fathers, and older adults – expressed gratitude to be in Canada. They are relieved to be in a country that values diversity, and they feel safe and welcome in their new communities. Many of the participants commented that the Canadian people are warm and polite. Many also expressed a feeling of hope for the future; as they explained, they came to Canada to provide a better future for their children, and they look forward to seeing them grow and succeed. In fact, many of the parents we spoke with have already noticed a subtle yet profoundly important change in their young children: they smile more now. For more information about the successes and challenges faced by Syrian refugee youth in Ontario, please see CCBR's report entitled

'Understanding the experiences of Syrian refugee youth'. Similar challenges have also been identified in past research by CCBR (e.g., Ochocka & Janzen, 2008).

Across the country, many feel-good stories have been highlighted in the media and news sources throughout the year, showcasing positive examples of Syrian families achieving success. For example, in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, community members helped one Syrian family to open a chocolate shop, [Peace by Chocolate](#), and to become financially independent within one year of arrival (Ray, 2017). In Hamilton, Ontario, three Syrian women opened a catering company called [Karam Kitchen](#), and have since brought a 'taste of home' to people and events across their community (O'Brien & Bloch, 2016). By participating in the Canadian economy and using their unique skills and talents to provide a service to others, these Syrians newcomers have expanded their personal and professional networks and have contributed to the social and economic fabric of their communities.

In Waterloo Region, Syrian parents and older adults who participated in this study have made various efforts to reduce their social isolation and become part of the community over the past year. Participants talked about visiting mosques, local community centres, their children's schools, and other gathering spaces including Victoria Park in Kitchener, to meet others and explore their community. Many participants commented that they love spending time outdoors with friends and family but feel more isolated in the winter months when the cold Canadian weather limits their movement. Nevertheless, many participants have stayed connected to others through coffee and conversation.

Service providers across Waterloo Region have worked hard over the past year to decrease social isolation and create cross-cultural opportunities that bring parents and older adults together. At the level of housing, for example, efforts have been made to resettle Syrian newcomers nearby other Syrian and/or Arabic-speaking families. Within schools, settlement workers have developed programming for parents, to help heighten their sense of community and belonging, while also helping them to learn English and navigate the school system. Several community-wide events have also been organized by the Region of Waterloo and other settlement organizations, to bring newcomers and Canadians together. These events have facilitated the development of relationships and have helped to build a sense of community. The community celebration held on March 25, 2017 (see page 9) was one example of these efforts.

It is important to note that participating Syrian parents and older adults did not feel that they were socially isolated in their Canadian communities. Rather, the biggest concern expressed in this study – and the number one barrier preventing Syrians from integrating smoothly into their communities – was family reunification. As several participants explained, they do not feel isolated from Canadian people; rather, they feel isolated from their families in the Middle East, and their hearts are aching to be reunited.

*I think that the first problem that newcomers face is their weakness in English. Newcomers have to study hard to be good at English, so they can develop good relationships with others and get good jobs. The other thing that I think newcomers need is an explanation of Canadian culture, to help them integrate.*

*In my name and the newcomers' name I want to thank the Government of Canada and the people of Canada. You have shown us great humanity and generosity and I hope that I can develop myself and be able to contribute to my beloved country Canada.*

-Muhammed Emir Hellak, Community Researcher

## 4.2 BARRIERS

Several challenges emerged within the focus groups, many of which were mirrored in the national literature and document review. It is important to note that many of our participants felt uncomfortable speaking about the challenges that they face, or did not want to dwell on them for long. Participants were aware that the findings would be provided to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), and perhaps did not want to appear ungrateful for the many formal and informal supports that they have received.

It is also important to recognize that many of the challenges that Syrian newcomers are facing in Canada are similar to what newcomers from other countries have been facing for years (Ochocka and Janzen 2008). In other words, while there is certainly some uniqueness in terms of the Syrian refugee experience, many of the major challenges – learning English, navigating the system of support, finding meaningful employment – remain the same. This section outlines the eight challenges that emerged in this study, in order of strength.

Before diving into the challenges, it is important to reiterate one important concept: While we set out to focus on the topic of social isolation for this project, most participants – the Syrian mothers, fathers, and older adults – did not believe that they were socially isolated. Many are surrounded by other Syrian newcomers in their communities, and are focused on addressing immediate concerns, such as learning English. Nevertheless, through discussions with service providers, the Research Team, and the Steering Committee, we began to realize that while Syrian newcomers may not be feeling isolated from their communities *now*, many of their other challenges may lead to social isolation *in the future*, if not addressed soon. In other words, the barriers explored below could be considered as a *pathway to social isolation*.

### 4.2.1 FAMILY REUNIFICATION

The biggest challenge expressed by participants in our study – as well as Syrian newcomers across the country – is family reunification and the stress associated with worrying about family and friends in other countries such as Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan. The challenges that Syrian parents and older adults face in Canada – learning English or French, finding employment, etc. – seem miniscule as compared to what their loved ones are facing back home. Within the focus groups and interviews – as well as during the community celebration on March 25, 2017 - participants spoke emotionally about the children, siblings, and elderly parents who were left behind. In a CBC news cast from December 2016, Syrian refugee Zaineb Aborqtei reflected on how he, similarly to other Syrian newcomers, is feeling in Canada:

“In Syria, they’re dying. And we on the outside are dying as well. The difference is they die because of bombs, while we die of sadness and loneliness” (CBC Radio, 2016).

In order to communicate with loved ones back home, many Syrian parents and older adults explained that they use social media apps such as WhatsApp. Nevertheless, communication can still be a large challenge given the few working utilities in Syria (Mussa, 2016). In order to combat some feelings of homesickness and loneliness, Syrian refugees have gathered together in Waterloo Region, both in their own homes and in public spaces such as mosques, community centres, and Victoria Park.

#### 4.2.2 LEARNING ENGLISH

Only about 10% of Syrian refugees who moved to Canada in the past two years could speak English upon arrival (Friscolanti, 2016). Learning English (or French, in some areas of the country) is paramount to successful integration in Canada and as such was one of the top challenges expressed by study participants. Being able to communicate with others is essential for building social networks and feeling connected to the community.

