The Evolving Settlement Sector: Innovation, Partnerships, and Newcomer Success

PLENARY SESSION PROCEEDINGS SUMMARY

(With contribution from Carol Derby, Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia)

1. Overview

Moderated by Paula Knight, CEO of Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia (ISANS), this closing plenary brought together leaders from settlement organizations across Atlantic Canada to discuss evolving newcomer needs, innovation, AI, workforce development, and the growing importance of partnerships.

2. Setting the Context

The panelists highlighted the scale and diversity of the settlement sector in Atlantic Canada:

- Jim Murphy (Association for New Canadians, Newfoundland and Labrador) noted that his organization served approximately 9,000 clients last year through eight satellite offices and a workforce of 275 employees. In addition to traditional settlement programming, they are exploring a "diversity shadow project" focused on understanding how services align with clients requiring additional supports.
- Dean Constable (PEI Association of Newcomers) described an organization with approximately 50 staff delivering 30 programs and wraparound services to both temporary residents and permanent residents.
- Olive Ozoemena (ISANS) highlighted the breadth of ISANS' services, including pre-arrival support, language training, labour market programming, employer engagement, community connections, and RAP services. ISANS serves approximately 14,000 clients annually through more than 400 staff and has reach across Nova Scotia and nationally through initiatives such as SOPA.
- Carolyn Whiteway (ARAISA) described ARAISA's role as an umbrella organization representing 40 settlement agencies across Atlantic Canada, focusing on capacity building, training, regional coordination, and national advocacy.

3. Emerging Trends and Needs

A dominant theme was that newcomer needs are becoming increasingly interconnected and complex.

Housing, healthcare, language and belonging

Dean Constable identified language as an emerging concern and spoke about the housing and healthcare crises in PEI. He noted that newcomers face additional barriers such as lack of housing references and discrimination in rental markets, while language barriers can further complicate access to healthcare.

Olive Ozoemena argued that newcomers do not experience settlement challenges in isolation. Employment, housing, social connections, language learning, and community integration happen simultaneously. She observed that newcomers increasingly want more than basic settlement support; they seek a genuine sense of belonging and inclusion.

Carolyn Whiteway noted that despite reductions in immigration levels, agencies are not necessarily seeing fewer clients. Instead, client needs are becoming more complex and costly to address. She cautioned against assuming service demands will decline alongside immigration numbers and stressed the need for tailored responses and stronger sector capacity.

Funding pressures

Jim Murphy highlighted the impact of reduced federal funding, including for advanced language training. He noted that provincial governments have stepped in to fill some gaps, such as supporting CLB 5-6 language classes, but acknowledged that funding reductions inevitably result in program reductions and increased pressure on organizations.

4. Innovation in the Settlement Sector

The panel offered a broad definition of innovation, emphasizing service design, organizational culture, and collaboration, not just technology.

Creating a culture of innovation

Dean Constable argued that innovation requires organizations to be willing to take risks and accept failure, which can be difficult in a sector where mistakes may affect vulnerable clients. He described efforts to rethink how services are delivered, questioning long-standing processes and exploring whether technology could help create more flexible approaches that better meet client needs.

One example he shared was the need to redesign interactions with newcomers rather than simply layering technology on top of existing processes. His view was that organizations

sometimes attempt to move too quickly without first considering how services should fundamentally be structured.

Breaking down silos

Olive Ozoemena suggested that innovation is often overcomplicated. For her, innovation means finding better ways to work together across organizations and systems. She emphasized breaking down silos, coordinating resources more effectively, and ensuring services meet clients where they are.

Capacity constraints

Carolyn Whiteway discussed challenges faced by organizations wanting to innovate. Creating space for experimentation, social enterprise development, and learning from failure can be difficult when agencies are operating under funding and capacity constraints.

Human-centred innovation

Jim Murphy emphasized that innovation in the settlement sector ultimately remains a people-centred endeavour. While hybrid and technology-enabled approaches have value, "humans serving humans" remains at the core of effective settlement work.

5. AI and Productivity

AI generated significant discussion, but panelists generally approached the topic cautiously and pragmatically.

Opportunities and risks

Jim Murphy described himself as a technology enthusiast and acknowledged that AI is already affecting organizational operations whether agencies choose to adopt it or not. He pointed to AI-powered interpretation tools as a promising development, sharing an example of using AI-assisted interpretation to facilitate an extended conversation with a Mandarin-speaking client. However, he cautioned that deployment must be thoughtful and accompanied by appropriate safeguards.

Foundations first

Olive Ozoemena stressed that before organizations focus on AI, they must address foundational issues such as fragmented systems and outdated infrastructure. She described AI as a tool that can help automate routine tasks, freeing staff to spend more time working directly with clients, but only if the underlying systems are strong enough to support it.

Governance and readiness

Dean Constable noted that his organization is still working through foundational questions such as when AI use is appropriate, how to protect data, and which functions should remain entirely human-driven. He emphasized that policies, governance structures, and clear guardrails take time to develop.

Sector-wide challenges

Carolyn Whiteway observed that many organizations are enthusiastic about AI but are still trying to catch up. She identified data quality as a significant barrier, noting that agencies must first clean and organize their data before they can effectively leverage AI. She also pointed to a widening gap between larger organizations with dedicated resources and smaller agencies attempting to explore AI "off the sides of their desks." Trust and knowledge sharing across the sector were identified as critical to moving forward.

6. Workforce Development and Retention

Discussion around the recently released Atlantic Economic Council report highlighted the need for settlement organizations to be recognized as key workforce development partners.

Newcomers stay for careers, not jobs

Dean Constable argued that settlement organizations have a critical role in helping newcomers build meaningful careers. His organization has been working closely with employers and HR professionals to identify and address barriers to newcomer employment. He emphasized that newcomers are more likely to stay in a region when they see long-term career opportunities rather than simply securing an initial job.

