

SHARING SETTLEMENT AND INTEGRATION PRACTICES THAT WORK IRCOM HOUSE

Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba Inc.
Winnipeg, MB

Area of Practice:
Housing

Video:
<https://youtu.be/mwQ1sW3jCdw>

A Pathways to
Prosperity Project

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**PATHWAYS TO
PROSPERITY**
Promoting Welcoming Communities in Canada



**VOIES VERS LA
PROSPÉRITÉ**
Promouvoir des communautés accueillantes au Canada

BACKGROUND ON THE ORGANIZATION AND IMPETUS FOR THE PROGRAM

The Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba Inc. (IRCOM) is a non-profit organization in Winnipeg, MB and is responsible for managing IRCOM House. IRCOM House offers secure, affordable and clean apartments to low-income newcomer families for up to three years after their arrival to Canada, complemented by IRCOM's many holistic, wrap-around supports and services.

IRCOM (originally called the South-East Asian Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba [SEARCOM]) was founded in 1984 by two social workers of Southeast Asian descent who wanted to support a large number of refugees ("boat people") arriving from Southeast Asia. They were deeply concerned about their community members who were struggling to integrate into Canadian society. In 1991, IRCOM opened its first apartment building, providing an alternative and supportive form of transitional housing to newcomers to Canada in their first three years of residence. In 2009, IRCOM was approached to open a second location, and the new building was opened in 2016.

The founders of IRCOM understood the importance of housing in the settlement process – it can either exacerbate or mitigate the challenges faced by newcomers – and this understanding led to the creation of a unique model aimed at addressing these challenges, including lack of access to affordable housing, isolation and lack of community connection and engagement, inability to navigate governmental and social systems, and lack of interpreters in such systems. IRCOM provides solutions to these problems by providing affordable housing for newcomers during the transitional years, paired with wrap-around services and supports for newcomer families. It also equips newcomers with the knowledge needed to choose future housing options within and beyond the social housing continuum.

OVERVIEW OF THE PROGRAM

Name:

IRCOM House

Description:

IRCOM provides low-income newcomer families with safe, affordable housing for up to three years after arrival to Canada, along with holistic, wrap-around programs and services for parents and children. For tenants who are working, IRCOM uses a Rent Geared to Income (RGI) model to ensure that tenants do not pay a disproportionately high percentage of income on their housing. IRCOM operates two buildings – a 66-unit apartment complex, known as IRCOM Ellen, and a 60-unit apartment complex, known as IRCOM Isabel, named after the streets they are located on within Downtown Winnipeg – offering such conveniences as proximity to schools, libraries, shopping, places of worship, social service agencies, government offices, recreational facilities, and employment opportunities. It also provides onsite settlement services and supports for tenants, many of which are also available to newcomers living in the surrounding community.

Goal(s):

To empower newcomer families to integrate into the wider community through affordable transitional housing, programs, and services.

Target Client Group(s):

IRCOM House is home to immigrants, convention refugees and refugee claimants who live in Winnipeg, are low-income, moved into the House within six months of arrival in Canada, have children under the age of 18 (or between the ages of 18-21 and enrolled in full-time high school), and can fit into one of the suite sizes (maximum of 4-8 people). Applicants are screened through a needs-based matrix.

Delivery Partner(s):

IRCOM delivers its three-year transitional housing model through an agreement with the Manitoba Housing Renewal Corporation (MHRC). The rent includes amenities such as fridge and stove, heat, electricity, water, on-site management, and regular maintenance.

Human Resource(s):

IRCOM House employs 6 staff, which includes live-in caretakers and cleaners. IRCOM also employs about 80 staff to deliver its programs and services; approximately 80% of whom are of a refugee or immigrant background. In addition, IRCOM far exceeds its goal of a 2:1 ratio of volunteers to staff, engaging over 200 volunteers in 2017/18.

Funding:

IRCOM receives financial support from over 45 different funding bodies, including Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), Government of Manitoba, City of Winnipeg, foundations, community funds, business and private donors. Click [here](#) for the full list of funders.

KEY FEATURES THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THIS BEING A PROMISING PRACTICE

Effective:

IRCOM is engaged in continuous and deep self-reflection; its impact on individuals, families, the community, and society as a whole is regularly assessed through research and evaluation. The organization holds itself accountable to its mission and the community it serves, and works diligently to meet its strategic priorities. Staff is knowledgeable and equipped to support clients in accessing, as well as advocating for, equitable access to services.

Efficient:

IRCOM has developed quick response systems to ensure the program runs efficiently and tenants feel physically and emotionally safe at all times. For example, it has staff on site 24/7 who are able to respond to different needs or crises as they arise.

Relevant:

IRCOM uses ongoing assessment to ensure the program continues to meet the needs of the community. It consistently has a waitlist of 100 or more families, and has recently been selected to participate in the National Housing Strategy.