Within our study and across Canada, Syrian refugees have experienced long waitlists for language training classes, with some waiting up to six months to be enrolled (IRCC, 2016; Uechi, 2016). Such wait periods can have a negative impact on newcomers’ sense of well-being, making them feel like they are falling behind. Once enrolled in language training, participants explained that the beginner-level classes were often too advanced for them. Many arrived in Canada without an understanding of the English alphabet, yet were being taught grammar by an English-speaking tutor. Participants explained that without an Arabic translator present, they were unable to understand the basic concepts, and would have preferred to learn English through conversation rather than focusing on grammar. Participants were also frustrated by the fact that they must reach a certain level of English before they can access employment supports, even though many agreed that they would learn English more quickly within a job setting.

Several participants also explained that English language classes are often inaccessible, especially for pregnant mothers, mothers of young children, and older adults. Individuals within these groups often experience difficulties in taking public transportation to and from English classes, finding it expensive and difficult to access, especially in winter conditions. In addition, mothers of young children explained that child-minding is not always available during language training classes. Service providers agreed that while coupling daycare with English language classes would be ideal, it is not always possible to find funding to do so, and there are liability issues to consider as well. A small number of participants (mostly mothers with young children) have been able to learn English from home, through a volunteer-run [English Outreach Program](#).

#### 4.2.3 FINANCIAL ISSUES

Across Canada, and especially in the Western provinces, finding adequate and affordable housing has been identified as a significant challenge for Syrian newcomers (e.g., Harris, 2016; IRCC 2016; Johnston, 2016). Within Waterloo Region, high rental costs have been identified by both Syrian newcomers and service providers as a barrier to successful settlement. As participants explained, a large proportion of their monthly allowance is used to cover rent, leaving few financial resources for food, transportation, clothing, furniture, and children’s activities. Findings from IRCC’s (2016) evaluation of the GAR, PSR, and BVOR programs mirrored these findings, with only 53% of GARs and 35% of BVORs agreeing that the income support provided through the Resettlement Assistance Plan (RAP) covered their basic necessities.

As our Community Researchers explained, living on social assistance can be an especially difficult adjustment for some families, who experienced a much higher standard of living at one time in Syria.

Without our study and across Canada, Syrian refugees have experienced delays in receiving their monthly allowance as well as their Canada Child Benefit credit (Harris, 2016; Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights, 2016), making it difficult to pay bills on time. Many of the smaller families have found it especially difficult, as they receive less through the Canada Child Benefit than larger families. Some parents also expressed challenges related to applying for Ontario Works and understanding taxes. While many of the Syrian parents in this study – and across Canada – have expressed a desire to be self-sufficient and to ‘give back’ to their communities, reports have shown that after one year of arrival, 93% of GAR families (and 26% of PSR families) still rely on social assistance benefits (Harris, 2016). Five years later, this numbers drop to 48% for GARs (Harris, 2016).

#### 4.2.4 SYSTEM NAVIGATION

System navigation was a significant challenge for parents and older adults in this study, both in terms of navigating the system of support (i.e., the actual services available to them in Waterloo Region), as well as navigating Canadian culture. These ideas are explored further below.

**Navigating the system of support.** Participants in our study explained that navigating the services and supports in Waterloo Region can be difficult. Many were not aware of – or did not know how to access – the full spectrum of settlement services available in our Region. In the case of GARs, caseworkers are assigned to families for this purpose specifically. Nevertheless, caseworkers are extremely busy, with dozens of families on their caseload, and are unable to visit families as much as they – or the families – would hope. Many of the parents expressed frustration with their caseworker, explaining that many of their calls or emails go unanswered for weeks. One father had needed a medical appointment for his infant, who was quite ill, but could not get in touch with his caseworker and did not know how to obtain the proper paperwork to get an appointment.

In the case of PSRs, sponsorship groups often have more time to help, as compared to a single caseworker. PSRs are much more likely than GARs to work at least part-time in their first year of arrival (Craggs, 2016), in part because PSR groups have more time collectively, and can use their personal networks, to find employment opportunities. One advantage of the GAR program over the PSR program is that GARs are more likely to be aware of settlement services available in their local community (Kozma, 2016). Nevertheless, most parents and older adults that participated in this study – both GAR and BVOR – were often unaware of what they could access in Waterloo Region.

Several participants also expressed frustration in trying to navigate the public transportation system in Waterloo Region. Not only have they found the various routes and schedules confusing, but they explained that the costs are too high and the weather is too cold to wait outside. According to the World Health Organization (2017), access to transportation is a determinant of health and can impact one’s ability to access employment, shops, and support services. If newcomers are unable to navigate and pay for the public transportation system, they will be further isolated from the supports that they need.

**Navigating Canadian culture.** Similar to navigating the local system of support, Syrian parents and older adults struggle to navigate Canadian culture. Due to their limited understanding of English, newcomer families have found it difficult to speak with Canadians about what it means to live here, including the laws and values that govern our lives. Some parents explained that they received unclear or inaccurate



information about the Canadian legal system upon arriving in Waterloo Region. One father was told that if he hits his children, they would be taken away from him, a thought that led to a large amount of fear. Examples such as this demonstrate the importance of providing cultural orientation that is clear and straight-forward, and being careful not to exaggerate or provide false information.

#### 4.2.5 NAVIGATING NEW FAMILY ROLES AND DYNAMICS

Many of the Syrian parents expressed fear and concern that they were growing apart from their children. As one parent explained, the children are becoming both Syrian and Canadian, and they do not know what this means. On the one hand, Syrian parents want their children to integrate and to meet new friends, in order to feel at home, learn the language, and succeed in Canada. On the other hand, some parents feel that Canadian youth are more “free”, have “more of a voice”, and are more distant from their parents, traits that they do not want their children to inherit.

Many parents explained that their children are also learning English at a quicker rate than they themselves are, which, while beneficial, also means that (1) parents cannot help their children with their homework, something that parents have traditionally been able to do; and (2) parents cannot communicate with their children’s new friends – as well as the parents of their children’s friends – making them feel further isolated from their own children. In addition, because the children and youth are picking up on the language and learning how to navigate the Canadian system, their parents are increasingly relying on them for support and to fulfill household responsibilities like accompanying relatives to medical appointments, shopping for groceries, etc. This increased dependence on their children, coupled with their children’s desire to be independent and to make a life of their own, can be stressful and challenging from both the parents’ and children’s perspectives.

