

Project Case Study Canadian Red Cross — First Contact Toronto, Ontario

1. Introduction

This case study of the Canadian Red Cross — First Contact is one of a series of case studies of projects funded at least in part through the federal government's National Homelessness Initiative (NHI). The case study first describes the project including: conditions prior to implementation, what the project involves and its objectives. It then describes project implementation to date. Finally, it notes outcomes to date, including comments from clients where available

Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) is producing these case studies in order to contribute to the government's understanding of how NHI is working in individual communities at the project level, to gauge the extent to which the objectives are being achieved at this mid-way stage of the three-year Initiative, and to determine what can be learned from the experiences of particular projects that may be applicable to others participating in the Initiative.

The case study is based on a review of the initial proposal for the project and other available documents describing the project and its objectives and how it fits into the community's plans to address homelessness, and on a series of interviews with people representing the following groups:

- managers and staff of the project
- clients of the project
- community organizations working in areas related to this project that might share clientele with the project or whose service to people who are homeless might be influenced by this project

2. Description of the Project

Conditions prior to project implementation

During several decades, the Canadian Red Cross has actively responded to the needs of persons experiencing threats to their safety and well-being in Toronto, Canada and throughout the world. Among its many activities, the Toronto Canadian Red Cross

Society provides disaster relief services, a family reunification program and settlement services. These activities fit into the agency's mandate of serving immigrants and refugee populations.

Data collected in the community with the assistance of the city of Toronto's Refugee Housing Task Group (RHTG) indicated that there was a serious lack of information about the refugee determination process and the services accessible to refugee claimants in the city of Toronto.

What the project involves

The RHTG — made up of the Canadian Red Cross and other government and non-governmental organizations, partnered with the CERIS (Joint Center of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Settlement) to submit a proposal for SCPI funding to create a one-stop information clearing house on services available to refugee claimants. The First Contact project would be delivered by the Canadian Red Cross and would assist refugee claimants to integrate into the local community. Clients would get referral and information on the processing of their refugee claims, completing the required forms, applying for legal aid and/or welfare, and searching for housing and employment.

First Contact project staff maintain on-going links with most of the members of the RHTG. They work closely with representatives of Citizenship and Immigration Canada, FCJ Hamilton House, Seaton House, Sojourn House (a city-operated shelter for refugees) and a number of service providers that aid refugees in Toronto. The Canadian Red Cross also relies heavily on volunteers with foreign language skills to serve clients in their first language.

First Contact is an easily accessible facility situated in downtown Toronto. It offers round-the-clock service to refugee claimants new to the city. Most of their clients arrive from the United States through the border crossing at Buffalo, New York. Others arrive at Pearson International Airport. Still others come from other parts of the province. Border officers and airport personnel regularly hand out an information card prepared and supplied by the Canadian Red Cross to refugees. The card is printed in several languages and offers a 24-hour telephone number and a map with directions to the agency. The First Contact project has a full-time intake worker to assist clients with referrals and provide support. There is also a part-time community resource worker responsible for the distribution of up-to-date information about the resources and services for refugee claimants in Toronto. Agency staff also recruit and support culturally and linguistically diverse volunteers conversant in a wide variety of languages (e.g., Spanish, Arabic, Bengali, Cantonese, Farsi).

In addition to referrals and support, staff also offer: orientation to the refugee claim process; workshops on housing; legal service; health; employment and retraining provided by representatives from partner agencies; referrals to settlement agencies;

information packages, e.g., on the re-settlement process; orientation to life in Toronto; and finally, in some instances, transportation.

Objectives of the project

First Contact has the following six objectives:

1. to mitigate homelessness by providing refugee claimants with accurate information about housing, social services, legal and health services during their first month of arrival;
2. provide a 24-hour-a-day/7-day-a-week telephone number for refugee claimants to access information about services provided in the city;
3. provide a drop-in centre that will serve as a point of congregation, provision of referrals and some services, especially for refugee claimants who are living in the general hostel/shelter system;
4. collect necessary data about refugee claimant numbers, needs, points of entry and barriers to accessing available services with the aim of continuously improving the welfare of refugee claimants in Toronto;
5. work with the agencies and stakeholders at various ports of entry including Canadian Immigration and Citizenship (CIC) and Travelers Aide at the Pearson Airport, and the various partners at the Fort Erie border with the United States of America in providing a sustainable service delivery model for the reception and orientation of refugee claimants;
6. provide a comprehensive analysis of data compiled through research and service delivery to provide recommendations for a permanent service model.

