



## Pan-Canadian Community Development Learning Network Profile of Effective Practice:

# Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers

### Context

The time was the early 1980s, the Vietnam War was drawing to a close and people were fleeing the brutal and dangerous conditions of their homelands. Many were ending up in refugee camps throughout the region as the violence had spread to include surrounding countries such as Laos and Cambodia. As the rest of the world increasingly realized the plight of the hundreds of thousands of refugees, countries like Canada began to open their doors to them. While moving to a region far from the perils of conflict was a welcome opportunity, the transition and acculturation to another society was not as simple as just showing up and participating. In order for newcomers to realize full social inclusion, bridging and resource infrastructure had to be created.

This Profile of Effective Practice is one of fifteen stories examining how innovative, community-based initiatives are using comprehensive approaches to improve social and economic conditions on a local level.

The profiles were prepared as part of a 2.5-year project of the Canadian CED Network looking at the links between social inclusion and community economic development.

For other profiles, more information on the project and additional resources on social inclusion and CED, see the notes at the end of this document.

### History

The Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers (EMCN) was formed in response to the great number of refugees coming to the city. A woman from a Mennonite church in Edmonton who had spent several years as a nurse in Vietnam became quite concerned when she learned that Canada was going to be opening its doors to many refugees, realizing that their transition to Canada would not go smoothly unless the newcomers received some assistance. She recognized that her experience naturally positioned her as someone who could be useful for kind of resource, and she began to enlist others from her church to get involved. They first began with some basic settlement services and English as a second language (ESL) classes in 1981 and incorporated EMCN in 1984.

### Edmonton, Alberta

**History** – In the land of the Cree and the Blackfoot, Edmonton became the “Gateway to the North” when it developed as a trading and commerce center beginning in 1795. The city boomed during the Klondike Gold Rush of 1897 as many moved through Edmonton on their search for fortune. Many of the prospectors eventually made Edmonton their home.

**Economy** – For the “Oil Capital of Canada,” high energy prices and low interest rates have contributed to high rates of investment and growth in Edmonton’s economy, with the City reporting an actual shortage of skilled labour available to ‘fuel’ this growth.

**Social Need** – In the context of this case study, newcomers to Canada locating in Edmonton continue to need considerable support with various resettlement challenges.

**Claim to Fame** – The “City of Champions,” Edmonton is well known by sports fans as the winner of 5 Stanley Cups between 1984 and 1990 as well as 7 Grey Cups between 1975 and 1987.

EMCN has grown significantly since that time and now, with the energy and gifts of 70 staff and several hundred volunteers, the organization is involved in a whole range of activities, partnerships, and relationships with the newcomer community of Edmonton.

### Activities

EMCN has grown to include a whole range of activities; something that is both reflective of the wide range of newcomers' needs as well as the responsive approach taken by the organization. EMCN offers ESL, employment services, housing, settlement counselling, personal counselling, community development and community economic development, advocacy and education. Some current priorities include family literacy, refugee housing, and specialized counselling for survivors of torture and trauma. ESL services are geared to those needing part-time classes at various times of the day. Employment services include drop-in help with resumes, job clubs, extended training programs, and full-year programs such as the Engineers' and Technologists' Integration Program. Every year, thousands of newcomers are able to access better jobs through EMCN's services than they would have been able to on their own.

The community capacity building projects are often developed or greatly supported by volunteers, many of whom are members of ethno-cultural communities. They include association members, board members, cultural brokers, and settlement workers volunteering many hours on an ongoing basis. EMCN also supports ethno-cultural community groups in developing their own programs through planning, training, and building partnerships, and works with community members to increase newcomers' access to health services by assisting in health projects, educating mainstream communities, and providing on-site psychological counseling services.

More recently, EMCN has been working to develop a Multicultural Centre and International Marketplace project. This is a major collaboration of community partners and vendors from a multitude of immigrant communities who want to develop their businesses in a marketplace atmosphere. The Multicultural Centre and International Marketplace is planned for the main

### EMCN

**Year Incorporated** – 1984

**Vision** - Newcomers will achieve full participation in the community, contributing their experiences and skills to strengthen and enrich the fabric of Canadian society.

**Activities** – ESL, employment services, training programs, settlement support services, counselling, community development, community economic development, advocacy, education, housing, professional accreditation, community capacity building, and business development.

**Impact** – Employment assistance for thousands every year and generally increasing the ability of newcomers to integrate into Canadian society with the necessary supports/services

floor of the primary EMCN building, with the goals being the economic development of immigrant entrepreneurs and the social development of the local neighbourhoods around the EMCN.

Another of EMCN's projects with multiple benefits is a 40-unit housing facility, which includes 20 units for transitional housing. EMCN recognized that with the high level of immigrant poverty and the huge housing crisis in Edmonton, the demand for their few units would be overwhelming. So they focused on making their housing spaces available specifically for refugees who, due to pre-migration trauma, were having an extraordinarily difficult time making connections and rebuilding their lives. EMCN found that many newcomers were living in isolation and in poor conditions in various parts of the city. This new facility provides quality and affordable housing in a community setting based on a self-help model, bringing together currently isolated people so that they can live together and support each other. They are also closer to EMCN services and have a community space in which to meet, socialize, and organize, providing them with an opportunity to explore interdependence and build on the ideas and positive contributions that they have to offer.

**EMCN's Mission:** *In a spirit of respect and compassion, with a concern for truth and justice, Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers will work to create opportunities for independence, choice, participation, voice, health, and self-esteem by offering relevant programs and services. This means:*

- *Determining needs in full and equal partnership and collaboration;*
- *Providing programs to meet identified needs;*
- *Identifying and working to change structures in society that are barriers to the acceptance and participation of newcomers;*
- *Helping create an attitude of acceptance towards immigrants and refugees*



*Foreign-trained engineers listen to a presentation from a large engineering firm on the Canadian work context.*

*Photo: Ben Lemphers*

## Participatory and Comprehensive Analysis

Initially, EMCN emerged as more of a charitable model; it was about good people looking to do good things for those in need. As new initiatives were created over the years, EMCN increasingly became departmentalized to the point where staff and services were more and more segregated. Staff in one department had no idea what staff in other departments did. "It was like three separate organizations," explains Executive Director Jim Gurnett.

But things began to change when Gurnett arrived four years ago. Sure that there must be a better way to support the newcomer community, Gurnett and the senior staff team made two course-altering decisions. One, EMCN would become more horizontal and integrated in their service delivery so that a person walking into any one of their doors could receive a much more comprehensive assessment and the staff could work with them to identify many more options that might be helpful to them than they had perhaps initially thought of asking about. Two, they would become more participatory by always talking and listening to newcomers' lives, dreams, and challenges and would then try to capitalize on their visions and address their needs.

But in order to create a new model for the structure and practice of EMCN, the leadership team knew that it would take an articulated explanation of what this new approach was all about in order for the staff and volunteers to grasp what they envisioned. Thus began the process of creating their Holistic Integrated Practice (HIP) framework, which was finalized and adopted in 2004. And yes, EMCN is now truly a HIP place!

EMCN states that the HIP framework affects the perspective and activities of each person working at the agency, and there is a shared responsibility to understand and demonstrate the



*The early childhood development centre is part of EMCN's comprehensive approach*

*Photo: Jen Gilecki*

approach. HIP means that in organizational structure and operations, EMCN focuses on how to best achieve its mission, rather than fitting the mission to the agency's structure or activities. The HIP framework is less about philosophy than it is task-focused. (For the full text of HIP, see Appendix A.)

