



**NEWCOMER
CENTRE**

Supporting LGBTQI+ Newcomer Employment in Edmonton

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Introduction

The Newcomer Centre Rainbow Refuge program in Edmonton, Alberta helps navigate immigration processes and provides critical information and support for preparing LGBTQI+1 refugee claims. They also offer individualized services to guide LGBTQI+ newcomers in their settlement process and address their specific needs. Currently, the Rainbow Refuge program at the Newcomer Centre serves over 1000 LGBTQI+ clients, while other LGBTQI+ serving agencies like the Pride Centre of Edmonton see over 450 newcomers pass through their doors on a weekly basis (Lafayette 2024).

One of the most important steps on the journey to settlement as a newcomer in Canada is finding and securing employment. As a response to the growing need to provide LGBTQI+ focused programming and resources for newcomers, the researcher and the Newcomer Centre's Rainbow Refuge staff engaged in a small-scale research pilot project to investigate LGBTQI+ newcomer needs, barriers, and experiences of accessing employment in Edmonton. The purpose of this project was twofold: to understand the larger context of LGBTQI+ settlement and employment support in Canada including best practices and common challenges; and to understand the experience of LGBTQI+ newcomers' journey to accessing employment in Edmonton. Over the course of the pilot project, we conducted interviews with LGBTQI+ service providers throughout Canada, completed an environmental scan of the resources, research, and best practices of other LGBTQI+ immigrant-serving organizations, and hosted several focus groups comprised of LGBTQI+ newcomers in various stages of their settlement journey. The results of the study are illuminating; the picture that has emerged demonstrates both the strengths of the Newcomer Centre's ability to serve LGBTQI+ clients and areas for growth and development.

The findings from this pilot project are preliminary and were meant to give the researchers and Rainbow Refuge staff a better sense of the larger context of LGBTQI+ newcomer research in Canada. Moreover, we sought to develop a baseline of understanding around employment challenges post-migration for LGBTQI+ newcomers in Edmonton. The findings are discussed in thematic format. At the end of each section is a list of recommendations based on the findings.



➔ Theme 1: The Importance of LGBTQI+ Social Support Groups for Employment

It is well documented that one of the ways in which sexual minority newcomers survive and thrive post-arrival is linked to the degree to which they establish support networks within LGBTQI+ affirming communities. Some of the most powerful spaces where sexual minority refugees find a place of belonging and affirmation are support groups and organizations that are either sexual minority refugee-specific or queer culture focused. These collective spaces break social isolation, foster self-affirmation, and build community (Lee and Brotman 2013). This was strongly reflected in experiences of the participants of our focus groups. Many referred to “group” (the Rainbow Refuge community group) as family. In particular, the work of Basel Abu Hamrah and Sara Buczynski, needs to be highlighted because they were named so often. It was clear that Abu Hamrah and Buczynski have built bonds of trust and respect among their clients and the result is a thriving LGBTQI+ Newcomer group in Edmonton.

Along with the Rainbow Refuge program, focus group participants also mentioned the importance of the Pride Centre of Edmonton and the support and community they found there. It was surprising how frequently the Pride Centre was mentioned in conjunction with the Rainbow Refuge program, which suggests the need for potentially strengthening partnerships and collaborative projects between the two organizations. These places provide the safe, affirming and protected spaces that are not always available to them in other spaces like extended family, religious, and ethno-cultural communities. As one participant noted in reference to her involvement with Pride *"... the churches here, I will not mention them, you cannot express which group you go to. You are not allowed, you cannot."*

Social opportunities for networking are vital for the pathway to employment. Many of the participants spoke of how their social connections, or having someone to vouch for them was critical to obtaining their first Canadian job. In fact, many agreed that it was more important than their resume or any Canadian certification/training they had achieved. These testimonies underscore the vital role that social groups play in the lives of newcomers to Edmonton. Further, because LGBTQI+ newcomers do not always have the same access to social networks in their religious and ethno-cultural communities (due to perceived and/or real discrimination and homophobia) this queer community is critical. Further, when LGBTQI+ newcomers are in this precarious position of needing employment and are not able to access the same social networks for referrals and opportunities, they may be forced to work illegally. Several focus group participants shared that they had worked (or were working) in some kind of 'underground' arrangement.



