Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Small-Centre Settlement Service Provider Organizations (SPOs) in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta

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Association des agences d'établissement et d'intégration des immigrants de la Saskatchewan

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Introduction and Methodology

RESEARCH APPROACH

This report began in the summer of 2020 as a community-engaged project, with the desire to document the experiences of staff at rural and remote newcomer service provider organizations (SPOs) in the Canadian prairie provinces during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was initially conceived as containing the following intentions:

to gauge the challenges facing rural newcomer social service provision during the COVID-19 pandemic;

to account for the economic and social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on rural-situated SPOs and newcomers themselves; and

to consider how the settlement sector, SPOs, and newcomers can be supported to strengthen post-pandemic service provision.

However, the project came to assume a longer trajectory as the pandemic lasted longer than most had envisioned and as the practical challenges of conducting research during a pandemic became noticeable. Notably, the project was unable to directly engage newcomers themselves, as locating and recruiting newcomer participants became prohibitively difficult at the time. Moreover, the focus of the project could no longer be to rapidly gather information in order to make prompt recommendations with and for the newcomer settlement sector in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta.

The primary intention became "to support those who support newcomers" in "small centres." In this report, we conceive of small centres as newcomer-receiving areas situated in the Canadian prairies and outside of the main Metropolitan areas of Winnipeg, Saskatoon, Regina, Calgary, and Edmonton. They involve rural areas, remote areas, and smaller cities. Documenting the experiences of settlement staff during the pandemic, with a particular focus on the challenges they faced in day-to-day work, this project aims to strengthen the small-centre newcomer-serving sector as the pandemic dissipates and many aspects of work life started to approximate the "pre-pandemic normal." This report reflects this objective. While the focus has shifted somewhat, the primary intention of supporting those who support newcomers in small centres across the prairie provinces remains throughout.

In summer 2020, Ray Silvius (University of Winnipeg), Don Boddy (MANSO), and Lori Wilkinson (University of Manitoba) applied for funding from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) to conduct a study that would centre the voices and experiences of rural and remote newcomer service provider organizations (SPOs) across the prairies throughout the pandemic. Upon receiving the funding, Amanda Carvalho (independent researcher and project co-investigator) was hired to manage the project, facilitate consultations with both a steering committee and a wider advisory committee (for complete list, see acknowledgments), conduct interviews and focus groups, code and analyze data, and prepare preliminary draft material.

The project steering committee was comprised of Silvius, Boddy, Carvalho, Janvi Tuteja (Saskatchewan Association of Immigrant Settlement and Integration Agencies – SAISIA), and Leesha Kanbour (Alberta Association of Immigrant Serving Agencies – AAISA). This committee was involved from the early stages of research design, and it was critical in the process of engaging other settlement staff. The advisory committee provided invaluable support through a series of facilitated discussions and "co-creation" exercises (see below). Collectively, the steering committee and advisory committee established the project parameters from an early stage. Laurie Sawatsky, an independent consultant with extensive experience in newcomer settlement services in rural areas, provided extensive feedback and suggestions on initial draft material. Dr. Jill Bucklaschuk was added to the research team to compile the final report. MANSO provided considerable administrative and logistical assistance.

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

Initial background research and community engagement provided an understanding of the effects of COVID-19 on small-centre SPOs and newcomers in rural areas. In November 2020, Amanda Carvalho participated in two conferences, Metropolis and Pathways to Prosperity (P2P) to initiate the research. The first session with the full committee occurred in January 2021. A draft timeline was created by using the project management software Asana. The research questions were developed collaboratively through two co-creation workshops, facilitated by Carvalho, using the Miro app with the full advisory committee. The first workshop used the "Lotus Diagram" method to brainstorm nine pre-identified critical areas with challenges SPO staff faced during the pandemic: accessibility, digital literacy, privacy/confidentiality, staff training, funding barriers, work/life balance, depersonalization, and mental health. These clusters were created based on the preliminary meeting with the full advisory committee and guided by the following questions:

1. How has the pandemic affected your work?
2. How has it made it difficult to serve newcomers?
3. How do we use lessons to strengthen sector during and beyond the pandemic?

The participants were encouraged to vote on the topics they believed had more importance after the session. The four most-voted topics–accessibility, digital literacy, depersonalization, and mental health–informed the second co-creation workshop. We divided the committee into four breakout rooms so they could discuss in more detail how that specific topic affected their daily work lives, identifying pain-and-gain points on a "journey map."

The research was subsequently guided by building upon bibliography and literature review while waiting for the Ethics Protocol approval to start recruiting participants for the focus groups and interviews sessions. The interviews were finally transcribed by a specialized agency.

DATA COLLECTION

Data was collected in fall/winter 2021-22. Research methods included seven online focus groups and five interviews with settlement workers from small centres in Manitoba, Alberta, and Saskatchewan. These sessions followed a semi-structured questionnaire and took between 1.5-2 hours each. The focus groups session had between three to five participants each. All participants received an honorarium of $25 per session and signed consent forms, as indicated by ethics protocol standards.

To understand the range of experiences, data collection included managers and settlement staff from diverse areas such as Social Workers in Schools (SWIS), language, refugee, employment, and Local Immigration Partnerships (LIPs). Recruitment for both focus groups and interviews occurred through recommendations by advisory committee members, as well as a call for participants distributed via email.

LIMITATIONS

Data collection was limited to participants' availability, which meant having a reduced number of interviewees. Further, the study did not conduct focus group sessions or interviews with newcomers, so it is important to remember their perspective in accessing settlement services throughout the pandemic is not represented in this research.

Transcripts were analyzed by Carvalho and coding was done manually by clustering similar topics to organize quotes and the narrative structure. Preliminary coding was developed based on focus groups and interview guides using the Miro app and then served as a framework for grounded coding. The findings of the study emerge from the frequency and interconnections of codes as well as the researcher's overall observations. The recommendations were shared with the advisory committee in spring 2022. In March 2022, Tuteja, Kanbour, and Boddy presented preliminary findings at the Metropolis Conference in Vancouver.

ETHICS

The project received approval from the University of Winnipeg Human Research Ethics Board.

DATA ANALYSIS

Focus groups and interviews were video- and audio-recorded by the researcher and sent for transcription.

Context

Immigration to Canada was profoundly altered by the pandemic, with arrival numbers nearly halting in the early months. For example, during the month of April 2020, only 4,105 immigrants arrived in Canada (February of the same year had 25,895 arrivals). During the entire year of 2020, there were only 184,595 immigrant arrivals, compared to 341,175 in the previous year (IRCC, 2022). Arrival numbers of permanent residents have recovered since 2020, with 406,040 in 2021 and 437,120 in 2022. Nonetheless, the Canadian government has continuously signalled that immigration would be central to post-pandemic recovery in Canada (see Esses et al., 2021)

Many racialized groups experienced disproportionate social, economic, and health consequences during the pandemic (see, for example, Kemei et al., 2023; Moyser, 2020) and reported an increase in race-based attacks with the beginning of the pandemic (Heidinger and Cotter, 2020). Similarly, the disproportionate social and economic vulnerabilities experienced by the LGBTQ2S+ population in Canada preceded the pandemic and were likely to be exacerbated during it (Prokopenko & Kevins, 2020). In short, the pandemic compounded existing social and economic vulnerabilities for marginalized groups.

Immigrants (those who come to Canada with the intention of permanently settling), refugees (those who come to Canada through processes of resettlement after involuntary displacement from their home communities and countries), and migrants (those who come to Canada for periods of time but without immediate pathways to achieving permanent residency, should they desire), were likewise affected in particular ways due to pandemic disruptions.[1]

The pandemic brought with it complicated implications for mobility across international borders into Canada, with variegated effects including access to rights, services, and resources, depending on country of origin and residence status (see Shields & Alrob, 2020) and the period during which one sought to gain temporary or permanent residency in Canada. Relative to Canadian-born citizens, immigrants, migrants, and refugees both had higher risk of exposure to COVID-19 pathogens and exhibited greater degrees of fear, stigma, and hesitancy surrounding COVID19 vaccines (Lin, 2022), signaling the need for greater public health services, interventions, and suitably tailored messaging.

Moreover, the pandemic exacerbated and compounded social (LaRochelle-Côté & Uppal, 2020), economic (Association for Canadian Studies, 2020; Hou, Frank & Schimmele, 2020; Hou, Picot & Zhang, 2020), and health (including mental health; see Evra & Mongrain, 2020) disadvantage and risk for various categories of immigrants, migrants, and refugees while creating new challenges. Such phenomena have been well documented (see Hamilton, et al., 2022; Mia & Griffiths, 2020; Shields & Alrob, 2021). The pandemic also disproportionately impacted both Canadian-born citizens and immigrants, migrants, and refugees along gendered lines, including the prevalence of women in paid and unpaid caregiving roles (see Banerjee, Chacko & Korsha, 2022), the disproportionate numbers of job losses (Banerjee & Thomas, 2022), and the gendered division of labour in rural and agricultural work (see "Gendered

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[1] We will refer to this group as immigrants, migrants, and refugees throughout this report.

Impacts"). During the pandemic, refugees struggled with compounded social isolation as they navigated a new society, culture, and language (Abbas, 2022). Arriving at a new country is always daunting, but doing so during a global pandemic with lockdowns and quarantines only exacerbated senses of isolation and loneliness.

