

A Place For Everyone:

A Formative Evaluation of the Halifax Regional Municipality Immigration Action Plan

| Independent Project | PLAN 6000 |

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| Presented on December 9, 2009 |

Immigration is key to the social and economic sustainability of Canadian cities. In 2008, the Atlantic Metropolis Centre awarded the Dalhousie School of Planning a pilot grant for a formative evaluation of the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) Immigration Action Plan. Created in 2005, the Immigration Action Plan aims to create and maintain a welcoming community for new and existing residents. The Plan proposes a series of short-term ('Phase 1') and medium-long term actions ('Phase 2') aimed at welcoming newcomers. HRM acted on most of the Phase 1 recommendations, and staff reports to Council indicate interested in revising the Plan before it moves into Phase 2.

In July 2009, I interviewed 27 stakeholders from a diverse selection of private and public agencies working with newcomers. I asked them what it means to be a welcoming community, whether this is an appropriate goal for the Plan, how effective the Plan has been in helping HRM become more a more inclusive as an organization, and how the Plan might be improved. Report recommendations reflect their experience and draw on best practices from two Canadian cities, Edmonton and Saskatoon. I suggest eight dimensions of a welcoming community in the context of Halifax; while not definitive, they are based what I heard from respondents about the aspirations and concerns of newcomers. The report identifies where the Plan has been successful, suggests potential improvements and makes recommendations for plan review.

| Eight Dimensions of a Welcoming HRM |

- 1** A welcoming HRM is **safe**. Many people move here with young families or to go to school: Along with employment and education, safety is their primary concern.
- 2** A welcoming HRM uses **existing public spaces, community programs and civic events to support increasing diversity**, while continuing to fund special events that introduce newcomers to the city and provide opportunities to meet locals.
- 3** A welcoming HRM **adopts an inclusive approach to new plans, policies and infrastructure**, from public art to swimming pools, based on **ongoing consultation with community groups**.
- 4** A welcoming HRM **leads the pack as an employer and promoter of corporate diversity**.
- 5** A welcoming HRM acknowledges **attaining equal satisfaction in customer service provision requires meeting distinct needs** based on linguistic and cultural differences, and allocates sufficient resources to meet those needs.
- 6** A welcoming HRM communicates with residents in language that **ensures everyone can understand how basic municipal services work and has equal access to them**.
- 7** A welcoming HRM **engages and supports multicultural and ethnic communities as well as settlement service providers as critical partners** in newcomer integration.
- 8** A welcoming HRM **provides newcomers with opportunities for political participation and volunteerism** and connects them to their community representatives.

| Lessons Learned |

Many people come to HRM for the high quality of life and to raise families; thus, concerns about public safety directly impact the attraction and retention of new residents.

As American social theorist John McKnight noted during a recent lecture in Nova Scotia, “Many studies show that there are two major determinants of our local safety. One is how many neighbours we know by name. The second is how often we are present and associate in the public outside our houses” (McKnight, 2009, 2-3). HRM encourages friendly and inclusive neighbourhoods through programs like ‘Good Neighbours, Great Neighbourhoods,’ and can use these resources to achieve the objectives of the immigration plan. In the longer term, the 2008 report Violence and Public Safety in HRM provides valuable insight on how the City can work to resolve underlying issues of racism and discrimination.

All HRM programs, plans and services, not just those targeting newcomers, require regular revision to reflect changing community needs.

“Cultural competency isn’t just information about different ethnic groups: You have to change your communication skills to accommodate different cultures.”

-NGO employee, Interview 22

As one NGO staff member asked, “What is our vision in terms of inclusion and being welcoming, and how does each city plan of these support or advance that goal?” (NGO staff member, Interview 15). The Immigration Action Plan proposes staff use ‘plain language’ in public documents, but effective communication remains the tip of the iceberg. The municipality can go much further by prioritizing ‘diversity and inclusion’ in all its areas of activity. Feedback from respondents indicates core areas of municipal responsibility such as public transportation as not just poorly communicated but actually designed in ways that exclude certain groups of residents.

A plan is only as effective as the human and financial resources supporting it.

Other municipalities with similar diversity and immigration goals, such as Edmonton and Saskatoon, invest significantly more time and money than HRM in research, staff and programs for newcomers. As the Cultural Plan adopted by HRM Council in 2007 makes clear, achieving strategic goals requires allocating effective resources (HRM Cultural Plan, 2007, 56). While respondents praised the municipality for taking proactive steps to welcome newcomers, they also expressed frustration with a perceived lack of leadership. The absence of a clearly defined lead department or Plan coordinator compromises stakeholder relationships and limits potential partnerships.

By adopting an asset-based approach that draws on institutional knowledge and community experience, HRM can build on success and address concerns early on.

While only a few staff members work on the immigration file, ideas for improving services for newcomers can be drawn from across the organization. Many respondents spoke of HRM Public Libraries as an outstanding example of a welcoming public space with excellent and inclusive services. Cultural organizations, settlement services and international students likewise hold a wealth of experience that HRM can use to inform its approach to diversity management. Building relationships with the international student community is an opportunity for the City to invest in its future. Approximately one-third of international students ultimately stay in Canada; it is up to Halifax to invite them to make this place their permanent home.

“HRM can’t do it by themselves. They need to act in collaboration with other partners and I think the partners are ready to do that”

-NGO manager, Interview 13