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# Come One, Come All Best Practices in Immigrant Retention

GREATER HALIFAX PARTNERSHIP

Halifax is rolling out the welcome mat – and more. Canadians, ex-pats, and immigrants are all being embraced by Nova Scotia's capital city, which has put in place a plan to ensure that a warm welcome is much more than two words on a carpet.

Indeed, says Dan English, Chief Administrative Officer for HRM, "Halifax Regional Municipality's primary role in immigration is to create and maintain a welcoming community. We must never forget that immigration is about people."

"In order to increase the number of individuals and families who move to our region and stay in the long term," he stresses, "we must create a welcoming environment."

In the province of a hundred thousand welcomes – *Ciad Mile Failte* in the traditional Gaelic – you'd think this would be easy. But as with every important message, this is one that must be reinforced, and widely shared. "We need to actively support newcomers. It's easy to take for granted that we do that already," says Sarah Young, Principal with MT&L Public Relations in Halifax.

That assumption has, however, been questioned recently. "In the last couple of years, we've heard that while we are a friendly community we are not necessarily a welcoming one," notes Young.

"Once we heard that," she adds, "we came together to change it."

That change started with the formation of the Welcoming Communities Committee, which was

established by the Greater Halifax Partnership and is made up primarily of recent immigrants – individuals who understand firsthand what it's like to be a stranger in a strange city. "Our job," Jacqueline Steudler, an Art Therapist from Switzerland, "is to serve as a sounding board and to give advice. That will help make the move to Halifax easier – and the community feel like home more quickly."

The committee plays a key role in introducing newcomers to local residents, and local leaders, so there will be familiar faces in their lives, notes Stephen Dempsey, President and CEO of the Greater Halifax Partnership, which leads economic growth for the municipality. "It plans events where local residents, leaders and municipal councillors can come together to welcome newcomers and introduce themselves as neighbours."

One of those events is an annual barbecue, this year held in Fleming Park, commonly called The Dingle, located on the famous Northwest Arm. Initially, notes Graziella Grbac, Manager of Community Economic Development with the Partnership, the event drew 60 to 70 people. This summer more than 200 turned out for an afternoon of camaraderie, including Mayor Peter Kelly and senior officials from the city.

Such events are more than fun, says Dempsey, they are essential. "It is not enough to say, 'Welcome, now settle in.' We recognize that

newcomers need to be integrated into the community, and they are looking to those of us who already live here to help them.”

Without such integration – without people feeling at home in the community – newcomers will leave. That exodus is a situation Halifax, like many cities in Canada, is grappling with. “Immigration is crucial to the future growth and development of Greater Halifax and Nova Scotia,” notes Dempsey. “Compared to the last census period, the number of new immigrants choosing Halifax increased by 53%, but that only represents half of one percent of all immigrants that came to Canada; it is not enough. We also need to work on increasing immigrant retention.”

To address the issue, the Greater Halifax Partnership led a community approach to open doors, open borders and open opportunities. Out of that effort emerged the Halifax Region Immigration Strategy, a blueprint for enhanced attraction and retention of immigrants to the city. Three components are critical to success: complementing federal and provincial initiatives in this area; more fully integrating immigrants already living in Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM); and drawing immigrants to the community who are most likely to put down roots and call Halifax home.

Halifax Regional Municipality also has an Immigration Action Plan. This plan will complement the Nova Scotia Immigration Strategy, while recognizing the municipal mandate and supporting the key components of the Halifax Region Immigration Strategy. “HRM is prepared to undertake positive changes that will allow us to more effectively serve our diverse community, says English.”

A vital starting point is leadership. The Halifax Immigration Leadership Council, co-chaired by the Partnership and the Metropolitan Immigrant Settlement Association (MISA), was established to provide that expert guidance and direction. Comprised of leaders in the field, and the community, the group is focused on attracting, retaining and integrating immigrants into HRM. “The individuals that form the Leadership Council are a unique team that help to make sure our immigration efforts are working,” says Dempsey.

