

COALITION ON RICHER DIVERSITY (CORD) Umbrella Organization Newfoundland and Labrador

Brief Conference Summary

“Excellent advance organization of presentation information and materials, identification of major topics, good leadership/facilitation at the workshop.” – Conference Participant

The Steering Committee for the Coalition on Richer Diversity (CORD) hosted its inaugural meeting on September 29th and 30th, 2007 at Memorial University in St. John’s. The focus was on strengthening partnerships between immigrants and long time residents of Newfoundland and Labrador, and between immigrant-serving agencies (ISAs), in order to better identify and address diversity issues present in Newfoundland and Labrador. Following shortly after the province announced its new immigration policy, it was anticipated that the formation of such a diverse coalition would be timely and provide significant direction in addressing a myriad of immigration concerns in the province.

We will need to add a section here for clarification of the issues at hand. What are the biggest problems? (Give some key specific examples here) Provide some food for thought. Tell people what the problems are? Don’t let them assume! (I don’t want to just say what I think they are)

The aim of the newly created Coalition on Richer Diversity is to bring together organizations and groups that work with immigrants to collaborate, to offer networking opportunities, and to help them grow into more aware and diversity-sensitive organizations. The focus is not to start over, but to cooperate with existing ISAs. By coming together, we can create more opportunities, assess needs, further develop services and ease the pressures on the system. Through research, education, outreach, advocacy, and mediation, the Coalition will work to identify what is being done, who is doing it, what needs to be done, and who can do it. **Participants**

Participants were invited from all over the province to take part in a number of stimulating activities and working sessions that were intended to create a unified vision of the coalition’s purpose, set a mandate, and draft its structure. Over seventy participants met to explore new ways to serve immigrants in the province. Ideas were presented and potential solutions to common challenges facing immigrants, as well as the community at large, were discussed.

Format

“This conference had more heart than any other conference I have ever attended, and I have been to a lot of conferences.” – Conference Participant

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was the approach used throughout these meetings. AI is a particular way of asking questions and envisioning the future that fosters positive relationships and builds on the basic goodness in a person, a situation or an organization. In so doing, it enhances a system’s capacity for change. The basic idea of AI is to build organizations around what works, rather than trying to fix what doesn’t.

This approach enabled the participants to remain positive and dream about how they would want a Coalition such as this to operate. It enhanced group cohesion and fostered a respectful environment. As one participant explained, “In order to create change, you need to be motivated

to create change. By focusing on the negative it is more difficult to become inspired to take action. This workshop was successful in remaining positive and inspiring people for the cause.”

The meeting opened with a play that depicted the struggles facing a family new to Canada. The rest of the conference consisted of guest speakers, general meetings and small group discussions. Lunch was provided on both days and Saturday evening featured a mixer with beverages, food and entertainment.

Conference Themes

The topics addressed included education, health, employment, support/ retention, outreach, and community building.

Some Key Findings

Education: “Teach all and all will learn”

- Provide cultural sensitivity education to relevant professionals
- Expand English Second Language (ESL) services (lobby for a government funded ESL training centre in the province)
- Reassess overlapping educational services

Health: “Forming comprehensive health support services for newcomers and immigrants. We need unity of understanding at the community level and unity of confidence and services enabling diversity among all”

- Language barriers are an issue
- Lack of information on both sides (regarding values and cultures)
- Certification of foreign trained health professionals needs to be addressed
- More diversity is necessary in staffing; more course on diversity need to be offered in professional programs
- A team for newcomers needs to be developed (Doctors, Lawyers, Nurses, Social Workers, etc.)

Support- Mediation- Retention- Culture:

- “We are a strong umbrella organization to enrich Newfoundland diversity; making connections, creating possibilities and celebrating successes.”
- Develop a “Welcome Wagon” for newcomers (with a radio station/ relevant programming)
 - Create a survey of data and services
 - Work with children (who can act as a bridge to adults in encouraging the local population to embrace newcomers)
 - Celebrate diversity (through festivals, musicals, fairs, etc.)
 - Help eliminate barriers

Outreach: “We now know where to go, what to do and what is happening in our communities in Newfoundland and Labrador.”

- ESL services need to be expanded

- Discrepancy between males and females needs to be addressed (women are often isolated and at home with children while men are in school/ working)
- An electronic database needs to be developed as an information clearinghouse of relevant activities and programs happening in Newfoundland and Labrador.
- Make the cause (celebrating diversity) popular by engaging the media, the public and the government.

Community Building/ Employment:

- “By discovering the strengths of newcomers, Newfoundland and Labrador society is enriched and everyone benefits”
- Network with existing faith communities, services and organizations
 - Promote volunteerism among newcomers and immigrants in the province
 - Welcome newcomers through strengthening partnerships
 - Encourage civic participation (help build relationships between immigrants and long time residents)
 - Help to change negative attitudes and stereotypes, which often stem from misunderstandings

Impressions

“The fact that we actually looked at workable ideas and reasonable outcomes. We came up with practical solutions that can be accomplished to facilitate immediate change.” – Conference Participant

The discussions held throughout this conference helped the Steering Committee gain a clearer picture of what needs to be done and what an umbrella organization should look like. The participants were enthusiastic and excited to have an open forum to voice their concerns. They were able to discuss relevant issues and mention their own experiences. The organization, topic selection and facilitators were commended in the evaluations submitted by conference participants. The importance of collaboration was strongly emphasized.

“I hope the findings about what needs to be done can be referred to organizations and individual members since as an Umbrella organization, the Coalition’s role should be more coordinating and fostering rather than delivering services directly.” – Conference Participant

The main criticism was that the meetings were too long and that it is difficult to have participants, who for the most part work Monday to Friday, give up their weekends. Some participants also raised the concern for representation and awareness of diversity issues in rural Newfoundland. Higher attendance was also suggested as was increasing the involvement of members from existing organizations and explaining to groups that the aim of the Umbrella organization is to network and coordinate not compete with them to provide services and programs.

These criticisms and the need to develop mutual awareness, cooperation and respect geared plans for another conference in the near future.

Next Steps

“We really touched on all the important themes. Now the main thing is the get down to organize and form the structure.” – Conference Participant

Participants identified a need for and expressed interest in the formation of issue groups. As such, working groups are being formed to begin work on the issues raised from this first meeting. An email mailing list will also be developed as a means to communicate relevant information, activities and programs to interested individuals and organizations.

It was suggested at the conference that the Coalition should meet again with mainstream organizations (government and public agencies) and minority group community representatives to explain its mandate in relation to the work of other agencies. As such, **CORD is now planning a workshop for the end of November/ early December** to meet with the relevant stakeholders to gain further direction in order to create its mandate.

“It would be shame, after all the energy invested in this project this very intense weekend not to have this take on life and prosper and grow.” – Conference Participant

For more information on the Coalition for Richer Diversity and/or the upcoming workshop, please contact Jose Rivera at XXX-XXXX or joserivera@canada.com