

EMOTIONAL WELLNESS FOR NEWCOMERS: INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF SERVICES AS A NEXT STEP?

Why is it important?

Every newcomer experiences an extraordinary life situation. Arriving in a new country, orienting oneself in it, and starting to function properly in all aspects of life form a combination of factors that significantly threaten emotional wellness.

It is important to consider that **many individuals leave their home country due to difficult circumstances such as security issues, economic instability, political unrest, or other unbearable situations**. This alone can significantly impact their emotional wellness, making them a particularly vulnerable group in need of support and assistance.

Focusing on emotional wellness can be seen as a form of prevention against the development of mental health issues. Such prevention is especially important concerning the fact that the solution to fully developed mental health challenges is usually long-term, costly, and with an uncertain outcome. Compared to that, emotional wellness services included in general settlement services for newcomers can be seen as a cost-effective instrument suitable for dealing with early stages of emotional distress and anxiety, preventing their development into severe mental health concerns.

There is no coherent policy addressing the emotional wellness of newcomers in Alberta. Emotional wellness services for newcomers in Alberta are

currently placed in the grey area between immigration and mental health mandates.

The core policy-related question arises from this setup of public policies in the field:

How do we make the emotional wellness of newcomers the topic covered by policies instead of leaving them in the vacuum of in-between policies?

Resolving this question is crucial in **making emotional wellness assistance more accessible and useful for newcomers**.

What is emotional wellness?

The concept of emotional wellness can be described as a subset of mental health, which touches on the field of emotions and is related to understanding the sources and factors influencing emotions, ways of processing and regulating emotions, accepting the existence of emotions, and resistance to destabilizing emotional responses to stressors. Emotional wellness refers to a positive and proactive approach to dealing with emotions in life. In this sense, **emotional wellness is one of the key components to ensure mental health**.

Fundamental intercultural differences can be identified in the area of emotions and their

¹ This is a short version of the policy brief. For the full version including references and a broader description of the policy context of the issue, see [link](#)

expression and handling. Therefore, this topic is crucial in the context of immigration and services for the integration of newcomers into society. In the context of immigration, **emotional wellness can be defined as the ability to enjoy life despite the disappointments and frustrations of integrating into a new culture.**

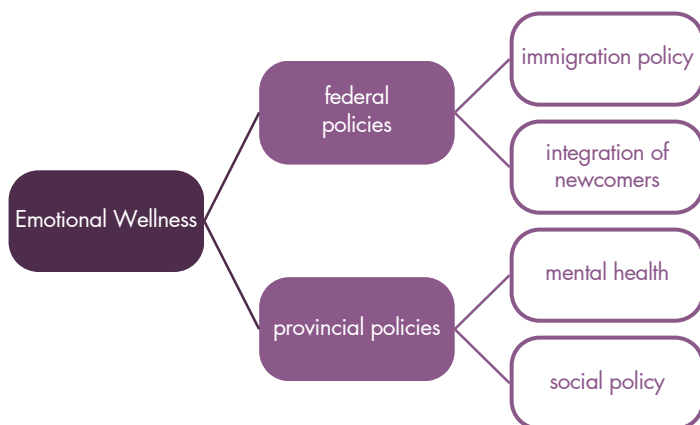
The emotional wellness of newcomers is a specific issue linked to specific variables stemming from challenges faced by newcomers, their cultural background, etc. It needs a specific and „made to measure“ approach.

Existing policy measures in the area of emotional wellness for newcomers

Responsibilities

The structure of Canadian public authority influences the provision of emotional wellness services for newcomers. From the public policy point of view, **the emotional wellness agenda is essentially split between two significant policy areas: mental health and immigration.** Within those fields, there are several policies in place, e.g., integration of newcomers, social support policies and systems, and mental healthcare.

The aforementioned policy areas are split between federal and provincial mandates. Mental health policy is primarily formulated and organized at the provincial level. The federal government is responsible for the immigration policy and the integration of foreigners.



Principles

The underlying principles of settlement policies and services are embracing and promoting cultural diversity and providing personalized and tailored services for individual newcomers, which are equally accessible to all newcomers. This leads to a **flexible and client-centred policy environment.**

The policy area of mental health shows a slightly different picture. Several strategic priorities in Alberta's mental health policy point to two crucial principles: **equal access for all Albertans and high-quality services.** From the institutional point of view, strong emphasis is placed on creating an integrated and coordinated system, which implies standardization by itself.

Diversity is also generally considered in strategic policy documents regarding mental health. At the same time, **specific processes and operational practices reflecting and addressing diversity are still being developed,** especially in the area of early intervention, which is the main focus of emotional wellness services.

