

# FROM HUMANITARIAN TO HUMAN

Changing the Way We Welcome  
Refugee Claimants



A PARTICIPATORY QUALITATIVE REPORT  
DECEMBER 2021



Yes it was.  
But, I can.

Participant Poem  
Refugee Claimant Voices  
Poetry Workshop  
August, 2021

We respectfully acknowledge that we live, work, and welcome on the traditional and unceded land of the Coast Salish peoples, including the shared traditional territories of the x<sup>w</sup>məθk<sup>w</sup>əyəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliłwətaʔt / səliłwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh).

Though the histories are distinct, commonalities exist between refugee claimants and Indigenous communities in Canada such as forced displacement, family separation, language and cultural oppression, colonization and marginalisation. We hold space for the inherent complexity and contradictions that emerge as we create safe refuge for newcomers on Indigenous Lands.

Both newcomer refugee and Indigenous voices must be heard to take steps towards reconciliation, dignity, belonging and justice.



## REFUGEE HOUSING & SUPPORT

### KINBRACE COMMUNITY SOCIETY:

This project was initiated by Kinbrace, BC's longest-serving housing provider for refugee claimants, offering dedicated support and accessible educational resources across Canada. Launched in 1998, the Kinbrace community offers a steady and ever-widening welcome to people seeking refugee protection in Canada.

The name "Kinbrace" joins two words: kinship and embrace. Each year, Kinbrace provides transitional housing and wrap-around support for approximately forty newly arrived refugee claimants. These families and individuals live in the community for three to nine months before moving into permanent homes. Across the country, Kinbrace's Ready for my Refugee Hearing resources are critical for thousands of refugee claimants annually as they navigate Canada's crucial yet complex refugee determination system. Kinbrace's dream for each refugee claimant is a world of welcome, a community of belonging, and a life of opportunity.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to acknowledge all individuals with lived refugee claimant experience who reflected on their experiences from the time of submitting their refugee claim to the time of receiving protected status in Canada. We appreciate your insights, openness to share your experiences and all suggestions to enhance experiences of welcome for and with refugee claimants to come.

Led by Kinbrace, this project was guided by an intersectoral, diverse, and experienced Research Steering Committee (RSC). The RSC provided meaningful feedback throughout the duration of this research project to enhance project quality, timelines, and achievement of outcomes.

**RESEARCH STEERING COMMITTEE:**

Jenny Francis (Chairperson)	Instructor, Geography Coordinator, SSH Research	Langara College
Derek Chu	Director of Operations	Kinbrace
Loren Balisky	Director of Engagement	Kinbrace
Kristi Pinderi	LGBTQ+ Support Worker	DiverseCity
Claire Roque	Ministry Specialist for Inland Protection of Refugees	RCEC Diocese of London- Refugee Ministries
Joni Rose	Senior Program Advisor	BC Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing
Nicole Stinson	Senior Advisor - Strategic Planning, Governance and Enterprise Risk Management	BC Housing
Shagufta Pasta	Senior Strategic Advisor, Organizational Initiatives Executive Office	BC Housing
Karen Gelb	Social Impact Coach	Social Venture Partners
Erin Goheen	Lecturer/Board of Directors	UBC/Kinbrace
Jenny Moss	Executive Coordinator	MAP BC
Geraldine Pratt	Head of Department, Professor (Geography), CRC in Transnationalism and Precarious Labour	UBC
Azadeh Tamjeedi	Legal Officer	UNHCR Canada

Key insights for this project were also provided by a **Community-Based Advisory Team (CBAT)** comprised of three individuals with diverse lived refugee claimant experiences. The CBAT provided guidance in the development of the research mechanisms and processes. Thank you, **Shanga Karim, Dennis Juarez and Diamo Tims.**

**Niwar Ameen Obaid** was a critical contributor to the success of this project in his role as **community based researcher**. Niwar provided insights and leadership, enhanced community outreach, applied his professional writing expertise in the facilitation of poetry and prose workshops, as well as drawing from his own experiences navigating the Canadian refugee claim system to connect with participants while cultivating meaningful discussion as well as supporting the thematic analysis.

Funding for this research was generously provided by a **Vancouver Foundation** Systems Change Develop Grant. We thank the Foundation for supporting this and other projects taking action to address the root causes of pressing issues.

We thank **The Houssian Foundation** for their generous funding to support the human rights of refugee claimants.

This project was undertaken by **Alexandra Dawley Consulting** - a consultancy that utilizes a participatory approach to enhance belonging and integration of refugees during - and as result of - meaningful research projects.

vancouver  
foundation

THE  
HOUSSIAN  
FOUNDATION

alexandra DAWLEY  
PROJECT MANAGEMENT • RESEARCH CONSULTING

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Kinbrace Community Society	02
Executive Summary	05
List of Acronyms	08
Introduction	09
Context	10
Background: Refugee Claimants in British Columbia	10
How Can We Amplify What Is Working To Change Systems?	12
Our Focus	13
Methodology and Research Approach	14
Literature Review	14
Community-Based Approach	14
Qualitative Study	14
Participant Demographics	15
Ethical Considerations	16
Data Cleaning and Analysis	16
Research Limitations	16
What We Heard	17
Dignity	18
Dignity in the Listening Sessions	18
Dignity in Poetry and Prose	20
Dignity in Visual Art Submissions	24
Belonging	26
Belonging in the Listening Sessions	26
Belonging in the Poetry and Creative Writing	27
Visual Art Submissions	30
Wellbeing	32
Wellbeing in the Listening Sessions	32
Wellbeing in the Poetry and Creative Writing	33
Wellbeing in the Visual Art Submissions	36
So, What Does This Mean?	38
Actionable Recommendations	40
Conclusion	41
References	42

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The majority of community-based research undertaken with refugee claimant communities in Canada explore the barriers to settlement or integration that these communities face. Studies undertaken in recent years have identified the adversities faced by refugee claimants and have played a critical role in identifying gaps in policy, resources, and service provisions. There is a need for affordable housing<sup>1</sup>, greater clarity and ease to find and access settlement services<sup>2</sup>, and more effective avenues to employment opportunities<sup>3</sup>. The research is clear: the majority of refugee claimants face significant hardship upon seeking asylum in Canada including within BC. It is also apparent that there are many stakeholders working hard to support refugee claimants as they face these challenges<sup>4</sup>. Undertaken from an asset-based systems change framework, this research takes a new approach. Instead of asking participants to recount gaps, challenges, or name the barriers they have faced, we explored where refugee claimants encountered dignity, empowerment, and mutuality from the time of submitting their refugee claim up to their hearing date with the aim of amplifying those “bright spots” and identifying opportunities to collectively move towards scalable, multifaceted, beneficial change.

Initiated by Kinbrace Community Society and funded by a Vancouver Foundation Systems Change grant, “From Humanitarian to Human” is a community-based research project led with the guiding question of: “What would a values-based, human-centered, and transformational welcome for and with people seeking refuge and protection in Canada look like?” We sought to better understand and challenge the humanitarian approach, charitable mindset, and organizational model - all systems deeply impacting refugee claimants. This research was facilitated through three distinct phases with individuals who have lived refugee claimant experience from across BC: Listening sessions; poetry/prose workshops followed by an invitation for creative writing submissions; as well as a call for visual art contributions. Drawing from thematic analysis of the thought-provoking insights shared by participants, a list of nine actionable recommendations is proposed: Steps towards more human-centered systems and practices of welcome for refugee claimants.

## METHODOLOGY AND APPROACH

In order to propel systems change, it is essential that all relevant stakeholders, in particular those typically seen as “beneficiaries,” “recipients,” or “persons of concern” are included as valued contributors to share their expertise and perspectives towards the development of impactful solutions. For this reason, we utilized a community-based qualitative design to ensure that refugee claimants and key stakeholders are at the heart of this research and proposed steps towards systems change (Minkler, 2004; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003).

The community-based approach was implemented in three ways: first, through the formation and guidance of a multisectoral and diverse Research Steering Committee (RSC) which was involved in the overarching design and implementation of this project, offering expertise and meaningful support. Second, assessment and review of all research tools used within this project came from a Community-Based Advisory Team (CBAT) comprised of three people with diverse lived refugee claimant experience. Together, potential gaps were identified and interview prompts/research materials were enhanced to ensure an Age Gender Diversity (AGD) approach was applied. Third, a community based researcher provided his professional skills and leadership, enhanced community outreach methods, facilitated interviews, led workshops, and drew from his own experiences navigating the refugee claim system to cultivate deep discussion as well as insight for the thematic analysis.

The number of research participants was limited to 23 due to the scope and capacity of this project. This was both large enough to allow for the unfolding of new and richly textured understandings while small enough to ensure the deep, case-oriented analysis inherent within qualitative data (Morse, 2000). Our qualitative sample was purposive; participants were invited based on their capacity to provide meaningful, in-depth information, as well as a cross-section of distinct experiences with AGD considerations. The first research phase, **listening sessions**, comprised one-on-one interviews with 20 participants. A strong rapport was established with each participant, and open-ended questions produced rich experiential sharing. Phases two and three applied an

<sup>1</sup> Report from 2018 Housing Forum retrieved November 20, 2021 from: <https://mapbc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Refugee-Claimant-Housing-Forum-Report-and-Action-Plan-2018.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Pomegranate Consulting (20019). Towards a Housing Solution for Refugee Claimants in BC: A Plan for Action. Addressing the Urgent Shelter and Housing Needs of Refugee Claimants in BC. MAP BC

<sup>3</sup> Statistics Canada (2020). The Long-term Labour Market Integration of Refugee Claimants Who Became Permanent Residents in Canada, Retrieved November 20, 2021 from: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11f0019m/11f0019m2020018-eng.htm>

arts-based research approach, to go beyond the limits of traditional reporting by utilizing creativity and expressive art. Our aim of utilizing arts-based research methods was for the reader to see experiences from a new angle and gain enhanced understanding of refugee claimant perspectives. We hope that this method will result in new levels of empathy, deep reflections, and the questioning of existing systems (Barone & Eisner, (2011; Lapan, Quataroli & Riemer, 2012). Phase two included poetry and prose workshops led by the community based researcher with nine participants who have lived refugee claimant experience. This was immediately followed by an **invitation for creative writing submissions**, yielding twelve submissions from which ten were deemed most related to the guiding questions and selected for inclusion within this report. Phase three stemmed from a **call for visual art contributions**. Participants with lived refugee claimant experience were invited to create and share art depicting meaningful moments of connection and/or personal reflections of belonging during their refugee claim experience. Six participants submitted nine pieces, seven of which are included within this report. A key element of our findings, the results of this arts-based research are evocative and compelling.

This research was coupled with a literature review which explored existing research in asset-based development; systems change; Canadian refugee claimant settlement and integration; Canadian refugee protection laws and policies; and mutual transformation/reflexive views on refugee integration and inclusion, belonging, dignity and wellbeing of refugees in Canada and beyond.

## WHAT WE HEARD

Throughout this research, it was confirmed that the individual experiences of refugee claimants are varied and unique based on a variety of factors including intersections of identity such as age, race, English language ability, gender, sexual orientation as well as other factors such as method of claim, family bonds, and the circumstances causing them to flee for safety. Participants shared experiences of struggle and reflections about the systemic barriers that refugee claimants are up against. We are not ignoring the magnitude of these realities but rather employing an angle aimed at maximizing what is working. Based on the gap in existing literature, we utilized an asset-based approach. Throughout all stages of research we paid particular attention to the experiences of **dignity, belonging** and **wellbeing** en-

countered and created by participants during their refugee claim experiences. What we found are similarities in the practices, postures, connections, experiences and places which made refugee claimants' days brighter. Through analysis of these dynamic findings, we pinpoint scalable factors that if amplified, could enhance the experiences of refugee claimants and drive enormous positive impact for all residents of Canada.

**Dignity** is revered as something of utmost importance by refugee claimants. It was described in two major ways by participants; first, being treated with respect and as a multifaceted person of value who is an equal and fellow human being; and, second, living in decent conditions with agency, pride, safety, cleanliness, in good health. Refugee claimants who cross through official border crossings or make inland claims following approved entry into Canada tend to experience less shame and more dignity in the basic need of claiming asylum than those who feel compelled to cross into Canada irregularly. The treatment of authority figures who refugee claimants typically encounter early in their refugee claim process, such as members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), Canadian Border Services Agency (CBSA), and lawyers, leave a lasting impact on refugee claimants and have the power to influence their sense of dignity. Additionally, the empathy, equality, practical guidance, and mutual respect found in deep human connections with individuals from key service providers such as settlement and/or housing organizations provide critical support in order for refugee claimants to live with dignity. Dignity is seen by refugee claimants as residing within the recognition of one's own resilience paired with a sense of agency and the ability to advocate for oneself to effectively communicate one's needs and to have these needs met. Ultimately, the ability to be an active contributor in their lives and communities, rather than a passive recipient of services, is central to refugee claimant's sense of dignity.