Their mobility and ability to reside in Canada long-circumscribed, seasonal agricultural workers and other temporary foreign workers were deemed "essential" and "necessary" workers at various points in the pandemic due to being indispensable to Canadian food production. Such designations had the temporary effect of upsetting various systematic forms of passport privilege, which confer admission to Canada disproportionately on the basis of factors such as geographical origin, race, and wealth (see Macklin, 2021).

Nonetheless, such "temporary"[2] residents bore disproportionate burdens and risks throughout the pandemic. This was in part due to their inability to access services, and real and perceived lack of political clout and labour rights, all of which are exacerbated by the perception of their temporariness (see Haley et al., 2020; Helps et al.,, 2021; Landry et al., 2021; Vosko &Spring, 2022; Vosko et al., 2022). The vulnerability of such residents remains structural–inscribed in the very temporary status that is utilized to facilitate conditional entry into the Canadian labour market and upon which the current viability, if not profitability, of such industries are predicated (Grez, 2022; Weiler & Grez, 2022). Canada's rural and remote areas, which rely on such labour for their agri-food and resource industries, were therefore centres of the tensions between the need for such workers and those workers inability to access services throughout the pandemic, as most IRCC-funded settlement services are limited to permanent residents.

Settlement service needs of immigrants, migrants, and refugees were exacerbated during the pandemic, as it proved difficult to navigate social systems amidst changing rules, risks, and contexts. Moreover, as we demonstrate throughout this report, small-centre SPOs faced innumerable challenges in providing settlement services during this time (see also Helps, et al., 2021). As the pandemic exacerbated pre-existing structural challenges faced by different categories of immigrants, migrants, and refugees, so did it exacerbate the challenges faced by small-centre SPOs in offering settlement services. These challenges are significantly related to the relative lack of population density in small centres and their distance from large centres, both of which render it difficult to offer a wide array of "place-specific" settlement services. Moreover, the relatively low number of newcomers compared to those found in larger centres, as well as funding models that support services for permanent residents alone, exacerbate the challenges of providing newcomer settlement and integration services in small centres and rural areas. Despite these challenges, providing settlement services to newcomers in small centres is necessary to combat potential challenges experienced by newcomers in rural and small centre Canada, including those that are related to immediate "settlement" needs, as well as those related to longer-term integration and inclusion.

The Government of Canada (through Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada [IRCC]) funds newcomer settlement and integration services via its Settlement Program. IRCC therefore serves as the primary funder of settlement service provider organizations (SPOs). These organizations do the practical work of providing settlement and integration services to eligible newcomers. The Government of Canada defines (newcomer) settlement and integration in the following manner[3]:

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[2] The actual temporary residence of those presumed to have temporary status is a matter of significant discussion in Canadian and international research due to such factors as parallel or alternative paths to permanency through provincial nominee programs, overstaying, and return migration. Moreover, the pandemic saw novel programs and policy that facilitated transition from temporary to permanent status in order to adapt to border closure measures (see Niraula, Triandafyllidou, & Akbar, 2022).

> Settlement refers to a short period of mutual adaptation between the newcomers and the host society, during which the government provides support and services to newcomers. Integration is a two-way process that involves commitment on the part of immigrants to adapt to life in Canada and on the part of Canada to welcome and adapt to new peoples and cultures.

While SPOs provide an array of indirect supports, we are focusing here on the direct services they offer. As part of IRCC's Settlement Program include, direct services include:[4]

a. Support Services that Enable Clients to Access Services, or 'barrier-reducing services' (including childcare, translation and interpretation services, crisis counselling, transportation assistance, and provision for disabilities.

b. Needs and Assets Assessment and Referrals, which include developing personalized settlement plans and referrals to settlement services (IRCC-funded and others).

c. Information and Orientation.

d. Language Training, including language assessment, referrals, and formal and informal language learning.

e. Employment-related, including: 'employment bridging initiatives, employment-related mentoring and networking, and employment and credential assessment counselling, skills development and training.'

f. Community Connections, services which are designed to help 'to connect clients with the broader community, public institutions, and community organizations.'

Pandemic disruptions to Canada's immigration system, the general climate of uncertainty, stress, and anxiety, and the compounded effects of the pandemic on immigrants, migrants, and refugees made settlement services all the more crucial for the well-being of these groups. Small-centre SPOs on the Canadian prairies had to offer services while navigating the stresses, disruptions, and uncertainties regarding the immigration system as well as those pertaining to their own work lives. We document this general scenario in the remainder of this report.

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[3] The summary of IRCC's Settlement Program provided in this section is derived from: Summary of Settlement Program: Direct and Indirect Services (Source: https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/transparency/program-terms-conditions/settlement.html).

[4] Note: not included here is the category "Ukraine Response: Airport and Hotel Supports."

Findings

CHALLENGES FOR RURAL SPOS & COMMUNITIES PRIOR TO THE PANDEMIC

Many of the challenges expressed by participants are, in fact, challenges that are encountered by many SPOs–and the NGO sector–regardless of geographic location. Such organizations are chronically underfunded yet expected to continue with their roles and responsibilities. Small-centre rural SPOs do encounter challenges in service provision that are specific to rural areas, though–or such challenges are exacerbated by being in rural and/or remote areas.

Doing More with Less

As is typically the case in the non-governmental organization sector, there is a tendency for staff in rural SPOs to take on work beyond their job descriptions and capacities. Describing the roles they find themselves doing, a participant shares, *"We have to provide care for [clients and] we have to provide connection to them. We have to network [and] we have to […] collaborate with other organizations to provide services."* Too often, when faced with limited capacity, both in terms of funding and human resources, rural SPO staff must do more with less. In addition, they must find ways to fill gaps in services and capacity by partnering and collaborating with other organizations. Most of the time they are inadequately compensated for their time and feel they do not have the necessary technologies, transportation, information, and services to properly do their work.

Collaboration

Collaboration is an essential element of service provision work. However, some service providers are hesitant to collaborate and worry that sharing information with others may jeopardize their own organization. For example, since funding is dependent on the number of clients served, organizations worry that collaboration may lead to fewer clients coming through their doors. Nonetheless, a lack of resources and capacity usually compels organizations to collaborate. For example, a participant explains that collaborating with their region's Local Immigration Partnership (LIP) has been very helpful. As an organization that provides connective resources and essential information, LIPs operate outside of the direct service provision sector and facilitate collaboration among multiple stakeholders. LIPs can help SPOs pool resources and build capacity to pursue funding sources, organize events, and connect with partners. Despite the benefits that collaboration may produce, such engagement takes time and energy that SPOs typically do not have, and, as such, collaboration may not always be a priority.

Ineligible Clients & Funding

Through regulations placed on their funding agreements, SPOs are mandated to serve only permanent residents. Such funding restrictions impede SPOs' abilities to respond to requests for support from the newcomer community. However, as a participant notes, *"No one will ever leave [our office] empty-handed from here."* Another explains their position on the matter:

"We're dealing with a human need for settlement and integration, not PR [Permanent Resident], not TFW [Temporary Foreign Worker], not Canadians born abroad. [There is a need to] get rid of those distinctions. It's not helpful. What is helpful is being able to address the need at a community level or regional level because

we don't care if they're TFW. We don't care if they're PR, they have the need."[5]

When individuals holding temporary work permits seek services, SPO staff will try to refer them to others in the community who could address their needs. It is very difficult for SPOs to turn away ineligible clients.

Another challenge for rural SPOs is that funding is allocated according to permanent residents' point of arrival. Given this funding model, there is no funding for SPOs to serve clients who have arrived elsewhere in Canada and later moved to their community. Like those individuals with temporary status, newcomers arriving in rural communities through secondary or tertiary migration still require settlement services if they are to successfully settle in Canada, yet SPOs do not receive the resources required to support such people.

Retention

Rural communities struggle with population decline as people move to larger centres and fewer people choose to reside in rural towns. Some communities have pursued immigration as a strategy to address demographic decline, with varying degrees of success. Once communities have figured out strategies to attract immigrants, they then struggle with retention. After living in a rural community for a short time, newcomers often leave for larger centres in pursuit of employment and social opportunities. As a participant explains:

"[Our community] wants immigrants, but after a while they leave and move to bigger cities where they can find more economic development, faster-paced life, more jobs, and things for their kids to do. So the smaller cities and rural communities, how can businesses and the province support these locations to keep those [newcomers]?"

Another participant describes some of the struggles newcomers experience in small towns, which eventually lead to them leaving:

"We want [newcomers] to come here, we need them, we have businesses that can't be sustained otherwise. And then they come, and they have extreme culture shock just being in a small community. Oftentimes they don't have a recognized driver's license, and there's no hospital for an hour, and they can't get to work because they need a license."

Retention of immigrants is a concern for rural communities, and SPO staff want to do all they can to make sure they are offering the services newcomers need to navigate their new homes. They also want to ensure that the community, as whole, is welcoming to immigrants, which is something that requires the work of multiple partners and sectors.

