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Supporting Refugees in Rural Canada: Exploring the Strengths and Weaknesses of Settlement Service Models in Smaller Communities

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ABSTRACT

This article demonstrates how refugee integration is supported in rural and small communities across Canada. We conducted virtual focus groups and interviews with 40 participants across the country who support refugees through settlement organizations, sponsorship groups, and other networks. The article outlines six participant-identified models of settlement services and explores the benefits, challenges, and limitations of, and potential improvements for, each model. These models highlight the mix of formal and informal supports existing in rural places and the urban focus of Canada's settlement system. Recommendations include adequate funding of settlement services in smaller communities and engaging with rural service providers.

KEYWORDS

refugees; resettlement; Canada; settlement services; integration; rural

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article illustre la manière dont l'intégration des réfugié.e.s est soutenue dans des communautés rurales et les petites collectivités partout au Canada. Nous avons mené des groupes de discussion et des entretiens virtuels avec 40 participant.e.s à travers le pays qui soutiennent les réfugiés par le biais d'organisations d'aide à l'établissement, de groupes de parrainage et d'autres réseaux. L'article présente six modèles de services d'établissement identifiés par les participants et examine les avantages, les défis, les limites et les améliorations possibles de chaque modèle. Ces modèles mettent en évidence la combinaison de soutiens formels et informels qui existent dans les zones rurales et l'orientation urbaine du système d'établissement du Canada. Les recommandations comprennent le financement adéquat des services d'établissement dans les petites collectivités et la collaboration avec les fournisseurs de services ruraux.

INTRODUCTION

Ongoing and prolonged conflicts across the globe have resulted in an increase in the number of people fleeing their homes and seeking refuge across state borders. Over the last decade, the number of people forcibly displaced has almost doubled (UNHCR, 2025, p. 6). At the end of 2024, over 123 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide, including 43 million refugees (pp. 2, 7). While accepting refugees is one way that countries such as Canada can share the responsibility of displacement, resettlement remains an option for only a select few. In 2024, just 8% (or 188,800 individuals) of the 2.4 mil-

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lion refugees identified for resettlement by UNHCR were resettled (p. 54). Within the context of rising global displacement, most refugees selected for resettlement in Canada, Australia, and the United States, and across Europe are destined for large urban centres (Patuzzi et al., 2020). However, these patterns are changing. More refugees are being resettled in small to mid-sized cities, rural communities, and towns through government dispersal and regionalization policies, informal mechanisms such as family reunification, and emerging community sponsorship programs (Boese & Phillips, 2017; Bose, 2014; Carlbaum, 2021; Coumans & Wark, 2024; Dennler, 2022; Esses & Carter, 2019; Gilhooly & Lee, 2017; Halaas & Biswas, 2020; Hawkes et al., 2021; Marks, 2014; McDonald-Wilmsen et al., 2009; Merchant et al., 2019; Patuzzi et al., 2020; Piper, 2017; Schech, 2014; Smith, 2008). This study considers settlement services and other supports for refugees in communities across Canada with populations under 125,000 people, which include small and medium-sized cities, towns, villages, and rural areas.

In Canada, while the country's three biggest cities, Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver, welcome the most newcomers, "the share of immigrants settling in these three cities has started to decline, falling from approximately 73–75% in the 1990s and early 2000s, to 56% in 2016 and 53.4% in 2021" (Haugen et al., 2024, p. 457). As a specific category of immigrants in the Canadian system, refugees are resettled across the country through the Government-Assisted Refugee (GAR) program, Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) program, or blended programs such as the Blended-Visa Office Referred (BVOR) program. While GARs are resettled in select communities that receive specific government funding through the Resettlement Assistance Program, sponsored refugees through the PSR and BVOR programs can be resettled anywhere across the country where a private sponsorship group has formed, including in rural communities (Government of Canada, 2017; Jenkins, 2019; Kaida et al., 2020; Labman, 2016). From January 2015 to November 2024, approximately 43,325 refugees (13%) intended to settle in communities with populations of under 125,000 people, including 115 communities named in government data (Government of Canada, 2025b). Of all refugees coming through each program, 35% of BVOR, 21% of GAR, and 5% of PSR program refugees intended to settle in these smaller communities (Government of Canada, 2025b).

While settlement services contribute to the integration of refugees into both urban and rural spaces, the provision of services in rural contexts is particularly important because access to basic services is already limited. While understandings of definitions and realities of rurality vary greatly across international, national, and regional contexts, the challenges that come with life outside of major urban centres are well-documented (Castillo et al., 2024; Federation of Canadian Municipalities, 2019; Flavel et al., 2024; Leimbigler et al., 2022; Thiede et al., 2018). In Canada, the United States, and Australia, and across Europe, rural populations face higher rates of poverty, aging and declining populations, limited employment opportunities, infrastructure gaps, and lack of access to services such as health care and public transportation. Although community development is diverse and depends on several factors, such as the local economy, population density, and the distance of a community from a major urban centre, evidence-based research demonstrates that these challenges are overwhelmingly present in places outside of major urban centres (Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation, 2021; Castillo et al., 2024; Coumans & Wark, 2024; Flavel

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et al., 2024; Haugen et al., 2024; Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, 2024; Leimbigler et al., 2022; Parkins & Reed, 2013; Thiede et al., 2018).

