

Evaluation of the Activities and Programming Delivered by the Vancouver Association for the Survivors of Torture (VAST)

Final Evaluation Report, 30 January 2024





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Qatalyst is recognized as one of the leading public sector consulting firms in Canada. We have created an extensive network of over 150 associates located across Canada and internationally. Our mission is to deliver leading-edge consulting services in a rapidly changing world. Better teams, better systems, and better technology will drive better results for our clients.

We have undertaken nearly 1,000 assignments for businesses, government, non-profits, and regional and Indigenous organizations with a particular focus on strategy, economic development, public policy, performance measurement and evaluation, organizational development and reviews, and service delivery model development.

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1. INTRODUCTION



1.1 VANCOUVER ASSOCIATION FOR THE SURVIVORS OF TORTURE (VAST)

Founded in 1986, Vancouver Association for Survivors of Torture (“VAST”) is specialized on delivering mental health and trauma recovery support services for refugees. Over the past thirty eight years VAST has supported human rights and psychosocial wellbeing of hundreds of refugees arriving in BC, many of whom seek protection in Canada fleeing violence and persecution. In BC, VAST is recognized as one of the primary mental health organizations for newcomers and is the only organization funded by the provincial government to provide psychological assistance to refugees.

VAST supports refugee mental health through counselling, documentation, referrals, and education. The counselling services offered by VAST are trauma-focused, and use psychoeducation, emotional self-regulation, and information sharing to prepare clients for the short-term refugee claim and long-term settlement in Canada. VAST also helps to document evidence of psychological trauma to support claimants as they undergo the complexities of Canada’s refugee claim process.

1.2 PURPOSE OF THE EVALUATION

Over the past few years, VAST has grown in size, staffing and the range of programming that it delivers to its clients. A formal program evaluation is necessary to determine if the trauma recovery and mental health support programs delivered by the organization are meeting goals and objectives of the organization and identify opportunities for improvement in the design and delivery of the program going forward. The evaluation addressed a range of evaluation questions related to a need for VAST programming and services, success in producing outcomes, and the effectiveness of the program design and delivery.

The evaluation was started in June 2021 with a review of the program documents and files and completed in November 2023. The field work, including interviews and surveys, was started in May 2023 and completed in September 2023. The scope of the evaluation included VAST’s trauma recovery and mental health support programs and excluded all other activities undertaken by the organization.

1.3 EVALUATION METHODOLOGIES

This project was undertaken in three phases. The first phase consisted of initial interviews as well as a file and document review, leading to the development of a detailed Evaluation Work Plan that outlined the strategies and methodologies to be implemented in the second phase of the project. The field research undertaken in the second phase of the evaluation included:

- **A detailed review of documents and files associated with the activities of VAST and its trauma recovery and mental health support programming.** The resources reviewed included background and organizational documents related to program descriptions, governance,

structure, planning, performance reports, funding agreements, budgetary and financial documents, and documents related to program activities, outputs and outcomes, including lists of clients supported and data on their profile and program participation.

- **Survey of 63 clients serviced by VAST.** The survey of VAST’s clients was administered online from May 2023 to July 2023. A dedicated survey page was created by our firm in four different languages, including in English, Spanish, Farsi and Arabic. The link to the survey with an introductory email was sent to current and former clients using VAST’s internal communication channels. A total 63 current or former VAST clients completed the survey. As demonstrated in the following table, most of those who completed surveys were refugee claimants or refugees when they received VAST services.

Table 1: Client Status in Canada when Received VAST’s Services

<i>What was your immigration status in Canada when you first received support and services from VAST?</i>	#	%
Refugee Claimant	45	71%
Permanent Resident	7	11%
Refugee (Convention Refugee/Protected Person)	7	11%
Canadian Citizen (Naturalized)	1	2%
Refugee (Government Assisted)	1	2%
Prefer not to answer	2	3%
Total	63	100

Most survey participants were between the ages 35 and 54.

Table 2: Survey Participant Age

<i>Your age group:</i>	#	%
18 to 24	2	3%
25 to 34	9	15%
35 to 54	48	79%
65 and older	2	3%
Total	61	100%

- **A review of the pre-and post-client assessment results.** VAST conducts assessment of client trauma symptoms during in-take process, as well as throughout client participation in the programs and services. The assessments are conducted using three different tools including VAST Vulnerability Screening Tool (VVAT), the Hopkins Symptom Checklist 25 (HSCL-25) and the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire (HTQ). VVAT, is not diagnostic, but facilitates early recognition of vulnerable persons, as it pertains to settlement and mental health checklist. HSCL-25 and HTQ both are considered psychological assessment measurements and have been proven effective for cross-cultural use, particularly with refugees.¹ All three tools are administered with most

¹ The Hopkins Symptoms Checklist 25 assesses levels of both anxiety and depression, and it is designed to assess symptom change. The Harvard Trauma Questionnaire (HTQ) is designed to be a cross-cultural sensitive instrument to assess trauma and torture related to mass violence and the refugee experience.

clients because they are complementary. While VVAT helps to identify vulnerabilities as part of the settlement processes, HSCL-25 helps to identify prevalence of anxiety and depression and HTQ helps to diagnose PTSD and trauma. The tools are used for clinical decisions management and treatment planning purposes. As part of this evaluation, a representative sample of client assessment results were selected by VAST staff and provided to us for review and analysis. As demonstrated in the following table, pre-and post test results were provided for 286 unique clients, of which 207 were deemed valid and included in the analysis.

Table 3: Pre- and Post Assessment Results

Type of Test	Unique Client IDs	Invalid (Missing information or the same date for pre and post)	Used in Analysis
VAST Vulnerability Screening Tool (VVAT)	177	37	140
Hopkins Symptom Checklist 25 (HSCL-25)	68	24	44
Harvard Trauma Questionnaire (HTQ)	41	18	23
Total	286	79	207

- Key Informant Interviews.** We were provided a list of 23 potential key informants including VAST staff members, board members, partners and clients. We conducted interviews with 16 of the 23 key informants; 1 formally declined and, despite repeated efforts, we were not able to schedule interviews with 6 other potential key informants due to various reasons (e.g., out of office, no response, etc.).

1.4 STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

The report is divided into three chapters. Chapter 2 provides a profile of VAST and its programs and services. Chapter 3 summarizes the major findings of the evaluation, while Chapter 4 summarizes our conclusions and recommendations. Appendix I provides detailed results of pre and post client assessments for trauma symptoms.

2. OVERVIEW OF VANCOUVER ASSOCIATION FOR THE SURVIVORS OF TORTURE (VAST)



2.1 BACKGROUND

Founded in 1986 by a small group of human right activists and mental health workers, Vancouver Association for Survivors of Torture (VAST) supports human rights and psychosocial wellbeing of hundreds of refugees arriving in BC, many of whom seek protection in Canada fleeing violence and persecution on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. Today, VAST works with refugees from over 100 countries in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America.

In British Columbia, a province with a population of approximately 6 million, VAST is the only organization funded by the provincial government to provide psychological assistance to refugees (including victims of torture and their families). Currently, VAST is BC's only Torture Treatment center, is a member of the International Rehabilitation Council for Victims of Torture and is the only agency in Canada funded by the UN's Fund for Victims of Torture. Over the past 33 years, the organization has grown to become one of the primary mental health organizations for refugees in the province and is recognized as a specialist in the field.

2.2 PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

VAST provides a wide range of programs and services targeted at refugees, survivors of torture and their families and works with governments and service delivery organizations to enhance government policies, attract resources and improve quality of services provided for refugees. A brief description of services and programs implemented by VAST is provided below.

Advisory Services and Advocacy

VAST provides advice, advocacy, policy influence and expertise on local, regional, provincial, national and global levels. Currently, the organization is a member of the International Rehabilitation Council for Victims of Torture (IRCT) and leads the Canadian Network for Survivors of Torture and Trauma (CNSTT). It also sits in an advisory capacity at most critical committees and advisory groups in BC dealing with refugees and newcomers. For example, VAST represents refugees and newcomers at the BC Immigrant Integration Coordinating Council (IICC) Steering Committee, the Inland Protection working group of Canadian Council on Refugees (CCR), and the LGBTQ Newcomers Service Providers Network.

Intake

VAST receives hundreds of referrals each year from professionals, such as doctors and lawyers, and social service organizations, such as health, housing, and settlement service agencies. Regardless of the source, all referrals are screened by staff for eligibility. Eligible clients are accepted into a two-hour in-take and assessment with one of the VAST Clinical Counsellors. During the intake, Clinical Counsellors conduct a clinical interview (e.g., reviewing clients immigration status, dependents, health history, employment status, housing status, etc.) and assessment of symptoms of trauma such as anxiety and depression. Once the in-take and clinical assessment is complete, the staff and

the client work together to develop a treatment plan. A treatment plan may include participating in VAST's group or individual therapy sessions and or referrals to outside service providers.

Psychological Support

VAST provides individual and group-based trauma-focused therapy for clients in multiple languages including Arabic, Farsi, French and Spanish. Psychological assistance at earlier stages focuses primarily on providing safety and stabilization for victims such as psychoeducation (increasing knowledge and understanding of trauma-related symptoms) and emotion regulation (increasing skills and abilities to self-regulate trauma symptoms). This is accomplished via a variety of clinical modalities, such as cognitive behavioral therapy, sensorimotor psychotherapy, and mindfulness. Psychological assistance at later stages focuses on treatment of the trauma, which often includes cognitive behavioral therapy and narrative exposure therapy.

Individual therapy is based on the developmental needs of victims and their families throughout the settlement process. Stage 1 individual therapy is provided for clients who are in the refugee claim process (predetermination) and focus on safety and stabilization. During this stage, psychological support is provided for clients in advance of their hearing with the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada. Occasionally, VAST also provides psycho-legal documentation necessary for the hearing, identifying clients psychological condition as a result of trauma and persecution. The process involves producing documentary evidence of psychological trauma for the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada.

Individual Stage 2 therapy is provided for clients who are in the post-determination process (determined to be Convention refugees) and focuses on mitigating the psychosocial barriers of trauma in the early-intermediate phase of the settlement process. During this stage, the organization provides psychological counselling for victims and their families as they seek secure housing, employment, and schooling, as well as building and fostering a community.

Stage 3 therapy is provided for clients and their families during the longer-term adaptation phase of the settlement process (after Permanent Residence status). The services focus on the long-term effects of trauma and provide victims and their families with psychological support as they revisit their trauma story.

The group therapy focuses on two aspects of settlement and adaptation. First aspect includes a 3-session psychosocial support group for refugee claimants, focused on the psychological dimensions of the refugee determination process, including providing testimony at the refugee hearing. Second aspect includes 4-6 session groups for Convention refugees (post-determination) focused on the psychosocial barriers of trauma on the longer-term settlement and adaptation process. As part of section stage, VAST's Clinical Counsellors work with the participants of the group sessions on the psychosocial effects of their trauma on such intermediate settlement needs of learning a language, seeking employment, building and fostering a community, as well as the effects of trauma on family relations.

Referrals

VAST has built strong partnerships with social service organizations throughout the region, including partners in the health sector, housing sector, settlement sector, and others. Based on client needs, VAST regularly refers clients to the appropriate services for their health, housing, and settlement needs.

Peer Counselling

Peer counselling services involve training survivors in basic mental health support tools and techniques to support each other. The program organizes support sessions where peers support each other in healing journeys and adjustment in Canada in their own language, using VAST tools, and culturally appropriate techniques.