A best practices approach requires awareness – locally. Immigrants need to be valued, and their contributions celebrated. So the Partnership developed an award-winning ad campaign, launched last year, which focuses on enhancing perception and attitudes of the business

community towards hiring an immigrant. Ads ran in the two daily metro papers and there are now plans to expand the campaign to include TV and billboards.

A more up-close-and-personal initiative is videos that feature employers who have hired immigrants and speak to the importance of these workers, as well as the need to welcome them to the community. “Employees are the backbone of any successful company, and it is important to build a team with the skills and expertise – and energy – to achieve your vision,” says Greg Grice, Regional President, Atlantic provinces, RBC Royal Bank.

“We must be willing to invest in employees, and we must be willing to invest in newcomers to Atlantic Canada,” he adds.

Such investment pays off – for everyone. Sometimes, of course, a helping hand is required. On March 20th, the Immigration Leadership Council, the Halifax Immigrant Learning Centre (HILC) and the Metropolitan Immigrant Settlement Association (MISA) hosted a very successful networking event aimed at promoting services that connect employers and newcomers. The Partnership led the coordination of the event attended by more than 200 individuals. Employers and newcomers learned about the programs and services available to them through Nova Scotia’s most recent bridging program, “Work in Nova Scotia” (WINS). The WINS program provides a range of language and employment supports and services to prepare newcomers for working in Nova Scotia. The event was a great forum to bring both of the groups together and was a huge first step in connecting employers with newcomers looking for meaningful work.

Newcomers aren’t alone in their need for a helping hand. Businesses also need to understand the benefits of hiring newcomers and the challenges inherent in that process.

To assist businesses throughout the metro area, the Partnership has added the Nova Scotia Office of Immigration to its SmartBusiness Action Team. SmartBusiness is about responding to business with real answers in real-time, and it is through the Action Team – a group of more than 25 senior business people and government officials – that the Partnership works with employers to address needs and identify opportunities that affect company growth.

“Supporting local businesses means talking face-to-face with employers and hearing first-

*According to Statistics Canada, Halifax is home to the lion's share of Atlantic Canada's immigrants. Core working-age recent immigrants (those who landed between 5 and 10 years prior to 2006) in the Halifax area fared very well in the labour market, with 88.9% of them employed, higher than that of Canadian-born Haligonians (84.7%).*

hand about what affects them. Armed with this information, our task becomes one of tackling obstacles and clearing the way for a vibrant and growing economy in Greater Halifax," says Dempsey.

In turn, the private sector will step up to the plate – and hit a welcoming home run. "It is crucial that we mobilize the private sector to attend events for newcomers and learn about immigration programs," adds Dempsey. "It is essential that they are actively welcoming new Nova Scotians."

First, of course, they have to find their new employees. The Partnership's Immigration Employer Support Program is helping employers by providing guidelines, information and support as they navigate through the hiring process. For those employers who have indicated recruitment challenges, the program provides information on the opportunities and benefits of hiring immigrants and how to begin.

Partnership staff is also meeting regularly with employers and discussing the different aspects involved in the immigration process, and the benefits of hiring newcomers.

Employers came together recently with potential new employees at Pier 21's Welcome Home to Canada job fair where 14 immigrants looking for work networked with approximately 70 local employers. This is the fourth time since 2006 the job fair and networking session has been held. It certainly won't be the last.

Work is one critical element of drawing immigrants to a community and keeping them involved and engaged. There are many more – and a welcoming community encompasses them all. "We know that newcomers stay in a location if they can be successful economically and are accepted into the social fabric of the community," says Grbac.

A welcoming community, she notes, does four critical things. It enhances diversity and cultural awareness in schools, workplaces and across the community. It helps to develop equitable business practices and awareness programs, and shares resource materials, tools and programs for

community groups and neighbourhoods. Finally, it celebrates success.

As home to 55% of Atlantic Canadian immigrants and 80% of immigrants to Nova Scotia, HRM has a significant interest in providing the most welcoming environment possible for newcomers. "HRM's ability to maintain and build upon the immigrant population is fundamental

#### **Halifax: Fast Facts**

- Halifax is a positively magnetic city – a recent Conference Board of Canada report ranked Halifax as the 7th most economically attractive city in Canada.
  - Of the 27 cities in the survey, Halifax is the only Atlantic Canadian city to rank in the top 10.
  - Halifax ranked well in the areas of education, environment and health.
- Between 2001 and 2006, Halifax received 5,060 new immigrants, which represents 18.4% of the foreign-born population. Compared to the last census period, the number of new immigrants increased by 53%.
- In 2006, Halifax had the largest foreign-born population in the Atlantic provinces with 27,400 people. This is a 12% increase from the foreign-born population in 2001.
- Halifax is home to almost 40% of Nova Scotia's residents and more than 15% of Atlantic Canadians.
- The city is youthful. More than half the population is currently under 45 years of age.
- Halifax is Canada's Smart City with 63% of the working-age population having a university or community college education, and almost 25% of the city's labour force having a university degree.
- There are six degree-granting institutions located in Halifax. Together, they enroll more than 30,000 students.
- Halifax is Atlantic Canada's economic engine, generating 45% of Nova Scotia's GDP and 15% of GDP for all of Atlantic Canada.
- Halifax and the Halifax economy have been growing steadily and consistently over the past decade, a period during which the unemployment rate for the area has always been below the national average.

to our region's economic, social and cultural success," states English.

According to Statistics Canada, Halifax is home to the lion's share of Atlantic Canada's immigrants. Core working-age recent immigrants (those who landed between 5 and 10 years prior to 2006) in the Halifax area fared very well in the labour market, with 88.9% of them employed, higher than that of Canadian-born Haligonians (84.7%). Their employment rate ranked among the highest of the 11 CMAs included in their analysis.

HRM is not alone in its efforts. The Atlantic Immigration Conference, hosted by the Atlantic Mayor's Congress in May 2005, sought to spell out how communities across Atlantic Canada could work together and share best practices in terms of attracting, welcoming, integrating and retaining newcomers to the region.

The city has now transformed many of those ideas into action. It is working with Citizenship and Immigration Canada to hold citizenship ceremonies in community facilities and provide information on local services following the sessions. It is providing welcome letters from the mayor and councillors for all newcomers. It is enhancing the immigration section of the HRM website so that there is a wealth of information and it is easy to find. The Partnership and HRM are also working together on the development of a *Newcomers' Guide to HRM*, a printed and electronic directory of services available in the community, such as public transportation, recreation and libraries, property taxes, garbage and recycling, and a snow-removal schedule.

It is, in all respects, rolling out the welcome mat.

That includes the work the Greater Halifax Partnership is doing in support of the Nova Scotia Nominee Program. Newcomers in Greater Halifax who want to apply for Nova Scotia's "community identified" stream of the Provincial Nominee Program contact the Partnership to obtain a letter of identification as a first step. "Our role is to look at candidates' community connections and potential contributions, and support them through this initial phase in their immigration process," says Grbac.

As newcomers move through that process, or move here from elsewhere in Canada, nothing replaces a friendly face and a helping hand. "It's about what we can each do individually," says Young. "Invite someone to a barbecue; take time for coffee with a newcomer. It's easy, and we all benefit."

Indeed, says Dempsey, the best way to welcome people to the community is one at a time. "It's the old-fashioned way - and it works. If people feel welcome, others will follow."

Welcome home to Halifax.

#### **About the Greater Halifax Partnership**

The GREATER HALIFAX PARTNERSHIP leads economic growth for Greater Halifax. Our focus is our businesses, our people, our community. The Partnership brings together all three levels of government, more than 150 private-sector investors and many different community groups to drive the economic growth of our region.