

AGM REPORT 2020 - 2021

RIWC is committed to supporting Asian and South Asian women and their families in taking greater control of their lives. RIWC provides culturally appropriate and linguistically specific settlement support and counselling services with the use of community determined strategies, developed and delivered by immigrant women.



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President's Report

Although there was a lot of uncertainty at the beginning of the 2020/21 fiscal year, disruptions as a result of the pandemic presented RIWC with opportunities to re-examine our programs in order to better serve our community.

RIWC was able to adjust to a new digital normal with the help of relief funds from Canadian Women's Foundation (CWF) and United Way Greater Toronto (UWGT) as well as additional core programming support from the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) and Toronto Employment and Social Services (TESS). We migrated from PCs to mobile laptops, transitioned from hard copies of client files to a PHIPA-compliant practice management system, and re-structured and streamlined our VAW counselling services to be more responsive to the needs of our clients.

Program participants attended virtual workshops and sessions with technology support in the form of laptop or iPad loans from RIWC, subsidies through Ontario Works to purchase a laptop and secure internet service, and guidance from RIWC staff and placement students on how to use video conferencing platforms as well as navigate vital online resources.

New programs were launched. The Wrap Around Program provided short-term life stabilization support services for vulnerable adults and their families living on social assistance who were facing challenges exacerbated by the pandemic. A novel digital literacy webinar series increased digital inclusion in our community through lessons on how to use mobile technology as well as access government and community benefits and services online.

Despite increased barriers to access, our community members continued to participate and benefit from our services when they needed it the most, which is a testament to the relevance of our programs. We would like to thank our staff and board members for their steadfast commitment and dedication, funders and partners for their ongoing guidance and support, and our volunteers who continue to turn up at RIWC to lend their skills and enthusiasm.

Violence Against Women

The Violence Against Women (VAW) program receives funding from the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) to provide community-based counselling, support and referral services for women and their dependents who have experienced abuse and/or sexual assault, so that they may live free of violence.

While many VAW clients were essential workers in the food and hospitality sector or as personal support workers, others remained at home in response to public health orders. As primary caregivers for their children, they assumed the responsibility of facilitating their children's virtual learning while, in some cases, continuing with their own education to expand their skills in preparation for refugee hearings. Others had to deal with increased food insecurity or health risks associated with living in shelters, exacerbated by the pandemic.

Due to physical distancing measures, counsellors were unable to conduct in-person sessions. While interim individual counselling through the Doxy.me telemedicine platform allowed for brief assessments of risk and preliminary support, more in-depth trauma-based counselling was a challenge. Virtual group sessions were introduced for youth as well as women on the waitlist for individual counselling as a means of providing more immediate and holistic support. However, stay-at-home orders made it difficult for some clients to seek a private space away from children or other family members to attend video sessions.

With the resumption of virtual refugee hearings in July, the VAW program received an increased number of referrals from clients seeking support through this stressful process. The VAW program also obtained support from MCCSS to implement Owl Practice, a PHIPA-compliant practice management system with a video-therapy feature. The additional provision of cell phones and laptops to staff allowed for more flexible and secure counselling options as well.

With in-person sessions on hiatus throughout the fiscal year, it was felt that clients requiring interpreter services would be better served through referrals to external organizations that provided counselling in their preferred languages.

Program Highlights:

A second VAW Coordinator was hired in June who was fluent in Hindi, Tamil, and Malayalam, thereby expanding counselling services to women with preferred languages other than English.

The VAW program introduced a 'Pre-Hearing Support Group' in December to better address the counselling needs of clients awaiting refugee hearings. The group sessions involved legal partners from the community to help prepare clients for the hearing process.

In December and January, two VAW students who had just completed their placements at RIWC were hired to provide support to the VAW and other RIWC programs.

