



AFGHAN WOMEN'S ORGANIZATION
REFUGEE & IMMIGRANT SERVICES

2021-2022

Annual
REPORT

Celebrating
Community Unity

Embracing An Inclusive Canada

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LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Afghan Women's Organization Refugee and Immigrant Services acknowledges that we are on the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishinaabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, the Wendat peoples, and the Ojibway/Chippewa peoples; and what is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. We also acknowledge that the Greater Toronto Area and Mississauga are covered by Treaty 13 signed with the Mississaugas of the Credit, and the Williams Treaties signed with multiple Mississaugas and Chippewa bands.

The AWO wants to honor the peoples who protected and nurtured this land and these waters for thousands of years and continue to do so today. We recognize the systemic and ongoing violence faced by Indigenous peoples across this country and the actions needed to promote justice, truth and reconciliation. We acknowledge and are grateful for the ongoing privilege we have as settlers, immigrants and refugees to live and work on this land.

MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

Forty-thousand Afghan refugees are being resettled by the Canadian government because of the crisis in Afghanistan, giving hope to many Afghans and to organizations such as the AWO. Over the past year, the AWO has been working tirelessly on many crisis response efforts, including advocating for Afghan refugees and supporting them in Canada.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban's takeover last summer triggered an unprecedented economic, financial, and humanitarian crisis that has left millions of Afghans in extreme poverty. In particular, women and girls have faced severe restrictions that have prevented them from participating in most aspects of daily life and public life.

While the AWO has always advocated for Afghan women and girls' rights, our advocacy work intensified during the summer of 2021 when a group of human rights defenders and women leaders contacted us regarding their safety. We were asked to relay their concerns and pleas for protection to the Canadian government. We have conveyed their concerns to the Canadian government at various round table discussions and meetings with Members of Parliament, Senators and Ministers.

Given the dire humanitarian situation in Afghanistan, we have also advocated for Canada to provide more humanitarian aid and remove barriers to delivering aid. Additionally, we have advocated for the establishment of feasible parameters to facilitate the resettlement of the 40,000 vulnerable Afghans in a streamlined and timely manner. We were also pleased to be invited to provide testimony before the Special Parliamentary Committee on Afghanistan in February and many of our concerns and recommendations were reflected in the Committee's report: Honouring Canada's Legacy in Afghanistan: Responding to the Humanitarian Crisis and Helping People Reach Safety.

Despite 40 years of suffering and loss, disproportionately affecting women and children, Afghans hope for a better future. For Afghans to achieve long-term peace and tranquility, we need to work together to promote solidarity. A key part of this will be supporting the newly arrived Afghans who will be able to provide guidance on what kind of future they envision for Afghanistan.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the overwhelming support from Canadians. As part of its efforts to meet Afghan refugees' basic needs, the AWO has collaborated with partner organizations and received generous donations from organizations and individuals. A big thank you to our donors for their kind donations and continued support. I am also grateful to our staff, volunteers, Board members, and other friends of AWO for their commitment, dedication, and contributions.



Asma Faizi

President

Asma Faizi



MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Greetings,

2021-2022 was indeed a year of unprecedented challenges and experiences. It is with enormous gratitude that I lead an organization that continues to strive for excellence in service delivery and live in a community that has stepped up and gone beyond to help in times of need.

In-person services continued to be halted by the impacts of the pandemic, which added to the frustrations of our communities as they already carried multiple and mounting health, economic, and social burdens. AWO has repurposed its programs and support services to virtual delivery platforms. Over the course of the year, we pivoted some of our support services providing limited in-person and outdoor programming when it was safe to do so and continued to respond creatively to those community members struggling and most in need of our services.

Our staff zealously worked at the risk of their health and burnout to deliver essentials food items, hygiene and cleaning products, masks, and other much-needed supplies to seniors, refugees, and families with young children.

Last August, we were confronted with yet another heart-breaking dilemma, the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban and the subsequent violence that ensued, negatively affecting the entire country with particularly severe impacts on women and girls, minorities, human rights activists, and journalists.

As the situation evolved and intensified in Afghanistan, many were forced to flee for safety and were in dire need of refuge. AWO stepped into the breach to provide urgent emergency assistance, though the magnitude of the need has stressed the institution.

Accommodating the influx of refugees here in the GTA and beyond while advocating for more visas were the two pillars of our crisis response during this period.

Afghans in the diaspora were extremely troubled, watching their motherland turning to ruins and their loved ones persecuted, killed, or displaced. AWO received thousands of monthly enquiries and pledges for support from people looking for advice and offering their support and direct assistance.

We are especially grateful to our staff and volunteers who miraculously held the fort and persevered to accommodate the flood of requests from anguished community members.

Despite all the grueling tasks and extensive work ahead, we have accomplished a great deal alongside our partners, funders, visionary Board, and tireless staff.

During this period, AWO's senior management team met frequently to assess the crisis and continue to deliver comprehensive, client centered and trauma informed services. Our staff regularly visited the refugee families, during their temporary stay in hotels. We have been able to supply them with both practical and tangible supports including clothing, technological devices, snacks, and other necessities for their children, and enrolling the adults in AWO English conversation circles and orientation sessions.

Many refugees continued to rely on our support to find housing, receive basic furniture and attend language and employment training programs.

Buoyed by the outpouring of generosity and compassion from the broader communities across Canada, we are more invigorated than ever to serve the struggling, facilitate a voice for the voiceless, advocate for the needy, and progress along the path of creating a more just society.

Over these trying times, we remained resolute in furthering our mission of improving the quality of life of refugees and new immigrants, including efforts to facilitate their social inclusion with the aim of empowering them to become integrated and contributing members in their newly adopted country.

2021-22 for AWO has been a time for reflection, camaraderie collaboration and service that has shown us the power of coming together. We extend our profound gratitude to friends and supporters of recently arrived refugees and communities who have been most impacted by the crisis in their countries of origin and the pandemic.



Adeena Niazi

Executive Director

Adeena Niazi



ABOUT AWO

Founded in 1990, AWO provides settlement and integration services to newly arrived refugee and immigrant communities all over the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and Peel Region. Most of our clients are women and their families, many of whom have escaped war and persecution and who experience multiple socioeconomic, race and gender-based barriers.

Annually, we provide upwards of 90,000 direct services through our trauma-informed, client focused programs, which go beyond settlement needs and Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) to providing mental health and wellness supports and encouraging active participation and connection with broader communities.

Our unique contribution is the provision of gender sensitive, culturally competent and linguistically appropriate services that help foster safety and a sense belonging for refugees and immigrants during a crucial time in their settlement journey. We serve all newcomers, with 90% of our clients coming from the following regional backgrounds: Afghans, South Asians, Central Asians, and from North African and the Middle East (mainly Iranians, Somalis, Syrians, Iraqis, Kurdish, Assyrians and Palestinians).

OUR VISION

Our Vision Refugees and immigrants, especially those who have experienced wars and persecution and those who are marginalized, leading self-sufficient and dignified lives in a socially inclusive society.

OUR MISSION

AWO works with refugees and immigrants, particularly those who have experienced wars and persecution and those who are most marginalized, with a special focus on women and their families. Our mission is to improve their quality of life, to promote their social and economic inclusion, and empower them to become contributing members of society and live in dignity.



OUR VALUES

Gender equality; access and equity; dignity and respect; social inclusion; and economic empowerment

OUR STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

Promote greater social and economic inclusion of women, youth and seniors; empower marginalized and isolated women and their families; enhance mental health services; strengthen partnerships and collaborations; and enhance organizational capacity and sustainability.