Art Program

Art program provides individual, family and small group expressive arts-based programming, both online and outdoor spaces. The art methods used during the sessions include play and drama therapy, music, singing, dancing, kinetic and trays, clay sculptures, drawings, painting and poetry. The expressive art therapy enhances an ability to share experiences and tell stories, an essential tool to support healing journeys.

Move and Relax

Therapeutic program that includes yoga delivered 5 days/week, 45 min sessions in English, Spanish, and occasionally in other languages.

Short Outdoor Excursions

The program involves outdoor activities such as walking and hiking to tap into the healing power of nature. The program is intended to create a sense of community and exploration of nature that can be therapeutic for participant engagement as well as our community.

Training and Capacity Building

VAST delivers a wide range of training for service delivery organizations and government agencies on torture, trauma and survivors. For example, Survivor Advocates program provides training for those with lived experience as survivors of torture to build upon their skills and educate others about torture, trauma, and the refugee experience. VAST maintains the BC Provincial Refugee Mental Health Support line that is accessible during work hours for any organization serving victims of torture to receive consulting support.

Data and Research

In 2020, VAST launched Voices Against Torture (VAT), a semi-annual journal to further lift the voices of survivors of torture to support resilience and dignity. VAT aims to critically inform readers and facilitate an open dialogue about key theoretical and practical issues in the fields of torture rehabilitation, refugee mental health, and trauma-informed healing.

Newcomer Outreach in Downtown EastSide

The program involves information and referral support programs for newcomers who temporarily live in Vancouver Downtown EastSide.

Temporary Foreign Workers (TFWs)

The program has a specific focus on TFWs which involves delivering group and individual therapy sessions for TFWs and capacity building support for employers and other organizations serving TFWs.

Beyond Borders and Binaries

Delivered in partnership with MOSAIC, the program offers peer-led trans, non-binary, and gender-diverse support groups for immigrants and refugees.

Colombian Truth Commission

VAST provides support for the Colombian Truth Commission process of interviewing survivors to learn their stories of torture and survival. VAST undertakes activities related to compiling and analyzing data of Colombians who fled political violence to British Columbia.

Kitchen and Community Days

This event gets organized regularly to bring together clients to prepare a meal from their home country to share with fellow participants and staff. This also includes the annual VAST client appreciation party, which is organized to bring staff and clients together in a positive and community environment.

Food and Clothing Bank

Food and clothing bank was organized to provide basic necessities for clients and it was postponed due to COVID-19 pandemic.

2.3 BUDGET AND RESOURCES

Over the past four years, VAST has experienced consistent growth of its budget and resources. In 2017, the overall budget of the organization was \$352,509. The number has increased to \$1,795,440 by 2023.

Table 4: VAST Annual Budget

Years	Organizational Budget
2017	\$352,509
2018	\$404,774
2019	\$464,277
2020	\$708,967
2021	\$1,020,482
2022	\$1,260,782
2023	\$1,795,440

Source: VAST administrative data

Contributions from the provincial government, grants from UN etc. are the major sources of funding. In addition, the organization generates income through charging fees for certain types of services (e.g., privately sponsored clients) and some of the training sessions that it delivers (e.g., VAST Capacity Building Trainings).

As demonstrated in the following table, the activities of the organization are run by 11 full time, 12 part time staff members supported by 30 volunteers. The team members operate in the areas of clinical service delivery, communication, intake and outreach, operations and admin, and research and documentation.

Members of the VAST team are from very diverse backgrounds. Staff members include those from the Middle East, South Asia, the Caribbean, Europe and South America. Over the most recent years, VAST has undertaken an intensive process to involve survivors at all levels of its work. Currently, more than 50% of team members and two members of board self-identify as survivors and have accessed VAST services at some point in the past.

Table 5: VAST Staff and Volunteers

Team	Positions	# of Staff
Clinical Team: ●3 full time ●6 part time ●5 Practicum Student ●3 volunteers	Clinical Counselor	9
	Psychologist	2
	Expressive Art therapist	2
	Psychiatrist	1
	Occupational Therapist Practicum students	4
	Move and Relax Instructor	1
Total		19
Communication:	Website	3
	Communications	1

Team	Positions	# of Staff
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ●1 part time ●5 volunteers 	Social Media	2
Total		6
Community Engagement Team (CET): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ●4 full time ●3 part time ●3 practicum students 	Community & Engagement Team (CET) Worker	4
	Community & Engagement Team (CET) Co-Lead	1
	Social Work CET Co lead	1
	Social Work Practicum Student	3
	Intake Engagement Coordinator	1
Total		10
Operations and Admin: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ●4 full time ●1 Part time 	Executive Director	1
	Associate Director	1
	Development & Research Manager	1
	Admin	2
Total		5
Research and Documentation Center: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ●1 part time 	Editor and Chief	1
	Editorial Board Members	7
	Volunteer researchers	5
Total		13
	Grand Total	53

2.4 INTENDED OUTCOMES

The figure in the following page provides a logic model for VAST, which outlines the key activities, outputs and immediate, intermediate, and long-term outcomes. As demonstrated in the table, the types of activities undertaken by VAST can be categorized into four different streams, including:

- Advisory and Advocacy
- Trauma Recovery and Mental Health Support
- Training and Capacity Building
- VAST Research and Documentation Centre (VRDC)

In immediate term, trauma recovery and mental health support activities are intended to increase client knowledge and understanding of trauma-related symptoms, decrease vulnerability and trauma symptoms (e.g., anxiety and depression, etc.) among clients, increase client skills and abilities to self-regulate trauma symptoms, and increase successful refugee clemency among victims/clients.

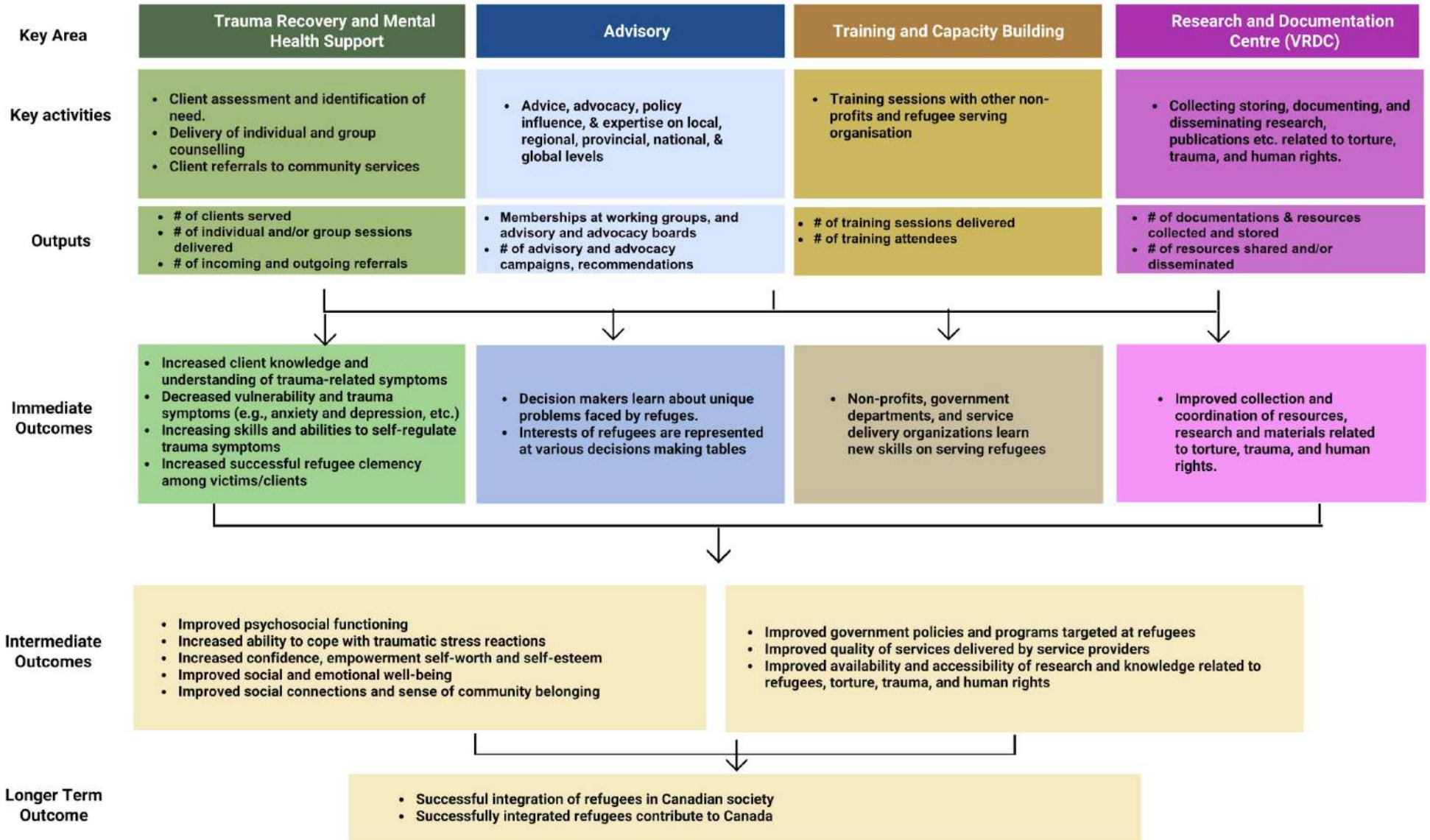
Advisory and advocacy activities are expected to ensure refugee interests are represented at various decision-making tables and decision makers learn about unique problems faced by refugees. Research and capacity building activities are expected to improve collection and coordination of

resources, research and materials related to torture, trauma, and human rights and ensure service delivery organizations build capacity in delivering adequate services for refugees.

In the intermediate term, these activities are expected to result in improved psychosocial functioning among clients, increased ability to cope with traumatic stress reactions, increased confidence, empowerment self-worth and self-esteem, improved client social and emotional well-being, improved social connections among clients and a sense of community belonging. At the same time, the programming should result in improved government policies and programs targeted at refugees, improved quality of services delivered by service providers and improved availability and accessibility of research and knowledge related to refugees, torture, trauma, and human rights.

In the long-term VAST is expected to contribute to successful integration of refugees in Canadian society who will contribute to growth and development of Canada.

Logic Model for VAST



3. KEY FINDINGS



3.1 NEED FOR TRAUMA RECOVERY AND MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT PROGRAMS

Increasing number of refugees are arriving in Canada due to conflicts and violence across the world, many of whom have experienced abuse and torture in their journey, requiring psychological interventions and extensive support for their resettlement in Canada.