Refugees destined to these communities face the same challenges that other rural residents face, as well as additional challenges that come with resettling in a new country, such as learning a new language and obtaining new skills and assets, including a driver's licence and vehicle—an essential mode of transit in rural areas (Breen et al., 2021; Haugen & Hallstrom, 2022; Haugen et al., 2023; Herslund & Paulgaard, 2021; Lam, 2021; Perry & Scott, 2021; Tardis, 2019). In the rural context, "gaps in settlement services are felt especially acutely … because the social service ecosystem there is so small … and settlement workers can rarely rely on other nearby organizations to meet some of the service needs of their clients" (Dennler, 2022, p. 7). Thus, the provision of even limited settlement services in rural places can provide critical support to the refugees living there (Curry et al., 2018; Dennler, 2022; Ziersch et al., 2020). However, it is important to recognize that despite the challenges, there are benefits to rural life. Research indicates that some newcomers appreciate living in smaller centres where they can be closer to nature, have access to more diverse housing options, and experience a close sense of community (Haugen et al., 2024).

While there are case studies that examine refugee resettlement and settlement services in specific rural communities or regions (Abu-Labanetal, 1999; Haugen et al., 2024; Lam, 2021; McNally, 2020), few Canada-wide studies have considered settlement services and other supports for refugees in rural areas. Funded by the Government of Canada, this study speaks to this gap and asks: How are refugees resettled outside of Canada's biggest cities currently being supported? What are the opportunities and limitations of these different forms of support? To answer these questions, we conducted a series of virtual focus groups and individual interviews with 40 individuals living and working or volunteering in communities across Canada with populations under 125,000 people, including those from settlement organizations, volunteer groups, and other support networks. The number 125,000 was utilized to capture the diversity of settlement and integration experiences outside of Canada's biggest urban centres, where the majority of refugees are resettled and federal and provincial settlement funds are spent (the details of which are discussed in detail below) (Braun & Clement, 2023; Government of Canada, 2025b). We selected this number in an effort to reflect the reality that many small and medium-sized cities serve as critical service hubs for rural and remote regions, while at the same time excluding Canada's largest metropolitan centres. The results of this project demonstrate the complexity of Canada's settlement service system, which is both underfunded and urban-centric, and highlight the mix of formal and informal support services being utilized. Drawing on participant responses, we explore the opportunities and limitations of current approaches to rural settlement services. We argue that it is necessary to adequately fund services outside of urban centres and to bring smaller communities to the table when making immigration policy decisions if governments in Canada and beyond want to facilitate the successful settlement and integration of newcomers into rural and smaller places.

BACKGROUND

Much of the research on newcomer integration contends that integration should be conceptualized as a multi-faceted pro-

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cess. Immigrants should not be the only ones adapting to the dominant host society, but rather, integration should actively involve the participation of both host societies and newcomers (Alba & Foner, 2015, p. 7; Spencer, 2024). It is important to note that Canadian immigration has been a critical component of the settler colonial project, and there is an increasing recognition of the importance and value of building bridges between Indigenous Peoples, newcomers, and the settlement sector (Coburn, 2024; Gyepi-Garbrah et al., 2014; Nobe-Ghelani & Lumor, 2022; Tanaka, 2023). One way of envisioning the complexity of the integration process is through the holistic integration model (Ager & Strang, 2008; Hynie et al., 2016, 2019). This model presents eight aspects of integration across three spheres: social (social connections, community welcome, institutional adaptation), interactional (language, cultural, functional—education, housing, employment, health services), and subjective (sense of belonging, safety and security) (Ashton et al., 2016; Hynie et al., 2016, pp. 187–189; Hynie et al., 2019). Across these spheres, the model emphasizes that "the onus to integrate, adjust, and change does not fall on just refugees/immigrants but also on the dominant host society" (Hynie et al., 2019, p. 38). For governments committed to the integration of refugees as a policy objective, settlement services are intended to help fulfill the obligations that host societies and governments have to newcomers and their integration into a new country. The integration of newcomers into the country is a policy objective of the Canadian federal government, which states in the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (SC 2001, c. 27), "The objectives of this Act with respect to immigration are … to promote the successful integration of permanent residents into Canada, while recognizing that integration involves mutual obligations for new immigrants and Canadian society" (Government of Canada, 2025a, s. 3.1.e). Settlement services in Canada are intended to contribute directly to supporting integration efforts, for example, through programs that connect newcomers to community members, language classes, cultural orientation programs, and employment workshops.

The Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (S.C. 2001) indicates that the responsibility for integration not only falls on newcomers but also requires action from Canadian society. However, while access to settlement services directly impacts integration outcomes and provides crucial support to newcomers in rural and smaller places, the provision of services across Canada is variable. This variability is due in part to the complexity of funding systems, the diversity of funders, and the variety of immigration streams. Settlement services across the country are characterized by various funding models and organizations, differing mandates depending on the immigration status of clients, and the funding of a variety of local organizations with their own mandates and structures (Praznik & Shields, 2018). Within this system are four main providers of settlement services: (a) civil society organizations, (b) school boards, (c) provincial governments, and (d) municipal governments (Praznik & Shields, 2018). These organizations and governments provide a variety of direct and indirect services to newcomers. Direct services fall into one of several categories established by Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC): "needs and assets assessment and referrals, information and orientation, language training, employment-related, and community connections," as well as "support services that enable clients to access services" such as childcare, interpretation, and transportation assistance (IRCC, 2025,

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s. 3.4). There are also indirect services, which "seek to enhance capacity in the IRCC-funded settlement community to optimize client outcomes," such as local immigration partnerships, conferences, employer and community engagement, development of training materials, and research (ss. 3.5–3.7).

Settlement services receive funding from a variety of sources. While all levels of government (municipal, provincial, and federal), and other groups such as community foundations and businesses, fund settlement services in Canada, the largest funder across the country is the federal government through the IRCC department (Dennler, 2022; Praznik & Shields, 2018). The Government of Canada spends approximately 1.1 billion in Canadian dollars per year for service provider organizations to provide settlement services to newcomers (IRCC, 2023). IRCC funds are released through set contracts that require organizations to compete and apply for funding regularly (Bachour, 2023; Braun & Clement, 2023). From April 2012 to March 2023, 46% of all permanent residents and 80% of refugees accessed at least one settlement service, such as language classes or orientation (IRCC, 2023).

However, as financial data show, access to settlement services is variable across the country. Federal funding to each region is not proportional to immigration rates, and there are regional disparities in funding levels and organizational disparities in terms of allocated funds (Braun & Clement, 2023; Roberts, 2020). For example, an analysis of federal and provincial government financial data revealed that although "Alberta is the third-largest immigrant-receiving province in the country," per-capita funding for newcomer settlement in Alberta is the lowest among the provinces (Braun & Clement, 2023, p. 263). Similarly, a small number of organizations, largely concentrated in big cities, continue to receive the majority of available funding, despite the fact that more and more newcomers are settling outside of these places. Braun and Clement (2023, p. 265) contend that "the five organizations that have received the most funding (all located in the Greater Toronto area) collected more than $583 million or 11% of IRCC grant funding (and represent less than 0.003% of recipients)." This concentration of federal settlement funding also creates significant barriers for new organizations wanting to access these funds (Braun & Clement, 2023).

Within this complex system, the provision of formal settlement services to PSRs is particularly complicated. The various models of sponsorship come with different distributions of financial and settlement responsibilities between the government, government-funded settlement services, and sponsors. There are long-standing tensions regarding the growth of private sponsorship in Canada, in particular, concerns that the government is privatizing refugee resettlement by shifting responsibility for resettlement and integration onto private sponsors (Cameron, 2020; Elcioglu, 2023; Labman & McNally, 2024; Labman & Pearlman, 2018; McNally, 2023). Today, sponsored refugees outnumber refugees coming through the government assistance program. Between January 2015 and November 2024, 183,275 (57%) refugees were sponsored (through the private sponsorship and blended programs), while only 138,320 (43%) refugees were resettled as GARs (Government of Canada, 2025b). As private sponsorship grows, understanding if and how these newcomers access settlement services is becoming increasingly important. While private sponsors act as the primary support networks for sponsored refugees, PSRs do qualify for, and require, settlement services (Agrawal, 2019). However, they may not access these services for a number of reasons, including the reality that settlement

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services may not be available in their region (as discussed above) and the expectation that sponsors are solely responsible for the settlement needs of PSRs. Additionally, the funding trail of agencies that serve PSRs cannot be readily traced, thus contributing to our lack of knowledge concerning settlement services in rural and smaller regions (McGrath & McGrath, 2013).