#### 4.2.6 EMPLOYMENT TRAINING + FINDING WORK

Syrian newcomers across Canada are anxious to find employment and to become financially independent (Kurjata, 2017). Nevertheless, newcomers are often unable to find work due to factors such as language and cultural differences, lack of Canadian work experience, unrecognized credentials and accreditations, and limited professional networks (Aycan & Berry, 1996; Eichler, 2015). This inability to attain employment can lead to feelings of social isolation and a lack of dignity (Harris, 2016).

Within our focus groups, finding paid work was not named as an immediate concern for Syrian parents, as most were focused on addressing other more pressing concerns, like learning English and navigating their new community. Nevertheless, many talked about the desire to work and to support their families. Many were unsure as to how to get a job with the skills that they possess. Some parents also explained that having a job would help them to learn English quickly, and to pick up on specific terms and technical jargon associated with their desired field of work. One father, for example, was a barber back in Syria and would like to continue his career as a barber in Canada. However, he does not have any Canadian connections in the field, and is learning the names of flowers and trees in his English as a second language (ESL) class, rather than the terms he would need to know in his trade.

A few parents also explained that it is unfair that they cannot earn an income and receive a government allowance at the same time. As they explained, they need as much money as they can get to settle and integrate into Canadian society, so if someone offers them part-time or full-time employment, it should not take away from the monthly allowance that they otherwise receive.

*I have been in Canada for 4 months. When I first arrived I lived in Kitchener for 3 months, then I moved to Waterloo. I like the community as it is well organized, has such fascinating nature, and is multicultural. You can meet people from all over the world and learn about their civilizations. The Canadian people are very nice and kind, and they treat others respectfully. The most difficult challenge for me is getting to know new places and roads, but with our GPS, it is becoming easier.*

*When I first arrived and before I got my job, I was almost socially isolated. I did not know anyone here except our sponsor family, and they are busy most of the time. When I got my job, I started meeting new people (Syrians and Canadians), and I started to feel that I am not alone in this new community. So, in my opinion, the most important step for the Government of Canada to take is to create employment opportunities for new refugees. Refugees should work a specific number of hours during the month and still get salaries from the government. That would really play an important role in helping newcomers to integrate into their new life and new society.*

-Saly Alkarmy, Community Researcher

#### 4.2.7 DISCRIMINATION, ACCESS TO FAMILIAR AND AFFORDABLE FOODS, AND OTHER CHALLENGES

A number of additional challenges were expressed in both the document review and our focus groups, including discrimination and access to familiar and affordable foods. While most Syrian parents and older adults expressed feeling welcome and safe in Waterloo Region, a few of the mothers had experienced discrimination in relation to their head scarves. Fear of discrimination can lead to social isolation, in that it prevents individuals from wanting to leave the safety of their house or neighbourhood. Other parents talked about the availability of familiar and affordable foods, craving a taste from home yet not always being able to find and/or afford it. While very few of our participants spoke about the price of food, research has shown that a growing number of Syrian refugees, especially those in the GAR and BVOR programs, are accessing and relying on food banks (Friscolanti, 2016; Grant 2016; IRCC 2016). One mother in our study joked that her family needs to fast in order to afford groceries.

#### 4.2.8 MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health was a final theme that emerged in this study in relation to challenges that Syrian newcomers face. Our findings demonstrate that anxiety, depression, and other mental health concerns are already present in many of the newcomers' lives (Friscolanti, 2016). Nevertheless, the Community Researchers found it difficult to ask participants about mental health; as they explained, the concept of mental health is new to many Syrian refugees, as is the idea of speaking to someone about mental health issues (e.g., a counsellor or a therapist). As our document review indicated, Syrian newcomers may also be hesitant to seek mental health support due to stigma, fear of being removed from Canada, or a lack of treatment that meets their language and cultural needs (Harris, 2016).

Findings indicate that health issues can also emerge – or become more severe – if other barriers to integration (such as those listed above) are not addressed. Employment, for example, is a key determinant of mental health. Having a job that is commensurate with one's skills, education, and

abilities has a positive impact on psychological well-being and successful integration in Canada (Aycan & Berry, 1996; Eichler 2015), and can help to reduce feelings of social isolation (Harris, 2016).

### 4.3 PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

This section will begin by outlining the solutions proposed by study participants (Syrian refugee parents, Syrian refugee older adults, and service providers) followed by an explanation of the values and principles uncovered in this study that should guide new interventions.

#### 4.3.1 SOLUTIONS FROM STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Within the focus groups, Syrian refugee parents and older adults found it difficult to think about solutions to address social isolation among Syrian parents and older adults in Waterloo Region. First, participants were largely unaware of the full spectrum of settlement services available in the community, and were therefore unable – or found it difficult – to imagine supports that are new and/or feasible. Second, parents and older adults do not necessarily feel that they are socially isolated, and therefore do not see the relevance in suggesting models to reduce social isolation. Nevertheless, participants did have some suggestions on how to address the various practical barriers that were listed above. Participants’ suggestions are listed in this section and serve as an important introduction to the suggested models and solutions outlined under ‘Next Steps’ (page 20). Many of these suggestions could address several barriers simultaneously, and are thus organized in order of strength (i.e., the most talked-about solutions listed first), rather than by the specific barrier that they address.

#### 1. Increase efforts to reunite families

While participants did not have concrete suggestions as to how the government could reunite families at a quicker pace, it was still a topic that came up in almost every focus group and interview with parents and older adults. The theme of family reunification was also emphasized at the community celebration on March 25, 2017. Attendants explained – through words and through tears - that they will not be able to integrate fully until they are reunited with their family. If the Canadian government is serious about evading social isolation among Syrian refugees, family reunification needs to be a priority.

#### 2. Create opportunities for Syrian newcomers to practice English through conversation.

Findings from focus groups, interviews, and the document review indicated that Syrian newcomers need opportunities to practice English through conversation, rather than solely through traditional ESL classes. Parents and older adults explained that they want more opportunities to meet with Canadians to engage in conversation, whether through formal events or informal gatherings.

#### 3. Create opportunities for part-time or full-time work at local organizations.

Syrian parents are keen to work and agreed that they would learn English quickly when forced to do so in a job setting. As participants explained, this would have numerous benefits, including: (a) greater financial stability; (b) an increased sense of belonging; (c) decreased social isolation, (d) an increased understanding of English; and (e) the development of job skills for future employment. These benefits were also outlined in the document review, with some articles suggesting that communities and/or the government should provide organizations with incentives to hire newcomers for positions where fluent English is not a necessity, such as cleaning (Kozma, 2016). Participants suggested that if paid work is not an option, increased access to volunteer opportunities would provide many of the same benefits.

