

AAISA PROVINCIAL CONFERENCE

Professionalism in the Settlement Sector

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Importance of Developing a Sector Identity

Developing a settlement sector identity involves professional development and socialization, a social learning process that includes the acquisition of specific knowledge and skills that are required in a professional role and the development of new values, attitudes, and self-identity components (Hall, 1987). In Alberta, development of settlement sector identity could be traced back to 1986 when AAISA began discussion about professionalization in the settlement sector. Five years later, the first Settlement Worker Training Program was launched in 1991 (Roxanne Felix & Ann Goldblatt, 2009).

In the ten years that followed, the settlement sector experienced a continuum of growth and diversification. There was growth in the number and diversity of practitioners who contribute to the sector as well as diversity of services provided. The uniqueness of the work of the sector was evident. Furthermore, there was a remarkable increase in the number of immigrants served and correspondingly increase in accountability requirements. Provision of the diverse services involves individuals with diverse backgrounds with array of qualifications. The diversity of roles and skills sets demonstrated and required within the settlement sector made it a challenge to define an identity specific to all settlement practitioners. All these changes and challenges informed the growing recognition that the sector needed to ensure the quality, consistency and relevance of the services it provides and the desired outcomes it supports and promotes for individual immigrants, their families and communities. This suggested that the sector needed to evolve as a profession, ensuring that all practitioners adhere to common standards of good practice.

In 2000, AAISA approved an Occupational Competencies framework for the settlement sector in the province. The framework provides a comprehensive picture of the work performed by settlement practitioners. Use of the framework can ensure that immigrants/refugees across Alberta receive consistent, high quality and relevant services to facilitate their settlement, adaptation and integration into Canadian society.

The framework provides a useful description of the work carried out by many different types of practitioners to meet the needs of immigrants. It describes the key purpose of the occupation and the values and principles that guide the work of all practitioners. It also describes:

- Broad-based Functions that enable practitioners to fulfill their roles
- Day-to-day Activities practitioners carry out to meet the expectations of each function
- Foundational Knowledge Specifications
- Performance indicators of good practice that describe the performance expectations associated with each activity
- Specifications for Function-Specific knowledge and skills practitioners need to perform in all aspects of their work.

The Occupational Competencies framework has been the foundation tool for professional development and for accreditation. The framework is used to develop and enhance the quality and relevance of settlement practitioners' training and establishes required competencies in the

accreditation process. The framework represents a blue print of good practices which can guide the development of new and experienced practitioners, strengthen the capacity of the sector, and effectively credential practitioners.

AAISA is committed to facilitating the recognition of settlement and integration work as a unique, specialized profession through the training and accreditation of settlement practitioners. AAISA offers the only accreditation program for settlement practitioners in Canada. Accreditation indicates that a settlement professional possesses the specific knowledge and skills that are required to facilitate the settlement and integration of immigrants and refugees, and to promote social change in areas related to multiculturalism, human rights and anti-racism. Accreditation is evidence and validation that the work settlement practitioners do is distinct from social services provided by other professionals and brings further attention to their unique skill set and knowledge. In this way, accreditation and certification further assert that the work that practitioners do is not the consequence of merely good intentions and diligence but those assets complemented by an abundance of experience, expertise and knowledge aimed at providing the most comprehensive services possible to this segment of the Canadian population.

Apart from clarifying the identity and role of settlement practitioners, accreditation indicates that they conduct their work with the expertise, accountability, and commitment required to work effectively with immigrants, refugees and other newcomers to Canada, and with agencies, funders, organizations and government. It communicates an assurance of accountability for their actions and an adherence to established standards for the settlement sector.

The designation of accredited settlement practitioners indicates that practitioners adhere to common standards of good practice and that newcomers across Alberta will receive consistent, high quality and relevant services regardless of the specific services that an individual provides or the size of the organization that they are working with. Furthermore, certification is evidence for the greater community that a settlement practitioner is focused on providing services in an ethical manner that puts the needs of the client and the community ahead of their own ambitions or personal benefits. The accreditation process gives legitimacy and recognition of the excellent work being done in the settlement sector and enhances practitioners' career mobility within the sector and across the social services field.

The development of a settlement sector identity advances the profile of settlement practitioners in the eyes of government policy makers and community leaders and emphasizes the importance and value of the sector's contribution to society and community in Alberta. It increases the recognition of settlement work as a specialized profession, which requires a unique and specialized skill set – and settlement practitioners as professionals dedicated to their clients' needs.

Designation Requirements and Expectations

AAISA accreditation is designed as a combination of the training modules attended, other relevant courses taken (Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition), and experience through documented case studies. An accreditation review committee reviews applications.

To apply for AAISA accreditation, one must be a “settlement practitioner” in one of the member agencies of AAISA. A settlement practitioner provides a range of specialized services to facilitate the orientation, integration, and settlement of newcomers to Canada so they can become actively engaged and acknowledged members of Canadian society.