Significant restructuring took place in March 2021 with the creation of an internal process chart, which detailed VAW services from intake sessions to exit reports. All existing forms and note templates were updated on Owl Practice and a RIWC Client Safety Plan was created based on existing documents from Victim Services Bruce Grey Perth and Community Legal Education Ontario with their permission.

As at the end of March, 180 women had received counselling services with 150 of them being new to RIWC. Six women received services in a language other than English. Also, 136 women and 69 dependents or children of the women participated in the group sessions.

Case Study:

Gloria (name changed to protect her confidentiality) is a 44 year old woman from Nigeria who currently resides in Toronto with her two teenage children and infant daughter. She found out about our employment services through outreach activities. She was then internally referred to the VAW Program after learning about our counselling services in a workshop provided by VAW staff. She had been placed on the VAW waitlist prior to the pandemic and so was invited to attend weekly virtual group sessions along with her children, which they attended regularly. She benefitted from pre-counselling support on topics such as understanding trauma, mindfulness, and boundary setting. Her children attended helpful sessions on topics such as understanding emotions and trauma and healthy coping and relationships. Gloria eventually transitioned into one-on-one virtual counselling, where she worked with a counsellor on establishing long-term coping mechanisms, emotional regulation, and grounding techniques. Upon completion of her sessions, she reported feeling well enough to manage going forward. At the same time, with the support of the employment program staff, she was able to enrol in a Personal Support Worker program and secure a placement as a successful graduate of the program.

Essential Pathways to Employment

The Essential Pathways to Employment (EPE) program is a pre-employment program funded by Toronto Employment and Social Services (TESS) for marginalized men and women who receive social assistance. Participants set their own goals, which they work towards throughout the eight-week core program with the support of a Program Coordinator. Other components of the program include daily computer classes, employment-readiness and life skills workshops, resume writing, and a customer service course. The Program Coordinator is also available as a resource to help participants overcome

any barriers to employment, including child care, professional attire, and mental health issues. Following completion of the core program, six months of post-program support is provided to participants during their job search with referrals to job opportunities and assistance with job retention whenever required.

In March and April 2020, all City funded programs were suspended. EPE participants also expressed general fears about the implications of the pandemic on their health, the rising cost of groceries, and the extra burden home schooling presented, which made it difficult for them to commit to an eight-week program.

Program Highlights:

With funding from United Way Greater Toronto, RIWC launched the Riverdale Laptop Library in May 2020 to secure equipment and internet service for participants in the employment training programs who lacked access to technology. Consequently, EPE programming resumed with computer classes and workshops taking place on Zoom. The in-person office administration placement at the Hub was also modified into a two-day virtual customer service workshop.

Technology benefits in the form of \$65 per month for internet service and \$275 towards the cost of a laptop were later made available through Ontario Works to participants who were referred to our employment training programs by TESS. The RIWC team provided additional support to participants in sourcing an affordable laptop as well as learning Zoom video conferencing whenever needed.

In 2020/21, five remaining participants from 2019 were able to achieve positive outcomes with employment or further education and vocational training.

With the modified virtual programming, technology support, and outreach activities, RIWC was able to achieve its 2021 target of 70 participants.

Case Study:

Natalie (name changed to protect her confidentiality) arrived in Canada in March 2020. She had studied dentistry and business administration in her native country and had some work experience in those fields. Without Canadian work experience, however, it was initially difficult to find a job where she could use her skills and education. When she started receiving support from Ontario Works, she was referred to the EPE Program. She received one-on-one support in short-term and long-term goal setting, learned software that was commonly used in workplaces, discussed techniques for effective conflict resolution and interpersonal communication, learned stress management skills to improve her self-esteem and work-life balance, and strengthened her presentation skills as well as job interview readiness. After completing the program, she was able to secure full-time employment as a healthcare professional and even offered to share other job opportunities at her new company with the classmates she had met at RIWC.

