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## Refugee project improves health-care service for all newcomers

Syrian refugees in Interior Health are receiving high-quality, culturally sensitive health-care services thanks to Interior Health's recent work to develop a systematic, evidence-based care approach for this population, a presentation during today's Interior Health Board meeting highlighted.

In November 2015, Interior Health learned that up to 400 Syrian refugees could be arriving to local communities over the winter months. At the time, there wasn't an organized system in place to respond to the health-care needs of newcomers to the area. Today, things are very different.

"I applaud Interior Health for their quick and diligent work to provide the high quality health care B.C. is known for to hundreds of Syrian newcomers," said Health Minister Terry Lake. "This is a great example of how teamwork among health-care practitioners and community partners can result in improved patient care."

"A lot of incredible work happened in a very short period of time," said Leslie Bryant MacLean, Leader of Quality and Projects for Population Health with Interior Health. "Through collaboration with physicians, nurse practitioners, community agencies, municipalities and other stakeholders, care pathways were developed, clinical tools were created, and education was provided on a number of topics including billing, cultural competence, health-care assessments and more."

In addition, Interior Health began identifying and recruiting a range of health-care providers (physicians, specialists, midwives, dentists, physiotherapists, and optometrists) who were willing to deliver care to refugees through the Interim Federal Health (IFH) program. Contact lists were developed for 18 communities to make finding health-care providers as easy as possible for the new arrivals.

From early November 2015 to the end of April 2016, 135 Syrian refugees settled in communities within Interior Health. While that number is lower than initial projections, the need for health-care services and support was significant. The new pathways and protocols helped ensure high-quality, evidence-based care was being delivered.

"Refugees face so many challenges when arriving in a new country and we wanted to make sure that accessing health care was as easy, comfortable, and welcoming as possible. The primary care centres did an amazing job accommodating urgent-care needs and using Arabic signage to welcome the refugees," added Bryant MacLean.

Refugee health teams were established in primary care centres in Kelowna, Kamloops and Vernon. These primary care centres served as health-care hubs providing screening, immunization, and addressing immediate health-care needs of refugees, as well as making referrals for treatment of chronic health concerns like diabetes and heart disease. Nurse practitioners were instrumental as primary care providers for the Syrian newcomers.

"We provided primary care with a nursing lens. Many of the cultural, social, and language needs were addressed seamlessly along with clinical diagnoses and treatment," said Colleen Regehr, Nurse Practitioner in Kamloops.

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The tools and pathways developed also helped community agencies, like Kelowna Community Resources, connect refugees with health-care services.

“We are very excited about Interior Health’s proactive approach to serving refugees. The collaboration between Kelowna Community Resources and Interior Health has ensured a seamless service for newly arrived Syrians to our community,” said Katelin Mitchell, Immigrant Services Manager for Kelowna Community Resources. “Our team is grateful to be able to pick up the phone and have immediate assistance to help these families navigate the health-care system. The lists of health-care professionals registered with IFH has been a great asset.”

“As a first generation immigrant to Canada myself, I personally understand the challenges newcomers face when arriving in a new country. I am so proud of the hard work and commitment that our health-care teams have dedicated to this initiative over the past several months,” says Erwin Malzer, Interior Health Board Chair. “Their focus on providing culturally sensitive health care helps ensure Interior Health continues to deliver top-notch care to all newcomers. The success of this initiative also strengthens our commitment going forward to provide culturally sensitive care that addresses the needs of all marginalized populations within Interior Health.”

The work done to respond to the health-care needs of Syrian refugees is expected to become the new standard for delivering health care to all newcomers including refugees, immigrants and temporary workers.

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## Backgrounder

- Between Nov. 4, 2015, and April 24, 2016, 135 Syrian refugees settled in communities within Interior Health.
- Syrian refugees settled in eight Interior Health communities.
  - Kamloops – 22
  - Kelowna – 68
  - Naramata – 4
  - Oliver – 7
  - Penticton – 5
  - Salmon Arm - 11
  - Summerland – 11
  - Vernon – 7

Of these, 47 were government assisted refugees (received financial assistance/support through the federal government). The remaining 88 were privately sponsored refugees (sponsored by churches and community groups).

- Between January and April 2016, Kelowna, Kamloops and Vernon primary care centres saw 91 Syrian refugees. One hundred per cent of these required the services of an interpreter.
- Interior Health's [refugee and newcomer webpage](#) features resources such as the Newcomer Clinical Care Pathway, local provider lists and other tools to support front-line workers who are caring for refugees across Interior Health. Between December 2015 and May 26, 2016, the refugee and newcomer webpage received 2,810 page views from within the province.
- The Interior Health area sees approximately 11,000 newcomers each year.