



**MAKING CANADA HOME:
THE SYRIAN REFUGEE
RESETTLEMENT INITIATIVE
TWO YEARS AFTER ARRIVAL**



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the organization responsible for the resettlement of 2,200 government-assisted Syrian refugees to Toronto, COSTI undertook a follow up telephone survey in the Fall of 2018 to learn more about their resettlement process and how they are doing one and a half years since the last survey was conducted in the Fall of 2016.

Three hundred and fifty-one (351) adults who are Head of Households participated in the survey; representing 82% of the 430 Syrian families resettled by COSTI. Interviews were conducted by phone by Arabic-speaking staff.

This document provides an overview of the challenges and successes of Syrian newcomers living in the Greater Toronto Area, as well as key findings for additional supports and service improvements.



Syrian newcomer family settled in Mississauga in 2016. “My daughter no longer hides underneath her bed or cries out at night!”

Given the difficult circumstances surrounding their departure from their country, this survey indicates that these refugees are doing better than anticipated at this point of their resettlement. Sixty-three percent (63%) continue in English classes, 50% have had paid employment, they are connecting with the broader community as 73% have made friends who are not Syrian, 96% of their children participate in school activities including afterschool activities such as sports, 75% report that their families’ emotional health has improved since coming to Canada and 100% want to become Canadian citizens. These are all healthy signs of a journey towards successful integration.

KEY FINDINGS FROM SYRIAN NEWCOMERS LIVING IN THE GREATER TORONTO AREA AFTER TWO YEARS

Ninety-three percent (93%) informed COSTI that their English has improved since coming to Canada (39% ‘somewhat better’ and 54% ‘much better’).

Sixty-three percent (63%) are attending English language classes, a decline from Year 1 (86%), as a result of respondents securing employment. 92% of those not attending English language classes reported they are not on a waitlist. For the 8% on a waitlist, times vary from 1 – 12 months with the majority having waited under 7 months (99%).

Barriers to participation in English language classes were health (98%) and transportation (2%).



Mahmoud Bakkar, Participant in Syrian Newcomer Professionals Internship Program – working full-time.

50% of all respondents secured paid full-time or part-time employment at some point after arriving in Canada, 25% more than Year 1 findings.

33% of respondents were working as of November 2018. 14% are working full-time and 19% are working part-time.



Mosbah Matar and his family found their first permanent home in Canada in March 2016. Move-out day was filled with excitement...and boxes!

Two and a half years after arrival, 79% of Syrian newcomers continue to live in the same home they moved into from temporary housing. 68% are happy with their present accommodations.

81% informed COSTI that their current health is good (53%), very good (16%) or excellent (12%). In addition, 45% report their health has improved since coming to Canada, 45% stated their health remained the same and 10% indicated that their health had deteriorated.



87% indicated that they and their family are happy (83%) or very happy (4%). 10% reported they were sad and 3% identified themselves or a family member as being depressed. Most respondents indicated their sadness and depression stems from poor physical and emotional health.

91% of respondents with school-age children indicated that their children are doing well to excellent at school. 96% of children participate in sports and after-school activities.

Three-quarters of respondents have made friends who are not Syrian since coming to Canada. (93.4%) know their immediate neighbours.

99% are glad they came to Canada and all but one respondent intend to become a Canadian citizen in the future.

“My children do a lot of volunteer work at their school.”

“They go to libraries, trips, also, they go skating and participate in activities organized by COSTI.”

INTRODUCTION

In October 2015, Prime Minister Trudeau announced Canada would resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees, a commitment that has since been surpassed. The year 2016 marked the largest refugee resettlement initiative in Canadian history, with over 46,000 refugees resettled in 2016.

The response from Canadians towards the Syrian Refugee Resettlement Initiative was extremely positive, with thousands and thousands of Canadians making monetary donations; donating their time; donating household furnishings, backpacks, books, etc.; coordinating social and recreational activities; and providing opportunities for employment.

As of March 1, 2018, just under 52,000 Syrian refugees have arrived in Canada. From November 4, 2015 to February 28, 2018, 2,200 Syrian newcomers have resettled in the Greater Toronto Area.

In the Fall of 2018, COSTI Immigrant Services undertook a follow-up telephone survey to ascertain how Syrian newcomers who arrived between November 4, 2015 and December, 2016 are doing two and a half years later.

METHODOLOGY

Phone surveys were conducted by Arabic-speaking staff to ensure language was not a barrier to participation. The Interviewer faced some challenges in undertaking the survey owing to an inability to reach potential participants (e.g. phone numbers no longer in service, no answer), as well as clients who were unable (e.g. due to illness or hospitalization) to participate. Only one client contacted declined to participate in the survey.

