

NEWCOMER INTEGRATION IN RURAL ONTARIO

Learnings from the Regional Forum, December 2018
& Community Consultations



FOREWORD/BACKGROUND

This document is a reflection on key themes emerging from an initiative carried out in 2018/19 to explore the challenges in newcomer attraction and retention in a regional rural Ontario context.

The purpose of the discussion paper is to summarize key themes and identify areas where policy or program delivery supports could be targeted for improvement. The main aim of the White Paper is to distill the ideas that might be transferrable or adaptable by stakeholders in other parts of rural Ontario.

ORIGIN OF THE PROJECT

Grey County spearheaded this initiative in partnership with the Rural Ontario Institute, Four County Labour Market Planning Board, Newcomer Centre of Peel (Rural Employment Initiative), Canadian Mortgage & Housing Corporation, & EDOs from an additional four counties in southwestern Ontario (Bruce/Huron/Perth/Wellington)

The development of this white paper and the delivery of the Regional Forum benefitted significantly from the input and support provided by each of our partners. Representatives from each partner organization provided invaluable insights and often served as a sounding board for the work that was completed. The contribution of time, feedback and background information from our partners enabled this initiative to have a regional perspective that addressed shared challenges and best practices.

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It is gratefully acknowledged that while Grey County received provincial funding through the RED program to support the work, the Province of Ontario is not responsible for any errors/omissions nor does it endorse any opinions or advice expressed in the white paper or any of the documents created through the process of the project.

A number of information resources were prepared to be shared at the forum and to support on-going work. These documents are available online and are all found here: <https://madeingrey.ca/newcomer-attraction-and-attention>

1. **Nexus Report “Environmental Scan: Rural Newcomer Integration” which includes**
 - a) an environmental scan and “Case Studies” of current state for newcomer integration and barriers that exist; and
 - b) stakeholder/partner interviews and informant interviews conducted with Grey County employers

2. **Housing Forum presentations:**
 - Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation
 - Blue Mountain Village Association
 - Grey County Planning Department

3. **Regional Forum Presentations/Activities**
 - a. Lionel Laroche, Keynote Speaker – Video Resources
 - b. Adam DeBuck, Danby Appliances
 - c. Allison O’Neill, Bruce Power
 - d. Gemma Mendez-Smith, Four County Labour Market Planning Board
 - e. Heather MacKenzie-Card, Fanshawe College & Oakwood Resort Initiative
 - f. Lindsay Hayter, Hayter Farms
 - g. Nexus Consulting – Mapping a Rural Ontario Presentation
 - h. Oliver Pryce, Rural Employment Initiative – Quick Sheet
 - i. Ryan Gibson, University of Guelph – Building a Strong, Welcoming Community
 - j. Tom Lusi & Sohrab Rahmati, Presentation on Employer Toolkit: A resource for hiring and retaining immigrant workers
 - k. Ease into Canada Toolkit – Danby Appliances
 - l. Welcoming Communities: New Resident Toolkit – Welcoming Communities Action Team

BACKGROUND

The collaborative activities focussed on newcomer attraction and retention, involving five largely rural southwestern Ontario counties and spearheaded by Grey County, emerged from a shared concern and the idea that there was much experience within the region that could inform further success.

The Forum in the fall of 2018 took place in the context of a growing understanding that demographic/migration trends and labour force dynamics are such that employers are being increasingly constrained in their ability to find the workers with the skills they need to successfully grow or maintain their businesses. Even though the overall population may be stable or growing, the labour force in many places is shrinking because the number of people entering retirement outweighs the number of young people entering the labour force. Thus newcomers and their willingness to stay becomes a more important part of the solution.

Many stakeholders in rural regions have been hard at work on attracting and retaining newcomers. They do so because the realization is growing that the contest for new talent and human capital is becoming a more and more important factor in the economic success and long-term vitality of their communities. There are encouraging signs that senior levels of government have also recognized this, indicated through the pilot program in Ontario to better utilize the Provincial Nominee Program specifically for northern and rural communities. This may eventually help with the attraction part of the settlement process if the pilot is a success and can scale up to deal with numbers much more impactful than the 5,000 initial target. But while newcomer attraction is important, it is ultimately fruitless if integration fails and retention falters. The focus of this initiative was to tackle critical factors central to retention.

The participating counties and organizations had an awareness that many employers in the region had promising integration initiatives that others could adapt to their workplaces if that experience was more widely shared and understood. Similarly, community-wide efforts among service organizations and municipalities were considered key to successfully improve the ability of a community to welcome and retain newcomers.