Access to Reliable Internet

Rural-based SPOs struggle to obtain good-quality, reliable internet connections since the basic infrastructure is often lacking in rural regions. A report published by the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) in 2019 found that access to recommended basic minimum internet, which applies to speeds of 50/10Mbps and unlimited data, is considerably lower in rural Prairie regions (1.7% of rural Saskatchewan households, 12.7% of rural Manitoba households, and 21.1% of rural Alberta households) compared to all other non-urban availability (40.8% of households) of internet services in Canada (p. 284). In addition to challenges around having access to reliable internet, it can also be prohibitively expensive in rural areas, which further limits access for many families. The lack of reliable and affordable internet in rural regions compromises SPOs' ability to serve their clients and complete daily work. A participant describes the situation for rural SPOs:

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[5] While it is unconventional to add quotation marks to block quotes, we have done so in order to emphasize and draw attention to the words of project participants.

"I'm happy if I get 500 Megs and you guys [in the city] are into gigs and terabytes. That divide is growing bigger and bigger. The policymakers are sitting in cities where they assume that those kinds of services are available in the rural areas or the smaller areas. They're not. That last mile technical connection has not been made and, until that happens, that whole education piece, that whole digital literacy piece isn't going to happen. So we are a generation away from being able to provide a fully online kind of support service […] because we don't have the physical infrastructure, and then we don't have the educational infrastructure to support that physical structure."

Lack of Information

Some participants express their desire to have more information and resources to help guide their day-to-day operations. However, the potential source of such knowledge is unclear since each SPO in each community has unique needs and circumstances. One participant explains their experiences with what they determine to be inadequate information:

"I had no real framework on what it was that was needed from me […] I spent more than eight hours in a day reading 90-page long reports or research documents […] trying to gather information and tools. I feel there's a lack of structure when it comes to settlement and immigration […] because each community requires something differently. My wish was for […] a basic handbook."

One example of the type of information that is lacking is detailed information on who is arriving and when. SPOs do their best to tend to the needs of newcomers who arrive in their community, but they are unable to adequately prepare in advance of arrivals. Many SPOs desire more pre-arrival services, especially ones that focus on the planning and preparation needs of rural areas. Pre-emptive planning can help communities ensure services are in place prior to newcomers' arrival, and this type of planning and preparation work can lead to successful retention.

The Distance it Takes to Be Local

Small-centre SPOs may be responsible for large, regional catchments, necessitating a considerable amount of travel between, and coordination amongst, personnel in small communities to serve newcomers located in the region. As many small-centre SPOs tend to have limited staff, small numbers of workers may be responsible for coordinating and delivering services over long distances. A lack of public transportation within and between small centres compromises the mobility of many newcomers, often necessitating that SPO staff cover such distances themselves.

1. PROVIDING SETTLEMENT SERVICES DURING A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

Despite prioritizing newcomer recruitment, settlement, and retention, small centres have faced challenges in offering newcomer settlement, integration, and inclusion services for some time. Such challenges were exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the pandemic indelibly impacted all areas of Canadian social, economic, and "everyday" work and personal life regardless of specific location, its impacts were, arguably, felt differently in urban and rural areas. As it pertains to newcomer settlement service delivery, these impacts exacerbated pre-existing difficulties and impediments while producing entirely new ones.

Pivoting to Remote Service Delivery

At the beginning of the pandemic, when workplaces suddenly closed, the need for services continued and organizations had to implement new ways of delivering services to those who required them. One of the only options for delivering services and reaching out to clients in a manner that was compliant with public health protocols was to use technology. This shift to almost exclusive use of technologically mediated work, remotely and at a distance from co-workers and clients, necessitated using new electronic programs and platforms where in-person meetings would have previously occurred. SPO staff continued to deliver the same services and programs offered before the pandemic, but the way they delivered these services drastically changed with little to no time to make this transition.

Transitioning services from in-person to fully online required much research, learning, improvisation, and testing. Organizations that had already worked with web-based platforms felt slightly more prepared than those that relied mostly on paper-based and in-person operations. As a result, SPO staff experienced much disorganization, and many communication issues and challenges meeting agreements and arrangements that were made before the pandemic. There was a considerable learning curve for SPO staff and clients as all tried their best to adjust to these new ways of doing things. Not only did the lockdowns force settlement workers to quickly adapt and learn new software and digital skills, but such times also made them rethink how they could use existing online platforms to better serve clients.

Pivoting to remote service delivery through technology presented innumerable and multifaceted challenges for SPOs. First, when shifting to the use of technology for service delivery, there is an assumption that service users do, in fact, have access to said technology, which is not always the case. Second, there were difficulties presented by varying levels of digital literacy among clients and staff, which were further exacerbated by language barriers. Third, working remotely, usually from home, was not a simple transition and required navigating numerous issues such as productivity expectations, privacy, and work-life balance. One participant summarizes these multifaceted challenges in the quote below, as they also explain how inadequate funding and guidance complicated service providers' work when delivering services remotely:

"[The funder said] 'do your own thing. But these places, we're going to give more Chromebooks, but then, other places, you're on your own until you figure out where to get the money.' If you expect everyone to do online learning, then they need to be able to provide the equipment. And also, you need to be able to provide the training for teachers, and how to access [software programs], because none of our teachers were on it. Or how […] to engage low-level, low-English learners if you can't use these online platforms. That was the most frustrating, especially as a manager, because you're trying to provide for your staff, but I had no idea what to do or where to go."

The expectations for remote service delivery were not met with the necessary physical and human resource infrastructure, jeopardizing both service delivery and service use.

Technology may have enhanced services in times of social distancing by keeping everyone connected, and often doing so more efficiently, but the warmth and personal connection felt when people share the same physical space does not always translate well into the virtual world. Technological communication can lack a particular "human connection" and remote service delivery very much impacted how SPO staff supported and served newcomer clients. Rural SPOs rely heavily on face-to-face interactions for service provision, especially for those clients with high needs and low levels of English or French language. Moreover, participants report that, in rural communities, using technology such as emails to communicate is interpreted as rude since most interactions are done in person. Having to communicate with clients and other partners remotely took considerable adjustments, and it was difficult for SPO staff to convey to clients the new imperative to connect and offer services at a distance.

a. Access to Technology

One of the most-cited challenges with using remote service delivery during the early stages of the pandemic was accessibility for clients. Many newcomers struggled with access to reliable internet, finding affordable devices, obtaining necessary services, and identifying safe spaces in which to access services. One participant summarizes the struggles experienced by clients:

"Internet was a big issue for our clients, because they

didn't have […] home internet and relied on free internet from places like the library or Tim Hortons[…] We had one student who was sitting outside the library and it's freezing cold and she's sitting outside, trying to use free Wi-Fi. And we're like, 'you come in,' so we let her use an empty classroom to access the Wi-Fi[…]. That was so sad, because there's people that really wanted to learn and just couldn't because they couldn't afford internet."

Poor internet connectivity in rural areas prompted some SPO staff to remain open for in-person service provision for as long as they could throughout the early months of the pandemic. In-person, one-on-one appointments were limited to only essential services for those clients who could not access remote services through technology. Many participants recall offering services by phone, especially to government-assisted refugees. However, doing so could result in longer response times and many felt it was more difficult to give instructions. Given the challenges in helping newcomers remotely, some service providers believed it was worth exposing themselves to potential health risks to offer in-person services. In those agencies that shut down completely, some service providers worked to find public places where they could safely meet clients in person. Such experiences were challenged by the weather, finding reliable internet to deliver services outdoors, and issues of privacy when meeting in public spaces. One participant said they would sit in front of businesses in their car with clients just so they could use Wi-Fi and deliver services since meeting in homes was not allowed at that stage of the pandemic.

Besides connectivity issues in rural areas impacting accessibility to reliable internet, a lack of devices also posed an obstacle to providing settlement services. Many newcomer families faced difficulties accessing and affording electronic devices. When a device was available—and it was often borrowed—access was typically limited to one device per household, and this would have to be used by all members of a family, including school-aged children who required devices for their remote schooling. There was a general assumption with the shift to remote work and services that all households could get online when needed, which, evidently, was not the case for many.

b. Digital Literacy

Offering services exclusively through technology assumes that everyone who needs to use such services can do so. However, for recently arrived immigrants and refugees, one cannot and should not make any assumptions about their abilities to use and access technology. Digital literacy is not a given and language barriers can further complicate one's ability to access services remotely. Many clients struggled with basic computer operations and doing seemingly simple tasks online such as signing into one's account or finding a cursor could derail a whole session with a client. One participant recalls some of the struggles faced by clients:

"It was frustrating for [clients], it was frustrating for us because we didn't realize how difficult it would be for them just to type in their name and to move the […] cursor where it was supposed to be because they […] didn't know what the mouse was or […] how to move it. It was next to impossible especially when you threw in Microsoft Teams as well."

Some service providers attempted teaching digital literacy and basic computer skills, but teaching about technology remotely through electronic platforms was almost an impossible endeavour. Also, for those clients with little-to-no English language abilities, connecting remotely and through electronic platforms was simply not an option (this is discussed in further detail in section 3).

Some SPO staff also struggled with using technology, complicating their ability to offer services. For example, some language instructors had a difficult time learning how to deliver classes online since they had varying levels of digital literacy while they were teaching individuals who also had variable digital literacy levels. However, despite the learning curve and challenges associated with using new technologies, some SPO staff report that learning such things was positive since they could expand their knowledge and get better at using technology in general.