Experiences of **belonging** exist in various levels for refugee claimants – spanning from an internal sense of peace and inner acceptance to familial ties, community bonds, and ties to Canada as a country. Participants reflecting on a sense of belonging and inner peace experienced through internal reflection, religious and spiritual bonds, and connecting with the physical urban environment and natural beauty of BC. Familial ties result in deep feelings of belonging and personal bonds. The sense of belonging found in familial ties is particularly apparent for those who give birth while in Canada. Refugee claimants commonly experience meaningful ties with others who have shared ethnic or cul-

tural backgrounds or are otherwise associated as being from the same community including religious groups, people with shared creative passions, or the LGBTQIA+ community. Multicultural friendships established through service providers, employment, volunteering, learning English, and becoming involved in community hubs can significantly impact one's sense of belonging. Immigration status as depicted by physical cards represents experiences of belonging for many refugee claimants. This includes receiving one's refugee claim ID, work permit card, positive refugee claim documents, receipt of Permanent Residence Card, as well as ultimately obtaining one's Canadian passport.

**Wellbeing** is cultivated both internally and externally as individuals navigate the refugee claim process. In addition to attaining a successful refugee claim and receiving protected status, which is central to wellbeing, factors such as experiencing and enjoying a strong sense of order, comparable political and social stability, security, justice and freedom in Canada is a meaningful driver of wellbeing for many refugee claimants. Throughout the refugee claim process, possessing the agency and opportunity to pursue physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health directly correlates to refugee claimants' state of wellbeing – creative/physical outlets and opportunities to social ties are essential. Participants reflected on the continued or new pursuit of one's dreams and future goals, as well as opportunities to give back to the wider community as being vital to their wellbeing. This was particularly apparent in those who had left positions of high socioeconomic status as well as with those who are driven to share their skills and talents. Additionally, experiencing nature, dignified and secure living situations, and taking the time to explore physical urban environments, the natural beauty of BC and their local communities are additional factors regarded as impacting wellbeing by refugee claimants.

## ACTIONABLE RECOMMENDATIONS

This report presents nine actionable recommendations which are rooted in the experiences shared by refugee claimant participants. Together, we can cultivate a more humane welcome of refugee claimants, increase the capacity to welcome those seeking asylum, and create transformative communities where refugee claimants and Canadians mutually flourish together. These recommendations aim to spark thought, conversation, and inform multi-level systems change.

**Recommendation #1: Heighten awareness of the significance held by individual interactions between refugee claimants and people in positions of authority, in particular the CBSA, RCMP and lawyers.** Systems manifest at the point of individual interactions and those in positions of authority should become more aware that they hold great power within the system, setting the course for refugee claimants as they enter the country.

**Recommendation #2: Continue emphasizing community bonding within programs and services for and with refugee claimants.** Community bonding is a critical component of connection for refugee claimants; community-based events such as shared meals, picnics, dance classes, nature outings, and holiday events provide a sense of belonging and wellbeing of refugee claimants. These connections are important to getting to know the people who we are walking alongside, learning with, and ultimately looking to support.

**Recommendation #3: Create additional transitional housing units to ensure newly arrived refugee claimants needing shelter are welcomed into housing that emphasizes their dignity and belonging.** This will provide refugee claimants with the emotional support, guidance, and individual connections that are crucial to their settlement and integration in Canada. By creating additional transitional housing units, it will also divert newly arrived refugee claimants from being housed in shelters, which can be disorienting and even traumatizing to refugee claimants.

**Recommendation #4: Increase leadership roles and opportunities to participate and contribute to the community.** These roles must recognize, value, and leverage refugee claimants' individual skillsets, expertise and passions. Creating spaces that recognize people's inherent worth, strengths, potential, and the multifaceted nature of who they are (beyond being a refugee claimant) will enhance refugee claimants' sense of belonging, confidence, and connection.

**Recommendation #5:** Amplify opportunities for creative outlets, self expression and physical activity to improve mental health and wellbeing, promote new connections, create new experiences and introduce enjoyable activities that can reduce isolation.

**Recommendation #6:** Enhance the capacity and reach of communications strategies that engage the public with the aim of building an informed, strengths-based awareness of refugee claimants in Canada. This will strengthen understanding, empathy, awareness of refugee claimants' skills, potential and contributions while "myth-busting" rumors.

**Recommendation #7:** Repair the right to seek refuge in Canada with dignity, in justice and without shame at official border crossings by suspending the Safe Third Country Agreement. This will restore protections guaranteed to refugee claimants under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and international human rights treaties.

**Recommendation #8:** Expand opportunities for refugee claimants to access programs and advanced classes that promote skill development and integration opportunities such as multi-level English Classes, customized employment support, mentorship, career pathways, and clear avenues for professional credential conversion.

**Recommendation #9:** Build upon best practices for applying an AGD approach and promoting opportunities to have diverse voices heard at all levels of decision making including policy creation, research, program development, and communication strategy. Normalize refugee claimants being unique in their needs and consider how age and gender intersect with other characteristics (e.g. disability, sexual orientation and or/gender identity, religion, ethnicity, education level, English language ability, income level) and how such intersections impact their needs, capacities and priorities. By applying this lens and promoting opportunities to participate in decisions, access to suitable programming and services that are inclusive and suitable for people of diverse ages, genders, disability, ethnicity, **religion, sexual orientation, income level, and gender identity will be enhanced.**

## LIST OF ACRONYMS

Age, Gender, Diversity (**AGD**)

British Columbia Settlement and Integration Services (**BCSIS**)

Basis of Claim (**BOC**)

Canada Border Services Agency (**CBSA**)

Community-Based Advisory Team (**CBAT**)

Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada – Refugee Protection Division (**IRB-RPD**)

Immigration Holding Centre (**IHC**)

Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada (**IRCC**)

Legal Services Society (**LSS**)

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex, Asexual Plus (**LGBTQIA+**)

Multi-Agency Partnership of BC (**MAP BC**)

Permanent Resident (**PR**)

Port of Entry (**POE**)

Research Steering Committee (**RSC**)

Royal Canadian Mounted Police (**RCMP**)

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (**UNHCR**)

## INTRODUCTION

More people are refugees than ever before in recorded human history. In fact, one person is forcibly displaced every two seconds due to conflict, violence, corruption and persecution. As of 2021, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) estimates more than 82.4 million people have been forced to flee their homes worldwide – more than double Canada’s population. Of those 82.4 million displaced, 26.4 million are refugees, and 4.1 million are asylum seekers, known in Canada as refugee claimants. As numbers become unfathomably large, the shared humanity behind each digit must not be overlooked. At the center of all services and professional interactions with refugees must be the truth that refugees are people with an identity, a past, loved ones and a dream for their future. Initiated by Kinbrace Community Society and funded by a Vancouver Foundation Systems Change grant, “From Humanitarian to Human” is a community-based research project led with the guiding question of: “What would a values-based, human-centered, and transformational welcome for and with people seeking refuge and protection in Canada look like?”

The title, *From Humanitarian to Human*, set a critical direction both for the research project and for the mobilization of our findings. Refugee claimants are often perceived and responded to as issues in need of a humanitarian solution. Humanitarian framing has been critiqued for its potential to professionalize welcome and to produce uneven relationships of dependency. So our project explicitly frames refugee claimants as unique, resilient persons on a journey to rebuilding their lives in new countries and communities. We ask: where have they been recognized as such in the journey towards welcome in Canada, and how can those experiences be multiplied and amplified?

Findings within this report are divided into three key themes: Dignity, Belonging, and Wellbeing. Ultimately, these insights underpin nine actionable recommendations which aim to spark thought and take a step towards catalyzing change in the individual, organizational, and systems levels - suggesting how a professionalized humanitarian system can become more human in its practice of refugee claimant welcome. Together, we can cultivate a more humane welcome of refugee claimants, increase the capacity to welcome those seeking asylum, and create transformative communities where refugee claimants and Canadians mutually flourish together.

### GROUNDING QUESTIONS OF THIS RESEARCH:

- As refugee claimants interact with service providers, government agencies and the general public, what practices/postures/places do refugee claimants witness or experience that “make their days brighter” and/or improve their quality of life?
- Which attitudes or values do refugee claimants appreciate in their interactions with service providers, government agencies, and the public because they promote feelings of safety, inclusion and belonging?
- Acknowledging the complex, challenging terrain refugee claimants navigate in their quest for refugee protection, where and when (even if just a moment) do they witness or experience rest, confidence, acceptance, empowerment, respect, encouragement, success, hope, a sense of opportunity, a lightness of spirit or the feeling of being affirmed?

<sup>5</sup> UNHCR (2021). Refugee Statistics. Retrieved from [www.unhcr.ca/in-canada/refugee-statistics](http://www.unhcr.ca/in-canada/refugee-statistics).

## CONTEXT

### BACKGROUND: REFUGEE CLAIMANTS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

Canada offers refugee protection to some people in Canada who fear persecution or who would be in danger if they had to leave. Some dangers they may face include torture, risk to their life or risk of cruel and unusual treatment or punishment. Thousands of people make their Canadian refugee claims in British Columbia (BC) annually. Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) and the CBSA have reported a significant increase of refugee claimants within BC in recent years. In 2013, there was a reported total of 535 refugee claimants processed by CBSA and IRCC. This number grew over sevenfold to 3850 in 2019 and despite unprecedented border closures due to the global pandemic, 2160 refugee claims were processed in 2020, with 1090 processed from January – August 2021<sup>6</sup>.

Refugee claimants enter Canada through airports, across the Canada-US land border and very occasionally by boat. Refugee claims can be made either at port of entry (POE) (at an official border crossing, marine port, or land crossing) or inland. However, it is generally prohibited to make a POE claim when arriving to Canada through an official Canada-United States land border post, due to the Safe Third Country Agreement (STCA). The STCA requires refugee claimants to request protection in the “first safe country” they arrive in, therefore with limited exceptions, those making a POE claim at an official Canada-United States land border post are denied access to the Canadian refugee system and immediately returned to the United States. Since the STCA does not apply to people who cross into Canada other than at an official border post, many people in need of safety in Canada (including within BC) cross irregularly in between ports of entry. The RCMP automatically arrests and detains anyone intercepted while irregularly entering Canada and facilitates a criminality check. If nothing is found indicating the refugee claimant may have any previous involvement in illegal activity, such as possession of contraband, drug trafficking, or connections to organized crime, they are transferred to the CBSA Immigration Holding Centre (IHC). Once with the CBSA, additional security, criminality, health checks and questioning takes place. If the individual’s identity is validated and they are determined eligible to make a refugee claim, the individual is released from detention to begin navigating the lengthy refugee claim process. Refugee claimant serving organizations



across BC work in ever-improving collaboration with each other and have a unique working relationship with the CBSA and RCMP. This collaboration is important to make certain that refugee claimants are not left without support or direction, particularly following release from the IHC and during the uncertain and often confusing beginning of their time in Canada.

BC has a unique and innovative intersectoral network to support refugee claimants that has been growing at pace with the increasing number of refugee claimants within the province: the Multi-Agency Partnership of BC (MAP BC). Established in 2008, MAP BC has become an innovative collective of over 40 government agencies, non-government entities, people with lived refugee experience, community leaders, and not-for-profit organizations from across Metro Vancouver and the Fraser Valley that work with and for refugee claimants. The mission of MAP BC is to work collaboratively to identify barriers and provide solutions to promote the protection and well-being of refugee claimants and service providers, by facilitating networking and information sharing. MAP BC’s platform for partnership is the first of its kind in Canada and



garners interest across the country as a ground-breaking collective finding solutions and cultivates innovative partnerships to enhance the experiences of welcome, safety and belonging of refugee claimants. MAP BC is politically neutral as a partnership and funded through a mix of private and government funding including from the Province of BC<sup>7</sup>.

This is not the only example of The Province of BC supporting new opportunities for the wellbeing of refugee claimants. Through the BC Settlement and Integration Services Program (BCSIS), the BC Ministry of Municipal Affairs funds over fifty service providers across the province to deliver supports and services for newcomers, including refugee claimants, who are not eligible to receive immigrant support services under federally funded programs. Additionally, the Ministry funds innovative approaches to enhance the experiences of refugee claimants such as the BC CHARMS Project (BC Housing Referral and Data Management System) which aims to streamline housing experiences for refugee claimants through an online database, thereby creating positive systemic change with refugee claimants at the centre.

In addition to the Province of BC, the federal government of Canada also provides some support for the housing needs of refugee claimants through its Reaching Home program. The Reaching Home program currently provides direct support and funding to urban communities, Indigenous communities, territorial communities and rural and remote communities across Canada. Funding through this program is received by several refugee claimant transitional housing providers in BC elsewhere, supporting their mission to ensure that refugee claimants are supported throughout the housing continuum and able to attain secure, safe, affordable and long-term housing.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Government of Canada (2021). Asylum claims by year 2013 – 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/asylum-claims/processed-claims.html>

<sup>7</sup> MAP(2018). A Forum Focused on Solutions: Addressing the Urgent Shelter and Housing Needs of Refugee Claimants in BC.

<sup>8</sup> Government of Canada (2020). Reaching Home Program. Retrieved from <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/homelessness/directives.html>

HOW CAN WE AMPLIFY WHAT IS WORKING TO CHANGE SYSTEMS?

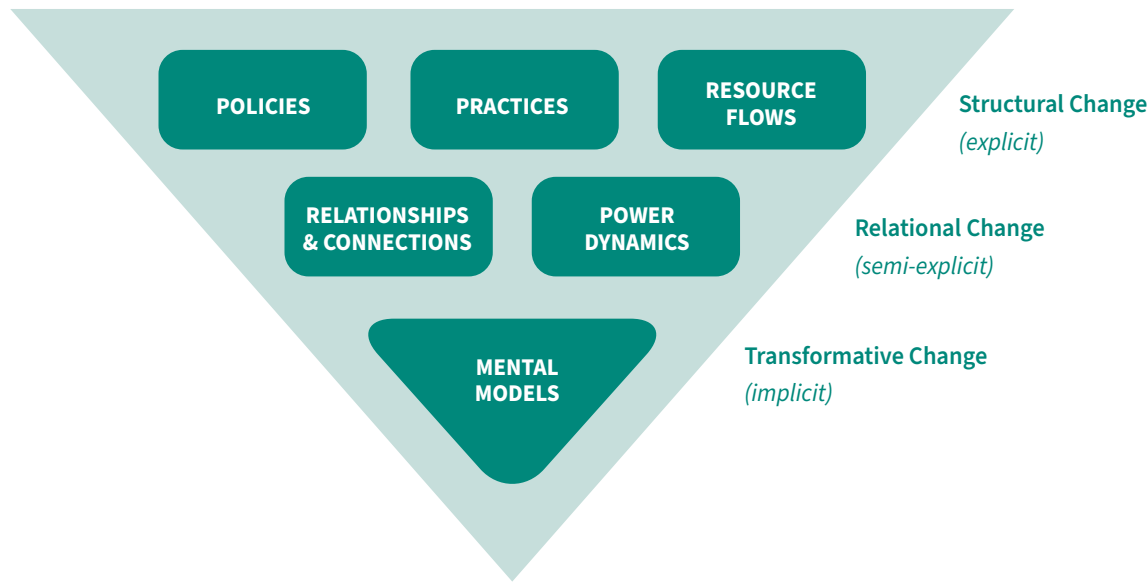
This research applies an asset-based systems change framework. Systems change describes the shifting of systemic forces – including structures, practices, policies, resource flows, power dynamics, and mindsets – that produce societal problems or strengths and hold them in place (Kania, Kramer & Senge, 2018). In order for systems change to be made possible, stakeholders must first recognize the systemic forces at play that they are existing within. Systemic forces propel or constrain sustained systems change, including : government policies, societal norms and goals, market forces, incentives, power imbalances, knowledge gaps, embedded social narrative and many more. Taking steps towards systemics change typically requires the participation of many different actors from varying levels within the system, and cross-sector collaboration including stakeholders from public, non-profit, philanthropic, academic, or private institutions as well as community constituents. Asset-based systems change refers to long-term, transformative systems change which is centered on recognizing

existing strengths as areas for amplification, expansion and development possibility (Kania, Kramer & Senge, 2018). This form of systems change is collaborative, and community-driven, incorporating the voices and expertise of multipleseveral stakeholders to “expand bright spots” and achieve sustained systems change.

Figure 1.1 depicts six interdependent conditions of systems change which typically play a major role in reproducing social inequalitiesholding social situations. The six conditions are divided into three categories: Structural change (explicit), relational change (semi-explicit), and transformative change (implicit). Conditions within from each of these three categories can be independently defined, measured, and targeted for change while also being interwoven and interactive. The interaction can be mutually reinforcing (e.g., a government leader’s mental module may trigger a policy change) or counteracting (e.g., scaling effective practices via government funding that is spread-out amongst different organizations may be thwarted by poor relationships between stakeholders throughout the system).

FIGURE 1.1

SIX CONDITIONS OF SYSTEMS CHANGE



Systems change is not about achieving linear, sequential and contained solutions for problems, as is often seen in traditional incremental approaches to problem solving. Rather, the process includes ongoing processes of interrogation to expand successes and shift the current undesirable state to a future desirable state. Moreover, the less explicit conditions may be the most challenging to clarify but can have huge impacts on shifting the system. Therefore, changemakers must ensure that they pay sufficient attention to the relationships, power dynamics, and underlying mental models (such as racism and gender biases) embedded in the systems in which they work. Bringing the lens of these conditions into enhancing experiences of welcome for refugee claimants throughout BC, can help actors improve their strategies for systems change, as well as strengthening the implementation and evaluation of their efforts. As Davidson and Morgan (2018) argue, “We must shift the system from our place of agency – what we are able to directly shift and change. We don’t shift a whole system, we gently nudge parts in sub-systems which in turn has a cascading influence across other sub-systems” (Davidson & Morgan, 2018, p.5).

### SYSTEMS CHANGE CONDITIONS—DEFINITIONS:

**POLICIES:** Government, institutional and organizational rules, regulations, and priorities that guide the entity’s own and others’ actions.

**PRACTICES:** Espoused activities of institutions, coalitions, networks, and other entities targeted to improving social and environmental progress. Also, within the entity, the procedures, guidelines, or informal shared habits that comprise their work.

**RESOURCE FLOWS:** How money, people, knowledge, information, and other assets such as infrastructure are allocated and distributed.

**RELATIONSHIPS & CONNECTIONS:** Quality of connections and communication occurring among actors in the system, especially among those with differing histories and viewpoints.

**POWER DYNAMICS:** The distribution of decision-making power, authority, and both formal and informal influence among individuals and organizations.

**MENTAL MODELS:** Habits of thought—deeply held beliefs and assumptions and taken-for-granted ways of operating that influence how we think, what we do, and how we talk.

## OUR FOCUS

From the onset of this research, we paid particular attention to the experiences of dignity, belonging and wellbeing encountered and created by participants during their refugee claim experiences. By approaching this research with these themes in mind, our intention is to better understand the “bright spots” that refugee claimants encounter so that they can be amplified, expanded-upon and change prevailing systems.

The systems that we seek to better understand and build a case and process for changing include the following:are:

**Humanitarian Approach:** The core principles of humanity, neutrality, independence and impartiality are laudable, yet may not address questions of power and neo-colonialism that are easily exploited in the context of forced displacement. In addition, the sheer number of people displaced ignites concern in the humanitarian model about the scarcity of resources.

**Charitable Mindset:** A charitable mindset promotes the view that supporting others is benevolent, but not critical to the world at large. This fails to consider justice, equity, dignity, and our shared humanity. Alleviation of poverty is one of the four pillars of charitable law in Canada - and yet, we wonder if viewing refugee claimants from a place of need, inadequacy and burden rather than a position of opportunity, strength, and effectiveness limits our imaginations about the potential for mutual transformation.

**Organizational Model:** Over-reliance by the citizenry of Canada on non-government charitable organizations, most of which are not-for profit or charitable organizations, to solve the problems faced by society at large is problematic because the issues are critical and systemic. . Funding and reporting paradigms enforce neoliberal organizational efficiencies towards warehousing and commodifying desperate people while downloading government services to local organizations who do not always receive adequate support to provide the services.

<sup>8</sup> GBCRefugeeHub. BCSIS (BC Settlement and Integration Services) Stream A and B Services for Refugee Claimants. Retrieved from <https://bcrefugeehub.ca/bcsis-stream-a-and-b-refugee-claimants/>

<sup>9</sup> The framework and definitions depicted here was created by FSG consulting, and first appeared in John Kania, Mark Kramer and Peter Senge’s publication: The Waters of Systems Change (2018). This framework draws upon extensive literature behind systems change and systems thinking.

## METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH APPROACH

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Between May 2021 and July 2021, we facilitated a literature review that explored existing research in the areas of refugee claimant settlement and integration experiences in Canada; Canadian refugee protection laws and policies; community bonding/bridging; mutual transformation/reflexive views on refugee integration and inclusion; as well as belonging, dignity and wellbeing of refugees in Canada. This literature review allowed collection and aggregation of existing data/reports and informed the research direction.

### COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH

This research employed a three part community-based qualitative research design. The project began with the development of a Research Steering Committee (RSC) comprised of people with lived refugee claimant experience; municipal and provincial government representatives; service providing organization representatives; housing providers; academics; and the UN Refugee Agency. The RSC was involved in the overarching design and implementation of this project and members drew from their areas of expertise to offer input and support.

Second, a specialized team of three people with diverse lived refugee claimant experiences formed a Community-Based Advisory Team (CBAT) which provided critical guidance for the research tools used within this project. Prior to commencing the qualitative research, this team met to review the research plan, including the interview prompts, materials for both the poetry and prose components, as well as the approach for facilitating visual art submissions. Through this process, potential gaps in our approach were identified, interview prompts were enhanced, and we were able to ensure successful application of an Age Gender Diversity (AGD) approach while incorporating a variety of voices at the forefront of our research design.

Third, a critical contributor to the success of this project was the community based researcher. He provided insights and leadership, enhanced community outreach, applied his professional writing expertise in the facilitation of creative writing workshops, and drew from his own

experiences navigating the Canadian refugee claim system to connect with participants while cultivating meaningful discussion in the listening sessions as well as supporting the process of thematic analysis.

### QUALITATIVE STUDY

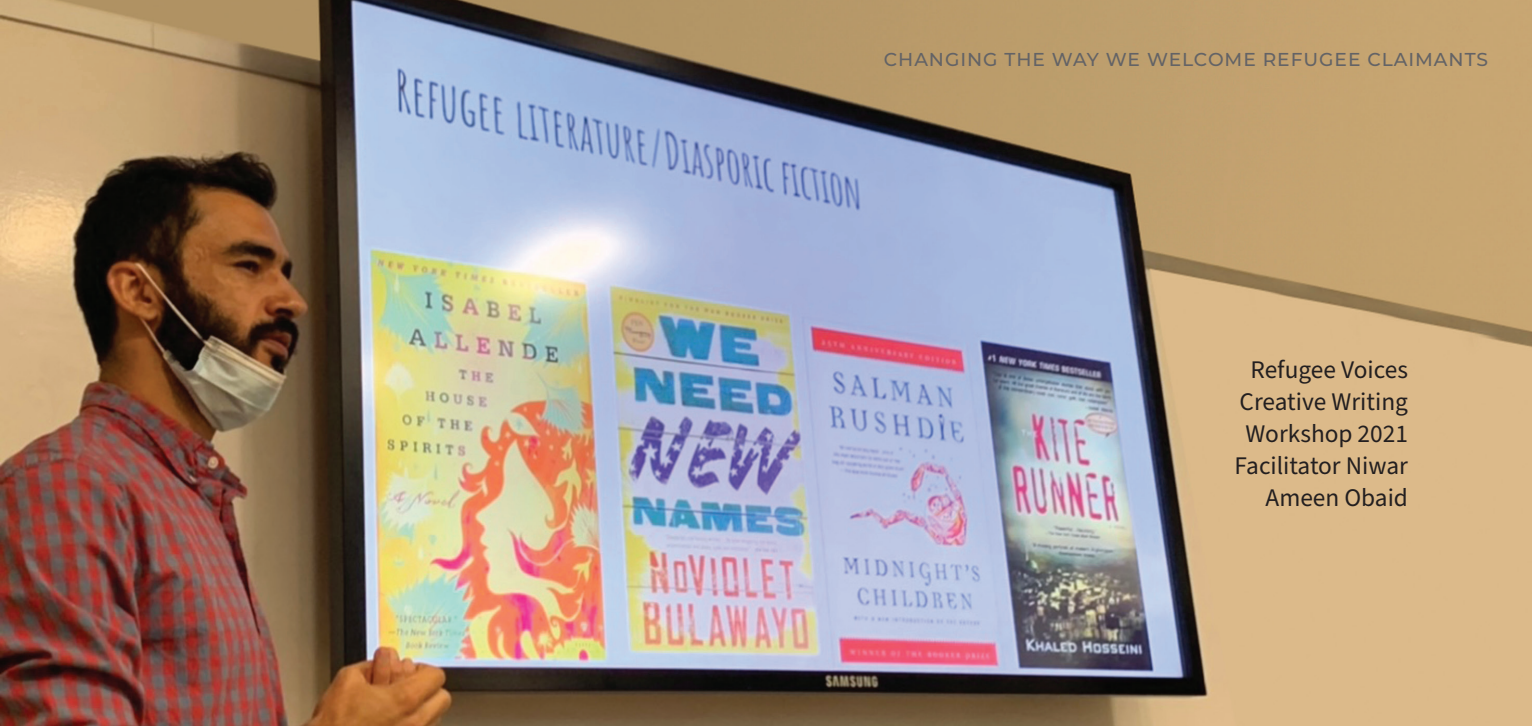
This study utilized a qualitative design to allow for in-depth exploration of how refugee claimants encounter dignity, empowerment, and mutuality from the time of submitting their refugee claim up to their hearing date. Taking into consideration the scope and capacity of this project, the number of participants was limited to 23 – large enough to allow for the unfolding of ‘new and richly textured understanding’ while being small enough that the ‘deep, case-oriented analysis’ of qualitative data was not precluded (Morse, 2000). Our sampling was purposive; participants were invited based on their likely capacity to provide meaning and in-depth information as well as ensuring an AGD approach, and diversity reflecting where the largest number of refugee claimants in British Columbia are from. The qualitative, community-based study was conducted between June - September 2021 via the following three methods:

#### 1) Listening sessions

Phase one of this research included 20 one-on-one listening sessions both in person following COVID-19 protocols, as well as virtually. A strong rapport was established with each participant and a semi-structured approach was utilized allowing for open-ended questions that promoted conversational flow/discussion producing rich data.