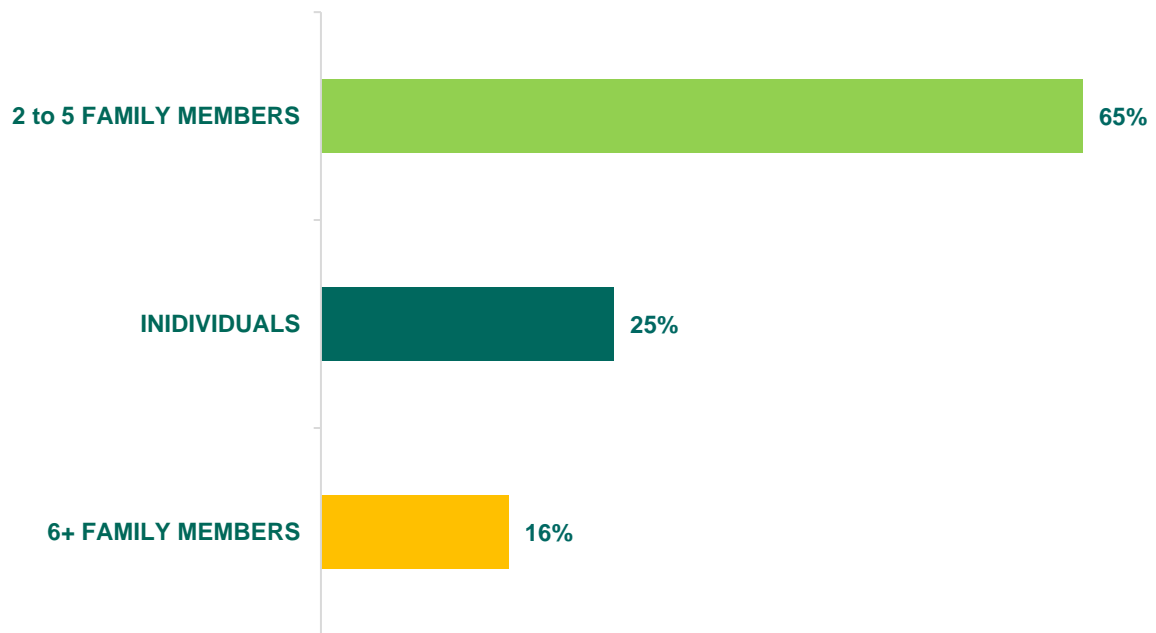
Although the majority of respondents were Head of Households within family units, in some cases the spouse was asked to participate. Respondents were asked to provide verbal consent prior to beginning the survey.

PARTICIPANT PROFILE AND FINDINGS

In total, 351 adult Head of Households participated in this survey; representing 80% of Year 1 arrivals. Almost 80% of respondents arrived between December 2015 and March 2016.

Syrian newcomer respondents included a significant number of larger-sized families. Sixty-five percent (65%) of respondents have family unit sizes of 2 – 5 and twenty five percent (25%) arrived as individuals. Almost 16% arrived as part of a family unit of six (6) or more people. Respondents have an average family size of 4.6.

SIZE OF FAMILY UNITS



ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION AND TRAINING

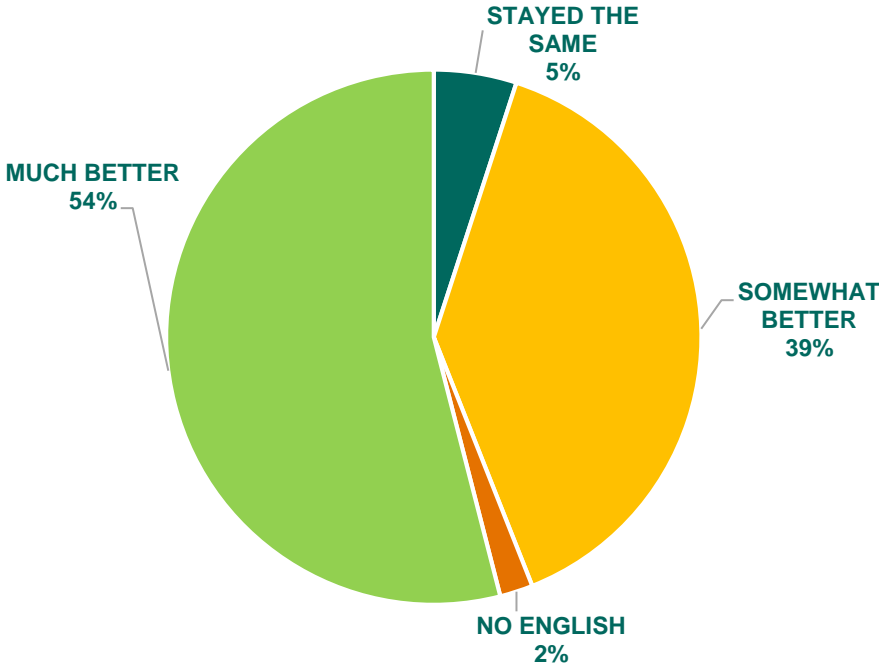
Most Syrian newcomers arrived in Canada with little or no English language proficiency, a finding supported by our Year 1 results in which 86% attended English classes.