To address some of the challenges and inequalities posed by access to technology and digital literacy, many SPO staff decided to use popular communications applications like WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger or simply text messaging, which were methods familiar to clients since they were often using them to communicate with family abroad. Nearly every client has access to a cellular telephone either themselves or through a family member, while not everyone could access a laptop. Using these familiar applications was not without challenges and some basic tasks–such as obtaining a signature–simply could not be completed via such programs. Having to use and sometimes learn these multiple programs, which may operate on different types of devices, was an adjustment for service providers and clients. A participant recounts their experiences:

"Before [clients] could just drop off a paper in between their class or whatever, and then we could explain it to them when they came to pick it up, whereas now we had to try and teach them how to take a picture [of the assignment] and send it over WhatsApp."

Using such popular and familiar communication technologies did help to navigate different levels of digital literacy, but it also blurred personal and professional boundaries for individuals who also used such platforms to communicate with family and friends. Moreover, using such "instant" forms of communication added stress for SPO staff since they were using their personal devices and phone numbers to attend to clients' needs at all hours of the day. There is an expectation of immediate responses with electronic messaging platforms and, as such, it was difficult for workers to enforce boundaries with their clients.

In addition, when using remote communication technologies, some people (staff and clients) were leery of and distrusted electronic platforms. For example, at the beginning of the pandemic, video conferencing programs such as Zoom were not recommended among SPOs because some organizations feared viruses and ransomware. Also, depending on cultural and religious backgrounds, and personal preference, some clients were hesitant to share personal information remotely because of privacy concerns, leading SPO staff to have to drive to clients' homes to get information or physical signatures or to pick up or deliver paperwork, documents, learning materials, and paper assignments. Organizations had to reassess their confidentiality practices and policies considering the shift in how they had to deliver services.

Despite the many challenges presented by the shift to remote service delivery, it also worked as a catalyst for improving some services, at least for those clients with higher digital literacy levels. For those clients, going online enhanced the reach and accessibility of settlement services. Although some clients with low digital literacy and language barriers did struggle to adapt to remote online services, the possibility of virtual learning was beneficial for many clients as it could be more accommodating in terms of working around childcare or shift work.

c. Working from Home, Working Remotely, & Working During a Pandemic

Early in the pandemic when there were lockdowns and only essential services were open, much of the labour force had to work from home. In very little time, people had to set up home offices and make considerable adjustments to their daily work lives and schedules. With children also attending school remotely, parents suddenly had to balance childcare with their full-time jobs within their homes. Both SPO staff and their clients were in the same positions as they tried to navigate new expectations and responsibilities while homebound. People's workdays were entirely disrupted with the shift to remote work. Many things that one takes for granted in a workday changed. For example, working at home meant no in-person meetings and, as such, travel time during a workday was eliminated. Some services, such as prompt access to interpreters in multilingual offices, were no longer available. Motivation and productivity while working from home required redefining. The shift to remote work and working from home was challenging to navigate for families, with both negative and positive outcomes as it profoundly altered workloads and work-life balance.

Scheduling meetings remotely meant limiting travel from one place to another, and it also meant that more meetings could happen in a day. As one participant explains, *"before you would drive to a meeting it would be one, maybe two meetings a day because you have to fit the other stuff in. And you'd be [physically] going to the meeting."* With the pandemic, travel from place to place no longer occurred, so SPO staff could then schedule more meetings in a day from one place. The decrease in travel time meant increasing their capacity and being able to do more work. One participant details their experiences with the new structure to their workday:

"Now I can click a button, and I'm at another meeting with no time to debrief, no time to reflect. You're reading emails about the previous meeting while you're in the next one and no real time to strategize. And it seems because we're more available, we can take on more, and it takes us away from the core of our work. And so I have many things pulling me away from supporting small centres."

Working from home also meant not being able to interact with one's colleagues face to face and changed the ways in which people approached their workdays. Coffee breaks together and pre- or post-work banter was no longer part of a regular workday. Many participants report having felt socially isolated while working from, missing both clients and fellow staff members (for more details on social isolation, see section 4). Another participant states that in knowing people only through a screen, they lost the connection that *"we need as human beings. We're missing body language, clues and so much that we only get when we are in person."*

People also miss the act of going to work. As one participant explains, *"I do miss the professionalism of the job and going in and dressing up and being there and conducting myself in that way."* Some SPO staff also reported experiencing motivation issues as working from home presented more distractions for some or blurred work-life boundaries. Explaining this matter, one participant states:

"Yes, of course with staff going to work at home we've seen motivation going down. Hard to be motivated and keeping up with tasks and emails and just kind of having a regular workday at home. They're having increasing distractions at home, some have younger children at home and so even some work life balance separating your home life from your work life because how, your kind of doing both at the same time even through the day."

Another issue encountered by SPO staff when working remotely was a challenge with building trust and creating new relationships with their clients, especially with newly arrived immigrants and refugees. Initially, after arrival, much confidential information must be exchanged, and new clients were reluctant or virtually unable to do so. Needs assessments with new clients were also difficult to do remotely. Building trust with new clients is such an essential part of being a service provider and, as one participant explains, newly arrived immigrants and refugees *"need to be able to trust you right off the start. [And when working remotely], we felt like we lost a lot of clients because that wasn't possible. It's really hard to build that rapport and that trust."*

Working from home also presented data and information management concerns. Quickly-put-together home offices did not have access to the same forms of data storage as SPO offices. Such a concern prompted SPO staff to be more diligent with confidential information. Many home-based work environments were not equipped to meet such expectations as home offices were often in shared spaces and lacked secure filing systems. As one participant reports, despite having home office space in which to securely store information, *"it's not the same as having it at the office, in the locked filing drawer[...]. Things were a little bit more at risk being at home."*

As the pandemic progressed and SPO staff eventually moved back to their offices, their workdays continued to change. Staff were tasked with acquiring and learning to wear personal protective equipment (PPE), having to extensively sanitize their offices between appointments, learn new health guidelines and safety protocols, keep up with changing regulations and restrictions, apply for funding to buy electronics, find food banks for unemployed clients, and create online workshops and orientation sessions. These are just some examples of tasks beyond SPOs staffs' typical job specifications and which often led to considerable overtime work, some of it paid and much of it volunteer. As one participant reports, *"Because we are a small community, we knew that those people needed help. There were multiple hours of volunteer time put in to ensure that people got the kind of help that they needed."* The constantly evolving landscape of the early months of the pandemic meant that SPO staff had to be endlessly flexible and accommodating, resulting in increased workloads without commensurate pay.

Working from home challenged how organizations and staff thought about productivity. There may have been an assumption, prior to the pandemic, that working from home would hinder productivity levels. However, for many reasons, SPO staff, generally saw their productivity increase or, rather, their understandings of productivity changed. There were new expectations for what could be done in a day and work became different. Though there were many struggles and challenges with structuring remote work and learning how best to work during a pandemic, some participants, especially those working in indirect services, felt more productive and efficient. Without in-person engagement, staff were able to prioritize their tasks better. The increase in productivity and capacity did vary among staff, though. Some participants report that they worked less from home and others report that they worked more. However, most participants did mention feeling supported by their organizations as they made the adjustment to working from home and required lower expectations. One participant explains their experiences and observations:

"Anytime some new technology emerges that kind of changes the way we operate it increases efficiency, which is what I think has happened [...]. We've become more efficient in our meetings and things like that because we can [...] cut down on the rest of it [such as] travel time and the setup."

There is hope among some SPO staff that funders will acknowledge such gains in worker efficiency and the new capabilities acquired during the unavoidable shift to using new platforms and new ways of doing things that came along with working remotely.

Most participants did find some positives to working remotely and from home. There was increased flexibility of being able to work from home. Some also mention the benefits of slowing down as they aim for a more positive work-life balance moving forward. Working remotely and using communications technology has allowed SPOs to connect with colleagues from distant regions. One participant states:

"We have offices in three different towns, so we're spread out and so, video conferencing is awesome, because it allows me to connect with my colleagues that are forty minutes away."

Several participants agree that being able to collaborate and network with service providers, partners, community stakeholders, and co-workers across regions via technology was a benefit that should be kept in the post-pandemic world. Using software such as Zoom, and the normalization of such remote meetings, has meant that SPO staff and others working in the settlement sector are able to connect and work with colleagues across the country. In fact, some participants suggest that there are now more opportunities for collaborative work than there were prior to the pandemic. For example, one participant notes that they were able to connect newcomers more easily with Indigenous communities through remote workshops.

The need to be creative may have been pushed onto many SPO staff, but such endeavors are not new to those working in the settlement sector. SPO staff continually find new and creative ways to engage both their clients and sector partners to continue assisting newcomers as they settle. Such work was even more important during the pandemic when social distancing and staying at home were the public health recommendations (and rules) for staying healthy and safe. According to one participant, they began to see the sector in a new way:

"At some point in all these Zoom meetings, we felt we were becoming the trophy generation of settlement. [Other organizations would ask], 'can you give us some best practices on creative ways of working?' And we [said], 'that's the whole point of being working in settlement, you're creative thinkers.' Because you think on your feet, you're always working one step ahead, you're always thinking."

To keep up morale and ensure that co-workers remained connected, participants report developing new and creative methods to contribute to a positive work environment. In addition to building comradery, such actions were also necessary to fight feelings of social isolation and fatigue associated with remote work and the fears around the pandemic. Workplaces implemented fun ways of engagement during remote meetings. One participant explains how, at their workplace, staff tried to make working from home a bit more lighthearted:

"[W]e were having lots of mini team meetings and trying to make those as fun as possible, working from home. So our [team meetings], we'd all be dressed up as super-heroes for one meeting, and then our next meeting we'd have beach theme. So just trying to get creative from our home environments while we were working together was a challenge."

