



# **From Isolation to Integration: Building a Sense of Belonging in a New Environment**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In today's world, the feelings of belonging and social connection are key to improving quality of life, especially for newcomers and refugees. A growing body of government and academic research points to how social connection is essential to mental and physical health and wellbeing. Cultivating belonging is especially important for newcomers and refugees, who often face the isolation of needing to learn a new language, make new personal and professional contacts, and navigate unfamiliar cultural, social, legal, and economic systems.

Moving to another country can bring feelings of loneliness and alienation, but it also offers opportunities to build new relationships and experience different cultures. This research explores how social programs and services can help people feel they belong in their new community.

Canada is one of the countries that accepts a high number of immigrants from various parts of the world. In 2023, Canada welcomed 471,771 permanent immigrants and 804,901 non-permanent residents.<sup>1</sup> In 2019, Canada led the world in Gallup's Migration Acceptance Index, making it one of the "most-accepting countries in the world for migrants."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics Canada Government of Canada, "The Daily — Canada's Population Estimates: Strong Population Growth in 2023," March 27, 2024, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/240327/dq240327c-eng.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Gallup Inc, "Canada No. 1 for Migrants, U.S. in Sixth Place," Gallup.com, September 23, 2020, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/320669/canada-migrants-sixth-place.aspx>

In 2021, first-generation immigrants made up around 23% of Canada's population, according to Statistics Canada.<sup>3</sup> That same year in Toronto, about 1.28 million residents, or about 46.6% of the population, were immigrants.<sup>4</sup>

There are multiple organizations across the country working to support newcomers. The Canadian Council for Refugees (CCR) lists 213 member organizations, nearly half of which are in Ontario.<sup>5</sup> Newcomer services can include getting assistance in finding a job, language training, or connecting with the local community.<sup>6</sup>

But how effective are support services in Toronto in helping newcomers feel they belong in their new environment? How do varying language skills and access to housing, jobs, and healthcare affect how involved newcomers feel in their community?

This research investigates this topic by sharing the views and experiences of immigrants from various backgrounds. In interviews, they describe their initial feelings of isolation and identify the moment (or moments) when they began to feel a sense of belonging in Canada. Some say they are still struggling to feel connected. Belonging is still a challenge for them.

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<sup>3</sup> Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, *Annual Report to Parliament on Immigration 2024*, accessed May 28, 2025, <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/publications-manuals/annual-report-parliament-immigration-2024.html>.

<sup>4</sup> City of Toronto, *2021 Census Backgrounder: Immigration, Ethnoracial Identity, Mobility and Migration, Religion* (November 2022), <https://www.toronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/8f69-2021-Census-Backgrounder-Immigration-Ethnoracial-Mobility-Migration-Religion-FINAL.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Canadian Council for Refugees, *Annual Report 2021–2022* (March 2023), [https://ccrweb.ca/sites/ccrweb.ca/files/2023-03/CCR\\_AnnualReport\\_2021-2022.pdf](https://ccrweb.ca/sites/ccrweb.ca/files/2023-03/CCR_AnnualReport_2021-2022.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, "Find Free Newcomer Services Near You," accessed May 28, 2025, <https://ircc.canada.ca/english/newcomers/services/index.asp>.

## 2. THE NEWCOMERS' STORIES

### 2.1 Abanoub

Abanoub (they/he) came to Toronto, Ontario from Egypt in 2018. “As someone who grew up as a religious minority and queer in Egypt, I have always struggled with the feeling of belonging,” they say.

When I first arrived in Canada I expected to resonate more with Canadian society as I was promised safety, freedom, and acceptance, but this was not the case. There were many times I felt and still feel like an outsider, for different reasons. But, unexpectedly, having a community that shares the same cultural background and connecting with people with similar experiences created a sense of belonging. Also, being present in spaces that represent me and all aspects of my identity gives me a sense of belonging. - (*Abanoub, in-person interview, October 2024*)

Not feeling a connection to the people in one’s environment, says Abanoub, “can make a person lose their sense of self and identity.”

When asked which organizations provide social services to migrants to help them feel more connected to their new home, they responded that it would be “unfair to immigrants to say that all organizations help them to connect to Canada as a home. And it will be problematic to generalize that all organizations do not know how to provide these services without causing harm.”

They received help with getting study and work permits from the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture (CCVT). They also enrolled in an English as a Second Language (ESL) program at the YMCA and did volunteer work with CultureLink, a newcomer support organization. Rainbow Railroad, an organization that supports LGBTQ+ refugees, had originally supported their efforts to come to Canada.

“For me, belonging is a place where I can be understood as a whole, and I can see and connect with others,” says Abanoub. “[In my] day by day, I found my sense of

self again, and life became complex but enjoyable for me. I have many values for being present and fighting for them.”

Abanoub does not want other newcomers to have the same struggles, so they are now studying in a community worker program to learn how they can support other immigrants and refugees in the future.<sup>7</sup>

## **2.2 Fatime**

Fatime Moradi, 26, came to Canada in December 2023 through a sponsorship program. She had fled Afghanistan and spent a year in Turkey before arriving in her new home. Now living in North York, Ontario, it took her months to overcome her inner isolation. For her, belonging means creating memories and being grateful for what she has.

Due to the security and cultural restrictions on women in Afghanistan, she had always sought a different experience, where she could have freedom and safety. She didn't feel a sense of belonging in Afghanistan because of these limitations, but over time, she created memories that made her feel more at home there.

When Fatime Moradi arrived in Canada, her sponsors worked hard to help her find a place to live, go to school, and access healthcare. Their support made it easier for her to face challenges.

However, she struggled with feeling like she didn't belong. In the early days in Canada, she felt a lot of pressure and stress. She often found it hard to sleep, and she cried without knowing why. She asked herself why she was crying when she had freedom and could do anything she wanted.

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<sup>7</sup> Abanoub, email message to the author, October 10, 2024; in-person interview with the author, October 17, 2024. Some responses were also provided in written form. ”

Fatime tried to keep busy by attending English classes that her sponsors helped her sign up for. She also visited her family doctor to talk about her health issues and her feelings of dissatisfaction. The doctor was supportive, but Fatime still faced sleepless nights.

Even though she had friends in Canada, she often spent her time smoking and lost in thought. She decided to be positive and grateful for the opportunities she had. One day last year, she hurried to take a shower and cried until she couldn't cry anymore. Afterward, she dressed in bright clothes and went out without a specific plan. She chose to take public transport to downtown Toronto.

That day, she walked down many streets and talked to herself. She reminded herself that she was in Canada, a place with great opportunities and choices. In that moment, her perspective changed. She realized that the city was becoming familiar to her. In other words, she had started to make memories in Toronto and North York, and she didn't feel like a stranger anymore.

This journey might be hard, she says, but it's not impossible: "We need to cry, face sleepless nights, and think deeply to find our way out of isolation."<sup>8</sup>

### **2.3 Odul**

Odul Gokce, 43, emigrated from Turkey to Canada with his wife five years ago. In Toronto, the two of them faced language challenges initially, but over time and with effort, they managed to overcome the barriers and improve their English skills. They have since found friends from Turkey with whom they can speak their native language, which also helps them maintain a connection to their identity. "When I made some

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<sup>8</sup> Fatima Moradi, in-person interview with the author, September 25, 2024.

friends from Turkey, I felt more comfortable,” he says. “Speaking my native language and expressing my feelings easily felt good.”

For Odul, “Belonging means living in a place where you can speak your native language.” Having Turkish friends he can connect with, he says, means that “even though I live far from my home country, I am not alone.” Belonging, in this sense, is a balance between holding onto one’s roots and adapting to a new environment.<sup>9</sup>

## **2.4 Derek**

Derek Lobban, 53, moved to Canada from Trinidad and Tobago in 1988, when he was 17 years old. His goal was to continue his education and build a better life. He has now lived in Canada for 36 years and considers it his home.

Although he had some familiarity with Canada from previous visits before immigrating, he felt more connected after starting his higher education and working part-time. Unlike many newcomers, Derek didn’t rely on social services to adapt to life in Canada. Instead, he found support in the Caribbean community, which gave him a sense of security and belonging. His relationships with people in his community, especially those from the Caribbean, have helped him feel welcome and accepted. “The Caribbean community helped by giving me an opportunity to participate in cultural events similar to back home as well as providing mentoring via established Trinidadian expatriates,” he says.