Two and a half years after arrival, English language proficiency has continued to improve. When asked if their level of English has improved since coming to Canada, 93% reported their English to be somewhat better or much better (39% and 54% respectively – see Figure 1). Two percent (2%) continue to self-identify as having no English.

Currently, 63% of respondents reported attending free English language classes, representing a decline from Year 1 (86%), primarily due to respondents securing employment. Ninety-two percent (92%) of those not currently attending English language classes similarly report they are not on a waitlist. Waitlists vary from 1 – 12 months, with the majority having waited under 7 months (99%).

Barriers to participation in English language classes included health (98%) and transportation (2%).

LANGUAGE IMPROVEMENT
Figure 1



Consideration of perceived language improvement by English language classes attendance indicates that 93% of respondents who attend language classes feel their language is 'much' or 'somewhat' better than last year. While it is not possible to link these findings to level of English language upon arrival (self-reported or test-based), the finding raises questions about the need for other forms of English language learning and practice, particularly in response to the ongoing challenges related to a lack of childcare spaces and/or the need to care for isolated family members dealing with health-related issues.



Ten percent (10%) of respondents have participated in additional training and/or educational programs other than English classes, including academic courses (e.g. adult education and community college), employment related courses (e.g. work ethics, work search), job-specific training (e.g. cooking, hairstyling, construction, plumbing, welding) and food and safety.

Syrian newcomer Khaled Abdulwahed and Lana Qadoumi
Khaled attends English classes, is pursuing employment and a University education.

“I am a pharmacist, I am working and learning English, and want to have my credentials certified.”

EMPLOYMENT AND INCOME SECURITY

Fifty percent (50%) of all respondents reported having secured paid full-time or part-time employment at some point after arriving in Canada. Thirty-three (33%) are currently employed, of which 14% are working full-time and 19% are working on a part-time basis (see Figure 2). In Year 1, 90% of all respondents who indicated they were not working, cited not being able to speak the language, learning English, or health issues as the main reasons for not working.

EMPLOYMENT STATUS

Figure 2



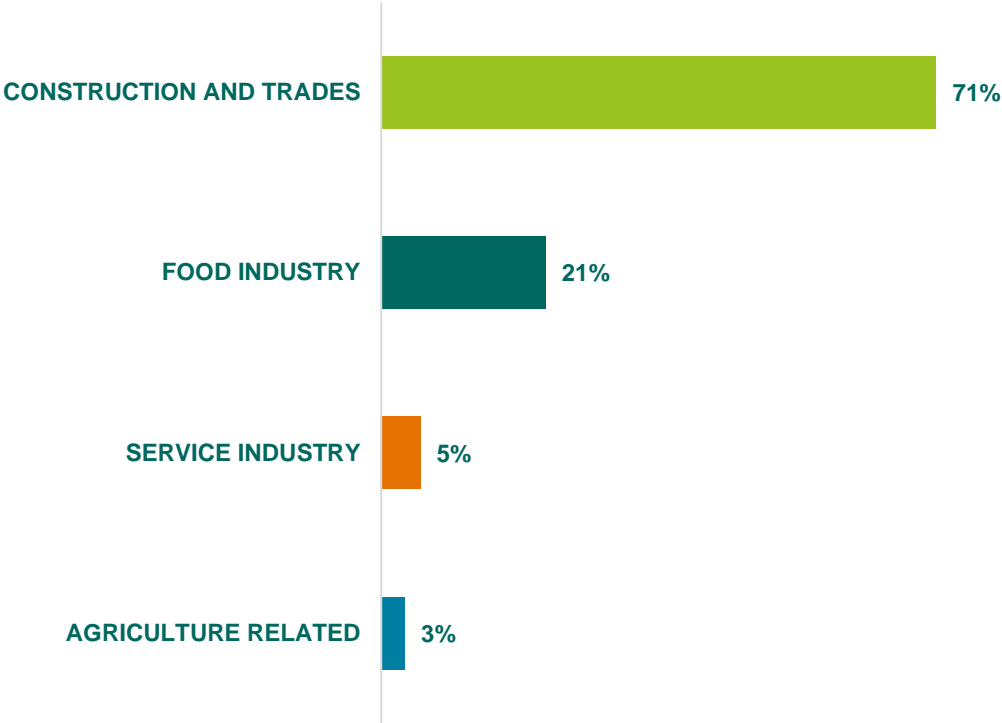
Forty-eight (48%) of respondents who are working, are employed in a similar job to the one they had before coming to Canada. There was no significant variation between those working full-time and part-time.

“When you apply for anything, you need Canadian work experience.”

