

# AN OPPORTUNITY TO SHINE AGAIN

CultureLink Settlement Services

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*Newcomer  
Seniors Taking  
Action Project*

**Contents**

Executive Summary..... 2

Background and Context..... 3

Newcomer Seniors Taking Action ..... 4

Activities..... 5

Outcomes..... 7

Learnings..... 9

## Executive Summary

The settlement and integration experiences of newcomers in Toronto are often very challenging. Newcomer seniors can face additional barriers and challenges as they are often economically disadvantaged, dependent on their families and isolated due to a lack of English. Evidence shows that newcomer seniors desire and benefit from opportunities to socialize with peers and to use their skills in a safe environment.

The Newcomer Seniors Taking Action (NSTA) pilot project was developed by CultureLink Settlement Services and piloted from July 2015 to January 2016. It was funded by the Seniors Community Grant Program. Its goal was to train newcomer seniors as leaders and facilitators, and to have them organize and deliver workshops and events to their peers. The NSTA pilot project built on an existing senior's community program, New Horizons for Seniors, which focused on active living and participation in social activities for seniors. This enabled the formation and development of three cohesive newcomer seniors groups: Spanish, Chinese and Polish. Building on this, the objective of the NSTA program was to empower these newcomer seniors with leadership and facilitation skills, and to help them build their capacity to plan and organize peer-to-peer learning – both for this pilot project and beyond.

Over the short duration of the NSTA pilot, seventeen (17) newcomer seniors attended two days of facilitation training, and then planned, organized and delivered to their peers a total of 14 workshops and events on a diverse range of topics. Approximately 65 newcomer seniors across the three newcomer seniors groups benefited from these workshops. In addition, events and activities were organized by newcomer seniors and held in various Toronto locations, benefitting the broader community.

The most significant benefit of the pilot was that newcomer seniors developed their capacity, skills, engagement and confidence through planning and running events, workshops and activities. Through facilitation and event planning, newcomer seniors were given a non-threatening and fun opportunity to test their skills with their peers and to “shine again.” This was reported as an empowering process – especially for newcomer seniors who lost their professional identity when they immigrated. As well, being able to identify and plan themes and content for workshops and events helped ensure that the content and format were relevant and appropriate to the targeted group.

Newcomer seniors also built and strengthened social ties with newcomer seniors and others in the community. This was critical to building and sustaining capacity for the continuity of these newcomer seniors groups. Despite a lack of funding or formal program support, since the end of this pilot project, newcomer seniors have continued to meet and participate and have organized a number of events and workshops on their own. This highlights both the resilience and skills of these newcomer seniors, as well as the critical importance of safe and stable newcomer senior spaces to convene and learn.

This report highlights the activities, outcomes and lessons learned in implementing the NSTA pilot project. It is intended to help other community agencies understand the value and impact of services and supports for newcomer seniors, and to support them in successfully planning and developing similar programs for this population.

## Introduction

CultureLink Settlement Services' Newcomer Seniors Taking Action (NSTA) training and skills-building pilot initiative ran from July 2015 to January 2016. It was designed to support the capacity of newcomer senior volunteers to lead and deliver education and social events in a peer-to-peer setting. As part of a commitment to sharing knowledge with the settlement sector and the broader community services sector working with seniors, this report highlights the successes, challenges and lessons learned in implementing the pilot program. It is intended to help agencies understand the value and impact of training and building capacity of volunteer seniors, and to support them in successfully planning and developing similar initiatives.

## Background and Context

Each year, newcomers of all ages come to Toronto to start a new life. Compared to the general population, newcomer seniors make up a greater proportion of all seniors. Toronto is home to the largest proportion of newcomer seniors in Canada (32%) and nearly two-thirds of all seniors living in Toronto are immigrants.<sup>12</sup> Newcomers come from a diverse number of countries and experiences and bring this richness with them.

The settlement and integration experiences of newcomers in Toronto are often very challenging. Extensive research highlights the main sources of settlement stresses: social and economic strain, social isolation, discrimination, and status loss. Newcomer seniors can face additional barriers in their integration process as they are generally out of the labour market, and often economically disadvantaged or dependent on their families.<sup>34</sup> Isolation through lack of English language skills also underlie challenges for newcomer seniors. Nearly two-thirds of newcomers age 50 and over reported having no knowledge of either English or French, and newcomers age 65 and older – especially women – are even less likely to speak English or French.<sup>5</sup> In addition, newcomer seniors often lack status in Canada. Many were productive, contributing members of the societies from which they came. One senior said, “to be non-entities here, seen as having nothing to give to the larger society, [is] dispiriting.”<sup>6</sup>

All newcomers benefit from access to support programmes and services. Programmes designed specifically for the needs of seniors and other newcomer groups contribute to the social and economic well-being of the individuals, their families and of society as a whole. Community agencies play a vital role in supporting the social integration of newcomers and combating their isolating experiences. Evidence shows that newcomer seniors desire and benefit from opportunities to socialize with peers in a safe environment.<sup>7</sup> Further still, some evidence shows that seniors who utilized social services were less likely to report the presence of elder abuse – a significant concern for all seniors.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ng, E., Lai, D.W.L., Lai, Rudner, A.T., & Orpana, H. 2012. What do we know about immigrant seniors aging in Canada? A demographic, socio-economic and health profile. CERIS Working Papers, 88-90

<sup>2</sup> Durst, D & M. MacLean. 2010. Diversity and Aging Among Immigrant Seniors in Canada: Changing Faces and Greying Temples. Brush Education

<sup>3</sup> Anisef, P., Kilbride, K.M., Ochocka, J., & Janzen, R. 2001. A study on parenting issues of newcomer families in Ontario . Report to the Settlement Directorate of Citizenship and Immigration Canada.

<sup>4</sup> Tang, T., Oatley, K., Toner, BB. 2007. Impact of life events and difficulties on the mental health of Chinese immigrant women. *Minor Health* 9: 281-90

<sup>5</sup> Kilbride, K. M. 2010. Speaking with Senior Immigrant Women and Sponsoring Families: A first-language investigation of the needs for holistic approaches to service. CERIS – The Ontario Metropolis Centre, Ryerson University to Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Ontario Region

<sup>6</sup> Kilbride, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Kilbride, 2010; Anisef, et al., R. 2001.

<sup>8</sup> Ammar NH & A. Zaidi. 2015. Elderly Abuse: An Exploratory Study of Elderly Members of the South Asian Community in the Greater Toronto Area. *Arts Social Science*.

In 2014, CultureLink conducted a community needs assessment for newcomer seniors to identify priority areas and service gaps. Through interviews, focus groups and surveys with over 40 newcomer seniors, this needs assessment confirmed the importance of seniors' services. In particular, it revealed that seniors desire peer-to-peer learning in their native language, and that many newcomer seniors are not confident about their facilitation and leadership skills. Newcomer seniors shared their desire for more information related to legal rights and obligations, and to health and well-being. Newcomer seniors highlighted the importance of trust for creating positive conditions for learning. The current seniors groups believe that CultureLink offers an ideal space to learn, share and grow.

## Newcomer Seniors Taking Action

The Newcomer Seniors Taking Action (NSTA) project developed by CultureLink was piloted from July 2015 to January 2016. It was funded by the Seniors Community Grant Program. Its objective was to train 15 seniors as leaders and facilitators and have them organize and deliver workshops and events to reach 100 newcomer seniors. The objective of the NSTA program was to empower newcomer seniors with leadership and facilitation skills and help build their capacity to plan and organize peer-to-peer learning – both within this pilot project, and beyond.



The NSTA pilot project builds on the existing senior's community program, the New Horizons for Seniors, funded by Employment and Social Development Canada. Its focus is on active living and participation in social activities for seniors. Under this program, CultureLink supported group activities and provided a space for weekly social gatherings for three linguistically distinct groups of newcomer seniors; Chinese, Polish, and Spanish. The NSTA built on this program to enhance the capacity of newcomer seniors through training and opportunities to lead in the development and execution of various workshops and activities.

The main objective of the NSTA pilot project was to build the capacity of newcomer seniors through a two-day skill-building workshop covering skills in facilitation, leadership, group dynamics and program design. A select group of newcomer seniors would participate in this workshop and use what they learned to plan, design and develop social and cultural events, information sessions and workshops for their peers and community members.

## Activities

Across the three groups of newcomer seniors, there are approximately 65 senior participants who regularly attend group meetings and social activities. The NSTA pilot project gave some of these individuals an opportunity to enhance their leadership capacity and participate in the facilitation training workshop. Staff in each of the seniors groups shared information about the NSTA pilot with participants and asked those who were interested to register for the facilitation training workshop. The facilitation training workshop took place November 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>, 2015 with seventeen (17) newcomer seniors participating in the NSTA pilot and attending the workshop. Of those who attended, eight (8) were from the Chinese group, six (6) were from the Spanish group, and three (3) from the Polish group. Participants identified the following key factors in choosing to participate:

- the topic and the calibre of the presenters running the workshop;
- the workshop was cost free;
- the length of the workshop; and
- opportunities to interact and learn with seniors from other ethnic groups.