OUR BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Asma Faizi - President
Beheshta Jaghori - Vice President
Huria Jalalzai – Treasurer
Mina Saboor – Secretary
Sheba Sheranze
Hakeema Mashal Sidiqi
Nasimeh Bayat
Kobra Rasul
Abeda Baluch
Parween Pazhwak
Sumaya Karimi

COMMUNITIES STEPPING UP TO WELCOME REFUGEES FROM AFGHANISTAN



Afghan Women's Organization
Refugee & Immigrant Services

Serving the Community
since 1990



This year has been one of the most challenging in our history and a remarkable testament to the generosity and power of communities coming together in times of crisis. As we struggled to navigate the needs of newcomers in the middle of a global pandemic, the crisis in Afghanistan unraveled and hurled millions into a humanitarian and political crisis. Almost immediately, Canadians stepped up with an outpouring of assistance.

We were truly touched by the power of solidarity, and the generosity of individuals and communities stepping up and coming together in times of crisis for our community.

Our ability to respond as quickly and successfully to those we serve this year would not have been possible without the incredible support and generosity of our fellow Canadians. We are eternally grateful and incredibly inspired by the many agencies, service providers, diverse organizations, private companies, big and small, and the innumerable, concerned individuals who reached out to us with offers of help.

Here are just a few of the many foundations, private companies, individuals, and agencies that mobilized funds and support to assist AWO with the Afghan refugee crisis.

The Hilary and Galen and Weston Foundation directed their generous support towards activities and workshops for newcomer refugee parents and children and flexible and substantial donation of Janssen Inc. went a long way in assisting effected communities of newly arrived refugees.

Both Scotiabank and CIBC bank selected a corporate day of fundraising in favour of AWO as their Agency of Choice in 2021. In addition, RBC and TD Banks as well as the Garry Morden Centre Mississauga Fire Department department raised dedicated funds to AWO to assist in resettling Afghan refugees in Canada.

Toronto Tech entrepreneur Sol Orwell collected an impressive amount of funds through his matching donations campaign for Afghan refugees and selected AWO as only one of two agencies that he considered particularly effective to be the recipient.



The young tech start-up company First Class Facilitation worked in partnership AWO in an initiative called “Empowered by Devices” whereby we collected, refurbished and distributed tech devices-- desktop computers, laptops, tablets, and cell phones-- to newly arrived Afghan newcomers, thereby helping them break their isolation in the virtual pandemic world and access necessary resources and services.

Community agencies like the United Way brought a wealth of understanding and experience and gave AWO both support for developing organizational resiliency along with addressing immediate needs for newly arrived Afghan refugees in the form of emergency funds, grocery cards and personal hygiene products. The capacity building organizational support along with the targeted community resources have been invaluable to AWO’s work this past year.

We received a huge response from organizations including B’nai Brith, Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Centre, GlobalMedic (P&G), Nazo Foundation, community businesses and individuals with a donation drive of funds, household products, food, as well as laptops geared to support newly arrived refugees.

Lastly, we would be amiss not to mention the countless individuals, private business owners and others who contributed through donations, big and small, and through their time and efforts to respond to the Afghan crisis and newly arrived refugees.

Thank You to Our Staff & Volunteers

We want to acknowledge the hundreds of hours of time that was donated by our volunteers and staff in response to the Afghan refugee crisis. They provided around the clock support to newly arrived refugees including airport pickups and transportation to hotels, interpretation at port of entry, hotels, and hospitals, conducted weekly information sessions, assisted with filling out forms, and collected, organized, and distributed donations including clothes, medications, food, and personal hygiene products.



Partnerships and Collaborations forged & deepened

The pandemic and Afghan crisis went a long way in strengthening AWO's partnerships and collaborations with other agencies. In response to the crisis in Afghanistan, and the Canadian Government's initiative to resettle 40,000 refugees, our communities needed to be ready to resettle large numbers of Afghans into different GTA neighbourhoods.

Six priority areas were identified, and an outcome driven task force was formed. Working with various umbrella groups across the GTA and province, we came together with our cluster partners organized by City of Toronto and United Way to share resources, supplies, ideas, and access joint funding opportunities to aid refugees and immigrants. Our cluster partners included the North York Community Center, TNO- The Neighbourhood Organization, Access Alliance, and Scarborough Center for Healthy Communities.

We worked in collaboration with many agencies including with Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada IRCC, City of Toronto, Peel Region, Polycultural and Immigrant and Community Services, COSTI Immigrant Services, and the Canada Revenue Agency to provide orientation webinars and timely information for newly arrived Afghans.

We collaborated closely with the Michael Garron Hospital and North York General Hospital along with other agencies receiving funding from the city of Toronto for Vaccine Engagement. The hospitals assisted with outreach, planning and implementation of the vaccine clinic in the neighbourhood falling within their catchment. Additionally, their doctors conducted information sessions for our clients and the hospitals also facilitated online vaccine booking appointments and greater access for our communities.



Through our employment program we formed and deepened partnerships with several organizations to provide additional supports to our clients. This included specialized labour market training, expertise, guest speakers, job connections, credential evaluation services and more. Our partners included the Labour Education Centre, the Catholic Crosscultural Services, the Toronto East LIP, Access Employment, Lifeline Afghanistan, Dixon Hall, Jumpstart Refugee Talent, YWCA, Skills for Change as well as several community colleges and schools.

Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC)

AWO continued to offer our language programs virtually over this period, with the LINC program curriculum building learners' language skills and developing their life and settlement competencies.

English language was taught virtually through a variety of real-life tasks and situations such as navigating online banking systems, ordering groceries online, or booking doctor's appointments. In addition to conventional lesson plans, communication skills were developed through sessions on financial literacy, sustaining mental health and wellbeing, Indigenous history and culture, the school system, and employment readiness in Canada. This inclusive approach to learning not only concentrated on teaching the language but assisted newcomers in developing strategies for getting themselves familiarized with the process of a successful settlement in their new country.



Overcoming Pandemic-related Challenges in LINC Classrooms

The COVID-19 pandemic and the pivot to virtual services presented many challenges to our staff, instructors, and learners. Together we endured, identifying strategies to deal with the isolation and distance. Some of the issues that LINC learners and instructors dealt with were as follows:

