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Lethbridge living

LETHBRIDGE FAMILY SERVICES IMMIGRANT SERVICES HELPS NEWCOMERS ADJUST TO LIFE AND WORK IN THE CITY

The city's sustained steady growth patterns of the past decade have recently started to shift because of an influx of new immigrants.

During the past three years, newcomers have arrived from more than 60 countries and speak more than 40 languages, with Lethbridge College students also representing nearly 50 different countries.

As such, Lethbridge's workforce has been widely diversifying itself in the past several years.

Lethbridge Family Services Immigrant Services (LFSIS) is the city's only source devoted to helping these recently immigrated individuals and families settle into the community.

The organization, which is funded by Citizenship and Immigration Canada and Alberta's Human Services, now serves about 700 clients.

It works with economic class immigrants who have come to Canada for a specific job; family class immigrants have been sponsored by family members already residing in Canada, refugees and special groups sponsored by the federal government; temporary foreign workers (TFWs) who are brought to Canada by employers to fill a

specific job; and non-immigrant foreign live-in caregivers.

Sarah Amies, program director for LFSIS, says they have helped more than 2,500 people since 2007 and have been working on settlement for about 12 years. She said the two most crucial issues that set up

because we are a certain size."

More than 25,000 immigrants came to Alberta in 2009. They now comprise around 20 per cent of Alberta's workforce, with TFWs representing three per cent of that total.

Last year, Lethbridge welcomed around

per cent less than Canadians.

This could lead to more forthcoming changes, Amies says.

"Most people would love to stay here and have an opportunity at a better life here in Canada," she said. "And Alberta itself is going to suffer a shortage of 77,000 jobs in the next 10 years."

The majority of newcomers in Lethbridge, which had about 500 immigrants arrive in 2009, are from the United Kingdom and the United States, but many have also arrived from India, the Kingdom of Bhutan, the Philippines and El Salvador.

About 35 per cent of newcomers to Lethbridge have a degree, diploma or trade certificate, while the top non-English languages spoken are Nepali, Spanish, Tagalog (used mainly in the Philippine), Hindi and Romanian.

Amies says every newcomer's "settling in" process is unique and degrees of success depend upon individual language skills, overall health, educational levels and financial means.

"Virtually anybody who moves from one country or culture to another country or culture is going to feel the effects of that whole process, regardless of level of sophistication," Amies said, adding about 55 per cent are coming from Southeast Asia.

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— Sarah Amies —

Lethbridge Family Services Immigrant Services program director

barriers for successful integration are language and employment.

"Both of these areas are integral to your ability to settle successfully in a new country," Amies said. "And employment opportunities are somewhat limited here

900 TFWs, who can stay and work in Canada for up to four years, but Amies said this number could rise sharply with new laws coming into place. TFWs are now being fast-tracked with a shorter arrival process, and employers are being allowed to pay them 15

Helping newcomers feel at home

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"One of the best settlement programs in Canada is here in Lethbridge. It's good for them because it's a manageable city. I call people in Regina, Saskatoon, even Calgary or Winnipeg, and it's not the same."

When the Timsinas arrived to Lethbridge there was no support network. Now they have created various avenues to help with integration, including monthly meetings and a driver education program with a Nepalese translator at the Lethbridge Public Library.

"Their first priorities are their families and language, a job; then it's an apartment, a car, maybe a house," Timsina said.

"And we're working on how to help the young kids. They went from nowhere and having nothing. Now they have Internet and Facebook and all the latest gadgets."

Timsina said the seniors sometimes stay at home too much, so he is working on ways to improve things. He has been developing a number of programs such as taking them out twice per week for a couple of hours to places such as the library.

"They are having more problems and there is a need for senior people to get along," he said, adding that more frequent religious observations would help as well.

One of their longer-term goals for the Bhutanese Society is to have a Hindu temple in the city.

But for now they will focus on continued integration efforts.

Nearly 100 of the Bhutanese refugees are employed at Sunrise Poultry, while others work with Lethbridge Family Services and the hotel industry.

Some are studying for health care at Lethbridge College. Others are studying in order to upgrade their English language skills, even for everyday tasks such as making and receiving phone calls, shopping and going to the doctor.

"It is very difficult for them. But if you get together with people, talk to them and express feelings, I think it helps," Timsina said.

"When there is too much information, it's very hard to consume. It's overwhelming and these people, as it is, are already lost coming to this place. So what comes in handy is us explaining on a monthly basis. We can explain things to them in our language, so I think that is helping them. And, in the process, we thought we can help this community."