The two-day facilitation training for newcomer seniors was conducted by *Facilitation Without Borders* at CultureLink Settlement Services. Three program staff from each of the newcomer seniors groups attended the training and provided additional language interpretation support. Seniors participating in the facilitator training were expected to use the skills they acquired to plan, develop and run a workshop or social activity for the larger newcomer senior group. As part of the program design, seniors who participated in the NSTA pilot and training received a small gift (\$50 gift card), a certificate of completion and a graduation celebration.

Feedback from newcomer seniors who participated in the facilitated training workshop was overwhelmingly positive. On the workshop evaluation form, all 17 participants strongly agreed with the following statements: “I enjoyed the workshop” and “I would recommend this workshop to others.” Areas for improvement suggested by participants included; using additional visual aids and multimedia supports; providing handouts; conducting the workshop in ones’ native language; and ensuring that any scheduling changes are effectively communicated in advance.



Following the training, 13 workshops and events were run by the seniors who had participated in the pilot. Workshops ranged in their scope and intention significantly – but were all planned and led by newcomer seniors. Many seniors conducted weekly presentations at regular seniors meetings on topics with which they were most familiar. These included presentations on their home cities, communities, hobbies, skills and settlement experiences in Canada. They, and provided an opportunity to practice organizing a presentation and public speaking in a non-threatening environment of

peers. Many of these presentations included storytelling, dancing, singing, joking and opportunities to share food.

More complex events were also planned by newcomer seniors. These included cultural events and celebrations showcasing the foods, arts and talents of the newcomer seniors at CultureLink and in a number of libraries across the city. Newcomer seniors not only planned the content for these events, including rehearsing dances; they also ensured that all logistics were taken care of. Newcomer seniors worked together to learn about the many aspects of event planning, including budgeting, scheduling, transportation, basic catering, leadership, collaboration and risk management.

Workshops on topics where external expertise would be required were also planned and facilitated by newcomer seniors. The topics of these workshops were decided by newcomer seniors in each group, based on needs. From there, newcomer seniors participating in the NSTA pilot planned complex workshops on important subjects related to health and well-being; workplace rights; and aging with dignity.



Newcomer seniors took on all responsibilities for these workshops, including contacting and coordinating with guest speakers, arranging refreshments and transportation, outreach and marketing, and facilitation. This experience provided not only an opportunity to further develop their planning and organizing skills, but also to identify and strengthen different partnerships around the community to support the project and to promote cultural exchange.

Approximately 65 newcomer seniors across the three newcomer seniors groups benefited from 14 workshops and events on a diverse range of topics organized by the newcomer seniors trained as facilitators. In addition, other newcomers, seniors and the broader community benefited from activities and events organized beyond CultureLink. These included cultural activities at the library, at a senior's residence and at the Air Canada Centre. These activities reached hundreds of individuals and provided a unique opportunity for newcomer seniors to perform publically.

## Outcomes

Through the NSTA pilot, newcomer seniors developed their capacity, skills, engagement and confidence in planning and running events, workshops and activities. Listed below are some of the strong program outcomes newcomer seniors experienced.

### *Skills-based learning*

Newcomer seniors who participated in the facilitation training workshop developed skills in leadership, facilitation, event planning, budgeting, marketing, communication and organization. In addition, the facilitators covered topics such as dealing with difficult group dynamics and fostering participation. Newcomer seniors who participated in this training both learned these skills in a formal setting, and practiced these new skills in a safe, welcoming peer-to-peer setting. Newcomer seniors shared their love of learning and their passion to develop new skills through targeted programming.

### *An opportunity to shine again*

Delivering workshops proved critical in building the confidence of newcomer seniors. For many newcomer seniors with significant professional experience and skills from their home countries, language barriers and isolation have not provided an opportunity for them to shine and showcase themselves in Canada. With new skills in facilitation and event planning, newcomer seniors were given a non-threatening opportunity to test these skills with their peers and to shine again. This proved to be an empowering process; newcomer seniors who participated in the NSTA pilot began by presenting informally to their senior group, and then began organizing more complex events and workshops. Participants gained confidence in their planning and presentation skills. And this was contagious. Newcomer seniors who had not taken the facilitation training workshop joined in event organizing and opportunities to prepare workshops and presentations.