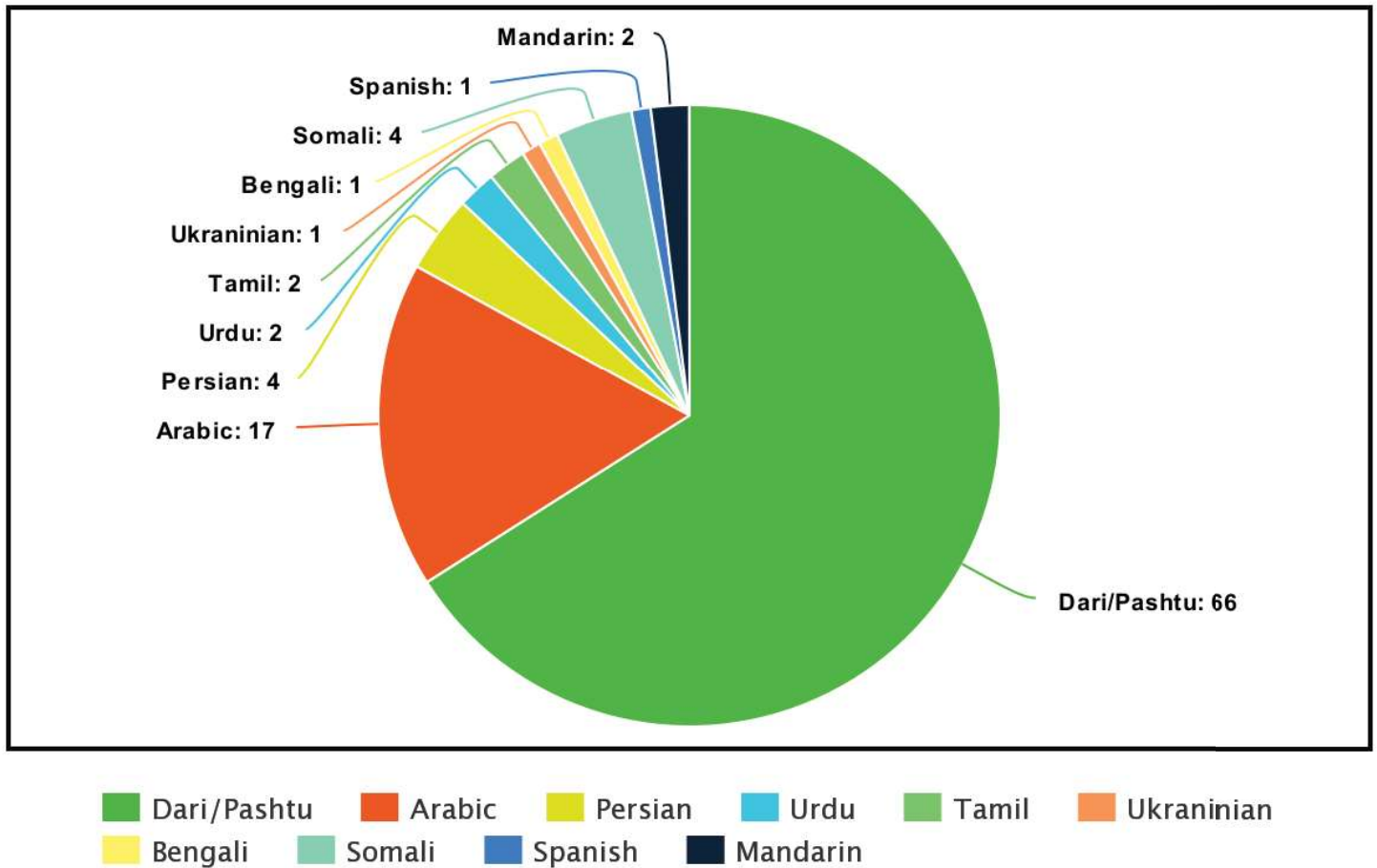
- **Technological knowledge and equipment were not available to all learners.**
- **Learning at home without a designated space free of noise and distractions was a barrier to their learning.**
- **The absence of safe and adequate childcare during class time prevented parents from focusing on their learning.**
- **Learning virtually and using Zoom were new concepts to most learners and some instructors. There was a huge learning curve for all involved.**

These were some of the strategies used to make the most of virtual learning conditions:

- **Smaller supportive groups were formed for English conversation and skills development allowing learners to receive additional time to practice their classroom assignments.**
- **Participants were given training on how to use Zoom and placed in digital language support groups to practice their classroom lessons. These groups also acted as social and networking outlets for them.**

AWO is proud to offer language skills training to learners from over 27 language groups. The following are our top 10 language groups.

Top Language Groups of AWO's English Language Learners



The Care for Newcomer Children (CNC) team were able to continue to provide enrichment programs for children and parental support to LINC participants with virtual programming. Age-friendly learning experiences through videos along with arts and learning activity kits for families enabled mothers to continue with their language learning while keeping the children engaged. Physical fitness was encouraged through online stretch and movement videos made available to LINC families through the CNC team.

Through the dedication, creativity and perseverance of both instructors and learners we were able to ensure that newcomers continued to receive quality teaching and learning. In a unique way, this process has allowed for a strong bond between instructors and their students. Both groups along with CNC team have been able to create an environment of compassionate community care.

AN AWO LINC SUCCESS STORY

Y.A. is a 28-year-old woman from Afghanistan who started our program in January 2021. She's a mother of two little girls, one of whom has a serious disease in which seizures can occur at any moment. Her daughter requires special accommodations and numerous trips to Sick Kids Hospital. Our Care for Newcomer Children's team has provided Y.A. with all the help that she needs to effectively navigate her child's condition and successfully participate in our programs.

AWO's LINC classes have afforded Y.A. a safe space to excel. Y.A. has worked very hard to improve her English skills with the hope of one day becoming a dental hygienist. Her dedication to achieving her goals has resulted in a quick and well-deserved promotion to next English level within short period of time.

Y.A. continues to be a model LINC learner. We wish her all the best in her future endeavours and AWO will continue to be here to support her every step of the way.

“As a teacher, every day brings new experiences. I learn from my students as much as they learn from me. I love to see my students grow, not only in their language abilities, but in their relationships with one another as they share their backgrounds and truly embrace Canadian culture. They leave the classroom able to communicate effectively and immerse themselves into society.”



Elena Erdogan, LINC Instructor

“When you do what you love, you love what you do. Seeing students learn and achieve is the greatest satisfaction, especially when they get promoted. Running into old students who are thankful for your instruction is very satisfying.”



Antonia Assifi, LINC Instructor

"It has been my absolute pleasure and privilege working at AWO LINC since 2009. From the first day, I knew it was not just a job, but a true calling. Teaching newcomers to Canada has had a profound impact on my life, as well as on my learners' lives. Spending five days a week together, for months at a time, makes us feel like family. Learning English is, of course, the top priority, but alongside the learning is sharing and caring. My learners have brought a wealth of life experience to the class, including some very difficult struggles and challenges they have faced. It is powerful to see the changes over time."



Kristine Corbet, LINC Instructor

SETTLEMENT PROGRAM

Throughout 2021-2022, our frontline settlement team demonstrated an impressive amount of flexibility, and a willingness to pivot and adapt to a new virtual service delivery model. Due to the high-level of trauma newly arrived Afghan refugees experience during the time leading up to their exodus from Afghanistan and on their journey to safety, most arrived in Canada with an extensive need for support and services. The global pandemic added a layer of complication and isolation making it difficult for newcomers to reach the services they urgently needed.