LGBTQI+ denotes Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, plus and is employed in this report because of its common usage within mainstream Canadian society. It is informed by queer immigration scholarship and research.



In terms of explicit employment programs, the focus group participants were very satisfied with the opportunities they were given to obtain certification, build and revise their Canadian resumes, and learn about workplace culture in Canada. However, it should be noted that not all participants were eligible for these services based on their immigration status, so not everyone knew about or had participated in the employment bridging and training programs offered at the Newcomer Centre.

“There is a program that helped me, helped me to express myself, know how to talk to people, how to write your resume, how to write your letter, how to talk when you’re going to have an interview. It’s called the I-WIN program. If you haven’t attended it, you can try it out. I can help you a lot. It helped a lot of people.”

Recommendations

- ➔ Continue to strengthen and provide meaningful, LGBTQI+-focused social support group and networking opportunities for LGBTQI+ newcomers
- ➔ Increase frequency of social events so that there are more opportunities to participate and so they can be smaller in size which may be less overwhelming to attend.
- ➔ Look for opportunities to collaborate with the Pride Centre and strengthen the relationship between the organizations.

➔ Theme 2: Mainstream LGBTQI+ Supports and Services in all Programs and Communication

The directors of the Rainbow Refuge program undertake a wide variety support services for their clients, but often do not have the time or capacity to train the entirety of the organization to appropriately serve LGBTQI+ clients. Some of the most consistent and recurring themes was the importance of mainstreaming LGBTQI+ service provision into general Newcomer Centre services. This is premised on the idea that LGBTQI+ clients may not want to disclose their identity but should still have access to the information that pertains to them. Said another way, the organization should move to operating under the assumption that “anyone could be LGBTQI+.” A simple example of this would be to provide sexual health information for LGBTQI+ newcomers in the “standard” curriculum or health programming material used for the general newcomer population. Another example related to employment might be to include information about employee rights regarding gender identity and sexual orientation in the workplace in all employment training.

This allows sexual minority newcomers timely access to the information they need, without having to “out” themselves in an unfamiliar context. This could be applied across a variety of programs and services to normalize support for LGBTQI+ clients across the institution. The idea behind our recommendations is to make LGBTQI+ support a part of the normal standard operating procedures of all programs in the organization, instead of having it siloed or centralized into the Rainbow Refugee program exclusively. This could also free up the time of the Rainbow Refuge staff to address the overwhelming demands not covered by other programs and services at the Newcomer Centre.

LGBTQI+-friendly signs and symbols should be seen throughout the organization, communicated clearly and frequently both visually and verbally, particularly on the organization's website. Websites are important avenues that immediately transmit ideas about inclusion and exclusion. Giwa and Chase (2018) note that, for LGBTQI+ newcomers searching for supports and services, the first thing many will look for is evidence of a safe and affirming space via LGBTQI+ positive images such as a rainbow or a statement declaring the organization welcoming or inclusive. This may not be evident immediately upon landing on the Newcomer Centre homepage. The website could also provide readily available information and links to community agencies that serve LGBTQI+ populations. Finally, in addition to having various ethno-cultural/religious backgrounds, age, gender, ability etc. represented on the website and communication materials, there should also be sexual and gender diversity represented, too.

Recommendations

- ➔ Mainstream basic LGBTQI+-focused service provision into standard organizational programs and service offerings.
- ➔ Consider other LGBTQI+ specific services and resources that could be included in the standard operating curriculum/procedure of the Newcomer Centre's general ambit of service provision.
- ➔ Include LGBTQI+-friendly images on the Newcomer Centre's homepage; include gender and sexual diversity representation on public/promotional material.
- ➔ Include links to LGBTQI+ broader community resources and organizations on Newcomer Centre homepage.

"I go through the website and social media handles... or official reports trying to read what has happened, what their stand is basically on LGBTQI+ ... so let's say for example, there is a company that doesn't mention anything about Pride Month or there is no posts on LGBTQI+? I tend not to apply for that position. Let's say it is a kind of ... anticipated discrimination."