Lobban also keeps in close contact with his family and friends back home, which brings him happiness and stability. Sports, especially his martial arts training, played a big role in helping him feel safe and more connected to the community. To Derek,

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<sup>9</sup>Odul Gokce, multiple in-person interviews with the author beginning October 11, 2024. Some responses were also provided in written form.



belonging means being part of and contributing to the community. Today, he feels settled in Canada and sees his future here.<sup>10</sup>

## **2.5 Mohamed**

Mohamed Adam Yousif, 40, immigrated from Sudan in 2012. During our interview, he sits in a corner of a café in Toronto, the heavy rain outside contrasting with the warmth inside. As he occasionally lifts his coffee cup, his gaze drifts to the rainy streets. Mohamed is a calm, thoughtful man, his face marked by the weight of life's experiences. Each of his words begins with a deep sigh, as if he's still processing everything that's happened.

"When I first came to Canada," he recalls, "I had no connections to anyone. But after two years of living in Toronto, I began to feel that this place was home. There are so many people here like me, with similar cultural backgrounds, and that made me never feel alienated." In other words, the presence of many other newcomers, even those from different backgrounds, can be a source of comfort.

For Mohamed, the sense of belonging comes "from deep within, believing that you are part of a particular society." He felt this sense of belonging when he started building relationships with fellow Sudanese and others who shared similar cultural experiences. "In Toronto, there's a very diverse community, and I never felt out of place," he says.

Many newcomers leave positions of honour and prestige in their home countries and find themselves taking on poorly-paid work in their new environments. Reflecting on the challenges he faced upon arrival, Mohamed shares, "In Sudan, I was a university

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<sup>10</sup> Derek Lobban, responses provided in the written form, following an in-person briefing on the topic and questions, September 26, 2024.

professor, but when I came to Canada, I had to do whatever work I could find just to survive. For a long time, I accepted any job that came my way to make a living. These experiences made me stronger.” Learning English also made him more resilient: “English was a difficult language for me, but by going to school and speaking with people, I learned it. In the beginning, I was very self-conscious about my accent, but over time I realized that the most important thing was to keep trying and do my best.” He also speaks about the social services he received in Canada, which were instrumental in his initial settlement:

When I first arrived, programs like Ontario Works (OW) and OSAP (the Ontario Student Assistance Program) helped me a lot. These supports allowed me to become financially independent and get my life started. I think these services are crucial for immigrants, but I hope that social workers receive more training to better understand the challenges new migrants face, especially when it comes to family relationships and cultural adjustments. - *(Mohamed Adam Yousif, in-person interview, November 2024)*

Mohamed acknowledges that there are contrasts between his own culture and Canadian culture, from language and religion to social values. “There are definitely many differences,” he says, “but I’ve tried to adapt to Canadian culture and integrate myself with it.”

On social interactions in Canada, Mohamed comments, “At first, it was difficult to connect with others because in Canada, people don’t easily talk to strangers. It takes time to build trust. However, in the workplace, it was easier to connect with colleagues since professional relationships develop faster.”

After over twelve years of living in Canada, Mohamed now feels that he is truly part of the community. “This country gave me the opportunity to grow and support my family. Now, I feel safe and comfortable here, and I hope to live here forever.”

Mohamed's story is an example of how, for many immigrants, a sense of belonging in a new country is a gradual process, one shaped by challenges, hard work, and the building of meaningful relationships. His perseverance and willingness to adapt to a new culture have helped him carve out a new life in Canada, a life that now feels like home.<sup>11</sup>

## **2.6 Maryam**

Maryam<sup>12</sup> arrived in Canada in 2023 along with her family of eight. She had some command of English and was able to overcome several hurdles, such as navigating public transit and getting her driver's licence. She received help from settlement organizations in formatting her professional resume and applying for jobs. She holds a bachelor's degree in law from Afghanistan and hopes to continue her studies in Canada.

But it was volunteering at the Afghan Women's Organization that anchored her in her new environment. The experience, she says, "not only enhanced my skills but also gave me a better understanding of the challenges and needs of other newcomers."

Though she is grateful for her opportunities in Canada, she says, "I still feel the ache of longing for my homeland and the family members who remain in Afghanistan. While I find peace and security here, moments of sadness and homesickness are unavoidable."

## **2.7 Latifa**

Latifa Yaqubi, who has been in Canada for over four years, shares her experience of the difficult period during COVID-19 lockdowns. She talks not only about

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<sup>11</sup> Mohamed Adam Yousif, multiple in-person and online interviews with the author beginning November 9, 2024. Some responses were also provided in written form.