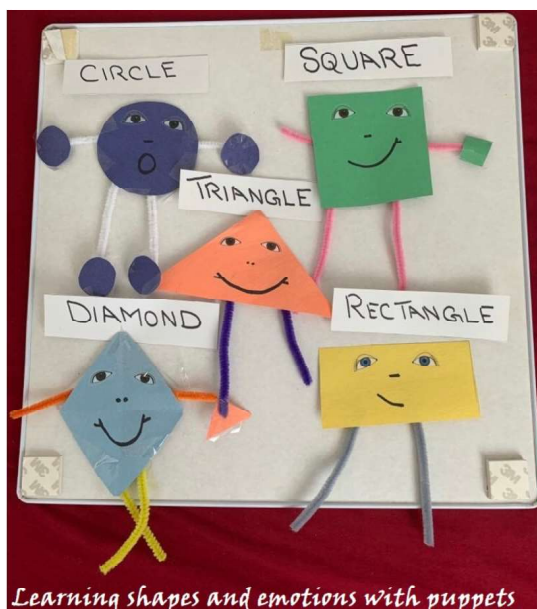
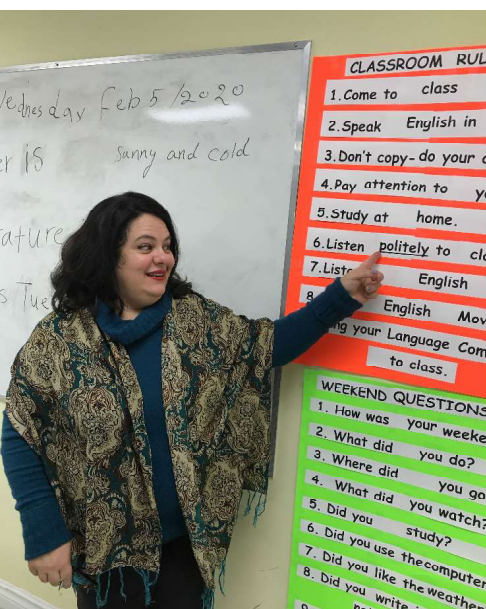
While challenged by the circumstances, we were also able to develop promising practices that will enable us to more effectively serve our newcomer community during periods of crisis, be more responsive to diverse needs and improve the overall accessibility of our services. Lessons learned from the pandemic were captured in an organization-wide evaluation of our settlement services. The results of the evaluation were shared with staff and have since been incorporated into our programming to enhance service delivery.

During this difficult time, staff and volunteer driven initiatives provided additional assistance for newcomers, seniors, and single parents through a variety of programs and services. These included coordinating and dropping off welcome packages and distributing nutritious and culturally appropriate food at AWO's Community Food Hut. Our community-based peer leaders' conducted wellness calls for seniors who were particularly vulnerable to social isolation during this time. To keep the communities we serve and our staff and volunteers safe, needs assessments were carried out over the phone, as were services enabling access to government services and benefits, assistance with filling forms, translation, interpretation, and referrals for additional community-based supports. Information and orientation to the Canadian context as well as community connection group sessions were offered via Zoom and other social media channels, such as WhatsApp that are commonly used by newcomer groups.



Our staff's effectiveness lies in their ability to serve newcomers in a gender sensitive and culturally sensitive manner, fostering a safe and warm environment for them to express themselves and begin to feel a sense of belonging. We offer settlement services in several languages including Dari/Farsi, Pashto, Arabic, Urdu, Punjabi, Assyrian, Kurdish, Turkish and English and can also relate directly through lived experiences with the challenges and pressures that newcomer women face. We are proud this year to have far exceeded our service targets in settlement of newly arrived refugees making a substantial difference in their journey towards integration and full participation in Canada.

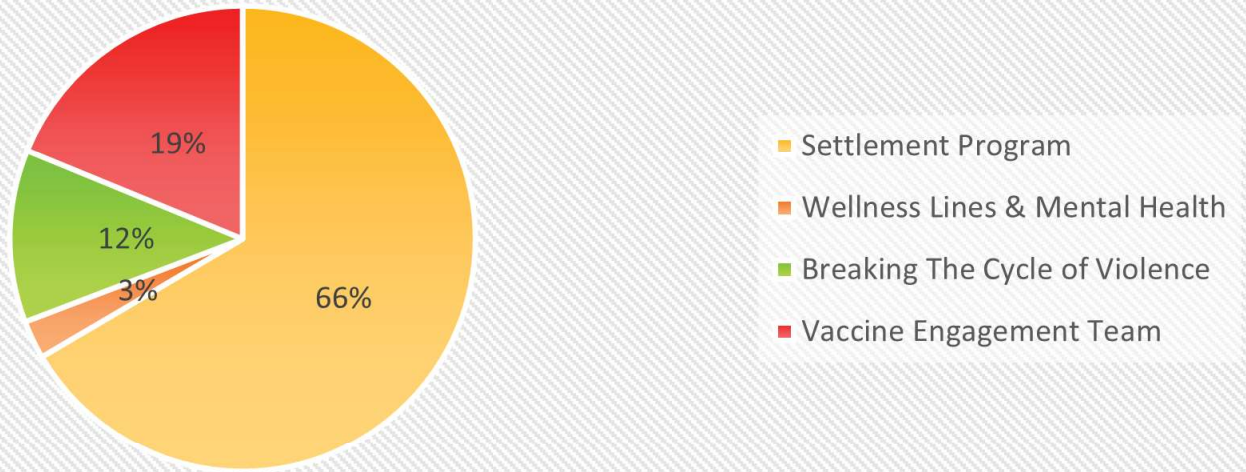
As Canada continues to increase its commitment to receive newly arrived refugees from war torn and conflict ravaged areas, and the pandemic continues to strain our health and social systems, there will be increased demand for effective community settlement supports from newcomers, especially from those who experience multiple barriers to their integration. Our organization is prepared to continue to strengthen our services to enable us to provide the necessary supports required for newcomers to find their place, contribute and thrive in their new communities.



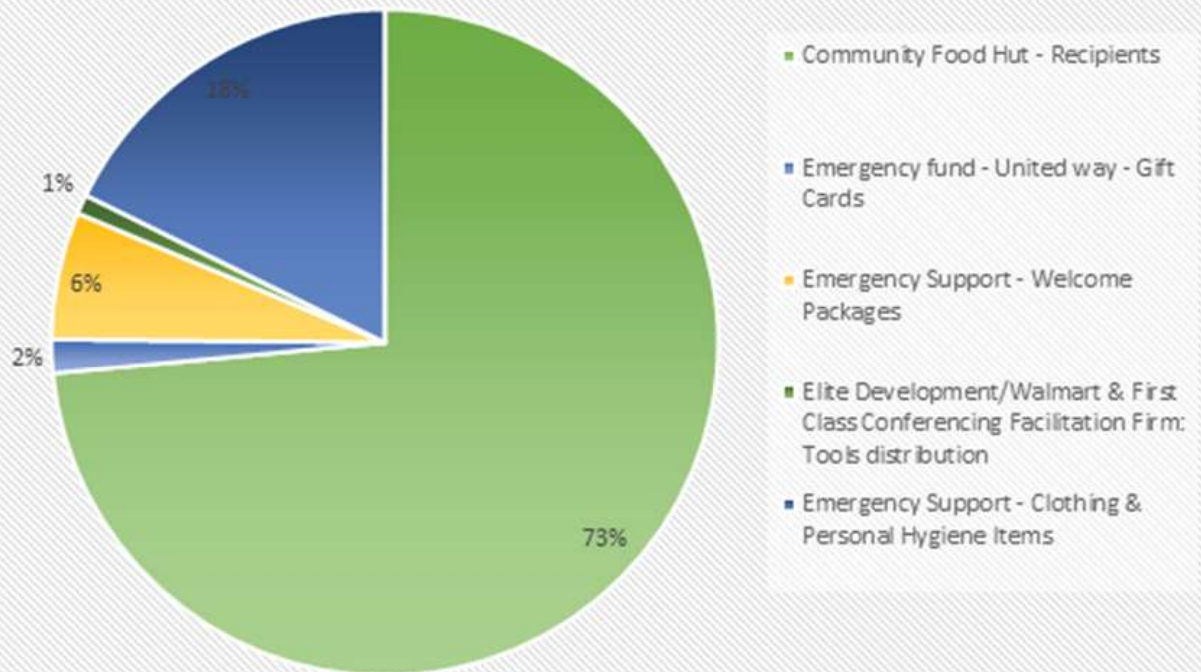
Learning shapes and emotions with puppets



