

SOMERSET WEST COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTRE

**Case Study: Innovative Multicultural Health Navigator Program Improves access to
Health Services for Refugees and Immigrants**

Ottawa, Ontario

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Multicultural Health Navigator (MHN) Program is one of the first “formal” (within the health system) and permanent multicultural navigation programs in Canada. It recognizes and addresses challenges in accessing and navigating the health care system applied with a cultural and linguistic lens. Barriers to access are multiplied for newcomers who do not speak the dominant languages, who are unaware of the health care system, may not have a job or place to live, and/or do not have a social support network in place. The MHN program is a link between individuals and the system. Its main purpose is to support and educate newcomers about what their rights are, and how to access the system appropriately while empowering them to be able to navigate the system independently when they are ready.

Hindia Mohamoud, Executive Director of Ottawa Local Integration Partnership (OLIP) observed, “This is the right time for this program because we are seeing increased inequities in the health and social systems. And this program addresses the needs of immigrants”. The question continues to be – how to support the person through a system that isn’t working. The MHN program was created in 2014 to address this reality as well as to identify a method to increase access to essential services.

In 2008, Somerset West Community Health Centre (SWCHC) and the Catholic Centre for Immigrants (CCI) received permanent funding to provide health screening and assessment for government assisted refugees (GAR). At the time, there was no standard process in Ottawa for newcomers to obtain health information and access the health and social services system. ⁱ This partnership initiated by a community health centre and a settlement agency evolved to give birth to the Ottawa Newcomer Health

Centre (ONHC) which houses the MHN program. The Ottawa Local Immigration Partnership (OLIP) is committed to “removing barriers that delay or limit the integration of immigrants into local life.”ⁱⁱ

OLIP, funded by Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada, convenes partners around these tables to discuss existing challenges with the system with the hope to implement practical solutions led by partners around the table. One such challenge was the existing disconnect between immigrants and the multitude of available services in the city. Through such discussion, partners identified ONHC to be the ideal host for the MHN program because of the existing health service that are offered to newcomers through this initiative. Critical components for a program at the early stage included:

- Culturally and linguistically appropriate care and system navigation;
- Education to newcomers as well as service providers to address expectations and bridging the gap between newcomers and service providers;
- Collaborative working relationships between health, social and settlement agencies to address the social determinants of health.

The relationship between Somerset West CHC and the sector table partners contributed to launch of the MHN program but remains an important factor in the success of the program. Since inception, the program continues to experience increasing demand for its services. Its success is appreciated by the funders who has made the program permanent after only 1 year and increased its funding twice in the first 3 years to meet demand and extended its scope to other language communities.

Executive Director of SWCHC, Naini Cloutier, emphasized the important contribution that this program makes to the health of newcomers in Ottawa. “The current health care system is not welcoming to immigrants. The ability to address attitudinal and structural barriers is the value of the MHN approach. We have developed organizational expertise that allows us to deliver culturally appropriate care, advocate with immigrants and empower them to advocate for themselves”.

Client Story: Maria

Maria is a 41-year-old unemployed Latin-American woman who has been living in Canada for many years. She was referred to the MHN program by a Diabetes Educator Nurse because Maria had multiple health, social and economic problems and needed the support to get connected to appropriate services in the community.

Maria has 2 children both under 10 years of age. Her youngest child was receiving health care for learning and behavioural challenges, and had eating problems as well. Various home visits were made to Maria’s home to discuss these issues. Maria was also experiencing pain in her arms and both arms were swollen. She was taking medication for this; however, the medication didn’t seem to be working and she was unable to do everyday tasks. She was frustrated and tired.

MHN intervention included a variety of tasks. MHN helped to fill out application for Para-Transpo, disability issues; referred Maria to the Social Worker/Counsellor at settlement services for help with social and financial needs; connected Maria to the legal clinic for family legal issues; secured housing and financial support through the social assistance program; provided an education session regarding health providers’

and patients' roles and responsibilities; encouraged and supported Maria to continue her ESL education; empowered Maria to request assistance for a referral to facilitate her children attending a summer camp program for low income families; and referred Maria to a parenting course upon request; and linked Maria to a primary healthcare provider.

The outcomes were phenomenal. Maria felt more empowered and independent and now knows when to ask for help. Although, due to her health issues, she is limited in what she can do, Maria is seeking out programs and services to assist her and her children. Maria has also resolved some of her social and financial issues and feels less worried.

Observations and lessons learned

Being at the right tables, with the right partners and taking on leadership role contributed to the successful launch of the program. Mohamoud said:ⁱⁱⁱ ““OLIP is able to bring the major players together at the same table. We connect on a continual basis with our partner agencies in the immigrant community. These are real partnerships – we value listening, identifying challenges, sharing our knowledge and experience, finding strengths and looking for solutions.”

Thoughtful and creative risk taking was essential. The MHN idea was an innovative, but untested, solution to the difficult problem of health system navigation and access for newcomers in Ottawa. SWCHC took the leadership to research and develop a proposal. The funder initially only provided funds for a 1 year pilot project. All these actions required risk taking—but also a bit of faith that it was the right thing to do.

The selection and training of MHNs has been critical to the ongoing success of this program. The MHNs must possess good understanding of the health and social services systems in Canada and know how to navigate them; must be inventive problem solvers; have good knowledge about their identified cultural and linguistic community and know how they contrast with the Canadian systems; and have the ability to provide basic education about health systems and be able to advocate on behalf of clients when required.

Consistent collaboration with other agencies and professionals is essential in addressing access gaps but also crucial in ensuring wrap around care. Housing, education, employment, literacy, etc. all impact newcomers' health. The MHNs are closely connected with community partners providing a diverse range of services. Continuous communication, coordination and advocacy are part of daily work of an MHN and this takes time and having a good network increases efficiency and ensures that the social determinants of health are addressed.

Timely data collection and analysis using a tool that measures outcomes is very critical to the ongoing success of the program. Evaluation is required to ensure quality improvement and sustainability as communities as well as the system changes.

ⁱ Jack McCarthy. (Jan. 17, 2019). Conversation.

ⁱⁱ Ottawa Local Immigration Partnership (n.d). Planting the Seeds of Progress; Ottawa's Immigration Strategy in Action; 2011 – 2012. Retrieved from <https://olip-plio.ca/knowledge-base/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/OLIP-Impact-Report-2011-20121.pdf>. Jan. 20, 2019.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hindia Mohamoud. (Feb. 1, 2019). Conversation