#### 2) Creative Writing Workshops and Submissions

Phase two utilized an arts-based research approach, defined by Barone & Eisner (2011) as the conscious pursuit of expressive form in the service of understanding. The poetry created through this approach makes it possible for us to empathize the experiences of others, and such empathy is a necessary condition to reach deep forms of understanding and meaning (Barone & Eisner, 2011). The objective of this approach was to create a platform for the creative sharing of feelings and nuanced experiences about how refugee claimants encountered dignity, empowerment, belonging, and wellbeing from the time of submitting their refugee claim up to their hearing date. This resulted in the sharing of a wide range of both implicit and explicit encounters and experiences with systemic forces, and within systems, shared by participants in a way that created empathy and transcends the everyday “question/answer” methods.



Refugee Voices  
Creative Writing  
Workshop 2021  
Facilitator Niwar  
Ameen Obaid

Firstly, **two creative writing workshops** were led by the community based researcher, held in person on July 31, 2021 (poetry) and August 7, 2021 (prose) with nine participants each. During this time, participants demonstrated their desire to create, connect, read and expand their own world views while enhancing their writing skills and applying writing as a method of self-expression. Following the workshops, participants had the opportunity to submit poetry and short stories to be included within this report, anonymously if preferred by the participant. We received 12 writing submissions and selected ten for inclusion within this report. The poetry created through this approach provides a unique window into the minds of the participants making it possible to better empathize with the emotions within the experiences of refugee claimants. Such empathy is a necessary condition to reach deep forms of understanding and meaning (Barone & Eisner, 2011). While the listening sessions tended to focus on the explicit, what makes the findings from the creative writing sessions unique are the ways they centered more so on the semi-explicit and implicit relationships and connections, power dynamics and mental models.

### 3) Visual Art Submissions

Phase three was a **call for submissions of visual art** which was circulated amongst refugee claimant communities from August 25 – September 15, 2021. We intentionally left the themes in our call for submissions open to allow for artistic interpretation by the participants. The invitation simply invited participants to submit art that explores “a moment of connection and/or belonging

encountered during their refugee claim process.” Nine photographs, drawings, paintings, and digital creations were shared, seven of which are included within this report. All art submissions were submitted as electric copies with the originals retained by the participants.

## PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

This project represents the shared experiences of 23 participants, each of whom arrived in Canada in 2013 or later and have lived refugee claimant experience (current or former). An Age, Gender, Diversity (AGD) approach was applied. There was some overlap between participants who participated in 1-to-1 interviews and also decided to participate in the writing and/or visual art submissions.

### Participants:

- Represented 13 different countries, including BC's top five refugee claimant countries of origin
- Were aged between 16-66 at the time of participation
- Included individuals who self-identify as disabled
- Included 12 male, ten female, and one non-binary individual
- Reported diverse sexual orientations
- Made a combination of Inland and POE refugee claims
- Live in Metro Vancouver, Fraser Valley and Vancouver Island

## ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Prior to participation in the project, a detailed explanation of the project, the expected role of participants, and the public nature of the resulting report was provided, with opportunity for questions. Participants were then asked to sign an informed consent form that outlined their role in the project and gave the researcher permission to use their responses with individual identifiers removed in the report. Participants were informed of their right to forego any question or end their participation at any time during the research project. Participants were assured that their identity would not be released at any stage. All participants received \$50 in compensation for their time and contribution. There was one case where Kurdish was preferred over English. In this case, all aforementioned details were provided (as well as the interview itself) in the language of preference. It was communicated to all participants that trained interpreters external to the project were available, however the only language required was Kurdish, which is the native language of one of the researchers.

## DATA CLEANING AND ANALYSIS

The following steps of cleaning and coding were taken with the qualitative data:

- Removal of all identification indicators
- Allocation of identifying codes to participants, utilized in interview notes, audio files and all administrative tools.

All interview recordings and post-interview researcher notes were reviewed, with particular attention given to where participants encountered dignity, belonging, and wellbeing as well as identifying emerging patterns in the data (Bowen, 2005).

## RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

A key limitation of this research was the exclusion of former refugee claimants in Canada who had received a negative decision from the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) and did not have appeal success, meaning they were required to leave the country. This decision was made due to limits in scope as well as numerous moral and ethical dilemmas. It is possible that the experiences

of individuals who did not have a successful refugee claim may differ from those of people who received a positive decision.

Although this project did include one 16 year old participant, another limitation of this research results from the focus on adult refugee claimants. It is likely that the experiences of children differ from those of their adult counterparts. It was decided not to include children due to limitations of time and scope.

Another area of this research that may be perceived as a limitation is its relatively small sample size of 23 participants. However, this is not uncommon within qualitative research, as it allows researchers to “develop an understanding of a phenomenon as it is experienced in a particular setting, rather than to draw broad conclusions about a particular aspect of human behavior” (Neuman, 2014, p.71). That is precisely the purpose of this research: to explore and present specific experiences where refugee claimants encountered dignity, empowerment and mutuality from the time of submitting their refugee claim up to their hearing date in Canada with the aim of amplifying those “bright spots.”

As refugee claimants navigate complex, anxiety provoking and at times heartbreaking terrain in their quest for refugee protection, they face a wide variety of systemic barriers and challenges. The brutal realities of trauma and systemic issues such as the lack of affordable housing, racism and marginalization, employment barriers, long processing times, challenges in accessing mental and physical health supports, and other barriers faced by refugee claimants in BC is well documented. We are not negating, discounting or ignoring the magnitude of struggles faced and systemic barriers refugee claimants are up against. Rather, we are employing a different angle.

Now is a time for a multi-level re-envisioning of the Canadian system of refugee protection and welcome to center the human dignity, belonging and wellbeing of all people seeking protection in Canada. The unique experiences shared throughout the listening sessions, poetry/prose, and visual art submissions clearly illuminate system conditions that refugee claimants witness, experience and create that make their days brighter, build essential interpersonal supports and connections, and improve quality of life and experiences of welcome in Canada. Although all of these conditions are interdependent, they can be independently identified, explored, and targeted for change.



## WHAT WE HEARD

From the onset of this research, we paid particular attention to the experiences of **dignity, belonging** and **wellbeing** encountered and created by participants during their refugee claim experiences. By approaching this research with these areas in mind, our intention is to better understand the “bright spots” that refugee claimants encounter so that they can be amplified, expanded-upon and change prevailing systems. Thematic analysis was applied to all collected data as a method of “identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns”. (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018 p.808). Amidst the unique and nuanced experiences of each person it became clear that there are many commonalities of practices, postures, and places that refugee claimants witnessed or experienced that made their days brighter or fostered a sense of dignity, belonging, and wellbeing. Within these three themes, we pinpoint scalable factors that if amplified, could enhance the experiences of refugee claimants and drive enormous positive impact.

What follows are key findings, organised in terms of the three overarching themes and presented via the results from the three research phases: listening sessions, creative writing and visual art submissions. The poetry and short stories are accompanied by short observational summaries of the creative writing sessions. Each piece is presented either anonymously or with a pseudonym selected by the writer. Some stand on their own without description, while others are accompanied by a brief summary prepared by the community based researcher who facilitated the creative writing sessions and worked closely with each writer throughout their creative processes. This report showcases seven visual art pieces. All but one artist chose to present their art within this report anonymously, and the pieces have been left without written description or analysis with the intention of leaving them open to interpretation to depict the emotional and symbolic aspects of people’s experience which may not be accessed through words (Dunn & Mellor, 2017). We endeavor to engage the senses and evoke an emotional, visceral response.

## DIGNITY

Article 1 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* states: “All human being are born free and equal in dignity and rights<sup>10</sup>.” The human right of being safe and seeking protection is fundamental and is a process that must be rooted in dignity. At its core, human dignity is the belief that all people are deserving of respect, safety, tolerance, and understanding because they hold value due to their humanity. To be a refugee is to have experienced grave assaults on one’s human dignity. Throughout the listening sessions, poetry/prose, and visual art submissions, the belief that the restoration of dignity is possible and opportunities for enhancing our protection system so that it centers on the dignity of refugee claimants exist, was widely conveyed.

Being treated with and living in dignity while navigating the refugee claim system is heavily tied to treatment by authority figures who refugee claimants initially encounter such as the RCMP or CBSA as well as bywith their lawyers. Additionally, deep human connections that include empathy, a sense of equityality, practical guidance, and mutual respect with individuals from key service providers such as settlement and/or housing organizations provides critical support in order for refugee claimants to live with dignity. Dignity is seen by refugee claimants within the recognition of one’s own resilience paired with a sense of agency and the ability to advocate for oneself – to effectively communicate one’s needs and to have these needs met. Ultimately, the ability to contribute actively to the direction of their not be a passive recipient of services but rather an active contributor in their lives and communities is central to refugee claimant’s’ sense of dignity.

<sup>10</sup> UN General Assembly. “Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” Paris, 1948. Retrieved from: [www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights](http://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights)

## DIGNITY IN THE LISTENING SESSIONS

Throughout the listening sessions, participants conveyed their widely held a belief that the restoration of dignity is possible despite arduous experiences was widely conveyed. The following terms were identified by participants throughout the listening sessions while discussing dignity:

***Inclusion - Choice - Control - Clean  
Self Care - Safe - Privacy - Freedom  
Safe Housing - Independence  
Communication - Empathy  
See me for ME - Employment - Respect***

### “First Point of Contact” Interactions

Initial interactions with authority figures such as the CBSA and RCMP make a significant impact on whether a refugee claimant experiences an initial sense of dignity in Canada. Throughout the listening sessions we heard a range of positive and negative experiences from negative to positive.

Several participants recounted crossing the border irregularly by necessity as they knew they would be denied the ability to claim asylum at official crossings due to the STCA. While reflecting on this topic, many participants became emotional and tearful. Refugee claimants shared the need to seek safety in Canada, walking through forests to cross the border at night and in the pouring rain with only the clothes on their back or a small backpack. It was shared that crossing irregularly stripped them of dignity while creating the sense of being “illegal.” Feelings of being a criminal resulted in lasting guilt, shame, and anxiety.

On the other hand, one participant from the Middle East described her experience and interaction with the RCMP as leaving a positive impression. She explained that she was received with respect. “The people at the RCMP really showed sympathy and I never felt discriminated against while crossing into Canada even though it was not an official crossing.” She recounted tripping while crossing at the border and hurting her knee but promptly received medical treatment and respect from the female officers.

A similar story was shared by a participant from Central America who shared the deep uncertainty and hesitation he faced while crossing through an official land border crossing. He was eligible for an exception to the STCA and was detained by the CBSA in an IHC while they facilitated his eligibility screening. He had just experienced a life changing trauma and felt particularly vulnerable. The officer's calm demeanor and patient tone left a lasting impact on his perspective towards the standard of dignity upheld by some authority figures in Canada.

One participant, a man from Africa, expressed, "Interesting thing about CBSA is they tell you their final decision, long after they have made it. These moments of uncertainty seemed long and tiring." The interviewee stated that he felt the process was unnecessarily drawn out but also expressed that he was not used to being treated with calmness and respect by authority figures or police. He recounted and valued the calm demeanor of CBSA staff, and being offered a small snack, water and coffee by CBSA agents.

One participant, from Africa, expressed that she and her partner felt herself feeling dehumanized, humiliated and ridiculed in the Immigration Holding Centre (IHC) and described the lasting trauma this experience has had on her life.

Another participant reflected on how his experience with the CBSA shaped his future career aspirations within Canada. He recounted crossing the border, stating:

*I was in shock and crisis at the time and was met with support, dignity and respect from the CBSA. I knew it would be hard to again become a lawyer in Canada and didn't have the English skills. That day the officers were so supportive and respectful, it inspired me to explore a career in a similar field where I can care, support and respect people in times of trouble. I do this everyday in my job, today.*

#### **Genuine Connection with Individuals from Service Providing Organizations**

Several participants reflected on the impact of developing one on one ties with case workers and volunteers from service providing organizations, in particular settlement agencies and transition homes, who see them as "more than a refugee claimant" while also taking the time to get to know them as individuals to provide customized supports. Refugee claimants also reflected on referrals made by settlement staff to English Conversation Circles, funded by the

Province of BC, expressing that they vary significantly in quality and those which are more structured with formal assessments being preferred over more informal ones.

One participant from the Middle East reflected on crossing the border irregularly (undetected) and being taken by taxi to a settlement organization. She was nervous about how she would be greeted and was pleased to be welcomed with a cup of tea, a full change of clothes, honest advice, clear guidance and calm staff. Her relationship continued not only with the settlement agency but also a transition home to which she was referred to. She characterized her relationship with the case workers she has been supported by as her "my number one supporters in Canada – the people who always have [her] back."

#### **Initial Housing Experiences**

There was a stark contrast in the level of dignity experienced by those who immediately moved in with family members/friends or transition homes versus those who lived in the shelter system - the former being significantly more positive than the latter. A woman from Africa reflected on her first week in Canada which was spent in a low-barrier shelter. She explained feeling horrible and dehumanized, unable to shower, and frightened by the heavy drug use as well as the racist comments and abuse she endured in the shelter. She was emotionally and physically tired yet at risk and nervous to sleep at night. Initially, she thought that the abuse she encountered was "normal" in Canada so she was unaware who to report it to and afraid to do so. She recounted, "I felt like it was another place that I had to escape." Fortunately, this all changed when she was supported by a settlement agency and referred to a transition home specifically serving refugee claimants. This experience was significantly different and she described it as a safe, private, clean space that she could "focus on [her] legal case and, you know, bask in [her] joy, with good people, and just be human again."

Several participants who arrived in Canada with close family or friends already here to welcome them, described a soft landing and a safe place to begin. One participant, a man from Central America reflected on immediately moving in with his sister upon arrival, who had a bed prepared for him with clean bedding, his favourite foods prepared, as well as encouragement to explore the community and take steps towards his settlement and integration despite difficult emotions. He expressed, "honestly, her home felt like my home."

### Employment and Self-reliance

The ability to work was identified as a critical component of providing for oneself/one's family and living with dignity. It must be acknowledged that the experience of finding employment is challenging and individuals face long work permit delays, lack of opportunities, and credential conversion depression. We found that this experience can be particularly heartbreaking for individuals with high levels of education and careers in their home country that are tied to status, identity, a sense of community/meaning, and prestige. Ultimately, several individuals expressed that attaining employment is a positive step towards living in dignity. One participant, who was previously a lawyer in Central America reflected on his experience working at a grocery store after arriving in Canada:

*It was difficult, I'm not going to lie. However, I made the most of this experience and I am proud of who it has made me into, today. I decided this would be how I practice and improve my English. This would be the way I meet people who are not just from my country. I was not on income assistance or taking from anyone. I became someone the company knew they could rely on, and although it was difficult, I am grateful for that experience and can see how much I have grown since that time. I arrived with ego and I can honestly say that has changed now."*

Another participant worked as a telecommunication engineer in his country of origin, but now he works in construction. He reflected,

*"If your mind is free, it doesn't matter what job you do." He is determined to provide for his family, concluding, "I get tired, but I am happy."*

### Connection With Lawyers and Clarity About What To Expect Throughout the Refugee Claim Process

It was mentioned by several participants mentioned that interactions with lawyers who "seemed like they truly cared", "would take their time with me," "clearly told me what to do" and maintained regular correspondence with refugee claimant clients incited feelings of dignity. Some clients reflected on the lawyers they were connected to through Legal Aid, one referring to his experience as "really great" and sharing gratitude for the refugee hearing preparation support he received from the Ready Tour.

Another participant, a man from the Middle East, reflected on the time of his refugee hearing. His son with a cognitive disability would not be comfortable in the room during the hearing. He was supported and connected by a settlement agency case worker who sat outside of the room with their son throughout the hearing as he knew his son would be comfortable, calm, and treated with dignity.

## DIGNITY IN POETRY AND PROSE

In the context of the workshop, the participants manifested a shared sense of dignity through their interaction as well as their views and ideas on writing in exile. More importantly, the emerging writers drew on their experiences as refugee claimants, revealing moments of resistance and perseverance, self-esteem, and pride.

For instance, a female poet criticizes her lover for not demonstrating courtesy:

### CIGARETTES

Kochar Abubakir

We smoke a cigarette,  
I stare at your fingers,  
I condemn them for not having learned  
To light a cigarette for women first.  
I wish  
Men in your neighbourhood had lit cigarettes for women.  
I wish  
Back home, women smokers weren't judged as whores.  
I have much to do,  
A duty too hard,  
The duty of educating you  
In a free country,  
You, the Eastern man.  
For a month my mission is  
Teaching you how to  
First, before yourself,  
Light a cigarette for me.

Representing a feminist narrator, the poet takes upon herself the duty of teaching her partner how to dispose of the old stereotypes from "back home" and adopt what the poet sees as better qualities in the new place. The poet is determined to reclaim the power and dignity she had lacked in her home country.

The poem also presents a situation where the persona or poet criticizes her lover for not demonstrating courtesy. A woman smoking a cigarette has usually symbolized a rebellious independence, an outcry for equal rights for women and men. The poet has an apparent feminist character, but also takes a step further; she not only reprimands the “Eastern man” for not showing a gesture of love, she also takes it upon herself to educate the man “in a free country”, that is, to teach him how to dispose of the old stereotypes from “back home” and adopt better qualities in the new place. The poet is determined to reclaim the power and dignity she had lacked in her home country.

In another example, a young female poet ends her poem “Togetherness” with the following lines:

**For the pain taught me  
To walk in a different journey, stronger.**

There is a sense of loss, nostalgia, and gratitude woven together in the poem as the poet reaches a point where she steers away from dwelling on her past and becomes committed to learning from her suffering, culminating in a moment of endurance and dignity. She witnesses a meaningful moment of togetherness while getting stronger on her new journey.

The poem “TOGETHERNESS” follows several ambiguous incidents that happened to the persona of the poem. There is a sense of loss, nostalgia, and gratitude woven together in the poem. “I am the light” is the whisper the persona hears from the beloved person somewhere in the dark. The night imagery is prevalent, created by the distance between two lovers. “The moment of togetherness” is romanticized, and the persona seems to have struggled to overcome the past and its insecurities, and that she has changed the story’s end and its meaning. She shows gratitude for her past experience and the person she has left behind, for now she has learned to follow her dreams. She still carries that meaningful moment of togetherness while being stronger on her new journey.

## TOGETHERNESS

Where hope is dancing,  
Walk in a dark, headless journey,  
I hear a whisper,  
I am the light,  
My soul

The whisper of missing you,

When at night  
My hair touches the soft pillow  
The silk case  
And the heavy winter blanket  
All reminds me of the sobbing over torn  
Pieces of fragile glass,

Or the time of air hugs, kisses  
Or wishful immigration  
The warmth of love we felt,  
Or the pages of my diary filled with your name  
illegible handwriting  
But I could read to romanticize  
The moment of togetherness.

Now, who I’ve got to blame?  
You or the miles of distance?  
I wonder, whether your world is shaken  
Or my heart trembled at the moment of goodbye  
You know  
That night 911 was the rescuer  
Panic was the queen of the sobby room  
Puffy eyes  
Paralyzed body,  
I couldn’t feel a thing  
But the question  
Why?  
Or the insecurities you painted  
On every canvas, I created with a dream

I feared admitting  
It was you,  
But I know to draw the end of the story:  
Thank you,  
For the pain taught me  
To walk in a different journey, stronger.

## PARADISE

I set foot in my paradise country with many dreams. I had imagined the house I would live in, study, and work. On the first day the immigration and refugee officers told me to find a shelter to stay in till I could find a rented place. “Shelter! Wouldn’t they give me a house as a refugee? Will I have to sleep in a room with anybody within the shelter?” I asked myself. I refused to accept their instructions, but the sun slowly set, and the officers argued there was no other housing choice. I had to go with the flow and go into the shelter to get a bed. That was the beginning of the tragic story.

I slept three rainy nights in front of the shelter till I got a bed. Five other guests were also staying in the room. Two of them were snoring and making loud noises like an electric engine. One other, slept near the door and was a sleepwalker and repeatedly called his father to help him every midnight. The one in the left corner periodically emitted smelly farts and cursed a lot. The other one who was opposite my bed most of the time talked to himself and switched into several characters, such as a manager, police officer, and even a landlord. In each of these alternating roles he fired somebody. I was super sensitive to lack of sleep and could hear every single tiny noise and therefore I couldn’t sleep. I stayed there for around 70 days and it was so miserable. I couldn’t help wondering to myself “This is the paradise I came for.”

The cold weather had triggered my long-term struggle with a disease called Osteoarthritis and I could no longer walk. One particular night the pain was so excruciating, I was taken to hospital by ambulance, but I forgot to take my phone and wallet.

After waiting for a long time, I was instructed by a hospital administrator to provide them with my ID in order to see a doctor. I told them I was a recent refugee who had just arrived and not yet gotten a Canadian ID. “You must bring a copy of your refugee ID when you get it otherwise you will have to pay the hospital and ambulance fees.” I promised to bring it to them as soon as I got it.

The doctor checked the X-rays, “You have to keep your hip warm and use a stick to walk. You can go now and enjoy your weekend.” Without any treatment or medicine the doctor was done with me.

Around 12 am, I was discharged at the hospital. Things went from bad to worse because of my severe migraine. I had no money to take a taxi and did not know where the shelter was since I had forgotten my wallet and phone. I walked slower than usual under a rainy shower. The streets looked scary and I rarely saw people walking. My glasses were misty and I had to squint to read for directions. A gentleman, like a guardian angel asked me what I was looking for. I told him the shelter’s name and he showed me the direction.

Ten days later, I received my immigration ID, and I immediately gave it to the hospital, “sounds great, no need to pay now.” One of the officers told me. Two weeks passed, the receptionist of the shelter informed me I had a mail. I was ordered to pay 1550 dollars for the hospital and ambulance bill. I had no money to have a good meal in a decent restaurant and wondered how I would pay that huge amount.

To cut a long story short, I emailed them about my erratic refugee status. They said if I emailed my ID to them once more they would not charge me. I did exactly what they wanted.

I moved out of the shelter to Surrey. Three months passed and I visited the shelter to meet with some friends and the staff. One of the recipients handed me a bundle of mails. Three of them were from the hospital. It turned to an seemingly endless series of harassment. I talked to them again and again to explain the same obvious thing. "Send us your ID and verify you are a refugee, we will close your file." I sent a picture of my ID and called and a lady told me, "Be sure you will not get any more email again."

Months later, I received two mails: one from the hospital and the other from the ambulance sector. Both mails warned me to pay the money before they tell the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA). Again, I talked to the hospital officers. Luckily the hospital closed the file, which was around 1000 dollars.

Then the long games with the CRA began. They called me at least twice a week. I had by then become familiar with some of the officers and became acquaintances. I told them I was a refugee and I was still on low income. They told me if I proved I was a low-income earner, they would get rid of the account for the ambulance fee. "Send us a bank statement then you will not get phone calls." I did what I was instructed, though they called me continuously. The problem took more than two years.

They used several methods to annoy me: mailing, emailing, and calling. I got a call one morning at 7:30. "This is Canada Revenue Agency, is this Diary Marif?" She asked, "YES, speaking" I was in bed, "How will you pay the ambulance fee, sir?" She instructed me. "I am neither a sir, nor will I pay for the fee." We had a difficult conversation. I asked her why they were disturbing me in the early morning. "We will disturb you until you pay the fee." She retorted and I disconnected the phone. This scenario occurred repeatedly for more than two years. I was traumatized by the CRA: their calls, emails, and mails. I also suffered because the house we moved to had bed bugs that attacked at nights while the CRA calls continued to haunt me in the daytime. They finally stopped calling, but they cut the ambulance fee from my annual tax return for a consecutive two-year duration.

Gradually, my utopia had become a living nightmare. I realized I had to deal with reality. There were many wrong things with the hospital system and their officers. I also have the same perspective for the CRA, and their teams so far. Fortunately, I later moved from that residence and finally escaped from the harassment of the CRA and the horror of bed bugs.

In this non-fiction piece of writing, the author recounts his experience after arrival, especially the housing and health journey. His dreams of the utopian country are crushed by an episode in which he is taken to hospital by an ambulance. He had not yet had any health cards or IDs, and is required several times to pay for the fees. He provides the IDs to the hospital and is told that he needs not to worry about payment. Yet, between the hospital administration and CRA he has to go through a long series of phone calls and investigations asking him to pay the money he owes. He is in no financial position to do that, and after a long tiring journey, he decides to ignore it and move on with his life. This piece of writing attests to the excruciating experience a new refugee faces when all he needs is support and safety.

## DIGNITY IN VISUAL ART SUBMISSIONS



*IN DIGNITY*  
Acrylic on Paper  
Participant - 2021



**UNTITLED**  
*Pencil on Paper*  
*Participant - 2018*

## BELONGING

Sense of belonging is a fundamental human motivation that drives people to form social bonds while influencing well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Hagerty et al (1995) describe a sense of belonging as consisting of the following dimensions: valued involvement, fit, frequency of affectively pleasant interactions, and sound stability of relationship. In the refugee context, integration is closely tied to a sense of belonging to the host country and local community. The UNHCR (2002) describes integration as being a shared, complex, ever-evolving process which allows refugees to adapt in certain ways to the culture of the host society while maintaining their cultural identity. Similarly, IRCC defines integration as a two-way process that encourages adjustments on the part of both newcomers and the receiving society (2020). Participants' references to integration commonly came hand in hand with reflections on belonging. Nearly all participants described belonging as maintaining social bonds with one's ethnic community, creating wider social bridges with other communities, and strengthening bonds and ties with the country of Canada.

Feelings of belonging were described by participants in a variety of different levels. On an individual level, some consider belonging to be an internal sense of peace and acceptance of one's own self. Others view belonging as having strong friendships and familial ties where they feel seen and understood. Experiencing belonging was also described by participants on a larger level, through community bonds and ties to Canada as a country.

Individually, participants described belonging as feeling inner peace experienced through internal reflection, religious and spiritual bonds, and connecting with the physical urban and natural beauty of BC. Familial ties result in deep feelings of belonging and personal bonds. The sense of belonging found in familial ties is particularly apparent for those who give birth while in Canada. Participants shared that initial ties and community bonds in Canada are frequently with others who have shared ethnic or cultural backgrounds or are otherwise associated as being from the same community including religious groups, people with shared creative passions, or the LGBTQIA+ community. Community bridging is also critical for one's experiences of belonging in Canada. Multicultural friendships established through service providers, employment, volunteering, learning English, and becoming involved in community hubs were all reflected upon as cultivating a sense of belonging. On a wider level, we found that immigration status as depicted by physical cards represents experiences of belonging for many refugee claimants. This includes receiving one's refugee claim ID, work permit card, positive refugee claim documents, receipt of Permanent Residence Card, as well as ultimately attaining one's Canadian passport.

