

HUMAN RESOURCES AND SKILLS

Improving Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada's (IRCC) Regional Settlement Strategy

DESCRIPTION

In 2012, the federal government cut \$29.8 million from the budget of Citizenship and Immigration Canada (now Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada) and closed nineteen offices across Canada. This has impacted the ability of rural and northern communities to attract, retain and service newcomers and international students, and to subsequently grow their economies.

BACKGROUND

Under Canada's Constitution, responsibility for immigration is shared among the federal, provincial, and territorial governments. Traditionally, provinces and territories have entered into comprehensive agreements with the federal government (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada or IRCC) that cover a wide range of immigration issues.

Additionally, various provinces and territories have secured agreements that cover more specific issues, in response to their respective needs. For example, British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland and Labrador, the Northwest Territories and Yukon have signed Provincial/Territorial Nominee agreements, which allow them to invite immigrants to meet specific labour market needs.

In both cases, a central element necessary to implement these agreements were the local settlement offices that were supported and/or staffed by IRCC. These offices are crucial to performing the work necessary to carry out the agreements and ensure that the provincial and territorial immigration departments are aligned in encouraging and informing newcomers and international students of the possibilities and opportunities that exist in mid-size urban municipalities across the country outside of the larger metropolitan centres, and especially those in Canada's more northern regions. These offices also deal with complex immigration issues, including assisting new immigrants, refugees, international students and temporary workers in filling out applications and providing information on citizenship and immigration programs offered by the federal government. Additionally, the in-person services also help with citizenship testing, permanent resident card pickups and immigration interviews abroad. These offices also act as a resource for employers looking to recruit from abroad.

Budget 2012 outlined significant reductions in the funding necessary to operate these regional settlement offices and programs. The IRCC budget experienced a cut of \$29.8 million in 2012-13 and as a result, nineteen IRCC offices were closed or consolidated, and a number of services were relocated to central offices or moved online. The impact of these closures continues to be felt in local communities with the absence of localized, stand-alone service staff to assist newcomers. This has also resulted in newcomers, international students or local businesses having to travel to access settlement services at centrally managed locations that may be hundreds of kilometres from their city. Clients accessing services online or through the phone have also raised concerns about lengthy hold and wait times for newcomer inquiries.

Postsecondary institutions that traditionally referred international students to local IRCC offices for the ease of accessing services have also been impacted. Retaining international students is an effective way of addressing population challenges and building a skilled labour force in communities with post-secondary institutions, and increasing retention should be a key measure of growth plans of these communities. Such a

goal, however, requires IRCC offices to be easily accessible to provide guidance to those international students experiencing a transition in their legal status.

Despite assurances from the federal government that this consolidation has increased efficiency and assisted in the creation of common service standards, the new model continues to affect the ability of mid-sized urban municipalities in rural and northern Canada to attract and retain skilled immigrants. Instead, potential migrants continue to be drawn to larger cities that offer the immigrant and settlement services they need.

These cuts have been especially detrimental to northern and rural parts of Canada that are looking to immigration to grow their populations and fill vacant positions in their local economies. Population growth through immigration has been almost entirely centred on large urban communities, in no small part due to the availability of immigration services. Census 2016 revealed that Ontario's population as a whole grew 4.6 percent and Canada's by 5.0 percent. Even with such positive trends, northern Ontario, for one, continued to experience a population decline. Similar stories play out across the country: 60 percent of Manitoba's population gains since 2011 have been in Winnipeg; Halifax grew by over 13,000 people while the rest of Nova Scotia's population actually declined by 11,000. It is no coincidence that the only IRCC office in Manitoba is in Winnipeg and the only IRCC office in Nova Scotia is in Halifax.

There are some services that only the IRCC offices were able to provide that have now moved online or have become consolidated. Many newcomers do not receive the level of service they need through the call centre or the IRCC website and seek access to in-person immigration experts. Whereas they previously sought these services at IRCC offices, now they seek them from their MPs' constituency offices, which do not have the same level of expertise or dedicated resources that IRCC previously provided.

The IRCC operates temporary offices around the country, but they are open only for short periods of time, at a length of two or three days, and open sporadically with less than a month's notice. Most are limited to conducting ceremonies and very rarely are able to provide basic services such as landing interviews or tests. These offices, while useful for the services they do provide, do not specifically address strategies for rural and northern communities or the lack of access of these communities to in-person immigration services once newcomers/international students arrive to Canada that were lost with the local IRCC office closures. Effective offices would act as a hub of information and services for immigrants to allow them to transition into their new communities as seamlessly as possible.

Not only immigrants, but local employers have need of IRCC offices as well. The Express Entry system, which aims to match employers with candidates prior to their arrival in Canada, was introduced in January 2015 but has undergone regulatory and key rule changes as recently as the spring of 2017. While changing regulations is part of policy development and improvement, it does create confusion for stakeholders in the private sector. IRCC offices not only provide guidance and answer questions for immigrants, but also help employers navigate the changing regulatory landscape. This is crucial for rural and northern communities, the bulk of whose businesses are small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). The challenge of navigating a changing regulatory landscape falls heavier on smaller employers than on large, multi-national corporations with dedicated human resources staff. Helping SMEs overcome this challenge through IRCC offices would allow easier transition for new immigrants/international students and grow local economies much more effectively.

The federal government maintains that IRCC has been moving diligently towards an increasingly integrated, modernized, and centralized working environment; they point to technology allowing IRCC to process applicants anywhere and in a more effective manner. Budget 2018 allotted \$86 million to the IRCC in the 2018-19 fiscal year, but projected significant declines in that funding for the next four years. Additionally, none of that funding was earmarked for expanding immigrant services in rural and northern

communities or opening new IRCC offices in such communities. These budgetary short-comings persist even as the federal government intends to increase annual immigration levels by 13 percent by 2020.

Current budget allocations mean that rural and northern communities are unlikely to see the benefits of increased immigration levels. As of 2016, 70 percent of Canada's 7.5 million immigrants lived in Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal, Calgary and Ottawa. These same cities account for 43 percent of Canada's population, meaning that the portion of immigrants going to rural and northern communities is far below their share. It is not clear the federal government has a clear strategy to correct this disproportion and ensure that rural and northern communities can attract immigrants.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That the federal government:

1. Conduct a cost-benefit analysis of offering immigration services in rural and northern communities, and small and mid-sized communities that do not have access to IRCC services that faced IRCC closures. This analysis should include different options such as transferring in experienced staff to rural and northern communities, and small and mid-sized communities to be able to take on this role, hiring IRCC service staff at existing government buildings to assist newcomers and international students or re-opening select or targeted offices based on the results of the research.
2. Ensure that there is a regional strategy to apply fairly the resources required to meet settlement needs for newcomers in all regions of the country.
3. Build on existing programs such as the Atlantic Immigration Pilot and examine their potential for increasing migration to smaller communities.
4. Take action to include a national vision and strategy aimed at increasing immigration to rural and northern communities across the country by 2021.
5. Take action to develop a strategy to increase international student retention rates in rural and northern communities.