“The language is a barrier, I am a tailor and I need to be able to communicate with customers.”

Syrian newcomers are employed primarily in Construction and Trades (71%), Food Services (21%), Service Industry (5%) and 3% in Agriculture related jobs (see Figure 3). As compared to Year 1 findings, this represents an increase in Syrian newcomers employed within the Food Services, Customer Service, and Construction and Trades industries.

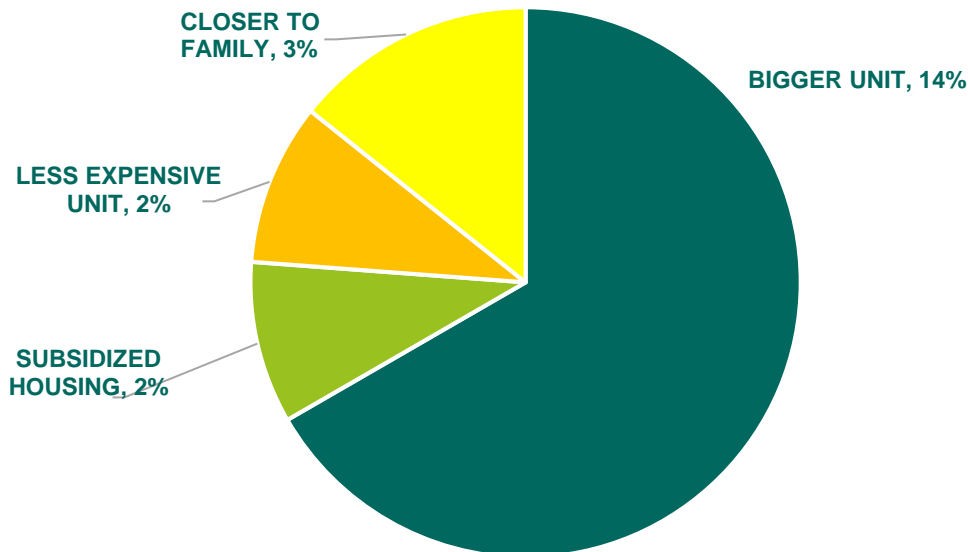
EMPLOYMENT SECTOR AND INDUSTRIES
Figure 3



HOUSING

Two and half years after arrival, over 79% of Syrians continue to live in the same home they moved into from temporary housing. Reasons for moving included: moved to a bigger unit (14%), to be closer to family (3%), less expensive housing (2%) and moved into subsidized housing (2%). (see Figure 4).

REASONS FOR MOVING
Figure 4



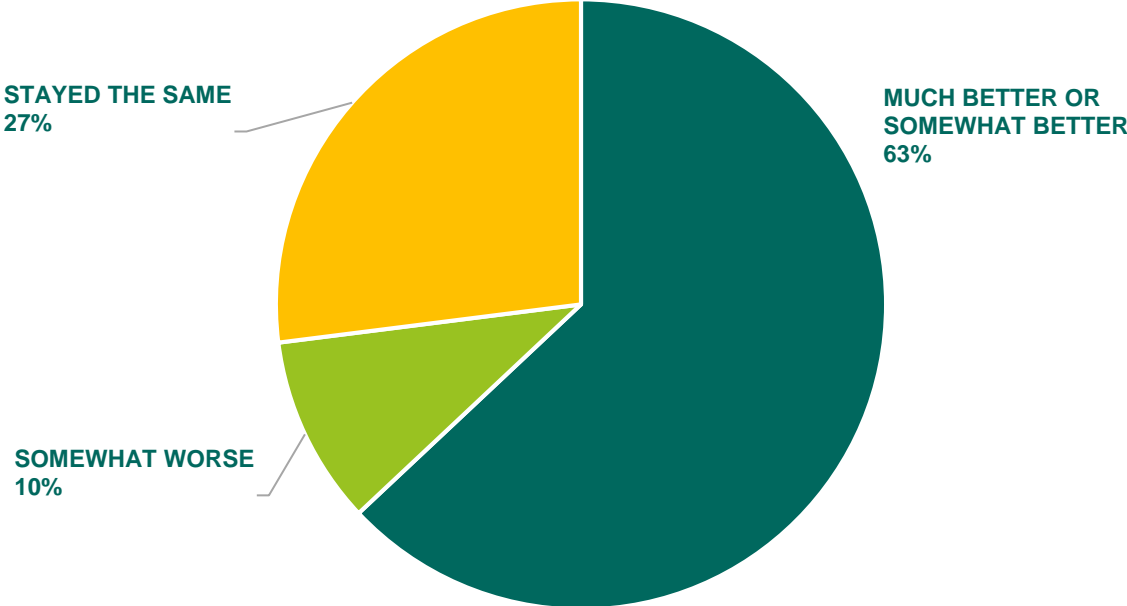
Seventy-eight (78%) of respondents who are no longer living in their initial housing have moved one time, 22% have moved three or more times since arrival.

