

THE PRIVATE REFUGEE SPONSORSHIP EXPERIENCE IN KINGSTON

A panel group discussion

By Lorraine Hudson, TESL Kingston

Since late 2015, the Kingston area has welcomed more than 100 privately sponsored refugees (PSRs), mostly from Syria and Eritrea. TESL Kingston has been involved in this community effort as a link between local ESL/LINC programs and a provider of professional development. In February 2016, TESL Kingston hosted a workshop on refugee mental health and its impact on education and settlement. As a follow-up in May 2017, the affiliate chapter presented a panel of local sponsors reflecting on the successes, surprises and challenges after a year of private refugee sponsorship.

The three-member panel featured a representative of the Frontenac Refugee Support Group, a community sponsorship group which partnered with the First Baptist Church, and representatives from two groups under Anglican Diocese of Ontario Refugee Support (DOORS): The Sanctuary Project, St. Paul the Apostle Church and faculty at Queen's University, administered by St. James Anglican Church.

Language, Sponsorship, and Settlement

Focussing their remarks on language, the sponsors also addressed mental and other health issues, family reunification challenges, and uncertainty around supporting refugees' autonomy, during and after the sponsorship period. They generally expressed limited knowledge about how best to help with language development while emphasizing its importance. In one sponsor's words, "Language is the key to everything!"

Language topped the list for another sponsor of what he described as "anchors" ensuring that people will settle into life in Canada and want to stay, even if it becomes safe to return to their home country. Other anchors were having a stable home, a positive experience at school, a sense of acceptance, gaining employment, having friends, being engaged in the community, and having hope for a better future. Language clearly has an impact on many of these additional anchors.

Language Learning Successes and Challenges

The sponsors related the intense desire of the refugee families to learn English and their delight in using newly acquired language. They also cited volunteer work opportunities as helpful to integrating the newcomers into the community and facilitating language acquisition. One sponsor shared the story of a 25-year-old currently studying on a bursary in an intensive English program at St. Lawrence College. The young person plans to transition to full-time college studies in September 2017.

In terms of challenges with language learning, the sponsors expressed uncertainty about whether slow progress might relate to post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, low mood, loneliness, or learning disabilities. They also struggled with addressing the frustration of newcomers whose spoken English swiftly surpassed their reading and writing skills. Other challenges included parents learning more slowly than children, especially for parents who were keen to find employment, and adjusting to the routine of school and classes. Irregular attendance at language programs for the first few months was attributed to adults having been away from school for a long time or having little formal education, as well as family roles and responsibilities. Similarly, some children initially had trouble settling into ESL and other classes at school.

Language Tutoring and Coordination

The three sponsor groups shared a commitment to supplementing formal language training with volunteer tutoring. One sponsor, a former teacher and principal, described creating a personalized ESL curriculum and lesson plans for individuals who could not or did not want to attend formal language classes, and to keep others moving forward with their language development during the summer.

All of the sponsors underscored the importance and challenge of managing volunteer tutors and working toward interconnected language support with instructors. One sponsor group structured tutoring by posting a volunteer job advertisement through the Queen's University Faculty of Education. Tutors were interviewed and trained, submitted reports, and received extensive support. The sponsor also shared an example of coordination with instructors: a practical resource provided by an instructor to an inexperienced tutor, building on an in-class lesson.

During the discussion portion of the panel, instructors and sponsors alike expressed a desire to further share resources and coordinate their efforts. For example, it would be helpful for instructors to receive advance notice of special events (such as special settlement-related information sessions) which affect class attendance. This type of coordination would help instructors plan lessons accordingly. Additionally, instructors voiced a commitment to incorporating key settlement topics such as financial literacy, including fraud prevention, into their lessons.

Responding to sponsors' desire to learn more about language instruction techniques, TESL Kingston presented a volunteer tutor training session later in May facilitated by a local ESL instructor. Additional sessions will be held to continue building skills and relationships.

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At the end of the one-year sponsorship period, the panellists noted that most of the refugees opted to remain in language classes rather than seek full-time employment, although a number are already employed. Most sponsors have continued to provide assistance informally with language learning and other areas. Some of the refugee families now receive income support from Ontario Works (OW) in order to continue language studies. They have shared with their intention to access OW for up to one year with the goal of sustaining themselves thereafter through employment.

All three panellists agreed that sponsorship has been a wonderful, rewarding experience. They expressed gratitude for incredible community support and sincere thanks to the language instructors and other service providers who have helped them and the refugee families during and beyond the sponsorship period. One sponsor highlighted the insight that we both teach and learn from newcomers while another recommended building relationships with senior members of cultural communities to further support newcomer settlement.

Broader Refugee Resettlement Effort in Kingston

In addition to welcoming PSRs, Kingston became a Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) centre for government-assisted refugees (GARs) in May 2016. One of the panellists is drawing on her private sponsorship experience as team leader of a GAR support group. The volunteer teams are acting much like sponsor groups in assisting GAR families with their settlement process. As of May 2017, about 125 GARs had arrived in Kingston.

Beginning in 2015, before Syrian refugees started arriving in Kingston, there were proactive efforts in the community to share information, laying the groundwork for as smooth a transition as possible. Cross-sectoral collaboration continues through the Kingston Immigration Partnership (KIP) which convenes regular refugee service provider meetings. For its efforts to connect local agencies in order to better serve refugees, KIP received the 2017 Family Advocacy Award from Family and Children's Services of Frontenac, Lennox and Addington.

Author Bio



Lorraine Hudson (B.A., M.Ed., OCELT) has taught English in Canada and France in a variety of contexts. She has been a LINC assessor, instructor and administrator. Lorraine enjoys learning languages herself and is fluent in French and Spanish. She currently works for Kingston Community Health Centres and OCASI – Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants.