

# FROM BARRIERS TO BREAKTHROUGHS

## How Immigrant Women Are Transforming Nova Scotia's Business Landscape



**Viktoriia Vinnichenko**

Forced to flee a war-torn homeland for survival, leaving behind family and careers, we faced loss and uncertainty while striving to rebuild our lives with dignity and hope in a new country. Through IWEN, I found acceptance, understanding, and genuine support. I connected with other entrepreneurs who shared their experiences and encouragement. IWEN also sponsored my participation in events, making it possible for me to showcase my craft through my business, **UkrArt Place** and take meaningful steps forward. Most of all, the joyful, safe, and welcoming atmosphere at ISANS events gave me a sense of comfort and belonging at a time when it mattered most.



**Yu-Hsuan Hsiang**

Participating in IWEN has been a significant part of my business journey. Through IWEN's programming and support, I gained a clearer understanding of how to approach my business, **Arequipe Patisserie**, more strategically and sustainably. The sessions encouraged me to step back, reflect on my operations, and make more informed decisions about growth and direction. IWEN also provided valuable opportunities to connect with other women entrepreneurs, expanding my professional network, increasing my visibility within the local business community, and reinforcing the importance of peer support when building a small business.



**Fatima Ezzahra Aabik**

Starting over doesn't mean abandoning experience, it rather means leveraging it differently with a deeper awareness of sustainability and community integration. I'm transforming years of entrepreneurial experience into a scalable digital solution rooted in Nova Scotia, solving real problems for organizations. Having the full support of IWEN in my journey has strengthened not only my business vision, but my confidence as a founder in Canada. Today, **Digital Box** represents both continuity and evolution, rooted in prior entrepreneurial experience yet built with greater structure and local anchoring.



**Peggy Elias Nakhle**

Although I previously owned a jewelry business in Lebanon, the legal, financial, and regulatory systems here are very different. IWEN programs helped me understand the requirements, avoid mistakes, and build my business, **JM Gems**, in a new country. Equally valuable were the connections to legal professionals, banks, advisors, and other business resources that would have otherwise been difficult to access on my own. Beyond technical support, the encouragement and follow-up made a real difference. I felt supported, guided, and empowered, and I am truly grateful for their role in helping me restart and grow my business in Canada.



**Janaki Patel**

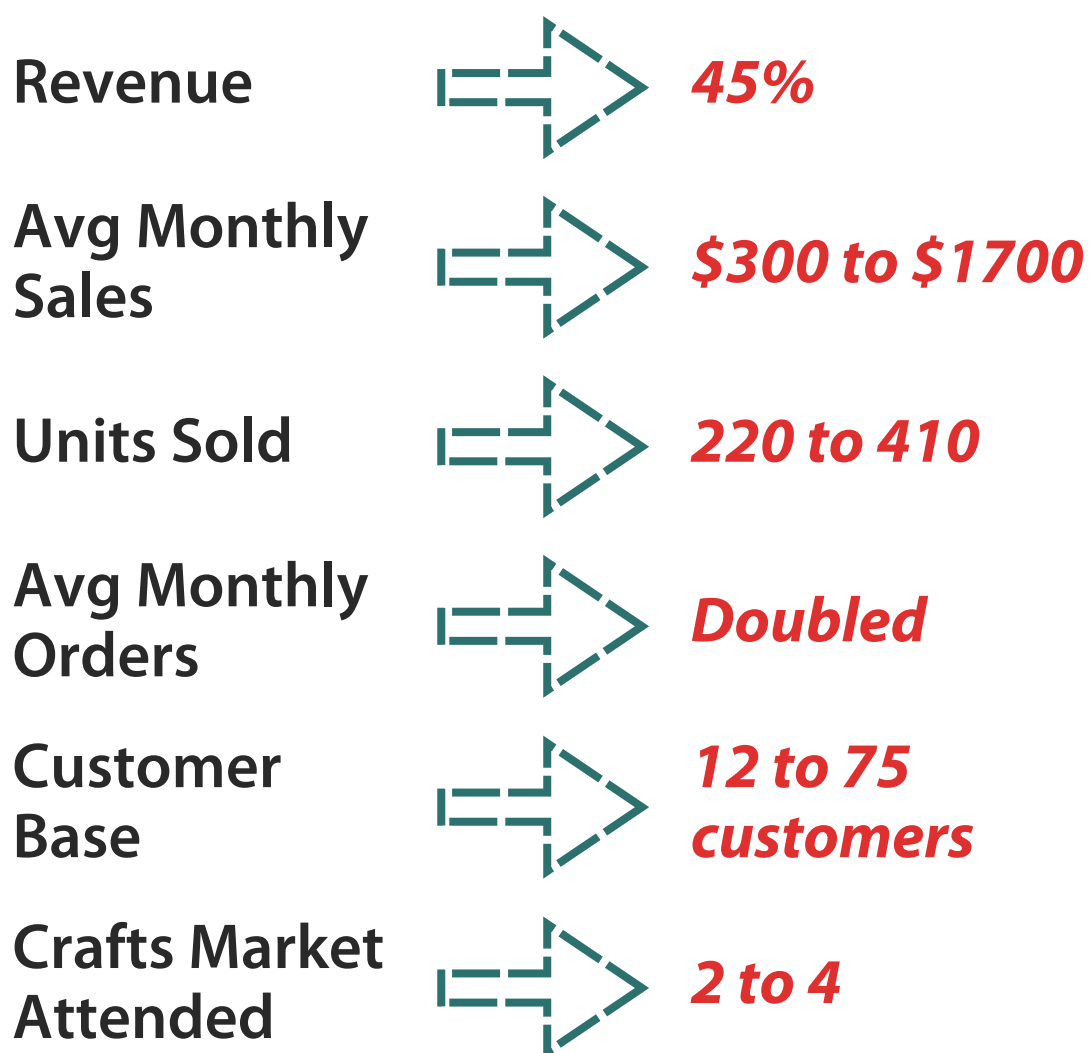
IWEN has played a vital role in helping me transform my passion into a sustainable business, **Little Dot Art Gallery**. Their unwavering support has guided me throughout my journey as a dot mandala artist. With their mentorship and guidance, I was able to expand my customer base, thrive during peak seasons, and confidently sell my artwork both locally and online. Their practical advice and constant reassurance gave me the confidence to take constructive steps and think strategically about the future of my business. I am deeply grateful for their continued support and faith in my journey as both an artist and a business owner.