METHOD

In this project, focus group discussions and individual interviews were used to capture, compare, and contrast experiences of refugee resettlement and integration, and settlement service access and delivery, across diverse rural and remote contexts. The study participants were people living and working or volunteering in communities with populations of less than 125,000 people. In contrast to previous studies, which examined resettlement in specific case study communities or regions, this study took a Canada-wide systemic approach. As this was a national study, conducting focus groups and interviews over Zoom made it possible to include settlement providers and sponsors from as many locations as possible. This study received ethics approval from the Human Participant Research Committee (HPRC) at the University of Alberta. The HPRC conducts its reviews in accordance with university policy and the 2018 **Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans** (Government of Canada, 2020). Voluntary and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Given the small number of people working in rural settlement in most contexts, to protect the anonymity of participants, we do not identify specific organizations, communities, or provinces.

Participants were recruited through a variety of relevant listservs and organizations such as regional sponsor Facebook groups, settlement service providers, sponsorship agreement holders (who have an agreement with the Government of Canada to sponsor refugees), and other relevant listservs. Contact email addresses and phone numbers for individuals and organizations were collected by the research staff via personal connections, IRCC databases, and internet searches. Researchers reached out to a total of 676 organizations and/or individuals across Canada. Additionally, the Government of Canada, as the funder of this project, distributed the call for participants to its own networks. The call was sent out twice. All who expressed interest in participating were included in the study if they were available to participate. Once the project hit the target number of 40 participants, recruitment ended.

Participants were divided into two subgroups with 20 participants each: refugee sponsors (including sponsorship agreement holder representatives) and settlement support staff (including local immigration partnership staff). Within each subgroup, participants were organized into focus groups with three or more participants, whenever possible. When scheduling conflicts, last-minute cancellations, or language barriers made it impossible for participants to join larger focus groups, smaller groups and individual interviews were organized. Canada is one of the largest countries in the world, with six time zones and a landmass of 9 million square kilometres, of which over 90% can be considered rural and remote (Statistics Canada, 2022). With this in mind, we attempted to represent as much of the rural experience as possible by including participants from diverse small and rural communities across the country.

As the study was Canada-wide rather than a comparison of specific regions, focus groups were organized to bring out commonalities

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in experiences across different geographic contexts. Each individual focus group was constructed to be as geographically diverse as possible, which would not have been feasible in person. For example, one focus group included settlement staff from Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, northern Ontario, and northern British Columbia (representing rural communities from coast to coast). Despite the differences in geographic contexts, the participants identified common challenges and experiences. Recruitment was targeted to include participants from different community sizes from small cities, to towns and villages, to very rural regions, with populations under 125,000.

Ten focus groups were conducted with 36 participants, as well as four interviews with individuals. Each focus group involved between two and eight participants, with most groups involving three to five people. A focus group methodology can help participants explore and validate their own experiences as well as differentiate them from those of the other participants (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009; Parker & Tritter, 2006). Small focus groups were utilized to converse in depth and in detail with these participants, who had specialized knowledge on the topic (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009; Plummer-D'Amato, 2008). Individual interviews were conducted with four participants whose perspectives were deemed important to diversify the types of participants and organizations represented in the data: (a) a sponsor who was formerly a refugee, (b) a settlement organization that serves refugees with specific needs, (c) a francophone organization, and (d) a sponsor from a region that was not yet represented in the focus groups. The geographic distribution and categories of participants are provided in Table 1. Participants from the province of Quebec were not included in this study, given that it runs its own settlement services, and IRCC does not directly fund settlement service providers in Quebec.

Two researchers asked participants a series of guiding questions. The conversations took place in a semi-structured format, where questions guided the session, but participants were able to expand upon relevant topics they felt were important. After introductions, participants were asked about:

- their experiences accessing and/or delivering settlement services;
- the existing settlement services they provided or accessed;
- if these services could be improved;
- if they could imagine a better way to deliver or access such services;
- the realities, benefits, challenges, and opportunities that they faced while living, settling, working, and/or welcoming newcomers into rural and smaller communities;
- any best practices regarding settlement service access and delivery; and
- how they envisioned the future of rural refugee sponsorship.

Analysis

After each focus group or interview, the two researchers discussed the content of the discussion and reviewed their notes. Once data collection was completed, the audio files were transcribed and anonymized. Any identifying information, such as the names and specific communities of participants, was removed from the transcripts. Thematic coding was used to identify common concepts and experiences across the transcripts in NVivo (Gibbs, 2007; Silverman & Patterson, 2015). Our analysis identified six different models of settlement services, discussed below, which cut across different geographic contexts.

