CICS

Centre for Immigrant and Community Services

ANNUAL REPORT 2024-25



Beyond the Welcome: Empowering Newcomers Through Employment and Housing

CICS Annual Report 2024-2025

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Centre for Immigrant and Community Services

Table of **Contents**

04 Message from the Board Chair and Executive Director

05 Board of Directors

06 Employment Support Services & Tenant Support Services

09 Settlement Services

11 Language Training Services

13 Community Health & Wellness, Food Services

15 Children and Youth Services

17 Women, Seniors and Family Services

19 Early Years Services

22 Volunteer Services

24 CICS in the Media

26 Agency Statistics

28 Financial Statement

29 Funder List

30 CICS Locations and Contact Information

31 Epilogue

Message from the **Board Chair** and **Executive Director**



If you drive along westbound highway 401 in Scarborough and find yourself slowed to a standstill just east of Kennedy Road (which you always will), you will see the head office of CICS right next to the highway, with the most eye catching feature in the complex being our greenhouse which sits in our Community Garden. We built the greenhouse a few years ago to provide a stable and safe growing environment for plants and seedlings grown in our garden to provide fresh produce for our foodbank program.

Stability and safety are basic requirements for growth. That is true for plant life, for humans, for communities and for global systems of politics and economy. Unfortunately, as we look back at the year that just faded into our rearview mirror, we see a world that is growing less stable and less safe.

International conflicts and natural disasters brought about by climate change dominate news headlines every day. Domestically we see violent crimes being reported with alarming frequencies. With the threat of tariffs and a trade war with the US, unemployment continued to climb, and lines at foodbanks kept growing longer. All the while the housing affordability crisis continued to push families closer to the edge where they must make impossible decisions on which necessities to pay for and which to forgo.

A few years ago, during the COVID pandemic someone posted a note on social media that was meant for encouragement: "Please remember: we are all in the same boat." Another person responded with: "No, we are NOT all in the same boat. We are in the same STORM, and some of us have better boats than others." When the world becomes less stable, to the point when some of our basic needs are threatened, some of us have better networks and abilities to cope, while those who lack basic financial resources and social capital end up falling through the cracks. Those are the population that CICS is committed to serving, and the "cracks" are the places where CICS is called to do our work.

In the "cover story" of CICS' 2024-2025 annual report you will read about how we stepped up in two main areas of service that address these "cracks" that the most vulnerable fall through. We extended our Tenant Support Services into York Region from Toronto with additional funding, and we can now provide legal support for those facing issues like wrongful evictions. In our Employment Support Services, for the first time CICS became an Employment Ontario agency and now offers programs and services including life stabilization services for those who are furthest away from employment, and AI tools to help job seekers.

Of course, there are also stores from our full range of programs and services including language training, settlement counseling, mental health services, community interest classes, Early Years programs, youth, women and seniors' programs, school settlement services, Community Garden and Food Programs, and so on. The goals of all we do remain the same: In a world of instability, we work to build better boats for the vulnerable in our communities so that we can have safe places to face the storm, together.

Board of Directors



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Beyond the Welcome

Empowering Newcomers Through Employment and Housing at CICS

An in-depth conversation with Carmen and Theresa of CICS on what it truly takes to build lives — not just livelihoods — for newcomers in the GTA.

Moving to a new country can mean starting from zero — no networks, no references, and sometimes, no roof over your head. But for thousands of newcomers across Toronto and York Region, that blank slate doesn't stay blank for long. Our ***Executive Director, Alfred Lam*** *sat down with* ***Carmen, Program Manager of Employment Services,*** *and* ***Theresa, Program Manager of Settlement and Integration Services,*** *to hear how their journeys led them to this work, and how their teams are redefining what it means to support newcomers where it matters most: in finding a home and a purpose.*

"I Was One of Them."

Alfred: Let's begin with your own stories. What brought you to CICS?

Carmen: I arrived in Canada as a newcomer, struggling with language barriers and cultural differences. In high school, I met a social worker who helped me immensely and inspired me to pursue the same path. I joined CICS in 2018 as a settlement worker, then moved into employment counselling through the **SOAR program** — which supports immigrant women with lower English proficiency. Their resilience drives me. When someone lands a job, it's not just about employment. It's about independence and self-worth.

Theresa: I've been with CICS since 2007. My goal was always to use my language skills and passion for community to serve where it mattered. I started in frontline settlement work and, over the years, moved into a management role where I could help shape program development and support our staff in making real change. Watching our services evolve — especially in areas like housing support — has been incredibly rewarding.

More Than Job Search. More Than Housing Help.

Alfred: Let's clarify something. Theresa, many people don't know what our Tenant Support Program actually does. Do you help people find places? Do you deal with landlords?

Theresa: We began the program in 2022 to support private-market tenants. We don't find housing for people, but we do a lot of preventative work — legal education, mediation, and now, with added funding, even legal consultations. It's about helping tenants

understand their rights, avoid eviction, and deescalate conflicts before they become crises.

Alfred: Carmen, how would you describe our employment services? Are we recruiters?

Carmen: No — we aren't recruiters or agents. Our services are free, and we serve both employers and job seekers. For job seekers, we provide everything from resume prep to career planning. For employers, we help with candidate screening and even offer incentives to hire. Since March 2025, we've been officially funded by Employment Ontario, which has expanded what we can offer — including financial supports for job seekers.



From Pilot Projects to Powerhouse Programs

Alfred: These programs didn't appear overnight. Can you speak to CICS's history in these areas?