Another participant explains how an exercise initiative that was first intended to support clients became a positive ritual for staff as well. Initially, during Zoom sessions, staff would participate in dance or yoga, and then post their videos to social media. Clients could then watch or share these videos. The same organization also organized remote question-and-answer sessions where clients asked the question and staff would answer. Such activities did build workplace morale and engaged clients in new and innovative ways.

Such feelings have lingered even once people started to work in their offices once again. When moving back to more in-person work, SPO staff have noticed how important having face-to-face interactions are to their work. Even when people did return to work in their offices, there continued to be feelings of disconnection and isolation. Adjusting to in-person work, while welcomed, was challenging. One participant explains, *"Things are not the same as what they used to be. [Now co-workers] shut their door when they're there, or [they] don't want to go into the coffee room anymore, because they're worried."* Another participant stated, *"It's only when COVID happened [that] we realized that individual one-on-one human contact is very valuable."*

2. YOUTH SUPPORT SERVICES AND SCHOOLING

Like most other public institutions, schools shifted to remote service delivery, with students engaged in remote learning in the early months of the pandemic. Suddenly, youth found themselves at home with their parents and siblings during the day and parents found themselves balancing full-time work with childcare and schooling. With the shift to remote schooling came the shuttering of schools and all related services and supports. School-based settlement services for youth halted, leaving newcomer youth without the supports they require as they adjust and adapt to their new environment. Parents, who were learning a new language and struggling through the settlement process, were expected to assist their children throughout remote schooling, despite not knowing the language or, perhaps, having very little education. It was a difficult circumstance for everyone as it profoundly altered expectations and routines.

Participants report having much of their in-school programming disrupted or cancelled during the pandemic, especially in the early months. As the pandemic went on and public health restrictions shifted, some programs and services were able to resume while others could not. Even when programs and services were able to resume, they did so under considerably challenging circumstances. For example, the in-school program for newcomer youth, Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS), completely stopped for long periods during the pandemic because of the inability to meet in person. The SWIS program prioritizes being actively engaged with students in schools, face to face during the school day, but during the pandemic, according to a participant, SWIS staff *"couldn't be in the schools. They couldn't meet with the kids properly."* Further, another participant explains:

"The most affected was our Youth Support Services. We were doing in-school information sessions throughout the rural areas with our high school and junior high newcomer students and that completely stopped. It stopped for almost a full two years."

When services started to transition back to being held in person, constantly changing public health restrictions and protocols brought much uncertainty and hindered SPO staff as they tried to continue providing services to newcomer youth.

When those programs and services were able to be offered within schools and in person, public health restrictions made it impossible for students to interact with others beyond their cohort (as a way of limiting contact and making contact tracing easier), which further compromised settlement workers' ability to offer resources, services, and programming in the way they had done so prior to the pandemic. If youth were not in the same cohort, they were not allowed to interact with one another within the SWIS program.

Since they were not allowed into schools and could not provide services to newcomer youth during the school day, the SWIS program experienced decreasing numbers of clients. With funding directly tied to the number of clients served, SPO staff feared a loss of funding or losing the SWIS program. As such, SWIS staff experienced heightened anxiety and uncertainty in terms of job security and their role within the settlement sector as the pandemic brutally altered their ability to offer support services to youth. As a participant explains:

"While the funder might suggest that nothing's going to change, everything's going to be fine, but how can it be fine when we can't go into schools to work with kids […]. How can my job be secure? We're walking on eggshells all the time."

Many adjustments within organizations were made so that the SWIS program could continue under such trying circumstances, while still striving to serve the needs of youth. A participant explains the struggles encountered with the SWIS program:

"With not being able to go into schools, we had to figure out how we were going to support our kids without losing that SWIS funding, so we really got together and figured out how we were going to do this. We started meeting some kids outside [or] we started meeting them virtually as much as we could. We started a Facebook Messenger group to talk amongst ourselves. We really went […] outside the box in […] continuing to provide our SWIS support, because if you don't, as we know, you lose the funding, so if you're not reporting numbers and people you're working with [you may lose the funding]."

As they did with all types of remote work, SPO staff found creative and unconventional ways to reach newcomer youth and provide services through the

SWIS program.

3. LANGUAGE BARRIERS & LANGUAGE LEARNING

For newcomers experiencing language barriers and those amid language learning, the pandemic further contributed to the daily struggles and challenges of navigating life in a new place. Understanding what exactly was going on in the early months of the pandemic was even more difficult for newcomers because very little information was being translated. Also, government documents and messaging are often inaccessible to those just learning English or French. Furthermore, since many newcomers often rely on family members or friends to perform interpretation and translation, accessing such supports was often impossible because of public health regulations around social distancing and restricted gatherings outside of one's household.

In such an environment, much of the language translation and interpretation work required to explain health protocols to newcomers became the responsibility of settlement workers. As is the case with so much of the additional work necessitated by the pandemic, the time and effort required by SPO staff to navigate public health information for clients often exceeded their typical daily responsibilities. Some participants discuss how they conveyed critical public health-related information in very basic English so their clients could understand while also not compromising their own health or contravening public health orders. The constraints and challenges presented by the pandemic necessitated new ways of doing such work. The social distancing protocols, if not the very inability to meet in person, complicated such attempts and, as one participant explains, *"Not having someone there in person who can pick up on some of those nuances in […] language was very difficult."* Phone calls were often difficult if a settlement worker could not speak the client's preferred language and interpretation services were not available. As discussed previously, the use of computer-based technologies was also challenged by discrepancies in computer literacy and low language levels often exacerbated clients' ability to communicate through technology.

Language learning was also made more difficult during the pandemic. Offering classes remotely was the only option during certain stages of the pandemic when gathering in person was not possible. Language learning at a distance proved to be a challenge as much of language learning occurs through observation and nuance. Other factors (such as digital literacy, access to devices, and conditions at home such as childcare) had to be considered. Varying levels of computer literacy made teaching and learning English even more difficult. A participant explains their experience:

"I teach low-level language learners, so my class wasn't able to go online, because my students have very low digital literacy. So, when we went remote originally in March 2020, we weren't able to go online for our remote learning, so I just did paper take-home packages. And we also had a WhatsApp group where I would video chat with them. So, we just had to make it work."

Another participant adds:

"Learning a language online is very difficult because they can't see the gestures and the body language. They can't see the way your mouth moves. The sound quality is usually terrible, so that adds a component. My students have all said that being online, wearing a mask when you're trying to talk to people, is hard."

Service providers and language instructors typically rely on non-verbal ways of communicating with clients, especially in cases where there are language barriers. When interacting remotely, the ability to see facial expressions would be compromised because clients may not turn on their web camera or their video quality may be poor. Therefore, much nuance was lost between service providers and clients.

Language assessment services were also difficult to provide during the pandemic. As some clients' employment status and immigration status are directly tied to language level, such difficulties created new forms of vulnerability. Given the difficulties in accessing online language assessments in rural areas because of bandwidth challenges, one participant explains that they attempted to provide hard copies of assessments, which were welcomed by clients. Online language assessments also necessitated additional labour, including someone dedicated to supervising the online component. One participant also noticed more language test failures since some clients did not have the time to study and practice, necessitating multiple attempts to increase their language benchmark level.

When daycares were closed and schools were operating only remote classes, families struggled to balance everything in their lives. For those parents engaged in language learning, studying a new language while their kids were at home was nearly impossible. According to a participant:

"The biggest struggle was for students that had children at home. There was no quiet space to do their work or there was not time for them to do their homework, because they're trying to help their kids with their English homework."

In addition to the lack of space and time, parents did not always have a device available at the time of their classes since there were multiple demands on limited equipment. As a result, language teachers noticed that student engagement in classes decreased as parents were stretched in all directions trying to balance language learning with having children at home. The effects of lower attendance impacted both students and SPOs. For students, not attending classes, obviously, will hinder one's ability to learn English. For SPOs, decreasing attendance can negatively impact funding to language programs. Language teachers and other SPO staff decided to be as flexible and forgiving as possible with students since everyone was under much stress.

Newcomer parents faced a situation where they could not study English in the way they needed, yet they were required to assist their children with schoolwork that was in English. Language barriers made it nearly impossible for children to receive parental assistance with schoolwork. One participant explains:

"If a teacher sends homework home with a child who has parents that can't speak English, they don't have any support when they go home. It causes a lot of family stress when the children are like, 'I don't know what to do,' and the mom and dad are, like, 'I can't help you either.'"

If a parent cannot speak English, then the child is at a disadvantage relative to students with English-speaking parents.

Although many families struggled immensely to balance language learning with their new at-home childcare responsibilities, some SPO staff did notice that the forced home-boundedness and remote learning opportunities led to some positive experiences. For example, a participant explains, *"Many clients actually took on more English language classes because they were remote."* Having language classes offered remotely helped some families by presenting flexible options, which was especially welcomed during a time where new responsibilities were being placed on parents.

