

SHARING SETTLEMENT AND INTEGRATION PRACTICES THAT WORK REFUGEE 613 WELCOMES YOU TO OTTAWA

Refugee 613
Ottawa, ON

Area of Practice:

- Promoting Welcoming Communities
- Information and Orientation

A Pathways to
Prosperity Project

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PATHWAYS TO
PROSPERITY
Promoting Welcoming Communities in Canada



VOIES VERS LA
PROSPÉRITÉ
Promouvoir des communautés accueillantes au Canada

BACKGROUND ON THE ORGANIZATION AND IMPETUS FOR THE PROGRAM

Refugee 613 is an independent, non-partisan coalition project based in Ottawa, ON. Established in 2015, it is an innovation and communications hub created by a grassroots network of citizens, settlement agencies, sponsorship groups, and community partners who support the integration of refugees. Its mission is to maximize the efforts of organizations and individuals by offering a vehicle for informing, connecting, and inspiring them to achieve excellence in welcoming and settling as many refugees as possible to Ottawa. Refugee 613 provides ongoing support to the community in the form of newsletters, training, events, service referrals, digital innovation, and strategic communications advice.

Refugee 613 Welcomes You to Ottawa was developed in 2017, in the context of the significant increase of Arabic-speaking refugees to Ottawa, along with the entrenchment of social media and digital messaging as communications tools by refugees and private sponsors for communicating and sharing information. Newcomers were crowdsourcing settlement information through WhatsApp, and while there were benefits in terms of people building connections, the information was often inaccurate and rarely linked newcomers to relevant services in the community. Refugee 613 decided to test the effect of seeding an expert-moderated online space on improving the quality of information sharing and bringing people closer to reliable services known to improve refugee experiences and outcomes. A decision was made to focus on Arabic-speaking Syrian refugees because they represented a large, somewhat homogenous group in terms of their arrival to Canada, language, and active use of online platforms. WhatsApp was selected as the platform because of its popularity, convenience, and ease of use.

OVERVIEW OF THE PROGRAM

Name:

Refugee 613 Welcomes You to Ottawa

Description:

Refugee 613 Welcomes You to Ottawa assists Arabic-speaking refugees in navigating settlement services by bringing high-quality information and referrals through two WhatsApp groups (WhatsApp allows a maximum of 256 members per group). Using smartphones, newcomers can ask questions, obtain referrals to local agencies, and learn about settlement-related workshops and events. Posts are also shared about cultural subjects, emergency alerts (e.g., school bus cancellations, services following major storms), and requests for research participants or community volunteers. The WhatsApp groups have a full-time expert moderator, who is online five days a week from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm. Questions are answered by the moderator or group members (with the moderator verifying and, if needed, correcting or adding to responses). Members can ask a question at any time of the day and are promised a reliable answer within 24 hours.

Goal(s):

The goals of Refugee 613 Welcomes You to Ottawa are to provide accurate settlement information in a timely manner, to correct misinformation circulating through social media, to empower and support newcomers in their settlement and integration journey, and to assist newcomers in navigating Canadian systems.

Target Client Group(s):

Arabic-speaking refugees in Ottawa

Delivery Partner(s):

Refugee 613 Welcomes You to Ottawa is co-delivered with the YMCA-YWCA of the National Capital Region's Newcomer Information Centre.

Human Resource(s):

Refugee 613 Welcomes You to Ottawa is delivered by a full-time digital community manager who moderates both groups. Responsibilities include answering questions from members, providing and/or vetting information and referrals, and ensuring that members adhere to the community guidelines in order to maintain a positive, inclusive, and respectful space.

Funding:

Refugee 613 Welcomes You to Ottawa is funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) and the Canadian Red Cross.

KEY FEATURES THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THIS BEING A PROMISING PRACTICE

Effective:

Refugee 613 Welcomes You to Ottawa leverages the concept of “meeting the client where they are.” It is delivered through WhatsApp – a free digital messaging platform that is familiar to many newcomers, which reduces technological barriers to joining the group – and in the language of the target audience, which removes language barriers and provides easy access to information along with cultural interpretation. Newcomers can ask questions at any time or passively monitor chats for information. All the information is vetted by the Refugee 613 moderator, who is regarded as trustworthy and knowledgeable about settlement services. WhatsApp also features the ability to save information, so newcomers can store the information for ongoing reference and access it when it may become relevant to their situation.

Efficient:

Refugee 613 Welcomes You to Ottawa provides accurate information in a timely manner. A single moderator manages both groups, which helps to ensure consistency and sharing of information across the two groups. If the moderator is unable to answer a question, there is access to a broad range of settlement experts, who are able to provide an accurate response within 24 hours.

