

Pilot project will offer settlement services to newcomers at Library

Libraries are often the first point contact for newcomers to Canada when seeking services to help them land on their feet.

Aurora is no exception, but what the Aurora Public Library lacks is an in-house settlement worker to make sure newcomers get information and referrals on language training, career and employment advice, and services related to housing, education, transit, citizenship, and so much more.

That, however, is set to change this week as the Aurora Public Library and Catholic Community Services of York Region, through Library Settlement Partnerships, begin a new monthly pilot project in which a settlement worker will be on hand from 1 to 4 p.m. to answer as many questions as possible.

"We haven't had a settlement worker in the Library and we thought it would be a good thing to do a pilot because if you're a newcomer you have to travel to the Welcome Centre in Newmarket or Richmond Hill in order to get information," says Claudia Olguin, Coordinator of Community-Led Initiatives for the Aurora Public Library (APL). "Having a settlement worker in the Library [will help us] break that barrier."

"People can just drop in, ask their questions, and sometimes newcomers don't even know that they can get help and assistance on getting information on how to renew Permanent Resident cards, or if they need assistance with housing and all these specific needs newcomers have. Having the library worker here in the APL 'Living Room' will allow them to have access without having to make an appointment. These days, a lot of these organizations are still doing virtual appointments [but] for a newcomer, it is not the same—especially if you have a language barrier."

These services will be available on the third Thursday of every month with a settlement worker who speaks several languages.

"The Library has a very positive image in the newcomer community," says Guanxin Hua, Program Manager of Library Settlement Partnerships in York Region for Catholic Community Services of York Region. "It's a public place, it is easy to access, and the Library is the first point of contact for many newcomers. Bringing a settlement service to where newcomers live nearby is to remove the barrier to make the service more accessible."

"People are moving north, especially along Yonge Street, which is the backbone. There are a lot of new development and there's lots of people in York Region included. The population is booming and also we noticed that there are quite a lot of senior newcomers. They are sponsored by their adult children, in many cases they live with their children, and they are invisible in a way. When you see the household, you will see they are not newcomer families, but they have a newcomer member in their household. The library is their place to go."

The program, Hua adds, focuses on providing "good service first" and can often reach many newcomers through word-of-mouth.

"Newcomers know where other newcomers are, so they will come gradually," she says. "Newcomers first need support, but each and every one of them have their own experience, their own skills, and they are eager to contribute back. This is always our intention. We're providing support for them first but we also want to create an opportunity for them to contribute back to the community. I hope all the community members are aware that they are not only just the service recipients, they are contributors too. It has really enriched our community, we can learn from each other, and it will expand the horizon for everyone's experience."

Feedback, notes Olguin, will help determine future programming, including whether the pilot program will become a permanent fixture in APL's offerings.

"Having the settlement worker in Aurora speaking to the newcomers, having one on one meetings, will also help the Library to see the needs of the community, whatever the needs of those newcomers to the community are, and help the Library plan programs for

the future,? she says. ?If you don't speak English, how can you find a job? They have different needs but those are the most basic needs: learning the language so they can start building a life in Canada and having that integration into society. We help them with that, we run programs, we have an English conversation we offer once a month and we offer newcomer book discussion groups in partnership with Library Settlement Partnerships that help newcomers ? that is the hope: practice their English skills and at the same time make them more confident when they are talking to people in English.

?Usually when you come to Canada from another country and have a Master's degree, a PHD or whatever it is?the credentials are sometimes not recognized so they have to come here and when they realize, ?I was a doctor back home I can't come here and just start working.' Even if their English is at a good level, they have to start exploring other options where they can succeed without having those specific credentials or start exploring careers where they want to go back to a very specific career ? how can I transition? What do I need to do to teach in Canada? Public libraries are an essential part of the community.?

For more information on the pilot program, which begins this Thursday, June 16, and another related APL programs, visit aurorapl.ca.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter