



VOLUNTEER TRAINING GUIDE

Welcome Group Program



INTRODUCTION

Launched in 2016 and developed in close partnership with settlement service providers, Together Project's Welcome Group Program creates newcomer social connections, supports newcomer integration priorities, and amplifies community engagement in building welcoming communities in Canada. Welcome Group volunteers are matched with refugee newcomers based on shared interests, newcomer needs, and volunteers' experience and skills, and provide six months of social and integration support.

This manual provides an overview of how volunteers can provide refugee newcomers with effective social support during a six-month match. Volunteers will learn more about the concepts explored below in the Welcome Group Program orientation session.



"I happened upon an article in the Toronto Star that featured Together Project and I thought, 'This is perfect.' I liked how you don't have to sponsor a family privately because that's out of reach for a lot of people. Thinking globally and acting locally is, I think, the best way that people can make change." - Brittany

SUPPORTING REFUGEES

We are currently facing the worst refugee crisis in world history. Resettlement has been met with an outpouring of support from everyday Canadians, and many volunteers have sought opportunities to engage directly with refugee newcomers and to develop sustained and meaningful relationships.

Some refugees will arrive in Canada with existing social networks - e.g. extended family, private sponsors, or cultural associations - who can help them integrate. However, many more will arrive not knowing anyone and may face greater barriers to building new relationships and integrating quickly - this is the population that Together Project serves through its Welcome Group Program.

The Welcome Group Program is currently open to Government-Assisted Refugees, Refugee Claimants, and Protected Persons. You can find definitions of these terms on the next page.

These newcomers are referred to Together Project by one of our local community agency partners after they have arrived in Canada and found housing.



"We all bring something different to the table. So if the family approaches me with a question, I can tap someone else on the shoulder and they'll step up, because you really can't do this alone."

- Marilou

TERMINOLOGY

Convention Refugee - A person with a well-founded fear of persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, and/or political opinion. They may be afraid of being persecuted either by their government authorities or by others, and are able to show that their government cannot or will not protect them.

Government-Assisted Refugee - Commonly known by the acronym “GAR,” this is a Convention Refugee who was selected and referred for resettlement to Canada by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) or another designated organization. The Canadian government sponsors their initial resettlement and provides one year of financial assistance and other support through Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC).

Refugee Claimant - Also known as an “asylum seeker,” this person has applied for refugee protection status in Canada and is waiting for a decision on their claim from the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB).

Protected Person - If the Immigration and Refugee Board determined a refugee claimant to be a person in need of protection, they are considered a “Protected Person” - in other words, refugee claimants who have had a successful hearing on their claim are considered Protected Persons.



"When you volunteer, today it might be with Syrians, then they'll be from Latin America, then East Africa. You'll learn cultures, customs, global issues. It's not just about volunteering, but it's self-nurturing, as well."

- Mohammed



WHAT IS INTEGRATION?

Integration is a two-way street: newcomers adjust to their surroundings and environment, and Canadians adjust and make space for their new neighbours by welcoming them into their communities.

As the foundation of multiculturalism, integration has made Canadian cities and towns some of the world's most vibrant and helps to ensure the intergenerational well-being of all Canadians. However, Canada's relatively open immigration policies do not guarantee successful integration and settlement. In many ways, the hard work begins when newcomers arrive.


BARRIERS TO INTEGRATION FOR NEWCOMERS

There are many barriers to integration, and for many newcomers, the most common of these is related to language. For example, when trying to access health care services, many newcomers may need interpretation. Volunteers can direct newcomers to health service providers and clinics that specialize in refugee client care, and show them how to use assistive technology such as Google Translate to support these interactions.

When seeking work, newcomers can face multiple barriers to employment beyond limited English. This can include needing a legal work permit, requiring accreditation of their former education and training, and adapting to cultural norms in the Canadian workplace.

Newcomer children may struggle to adapt to new schools and new social settings, and newcomer parents may have a hard time engaging with the school system.