A review of the literature indicated that:

- *The world is living through a refugee crisis.* According to UNHCR, in 2022, 108.4 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of conflict, persecution, human rights violations and violence. Among them were 27.1 million refugees.² This was the highest level of displacement on record in the history of humanity and increase by 19 million people (17%) compared to numbers in 2021. In 2022, Ukraine, Syria, Venezuela, Afghanistan, South Sudan and Myanmar accounted for the majority of people displaced across the world. The Russian Federation's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 created the fastest displacement crisis, and one of the largest, since the Second World War. At the end of 2022, a total of 11.6 million Ukrainians remained displaced, including 5.9 million within their country and 5.7 million who fled to neighboring countries and beyond.³
- *Canada is one of the leading countries in the world in accepting refugees and the number of refugees resettled in Canada have been increasing steadily over the past decade.* Canada has a strong tradition of welcoming refugees and is considered a major player in addressing the global refugee crisis. The country has accepted over 1,088,015 refugees from 1980 to 2019.⁴ Canada's identity and image as an accepting, multicultural environment helps to rouse up support for refugees within the country and labels Canada to the world as a destination for refugees.⁵ The number of asylum claims in Canada have been increasing drastically over the past decade, going from 10,365 in 2013 to 91,740 in 2022, almost nine times the increase over a 10-year period.^{6,7} In 2022, a total 140,621.00 refugees were under the UNHCR's mandate in Canada making the country one of the world leaders in the resettlement of refugees, a 29% increase compared to numbers in 2019 (109,214.00).⁸ From 2015 to 2021, Canada's resettled

² UNHCR Refugee Statistics: Global Trends, June 2023

³ UNHCR Refugee Statistics: Global Trends, June 2023

⁴ UNHCR Refugee Statistics: <https://www.unhcr.ca/in-canada/refugees-in-canada/>

⁵ Canada's Refugee Crisis: The complicated way we take in new Canadians, Patrick Pearson, January 23, 2020, <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/ec96eaf06e9a46879a8d7f03df55e311>

⁶ Canada's Refugee Crisis: The complicated way we take in new Canadians, Patrick Pearson, January 23, 2020, <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/ec96eaf06e9a46879a8d7f03df55e311>

⁷ Government of Canada, Asylum claims by year – 2023 <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/asylum-claims/asylum-claims-2023.html>

⁸ Canada Refugee Statistics 1960-2023 <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/CAN/canada/refugee-statistics#:~:text=Canada%20refugee%20statistics%20for%202022,a%207.33%25%20increase%20from%202019.>

refugees came predominantly from Africa and the Middle East, with 76,300 of the 160,490 from Syria.⁹

- *Refugees face many challenges and hardships with resettling in Canada related to cultural differences and accessing services.* Once they arrive, refugees face many hardships and challenges with the integration into Canadian society. Most refugees come to Canada with few, if any, financial resources, and often have to learn a new language and adapt to a new culture. Adjusting to a new country, especially under such stressful circumstances, often becomes extremely difficult. A western lifestyle is often different in many ways to that of whatever country a refugee is coming from, and such cultural differences can make an individual feel distant from their new home.¹⁰ Refugees also face many challenges with accessing social and health services available for them in their communities. Cultural differences, lack of social support, socioeconomic status, health system structure, language barriers, limited knowledge of health and social services, treatment preferences, and geographic distance are all potential barriers to accessing services for newcomers in Canada. Furthermore, COVID-19 pandemic created an additional psychological burden and increased protection risks, often disrupting care for those with existing mental health conditions.¹¹
- *Many refugees undergo mental health struggles while resettling due to an experience of traumatic events, abuse and torture and require prolonged and complex psychological interventions.* Many of the refugees who settle in Canada have experienced torture, abuse, violence and extreme hardships in their journey. According to UNHCR, in 2019, 30% of resettled refugees, in Canada, were survivors of torture or violence, 29% had specific legal and physical protection needs, 18% were women at risk, and 10% were children at risk or reunited family members.¹² Torture and abuse is one of the most devastating human experiences leading to multifaceted injuries and long-lasting emotional and functional difficulties, including posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, endured shame and guilt, disability and impaired quality of life, and increased interpersonal aggression.¹³ Exposure to prolonged and repeated intentionally inflicted aggression not only evokes substantial distress but also affects victims' personality, resulting in dissociation and an impaired sense of identity as well as profound changes in attachment and relationship and victims' core belief system.¹⁴ Often such victims require prolonged and complex psychological interventions to help with addressing their trauma and support their settlement. A number of therapeutic interventions have shown to be moderately

⁹ Reuters, Canada risks missing annual refugee resettlement target after slow start:

<https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/canada-risks-missing-annual-refugee-resettlement-target-after-slow-start-2021-04-28/>

¹⁰ Canada's Refugee Crisis: The complicated way we take in new Canadians, Patrick Pearson, January 23, 2020, <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/ec96eaf06e9a46879a8d7f03df55e311>

¹¹ UNHCR Global Trends Forced Displacement in 2019

¹² UNHCR. Refugee resettlement to Canada. <https://www.unhcr.ca/in-canada/unhcr-role-resettlement/refugee-resettlement-canada/#:~:text=In%202019%2C%2030%20per%20cent,and%205%20per%20cent%20had>

¹³ Ginzburg K. & Neria Y. 2011 Mental Health Interventions for Survivors of Torture: Current Status & Future Directions

¹⁴ Ginzburg K. & Neria Y. 2011 Mental Health Interventions for Survivors of Torture: Current Status & Future Directions

effective in helping survivors of torture including psychodynamic approach or a relational/interpersonal perspective, “insight therapy”, narrative exposure therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) techniques.¹⁵

According to key informants, there is a strong need for the programs and services delivered by VAST given that refugee numbers in BC are increasing and VAST is the only organization in the region that can provide trauma-informed and culturally and linguistically appropriate mental health services at free of charge.

When asked how much of a need there was for the mental health support programming and services delivered by VAST on the scale 1 to 5, where 1 is no need at all and 5 is major need, key informants provided an average rating of 4.8 (n=11) to indicate that the need was major.

Key informants justified a strong need for VAST services by indicating:

- *Increasing number of refugees are arriving in Vancouver.* Due to global instability and wars, an increasing number of people are seeking asylum in Canada and the Government of Canada has committed to welcoming a large number of refugees. Many of the refugees arrive in Vancouver with complex trauma and that need psychological intervention to support their integration into Canadian society. The demand for VAST services is far exceeding its capacity and the organization has a waiting list of six months.
- *Mental health support programming and services delivered by mainstream settlement or healthcare organizations are not able to address the needs of refugees.* The services targeted at refugees with complex needs should be trauma-informed and culturally and linguistically appropriate. The Canadian healthcare system is not equipped to handle the severity of trauma and cross-cultural complexity of refugees in their immigration journey. According to key informants, mental health services delivered by other agencies are rarely accessible (due to barriers related to language and trauma) and services delivered by private mental health clinics are not affordable for refugees. As a result, mental health needs of most refugees who experienced trauma goes unmet, affecting their ability to re-settle in Canada. VAST is the only organization in BC that can address their needs by delivering trauma-informed services in the primary language of refugees (e.g., Farsi, Spanish, Arabic and French) at no cost.
- *Documenting abuse and trauma in a professional way, which serves as evidence during refugee clemency.* Many of the refugee claimants in Canada are struggling to provide documented evidence of torture and abuse that they suffered. VAST is able to conduct professional assessment and document the abuse and torture which is accepted as evidence by Canadian immigration system. Therefore, VAST’s services have become critical for many victims to add credibility to their application in the refugee clemency process.

According to key informants, VAST has been largely successful in addressing the needs of its clients. Not only does the organization deliver effective and trauma-informed mental health

¹⁵ Ginzburg K. & Neria Y. 2011. Mental Health Interventions for Survivors of Torture: Current Status and Future Directions

support programming and services, but it also organizes social events that create a sense of community and belonging among participants. Often therapy is not sufficient to address the complex needs of refugees. VAST undertakes a holistic approach to its programming that includes peer support, community building, and sharing of experience with people who went through the challenges. The organization ensures that its services meet the international standards of rehabilitation for refugees and survivors of torture (e.g., IRCT’s Global Standards on Rehabilitation (GSR) for survivors of torture, UN Convention Against Torture and Istanbul Protocol, etc.). VAST is a value driven organization and flexible to change its approach and adapt to the changing needs of its clients.

According to key informants, the key challenge for VAST in meeting the needs of clients is resource limitations. The organization often lacks resources to be able to meet increasing demand for services. Key informants also mentioned that the success of VAST services is negatively affected, occasionally, when the organization is not able to provide services in the language of clients and has to hire interpreters. It is hard for clients to build trust and develop effective relationships with counsellors through interpreters.

3.2 IMPACTS AND EFFECTIVENESS OF THE SERVICES

Client Profiles

From 2017 to 2021, VAST served a large number of clients from various backgrounds. A majority of clients were refugee claimants new in Canada coming from countries such as Mexico, Iran, Syria, Colombia, Iraq and Afghanistan who currently live in Vancouver and the Lower Mainland Region.

Over the seven-year period under review from 2017 to 2023, the organization served a total 7,816 clients. The organization served an average of 1117 clients annually.

Table 6: Number of Clients Served Across Years, 2017 to 2023

Year	# of Clients Served
2017	890
2018	1037
2019	1262
2020	925
2021 ¹⁶	896
2022	1063
2023	1742
Total	7816
Average Annual	1117

Source: VAST administrative data

¹⁶ Represent data for the partial year from January to March.

A majority of clients served by the organization were between the ages of 19 to 49. Clients younger than 18-year-old represented 16% and those older than 60 represented only 9%.

Table 7: Client Age Breakdown, 2017 to 2023

Age of Client	# Of Clients Served	% Of Clients Served
18 years old and younger	1209	16%
19 to 29	1611	21%
30 to 39	2279	29%
40 to 49	1517	19%
50 to 59	536	7%
60 and older	664	9%
Total	7816	100%

Source: VAST administrative data

The organization has served clients from different self-identified gender groups. Most clients, at the time of intake, self-identified as female, male, gay and transgender.

Table 8: Client Gender, 2017 to 2023

Gender	# Of Clients Served	% Of Clients Served
Female	4080	52%
Male	3349	42%
Other/ Non-Binary	167	2%
Not Indicated	220	3%
Total	7931	100%

Source: VAST administrative data

Over the four-year period under the review, the organization served clients from 84 countries, of whom clients from Mexico (18%), Iran (12%), Colombia (11%), Syria (7%), Afghanistan (6%) and Iraq (4%), represented the largest percentage.

Table 9: Country of Origin, 2017 to 2023

Country of Origin	# Of Clients Served	% Of Clients Served
Mexico	1427	18%
Iran	907	12%
Colombia	838	11%
Syria	571	7%
Afghanistan	487	6%
Iraq	330	4%
Honduras	181	2%
Nigeria	151	2%
El Salvador	146	2%
Venezuela	176	2%
All Other Countries	2383	30%
Unidentified	217	3%
Total	7816	100%

Source: VAST administrative data

Spanish, Arabic, Farsi, English, Kurdish, and Dari were the most common primarily languages spoken among clients served by VAST.

Table 10: Client First Language, 2017 to 2023

First Language	# Of Clients Served	% Of Clients Served
Spanish	3029	39%
Arabic	1124	14%
Farsi	1033	13%
English	566	7%
Dari	368	5%
Kurdish	197	3%
Urdu	89	1%
French	76	1%
Pashto	76	1%
Mandarin	64	1%
Punjabi	73	1%
Indonesian	62	1%
Turkish	48	1%
Portuguese	53	1%
Kirundi	41	1%
Swahili	91	1%
All other languages	666	9%
Unknown	160	2%
Totals	7816	100%

Source: VAST administrative data

Almost all clients served by VAST are newcomers to Canada, including those who recently made refugee claims in Canada (62%), government assisted (16%) or privacy sponsored (3%). The organization also served a few temporary foreign workers (3%) and foreign students (2%).

Table 11: Entry Pathway to Canada, 2017 to 2023

Entry Pathway	# Of Clients Served	% Of Clients Served
Inland Claimant	4854	62%
Government-assisted	1243	16%
Port of Entry Claimant	462	6%
Temporary Foreign Worker	208	3%
Immigrant	271	3%
Privately Sponsored	214	3%
Foreign Student	139	2%
Is Not a Newcomer	44	1%
Blended Visa (BVOR)	44	1%
Unidentified	174	2%
CUAET	62	1%
Visitor	100	1%
Total	7816	100%

Source: VAST administrative data

At the time of intake, clients were mostly refugee claimants, permanent residents, or Protected Persons. While VAST primarily serves refugee claimants (predetermination) and convention refugees (post-determination), it occasionally provides services for some permanent residents and naturalized citizens who were once Convention refugees. Of the 7816 clients served from 2017 to 2023, 61% were refugee claimants, 18% were permanent residents, 4% were failed refugee claimants, and 2% were naturalized citizens.

Table 12: Immigration Status at Intake, 2017 to 2023

Immigration Status	# Of Clients Served	% Of Clients Served
Refugee Claimant	4727	61%
Permanent Resident	1435	18%
Convention Refugee/Protected Person	718	9%
Failed Refugee Claimant	329	4%
Naturalized Citizen	127	2%
Temporary Foreign Worker	164	2%
PRRA/H&C (Humanitarian and compassionate grounds)	82	1%
Temporary Displaced Persons	44	0.6%
New PRRA (pre removal risk assessment)	14	0.2%
Unidentified	175	2%
Totals	7816	100%

Source: VAST administrative data

About one-third of the clients (33%) lived less than 12 months in Canada when they were first introduced to VAST services and programming and 50% were living in Canada from less than three years.

Table 13: Duration in Canada at Intake, 2017 to 2023

Duration in Canada	# Of Clients Served	% Of Clients Served
Less than 12 months	2564	33%
1 to 3 years	3906	50%
4 to 6 years	738	9%
6 to 10 years	200	3%
Over 10 years	220	3%
Unidentified	187	2%
Total	7816	100%

Source: VAST administrative data

Over the past seven years under the review, VAST has served clients across BC and mostly those from Vancouver, Surrey, Burnaby, New Westminister, Coquitlam, North Vancouver and Richmond.

Table 14: Client Location in BC, 2017 to 2023

Client Location in Canada	# Of Clients Served	% Of Clients Served
Vancouver	4525	58%
Surrey	1202	15%
Burnaby	636	8%
New Westminster	348	4%
Coquitlam	320	4%
Richmond	176	2%
North Vancouver	128	2%
Port Coquitlam	67	1%
Abbotsford	67	1%
Delta	50	1%
Kelowna	48	1%
Langley	43	1%
Maple Ridge	40	0.5%
West Vancouver	26	0.3%
Port Moody	26	0.3%
Victoria	23	0.3%
Campbell River	11	0.1%
Nanaimo	6	0.1%
Chilliwack	6	0.1%
Whistler	4	0.1%
North Delta	4	0.1%
Kamloops	2	0.1%
South Delta	2	0.1%
Unknown	53	1%
Totals	7816	100%

Source: VAST administrative data

Client Referrals

Most clients learned about VAST and its services through referrals from other services delivery organizations, lawyers as well as friends and family.

VAST works very collaboratively with other organizations that serve newcomers to coordinate activities. The organization has an outreach associate in charge of connecting with other service delivery and community organizations and promoting its programs and services among potential clients. The representatives of VAST participate in training, workshops, consultations at schools, agencies, healthcare providers to increase awareness. The programming and services delivered by VAST are also promoted through other outlets such as libraries, Welcome BC guide, BC 211, etc. Therefore, the organization receives hundreds of referrals each year from professionals, such as doctors and lawyers, and social service organizations.

According to VAST administrative data, most clients are referred to VAST by service delivery organizations such as SOS (Settlement Orientation Services), ISS of BC, Options Community Services, as well as lawyers, self-referrals and family and friends.

During the survey, VAST clients confirmed that they first learned about VAST and its services through settlement or services delivery organizations, lawyers and as well as referrals by friends and family. A few clients also learn about VAST at the hospital or through online search.

Table 16: Client Learning About VAST

<i>How did you first become aware of VAST's services?</i>	%
Settlement or service delivery agency (e.g., MOSAIC, ISS of BC, Salvation Army, SOS, etc.)	37%
Lawyer	20%
Family or friends	17%
Hospital	9%
Online (e.g., social media, Google, etc.)	7%
Government agency (e.g., IRCC, etc.)	5%
Other (Foodbank, English classes, etc.)	5%
Total	100%

Client Participation in Programs and Services

A review of the administrative data demonstrated that VAST delivers a large number of trauma recovery and mental health supports to its clients.

VAST provides a wide range of trauma recovery and mental health support for clients, including group sessions, one-to-one counselling, etc. Internal database is used for client case management and tracking of client interaction with the programs. The following table provides an overview of the types of records registered for clients from 2017 to 2021 in the database. About half (1208 or 49%) of the clients served by VAST from 2017 to 2021, received at least one appointment (e.g., group sessions, one-to-one counselling, etc.). From 2017 to 2021, a total of 8086 occasions of group sessions, one-to-one counselling, etc. were delivered to 1208 clients. Each client received the services an average 6.7 times.

Table 17: Types of Services Delivered, 2017 to 2021

Types of Services Delivered	# of Times the Service was Delivered	# of Clients Received Services	Average Per Client
Appointment (e.g., group sessions, one-to-one counselling, etc.)	8086	1208	6.7
Case Note	4148	947	4.4
Referral Out	239	157	1.5

Source: VAST administrative data

VAST clients reported participating in a range of programming delivered by the organizations and were very satisfied with the services that they received.

During the survey, clients were asked to identify the type of trauma recovery and mental health support services that they received from VAST. As demonstrated in Table 18, most clients reported attending individual counselling, group therapy, expressive art therapy and move and relax

sessions. Clients also attended outdoor activities organized by VAST, peer support services, referrals to other services, and capacity building or training supports.

Table 18: Type of Services Attended

<i>What types of support services did you receive from VAST?</i>	#	%
Total number of service recipients who provided an answer	64	
Individual Counselling	62	82%
Group Support	40	53%
Expressive Art Therapy	26	34%
Move & Relax	24	32%
VAST Outdoors	11	14%
Peer Support	8	11%
Referrals to other services outside of VAST	8	11%
Capacity building/training	7	9%

During the survey, about one-third of VAST clients reported attending VAST services and programming over a 6-month period, 22% reported attending from 4 to 6 months period, 29% reported attending from 2 to 4 months, 19% attended for one month or less. The average duration of services for all clients who participated in the survey was 4.9 months.

Table 19: Length of Services

<i>How long did you attend these support services that VAST provides?</i>	#	%
Less than 1 month	7	11%
1 month	5	8%
2 months to 4 months	19	29%
4 to 6 months	14	22%
Over 6 months	20	31%
Total	65	100%
Average		4.9 month

When asked to rate their level of satisfaction with the programs and services that they received from VAST, on a scale 1 to 5, where 1 is not satisfied at all, 3 is somewhat satisfied and 5 is very satisfied, survey participants provided an average rating of 4.5 (n=67) to indicate that they were very satisfied with the services. As demonstrated in the following table, survey participants were satisfied because the services that they received were effective in helping to address mental issues and challenges that they were experiencing (e.g., addressing trauma, stress, isolation etc.), and staff showed compassion and care and were highly qualified in dealing with client problems.

Table 20: Reasons for Client Satisfaction with the VAST Services

<i>Please tell us why you were satisfied or not satisfied?</i>	#	%
Total number of service recipients who provided an answer	55	
Effective in addressing issues of trauma, fear, stress, anger and PTST, isolation and other psychological and mental challenges through group therapy, referral, counselling, outdoor events, etc. (e.g., Helped regulate emotions & express feelings, helped to destress, relax and focus, addressed isolation, assisted in facing emotional challenges, helped to adopt in Canada and integrate into society, supported in overcoming suicidal thoughts and gave reason to live, learned self-healing and mediation, etc.)	24	44%
Professional and highly qualified staff (e.g., staff showed interest in problems, worked hard to address challenges, treated with respect, good people to work with, etc.)	14	25%
Helped to prepare for hearing (e.g., provided information about the process and how to prepare, helped with access to lawyer and legal counsel etc.)	4	7%

Survey participants who reported lower levels of satisfaction with the services mentioned that they experienced challenges with accessing the services or the services were not sufficient to address their problems (e.g., could not book adequate time due to busy schedules, was not able to obtain services when needed, took long time to be able to receive services). Two survey participants also mentioned that VAST did not have a therapist who could speak their language and interpreters were required, which affected the quality of the services.

Program Impacts on Clients

Pre-and post-psychological and vulnerability assessment results demonstrated consistent improvements in trauma symptoms among clients who participated in VAST programming from 2017 to 2023.

VAST conducts an assessment of client trauma symptoms during in-take process, as well as throughout client participation in the programs and services. The assessments are conducted using three different tools including VAST Vulnerability Screening Tool (VVAT) and the Hopkins Symptom Checklist 25 (HSCL-25) and the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire (HTQ). HSCL-25 and HTQ both are considered psychological assessment measurements and have been proven effective for cross-cultural use, particularly with refugees; while VVAT, is not diagnostic, but facilitates early recognition of vulnerable persons and used mental health checklist.

The Harvard Trauma Questionnaire (HTQ) is designed to assess symptoms of trauma and torture related to mass violence and the refugee experience. As part of this evaluation, we reviewed pre and post results for a sample of 23 clients who participated in the program from 2017 to 2023. Pre and post assessment results demonstrated that of the 35 assessment indicators used by HTQ, VAST clients demonstrated improvements in 30 indicators (i.e., ranging from 46 percentage point improvement for ‘feeling others are hostile to you’ to 5% percentage point improvement for ‘sudden emotional or physical reaction when reminded of the most hurtful or traumatic events’).

The average improvement for all 30 indicators combined was 16% for the sample of 23 clients reviewed.

VAST Vulnerability Screening Tool (VVAT) assesses client vulnerability as it pertains to settlement and helps with early recognition of vulnerable persons. The tool uses 10 indicators to assess client mental state and is administered with VAST clients during the in-take process and then while they remain in the program. We reviewed pre and post results for a sample of 140 clients who participated in the program from 2017 to 2023. Pre and post assessments results demonstrated that these 140 clients demonstrated improvements across all 10 indicators. The average improvement for all 10 indicators combined was 12% (ranging from 18% improvement for ‘feeling scared or frightened’ to 3% improvement for ‘suffering from other physical pains’).

The Hopkins Symptoms Checklist 25 assesses levels of both anxiety and depression, and it is designed to assess symptom change over time. As part of the evaluation, we reviewed pre and post assessment results for a sample of 44 clients who participated in the program from 2017 to 2023. The results demonstrated improvements for 12 indicators, no changes for 4 indicators, and decline for 7 indicators. The average improvement for all 23 indicators combined was 3%. More detailed description of the pre and post assessment results are provided in Appendix 1.

Table 21: Improvements in Client Trauma Symptoms

Assessment Methods and Tools	# of clients participated in assessment	Average % Improvement in Pre and Post Results for All Questions Combined	# of Month between Pre and Post Test
Harvard Trauma Questionnaire (HTQ) (35 Questions)	23	16%	8.2
VAST Vulnerability Screening Tool (VVAT) (10 Questions)	140	12%	7.9
Hopkins Symptom Checklist 25 (HSCL-25) Questionnaire (25 Questions)	44	3%	9.5

Key informants consider VAST trauma recovery and mental health support programming as successful in generating a range of impacts on its client. The services have been successful in helping clients to cope and heal from trauma, develop self-esteem, build connections, and facilitate their re-settlement in Canada.