Sixty-eight percent (68%) reported being happy in their current/present home because they live in a nice neighbourhood/area, convenient location (close to schools, stores, doctor), and rent is affordable.

“We live in a nice building surrounded by nice neighbours.”

Sixty-three (63%) of respondents who have moved report the condition of their housing is much better (16%), or somewhat better (47%). Twenty-seven percent (27%) indicated that their housing situation stayed the same and 10% somewhat worse (see Figure 5).

HOUSING CONDITIONS
Figure 5



“It’s close to my kids’ school and close to everything I need.”

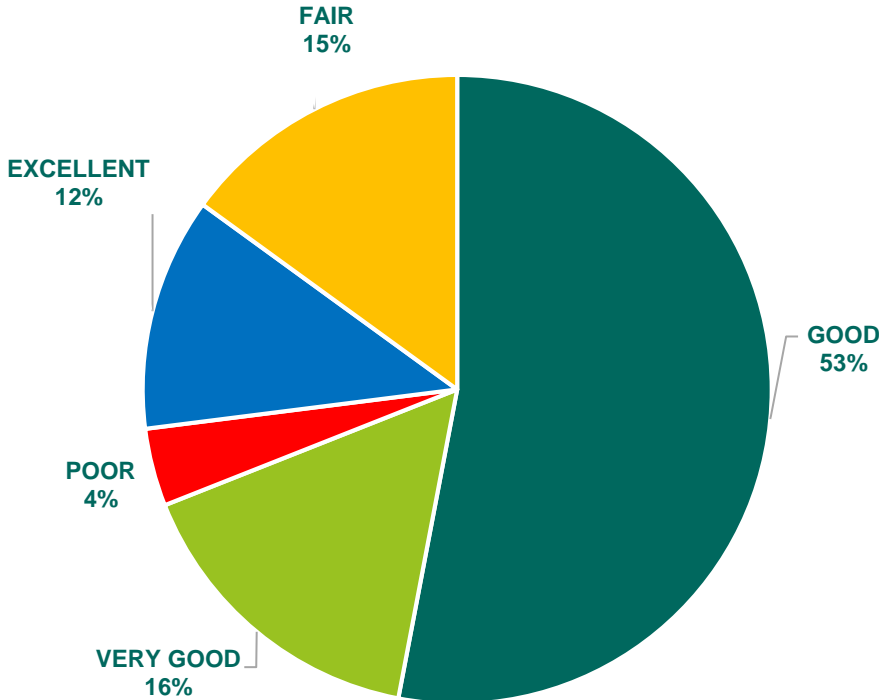
“Public transit and grocery stores are just a few minutes away from where I live.”

HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Overall, 81% of participants expressed they and their families are in good or excellent physical health, with many indicating that their health and well-being had improved since coming to Canada.

Respondents were asked questions relating to their current family’s physical and emotional health, as well as to speak to whether these had improved or worsened over the last year. The vast majority of respondents reported their current health to be good (53%), very good (16%) or excellent (12%). In addition, 45% reported their health has improved and 45% stayed the same since they arrived in Canada, and 10% indicated that their health had declined (see Figure 5).