3. Implementation to Date

The First Contact project is in its second year of operation. A steering committee with members from the RHTG is overseeing the projects' activities. Training sessions on the refugee determination process have been provided to staff. Staff from partner agencies have offered several information sessions to clients designed to orient them to the city's resources and services. To date, more than 22 culturally and linguistically diverse volunteers have been recruited. Information packages and First Contact cards have been prepared for wide distribution to the refugee population. The agency has also formed coalitions with the Fort Erie Multi-Cultural Centre and the Buffalo Refugee Shelter Casa Viva to better serve refugees arriving in Toronto. Agency staff also make regular presentations to other agencies in the city in the hopes of soliciting their help for clients.

The agency's statistics indicate that in 2001-02, the program assisted more than 361 refugees. Of that number, approximately 37 percent stayed in shelters upon their arrival to Toronto, 20 percent lived on the streets while searching for refuge, and fewer than 25 percent were able to live with family and friends. Volunteers housed a further 10 percent during their period of assimilation into the community.

To gauge the impact of First Contact services on refugee claimants, staff recently conducted client feedback sessions. The information in the preliminary report indicates a very high level of satisfaction with services as well as insightful information about both the positive aspects of, and clients' concerns with, the First Contact program. For instance, clients offered comments about the problems they encountered upon arriving in Toronto, the agency's intake services, contributions to social integration and overall expectations. In the near future, staff will analyse the collected data and seek ways to improve upon the project's operations.

Since the inception of the First Contact program, many former clients have returned to the agency to offer their language skills and to share the benefits of their experiences as newly integrated Torontonians to new arrivals.

4. Outcomes to Date

Preliminary observations

While it is premature to make any assessment of the impacts of the Canadian Red Cross' First Contact project on the lives of its many clients in the longer term, it is possible to make the following preliminary observations:

- The First Contact program has apparently already made a difference in the lives of many homeless refugees who have come to settle in the Toronto area; this is demonstrated by the statistics on numbers served and the recent First Contact client feedback report completed in June 2002.
- The agency's staff is working diligently with the staff of its partner agencies in Toronto to continue to improve upon the services of the First Contact program. First Contact staff maintains close ties with their partners in order to provide assistance to their clients in the form of workshops, referrals, advice and information.
- The First Contact staff and their RHTG partners have developed a work plan with three phases (implementation, data collection and final reporting) that describes the activities planned by the agency along with timelines and expected outcomes, as well as results achieved to date.
- The significant number of clients who maintain contact with the Canadian Red Cross to either work as volunteers, take advantage of the agency's many services or sustain relationships with fellow refugees is a strong indicator of the success of the First Contact program in Toronto so far.

Client comments

In order to get a sense of the project's impact on clients, the researcher spent a day at the Canadian Red Cross having informal conversations with clients. The researcher asked clients what changes, if any, they have experienced as a result of the inception of the project or of additional services made possible by NHI funding. The responses are, by their nature, the subjective comments of those individuals willing to respond.

One said, "I arrived in Toronto stressed and afraid. I was welcomed by the First Contact staff who helped me to secure a bed at Seaton House. The staff helped me very much with getting legal aid help, a SIN number and a health card. I'm working as a volunteer here while I search for a job."

Another reported that, "When I first arrived in Toronto, I wasn't sure where to go for help, so I came to the Red Cross. They helped me to find a bed at the Salvation Army Evangeline shelter. They also referred me to the Newcomers program at the YWCA. I've worked here as a volunteer since November 2001. After a long time, I finally found a place to stay, now I'm looking for a job."

A third said, "I arrived in Toronto from the border at Buffalo, N.Y. When I first arrived, there was no space at the refugee shelter (Sojourn House) so the staff here helped me to get a bed at Seaton House. I finally got a bed at Sojourn House two months later. I managed to find a place to live with some friends. I'm looking for a job now. With the staff's help, I'll find a way to improve my English language skills."

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