Carmen: Employment services go back nearly 30 years. We started with job search workshops under our settlement services. In 2015, we got our first employment-specific funding from the City of Toronto. That's when things really started to grow — from one counsellor to a full team. In 2025, we officially became an Employment Ontario provider. Today, we're one of Toronto's top 5 in employment outcomes.

Theresa: Housing support also has deep roots. Frontline staff have always handled basic tenancy issues. But many cases required legal knowledge we didn't have in-house. That changed in 2022 with our City of Toronto contract. And this year, we secured funding from the Department of Justice — a first for CICS. That's huge. It affirms that housing isn't just a settlement issue; it's a justice issue too.

The Chicken and the Egg: Housing vs. Employment

Alfred: For newcomers, job and housing often feel like a catch-22. How do your teams approach that?

Carmen: Holistically. We don't just ask for a resume — we ask about everything: financial situation, health, family, language, goals. Then we co-create a plan. One client wasn't ready to work right away, so we started with SOAR training. Today, she's going through job interviews with confidence.

Theresa: It's the same for housing. Stability in one area supports growth in the other. That's why CICS operates as an integrated hub — clients get employment, housing, mental health, and settlement services in one place. It's not just about programs; it's about treating people as whole individuals.

"Sometimes the only thing our clients need is someone to believe in them before they believe in themselves." – Carmen

The Human Side of Struggle

Alfred: Let's talk honestly. What are some of the heartbreak stories that stay with you?

Carmen: I've worked with brilliant clients who freeze during interviews because of language barriers or lack of confidence. Some rehearse with us word-for-word because they're terrified to speak. It's heartbreaking to see such potential feel invisible.

Theresa: One client received an eviction notice in English he didn't understand. He ignored it — and came to us one week before eviction. We stepped in, mediated with his landlord, and he kept his home. It taught me that even basic communication can be life-changing.



Working at 200% Capacity — And Still Not Enough

Alfred: You're dealing with systems that feel broken — housing crises, discrimination, underemployment. How do you stay motivated?





Carmen: Honestly, it's hard. Every registration is a real person, and sometimes there are just too many. But our team keeps brainstorming ways to do more with less. We've launched interview workshops, "English Chat Rooms," virtual employer panels, and even AI-powered mock interviews. It's exhausting — but deeply worth it.

Theresa: It's discouraging when the system fails someone despite our best efforts. But our team never gives up. We check in, we escalate, we advocate. That resilience — that fire — is what keeps me going.

Are Brighter Days Ahead?

Alfred: Do you see hope? Momentum? Signs of positive change?

Carmen: Absolutely. Word-of-mouth referrals are growing. That means people trust us. And our team's energy is contagious — we lift each other up and bring that optimism to our clients.

Theresa: Yes. When clients bring their friends and family, it shows impact. It tells me we're not just helping individuals; we're helping communities grow stronger together.

"We're not just offering help — we're building trust, and that's the foundation of lasting change." — Theresa

And Yes — There Are Success Stories

Alfred: Let's end on a high note. Can you share one story that keeps you going?

Carmen: At a recent job fair, three clients got hired on the spot — including one of our own volunteers. Nine more got interview calls. Those moments remind us: we can make change.

Theresa: One client narrowly avoided eviction because we helped him write a simple letter. He was days away from losing his home. That experience showed me how something small, like explaining a document, can save someone's future.

Final Thoughts

In a city that often feels like it's teetering under the weight of housing shortages and job market inequities, CICS isn't just a support service — it's a lifeline. And the people behind it — like Carmen and Theresa — are walking beside newcomers every step of the way, advocating, innovating, and proving that even in the toughest times, compassion and community can make the impossible feel possible.

To learn more about CICS services, visit www.cicscanada.com



Alfred Lam
Executive Diretor



Carmen Zeng
Program Manager of Employment Services



Theresa Peng
Program Manager of Settlement and Integration Services

*Special thanks to **Harry Choi (@harrychoiphotography)** for photographing the interview, and to **Andrew Choi** of **Haven Brews (@havenbrews)** for generously hosting us at the café.*

Settlement Services



The Evolving Road to Belonging: A Settlement Worker's View from the Frontlines

*For more than two decades, **Daniel Gu** has stood on the frontlines of Canada's immigration story — not in the headlines or statistics, but in the daily realities of helping newcomers build new lives. As a veteran **Settlement Worker** at CICS, Daniel has witnessed firsthand how the journey of settlement has shifted — from job market hurdles and language barriers to new complexities driven by digital transformation and shifting societal expectations.*

In this exclusive interview, Daniel offers his honest reflections on the evolving needs of newcomers, the growing weight of uncertainty many newcomers face, and why it matters to newcomers.

Q: You've been supporting newcomers for more than 20 years. What first brought you into settlement work, and what's kept you here?

Daniel: I've been working as a Settlement Worker for over 20 years now. Two things brought me here: a passion for working with people, and my own experience as a newcomer to Canada. I know from personal experience how overwhelming settlement can be — how important it is to have someone to walk beside you. That understanding motivates me to support others through the same journey.

Q: More and more, we hear newcomers saying it's harder to settle in Canada now than it was 10 or 20 years ago. From your experience, how have these challenges changed over time? Are today's immigrants facing different barriers?

Daniel: I believe that every era presents its own set of challenges. The difficulty is not necessarily greater or lesser — it is simply different in nature. Over two decades ago, new immigrants to Canada primarily faced issues such as financial insecurity and a lack of Canadian work experience.



Today, in the digital age comes, the landscape has become more complex:

- Employment barriers persist, but there is now a heightened demand for both Canadian experience and digital literacy.
- Many newcomers experience social isolation, which has been intensified by the pandemic and the growing shift toward online services.



- The digital divide poses a significant challenge, particularly for older adults.
- Systemic discrimination continues to affect equitable access to employment and public services.
- While today's immigrants often arrive with higher expectations, they are also confronted with greater uncertainty.

These evolving challenges highlight the importance of providing settlement support that is flexible, responsive and inclusive.





Q: What aspects of CICS's settlement services do you find most unique or impactful?

Daniel: CICS's settlement services stand out for our deep community integration and practical responsiveness to newcomer needs.

1. One of the most impactful aspects is the ***wide variety of accessible and culturally sensitive workshops***, covering topics like taxes, legal rights, healthcare, and housing. These sessions not only inform but also empower newcomers to make confident decisions.
2. CICS's ***hybrid service delivery model*** — offering both in-person and virtual support, including WeChat consultation and Zoom workshops. They significantly lower access barriers for immigrants with mobility, language, or technological challenges.
3. The ***collaboration with other community partners***, such as mental health workers and housing specialists, enables CICS settlement services to offer truly holistic support that goes beyond traditional settlement help.



We're not just helping people access information — we're helping them rebuild their lives.

Q: What do you think settlement work will look like in the next few years?

Daniel: The future is going to be more digital — no doubt. We'll see ***more virtual platforms, multilingual AI tools***, and mobile apps that make it easier for newcomers to connect with services at any time, from anywhere. But the shift isn't just about technology — it's about ***personalization***:



- Services will need to support not just employment or language learning, but also ***mental health, senior support, digital education***, and ***youth integration***.
- We'll see more ***cross-sector collaboration*** with health, education, housing, and community agencies to build integrated networks of care.
- And we must keep emphasizing ***equity***, because without it, even the best tools and services won't reach everyone who needs them.

Q: What has been the most rewarding experience for you as a Settlement Worker? Could you share a success story that has stayed with you?

Daniel: As a settlement worker, the most rewarding part of my job is helping clients overcome the challenges they encounter and receiving their recognition for the support I provide. Human emotions are mutual — when clients express appreciation for our services, it serves as positive reinforcement that motivates and improves our future work.

Here's a story I'd like to share. I once helped a senior client with a medical expense reimbursement. He had received treatment out of Toronto in Ontario. He forgot to bring his OHIP card and he ended up paying several



thousand dollars out of pocket. He came to me for help. At first, I thought a couple of phone calls would fix the issue. But it turned into a complex, two-month-long process involving multiple communications with the OHIP office and the medical provider. Through persistence and careful coordination, I was eventually able to help him receive a full reimbursement. When the client expressed how satisfied and relieved, he was with the outcome, I felt that every bit of effort was worthwhile. Moments like this remind me why I do this work.

"Settlement is more than paperwork. It's about building trust, resilience, and belonging." — Daniel Gu



Daniel Gu
Settlement Worker

Language Training Services







Beyond the Classroom: How Newcomer Language Needs Are Evolving — and Why the Human Touch Still Matters

In today's fast-moving, tech-driven world, language learning is no longer limited to classrooms or textbooks. From AI-powered tutoring apps to career-specific ESL courses, the tools available to newcomers are more diverse and dynamic than ever before. But as language training evolves, so do the learners — and so do their needs.

*At the heart of this transformation is **Edna Agustin**, our longtime instructor in the **Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC)** program. For years, she's helped students navigate not just grammar and vocabulary, but also the confidence and connection that language learning brings. In this candid interview, Edna reflects on her journey, the transformation of language instruction, and why, even in a digital age, the classroom remains a space of trust, growth, and transformation.*

Q: You've been a language instructor at CICS for many years. What was your path before joining, and what has kept you here so long?

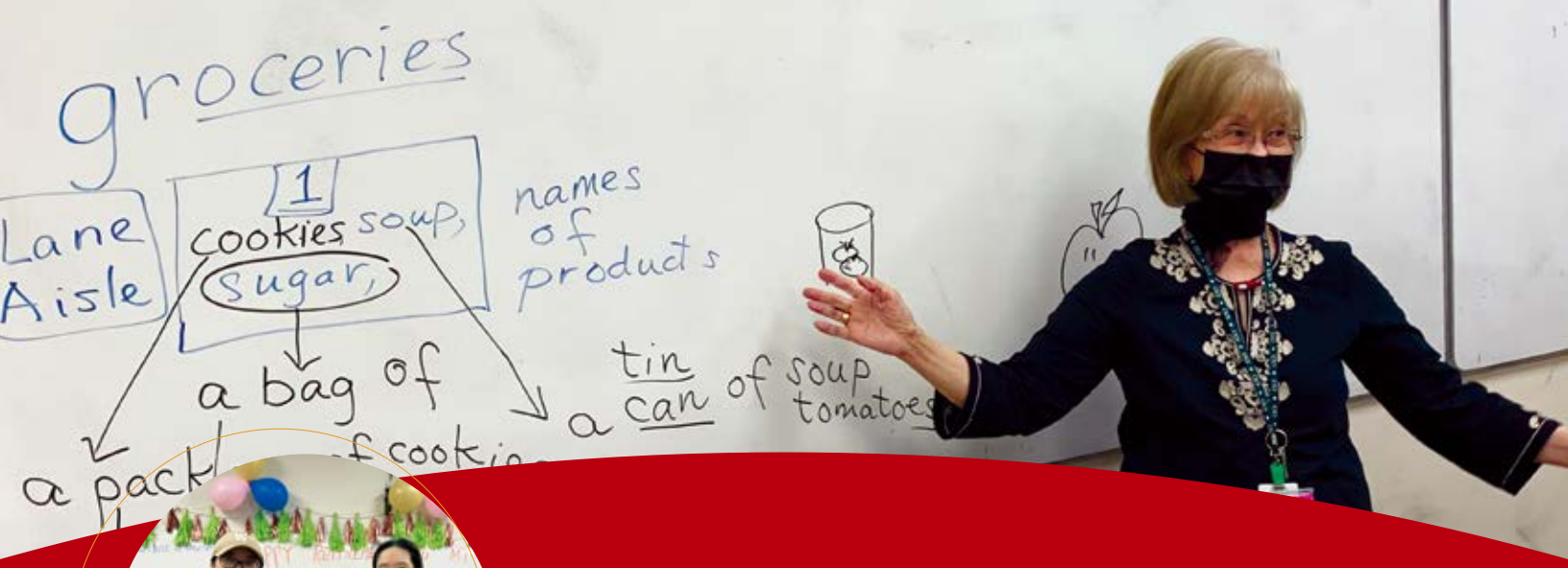
Edna: Before joining CICS, I was a daycare teacher at YMCA in Scarborough and a Montessori junior casa teacher in Richmond Hill. Teaching is my passion, and I found joy and fulfillment in being with CICS.

