



October 22, 2020

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

ORIENTATION TO ONTARIO PROGRAM LAUNCHES BILINGUAL CHATBOT

NEWCOMERS CAN NOW ACCESS, UP-TO-DATE INFORMATION
ON PROGRAMS AND SERVICES RELATED TO THEIR SETTLEMENT NEEDS
ANY TIME OF THE DAY OR NIGHT

Toronto, October 22, 2020 – COSTI is proud to announce the launch of the Orientation to Ontario (O2O) Bilingual Chatbot. The Chatbot is the newest addition to O2O's client-centered user experience, where newcomers can access standardized information about settling in Ontario and connecting to community services as soon as they arrive, while accessing print and online resources, on-demand webinars and workshops, at any time.

Dr. Rupa Banerjee, together with post-doctoral fellow Leslie Nichols, received a grant from the Canadian Institutes for Health Research to develop a digital solution to address a pressing social need of a vulnerable population in the community. The digital solution prototype, a chatbot that would reach newcomers and provide settlement information in an accessible way through mobile devices, was presented to a panel of expert judges at the Hacking Health Conference in June 2017. The digital prototype received the "Most Scalable Idea" Award for its capacity to be widely applied across multiple platforms. A member of the expert judges, Cossette Health (an app development firm now known as Gene Global) expressed its interest in working on the initiative by offering its services and expertise pro bono.

"We are thrilled that COSTI's Orientation to Ontario program was selected to partner on the development of the Chatbot," says COSTI's Executive Director, Mario J. Calla. "The program has a tradition of offering newcomers a variety of in-person and online tools and resources catering to the different learning styles of newcomers. The O2O Bilingual Chatbot is a complementary component to existing O2O resources and services available, allowing tech savvy newcomers to learn more about Ontario, and explore and receive answers to their settlement questions at any time."

"The O2O Chatbot is a great addition to the array of client-centered resources offered by the O2O program," comments Cathy Woodbeck, Executive Director of Thunder Bay Multicultural Association and O2O partner. "It provides newcomers to Ontario, in our case Northwestern Ontario, with answers to their most frequently asked settlement questions, based on their immigration status and topic of interest such as employment, education, housing, training, money and personal finances and community involvement. It makes it easier for clients to get the information they need in real time, and has been built in a way that the answers given are relevant, accurate, and tailored to the needs of each newcomer."

The O2O Chatbot also connects users to local settlement service providers, 211 Ontario and settlement.org. If users require additional information not included in the pre-defined responses, the chatbot also includes an option to contact the O2O Program Team.

The O2O Chatbot can be accessed on COSTI's website (www.costi.org) and O2O's website (<https://settlement.org/o2o/>) and is available at all times.

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For more information, please contact:

Mary Cellucci, COSTI
Mobile: 647-631-1574

COSTI Background Information:

COSTI Immigrant Services is a community-based multicultural agency providing employment, educational, settlement and social services to new Canadians and individuals in need of assistance. Since 1952, COSTI has been helping those in need, assisting newcomer professionals and tradespersons and all individuals looking for employment, providing hope to refugee families, protecting women and children, strengthening families, combating racism and discrimination, and assisting all those who function at a disadvantage in society.

With a staff of over 350 people, speaking more than 60 languages, COSTI strives to ensure that all individuals, regardless of language, cultural, or financial barriers, are given the opportunity to use their existing skills, learn new ones, and participate in all aspects of Canadian life. COSTI presently provides support to over 39,000 individuals annually.

www.costi.org

Orientation to Ontario (O2O) L'Ontario, c'est chez moi:

A bilingual initiative, O2O is designed to ease the transition of newcomers by providing access to standardized information about settling in Ontario and connecting newcomers to community services upon arrival.

Jointly funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada and the Province of Ontario, the program consists of three different resources catering to different learning styles: workshops that are delivered by 32 service delivery organizations in 26 communities across Ontario; print resources; and an interactive website featuring O2O online resources and on-demand webinars. COSTI administers the program in collaboration with the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI), Centre de sante communautaire Hamilton/Niagara and George Brown College.

In 2019/20, 5,940 newcomers participated in 430 workshops delivered across Ontario.

<https://settlement.org/o2o/>