#### **4. Increase opportunities to learn English close to home**

Many mothers explained that daycare is not always provided at ESL classes, and without access to daycare they must stay at home with their children. In addition, a few of the older adults, pregnant mothers, and persons with physical disabilities found it difficult to commute to ESL using public transportation, especially in the winter. Participants suggested that ESL classes should be held closer to home, perhaps in community centres or participants' houses, where individuals could gather and learn together in a comfortable and accessible setting. Moreover, at all ESL classes, participants suggested that an Arabic-speaking tutor should be present, to help explain various concepts within their mother tongue.

#### **5. Create additional formal supports for system navigation**

Several parents and older adults commented that they continue to feel lost within Waterloo Region and are desperately in need of a dedicated individual to help them understand the system of support and what it means to live in Canada. While case workers have been assigned for GAR families, GAR newcomers (and PSR/BVOR newcomers, though to a lesser degree) are not receiving frequent, reliable, and consistent supports. Several parents also explained that they would appreciate the opportunity to meet, on a consistent basis, with other Syrian newcomers who have lived in Canada for over a year. A formal 'Peer Support Worker' position could be developed, to connect Syrian parents/older adults with other Syrian immigrants or refugees that have lived in Canada for longer. Professional 'System Navigator' positions could also be created, to help newcomers navigate the full spectrum of services available locally, including mental health supports.

#### **6. Develop opportunities for Syrian newcomers and other Canadians to meet**

Many participants expressed a desire to meet other Canadians and to learn about the local community and Canadian culture. Given that community centres, religious institutions (mosques, churches, etc.) and outdoor spaces like Victoria Park in Kitchener are visited often by Syrian newcomers, these could serve as venues for formal and informal events that connect people through sports, music, or food. Participants who are supported through the PSR program have shared stories about the life-long friendships they have developed with their sponsorship groups; many of the GAR participants were envious of these friendships and wanted opportunities to forge such relationships as well. Participants also explained that having events where Syrian newcomers and other Canadians can come together will help to reduce stereotypes amongst both groups and decrease discrimination.

#### **7. Access to affordable housing**

Many parents expressed frustration with the temporary housing where they were first placed after arriving in Canada. While the temporary housing (e.g., the Howard Johnson hotel) helped to increase Syrians' sense of community, and to forge friendships between newcomers and staff or volunteers, they were too crowded and had little privacy. In addition, most participants expressed frustration over the cost of rent in permanent housing, and advocated for more affordable housing solutions.

#### **8. Discounts on public transportation fares**

Most of the Syrian refugees we spoke to rely on public transportation to get around Waterloo Region. However, public transportation is expensive and often limits newcomers' ability to travel around the community, attend appointments, shop for groceries, etc. Providing discounts on public transportation would help to reduce social isolation among Syrian newcomers and increase their overall sense of well-being.

#### 4.3.2 VALUES AND PRINCIPLES FOR NEW, INNOVATIVE PROGRAMS

In terms of values and principles that must be in place to guide new interventions, four ideas emerged: the centrality of family, the importance of neighbourhoods, the value of diversity, and the cultivation of empathy.

##### **The centrality of family**

Through our document review and in speaking to parents, older adults, and service providers, it became clear that developing family-based and intergenerational solutions are of utmost value to Syrian newcomers. Unlike many of the services and supports available in Canada that target particular cohorts of people (e.g., infants, youth, parents, older adults), Syrian newcomers are in need of supports that bring families together. Syrian culture is rooted in values of family and interdependence, so in order to develop relevant and meaningful supports for newcomers, these values must also be embraced.

##### **The importance of neighbourhoods**

Over the past year, Syrian newcomers have learned to navigate their neighbour and have developed relationships with the people and organizations closest to home. Neighbourhoods became central to where refugees shop, play, and go to school. While Syrian newcomers may not feel connected to Waterloo Region as a whole, their neighbourhood is the place they know and where they often feel the most comfortable. Through discussions with our Research Team and Steering Committee, it became clear that we need to embrace the idea of neighbourhoods and create services and supports close to peoples' homes, rather than concentrating them in one or two major areas (e.g., downtown Kitchener). Partnerships should be encouraged with – and resources should be provided to – community centres, Neighbourhood Associations, library branches, and local schools. Such solutions will enhance newcomers' sense of community connectedness and decrease social isolation.

##### **The value of diversity + intercultural exchanges**

Several of the Syrian parents and older adults explained that they appreciate the diversity of cultures and religions that exist in Canada, and want to learn more about them. Creating supports that are not solely focused on Syrians, but are accessible for all Canadians, will help to encourage cross-cultural learning and the formation of friendships. Newcomers would learn more about Canadian values and culture, for examples, and other Canadians would learn more about Syria and Islam.

##### **The cultivation of empathy**

Finally, participants in this study explained that it is important to develop opportunities where Syrians and Canadians can cultivate empathy through sharing stories and learning from each other. As they explained, attitudes are largely shaped by personal experiences and interactions; creating situations where people of different cultures and backgrounds can spend time together will decrease misunderstandings and prejudice. Syrian parents/older adults and service providers also discussed the role that policy and the media can play in cultivating empathy. Parents and older adults suggested that inspirational remarks and positive news stories can help them – and other Canadians – to feel motivated and to help one another.

## 5 NEXT STEPS

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### 5.1 Suggested Models and Interventions

Once all primary and secondary data was collected, our Research Team and Steering Committee met several times to discuss recommendations moving forward. In particular, they discussed models and approaches to maximize settlement outcomes and reduce social isolation among Syrian refugee parents and older adults. Our team used their understanding of the findings, as well as their knowledge of current settlement services and supports in Ontario, to develop relevant, practical, and feasible models.

At the community celebration on March 25, 2017, draft models of support were shared with research participants and other community members. Attendants (~80) listened to a brief presentation on the study findings (see PowerPoint presentation online [here](#)) and were then asked to walk around the room and speak with Community Researchers about the suggested models. The names of each model were displayed on posters in both Arabic and English, and attendants were asked to place a sticker beside the two models that resonated most with them. In this way, attendants could provide feedback on the models of support and to actively participate in the development of solutions. Pictures from the community feedback session on March 25<sup>th</sup> can be found in **Appendix E**.