Q: Language learning has changed dramatically. From your early days in the classroom to today's tech-driven approaches, what adjustments have you had to make — and what do you believe will never change?

Edna: When I started, classes were all in-person, with blackboards and paper handouts. Then came smartboards, digital worksheets, and eventually online teaching. Honestly, technology was a challenge for me. I wasn't tech-savvy, and I had to push myself to learn. But I adapted — and I'm proud of that. Even so, what hasn't changed is the power of human connection. No app or AI can replace the warmth, encouragement, and motivation a teacher brings. That's what makes learning real and personal, and it's still what students respond to the most.

Q: Speaking of students, how have the needs of newcomers changed during your teaching career?

Edna: We live in an ever-changing world. Many newcomers nowadays are better equipped to learn a new language. They have many tools to assist them, but they still need the personal support and guidance of a "real" teacher. Many of them still prefer to have in-person classes over online classes.





Q: What advice would you give to someone starting a career in language instruction today, in this fast-changing environment?

Edna: So you want to be a teacher, eh? Then be ready to love what you do and have fun doing it. Make every day a new, fun and exciting day for you and your students. Let the students get involved in the enhancement of their own education. Remember, ***teaching is learning***, and it is a never-ending quest for knowledge and development of new skills.

Q: What would you say to learners who feel discouraged — those who are struggling to learn English while balancing jobs, family, and the pressure of starting over in a new country?

Edna: An enthusiastic, fun-loving, and well-motivated teacher exudes an atmosphere of enthusiasm, fun, and positive motivation to help students achieve their goals in learning a new language. A learner is like a seed – it needs to be nourished and well-taken care of in order for it to grow into a beautiful tree. To all these students: ***"Don't worry. Be happy. Don't give up! Keep on learning and making your better BEST!"***

Q: What's been the most rewarding part of your career? Can you share a story that's stayed with you?

Edna: Professionally, as a LINC Teacher, I feel that my success was being able to motivate and inspire students to learn through ***"Brain Exercises"***. I was able to share these exercises with other teachers through workshops I conducted at ***TESL Conferences in many cities in Ontario***.

Personally, as a LINC Teacher, I am really uplifted to high heavens by the impact I have unknowingly imprinted on ***the lives of the many students*** who have shared their success stories with me – such as attending community college, finding a better job, and talking to their neighbours, clients, and child's teacher in English. These simple stories that penetrate a teacher's heart and mind cannot be bought. There is no dollar amount equivalent to the joy of listening to these stories. They are "psychic" rewards that make me keep on going. Helping students grow and connect to the real world is a huge and astounding success for a LINC Teacher like me.

Final Thoughts

As technology reshapes how we learn, the ***why*** behind language education remains the same: to build connection, opportunity, and belonging. Teachers like ***Edna Agustin*** remind us that while newcomer needs may be transforming, the human spirit behind language learning is as strong — and as necessary — as ever.

Whether it's guiding a learner through their first English sentence or helping them find their voice in a new society, Edna's work is a reminder that in language, we don't just learn to speak — we learn to be heard.





Edna Agustin
Instructor (LINC)

Community Health & Wellness, Food Services



Justice in Society: Building Healthier Communities through Equity and Empowerment

In a city where the cost of living keeps rising and the social safety net is stretched thin, access to food, mental health resources, and a sense of belonging can feel out of reach for many — especially newcomers. CICS is redefining what it means to pursue justice in our communities — one food basket, one garden plot, and one connection at a time.



*At the helm of CICS' Community Health & Wellness, Food Services is **Victoria Liu**, a passionate advocate whose mission is rooted in equity and empowerment. In this interview, Victoria shares how wellness begins not in hospitals, but in our neighborhoods — and how food, care, and connection form the pillars of a more just and compassionate society.*

Reimagining Community Health: It's More Than Healthcare

Q: Victoria, let's start with the basics — what exactly is "Community Health," and how does your work bring this concept to life at CICS?

Victoria: Community Health is about ***improving people's overall well-being*** — physically, mentally, and socially — by making health and support more accessible in daily life. At CICS, I focus mainly on the Community Food Program, which includes the food bank, community garden, and community kitchen. These programs not only address food insecurity but also build skills, confidence, and connection.