Finding secure housing can also pose a challenge for newcomers. One of the main barriers that newcomers face when seeking housing is that many do not have banking history or employment history, making some landlords apprehensive about renting to them. Discrimination also exists within the rental market based on landlords taking advantage of newly-arrived individuals who may not understand their rights as tenants.



Every newcomer household has different integration priorities and barriers, and Welcome Group volunteers would benefit from learning how these barriers manifest, and how they can help the newcomers they are matched with overcome them.

HOW DOES SOCIAL SUPPORT WORK?

Social support is invaluable to refugee newcomers who, almost by definition, have been torn from their social networks. Refugee newcomers face a number of obstacles when trying to rebuild networks in a new community, particularly around language, culture, and discrimination.


In this section, you will learn about vulnerability, empowerment and autonomy, cultural humility, trauma-informed care, privacy and confidentiality, and how to ensure everyone's sense of safety and well-being when meeting in-person or online. Understanding principles of safe social support can go a long way towards fostering healthy social connections and guarding against future trauma.

- **FOSTERING AUTONOMY AND PRACTICING EMPOWERMENT**

It is important for volunteer Welcome Groups to distinguish between charity versus empowerment, and dependence versus autonomy. Those supporting refugee newcomers can run the risk of fostering relationships of dependency. This can be exacerbated by acts that may be perceived as charity – for example, excessive gift-giving, driving family members to appointments, giving financial or material support, etc.

Autonomy and empowerment are critical to integration for refugee populations. Newcomers must develop a sense of self-sufficiency. While self-determination and self-sufficiency are often associated with employment and financial independence, they also refer to the freedom to direct and practice one's own values, beliefs and culture.

Welcome Group volunteers should be careful of situations where they risk creating a dependency or impeding the self-sufficiency of the household they are matched with. Charitable actions like material support and giving



rides to newcomers might seem like the easiest solution to overcoming some barriers, but empowering them to overcome those barriers on their own is what will ultimately build up their autonomy.

Instead of driving newcomers to their appointments, show them how they can use public transit to get around, perhaps even accompanying them for their first few trips. Rather than giving gifts and other forms of material support, volunteers can visit Together Project's [Resources](#) page to find relevant donations services they could use. For example, under "Technology Resources," you'll find information on subsidized internet access and refurbished, discounted phones and computers.

• **CULTURAL HUMILITY**


Practicing cultural humility involves accepting the limits of what you may know about others and their culture, and working to increase your self-awareness of your own potential biases. Volunteers aren't expected to have all of the answers, and in fact are in a position to learn a great deal through participation in the Welcome Group Program. For more on cultural humility, click [here](#).

Approach your match interactions with an open mind, and note that if you create an environment of openness and mutual respect, you can learn a lot from one other and build trust over time. This trust is valuable not only as a foundation of a social connection between volunteer and newcomer, but also to ensure your support is well-received and effective.

• **VULNERABILITY**

Vulnerability describes the degree to which an individual or community is susceptible to harm or mistreatment. It informs many parts of development, humanitarian, and volunteer work, and it is a crucial concept for all Welcome Group volunteers to understand.

Working with vulnerable people entails understanding that newcomers' freedom and capacity to protect and care for themselves can be hindered by social and political circumstances, lack of knowledge and access to resources, and the potential inability to make fully informed decisions.



Reducing an individual's vulnerability requires building their capacity to mitigate, respond to, and cope with future hazards. For example, many newcomers may not speak English in their early days in Canada. Thus, they face unique challenges in navigating unfamiliar bureaucracies, public transit, and social systems. Limited financial resources are often a significant source of stress, presenting restricted options in day-to-day life and higher-stakes decisions. Volunteers should be mindful of the potential vulnerability of the household they are matched with, and adjust their approach to social support accordingly.

"People can get so much help from social services, government, and so on. But as a human being, what you need is some social support, you know, some love, kindness. And people around you to share your joy and your worries with."

-Feven




• **TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE**

Welcome Groups should be aware that trauma among refugees is often significant, but that volunteers are not expected to take on the role of social workers, psychologists, doctors, or counsellors.

Trauma-informed care is not intended to resolve or treat trauma, but rather to minimize the potential for harm and re-traumatization, and to enhance safety, control, and resilience of others. You don't need to know someone's personal history to use this approach.