One challenge of this new approach is that each staff person must increase their awareness of all aspects of EMCN's activities and resources and needs to be willing to engage any person they encounter with a more holistic assessment of

their situation and available resources and supports. Gurnett describes this as a transition "from a jigsaw to weaving." There is also a shift in how staff view the people they are working with. "We try not to use the term 'clients' anymore, we are all part of the community. It is not about 'us and them,' this is about learning from each other. The relationships need to be 'flatter' and more democratic."

This new framework also means more work and responsibility. While all of the staff are expected to use the HIP, Gurnett admits that some staff have found the transition quite frustrating and the resulting employment less satisfying. "Those who love it, they love it a lot. Others were more used to the traditional model. But now, rather than just collecting a person's resume for example, the staff are supposed to invite the person to share more widely about their life, and find out if there are other supports that they could use."

The shift in focus to a participatory and empowering approach came from seeing that working only with individuals and families had its limits in terms of making a difference in a whole community of newcomers. This is why EMCN embarked on a new stream of capacity building activities, working with other newcomer organizations and informal newcomer groups from a wide variety of cultural communities to support them in the creation of their own solutions to the challenges and opportunities they face.

Being responsive to the dreams and priorities of the community has had another natural result: a much more multifaceted set of activities and services are now happening at EMCN. Although Gurnett says the new participatory and listening approach has resulted in many more ideas than EMCN can possibly enact, they do pursue whatever they consider doable and fundable.

“We heard again and again that refugee housing was too expensive and unsafe, so we set up supported housing because we heard about the anxiety in people’s lives this caused. Now we are hearing about school systems. School staff don’t have training on cultural diversity or how to be culturally responsive, so we put cultural liaison workers in place that will help school staff understand various issues and will also work with the children and parents in order to understand how the Canadian school system operates so that there are fewer issues in the future. This work is important because the high school non-completion rate of teen refugees is 90%.”



*Economic success for immigrants often requires them to gain more experience with computers and software.*

*Photo: Vrinda Naik*

## **Outcomes and Evaluation**

In 2001, EMCN developed a 5-year strategic plan that articulated their vision, mission, goals, strategies, rationale, and action items. The strategies include: facilitation, evaluation, communication, collaboration, coordination, advocacy, incubation, revenue generation, and accountability. Evaluating how they are doing is not always easy to measure, particularly with the new approach. And so, EMCN uses a variety of evaluation mechanisms in order to capture most completely and appropriately what their impact in the community has been.

EMCN develops logic models with outcome indicators for each activity or service. As stated in the HIP, “All staff should be able to describe work so that goals, activities, outputs and outcomes (short, medium and long term) are distinct and clearly presented, and to maintain records that enable progress in all these areas to be evaluated.”

In the case in their housing initiative, they have been able to access resources to develop a large multi-year research project in association with a professor at the University of Calgary that is conducting a detailed analysis and tracking of the interdependent nature of the dynamics experienced by newcomers in need of affordable, quality housing. This research project will track not only what happens in the lives of the people in the EMCN building, but will also

compare control groups of similar people without this housing opportunity in Calgary and Winnipeg over the next few years. This will provide considerable insight into the initiative and will help demonstrate how interdependence works – something that is very important in garnering the support of funders, policy makers, and the broader public when taking a holistic, multifaceted approach to organizational activities.

EMCN is also in the process of piloting a new database developed by an NGO in Calgary called HOMES. This is an initiative of the Alberta Association of Immigrant Serving Agencies (AAISA) and is funded by the Province of Alberta. EMCN is one of five AAISA agencies piloting the database. The substantial database and reporting system will include every kind of recorded data about activities and people that EMCN thinks might be of value at some point.

In a broader societal context, EMCN also evaluates its work by looking around the city to see what impact they are making on the dominant culture's attitudes toward newcomers and on general integration of newcomers. Naturally, this is difficult to measure and perhaps even more difficult to attribute praise or blame for changing trends. While there are some slow yet positive changes taking place at the City of Edmonton, such as the creation of a Diversity Office to evaluate City hiring and programming practices, Gurnett points out that there is still much to be accomplished on this front.