<sup>12</sup> Maryam Kohdamani, telephone interview with the author January 24, 2025. Interview questions were shared in advance, and some responses were also provided in written form.

her own challenges but also about the impact of the distance from Afghanistan, her family, and the new culture. Latifa recalls,

At first, everything was really hard for all of us. We felt tired and unfamiliar with everything. The markets, the stores, everything was new. I was happy to be amazed by the natural beauty and the impressive buildings of Canada. But at night, when my father would come home from work, we would sit around the dining table and all we talked about were stories from Afghanistan. My mother wasn't satisfied with anything here, and we would still follow the news from Afghanistan every day. During the COVID period, several of my mother's relatives passed away, and all of this made it hard for us to accept our new environment and home in Canada.

Latifa continues,

However, my two brothers and I went to school, and I struggled to introduce myself to new friends. When I tried to talk, we had nothing in common to share except for greetings. My English wasn't very good, and I couldn't speak for more than a minute. But after finishing school and improving my language skills, I started to feel a strange love for the natural beauty and opportunities Canada offers. Now, I feel a sense of belonging to Canada and its environment. I never imagined that I would want to return to Afghanistan because I was so young when I left. I feel less connected to Afghanistan, and I believe the pain of being away is something I only see from my mother's perspective. I think that as much as we love Canada, Canada loves us in return and gives us opportunities. I feel a sense of belonging to the people, the English language, and the environment here, and I love it.<sup>13</sup>

Latifa's experience highlights that younger generations, who in contrast to their parents or guardians can learn English or French in a school environment, may more easily adapt and feel a sense of belonging.

## **2.8 Nabila Shifa**

But many newcomers' journeys to Canada have, in themselves, been traumatic. Nabila, 42, is a single mom. Her journey to Canada started for the first time in 2013, when she was pregnant with her first baby. She went to Buffalo, New York, from Saudi Arabia, and applied for asylum status in Canada. After three weeks, her application was rejected. She went to Texas, where she had family. Her baby died one day before its

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<sup>13</sup> Latifa Yaqubi, in-person interview with the author, December 7, 2024.

due date, and afterwards, she returned to Saudi Arabia. After six months, she became pregnant with her son. Her family encouraged her to try immigrating to Canada again. In 2017, when she was pregnant with her third child, she returned to America and crossed the border into Canada near Montreal. “They accepted my son as a refugee, but they didn’t accept me as a refugee.” But in 2022, her status changed.

She says she’s happy to have her mother and three sisters with her in Canada. But the father of her children is still in Saudi Arabia. “Maybe if he was here, it would be less stress,” she says, “because I’m alone with the kids and they need their father.” Her past troubles with being accepted as a refugee have also left a deep impression on her, making it difficult to form a deep attachment to Canada. “Maybe one day we will feel we belong here,” she says. “I don’t want [my children] to stay in a country like Canada. At the end, the government will say, ‘You are not a citizen of this country.’”<sup>14</sup>

## **2.9 Maryam K.**

Maryam Kohdamani, a young girl who migrated from Afghanistan to Canada in 2023 with her family, shares her experience of adapting to a new environment and overcoming social isolation:

One of the biggest challenges for me was navigating the public transportation system without a Canadian driver’s license. This motivated me to focus on obtaining my G2 license. Finding a job and creating a professional resume was also difficult, but with the support of settlement organizations, I was able to craft a strong resume and start applying for jobs.

[...]

Volunteering at the Afghan Women’s Organization helped me improve my skills and gain a better understanding of the challenges faced by other newcomers.

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<sup>14</sup> Nabila Shifa, online interview with the author, February 22, 2025. Some responses were also provided by voice message.

Pursuing further education remains a key part of my journey. Although I hold a bachelor's degree in law from Afghanistan and once dreamed of becoming a judge, I know that achieving this goal in Canada will require further study and effort.

[...]

While I have found peace and security here, I still feel the ache of longing for my homeland. Despite this, my family and I are deeply grateful to Canada for giving us a second chance to build a better future.<sup>15</sup>

### **3. THE SUPPORT WORKERS' STORIES**

#### **3.1 *Juanne***

Juanne Nancarrow Clarke is a professor emeritus from the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Wilfrid Laurier University. Clarke has researched Canada's private sponsorship model in the context of Syrian refugees and written about its successes and shortcomings. "Support from institutions such as schools and healthcare services, along with fair treatment in everyday interactions and formal systems, enhances newcomers' feelings of security and acceptance," she says.

