



January 30, 2023

SafeWalk Case Study on Engaging Newcomer Neighbours in Community Leagues

Background

In 2022, the EFCL partnered with Sisters Dialogue – a women's collective formed to address the needs of Muslim women – to create the SafeWalk pilot. The pilot was launched in response to a lack of safety due to Islamophobic attacks in our city, and it aimed to build support and feelings of safety for racialized, visibly Muslim women in northeast Edmonton neighbourhoods.

Our model acknowledged the need for foundational work to create safety and trust between diverse neighbours and community volunteers. Finding ways to begin building relationships, however, was challenging. Of the four Community Leagues that took part in the pilot, only one League had connections with Muslim women living in their neighbourhood.

In June, EFCL held a cultural bazaar and program launch at the Bannerman Community Hall. We hoped this would allow us to connect with Muslim women in the northeast. The launch drew media attention and people from across the city, but did not have the desired outcome of connecting with Muslim women in the local area.

Most of the Community League's volunteers took a break through July and August, with the exception of South Clareview Community League (SCCL). SCCL had previously identified engaging with newcomer neighbours as one of their priorities. In July, SCCL partnered with Sisters Dialogue and the SafeWalk coordinator to create a simple Moms and Kids Playground Program model to engage Muslim and newcomer women in the South Clareview area to build relationships.

Moms and Kids Playground Program

The Moms and Kids Playground Program was born from feedback that some Muslim women in the neighbourhood did not feel safe taking their kids to the park. We wanted to create a simple, low-barrier way to build relationships between newcomer and Muslim women in the area, the SCCL and other neighbours. Our idea was to invite women and children to meet at the same

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time every week, enjoy food together and to provide activities for the children. The program ran weekly through the month of August.

In the past, SCCL found their programs drew mostly non-newcomer families. This program had the opposite effect: it drew almost exclusively newcomer moms and kids, with a few exceptions. Each week, 15-20 newcomer moms and 20-25 children joined. The program was very successful creating connections and dialogue between newcomer and Muslim women and the SCCL, and led to the creation of a new League program in the fall led by Muslim women in partnership with the president of SCCL.

There were a number of components that were key to the Moms and Kids program being welcoming and engaging for newcomer and Muslim women.

1. Representation and cultural bridge

The program was planned by a core team including the founder of Sisters Dialogue and the Sisters Dialogue program coordinator who brought their own cultural and lived experience as racialized Muslim women. Sisters Dialogue had experience organizing events for culturally diverse groups of Muslim women. They played the important role of cultural bridge between the League and newcomer women, especially Muslim women.

In an effort to ensure both newcomer and non-newcomer moms felt welcome at the program, Sisters Dialogue invited a Muslim woman who previously volunteered with Sisters Dialogue and SafeWalk to co-facilitate the program, along with the president of SCCL.

A number of visibly Muslim women from Sisters Dialogue attended each week. This created a welcoming environment for women to join the group. Each week there were Muslim women who spoke Somali, Arabic and French supporting the program. This allowed for translated conversations with newcomer women and allowed the sharing of information about SCCL and SafeWalk. Sisters Dialogue ensured that there was culturally appropriate food at the events, resulting in a relaxed, social atmosphere.

2. Advertising and promotion

Posters for the Moms and Kids program invited women living in the South Clareview area to join us each week at the same place and time, and indicated there would be activities for kids and Halal snacks. We included photos and descriptions of both the SCCL president and the Muslim facilitator, making it clear she spoke Arabic, English and French, and had her Early Childhood



Learning certificate. The posters were translated into Arabic and French to ensure they reached at least a portion of newcomer women who may not yet read English.

Posters were put on display at local daycares, at the local Islamic Centre, the C5 Hub, the South Clareview Library, and at the local Sobeys, as well as on social media. Posters were sent out by email through the MultiCultural Health Brokers and Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers mental health networks, Amnity House and the Somali Womens and Children's Society.

Children who showed up at the playground were helpful in running back to their houses to ask their moms and their neighbours to come and join the program each week. We also got to know where some of the neighbours lived and knocked on doors to invite them over, particularly on the last day when we changed the venue to the community hall. SafeWalk and SCCL also had a table at the Belmont School's Meet and Greet night, and connected with many families that way.

3. Program Logistics and Budget

Before the program started, we contacted the Neighbourhood Resource Coordinator for a city permit because the program took place at the Belmont School playground which is city land. We had a budget for food and drinks and facilitation of children's activities. We had first aid kits on hand at each event, and plenty of water bottles as well as other food and drinks.

Kids Activities

Along with the facilitator we had five volunteers from SCCL and the SafeWalk program who helped with set up and take down, and played with the kids each week. SCCL provided some outdoor games and we brought games and equipment from EFCL. There was at least one facilitated craft activity each week, lawn games and active games like tug of war.

Food and Drinks

Each week, we brought food from Somali, Lebanese and East African restaurants, as well as treats for the kids, water, juice boxes, coffee and tea. The food provided a central connecting point for everyone in attendance and was a key in making the program feel relaxed and welcoming. Sisters Dialogue emphasized that offering culturally appropriate food and a variety of drinks was an essential part of the program.





Connection

There was no formal programming for women; rather it was a chance to come together socially and chat with each other. Many women had questions and were curious about the League. Through interpretation, the SCCL president explained the Community League and pointed out where the hall was, shared information about memberships, skating and other programs. Women expressed a need for children's programming during the summer and over school breaks, and were happy to hear that SCCL provides some already.

Some women needed support for various issues and people from SCCL, Sisters Dialogue and SafeWalk were able to provide referrals and contacts, with support of interpreted conversations. Women shared food, played cards, socialized and relaxed together.