➔ Theme 3: Organizational Knowledge and Cultural Sensitivity



Another important theme we encountered was the importance of trauma-informed care and cultural sensitivity regarding gender identity and sexual orientation in newcomers. We recommend that all frontline workers know and understand basic LGBTQI+ terminology and common issues, and that there is a level of awareness of how sexual violence-based trauma can affect sexual minorities throughout the migration process. Important and helpful concepts to know and understand are things like intersectionality and how to use safe, inclusive, and non-judgemental language (Lee et al. 2020). Other recommendations include integrating LGBTQI+ topics into larger multiculturalism/cultural sensitivity organizational training or incorporating LGBTQI+ terminology in language classes.

When there is a lack of knowledge about how difficult the resettlement process can be for sexual minorities and limited cultural sensitivity to sexual orientation and gender identity, it can prevent LGBTQI+ refugees from learning about available resources to meet their basic needs, potentially delaying their ability to find and retain employment. This is not to suggest that all employees become experts in LGBTQI+ migration and trauma, but rather to encourage all staff to have a common understanding and sensitivity to the realities of sexual minority clients. This recommendation also is in line with the normalizing and mainstreaming of LGBTQI+ newcomer support within the organization.

Recommendations

- ➔ Provide staff with basic gender identity/sexual orientation cultural sensitivity training and education.
- ➔ Include LGBTQI+ topics into larger organizational multiculturalism training on a regular basis.
- ➔ Provide professional development opportunities for Rainbow Refuge staff to stay up to date on best practices and LGBTQI+ newcomer-related policy changes in Canada.





➔ Theme 4: Knowledge Gaps

Throughout the course of the focus groups, we noticed that there were certain information gaps surrounding employment, from being aware of their rights in job interviews, to navigating their volunteer involvement with Pride on their resumes, to larger structural processes like foreign credentialing.

Volunteering is promoted as a way to gain exposure to employers and experience in the Canadian labour market that can lead to employment in the future (Allan 2019). Many newcomers are doing all they can to secure their first Canadian job, including active volunteer work. Several of the focus group participants (all female) volunteer regularly at the Pride Centre to keep busy and active during their time of unemployment and to gain Canadian experience in a safe space.



There emerged a consensus among participants that, while they were happy and grateful to be able to volunteer at the Pride Centre, they were too fearful to put that on their resumes as “volunteer experience.” After explaining to the focus group that she had given her resume to an acquaintance at an organization she wanted to volunteer/work with – and they saw that she had put “Pride Centre” on her resume – she recalls that “... *up to now, they did not call me. Even now, I think they cut me off. And a lot won't chat with me there. And I was like 'why did I give them my resume?'*”

These types of experiences may be something worth knowing for staff who do job ready training. It was unclear whether participants knew Canadian labour laws, but it is imperative that all clients who use employment services know their rights as job seekers and employees. Further thought and consideration might be given on how best to advise clients in these types of situations (disclosure) should the situation arise. While most participants came to Canada because they understood it to be a safe place to live and work, and while some of them knew that Canadian employers couldn't discriminate against them based on their gender identity/sexual orientation, most still expressed fear about having their employer (or potential employer) or other community members learn this about them.

Participants expressed their fear and uncertainty when they were asked about their sexual orientation (along with gender, age, etc.) as users of Indeed (an online job matching and hiring platform). They did not want to disclose that information (even though that data was collected voluntarily and separate from their user profile for Indeed), but they also did not want to lie about it, or not do as they were asked. Some education around the collection of user data and how it is unrelated to their Indeed profile (or other hiring platform sites, government sites etc.) and job applications would also be something to consider educating newcomer job seekers about. This is a very particular concern for LGBTQI+ newcomers who remain unsure and fearful about who they can safely disclose their identity to.



It is also worth mentioning the confusion and frustration many were feeling because their credentials and experience were not recognized, even for opportunities to volunteer. A nurse, who has worked for over twelve years with international non-profits in her country was searching for opportunities to work in senior's homes.

"Everyone kept asking, 'do you have healthcare aide certificate?' I say 'no, but as I told you, I'm an internationally accredited nurse, can't I...volunteer at least? Do the sweeping and study the area?' The front lady told me 'no my dear you can't volunteer, you can't do work, maybe you can put in a resume to do our cleaning.'"