## BELONGING IN THE LISTENING SESSIONS

Several participants expressed the significant impact that service providing organizations such as settlement agencies and transitional home providers had on them. We learned that many refugee claimants experienced emotional support, guidance, and individual connections as a result of these linkages - particularly important for those without families or other pre-existing social ties in Canada.

One participant, a man from South East Asia, reflected on a community picnic as an experience that brought him a sense of belonging in more ways than one, expressing:

*"The invitation made a lasting impression. Surrounded by everyone that night, for the first time in a long time I was seen, no longer alone; it was like a family reunion despite being here without family. I was asked to volunteer on the coordinating committee for the next one and now I have helped coordinate three with my team. I know what people are facing and I can help."*

### **Bonds With Local Family, Close Friends or Ones' Partner**

While some interviewees struggled to develop a sense of belonging in Canada, several others expressed a deep sense of belonging and connection with family members, close friends, or their partner in Canada. A young man's strong connection to his mother makes him feel that he belongs here. He reflected, "wherever my mom is, that is like my place." A woman's reunion with her husband after a long wait for his PR application to be approved, led her to finally feel that Canada is a place she can call home. Individuals who gave birth to a child in Canada expressed feeling a new level of belonging and closeness to Canada. "We have a Canadian now," one mother said, smiling and gesturing to her child. Another interviewee found himself experiencing a sense of belonging after seeing his children excelling in school.

### **Deep Connection with Individuals from Service Providing Organizations**

Several participants expressed the significant impact that service providing organizations such as settlement agencies and transitional home providers had on them, not only through the provision of housing but also on a larger scale, noting that from some organizations they received continuous emotional support from someone who authentically cared about them like their own family member. One participant, a woman from Africa expressed "I feel so connected when I get help from people and organizations, because of the wonderful people I have come to know through NGOs, I feel like home, like I have been here for a thousand years."

### **Positive Decision on Refugee Claim and Receipt of PR Card**

The experience of receiving a positive decision brought up a great deal of emotion for several individuals while they reflected on the experience. One participant expressed that everything felt simplified and easier after getting refugee status, stating, "The road will open for you...and you know where you can go." Other participants felt similarly, including one individual from the Middle East who expressed, "After the claim was accepted, we felt a new connection to this place. If you're not safe, even if it is your country, you're not feeling you belong to that country. Feeling safe, secure, and free makes one feel home, no matter what country they live in. Now, Canada is my home."

## **BELONGING IN THE POETRY AND CREATIVE WRITING**

The creative writing workshop provided a safe and creative space for the participants to reflect on, share, and write about their refugee experiences, while showing or reminding them that they are part of a larger group and community, that they are being heard, and that their contributions are meaningful.

Sense of belonging is a vital yet inconsistent feeling or emotion throughout refugee journeys. In one example, a poet describes his vision of his new home:

**Here, on the shore of a new land  
I pitch a tent  
A nest from the straws of childhood dreams  
I plant my mother's smile on it.  
And I let the child in me  
Go out and play with  
Geese and seagulls  
I let the child in me  
Build a sandcastle  
Call it home.**

As a person with a complicated past and a rich history, the poet seems to be striving for a peaceful space where they can reinvent themselves while retaining some of their heritage that is still meaningful to their present. This indicates the potential merging of memories and future aspirations realized in their new home.

Belonging to a new place can be linked not only to the physical location, but also the powerful presence of a friend, family, or partner. In the following excerpt from a short story titled "The Woman Cellist", a writer tells the story of a person whose depressive disorders and suicidal attempts came to an end after he bumped into a loving musician:

*"It sounds like we have a lot in common. I shouldn't have bought the rope. Here I am, instead of the rope to hang myself on, I am hugging the woman's legs tight like a cello. I look out the window and see the world opening up itself for me."*

This is a powerful example of how a person can impact one's life and sense of belongingness. As social beings, there is great value in cultivating spaces where refugees can meet, support each other, and make meaningful connections.

## JULY

She didn't let July to complete  
 The hotness of summer turned to breeze  
 From the window of the plane she was staring at the  
 island of Hope  
 Watching every single light of the city  
 Planting a hope on every sparkle.  
 She arrived in the land of life  
 The land of hope  
 The land of being oneself:  
 Yes, it is me, myself, my hopes, I came for.  
 She greeted good-morning to the sun and kissed the  
 sky  
 Wore a green dress of wishes  
 Did her hair and asked the mirror how she looked!  
  
 Thrilled, she carried a vase beaming with green blossoms of hope,  
 Closed the door quickly,  
 Joy drizzled from her tip to toe to the corridor...  
 With soft steps she roamed the streets  
 Cheered in the gardens and bushes  
 Merged her freedom with the melody of birds  
 Inhaled the breath of being-herself  
 Yes, now it is only her, and herself  
 She poured a handful of the lake water on the vase  
 Hoping they will blossom in the land of hope  
 To the blossoms of her wishes she smiled a full of life  
 From her pocket, she secretly took out a handful of soil  
 And smelled the scent of homeland.

This poem mainly explores the theme of being oneself in a land that thrives on hope and freedom. July marks some delightful event for the persona of the poem, perhaps denoting some good news of being welcomed and accepted in the new place. The imagery used in the poem implies a sense of belonging that is powerful and euphoric. The last line is quite remarkable, as the poet seems to have carried "a handful of soil" from her home country, yet she enjoys the scent of her homeland in the new land. It is as though she has carried with her the soil and wishes to have her hopes "blossom in the land of hope."

## A CHILD PLAYING ON THE SHORE

By Nicher

With the eyes of a stranger  
 I stare at my shadow  
 Crossing the borders before me.  
 I am a modern dervish  
 Wandering on the roads of in-betweenness  
 Travelling as far as the horizon unfolds:  
 I find nothing but me.

I've stepped out of my history  
 Maybe I want to reach the end of eternity:  
 Here, on the shore of a new land  
 I pitch a tent  
 A nest from the straws of childhood dreams  
 I plant my mother's

Smile on it. And I let the child in me  
 Go out and play with  
 Geese and seagulls  
 I let the child in me  
 Build a sandcastle  
 Call it home.

The poem starts with the image of persona's shadow crossing the border before him, as though an unconscious force in him had long wanted to be unleashed and free. It is actually the child in him that longs to have his creative imagination actualized in a new place. The line "I've stepped out of my history" denotes a necessary breakaway from the past world, and with the "mother's smile" planted on the tent on the shore of a new land, he is finally able to let the child in him cherish childhood innocence in nature. The poem is a testimony of a refugee's struggle and fervent desire to pursue freedom.

## The Woman Cellist

It has been a few days I wanted to buy a rope and hook it on the ceiling. Being short, I can't reach the ceiling even with a chair under my feet. It has been two days and six hours I haven't eaten anything, and six days I haven't been outside. I have switched off my phone, sealed off myself from the rest of the world. The only thing open is a window overlooking the main street in this bustling city. Everyone in this city is busy but me, and I am no longer of any value to this age. The mayhem of the cars comes in through the window and makes life more sickening. I'm buying a rope, and I must figure out a way to hook it somewhere on the ceiling.

When I returned from war back home, I wasn't alone. I had two other friends with me, and my wife had to take care of the three of us, as though she now had three husbands. After some time my wife stood up, and she couldn't endure me and my wretched friends. She left and never came back. My friends and I also left our homeland.

We flew to Canada, and upon our arrival, we got separated on good terms. This way I was more able to adapt into this life here. Now I have a Kurdish heart and Canadian citizenship. I haven't talked to those friends to check if they have got their citizenship yet.

I recall the times when I was a soccer player, the best player of our team. I reminisce about the early mornings when my wife used to tickle my feet soles to wake me up. Those times are gone, and I feel like there's nothing for me to look forward to.

Through my apartment window comes the sound of a cello. I put on my jacket and go out to the streets. I take the elevator, too tired to use the stairs. On the main street, I hear the melody of the cello. I stop by and see the cellist, a woman whose beautiful hair falls on the cello between her legs. I need to buy the rope. I get on the train, got to the mall, buy the rope, and take the train back. I walk to the building and see the woman cellist is still there, oblivious to the world, floating on her own. I put all my cash in the container in front of her. I close my eyes and listen. There is something to the melody she is playing, a message I can't grasp. She then stops and smiles at me, puts her cello in the bag. I greet her and ask to do me a favor. She is a tall woman, tall enough to hook the rope on the ceiling for me.

In my apartment, I ask her to hook the rope for me. She asks for some tea. We have a brief conversation. She is an immigrant artist. It sounds like we have a lot in common. I shouldn't have bought the rope. Here I am, instead of hanging on the rope, I am hugging the woman's legs like a cello. I look out the window and see the world opening up itself for me.

Now the woman cellist is my wife, and she is pregnant with a baby girl. Now I know where I belong.

A man with PTSD struggles to find meaning in his life, and he decides to take his own life. He has got the Canadian citizenship, misses his divorced wife, and knows nothing about his friends. The absence of love and good social connections can cause depression and other serious mental disorders. All that the narrator has hoped for was a better time to look forward to. A woman cellist playing beautifully on the street saves his life. The powerful image at the end, in which the narrator hangs not on the rope but the legs of the woman, signifies the embrace of life itself. The cello symbolizes the meaning of life promised by the new place. The story sheds light on the hope that we can see through out windows, the love a stranger can give us on the street, the infinite ways we can find meaning if we let the world "open up itself."

## BELONGING IN VISUAL ART SUBMISSIONS



**UNTITLED**  
Acrylic on Paper  
Participant - 2021



**CHILD**  
Charcoal on Canvas  
Participant - 2021

## WELLBEING

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines wellbeing as a state in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully and is able to contribute to her or his own community (2001). Wellbeing is cultivated both internally and externally as individuals navigate the refugee claim process. In addition to attaining a successful refugee claim and receiving protected status, which is central to wellbeing, factors such as a strong sense of order, relative political and social stability, security, justice and personal freedom in Canada are meaningful drivers of wellbeing for many refugee claimants. Throughout the refugee claim process, possessing the agency and opportunity to pursue physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health directly correlates with a refugee claimant's state of wellbeing; creative and physical outlets and opportunities to form social ties are essential. The pursuit of one's dreams and future goals, as well as opportunities to "give back to the community" are vital for refugee claimants, in particular for those who have left positions of high socioeconomic status and those who are internally driven to share their skills and talents. Experiencing nature, clean and secure living situations, and exploring the local community are additional factors regarded as impacting wellbeing by refugee claimants.

### WELLBEING IN THE LISTENING SESSIONS

When describing wellbeing, the following words were frequently identified throughout several listening sessions:

**Physical Strength – Mental Health  
Parks – Calm Beaches – Running  
Writing and Reading  
Watching TV to Improve English  
Counselling – Group Therapy  
Medication – Healing – Justice**

### Perceptions of Security, Justice and Freedom in the New Place

Several participants expressed that the refugee claim process created space for them to make a case for asylum that was more just and fair than that they had experienced in their country of origin. "The priority placed on human beings" in Canada was something that made a female refugee claimant feel safe here. One participant expressed gratitude for all that had been offered to her by government funded programs led by settlement agencies as well as members of the wider community, expressing "they made me feel somehow welcome, they invested in me, and it is my turn to give back."

### Focus on Multifaceted Health Needs: Mental, Physical, Emotional, Spiritual

It was common for refugee claimants to express their desire to maintain their physical health throughout the claim process. Several participants expressed the wellbeing connection between body and mind. One young man from Central America lamented his desire to exercise in the context of his inability to afford a gym membership. Instead, throughout the claim process he worked out at home and jogged outside to maintain his mental and physical health. Similarly, another man from Central America expressed his daily fitness regime as the one thing he could control, and a critical component for his mental health and wellbeing. Another young man from the Middle East reflected on experiencing the cycle of depression:

*If you are depressed, you're just stuck and lose all motivation. In the end, change comes from within you and if you aren't in a place where you can get out of the cycle and respond to support, even your best friends can't help. I was lucky to have friends here during the time before my hearing, especially being separated from so many close friends and family back home .... Through the experience I see I am now more resilient. There is a limit to how far I will let myself slip. If I got through that, I can get through anything.*

### Nature and Place

The places one visits has a significant impact on one's wellbeing as expressed by interview participants. Several participants living in downtown Vancouver reflected on visiting local libraries and the accompanying feelings of blending in, and having access to books and free resources.

In addition, perhaps not surprisingly, the diverse nature surrounding Vancouver is a place that was identified as being critical to their sense of wellbeing. One refugee claimant, a man from Eastern Europe, expressed that before his hearing, he would go to Bear Creek Park in Surrey and just run into what he described as “a peaceful wilderness” with abandon. He suggested, “Your mind is empty when your lungs are full.” Another participant, a woman from Central America, expressed, “Nature is a blessing from God; it makes me relaxed and reduces pressure.”

### **Life Purpose**

A young participant from the Middle East was motivated to perform well in school here in Canada, driven by a promise she made to a friend who died in a bomb explosion at an educational center in her home country. In a letter to him she wrote, “I am here...and I make a promise, if I am studying one percent for me, I’ll add another two percent for you... that means I will push it to the limit.”