Survivors of trauma often have difficulty in talking about their experiences, and someone who is asked to share their experience when they are not ready may be at risk of re-traumatization. Take the lead from the newcomer about what they want to share and when they want to talk about it. Be respectful of their choices, and always be mindful about how the long-term effects of trauma may be affecting their mental health. For more about trauma-informed care, click [here](#).



There are many local mental health supports available, and you can access a list of these on our [Resources](#) page under “Health and Mental Health Resources.” Welcome Groups can help newcomers find the mental health services they need— many of which are culturally-specific and free or low-cost.

• **PRIVACY, CONFIDENTIALITY, AND CONSENT**


If newcomers need their Welcome Group to help them access healthcare, volunteers can assist in finding a clinic, booking an appointment, and helping them navigate to the office. However, newcomers must be seen privately by their medical practitioner unless they request otherwise. Details about health conditions are confidential, and it is important to respect their privacy.

Because of the sensitivity of some of the information that might be shared with your Welcome Group in the course of your match, Together Project asks all volunteers to seek what is known as “informed consent” - permission granted in the knowledge of the possible consequences. Newcomers should understand exactly what they are consenting to and its potential consequences when they agree to, for example, have their photo taken, or have you advocate on their behalf.

Welcome Groups should be very careful when considering sharing their experience on social media. While you might be excited to share photos and videos with others, you should always ask newcomers for their consent prior to sharing any photos of them or their identifying information online. It is important to respect the privacy of refugee newcomer households, and not to solicit personal information beyond the scope of this project, and/or to file, store, or share information about the newcomers without their consent.

• **MEETING IN PERSON**

If a Welcome Group and a newcomer household agree to connect in person, they are free to meet up whenever and wherever they would like. For in-person meetings, we suggest that at least two volunteers are present to ensure everyone’s sense of safety and well-being.



When interacting with a refugee newcomer, always prioritize a sense of physical and emotional safety. If they agree to meet in person, they could be uncomfortable with a hug or a handshake. Be open-minded and always follow their lead.

If newcomer youth aged 18 and under need assistance with homework, it is important to have parental consent and to have two or more volunteers meet the youth, regardless of whether the meeting is in-person or online.

Throughout the year, Together Project organizes opportunities for groups to meet outdoors through picnics, nature walks, and more.

For our events, keep an eye out for our monthly Volunteer Resources Newsletters in your inbox.

"The picnic was a big tipping point in helping form the relationship between us and the family."

-Jas



TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE VOLUNTEERING

• FOCUS ON PRIORITIES

When refugee newcomers join the Welcome Group Program, they are asked to identify the key integration priorities of their household. These priorities are shared with Welcome Group volunteers ahead of their match, and can be thought of as the overall "road map" for the next six months of social support.



• **UNDERSTAND WELCOME GROUP ROLES**

Each Welcome Group has a member who serves as its Welcome Group Lead. The Lead is the main point of contact between Together Project staff and a Welcome Group. This person is responsible for assigning tasks to volunteers based on expertise and interest, and keeping track of their group's overall activities to simplify coordination with their Match Supervisor and, if applicable, the newcomer household's referring settlement worker.

However, each volunteer is a key participant in the Welcome Group, as everyone is carefully selected according to their skill sets and special interests to provide a support system for a refugee household.

When a Welcome Group is helping a newcomer family that is just learning to speak English and doesn't already include a group member that shares a language with them, a volunteer Cultural Ambassador will be assigned to the match to help bridge cultural and linguistic gaps. Cultural Ambassadors usually support three matches at a time and provide translation online or in-person.

• **MANAGE EXPECTATIONS**

If a newcomer household doesn't progress towards their goals as quickly as expected, some volunteers may become frustrated. Perhaps the newcomers still struggle with basic English, or they don't grasp local social customs, or they choose their priorities in a way that seems to slow down their overall integration process.

Remember that integration occurs at a different pace for everyone. Volunteers can be mentors, allies and guides in a newcomer's integration journey. It is neither expected nor possible to solve every problem that a newcomer faces during a six-month match.