Building pathways

Jim Murphy discussed the need for faster employment pathways, particularly for refugee populations. He highlighted the potential of bridging programs and intensive language training to accelerate labour market integration and reduce dependency on income support while recognizing newcomers' strong desire for self-sufficiency.

Settlement sector as a talent pipeline

Olive Ozoemena emphasized that settlement organizations are not only providing services but are also supporting the talent pipeline employers need. She repeatedly returned to retention as a central challenge, asking how communities can create stronger anchors that encourage newcomers and their families to remain in Atlantic Canada.

Recognition of sector expertise

Carolyn Whiteway said the workforce development conversation can help counter anti-immigration narratives but argued that settlement organizations need greater recognition as experts in newcomer attraction, integration, and retention. She highlighted ongoing work with employers and emerging industries but stressed that these efforts require long-term commitment.

Paula Knight concluded that settlement-sector leadership must have a seat at workforce development and economic planning tables, noting that communication gaps often prevent the sector's expertise from being fully utilized.

7. Partnerships as the Foundation

Perhaps the strongest message from the session was that collaboration is no longer optional.

"Partnership is not a choice"

Olive Ozoemena stated that partnership must be the anchor for future work. Organizations are increasingly expected to deliver more services with fewer resources, making collaboration essential for achieving better outcomes. She emphasized that services should be designed around clients' experiences rather than organizational mandates.

Moving beyond competition

Carolyn Whiteway acknowledged that competition can exist within the sector but praised Atlantic Canada's culture of collaboration. She noted that partnership requires ongoing effort and cannot simply be mandated.

Leveraging complementary strengths

Jim Murphy provided a housing example where partnerships enabled organizations to access funding and expertise they could not obtain independently. By combining settlement expertise with housing-sector partners, both organizations were able to better support newcomers.

Inclusion through partnership

Dean Constable argued that organizations should not try to be everything to everyone. Instead, effective service delivery means recognizing when another organization is better positioned to lead and connecting clients accordingly.

Paula Knight reinforced the need for a whole-of-community and whole-of-government approach, noting that newcomer success is tied to broader issues such as housing, community development, and social inclusion.

8. Relationship with Academia

In response to a question from the audience, panelists emphasized the importance of partnerships with researchers and academic institutions.

Olive Ozoemena described how ISANS works with academic partners to investigate emerging issues identified through frontline service delivery. Examples included research on seniors experiencing cognitive decline and a biliteracy initiative. She emphasized that research helps build the evidence needed to support funding proposals, program development, and policy discussions.

Jim Murphy agreed, noting that research provides the evidence required for informed decision-making and better program design.

9. Key Messages from Panelists

1. Shift from newcomer attraction to newcomer retention

- Focus on helping newcomers build careers, not just find jobs.
- Develop stronger retention strategies that address the factors influencing family decisions to stay.
- Create pathways to meaningful employment, community connections, and upward mobility.
- Recognize that retention is influenced by housing, healthcare, schools, and sense of belonging, not just labour market outcomes.

2. Position settlement organizations as workforce development partners

- Include settlement organizations in workforce development and economic planning discussions.
- Recognize the settlement sector as part of the talent pipeline that employers depend on.
- Strengthen employer engagement and partnerships to address barriers to newcomer employment.

- Ensure settlement-sector expertise informs regional labour market strategies.

3. Make collaboration the foundation of service delivery

- Move beyond organizational silos and strengthen partnerships across government, employers, educational institutions, community organizations, and settlement agencies.
- Build systems that complement rather than duplicate services.
- Adopt a whole-of-community and whole-of-government approach to newcomer integration.
- Share resources, expertise, and funding opportunities wherever possible.

4. Focus on belonging, not just service provision

- Expand success measures beyond employment and immediate settlement outcomes.
- Intentionally build programs that foster social connections and community inclusion.
- Recognize that newcomers increasingly seek a sense of belonging and long-term community attachment.
- Design services around the newcomer experience rather than organizational mandates.

5. Invest in innovation and create space to experiment

- Foster organizational cultures that support innovation and learning.
- Be willing to test new approaches and accept reasonable risks.
- Rethink service delivery models rather than simply digitizing existing processes.
- Create capacity and funding mechanisms that allow organizations to innovate.

6. Build the foundations before scaling AI

- Modernize infrastructure, data systems, and governance before implementing AI solutions.
- Develop clear policies for privacy, security, and appropriate AI use.
- Ensure data quality and interoperability across systems.
- Use AI to automate routine administrative tasks and enhance service delivery, while preserving human judgment and relationship-building.
- Share knowledge and lessons learned across the settlement sector.

7. Strengthen language and employment pathways

- Maintain investment in language programming despite funding pressures.
- Expand bridging and employment-focused language programs.
- Develop faster pathways into the workforce, particularly for refugees and vulnerable newcomer groups.
- Address barriers to housing, healthcare, and employment that are compounded by language challenges.

8. Use research and evidence to drive decision-making

- Strengthen partnerships with universities and researchers.
- Use frontline observations to identify emerging issues requiring research.
- Improve data collection and analysis while ensuring the "story behind the data" is understood.
- Use evidence to support program design, funding proposals, and policy advocacy.

Overall Takeaway

The discussion reflected a sector that is navigating increasing complexity while being asked to do more with constrained resources. Despite these challenges, the panelists expressed a strong sense of optimism and shared purpose. The key messages were clear: newcomer needs are becoming more interconnected; retention must be prioritized alongside attraction; settlement organizations are critical workforce development partners; AI should support rather than replace human-centered services; and collaboration across sectors is essential to achieving successful newcomer outcomes.