There was minimal understanding of the structural and procedural obstacles to credential and job experience recognition in Canada among participants. Research findings that suggest Canada continues to fail at having a system that effectively and consistently recognizes and accepts transnational immigrants' prior credentials and work experience (Guo 2009). Participants suggested that the Newcomer Centre could help unemployed newcomers by coordinating volunteer placements/opportunities based on sector and professional backgrounds, since they faced so many obstacles in trying to secure these on their own.

Recommendations

- ➔ Ensure newcomers know their rights as employees, including the protected status of gender identity/sexual orientation (both during interviews and on the job).
- ➔ Offer training and recommendations for disclosure about volunteering with LGBTQI+ organizations in resume writing workshops and job interview training.
- ➔ Provide explanation for the collection of socio-demographic data (voluntary disclosure, unrelated to personal profile) on websites like Indeed.
- ➔ Provide support and coordination for volunteer opportunities related to professional training and experience (e.g. healthcare, food service/hospitality, etc.)

"If you take your resume, and you say you are volunteering at Pride ... some Catholics, they don't want to read about it ... they may befriend my co-worker, or someone I meet at church, but when they see you use 'she/her -- that is a problem. And yet, that is how you get connections ... so I have a lot of headache."

➔ Theme 5: Intersectionality: racial, gender, sexual orientation discrimination

Experiences of racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia were woven throughout the focus group discussions, highlighting the intersections of both being racial and a gender/sexual minority in Canada. A few of the instances shared were: being asked to submit a picture of themselves for a housecleaning job on Kijiji or being asked if they immigrated to Canada from Uganda, hateful comments while riding public transit or using social services, to not being offered a job after disclosing they were involved with Edmonton Pride Centre.

A trans man recounted his experience of being told that he was “mentally disturbed” by a doctor because he identified as a man. *“I felt so bad. And he didn’t work for me. I was in pain, real pain, but he didn’t work for me.”* Focus group participants shared and commiserated on this collective experience, recounting their experiences and nodding in support of others while they listened. Many of the stories of racism/sexism/homophobia came from the women and a trans man who participated in the focus groups. Intersectionality is a particularly helpful term to understand these experiences.

It requires consideration of the ways in which both being a woman AND being non-white AND being poor, for example, create experiences of oppression and discrimination more than just one of those categories alone. Often, the experiences of discrimination expressed by participants were not just based on one factor (race) alone, but included gender/sexual orientation, too.

One issue that did come up both in the research and from focus group participants was the need for safe housing options. Securing housing is a challenge for most newcomers, but LGBTQI+ newcomers face additional challenges on the grounds of their race and gender identity/sexual orientation and socio-economic status. It is reported that LGBTQI+ newcomers have a difficult time finding housing. They are either forced to live with family and friends who are not accepting of their identity because they cannot find safe roommates. Lack of affordable housing also compounds this issue by reducing or eliminating the housing options and choices of LGBTQI+ newcomers, often forcing them to live in unsafe environments where they face stigma and violence (Mule & Gates Gasse 2013).

Social workers recommend that policies be developed that ensure safe housing for sexual minority newcomers upon arrival (Alessi, Kahn, et al. 2018). Access to safe housing illustrates the complex intersection of race, sexual orientation/gender identity and social class.

A similar study to this pilot project conducted in 2023 in the Windsor–Essex region of Ontario explored the social service needs and experiences of LGBTQI+ immigrants and refugees. The study found, among other things, that LGBTQI+ newcomers had either experienced bullying and harassment or feared that they would be “outed” and subject to bullying if they were seen in the offices or spaces of LGBTQI+ support staff (e.g., in offices with windows decorated with rainbows (Piling, Ku, et al. 2023). A focus group participant also expressed this fear of being “found out” by a member of his community while in the offices of Rainbow Refuge staff.

“Like I feel that with race, like you being Black and queer together ... those two don’t go together in people’s minds.”

Recommendations

- ➔ Consider the intersecting identities of LGBTQI+ clients and the ways this impacts their experiences of discrimination (e.g. at work, finding housing, etc.)
- ➔ Find ways through partnership, advocacy, policy and procedure that ensure housing safety for LGBTQI+ newcomers upon arrival in Canada.
- ➔ Prioritize the importance of privacy and confidentiality when clients use Rainbow Refuge services at Newcomer Centre locations.

There has been a recent influx of SOGIESC refugees from Uganda to Edmonton (March 2023 onward) due to a change in the law that criminalizes homosexuality in that country.