Recommendations are organized below into four categories: Neighbourhood Involvement and Support, Skills Training and Employment Support, Mental Health Support, and Other Issues to Address. All models reflect and incorporate the four principles and values that emerged in this project: the centrality of family, the importance of neighbourhoods, the value of diversity, and the cultivation of empathy.

For all models and interventions, we strongly suggest using a community development approach, while also adapting traditional therapeutic methods, to build a more resilience-based way of working with Syrian parents and older adults. Having an advisory board or steering group that ensures Syrian parents, older adults, and service providers are directly involved in designing and delivering the interventions will ensure that this approach builds capacity and resiliency.

In addition, rigorous community-based evaluation studies will be instrumental in shaping interventions and identifying the impact of these interventions in practice. For example, process evaluations would identify the people who are actively participating in a program or not engaged in a particular intervention, what aspects of programs are working well or not. Conversely, an outcome evaluation would capture the benefits and/or limitations of participating in a program. A developmental evaluation would shape the interventions as they are being implemented.

#### 5.1.1 Neighbourhood Involvement and Support

Settlement services and supports should be developed within local neighbourhoods, where Syrian refugees are currently living, and be supported by – and housed within – community centres, neighbourhood associations, local library branches, places of worship (mosques, churches, etc.), and schools. These solutions would increase newcomers' sense of belonging and help them to develop friendships with people and businesses in their own community. Specific models could include:

- **Friendship and conversational circles**, to be held at least once a week, that focus on specific themes that emerged as priority concerns or barriers in this study (e.g., budgeting, understanding taxes, (re)learning to parent in Canada, navigating the local community, understanding the importance of volunteering). These could be organized by a paid facilitator as well as local volunteers, and could feature guest speakers such as lawyers, high school teachers, and financial

advisors. They would be open to the public, and the information would be relevant to all parents or older adults, not just newcomers. The circles would focus on making friends, and would connect individuals to other activities within the community, created by these and/or other groups. Children's activities would also be available, to ensure that parents of young children could participate as well.

- **Family-centered events**, to be held at least once a month, and could include porch parties, neighbourhood BBQs, garage sales, and invite-a-family-to-dinner campaigns. Events may also include organized trips to local attractions, lakes, camp grounds, etc.
- **A skills-exchange**, to be coordinated by community groups or neighbourhood associations, that allow all community members within a neighbourhood to exchange skills or items, such as haircuts, tools, baked goods, or English tutoring lessons.
- **'Families of Five'**, to be coordinated for every GAR family that comes to Canada, wherein four or five volunteers would form a group to support a refugee family. These 'Families of Five' – similar to the 'Group of Five' idea out of the PSR program – would be responsible for helping a newcomer family to settle and integrate in their first year in Canada. 'Families of Five' may consist of individuals who have completed their one-year PSR commitment, who are still waiting on a PSR family to arrive in Canada, or who never signed up for the PSR program but are interested in volunteering within their own neighbourhood. Basic training would be provided to all groups about the barriers that newcomer families may face, and the settlement services and supports available in their community. They would help newcomers to navigate the system of support and Canadian culture. Social media, such as Facebook, could play a role in connecting 'Families of Five' together.

#### 5.1.2 Skills Training and Employment Support

Several solutions emerged around the topic of employment, to help Syrian parents find and keep paid work. Many of these solutions could also be relevant to youth, and are also explored in the report entitled 'Understanding the experiences of Syrian Refugee youth'. These models will help Syrian parents to build relevant job skills – such as interviewing and resume development – as well as increase their access to relevant positions in Waterloo Region and beyond. It is also important to note that several useful and successful programs already exist in Waterloo Region to support skills training and job development for newcomers and other community members. Examples include the Job Search Resource Centre at The Working Centre and employment counselling at the Kitchener-Waterloo Multicultural Centre and the local YMCA. These services should continue to be supported financially as they are beneficial to all members of the community in need of employment-related supports.

- **Mentorship programs**, that would link a newcomer parent to a mentor in their desired field of work. Such opportunities would help newcomers to build their professional network and to learn about the training and skills required to secure such a job. Mentorship programs would also help businesses and organizations to understand the skills that newcomers possess, and to consider ways of hiring newcomers that would benefit all sides. While mentorship programs exist in some communities for newcomers, they should be intentionally adapted for refugees. One example of a mentorship program for newcomers with professional backgrounds in Waterloo Region is the YMCA Mentorship Program (<http://www.ymcacambidgekw.ca/en/employment-services/Mentorship.asp>).
- **Apprenticeship programs** that would begin with basic job training, such as interview skills and resume building, as well as workshops on how to set realistic employment goals. Newcomers would then be able to practice their skills by interviewing with a partner organization and securing an apprenticeship or internship there. Local organizations would be asked to "be brave"

by participating in this program, and tracking their successes via social media (using such hashtags as #bebrave). One example of an existing internship program for newcomers in Waterloo Region is the Immigrant Internship Program at Conestoga College (<http://www.conestogac.on.ca/new-canadians/>). This program has been successful at securing employment for many newcomers, due in part to its numerous well-established partnerships with organizations in the local community.

- **English classes in the work place**, to be provided by organizations who hire newcomers, so that newcomers aren't forced to choose between attending ESL classes and finding paid work. English classes could occur for an hour each day, or a few hours per week, to help newcomers learn English that is relevant to the job. This is especially important for newcomers who work in positions that don't require much communication (e.g., factory jobs), as they won't learn English by conversing with others.
- **Resource kits**, to connect newcomers with existing employment supports in the community. Examples in Waterloo Region include the Job Search Resource Centre at the Working Centre and employment counselling at the Kitchener-Waterloo Multicultural Centre and the local YMCA. These resource kits could be provided to newcomers during the Friendship and Conversation Circles.
- **Employer incentives**, (e.g., wage incentives), to encourage local businesses to hire newcomers.

### 5.1.3 Mental health Support

Many solutions emerged in relation to mental health, the first of which is a policy directive to reunite Syrian families, and the second and third involve creating new positions within each settlement community to welcome newcomers and to help them navigate the system of support and Canadian culture.