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Table 1

Geographic Distribution of Participants by Category

Province/territory	Sponsor/sponsorship agreement holder participants	Settlement staff participants	Local Immigration Partnership participants	Total
British Columbia	3	1	1	5
Alberta	1	3	3	7
Saskatchewan	1	3	1	5
Manitoba	1	3	0	4
Ontario	5	2	0	7
New Brunswick	2	0	0	2
Prince Edward Island	0	1	0	1
Nova Scotia	6	2	0	8
Newfoundland and Labrador	0	0	0	0
Northern Territories	1	0	0	1
Total	20	15	5	40

Limitations

This study is limited to the perspectives of settlement workers, sponsors and volunteers, and other support staff in rural and smaller communities across Canada. These individuals and their organizations/sponsorship groups can be contacted through contact information publicly available online or through relevant listservs, unlike refugees, whose contact information is not publicly accessible. While one formerly sponsored refugee was included as a participant, they were selected in part because they were also involved in the sponsorship of other refugees. The inclusion of this participant was an effort to enrich the sample and demonstrate the diversity of sponsor support and does not represent the refugee perspective on rural settlement services and support. While the inclusion of refugee experiences was outside the scope of this project, other scholars in the field have included refugees (see, e.g., Haugen, 2019; Kyriakides et al., 2020; Lam, 2021; McNally, 2020). This limited body of research is vital to our understanding of settlement services and supports outside of Canada's biggest cities and demonstrates the need for more research that includes rural refugee perspectives.

RESULTS: OPPORTUNITIES AND LIMITATIONS OF RURAL SETTLEMENT SERVICE MODELS

The results of the focus group and interview data indicate that the realities of life in rural and smaller places across Canada significantly impact the provision of settlement services and supports for refugees. Other studies have extensively documented the challenges and benefits of living in rural communities in general (e.g., lack of public transportation); the remainder of this article focuses on the results of the study specifically related to newcomers and analyzes the opportunities and limitations of settlement service models in the context of small cities, towns, and rural communities. We map six different models of settlement services that participants identified, and explore each model's benefits, challenges, limitations, and

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potential improvements. These models are: (a) comprehensive services, (b) settlement networks, (c) umbrella service organizations, (d) municipal settlement services, (e) virtual services, and (f) volunteers and sponsors. Rather than explore each coded theme individually, we conduct a high-level analysis of the implications of these themes for settlement service models. Our results demonstrate that the delivery of settlement services to newcomers across rural Canada varies greatly.

Comprehensive Services

Settlement organizations in regional hubs usually offer comprehensive settlement services (Söderbaum & Shaw, 2003). These centres have large enough populations to qualify for settlement funding based on the per-capita funding model, and a wide range of services can be available to newcomers (Dennler, 2022). These settlement organizations often have specialized staff teams providing different services to various categories of eligible newcomers, including GARs through the Resettlement Assistance Program. The primary strength of this model is that a broad range of services can be provided to all newcomers, including sponsored refugees.

While this model works well for larger communities or regional hubs with a significant and consistent client base, this policy design is urban-centric. When services are funded on a per-capita basis, more rural and remote communities with a small or geographically dispersed client base do not qualify for such funding (Dennler, 2022; Reimer & Bollman, 2010; Vilches et al., 2017). Issues with the per-capita funding model were raised by a number of participants. One participant in the Prairies stated that it is difficult to attract and retain newcomers if there are no settlement services available:

> When it comes to IRCC-funded services or provincially funded settlement services, it's always a chicken and egg problem where the funding follows the numbers. … So new [immigration] programs are introduced, and the idea is that newcomers will arrive and then we'll bring the services in, but that doesn't work.

One critical settlement service is language education. Required for all aspects of integration, language education is essential for refugee newcomers (Derwing & Waugh, 2012), many of whom arrive in Canada not knowing any English or French. The participants reinforced this reality, referencing language learning often. They commented on the challenges they faced providing and/or helping newcomers access language education that reflect documented issues with language learning provision in rural Canada. For example, Lam (2019) demonstrates how language education in rural places has been negatively impacted by funding cuts, per-capita funding models, and a lack of long-term funding.

In addition to the documented challenges, participants also suggested opportunities to improve services moving forward. For example, transportation could be provided to newcomers to access comprehensive services. Currently, refugees in more rural and remote places often need to drive to access services, which is not always feasible for newcomers or their support networks. Participants spoke of the difficulties refugees experience when they attempt to access public transportation in rural places. One settlement worker in the Prairies noted that despite the fact that providing transportation to newcomers did not fall within their mandate, "we ended up getting a van for the [settlement] centre, so we could supply transportation to our programs for our clients. That's a huge gap in this area." Providing funding for rural settlement programs to purchase a van or minibus, or provide transportation to their

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programs in another way, would reduce the transportation barrier for refugees to access settlement services.

Another opportunity identified is for service organizations to receive funding to support satellite offices in neighbouring communities, which would serve newcomers in surrounding regions. Participants also suggested alternative ways to calculate settlement funding, such as ensuring a base level of services regardless of geography to promote equity across locations, considering the percentage of foreign-born people in the community's population, and calculating anticipated future client numbers based on immigration goals.