The AAISA model of accreditation includes three levels of accreditation, Level 2 Practitioner, Level 3 Practitioner, and Mentor, in addition to a first level at which *orientation* is given by a settlement agency. Please see the summary of requirements for accreditation below for each level.

Summary of Requirements for Accreditation

The following describes the three-level accreditation model.

Level 2 Practitioner

To recognize practitioners who have developed a level of competence in the settlement field

1. Documented Experience
 - a. Minimum 24 months full-time experience in Canada within previous 5 years
 - b. Self evaluation of 3-5 in 9 CORE functions
2. Documented Education / Training
 - a. Minimum of 100 hours of training related to competencies
3. Foundational Knowledge and Skills
 - a. Demonstration of training for 20/57 competencies in CORE areas
 - b. Of these, a self evaluation rating of 3-5 for at least 15 competencies

Level 3 Practitioner

To recognize experienced practitioners who have developed a level of excellence in the settlement field

1. Documented Experience
 - a. Minimum 5 years full-time experience in Canada
 - b. Self evaluation of 5 in 9 CORE functions
 - c. Rating of 3-5 in all functions of ONE option
2. Documented Education / Training
 - a. Minimum of 200 hours of training related to competencies
3. Foundational Knowledge and Skills
 - a. Demonstration of training for 45/57 competencies in CORE areas
 - b. Of these, a self evaluation rating of 4-5 for at least 15 competencies in either CORE or OPTIONAL areas

Mentor

To recognize experienced practitioners who have developed a level of excellence and have provided leadership in the settlement field

1. Documented Experience
 - a. Minimum 7 years full-time experience in Canada
 - b. Self evaluation of 5 in 9 CORE functions
 - c. Rating of 3-5 in all functions of ONE option
2. Documented Education / Training
 - a. Minimum of 200 hours of training related to competencies
3. Foundational Knowledge and Skills
 - a. Demonstration of training for 45/57 competencies in CORE areas
 - b. Of these, a self evaluation rating of 5 for at least 15 competencies in either CORE or OPTIONAL areas
 - c. FIVE examples of leadership roles related to competencies

Section I: Documented Experience

- Requires a letter of verification of their position by the current agency Executive Director or designate and a detailed description of roles/functions for positions held
- Self-Evaluation must be verified by the current agency Executive Director or designate

Section II: Documented Education / Training

- Requires completion of a form that lists training that addresses the AAISA competencies. Training may be evaluated or non-evaluated learning. Training may be offered through an AAISA member agency, AAISA, post-secondary institutions or workshops / seminars
- Requires copies of certificates, transcripts, and course descriptions

Section III: Foundational Knowledge and Skill

- Demonstration of competencies may be through the completion of an AAISA module, documentation of equivalent training, or through the submission of a related case study
- PLAR processes are used to evaluate documentation of equivalent training and submissions of case studies.
- Case studies have been developed for and asks applicants to demonstrate selected competencies by drawing on their skills and knowledge acquired in the workplace to solve a problem or provide a detailed example. Evaluation criteria are provided with each case study so that the assessor knows what points to look for in the applicant's responses. A minimum mark (i.e. 23/30) is identified as needed for the applicant to be deemed as demonstrating applicable competencies.
- Self-Evaluation must be verified by the current agency Executive Director or designate

How Designation Guides Relationship

One of the core competencies required of settlement practitioners' designation is ***building and maintaining effective relationships*** in relation to clients, volunteers, other staff, and community.

Across all functions and in all roles, practitioners need to have the ability to:

- ***be self-aware and develop interpersonal skills*** – recognize personal strengths, recognize needs for personal and professional development and strive to fulfill these needs, acknowledge and accommodate differences in values and beliefs and demonstrate sensitivity in a cross-cultural environment;
- ***Facilitate the exchange of information*** – This may include sharing experiences and perspectives with others; creating and supporting opportunities to exchange ideas and information with others; recommending information and resources to others;
- ***Develop and maintain relationships with the community*** – working cooperatively with other service providers in the community, communicating regularly with others and sharing information, referral services in order to achieve the best possible outcome for the clients; and
- ***Develop trusting relationships and give and receive feedback*** - creating a welcoming and nurturing environment; assuring confidentiality in relation to personal information and experience; respecting clients' cultural and religious beliefs and practices.

In their accreditation application, practitioners are required to do a self-evaluation – by rating their ability in these areas and demonstrate how each competency was achieved – either through AAISA training Modules or Prior Learning Assessment Records (PLAR): Equivalent Training completed or Case study completed.

Accreditation as Mentor acknowledges the individuals as a leader with the ability to influence, motivate and enable others in their organizational settings and in the community to achieve greater success in accomplishing the goals and ideals of the settlement sector – this would include individual practitioners, immigrant serving organizations and community capacity. These individuals would also be called upon to advocate for their clients and to advance the profile of settlement practitioners.