STATE OF PHYSICAL HEALTH
Figure 5

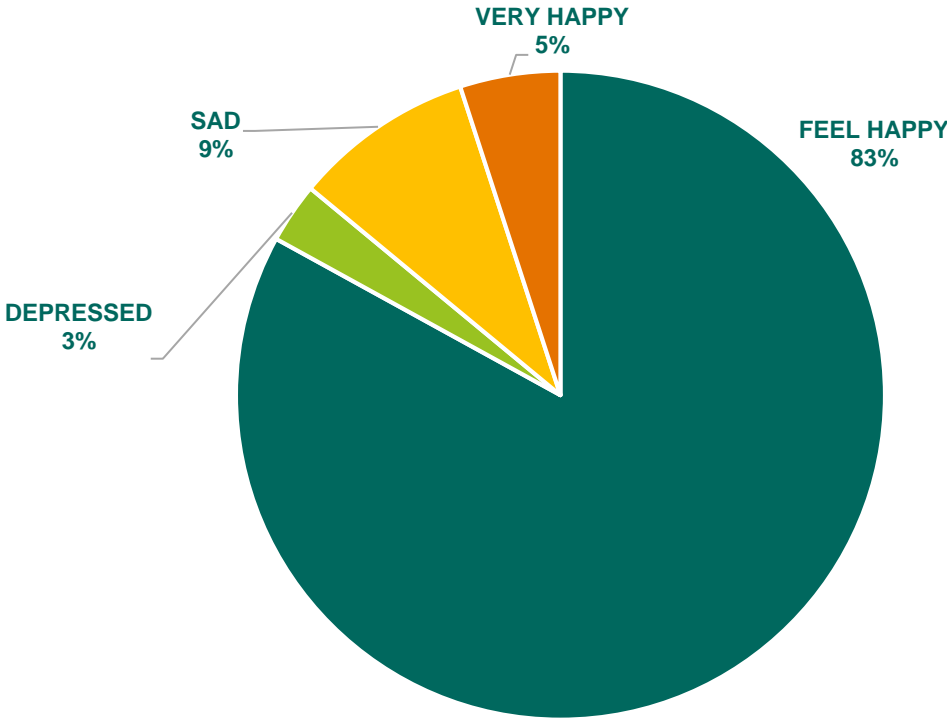


Close to nine out of ten respondents (88%) report their family to be happy or very happy. Nine percent (9%) indicated their family to be sad and 3% depressed (see Figure 6). Seventy-five percent (75%) reported that their family’s emotional health improved since coming to Canada.

Ninety-nine percent (99%) of respondents reported having a family doctor, and 89% noted that their health needs have been addressed by having access to good doctors, receiving the right care, being able to communicate with the doctor in their mother tongue, and being able to visit their family doctor regularly.

Eleven percent (11%) reported that there are no clinics nearby or that a family doctor is not easily accessible, medication as well as physiotherapy are expensive and not covered by OHIP.

STATE OF EMOTIONAL HEALTH
Figure 6

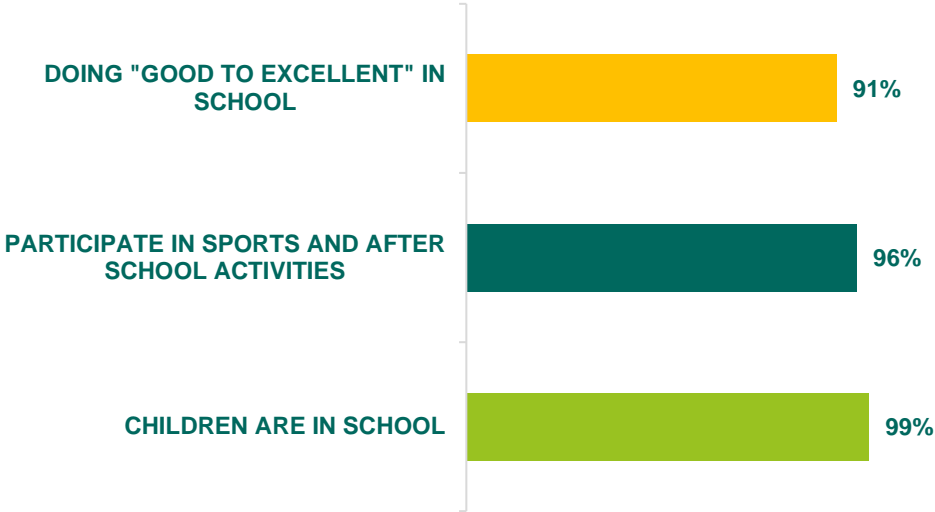


“We visit our family doctor when we face health issues, but dental care is very expensive.”

Given concerns expressed by parents about their children’s future integration, it is encouraging that most parents with school-aged children believe their children are doing well to excellent (91%).

Ninety-nine percent (99%) of children attend school, with 96% of children participating in school activities. Children participate in sports or after school activities, such as swimming (35%) soccer (25%), hockey, football and gymnastics (10%), and children attending all the activities provided at school (30%).

ENGAGEMENT OF CHILDREN
Figure 7



COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT AND EARLY INDICATORS OF INTEGRATION

Respondents were asked a series of questions relating to broader involvement with the community, as well as citizenship, in order to obtain a sense of early integration.

- Two-thirds of respondents reported having made non-Syrian friends since their arrival in Canada.
- Ninety-three percent (93%) of respondents know their immediate neighbours.
- Over half reported accessing their local library and 73% access their local community centre.
- Sixty-six percent (66%) attend mosque on a regular basis, 2% attend church, and the remainder do not attend a mosque or church.
- Ninety-six percent (96%) are familiar with public transit. Ninety-nine percent (99%) are glad they came to Canada, and 100% intend to become a Canadian citizen in the future.



Mother's Day Hike at the Limehouse Conservation Area with the Toronto Bruce Trail Club.
Photo Credit: Together Project/Tides Canada

While integration is difficult to measure, responses indicate Syrian newcomers are making connections with others in the community, including their neighbours and making non-Syrian friends, as well as accessing supports and services in the local community.

Even as they do so, however, ties to family and friends in Syria and abroad remain strong. Remittances represent one way in which refugees can provide necessary supports to family and friends abroad. At the time of the research, 6% are financially supporting family/friends in Syria or in neighbouring countries.



Participants of COSTI's Syrian Newcomer Youth Leadership Program.

OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

To better gauge how Syrian newcomers are doing two and a half years after arrival in Canada, respondents were asked a series of three open-ended questions:

- What specific information on Canada would be good to have before coming to Canada
- What is their most pressing need or concern, and
- What message they would like to provide to COSTI or the Government of Canada

Analysis of the responses to open-ended questions identified seven major themes:

- Gratitude and Thanks
- Learning English
- Employment and Income Security
- Housing
- Health and Mental Health
- Family Reunification, and
- Education

Highlights of responses to the three open-ended questions are presented, followed by discussion of the main themes overall.

Where possible we have included participants' words.

“I need to find more affordable housing. The rent is very high.”

“I need help finding a job.”

“I need help to bring my daughter, son and parents here.”

Important Information: Pre-Arrival

Participants were asked to reflect on what information would have been helpful to receive prior to arrival in Canada in order to ease their subsequent integration. The most frequently cited areas for pre-arrival information were:

- Housing
- Employment
- Canadian Law
- Education System
- Life Experiences (culture, weather)

“Rent is too high. Need to know about this before we arrived.”

“If I had known learning English was this hard, I would have learned more before coming to Canada.”

“It would be good to know more about employment before coming.”

Most Pressing Needs or Concerns

When asked about their most pressing needs or concerns, Syrian newcomers provided insight into the daily challenges being faced in their new homes. They need help with:

- Reuniting with family members abroad
- Finding affordable housing
- Finding employment
- Financial support
- Learning/Improving English
- Children's homework
- Finding a family doctor and/or dentist
- Getting a Driver's license

“Educated newcomers are struggling to find the right job for them. We need five years at least to evaluate our credentials and hopefully find work in our field.”

“We would appreciate to have some volunteers who can help us improve our English at home.”

“My son has autism and his health is worse now, I am asking if anyone can help us to improve his situation.”

Message for the Government of Canada and COSTI

Resettled refugees may not often get an opportunity for their voice to be heard by those in Government and/or provide feedback to the organizations they access. In order to provide an opportunity to 'speak' to these groups, participants were asked if they had any message they would like to give to the Government and/or COSTI.

While some responses focused upon the need for improvement and change, the overwhelming message from Syrian newcomers two and a half years after arrival was one of thanks. Almost 70% of responses to this question thanked the Government of Canada and Canadians for welcoming them to Canada and expressed gratitude for the ability to begin a new life in safety.

“I just want to thank the government for all their support and thank you to COSTI for helping us, even after two and a half years, they keep in touch with us.”

“I am asking the government to provide job opportunities for handy men like myself. I need some support to open my own business and in this way, Canada will benefit from us.”

“I would like to let the government know that the LINC classes are not efficient; I am in Level 1 but how can I improve if I am not familiar with the letters?”

“All my children are in Canada and we are thankful for all of the help.”

“I would like to thank the government for bringing us to Canada. We came here without paying anything and my kids now are getting the best education in the world and they are doing great in their schools. Their future has changed since we landed in this country. I can't tell you how much I appreciate what was given to us.”

“Thank you to the Canadian government for all the support and I want to kindly ask them to support the newcomers who are working here and paying taxes. Sometimes it becomes complicated for the people who are working than the people who are on welfare; I mean, I was asked to provide a lot of documents for the government in order to continue having child benefits for my kids. It took one week off from work just to complete all the requirements. Please support us instead of making it harder on us.”

“I am so proud to live in Canada and I wish that someday I will make Canada proud of me as well.”

“Thanks to COSTI for all their support. They helped us a lot with all our paper work and applications. The staff were so great with us.”



Photo Credit: Lisa Kannakko and Together Project/Tides Canada

CONCLUSION – COSTI’S RESPONSE TO SYRIAN NEWCOMER NEEDS

The responsibilities undertaken by COSTI Immigrant Services to resettle 2,200 government-sponsored Syrian refugees occupied us for most of 2016 and 2017. In 2018, our focus was to continue to improve our services to Syrian newcomers by addressing service gaps within COSTI and develop new programming and partnerships to help address clients’ concerns.

As noted in the survey responses, the vast majority of Syrian newcomers are either working or taking English classes. However, they continue to have concerns regarding employment, health, housing and their children. The challenges in serving such a large group with a broad range of needs, inspired a review of how COSTI delivers services to refugees. As a result, a Refugee Services Division was established in 2017 to bring greater focus and innovation to refugee services.

Below are highlights of how COSTI has been addressing the needs identified by respondents in the survey.

Mental Health Needs

COSTI received a number of refugee families who were victims of Daesh. It became clear that the trauma suffered by these families required a more intensive and supportive response. Consequently, staff in the Division were trained in trauma informed care and a wraparound service approach was instituted for high need clients. This approach includes the involvement of volunteers and specialized community services to support the families. In fact, it was identified that the children of these families needed summer activities and a number of organizations stepped forward to help. The York District School Board offered free space and other organizations offered a variety of resources resulting in a summer camp for 200 children and youth, set-up quickly and without additional funding.