Relevant:

Refugee 613 Welcomes You to Ottawa is a source of trusted settlement and integration information on which members can rely as they navigate life in their new community. Since the moderator is fluent in English and Arabic, both linguistic and cultural interpretation are provided, assisting members in understanding complex content and contributing to a sense of community among participants. In addition, most Arabic-speaking refugees are familiar with WhatsApp, as it is the de facto communication and networking tool used in their communities.

Sustainable:

Refugee 613 Welcomes You to Ottawa requires minimal resources to deliver its service. It uses a free digital messaging platform, and one moderator manages both groups, each with over 200 members. Additional support is provided by volunteer moderators and experts.

Transferable:

Refugee 613 Welcomes You to Ottawa could easily be replicated by other organizations across Canada. Refugee 613 is currently developing a toolkit for organizations on how to use digital messaging to assist newcomers with their settlement and integration needs. The toolkit will contain resources and tips for building a strong online community while saving time and avoiding mistakes. It will provide sample policies, guidelines, and checklists to assist with setting up and running a digital messaging community with confidence.

Innovative and Forward Thinking:

Refugee 613 Welcomes You to Ottawa was initiated in response to a real problem and gap in services for Arabic-speaking refugees to Ottawa, responding with a cost-effective solution to meet their unique settlement needs and preferred communication style. The questions asked by members also help to inform Refugee 613's broader strategic communications work. For example, members recently had questions about accessing parks during the COVID-19 lockdown. As a result, Refugee 613 created a series of multi-lingual videos to explain the new rules, which were shared via the WhatsApp groups and Refugee 613 YouTube channel.

Differs in Definable Ways from Other Similar Practices:

Refugee 613 Welcomes You to Ottawa is the first digital messaging community designed specifically to provide accurate settlement information and referrals to refugees in Ottawa. It is the only program of its kind and does not duplicate other services, digital or otherwise, in that both WhatsApp groups are managed by a full-time moderator who shares information, answers questions, and corrects misinformation to ensure refugees receive accurate and timely information and support.

High Client Uptake:

Refugee 613 Welcomes You to Ottawa has high client uptake, with over 500 members from different Arabic-speaking countries. The group became popular very quickly and exceeded initial expectations with regards to uptake and participation. Since WhatsApp has a 256 user limit per group, a second group was added. The service is promoted through the Refugee 613 website, referrals from community partners, flyers, and social media.

High Client Retention:

Refugee 613 Welcomes You to Ottawa has high client retention. Activity within the groups has increased steadily over time, and the majority of members continue to participate in the groups. Strict guidelines have been created, and monitoring of the groups is done to ensure the groups remain apolitical, non-religious, and a “safe space” that is free of bullying or intimidation. The groups are actively moderated to maintain momentum, such as mixing newer and older participants in the two groups.

Strong Evidence of Successful Outcomes:

An independent evaluation was conducted in 2018, which included input from 179 completed surveys, 11 key informant interviews, 2 focus groups with 20 participants, and a document review. Overall, the evaluation confirmed that Refugee 613 Welcomes You to Ottawa is meeting its intended purpose, is highly successful and popular with its target audience, and is seen as valuable by settlement service providers. The majority of respondents rated the WhatsApp group as excellent and the information as reliable and trustworthy, and use the WhatsApp group to obtain settlement information that they cannot find elsewhere. Most members are very active in the group and would recommend it to others, with 85% of survey respondents indicating that they participate in the group at least once a day.

PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT AND EVALUATION STRATEGY

Refugee 613 conducts ongoing monitoring and evaluation of its WhatsApp groups for Arabic-speaking refugees. Staff collect quantitative and qualitative data, including the number and types of inquiries and referrals made, and collate this information on a monthly basis. In 2018, an independent evaluation of Refugee 613 Welcomes You to Ottawa was conducted by Siena Consulting. Using a collaborative approach, the evaluation workplan was developed in collaboration with key stakeholders of Refugee 613 and informed by evidence and best practices in the settlement sector. Possible barriers to soliciting input from newcomers were considered, including cultural and language differences, and principles of diversity and equity were incorporated into the evaluation process. Data collection activities included a document review, online survey, one-on-one key informant interviews, focus groups, and monitoring and observation of the WhatsApp groups.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Refugee 613

<https://www.refugee613.ca>

Refugee 613 Welcomes You to Ottawa

<https://www.refugee613.ca/pages/coming-soon>