As part of the interviews, key informants were asked to rate success of the VAST mental health support programming in generating a range of impacts on participants using a scale 1 to 5, where 1 is no impact all, 3 is somewhat of an impact and 5 is major impact.

As demonstrated in the following table, according to key informants, VAST services have been very successful in helping clients to deal with their trauma and regulate symptoms, improving social connections and sense of community belonging, increasing confidence, empowerment, self-worth and self-esteem and contributing to successful re-settlement of refugees in Canadian society.

Table 22: Impact of the Program

<i>How much of an impact do you believe that the program has had to date in terms of: (On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is no impact at all in that area, 3 is somewhat of an impact, and 5 is a major impact)</i>	Average Ratings (n=71)
Increasing client skills and abilities to self-regulate trauma symptoms and cope with trauma (e.g., anxiety and depression, etc.)?	4.8
Improving social connections and a sense of community belonging?	4.8
Increasing confidence, empowerment, self-worth, emotional well-being and self-esteem among clients?	4.7
Supporting clients through the refugee clemency process?	4.8
Contributing to successful resettlement of refugees in Canadian society?	4.6

Key informants provided rationale and justifications for their ratings summarized as follows:

- Increasing client skills and abilities to self-regulate trauma symptoms and cope with trauma.** According to key informants, most survivors of torture are not aware of trauma symptoms and how it affects their wellbeing and daily life. Therefore, psycho-education is a big part of initial intervention by VAST programming. Education helps clients understand reasons for their feelings, and behaviors and how trauma affects their decisions and daily lives. VAST therapists help clients to stabilize their nervous system and self-regulate and process their memories. Clients learn knowledge, skills and techniques to regulate their trauma symptoms, deal with crises and return to normal life. Clients learn how to calm themselves, relax and regulate emotional responses. Attending group sessions also helps them to overcome trauma symptoms as clients learn from the experience of each other.
- Improving social connections and a sense of community belonging.** Key informants noted that when clients come into contact with VAST mental health support programming, they go through detailed assessment of their trauma and emotional well-being. Then, clients go through extensive individual or group therapy, peer counselling and participate in social activities and events (e.g., language groups, community kitchen, etc.) to help build connections and share their experiences. They are also connected to other services and resources available in their communities. The outdoor and social activities implemented by VAST help clients to socialize, share experiences, and build connections and sense of belonging. Referrals to other agencies help clients to connect with other programs and services that exist in their communities. Finally, many clients who go through recovery are able to join VAST as volunteers or staff. For example, VAST runs a survivor advocate program, which trains previous clients to assist newcomers. According to key informants, giving back to the community has been critical in building social connections and a sense of community.
- Increasing confidence, empowerment, self-worth, self-esteem and emotional well-being.** According to key informants, VAST services help clients to better control symptoms of trauma and their emotions and behavior, which increases self-confidence. Furthermore, VAST's approach to psychotherapy is strength based focusing on building resilience and empowerment. Therapies, group sessions, social activities all contribute to a feeling of safety,

empowerment, sense of dignity, and acceptance and belonging, which contributes to self-fort and self-confidence.

- **Supporting clients through the refugee clemency process.** The counseling and therapy sessions organized by VAST help clients to regulate their trauma symptoms, relax and communicate their thoughts and feelings clearly. As a result, they are able to share their experience and give accurate testimonies during refugee hearing. Clients also share their experience at refugee hearings during support groups organized by VAST and learn from experience of each other. The psychological assessment (e.g., torture and trauma) conducted by VAST meets international standards of (Istanbul protocol) and thus recognized as evidence by the Canadian jurisdictional system. Clients are able to use the results of these assessments as evidence of their experience during refugee hearing.
- **Contributing to successful resettlement of refugees in Canadian society.** According to key informants, results of torture often affect client's ability to function normally because they are constantly under the 'fly or flight' mode. Political oppression, violence and torture tend to silence people as they have a profound impact on survivor's worldview. In VAST, clients belong to a community of people who have been oppressed and hurt before but have been able to heal. The community is infused with values of social justice and truth, goodness and radical sense of love, which contributes to the healing of everyone. Once the trauma symptoms are regulated and controlled, most clients are ready to start building their life and resettle in Canada. Furthermore, VAST provides referrals and supports client connection to their communities, contributing to their resettlement.

Survey participants reported success of the VAST trauma recovery and mental health supports in generating a wide range of impacts on their mental and health and well-being and contributing to resettlement in Canada.

During the survey, clients were asked to rate the usefulness of VAST's services and programming in their healing journey and resettlement in Canada, using a scale 1 to 5, where 1 is not useful at all, 3 is somewhat useful and 5 is very useful. The following table provides average ratings for different areas of usefulness. As demonstrated, survey participants consider all VAST services as useful in their healing journey and resettlement in Canada. In particular, individual counselling sessions, assessment of past trauma, ability to receive services in their own language, and staff skills and qualifications were rated as very useful. Other services such as providing documentary evidence of psychological trauma, expressive art therapy, group therapy, peer support and outgoing referrals were rated as useful.

Table 23: Types of Services that were Most Useful for Clients

<i>What aspects of the VAST programs and services did you find most useful in your healing journey and resettlement in Canada? (on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is not useful at all, 3 is somewhat useful and 5 is very useful)</i>	Average Ratings (n=71)
Individual counselling sessions	4.6
In-take processes and assessment of the past trauma	4.6
Ability to receive services in a language of your choice (e.g., English, Spanish, Arabic, Farsi, etc.)	4.5
Skills and qualifications of the staff members working with you	4.5
Providing documentary evidence of psychological trauma for the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada	4.3
Expressive Art Therapy	4.2
Group therapy sessions	4.2
Peer support	4.1
Referrals to services outside of the organization	4.0

During the survey clients were also asked to rate the impact of the VAST trauma recovery and mental health support services on different areas of clients' mental health and wellbeing using a scale 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all, 3 is somewhat and 5 is great extent. The following table provides average ratings for each area of impact. As demonstrated in the table, according to survey participants, the VAST programming has been successful in improving their overall social and emotional well-being, helping them to better understand and address trauma symptoms, and building self-esteem and sense of belonging. The survey participants also consider the program successful in helping them to access other services in their communities and integrate into their communities.

Table 24: Impact of the Program on Clients

<i>On scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all, 3 is somewhat, and 5 is to a great extent, to what extent do you believe that participating in services delivered by VAST has:</i>	Average Ratings (n=65)
Improved your overall social and emotional well-being?	4.3
Increased your knowledge and understanding of trauma-related symptoms?	4.3
Increased your confidence, self-worth and self-esteem?	4.2
Increased sense of community, connection and belonging?	4.2
Helped coping with stress and other migration challenges?	4.2
Helped with dealing with symptoms of your past trauma and its impact on your life?	4.1
Contributed to your successful integration into Canadian society?	4.1
Provided documentation to support the refugee hearing process?	4.0
Increased your access and use of other community and healthcare services?	3.6

Survey participants noted that VAST services helped them to address symptoms of torture such as depression, anger, fear, and anxiety and develop mental strength, confidence, feeling of safety and security. The services also helped them to connect with others in their communities and develop a sense of belonging.

Table 25: Impact of the Program on Settlement Journey

<i>Based on your responses to the question above, how did accessing services at VAST improve your ability to better navigate your settlement journey?</i>	#	%
Total number of service recipients who provided an answer	41	
Helped to develop mental stamina, confidence, feeling of safety, feeling of self-worth (e.g., resilience, stronger personality, ability to leave the past, behind and move forward, ability to express own thoughts clearly, clear thinking, etc.)	15	37%
Helped to connect or build a community (e.g., felt a sense of belonging, volunteering and serving other refugees, understanding different cultures and getting along with people from different backgrounds, etc.)	13	32%
Addressed issues of trauma, depression, anger, fear, and anxiety	7	17%
Documented trauma in a professional and scientific way, and provided tools to be able to attend hearing and defend own case	6	15%
Provided referrals and access to other services (orientation, connection, etc.)	6	15%

Survey participants also provided many examples describing how VAST programming and services helped them in their healing journey. For example, one participant described how attending VAST’s weekly services was the most positive day in his/her life, helping to relax and reduce the stress of trauma:

I felt that every Wednesday that we met online during the Covid period was a healing time for me, expressing myself being counselled on how to reduce stress and tension, yoga or exercise, sharing experiences of other people’s feelings. It was a time that I expressed my inner feelings of sadness and my way of escape.

Survey participants also provided examples demonstrating how VAST services and programming helped them control and regulate their symptoms of torture such as anxiety, fear, depression and anger. As noted by one participant during the survey: *“The individual therapy I received helped me feel much better and the group through it helped me control my anguish, depression and anxiety.”*

Overcoming the feeling of fear and being able to trust in other people and society is one of the critical struggles that torture survivors experience. According to participants, counselling sessions, group therapy and hearing experience and the healing journey of other survivors helped them to feel safe and build trust and reliance. One participant described overcoming fear through art therapy and outdoor programming: *“They have helped to overcome my fear, the trauma I passed through and taking me out for outdoors and getting orientations.”* Another participant described his/her experience of overcoming the fear, learning to trust and feel safe again:

We need protection when we come here [because] we see and experience injustice when we come here. But VAST provides that support to make it justice. We attended the groups and learned the history of different people and how they went through. it opens your mind, and you start trusting again to society and other people that really helps to be able to see yourself in Canada. Counselling is very important, especially for

trauma. We learned how we can trust again and not be scared anymore. They help us to feel safe again. You can trust in yourself in this country again.

Many clients also described how participating in VAST services helped them build confidence and self-esteem. According to one participant, VAST service helped him/her connect to inner life-force and reconnect to his internal strength: *"The expressive arts therapy I received was profoundly, positively life changing. I rediscovered my life. I reconnected with my life force. It helped me reconnect to myself and the world."*

VAST services also helped many survivors of torture in their immigration journey. Not only VAST assessments were used as evidence of torture at the immigration hearings, but the services also empowered the survivors to be able to tell their stories. During the survey, one client described how services helped him/her to overcome fear and tell her/his story of torture, contributing to positive results from his/her immigration hearing:

The counselor helped me through my depression that I was passing through during my refugee claim. She made me [feel] I was not alone in the process, I was able to come out of my shell, tell my story more profoundly without fear, faced my challenges and became successful with my immigration process and adaptation and integration into Canadian society. VAST was part of my success story.

Similarly, another survey participant described how relaxation classes and counselling sessions helped him to control his stress during his refugee hearing: *"The classes 'move and relax' helped me a lot, it helped me how to relax my body specially went I had my hearing closed, my counseling helped me a lot to how to breathe and tools that helped me to let out my stress during my hearing."*

During the survey a few participants mentioned that the services by VAST helped them overcome suicidal thoughts or ideations. One participant mentioned that he/she owes her/his life to the support that he/she received from VAST: *"I'm not sure if I would still be alive right now without the support of VAST. Many people from VAST helped me [and...] were very important to me and I will always be grateful to them."*

Compassionate care, understanding of client needs and empathy demonstrated by the VAST staff have helped clients to feel cared for and break down their isolation. During the survey, one participant described how staff attitude was critical in his/her healing journey: *"They were very helpful and knowledgeable in information, psychosocial support staff were very friendly and empathetic, they were with me all through my journey which made me feel very special and not alone."*

Another client described how difficult it was for the VAST staff member to build trust and help him/her due to the severity of his/her trauma. According to her/him, the skills and persistence of the VAST staff member was key in helping him to open up and discuss his challenges:

I had never received any counselling services, [and] there was a lot to do [since] I was totally depressed. The counsellor had a knowledge of gaining my trust under very difficult circumstances of languages and differences of culture, but God knows how

hard working she was. I became someone because of her. I am so grateful. She is one of the most important people I will never forget in life.