### "Real Support - Real Outcomes"



**UkrArt Place**

UkrArt Place is a premier destination for handcrafted Ukrainian art and home décor. Founded in 2023, this handmade crafts business carries forward a traditional collection of Ukrainian dolls, handcrafted eggs, and cultural pieces inspired by East Slavic ethnicity. The business blends traditional craftsmanship with locally sourced materials from Nova Scotia, sharing heritage, resilience, and cultural storytelling with customers across Canada.

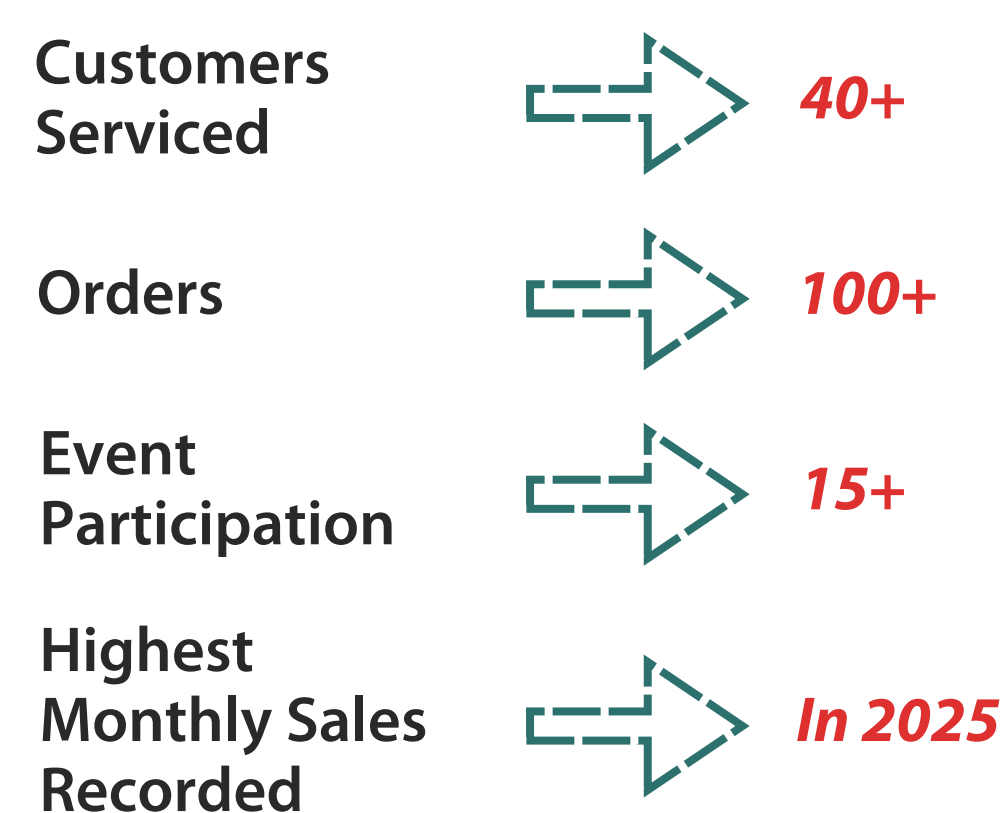


\*Accepted into curated and juried markets; approved as a licensed vendor at brewery and cultural markets



**Arequipe Patisserie**

Arequipe Patisserie is an artisanal dessert studio crafting elegant, hand-decorated cakes and pastries inspired by floristry and thoughtful craftsmanship. Since its launch in August 2023 in Halifax, Arequipe Patisserie has experienced steady, measurable growth, expanding from a small custom cake operation into a multi-channel dessert business serving private clients, weddings, and public markets.



\*Expanded from custom cakes to a range of market-ready dessert offerings, increasing average order value. Overall, this performance reflects rising demand, improved operational efficiency, and strengthening brand recognition within the HRM community.



**Digital Box**

Digital Box is a federally incorporated Canadian company founded in Nova Scotia, built on resilience and long-term commitment, created to serve Canadian organizations by designing and developing pragmatic and scalable digital solutions that reduce operational complexity and support sustainable growth. Wise Property is an expandable IT tool aiming to simplify property management operations for PMs and REIT.

- Founded Digital Box by end 2024, weeks after completing the IWEN program
- Launched Wise Property as the first flagship product of Digital Box, an IT SaaS platform that offers a robust security foundation fully compliant with Canadian federal and provincial regulations, ensuring data protection, privacy, sovereignty, and governance by design
- The platform focuses on practical, real-world needs such as lease management, expense tracking, claims follow-up, tenant coordination, and facilities management, supported by dashboards that enable informed decision-making
- Established an international development partnership to support product delivery and cost efficiency
- Currently advancing through the development of Wise Property, with a first release planned for early adopters in July 2026



**JM Gems**

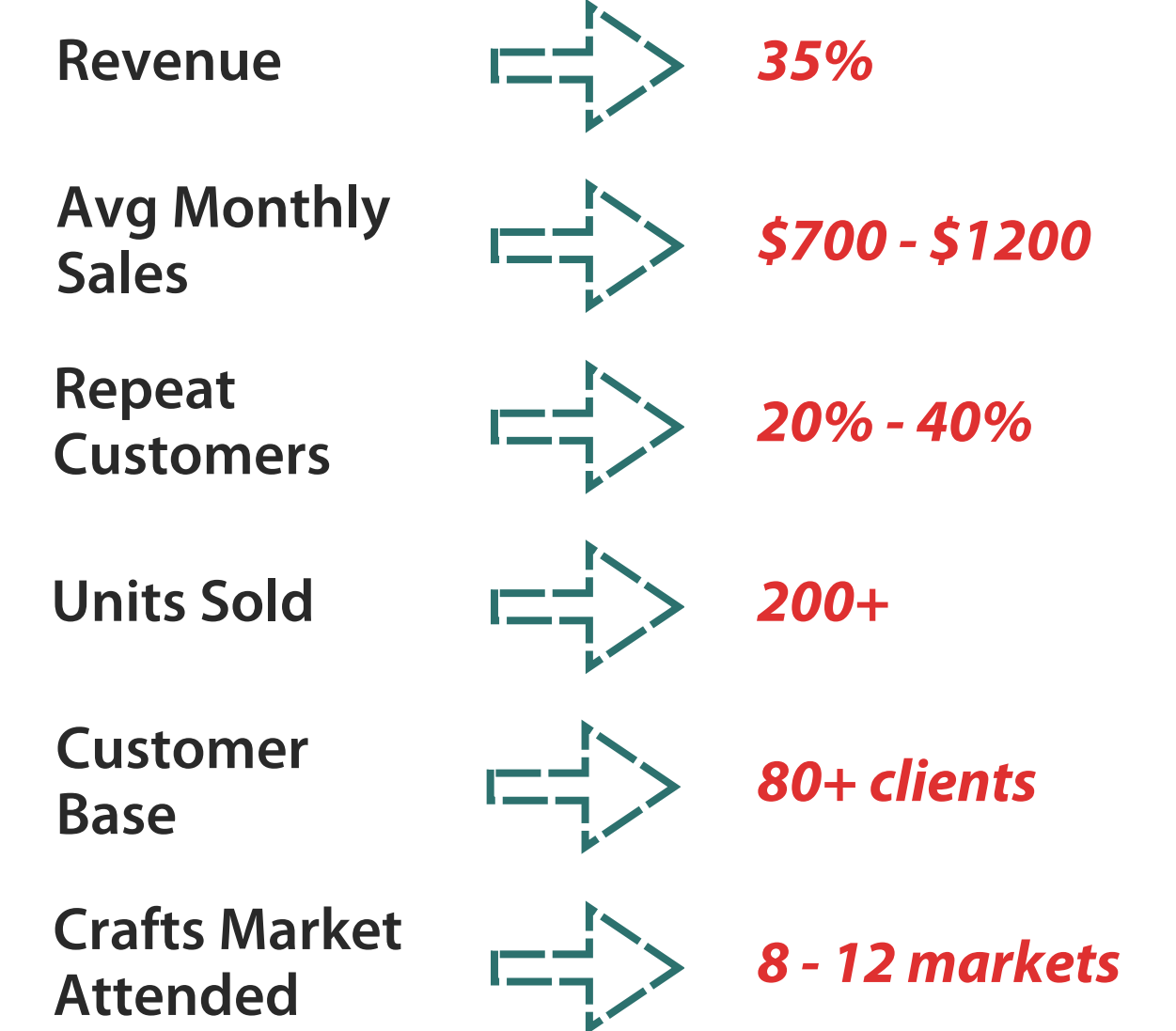
JM Gems specializes in luxury custom jewelry. For over a decade, the company has professionally delivered high-quality jewelry sales, custom designing, certified appraisals, and comprehensive gemological services. Known for meticulous craftsmanship and strict confidentiality, JM Gems serves jewelry manufacturers and brands across North America, Europe, the Middle East, and Asia.

- Showcased as one of Halifax's most renowned jewelers
- Completed 400+ professional appraisals and custom jewelry pieces to date
- Participated in 10+ Halifax markets and pop-up events
- Serving 6+ professional jewelers with repeat wholesale diamond and appraisal clients
- Achieved the highest annual sales in the past three years in 2025
- Consistently fully booked months driven by weddings, celebrations, and special events
- Expanded Halifax services from jewelry design and sales to include professional appraisals and wholesale diamonds



**Little Dot Art Gallery**

Little Dot Art Gallery is a creative hub for handmade dot mandala art and crafts inspired by Eastern spiritual culture, symbolizing the cosmos, inner journeys, and mindfulness. The gallery offers a diverse range of hand painted wall art, home décor, including microwave- and dishwasher-safe crockery, traditional lippan mirror-work and unique souvenirs. In addition to being a regular vendor at local markets, it operates through an online shop, reaching customers across Canada beyond Nova Scotia.



\*Market recognition: Fully booked during peak seasons; Summer & Christmas

### Removing barriers to newcomer success

IWEN Clients' Businesses span a wide range of industries including jewelry design, retail, skincare & beauty, arts & crafts, education & consulting, digital marketing, food production and construction.

### IWEN 2-YEAR IMPACT



### Prominent IWEN Businesses



### Newcomer to Entrepreneur

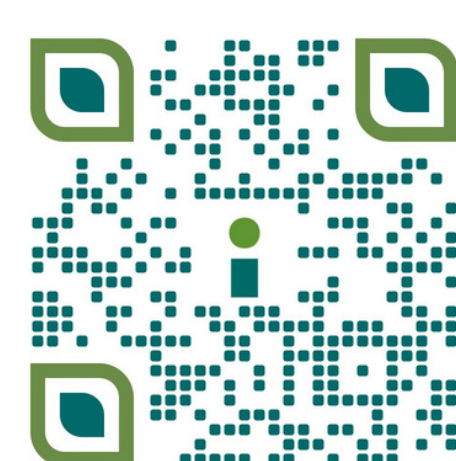
The Immigrant Women Entrepreneurship Network (IWEN) at ISANS is transforming Nova Scotia's entrepreneurial landscape by supporting newcomer and refugee women to start and grow their businesses. Through practical training, personalized mentorship, microloan support, market showcases, and inclusive networking events, IWEN helps participants build confidence and overcome systemic barriers. Partnerships with community and industry stakeholders, along with intercultural training, further promote gender equality and economic inclusion. This poster shares the journeys and impact of women from various countries and cultures who have taken part in IWEN, highlighting their progress, achievements, and contributions to the province's entrepreneurial ecosystem.

### Our Funder:



<https://isans.ca>

[business@isans.ca](mailto:business@isans.ca)



[in](#) Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia

[ig](#) isans.ca

[f](#) ISANS



## SOPA

Settlement Online Pre-Arrival is a free program funded by IRCC that helps you arrive prepared for work and life in Canada. SOPA is an initiative led by the Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia (ISANS) and delivered by six settlement agencies across the country. SOPA provides personalized guidance, online courses, and expert support to help you build skills, understand the Canadian job market, explore professional licensing, and start forming connections.

## PRE-ARRIVAL CANADA CONNECTS PROGRAM

The Canada Connects program is designed to help pre-arrival newcomers build connections with landed and settled newcomers to better prepare for their own settlement journey.

Focused on women, youth, and refugees, the matches are tailored and the volunteers meet virtually with pre-arrival newcomers.

## WHY MATCHING MATTERS?

- IRCC's 2018 findings – receiving mentorship reduces stress during resettlement.
- Build meaningful social connections and a sense of belonging.
- Early social ties support mental health and well-being, reducing anxiety.
- Connections help address challenges faced by newcomers.
- Smooth transition for youth and help them feel more confident.
- Higher retention rates in their settlement city.

## PROGRAM'S STRUCTURE:

- SOPA intake counsellors introduce the program to the client
- Intake counsellor makes an internal referral
- Program Coordinator matches the client with appropriate mentors, considering:
  - Gender
  - Age
  - Spoken language
  - Destination city/province
  - Background
- Clients and mentors held weekly or bi-weekly virtual meetings to discuss housing, life in Canada, school, community services, job search, etc.

## CANADA CONNECTS VOLUNTEER RESPONSIBILITIES

- Provide information on Canadian customs, culture, and society.
- Offer insights into daily life in Canada.
- Engage in leisure activities together.
- Provide moral support.
- Facilitate English language practice in an informal setting.
- If applicable, arrange one in-person meeting following the participant's arrival.

## Our Funder:

Funded by: Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada  
Financé par : Immigration, Réfugiés et Citoyenneté Canada

## Our Partners:

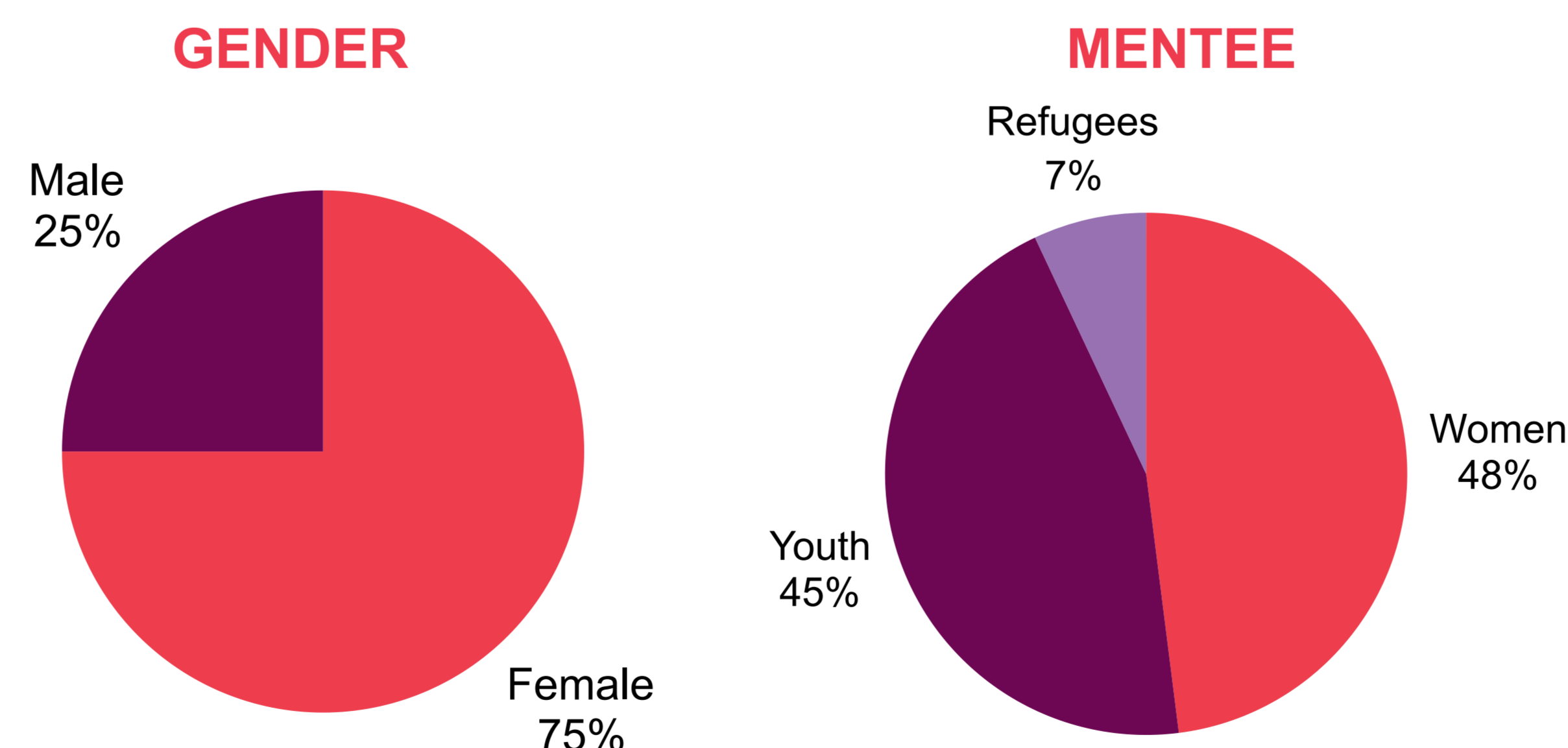


## MAPPING OF THE MATCHES



## MATCHING DATA APRIL 01 TO SEPTEMBER 30, 2025

Province	Number
Alberta	11
British Columbia	1
Manitoba	11
Ontario	18
Saskatchewan	9
Atlantic	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>56</b>



## TESTIMONIALS

“It has been incredibly beneficial during this transition. The support you provided made a significant impact, especially in adjusting my resume to fit Canadian professional expectations. That guidance was a crucial first step, and it really helped me feel more confident about my applications. - **Ghaida** from **Tunisia (settled in Calgary)**”

“I really felt that I was talking to a sister who holds my hand as I am moving to a scary new place. - **Salma** from **Morocco (moving to Toronto, Ontario)**”

“The mentorship programs have been really helpful as am currently working with RODS, RIWC and IWS to enable me settle in quickly and more appropriately. - **Nnenna** from **Nigeria (arrived in Regina, Saskatchewan)**”

“I shared information on essential settlement tasks and connecting with community resources. This ongoing support helped the mentee gain confidence and independence in navigating her new surroundings.”