Additionally, she says, exposure to positive messages about immigration and favourable portrayals of their homeland in the media can boost their spirits. Establishing close relationships with Canadian citizens and learning the official languages in their new home are also key factors in facilitating integration. Newcomers need support from their peers during the initial days, she says, and the success of their children in school can strengthen the sense of belonging within families. Easy access to information about available services and opportunities, as well as the recognition of skills and qualifications from their home country, helps them to fully utilize their rights.

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<sup>15</sup> Maryam Kohdamani, telephone interview with the author, January 24, 2025. Some responses were also provided in written form.

Conversely, a lack of a welcoming environment can lead to social conflicts and increased prejudice against newcomers among those already living in Canada. Therefore, it is essential for Canadian society to create an inclusive and supportive environment that not only benefits newcomers but also enriches the cultural and social fabric of the community.<sup>16</sup>

### **3.2 Darrell**

Darrell Pinto, director of employment at Jumpstart Refugee Talent, a Toronto-based organization, underscores the vital role employment plays in fostering a sense of belonging for newcomers. “We only focus on employment, although we know that to feel truly connected and a sense of belonging to any community, more than employment is needed,” he explains. Due to limited resources, the organization specializes in job readiness, offering services such as resume building, interview coaching, and credential evaluation. Additionally, they maintain relationships with employers and refer qualified candidates, although securing a job remains highly competitive. “Employers receive applications from many channels, including ours, so while we give refugee candidates an edge, the final decision is up to the employer,” Pinto notes.

The organization has witnessed firsthand how finding employment alleviates stress for immigrants who have often struggled for months to secure work. “When someone does get a job, they feel a sense of relief because the chances are they have been looking for some time. They all have bills to pay. When they do get that job, they are so grateful,” Pinto says. He adds that many immigrants remain with their first

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<sup>16</sup> Juanne Nancarrow Clarke, in-person interview with the author, October 30, 2024. Some responses were also provided in written form.

employer for an extended period, as the process of job searching is often difficult and exhausting.

Beyond financial security, employment also serves as an anchor, enabling immigrants to work towards other goals. “Employment is only one part of a sense of belonging,” Pinto explains. “Once they have a stable income, housing becomes more attainable, and they can start building a future in their new community.”

Although the organization does not directly assist with housing, it refers clients to settlement agencies across Canada that offer broader support services. Pinto acknowledges the challenges newcomers face but stresses that meaningful employment is a crucial first step toward integration and stability.<sup>17</sup>

### **3.3 Bill**

Bill Croson and his partner offer a safe space in their Toronto home for newcomers, especially those facing violence or threats due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. But security can also be found in more mundane activities. In an interview, Bill emphasized the importance of helping immigrants navigate bureaucratic processes to access healthcare, language support, and government services. “We also try to make connections with other people in the queer community so that they can positively experience the LBGTQIA+ community in a way they may never have known in their countries of origin or in the countries where they sought refuge after escaping their countries of origin,” Bill wrote in a follow-up email.

Bill highlighted the long-term impact of their efforts, noting that many individuals stay in their home for years, building lasting connections. However, he acknowledged

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<sup>17</sup> Darrell Pinto, phone interview with the author, February 27, 2025. Some responses were also provided by voice message.



newcomers' ongoing challenges of finding affordable housing and employment, particularly for those with limited English skills or no Canadian work experience. He critiqued employment services for not adequately addressing the needs of newcomers, such as the mismatch between the common Canadian resume styles many employers require and the kinds of backgrounds, experience, and skills that many immigrants have.

Bill also addressed the mental health struggles faced by immigrants and the lack of awareness surrounding available healthcare supports (though he noted that these supports are limited). He expressed frustration with the bureaucratic barriers to accessing care. He also noted the stigma surrounding mental health that exists in some cultures and how that prevents people from acknowledging that there are issues. Language acquisition and cultural adaptation are additional hurdles, with some newcomers finding English classes overwhelming and, as a result, clinging to their original cultures.

Lastly, he noted that many newcomers, particularly in the LGBTQIA+ community, still feel like outsiders due to religious, cultural and systemic barriers. Queer newcomers often face the same prejudices with people who have arrived in Canada from the same or similar countries of origin and from the same ethnic and cultural backgrounds. For employment, many employers require that job applicants present evidence of Canadian work experience. As newcomers, they usually have none.

Bill also emphasized that more attention should be given to the trauma and challenges that have been faced by all forced migrants. These observations point to a barrier that arises from expectations among broader society that newcomers must

behave just like longtime residents, with little or no consideration for newcomers' lived experiences.<sup>18</sup>

### **3.4 Robina**

Robina Aryubwal, who works with Journalists for Human Rights (JHR) in Canada, has participated in the organization's services to support journalists and newcomers to Canada, particularly after the Taliban's 2021 return to power in Afghanistan. By focusing on providing supportive services for immigrant journalists and human rights activists, especially in times of crisis, she has helped these individuals establish strong connections with their new communities.

Through her work with JHR, Robina has supported over 500 Afghan refugees through their evacuation and resettlement process, using her native languages and cultural understanding to build trust and empathy. She emphasizes the importance of psychological and cultural support, organizing counselling and support sessions to reduce feelings of isolation among migrants and human rights activists. Additionally, she works to improve the living conditions of refugees by helping them access resources for housing and employment. Robina believes that providing trauma-informed support, language training, and social engagement programs can significantly contribute to fostering a sense of belonging and integration among immigrants.

I often saw deep feelings of isolation and trauma among those who had been evacuated. To address this, we at JHR provided compassionate and culturally sensitive support, showing kindness and understanding. We made sure they felt heard, valued, and never alone.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Bill Croson, responses provided in the written form, preceded by a phone discussion with the author about the topic, November 1, 2024.

<sup>19</sup> Robina Aryubwal, responses provided in the written form, November 19, 2024.

Belonging helps heal trauma by giving people a sense of safety, connection, and support. When someone feels like they are part of a community, they are less isolated and more likely to share their experiences, which can reduce stress and fear. Supportive relationships provide emotional comfort and help rebuild trust, especially for those who have faced displacement or violence. Feeling accepted and valued also boosts self-confidence and mental well-being, making it easier to move forward and heal from past trauma.

#### **4. KEY TAKEAWAYS**

Based on these interviews, the following is a list of factors that have helped facilitate a sense of belonging.

##### From newcomers' perspectives:

- Having a community that shares the same cultural background and connecting with people with similar experiences.
- Developing familiarity with the new environment, allowing newcomers to create positive memories of their current home.
- Having opportunities to connect with people from their home communities and speak their native language.
- Finding work, achieving financial stability, and developing a professional network.

##### From support workers' perspectives

- Providing culturally sensitive programming.
- Providing access to stable housing and employment.

- Lifting bureaucratic barriers that prevent many newcomers from accessing health services, particularly mental health services.
- Lifting employers' requirements that newcomers have "Canadian experience" on their resumes.
- Providing social engagement programs to allow newcomers to feel they are part of their communities.

## 5. CONCLUSION

These stories show that the feeling of belonging for migrants is a gradual process, shaped through social relationships, self-identity recognition, and the creation of memories in new places. In other words, belonging is about far more than access to services. As Kim Samuel writes in *On Belonging*, "We are searching for a deeper connection."<sup>20</sup>

Samuel explains that belonging takes shape in four main areas: social relationships, connection to nature, the ability to influence political and economic decisions, and finding meaning and purpose in life. These areas not only show that belonging is more than just access to resources, but they also emphasize that to create an inclusive society, spaces must be made where migrants feel this: whether we are talking about the cosmos, humans, political structures, or economic systems, what matters is not the placement of things, but how they are interconnected. We don't need to be perfect; we don't need to be the best. It is enough that we are here, and that we belong equally. We can and should learn to accept different perspectives as just

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<sup>20</sup> Kim Samuel, *On Belonging: Finding Connection in an Age of Isolation* (New York: Abrams Press, 2022).

that—different, but no less valid—since none of our thoughts or opinions are the central reference point around which all others must revolve.

**“If you want to make the world a better place, take a look at yourself, and then make a change.” - Michael Jackson, “Man in the Mirror”<sup>21</sup>**

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Jackson, “Man in the Mirror,” *Bad*, Epic Records, 1987, quoted in Kim Samuel, *On Belonging: Finding Connection in an Age of Isolation* (New York: Abrams Press, 2022), 238.

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