Settlement Networks

In a settlement network model, workers serve a particular geographic area as part of a larger organization that supports a network of settlement workers in different areas. This model has several strengths. First, it makes settlement services possible in areas with no previous services and where the client base is broadly dispersed. Second, with a settlement network, a central organization can take the lead in applying for funding and administering funding and specialized services, without that burden falling entirely to one individual settlement worker.

However, this model also has weaknesses. Given the time limitations and expertise of one staff member, the range of services offered is limited. Settlement workers do not necessarily have specialized training to deal with all situations, while colleagues with specialized training may be several hours away. Settlement workers can also struggle to serve a large geographic area. For example, one participant from Atlantic Canada stated:

> I cover three and a half counties in my area so I have quite a large geographical area that I cover. I'm here alone in my office and my closest co-worker is an hour and a half drive away from me, and I have actively [sic] 368 clients of my own.

Participants noted the risk of staff burnout for those attempting to meet all of the settlement needs in a large area. They explained how a service provider can end up attempting to "do everything" because they are the only available provider in the region. One individual from Atlantic Canada stated that because rural settlement workers are often the only worker in the area, they "do lots of things that are not really our job."

A number of opportunities were put forward by participants to improve this model. In particular, increasing travel budgets would enable settlement workers to travel across the broad geographic area they serve. Service providers in regional centres also noted how they would like to expand their services to better serve the surrounding geographic area but are unable to do so because of a lack of funding for travel, service provision, or satellite services. Additionally, participants mentioned that creating a settlement service sharing model, where workers based in rural communities can access complementary services in nearby cities, would help workers feel more supported and give them access to more resources.

Umbrella Service Organizations

In some communities, settlement services are provided as part of a broader community umbrella organization with a larger mandate. For example, an organization on the West Coast provides settlement services for newcomers, but also employment, literacy, and other programs for other residents of the community. This model draws on the strengths of existing community organizations and services with a long history in the community, making it possible to start a settlement program without creating a

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new organization and new financial mechanisms. It also connects newcomers to other programs and services that they may need.

The primary weakness of such a model is the limited number of staff members dedicated to settlement services. Participants stressed that within this model, often only a few staff are responsible for the entire settlement program, including applying for funding and implementing settlement programs, which can be a significant amount of work. Additionally, an organization operating under this umbrella model may not be recognizable to IRCC as a distinct settlement organization, which can limit funding accessibility. IRCC has the most restrictive eligibility criteria of all settlement service funders in Canada. Only permanent residents, protected persons, resettled refugees, and individuals who have been approved for permanent residence or who are participating in certain programs with a pathway to permanent residence are eligible to receive services (IRCC, 2025). Thus, for organizations serving a broad range of community members, such as temporary residents and naturalized citizens, IRCC funds may not be accessible. Participants suggested that more training or mentoring could be made available for long-standing community organizations trying to start a settlement program or access IRCC funding for the first time.

Municipal Settlement Services

In some instances, settlement programs are funded and hosted by municipalities. A settlement staff participant working within this model in the Prairies discussed the benefits they derived from being housed within a municipality and the networks and connectivity that the model provided them. They stated that

> being housed within a municipality, … having our fiscal agent be the town, has been quite a strength … [because] we are looped into a lot of the other community services. We have a great relationship with the other opportunities that are provided through the municipalities. … Our partnership with [town x] [is a strength] because there can be collaboration and leveraging of different resources.

This model offers an ability to draw on the existing strengths and financial mechanisms of well-established community institutions while connecting newcomers with municipal services and other community services. It allows local governments to actively engage in welcoming newcomers and can build trust between newcomers and their new community. A weakness of this model is that it may be difficult to serve clients who live outside of the municipality or cover a broad geographic area without satellite offices.

Virtual Services

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, all settlement organizations across Canada, including those in our study, made at least a partial shift to virtual services. Participants spoke frequently about their experiences with virtual service delivery, overall agreeing that virtual services can expand service access but cannot replace in-person services, especially for specific services like lower-level language classes.

The primary benefits of virtual services include expanding access to more communities and minimizing the transportation barrier. Some specialized settlement services that were only available in large urban centres are now available virtually in smaller communities. For example, one settlement staff participant on the West Coast elaborated on their experiences with language classes in the context in which they work:

> We are one community, probably one of the only ones [in the region] who offer a LINC [Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada] program. What we did in the last year is we put the class online for the intermediate and higher-level

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> students, and we worked with our settlement service provider partners in other areas [to] open this class to their clients and students, and that was the first time that this happened, and it is a huge success, because the service wasn't there before in these other communities, and to actually get the LINC class on the road has a lot of requirements from IRCC. That is super difficult for small programs to fulfill.

Virtual settlement services also have weaknesses. In some rural areas, limited internet access makes virtual meetings impossible. While over 90% of urban households have access to high-speed, reliable internet, only 59.5% of households in rural and remote areas have the same connectivity (Auditor General of Canada, 2023, p. iv). Some newcomers are not interested in participating in virtual services, and low digital literacy among refugees is another barrier. Participants flagged virtual English classes as particularly challenging, especially for the most beginner English learners. Additionally, the geographic eligibility for services is sometimes unclear.

