The impact of the Syrian refugee influx on local systems of support
Disruption leading to innovation

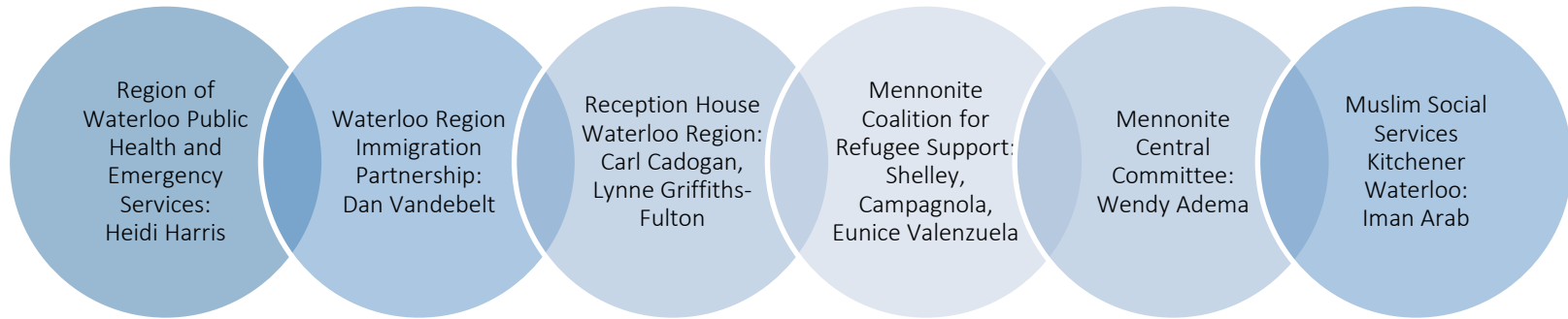A collaborative research project in Waterloo Region
June 2017

Research partners

Research Team

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Waterloo Region Advisory Committee

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Funded by

Project background

- Social innovators speak of the need for disruption to spark innovation – of seizing on de-stabilizing moments to create new ways of thinking and acting that better address society's complex challenges (Westley, 2008)

- The Syrian refugee influx was disruptive for many local communities in Canada. The Federal government itself had anticipated that *"the number and pace of refugee arrivals… will likely challenge even communities with established settlement/resettlement services and growing labour markets"* (IRCC, 2016)

- Between November 2015 and January 2017, Canada accepted just over 40,000 refugees, with at least 1,630 arriving in Waterloo Region (IRCC, 2017)

- The number of refugee arrivals to Waterloo Region was over 250% greater than previous years (Regional Municipality of Waterloo, 2015), at a time when Federal funding for settlement supports was decreasing

- Waterloo Region was seen to be a promising community to reflect on the impact of the Syrian refugee influx and explore implications for future refugee support

Research purpose

- Using Waterloo as a case study, the purpose of this nine-month project was to collaboratively explore the disruptive impact of the recent Syrian refugee influx on the way local communities support newcomers.

- This was done in order to:

  ○ determine how local communities innovate to better support refugees

  ○ determine how public policy can reinforce these innovations

System change lens

VISION
- motivations + values guiding refugee support

STRUCTURE
- players + programs + partnerships + resources in supporting refugees

PROCESS
- practices to lead, plan, equip + evaluate refugee support

Main research questions

Looking Back

1. What are the motivations, values and aspirations for individuals/groups involved in supporting refugees, and how (if at all) have these shifted as a result of the Syrian refugee influx?

2. What new players, activities/programs, partnerships and resources emerged to support refugees, and to what extent have they been effectively integrated in the existing newcomer system of support?

3. What new practices emerged to lead, plan, equip, and evaluate refugee support within the community, and to what extent are these practices integrated with existing practices?

4. What has been the cumulative impact of the changes noted above to overall system functioning?

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Main research questions

Looking forward

5. How can changes experienced in the community (including new stakeholders who became involved) be leveraged to sustainably improve how refugees and other newcomers are supported?

6. How can public policy reinforce these improvements?

Research methods

1. **Document review**
- Local print and online sources were reviewed to provide context, including from local media, the Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership (WRIP), the regional government, and other local organizations

2. **Key informant interviews** (6 interviews with 11 individuals)
- Face-to-face interviews were held with key leaders who provided a "balcony-level" view. Participants were identified by the Advisory Committee. They represented a range of government, sponsor group, and service provider perspectives, including a range of organizations that deal exclusively with refugees/claimants and newcomers more broadly.

3. **Community survey** (38 responses: 10 individuals + 28 groups)
- An online survey was circulated to all known people and groups who were active in supporting Syrian refugees in the past year. Invitations were circulated to those in the Syrian refugee resettlement structure (Slide 18) and to known private sponsors. Approximately 150-190 people received the link; only one person per group was asked to complete it.

4. **Organizational focus groups** (3 focus groups + 2 interviews, 14 individuals total)
- Face-to-face focus groups were held with representatives who received the online survey. Two additional phone interviews were conducted with two individuals who could not attend a focus group, but wanted to participate. Similar to the key informants, participants represented a range of organizations and perspectives.

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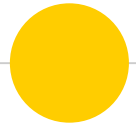
Research question 1: Vision

What are the motivations, values and aspirations for individuals/groups involved in supporting refugees, and how (if at all) have these shifted as a result of the Syrian refugee influx?

