



TIES Centre for Immigrant Research
Conference Report

28TH METROPOLIS CANADA CONFERENCE: KEY INSIGHTS FOR PRACTICE

Overview

The 28th Annual National Metropolis Canada Conference brought together settlement practitioners, policymakers, government officials, and researchers, from across Canada to exchange knowledge and discuss emerging challenges in immigration policy and newcomer integration. The conference was held from March 11–13, 2026, at the Halifax Convention Centre in Nova Scotia and focused on the theme “Changing Course? Establishing Consensus on Canada’s Immigration Future.”

The central theme of this year’s conference reflected the policy shift introduced by the 2026 Immigration Multi-Year Levels Plan, which significantly reduced the targets for both permanent and temporary migrants after a decade of expanding immigration levels. This shift raised important questions about the future direction of Canada’s immigration policy, the country’s labour market needs, and the sustainability of settlement services. Conference sessions and plenaries explored how these policy changes may affect different regions, immigration streams, and communities across Canada.

A recurring topic throughout the conference was the impact of funding reductions on service provider organizations (SPOs). Many panellists and practitioners expressed concern about budget cuts affecting settlement programs nationwide. Despite these challenges, there was a strong sense of solidarity among organizations. Participants emphasized the need for greater collaboration, resource sharing, and strategic partnerships across institutions to sustain settlement services and support newcomers effectively during this period of policy transition.





Strategic Reflections

A central message emerging from the conference is clear: immigrants are not the issue—systemic and structural barriers are. Service provider organizations (SPOs), including TIES, play a critical role in identifying and removing these barriers to enable meaningful integration. In a context of constrained funding over the next fiscal cycle, the pressing question is how to “do more with less.” This will require strategic collaboration and partnerships across sectors—among SPOs, governments, employers, and community organizations—to share resources, expand capacity, and sustain impact.

The conference also highlighted a broader shift toward more sustainable and diversified funding models. Examples such as the Saskatchewan Open Door Society demonstrate the importance of moving beyond grant-based funding to include corporate partnerships, foundation support, donor engagement, fee-for-service programming, and social enterprise approaches.

At the program level, there is growing demand for occupation-specific and employment-focused language training, signaling opportunities for more targeted, labour market-aligned initiatives. At the same time, there is increasing pressure to enhance operational efficiency and demonstrate stronger return on investment without compromising service quality. This includes rethinking delivery models and finding an effective balance between online, hybrid, and in-person services.

Technology and artificial intelligence were also identified as key enablers, with a need for responsible adoption supported by clear ethical guardrails. Additionally, strengthening pre-arrival services presents an opportunity to better prepare newcomers before arrival, improving early integration outcomes.

Finally, persistent challenges such as foreign credential recognition and limited access to high-demand programs—such as trade training offered by organizations like Calgary Catholic Immigration Society (CCIS)—underscore the need for innovation, research, and new delivery models to better align services with labour market realities.

Dr. Sally Zhao, President & CEO, The Immigrant Education Society (TIES)





Rural Settlement and Regional Immigration

Another important theme across several panels and workshops was the role of rural and northern communities in Canada's immigration strategy. With many rural regions facing demographic decline and labour shortages, immigration has increasingly been seen as a key tool for regional development. Presentations highlighted the importance of building local capacity in smaller communities, including expanding settlement infrastructure, improving access to employment opportunities, and strengthening social support networks for newcomers. Panelists discussed the need to adapt settlement models to the realities of rural contexts, where access to services, transportation, and community connections may be more limited compared to large urban centres.

These discussions closely connect to ongoing initiatives such as the TAIGA RISE project, which focuses on understanding and strengthening attraction, integration, and retention strategies in northern ecosystems. The project presentation at the conference explored perceptions of northern communities from both residents and individuals outside the North, providing valuable insights into how these regions can better position themselves to attract newcomers and support long-term settlement.

Dr. Hamed Kazemzadeh, Research Associate, TIES Centre for Immigrant Research

Integrated and Holistic Approaches to Newcomer Wellbeing

A strong thread running through the conference was that successful newcomer integration depends on services that go beyond transactions and truly wrap around people. Across sessions, it became clear that when organizations work together across sectors, sharing knowledge and coordinating care, outcomes for newcomers improve significantly. No single program or provider can meet the full complexity of a newcomer's needs alone. Integrated, community-rooted approaches that bring together mental health, settlement, education, and local partners create the kind of consistent, trusting relationships that make real belonging possible.

Azita Afshar, Manager, Mental Health & Family Wellbeing

Trauma-Informed Practice as a Foundation for Service Delivery

One of the most profound takeaways from the conference was the reminder that trauma-informed approaches are not simply a clinical tool. It is a way of being with people. For newcomers, who often arrive carrying layered and complex histories, mental health does not exist in isolation from culture, language, or lived experience. The conference reinforced that when we approach clients through a trauma-informed lens, we create conditions where people feel genuinely seen and safe enough to engage with support. This same principle extends to the staff who serve them. Practitioners in this field carry meaningful but emotionally demanding work every day, and organizations that lead with trauma-informed values create teams that are not only more effective, but more sustainable over time.

Jisha Philip, Lead, Mental Health & Family Wellbeing

Expansion of Digital Tools in Settlement Services

A key takeaway from the conference is the focus on understanding the potential role of AI in supporting service delivery. As the use of AI in the settlement sector is still at an early and exploratory stage, most initiatives were structured around brainstorming, idea generation, and exploratory discussions about possible applications, rather than demonstrating fully implemented or evaluated models. There remains considerable uncertainty around ethical considerations, as well as hesitations among both service providers and clients regarding the use of AI-supported tools. This highlights the need to address issues of trust, accessibility, and culturally responsive design alongside ongoing technological development.

In this context, our IRCC-funded project, SettleSMART, is well-positioned to contribute to this emerging space. Through a comprehensive methodology — including a web-based environmental scan across Canada, an international scoping review, an advisory table, and two surveys involving approximately 300 participants — the project not only identifies key needs and gaps in the sector, but also supports the development, testing, and evaluation of AI-informed tools, with careful attention to ethical considerations.

Dr. Fatemeh Kazemi, Senior Researcher, TIES Centre for Immigrant Research





Implications for Our Work

Participating in the conference provided valuable opportunities for network building and knowledge exchange. Engaging with representatives from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), academic researchers, and colleagues from settlement organizations across the country opened up meaningful opportunities for collaboration and future partnerships.

These connections are particularly important for projects like TAIGA RISE, which rely on cross-sector collaboration and national dialogue to better understand immigration trends in rural and northern regions. At the same time, the conference reinforced the importance of continuing to invest in research capacity within the settlement sector. As immigration policies continue to shift rapidly and funding environments become more constrained, organizations increasingly need to rely on data, evaluation, and evidence to design effective programs and advocate for sustainable funding.

In this context, we are on the right path. Our work in developing policy briefs and evidence-informed outputs—grounded in the needs and gaps we are directly observing through our research—positions us well to contribute to these evolving conversations. These efforts not only strengthen our internal direction but also enhance our ability to inform policy and practice at a broader level.

Overall, the conference highlighted both the uncertainty and the opportunity facing Canada's immigration system. While policy changes and funding pressures present significant challenges, they also create space for innovation, stronger collaboration, and more strategic, evidence-based approaches to supporting newcomers across the country.



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