- **Efforts to reunite families**, to continue to be coordinated by IRCC, to help reduce social isolation among Syrian newcomers and prevent poor mental and physical health. Immigration policy must emphasize the importance of family reunification, and all efforts should be made to bring families closer together.
- **Peer support circles**, to be coordinated in each community by a Peer Support Worker of Syrian background who has lived in Canada for over a year and has received training to support others socially and emotionally. The Peer Support Worker would facilitate dialogue among support circle participants, and help them to understand Canadian culture. Peer support circles could occur within neighbourhoods or more centrally in Waterloo Region.
- **System navigators**, to be hired within each community. People trusted and trained to help Syrian community members to navigate the local mental health services and supports (and other social and health systems of support). System Navigators could meet with newcomers individually or in groups and link them to services and supports. System Navigators could also act as community leaders to increase the competence of Canadian health care professionals to become more sensitive and aware of cultural differences among cultures.
- **Newcomer-led CBR research projects**. Throughout this study, it became clear that newcomer parents and older adults want to study their situations in Canada and to develop and prioritize solutions. Action-oriented and participatory studies will promote positive mental health by allowing newcomers to be active and engaged in their community, and to learn practical skills that are useful in their everyday lives. Newcomers will be able to express their ideas and emotions to others, and to advocate for solutions that are relevant and meaningful to them.



#### 5.1.4 Other issues to address

- **Couple daycare with all ESL classes**, or develop alternative opportunities for mothers with young children and individuals with mobility issues to learn English at home or in their neighbourhood.
- **Increase access to affordable housing**, to ensure that newcomers who rely on social assistance can afford their rent and other basic necessities, and provide their children with opportunities to succeed (e.g., joining sports teams, other extracurricular activities)
- **Provide regional governments with a list of all privately sponsored refugees living in their community**. Without knowing who these individuals are – and without a way to communicate with them - it is impossible to ensure that they are receiving the supports and services they need to reduce social isolation and successfully integrate into Canadian society.

## 5.2 Knowledge Mobilization

The Research Team presented the major findings of this study to research participants, members of the Syrian newcomer community, and other study stakeholders at the community celebration on March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2017 in Kitchener, Ontario. The research generated a lot of excitement and interest among Syrian newcomers, service providers, and other community members. Several service providers have commented that they will learn from our findings and explore ways in which to incorporate this research – and some of the suggested models/interventions – into their existing practice.

The presentation slides from the community celebration are posted on CCBR's website and the final report will be disseminated to participants through the website as well. We will also disseminate the findings to the funder (IRCC), to the organizations and agencies involved in organizing focus groups, and to the Steering Committee members. We will continue to foster relationships with IRCC and relevant policy makers to inform and develop initiatives to address the barriers identified in this study and to continue to support Syrian newcomers' transition into their new lives in Canada.

## 5.3 Lessons Learned about the Research Process

Several important lessons were learned throughout the research process. First, this study re-emphasized the importance of following a community-based research (CBR) approach when working with newcomer populations to understand their challenges and to build relevant and meaningful solutions. This project was successful because we conducted research *with* rather than *on* the local Syrian population, and had consistent support and guidance from our Community Researchers and Steering Committee members.

The Community Researchers learned many skills throughout the research process; most of the Researchers had never conducted an interview prior to this project and are now seasoned experts in recruiting participants, asking meaningful questions, and summarizing qualitative data. The Community Researchers were also able to build their professional and personal networks through this project, and to gain valuable Canadian work experience.

Each week, during Research Team meetings, the Community Researchers brought back insights from their focus groups. These notes revealed many important lessons on conducting research with refugee parents and older adults.

One of the first hurdles the Community Researchers encountered was the hesitancy of participants to sign the consent form and to have their voices recorded. They employed numerous strategies to increase participants' comfort, such as holding the focus group in an informal setting (e.g., participants' homes), using ice breaker activities, and emphasizing that there were no negative consequences to participating (e.g.,

that participating in the focus group would not threaten their family's reputation or status in Canada). They explained that the Canadian government wants to hear from newcomers about their experiences – both the positive and the negative. In addition, Community Researchers noted that participants were more likely to show up to focus groups if: (a) they had a personal connection to the individual that invited them (a leader at the mosque, etc.), and (b) transportation was arranged for them in advance. Community Researchers also had to consider the time of day when organizing focus groups, as many parents and older adults have ESL classes either in the morning or the afternoon. Other considerations for scheduling included timing of prayers, of meals, and of children's schooling. Oftentimes, evening or weekend focus groups seemed to gather the most participants.

Within the focus groups, it was found that participants did not often discuss or debate matters with each other. Rather, one person would tend to answer a question on behalf of the group, and others would simply nod to agree. In some situations, the Community Researchers had to purposely ask questions to individuals one at a time, to gather more detail or understand if there were differences in opinion.

Within a few (but not all) of the focus groups with fathers, participants commented that they were happy to speak with a female Researcher, rather than a male Researcher. Also, with a few of the focus groups with mothers, some tension was noted between the Researcher and the participants. As the Community Researchers explained, this may have been due to the fact that our Researchers were well-educated, could speak English, and had paid positions in Canada, in contrast to participants and their family members who were often struggling with English and had not found a job.

## 6 Conclusion

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This report summarized the findings and recommendations that emerged through a community-based research project with Syrian refugee parents and older adults in Waterloo Region. The purpose of this project was to identify the barriers that contribute to social isolation among Syrian parents and older adults, and to develop solutions to address these barriers in the future.

Throughout this project we worked with six Community Researchers who conducted most of the primary data collection. In total, we spoke with 57 Syrian refugee parents, Syrian refugee older adults, and service providers through focus groups and interviews. Through this experience, the Community Researchers were able to give voice to the concerns of their fellow Syrian newcomers and to contribute to the development of relevant and meaningful innovations. The Community Researchers also identified many important lessons about how to conduct research with refugees and other newcomer populations. As a final action piece to the project, we gathered over 80 Syrian newcomers and other community members to discuss findings and possible solutions. This project was especially valuable to the Community Researchers as they gained confidence in their skills and abilities, earned valuable Canadian work experience, and built upon their personal and professional networks.

Waterloo Region has been supporting refugees and immigrants for several decades, and the recent influx of Syrian refugees has intensified this community effort. Over the past year, many organizations and groups within the community have worked hard to create opportunities for Syrian newcomer families to gather and learn. As a community, we are anxious to continue these efforts and to pursue the solutions outlined in this report. We look forward to IRCC delivering on its promise to create new and alternative ways to support the successful settlement and integration of Syrian newcomers in Canada.