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Vision

Drawing on values that have historically defined the region

- Segments of the community have long been supporting refugees

- Goodwill that emerges when confronted with a humanitarian crisis

- Communities (both established and more recent) who live out their faith

- A collaborative community-building spirit captured in the "barn-raising" narrative

"It's part of our definition of our community… I don't think I've ever given up the notion that we are a community of doers and responders.. it's like barn-raising, if somebody needs something, we help them." (Focus group participant)

"People are good-hearted and they want to help folks out. This is a community that accepts all newcomers, right? And has a good history of working to do that. I mean not always successfully, but you know, it was just oh gosh we've got a lot of people coming here, we better step up." (Focus group participant)

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Vision

Yet motivated in reaction to a current global refugee crisis

- Media: National and local coverage overwhelmingly favourable to Syrian refugees

- Political synergy: Commitments made by a new federal government supported by provincial and municipal governments

- Crisis aversion: Recognition that a coordinated response was quickly needed to prevent the local support system from becoming overwhelmed

"[The community was motivated by] the media showing the daily struggles of refugees fleeing Syria by boat and the civilian casualties, particularly children (namely Alan Kurdi)." (Survey respondent)

"There was a lot of buzz and energy around what was happening, so that was great, but I almost felt like 'where have you been all this time?'... We've always needed these kinds of supports and services so I was very happy to see it." (Focus group participant)

"The other piece that was really important... was the political support. Federal, provincial, regional and municipal politicians came together to work together in a way that I have not seen before." (Focus group participant)

"We had some concern of this going really badly...if this starts to go sideways, well, people are going to look at the past and say... why didn't you guys step in and make this work? So that's what's floating [in] the background... It sounds negative, but part of the motivation is... if it didn't work, fingers were going to be pointed, and inevitably, they would point to us." (Key Informant)

Vision

Leading to an enlarged vision and new collaborative norms for local refugee support

- This was not business as usual; something unprecedented needed to be done

- This was something bigger than any one group could handle; collaboration was essential

- A recognition that methodical planning was not possible; mistakes were going to be made

- A "yes we can" attitude that foregrounded the importance of supporting refugees, and minimized negative attitudes towards refugees

"The collaborative leadership by the Regional government and the community agencies has been the key. [That has been] the one thing that has made this a success over the last year and changed the way different stakeholders engage with the resettlement of refugees." (Key Informant)

"I think one of the strengths we've brought to it is a collaborative approach to doing things. As soon as this thing started to happen and emerge, we thought that we couldn't have people running all over the place doing their own thing. Somehow we had to bring this together." (Citizenship and Immigration Committee Meeting #14, May 19, 2016)

Research question 2: Structure

What new players, activities/programs, partnerships and resources emerged to support refugees, and to what extent have they been effectively integrated in the existing newcomer system of support?

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Structure

Rapidly organizing a refugee support structure that built on past efforts and relationships

- Drawing on the emergency pandemic response structure that the Regional government had developed during the SARS crisis

- Leveraging the infrastructure and expertise of the Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership (WRIP) and its active members

- Recognizing the central role of Reception House Waterloo Region in local refugee support

"The [structure] started as an emergency plan. We drew on the Region's pandemic plan that also requires a broad community response. The refugee plan draws on this for inspiration." (Key Informant)

"As an agency that serves refugees, we were one of many [agencies] getting non-stop hundreds of phone calls saying 'we want to help, how do we help?'... So even that drove us back to the Partnership to say 'we need to do this collectively'... Because it was way beyond any of us non-profits being able to manage the response, and I think it was awesome to see the community that mobilized." (Focus group participant)

"[Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership] participated in the steering committee meetings and in the control group meetings... Just having that bird's eye view of everything [was helpful] in making sure that nothing gets missed and connections are being made." (Key Informant)

Structure

While foregrounding a commitment to a community-based approach

- Resisting the urge to declare an emergency response that would have been directed by a limited number of experts

- Rather creating a "community-owned" structure that actively engaged and coordinated the many existing and new supporters of refugees

- A structure that was flexible enough to adapt to a dynamic local context (e.g., pace of refugee arrivals; number and types of supporters)

"Waterloo Region built something that came to a pinnacle where there was direction and collaboration here [at the Region] that filtered out through the community…the Region bringing it together was helpful.. [but] we did not do the work that community [organizations/groups] did. We brought it together, facilitated, asked tough questions sometimes." (Focus group participant)

"What I liked was that it was a community response [with everyone] working together. No one organization owns it. No one was on their own… [There was] creative, interesting, and balanced leadership." (Key Informant)

Structure

To create something distinctively new for the moment

- The Waterloo Region Refugee Resettlement Preparedness Plan embedded within the Regional government and affirmed by community leaders

- Control Group: Oversight of regional leaders that made action happen quickly

- Steering Committee: Co-chaired by a Regional commissioner and the head of Reception House. Included all working group chairs

- Working Groups: Nine groups where ground level action happened. Open groups that defined their own leadership, membership and mandate

- Communications: The Region's corporate communications department that funnelled information across the structure and outward to the community

- Created in the absence of active involvement and additional funding from senior levels of government