Food Service and Hospitality Training

The Food Service and Hospitality Training (FSHT) program is a unique employment program funded by Toronto Employment and Social Services (TESS) for marginalized men and women receiving social assistance who wish to enter the food service and hospitality sector. Participants set their own goals, which they work towards throughout the ten-week core program with the support of a Program Coordinator. Other components of the program include daily computer classes, employment-readiness and life skills workshops, resume writing, specialized workshops from the food service and hospitality sector, Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS) certification, Food Handlers certification, and a customer service course. The Program Coordinator is also available as a resource to help participants overcome any barriers to employment, including child care, professional attire, and mental health issues. Following completion of the core program, participants complete 40 placement hours at the Hub's Social Gardener Café or Art Gallery or another location with a local partner. Six

months of post-program support is also provided to participants during their job search with referrals to job opportunities and assistance with job retention whenever required.

During the pandemic, participants were given written assignments to complete in lieu of a placement as approved by TESS. The Smart Serve certification requirement was also replaced by a two-day customer service course.

Program Highlights:

TESS increased the number of participants enrolled in the FSHT program in 2020 from 15 to 20, a target that we were able to achieve. We will also anticipate 20 graduates in 2021.

Of the 15 FSHT participants in 2019, 87% achieved positive outcomes by the start of the 2020/21 fiscal year. 40% were able to find employment, 27% pursued vocational or skills training, 7% became self-employed, and 20% sought further education.

Case Study:

Karen (name changed to protect her confidentiality) arrived in Canada in 1991 and learned English while attending high school in the GTA. She gained some experience working in customer service, call centres and retail. After becoming a mother of three, she and her spouse separated, making Karen the primary caregiver of her three children ages 6, 8 and 11. Without family support, motherhood made work increasingly difficult, resulting in her need for Ontario Works. Her caseworker referred her to the FSHT program at RIWC based on Karen's interest in the food industry. She received one-on-one support in short-term and long-term goal setting, refreshed her skills in computer software that was commonly used in workplaces, obtained her Food Handlers and WHMIS certifications, and gained valuable hands-on food service experience in her field placement at The Social Gardener Café. She went on to enroll in the Human Resources Management Program at Humber College Institute of Technology & Advanced Learning and is expected to graduate in 2023.

Through the FSHT program, Karen has found a new sense of direction in her career. She would like to bridge her interest and placement experience in the food industry with her current studies in human resources, helping food companies maintain safety and best practices in training.

Wrap Around Program

In June 2020, RIWC received funding from Toronto Employment and Social Services (TESS) to provide short-term life stabilization support services for vulnerable adults and their families living on social assistance in response to challenges posed by the pandemic. A full-time Service Navigator and part-time Housing Worker were hired to deliver individual and group sessions remotely over an eight-week period. Session topics included personal safety, mental health, gender based violence, immigration, eviction and renter's rights, food security, financial literacy, employment, childcare, and identifying culturally and linguistically appropriate healthcare resources and information. Goal setting and weekly check-ins with coaching and referrals to other supports based on the participants' needs were also integral components of the program.

In 2021, RIWC received additional funding from TESS to provide two months of post-program support following the core component, which allowed for ongoing information sessions and monthly check-ins.

Program Highlights:

From June 2020 to December 2020, 42 people participated in the Wrap Around Program. Due to the overwhelming success of the TESS programming, funding was extended in 2021 with a RIWC target of 37 participants for the remainder of the year.

Case Study:

Trudy (name changed to protect her confidentiality) arrived in Canada in May 2020. During the early stages of the pandemic, it was difficult for Trudy to learn about the city and to find the resources needed to lay the foundation for her new life in Canada. Fortunately, she had a friend with whom she could stay until she got settled. Once she became eligible for Ontario Works, she was referred to the WRAP Around Program at RIWC. She took part in a financial literacy workshop, learned about her housing options, and received regular updates on affordable rental housing listings prepared by the Housing Worker. With the waiting period for a health card waived due to COVID, she was able to secure a family doctor in a timely fashion. She also enrolled in a bridging program at Humber College for new Canadians with foreign credentials. Trudy referred to the Wrap Program staff as her “saviours” in helping her navigate all of the available services during her initial few weeks in Canada. She really appreciated the weekly check-ins and how the staff always had ideas on how to help her.