My mission is to help individuals and families — especially those facing barriers — ***feel supported and empowered*** to live healthier lives with dignity and a strong sense of community.

Why Newcomers Need More Than Just Shelter and Jobs



Q: Many newcomers to Canada are overwhelmed with basic needs — housing, employment, school enrollment. Why should "community health" still be a priority for them?

Victoria:
Why:
Community health is vital for newcomers because ***it supports their overall well-being*** amid many pressures. Access to health services, mental health care, and food security reduces stress and prevents illness. Without it, newcomers face greater barriers that hinder successful settlement, making community health essential for equity and long-term integration.

How:
Community health is prioritized by providing culturally sensitive healthcare, accessible mental health supports, and reliable food programs ***tailored to newcomers' needs***. Building social networks and helping navigate healthcare and social systems also fosters resilience. These efforts remove barriers, empower newcomers, and create a supportive environment for them to overcome settlement challenges effectively.



From Clients to Community Builders: The Role of Newcomers in Health Equity

Q: Once newcomers begin to feel more settled, how can they contribute to community health themselves?

Victoria: Indeed, it takes newcomers some time to feel settled and start engaging with their communities. Once involved, their contributions act as ***bridges — connecting diverse cultures and fostering social cohesion***. For example, newcomers may introduce healthy food practices, traditional healing, or community celebrations that support mental well-being. They also volunteer at food banks, join neighborhood clean-ups, or participate in health promotion programs. Through these actions, newcomers help address local needs, foster inclusivity, and build strong social networks — strengthening resilience and creating healthier, more connected communities for everyone.

The Food Bank as a Bridge, Not a Destination

Q: Across the nation, more and more people are dependent on foodbanks to survive. An article published late last year (Nov 12, 2024) in the National Post finds 4 out of 5 new foodbank users in Toronto are newcomers. Do you see the same trend at CICS' foodbank?



Victoria: While we do see many newcomers across age groups — students, adults, and seniors — using CICS' foodbank, we've also noticed some positive shifts. For example, some students who previously relied on our services have stopped visiting, likely because they've graduated, found jobs, and started earning stable incomes. Similarly, other clients have moved from part-time to full-time work or secured more stable shifts, improving their financial situation. In this way, the foodbank acts like a safety net or stepping stone, providing temporary support during challenging times. It's encouraging to see users move beyond the need for foodbank services, which also helps free up capacity to serve the next batch of people in need, ensuring continuous support within the community. Through these actions, newcomers help address local needs, foster inclusivity, and build strong social networks — strengthening resilience and creating healthier, more connected communities for everyone.

Beyond Band-Aids: Tackling the Root Causes of Hunger

Q: Food banks have been criticized as "Band-Aid solutions." How is CICS working to address poverty more sustainably?

Victoria: We recognize that foodbanks alone are a temporary, "Band-Aid" solution that address immediate hunger but don't fully resolve the root causes of poverty. ***At CICS, our approach combines meeting urgent food needs with longer-term support to help clients build stability and independence***. This includes connecting clients to employment resources, skills training, language and settlement services, and mental health supports. We also offer workshops on budgeting, nutrition, and community gardening to empower self-sufficiency. By integrating food support with these broader programs, we aim to break the cycle of poverty — helping clients not only survive today but thrive tomorrow within a supportive community.





Justice Begins with Access

At its core, justice in society means more than fair laws — it means fair access: to food, to health, to opportunity, and to community. Victoria and her team are proving that community wellness is a form of justice. And with every meal served, every connection made, and every life uplifted, they are building a future where health isn't a privilege — it's a right.









Victoria Liu
Community Health Manager

Children & Youth Services



Bridging Journeys: Youth, Reconciliation, and New Beginnings

*In the ever-evolving landscape of youth services, one voice stands out for its authenticity and vision — **Nikki Huang**, one of our newest Youth Workers. With a background steeped in grassroots social justice work and a personal experience of migration, Nikki brings not only professional commitment but also lived empathy to her role.*



In the interview, we can see that for Nikki, reconciliation isn't just a buzzword. It's part of a deeper question she carries: How do we, as newcomers, respectfully find our place on Indigenous land? As she steps into her new role at CICS, Nikki is already creating pathways where youth can explore their own stories while learning to honor those that came before.

From Wage Theft to Advocacy: A Personal Journey

Q: As one of our newest youth workers, you come to us with unique experiences of doing social justice work, especially with the Indigenous Communities. Can you tell us more about your background and how you envision continuing that journey at CICS?

Nikki: My social justice journey began with my experience as an international student in Canada. While working part-time, I experienced wage theft, which led me to seek help from a local community organization. That experience opened the door for me to get involved in grassroots work.

Over time, I supported youth and workers from various immigrant communities and started noticing the shared struggles, like language barriers, discrimination, and isolation. I also began learning more about Indigenous communities and reflected on my position as a settler. At CICS, I hope to continue this journey by creating opportunities for newcomer youth to engage in both community building and learning about justice, inclusion, and reconciliation.

Beyond English Classes: Reconciliation as Settlement

Q: Ask most people about services to newcomer youths, they will likely think of helping them fit into their schools, learning English, providing academic support, assisting them to navigate university applications, etc. How do you plan to integrate your focus of social justice and reconciliation with the Indigenous Community into their own settlement journey?