"[The Refugee Resettlement Preparedness Plan] set a good tone. It was a coordinated community response where all sectors played together." (Key Informant)
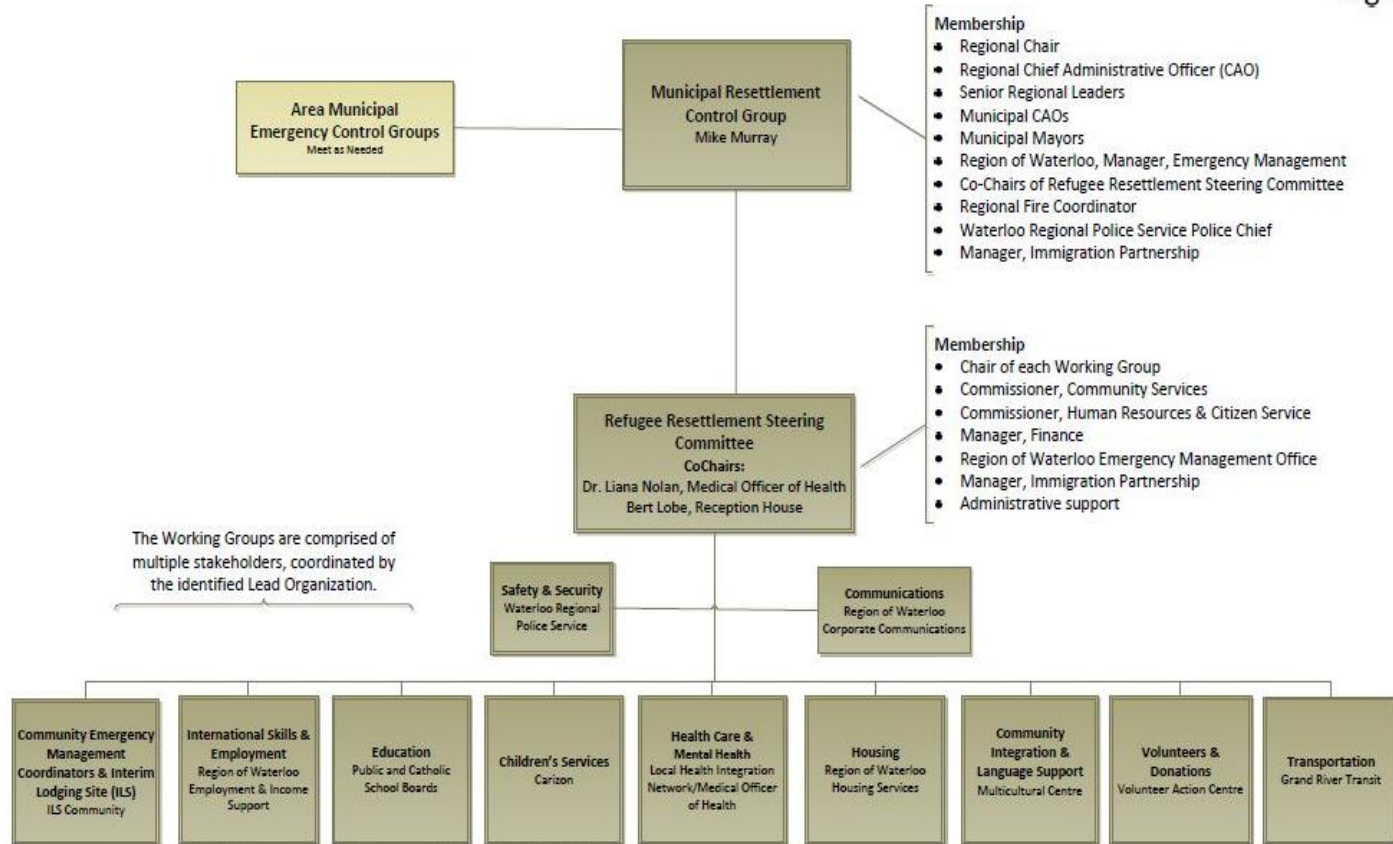
Structure

Waterloo Region
Syrian Refugee Resettlement Preparedness Plan
12/7/2015

Region of Waterloo

Area Municipal Emergency Control Groups
Meet as Needed

Municipal Resettlement Control Group
Mike Murray

Membership
- Regional Chair
- Regional Chief Administrative Officer (CAO)
- Senior Regional Leaders
- Municipal CAOs
- Municipal Mayors
- Region of Waterloo, Manager, Emergency Management
- Co-Chairs of Refugee Resettlement Steering Committee
- Regional Fire Coordinator
- Waterloo Regional Police Service Police Chief
- Manager, Immigration Partnership

Refugee Resettlement Steering Committee
CoChairs:
Dr. Liana Nolan, Medical Officer of Health
Bert Lobe, Reception House

Membership
- Chair of each Working Group
- Commissioner, Community Services
- Commissioner, Human Resources & Citizen Service
- Manager, Finance
- Region of Waterloo Emergency Management Office
- Manager, Immigration Partnership
- Administrative support

The Working Groups are comprised of multiple stakeholders, coordinated by the identified Lead Organization.

Safety & Security
Waterloo Regional Police Service

Communications
Region of Waterloo Corporate Communications

Community Emergency Management Coordinators & Interim Lodging Site (ILS)
ILS Community

International Skills & Employment
Region of Waterloo Employment & Income Support

Education
Public and Catholic School Boards

Children's Services
Carizon

Health Care & Mental Health
Local Health Integration Network/Medical Officer of Health

Housing
Region of Waterloo Housing Services

Community Integration & Language Support
Multicultural Centre

Volunteers & Donations
Volunteer Action Centre

Transportation
Grand River Transit

Research question 3: Process

What new practices emerged to lead, plan, equip, and evaluate refugee support within the community, and to what extent are these practices integrated with existing practices?

Process

- **Designating leadership:** Gaining agreement on who is leading what early on (when no one had clear authority to lead)

- **Stripping of bureaucracy:** Working toward a common goal even if it meant doing things outside of normal procedures

"We got together as a senior regional staff and came up with the organizational chart. We realized that no one had the social license to lead this, but [we] had to ask ourselves if this would resonate with other groups." (Key Informant)

