Exploring Digital Equity for Newcomer Services:

Perspectives on Access and Challenges in Peel Region

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Research partners:

With funding and support from:

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RESEARCH PARTNERS

The Service Delivery Network (SDN) is a collaborative table of Peel's local immigration partnership, Peel Newcomer Strategy Group. The SDN supports innovation and testing of new initiatives for future spread and scale of promising practices. One strategic focus of the SDN is Digital Equity and Inclusion in settlement services. This research study aims to deepen the sectors understanding of barriers to digital equity for newcomers in Peel region. The research has been conducted by Peel Newcomer Strategy Group (United Way Greater Toronto) in partnership with Peel Children's Aid Society's Child Welfare Immigration Centre of Excellence (CWICE), and Peel Multicultural Council (PMC).

Peel Newcomer Strategy Group (PNSG): PNSG is the local immigration partnership for Peel region and a project of United Way Greater Toronto (UWGT) funded by Immigration, Refugees & Citizenship Canada, the Region of Peel, and UWGT. As a community collaborative, PNSG engages stakeholders to facilitate integrated newcomer services based on local data and planning. PNSG coordinated the digital equity and inclusion project:
- Mariam Mian (Lead Writer)
- Jessica Kwik

Peel Children's Aid Society Child Welfare Immigration Centre of Excellence (Peel CAS' CWICE): Peel CAS' CWICE is a service and training centre recognized nationally for its leadership and innovation. A first-of-its-kind model, CWICE centres the intersection of child welfare with unresolved immigration, settlement, or border-related issues. CWICE is grounded in practice, to inform capacity building and research, and provides a unique structured provincial response to system navigation. CWICE promotes achieving equitable outcomes for all children, youth, and families receiving child welfare service, regardless of immigration status or geographical location within Canada. Launched in 2018, today CWICE operates an international consultation centre, participates in research across the country, and offers a national training program. Deemed a model of Ontario's child welfare re-design, CWICE offers service to children, youth, and families across Ontario. Peel CAS' CWICE contracted the services of a research assistant to support this project, along with the following staff members:

- Peter Almounauar
- Liz Okai
- Danielle Ungara
- Ghezal Wallid

Peel Multicultural Council (PMC): PMC is a community-serving organization, providing settlement and integration services to newcomers to Canada. Our services include English classes (LINC, ESL-Home based business), Enhanced Language Training (ELT), Job Search Workshops (JSW), Newcomer Settlement Program (NSP), Community Connections for adults and youth, Oath services and many more. PMC provided existing aggregated data from their digital literacy classes and supported the research project, with support from the following staff member:

- Prihan Algohary

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Community Research Ethics Office[1].

[1] Community Research Ethics Office (CREO)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The project aimed to identify and understand the barriers to digital equity and inclusion faced by newcomers in Peel region for settlement services. The project sought to answer two questions: Firstly, which newcomer groups are not accessing digital newcomer settlement services? and secondly, what are the factors that may hinder access to digital newcomer settlement services?

The research was informed by a document scan, demographic data review, key informant interviews and surveys of service provider organizations. This research project was a collaborative effort between the Peel Newcomer Strategy Group based at United Way Greater Toronto, Peel Children's Aid Society's Child Welfare Immigration Centre of Excellence (Peel CAS' CWICE), and Peel Multicultural Council.

The findings suggest that there are three key client groups who are less likely to access settlement services digitally:
- those with language barriers
- those with limited digital skills
- those with established family supports at the time of immigration to Canada

Newcomers[2] interviewed shared some of the barriers they faced to access settlement service:
- language barriers
- little or no digital literacy
- technology limitations
- privacy and security concerns relating to use of personal data
- lack of awareness about digital services
- cost of technology

Surveys with service providers suggested that they have made efforts to increase the uptake of digital settlement services. However, limited resources could prevent equitable delivery of digital settlement services.

Recommendations for service providers include focusing on building digital skills for newcomers, mitigating barriers due to language, as well as privacy and security concerns. Organizations should increase awareness about digital services and incorporate consistent user feedback to ensure that diverse needs are being accommodated. A hybrid-service delivery model would ensure that services are inclusive, while balancing the convenience and flexibility of digital services with the human connections of in-person services.

[2] A newcomer is an immigrant or refugee who has been in Canada for a short time, usually less than five years. Newcomers to Canada may be permanent residents, refugees, or temporary residents.

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

Settlement service providers funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) traditionally provided in-person prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. With the introduction of pandemic and lockdown mandates in 2020, these services transitioned from in-person to digital platforms. Currently, services are offered in a combination of these formats.

Access to digital services is not universal; there are groups that are at a larger disadvantage when accessing these services. A document scan indicates barriers include lack of digital literacy, lack of or high costs of access to devices or the internet, and lack of awareness of available digital service options. Currently, digital services offer an efficient and cost-effective alternative to in-person services. This research aims to identify the groups that may not be accessing digital services, as well as the barriers they face, or the reasons they may not be utilizing these services.

Research Objectives and Focused Questions

The study explored digital access to settlement services for newcomers in Peel region, focusing on understanding barriers and examining their experiences. Through a mixed-methods approach, we examined whether and how newcomers interact with both digital and in-person services. Ultimately, the project seeks to inform service improvements by identifying access challenges, ensuring services meet the diverse needs of newcomers.