Nikki: When people talk about settlement, it's usually about school or language, and those are very important. But I also think it matters for newcomer youth to learn about the land they're on and the people who have been here long before us. I'm still learning myself, but I hope to create small opportunities, like community visits, storytelling circles, or just opening space to talk about where we are and why that matters. I don't want to push ideas on anyone, but I do think it's meaningful for youth to connect their own journeys with the broader story of this place.



Quiet Leadership, Loud Impact

Q: How can newcomer youths play a leadership role in advocating for anti-racism and anti-bullying and other social justice concerns when they themselves often are victims of such discrimination?

Nikki: I think newcomer youth have a lot of insight because they've experienced discrimination themselves. That can give them a deep understanding of unfairness. But I also understand that not everyone feels ready to speak up right away. My role is to support them in small ways, by creating spaces where they feel safe to share, connect, and be heard.



Leadership can start with listening to each other, or standing up for a friend. I've seen youth gain confidence over time, and when they do speak out, their voices are powerful because they come from lived experience, not theory.

The Human Bridge

Q: At CICS, we see creating opportunities for human connections as part of our core mission. As a youth worker, you are a bridge between parents, schools, the youth, other community organizations, etc. How do you see yourself playing that role?

Nikki: I see my role as someone who listens and helps different people understand each other. Sometimes that means supporting a youth to express something to their parents or helping a teacher better understand a student's situation. I've also worked with other community organizations to share resources or make referrals when families need support beyond our programs. These connections may seem small, but they build trust and make youth and families feel less alone. I try to show up consistently and be someone they can rely on, someone who helps make those relationships a little bit easier and more human.

A Success Story

Q: What do you find most rewarding or satisfying as a Youth Worker? Could you share a success story that has stayed with you?

Nikki: What I find most rewarding is seeing youth slowly open up and feel more confident. One youth I worked with was very quiet at first. She barely spoke in group settings and kept to herself. But over time, through small roles like helping with setup or supporting others, she began to engage more. Eventually, she co-led a small activity with a teammate. It was not a big moment on the surface, but it meant a lot to her and to me. Seeing that kind of growth,



even small steps, reminds me why this work matters. It is about showing up and building trust over time.

CICS Voices: Building a Better Future, Together

Through the lens of Nikki Huang's work, we see how social justice, youth empowerment, and reconciliation are not separate goals — but interconnected parts of the same journey. At CICS, we believe that welcoming newcomers means more than helping them settle. It means helping them thrive, engage, and become changemakers in a world that deeply needs them.



Nikki Haung
Youth Worker

Women, **Seniors** & **Family** Services



Thriving in the Golden Years: How CICS is Empowering Newcomer Seniors

While much of the newcomer experience in Canada often highlights the pursuit of employment, learning English, or supporting children through school, there's a quieter group navigating their own profound life transition — seniors. At CICS, this group isn't forgotten. In fact, they are at the heart of a dynamic and growing network of support, thanks in large part to people like ***Emily Chan,*** *a dedicated and compassionate* ***Community Service Worker.***



We had an interview with Emily to talk about the unique needs of newcomer seniors, the growing demand for elder-focused services, and her personal mission to help seniors not just age — but flourish.

A Journey of Empathy and Purpose

Q: Can you share your journey to becoming a Community Service Worker at CICS?

Emily: Before joining CICS, I had been working in elderly services and truly enjoy working with seniors, as they are so wise and friendly. As a newcomer myself, I understand the challenges of settling into a new environment, and I hope to use my own experiences and knowledge to help others navigate their journeys. Knowing that I can make a positive difference in someone's life is what motivates me every day. I admire CICS for its values and vision in empowering newcomers to settle and thrive in Canadian society. These values align perfectly with my personal philosophy, making it an honor to be part of this team and contribute to the well-being of seniors.

The Hidden Struggles of Newcomer Seniors

Q: What unique challenges do newcomer seniors face during their settlement journey?

Emily: Loneliness is one of the biggest issues. Many have left behind close friends, familiar places, and daily routines. Starting over in a new country can be overwhelming, and without strong support networks, they can feel isolated. Technology adds another layer — so many services are now online, and if seniors aren't confident using digital tools, they can feel left behind or even helpless. It's not just about access — it's about inclusion. Emotional support, patience, and just being present can make a world of difference.

Community, Connection, and a Little Surprise

Q: What programs are most popular with seniors? Do any of their interests surprise you?

Emily: Our most popular programs are usually exercise and fitness classes. Seniors love group activities that keep them active and healthy. However, it's been surprising to see how open they are to trying new things. Many seniors have hidden talents or passions that surface when given a chance to explore. Their enthusiasm and willingness to learn inspire me every day.







A Vision for Aging with Dignity and Purpose

Q: Canada's aging population is growing. What's your dream for CICS's role in supporting elder newcomers?

Emily: My dream is to empower seniors to help themselves and others. Many seniors are in their golden years, with both time and ability to contribute meaningfully to their communities. By offering programs that focus on ***mutual support, peer mentorship, and volunteering opportunities***, we can help seniors feel a sense of purpose and belonging. Aging well isn't just about staying healthy; it's about staying engaged, sharing life experiences, and being valued as active members of society.

Looking Ahead: Embracing the Digital Future

Q: What trends do you see in senior services for newcomers in the near future?

Emily: I foresee a growing emphasis on technology and digital literacy for seniors. As more services and resources move online, it's crucial to help seniors feel confident in using technology to stay connected, access support, and participate in virtual programs. ***Mental health*** support will also become increasingly important, as isolation and cultural transitions can impact seniors' emotional well-being.