### *Driven by needs and interests of newcomer seniors*

When seniors took an active role in designing and developing workshops and information sessions, the content suited their needs. The learning objectives linked directly to areas in which they needed further knowledge and understanding. Program staff indicated that they were not always aware of the content needs and desires of newcomer seniors, but the NSTA enabled the seniors to plan their own content. Much of the content of the formal workshops focused on understanding the Canadian system and human rights so as to be able to better engage and integrate.

### *Fun and cross-cultural learning*

Many seniors felt most comfortable running workshops and events on familiar topics. The NSTA program allowed seniors to showcase their cultural knowledge and history and bring it to the group. Through the arts, seniors also worked together to organize events beyond CultureLink for the broader community. This was important not only for the





newcomer seniors leading the workshops and events, but also for all newcomer seniors participating. Everyone gained knowledge of one another’s culture and history and had opportunities to celebrate in a fun and relaxing social environment. Newcomer seniors reported that the NSTA pilot created many opportunities for laughter and fun, and that these were essential to seniors’ well-being.



*Building social connections*

In addition, newcomer seniors developed skills and confidence, and strengthened their social ties to other newcomer seniors and others in the community. For some newcomer seniors, this group is the only social space that they have in Toronto and provides vital support and a lifeline from isolation. For one Polish senior, the group is “a great reason to leave my apartment and meet friends, and have a nice cup of tea with them.” The additional engagement of seniors in their programming enabled social connections to strengthen within the groups. In addition, organizing workshops and events in spaces, and with contacts, beyond CultureLink broadened the social networks and connections of participants.

*Capacity for continuity*

One of the intentions of the NSTA pilot project was to support seniors’ capacity to plan, develop and run workshops and events for their own groups. Previously, organizing events and activities for newcomer seniors had been done by CultureLink staff. This was important in the early formation of the seniors groups, as trust and rapport was being established. Later, the NSTA pilot offered an opportunity for the newcomer seniors to take ownership of the seniors’ group and to plan and organize their own functions. Since this pilot project has ended, newcomer seniors have continued to meet and participate and have organized a number of events and workshops. They are doing this despite the absence of any funding support.

## Learnings

The NSTA pilot was overwhelmingly successful for newcomer seniors who participated. These included effective outreach and managing expectations for newcomer seniors, sustaining engagement and participation, building autonomy into the program and providing opportunities for newcomer seniors to provide feedback. For CultureLink Settlement Services, funders and other community agencies working with seniors, the NSTA project has highlighted a few key areas that will yield continued success.

### *Learning in your native language*

CultureLink made significant efforts to translate the 2-day facilitation session for newcomer seniors. However, the facilitated sessions were conducted in English, which limited the engagement and comfort of participants. In addition, some newcomer seniors screened themselves out of the training due to language barriers. As much as possible, programs for newcomer seniors should be offered in their native language. In addition, evaluations and other mechanisms to gather feedback from participants should be available in newcomer seniors' native languages.

### *Engage all newcomer seniors*

The NSTA pilot has directly benefitted the seventeen (17) seniors who participated in the pilot project. In addition, there were significant benefits to other newcomer seniors in each of the groups. These included those who got involved in planning events, who gained some skills in facilitation and who developed their confidence in planning and running events. As such,



opportunities to formally engage and acknowledge all newcomer seniors in similar training programs would be beneficial. Recognizing that all newcomer seniors were participants in the NSTA pilot and deserved to be recognized, one staff member purchased thank you notebooks for all seniors in the group to acknowledge their hard work in supporting the organization of events and activities.

### *Ongoing funding essential*

The success of the NSTA pilot can largely be attributed to the fact that there was a strong and active newcomer seniors group already in place. The New Horizons for Seniors program was a safe space where newcomer seniors were already engaged. It was a logical next step for them to take their learning and leadership to the next level with this pilot. Unfortunately, program funding has lapsed for both the NSTA and New Horizons for Seniors. There is currently no funding available within CultureLink to support ongoing seniors programs. This has resulted in a difficult situation. CultureLink continues to provide free space for newcomer seniors to meet, but has no funding for staff support or capacity-building. Due to the strength and resiliency of these seniors and the importance they place in these seniors groups, they continue to meet and some CultureLink staff continue to volunteer their time to support the groups. The NSTA pilot provided many of the skills newcomer seniors need to continue to run groups and events, but with no resources, it will be difficult for these important groups to continue, to grow, and to build the strengths of newcomer seniors.