Coming to a new country, especially as a refugee, can present unique opportunities and challenges. Always be patient, and celebrate whenever a challenge is overcome.

• **AVOID SERVICE DUPLICATION**

Welcome Group volunteers are not expected to single-handedly resolve every challenge a newcomer faces. Many service providers exist that can offer professional support towards specific challenges like employment, and other settlement workers might already be focusing on priorities like school or language class registration.

Rather than duplicate these services, Welcome Group volunteers can make sure that newcomers are aware and able to access them - this service navigation is one of the most valuable forms of support Welcome Groups can offer. To see a list of upcoming workshop events, be sure to check our Resources page, our social media accounts, and our monthly Volunteer Resources newsletters for a spectrum of services including language training, community connection programs, health and mental health services, and more.

"Early on, it was really important to have a set time to meet every Wednesday at 7:00. Whether it was fifteen minutes just to check in, or an hour and a half to talk about travel visas, it really helped to have something set so we didn't fall off track."
- Natasha





TIMELINE OF A MATCH

We've put together an outline of a common six-month Welcome Group experience, but please keep in mind that every match is unique.

MATCH INTRODUCTION

Your first meeting with the newcomer household will give everyone an opportunity to introduce themselves, discuss the match priorities, and plan out next steps.

Welcome Group volunteers should be prepared to introduce and share something about themselves, and to take notes on their match priorities and how to follow up with next steps.

The introduction will be facilitated by your Together Project match supervisor, who will also set up your WhatsApp chats with the household so that you can communicate with each other independently moving forward.

FIRST WEEKS

Early on in your match, you'll likely be developing a schedule for your interactions, problem-solving some immediate challenges, and organizing how your group will be addressing different priorities.

Here are some suggestions:

- Set up a regular schedule for interacting with the household you're matched with (e.g. around regular language practice, online or in-person check-ins, job search sessions, etc.)
- Determine which Welcome Group members are interested in assisting with which priorities - for example, some members might want to pair up to help the parents practice English, while another pair can focus on tutoring the youth, and the fifth member can focus on helping the adults with their job search

- Having met the family and discussed their priorities, the group can start looking into specialized resources related to those priorities - Together Project has a dedicated Resources page that can be a great jumping off point for research
- If the household has a dedicated settlement worker - typically, this is the person who referred them - the Welcome Group Lead should connect with them soon after the match introduction to discuss where the group will be focusing its efforts, and to see if the settlement worker may be able to assist with any resources or guidance
- Check in with your match supervisor regularly to share progress updates, obstacles, and insights - they're there to help!

MID-MATCH

After a few months, your group may have already addressed some of the household's more immediate priorities (e.g. registering in classes, finding a job, accessing healthcare), and it might be a good time to reassess the match priorities.

At this point, many matches may be focused on just one or two longer-term integration goals, like finding a good job or improving language levels. It might be a good time to suggest more socially-focused activities, like a picnic or shared meal, or an outdoor activity.

If you're unsure about how to progress with a certain priority, or otherwise feel like your group might be stuck in trying to help your match overcome a particular barrier, remember that you can always reach out to your match supervisor for support and suggestions.



"We have to meet people where they're at. Just show them that you're there and you're willing to show them things and take initiative if they want it."

- Kathleen



END OF THE MATCH

Most matches last for six months, however, some may end early if the match is not a good fit, or if the household no longer needs assistance.

At the end of the match, volunteers and newcomers will be asked to complete an exit survey to understand the successes and challenges of the match. This information is used to improve and refine the Welcome Group Program.

If a volunteer finishes their match and wants to support another refugee household, they can notify their Match Supervisor to see when they can be put into a new Welcome Group.

Depending on the number of newcomers signing up for our program, your help could be required in a few months, or even immediately. Some of our volunteers are consistently rematched, while others take what they have learned and use it to enrich other parts of their lives.

Either way, we hope that you share your experience with others, and encourage your friends and family to join us if they're interested in providing social support for refugee newcomers!



"Even if you have full-time work or school, it's a small piece of time with a big impact."

- Paula

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