Having a dedicated mentor offered both practical and emotional support, reducing the uncertainty and stress often experienced during the early stages of resettlement. As a result, the client successfully settled and developed a stronger sense of belonging within her community.

This mentorship experience was also valuable to me personally, as it enhanced my communication, cultural awareness, active listening, leadership, and problem-solving skills. - **Mentor Dorene B. Stern** from **British Columbia**

## Presented by:

Anika Sweet, Supervisor, Pre-Arrival and Employment Transition (asweet@isans.ca)

Sayed Hashim Sadat, Pre-Arrival Canada Connects Coordinator, SOPA (ssadat@isans.ca)

Read more about the SOPA program here:



# ISANS Community Connections Program

Through strong community partnerships, we engage all newcomers in inclusive recreation and art programs, with a special focus on Government Assisted Refugees and their families

## WHY THIS PROGRAM MATTERS

Newcomers often arrive with excitement and hope but face multiple obstacles when trying to engage in local recreational and social programs. The Community Connections Program aims to bridge that gap, enabling individuals and families to feel welcomed, connected, and supported in their communities.

## KEY BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

1. Lack of information about recreation opportunities (Many newcomers are unaware of what programs exist, where they are, or how to join).
2. Financial constraints (Costs of registration, equipment, and travel can be prohibitive).
3. Complicated registration processes (Multiple steps, unfamiliar platforms, or bureaucratic requirements can discourage participation).
4. Language and culturally relevant programming (Programs may not accommodate language diversity or cultural expectations).
5. Racism, discrimination, and lack of inclusion (Some newcomers experience exclusion, racism, or discrimination).
6. Transportation, childcare, or scheduling conflicts (Getting to venues, juggling childcare, or aligning with work schedules can be barriers).
7. Confidence, social anxiety, or unfamiliarity with local norms (Some clients may feel shy, unsure, or hesitant to participate in a new community).

## WHAT WE OFFER

1. **Orientation and Needs Assessment**
2. **Sports & Movement:** hockey, judo, multisport, lacrosse, swimming, soccer
3. **Arts & Creativity:** open-studio art programs, community art workshops, collaborative projects
4. **Outdoor & Nature:** Learn to Camp, urban hikes, youth sailing, sea kayaking, nature clubs
5. **Cultural & Social Recreation:** field trips, community events, cultural celebrations, heritage tours

“This program really brightens our winter days... giving newcomers a chance to feel included, make connections, and enjoy moments of warmth and friendship.”  
– Client participant in Open Art Program, 2025



“I really liked that the children had the opportunity to make new friends... keeps kids active and teaches them confidence outdoors – Client participant in Sea School Sailing & Kayaking, 2024

## HOW THE PROGRAM WORKS

### Funding & Support access to community funding opportunities

- Assistance applying to Kidsport, HRM Affordable Access, and other subsidy programs
- Promotion of free community events and drop-in activities

### Strategic Partnerships

We collaborate closely with community organizations to expand inclusive offerings, such as:

- Newcomer Hockey Program (Hockey Nova Scotia)
- Learn to Camp (Nova Scotia Parks)
- The Nova Scotia Sea School (outdoor youth programming)
- Numa Judo
- Speedy Kids Oval Program Society
- Wonder'neath Art Society
- Young Naturalist Club
- Blue Nose Marathon, and more

These partnerships allow us to co-design culturally responsive and accessible programs