➔ Theme 6: Personal Failure vs Systemic Barriers

No matter what the topic, it was clear that despite being overwhelmed, angry and frustrated with being under/unemployed, almost all participants were grateful to be in a country that was safe for them to be who they wanted to be. Embedded in these narratives was also this sense of personal accountability to prove themselves worthy of employment and acceptance in Canada. This surfaced in a variety of ways, from discrediting their language proficiency and working to become more fluent, to believing that their poor working conditions were inevitable but could be overcome through hard work and self-improvement, or to seeking out and obtaining every single certification and training opportunity available.



What was consistently absent was the understanding that their employment status was not just a result of personal inadequacies but also a consequence of much larger, systemic problems like racism, xenophobia, and the immigration/foreign credentialing system itself. Many of the focus group participants existed in the “tragic gap” between expectations of Canada being a country of safety and opportunity and the reality of the difficulties of foreign credential recognition, everyday racism, and under/unemployment. Whereas many of them attribute this gap to personal failure or just an inevitability of their circumstance, research, scholarship, and lived experience would attribute it to larger structural factors. Shiza (2023) attributes this under-use of foreign trained professionals and broader declining immigrant employment outcomes to a “hierarchical skill regime based on skin colour and country of origin rather than qualifications” (Liu 2019 as quoted in Shiza 2023, p. 489).

Immigrant-serving organizations offering employment programs for newcomers tend to focus on individualistic training with an emphasis on personal accountability.

As Thomas (2015) notes, “this perspective expects that newcomers should be able to overcome barriers in the labour market if they improve their credentials, obtain Canadian experience, and quite simply, work harder” (p. 161). As such, this viewpoint does not address systemic barriers that exclude immigrants from obtaining meaningful employment opportunities (e.g., stiff requirements for licensing, “Canadian experience,” costly retraining and upskilling, racism, homo/transphobia and discrimination). It is worthwhile to note the sentiments expressed by focus group participants and the incongruity with the reality of the larger ongoing circumstances.



Recommendations

- ➔ Find ways to counter “personal accountability” narratives of employment that attribute under/unemployment to personal or individual inadequacy or failure.
- ➔ Continue to build collective accounts of difficult circumstances instead of individually focused ones.

“I think Canada really gives you hope. No matter what, you’re not somewhere you don’t want to be. At the end of the day, you see the light at the end of the tunnel. And the end of the day, if I better myself in this or that thing, it always gives you that hope ... Like two weeks back, I was really so down, I had nothing to do. I was in my room. But – I had to, you know, get myself together to start looking again. There’s always a new opportunity out there ... it’s there if you look for them. [I have to] put myself in a better position, too, so that if the opportunity finds me, I’m ready for it”



Conclusion

It is not easy to come to Canada as LGBTQI+ refugee. There are many challenges that make settlement and integration more complex because of intersecting factors like race, gender identity, social class, and sexual orientation. In this report, we have documented the employment experiences of LGBTQI+ newcomers and the links to services provided by the Newcomer Centre. We have also tried to incorporate the most current research and recommendations from scholars and practitioners in Canada with the lived experience of newcomers and day-to-day operations of the Newcomer Centre. We tried to make practical, relevant recommendations for the Newcomer Centre so that they can better support LGBTQI+ newcomers.

The Rainbow Refuge program has many strengths and the respect they have garnered from their clients is clear; the support they provide is invaluable to the community they serve. It is, however, important to continue to strive to make the organization as safe and inclusive as possible, while recognizing the unique and complex circumstances LGBTQI+ newcomers encounter when they resettle in Canada. While many of the intersecting challenges LGBTQI+ newcomers face is beyond the scope of the Newcomer Centre, there are still ways that the organization can remain responsive to the needs of this group of newcomers both when they seek and retain employment and as they integrate into the community. These recommendations are not exhaustive.

The research project done here was meant to illuminate the current realities of LGBTQI+ newcomers in Edmonton and provide a broad resource for the Newcomer Centre as they continue to serve LGBTQI+ clients. We highly recommend moving to an intersectional approach for the provision of services that are holistic and address LGBTQI+ newcomers' lived reality while integrating support for them throughout the full complement of services offered by the Newcomer Centre.

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