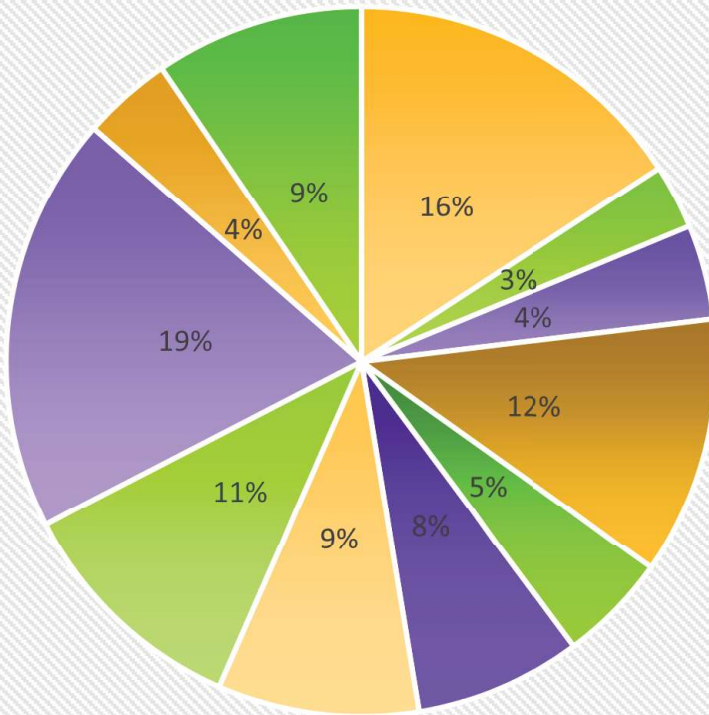
Total Direct Services = 96823



Total Monetary/In-kind Support Recipients = 22584

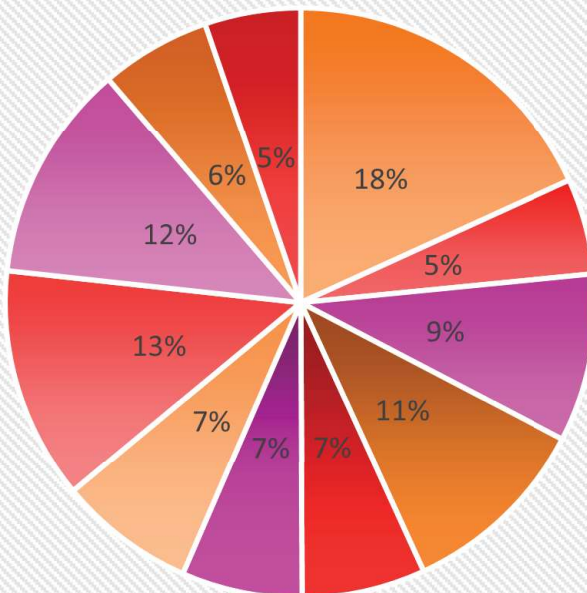


Total Group Sessions = 1058



- Settlement General Group Sessions
- Positive Parenting
- Financial Literacy
- Senior Group Sessions
- Employment Group Session
- Citizenship Classes
- Youth Homework Clubs
- English Conversation Circle
- Youth Group Sessions
- From Violence to Resilience
- Wellness Sessions

Total Group Sessions Participants = 10397



- Settlement General Group Sessions
- Positive Parenting
- Financial Literacy
- Senior Group Sessions
- Employment Group Session
- Citizenship Classes
- Youth Homework Clubs
- English Conversation Circle
- Youth Group Sessions
- From Violence to Resilience



EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM

The COVID-19 pandemic presented huge labor market challenges for all Canadians, and this was especially true for newcomers who already face multiple barriers in their employment journeys. Sectors that tend to employ a high proportion of newcomers, such as restaurants and the hospitality industry, were particularly hard hit and many of our clients faced job losses.

During this difficult time, AWO continued to support newcomers in building their skills, knowledge, and awareness of the Canadian working environment. Clients received help with individualized employment plans, resumes and cover letter writing, job applications, job interviews, mock interviews and networking strategies. We also provided ongoing support to prepare clients for the workplace and continued referrals to various job openings and job fairs.

During this year we transitioned to providing services online, including our weekly Zoom video conferencing sessions. Many clients noted that online sessions were equally as valuable to them as our in-person sessions pre-pandemic and allowed them to continue to network and stay motivated in their job search.

We also launched specialized employment projects, such as ScotiaRise-funded Prepared for Successful Employment Program, which is working with newly arrived Afghan refugees, with a special focus on trauma informed pre-employment preparation for those who have been out of the formal labour market or underemployed. The program's scaffolded supports focus on pre-employment journey, social and life skills development, supportive counseling, and wrap-around supports including mentoring, access to work appropriate clothing, and childcare, to ensure equitable access. It also includes referrals to mainstream programs that may be relevant to labour market needs and direct connections with employers.

YOUTH PROGRAM

Newcomer youth face a multiplicity of unique challenges in their integration journey. Along with adapting to a new social and cultural environment, making new peer connections, they have the pressure to succeed in a new academic environment and a different dominant language. They may face racism and discrimination along with trauma that they are carrying from their pre-settlement journey.



This year was a particularly challenging time for youth, with the pandemic continuing to cause disruptions in daily life, compounding social isolation and mental health issues. This was accompanied by the frustration felt by many having to deal with the academic limitations of online learning, especially among newcomers who often have lesser access to technology, a dearth of conducive learning environments at home as well as a lack pre-existing social connections.

AWO’s youth program counsellors conducted personalized sessions with each newcomer youth to better understand their needs and provide immediate and longer term supports. Where needed, the counsellors acted as liaisons with the different school boards and with parents and teachers, providing orientation and information on services available and advocating on behalf of those with special needs.

Our programs helped young newcomers find their footing by providing social outings to sports and cultural events, volunteer opportunities to get work experience in Canada and high school community hours, and academic peer support from University of Toronto Schools (UTS) via our Homework Clubs. For more challenging issues, we provided one-on-one counselling, access to peer support group sessions, and referrals to specialized services for stress and/or anger management, and how to deal with symptoms of depression and anxiety.



Our volunteer program provided our newcomer youth with an important avenue to get engaged in their local community, make social connections, get Canadian experience and give back. Over the past year, youth helped with AWO’s Community Food Hut, delivering food to isolated newcomers and seniors, and assisting with translations for seniors. They also provided peer-to-peer support and co-facilitated education sessions for young newly-arrived refugees and their families staying at the hotels and helped out with the Flemingdon Health Centre Vaccine Clinic in Thornecliffe Park neighbourhood. Our youth collaborated with community organizations for the walk to support the victims of the London attack. We are proud of how our youth have overcome huge personal challenges and rolled up their sleeves and pitched in to help their communities during this difficult year. We are deeply grateful for all their contributions and trust that the work they’ve done, and the lessons learned will serve them well in the future.

SENIORS' PROGRAMS

Newcomers and refugee seniors in our communities have always struggled with isolation due to language barriers, lack of extended family nearby, lack of mobility, ability to navigate systems and other barriers to participation; however, the ongoing pandemic conditions have sharply increased the isolation felt by seniors and put further strains on their health and wellbeing. Last year, AWO pivoted from activity-based programming with seniors to include addressing immediate needs such as food security and access to personal protective equipment (PPE). Our programming shifted to 100% online which was a sharp learning curve for senior leaders and volunteers, and our senior participants.