The questions we aim to answer are as follows:
1. Which newcomer groups are not accessing digital newcomer settlement services?
2. What are the factors that may hinder access to digital newcomer settlement services?

Key Concepts Guiding the Research

This report incorporates several key concepts central to our discussion. Digital inclusion will provide the tools to achieve digital equity. In other words, digital equity outlines the goals, whereas digital inclusion encompasses the activities to achieve them (National Digital Inclusion Alliance). To promote clarity and a common understanding, we will define and explain these concepts in this section. The definitions are sourced from the National Digital Inclusion Alliance, a non-profit organization based in the US committed to advancing digital equity and inclusion.

Digital Equity:
"Digital equity is a condition in which all individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in our society, democracy, and economy. Digital equity is necessary for civic and cultural participation, employment, lifelong learning, and access to essential services."[3]

Digital Inclusion:
"Digital Inclusion refers to the activities necessary to ensure that all individuals and communities, including the most disadvantaged, have access to and use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)."[4]

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

The study has used a mixed methods approach with qualitative and quantitative data collection to capture perspectives of service providers and service users The research can leverage the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative methods to gain a deeper understanding of newcomers' experiences with settlement services, identify barriers, and inform recommendations for service improvement. This approach allows for a more robust and nuanced exploration of the research objectives. Details can be found in the appendix.

- Document scan (Appendix 1)
- Interviews with 25 Newcomers of diverse age groups, racial and educational backgrounds and a 48/52 split between men and women. (Appendix 2)

[3] https://www.digitalinclusion.org/definitions/
[4] https://www.digitalinclusion.org/definitions/

- Surveys with 17 Service Provider Organizations:
- Demographic data from Peel Multicultural Council's Digital Literacy Exchange Program
- Equity Analysis Tool (Appendix 4): The Digital Equity Ecosystems Measurement Framework (Rhinesmith & Santo, 2022) was selected to analyze our findings through a digital equity lens.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The findings section aims to highlight newcomer needs, before understanding newcomer interactions with and barriers to digital settlement services. It also aims to answer our two key research questions, through existing data (such as the PMC Digital Literacy Exchange Program) as well as information from the interviews and surveys:

- Background: Newcomer needs and settlement services
- Research Question 1: Which newcomer groups are not accessing digital newcomer settlement services?
- Research Question 2: What are the factors that may hinder access to digital newcomer settlement services?
- Service Provider Survey Findings

Newcomer Needs and Settlement Services

To understand access to settlement services, it is important to know the main needs of newcomers once they arrive in Canada. The most common theme found across the interviews was employment. Most newcomers felt that their main need was employment, which would support their settlement process by providing financial stability. Employment also makes access to other needs, such as housing, easier, as landlords are more willing to rent to those with a steady source of income. Housing is another main need that most newcomers identified. Other needs identified were understanding and navigating the Canadian systems such as the financial system, social insurance, and the healthcare system. Newcomers shared that they need support understanding elements of the financial system such as opening bank accounts and filing taxes. Some newcomers also prioritized English language training as a need.

Settlement agencies provide support to meet all these needs through information and orientation services, language training and employment support. These services are offered digitally, as well as in-person. Our research aims to identify individuals who struggle to access digital settlement services, while also examining barriers faced by those unable to access the services and newcomers who could access them but encountered limitations.

This background information was then supplemented by research answering our main research questions:

1. Which newcomer groups are not accessing digital newcomer settlement services?

There are two stepping stones to accessing digital settlement services. The first is digital literacy, which allows a person to access the platforms that offer these services. An individual should have a basic level of digital literacy, which means that they can operate a device such as a laptop, computer, or smartphone, and be able to access the internet through it. The second is being literate in the language that the services are offered in. Digital settlement services are largely offered in English or French. Those who are fluent in these languages can benefit more easily than those who are not fluent.

It was identified, through our interviews and focus group, that participants who were unable to access digital settlement services largely fell into three groups:

1. The first group were newcomers who were not digitally literate and did not have digital skills. They were either unable to, or not confident in using devices such as computers and extended features of smartphones, which are the gateway to access such services. They relied on in-person services to meet their settlement needs.

2. The second group were newcomers who are not fluent in English and therefore, are unable to access digital settlement services. Most content is in English, and translation is often not accurate. This is not restricted to a specific age group, gender, ethnicity, or educational background, as the participants who raised language as a barrier were diverse. There was also an overlap between the first and second group, where approximately a third of the newcomers who were not digitally literate, also faced a language barrier in English.

3. The third group were newcomers who arrived as family members e.g. as spouses or children of their family members already settled in Peel. In this case, their family members supported most of their settlement needs, guided them and helped navigate their settlement journey. These newcomers did not feel they needed to access digital settlement services, as their needs were already met through family support. However, once they settled, some of the newcomers in this category did reach out to agencies for employment support.

A longitudinal analysis of demographic data from Peel Multicultural Council's Digital Literacy Exchange Program was conducted to identify which groups are unable to access digital settlement services due to lack of digital literacy. The data from the program mirrored our interview findings, while also providing additional insight into specific demographic groups.

