

North Etobicoke Local Immigration Partnership

June 28, 2011
Presentation by

Debbie Douglas
Executive Director, Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI)

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today.

It is wonderful to be here in Etobicoke, home to some of Toronto's fastest-growing immigrant communities and home to some of the organizations that lead the work in serving and empowering them.

I want to congratulate you on all the work you have accomplished to create a Welcoming Community by working in collaboration as the North Etobicoke Local Immigration Partnership, work that is critical in this part of Toronto, one of the most dynamic in terms of the higher than average settlement of immigrants.

At OCASI, we are particularly proud of the accomplishments of our member agencies in North Etobicoke. We take pride in the fact that our member agencies are playing a leadership role in the 14 LIPs across Toronto and the 44 LIPs across Ontario.

The Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, OCASI, is Canada's largest immigrant-focused Council. Founded in 1978, we are the umbrella organization for the immigrant and refugee-serving sector in Ontario with more than 200 member agencies across the province. Our member agencies provide a broad range of services to facilitate the settlement of immigrants and refugees in their local communities. They also actively engage with other stakeholders to advance immigrant integration outcomes in the communities where they are located and have been doing so for many years. The LIPs are one of the more recent forms of this collaboration, and are benefiting from years of active partnership and coalition building across the province.

In the next few minutes, I will try and make the connection with the local settlement strategy for the North Etobicoke Local Immigration Partnership (NELIP), our national immigration program, and where service coordination would fit in that big picture.

As you have seen from the reports, and as you well know through your own experience, the high levels of poverty, particularly racialized poverty, the high rates of unemployment among immigrant women and many other factors are the realities that have informed your work in this community.

It was not too long ago that Statistics Canada told us that immigration will account for all labour force growth by 2011. We are halfway through 2011, emerging from a recession, and continue to see high levels of unemployment and underemployment among immigrants. We have seen some positive change over the years, resulting from federal and provincial government investment in bridging programs, the creation of the Commissioner for Fair Access to Regulated Professions,

and mentoring initiatives at the City of Toronto that have led to worthwhile employment for some internationally trained immigrants.

These are steps in the right direction. But much more needs to be done. For example, OCASI and now many others are asking all levels of government to give employers, especially small and medium sized businesses, a tax incentive for hiring, retaining and promoting immigrants. We are asking the provincial government to bring back employment equity legislation, something that would benefit all equity-seeking groups. These initiatives would become ever more critical, as our economy comes to rely more and more on immigrant labour.

At the same time, we cannot help but be aware of the disturbing trend in our immigration policy, the shift away from permanent migration to building a population of disposable workers through temporary migrant work initiatives. Most of these workers would not have an avenue to stay legally and permanently at the end of their contract. Many are subject to workplace abuse, are owed thousands of dollars in unpaid wages, and are at risk of deportation if they become out-of-status, which sadly happens far too often. These conditions are serving to increase our population of individuals with less than full resident status in Canada, and increasing the challenges for community organizations that try to provide information and services, often with little or no funding.

We also have to be aware of the potential changes to our landscape, whether in community service, or government, or business. We are anticipating a cut of \$4 billion dollars to the federal budget – cuts that may well come out of services to Canadian residents including immigrants and refugees; cuts that may come out of the federal civil services, which may have an impact on access to federal services. As recently as last year and what is having an impact this year, Ontario's immigrant and refugee serving sector was asked to absorb almost \$44 million dollars in cuts to federal immigrant settlement funding to this province. Before we can fully come to terms with the impact of those cuts, we may be asked to absorb a further cut to services. Ontario is still recovering from the recession, and the provincial election on October 6 this year will certainly bring new challenges, regardless of the outcome. Going into the new year, we are looking at impending cuts to municipal services, cuts that would very likely have a harsh impact in North Etobicoke.

In this context, service coordination has rapidly become a critical necessity for all our communities and all our sectors. It's no longer a way of maximizing resources, a cheaper way of delivering the same outcomes – it has become a factor in defending and strengthening the services that are essential for the effective economic, social and political integration of immigrants.

In the October 2009 issue of Inside Edge magazine, Douglas Watt - Associate Director Organizational Effectiveness and Learning at Conference Board of Canada, in an article called "Small Towns Are Hometowns for Immigrants" made the following suggestions about immigration policy:

"Immigration should be an integral part of a community's long-term economic development strategy, rather than a temporary solution to address a short-term labour shortage or offset a declining population."

