



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

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They Have Stood By Me: Supporting Refugee Families in Winnipeg

As Manitoba has welcomed many newcomers over the last few years, it has developed services to help these individuals and families adapt. Refugee families and individuals struggle with multiple challenges such as language, literacy and trauma-related mental health issues. A coordinated, integrated approach is needed to assist newcomers to navigate social systems and receive the support required to transition successfully to Canadian society.

The Family Centre of Winnipeg has endeavoured to address the unique needs of this population. Its Family Supports for Refugees (FSR) program provides extensive support services using a unique client-centred model for refugee families facing multiple barriers or challenges. The program is set up to be flexible in the services it can provide and is able to adjust those services to its clients' needs. The Family Centre support coordinators work closely with families, helping to identify their needs and appropriate resources.

In 2012, the Family Centre of Winnipeg approached the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives–Manitoba (CCPA-MB) to do a qualitative study of its FSR program to better understand the needs and challenges of refugee families in Winnipeg. To do this, we talked to staff from The Family Centre, as well as other organizations that, directly or indirectly, support refugees. We also talked to clients in the FSR program.

Many of the clients said that what initially brought them to The Family Centre was their struggle to find child care for their

children. They experienced difficulty filling out the needed application forms with limited English literacy, and were frustrated by the extended wait times for daycare openings. Mothers described the help they received from their support coordinators in accessing available daycare spots and subsidies as one of the most important services they received from The Family Centre. Other valuable services included help with housing, meeting basic needs, and dealing with forms, correspondence and paperwork, among others.

Not only do support coordinators provide information and connect newcomers to resources and services, for many they are also a source of great emotional support. One mother stated, *“Probably [my support coordinator] is the only person I can talk to about anything and everything.”* A number of interviewees alluded to feeling like children, having to relearn everything over again and how that can be disempowering and overwhelming. One interviewee who had recently gone through a breakdown in her marriage said:

You don't have any relative here. Just you and the children. All the problems that you have, you have to face alone. So if you don't have anybody there to tell you “it's okay, we can help you, can support you”, you can't stand up. You just get frustrated and lose yourself and lose

there is an alternative.

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the kids. But if you have somebody beside you, helping you, take you, saying “let’s go see it, let’s go do it”, it’s just like giving you more morale and more energy, that you say back home “I can do it”. That’s what they do at The Family Centre.

Partner organizations clearly describe the FSR program’s approach as valuable, as they refer clients who have needs beyond what their organization can address. As one staff member said:

The things that [The Family Centre] can do, that we can’t do, are just amazing. I mean, they’ve got lots of my clients connected to in-home supports, to childcare, to lots of one-on-one supports; so they’ve really been very helpful.

A large part of the work that the support coordinators do involves collaboration and consultation with other organizations and resources in the community. Partner organizations said that they also receive support when they need guidance working with complex refugee family issues:

The Family Centre offers the families we work with support but they also offer us as staff support, so when we’re dealing with really complex families we can work together as a multidisciplinary team. And I think that really adds a lot of value to the work that both of our organizations can do.

This flexibility and focus on client needs is especially important when working with a client base that struggles with multiple issues. The Family Centre staff and members from other organizations concur that, when working with high needs families, spending more time with them and providing more extensive supports and services makes a huge difference in the family’s ability to successfully integrate into Canadian society.

The report’s primary recommendation is the importance of maintaining The Family Centre’s holistic, client-centred approach to service delivery, with a focus on supportive relationships. It would be beneficial to extend this approach, with an emphasis on holistic long-term transitional services,

as a general service delivery model for all social service organizations working with refugees. Additionally, immigration and settlement programs should be better coordinated with other program areas, such as child care and housing, to better meet the needs of refugees and newcomers.

This research has demonstrated that many social programs and larger social systems are not always appropriately equipped to provide services to refugees, particularly refugee women and children. Because of this, many in this population are not getting the services they need to integrate into Canadian life. The FSR program mediates interactions between newcomers and these systems and is able to put things together when they fall apart, while continually challenging social service organizations to do better. The FSR program is a testament to the progress that can be made when a program is willing to meet clients where they are and be the kind of personal, committed, and holistic support that so many refugee families need.

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