"For me, the biggest disruptor has been the stripping away of bureaucracy and just saying that we're a player at the table with everybody else so we're going to do our part rather than worrying about organizations, and positions, and these are our processes and this is a big task and this is our part of it and we're going to do that" (Key Informant)
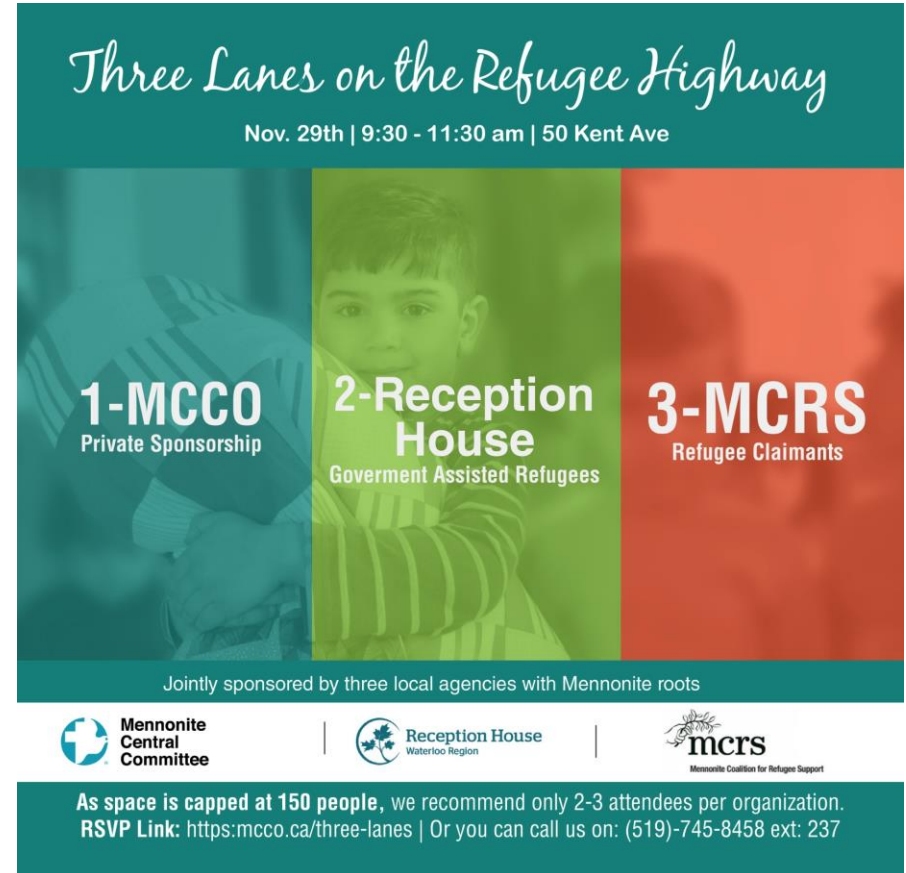
"One direct thing that we had happen was we were in Kitchener, and we had an arrangement with the City of Kitchener – a leisure access card – [we could] get them for refugees [so they could] use the facilities, they could use them in lessons and all those sorts of things that they need, right? We're now in Waterloo, right near the Breithaupt Centre [in Kitchener]. So like, they can walk to Breithaupt. So the City of Waterloo and the City of Kitchener are being nice with each other, and we're getting the leisure cards from Waterloo and they're using them at Breithaupt Centre… [They said] oh refugees! We want to help them, right? Before, that never would have happened… We have kids taking swimming lessons at Breithaupt where they can walk to, with City of Waterloo support." (Focus group participant)

Process

- **Collaborative planning:** Increasing cooperation among local leaders across sectors (often in the absence of Federal directives and communication)

- The image to the right is an example of collaborative planning: Local organizations co-hosted an event to share information on the various streams of refugees coming to the Waterloo Region.

  "Looking at this collaborative structure, the collaborative leadership by the Regional government and the community agencies has been the key - the one thing that has made this a success over the last year and changed the way different stakeholders engage with the resettlement of refugees." (Key Informant)

Process

- **Engaging new players:** Trying (sometimes unsuccessfully) to connect people and groups into the system of support (e.g., new types of private sponsors, non-settlement organizations)

Our community did well with integrating new players into our refugee support system (n=34)

Number of respondents (y-axis, 0 to 30)

- Disagree/Strongly Disagree: 9%
- Neither Agree nor Disagree: 12%
- Agree/Strongly Agree: 73%
- Don't Know: 6%
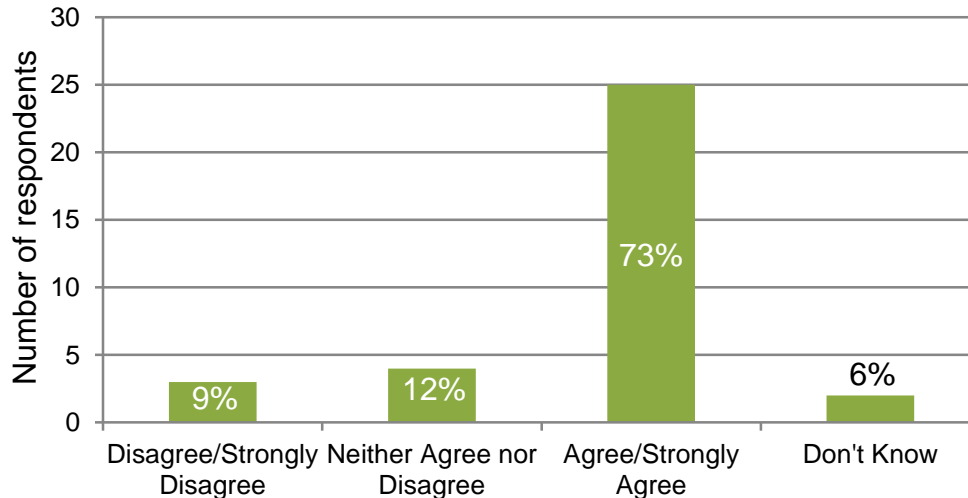
"The participation of individuals and small groups rather than just formal organizations [was new in this response]" (Survey respondent)

"Refugee issues that often exist under the radar were suddenly mainstream. New partnerships between formal and informal sectors, between faith and other community groups, etc. Many first time private sponsorship groups getting intimately involved in refugee settlement - learning about many community services and supports (or the lack there of)." (Survey respondent)

Process

- **Coordinating communications:** Multi-strategy flow of (sometimes limited) information to decrease confusion and duplication (e.g., www.WRwelcomesrefugees.ca, WRIP bulletins, local media)

"[We] have worked closely with Regional and City Corporate communications people to support the streamlining of communication so that everyone has the same information, at least on a basic level. The development of the refugee portal as a place where all the information that we have available can rest for everybody was important. All the services that are available were described directly to the public, to those who were wanting to support different aspects... [There were also] regular briefing notes that were shared with all of the Immigration Partnership and all regional council and all city council and all of the CEOs and all of the MPPs and government people looking at what the challenges and successes are, and what's coming up on the horizon." (Key Informant)

Process

- **Leveraging and expanding personal relationships**: Building on existing trusted relationships was key to initially develop a rapid response. Developing new relationships was key to manage a robust response.