That:

“Employers need to provide jobs that match immigrants’ skills and education levels, and demonstrate a commitment to recruiting and retaining immigrant talent.”

“Community stakeholders—such as immigrant services agencies, training providers, libraries, and health-care facilities—must support the attraction, settlement, integration, and retention of immigrants.

And finally, that:

A critical mass of immigrants in a community is needed for long-term success”. The presence of ethnic and cultural networks in a community is the number-one factor in determining where immigrants will first settle—even topping the availability of jobs”

While he wrote these comments as advice to small towns, they hold true even for a large metropolis such as Toronto, where immigrants literally live in ‘small towns’ such as Etobicoke North and face significant challenges to effective and meaningful integration.

The North Etobicoke LIP provides a vehicle to engage in the kind of visioning, planning, and strategizing suggested in the Watt article – the kind of work that you have been engaged in for the last year. The role of LIPs will become ever more critical, not just for service coordination, but to legitimately work towards long-term change in immigration policy that would benefit all our communities and sectors.

OCASI has always been fan of the involvement of multiple players at the local level of immigrant integration. We have always believed that all levels of government, the public sector, business and community organizations, all need to be involved in setting long-term immigrant settlement priorities for local communities and engaging in long-term planning. Immigrant integration occurs within the local community. And it is local stakeholders such as you that face the greatest impact, but that also have the most to gain anticipating and preparing for the settlement and integration of future residents in your communities. You must be involved in the discussion from the start. You must be involved from selection, to settlement and integration in your own communities, without in any way diminishing the federal government’s overarching role and responsibility to set broad immigration policy and to have in collaboration with provinces, responsibility and control of selection.

We hope that Local Immigration Partnerships (LIPs) will allow you to do just that. As we can see in North Etobicoke, it has already accomplished an important part of that vision by bringing together a diverse group of stakeholders to the same table. As we anticipate further fallout from the recession, particularly cuts to services, we will need more players at the table to help mitigate the full effects on the most vulnerable residents in our communities.

OCASI has asked the provincial government to increase investment in settlement and integration services for immigrants and refugees, and to open up funding to new organizations that have not previously received funding. The Ontario government has attempted to respond to some of the concerns we raised regarding the impact of cuts to federal funding for settlement. They will need to do more in the months ahead as we brace for further cuts. Ontario investment in these services

is critical, since they allow agencies to deliver services to immigrants without restriction based on immigration status, including refugee claimants, migrant workers, and the ‘undocumented’ – and many North Etobicoke residents are represented in these categories.

We have asked the Ontario government to include the realities of refugees, immigrants and racialized residents, particularly women, in their poverty reduction strategy including their call for EI reform. We do not know what will be the outcome of the October elections, but we fully expect the Ontario government to maintain its commitment to immigrant and refugee integration by investing in services as well as being a strong voice for Ontario’s share of federal settlement dollars.

The LIPs are a positive example of an approach to service coordination among a broad range of local stakeholders, showcasing a model that is driven by local needs and leadership. But more work can be done to realize the other part of Citizenship and Immigration Canada’s (CIC) goal, of fully realizing true service coordination among the many settlement service programs funded by CIC, but also for other local programs funded by other levels of government.

CIC had encouraged service coordination in the most recent round of call for proposals for service delivery. For various reasons including resource limitations, CIC was not able to fully follow through on the many proposals featuring community-centered and fully coordinated service delivery models. Community organizations had invested a significant amount of time and resources in proposal development and not surprisingly, were deeply disappointed at returning to a new variation of the silo approach to service delivery.

But the effort was not a complete waste, and we took away some useful learnings from this process. We know that effective service coordination will require not just a willingness on the part of all stakeholders, from funders, to community organizations to public institutions and clients to collaborate to avoid duplication and maximize good practices, but also a solid understanding of the actual process of referral, case management, output recording and reporting, outcomes measurement, fiscal responsibility, and the ability to effectively understand and assess a funding proposal.

As we look forward to more cuts, cuts that would likely result in more hardship for our communities we will need to strengthen our models of partnership and collaboration such as LIPs, as one way of weathering the difficult times ahead, while remaining responsive to the complex needs of our communities.