Outcomes

The Moms and Kids program was successful connecting newcomer mothers from various cultural backgrounds with each other, with the SCCL, and with Sisters Dialogue and SafeWalk.

Through conversations at the events, women expressed interest in the SafeWalk program for trips over transit to physicians appointments or just walks for exercise around the neighbourhood. For many women, finding time to walk was a barrier due to their children's schedules. Schedules were busy as school was about to start, so there was a sense that we would continue the conversation about organizing walks in the spring.

Participants expressed gratitude for the playground program and requested to keep the program going through the fall and winter. Their vision was to have cultural potlucks as the main focus, with different women sharing food from their culture at each gathering. Continued support for children's activities was key, including the option for the older kids to skate in the winter while the mothers gathered. Sharing crafts and having time to practice English skills were also mentioned.

Women's Gatherings

In the fall of 2022, the Moms and Kids playground program transitioned into monthly Women's Gatherings. The SCCL board voted to offer hall space once a month for the gatherings, on the third Sunday of each month. A few participants volunteered to work with the SCCL president to coordinate the events. Sisters Dialogue and SafeWalk supported the October and November



events and then passed them over to the League and volunteers. The SCCL president feels these events have a huge impact in exchange for a relatively low demand of resources from the League.

For the October event, women brought food from Mauritania, Iraq and Palestine. For the November event, women brought food from Somalia and there was a reading of a local Somali author's new children's book, *Dear Black Child*. A Somali-led organization, Hoyo Collective, gave a presentation on their work.

There is a plan for the December event to include food from Morocco and Turkey, and a mini-fashion show of Moroccan traditional wear. SCCL organized a presentation from Inclusion Alberta, as many women have children with special needs. There is recognition that women can work with SCCL to address needs for resources and information.

SCCL connected with the Community Services Learning department at the University of Alberta, and applied to have students from the Developmental Psychology course volunteer to create curriculum and provide children's programming during the Women's Gatherings. They also have a connection with the local highschool where students can fulfill their volunteer hours requirement by working with the kids at the gatherings.

We estimate around 45 women have attended the first two events, with 25 or so at each event and an equal number of children or more. Many women travel from other parts of the city to these events, saying they feel it's valuable to have spaces to connect with other newcomer and Muslim women, share cultures and learn from each other. We believe programs like this would be successful in every neighbourhood, especially since they require relatively small amounts of resources to organize.

Here are five key points to building relationships and inclusive programming:

1. Get to know your neighbourhood

Many Leagues face a challenge of knowing who lives in their neighbourhood. The City of Edmonton has a social atlas of Edmonton with some helpful information. The Neighbourhood Profile website summarizes information from the 2016 census and allows you to select your neighbourhood to get an idea of household languages spoken, areas people immigrated from, and number of people who identify as Indigenous or visible minorities. This data can help Leagues understand cultural groups that live in the neighbourhood but are not yet engaged in the League, and take steps to form relationships with those communities.



2. Learning Opportunities

It is important to understand the barriers to participation that many newcomers face, and factors that facilitate social inclusion. The Mapping and Planning Support project has a helpful document Engaging Newcomers that is based on newcomers' reports of their experiences.

EFCL has created online modules on Supporting Inclusive Communities that provide rich information to guide Leagues.

Anti-racism training is an extremely valuable tool for increasing understanding of the perspectives and experiences that racialized and culturally diverse neighbours live, and working towards meaningful relationships across differences. Get in touch with EFCL for names of consultants who offer training.

There are also intercultural skills workshops offered by local organizations such as Catholic Social Services and the Multicultural Health Brokers, that can help Leagues reflect on creating welcoming spaces that invite engagement from diverse cultural community members.

3. Cultivate relationships with cultural bridges

As Leagues gain a better picture of the cultural groups that are represented in their neighbourhood, the next question is often how to build relationships with neighbours who are not yet engaged in the League.

Developing meaningful relationships with diverse ethnocultural communities is often facilitated by a cultural bridge, an organization, or people who are from the cultural community or have relationships of trust with that community and can bridge relationships with the League.

Increasing connection and inclusion in the Edmonton community is a goal shared by most newcomer serving organizations and many grassroots organizations. Leagues might consider reaching out to local organizations to see if there are natural ways to collaborate. This may require getting a grant to support a new program idea or other ways to ensure the relationship is equitable and mutually beneficial. Visit this MAPS. site to see neighbourhood specific organizations that support newcomers.

4. A reminder of neighbourhood resources



- Other Leagues in your area may be trying to do similar work and there may be mutual learning from each other to build on relationships that have already been established
- EFCL has Supporting Inclusive Communities modules and Community Inclusion Cafes as ways to learn more
- Neighbourhood Resource Coordinators are assigned to geographical areas. Along with helping with event permits and logistics, they often have a wealth of knowledge of other initiatives, organizations, and funding opportunities
- Community Social Workers are assigned to geographical areas and often have connections with different cultural groups living in the area, and local organizations and initiatives that may offer potential opportunities for collaboration
- Edmonton libraries can share program information and make connections with newcomer neighbours through onsite settlement workers
- One idea would be to post a map with the location of Community Leagues, and talk with settlement workers about sharing with newcomer families how to get in contact with the League to get involved
- University of Alberta, Norquest, NAIT and McEwan have community service learning programs in which students volunteer hours for community-based work. Computer science students built a website that allowed SafeWalk participants to sign up and request walks and be paired with a volunteer to walk together

5. Start simple and remain flexible

As we learned, developing new relationships and building meaningful engagement in programs and Leagues requires time and patience, and doesn't always look like we originally planned. One of the keys of the Moms and Kids programs was that it was a simple idea that felt easy, low-risk and that we were really happy to try. In this case it did work, and was a stepping off point in an entirely new direction – one led by newcomer women themselves.