Regarding the evaluation of the HIP, Gurnett explains, "We believe, and we have good reason to believe, that this simply is the just way to work with human beings. And so, until people complain about our new approach, we will continue on with it. There are so many more positive comments and compliments; it is such a great relief for newcomers to be able to come to one place and all sorts of other things also start happening. Rather than stumbling through the community looking for help, now many solutions come from one place. People are saying 'I can't believe how good it was for my family to come here, I just came here for a job, now my wife is in ESL, my teens in programs, and my younger children are in an early childhood program.'"

A quote used around EMCN regarding the new approach explains their perspective, "Talking about HIP is like talking about Niagara Falls or the Rockies. Not until you're there do you experience its true magnificence." So far, the anecdotal evidence overwhelmingly supports the new participatory and holistic practices.

## Unique Success Factors, Policies and Lessons

A significant challenge for EMCN and the immigrants and refugees they support is that the province of Alberta still does not have an immigration policy. This makes it more difficult to make a case for funding new services that the community and EMCN identify as being necessary. While they have received

### Lessons Learned

- A unique success factor for EMCN has been the high level of commitment from the staff. Gurnett says, "I have never worked with such a group of powerful and committed people. We could not be out on the edge, taking all those chances, investing all the energy that we are if the staff didn't fully care about the full participation of immigrants in our community. The work doesn't happen nicely between 9 and 5, our centre is a hive of activity Saturday afternoons, Sundays, and every evening. The staff work whenever it best works for the community."
- In taking a new approach, it is important to hire deliberately with this in mind. And it is important to have senior staff that are willing to spend lots of time with them, supporting them during the transition.
- You need to be fully respectful and honour the fact that everyone has good ideas; you can't impose from the top down. Good leadership can influence and give people ideas, but you need to slow down with your own ideas and listen to others in the community.

## *Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers*

significant support for ESL and some employment support services from the province, many of the community's other more innovative solutions do not receive support. EMCN's good ideas and great results are able to leverage funding for many of their initiatives, but an overall provincial policy with clear goals and priorities would make acquiring support that much easier. The City of Edmonton also has had nothing in place to support newcomers.

However, both of these levels of government are in the process of changing their lack of support. The province is drafting an immigration policy that should be available in the fall of 2005 while the City is also exploring options for increasing their support to the newcomer community. One way that the City has already been supportive has been by influencing the local Family & Community Support Services (a joint municipal-provincial program) to provide EMCN resources for various projects from time to time.

*Brendan Reimer*

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*For more information on the Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers, visit their website at <http://www.emcn.ab.ca>*

*More Profiles of Effective Practice and other resources on social inclusion are available at: <http://www.ccednet-rcdec.ca/en/pages/learningnetwork.asp>*

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## **APPENDIX A – Holistic Integrated Practice (HIP) Overview**

In July, 2004, Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers officially adopted a model of structure and activity called "Holistic Integrated Practice" (HIP). **Holistic Integrated Practice** describes the approach being used to ensure the mission of the organization is achieved in the fullest way. It affects the perspective and activities of each person working at the agency, and there is a shared responsibility to understand and demonstrate this approach. HIP means that in organizational structure and operations EMCN focuses on how to best achieve the organizational mission, rather than fitting the mission to agency structure or activity. The HIP model also offers improved opportunity for professional growth and career advancement for staff members.

What does HIP look like?