Our first priority was to connect with our most vulnerable community members, facilitating vaccine access, basic needs like food, groceries, and supplies while providing social and emotional support through wellness calls and check-ins. Our volunteers visited seniors to help them connect them with hot spots and offer them accompaniment support with digital devices and how to navigate the virtual environment. Our main objective over the past year has been to keep newcomer seniors connected, with each other and the outside world, with a particular emphasis on the most isolated and vulnerable members of the community.

Through our programs seniors came together to practice English with each other through conversation circles, they participated in tax clinics, attended workshops on how to avoid becoming a victim of fraud, and participated in gentle exercise classes.



Many of our seniors were also involved with special projects to foster their expression and creativity including an arts-based, multi-generational project involving an Arabic storytelling tradition; the creation of a calendar that highlighted seniors' contributions of gardening, cooking, and storytelling; and in the spring, seniors took turns leading and sharing expertise in an online balcony gardening group. One senior even hosted her own cooking show on Instagram live. Sharing recipes and cooking techniques showing how to make the most out of the produce they had grown themselves and how to make nutritious, delicious meals during the long, cold winter were highlights for the senior participants.

While nothing can replace in person connection, for now, we are encouraging seniors to be as active as they can while at home, to get vaccinated, and to continue improving their digital literacy so that they can better engage in and lead online sessions.



SUPPORTING WOMEN & FAMILIES BY BREAKING THE CYCLE OF VIOLENCE

The pandemic has negatively impacted several social determinants of health increasing the frequency and severity of gender-based violence in racialized, refugee, and immigrant communities. Isolation and vulnerability caused by overcrowded households, job loss, lack of social connections and increased mental stress has all exacerbated conditions for women within their communities. Some clients who have narrowly escaped gender-based violence perpetrated by various regimes back home are still struggling to overcome their trauma while facing the pandemic-induced fear and isolation.

Some of our clients still face difficulty accessing virtual services due to digital literacy and/or lack of devices increasing the barriers preventing women from being able to take a more active role in crisis situations, step out of violent environments, and make decisions that prioritize their needs.

AWO's gender-based services, which include crisis counselling, mental health, and Wellness Peer Leader support programming, have all seen an increase in cases during the pandemic. Our crisis counsellors have seen an uptick of 40% in GBV cases.

Highly traumatized communities require extensive time, sensitivity, and experienced staff to build enough trust to engage in conversations about GBV.

The Wellness Line, program a phone-based/virtual service that ensures a greater degree of anonymity, has helped us reach out to more vulnerable women and provide time sensitive support.

With the generous support of funders and the coordinated assistance of our agency partners and collaborators AWO was able to expand and intensify programming to ensure anyone reaching out in crisis could be assisted with either one-on-one support or referrals to appropriate services. Funding support from agencies such as the Canadian Women's Foundation, the RBC, and the United Way of Greater Toronto's program ensured that AWO had experienced and linguistically and culturally competent crisis counsellors and skilled peer leaders in our Wellness Line programming.

The Wellness Line can be reached 7 days a week and after hours and is a crucial service that acts as a preventative measure as well as a crisis hotline for racialized refugee and immigrant women and girls from slipping into further isolation and increased risk of further violence. Safety is prioritized while introducing GBV prevention and awareness activities and topics that support mental and physical wellness. Peer Leaders are fluent in Arabic, Farsi, Dari, Urdu, and Somali with additional volunteers available in various other languages making the services more accessible and inclusive to others.

Those who accessed AWO's crisis counselling were provided wrap-around services that included online sessions covering healthy family relationships, gender norms, self-care, and parenting; employment counselling; financial literacy; and opportunities to meet (virtually) to socialize and expand their social network.

AWO has also been involved in addressing gender-based violence through other initiatives. For 6 years, our communities have participated in the Let's Talk Not Hide program aimed at increasing awareness about gender-based violence and encouraging community members to take an active approach to prevention and to intervene to protect those at risk.

Trained, multilingual community Peer Champions have been engaged with many ethnocultural newcomer communities using myriad of platforms, tools and strategies to socially animate community members to stand against violence and injustice.

The Let's Talk Not Hide team believes each neighbour, friend and family member has a role to play in raising awareness about the value of healthy relationships and in stopping family violence. Peer Champions are informed and compassionate community workers who provide support and education to bystanders in building the communities up by deconstructing the taboos about the often silenced issues surrounding family violence.

This year's theme for the peer-led program is "Voices Together-Engaging Men as Allies". Building on the learning from our crisis support and public engagement, AWO has extended into an important research project in the newcomer and refugee community knowledge to develop strategies and tools for effective gender-based violence interventions, practices, services, and types of support. This research is funded by WAGE Canada and conducted in collaboration with York University's Centre for Refugee Studies.





WELLNESS AND MENTAL HEALTH

AWO has been a staunch advocate for additional supports for individuals and their families who are impacted by trauma and mental health issues. This year dedicated mental health workers became a welcome addition to the growing AWO team. More focused attention to mental wellness has been a much needed and welcome inclusion in our settlement programming. It has helped address the challenge of long wait times to access mainstream mental health services as well as gaps in linguistically and culturally appropriate services. Mental health workers are able to provide immediate reprieve while clients wait for referrals and mitigate some of the distress that clients may be experiencing. While other community services are available that specialize in mental health, AWO workers have a unique relationship with clients and an understanding of their particular contexts and backgrounds.

New clients participate in informal and non-intrusive risk assessments to ensure their immediate safety and wellbeing. Clients, community members, staff, and volunteers have all benefited from orientation sessions and supports provided that have assisted in dealing with stress, identifying signs of anxiety and depression, elder abuse and seniors' health and wellness, and accessing mental health care in Ontario. These supports have helped improve psychological resilience of staff and volunteers and deal with burnout and compassion fatigue, which was especially important to address during this particularly challenging year. Our mental health workers have helped staff and clients develop mindfulness practices, access resources and referrals, and raise awareness and knowledge of a range of mental health issues.



ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

AWO participated in the City of Toronto funded Climate Action Fund program in collaboration with community partners TNO, The Neighbourhood Organization, and SewTO Collective. Women in the SewTO Collective sewed 375 reusable bags from discarded textiles diverting 200 kgs of materials from the landfill and in turn generated some income for themselves. These beautiful, reusable bags were distributed to newcomer families who access food at the AWO Community Food Hut, the TNO Food Collaborative, the Thorncliffe Wellness Café's green champions and to newcomers attending the City of Toronto's Newcomer Day.

Together with the young start up company First Class Conferencing Facilitation we participated in a tech drive to collect, refurbish and distribute gently used desktops, laptops and cell phones to newly arrived Afghan refugees. This gave newcomers a means to connect to friends and family and to vital social services along with keeping these devices out of our landfills and giving them a new lease on life. To date, the value of these tech devices is estimated to be over \$30,000.

ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOOD

Our Community Food Hut, in partnership with Second Harvest, helped address food insecurity in our newcomer communities, through the distribution of healthy, nutritious food items. The Community Food Hut also formed an important hub for families to gather, for volunteerism and much needed outreach, support and connection especially during pandemic times.



Emergency funding from Second Harvest and funding from Nazo Products Inc along with food donations from B’nai Brith Canada and Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center allowed us to prepare food culturally appropriate welcome packages as well as PPE, personal hygiene products, infant formulas, and diapers for newly arrived families.

A second Food Access Center in Scarborough was opened also in collaboration with Second Harvest and with support from the United Way of Greater Toronto expanding this well received service. Food deliveries were made by our staff and volunteers to especially vulnerable clients who were house bound or unable to travel during the Covid 19 pandemic.

