

Report on the Host Program Research Project

by

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Having been offered the opportunity to participate in this research, I was thrilled to be part of a great team that takes this matter seriously. As the person in charge with conducting research interviews among mainly refugee immigrants, I found it both engaging and an eye opener to many of the issues that immigrants encounter. Of particular interest to me was the fact that I am also a beneficiary of the refugee program and personally knew some of the interviewees.

Out of the several letters that were sent out, there were few feedbacks, but through local contacts and thanks to assistance from Joey and Julie of the host program at the PEI Association for Newcomers to Canada, I was able to get in touch with some individuals who were still residing in Prince Edward Island. In total, there were about ten responses eight of which were from people who benefited from the services offered by the Host program. The families and individuals I interviewed were from diverse backgrounds and different parts of the world. There were families from Latin America, Asia, Europe and Africa.

As the main focus of the research was to develop some understanding of the role and dynamics of the Host program and its contribution to immigrant retention on Prince Edward Island, I was hoping to find as many beneficiaries of the program as possible. All in all participants who responded were very positive about their experience with the program, they credited the program for improving their language capabilities, experience, knowing a new culture, and for helping them integrate and feel as part of the society. In the words of one immigrant from Somalia: “when we first came here no one in my family spoke English, but thanks to the efforts made by our host and the kids’ school, we could now communicate and be confident in conversing in English. Our host was of great help even in explaining content of letters that required good language knowledge, I thank them for that”. Though the responses were generally appreciative of the program, some respondents pointed to few issues that they felt needed some attention. Some of these issues were in terms of waiting period before a new immigrant is matched with a family or an individual. Though many claimed to have found a match in no time, some cited that upon arrival they knew no one here, and that was the perfect time to find a host since they are usually lonely and strange in a new land. The second concern for some was on the availability of their hosts, here they said some hosts have fixed times and at times may not be available when

needed since they are busy. To this, one immigrant from South East Asia said: “people who commit to be hosts, should put in more time or be flexible with hours and days when they can be available”.

Even though most of the participants did not mind the age or gender of their hosts, there was an individual who said, it would be appropriate if people are matched with hosts who are in their age brackets since they will be more open to them. One respondent also pointed to some issues of miscommunication between her and her host volunteer. She lamented that it would be helpful if a volunteer could speak or understand some little language of her match. Another pointed to the fact that volunteers have to be original residents of the province or people who have lived here for quite a long time. This he says is because the purpose of the whole exercise is to be able to integrate in to the society and learn the culture; so to him having another immigrant being a mentor may help but does not serve the purpose as much.

On factors that may contribute to the exodus of immigrants out of the province, the participants gave various views; The most popular response was lack of employment and absent of community setting, that is people from their own backgrounds. One particular interesting response was from an immigrant who said: “frankly most of the people that I know and who have moved away found the province small, they came from big cities and hence found it hard to adjust to life in small towns and cites. Another thing is that it is very difficult to find varieties of ethnic foods or cuisine here, so since such ethnic foods are important and are available in larger cities, immigrants then prefer to relocate there”. Some said that had it not been for the host program and supporting community such as their own natives, church and the involvement of children in schools, they might have probably left the province too.

On looking at the types of immigrants who are more likely to move out of the province, and through responses from the people I interviewed, I observed that those that tend to leave are mainly immigrants with family ties in other provinces so they tend to prefer relocating to where their relatives are settled. There are those who relocate purely for the purpose of finding employment and high paying jobs; this category consists mainly of young single persons, particularly males. Among refugee immigrants, most come under government assisted programs and some make it here through private sponsorship groups. These entire categories end up benefiting from Government support programs. Thus, families with children may likely be able to settle longer in the province as they benefit from financial incentives and support from either immigration or social services. Even in cases where the lead male figure in the family opts to relocate to another province for employment purposes, the rest of the family remains behind here in the province.

All in all, the host program experience was rated high, particularly by those who have benefited from it. Though there were those who said they knew nothing about it but welcomed the idea,

many expressed the need for such a program to continue and be improved through the following ways:

- More outreach, as in making the program known in the community so that more people could enlist as volunteers.
- Speeding the process of matching volunteers with new immigrants.
- Matching immigrants with like-minded people or maybe similar age groups and interests.
- Encouraging more immigrants to participate as host volunteers since such would encourage newcomers to settle in the province.

Once again, I thank you very much for offering me the opportunity to be part of this innovative and meaningful research, I look forward to reading the final paper that would come out of the overall research project.