Women in the Garden (2017 to 2022)

Funded by the United Way Greater Toronto, Women in the Garden (WIG) is a culturally-relevant intergenerational health and well-being project designed to improve physical and emotional health as well as improve access to healthy food, community resources, and connections for isolated immigrant and refugee women in East Toronto. The framework includes new techniques for urban agriculture, age-appropriate exercises and mindfulness techniques, modules for practical workshops, and peer leadership building to increase community capacity.

In-person yoga, gardening, and nutrition classes were suspended following the initial lockdown in March 2020. The WIG Program Coordinator continued to regularly check in with women enrolled in the program to ensure engagement until a virtual alternative could be arranged. A video recording of a yoga session that was initially shared with participants highlighted the challenges senior women of various backgrounds experience with technology. Many of them had difficulty using devices such as tablets as well as services such as email and Zoom video conferencing.

With support from our funder, we were able to develop a user-friendly website with interactive modules and curated content to transition the program to an accessible digital format. Online modules were also supplemented with workshops conducted in real time via Zoom by a gardener, nutritionist, and certified yoga instructor to create further opportunities for connectivity and interaction among participants in an effort to alleviate social isolation while stay-at-home orders were in effect. iPads were procured and technical support was provided as part of the digital literacy training component so that participants could attend the sessions as well as access resources to keep informed about the pandemic. Improvements to the online program were subsequently made based on the constructive feedback we received from a group of senior women at the Working Skills Centre, one of our community partners.

Program Highlights:

Following the digital launch in February 2021, there were 16 registrants consisting of senior women from various backgrounds who were able to benefit from the program. A survey was conducted in March 2021 where we received overwhelmingly positive feedback. Respondents confirmed that they noticed positive changes in their physical and/or mental health since starting the program. Furthermore, participants indicated that they had had conversations with friends and family about exercise, mindfulness, and meditation following enrollment, thereby extending the level of impact. Survey results also indicated a preference for live workshops and demonstrations, nutrition content, and activities geared towards age-appropriate wellness practices.

Testimonials:

“The Zoom workshop on healthy lifestyles was an excellent approach to mindfulness. I’m really thankful to all the members of RIWC for providing us with services in the comfort of our homes.”

“Your demonstration on arthritis was really good. The facilitator explained everything in great detail within an hour. At times the hour seemed short as we wanted to learn more information related to physical problems.”

Empowering Women in the Food Service and Restaurant Industry (2018 to 2022)

With funding from the Department of Women and Gender Equality, we have been working with a consortium of private sector partners to identify and address intersectional barriers that prevent women from achieving economic security within the food service and restaurant industry. Over the project period, three pilot initiatives will be launched and evaluated using a GBA+ framework to support vulnerable racialized women who are currently employed or transitioning to employment in the sector.

To achieve our project objectives, we developed partnerships with George Brown College, Centennial College, Hospitality Workers Training Centre, Cité College, Cuisine Santé, Workplace Safety and Prevention Services, and Restaurants Canada to work with us to identify key action areas and develop the three pilot initiatives.

This year, we completed the development of sector-specific anti-violence and harassment training resources, including a PowerPoint presentation and workshop outline, resource directory on how to access culturally and linguistically appropriate resources, and a 10-week conversation guide for a mentorship program to support culinary students in Ontario. With the closure of the colleges and restaurants in 2020, the resources could not be piloted by our project partners. We were granted an extension from the project funder to postpone our pilot activities until the following year.

Development of Intercultural Intergenerational Resiliency Framework (2019 to 2020)

With funding from Canadian Heritage, we worked with a cross-section of stakeholders from immigrant, refugee and Indigenous communities to develop a new Intercultural Intergenerational Resiliency Framework (IIRF).