Similarly, a woman from Central America expressed:

*I know I can do more, I can be of use to this country, to the Canadian people [...] I can [give back] to the locals—to this country—something that this country has given me. Every day I’m seeing clearer; everyday I am thinking better. I am healing and I am so grateful for that.*

The theme of life purpose made some participants reflect on the necessity for employment, beyond financial stability. One man from Central America emphasized:

*We aren’t made to be lazy. I need something to get up for in the morning and to have something to work for. It might not be the best job that I have had, but at least it is something that makes me exercise, talk, and connect. As human beings we need that connection. This is how work has benefited my wellbeing in a positive way.*

### **Creative outlets, pursuing dreams, practicing hobbies**

A refugee claimant who has passion for music was invited to play in the graduation ceremony for their English language class. Playing in front of a large audience made him feel connected to a larger community in Canada.

Another refugee claimant who is a singer reflected on how settlement agencies and the MAP BC collective provided

opportunities for creative expression, “Music for me has been a therapy. Settlement agencies have played a crucial part in my social and emotional life by inviting me to music events and to perform”. Regarding her music, she said, “I intend to use it to advocate and help, not only claimants but anybody who has been through abuse.”

## **WELLBEING IN THE POETRY AND CREATIVE WRITING**

A sense of wellbeing emerged as an overarching theme in the workshop. This is evidenced in the authors’ struggles for peace, freedom, sense of justice and security, and description of their healing journey, be it spiritual, psychological, or physical. In a poem entitled “Three Words” the poet reflects on the hardship and simultaneous beauty of transitioning to her new life.

*One day someone asked me how my experience of coming to Canada as a refugee had been. Then, three words appeared in my mind. It was impossible to answer at that time. I could not summarize in a few words, an experience so strong, so challenging and at the same time, so beautiful.*

In a poem titled “Dance of Freedom” a female poet describes her journey in the new country in compelling, expressive metaphors:

**Homeland becomes the dancer  
In whose arms I get drunk  
In a free night, on a free street,  
I thread songs of freedom  
I sing: you, my freedom, mi amor,  
The man I’ve been seeking for three years  
Dance with me, and tell me  
Where are the wounds that lie within us?  
Here, my skirts have got shorter  
My imagination widened  
My home has become smaller  
My dreams, bigger.**

The narrator struggled to overcome her past and the tragedy attached to its memory. Music and dancing in a multicultural Canadian spaces where she witnessed people of different origins celebrating love and freedom helped her let go of the past and treasure her new home. This is an example of wellbeing in a refugee whose whose imagination and dreams are liberated in the new place.

## DANCE OF FREEDOM

It is raining,  
Not reminiscing about homeland,  
Our nights become wounds  
And the new homeland teaches us how to dance  
Past is a wound:  
In an Italian bar  
A Mexican dancer wearing a big hat  
Caresses the wound.  
We the refugees, where are the wounds that lie  
within us?  
A Chinese bartender fills my glass  
In memory of war, I raise it,  
A toast for the martyrs  
who never got to say their goodbyes;  
Where are the wounds that lie within us?  
Maybe on my back  
Where the map of home is tattooed;  
From behind, the Mexican dancer pulls me by  
the waist,  
Invites me to tango.

Homeland becomes the dancer  
In whose arms I get drunk  
In a free night, on a free street,  
I thread songs of freedom  
I sing: you, my freedom, mi amor,  
The man I've been seeking for three years  
Dance with me, and tell me  
Where are the wounds that lie within us?  
Here my skirts have got shorter  
My imagination widened  
My home has become smaller  
My dreams bigger.

## THREE WORDS

I do not know how many transitions a life has. I do not know how many times you have to start over. But I am tired. I do not know if life can pay me back what I think it owes me; or if I have to pay it something.

One day someone asked me how my experience of coming to Canada as a refugee had been. Then, three words appeared in my mind. It was impossible to answer at that time. I could not summarize in a few words, an experience so strong, so challenging and at the same time, so beautiful.

What my mind did, was immediately outline those words that now define my Destiny and my Life. I never thought words were going to have a peculiar scent, colour or even taste. Those words have given my life bittersweet flavours, bright light colours and a hopeful coffee scent. Three words that now I keep in the suitcase of my story: refugee, new country, new beginning.

I felt prepared for what I thought was coming. What I did not know was that my body was not. The change was so fast and brutal that my mind barely assimilated it; but my body, my body played a bad game on me. It could not understand what we were living through, and uniting with my mind, the weakest part of my being, they decided to liberate me.

The narrator of the story describes the hardship of transitioning to her new life. The inability to express her situation as a refugee is remarkable, as she only remembers the three words in her suitcase “refugee, new country, and new beginning.” It is a real struggle that affects not only her mind, but her physical body too. Between her mind and body, she finds a way to reconcile both to finally be liberated.

## THE PASSPORT By Nicher

The immigration officer at CBSA received my file and asked me to wait. After twenty minutes, he returned, looking empathetic. He handed me a few documents, asked me for some signatures, and then gave me instructions on what to do next.

I walked out of the building and went to a nearby Tim Hortons. While sipping my coffee at a corner table, I stared at the snow banks outside and reflected on the last days in my home country, precisely, the moments my plane from Erbil took off. I looked down at those magnificent mountains below, and for the first time I felt I was shedding my skin.

Being from Kurdistan, I never felt what part of me belongs to Iraq. I carry an Iraqi passport that is no different from the worth of a potato. Those borders were defined a century ago, and I never understood why all of my people should suffer the repercussions of some stupid agreement made between allies after the First World War, those colonialists who split the lands and went home. Being born within Iraqi borders was a curse. My parents, their parents, and their grandparents, all of them had to pay the price. I decided not to. So I moved.

I moved to Canada. They have seized my passport, and I care not the least. That passport was like a stain on my face. Wherever I travelled, the passport was all that mattered, not my personality, mannerisms, history, qualifications, competencies, resume, or anything else of my human aspect. Now I don't have a passport. But I am in Canada, the land of my dreams.

It is true that all refugee claimants work with their lawyers to write a story. Being a writer, I knew how to write my story in the best of ways. I knew there was no place for fiction, that everything had to be supported by evidence. All that happened to me was fresh in the memory, and the lawyer was happy that I wrote an incredible story for him. What happened to me back in Iraq may sound like fiction to a Canadian resident whose reality is utterly different. Here I was, sharing a story that was going to define me forever. I sometimes envy Canadians who were born and brought up in this free country. But I am also proud of my past experience, my struggle and goals.

I can rewrite my story. Yes, I can change my destiny. I am not a motionless tree, but I can be its meaning. I can give all that I have, share all that I learned. I wake up everyday and I tell myself: today is all that I have. I am sipping my coffee, and I don't know for how long I won't be able to move out of this country. Yet I am content, because I know I can work, I can count on my skills, and I can count on the compassion of the people around me.

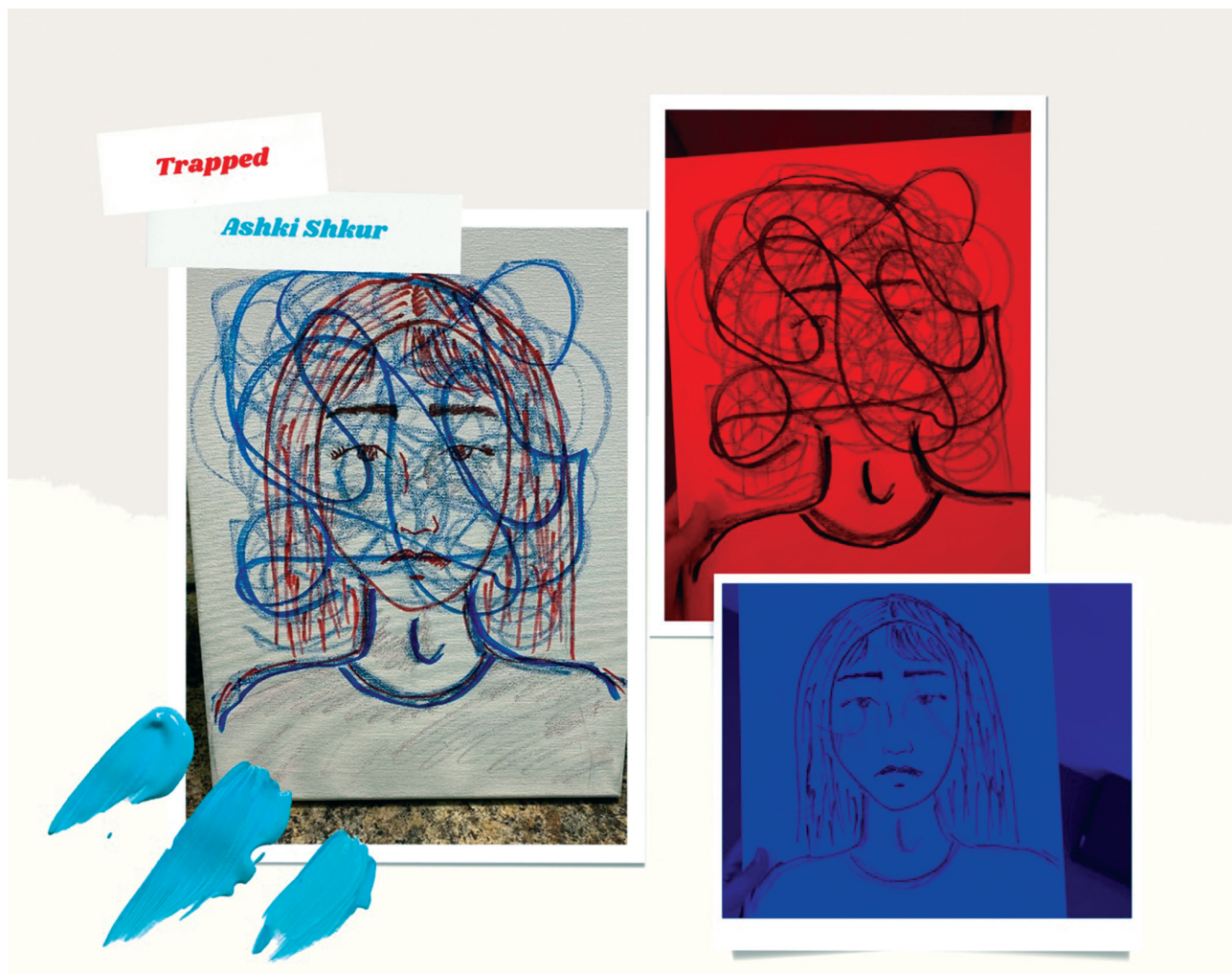
I am looking at a plane far above, in the blue sky. Perhaps someday I will get a Canadian passport, perhaps not. When I do, I will travel around the world, and that's maybe when I will taste the freedom I lacked back home.

## IT WAS AND IT IS!

When night was like daytime and daytime was like night  
 When friends were laughing with tears on their cheeks  
 When roads appeared from the Ocean  
 When the sky became the playing ground  
 When feathers grew on the human body  
 When salt turned into sugar and sugar into alcohol  
 When mushrooms grew taller than trees  
 A smile brought a mountain glass in his hand and joy drew flowers on his face  
 It is time to relax with stars and call the butterfly dreams to come.

In a paradoxical manner, the poet expresses the sense of confusion, anticipation, and excitement about a major change in life. The extreme emotions described in the poem point to the shift in perspective and attitude of the persona, as well as the extraordinary moments the person experiences after arrival in the new place, the new present. It is striking how the last line shifts in tense, as the persona beautifully invites the "butterfly dreams to come."

## WELLBEING IN VISUAL ART SUBMISSIONS



### TRAPPED

Mixed Media

Ashki Shkur - 2021

*"I created Trapped to show two different expressions; "normal" and anxious. Trapped highlights how I felt internally under red light and how I showed myself externally under blue light. All my life I've had to act 'normal' even when I was filled with anger and anxiety since I wasn't allowed to attend school back home, because of my gender. Trapped is important to me because it made me realize how I was forced to show a "normal" face everyday and couldn't stand up for my education. Lastly, Trapped taught me that if I did not go through my journey, I would not be the person who not only stands up for myself today but also advocates for others."*



*THE LION IN ME*  
Digital Art  
Participant - 2021



*ME, A WARRIOR WHO  
FIGHTS FOR MY RIGHTS*  
Digital Art  
Participant - 2021

## SO, WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

The experiences shared by participants indicate important experiences of dignity, belonging and wellbeing encountered and created during their refugee claim experiences. Divided by theme, below we have pinpointed the “bright spots” that refugee claimants encounter so that they can be amplified, expanded-upon and change prevailing systems.



## DIGNITY:

- Respectful, professional, informative and empathic interactions with authority figures such as CBSA and the RCMP make a lasting impact on refugee claimant's sense of dignity in Canada.
- Feeling respected, understood, and given adequate time to share their case properly when speaking to their refugee lawyer improves refugee claimants' dignity while navigating the refugee claim process. This can also contribute to their clarity in the claim process and impact their sense of fairness and justice.
- Connection, relationship, tone and level of knowledge from case workers within service providing organizations and transitional housing is deeply impactful in the lives of refugee claimants in Canada. These supports are often trusted allies and bridges to trainings, language learning, community connections, employment opportunities and more.
- Safe housing is critical for the dignity, safety and the wellbeing of refugee claimants in Canada. Low barrier shelters can cause additional distress and trauma for refugee claimants. However, living in transitional housing that is specifically intended for refugee claimants is often safe, private, clean and brings connection with members of the wider community. Best practices of refugee claimant transitional housing providers in BC can be learned from and expanded upon to best serve refugee claimants.
- The ability to work is a critical component for refugee claimants to provide for oneself/one's family and live in dignity. Reduced wait times for work permits would result in less refugee claimants being unable to legally find employment. Customized employment services, English language skills, and credential conversion services are also essential for refugee claimants to attain employment.
- The STCA directly impacts the decision of many refugee claimants to cross into Canada irregularly in search of safety. Removing the STCA would reduce the necessity for RCs to cross irregularly, resulting in more dignified experiences.