## 7 References

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## 8 Appendices

### Appendix A: Research Team and Steering Committee



**Research Team** (from left to right): Joanna Ochocka, Emir Hellak, Kyla English, Aleesha Jones-Blue, Rich Janzen, Huda Al-Obaidi, Boushrah Fanous, Saly Alkarmy, Yuting Kuo, Harout Tatarian. Missing: Suhaila El-Batrouk



**Steering Committee** (from left to right): Saly Alkarmy, Yuting Kuo, Aleesha Jones-Blue, Rich Janzen, Emir Hellak, Harout Tatarian, Joanna Ochocka, Eltag Elkhalfifa, Katelyn Godin, Kyla English, Lynn Schulze, Huda Al-Obaidi, Suhaila El-Batroukh, Boushrah Fanous, Lisa Loiselle, Phyllis Martin Argueta, Thivja Sribaskaran. Missing: Mohamed Bendame, Iman Arab, Andrea Savu

## Research Team and Steering Committee Members

Name + Position	Role	Research Team (parent study)	Steering Committee
Joanna Ochocka (Director, CCBR)	Project Lead (parent + older adult study)	√	√
Rich Janzen (Director, CCBR)	Project Lead (youth study)	√	
Kyla English (Researcher, CCBR)	Project Coordinator	√	√
Huda Al'Obaidi (CCBR)	Lead Community Researcher (youth study)		√
Harout Tatarian (CCBR)	Community Researcher (youth study)		√
Boushrah Fanous (CCBR)	Community Researcher (youth study)		√
Suhaila El-Batroukh (CCBR)	Lead Community Researcher (parent + older adult study)	√	√
Saly Alkarmy (CCBR)	Community Researcher (parent + older adult study)	√	√
Muhammed Emir Hellak (CCBR)	Community Researcher (parent + older adult study)	√	√
Mohamed Bendame (Muslim Association of Canada)	Steering Committee Member		√
Iman Arab (Settlement Worker, Muslim Social Services KW)	Steering Committee Member		√
Eltag Elkhalifa (Case Worker, KW Multicultural Centre)	Steering Committee Member		√
Lynn Schulze (Teacher, WRDSB)	Steering Committee Member		√
Phyllis Martin Argueta (Teacher, WRDSB)	Steering Committee Member		√
Lisa Loiselle (Associate Director of Research, MAREP, University of Waterloo)	Steering Committee Member		√
Thivja Sribaskaran (Student, University of Waterloo)	Steering Committee Member		√
Andrea Savu (Manager, Reception House)	Steering Committee Member		√
Katelyn Godin (CCBR)	Steering Committee Member		√
Aleesha Jones-Blue (SDS Student, University of Waterloo)	Research Assistant	√	√
Yuting Kuo (MSW Student, Wilfrid Laurier University)	Research Assistant	√	√

## Appendix B: Focus group protocol for Syrian refugee parent/Older adult study

### Questions

*Introduce yourself, the role you play as a community researcher, as well as the purpose of the study and the consent form.*

- 1) Please tell us your name and a little bit about your family.
  - a. Where did you stay when you first arrived? In what type of housing do you live now? Are your children in school or day care? Any other adults or children living with you; if so, who are they?
  - b. Do you have other family living in Canada? Where?
  - c. What activities do you do during a typical day?
  
- 2) Please tell us a little bit about your experience so far in Canada.
  - a. What's your favourite thing about living in Kitchener Waterloo?
  - b. What are the top three challenges that you have faced so far?

*Introduce the topic of community connections and social isolation: Many people believe it's important to be connected to your community – having people to see and places to go. Social isolation or loneliness can have a negative impact on people's lives. We would like to ask you a few questions about your own connections in the Kitchener Waterloo community and about your ideas of what to do to prevent social isolation.*

- 3) Do you currently connect with other Syrian people living in the community?
  - a. How do you connect? What do you do together? How often?
  - b. How do they support you?
  - c. Do you wish you had more opportunities to talk with other Syrian community members? Why or why not?
  
- 4) Do you currently connect with any other people or groups in the community?
  - a. How do you connect? (face-to-face, social media, etc.)
  - b. What do you do together? How often?
  - c. What types of support do they provide? Have you found these connections helpful?
  - d. Does your family have a case worker or a sponsor group? How often do you meet with them? What types of support do they provide? How helpful have they been?
  - e. Do you wish you had more opportunities to talk with other community members? Why or why not?
  
- 5) What types of activities do you do in the community? Where do you go?
  - a. Do you feel comfortable or welcome in these places?
  - b. What would help to make these places better for you?
  
- 6) If you think about life a year down the road, what might prevent you and other Syrian parents from being connected to others, both within and outside of the local Syrian community?
  
- 7) What would help you to be able to connect to other places and with other people/groups in the community, both now and in the future?
  - a. Who could help with this? When? How often?
  - b. Do you think this would make sense for other Syrian parents who stay at home with their children?



- c. We understand that it's sometimes more difficult for parents to adjust to a new country than for their children. What could Syrian parents do to make a better life for themselves in Canada? Are there any specific supports that would help Syrian parents pursue their own personal dreams and identity?

*End by thanking them, and telling them about the **community forum** entitled 'Our Home, Your Home' on March 25, 2017 (1-3 pm, Kitchener City Hall). **Please give all participants a copy of the flyer.***



## Information About This Study

- This study is being conducted by the Centre for Community Based Research.
- This study is funded by the Government of Canada (Citizenship, Refugees, and Immigration Canada).
- The purpose of this study is to explore social isolation and other challenges that Syrian refugee parents and seniors face.
- This study will also explore possible solutions of what can be done to help Syrian parents and seniors connect with people and places in the community.
- In this study we will talk to about 30 to 48 Syrian parents, and about 10 Syrian seniors. We will talk to them in small groups.
- The information that we gather in this study will be summarized in a final report. All participants will receive a copy of the final report.
- The study will also be shared at a community celebration on **Saturday March 25, 2017** at Kitchener City Hall (1-3 pm). Anyone is invited to attend.

## Consent form

- In this study, you will be asked questions about the challenges that you and other Syrian parents and seniors face. You will also be asked about how we can create a more supportive community together.
- When we talk about this study, your name will not be used. We will not use your name in the final report, or in any presentation.
- When the focus group is over, please do not talk about what was said.
- Being part of this focus group is voluntary. That means you can leave whenever you want. It also means you can refuse to answer a question if you choose. We will not tell anyone if you choose to participate or not.
- If talking today upsets you, we can connect you with someone who can help.

Participant name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant signature (optional): \_\_\_\_\_

## Sampling + Recruitment Plan

### Selection Criteria

All parents *must* be:

- Staying at home and caring for at least one young child
- Living in the Waterloo Region

We would also like to have a diverse range of:

- Gender (equal number of male and female participants)
- Age
- Length of stay in Canada
- English language capacity
- GAR and PSR
- Religious & cultural identity
- Education level
- Hometown in Syria

### Telephone Script for parents

Hello. My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I am working as a Community Researcher with an organization called the Centre for Community Based Research. We are conducting a study to explore the challenges that Syrian parents and seniors are facing in Canada. We are especially interested in social isolation, and what can be done to help Syrian parents and seniors connect with the community. We are talking to many Syrian parents and seniors in Kitchener-Waterloo about this. As a (parent or senior), I would like to invite you to a focus group for this study on (date) and (time). It will happen at (location). Would you like to come? If you would like, I can email you a letter with more information about this study.

**Appendix C: Parent/older adult tracking form**

Person	Gender	Age	Number and age of children	Hometown in Syria	Religious/cultural identity	Date of arrival in Canada	GAR or PSR or blended	Education level	English language level
1									
2									
3									
4									
5									
6									
7									
8									

\*One form filled out per focus group, with Community Researchers' names and date at the top.

Appendix D: Invitation to the community celebration

وطننا  
وطنكم

.....

مجتمع للاحتفال بالسوريين الجدد في منطقة واترلو  
٢٥ آذار ١-٣ مساءً

العنوان:  
Kitchener City Hall, 200 King St W

الاحتفال مجاني - يوجد أنشطة للأطفال

 CENTRE FOR  
COMMUNITY  
BASED RESEARCH

OUR HOME,  
YOUR HOME

.....

A community celebration of Syrian  
newcomers in Waterloo Region

March 25, 1-3pm  
Kitchener City Hall, 200 King St W

This is a free event - activities for children  
provided!

 CENTRE FOR  
COMMUNITY  
BASED RESEARCH

Appendix E: Pictures from the community celebration



Attendees watch a presentation at Kitchener City Hall. Photo courtesy of Kyla English.



CCBR presenting research findings to participants and other community members. Photo courtesy of Kyla English.



Youth point to the most popular recommendation to reduce social isolation: family reunification. Photo courtesy of Rich Janzen.

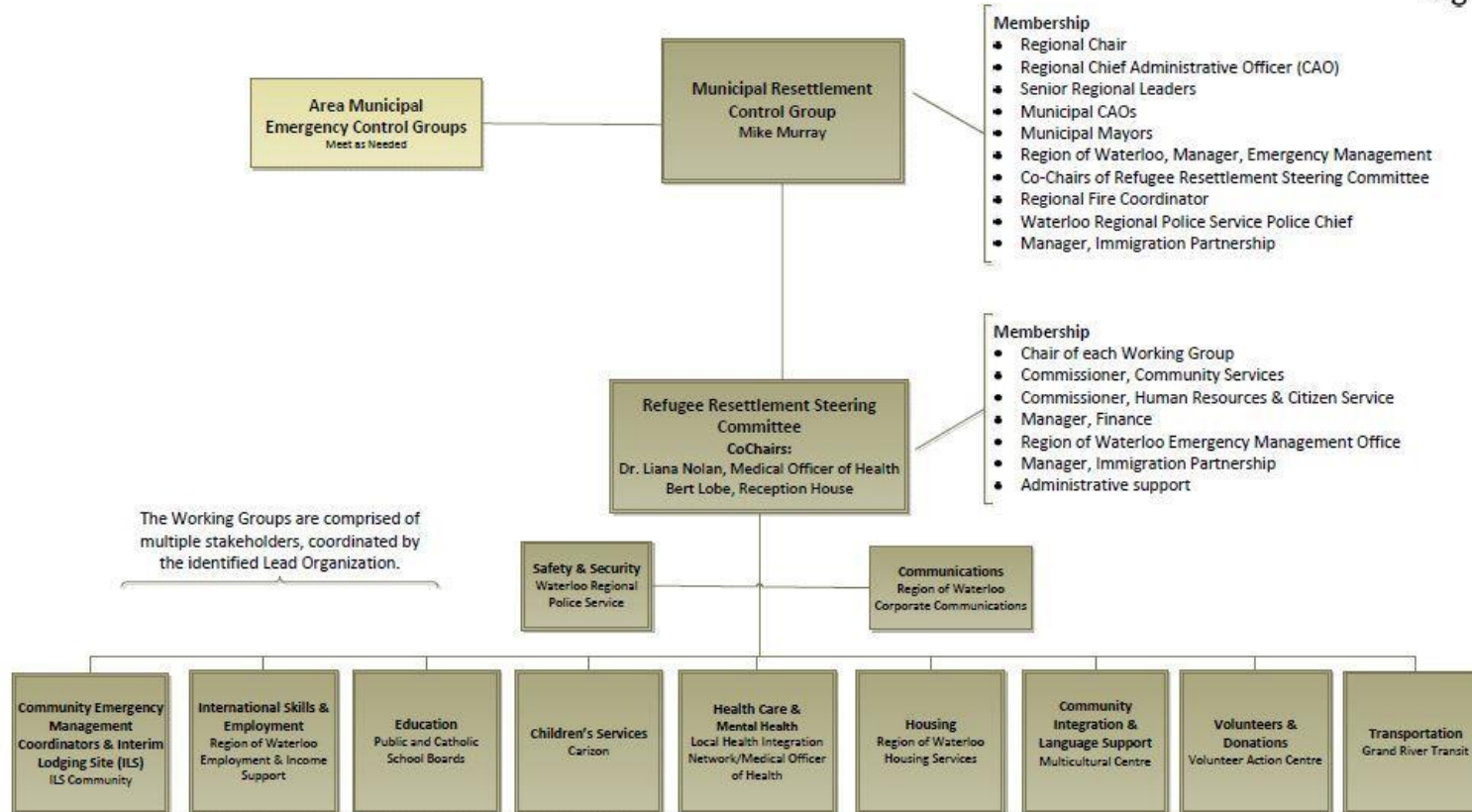


Research participants and other community members watch a presentation of the research findings by CCBR. Photo courtesy of Rich Janzen.



## Waterloo Region Syrian Refugee Resettlement Preparedness Plan

12/7/2015



DOCs #2019220