Finally, there was interest in furthering the discussion of the role that attainable housing plays in the decisions of newcomers to settle in a community for the long term and how to find solutions to those housing barriers. This context framed the themes for collecting and sharing ideas.

The challenges were framed as:

- Workplace integration
- Lack of sufficient attainable housing
- Perceptions of newcomers by resident population/employers

WORKPLACE INTEGRATION

The speakers and presenters, the forum participant table group discussions and the environmental scan demonstrated that there are many inspiring stories and promising practices to draw on. It was also emphasized that stakeholders must take positive steps towards a more comprehensive and coordinated approach in order to address the many complex factors surrounding newcomers' integration into rural communities.

The presentations from employers such as Danby, Bruce Power and Hayter Farms demonstrated that multi-faceted workplace initiatives are successful no matter the size of the workplace. These employers recognize the individual newcomer as engaged citizens with contributions to make and challenges to overcome in their integration into community life. Workplace integration practices go beyond learning specific duties and workplace norms. Workplace integration was looked at as embedded in a wider community system going further than offering supports such as occupation-related ESL training or translation of health and safety documents. Employers emphasized community integration supports as complimentary and necessary to workplace integration efforts.

This understanding points to the capacity of local agencies, service providers and community groups to network with one another as being crucial for the evolution of comprehensive, community-wide approaches where gaps can be continuously addressed and the ability to navigate as an employer or newcomer becomes easier. The ideal goal of "wrap-around services" offered through one point of access, as voiced at the Forum, would clearly require ongoing coordination and willingness to collaborate. The objective of a one-stop portal where employers and service providers access a suite of tools and/or customized guidance would create a more comprehensive service for newcomers.

Given the investment in Local Immigration Partnerships/Portals it is apparent that senior levels of government are supportive of better integration and coordination. However, more investment in this capacity was seen as worthwhile and necessary by many contributors to the Forum. Nevertheless, this approach implies that the services exist within a region and better connections/referral among them will improve access.

The inspiring example of the Newcomer Centre of Peel and the Rural Employment Initiative, through which underemployed urban newcomers are linked with employers/agencies in rural regions needing their skills, is focussed on the attraction part of the settlement process. The example no doubt stimulated thinking about how this principle could also be applied to the integration part of the process.

A number of suggestions emerged from the participant dialogues at the Forum about the challenge of distance for newcomers in a small town or employers far from urban service centres and the need for innovative service delivery. Improvements would result not just from linking up within a region but also from connecting with service providers outside an area to redress service gaps. Improving transportation and mobility is one strategy but that may also reinforce the idea that services and cultural integration is easier in urban centres, counteracting the goal of retention. For example, one participant identified that ESL services should be mobile rather than expecting newcomers to travel to urban centres. Innovation that builds bridges between urban-based service providers and rural newcomers and agencies so that they are better supported in situ will require careful program design.

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The Forum provided an opportunity to bring forward the potential of how a foreign student program might help grow a skilled workforce. As the Forum was held at the Blue Mountain Resort, the example of meeting workforce needs through Georgian College and Fanshawe College's foreign students in the Hospitality and Tourism program was showcased. These programs usually take approximately two years to complete with the prospect of finding employment in the field that eventually leads to permanent residency.

In simple terms this is a potentially promising solution as the student has a Canadian education and Canadian work experience. However, more times than not, the student, after investing in their education and work experience, is not guaranteed to be granted permanent residency status unless they are in specific jobs with occupational qualifications designated by the federal government. This is a lost opportunity and better processes for these "qualified and skilled" individuals to become a part of the Canadian labour force landscape would be a positive outcome. If there are to be collaborations between educational institutions and businesses to use foreign students as a viable labour pool then more needs to be done to achieve the final goal of making them a permanent part of the fabric of the local workforce. This idea of creating a "virtuous cycle" will be a very effective step in growing the local workforce. Effective retention leads to better attraction.

PERCEPTION OF NEWCOMERS

An integrated, "whole of community" philosophy does not minimize the reality of racism and bias that participants spoke to as being present and real in their communities. Lionel Laroche presented data and led several exercises with participants that highlighted inherent biases people bring to cross-cultural interpersonal exchanges in and out of workplace settings. The message was that workplace integration also requires adjustments from the people receiving newcomers into their workplaces. While newcomers need to adjust to integrate, so do the people and organizations into which they are coming. Appreciation of the value of diversity and potential for innovation that flow from newcomer integration necessitates that long term residents of the community adjust as well.