Most participants agreed that virtual service delivery makes sense in some cases, but it is important to acknowledge that not every service can or should be delivered online. One participant on the West Coast stated, "I think it is very important to actually see what services make sense to provide remote online and what services don't make sense." Opportunities for improvement include adding digital literacy programming as an eligible service for IRCC funding to facilitate the ability of newcomers to access virtual services. The geographical eligibility of clients for virtual services (i.e., whether clients in the same city, region, or province, or Canada-wide are eligible) should also be clarified.

Volunteers and Sponsors

In many instances, volunteers, often refugee sponsors, are the main contacts for refugees and deliver the majority of services. In these situations, often in more rural and remote places, there are no settlement offices serving a particular region, or the services available (such as those centrally located in a large city) are not applicable to or easily accessible by refugees or their sponsors. While having to rely on volunteers and sponsors can increase local community support for refugees and offer opportunities for settlement in more rural and remote regions (Haugen, 2019; McNally, 2020), relying solely on volunteers means service provision is dependent on the skills, time, energy, and health of a limited number of individuals doing this work. As one study in Alberta found, "The settlement experience of PSRs relies heavily on their sponsors and varies considerably based on the sponsors' commitment, experiences, and understanding of what it takes for a refugee to settle in a new country," with some sponsors not equipped to provide adequate support to refugees (Agrawal, 2019, p. 959). In such a model, volunteers are also at a high risk for burnout. In addition, volunteers may have little or no training for their work, especially for specialized tasks such as teaching English. Research has shown that well-intentioned individuals who volunteer with refugees may sometimes reinforce power hierarchies and adopt a paternalistic approach to refugees (Haugen et al., 2020; McAllum, 2020; Stock, 2019).

Participants commented on the limited financial and settlement capacity of sponsors. One sponsor explained how they supported the refugee newcomers without burning out:

> [A best practice for us has been] creating distinct settlement groups for each family coming in. No one burns out. You've got a deep enough group, 8 to 10 people around a family that you can share responsibilities, and you broaden your base in the community. You get obviously more people

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> involved and it helps you build your organization as well as maintain an organization. … It seems to be a very good organizational model.

While this reflects an example of sponsor practice to ensure that refugees and volunteers are supported, a volunteer-only settlement model requires significant participation from community members that does not exist everywhere (Haugen, 2022). Thus, support through this model is highly dependent on the time and resources of particular people and places and is not equitable for all newcomers. In the worst cases, if the sponsorship breaks down and settlement services have not been accessed or are not available, refugees may not know where to go to for support. Participants reflected this stark reality through their expressed desire to expand sponsorship overall while also emphasizing that small volunteer-run sponsor groups and sponsorship agreement holders (SAHs) need sufficient support. To improve on this model, participants suggested adjusting sponsor training materials to consider rural realities, providing guidance to sponsors on pre-arrival supports, supporting the administrative capacity of SAHs, and encouraging sponsor–settlement collaboration. Combining volunteering alongside access to formal settlement services would benefit both sponsors and refugees.

DISCUSSION

Our results demonstrate the numerous barriers that settlement staff, volunteers, and sponsors face when helping refugees resettle and integrate into rural and smaller places in Canada. These barriers are largely related to settlement funding structures and the existing challenges present in rural and smaller communities that are often outside of the scope of settlement service provision. While there are opportunities to address these barriers moving forward, the broader policy context places limitations on the agency of individuals working to resettle and integrate newcomers in rural and smaller communities. Specifically, the national orientation toward economic migration and the use of migrants to fill gaps in the labour market and the ongoing path dependencies created by the role of rural economies within the national, natural resource-based economy of Canada place constraints upon where and how resettlement takes place and is understood in Canada (Carter et al., 2008; Innis, 1930; Markey et al., 2008).

Existing funding structures have created significant challenges for settlement organizations wanting to serve newcomers in smaller and rural communities. Study participants made important suggestions that could address funding disparities. For example, they proposed alternative ways to calculate settlement funding, such as ensuring a base level of services regardless of geography or population density. This system would promote settlement service equity across Canada and help expand federal funding across the country. Funding allocations could also take into consideration the percentage of newcomers in relation to the community's population. Even though the number of newcomers in a rural community may be lower than the number in an urban centre, the number per capita is very high in some places (Haugen et al., 2024; Lam, 2019). Additionally, calculating anticipated future client numbers based on immigration goals, rather than responding retroactively to settlement numbers, would also help address settlement service disparities.