1. The organizational structure of the agency is not described through such traditional "departmental" labels as Community Services, Career & Employment Services, Language Services, and Administrative & Finance Services. Staff work in a wide range of ways in cooperation with others
2. Groupings of staff are fluid. As programs or services are developed or modified appropriate groups of staff will be brought together to meet the requirements of the area of activity in the best possible way. These groups may vary over time. At a given time a particular staff person may be participating in more than one such service team. This enables people with various specializations or strengths or areas of interest to be able to contribute in such areas to the fullest extent and not to be doing things for which they may be less qualified or less interested simply because of their location in the organizational structure or the position for which they were first hired.
3. Relationships are a key part of the HIP model. EMCN has comprehensive human resources policies that describe both the overall philosophy and the specific details of how staff should relate to each other in a wide range of ways. EMCN is not a good place to work, generally, for a person who prefers to "be left alone" to do her/his job in isolation from other staff and the overall agency life, no matter how excellent the person's particular skills may be. Every bit as important as honest and caring relationships between staff of the organization is for every member of staff to treat all others coming to the agency with dignity and affection. Every room in the agency displays a clear statement of EMCN's commitment about how we are to work with people. It is out of this relational approach to work that the capacity to holistic integrated practice arises, not from technical skills in particular duties.
4. Jobs in the agency are described using a common template with standard descriptors and categories. All jobs are identified in terms of work of equal value using this template and a numeric formula of weighting. The salary grid for the agency is based on the application of this template. Each level of the grid represents one or more jobs that have similar numeric value even if the activities are quite different. There may be positions paid at the same level as members of the leadership team but who do not have leadership/managerial responsibilities, but are at that level of remuneration because of other factors related to their job requirements (for example a position that requires significant educational background or professional credentials).
5. A Lead Team works closely together to ensure there is continual attention that HIP is being practiced throughout the agency and to develop new areas of activity that are



consistent with the mission in the fullest possible way. The Lead Team includes the Executive Director, Associate Directors, Managers and Coordinators. The Lead Team provides the opportunity for staff wanting to be involved in leadership in the community/NGO sector to participate in a progressive development of skills and experiences with increasing responsibilities. Generally each more senior level of the Lead Team will have both greater program and professional supervisory responsibilities for some area of activity AND greater expectations to commit time and energy to the agency as a whole.

6. The initial and early contact of a person with EMCN is a critical part of the HIP model. No one should be able to come to any part of the organization and receive a single isolated service or information. Some effort, in an appropriate way, should be made with each person to invite them to offer information about other needs or questions or information they may like to share. Each staff person should be able to either provide a good referral to someone else in the agency who can help with a further service or be able to provide this additional assistance her/himself. At a minimum all parts of the agency should have posters and leaflets about other agency services clearly visible and available. Excellent complete and accurate record keeping is important to HIP success too. All such record keeping must meet all legal standards regarding privacy and confidentiality. A new database should be available for all staff in the agency to use by mid-2005 but until then all staff should use other acceptable approaches that have been approved by their supervisors.
7. Each person has aspects that have often been described in such terms as physical, mental, relational, spiritual and emotional. In more recent times, the complex set of circumstances that affect a person's life have been presented using the health determinants approach that identifies income, social status, social supports, education, employment, social environment, physical environment, health services, gender and culture as important to understand and address if a person is to have a healthy and successful life. HIP recognizes that there are systemic issues that must be addressed for people to be able to fully participate and not that each individual is wholly responsible for her/his own success or otherwise and that the organization's work is done if individual/family services are provided. This means that as programs and services are developed or modified there is consideration of where this work for public policy and/or social change may also be an aspect of activity.
8. HIP is consistent with the concepts of Community Development. It depends on listening carefully to what people have to say and developing activities that seek to work with people. In a more traditional NGO model the image is of the organization as a restaurant, offering a "menu" and people can come and order. Often the dishes on the menu were determined by either the ideas of professional helpers and experts, perhaps using academic research as well, about what people "need" or by the priorities of funders. In HIP the image is of a collective kitchen instead, where the dishes to be prepared are decided in a cooperative way and where the work is also done together, people working side by side, rather than "top down", valuing each other as equals, even if some are sometimes doing more giving and teaching and others more receiving and learning.
9. Complementing the HIP model, all activities and services at EMCN are described using a logic model of outcomes. All staff should be able to describe work so that goals, activities, outputs and outcomes (short, medium and long term) are distinct and clearly presented and to maintain records that enable progress in all these areas to be evaluated.