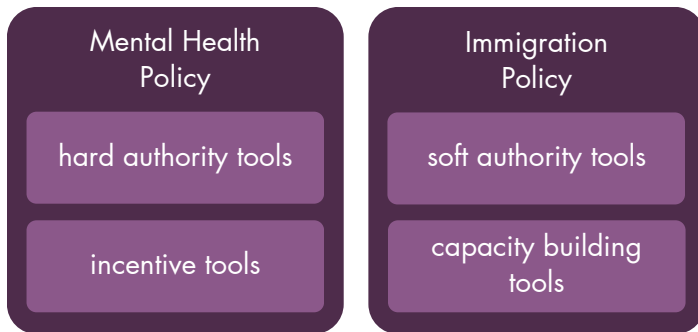


Policy tools

A non-coherent policy environment for emotional wellness can also be confirmed by looking at policy tools used in mental health and immigration policy areas. In mental health, we can observe a combination of hard authority tools and incentive tools prevailing. There is a strong emphasis on **standardization of services, and the qualification burden for providing services is set quite high.** As a result, we end up with services that can be considered of high quality in dealing with fully developed mental health disorders.

On the contrary, immigration policy is based on a combination of soft authority and capacity-building tools. As a result, the sector is more **dynamic and responsive** to changing situations and needs of service recipients. At the same time, **the pressure on flexibility presupposes a lower level of standardization.**

This may pose challenges to those who are trying to deal with issues that lie somewhere between these policy fields. This could mean switching from flexible made-to-measure (settlement services) to well-standardized services (mental healthcare).



Gaps in existing policies

In general, the provision of emotional wellness and mental health services is associated with several problems. Many are common to the mental health services sector as a whole, and some are specifically related to the environment in which this type of service is provided to newcomers. We will focus only on issues specific to providing services to newcomers.

As described above, emotional wellness services fall within two distinct policy areas. One of the main results of such an arrangement is that **we need to establish a certain communication structure and shared knowledge on emotional wellness between those two policy fields**. We must establish a common understanding of emotional wellness, its core aspects, and its importance between settlement services providers and mental health workers. This is impossible without developing a complex policy framework defining emotional wellness, reflecting the main issues that providers of these services face.

Considering the process's complexity, we can identify several important aspects that should not be neglected. In terms of access, **culturally sensitive communication about emotional wellness services must be implemented**. Issues in coping with emotions are often subjected to stigmatization in many cultures. As a result, even providers of these services can be subjected to stigmatization and mistrust. Visiting an emotional wellness professional can be seen as a sign of weakness and proof of failure. We can overcome this by **blending emotional services into the general settlement services**.

Settlement workers, who can establish relations with clients based on trust, are well-positioned to become the point of access to emotional wellness services.

We can identify three general sets of problems that service providers are currently facing:

- 1 **Policy vacuum** in the provision of emotional wellness services
- 2 **Plurality of providers of services** in the field of emotional wellness and mental health for newcomers, with providers governed by different principles, accompanied by **sharp distinctions between medical and non-medical services**
- 3 The **need to deepen knowledge and methodologies** in the field of providing mental health services to newcomers, considering their cultural and language background and the specific situation in which they find themselves

In all of these areas, we see significant policy gaps that need to be worked on in the future.

Recommendations

- 1 **Define the concept of emotional wellness** of newcomers, and include the definition into the policy framework of immigration policy and settlement services.
- 2 **Establish the set of policy-guiding principles** for emotional wellness services, based on accessibility, orientation on prevention, and cultural sensitiveness.
- 3 **Develop a toolkit** for the provision of emotional wellness services for newcomers.
- 4 **Develop training** on emotional wellness services for settlement services workers.
- 5 **Standardize the links to other policy fields**, especially mental healthcare.
- 6 **Promote the provision of services** based on a stable and predictable environment that will allow different models to be developed, tested, and maintained in practice.
- 7 **Institutionalize the provision of services**. In a longer-term perspective, shift from using capacity-building policy measures to incentive policy tools.

The full version of the policy brief is available here:

More about TIES Centre for Immigrant Research

Embedded in a community-based immigrant-serving organization, TIES Centre for Immigrant Research aims to move the immigrant-serving sector toward greater use of evidence-based knowledge, best practices and data to inform its efforts to help newcomers settle into Canadian society.

Contact

Katerina Palova, MA [she/her]

Manager, TIES Centre for Immigrant Research
Adjunct Professor, The University of British Columbia
Research Associate, University of Michigan

katerinapalova@immigrant-education.ca