Four cohorts of classes between 2019-2023, each ranging from 300 to 600 participants, were analyzed. The largest group are people who did not have English as their first language. Next, there were four large intersecting groups: seniors, women, newcomers to Canada, and participants from low-income households. There was also some representation from groups who had not finished high school, persons with disabilities, and residents of rural or remote geographic areas.

2. What are the factors that may hinder access to digital newcomer settlement services?

Language

Among our sample group, language appeared to be the most common barrier. Participants who were not literate or fluent in Canada's official languages, English or French, found digital settlement services inaccessible. Whether it was accessing a website or connecting virtually with a service provider organization, participants found it difficult to communicate and comprehend the material. There were options to translate texts on websites into some of their first languages; however, there were setbacks. Newcomers found that the translation was not accurate, leaving room for misinterpretation. Manually translating online content by copying and pasting it into a translator was tedious. One newcomer shared their experience accessing digital settlement services:

> "At that time there wasn't much information (online) if you needed something. For more information you need to call. So there was another description of the services like if you want more. You need to call. So you know what I mean by how do I call if I don't speak the language. Like I had to start from zero. I use literally used to write before I talk and practice like a lot, and then I will call and then they will… I don't know if I understood at that moment or no, but I will just go with the flow."

In some cases, participants had a basic grasp of English, but found it difficult to comprehend the use of specific Canadian phrases and slang, as well as accents. These language-related barriers directly tie to one of the newcomers' primary needs: access to English language training. By improving their language skills, they can better communicate and effectively access digital settlement services.

In the case of language barriers, newcomers found it easier to visit settlement organizations in person for services, where they could find a person who spoke their first language. In instances where this option was not available, newcomers did not feel comfortable utilizing settlement services.

Digital Literacy

Lack of digital literacy also presented as a significant barrier to access digital settlement services. Participants expressed difficulties due to their limited digital skills. In some cases, they did not know how to operate a computer or a laptop or access the internet. While some participants were able to use their phones for calling and texting, they were unable to use internet on it to access and engage with online content. In some cases, this lack of digital literacy also precluded them from participating in online job interviews and other services.

Those who had a basic grasp on digital skills still found online platforms confusing to navigate. While they were able to access websites, or join virtual sessions, they struggled with more complex tasks such as screensharing. They shared they had to rely on family members or others for assistance in navigating the websites or sessions. Lack of clear guidelines or instructions made this process more difficult.

Human Interaction

Many participants highlighted the need for in-person human interaction as a part of their settlement experience. Some newcomers arrive in Canada with a limited or non-existent social network, relying on settlement service organizations to help them navigate their journey, learn about Canadian systems and cultures, and settle. This experience can be overwhelming and daunting. They find it reassuring and comforting to communicate with a settlement organization staff member in-person to address their needs and offer support. Speaking with someone directly made it easier to receive and understand information comprehensively, provided the opportunity to ask clarifying questions, reduced uncertainty, and eased anxiety. These newcomers preferred it to self-directed research, which was time-consuming and confusing. Overall, they found it easier to get correct information and answers to their questions in-person, and those interactions also built trust.
One participant shared:

> " A personal touch or a one-to-one talk gives a person reassurance. It kind of gives a comfort, it kind of gives a human touch.... It's the human contact that kind of reassures that, okay, things will be okay and if something goes wrong, we are there. That helps a lot. At least in my case it does."

Another participant shared:

> "We are uncertain about too many things; if we talk to a real person, like physically, it eases our anxiety."

Some participants worried that increased digitalization was leading to the loss of valuable in-person connections and a sense of community, which is crucial to build when one is in a new environment.

Lack of Awareness

Some participants shared that they did not access digital settlement services because they were not aware of them. They had believed going in-person was mandatory for receiving the service, and a virtual option did not exist. Similarly, some were unaware of settlement services overall, and shared they had not explored what services were available to them. They had family members or friends/community members who supported their settlement journey and provided them guidance; therefore, they did not need to seek out settlement services.

Scams

Some participants who had limited digital literacy indicated that they were wary of accessing digital settlement services, as they were not able to discern if a certain service was legitimate or not. Some had experienced scams online and no longer wanted to take the risk, choosing to rely on in-person services. They found it risky to share their personal data online without any layers of security or protection (e.g. one-time passcodes to verify identity) and did not trust online services.

Immigration Status

Immigration status significantly impacts access to digital settlement services. Permanent residents can access a wide range of services, compared to those with non-permanent status such as international students and work permit holders. They are often excluded from essential services such as employment and language, due to policy-related and systemic limitations that affect service providers' scope.

Better Connections for Professional Networks

Personalized, in-person interactions are crucial for newcomers to build professional networks. Participants highlighted that face-to-face meetings and direct connections proved to be more effective and useful in terms of relationship building and advice.

One participant shared, "the major focus of people like me is finding a professional network or getting connected with the job opportunities… it's always more effective to build connections and relationships, when you meet people in person."

Digital interactions had not provided the same level of opportunity for connection. In-person activities also contributed to newcomers' social integration and understanding workplace culture. This underscores the value of direct human interaction, specifically for professional networking and employment support.