4. SOCIAL ISOLATION, DEPERSONALIZATION, AND SENSE OF COMMUNITY

For newly arrived immigrants and refugees, having a sense of belonging and social inclusion are key factors for successful settlement and integration, in addition to being essential to one's well-being. Settlement offices are key sites where such belonging and social inclusion take place, particularly in small centres. As one participant notes, *"When newcomers come to the office, they are seeking help, but also they're seeking some sort of comfort […]. Nothing can effectively replace that face-to-face interaction."*

Community-building activities and initiatives were deeply affected by the pandemic, including—but also beyond—the settlement sector. Public health restrictions and protocols challenged everyone's sense of community as restrictions around gatherings and social distancing led to the cancellation of various community connection programs and events responsible for newcomers' integration into communities. Even programming within SPOs was halted. As one participant explains, *"Any kind of group supports that we provided [were impacted]. We have moms-and-babies' programs that provide supports for stay-at-home moms to prevent isolation [and those were cancelled]."* With the long periods of being homebound in the early months of the pandemic, social isolation was unavoidable for nearly everyone but exacerbated for those arriving to a new country and community.

The pandemic made settlement even more challenging for newcomers since they could not engage in their new community or establish new social networks easily. Social isolation is commonly cited as a barrier to the early stages of settlement, and the pandemic only made feelings of social isolation more profound. For instance, a participant discusses the social isolation felt by clients who had not established connections in the community:

"I have been hearing a lot of feelings of isolation, and actually being able to name that. Like I have had people reach out to me and say, like, 'I do nothing but sit at home, and I, this is all I know in Canada. So I don't know if this is actually going to be my life going forward. If it is, I can't do this [...].' Yeah, it's definitely the isolation, and just the not understanding of what is normal, and what is because of COVID. I've had a lot of people as well not feel like they have any connection to the community."

The importance of in-person connections cannot be overstated for newly arrived immigrants and refugees, and without such contact it becomes even more difficult to settle in a new place. SPO staff were constantly worried about the well-being of their clients in such a socially restricted environment.

Before the pandemic, SPO offices would provide many opportunities for newcomers to build social networks and relationships. The act of going to a settlement office to meet with SPO staff and then visiting with other clients in the waiting room can be an important way for newcomers to engage and build community, but such interactions were not possible when offices were closed. In-person language classes also play an important social role for language learners, in addition to the educational role they play. During the pandemic, that social aspect was lost. According to a participant who taught language classes:

"We have a coffee break every morning for fifteen minutes, and all of our classes would come out into the foyer, they'd have coffee, they'd visit, they speak their own language for a bit. And now we can't do that, so it really affects our community."

Through language classes and other programming, SPOs often celebrated sharing one's culture and learning about other cultures through events such as potlucks, but those also could not occur early in the pandemic. In such settings and beyond, being able to share food is an important aspect of sharing one's culture and learning about other cultures. Without such community-building events, newcomers had few opportunities to connect and learn from one another in such joyful settings as a potluck.

Working remotely led to feelings of social isolation for SPO staff, too. The pandemic halted any opportunities to connect with colleagues face to face and activities such as potlucks and quick conversations with co-workers during coffee breaks or after work were deeply missed. As one participant reflects:

"The pandemic has created new ways that we connect to people and the way we deliver services, but still the vital piece, which is good for our mental health, it's good for our well-being, is that in-person interaction

that is missing. No matter how we do virtual potlucks, it's not the same when you have an in-person potluck or coffee time with a colleague. So it's still going to be the preferred connection piece."

The pandemic has been depersonalizing, as remote work replaced the work rituals that bonded staff members to one another and to clients. One participant mentions, *"Safety protocols have changed our sense of community. Sharing food together, physical touch, be able to meet in large groups, things like that. I think I have felt that shift, and I think it's been, I've felt maybe a bit of sadness about those losses, but I mean, in general."* Furthermore, *"We just are not as social. We're doing everything virtually. And so it's amazing if you actually have time to spend with people. It's amazing how much you realised that you've missed it."*

Beyond one's immediate workplace, SPO staff also missed being involved in their wider community. Networking and connecting with other stakeholders in the community are vital parts of small-centre SPOs' work, and it was missed when it could not happen. As one participant explains:

"I have my online people, but I still love the aspect of community connections in person, because that has been small centres, that is how you do it. You need to meet people. You need to talk to them. You know almost every key stakeholder in your small community."

Organizations also were unable to hold community events that celebrate and build knowledge around diversity and culture, negatively impacting efforts to build welcoming communities. As one participant mentions:

"In [some communities] we are involved in a lot of the community events and those completely stopped as well, and in fact, they still are [stopped]. So that was a big loss for us, because that was bringing culture into the community, into the events, and doing that, the learning of the diversity and the culture in our communities, has totally been stopped at this point."

To address social isolation, SPO staff worked hard to engage clients. They also worked to stay engaged with sector partners and other stakeholders. However, as everyone tried to adjust to a "new normal," people were exhausted and overwhelmed. As a participant explains, client engagement was severely limited, negatively impacting people's ability and capacity to engage in anything beyond coping with the day to day. Forms of engagement in the context of the pandemic were all new and required learning, and they were often fraught with worry and more stress.

Remote language classes became an opportunity to engage newcomers on pandemic-related topics and enable important conversations that created stronger social bonds among students and instructors. One participant describes how they relied on and used their language classes as an opportunity to pursue new forms of social engagement:

"[Classes became an opportunity to] talk about [topics] that they hadn't been able to talk about before, like the vaccine, like their anxieties around vaccinations. Like their views on health and wellness. Like, very importantly, their views on trust of governments, missing their family. Like, it's all new opportunities to engage on different topics and different levels and support them in different ways. [Remote classes allow clients] an opportunity to talk about how, you know, they don't trust government. From where they come they're used to being oppressed, and so coming here and being told what to do is not comfortable for them."

Settling in a new place in the early stages of the pandemic was very difficult for newcomers, for a multitude of reasons. SPO staff acknowledged these difficulties and worked to find new ways of engaging and informing newly arrived immigrants and refugees. Some participants mention being able to empower clients through new programs that enable new spaces for immigrants to talk about such topics as immigration and anti-racism initiatives. A participant mentions that holding a virtual town hall on anti-racism attracted over 150 participants. As they explain:

"We started to create spaces that allowed [clients] to have a voice even though it wasn't in person. It definitely forced us to rethink how we work, and how we make things happen. And I'm grateful for it, because now we're prepared if something like this is to happen again."

5. OTHER CHALLENGES FOR SPOS AND THEIR CLIENTS

a. Mental Health & Substance Abuse

Following from the inevitable feelings of social isolation caused by the pandemic, SPO staff became concerned about their clients' mental health. Seeking supports for the impact that pandemic-related loneliness and isolation have on one's mental health and well-being is not always straightforward for immigrants and refugees. One of the most significant challenges to receiving mental health support is language barriers, which is made more difficult in rural communities where there are limited interpretation services. Furthermore, there may be stigma in seeking psychological and mental health support, especially in rural and remote communities (Mental Health Commission, 2021). Language and cultural barriers contribute to such stigma, making it difficult for newcomers to seek needed mental health supports. Even when someone does overcome such barriers and seeks mental health supports, accessing supports remotely and/or via technology can be alienating, or even impossible if individuals do not have access to devices or suitable internet.

In addition to increased mental health concerns for newcomers, SPO staff also have concerns for their own mental health and well-being while coping with the pandemic. Even prior to the pandemic, the emotional burden associated with working in the settlement sector can weigh heavily on individuals, impacting their mental health and leading to increased stress and risk of burnout. However, working throughout a global pandemic has only exacerbated the stresses experienced by SPO staff. A participant explains the challenges of adjusting to working in a pandemic:

"What about the wellness, the mental awareness of mental health of all the staff? For example, I was so happy when I came back to the office after working for so long at home. It was actually [like] finally I can breathe, I can see people […]. The staff also needs supports […]. Just even, just to ask them, how are you doing? How are you coping? Are you OK, I think is enough of a statement to […] show that, OK, you care."

Furthermore, there is a sense of helplessness among some SPO staff as they have felt unable to provide all the necessary help to their struggling clients. As one participant notes:

"If I'm not mentally fit, I cannot help them. I can't provide services. I can't provide information to them […]. [Every day I ask] how can I help someone today? Helping someone today makes me happy a lot."

Some workplaces offered mental health seminars to staff, and others note receiving support from colleagues. Since service providers were overworked and stressed, it was very difficult for them to also address mental health challenges for clients.

Most participants report feeling exhausted and overworked as they struggle to maintain a healthy work-life balance during the pandemic. Learning to work from home, sometimes with children present, put much pressure and stress on parents trying to maintain their productivity and get work completed. Having to be informed about changing policies and public health regulations, and then communicating such information to clients, also contributes to the challenges experienced by SPO staff. Online fatigue became a concern with seemingly endless Zoom meetings, workshops, virtual conferences, training sessions, and emailing. When reflecting on their experiences throughout the pandemic, a participant observes:

"There's just a fatigue, an online platform fatigue. I don't know what you want to call that, but people are just tired of going online. That personal connection is something that has become a really big gap for us with

our newcomers."

SPO staff also saw new tasks and responsibilities introduced that were beyond their job descriptions. Such stressors have produced negative impacts on some SPO staff's physical and mental health. Working remotely made it hard to maintain a sense of working as a team and it had a negative impact on those who relied on going to an office to maintain social connections.

b. Families

The pandemic created strain within many households as all family members found themselves at home together, all day. As a participant added:

"There's nowhere to escape when the kids weren't going to school and the parents weren't going to language classes. Everybody is stuck in this house. That led to some domestic issues going on in families that we had to deal with."