Moments That Matter: A Story of Success

Q: What has been the most rewarding experience for you as a Community Service Worker? Could you share a success story that has stayed with you?

Emily: The most rewarding experience for me is seeing seniors leave our programs with smiles on their faces. It's heartwarming to know that our efforts help them discover our services, actively participate, and expand their social circles. One story that stays with me is about seniors who initially didn't know about CICS but gradually became involved in our programs. Over time, they made new friends and even started meeting up with them outside of our activities. Witnessing their transformation and the joy these new connections bring is incredibly fulfilling and reminds me of the positive impact we can make in people's lives.



From Isolation to Integration

Through empathy, targeted programming, and a deep commitment to community, CICS is proving that seniors don't have to navigate settlement alone. Thanks to workers like Emily Chan, newcomer seniors are being welcomed, supported, and celebrated — not just as elders, but as vibrant, vital members of Canadian society.

Because at CICS, aging isn't just about getting older — it's about growing stronger together.





Emily Chan
Community Service Worker



Early Years Services

Planting Seeds of Belonging: A Conversation with Miranda Fung on Early Years, Inclusion & Impact

*For over 20 years, **Miranda Fung,** our Program Manager of **Early Years Services,** has been a quiet force shaping how newcomer families and young children find their first sense of belonging in Canada. Through immigration shifts, policy overhauls, and even a global pandemic, Miranda's calm leadership and heartfelt dedication have guided CICS' Early Years programs through seasons of change — always rooted in connection, equity, and care.*

Q: You are one of our longest-serving team members in Early Years Services. Can you walk us through your journey at CICS?

Miranda: Having worked with the Early Years team at CICS for over two decades, I've had the privilege of witnessing the evolution of our services and the ever-changing needs of our community. From supporting families during the immigration wave in the 1990s to serving today's diverse newcomer populations, our journey has been one of adaptation and resilience.

From the establishment of the ***Ontario Early Years Centres — now known as EarlyON Child and Family Centres*** — to navigating the global pandemic, pivoting to virtual programs, and returning to in-person services, and now stepping into the era of artificial intelligence, our work has continuously evolved. Through it all, my passion for supporting young families has remained unwavering. We've grown, adapted, and persevered.

Q: What kinds of programs and services does the Early Years team provide to the community?

Miranda: Our team offers a wide variety of free programs for families with children aged 0 to 6. These include:

- EarlyON programming that promotes early learning and healthy development.
- School readiness programs to help children and their families make a smooth transition from home to school.
- Interest-based classes, like music and arts, which nurture curiosity and build confidence.

Beyond that, we also support caregivers by creating inclusive spaces for parenting education, peer support, and community building. We believe that when you support the parent, you empower the child.





Q: Ontario has seen significant shifts in childcare policy over the past decade. How have these changes affected how CICS delivers its Early Years Services?

Miranda: Changes in Ontario's childcare landscape have significantly impacted our services. The introduction of ***full-day kindergarten in 2010*** shifted our focus from children aged 0–6 to those aged 0–3.8. More recently, the implementation of the ***$10-a-day daycare program*** has further shifted our service demographic, with a growing emphasis on infants and toddlers aged 0–2. These systemic shifts have required us to reassess and realign our approach to ensure we continue meeting the evolving needs of young families.



Q: Many of the families CICS serves are new to Canada and may not speak English fluently. How does your team support them through that transition?

Miranda: Many of the families we serve are newcomers to Canada who face language barriers and may be unfamiliar with the Canadian education and social service systems. Our team plays a vital role in ***bridging these gaps*** by advocating for families and connecting them with appropriate community resources. We help parents understand their children's developmental needs and refer them to services such as ***preschool speech and language programs and other early intervention supports***. In addition, we guide families toward settlement and integration services. When language is a barrier, we assist with interpretation and ensure they are connected to the supports they need — promoting equitable access and inclusive service for all.

Q: Since CICS is not a licensed daycare provider, what do you think makes our Early Years Services unique and valuable?

Miranda: Our role is both unique and meaningful. We provide high-quality early learning experiences in a welcoming, inclusive, and responsive environment — for both children and parents — during the critical early years.

Our programs are especially valuable for families who are seeking opportunities for their young children to learn and grow outside of childcare settings.

The 0–6 age range is a vital window of development — a golden opportunity to nurture young minds and support holistic growth. Our programs ***empower parents to build skills, gain confidence, and better understand child development in the Canadian context***. We also offer a safe space where families can connect with others and form lasting community bonds.





In today's world, where dual-income households are common and families face increasing demands, it's not easy for a parent to choose to stay home full-time. Those who do often face unique challenges — but over time, many see the rewards. Our programs provide a meaningful option for these families. With support and guidance, parents often witness remarkable progress in their children, along with the development of strong parent-child relationships. It's truly a worthy investment. CICS Early Years Services offers that opportunity — for children to thrive and for parents to grow alongside them.





Q: What is your vision for the future of Early Years Services at CICS?

Miranda: I believe the quality of early childhood care plays a foundational role in building healthy, inclusive communities. My vision for CICS' Early Years Services is to ***continue being a trusted, welcoming hub for families*** — a place where children thrive socially and emotionally, where parents feel empowered and supported, and where every family is treated with dignity and respect.

Q: What has been your most rewarding experience? Can you share a story that captures the spirit of your work?

Miranda: Over the years, countless success stories have stayed with me. I've seen parents and grandparents join our programs while struggling with social isolation or emotional challenges, and new parents uncertain about how to prepare their children for formal schooling. Through our parenting workshops and support groups, they've found confidence, connection, and a renewed sense of well-being. I've also witnessed children with separation anxiety blossom into confident kindergarteners, and children with speech delays receive timely intervention through our referrals.