RIWC partnered with the Alliance for Intergenerational Resilience (AIR) to build bridges between Canada’s First Nations communities and newcomers to Canada, promote intercultural understanding, and increase awareness of Canada’s cultural diversity. In addition to AIR, we developed partnerships with Oasis Centre des femmes, Native Child and Family Services of Toronto, Ralph Thornton Community Centre, and the Barbra Schlifer Commemorative Clinic to help guide the development of our IIR Framework. We also worked with academic advisors from the University of Auckland, Carleton University, York University and the University of Toronto for research guidance with our literature review.

Through the project, an IIR Framework and a two-level Medicine Wheel Model was developed by the Lead Researcher and presented to the research team and Advisory Board. Focus groups were held in the summer of 2020 to obtain feedback from community groups and First Nations youth to further inform and validate the need and use of the model. At the end of the project, a new website was launched by RIWC

to virtually present our findings and resources to the community at large. We were successful in achieving our project objectives and our findings have been submitted to Canadian Heritage.

Capacity Building for RIWC Women's Programs (2019 to 2022)

With project funding from the Department of Women and Gender Equity, we aim to complete a GBA+ review of RIWC's programs and develop a new strategic plan, five-year fundraising strategy, results-based management plan, and new human resources management policies to strengthen RIWC's capacity to respond to the needs of the community and further enhance women's participation in the social life of the country.

To achieve our project objectives, a Special Projects Coordinator, Fundraising & Grants Consultant and Strategic Planning Consultant were engaged and recruited to complete the key project milestones. This year, we completed the development of the strategic plan with six pillars identified as our priorities for the next five years. These priorities include: (1) Foster Cultural Equity for Women in Toronto, (2) Improve Health and Wellbeing for Vulnerable Populations, (3) Increase Access to Programs and Services, (4) Build Stronger Community Connections for Women and Families, (5) Improve Economic Security of our Communities, and (6) Develop Resources to Promote Digital Literacy and Inclusion.

A fundraising strategy has been developed based on our new strategic priorities and we have been implementing it over the last year. We were successful in raising funds from Canada Summer Jobs, Canadian Heritage, Canadian Women's Foundation, New Horizons for Seniors Program, Toronto Foundation, and United Way Greater Toronto to help us achieve our strategic priorities.

Building Digital Literacy (2021)

We received funds from the United Way Greater Toronto to launch a new digital literacy webinar series to increase digital inclusion in our community. Between April and June 2021, RIWC hosted an eight-part webinar series to help clients navigate online resources so that they could better access government benefits and community services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the end of the project, webinar participants completed an online evaluation survey to help us assess the impact of the program on our target population. The following is a summary of the project outcomes:

- 91% felt more confident in their ability to use technology independently;
- 100% of participants intended to apply what they had learned in their day-to-day life;
- 90% of participants believed the content addressed their needs;
- Topics that were most useful included access to government services and use of mobile technology;
- 100% of the participants found the curriculum content helpful;
- 72% of participants would attend a similar program in the future.

The live webinars were held weekly and are available to download from RIWC's website.

Volunteer Report

In 2020-21, RIWC programs and management relied upon the services of 18 placement students, 6 volunteers, and 5 board and committee members for a total of 6613 volunteer hours. Placement students came from Centennial College, Humber College, Seneca College, Ryerson University, and York University.

We would like to thank all the placement students and volunteers for the contributions they have made to the EPE, FSHT, WIG, VAW, and Wrap Around programs as well as Hub activities in general. In return, our programs provided placement students with a valuable opportunity to apply theory to practice. And of course we continue to embrace volunteers with various skills and enthusiasm who are seeking a space where they can give back to the community.

Our board members are a great asset to our organization and it would be impossible for RIWC to provide the services that we do without their dedication, time and help, for which we are extremely grateful.