Through the City Toronto’s “Investing in Neighbourhoods” (IIN) program we were able to add two additional support workers to our community team to assist in the receiving, sorting, packing, distributing and administration which has further increased our capacity to better serve our clients.

HEALTH EMERGENCY

Vaccine Engagement Teams

Prioritizing the health and safety of the most vulnerable members of our community, in March 2021 AWO became involved in the City of Toronto Funded Vaccine Engagement Program. We worked in partnership with the Vaccine Engagement Teams (VETs) from North York Community House, Access Alliance Multicultural Health & Community Services, The Neighbourhood Organization (TNO) and Scarborough Centre for Healthy Communities a key reason why Toronto was able to lead the world in success impact of its COVID-19 vaccine campaign.

Trained AWO Community Ambassadors formed key points of contact in the neighbourhoods where they live and/or work, providing access to vaccine resources, building vaccine confidence, and amplifying public health messaging across their networks. Ambassadors reflected the diversity in culture, race and language of Toronto's equity-deserving groups and facilitated targeted outreach to individuals and communities. Through their dedication and commitment these community ambassadors contributed towards saving countless lives in the City of Toronto by increasing vaccine confidence and uptake and reducing barriers to access.

From September to December 2021, consortium partners, in collaboration with AWO, Toronto Public Health, and the East York, Don Valley and North York clusters focused their vaccine engagement efforts on newly arrived Afghan refugees and newcomers. The partnership aimed to reduce language barriers and cultural barriers for access to information on COVID-19 vaccines. It resulted in direct engagement with over 1000 Afghan newcomers and refugees. Community Ambassadors successfully provided information about vaccines in a culturally and linguistically appropriate manner and established links for further settlement support.

“TNO and Afghan Women’s Organization Community Ambassador Outreach (January to March 2022): Ambassadors engaged residents across the region to build confidence in vaccines and improve access by providing transportation vouchers, assuring people had the appropriate documents and supported them in scheduling appointments. Ambassadors visited 391 buildings and 4,871 people and distributed 4,338 rapid antigen test kits. They also attended 16 vaccine clinics and 2 mobile clinics to promote access for community members.”

(Excerpt from the City of Toronto website on Vaccine Engagement)

Health & Safety Committee

Using our lessons learned from last year's deep dive into pandemic-related health and safety, AWO's Joint Health and Safety Committee (JHSC) continued to meet frequently to develop and activate Health and Safety protocols for the organization and our visitors. The changes to federal, provincial and municipal public health mandates were discussed by our team and added to the existing protocol.

For most of the year, in-person appointments were limited. Staff at all locations worked at the offices on a rotating schedule, and intake workers in reception areas were the first line upholders of physical distancing and masking mandates. More complex infrastructure issues related to ventilation have gradually been addressed with cooperating building managers.

Our AWO JHSC recognized the immense strain that the organization and wider community have been under while attempting to follow public health mandates. We heartily commend our staff, volunteers, and our community of service providers who worked to uphold safety protocols while ensuring that newly arrived refugees and immigrants and community members in crisis needs were met. We hope that our learnings and adaptations from the pandemic will help ensure AWO's capacity to provide flexibility, safety, and quality service well into the future.

Active Dialogue Via Social Media

As we have heard over and over again during the pandemic, our way of providing service has radically changed. AWO was swift to respond to a multitude of needs surfacing in the community in addition to altering its in-person services. Active, reciprocal communication platforms became obligatory during the pandemic and then further intensified by the massive numbers of Afghan refugees arriving due to the Taliban invasion. A special Social Media Committee was tasked to provide up-to-date information on programs and services as well as responding in a timely way to the increased number of inquiries coming from the community through our Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn platforms.

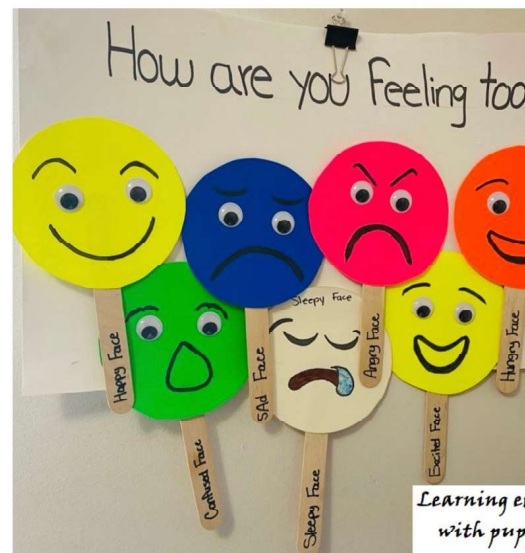


AWO staff have since been able to keep these channels open for dialogue with hundreds of compassionate community members, responding to their questions, listening to their concerns and suggestions, and / or arranging to receive their extraordinary donations during these ever-changing times.

FROM CRISIS TO SAFETY- PRIVATE SPONSORSHIP OF REFUGEES

AWO's support to refugees is particularly unique because of the crucial role we play in making the refugee settlement process smooth and creating a sense of belonging for people. As Afghanistan was plunged into an unprecedented humanitarian and political crisis AWO was swamped with calls from concerned family and friends for information on the Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) program and assistance with refugee resettlement to Canada. Through the tireless work of our PSR workers and volunteers, and despite ongoing challenges with the pandemic, we continued to support sponsors and refugees through WhatsApp, Zoom and in-person, successfully submitting 126 applications for resettlement of refugees from Afghanistan and a variety of different countries.

Receiving refugees during the pandemic was undoubtedly challenging all around, but also an opportunity for AWO to gain new experience in arranging and implementing quarantine plans, complying with the public health guidelines, and providing additional information and supports. As people left a situation of crisis to a safer home in Canada, we helped along with sponsors to put into motion settlement plans, providing people with an array of practical, financial, and emotional supports upon arrival. These included airport pickups, assistance during the quarantine period, providing health and safety information and kits, locating adequate housing, help with groceries, internet, communication and local transportation. We continued to provide ongoing support and settlement services and made referrals to appropriate services and resources within the community, such as schools, language training centers and employment services. With ongoing check-ins, assistance, and tangible support, the PSR program at AWO continues to serve as an important avenue for those fleeing war, persecution and displacement to build a new life in Canada while enriching it with their diverse skills, experiences and perspectives.



AWO RECOGNIZED FOR ITS OUTSTANDING WORK IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

“I want to take this opportunity to highlight the outstanding work of the Afghan Women’s Organization Refugee and Immigrant Services in my riding of Don Valley East. Adeena Niazi, the Executive Director and her entire team continue to empower women, their families and Afghan Canadians in my community and more broadly throughout the entire GTA. From settlement services, advocacy to humanitarian work in Afghanistan the AWO has been a lifeline to so many people seeking their help. Speaker, this organization is helping people and their families build new lives here in Canada, some starting with absolutely nothing having left everything they own behind and surviving the devastation back home. I have always been impressed by their passion, dedication towards helping others and the success of their programs and services. Mr. Speaker, we are lucky to have such an organization here in Canada and I want to thank them for all their work.” Michael Coteau, Member for Don Valley East, Statement delivered on February 16, 2022.



CANADA IS MY NEW HOME- REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT STORIES

“Soman and her sister, Simran, came to Canada in February 2019 after living in New Delhi as Afghan refugees for 10 years. “As a refugee, it’s never easy, especially back in India where we didn’t have many rights,” said Soman. “It was a life where you always felt helpless.”