Technology Barriers

Participants shared that they faced challenges in accessing digital settlement services due to technological and financial constraints. Some issues highlighted included outdated software versions, device malfunctions, and unstable internet connections. The high cost of internet services in Canada further exacerbates these challenges, making it difficult for newcomers to afford consistent access. Participants also expressed frustration with the technical difficulties that disrupt their learning and engagement.

Privacy Concerns

Participants shared privacy concerns also made them hesitant to use digital settlement services. One key issue is the discomfort with mandatory camera usage, where some participants feel it is a barrier to participation if they cannot attend without being on camera. Additionally, there are concerns about privacy and the handling of personal information on digital platforms. Despite existing security measures, some participants remain uneasy about sharing their data online. The lack of transparency around recording conversations for training purposes further exacerbates these concerns, with participants feeling that explicit consent should be obtained beforehand.

Quality of Information and Timing of Service

Participants found the information available online about certain services and programs was not comprehensive, and preferred visiting in-person locations and interacting with staff. Participants felt that their needs were better met when visiting the physical location of a settlement service provider. Service response was considered to be immediate, compared to connecting via email, where they would have to wait an unspecified amount of time to receive a response, and even longer if they had follow-up questions.

Childcare Services

Service provider organizations provide childcare and childminding services, which encourage participants with children to utilize services in person. Participants face difficulty accessing services digitally from home, as they have to attend to their children.

Findings from Service Provider Organization Surveys

To understand newcomers' level of access to digital services and the barriers they face, service providers' experiences can offer insight on the realities of service delivery. Their perspectives can identify key successes, gaps, and areas for improvement.

Tools and training

Service providers use a variety of digital tools and mediums to provide settlement services. Most services provided include information and orientation, language training, and employment support. Of the total number of responses, 60% of survey respondents said they received some kind of training to deliver digital services. They ranged from in-house to external trainings, focusing on devices, systems, and online platform usage. Despite the trainings, 16.7% of respondents felt they were 'very uncomfortable' utilizing digital tools and platforms to aid newcomers. 70% were either 'very comfortable' or 'comfortable', and 13.3% were neutral.

Video conferencing platforms and email were the most popular choice for interacting with newcomers, with all respondents using them. Other popular choices were the SPO's own websites (70%), social media websites (57%), messaging services such as WhatsApp (57%), and internal digital platforms (6.7%). One organization also used AI-based chatbots and Learning Management Systems (LMS) systems for e-learning. There is a wide range in the complexity of the tools that organizations use, which may correspond to a varying level of difficulty for newcomers, especially those with low digital skills. For example, some organizations used video conferencing tools, which may be easier to navigate, as opposed to LMS platforms, which may need a higher skill level to use. Service providers also encouraged newcomers to adopt digital services with a variety of strategies.

Barriers to using digital services and mitigation

Digital services seem to be a popular choice among newcomers. 73% of service providers surveyed reported that newcomers frequently utilized digital services rather face to face services, while 17% reported they occasionally utilized digital services. When discussing barriers that newcomers might face, service providers reported overwhelmingly that lack of digital literacy and lack of devices were the biggest barriers. These were followed by lack of reliable internet and in-person services. Some also reported privacy concerns while considering accessing digital services.

As standard practice or as a response to address challenges newcomers face, service providers have implemented different strategies. To serve newcomers' diverse needs better, some organizations offer content in multiple languages and have frontline workers who speak several languages, where possible. However, this varies by the organization's capacity and resources and is not consistent across the board.

Many organizations employ digital literacy training, offer orientation sessions, and provide ongoing support. Partnerships with tech organizations that loan out devices and provide

internet access are also common. Additionally, promoting digital services via social media and through one-on-one support was frequently mentioned. Some organizations adopted a hybrid model to retain the skills gained during the pandemic, while others prioritized personalized support and practical demonstrations of how to use digital tools. However, a few organizations report no active strategies.

User feedback

Service providers are also cognizant of collecting feedback regarding their digital services to constantly improve their service delivery. Many use digital platforms to collect that feedback including emails, surveys and polls, as well as collecting on-going feedback in person. Over 80% of service providers believe that newcomers are satisfied with the accessibility of digital services they provide.

Newcomers often like the flexibility and convenience of digital services, which they believe are both time and cost effective. However, some people prefer in-person contact and struggle with the internet and technology. Incorporating their feedback has resulted in improvements such as making services more mobile-friendly, providing virtual and in-person choices, and resolving challenges such as lack of equipment. Ongoing changes are based on participants' feedback, with an emphasis on improving digital literacy and providing safe, user-friendly access.

Analysis

The Digital Equity Ecosystems Measurement Framework (Rhinesmith & Santo, 2022) was selected to analyze our findings through a digital equity lens, which highlighted the gaps in achieving digital equity and inclusion (for a complete analysis, refer to Appendix 4).

The findings reveal several critical issues surrounding access to digital settlement services for newcomers. The most prominent challenge is the language barrier, which remains a significant obstacle despite the availability of translation tools. The inaccuracies in translated content and the tedious process of manual translation exacerbate the problem, leaving newcomers vulnerable to misunderstandings and creating an overall sense of frustration. While service providers do offer multi-lingual information and services, there are some language minorities that will always be present and may not be catered to. Awareness of, connections to and referrals to language specific services is a crucial area to ensure that these services are equitable. Additionally, digital literacy is a key factor limiting newcomers' ability to fully engage with online services, as many struggle with basic tasks, leading to reliance on others and making the digital experience inefficient and discouraging.

