The Welcome Group Program: Social Connections to Accelerate Refugee Integration in Toronto, Canada

Anna Hill, Together Project Co-Director

Meet, Share, Inspire: International Conference of Good Practices on Refugee Protection
MATCHING PROGRAM

-We support our volunteers in 6-month cohorts of 10-15 matches.
-Our training curriculum prepares our volunteers to provide safe, effective social support to accelerate refugee integration.
APPROACH

- We work closely with our settlement agency partners to make and monitor our matches.
- We use a preference matching system based on criteria like family size, common interests, profession and geographic location.
- Our Cultural Ambassadors provide language and cultural interpretation.
- We use WhatsApp to offer remote support throughout the match.
- Our monitoring and evaluation allows us to refine and strengthen our model.
IMPACT

- We have matched over 500 volunteers with 500 refugees in cities like Toronto, and Ottawa in Canada.
- 90% of our volunteers and newcomers are satisfied with their experience.
- 80% of newcomers report that their Welcome Group was helpful in making them feel more independent.
- 90% of volunteers report having learned more about refugee integration and the specific challenges refugees are facing through their match.
LESSONS LEARNED

- Friendship cannot be expected or enforced. The term carries different meanings for different cultures.
- Instead, our goal is to build “social connections” that are based on newcomer-defined priorities like language learning, or access to employment, healthcare or education.
- Newcomer-defined priorities clarify expectations for both the refugees and the volunteer participants.
- This sense of shared purpose is essential to build social bridges between diverse groups.
- In addition to our Welcome Group matching program, we also host community events in public space to foster newcomer social inclusion.
- Since 2017, we have worked with about 20 partners to host over 30 community events for refugee newcomers across Toronto.
- Toronto’s mayor, John Tory, gave the keynote address at our Newcomer Picnic in 2018.
THANK YOU!

www.togetherproject.ca
anna@togetherproject.ca