- **Leveraging monetary support:** Citizens and organizations were stepping up to offer financial supports (e.g., the Immigration Partnership Fund for Syrian Newcomers)

"The other amazing thing… is the degree to which people were prepared to make financial contributions to the KW and to the Cambridge and North Dumfries community foundation, and the degree to which those foundations were willing to match the donations." (Focus group participant)

"The Immigration Partnership Fund for Syrian Newcomers launched with a $100 donation, but within days $80,000 worth of donations flooded in. The KWCF also stepped up by establishing a matching program. Between pledges received from fund holders and the support of The KWCF unrestricted fund, $400,000 was committed for matched donations." (www.kwcf.ca)

Research question 4: Impact

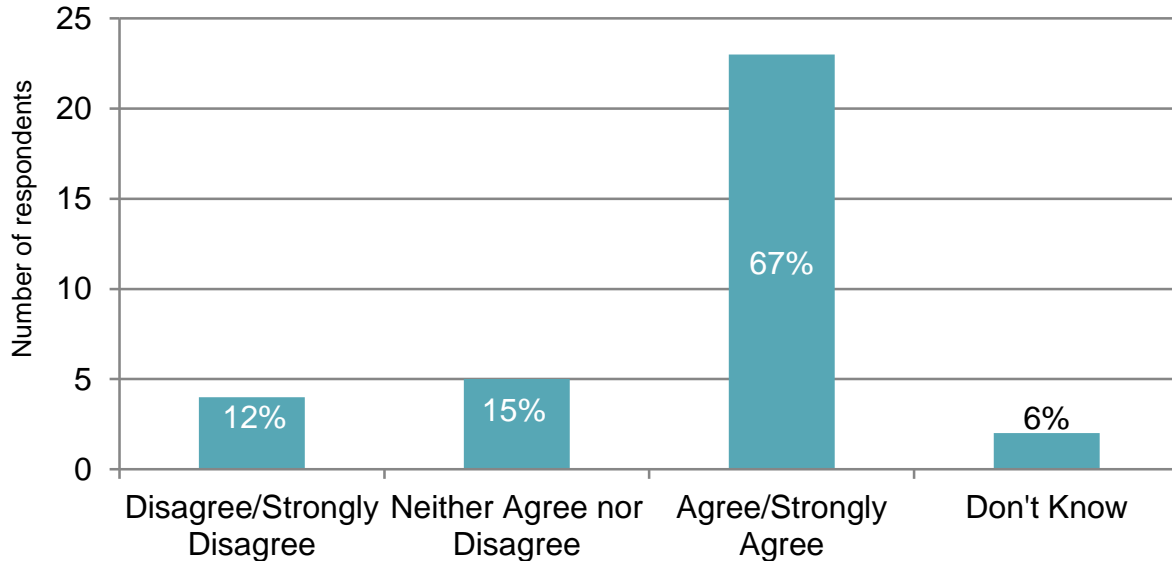What has been the cumulative impact of the changes experienced to overall system functioning?

Impact

- Participants agreed that Waterloo Region can be proud of how we supported refugees

Our community rose to the challenge and we can be proud of how we responded to the influx of Syrian refugees (n=35)

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We asked survey respondents to describe the **community's attitude** toward the Syrian refugee influx. Here's what they said...

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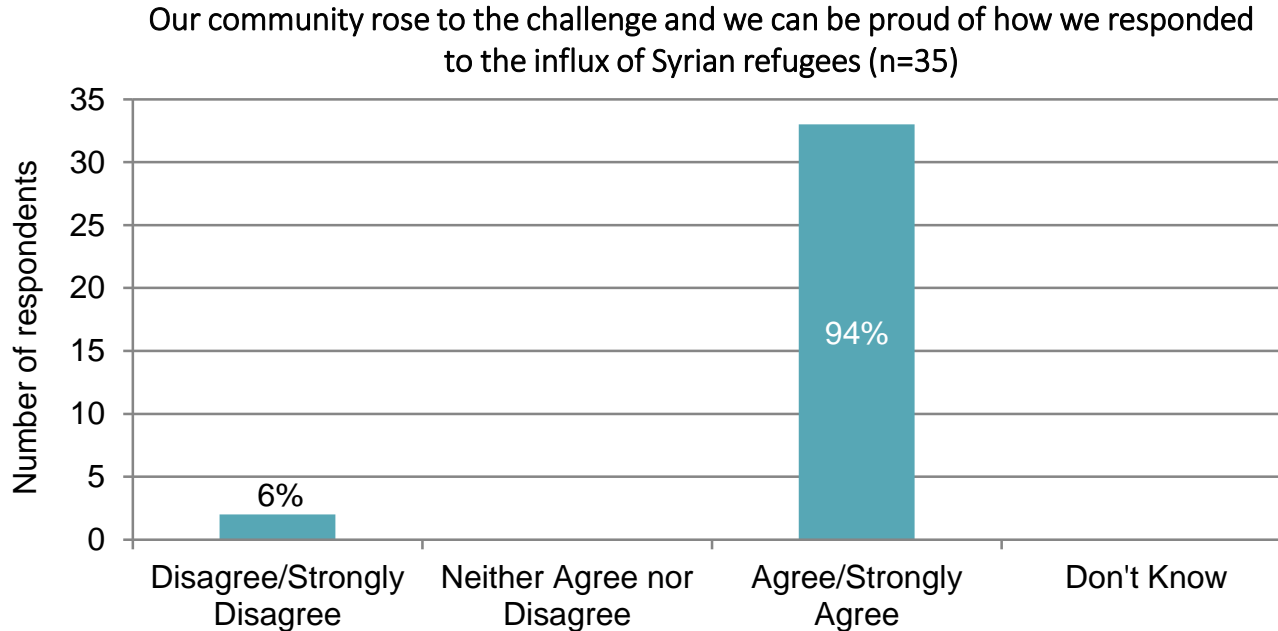
Impact