In some cases, women who would use the time when their husbands were at work to check in with SPO staff could no longer rely on having such time in their days. The pandemic necessitated that SPO staff find creative measures to reach out to newcomer families, ensuring that all family members were safe. One participant explains how they put together pandemic care packages for families and would drop them off a few times per week just to be able to covertly check in with families.

Newcomer women often carried the burden of childcare throughout the early months of the pandemic when daycares and schools were closed. In addition to care responsibilities, women were also faced with new work expectations, especially in sectors that relied heavily on the labour of immigrants and refugees. Balancing home-schooling and childcare with a job and all the new concerns around COVID-19 placed remarkable strain on women. SPO staff noticed the difficulties women were facing and sought new care and family-based programming to ease their burdens.

c. Housing

Rural regions' capacity to respond to homelessness and housing precarity is limited because of a lack of funding, few available shelters and affordable housing options, restricted social services such as healthcare, food banks, substance use and addiction programs, and geographic isolation (Schiff et al., 2020). The pandemic has only compounded such challenges.

Some participants have observed an increase in housing precarity and homelessness among clients in rural communities during the early months of the pandemic. During a time when organizations are already strained, increased rates in homelessness further stretch SPOs' ability to respond to the needs of those who are precariously housed. Furthermore, homelessness and housing precarity present increased physical and mental health risks during a pandemic and widespread transmission is a concern in situations where housing is overcrowded (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2021). Service providers felt their already burdened workload increase as they struggled to meet the housing needs of clients

d. Employment

Like workers everywhere at the beginning of the pandemic, many newcomers in small centres experienced layoffs, resulting in high unemployment rates. Settlement workers suddenly found their days filled with helping unemployed clients with their Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) applications. Some immigrants and refugees who lost their jobs in small centres moved to larger cities in search of jobs while others stayed and hoped to find other work. Those newcomers that chose to stay in their community required employment services, and SPOs continued to help their clients. However, SPOs struggled to offer such services and find jobs for their clients in a climate of high unemployment rates. Public health restrictions around meeting in public and private made it challenging for SPO staff to connect with potential employers in communities in the ways they had done prior to the pandemic. Also, offering employment services remotely was difficult. As a result, some participants note a decrease in organizational funding because fewer clients were accessing employment services.

While unemployment rates were high across many sectors, SPO staff did notice more jobs in cleaning sectors for low-literacy clients. Such jobs were focused on abiding by public health regulations for clean workplaces, including having someone at the entrance of businesses to ensure customers sanitized their hands or washing high-touch surfaces such as elevator buttons.

e. Work Permits

There was much to navigate at the beginning of the pandemic, and previous assumptions around how to get things accomplished did not always apply. SPO staff had to navigate new ways of doing their jobs and helping clients in a climate where many other services and offices were closed, hindering newcomers' ability to complete vital paperwork. For example, when Service Canada offices were closed to the public, many newcomers experienced both uncertainties with and long waiting times for such things as the issuance of work permits and documentation regarding immigration status. Such challenges posed new financial and mental health stressors for newcomers, and especially for those on temporary work permits and those with vulnerable immigration status. As one participant explains:

"When you see your work permit is expiring in two months or three months, it becomes a problem. So you have to figure out how to get going, how to apply for permanent residency, and so on. So we had a lot of call like that, 'I'm worrying about this expiring. So what's going to happen? Do you know when this is going to start?'"

Newcomers' jobs and their ability to legally work in the province were negatively impacted by the closing of offices and the general upheaval within workplaces that existed early in the pandemic.

f. Rural Mobility

The rural regions in which small-centre SPOs are located can be quite geographically large, with much space between towns. Travelling throughout these areas can take much time and be costly as they are not as accessible as urban centres. Also, public transportation is non-existent. Such relative lack of mobility in rural areas was exacerbated during the pandemic with its associated travel restrictions, contributing to feelings of isolation and challenging how rural SPOs could conduct their work.

g. Volunteers

Some services like driver's education, often provided by SPOs, were also impacted throughout the pandemic. Such programs and services often rely on volunteer work, and the difficulties associated with safely meeting in person meant that many settlement agencies lost a lot of volunteers. Some participants did question the sector's ability to move forward with an array of programs and services if volunteers could not be found.

Conclusions and Moving Forward: Restoring a Human-Centered Approach to Newcomer Settlement Service Provision

The intention of this final section is to consider how to "support those who support newcomers" in small centres across the Canadian prairies–staff at small-centre SPOs–as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic. To do so entails capturing the lessons learned from this study, acknowledging the profound disruptions that the pandemic had on the settlement sector in prairie small centres, and celebrating the resiliency of staff at SPOs. We are hopeful that this study contributes to the long work of reversing the depersonalizing and alienating effects of the pandemic, including the ongoing efforts to build meaningful relationships with newcomer clients and across the newcomer-serving community.

This section captures insights about supporting and strengthening post-pandemic settlement service provision in small centres. In this section we offer general reflections that are woven through the words of project participants with the intention of contributing to the discussion moving forward. Rather than offering a series of bullet points and hard "recommendations," though, we have attempted to capture learning from this study in a way that will prompt further reflection on the newcomer settlement sector in small centres across the Canadian prairies and beyond.

RURAL AND REMOTE REALITIES AND SMALL-CENTRE SETTLEMENT SERVICE CAPACITY

Small-centre newcomer SPOs face particular realities in their efforts to provide services to support newcomer settlement, integration, and inclusion the entirety of the "continuum of settlement, integration, and inclusion" (see Silvius and Boddy, forthcoming). Moreover, small centres have certain "place-based realities" that render newcomer service provision different there than offering similar services in an urban context. Our concluding remarks acknowledge such realities.

Whether or not they are operating in the context of a global pandemic, small centres have two distinct needs when organizing services for newcomers. The first is to capture the place-based realities of the community, including offering services on site when possible. Contrary to urban scenarios, small centres lack a density of newcomer-specific services, and newcomers are often referred to service providers that do not have newcomers as their primary focus. Such service providers may benefit from liaising with service providers located in urban environments, whether it be for the training of SPO staff or offering urban-situated services to newcomers. In this way, small-centre SPOs and their newcomer clientele may benefit from a scale of operation and specialization of work greater than that which the small centre can provide by itself (see Silvius and Boddy, forthcoming).

There is a continuous need to respect and acknowledge modes of interaction that are prevalent in some rural areas, including the importance of face-to-face interactions for building trust. Participants report that, in rural communities, using technology such as emails to communicate is often interpreted as rude since most interactions are done in person. Some small-centre SPOs rely heavily on face-to-face interactions for service provision, especially for those clients with high needs and low levels of English or French language. Therefore, there is a need to invest in opportunities for government and settlement providers from urban centers to learn more about small centres' realities, specificities, and needs.

REMOTE WORK, REMOTE SERVICES AS EMPOWERING TO SMALL-CENTRE SPOS? SEPARATING THE BABY FROM THE BATHWATER

This section focuses on remote engagement in terms of: 1) service delivery; and 2) networking, collaborating, and coordinating amongst SPOs and other agencies across distances. We recognize that the question of staff working from home or the office is an ongoing negotiation within SPOs and across the sector, and we are optimistic that such discussions can be held with staff needs at the centre.

Under certain circumstances, remote engagement offers a powerful tool for settlement workers in small centres. For one, it eliminates distances between the small and larger centres in which SPOs are located. It can enhance the overall capacity for collaboration across the region and allow small-centre SPOs to partake in events held in larger and/or distanced centres without the time and expense associated with physical travel. This may enable small-centre staff to partake in training and collaboration that would otherwise be inaccessible. It may allow newcomer clients to receive services that are otherwise not easily scalable to small centres.

Such positive aspects of remote collaboration with service providers, partners, community stakeholders, and co-workers across regions via technology can serve small-centre SPOs as we emerge from the pandemic. However, remote is not always better, and it is not always without negative consequences for small-centre SPOs. Plugging in to services offered elsewhere is not a panacea for small-centre SPOs, particularly if it comes at the expense of growing and cultivating local capacity and expertise on matters pertaining to settlement. Settlement services are part of a broader question regarding rural and remote service provision and the ongoing struggle to ensure that rural residents have access to a needed array of social services in the community in which they live. Moreover, some settlement services–language assessment, for example–are best performed in person, according to our participants.

Technology may allow us to troubleshoot accessibility barriers for some, to be more efficient and productive, to overcome geographical boundaries, and to network with people from all over the world, but the need to interact with one another in person, face to face should not and cannot be overlooked. In the settlement sector, where trust and relationship building are an essential component of a successful settlement experience for immigrants and refugees, remote communication and social distancing can produce negative impacts on both SPO staff and newcomers.

One participant feels that certain cost-effective measures that entailed service at a distance would be retained emerging out of the pandemic but cautions against losing the human-centred approach:

"If COVID ends tomorrow, will we stop doing what we do now? No, in many ways, maybe funders, people may have found this to be cost effective. But the end of the day, face to face in dealing with someone that's working through whatever they [are] working through, I don't think we could ever replace that. We don't want to create social[ly] illiterate individuals […]. I still want to have hope that when we can reach out to someone, greet someone and whatever gesture we use, the handshake, the hugs, the physical connection, I think those [are] values and virtues that we should still adhere to, and hope for."