It was AWO that helped the sisters come to Canada, along with their parents and brothers. When they first arrived in Canada, Soman said her family was in such a state of emotional and psychological distress she didn’t want to go out or talk to anybody. AWO helped with their basic needs of food, clothing and shelter, but took it a step further by helping them connect with the local Afghan community. AWO staff also enrolled them in English classes, registered the parents for seniors’ programming and provided supports for the family’s physical and mental well-being. “When you go to a new country, everything is new for you and ... you feel like you don’t fit. It takes you time to feel part of that community and the environment around you,” said Soman. “The English classes helped me get to know new people and get used to the environment.”

Both Soman and Simran are now attending George Brown College and studying business administration. Simran hopes to work with an aid organization; in particular, she’d like to help give Afghan girls the opportunity to study. Soman hopes to start a family business. “I’m really optimistic about my future,” Simran said, “and the opportunities I have in what I can do for myself and my family.”

Excerpts from Toronto Star Article “Pulling on Lived Experiences” Sisters find new life in Canada thanks to Afghan Women’s Organization. December 5, 2021

CANADA IS MY NEW HOME- REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT STORIES

Farid

I arrived in Canada on August 8, 2021, from Afghanistan with my wife and five young children. Like many who arrive as refugees, I experienced culture shock and did not know how to start my new life in Canada. After attending one of AWO's virtual sessions, I connected with a settlement counsellor who was able to provide immediate supports for me and my family as well as help me set short- and long-term goals.

I began to get the help I needed, to understand my rights and responsibilities and to learn about Canadian systems. I received assistance with applying for child tax benefits, completing income tax forms and help with enrolling our children in school and in AWO's Homework Club. Additionally, I was given a referral to a family doctor, information on food banks, on applying for subsidized housing and for the Ontario electricity support program.

My employment goal is to work in the construction industry. AWO's employment counsellors worked with me to search for options to pursue this career path. I started a LINC class and after completing level four was able to join a 12-week construction program offered by the Labour Education Centre. My shock from being in a strange country began to decrease as I participated in more AWO online sessions, made new friends, and was moving forward with plans for education and employment with professional and emotional support from AWO. To this day, every time I contact someone from AWO, I get a positive vibe.

“AWO is my hands and legs; I would have been lost without the help of the AWO”



Farid

Bibi Sara

I am a 48-year-old woman, who came to Canada through the new resettlement program for Afghan refugees. I travelled alone without any family or friends. In Afghanistan, I worked as a civil engineer for many different organizations.

In Canada, I first lived in shared a one-bedroom apartment in London, Ontario with a roommate who had addiction issues. These conditions made me anxious and depressed. Every night, I would leave the apartment to cry for hours by myself on the street. Already feeling alone and unsure of what to do, the situation in the new home increased my sense of insecurity.

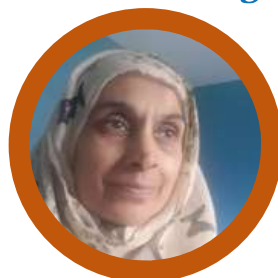
Through an acquaintance I was connected to AWO and assisted with finding temporary housing in Whitby, Ontario. Initially, since I didn't have enough money to buy groceries, an AWO staff member would deliver food to me weekly from AWO's Community Food Hut, a food security program for newcomers. Eventually, AWO connected me with another client who was looking for a roommate. Now I live close to AWO's Scarborough location, giving me close access AWO's Community Food Hut program where I also volunteer my time to help others.

I met with AWO settlement counsellors to set my short- and long-term goals and attend sessions on areas such as understanding my rights and responsibilities.

Through AWO, I have received a variety of support services including a referral to a family doctor, assistance with completing my income tax return and subsidized housing application, along with access to opportunities to meet people and to employment programming.

With AWO's support, I'm now enrolled in adult school and looking forward to eventually joining the University of Toronto to complete a civil engineering degree. I've begun participating in AWO's online sessions, making new friends, and confidently moving ahead with my education and employment goals in Canada.

"I was in a coma and the AWO brought me back to life."



Bibi Sara

Zuhal

On a cold day in December of 2021, Zuhal arrived in Canada from Afghanistan. She had faced enormous obstacles before she escaped, and now new challenges lay ahead. The cold weather in combination with the COVID-19 pandemic prevented people from socializing, and these factors along with Zuhal's less than fluent English and the strange, new rules and customs left Zuhal feeling in culture shock. Having to start all over in a new country felt intimidating.

Early in January, Zuhal visited the AWO's Mississauga location. The settlement worker helped Zuhal with some of her basic needs, such as obtaining OHIP, and worked with her to develop a plan which included taking LINC classes to improve her English and getting her credentials assessed to plan for a possible career. as a nurse. Attending LINC classes full time strengthened Zuhal's English and her confidence which led to an opportunity to volunteer at AWO.

Zuhal's story has continued with many positive changes including plans to apply for a master's degree programme. She is now working full time as an administrative assistant a Catholic Cross-cultural Services, a non-profit organization helping newcomers in Canada. For newcomers feeling isolated and alone after surviving the trauma of war and violence, Zuhal's story can inspire faith in the possibility of being able to move towards one's goals, even in a strange, new environment.

“I never thought that one day I will help others in Canada, but it happened. And I am believing in myself and the helping the system for newcomers in Canada. I would like to say all newcomers that: it is true that “Canada is the land of opportunities””



Zuhal

FINANCIAL STATEMENT

REVENUE

FEDERAL	\$ 5,279,301
PROVINCIAL	\$ 151,990
MUNICIPALITIES	\$ 132,941
FOUNDATIONS	\$ 324,918
DONATIONS	\$ 1,314,948
MISCELLANEOUS INCOME	\$ 53,354
TOTAL REVENUE	\$ 7,257,452

EXPENDITURES

SALARY, MERCS & BENEFITS	\$ 4,568,868
BUILDING OCCUPANCY	\$ 693,223
PROGRAM EXPENSES	\$ 206,850
PURCHASE OF SERVICES	\$ 197,856
OFFICE AND GENERAL	\$ 124,591
STAFF TRAVEL	\$ 10,973
STAFF TRAINING	\$ 4,083
REFUGEE SETTLEMENT	\$ 379,838
TRANSFER TO RESERVES	\$ 1,067,057
TOTAL EXPENDITURES	\$ 7,253,339

EXCESS REVENUES OVER EXPENSES AFTER RESERVETRANSFER	\$ 4,113
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Thank you to our community of service providers and institutions that we rely on to do the work of supporting newcomers and refugees. You have provided us with referrals, shared your space, provided information, and so much more. Your support, generosity, and peer leadership help us get the work done in the company of kindred spirits.

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Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services

Furniture Bank

Kids up Front

North York Community House

Ontario Justice Education Network

Peel Family Education Centre

Scarborough Centre for Healthy Communities

Second Harvest

TNO - The Neighborhood Organization

Tides Canada Initiatives Society - Together Project

Collaborations

Absolute Health Centre

Access Employment Mississauga & Brampton

Afghan Canadian Islamic Community

Agincourt Community Services Association

BalanceAI (OISE)

B'nai Brith Canada

Canada Revenue Agency - Tax Centre

Canadian Mental Health Association - Toronto Branch

Catholic Cross-cultural Services

CCVT

CDI College Mississauga



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First Book Canada
FiveSaveLife
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Flemingdon Legal Service & Flemingdon Community
Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center
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Halton Women's Centre
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