Challenges did lead to some negative impact though…

- Unmet expectations (e.g., finding adequate housing, leveraging goodwill of private sponsors, utilizing the outpour of support)

- Gap between resources and need

- Created a system of dependence (newcomers finding it difficult to support themselves)

"Our model is set up to support [refugees], as long as we have our community partners. What we ran into was our community partners were overwhelmed, [and] it became more difficult for us to run our normal approach." (Focus group participant)

"We also found initially… we had a modest excitement [among healthcare providers] about 'oh we would love to participate, we want to help!' But I think they've experienced service provider fatigue, you know? Well we've seen so many kids, or they're not showing up for their appointments, or the interpreter didn't come… That initial enthusiasm is starting to wane." (Focus group participant)

"People are saying [to us as service providers] 'I would like another place to live. You're a worker that's coming in [to my house], so you're going to find us another place to live'. In some ways it's that expectation based on the model of let's settle folks, let's get them the things that they need, and that's how things are done in Canada. It's not! So we've created a bit of a system [of dependence] in families." (Focus group participant)
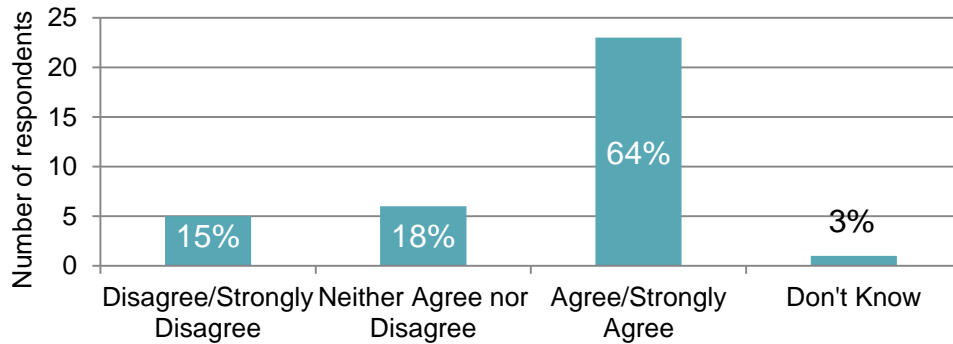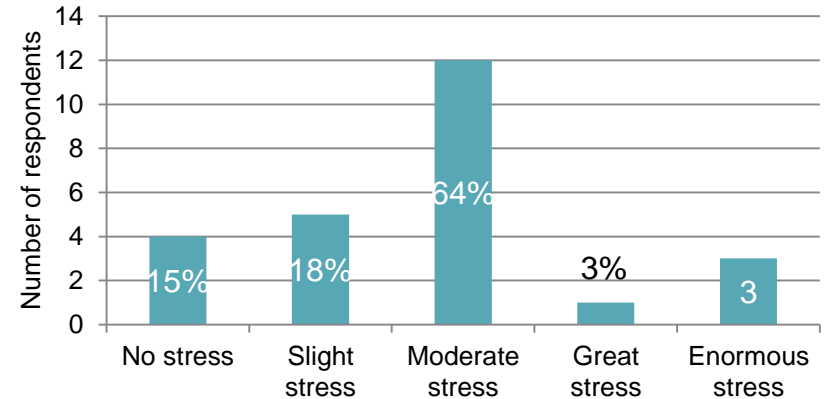
Impact

Other negative impacts...

- Personal and system stress caused by resource limitations
- Service provider fatigue and organizational capacity stretched

The influx of Syrian refugees placed a lot of stress on how we support refugees locally (n=35)

Number of respondents

25

20

15

10

5

0

Disagree/Strongly Disagree — 15%

Neither Agree nor Disagree — 18%

Agree/Strongly Agree — 64%

Don't Know — 3%

How much stress did the influx of Syrian refugees place on your organization/group? (n=25)

Number of respondents

14

12

10

8

6

4

2

0

No stress — 15%

Slight stress — 18%

Moderate stress — 64%

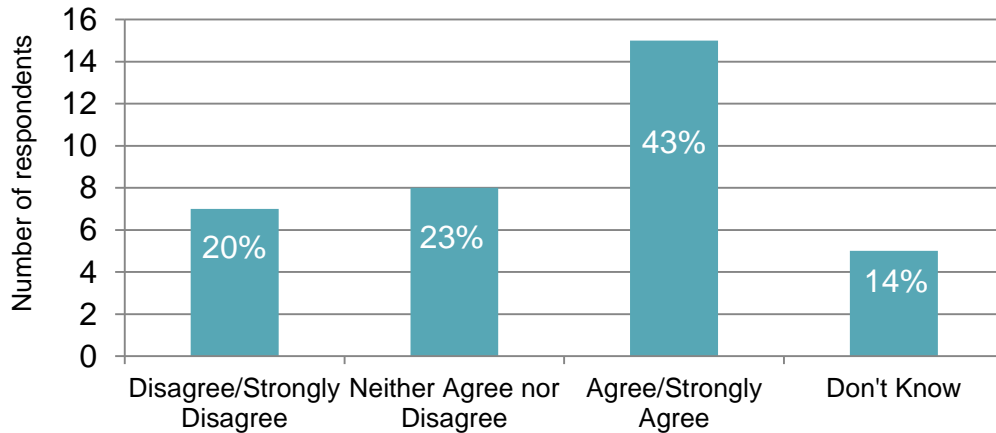Great stress — 3%

Enormous stress — 3

Impact

Other negative impacts...

- Supporting Syrians at the expense of other refugees and refugee claimants

The Syrian refugee influx drew resources away from other refugees coming to our community (n=35)

"Some [health care] leaders started to pay attention to the status of refugee when they never had before. Focusing on Syrian refugees instead of refugees in general was kind of detrimental. It actually drew a great deal of tension among all refugees. Syrians were exempted from paying back their plane ticket loan, whereas other refugees who have been in Canada for a number of years are still paying their loans to Immigration Canada. Most of the non-Syrian clients bring this issue to our attention." (Survey respondent)
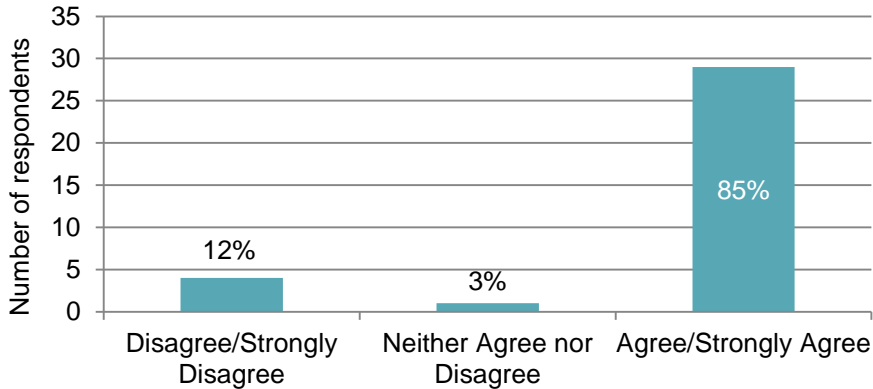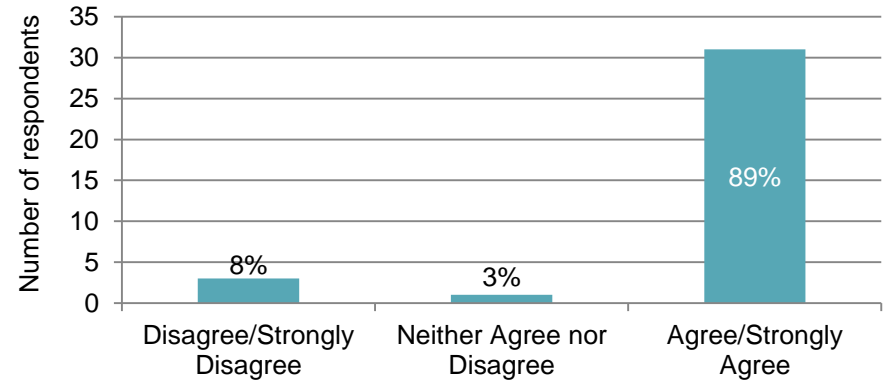
Impact

Yet new opportunities also led to significant and unanticipated benefits

- Unleashing of previously untapped resources
- Stronger leadership for supporting refugees
- Shift from a resettlement organization to a resettlement community

We have more helpful resources to equip organizations/groups to support refugees than we had prior to the Syrian refugee influx (n=34)

We have stronger refugee support leadership in Waterloo Region as a result of this past year (n=35)
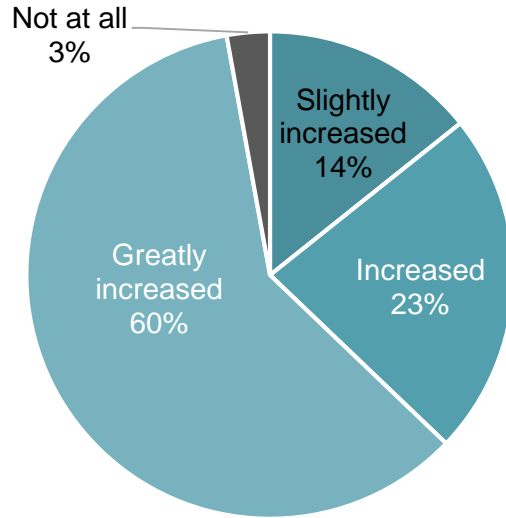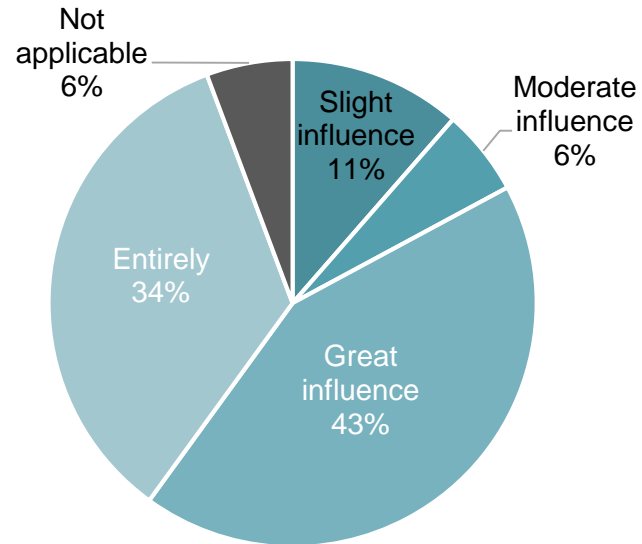
Impact

- Participants also agreed that there was increased community and organizational awareness and involvement in refugee issues

To what extent did your involvement* with refugees increase over the past year? (n=35)

To what extent do you attribute your increased involvement* with refugees to the influx of Syrian refugees? (n=35)

Not at all 3%

Slightly increased 14%

Greatly increased 60%

Increased 23%

Not applicable 6%

Slight influence 11%

Moderate influence 6%

Entirely 34%

Great influence 43%

*In the organizational survey, 'your involvement' was replaced by 'your organization's involvement'

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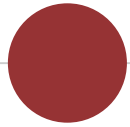
Research question 5: Looking forward

How can changes experienced in the community (including new stakeholders who became involved) be leveraged to sustainably improve how refugees and other newcomers are supported?