VAST policy of hiring its former clients also contributes to effectiveness of its services. Staff are able to better associate and connect with their clients. During survey one former client described his/her journey of becoming VAST staff member:

As part of my healing journey, about 5 years after receiving services at VAST, I became a volunteer at VAST. After that, I became a practicum student. And after that, a staff member (a part-time Expressive Arts Therapist).

Similarly, another client described opportunity provided by VAST to volunteer and assist new refugees, which helped him/her to feel part of the community and contributed to his/her own healing and integration into the Canadian society:

I had direction, information, support and they believed in me to have allowed me to be part of the client engagement committee. They gave me an opportunity to contribute to the community and they made me [feel] a sense of belonging and that everyone has got something to offer. I had always loved giving but coming in contact with VAST increased that passion and the grace with which all the board members, staff and volunteers made it more graceful for me to want to give my time, talent and resources back to the community. The joy that refugees get from knowing they have support like the one given at VAST is immeasurable and I will forever be grateful to the VAST family for all that I got passing through them. I am a success story and VAST is part of my story.

VAST services and activities have contributed to increasing capacity of government agencies and NGOs in serving the needs of refugees and bringing more awareness to the issues of torture among Canadian public.

According to key informants and survey participants, VAST is playing a key role in strengthening the capacity of the civil society organizations and government departments in serving the needs of refugees and survivors of torture. In particular, the organization is representing refugees at key national (e.g., Canadian Network for Survivors of Torture and Trauma) and international tables (e.g., UNHCR programs, International Rehabilitation Council for Victims of Torture, etc.) and provincial working groups and committees (e.g., BC Health Coalition, Provincial Refugee Health Working Group, City of Vancouver Poverty Reduction Coalition, UBC Refugee & Migration Working Group, the Vancouver Police Department, the Regional Ethnocultural Committee of Corrections Canada, and the Canadian Association for Mental Health, Immigrant & Refugee Mental Health Group, BC Immigrant Integration Coordinating Council Steering Committee, and the LGBTQ Newcomers Service Providers Network); and delivers a large number of training sessions and capacity development work with other service delivery organizations (e.g., NGOs, settlement organizations, etc.), government departments (e.g., detention centers, immigration services, etc.), educational institutions, law firms and practicum students. According to key informants, most staff members working at settlement services, detention centers or government institutions dealing with newcomers have limited knowledge of trauma yet capacity to deliver trauma-informed services. VAST's training is helping to bridge this gap by offering support to build their capacity.

VAST's efforts have also been key in raising awareness of issues of torture and trauma among Canadian public. Although most people in Canada are somewhat familiar with UN conventions related to refugees (e.g., the 1951 Refugee Convention) or environment (e.g., Paris Agreement on climate change), very few have heard about similar conventions on torture (e.g., UN Convention Against Torture, Istanbul Protocol, etc.). VAST is trying to address this challenge by raising awareness of Canada's obligations under the international treaties and conventions related to torture through its work related to advocacy and training. VAST helps survivors to tell their stories and assist in publicizing their voices through media and research.

Finally, in 2020, VAST launched Voices Against Torture (VAT), a semi-annual journal to further lift the voices of survivors of torture to support resilience and dignity. The objective of the initiative is to facilitate an open dialogue about key theoretical and practical issues in the fields of torture rehabilitation, refugee mental health, and trauma-informed healing. According to key informants, these efforts help to strengthen the capacity of the sector to better serve the needs of refugees and contribute to overall success of programming and services.

3.3 FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO AND CONSTRAINING THE SUCCESS

During interviews and surveys, clients and key informants identified a range of factors that have contributed to the success of the activities and programming delivered by VAST. These factors are summarized as follows:

- **Strong focus and comprehensive knowledge of issues and needs faced by refugees and survivors of torture.** According to key informants and survey participants, the key advantage of VAST services over all other similar programs in the community is the high degree of specialization on refugees and survivors of torture. Over the years, VAST has been able to develop expertise in serving the needs of refugees and survivors of torture. In particular, VAST's staff members mostly have immigrant or refugee background (e.g., lived experience), are specialized on specific immigrant groups or communities (e.g., Spanish, Arabic or Farsi speaking), and able to provide their services in clients' own native tongue. For example, the nature of trauma and experience of a woman from Afghanistan is very different compared to that of someone from South America. VAST is able to understand these differences and deliver services that are tailored to their specific needs. The staff members are aware of how the trauma affects people, the power dynamics between themselves and clients and are able to create an environment where clients feel comfortable, safe, respected and non-threatened.
- **Skilled and dedicated staff members.** VAST staff members are well trained and have passion and strong dedication to supporting clients. They are committed to their mission, work extra hours, and go above and beyond what is required of them to assist clients. Many of the qualified staff members have been with the organization for many years and are able to transfer the expertise to newly hired staff and volunteers.

- **Extensive follow through.** VAST tries to work with clients through their entire settlement and healing journey. This involves case management and extensive follow-through to ensure the clients are able to access and benefit the most from services and programs available to them. Staff make referrals to other programs and services and then follow up with clients to make sure they are able to access the services (e.g., mental health supports, physician, doctors, dentists, psychologists and special care, etc.).
- **Strong track record and reputation.** VAST is independent of politics, does not have affiliation and has a strong track record and history of delivering effective and professional services to refugees and immigrants. The organization advocates on behalf of refugees and survivors of torture and delivers training and capacity building support. According to key informants, these efforts have helped VAST to develop a strong reputation in the field. Members in the community, government agencies and service delivery organizations trust and are willing to support activities and programming delivered by VAST.
- **VAST is a value-driven and nimble organization.** Key informants noted that VAST services are holistic and integrative combining a range of interventions, programs and services, which plays a key role in addressing client's needs. The organization is small and agile and can change and adapt to client conditions and needs. There is no bureaucracy in decision making and staff can easily be accessed. The organizational culture is based on fairness, creating an inclusive and welcoming environment, where clients feel a sense of belonging. The clients feel their interest matters and their opinions and participation are appreciated.

Key informants and survey participants identified a number of issues, challenges and gaps that VAST is facing in delivering its services and programming, which are summarized as follows:

- **Funding and resource challenges.** According to key informants and survey participants, the organization is chronically underfunded, which affects its ability to deliver effective services in meeting the needs of its clients. Despite the influx of refugees and newcomers in BC over the past few years, little additional resources have been allocated by the governments to support service delivery organizations in the field. When determining refugee quotes, the federal government rarely considers perspectives from service delivery organizations and their needs for additional resources and funding. For example, VAST has not received federal funds for its service since 2014. Similarly, the funding that it receives through provincial government is focused on settlement rather than healthcare and is not sufficient to address complex needs of torture survivors. Most other funding that the organization receives is project specific and temporary, not allowing long term planning. The organization constantly has to look for additional funding, which requires time and effort by the staff, taking their focus away from serving the needs of clients.
- **Staffing challenges lead to delays in services and waitlists.** Largely due to resource constraints, the organization lacks adequate staffing to be able to address the clients' needs. The clinical staff is overworked and overwhelmed, and the organization is run by an Executive Director who works only part-time. In the past few years, the organization has also experienced internal labour disputes and moved to unionization. Staffing challenges often result in long wait

lists (e.g., wait lists can be up to six months) and restrictions on the amounts of services delivered to clients (e.g., restrictions on number of sessions that each client can attend). Some clients have severe traumas and require extended services (e.g., longer sessions, more attendance, etc.) to properly benefit from the participation. During interviews, representatives of other service delivery organizations noted that they often end up referring their clients to other service delivery organizations because VAST is not able to accommodate their needs in a timely manner. According to key informants, the organization needs more clinical staff members (e.g., counselors, front-line workers, psychologists, expressive art therapists etc.) to deliver more of the existing services and also deliver additional services (e.g., Stage 2 trauma recovery work, clinical psychiatrists, etc.). The staff is also needed to do more outreach and connection with other services delivery organizations, undertake social media activities and expand VAST services to other regions and areas of BC. Currently, VAST's activities are mostly focused in the Vancouver area.

- **Changing newcomer needs and occasional use of interpreters which affects the quality of the services.** The needs of newcomers, their language skills and nature of trauma experienced are dynamic and constantly changing. Occasionally, and largely due to funding constraints, VAST experiences challenges with adapting its services to ever-changing client needs in a timely manner. For example, when an influx of Syrian refugees came to Canada, it took a while for VAST to develop its services delivered in Arabic language. Similarly, at the time of this evaluation, the organization still lacked capacity to deliver services in Ukrainian, Kurdish, Turkish, or Rohingya languages. When the organization does not have therapists who can speak the native language of clients, it often has to hire interpreters, which affects the quality of the services. To address the issue, key informants and survey participants recommended hiring clinical staff members who can speak the most requested languages, and when not possible, using well-trained interpreters who have expertise in translating clinical therapy.
- **Finding a balance between flexibility and responsiveness.** Key informants noted that VAST is very flexible in its approach, has no bureaucratic rules and all staff members are highly accessible. At the same time, due to large work volume, organization often appears a bit disorganized, and staff roles or organization structure are not always clear. Partner organizations sometimes struggle to find the right person to communicate with and receive timely responses to their requests and inquiries.
- **Outdated infrastructure, which affects efficiency and effectiveness of the operations.** The organization works from a very small office, its operational system and IT infrastructure are outdated, affecting the quality of the services and programming that it delivers.
- **Canadian society fails to provide adequate support for refugees affecting their mental status and recovery from the past trauma.** According to key informants and survey participants, refugees in Canada are not able to address their basic needs at an adequate level affecting their recovery process. The refugees often face challenges with accessing proper housing, employment opportunities, access to legal services etc., which puts them in a very stressful situation. As demonstrated in the following table, survey participants identified housing, employment, and language barriers as the most difficult challenges of their

settlement in Canada. The COVID-19 pandemic, stay-at-home orders and mandatory guarantees created additional challenges for newcomers over the past few years.

Table 26: Most Difficult Challenges Faced During Resettlement

<i>Migration has its challenges, what challenges were the most difficult to navigate during your journey?</i>	<i>#</i>	<i>%</i>
Total number of service recipients who provided an answer	64	
Housing	21	33%
Employment	19	30%
Language	18	28%
Belonging to community and finding friends and social integration	5	8%
Transportation	4	6%
Other (Understanding culture, accessing healthcare, childcare, weather, missing family at home, etc.)	5	8%

Transitioning to online delivery affected the quality of some services. During the pandemic, many of the VAST services and programming were transitioned to be delivered online, which increased their accessibility during difficult times. However, according to survey participants, the lack of in-person communication affected the effectiveness of some services.