## BELONGING:

- One-on-one relationship with case workers from service providing organizations such as settlement agencies and transitional housing have a significant impact on refugee claimant's sense of belonging. Time should be taken to establish personal connections and understand refugee claimant needs.
- Community events such as shared meals, picnics, dance classes, nature outings, and holiday events provide a sense of belonging and wellbeing and should be a priority for all refugee claimant serving organizations. Best practices can be learned from organizations offering these community events regularly and cross-referrals would allow refugee claimants to experience a wider variety of events and community members.
- Refugee claimants may find peace, connection with their local surroundings, and a sense of belonging through exploring urban environments and nature.
- Initial ties and community bonds in Canada are frequently with others who have shared ethnic or cultural backgrounds or are otherwise associated as being from the same community including religious groups, people with shared creative passions, or the LGBTQIA+ community. This is an important piece of belonging.
- Refugee claimants often find Canadians "friendly but not friends." Multicultural friendships can be established through service providers, employment, volunteering, learning English, and becoming involved in community hubs.
- Immigration status as depicted by physical cards represents experiences of belonging for many refugee claimants. This includes receiving one's refugee claim ID, work permit card, positive refugee claim documents, receipt of Permanent Residence Card, as well as ultimately attaining one's Canadian passport.

## WELLBEING:

- Many refugee claimants feel that the refugee claim process is structured, largely unbiased, fair and just. This builds feelings of confidence in the process, and a perspective that Canada has a strong sense of security, justice, and freedom. This is particularly the case for refugee claimants who have strong relationships with their lawyers and concrete understanding of the refugee claim process.
- Refugee claimants recognize the intersections between physical, mental, and spiritual health and wellbeing. Physical and creative outlets are valued by refugee claimants and opportunities are coveted when they are made available. Many refugee claimants cannot afford a gym membership, art supplies, or workshops, making it an area to be amended.
- Life purpose is an essential component of wellbeing. Refugee claimants thrive when they feel motivated, purpose-driven, included, and see that their skill-sets and potential are being utilized.
- Nature is an important component for refugee claimant mental health. Nature outings coordinated by organizations and community associations, as well as individual exploration of local beaches, parks, and trails provide space for peace, distraction for the anxieties of the refugee claim process, and solitude for refugee claimants.
- Refugee claimants thrive in leadership roles where they are active contributors, regarded as skilled volunteers or employees, where they can apply their skills and make a positive impact in the community. At times it can be challenging to find where and how to participate, particularly without Canadian experience or fluency in English. Service providers may work with refugee claimants to amend these gaps.
- Refugee claimants make a positive impact when included in all levels of decision making, including policy creation, research, program development, and communication strategy. Refugee claimants are unique in their needs, skills, backgrounds, and intersections of identity. Programming, services, and policies can be enhanced by their diverse voices to ensure that they are inclusive, suitable and elevated for and by people of diverse ages, genders, disabilities, ethnicities, religions, sexual orientations, income levels, and gender identities.

## ACTIONABLE RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations aim to spark thought and inform multi-level systems change to amplify experiences of dignity, belonging and wellbeing for refugee claimants. Together, Canadians can cultivate a more humane welcome of refugee claimants, increase the capacity to welcome those seeking asylum, and create transformative communities where refugee claimants and Canadians mutually flourish together.

### RECOMMENDATION #1:

**Provide training and opportunities to inform about the significance held within individual interactions between refugee claimants and people in positions of authority, in particular the CBSA, RCMP and lawyers.** Systems manifest at the point of individual interactions and those in positions of authority should become more aware that they hold great power within the system, setting the course for refugee claimants as they enter the country.

### RECOMMENDATION #2:

**Continue emphasizing community bonding within programs and services for and with refugee claimants.** Community bonding is a critical component of connection for refugee claimants; community-based events such as

shared meals, picnics, dance classes, nature outings, and holiday events provide a sense of belonging and wellbeing of refugee claimants. These connections are important to getting to know the people who we are walking alongside, learning with, and ultimately looking to support.

### RECOMMENDATION #3:

**Create additional transitional housing units to ensure newly arrived refugee claimants needing shelter are welcomed into housing that emphasizes their dignity and belonging.** This will provide refugee claimants with the emotional support, guidance, and individual connections that are crucial to their settlement and integration in Canada. By creating additional transitional housing units, it will also divert newly arrived refugee claimants from being housed in shelters, which can be disorienting and even traumatizing to refugee claimants.

### RECOMMENDATION #4:

**Increase leadership opportunities where refugee claimants can participate and contribute to the community.** These roles may be paid or volunteer opportunities. They must recognize, value, and leverage refugee claimants' individual skillsets, expertise and passions. Creating spaces that recognize people's inherent worth, strengths, potential, and the multifaceted nature of who they are (beyond being a refugee claimant) will enhance refugee claimants' sense of belonging, confidence, and connection.



**RECOMMENDATION #5:**

**Amplify opportunities for refugee claimants to access quality creative outlets, self-expression and physical activity to improve mental health and wellbeing, promote new connections, create new experiences and introduce enjoyable activities that can reduce isolation.**

**RECOMMENDATION #6:**

**Enhance the capacity and reach of communications strategies that engage the public with the aim of building an informed, strengths-based awareness of refugee claimants in Canada. This will strengthen understanding, empathy, awareness of refugee claimants' skills, potential and contributions while "myth-busting" rumors.**

**RECOMMENDATION #7:**

**Increase dignity in the right to seek refuge in Canada, with justice and without shame at official border crossings by removing the Safe Third Country Agreement.** This will restore protections guaranteed to refugee claimants under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and international human rights treaties.

**RECOMMENDATION #8:**

**Expand opportunities for refugee claimants to access programs and advanced classes that promote skill development and integration opportunities such as multi-level English classes, customized employment support, mentorship, career pathways, and clear avenues for professional credential conversion.**

**RECOMMENDATION #9:**

**Build upon best practices for applying an AGD approach and promoting opportunities to have diverse voices heard at all levels of decision making including policy creation, research, program development, and communication strategy.** Normalize refugee claimants being unique in their needs and consider how age and gender intersect with other characteristics (e.g. disability, sexual orientation and or/gender identity, religion, ethnicity, education level, English language ability, income level) and how such intersections impact their needs, capacities and priorities. By applying this lens and promoting opportunities to participate in decisions, access to suitable programming and services that are inclusive and suitable for people of diverse ages, genders, abilities, ethnicities, religions, sexual orientations, income levels, and gender identities will be enhanced.

## CONCLUSION

As the number of people who have been forced to seek asylum worldwide continues to increase at unprecedented levels, the rate of individuals seeking safety in BC is steadily increasing with thousands of refugee claims made annually. IRCC and the CBSA have reported a significant increase of refugee claimants within BC in recent years. In 2013, there was a reported total of 535 refugee claimants processed by CBSA and IRCC. This number grew over sevenfold to 3850 in 2019 and despite unprecedented border closures due to the global pandemic, with 2160 refugee claims processed in 2020.

Undertaken from an asset-based systems change framework, the research outlined in this document depicts meaningful experiences of refugee claimants, clearly presenting where refugee claimants encounter or create dignity, wellbeing and belonging from the time of submitting their refugee claim up to their hearing date. The "bright spots" identified present opportunities to collectively move towards scalable, multifaceted, beneficial change.

We have identified nine actionable recommendations which are rooted in the experiences shared by refugee claimant participants with the aim of sparking thought, greater understanding and conversation. They seek to inform multi-level systems change to amplify experiences of dignity, belonging and wellbeing for refugee claimants. These actionable recommendations will serve as a useful resource in moving forward towards systemic change. Additionally, continued community-based research would be a beneficial next step, particularly that which includes the voices of members of the wider community in Canada – successful integration takes both the newcomers and members of the wider community. There is also space to apply our findings to further delve into the details of systemic change in further research. Additionally, further discussions between stakeholders, including refugee claimants, are essential as next steps begin to be taken.

## SELECTED REFERENCES

- Barone, T. & Eisner, E.W.** (2011) *Arts Based Research*. Sage Publications
- Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R.** (1995). The need to belong: desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3), 497.
- BC Settlement and Integration Services.** (2019). Stream A and B Services for Refugee Claimants. Retrieved from <https://bcrefugee-hub.ca/bcsis-stream-a-and-b-refugee-claimants/>
- Bowen, G.** (2005) Preparing a Qualitative Research-Based Dissertation: Lessons Learned. *The Qualitative Report*, 10(2), 208-222.
- Castleberry, A., & Nolen, A.** (2018). Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Research Data: Is It as Easy as It Sounds? *Currents in Pharmacy Teaching and Learning*, 10, 807-815.
- Davidson, S. & Morgan, M.** (2018) *Systems Change Framework*. Sax Institute.
- Dawley, A.** (2018). Newcomer Mental Health and Well-Being: Exploring the Social Determinants of Mental health and Barriers to Care Experienced by Newcomers in Nanaimo. *Central Vancouver Island Multicultural Society*.
- Dunn, V. & Mellor, T.** (2017) Creative, Participatory Projects with Young People: Reflections Over Five Years. *Research for All*. 1(2): 284-299.
- Government of Canada** (2021). Asylum claims by year 2013 – 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/asylum-claims/processed-claims.html>
- Hagerty, B. M., & Patusky, K.** (1995). Developing a measure of sense of belonging. *Nursing Research*, 44(1), 9-13.
- Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada.** (2021). Making a claim for refugee protection? Here's what you should know. Retrieved from <https://irb.gc.ca/en/applying-refugee-protection/Pages/index.aspx>
- Immigrants Refugees and Citizenship Canada** (2020) Canada's Settlement and Integration Model. Retrieved from <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/ircc/documents/pdf/english/pub/metropolis/imc2019-presentation-integration-eng.pdf>
- Kania, J., Kramer, M. & Senge, P.** (2018). The Water of Systems Change. Retrieved from [https://www.fsg.org/publications/water\\_of\\_systems\\_change](https://www.fsg.org/publications/water_of_systems_change)
- Lacroix, M.** (2004) *Canadian Refugee Policy and the Social Construction of the Refugee Claimant Subjectivity: Understanding Refugeeeness* *Journal of Refugee Studies* 17(2) Oxford University Press
- Loescher, G.** (1993) *Beyond Charity: International Cooperation and the Global Refugee Crisis*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lapan, S., Quartaroli, M., & Riemer, F.** (2012). *Qualitative research: An introduction to methods and designs*. Jossey-Bass/Wiley.
- Multi-Agency Partnership of BC** (2018). A Forum Focused on Solutions: Addressing the Urgent Shelter and Housing Needs of Refugee Claimants in BC. [PDF file] Retrieved from: <https://mapbc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Refugee-Claimant-Housing-Forum-Report-and-Action-Plan-2018.pdf>
- Minkler, M., & National Task Force on Accreditation in Health Education.** (2004). Ethical Challenges for the “Outside” Researcher in Community-Based Participatory Research. *Health Education & Behavior*, 31(6), 684–697.
- Wallerstein, N., & Duran, B.** (2010). Community-based participatory research contributions to intervention research: the intersection of science and practice to improve health equity. *American journal of public health*, 100 Suppl 1(Suppl 1), S40–S46.
- Morse, J.** (2000) Determining Sample Size. *Qualitative Health Research*. 10(1), 3-5
- Lawrence Neuman, W.** (2014). Social research methods: Qualitative and quantitative approaches.
- Pomegranate Consulting** (2019). Towards a Housing Solution for Refugee Claimants in BC: A Plan for Action. Addressing the Urgent Shelter and Housing Needs of Refugee Claimants in BC. MAP BC
- Ready Tours** (2021). <https://refugeeclaim.ca/en/>
- MAP BC** (2018). Report from 2018 Housing Forum retrieved November 20, 2021 from: <https://mapbc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Refugee-Claimant-Housing-Forum-Report-and-Action-Plan-2018.pdf>
- Statistics Canada** (2020). The Long-term Labour Market Integration of Refugee Claimants Who Became Permanent Residents in Canada, Retrieved November 20, 2021 from: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11f0019m/11f0019m2020018-eng.htm>
- UNHCR** (2002). Local integration: an under-reported solution to protracted refugee situations. *New Issues in Refugee Research*. (Research Paper No. 158)
- UNHCR** (2021). Refugee Statistics. Retrieved from [www.unhcr.ca/in-canada/refugee-statistics](http://www.unhcr.ca/in-canada/refugee-statistics)
- UN General Assembly.** “Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” Paris, 1948. Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>
- World Health Organization.** (2001). The World health Report : 2001 : Mental health : new understanding, new hope. *World Health Organization*. [PDF file] Retrieved from <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/42390>

Graphic design and layout by Trisha Oldfield  
[www.littlefishdesign.ca](http://www.littlefishdesign.ca)