A certified settlement practitioner is also expected to abide by the values and principles that guide the work of all practitioners, and, consequently, their relationship with clients. A certified practitioner is expected to adhere to commonly accepted values and principles such as:

- ***Empowering clients*** by providing them with tools and information necessary to make independent decisions and facilitate integration;
- Recognizing that a spirit of ***respect*** and ***care*** must pervade all service delivery and is key to ensuring equity and easing transition; and
- Being ***accountable*** to clients, the larger community and funders. While the designation provides a degree of recognition of the settlement sector, there is also the onus of accountability. Self-regulate within the sector maintains the quality of service that we wish to associate with professionals. This accountability is required to ensure that partnerships and relationships continue to develop and are sustained by settlement practitioners' best practices and approaches to integrating newcomers into the

community. These relationships are sustained in part by maintaining our levels of expertise and demonstrating our value as resources who conduct themselves ethically and in adherence to standard set out for the profession in accordance with the vision and mission of the organizations and professional bodies that we represent. Accountability to the community as well as to funders is a major factor behind setting up performance standards and measure actual performance.

SUMMARY

While the essential competencies of settlement practitioners are presented as discrete activities, the knowledge and skills need to be integrated into a coherent daily practice. Given the changing circumstances and evolving environments that practitioners must interact in - whether as an advocate, a partner with agencies and government or as a transition and settlement worker - practitioners must demonstrate a profound range and depth knowledge, skills, judgment, and sensitivities.

Certification of settlement practitioners has helped define the contribution that the sector makes toward facilitating the dynamic process of integrating newcomers into Canadian society. It has also instilled a level of accountability in practitioners and further enhanced their commitment to their work, their professional development and the ethics of the work that they do. The success of this enterprise requires a deep commitment on the part of settlement practitioners and newcomers, but also the community as a whole. The recognition of settlement practitioners as professionals has validated the work the settlement practitioners do and indicated its value to the community.

REFERENCES

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Hall, D. T. (1987). Careers and Socialization. *Journal of Management*, 13, 301-321.

www.aaisa.ca/training&education.php

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Testimonials

I believe that as an Accredited Settlement Practitioner, it gives me an air of confidence in my daily work and interactions with other professionals and the various ethno-cultural communities that I serve. I also believe that to be a professional in this field, I need to acquire adequate knowledge, skills and training. (Toyin Fatona, Certified Settlement Practitioner, Level 3)

I have found that many service providers' organizations have no idea what settlement worker is, what is needed in order to be employed by settlement agency and what we actually do. It has been ongoing learning of myself and my skills as well as providing education for those who are not in our sector. Professional designation means that you are following set of established procedures and standards set by professional association (AAISA in this case) in order to provide quality work/service. My professional designation gives me a pride in what I do and with that I always talk about it to other professionals. (Božana Šljuka, Certified Settlement Practitioner, Level 3)

Being an accredited settlement practitioner makes me feel very knowledgeable, skillful and competent in the work that I do.

This designation gives me the protection and security that I need in performing my duties and responsibilities ... it makes me very confident to represent the Settlement Sector and my Agency at any time and be proud of myself in the professional arena. (Theresa Saffa, Certified Settlement Practitioner, Level 3)

I am proud to be accredited by AAISA. It has given me a professional status and has validated my qualifications and experiences (Surinder Uppal, Certified Settlement Practitioner: Mentor)

Obtaining the AAISA accreditation recognizes my cultural competency and my level of professionalism in settlement work. It also assists settlement workers with their credentials to help meet the established standards for the settlement sectors and enhance the quality of work done for clients in this field.

This accreditation not only provides a broader knowledge in facilitating the orientation, integration and settlement to address the needs and concerns of immigrants and refugees, but also represents a significant achievement that will enhance service delivery at the immigrant - settlement service sector (Pol Ngeth, Certified Settlement Practitioner: Level 3)

The process of acquiring Mentor level certification was certainly a fulfilling experience of deep and thorough self-reflection of my almost decade-long experience in settlement and leadership. It makes me proud to be one of the first accredited Mentors in Alberta and in Canada, and enables

me to further assist my co-Settlement Practitioners in upgrading their levels of expertise based on standardized competencies in the field

I am honored to be part of this accreditation process that is paving the way for the recognition of Settlement work as a legitimate and important. (Marichu Antonio, Certified Settlement Practitioner: Mentor).

“The ASSIA Accreditation gave me a great opportunity to be a recognized settlement practitioner. It is a great opportunity to review my long work and experience in the areas of settlement and community development field.

Those Modules and training enabled my performance enhancement by way of giving me strength and better understanding of my work place environment and operations as well as my position in the community with which I work. Now I can do better help to newcomers to make them self-dependent. (Shaheda Begum, Certified Settlement Practitioner: Level 2).