Recommendations for Improvement

Clients and key informants provided a range of recommendations on how the VAST services could have been improved. These recommendations are summarized as follows:

- **Provide timely access to services and reduce wait times.** According to survey participants and key informants, most refugees arrive in Canada with complex trauma and often require urgent services. However, often due to busy schedules and full caseloads, VAST staff are unable to accommodate quick services resulting in wait times. Despite extensive staff efforts to prioritize critical cases, many potential clients are not able to get timely access to services. Given the influx of refugees in BC is increasing, the key informants and survey participants recommended more resources to support timely access to services.
- **Hire more counselors,** particularly those who can deliver services in other languages. Several survey participants and key informants recommended hiring more staff members who can deliver clinical services to address the growing need. They also recommended hiring professionals who can deliver their services in the first language of clients. Having more staff would enable clients to change counselors if a particular staff does not meet their needs.
- **Deliver more services.** Both survey participants and key informants strongly recommended VAST to deliver more of its services and programming. A few survey participants noted that the amount of services provided for clients often is insufficient given clients' complex trauma. Clients would benefit from more mental health and wellness services and programming. For example, Spanish Group Therapy is delivered only once a week during morning hours, and most clients who work are not able to attend. Clients want more sessions offered at different

time slots to accommodate the time schedules of various clients. Similarly, key informants recommended more group sessions offered in different languages, and more art therapy classes.

- **Add more language capabilities.** According to key informants and survey participants, VAST's ability to deliver clinical services in client's native tongue has been its key advantage. There is a need to expand this expertise and offer clinical services in more languages such as Ukrainian, Kurdish, Turkish, and Rohingya languages.
- **Implement programs to help integrate clients to Canadian society.** Several survey participants noted a need for VAST to develop programs and services that could facilitate integration of its clients into Canadian society. Specific programs mentioned included teaching about Canadian way of life and courtesy, language, accessing health care, ensuring safety, learning about traffic rules and basic banking and tax planning, providing legal services through immigration process, etc. According to survey participants, although some of these services are already provided by other settlement agencies, due to unique needs (e.g., complex trauma) most clients served by VAST are not able to access them at an adequate level. VAST is in a position to accommodate their needs and deliver services that would address their unique circumstances.
- **Deliver mentorship programming.** Most refugees need extensive one-to-one support, guidance and mentorship, particularly during early days of their arrival in Canada. Therefore, several survey participants noted a need for VAST to provide access to such services.
- **Assist with social isolation.** Several survey participants recommended more focus on social connections for clients, such as organizing social groups in different languages (so participants can better communicate), helping to establish connections to other social groups and cultural activities and organizing more outdoor and in-person activities.
- **Support with housing and employment.** According to key informants and survey participants, refugees and refugee claimants have to deal with financial hardships in Canada. The government provisions are not nearly sufficient to address their basic needs. Due to their past trauma and marginalization they also struggle to find proper employment and housing, affecting the process of healing. The survey participants and key informants recommended providing housing and employment support specific to survivors of torture. Although VAST is not directly involved in providing such services, it could facilitate the process by advocating on behalf of its clients.
- **There is an opportunity for VAST to better promote its programs and services among its clients.** VAST clients have limited knowledge of other VAST services not related to trauma recovery and mental health support. However, there is significant interest to learn more about them. VAST organizes and delivers a wide range of other non-clinical programming focused on advocacy, research and promotion of rights of refugees in Canada and beyond. During the survey, participants were asked to indicate their knowledge of these programs. As demonstrated in the following table, The knowledge and awareness of specific programs

ranged from 21% to 7% among participants, while over one-third (34%) of clients did not have knowledge of any other programs.

Table 27: Participant Knowledge of Existing VAST Services

<i>VAST is also delivering or planning to deliver some other services. We would like to know if you have ever heard about any of the following services or programs initiated or supported by VAST? (Select all that apply)</i>	#	%
Total number of service recipients who provided an answer	76	
Have not heard about any	26	34%
VAST Survivor Advocates	16	21%
Voices Against Torture (VAT)	16	21%
VAST Women Survivors Resource Network (WSRN)	13	17%
Canadian Network for Survivors of Torture and Trauma (CNSTT)	12	16%
VAST Research and Knowledge Centre (RKC)	10	13%
VAST Cultural Brokers	8	11%
United Nations Convention Against Torture (UNCAT)	8	11%
International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (IRCT)	5	7%

Most refugees come to VAST with little information about services that are available for them in Canada. Providing them with brochures and links to websites often is ineffective due to language and systemic barriers. Therefore, a number of survey participants recommended VAST to develop a system that provides a proper orientation about the services available to them (delivered by VAST or other agencies) and assist in accessing the services (e.g., addressing language barriers, etc.).

As demonstrated in the following table, most survey participants were interested in learning more about VAST's Research and Knowledge Centre (RKC), Canadian Network for Survivors of Torture and Trauma (CNSTT), VAST Women Survivors Resource Network (WSRN), VAST Cultural Brokers and International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (IRCT).

Table 28: Interest in Specific VAST Programs

<i>Would you be interested in learning more about any of these services?</i>	#	%
Yes	49	75%
No	6	9%
Don't know	10	15%
Total	65	100%
Which programs would you be interested in learning more about?	N=65	%
VAST Research and Knowledge Centre (RKC)	25	38%
Canadian Network for Survivors of Torture and Trauma (CNSTT)	24	37%
VAST Women Survivors Resource Network (WSRN)	21	32%
VAST Cultural Brokers	17	26%
International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (IRCT)	17	26%
Voices Against Torture (VAT)	14	22%
VAST Survivor Advocates	13	20%
United Nations Convention Against Torture (UNCAT)	11	17%

- **Focus on staff training, capacity building and burnout.** Often staff members working under stressful conditions experience burnout. Therefore, key informants noted that it was important for VAST to take care of the health and wellbeing of its own staff and support their mental health to avoid burnout. They also mentioned the importance of ensuring continuous capacity building, and training for staff members to upgrade their skills in different areas of service to ensure VAST programming is up to national and international standards.
- **Stay focused on key areas of strength.** VAST has been known for its strength in delivering trauma informed services for refugees and newcomers. Key informants noted the importance of keeping that focus as the organization is fulfilling an important niche in the ecosystem. All new programming should be aligned and complement its core areas of strength. For example, they recommended VAST to develop programs that target specific refugee groups (e.g., Ukrainians) and address their mental health needs at a deeper and complex level.
- **Upgrade infrastructure.** Psychotherapy is not just a social connection but also an environment within which it is happening. It is important VAST delivers its services and programming in a therapeutic environment, which requires upgrade of its infrastructure, office and therapy rooms and provide better art supplies for effective programming.
- **Address financial and resource constraints.** Key informants and survey participants recommended efforts to raise funds from different sources to address staffing, resource and service shortages. Given the reputation of the organization, increasing need for its services, and quality of the services delivered, VAST should be able to attract additional funding and resources to enhance its services. According to key informants, the organization can do a lot more to raise funds from provincial sources such as governments, foundations, and private donors.
- **Target all newcomers instead of focusing on refugees.** Key informants noted that many of those who come to Canada under other immigration programs (e.g., migrant workers, international students etc.) also have experienced trauma and torture and could benefit from VAST's mental health and trauma recovery services but are not eligible to participate. According to these key informants, VAST needs to expand the scope of its services to include all newcomers with trauma regardless of their immigration status.
- **Expand the services to other regions and areas of BC.** According to key informants, many refugees who live outside of the Lower Mainland area, (and have experienced torture and trauma), would benefit from VAST's services. There is a need for VAST to expand outreach and target those living outside of the Lower Mainland. Key informants also noted that the name VAST is limiting the organization to Vancouver only.
- **Provide timely response to inquiries.** According to key informants, due to busy schedules often it takes time for staff members to respond to inquiries, which results in missed opportunities. They recommended changes in the operations so the staff can respond to inquiries in a timely manner.

- **Continue representing the sector at the regional, national and international levels.** Several key informants noted that VAST is well positioned to represent torture survivors at the national and international tables and it should continue and expand these efforts to ensure the voices of its clients are heard at all levels. Several key informants also noted an opportunity to expand partnership efforts with organizations that work in preventing violence. There are many organizations in Canada and abroad focused on preventing and addressing consequences of violence and partnering with them can enhance VAST's advocacy efforts.
- **Enhance organizational structure and clarify roles and responsibilities.** Key informants noted a need to enhance VAST board of directors by bringing people who have experience in clinical physiology and trauma treatment and bringing more clarity into roles and responsibilities of the board, management, staff and union to avoid any future potential issues or conflicts.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



4.1 CONCLUSIONS

The major conclusions arising from the evaluation are as follows:

1. There is a strong and continued need for the trauma recovery and mental health support programs delivered by VAST.

As the world is living through a refugee crisis, the number of asylum claims in Canada has increased ninefold over the past decade. Increasing number of refugees arrive in British Columbia with complex trauma that need psychological intervention to support their integration into Canadian society. Mainstream service delivery organizations often are not able to meet complex psychological needs of refugees due to cultural, language, financial and other systemic barriers.

According to key informants, VAST is one of the very few organizations in BC that can provide professional and trauma-informed and culturally appropriate physiological and mental health support in the primary language of refugees at no cost to participants. Therefore, the demand for its services has been increasing steadily and the organization has long wait lists for its services.

2. VAST programs and services have largely been effective in helping clients in addressing consequences of trauma, building connections, developing confidence and self-esteem, telling their stories during refugee clemency process and facilitating their re-settlement in Canada.

From 2017 to 2023, VAST has served an average 1117 clients annually who attended a wide range of trauma recovery and mental health support services delivered by the organization, such as counselling, group therapy, expressive art therapy, move and relax sessions, outdoor activities, peer support, and referrals to other community services. The results of the survey with VAST's clients demonstrated that the clients attend VAST programming for an average 4.9 months, are very satisfied with the services received (average rating of 4.5 on a scale 1 to 5, where 1 is not satisfied at all, and 5 is very satisfied, n=67), and they find the VAST programming and services as useful in their healing journey.

Results of psychological assessment measurements conducted on clients at intake and at the end of their participation demonstrated improvements in their trauma symptoms. Both clients and key informants agreed that VAST programming was successful in helping clients to self-regulate trauma symptoms and cope with trauma, increase their confidence, empowerment self-worth, self-esteem and emotional well-being, improve social connections and sense of belonging, support them through refugee hearing process, and facilitate their successful re-settlement in Canada. VAST services and activities have also contributed to increasing capacity of government agencies and NGOs involved in serving the needs of refugees and bringing more awareness to the issues of torture among Canadian decision makers and general public.

3. A number of internal and external factors have contributed and constrained the success of activities and programming delivered by VAST.

While specific focus and deep knowledge of issues and challenges faced by survivors of torture, skilled and dedicated staff members, strong track record and reputation and nimble and flexible approach to its work have contributed to its success; funding and resource challenges, outdated infrastructure of the organization, staffing limitations, delays in services, constantly changing needs of refugees, and lack of adequate support for refugees in Canada have constrained the success of VAST programming and services.

4.2 OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

The major opportunities to improve VAST's trauma recovery and mental health support programs are as follows:

1. Address resource and staffing challenges.

As noted in the report, the need and the demand for the trauma recovery and mental health support programs delivered by VAST is growing steadily while the organization is struggling with resource and staffing challenges. As BC's one of the only very few organizations that can address unique needs of refugees who survived torture, VAST needs a lot more resources and funding to address the growing demand for its services. The resources are needed to hire new staffing, reduce wait times and also add services in the languages that are most commonly spoken by the newly arriving refugees (e.g., Ukrainian, Kurdish, Turkish, and Rohingya, etc.).