Under the proper circumstances, online training and service delivery can be beneficial to both the service provider and client. Hybrid models of work and service delivery with a mix of online and in-person delivery may render services more accessible to more people. The pandemic offered lessons about the need for flexible program delivery to enable accessibility for diverse groups. To the extent that they are suitable to SPO staff, hybrid, remote, and in-person services should be designed with accessibility in mind for both the service provider and service user. Hybrid models of work and blended learning modes that combine online and in-person services can be designed with the intention of enhancing accessibility to a broader audience–, offering a variety of methods of engagement (remote, on-site) and service window times for newcomers busy with family and work obligations. For example, flexible "drop-ins" (in-person or remote) can help accommodate newcomers with complex family schedules.

It cannot be assumed that all staff are capable of remote/platform-based service delivery without proper time and resources dedicated to staff training. Settlement workers must be supported in ongoing training and upskilling to perform remote and platform-based work, while it is acknowledged that both workers and clients possess different levels of digital literacy, technological capacity, spaces within which to comfortably do remote work, and so forth. Equity in service accessibility necessitates acknowledging differential access to technology and digital literacy: access to reliable internet, which is an ongoing issue in rural and remote areas (Weeden & Kelly, 2021), finding affordable devices, obtaining necessary services, and identifying safe spaces in which to access services.

The adoption of various online platforms and apps for settlement service provision remains an ongoing discussion in the settlement sector. If such developments are to meet the needs of small-centre SPOs, they must be "rural and remote friendly"– accessed with low connectivity even in rural remote areas, for example.

Moreover, feelings of cultural appropriateness and individual comfort levels and preferences differ on matters pertaining to conveying sensitive and/or personal information via online platforms. One focus group participant emphasized the need to offer personal services for clients who were operating in a new cultural context.

REBALANCING AFTER THE EMERGENCY: SUPPORTING SMALL-CENTRE SETTLEMENT WORKERS

Those who work in the settlement sector are accustomed to the need to be flexible, creative, and responsive. They are constantly asked or told to do more with less and adjust to new immigration policies within a constantly shifting and evolving global migration landscape. In many ways, working during a pandemic was yet another hurdle they had to overcome, in a long list of hurdles. SPO staff have become good at being flexible and "pivoting" whenever it is needed.

Responding to the constantly changing rules and regulations during the pandemic was challenging, but in many ways SPO staff already had the skills necessary to do so while still prioritizing the well-being of their clients. As one participant states:

"And whether we're in a big centre or a small centre we all have really smart and innovative people on our teams, and our clients are smart and innovative. And they have probably been through more than most people. And so it's–this is another hurdle, but one that will hopefully pass right? So I think it's–there's so many positives as well as learning and just overall self-reflection that has gone on because of this."

Acknowledging and celebrating the resiliency, creativity, and flexibility of settlement staff does not mean relying upon these qualities without accounting for their needs moving forward. It means acknowledging the accomplishments of the settlement sector during a period of unprecedented difficulties and any positive tools, techniques, and processes that occurred under trying circumstances, provided that such things continue to meet the needs of settlement workers and the clients they serve. However, it also means striving to fully recapture, as well as strengthen, that which was lost during the pandemic. This includes, notably, the "human touch" of settlement work: the ability to make bonds, offer support, and build community through direct, face-to-face interaction. As a participant explains:

"Settlement is still a human response. There's only so much you can do with settlement over a computer. You still need to have that human touch in order to be welcoming. We can make computers as welcoming as they are, but being able to share that sunbeam that I see falling across you is a whole lot different than in the shade that I'm feeling in my office. So there is a certain human element connection that remains vital to settlement. And I don't think that the digital approach is going to meet all of that."

Complex and innovative problem-solving by SPO staff should be celebrated. And, to a certain extent, providing settlement and integration services always necessitates a healthy dose of learning on the fly. That said, it is hoped that the most arduous examples of forced creative adaptability associated with the pandemic are over and that SPO staff can look forward to a future in work their work is supported by planning, processes, and resources.

Our study demonstrates that the size and complexity of staff roles and responsibilities inflated during the pandemic; unprecedented circumstances compelled all settlement workers to adapt and take on new roles and responsibilities to ensure service delivery during the pandemic. Settlement workers routinely undertook such work and "did what it took" out of a commitment to serving newcomer clients, often working "beyond their paygrade" in terms of tasks performed and amount of time dedicated. Can we envision an end of the era of endless adaptability and troubleshooting for SPO staff and the emergence of one with predictable parameters for roles and responsibilities?

Isolation and online/platform fatigue associated with remote work and learning necessitates rebalancing online and in-person work lives. This includes the need for "platform detox" and a restoration of spaces for down time and breaks from platform-based engagements and meetings. Remote work during the pandemic, and the sector's switch to platform-mediated work, brought with it the ability to participate in various discussions with people not in one's immediate environment in short succession. Meetings could be held one after the next without the downtime and opportunities to reset that come with having to physically move from one space to another in order to meet.

Should remote work and learning persist in the settlement sector, there is a need for consistent, multi-year support and investment in digital literacy for staff and clients. Providing funds to access devices without a corresponding increase in support for digital literacy would not address the issue.

To address some of these struggles, a participant suggests more should have been done by the funders of language learning programs to assist both students and instructors in terms of digital literacy. They explain:

"Our language program is federally funded, so I think there needed to be intervention from IRCC for it. If you expect everyone to do online learning, then they need to be able to provide the equipment. And also, you need to be able to provide the training for teachers […]. Or have informational webinars or whatever, on how to engage low-level, low-English learners if you can't use these online platforms."

Participants noted the need for more supports from funders and guidance in terms of equipment and training, suggesting that expectations for remote service delivery were not met with the necessary physical and human resource infrastructure, jeopardizing both service delivery and service use.

What does it mean to be productive, and what expectations around productivity were ushered in during the pandemic? Participants wanted decision-makers to acknowledge the gains in worker efficiency and the new capabilities acquired during the unavoidable shift to using new platforms and new ways of doing things that came along with working remotely. Staff-centred discussions around productivity expectations as it relates to online work are required as we emerge from the pandemic.

These may include matters such as: the need for privacy (for both workers and clients) in program delivery and staff-client interactions; work-life balance, particularly as the pandemic era modes of work blurred the lines between work time and personal time; and accounting for workers' mental health needs. The latter necessitates acknowledging the emotional toll associated with doing settlement work under "normal" circumstances, and that such a toll was exacerbated during the pandemic. Our participants seek discussions, tools, and resources to support a smoother remote work journey with clear personal and professional boundaries (I.e., maximum work hours per day, devices with No Caller IDs, cars, mental health breaks, and dedicated counselling and therapy programs, including in-house counsellors).

CAPACITY, AUTONOMY, INCLUSIVITY, AND ACCESSIBILITY IN SMALL-CENTRE SETTLEMENT SERVICE PROVISION

For some of our participants, defined parameters of funding, with expectations of specific results within given time frames, constitute one threat to the "human" element of settlement services. Another focus group participant suggested that funding that sought to "solve" settlement challenges in a definitive amount of time (for example, three years) was not aligned with the reality of settlement challenges. Rather than approach settlement with a "business approach," the settlement sector should return to being a "human sector." Another participant noted, *"We're not thinking like funders. We're […] providing a human service."*

The pandemic exacerbated long-running challenges the sector has faced in their attempts to ensure equitable access to services for newcomers in small centres. First amongst these was the imperative to serve all newcomers regardless of immigration status, despite permanent status being required for many federally funded settlement services. This is a crucial matter in rural and remote areas, which experience a high proportion of temporary foreign workers due to the prevalence of this group within agri-food and related industries (see Helps et al., 2021). Moreover, newcomers require services along the continuum of settlement, integration, and inclusion in the community in which they live, regardless of their point of entry.

The pandemic exacerbated the challenges that small-centre SPOs face in their ability to continuously offer services amidst the imperatives of funding cycles. Participants called for more inclusive funding that does not rely on numbers but rather on centring newcomers and SPOs staff's needs. They also sought SPOs' autonomy for the allocation of resources (who and how they can serve) and greater guidance and support from funders to help them navigate constant changes in regulation and restrictions.

Regionalization–the process whereby individual SPOs collaborate and/or pool resources to scale up the information, services, or support available to all in a region–can assist small-centre SPOs. This is particularly the case for smaller offices with the lowest number of staff members and resources at their disposal, as it enables them to benefit from a larger pool of expertise and knowledge resources.

There is an ongoing need to support small-centres SPOs' efforts at coordination and collaboration on a regional basis. This can be in the form of soft services and supports to coordinate and integrate efforts among local settlement agencies, local partners (libraries, food banks, housing, and childcare facilities, essential services providers, grassroots organizations, community leaders, etc.), and funders on municipal, provincial, and federal levels. It may include collaborative hubs/repositories of best practices, frameworks, resources, tools, guidelines, and so on.

However, such efforts should not come at the expense of ensuring that small-centre SPOs have the requisite staff and capacity to serve those who require services in their communities. Participants emphasized the need for SPOs' autonomy for the allocation of resources received from funders as well as guidance and support in navigating constant changes in regulations and restrictions.

Finally, equity and accessibility in service delivery can be enhanced by worker inclusion in, and contributions to, anti-oppressive platforms and spaces to discuss the overlaps between immigration, race, gender, culture, religion, Indigeneity, and so forth. Efforts to decolonize small-centre settlement, integration, and inclusion services for newcomers are strengthened with staff input and participation.

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