### Orientation & Needs Assessment

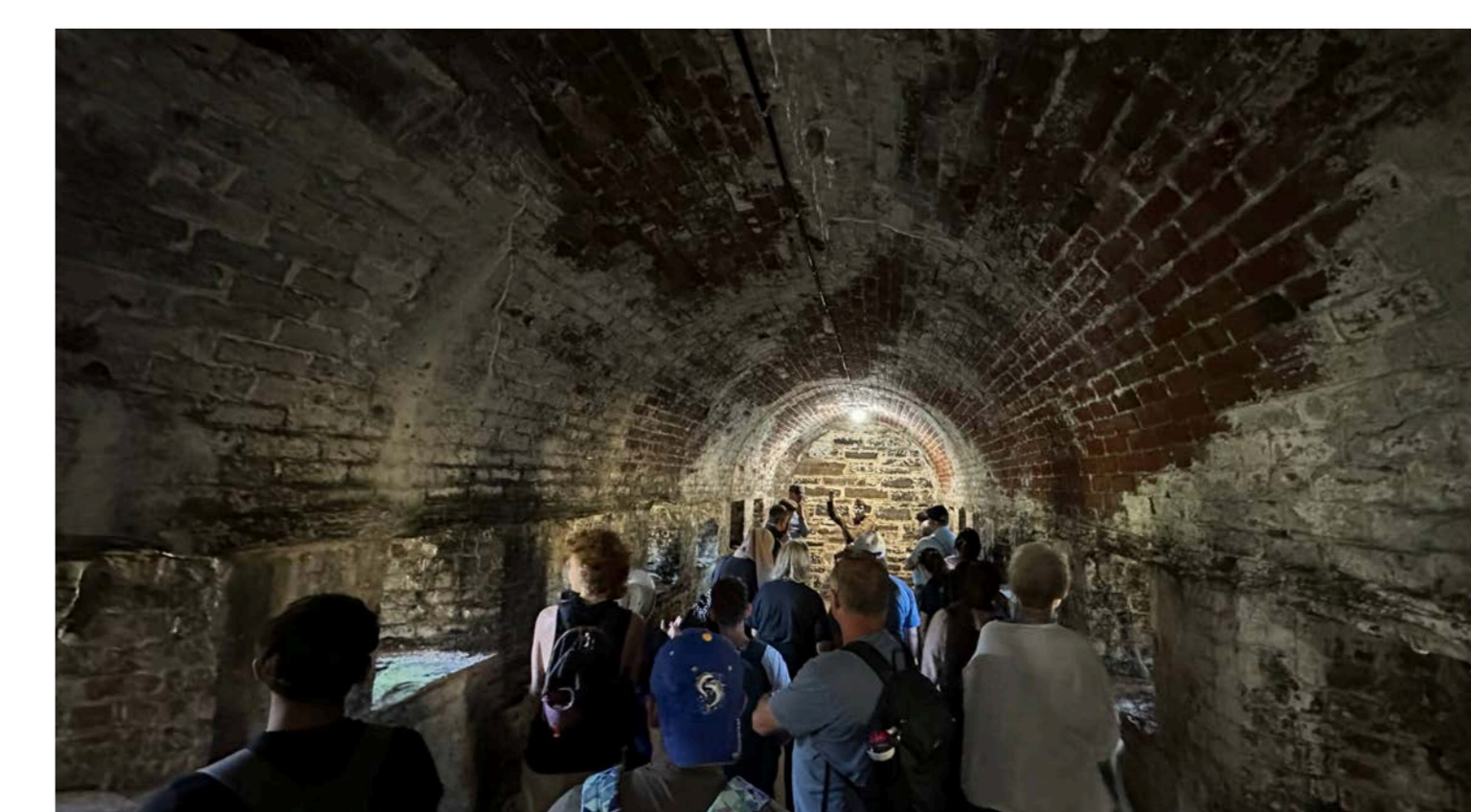
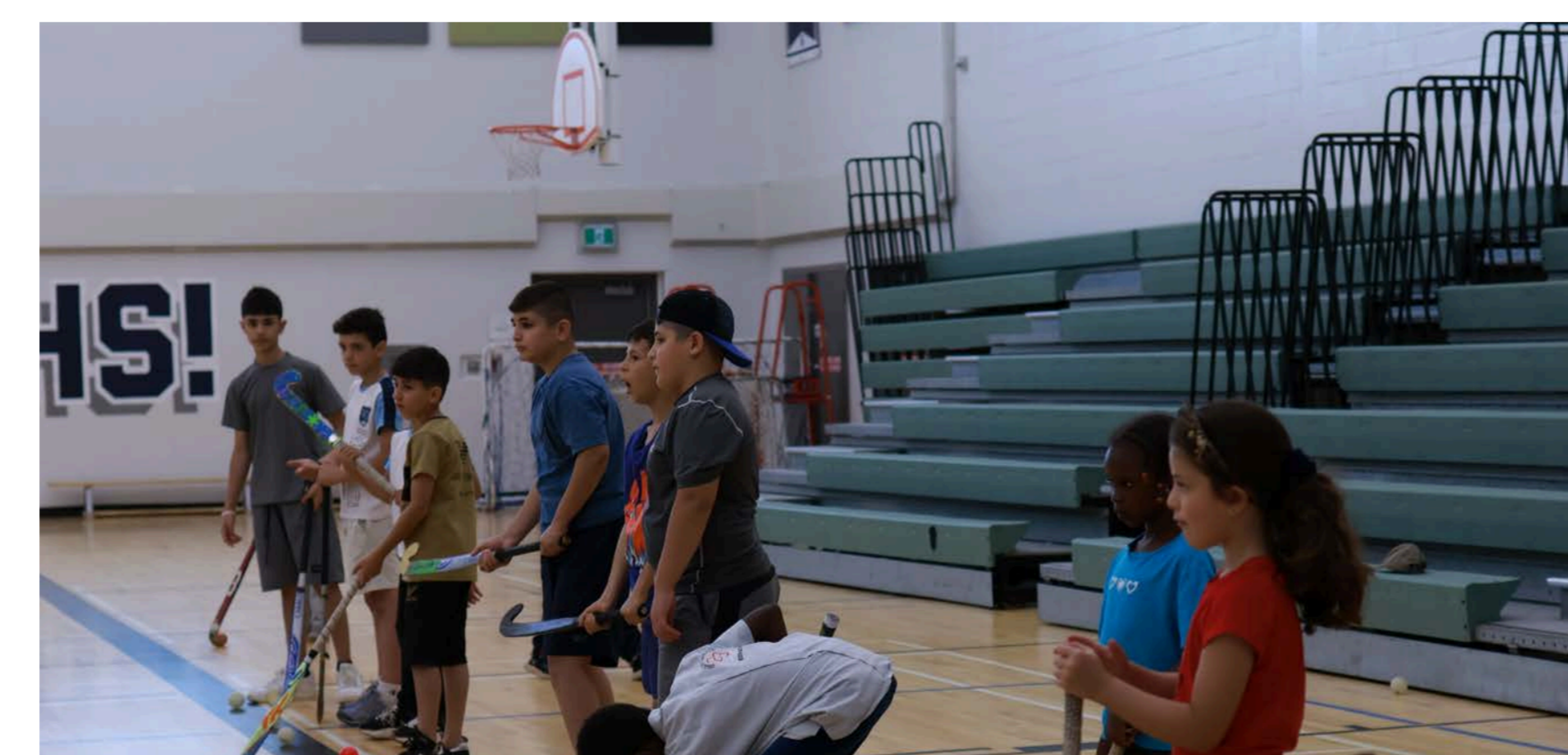
- Conduct individual and group orientation sessions
- Host group-based registration workshops
- Assess each client's interests, constraints, and goals
- Tailor recommendations to their unique situation

### Registration & Digital Support

- Referrals to ISANS digital navigators who coach clients in using apps and online platforms
- Hands-on help to set up funding accounts, registration portals, and payment systems

### Accessibility & Capacity-Building with Partners

- Referral staff in Rec programs to **ISANS Intercultural Competence Training** workshops
- Provision of “readiness tools” and ongoing consultative support
- Distribution of a **Recreation Program Planning Checklist**, covering:
  1. Program design & scheduling
  2. Promotion & outreach
  3. Financial accessibility
  4. Venue and transportation logistics
  5. Registration workflows
  6. Volunteer & staff training in inclusive practices



## Our Funders:

sport nova scotia



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isans Immigrant Services  
Association of Nova Scotia

# Generating prosperity: By creating welcoming communities

Welcoming communities foster Canada's prosperity by removing barriers to integration and empowering newcomers to contribute economically, socially, and culturally.

## WELCOMING COMMUNITIES PROGRAM

The Welcoming Communities program at the Immigrant Services Association of Canada (ISANS) creates welcoming communities in Nova Scotia by:

- Delivering intercultural competence training
- Delivering intercultural equity, diversity and inclusion (I-EDI) training
- Empowering organizations to support newcomers

### BUILDING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE (BIC) WORKSHOP

#### This training:

- Raises awareness about settlement and integration challenges
- Provides practical strategies for building relationships with newcomers
- Teaches intercultural competence for engaging with immigrants
- Empowers communities to foster inclusive environments
- Creates networking opportunities

165

52

2823

Workshops delivered

Organizations

Participants

\*Between Oct 2020 and Oct 2025

- Empowered Nova Scotia Health leaders to support Internationally Educated Nurses (IENs) that Nova Scotia recently welcomed.
- Supported IENs to succeed in Canada.



“Helped to build stronger relationships within our garden group...”

Engaging, replete with examples of challenges experienced by newcomers and refugees, and included a guided imagery to help students further develop empathy...

A treasure of information invaluable to anyone wishing to create a more welcoming community...

An immersive experience that gets you to put yourself in the shoes of another, creating compassion, connection and change... BIC workshop participants

### INTERCULTURAL EQUITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION (I-EDI) WORKSHOPS

#### Tailored I-EDI workshops include:

- Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) 101
- Unconscious & Implicit Bias
- Micro-Aggressions: They're not Small
- The Newcomer Immigrant Experience

99

53

2613

Workshops delivered

Organizations

Participants

\*Between Oct 2020 and Oct 2025

- Power & Privilege
- Celebrating our Black Heritage: Uniting People of African Descent



“A reminder that what separates us as a people pales in comparison to what unites us and reaffirmation that, when we walk together, we can go the long haul on the road to holistic prosperity. - Ayo Aladejebi, Executive Director, Engagement, Equity and Belonging, Dept of Labour, Skills and Immigration

Created a safe space for open dialogue, helping us recognize biases and take meaningful steps toward a more inclusive workplace. - Stephen MacDonald, President & CEO, EfficiencyOne

There is not a Department within the Government that would not benefit from this training. - Shauna Fukes, Manager Finance Operations, Province of Nova Scotia

### EMPOWERING ORGANIZATIONS

- Participated in the Atlantic Region Association of Immigrant Serving Agencies (ARAISA)'s Atlantic Immigration Program Intercultural Competence Training (AIP ICT) Working Group
- Resulted in the development of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC)'s mandatory onboarding Intercultural Competence training for AIP Employer designation.
- Reduced barriers and improved sense of belonging for newcomer employees.
- Served on the Steering Committee for the creation of Recreation Nova Scotia's Anti-Racism Charter in Recreation.
- A tool for designing and maintaining spaces where newcomers find solace, value, and experience a sense of belonging.



“38 'change champions' ... all have more understanding and skills to be able to address situations of racism” ... and have more skills to be active in their allyship with colleagues, leadership and most importantly, the patients that they work with. - Rhea Farris, RSW, Health Services Lead, Primary Health Care, Western Zone, Nova Scotia Health

It was a safe space for sharing and the commitment to speak truths without harm. Gave opportunity to generate ideas and consider in all engagements and entanglements how we need each other to be our best and produce our best. - Sylvia Parris-Drummond PHD (candidate), Chief Executive Officer, DBDLI

These pathways for creating welcoming communities help to build community capacity, bridge differences and foster resilience. Newcomers are supported to reach their full potential, thereby resulting in prosperous outcomes for Canada.

#### Our Funders:



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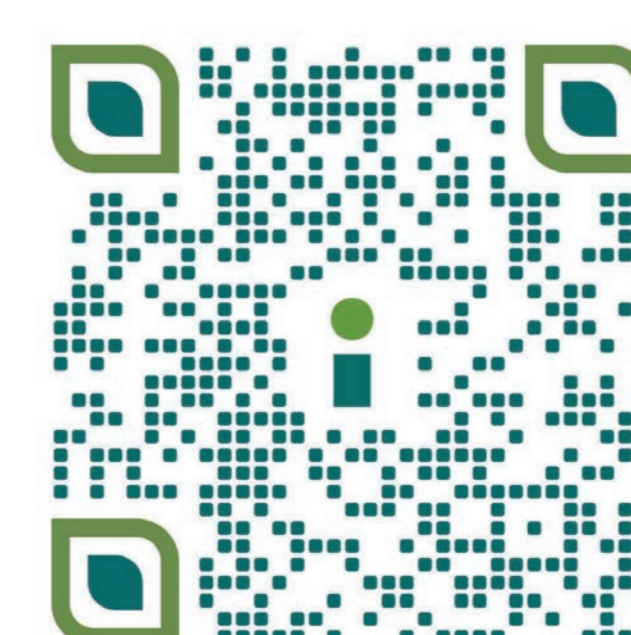
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**isans** | Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia

# From survival to belonging: Strengthening newcomer wellness and pride

**Presented by:** Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia  
**Funded by:** Office of Mental Health and Addictions, Nova Scotia  
**Co-Funded by:** Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC)

## ABOUT THE PROJECT

The Wellbeing for All (WBFA) project, part of ISANS' Newcomer Wellness Program, strengthens newcomer mental wellness and belonging through inclusive, client-centred, and trauma-informed practices.

WBFA helps newcomers move from survival to belonging, fostering resilience, inclusion, and full participation in Canadian life while celebrating diversity and pride in each person's identity and lived experience.

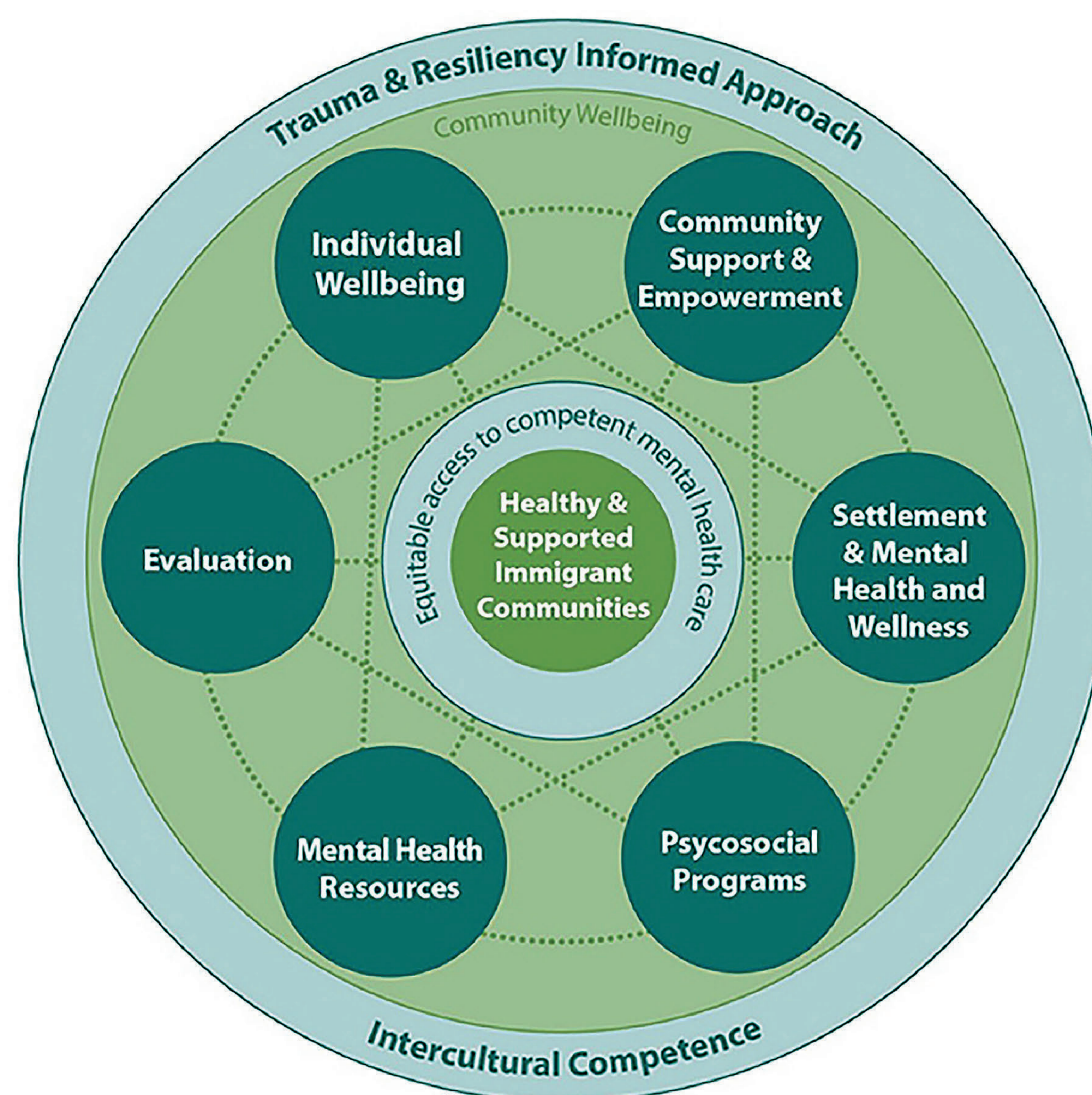
## WHAT WE DO

- Facilitate wellness groups and individual sessions for newcomers
- Co-develop wellness guidelines with community partners
- Deliver staff and interpreter training on trauma-informed, inclusive practices
- Engage Advisory Committee members from diverse cultural and mental-health sectors
- Conduct community consultations exploring experiences and recommendations
- Create a Wellness Toolkit and deliver Lunch & Learn sessions for ISANS staff

## GROUPS OFFERED

- Women's Group
- Men's Group
- Mixed Group
- 2SLGBTQIA+ Group
- Trauma Stabilization Group

## Community Collaborative Model of Supporting Im/migrant Mental Health & Well-being



## OUR APPROACH

We grounded our approach in:

- Cultural safety and inclusivity
- Intersectional, trauma-informed practice
- Collaboration and co-design
- Evaluation and continuous learning

## OUTCOMES:

- **Inclusive access** to mental wellness support for all newcomers, including 2SLGBTQIA+ communities
- **Stronger resilience** and better mental health understanding
- **Early, affirming support** that meets each person where they are
- **Compassionate care** for those experiencing settlement stress, mild trauma, or adjustment challenges

## EVALUATION GOALS:

- Identify effective wellness interventions and promising practices
- Strengthen ISANS' organizational capacity for inclusive mental wellness
- Enhance collaboration across settlement, health, and community sectors
- Amplify what works best to support newcomer resilience, inclusion, and belonging

(Adapted to reflect the Newcomer Wellness and WBFA projects, ISANS 2025).



“We came to Nova Scotia with one dream to live openly, safely, and authentically as a two-mom family. Leaving behind our home, careers, and loved ones wasn't easy, but we wanted our children to grow up where love isn't a secret and identity isn't a risk. ISANS became our landing place a community that saw us, heard us, and welcomed us with dignity. Today, we both work at ISANS, helping other newcomers find the same safety and belonging we once searched for. As we celebrate 25 years together, we look back with gratitude and forward with pride, hope, and love” - Nadia and Aya



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