2. Continue efforts to address existing issues and gaps and improve the quality and effectiveness of the services.

As noted in the report, there are many opportunities to address existing challenges and gaps and improve the quality and effectiveness of trauma recovery and mental health support programs delivered by VAST. These areas of improvement include reducing wait times; recruiting more clinical staff members and more language capacities; increasing responsiveness to inquiries by clients and partners; clarifying roles and responsibilities of staff, board and union; promoting other VAST services to existing and potential clients; upgrading IT and service infrastructure; obtaining better office space; procuring better art supplies; and upgrading therapy rooms to better suit psychotherapy sessions for an effective programming.

3. When expanding programming and services it will be critical to keep a focus on core areas of organizational strength and on areas where the organization can generate more substantial impacts.

The survivors of torture served by VAST have many unmet needs and require additional services with their integration and resettlement in Canada. VAST is under pressure to expand the existing services and develop more programming to assist clients with their unmet needs. When deciding on and delivering new services or programming, it will be important to focus

on areas where the organization is most effective (e.g., delivering culturally appropriate trauma informed psychotherapy), that are aligned with VAST mission and where it can generate more substantial impacts. Other areas of client needs (e.g., settlement, housing, language, employment, etc.) can be addressed through referrals and close collaboration with other NGOs and service delivery organizations.

APPENDIX I: PRE-AND POST CLIENT ASSESSMENT RESULTS



I.1 HARVARD TRAUMA QUESTIONNAIRE (HTQ)

VAST assesses client trauma symptoms during in-take process, as well as throughout client participation in the programs and services. The assessments are conducted using three different tools including the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire (HTQ). HTQ is designed to be a cross-cultural sensitive instrument to assess trauma and torture related to mass violence and the refugee experience. It is considered psychological measurements and has been proven effective for cross-cultural use, particularly with refugees. HTQ helps to diagnose PTSD and trauma and is used for clinical decisions management and treatment planning purposes.

As part of this evaluation, we reviewed pre and post results for a sample of 23 clients who participated in VAST programs and services from 2017 to 2023. As demonstrated in the following table, pre and post assessment results demonstrated that of the 35 assessment indicators used by HTQ, VAST clients demonstrated improvements in 30 indicators (i.e., ranging from 46 percentage point improvement for ‘feeling others are hostile to you’ to 5% percentage point improvement for sudden emotional or physical reaction when reminded of the most hurtful or traumatic events). The average improvement for all 30 indicators combined was 16%.

Results of Harvard Trauma Questionnaire (HTQ) Administered with a Sample of VAST Clients

Harvard Trauma Questionnaire (HTQ)	Pre (earliest point of measurement)				Post (latest point of measurement) ¹⁷				Change %
	A little/Not at all		Quite a bit/Extremely		A little/Not at all		Quite a bit/Extremely		
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	
Feeling others are hostile to you	4	31%	9	69%	10	77%	3	23%	-46%
Feeling that people do not understand	2	15%	11	85%	7	54%	6	46%	-39%
Feeling no trust in others.	3	23%	10	77%	8	62%	5	38%	-39%
Hopelessness.	1	8%	11	92%	5	42%	7	58%	-34%
Feeling that someone you trusted betrayed you	5	42%	7	58%	9	75%	3	25%	-33%
Unable to feel emotions	10	48%	11	52%	17	81%	4	19%	-33%
Trouble sleeping	1	5%	20	95%	7	33%	14	67%	-28%
Feeling jumpy, easily startled	5	26%	14	74%	10	53%	9	47%	-27%
Feeling guilty for having survived.	6	50%	6	50%	9	75%	3	25%	-25%
Avoiding thoughts or feelings associated with the traumatic or hurtful events	3	15%	17	85%	8	40%	12	60%	-25%
Recurrent thoughts or memories of the most hurtful or terrifying events	1	5%	20	95%	6	29%	15	71%	-24%
Feeling that you have no one to rely upon	6	46%	7	54%	9	69%	4	31%	-23%
Bodily pain	1	7%	13	93%	4	29%	10	71%	-22%

¹⁷ The pre- and post tests were conducted an average 246 days apart.

Harvard Trauma Questionnaire (HTQ)	Pre (earliest point of measurement)				Post (latest point of measurement) ¹⁷				Change %
	A little/Not at all		Quite a bit/Extremely		A little/Not at all		Quite a bit/Extremely		
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	
Feeling detached or withdrawn from people	5	25%	15	75%	9	45%	11	55%	-20%
Finding out or being told by other people that you have done something that you cannot remember	8	53%	7	47%	11	73%	4	27%	-20%
Troubled by physical problem(s)	5	33%	10	67%	8	53%	7	47%	-20%
Feeling exhausted	1	6%	15	94%	4	25%	12	75%	-19%
Feeling humiliated by your experience.	5	38%	8	62%	7	54%	6	46%	-16%
Recurrent nightmares	3	14%	18	86%	6	29%	15	71%	-15%
Feeling on guard	4	20%	16	80%	7	35%	13	65%	-15%
Feeling irritable or having outbursts of anger	7	33%	14	67%	10	48%	11	52%	-15%
Feeling as if you don't have a future	6	32%	13	68%	9	47%	10	53%	-15%
Having difficulty dealing with new situations	5	36%	9	64%	7	50%	7	50%	-14%
Inability to remember parts of the most hurtful or traumatic events	12	57%	9	43%	14	67%	7	33%	-10%
Feeling that you have less skills than you had before	6	35%	11	65%	7	44%	9	56%	-9%
Difficulty paying attention	4	29%	10	71%	5	36%	9	64%	-7%
Feeling as if you are split into two people and one of you is watching what the other is doing	11	79%	3	21%	12	86%	2	14%	-7%
Difficulty concentrating	4	19%	17	81%	5	24%	16	76%	-5%
Avoiding activities that remind you of the traumatic or hurtful event	7	35%	13	65%	8	40%	12	60%	-5%
Less interest in daily activities	6	32%	13	68%	7	37%	12	63%	-5%
Sudden emotional or physical reaction when reminded of the most hurtful or traumatic events	4	20%	16	80%	5	25%	15	75%	-5%
Poor memory	8	57%	6	43%	8	57%	6	43%	0%
Feeling unable to make daily plans	9	69%	4	31%	8	62%	5	38%	7%
Feeling ashamed of the hurtful or traumatic events that have happened to you	8	62%	5	38%	7	54%	6	46%	8%
Feeling as though the event is happening again	11	55%	9	45%	9	45%	11	55%	10%
Blaming yourself for things that have happened	7	58%	5	42%	5	42%	7	58%	16%
Average Change for all questions combined									-16%

I.2 VAST VULNERABILITY SCREENING TOOL (VVAT)

VAST assesses client trauma symptoms using the VAST Vulnerability Screening Tool (VVAT). VVAT is not diagnostic, but facilitates early recognition of vulnerable persons, as it pertains to settlement and mental health checklist. VVAT helps to identify vulnerabilities as part of the settlement processes. The tool uses 10 indicators to assess client mental state and is administered with VAST clients during the in-take process and then while they remain in the program. As part of this evaluation, we reviewed pre and post results for a sample of 140 clients who participated in VAST's programming and services from 2017 to 2023. Pre and post assessments results demonstrated that these 140 clients demonstrated improvements across all 10 indicators. As demonstrated in the table in the following page, the average improvement for all 10 indicators combined was 12% (ranging from 18% improvement for 'feeling scared or frightened to 3% improvement for 'suffering from other physical pains').

VAST Vulnerability Screening Tool Results for a Sample of VAST Clients

VAST Vulnerability Screening Tool (VVAT)	Pre (earliest point of measurement)		Post (latest point of measurement) ¹⁸		Total # of Participants	Change %
	#	%	#	%		
Do you often feel scared or frightened?	97	72%	73	54%	134	-18%
Do you find yourself losing interest in things?	102	78%	80	61%	131	-17%
Do you often have nightmares?	88	65%	66	49%	135	-16%
Do you often have trouble concentrating?	106	78%	87	64%	136	-14%
Do you often have problem falling asleep?	110	79%	93	66%	140	-12%
Do you often forget things in your daily life?	98	72%	82	60%	136	-12%
Do you often suffer from headaches?	100	73%	85	62%	137	-11%
Do you easily get angry?	88	65%	73	54%	135	-11%
Do you often think about painful past events?	113	84%	105	78%	135	-6%
Do you often suffer from other physical pains?	94	68%	90	65%	139	-3%
Average change for all questions combined						-12%

¹⁸ The pre- and post tests were conducted an average 237 days apart.

I.3 HOPKINS SYMPTOM CHECKLIST

VAST assesses client trauma symptoms during in-take process, as well as throughout client participation in the programs and services. The assessments are conducted using the Hopkins Symptom Checklist 25 (HSCL-25). HSCL-25 is considered psychological assessment measurements and has been proven effective for cross-cultural use, particularly with refugees. It assesses levels of both anxiety and depression, and it is designed to assess symptom change.

As part of the evaluation, we reviewed pre and post assessment results for a sample of 44 clients who participated in the program from 2017 to 2023. As demonstrated in the table in the following page, the results demonstrated improvements for 12 indicators, no changes for 4 indicators, and decline for 7 indicators. The average improvement for all 23 indicators combined was 3%.

Hopkins Symptom Checklist 25 Pre and Post Test Results for a Sample of VAST Clients

Hopkins Symptom Checklist 25 (HSCL-25) Questionnaire	Pre (earliest point of measurement)				Post (latest point of measurement) ¹⁹				Change %
	A little/Not at all		Quite a bit/Extremely		A little/Not at all		Quite a bit/Extremely		
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	
Spell of terror or panic	23	56%	18	44%	31	76%	10	24%	-20%
Feeling tense or keyed up	11	29%	27	71%	17	45%	21	55%	-16%
Nervousness or shakiness inside	15	34%	29	66%	21	48%	23	52%	-14%
Feeling restless or can't sit still	11	28%	28	72%	16	41%	23	59%	-13%
Faintness, dizziness or weakness	17	38%	28	62%	21	47%	24	53%	-9%
Suddenly scared for no reason	22	49%	23	51%	25	56%	20	44%	-7%
Feeling no interest in things	12	35%	22	65%	14	41%	20	59%	-6%
Heart pounding or racing	21	50%	21	50%	23	55%	19	45%	-5%
Feeling of worthlessness	14	44%	18	56%	15	47%	17	53%	-3%
Trembling	27	66%	14	34%	28	68%	13	32%	-2%
Worry too much about things	3	9%	32	91%	4	11%	31	89%	-2%
Feeling fearful	17	39%	27	61%	18	41%	26	59%	-2%
Headaches	18	43%	24	57%	18	43%	24	57%	0%
Difficulty falling asleep, staying asleep	14	37%	24	63%	14	37%	24	63%	0%
Feeling hopeless about future	14	40%	21	60%	14	40%	21	60%	0%
Feeling lonely	13	37%	22	63%	13	37%	22	63%	0%
Blaming yourself for things	16	40%	24	60%	15	38%	25	63%	3%
Feeling low in energy, slowed down	13	33%	27	68%	12	30%	28	70%	2%
Thought of ending your life	28	85%	5	15%	27	82%	6	18%	3%
Poor appetite	23	61%	15	39%	21	55%	17	45%	6%
Feeling of being trapped or caught	21	64%	12	36%	19	58%	14	42%	6%
Crying easily	17	43%	23	58%	13	33%	27	68%	10%
Feeling everything is an effort	14	40%	21	60%	10	29%	25	71%	11%
Average change for all questions combined									-3%

¹⁹ The pre- and post tests were conducted an average 285 days apart.