Looking forward

Recognition among participants that there is a limited window to benefit from innovation

- Many people and groups were engaged over the past year

- New structures and processes were quickly put into place

- As the numbers of Syrian refugee arrivals decrease, now is the time consider what the "new normal" for local refugee support looks like

Looking forward

So, what is this **new normal**?

First, there is a need to maintain flexible leadership

- Many people and groups rose to lead various aspects of refugee support

- Active leadership may now shift from a primary focus on initial settlement to include a focus on belonging

- As a result, some supporting structures and processes may now become dormant, with the potential to be resurrected as needed.

- Still, future refugee support should leverage the many new relationships among leaders that were formed this past year

"There is a need for groups to be able to ramp up and then ramp down. So how do you have internal flexibility to go from zero to ten? It calls for some flexibility in your structure. We were lucky because we had key organizations already in place... They had to ramp up really fast and they had to ramp up after the fact - after people were already arriving" (Focus group participant)

Looking forward

There is also a need to reinforce a community-wide response

- Ensure that refugee support remains the responsibility of the whole community (not just the role of designated agencies)

- Promote refugee independence (not dependency), where refugees can be supported to transition beyond month 12 and contribute back to the community

- Use the infrastructure of the Waterloo Region Local Immigration Partnership (WRIP) to coordinate future refugee support

"The community owns it and the community has players in place and I think if and when there is a need that sort of superseded their ability to do it, people start to ask for help. And I think that makes sense." (Focus group participant)

Looking forward

It is also important to continually equip both individuals and groups in supporting refugees

- E.g., ensure access to interpretation, inform people of existing refugee supports, promote cross-cultural awareness, develop creative fundraising strategies)

"Just since last fall there have been a lot more of our staff coming forward and being very concerned about how to support issues with interpretation… It's taking longer to get interpreters, it's taking longer to connect with people. So that has been… a disruption to our normal work." (Focus group participant)

"One of the things that made this successful [early on]… was we engaged Shamrose for Syrian Culture and said come and tell us who are these people? What is this country? We really tried to teach ourselves as much as we could in that limited window of time in order to prepare. In hindsight it would have been great if… those organizations were already sitting at the table. That they were part of the broad collaboration in the first place so we didn't have to go and look for them.. Locally we need to better engage and include the various community-based, ethnic-based, ethno-specific groups that are represented here… I think we need to actively push for more diversity." (Focus group participant)

"There were so many unique things that happened this last year that were a result of that funding [through the Foundation]. It was very innovative and very immediate to the needs.. that funding is just about gone. So to me, if that fund was continuing, that would be huge." (Focus group participant)

Looking forward

We also need to extend similar vision, structure and process in support of other vulnerable populations and community-wide initiatives.

- This could include:
o Other newcomers to Waterloo Region (whether immigrants, refugees or refugee claimants)
o People in need of affordable housing
o [Wellbeing Waterloo Region](#)

"So in my mind the new normal needs to take the myriad practices that we have for deciding how people get a roof and rewrite them so that they simply apply to everyone that needs a roof. I would like to say that same process needs to be done in our employment services as well, and our children's services… We saw that work in this model, so we know it's do-able. The question is how do we take that leap of faith and go on to rewriting our system so that it looks like this but responds to everyone, not just someone who's arriving for the first time in the country." (Focus group participant)

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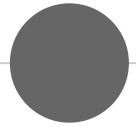
Research question 6: Policy

How can public policy reinforce these improvements?

Note: An expanded version of this section can be found in a policy brief located on the project [website](#).

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Policy

- Reinforce community ownership of the resettlement process

- Invest in Local Immigration Partnership (LIP) infrastructure

- Build on the strengths of separate refugee programs to provide equitable support to all refugees

- Improve federal resettlement services in support of all refugees

"There needs to be some bridges between the two [GAR and PSR]." (Key Informant)

"So almost every service that's new that's come up this year is for Syrians. So we've got a house full of 13 young-adult refugees, not Syrian, that don't qualify for any of those programs. We've got teenagers walking 35 minutes to KCI [Kitchener Collegiate Institute] that don't qualify for the bus pass. So there's just a lot of things that came in that are for only those people, because that's where the funding was. Our community hasn't really changed that much yet." (Focus group participant)

Policy

- Ensure smooth transition towards independence and stability

- Address false expectations and negative narratives about refugees

- Evaluate local systems of support to enable evidence-based decision-making

- Recognize and address root causes of global refugees

"The federal resources end [at month 13], and then they're into [social assistance]… and it doesn't appear to me that that was really well explained to [refugees], and is a massive hardship for folks. People want to be working, they want to be contributing, but there's lots of barriers to them being able to do that." (Focus group participant)

"The government funded some research five years ago where they compared different populations of refugees and what contributes to success and I think that research identified that private sponsored refugees do better, but that was 5 years ago. I think that research needs to be done again and if the same results are produced it lends more weight to the idea that we need to invest in this model." (Key Informant)

"The challenge is going to be: how do we sustain the means that we made in the ways that the community works together going forward. There are other people in the community who access the same services. The things that we are doing should be benefiting everyone in the community who are accessing these services. The things that we're doing better, how do we bring that forward. There is a desire to sustain improvements that have come through the last year, [I'm a] bit concerned because nobody has a clear idea how to do that." (Key Informant)

Next Steps

The Advisory Committee will discuss how to share research findings and encourage discussion about implications for future refugee support in Waterloo Region and beyond. Activities will include:

1. Developing a policy brief (June 2017)
2. Holding a community-wide discussion or forum (Fall 2017)
3. Writing an academic journal article

For more information, please visit the project website here.