Moreover, the findings indicate that digital services often fall short of addressing newcomers' psychological and social needs. The absence of human interaction in digital platforms reduces the level of trust and comfort, which many participants identified as crucial when navigating their settlement journey. These findings demonstrate that while digital services provide flexibility, they cannot fully replace the value of in-person interactions, especially for those in need of emotional support and community building. Furthermore, issues such as privacy concerns, technology barriers, and the fear of online scams raise significant trust and security challenges. The research indicates a need for more secure, user-friendly platforms and increased digital literacy training to alleviate anxieties around privacy and fraud. These findings emphasize the need for a more holistic approach that balances digital convenience with human-centered support and enhanced security measures.

The survey highlights both progress and ongoing challenges in delivering digital settlement services. While many organizations have adopted digital tools and trained staff, 16.7% of service providers still feel uncomfortable using these technologies, indicating gaps in effective training. This discomfort, combined with the widespread digital literacy issues faced by newcomers, may limit the effectiveness of services. Although video conferencing and social media are widely used, reliance on basic platforms could overlook the needs of newcomers with low digital skills. Additionally, inconsistent strategies across organizations, paired with resource limitations, hinder equitable service delivery. The success of hybrid models shows promise, but without further investment in IT infrastructure and staffing, sustaining this flexibility remains a challenge.

LIMITATIONS

Barriers of language and digital literacy are not exclusive to newcomers. Since settlement services are aimed towards newcomers, there is no comparison group of Canadian-born individuals so these barriers are limited to newcomers. These may transcend immigration status as larger impediments to digital access and be correlated with other characteristics such as age or education level, rather than immigration status. This is confirmed by demographic data from PMC's Digital Literacy Classes discussed earlier.

RECOMMENDATIONS

By addressing the challenges under the themes of digital access, inclusion, equity, and safety, settlement services can become more accessible, user-friendly, and supportive of the diverse needs of newcomers:

1. **Enhance Digital Literacy Training:** Digital literacy training for newcomers is not uniform across the board for settlement agencies. Brief digital skills assessments of prospective clients can inform focused support to ensure all clients are able to benefit from digital settlement services. These assessments should be conducted early in the settlement process and can ensure development of comprehensive digital literacy training plans. These can also provide input for tailoring their digital services to be accessible to those with the most basic digital literacy skills. Similarly, this also provides an avenue for collaboration between agencies to upskill and develop their own staff's digital literacy, so that they are confident in delivering digital services.

2. **Address Language Barriers:** While agencies can serve a multilingual audience in-person, they may face challenges providing multilingual services digitally. Addressing digital needs early could enable hybrid connections to language classes, reducing demand for in-person classes. Creating simplified local content and avoiding jargon or complex phrasing may make content more accessible to newcomers. In cases where an agency may not have multilingual staff, connecting settled newcomers with newer arrivals who speak the same language through community groups may ease their transition and provide support to overcome the language barriers they face. Staff can also collaborate with other service providers offering language specific services. Providing information through audio and video guides that emphasize visual and auditory cues over language

can help overcome language barriers. Additionally, translating these guides into multiple languages can make digital settlement services more accessible and comfortable for newcomers.

3. **Address Privacy and Security Concerns:** Transparent communication regarding privacy policies and measures to protect personal data is essential. Educate newcomers on identifying trustworthy online settlement services and detecting scams. SPOs could offer digital literacy orientation, including resources and webinars focused on internet safety, fraud prevention, and secure online practices.

4. **Increase Awareness of Digital Services:** Develop targeted outreach strategies to inform newcomers about the availability of digital services. This can be done through referral programs, community partnerships, social media, and in-person engagements to ensure that all users, especially those who are unaware of virtual options, know how to access services.

5. **Enhance Hybrid Service Delivery:** Continue offering hybrid models that combine digital and in-person services. While digital services provide flexibility and convenience, in-person interactions are critical for trust-building, receiving emotional support, and developing community connections.

6. **Create Feedback Loops:** Collecting client feedback is not consistent across SPOs. Regular feedback mechanisms to understand newcomers' evolving needs and challenges in using digital settlement services would support continuous improvements in service delivery.

CONCLUSION

This report highlights significant barriers and gaps in access and inclusion of digital settlement services for newcomers. These barriers prevent the settlement sector in Peel Region from achieving digital equity. The most significant challenges relate to language barriers, limited digital skills and lack of awareness. These prevent marginalized newcomers from benefitting from digital settlement services. Settlement service organizations have invested time and effort to address these issues; however, there is disparity in the digital maturity of organizations, as well as of the resources at their disposal to allocate to digital settlement services. This lack of uniformity across organizations may leave many newcomers underserved. Additionally, concerns about privacy, security, and the impersonal nature of digital services further limit engagement. This highlights the need for more secure, user-friendly platforms that balance digital convenience with human-centered support. The findings emphasize the importance of a hybrid model that combines digital flexibility with adequate in-person interactions, ensuring that all newcomers, regardless of their digital literacy or resources, have equitable access to settlement services. Without more comprehensive strategies and consistent support for service providers, these challenges may continue to exacerbate the digital divide.

While our research focused on those who were unable to access digital settlement services, and exploring barriers to these services, it is important to note that there has also been considerable work done to promote digital inclusion. Interview participants who had accessed these services also spoke to their merits of convenience, time saving, and cost-effectiveness. The purpose of this research is to focus on improving access for the marginalized to achieve digital equity in Peel Region, so all newcomers receive the same foundation when they begin their settlement journey. The findings informed recommendations which centered around mitigating language and digital literacy barriers, addressing privacy and security concerns and increasing awareness of services. In conclusion, while efforts are being made to make digital settlement services in Peel Region more inclusive, and likely across Canada, the journey to achieve digital equity would be incomplete without accommodating the diverse needs of newcomers.

Appendix 1: Participant Demographics

A total of 25 participants were interviewed between May and July 2024.

AGE	
18 - 29	24%
30-39	36%
40-49	20%
50-59	8%
60-69	12%

GENDER	
Men	48%
Women	52%

RACE/ETHNICITY	
South Asian	64%
Latin American	12%
East Asian	12%
Black	4%
Middle Eastern	4%
Multi-racial	4%

EDUCATIONAL LEVEL	
Post-graduate degree	36%
Undergraduate degree	44%
Some college	16%
High school degree	4%

Appendix 2: Research Methodology and Data Collection

The study has used a mixed methods approach with qualitative and quantitative data collection to capture perspectives of service providers and service users The research can leverage the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative methods to gain a deeper understanding of newcomers' experiences with settlement services, identify barriers, and inform recommendations for service improvement. This approach allows for a more robust and nuanced exploration of the research objectives.

Document Scan

The document scan for this research focused on existing studies and reports related to the access and use of digital newcomer settlement services. The purpose of the review was to understand the current context and landscape of digital settlement services in Canada, both from the perspectives of the service user and the service provider. The search criteria mainly focused on key words such as digital equity, digital inclusion, and digital divide for newcomers, and documents published within the last 15 years. It explored the themes of digital literacy, language barriers, and the digital divide, particularly as they affect newcomer populations. Sources were drawn from academic journals, government reports, news articles, and community research.

Interviews with Newcomers

Twenty-five newcomers living in Peel were interviewed to share their experience of using or not using digital services between May and July 2024. 18 newcomers were interviewed individually, either virtually through Zoom, or in-person. Seven newcomers participated in a group interview, in-person, at the Peel Multicultural Centre office. The interview participants had arrived in Canada within the last ten years, and currently resided in Peel. There was a fairly even split between those who had utilized digital services and were able to speak to the merits and disadvantages, and those who were able to speak to the barriers they faced and were not able to utilize services. The interviews explored the main needs of newcomers, the awareness and availability of services, both in-person and digital, and factors that may contribute to a person's decision to use a specific format option for settlement services. Some themes investigated in the interviews include digital skills and literacy, financial constraints and community or cultural influences.

Surveys with Service Provider Organizations

Settlement organizations were sent an online survey to gather their experience with digital and/or hybrid delivery of services to newcomers, using SurveyMonkey. Seventeen IRCC-funded settlement organizations that offer services in Peel participated in the survey,

resulting in 30 responses from management and front-line staff. The surveys were designed to understand an organization's approaches to, and experiences with providing digital services. Factors such as digital literacy of staff, comfort level providing online services, challenges and troubleshooting mechanisms, feedback from clients and service users, as well as a variety of digital tools were explored.

Peel Multicultural Council's Digital Literacy Exchange Program

From 2019-2023, Peel Multicultural Council hosted a digital literacy program, focused on building digital skills for several groups, including newcomers. The demographic data from these cohorts helps identify who is not able to access digital services.

Equity Analysis Tool

The Digital Equity Ecosystems Measurement Framework (Rhinesmith & Santo, 2022) was selected to analyze our findings through a digital equity lens.

The Digital Equity Ecosystems Measurement Framework is designed to assist local coalitions in fostering and sustaining healthy digital equity ecosystems, which are essential for promoting equitable access to technology and advancing social, economic, and racial justice. Developed through participatory research involving coalition leaders, the framework provides a structured approach for these organizations to assess their efforts in digital inclusion and equity. The DEEM framework aims to fill a gap in existing measurement tools, enabling coalitions to collect data for planning and improvement while mobilizing community action against digital inequities. Ultimately, it serves as a foundational tool to enhance understanding and evaluation of the impact of local initiatives on digital equity outcomes.

The framework provided a clear method to assess digital equity and inclusion efforts in settlement services, by providing guidelines and allowing flexibility in tailoring the indicators to this study's context. The following themes for analysis are adapted from the 'Community Impact" indicators of the framework:

'Indicators related to positive changes to the lives of individuals and the broader community that a coalition is hoping to bring about through its efforts (i.e., measured by the percentage of each in relation to the whole). Note: Indicators of community impact must be tailored to and respond to the needs of a given community. Ultimately, they should be defined by the coalition members, in partnership with other stakeholders and the broader community.' Indicator Area (Rhinesmith & Santo, 2022).

resulting in 30 responses from management and front-line staff. The surveys were designed to understand an organization's approaches to, and experiences with providing digital services. Factors such as digital literacy of staff, comfort level providing online services, challenges and troubleshooting mechanisms, feedback from clients and service users, as well as a variety of digital tools were explored.

1. Digital Access

- **Device and Internet Access:** Analyze whether users have equitable access to necessary devices (e.g., smartphones, computers) and quality internet connections. Are there disparities in access based on geography, socioeconomic status, or other factors?
- **Digital Skills:** Evaluate the range of digital skills among users, from basic to advanced. Consider whether the system accommodates individuals with varying levels of digital literacy.
- **Connectivity:** Assess the overall quality of internet connectivity required for using the system. Does the system function well in areas with lower bandwidth or inconsistent internet?

2. Digital Inclusion

- **Equitable Access to Technology:** Investigate whether all users have equal access to affordable internet services, devices, and the digital skills necessary to engage with the system. Are there programs or initiatives to support users who may be at a disadvantage?
- **Ongoing Support and Resources:** Review whether the system offers continuous support, resources, and opportunities to help users thrive, particularly marginalized or underrepresented groups. Are there mechanisms in place for users to easily access help when needed?

3. Digital Equity

- **Inclusive Design and Development:** Examine if the system's design, implementation, and evaluation processes center the voices, knowledge, and expertise of its users, especially those from marginalized communities. Are user feedback and experiences actively integrated into system improvements?
- **Privacy and Security:** Assess the measures in place to protect users' privacy and ensure data security. Do users feel confident that their personal information is safeguarded while navigating the system?

4. Safety in Digital Spaces

- **User Safety and Security:** Explore whether users feel safe while navigating digital spaces. Are there systems in place to prevent harassment, cyberbullying or exploitation?

Appendix 3: Document Scan Findings

The document scan examined the current state of access, use and barriers to digital settlement services. Studies from across Canada were reviewed, given the limited research addressing this issue in Peel.

Digital Equity and Access to Services

Digital equity is a key factor in ensuring that all individuals, particularly vulnerable groups like newcomers, have equal access to essential settlement services through digital platforms. Andrey and Abdelaal (2022) highlight those newcomers, alongside older adults and low-income individuals, report lower internet usage and digital skills, creating significant barriers to accessing digital services. The 2023 Settlement Outcomes Report further underlines this issue, emphasizing that while many Settlement Program and Service Provider Organizations (SPOs) successfully transitioned to remote service delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic, not all newcomers were able to take advantage of these services. The report reveals that only 68% of newcomers were aware of the available IRCC-funded settlement resources, suggesting a gap in service awareness that may prevent many newcomers from accessing essential digital services (2023 Settlement Outcomes Report).

Moreover, these services may be unavailable to those who do not have permanent resident status. Organizations have been advocating to expand services for all newcomers regardless of their immigration status to ensure equity (Liu et al., 2021). The digital divide affects access to technology, in addition to individual characteristics such as age and education, which shape who benefits from digital tools. Furthermore, the 2023 Settlement Outcomes Report shows that socio-economic factors play a critical role in digital service uptake, with newcomers from lower-income backgrounds exhibiting lower usage rates. This indicates that even with the availability of digital service options, technological and financial barriers continue to limit access, particularly for economically marginalized groups (2023 Settlement Outcomes Report; Monteiro, 2022).

Barriers to Digital Inclusion

Several factors hinder newcomers' access to digital settlement services, including technological barriers, language, and literacy. Premji (2020) highlights that many newcomers face a vicious cycle of exclusion due to the high cost of devices and internet connectivity. Similarly, the 2023 Settlement Outcomes Report finds that inadequate internet connectivity and lack of devices significantly limited newcomers' ability to use online services effectively. For instance, newcomers from lower-income groups were disproportionately affected by these barriers, emphasizing the need for affordable technology solutions (2023 Settlement Outcomes Report; Premji, 2020).

Language and literacy also play significant roles in digital inclusion. As noted by Sexsmith (2010), linguistic competency in English or French is essential for navigating digital platforms, but many newcomers face challenges due to low proficiency in Canada's official languages. In Peel, 4% of the population do not speak English or French (Statistics Canada, 2017). The 2023 Settlement Outcomes Report confirms that language barriers continue to pose significant challenges, particularly for newcomers with limited English or French proficiency, which further impedes their access to online settlement resources (2023 Settlement Outcomes Report; Sexsmith, 2010).

Social media and other digital platforms provide unique opportunities for newcomers to connect with their peers and access vital information. Taylor (2011) highlights that many newcomers rely on social media tools to communicate with peers and access settlement information. However, the 2023 Settlement Outcomes Report notes that digital engagement with online resources varied among newcomers, with some facing difficulties due to unfamiliarity with digital tools or user interfaces. These challenges suggest that while social media and digital platforms offer significant potential for social inclusion, targeted digital literacy programs are essential to ensure that all newcomers can benefit from these resources (Taylor, 2011; 2023 Settlement Outcomes Report).

Monteiro (2022) also emphasizes the link between digital access and employment outcomes, finding that newcomers who use the internet for employment or training are more likely to secure jobs. However, as the 2023 Settlement Outcomes Report points out, technological and socio-economic barriers prevent many newcomers from engaging with these digital tools, particularly those from marginalized or lower-income backgrounds. This highlights the need for comprehensive strategies to ensure that digital access is equitably distributed across different newcomer groups (Monteiro, 2022; 2023 Settlement Outcomes Report).

Digital Literacy and the Settlement Sector
Digital literacy is crucial for ensuring that newcomers can access settlement services effectively. The Systemic Issues and Social Change Working Group (2020) highlights that ongoing digital literacy training is necessary for both newcomers and service providers. The 2023 Settlement Outcomes Report echoes this finding, indicating that while digital services were widely available during the pandemic, newcomers expressed a clear need for more support in navigating these online platforms. Basic digital skills training, particularly in areas such as online job search and employability skills, was in high demand, and many newcomers showed interest in receiving training on online collaboration platforms (2023 Settlement Outcomes Report; Systemic Issues and Social Change Working Group, 2020).

In addition, hybrid service delivery models, as proposed by Liu et al. (2021), which allow for both digital and in-person service options, could help overcome some of the barriers to digital access. This model is particularly important in addressing the needs of newcomers with limited digital literacy or inadequate access to technology, ensuring that all individuals, regardless of their digital skills, can receive the support they need for successful settlement (Liu et al., 2021).

Conclusion

The literature and findings from the 2023 Settlement Outcomes Report highlight the ongoing challenges faced by newcomers in accessing digital settlement services. Despite the successful transition to remote service delivery, barriers such as technological access, language proficiency, and socio-economic factors continue to limit the effectiveness of these services. For Peel's newcomer settlement services, improving digital literacy training and increasing awareness of available services are critical steps toward closing the digital divide.

To achieve true digital equity, continued investment in digital infrastructure and targeted outreach efforts are necessary. Tailored training programs, particularly for older, lower-income, and less digitally literate newcomers, will be crucial in ensuring that all newcomers can access the digital tools and resources they need for integration into Canadian society. Additionally, expanding access to services for all newcomers, regardless of immigration status, is essential to ensuring equity in service delivery (Liu et al., 2021).

Appendix 4: Equity Analysis

1. Digital Access

Participants who did not access digital settlement services faced significant challenges due to language barriers, technological constraints, and limited digital literacy. Inaccurate translation tools and the tedious process of manual translation made services inaccessible for those not fluent in English or French. Many lacked access to devices or stable internet connections, with high costs and outdated technology further complicating usage. Additionally, limited digital skills prevented effective navigation of online platforms, requiring participants to rely on others for help with even basic tasks. While settlement services have proved beneficial for those with better digital skills and avenues for access, inequities in digital access to settlement services are prevalent, with limited options to accommodate those with lower levels of digital literacy or language barriers.

2. Digital Inclusion

While the design of these services is intended to cater to most newcomers, individuals with temporary statuses (e.g., work permit holders, international students) were often excluded from certain digital settlement services, highlighting a significant inequity in service access based on immigration status. This is a systemic issue, which settlement organizations have limited control over.

Affordability of devices and internet connections also posed as a barrier, excluding those who did not have access to them. However, some settlement agencies reported that they have measures in place to support those who are excluded due to affordability concerns. They offer device loaning programs, to solve the issue of access and affordability of devices. Participants also shared that public libraries have been a key access point for internet and devices to utilize digital settlement services, at little to no cost.

Some participants did not know that digital settlement services existed and assumed in-person attendance was mandatory. Others were unaware of the availability of settlement services altogether. This shows a gap in inclusive outreach, where digital services are not adequately promoted or communicated to all potential users.

Settlement agencies also offer digital skills training, one-on-one support, and other resources to ensure that newcomers can access and benefit from digital settlement services. While there are those who still may choose not to take digital skills training, settlement organizations do make a solid effort to promote digital inclusion.

3. Digital Equity

Most organizations indicated that they regularly take and incorporate user feedback in their implementation and service delivery, to ensure that they can cater to service user's needs. While having individual, contextualized service is both expensive (in terms of technology and human resources) and tedious, constantly incorporating feedback to adapt programs is gradually improving digital equity. However, the findings indicate that settlement organizations vary in their capacity to provide services in multiple languages, and digital literacy training is not uniformly available. This inconsistency highlights inequities in service delivery, where organizations with more resources can offer better support, leaving others behind.

Lastly, the lack of human interaction in digital platforms reduced trust and comfort, particularly among newcomers who relied on personal, in-person support for their settlement journey. While digital services offer flexibility, they fall short in providing the emotional and social reassurance that in-person services offer.

4. Safety in Digital Spaces

Some participants expressed concerns about sharing personal information online, fearing scams or data breaches. The lack of transparency regarding data privacy and the use of mandatory cameras during virtual sessions made them uncomfortable, highlighting a need for stronger privacy protections and more transparent security measures in digital platforms.

The experience and fear of fraud made some participants wary of digital settlement services. This lack of trust further limited their engagement with online services, stressing the need for building more secure, trustworthy platforms. It also reduces the effectiveness of digital services and pushes newcomers towards in-person options, which they perceive as safer.

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