Sustainable:

Several years ago IRCOM created a document to show the instability caused by one-year project funding; it presented this document to various partners and funders and now requests multi-year funding in all its applications or proposals. Through this document and other external research and evaluations, it has been able to provide sufficient evidence to secure funding to offer its programs and services to tenants and non-tenant community members. The Government of Manitoba, recognizing the positive outcomes experienced by IRCOM's tenants, invested \$14 million into building the second apartment complex. MHRC signed a 20-year sponsorship management agreement with IRCOM to oversee the day to day operations of IRCOM House.

Transferable:

The model could be replicated in different-sized communities, provided the community is willing to invest in the building as well as the services, partnerships, and other resources. The building itself requires adequate space on the main floor for a classroom, community space, community kitchen, and offices.

Innovative and Forward Thinking:

IRCOM combines housing and support services with a focus on the emotional integration of newcomers. It provides safe, affordable, transitional housing for low-income newcomers, together with on-site settlement and integration services for the whole family. Clients live in a community with others who are also beginning their new life in Canada, and are able to learn in a safe environment where there is space for learning from mistakes and opportunities to adapt to new expectations.

Differs in Definable Ways from Other Similar Practices:

IRCOM House provides transitional housing for up to three years, which is longer than the 6-18 months provided by other housing service providers. IRCOM's funding structure, which does not rely on a single source of income, as well as its ability to engage and utilize in-kind support, allows for agility and flexibility. This has enabled IRCOM to support all newcomers and be responsive to the immediate needs of the community. In addition, 80% of IRCOM staff have lived experience as immigrants and refugees and can help to bridge both worlds.

High Client Uptake:

IRCOM does not need to do client outreach, as it consistently meets or exceeds its targets. The apartments are in high demand and on-site programs and workshops run at full capacity.

High Client Retention:

IRCOM has a high client retention rate. At any given time, the apartment complexes have a waitlist of 100 or more families. Most families remain at IRCOM House for as long as possible.

Strong Evidence of Successful Outcomes:

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives conducted a three-year qualitative research project of IRCOM House that explored the experiences of a sample of IRCOM House's current and past tenants. A total of 19 participants stayed with the project for the full three years. The experiences of participants living at IRCOM House were overwhelmingly positive. Many participants felt as if they were in "good hands" while navigating the first three years of settlement. Many parents observed how important the supports at IRCOM were for their children, as they could see their academic abilities increase and their social lives flourish. Many of the burdens that newcomers face in the early years of settlement were eased by living at IRCOM House. Tenants were given both the space and tools to grow during what is a highly stressful and important stage of their settlement process. IRCOM's holistic view of settlement positively shaped newcomers' lives.

PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT AND EVALUATION STRATEGY

In 2016, IRCOM House partnered with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives to explore the experiences of a sample of IRCOM House's current and past tenants. The goal of the project was to provide meaningful findings that could benefit IRCOM as it further developed its own knowledge of the impact of its work. Emphasis was placed on discerning change in participants' housing trajectories and their settlement process over a three-year period. Qualitative methods were used to gather data; current and past tenants were interviewed three times over the course of the study. Participants were encouraged to speak freely about their experiences, and interpreters were employed for those participants who required them. Additional data were drawn from various organizational documents (e.g., annual reports, internal records) and consultations and interviews with key stakeholders (e.g., current and past staff, Board members, volunteers). Prior to recruitment of interview participants, the project was approved by the University of Winnipeg's Human Research Ethics Board.

IRCOM conducts ongoing evaluation using a variety of evaluative practices to measure impact and improve programming. Each program has its own unique measurement matrix, such as logic models, surveys and/or focus groups, which are designed by the respective program leads. In addition, IRCOM House hosts bi-annual community meetings with all tenants to discuss successes and challenges. Each meeting is 3-4 hours long and includes interpretation in all languages spoken by tenants.

Until recently, there was no coordination of performance measurement or evaluation across programs. As a result of the aforementioned research conducted by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, IRCOM recognized that there was an opportunity for growth and room for improvement in this area. Fortunately, IRCOM was recently selected to participate in the National Housing Strategy. As part of the project, IRCOM will be supported to develop an internal database that will capture and correlate quantitative and qualitative data and outcomes across all of its programs, and compare organizational outcomes with national indicators of integration.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

IRCOM

<http://www.ircom.ca/>

Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Manitoba: *'They Can Live a Life Here': Current and Past Tenants' Experiences with IRCOM's Model of Housing and Wrap-Around Supports*

<https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/they-can-live-life-here>

Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Manitoba: *Fast Facts – Newcomer Families: The Role of Housing and Wrap-Around Supports in Winnipeg*

<https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/commentary/fast-facts-newcomer-families>

Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Manitoba: *The IRCOM Model: Housing and Wrap-Around Supports for Newcomers in Winnipeg*

<https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/ircom-model>