



WELLESLEY INSTITUTE
advancing urban health

Policy Brief

St. James Town Research into Action: Language Training

“Many of the residents here are struggling to survive on minimum wages and a number of them cannot speak English fluently. As a result they cannot communicate their frustrations effectively.”

-SJT Initiative Participant, Photo Voice Report

This series of policy briefs analyzes the implications of the research findings from the *St. James Town Initiative* and sets out recommendations and options for action.

Language in St James Town

- 66% of SJT residents have a mother tongue that is neither English nor French.
- 42% speak neither English nor French at home.¹
- The most common languages spoken are Tamil, Tagalog and Chinese.
- English language training is a key issue for SJT residents, particularly newcomers to Canada.

The Importance of Language

- English-language proficiency plays a crucial role for SJT residents in terms of their ability to find employment, successfully integrate into their new neighbourhood and learn, know and understand their rights (particularly their rights as tenants).
- Language ability is a vital component of an immigrant’s successful integration into the Canadian labour market. Eighty percent of Ontario employers consistently cite language and communication skills as the number one barrier to hiring skilled immigrants.² Effective and accessible language training policies are imperative for helping non-English speakers integrate effectively and succeed in the workplace.³
- Communication barriers can also lead to increased social isolation, impede access to information and public services, and prevent residents from asserting their rights.

The *St. James Town Initiative* is Wellesley Institute’s largest research and community capacity building project. In the first phase of the project, participatory research methods such as Photo Voice and Community Mapping were used. The Initiative is the first of its kind to integrate Photo Voice into concept mapping software to organize data for planning and action. Its goal is to work with the community to better understand the ways in which neighbourhood factors affect immigrant residents’ health and well-being.

How Language Affects Health

- Lack of proficiency in English also affects SJT residents’ health:

¹ Statistics Canada, “Census Tract Profile for 0065.00 (CT), Toronto (CMA) and Ontario.”

² Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC). “Invest in Immigrant Employment for a Stronger Economy.” 2009 Provincial Pre-Budget Submission, November 21, 2008.

³ *Ibid.*

- There is considerable research evidence and provider consensus that language is a crucial barrier to equitable access to good quality health care for many patients who are uncomfortable speaking English.⁴ If patients are unable to communicate effectively with their health care providers, they face increased risks of misdiagnoses, misunderstandings and reduced adherence to medication or prevention instructions.⁵
- Many service providers rely on clients to bring family members or friends to serve as interpreters, which raises concerns about confidentiality and the reliability of the interpretation.
- Many SJT residents leave the neighbourhood to access health services in their own language.
- More broadly, it can be difficult to communicate when residents' health is being affected by issues such as maintenance problems in apartment buildings. Individuals may also experience frustration and emotional strain from being constantly misunderstood, and feel like their voices are not being heard.⁶

Language Training Programs

- Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC)
 - LINC is a federally funded program, aimed largely at adults, which provides free, basic language training through numerous service providers
 - Participants receive support for transportation costs and access to child care services (although service providers are often unable to provide these additional services to all participants).
- Enhanced Language Training (ELT)
 - Learning English for employment purposes is the single most important language training need.⁷
 - Since LINC provides basic language training that is insufficient for use in today's knowledge-based workplace, Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) developed Enhanced Language Training (ELT) which provides free, higher-level, occupational-specific language training in combination with labour market support in areas such as workplace culture, resumé-writing and job searching.
- English as a Second Language (ESL) Programs
 - Individuals who do not qualify for LINC or ELT depend on provincially funded or private ESL classes
 - ESL budgets tend to be much smaller and are affected by changes in provincial education budgets and school board priorities. As a result, ESL classes are often inadequately funded and can have long wait lists, particularly in Toronto.⁸
 - The vast majority of classes are offered during business hours on weekdays, making it difficult for newcomers to balance jobs and ESL classes.
 - Other barriers to participation in language training include:

⁴ Gardner, Bob. "Health Equity Discussion Paper." Toronto Central Local Health Integration Network, 2008, p.15.

⁵ Hyman, Ilene. "Literature Review: Costs of Not Providing Interpretation in Health Care." Access Alliance, June 2009, p.5.

⁶ Haque, Nasim et al. "Photovoice Project." St. James Town Initiative, Wellesley Institute, p.42.

⁷ Wayland, Sarah V. "Unsettled: Legal and Policy Barriers for Newcomers to Canada: Literature Review." A Joint Initiative of Community Foundations of Canada and the Law Commission of Canada, 2006, p.53.

⁸ *Ibid*, pp 54-55.

- Fees, when participants do not qualify for government-funded programs;
- The need for immediate income which takes precedence over the need for language training;
- Restricted eligibility for LINC and ELT;
- Course scheduling that is not conducive to work/child care schedules;
- There are very few programs for immigrants with disabilities.⁹

Policy Action Needed

Significant improvements in accessibility, quality and relevance of language programs are required to ensure that newcomers reach proficiency in English.¹⁰ Policy options include:

- **Expanding Eligibility:** LINC and ELT are only available to permanent residents, convention refugees and those whose application for permanent residency is being processed. Both programs, especially ELT, should be made available to temporary workers, refugee claimants, international students and immigrants who have already become citizens but may require additional employment-specific language training.
- **Increasing Funding for ELT:** ELT has shown potential in helping immigrants obtain jobs in their fields, but the programs are not widely available. Thousands remain on wait lists or cannot access ELT. Federal funding for ELT programs should be increased and additional programs – building on successful pilot projects that have improved language skills and helped immigrants integrate into the labour force – should be developed.
- **Reducing Barriers:** Reducing other barriers to access – including ensuring the provision of child care services, reducing fees and providing services for immigrants with disabilities – is crucial.
- **Improving Outreach:** In many cases, immigrants are not aware of language training opportunities. Outreach needs to be expanded to effectively target specific newcomer communities in their language and networks. Newcomers must be made aware of language programs for which they are eligible and encouraged to take advantage of the opportunities to improve their English skills.¹¹
- **Overseas Language Training:** In a consultation with the federal government, many immigrants recommended that additional language preparation should be undertaken prior to arrival in Canada. The federal government should provide online Canadian culture-specific language training for potential immigrants to improve their skills and knowledge before they come to Canada.
- **Coordinating Services:** Governments need to ensure that the complex maze of providers and programs are better coordinated and must provide specific funding to community providers to link up their services. There is great potential in hub-style integrated delivery in which a whole continuum of comprehensive services – language training plus employment training, child care etc. – are delivered out of one-stop locations such as multi-service neighbourhood centres, community health centres and other non-profit organizations.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.56.

¹⁰ Wayland, Sarah V. "Unsettled: Legal and Policy Barriers for Newcomers to Canada." A Joint Initiative of Community Foundations of Canada and the Law Commission of Canada, 2006, p.20.

¹¹ Alexander, Craig. "Literacy Matters: Helping Newcomers Unlock Their Potential." T.D. Bank Financial Group, n.d., p.16.