The challenges inherent to life in rural and smaller communities, in Canada and beyond, also present significant barriers for those supporting refugee newcomers in these spaces. The lack of settlement service provision across rural Canada is only one

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aspect of the lack of investment into, and underdevelopment of, smaller places (Reimer & Bollman, 2010). Participants' emphasis on the challenges newcomers face in rural places confirms other evidence that demonstrates the inherent challenges that all residents in rural spaces face, which are not addressed under the purview of settlement service agencies, settlement funding streams, or the federal government department responsible for immigration. These rural challenges present significant barriers to the settlement and integration of resettled refugees in Canada and beyond (Haugen et al., 2023, 2024). As one European study notes, despite the connections between refugee resettlement and larger infrastructure challenges in rural communities, "resettlement and rural development are still largely treated as separate policy areas" (Patuzzi et al., 2020, p. 35). That study concludes that "promoting better links to local development could also help communities look beyond classic 'integration' policies and make investments in broader infrastructure that serves everyone" (p. 35). Holistic approaches to newcomer integration also reinforce the importance of the larger community, and the "sociopolitical context," in which refugees settle (Hynie et al., 2019, p. 38). Several aspects of the holistic integration model, especially the aspects of functional integration (education, housing, employment, health services), do not fall under the umbrella of settlement services but rather speak to broader social services or opportunities that are available (or lacking) in host communities (Hynie et al., 2019).

Despite existing barriers, there are opportunities. Our results demonstrate that individuals supporting newcomers on the ground in rural places have important insights into, and knowledge of, the delivery of settlement services in these spaces. Innovative and sometimes inexpensive opportunities exist for improvements. However, rural sponsors and settlement workers felt unheard within the larger context of immigration pathways and decisions regarding service provision. One of the study participants from the Prairies stated that

> rural communities [should] be involved in planning around immigration policy. … Big meetings are happening in [cities] to talk about resettlement strategy and there's a decision that rural communities will have to be an important destination … but as a rural community, we haven't been part of that discussion. No one's asked us what we need. … There is this kind of strategic focus on rural communities, but no strategic planning for the infrastructure that these communities will need in order to welcome, integrate, and retain newcomers. … When we're creating a vision for what we want in our rural communities, people in the communities have to be part of writing that vision, right from the beginning.

Bringing service providers in smaller and rural places to the table when making resettlement policies and decisions is one way to address the complex challenges that newcomers face. The need to understand rural barriers and adequately fund settlement services outside of large and mid-sized cities will only increase as governments continue regionalization policies and rely more on private sponsorship. Additionally, as community refugee sponsorship expands around the world as a model for welcoming refugees, it is important to recognize that these private programs require government-funded supports, such as settlement services, to be successful (Labman & McNally, 2024).

These identified barriers and opportunities exist within a broader policy context of institutional and policy design that defines the urban–rural divide in Canada. The urban policy bias and per-capita funding structures are significant examples of how funds and services have historically been, and continue to be, allocated to urban cen-

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tres, where transaction costs are lower and population density is greater (Innis, 1930; Reimer & Bollman, 2010; Stanford, 2020; Watkins, 1963). Across Canada, the decline of rural areas has been "facilitated through an intentional policy program that views hinterland areas as a 'resource bank' from which to fund provincial infrastructure and services, without adequate attention to rural reinvestment" (Markey et al., 2008, p. 409). Resources and opportunities have been unevenly distributed across the country, resulting in the contemporary challenges that rural and smaller communities face, such as higher rates of poverty, aging and declining populations, limited employment opportunities, and lack of services (Coumans & Wark, 2024; Haugen et al., 2024; Patuzzi et al., 2020).

These funding and development disparities are structural and historically contingent; they are not natural or inevitable but are intentionally designed by a political system (Markey et al., 2008). While rurally located settlement staff, volunteers, and sponsors are working creatively through both formal and informal structures to resettle and integrate newcomers, their agency is constrained by the broader structural limitations of the system in which they work. Recognizing this reality helps contextualize the challenges that rurally resettled refugees face when settling outside of urban centres. Attempts to improve the integration outcomes of rurally resettled refugees will continue to fall short if the broader context of rural development and decline are not considered or addressed.

CONCLUSION

Ensuring that newcomers can successfully settle and integrate into Canadian society, wherever they settle, requires innovation, local knowledge, and a settlement service provision framework that is not based on the current per-capita, urban-centric policy model, which results in the inadequate distribution of existing funds. Moving forward, the way we understand and fund settlement services as a public service will need to change if the goal is to successfully settle, integrate, and welcome newcomers into rural and smaller communities in Canada. Internationally, as many countries seek to settle refugees in smaller communities and to adapt components of the long-standing Canadian private refugee sponsorship program, there is much to learn from the Canadian experience about how to provide settlement services over a vast and diverse geography to various categories of immigrants and refugees.

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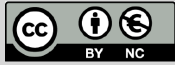
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