

Enhancing Workforce Integration Through Volunteer-Driven Initiatives Submitted to New Canadians Centre – NCC Peterborough & Cobourg

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Executive Summary

This report explores how volunteer-driven economic programs support newcomers, immigrants, and refugees, in identifying employment opportunities and becoming integrated into the local workforce. By examining the barriers newcomers face when navigating job markets, including language barriers, lack of employer recognition of credentials, and ethnographic biases, the report addresses how the experiences of newcomers are shaped by governmental immigration policies, as they create challenges and barriers for positive newcomer integration. The New Canadians Centre (NCC), the organization this study worked alongside, supports newcomers in obtaining employment, all while focusing on collaborative approaches to community engagement. This report includes findings from a diverse range of studies, demonstrating a continuous shift towards understanding volunteer-driven programs as essential to the significant improvement of the integration process and engagement of newcomers in our communities. By providing more specifically tailored supports, networking opportunities and skill building workshops that promote culturally humble practices through the acknowledgement of diverse lived experiences and needs, researchers recommend the implementation of a tailored Comprehensive Workforce Development Program and an AI-Powered Job Matching Portal. These recommendations aim to help increase job assignments placement and decreased barriers to employment for immigrants to Canada. This research indicates the collaborative role of community is a significant factor in bringing about success for newcomers to Canadian society.

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About the Researchers

Both researchers involved in this project are fourth-year students at Trent University, currently enrolled in *POST 4873H: Introduction to Community Engagement with Immigrants* taught by Professor Bharati Sethi. This course emphasizes the importance of ethical, collaborative, and community-informed research, and has fostered a meaningful partnership between Trent University and the New Canadians Centre (NCC) Peterborough. Through this project, we have not only developed academic and professional skills but also gained a deeper appreciation for the work being done in Peterborough to support newcomers. We approached this project with a shared commitment to producing research that is thoughtful, practical, and rooted in a desire to contribute positively to the community.

Jayden Luscombe

Jayden is in his final year of a joint major in Political Studies and History, with a specialized focus on public policy and legal studies. This project is his second published report in partnership with a community organization. In addition to academic pursuits, Jayden serves as Vice President of the Trent University Politics Society and has volunteered with Neighbourhood Legal Services London Middlesex, where he gained experience working with various community organizations and community members. His background in legal processes and policy analysis helped shape the research's focus on policy relevance and service impact. A key priority in his research and recommendations was to offer meaningful, actionable solutions that support both the community and the NCC, while remaining mindful of the contemporary political and

economic climate. As a result, the proposed policies have been designed to be cost-effective and efficient, without compromising the quality or impact of services delivered.

Camryn Vanderklooster

Camryn brings a unique interdisciplinary perspective to this research, combining her background in Biology and Political Studies with a strong interest in global politics, humanitarianism, and community well-being. Though this is her first published research report, she approached the project with great enthusiasm and a deep commitment to learning and contributing meaningfully. Her analytical skills and dedication to global justice informed the project's focus on inclusive, forward-thinking program design. Camryn aspires to work in humanitarian or international development fields where policy and equity intersect. She provided valued perspectives and thoughtful contributions rooted in her commitment to social justice. Her interdisciplinary background allowed her to approach the research with both analytical precision and compassion, ensuring that the voices and needs of marginalized groups remained central throughout the project

Together, we have worked hard to ensure this research reflects the priorities of the NCC and is grounded in respectful engagement with the broader migrant community. We hope the findings and recommendations offered in this report will support ongoing efforts to strengthen volunteer-driven integration programming and contribute to lasting, community-led change.

Section 1: Introduction and Background

Canada is currently navigating a complex and evolving political and economic landscape, one in which immigration policy has taken center stage. Amid shifting federal priorities, including the recent tightening of immigration targets, and increasing public scrutiny over issues like housing affordability and service capacity, organizations that support newcomers face both new opportunities and mounting pressures. At the same time, programs like those offered by the New Canadians Centre (NCC) Peterborough remain essential pillars of community resilience and inclusion. In this environment, understanding how volunteer-led economic integration programs can be strengthened is both timely and necessary.

Volunteer-driven economic programs play a vital role in bridging service gaps by offering newcomers access to networks, employment preparation, and skill-building opportunities. Our project sought to examine these dynamics through a literature review, evaluating best practices across rural and urban settings, and identifying the unique challenges faced by underrepresented groups, including refugee women, racialized immigrants, and LGBTQ+ newcomers. Our report examined the intersection of immigration policy, labour market access, and volunteer capacity. It assesses the differences between formal and informal tutoring models, the limitations of current services and the need for cultural awareness. Drawing on recent scholarship and public policy reports, we examined how resettlement challenges are compounded by structural issues such as language barriers, credential recognition, and discriminatory hiring practices. The New Canadians Centre already plays a pivotal role in addressing many of these barriers through its employment services. This is why NCC initially outlined a broad scope for this research, seeking insights into best practices for volunteer-run economic programs. As the project progressed, however, it evolved into a more targeted and responsive effort not only focused on enhancing existing programs but also creating innovative recommendations. Our research was designed to complement and strengthen NCC's existing initiatives by identifying opportunities for program enhancement and innovation.

Section 2: How We Did It

This study used a specific method to its approach that combined two types of research: a review of existing articles from academic publishers and feedback from people in the community. Researchers looked at many articles to find out what challenges newcomers face the most regarding their integration into the Canadian job market, such as challenges related to gender and economic inequalities that make it harder for them to fit in. A key part of this study was Community Based Research (CBR), which focuses on how immigration policies connect with community involvement, which is important for small rural towns like Peterborough. CBR helps ensure that real experiences from people living in the community guide research efforts, promoting understanding and respect for their diverse backgrounds. By committing to self-evaluation, researchers examine their own beliefs and cultural background before trying to understand someone else's culture. This involves looking at how different social categories, such

as race, class, and gender, connect and overlap, creating systems that can lead to discrimination for newcomer groups. Therefore, because researchers reflect on their own biases while also considering how different social identities can influence people's experiences of inequality, this study found that newcomers' experiences are influenced by various social identity factors, where all involved parties need to consider many sides of social fairness. The research process included several steps: starting with a search of articles using databases like Omni and Google Scholar to find common research topics; a review of the latest studies (from 2019 to 2025) to identify gaps in Canadian immigration policies, and community practices; and a final focus on the specific challenges faced by newcomers with multiple related social identities, considering their unique backgrounds and struggles.

Section 3: What We Found

The research on jobs in rural Peterborough shows that newcomers face many problems compared to those in cities, making it hard for them to find work. Key issues include cultural responsibilities, lack of childcare, dependency on low-paying farm jobs, and limited support services (Haugen et al., 2024). Housing issues make this situation worse because the location newcomers live, and the quality of that housing is a large factor to whether they choose to stay in a rural city like Peterborough (Cleave & Arku, 2020). Other issues, such as community opinions towards newcomers and the geographic location of where their house resides in rural neighbourhoods, also influence their adaptation, and negative local community attitudes may stop them from settling in rural areas permanently (Cleave & Arku, 2020). A newcomer's gender, religion, and sexuality were also particularly relevant to newcomer economic integration as non-white female newcomers' qualifications are often ignored, forcing them into low-paying and over-exploited positions (Okeke-Ihejirika, Salami, & Karimi, 2019; Akbar, 2018).

Additionally, newcomers who do not fit the norm, such as LGBTQ+ people and Muslim women, are subject to more prejudices due to their sexuality and religion that affect their economic achievements (Ramaj, 2021; Zainub, 2023; Nazari, 2024). These issues raise three recommended action to fix these issues specifically: 1. Creating a Comprehensive Workforce Development Program for marginalize groups, 2. A.I. Powered Job Matching Portal, streamline job searching practices, and 3. Community Volunteering and Skills Development Programs

which helps to teach volunteers on how to be understanding to people from different cultures and create partnerships and relationships with different communities, both culturally and over the long term. Overall, these solutions were created to address challenges newcomers face during their integration into the cultural and economic branches of the community, particularly for populations considered vulnerable under capitalism.

Section 4: What It Means

This report presents research that has implications for multiple stakeholders. For NCC and similar organizations that aid in facilitating the integration of immigrants and refugees, the report pinpointed the critical need for customized volunteer-led economic integration programs that speak to the multidimensional, systemic barriers faced by newcomers. Relevant barriers were identified in the data, such as language barriers, non-recognition of credentials, and socio-cultural bias, all of which may provide evidence-based implications for NCC to build upon and improve employment service provision and community engagement initiatives. The Comprehensive Workforce Development Program and AI-powered job matching portal are both practical ways to promote more effective integration of newcomers into the local workforce, which is vital for both individual agencies, and the economic contribution of the wider community.

This research serves also as a backdrop for newcomers, highlighting the necessity of culturally relevant and accessible support systems to assist in their integration into the workforce. These initiatives help establish networks and mentorship pathways that are needed to address newcomer fears of isolation while building better community partnerships. Focusing on the lived experiences of each newcomer group - such as racialized newcomers or LGBTQ newcomers - allows organizations, such as the NCC, to be effective in the services they provide, ensuring that each newcomer feels valued and respected while receiving a fair opportunity to succeed economically in their new home. These next steps would fit with larger provincial goals to ensure social inclusion and economic resiliency in communities that contain diverse populations. In addition, for researchers and students, this study involves another layer of inquiry into the concept of CBR methodologies that include the lived experiences of marginalized populations in the research process. By emphasizing the importance of bridging academic inquiry with real-

world applications, such as the economic integration of newcomers through CBR, academia can challenge biases that portray it as culturally superior, foster trust with communities, and encourage a more participatory role in social justice matters.

Contributing these findings to the discussion around barriers and equity issues additionally allows researchers and organizations alike to deepen the conversation around immigration policy and socioeconomic integration, thereby encouraging future students and scholars to explore these important topics with an emphasis on community, collaboration, and respect.

Overall, this report is a useful document that not only builds upon NCC's current programs which aim to build upon the quality of life of newcomers in Peterborough, but also contributes to an honest, and informed pathway to scholar discourse about immigration and community resilience. This report communicates that integration is a community priority that requires a concerted effort among all actors in the community, including newcomers, organizations, and policymakers to make it work in a comprehensive, inclusive, and collaborative manner.

Section 5: Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on our literature review we have developed three key recommendations to enhance the effectiveness, sustainability, and inclusiveness of volunteer-led economic programs at the New Canadians Centre Peterborough. These recommendations are designed to be practical while also aligning with NCC's values of empowerment, community, and inclusion.

1. Develop a Comprehensive Workforce Development Program

Overview:

This recommendation proposes the launch of a structured workforce development program for newcomers in Peterborough. Unlike basic job referral services, this program would offer a step-by-step path to finding meaningful, long-term employment. It would include practical workshops, mentorship, and ongoing career support, all delivered by trained staff and volunteers. Newcomers would receive help with building resumes, understanding Canadian

workplace culture, practicing interview skills, and improving language where needed. The program would also focus on important interpersonal skills, such as professional communication and teamwork, which are often key to success in the Canadian job market. To ensure relevance and results, the program would work closely with local employers, schools, and service organizations. By building real-world connections and providing targeted support, it would help newcomers not only find work but thrive in their new roles. Most importantly, the program would be flexible, recognizing that people come with different experiences, goals, and needs. Whether someone was a skilled professional in their home country or is just entering the workforce for the first time, this initiative would help them build confidence, grow their networks, and take the next step in their career journey.

Rationale:

Many newcomers, especially those who arrive through government-supported programs, face serious challenges when trying to find work. Their past education and job experience may not be recognized in Canada, they may be unfamiliar with local workplace expectations, and they often lack the networks that help people find good jobs. These challenges can lead to underemployment, where skilled individuals end up in low-wage jobs just to survive. This not only affects their confidence but also delays their full participation in the community. A well-rounded employment program can change this. By providing more than job listings, by offering guidance, training, and mentorship, it helps newcomers rebuild their careers and feel confident in their abilities. Programs like this have been shown to improve outcomes, especially when they include support that is sensitive to diverse cultures, languages, and personal backgrounds. It also benefits the wider community: local employers gain access to a motivated, diverse talent pool, and Peterborough becomes a more welcoming and economically resilient place. In short, this is about giving people the right tools to succeed, and making sure no one's potential is overlooked.

Implementation Steps:

- Partner with local employers, professionals, and educators to co-create relevant workshops and mentoring opportunities.
- Offer “wraparound” support such as resume-building sessions, interview preparation, and access to sector-specific language training.

- Integrate culturally responsive and gender-sensitive programming that acknowledges caregiving responsibilities and other intersectional challenges.
- Build feedback loops into the program to evaluate effectiveness and gather input from participants for continuous improvement.

Expected Impact:

- Greater newcomer confidence in job-seeking and workplace integration.
- Reduced mismatch between newcomer skills and job placements.
- Increased retention and satisfaction among both employers and newcomers.

2. Launch an AI-Powered Job Matching Portal

Overview:

This recommendation proposes creating a digital job-matching platform powered by artificial intelligence (AI) to connect newcomers with local employment opportunities more effectively. Users or NCC staff would input key details such as education, work experience, language skills, and availability, and the system would generate personalized job matches from businesses in the Peterborough area. This tool is designed specifically for refugees, migrants, and newcomers, acting as a smart link between job seekers and employers. It would not replace caseworkers or volunteers but support them with an easy-to-use dashboard that highlights the best employment options for each client. The platform would be locally tailored by partnering with small and medium-sized employers already working with NCC. It would include multilingual access and be simple enough for users with limited digital experience. Successful models like Stanford's GeoMatch have shown promising results, with refugees placed by AI being 40 to 70 percent more likely to find work compared to traditional methods (McEvoy, 2024). While the system uses data to find patterns and connections, all final decisions would remain in the hands of human staff who can consider each person's full story with empathy and understanding

Rationale:

Canada and other countries are increasingly turning to AI to improve public services, including immigration and settlement support. Programs like Toronto Metropolitan University's Build a Bridge competition have already shown how AI can support immigrant integration. One

winning project, KASA AI, used technology to offer newcomers personalized information and connections to local resources. (TMU, 2024) Similarly, the federal government has begun using AI to streamline immigration processing, while ensuring human oversight and fairness (IRCC, 2024). These examples show that AI, when used responsibly, can enhance service delivery without removing the human element. Our recommendation is also supported by research showing how AI can improve employment outcomes for refugees who are often overqualified for the jobs they end up in. Tools like resume builders and job search engines can reduce staff workloads and help clients access better opportunities. However, AI must be used with care. If it relies on biased or incomplete data, it could unintentionally reinforce barriers instead of removing them (Qureshi, 2024). That is why it is essential to include ethical safeguards, involve newcomers in the tool's design, and ensure the system is transparent and accountable (Roshan, 2024). Additionally, research from the University of British Columbia shows how AI literacy and digital training can improve newcomer employability and support broader digital inclusion (Joy, Zhu, Picault, & Ransom, 2025). As AI becomes more central to hiring processes and service delivery, it is crucial that newcomers are not left behind. A well-designed AI job-matching portal could help reduce underemployment, restore professional identity, and build stronger economic futures for both individuals and the local community.

Implementation Steps:

- Collaborate with local post-secondary institutions or developers to design a user-friendly portal tailored to NCC's clients.
- Ensure the system supports multiple languages and accessibility standards.
- Include a volunteer support feature where clients can receive help navigating the system.
- Pilot the tool with a small cohort and refine the system before broader rollout.

Expected Impact:

- Increased efficiency and transparency in job-matching for both clients and employers.
- Reduced workload for NCC staff and volunteers handling employment services.
- Enhanced digital literacy among newcomers with training and support.

3. Expand and Strengthen Community Volunteering and Skill-Building Initiatives

Overview:

This recommendation proposes strengthening and expanding the role of volunteers within the New Canadians Centre's economic integration programs. While volunteers already contribute meaningfully to NCC, this initiative would bring greater structure, clarity, and purpose to their involvement. Volunteers would be trained and guided to take on specific roles such as language practice partners, job search mentors, workplace culture coaches, or connectors to local professional networks. Clear expectations, goals, and orientation would help ensure that each volunteer's contribution supports the broader objectives of newcomer integration. Importantly, this recommendation also highlights the value of offering volunteering opportunities to newcomers themselves. Many new arrivals have valuable knowledge, lived experience, or professional skills to share. Peer-based volunteering allows them to build confidence, develop transferable skills, gain local references, and feel a sense of purpose and belonging. Volunteering can be an important stepping stone into the Canadian job market, especially for those still working toward credential recognition or improving their language skills. Whether newcomers are supporting others from similar backgrounds or collaborating with the community, these experiences foster leadership, connection, and mutual learning.

Rationale:

Volunteers are already a vital part of NCC's success. However, their roles are often informal or limited to individual tasks, which can reduce overall impact and engagement. By organizing volunteer activities around clear goals such as language development, job readiness, or career support, NCC can make volunteer contributions more focused and effective. With the right training and support, volunteers will feel more confident in their roles, and staff will find it easier to connect the right people with the right opportunities. Encouraging newcomers to volunteer adds even more value. It allows them to build skills, practice leadership, and feel part of their new community. Volunteering can also help address common barriers newcomers face, such as limited Canadian work experience or small social networks. This kind of hands-on involvement helps people build confidence, gain resume experience, and form meaningful connections.

A helpful example comes from the Multicultural Café, a small nonprofit food service-learning initiative located at a regional college in the interior of British Columbia (Riley & Douglas, 2017). The café was developed as part of a community-based program to support refugee and immigrants by offering a welcoming, low-pressure space to build skills and community connections (Riley & Douglas, 2017). It was created through collaboration between settlement staff, the college, and local community members who wanted to create a supportive environment where newcomers could feel comfortable and included. Participants were invited to volunteer in roles aligned with their interests and strengths, such as preparing food, organizing events, leading cultural activities, or helping with day-to-day operations. Staff and volunteers worked together in a relaxed setting that encouraged business language practice, confidence-building, and exposure to Canadian workplace expectations. Similar initiatives exist at Trent University, such as the Seasoned Spoon Café, a non-profit, vegetarian cooperative. The café serves locally sourced, organic food at affordable prices and functions as a community hub for food education, sustainability, and student engagement. Given its cooperative model and commitment to community involvement, the Seasoned Spoon could be explored as a potential site for newcomer volunteer engagement or as inspiration for developing a similar program at Trent University or Fleming College.

Implementation Steps:

- Create a clear and welcoming training program for volunteers. Include topics like cultural awareness, inclusive communication, and how to support newcomers.
- Organize volunteer roles into specific areas such as employment support, language tutoring, community outreach, or event help. Each role should come with clear responsibilities and learning goals.
- Continue offering volunteer roles to newcomers to help them build confidence, practice English, gain Canadian work experience, and feel part of the community.
- Create casual and inclusive spaces like the Multicultural Café where newcomers and long-time residents can volunteer together. These spaces help build skills, relationships, and confidence.
- Celebrate volunteer contributions regularly through newsletters, events, and social media. Share stories that show the impact of volunteering on individuals and the community.

Expected Impact:

- More consistent and meaningful support from volunteers across NCC programs
- Stronger relationships between newcomers and volunteers, built on trust and shared goals
- Increased confidence and leadership among newcomers through supported volunteering opportunities
- Better integration outcomes as newcomers gain experience, skills, and community connections
- A more welcoming, inclusive community where everyone has a role in supporting newcomer success

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Section 6: Acknowledgements

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