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Collective Impact: Building inclusive and engaged communities in refugee services in Waterloo Region

By Jacqui Terry-Carroll

Introduction: solving complex problems on a large scale.

The region of Waterloo has a reputation for innovation and collaboration, perhaps more within the tech sector, but it is a well earned reputation in the not for profit sector as well. I am going to relate the process of exploring Collective impact as it pertains to my time working within the Refugee services sector, in the midst of an unprecedented shift in the field. Kitchener-Waterloo is one of six reception centers for refugees in Ontario. We have a strong local Immigration Partnership and our community is well prepared to innovate with new ideas in service delivery for refugees.

Waterloo Region has welcomed over 1200 GARs (Government assisted refugee) and privately sponsored refugees (PSRs) in the last several months and can expect 1200-1400 more in the next two years. Over 18 different registered groups of varying sizes are responding, each stretched to full capacity in their respective areas and this increase in numbers of refugees both government, privately sponsored and refugee claimants are putting strain on the multiple agency support system. Refugee-serving organizations agree that this unprecedented influx of refugees has created a unique opportunity to explore new and innovative ways of delivering service. For the sector to respond effectively and operate sustainably, and see greater settlement success of its refugee clients, we need to thoughtfully consider a new approach to partnerships and service.

A group of leaders in each of the agencies have come together in a group called the Refugee Services Action group (RSAG) in order to build a collaborative response to all the shifts we have recently seen. They are considering how to prepare for the challenges of the future and part of this response is considering the Collective impact model. The RSAG group is

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guiding the community conversation, and is leading the conversation within their own agencies.

This group includes the leading refugee-serving organizations in Kitchener-Waterloo: The Mennonite Coalition for Refugee Support (MCRS) who serve refugee claimants, people escaping persecution who are applying for asylum upon arrival in Canada; Reception Center who welcome government sponsored refugees (GARs); Sanctuary Refugee Health Center who provide health care for GARs, privately sponsored refugees and for refugee claimants; Welcome Home, a program of Ray of Hope, providing affordable housing, living in community for all types of refugee. Other partners at the table include the Canadian Mental Health Association and the Region of Waterloo and the local Immigration Partnership (IP) is interested to facilitate the conversation, in the interests of improving sector servicing.

Each of these organisations aims to support and advocate for refugees, to ensure their success here in Canada according to the mandates of each organisation.

Although we have many of the same hopes and goals for similar clientele, we are often in competition for resources, and apply to foundations in competition with each other.

Increasing numbers of charities also compete for prime spot in the public mind locally. Millennials and the new generation of givers require a different type of engagement and as our donor base ages, it decreases. Donors have loyalty to one or another organisation that supports refugees, even as we work within the same community, often with the same families, creating competition and the appearance of dis-unity to supporters. Small organisations have ongoing challenges in maintaining staffing, providing training, incentives, benefits and more. Donors, funders and community members want to see a more unified approach to refugee support. A more unified approach will ultimately better serve refugees, which is of course our combined, ultimate goal.

Recently we have seen the rise of a number of citizen groups and others (schools/churches/clubs) who have never before been involved with refugees and are frustrated by the barriers they experience while trying to help. There is opportunity to

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leverage their enthusiasm and include them in the local network of support in a more sustained way, linking formal services and informal supports.

Developing a cohesive response to the multiple issues facing all refugees is critical in the months and years ahead and with increased collaboration we can identify program gaps, streamline programs, and improve use of resources. The need for innovation, finding new ways to work together, to improve the settlement experience for refugees and for all who live in this region is critical, since many funders are now interested in long term solutions, and not in the vital but hard to sustain programming costs. Longer term returns, greater sustainability and better planning for the future will allow our service delivery to improve across the board.

By exploring a multi-pronged approach to improve our regional services, the group is thoughtfully considering several options: a single service hub location through increased partnerships or mergers; shared fundraising opportunities; better linkages between service organizations and private sponsors of refugees. The potential of collective impact is being explored in order to allow our community of agencies to move the needle on systemic issues related to refugees. Discovering the opportunity of collective impact allows us to consider changing systemic issues not only on how refugees are served but all those who face barriers to accessing services within our social sector. (for instance 'affordable housing' is an oxymoron for many. If we can advocate for change for housing allowances for refugees, this could have an effect on the housing allowances for all of those needing social assistance.)

There has never been as good a time to discuss the possibility of collective impact as now.

Five Conditions on the road of Collective Impact

The core of the approach is the 5 conditions of collective impact which we have explored as a group without following any road map.

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- **Common Agenda:** Each of organisations aims to support, and advocate for refugees, to ensure their success here in Canada according to the mandates of each organisation. All the agencies want to see refugees better served, and better settled, to improve prosperity for all.
- **Shared Measurement:** Recognizing this as a shortfall, one of the initial projects launched by the group was a settlement ‘passport’ , a road map to help different types of refugees and newcomers follow a planned route towards settlement, and to have a document that could be offered to a service provider covering basic details, rather than having to re-hash stories and information each time they approach a different organisation. (currently there is no information sharing on clients across organizations). There is a need to research best practices and gaps in service through a community-based assets scan - it has become extremely clear that not having a common measurement of success for refugee settlement is a hindrance
- **Mutually Reinforcing Activities:** Each stakeholder recognises that more strain on refugee services in an environment with diminishing resources is not sustainable. In order that refugees are served, innovation must happen
- **Continuous Communication:** regular meetings of the RSAG, and frank open conversations and information sharing has built a high level of trust among members. The influx of new refugees has vastly increased the need for organizations to communicate effectively to manage it as well as possible.
- **Backbone Support:** one of the larger organisations at the table is willing to talk seriously about this possibility.

I have been able to learn about Collective Impact both through my participation in the Fellowship and at the AFP Congress last year. I brought my learnings to the RSAG, and provided training for staff and management from two local agencies. I was also able to spearhead a grant application to the Ontario Trillium foundation with the goal of exploring Collective Impact for refugee agencies in Waterloo Region.

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The conversation is at the point of exploration: will this work for us? Or at least for some of us? Time will tell if Waterloo Region will apply its own unique spin on Collective Impact, or if it will create something entirely new to respond to the challenges ahead.

We can see the possibility of far greater impact, less duplication, a new level of collaboration and partnership opening up which will mean that organisations are not chasing the same funders/donors in competition, but using a shared approach to funding issues. There are a number of funding opportunities available to collaborative groups that could significantly expand our collaborative resources. (Groups being those supporting refugees and refugee claimants). Sharing of functions could increase administrative efficiency; finding scale economies and cost savings; centralized expertise (health plan benefits or payroll expenses for example). These options need to be explored are :

- Re-structure the refugee support sector to better serve clients, and increase sustainability for our work.
- Determine opportunities as a sector to collaborate to provide sustainable services for refugees.

Ultimately our goal is to improve service delivery for our clients, provide them with the best possible start here in Canada and to be efficient and cost effective as we do this. Our community will only benefit from happy, settled people that live in a region that is safe, healthy and economically sustainable for all its families which will make our community resilient, vibrant, diverse and connected.

This report could not have been written without the generous support of the agencies involved, especially the Mennonite Coalition for Refugee Support. Thank you for all that you do to make the lives of refugees in Canada easier.

Appendix 1

Proposed Approach

Phase 1: Foundation

- Create cross-stakeholder steering committee

Phase 2: Learning together

- Focus groups with agency board members and staff, other citizen groups
- Discussions with key informants (eg Immigration Partnership)
- Confidential survey of all Executive Directors

Phase 3: Action

- Forum/meeting to share learnings
- Prioritize and strategize a response