

Attachment 4: Reunification and Adaptation Project

The objectives of the Reunification and Adaptation Project (RAP) program were:

- To support families affected by family separation and reunification through peer support groups
- To raise awareness of issues with stakeholders (Toronto Public Health, settlement agencies and beyond)
- To build an information base about the phenomena of family separation and reunification and identify associated needs
- To develop preliminary support tools and a peer support model to engage and empower newcomers affected by FSR
- To prepare communities, services and families to actively support newcomer children and youth to deal with issues associated with FSR
- To identify and engage community stakeholders to integrate FSR into practices (e.g. intake, services) and policies
- To disseminate findings through publications and other forms of information sharing to broader audiences

Implementation

The project was carried out developmentally; building as learning took place through three phases and included a review of the literature on the topic. While the first phase allowed a discovery of the breadth and depth of need and variations across communities, the second and third phases focused on the development of the peer support model, development of a toolkit and engagement of stakeholders within TPH and in the broader sectors.

The project began with an exploration of the issue. Twelve settlement and other newcomer serving agencies with roots in particular communities were invited to consult with community members about how family separation and reunification affected them. The information provided informed the choice of the vulnerable communities that were identified in the RFP. In total, 23 agencies in three consortiums applied for the RAP funding. The consortium led by SAFSS was the successful proponent.

There was wide diversity in participants' background in terms of year of arrival (home language and last country of residence). Each consortium member had at least two part-time staff and sessions were held either as one-on-one or as group, with youth and/or parents, and ranged in approach and formality. Participants were recruited using a range of outreach strategies.

Each agency implemented the program according to their selected sub-population focus. The foci were: live-in caregivers; families with young children who were sent overseas; families affected by civil war; youth escaping political violence; youth involved in the criminal justice system who joined their parent(s) in Canada after many years apart; parent(s) working overseas; and families affected by FSR in one geographic community.

Through the mechanisms of regular meetings with staff and monthly consortium with agency program managers, trusting relationships were established with the consortium and across agencies. Key aspects of this effective collaboration were: the leadership provided by the

consortium lead agency (Settlement Assistance and Family Support Services) in budget management, problem-solving as needed and chairing consortium meetings; effective follow through on needs as they were expressed.

Findings – Program Impact

TPH staff interviewed a sample of participants, project staff and settlement agency managers and reviewed session and monthly reports and found that:

- Participants were vulnerable to social isolation, depression and emotional issues associated with FSR. However, as a result of the program, they felt less isolated and more hopeful in managing FSR through improved social networks, knowing that they were not alone in experiencing FSR and better understanding how FSR affects people
- Participants valued the uncommon opportunity to talk about these issues through RAP. By focusing on FSR, RAP elevated awareness and gave permission to talk about issues that are often hidden, suppressed or undervalued.
- Most RAP staff and consortium members reported that they had not previously attributed importance to FSR even though they were aware of it. They credited RAP with increasing their awareness of the depth of the issues, the associated stress for families and the interrelation of FSR with settlement issues. The consensus was clear that FSR is a significant issue that permeates other settlement processes and that needs to be addressed through specific programming and advocacy.
- RAP staff and consortium members valued the participant-driven program model in terms of defining how and what needs were addressed
- There was value in having participants in different stages of FSR to prepare less experienced participants and help them gain perspective on issues.

Both staff and participants observed that emotional issues associated with FSR are often deep seeded, and often take a long time to surface, and to address suggesting the need for longer term support and counselling. Mental health promotion early in the immigration process may help people to recognize and address FSR issues more effectively to limit their impact.

All stakeholders interviewed for the project concurred that RAP was valuable because it:

- Gave focus and raised awareness to participants, staff and relevant sectors about an important issue that is foundational to mental health and well-being and in turn successful settlement
- Addressed a wide-spread issue given large Toronto's newcomer population
- Effectively addressed social isolation and depression expressed by participants related to FSR by providing opportunities to share stories and concerns and learn from others in similar situations; to understand that they were not alone in experiencing FSR; to build resource connections for further support; and to develop new skills and strategies that strengthen resiliency and families