

Immigrants battle language barriers, isolation

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Immigrants who settle in the Tri-Cities, one of the top destinations in the province, face significant challenges in terms of English **language** ability, navigating the health care system and social isolation, new research finds.

The region, which includes Coquitlam, Port Coquitlam, Port Moody, Anmore and Belcarra, receives about 2,100 new **immigrants** each year, according to the 2011 Census. Forty per cent of Tri-Cities residents are **immigrants**.

Language training was the biggest need identified, with almost two-thirds of those surveyed by Reichert & Associates on behalf of the Tri-Cities Local **Immigrant** Partnership group saying they needed help. The research will be used by the group to inform a strategic plan for immigration to the Tri-Cities, due in March 2016.

Sandra Wilking said her organization, S.U.C.C.E.S.S., along with others that provide English classes to newcomers, is having to put people on six- to 12-month waiting lists.

This is because there are not enough instructors to meet demand, but also because of the arrangement with Citizenship and Immigration Canada, which funds classes for permanent residents, Wilking said. The amount of money B.C. receives from C.I.C. is proportional to the number of **immigrants** the province receives, and that number has been on the decline in recent years, even though the Tri-Cities is experiencing a surge.

Not being able to effectively communicate in English affects an **immigrant's** ability to find a job, conduct daily business, make friends and participate in his or her community.

Health care was another area of concern identified in the research, with just under half of respondents (49 per cent) reporting problems understanding or accessing the system.

"For example, you've got to go to the GP to get to the specialist. In some countries that is not true; you can go straight to the physician that you know," Wilking explained. "Or if you go to a hospital or an ER, what happens there."

Thirty-eight per cent of **immigrants** surveyed also reported problems finding a job or with underemployment.

Other challenges identified in the research, which consisted of interviews, surveys and focus groups involving **immigrants** living in the Tri-Cities, are similar to those identified by people who grew up in Canada.

Finding a family doctor, for example, is also a challenge faced by Martin Wyant, CEO of SHARE Family & Community Services in Coquitlam. He has not been able to find one after several years in Metro Vancouver and still uses clinics.

Social isolation represents another challenge that is not unique to **immigrants**, though it may be exacerbated by other factors such as limited English **language** ability.

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Despite the fact that almost all **immigrants** (98 per cent) said it was important to feel connected to your community, just 44 per cent said they felt welcome in their neighbourhood, 47 per cent were neutral on the question and nine per cent reported feeling unwelcome.

One in four Tri-Cities **immigrants** said they find it difficult to make new friends and 40 per cent reported being alone more often than they'd like.

A 2012 survey by the Vancouver Foundation asked the same questions to a sample of all Metro Vancouver residents. One in three respondents to that survey said they had a difficult time making friends, but a smaller proportion (25 per cent) reported being alone more often than they'd like, suggesting this may be a larger challenge for **immigrants**.

"I live and breathe that report. Big time," said Wyant, referring to the Vancouver Foundation research on social isolation. "The sense of disconnection is large and it's true. As someone coming from northern Ontario to B.C., I feel it."

Wyant noted that because Tri-Cities residents are more likely than others in Metro Vancouver to live and work in different cities, forming community ties can be more of a challenge.

"It sounds silly and trite, but how do we get people to make friendships, to make a connection, to build some trust with their neighbours, to find some common ground?"

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