COSTI’s Family and Mental Health Services worked with the Refugee Services Division to develop a Wellness Centre to more holistically address the mental health needs of the refugees. Training was provided to COSTI staff working with refugees on mental health literacy and a mental health screening tool was deployed for all government-sponsored refugees shortly after arrival to identify the need for wellness supports. Wellness supports now include clinical counselling and exercises in sustainable coping strategies such as meditation, mindfulness and yoga sessions and recreational activities.

Enhancing Opportunities for Learning English

For those women experiencing difficulties in accessing English language classes, COSTI has established small group sessions near their home and individual tutoring at home as well.

In partnership with the Syrian Canadian Foundation, home and community-based English language training is delivered to Syrian newcomers, with tutoring provided by the University of Toronto.

Employment Services

A number of pre-employment workshops, one-on-one assessments and referrals to job finding and skills development training were offered in 2017. Last year, 27 Syrian newcomer professionals participated in the Paid Internship Project for Syrian Newcomer Professionals, sponsored by La Fondation Emmanuelle Gattuso. All 27 were successful; 23 found employment in the Accounting, Banking, Information Technology (IT), Architecture and Health & Safety Training in Construction fields; 2 returned to school in pursuit of certifications; and the remaining 2 participants joined English classes and are considering self-employment. We are currently working to secure new funding so that we can continue to offer this successful service-delivery model to newcomers and future arrivals.

In addition, COSTI has partnered with the Labour Education Centre in providing Syrian newcomers with safety training certification and referral to construction unions for job placement.

Cultural and Community Engagement

Syrian newcomers who are socially isolated and not engaged due to emotional or traumatic experiences are provided recreational, socialization, cultural and community activities through COSTI's Community Engagement Office. This includes field trips to parks, winter tobogganing and trips to museums. These initiatives are proving effective in helping individuals suffering from trauma move to a more functional state.

More broadly speaking, our community partners have been working with COSTI to provide a variety of opportunities to our clients to engage more fully in the community. The Centre for Refugee Studies at York University provides field trips, the Sick Muse Project provides art therapy sessions, CultureLink provides music sessions and cycling, Snug Harbour Media provides dance lessons in Canadian and Dabbkeh idioms, the Toronto Public Library provides story-telling and arts and crafts and Camp Engies provides a summer weekend engineering camp for girls. This is a small example of the many activities available to our clients to expose them to Canadian culture and to help them integrate.

COSTI's Stakeholder and Volunteer Engagement General Manager, continued to work with existing and new partners to deliver services to all government-sponsored refugees that support their integration: housing support services; activities, community events and workshops that engaged children and parents; introduction to services available in their local community; and donations of food, clothing and household items.

In addition, a family-matching initiative that saw Canadian host families paired with refugee families continued in 2017/18 with the Together Project. Host families provided invaluable support and assistance to refugee newcomers – from the day they move from temporary housing to their new home. They provide support in receiving furniture; setting up their households; shopping for essential items such as food, bedding etc.; escorting families to local financial institutions, grocery stores, parks and community centres; exploring nearby public transportation routes, and help in registering children in school. Having the host family by their side has proven to be a great comfort to recent refugee families arriving at our Ralph Chiodo Family Immigrant Reception Centre. The program expanded to London, Ottawa, Thunder Bay, matching over 375 volunteers with government-sponsored refugees.

Additional programming added over the past year:

- The Newcomer Youth Civic Engagement Project addresses the national priority of increasing civic engagement among newcomer youth. Approximately 140 newcomer youth between the ages of 16-21 are recruited from four partner sites across Canada to participate in the series of activities, aiming to increase engagement among newcomer youth.

Partners provide program development, training workshops, a community project, and a national youth gathering. Youth receive 25 hours of programming through leadership training workshops and participate in a youth-led community project and a national gathering, where they present on their community project and are able to network with peers from across Canada.

- In 2017/18 COSTI partnered with the Together Project in developing a standardized model of volunteer engagement with government-sponsored refugees –all were Syrian newcomers. Together Project, connects refugee newcomers and Canadians to build stronger, more integrated communities through three program areas: matching, community and research.

Together Project developed the “Welcome Group” model in close partnership with COSTI. The model builds on existing family matching programs and connects Canadians with government-sponsored refugees from all countries of origin who arrive at COSTI’s Ralph Chiodo Family Immigrant Reception Centre.

Together Project and COSTI developed a series of four manuals to empower volunteers and tools for volunteering with refugee newcomers. Over 250 volunteers in London, Ottawa, Thunder Bay and Toronto were trained using the manuals, available online, and provided with information and training to best support refugee newcomers, and to understand the role of volunteer support in fostering durable integration.