The value and contribution that leadership can make becomes clearer if the perception that successful integration is only a result of adjustments made solely by newcomers is discarded. Political leadership in the community reflecting a mindset of mutual learning becomes more important. One participant at the Forum spoke of his personal experience in immigrating from another English-speaking country noting that immigrants are not always a visible minority or ethnically distinct and that integration can still be difficult. Rural communities with strong social ties can feel very closed to people coming from elsewhere regardless of how different they may look or whether they have a noticeable accent. Social isolation is not a recipe for retention.

Political leaders who invite their residents to take the first step and include newcomers in the social life of a community are playing an important role in creating the space for mutual adjustment.

This dynamic is something that also came to the fore in the context of Professor Ryan Gibson's presentation, which spoke to the lessons learned from the welcoming community successes in rural Manitoba. One key feature was the role and importance of leadership, from formal political leaders and respected business leaders. Those principles were used as a lens for the assessment of current initiatives in the environmental scan completed by Nexus.

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Information gathered from employers indicate that a significant minority of employers do not want diversity programs in their workplaces. This implies a coalition of the willing for promoting cultural diversity rather than expecting universal uptake. There are ‘trail-blazing’ employers in the region whose integration successes can be emulated – such efforts need to be celebrated by community leaders so that other employers see the value even if they aren’t necessarily early adopters of diversity programming.

ATTAINABLE HOUSING

Several important housing initiatives in the region are already underway and the newcomer integration forum was an opportunity to share current and emerging strategies that impact the ability of newcomers to find attainable housing.

The particular context of South Georgian Bay is worth noting. The area which straddles parts of both Simcoe County and Grey County has had significant growth pressure and housing price rises. Consequently the regional economy and specifically the tourism sector has a shortfall in available workers as the typical pay rates in the sector make attainability an issue. This concern is also evident along the Lake Huron shoreline where prices of homes and the relative lack of rental housing means employees cannot always find suitable housing.

An employer survey found that for their employees:

- 91% - finding appropriate housing was a challenge
- 60% - affordability is a significant barrier to living in the area permanently
- 50% - paying more than \$1,500 per month in housing costs
- 71% indicated improved transit would improve choices

Thus the regional strategy included these elements:

- Public Private Partnerships – to target entry level workforce – Student housing model
- Building on County and Town land use policies (CIP, surplus land, incentives, inclusionary zoning, etc.)
- Employers – Underwrite % of rental guarantee
- Public Sector – Offer incentives, if needed
- Developer – Build and operate to public sector / employers specs (affordability, design, public realm, etc.)
- Improvements on public transit cross county borders

Evidently the relevance of these strategies for other regions in the province is not universal. In some places the level of wages and housing availability will be better aligned for newcomer retention. In fact even within this regional approach it was recommended that community-specific tailored strategies became part of the way forward. The CMHC experience provided many examples of types of housing initiatives suitable for a rural context and that could form the part of a local or regional strategy. The regional attainable housing strategy discussed at the forum, did demonstrate the importance and value of a multi-stakeholder, community-wide approach – a universal method that can be applied to any rural community.

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The lessons learned provide some useful principles:

- There is limited understanding of difference between attainable & affordable
- Multi-stakeholder / multi-disciplinary collaboration was accelerator
- Business community, economic development leaders & destination marketing organizations had to come forward to drive initiative & back up business case with research
- Talking about challenges publically added to credibility & trust
- Including local residents helped to identify points of alignment & local champions
- Marketing efforts must be accompanied by infrastructure planning
- Housing initiatives need to be undertaken in parallel with other activities such as Transit Development & Post-Secondary Programming

CONCLUSION

In order for rural communities in Ontario to address labour shortages and changing demographics through the attraction and retention of newcomers a community-wide approach needs to be implemented. It is crucial to align all key stakeholders on collaborative strategies to improve workplace integration, public perception and affordable and attainable housing. More importantly, the value of retention as a key factor in community and economic development needs to be continually emphasized. Typically it can take up to 4-6 years for a newcomer family to feel integrated into their new community. Employers, service providers and community leaders need to take a holistic approach and think about it from a newcomer's perspective. Ask questions, learn about challenges and be open to new ideas. In rural communities you're not just working with the individual; you are helping to create a network for that newcomer and potentially their family. As an employer or a service provider, you are integrating all aspects of their life, whether it's a spouse, children, religion, passion or interests. So when considering attraction, include retention strategies in your plan. Retention takes time but when you're successful, everyone wins and our communities and workplaces will thrive.