One story that stands out is of a newcomer father from East Asia who attended our program with his young son. Despite not speaking any of the primary program languages — English, Cantonese, or Mandarin — he participated actively and wholeheartedly. In a heartfelt testimonial, he shared:
"I got a lot of information from this class… it provided me with a comprehensive understanding of the education system in Ontario, relieving my concerns. I learned effective stress management techniques for both myself and my child. I used to scold my son when he didn't listen, but I've now adopted a different approach. This change has reduced stress for both of us, and his willingness to share has gradually improved."

Stories like his remind me of the profound and lasting impact we can make. Each participant's face remains etched in my memory. These stories are more than just anecdotes — they are the heartbeat of our work at CICS.

Final Thoughts

At CICS, the early years are not just a phase — they're a foundation. With leaders like Miranda Fung at the helm, Early Years Services remains a sanctuary of learning, inclusion, and possibility. In every circle time, in every parenting workshop, in every quiet conversation with a caregiver, a brighter future is quietly taking root.



Miranda Fung
Program Manager of
Early Years Services



Volunteer Services

Hearts in Action: Honouring the Volunteers Who Power CICS

*From food distribution during a global pandemic to delivering AI-driven business workshops for newcomers, volunteers at CICS are more than just helping hands — they are the pulse of community transformation. Behind this dynamic network of service is **Yan Cheng**, CICS's **Volunteer Program Coordinator**, who has helped shape a new vision of volunteerism: one that embraces not just time and effort, but also passion, professionalism, and purpose.*

In this interview, Yan reflects on her journey, the evolution of volunteerism, and why volunteers — past, present, and future — remain at the heart of CICS's mission.

Q: How long have you been working as a Volunteer Program Coordinator, and what led you to this profession?

Yan: I joined CICS Volunteer Program in March 2020, just as the pandemic started. With a small garden program team and nearly 50 volunteers, we quickly established a pop-up food bank to support the most affected community members and seniors in the neighborhood. Witnessing how volunteers made this possible deeply inspired me. I was also moved by how our management prioritized both community needs and the safety of staff and volunteers. This experience led me to grow into my current role as Volunteer Program Coordinator in August 2022.

Q: CICS has such an impressive volunteer base. Can you give us a sense of the scale of this work in recent years?

Yan: Absolutely. The numbers speak volumes about the dedication of our volunteers:

Year	Volunteers Engaged	Total Hours Contributed
2022–2023	414	12,270 hours
2023–2024	636	18,110 hours
2024–2025	541	19,862 hours

This isn't just about numbers — each hour represents real impact, whether it's supporting newcomers, seniors, or youth programs. The dedication our volunteers show is truly extraordinary.



Q: Many people associate volunteering with simple tasks, but CICS seems to attract professionals as well. How are you tapping into those skills?

Yan: While we still have traditional volunteer roles, we've seen more volunteers with professional backgrounds join us in recent years. At CICS, skilled volunteers such as ***registered nurses, lawyers, network security engineers, graphic designers, website developers, marketing professionals, licensed language instructors, and certified interpreters and translators*** support clients one-on-one and play key roles in delivering specialized training programs. It's also thanks to our dedicated staff, who patiently provide training and detailed guidance, ensuring volunteers feel supported and confident throughout their service. This collaboration truly enriches the services we offer to the community.



Q: During your time as volunteer coordinator, what changes have you seen in the community in terms of the kind of folks that apply to become volunteers?

Yan: Today's volunteers come from a wide range of backgrounds. I'm seeing more ***professionals in fields like law, IT, healthcare, and digital marketing*** who are eager to give back — and they're bringing fresh, innovative ideas. We're also receiving more inquiries from corporate and academic partners. For example:

- ***Deloitte*** volunteers joined us on Impact Day to share career insights with newcomer adults and youth.
- ***Culinary students*** from local colleges supported our United Way fundraising event.
- ***University of Toronto students*** helped build garden plots during reading week.

There's a growing desire for skills-based volunteering, where people want their time to be meaningful — not just to help, but to create impact.

Q: Can you share a story that really captures the impact of your volunteers?



Yan: One of the most rewarding projects for me happened between April 2024 and May 2025. We had two outstanding volunteer instructors support our Manicure and Pedicure Training Program with digital business workshops.

- ***Yan Zhang***, a professional visual designer, taught participants how to build a website using Wix and AI tools.
- ***Cally Cheng***, with a background in marketing and commerce, offered sessions on ***Canva flyer design, business card creation, and social media marketing***.

The impact was immediate and heartfelt. Our adult educator, Jane, praised the instructors' preparation and ability to build learner confidence. One student told us that she had previously struggled with technology, but after the workshop, she felt brave enough to try again. It was a beautiful reminder that volunteering isn't just about giving — it's about ***empowering others to grow***. Yan and Cally are gems, and their work made a real difference.



Yan Cheng
Volunteer Program Coordinator



Q: Why do you think so many talented people are choosing to volunteer at CICS? What makes this place special?

Yan: I believe it's the culture of trust and community. With over ***55 years of history***, CICS has earned a reputation as an organization where people feel ***safe, appreciated, and truly valued***.

Our ***family-oriented, inclusive environment***, combined with a clear sense of purpose, makes CICS a place where volunteers know their time matters. Whether you're planting vegetables in the garden, interpreting in a legal clinic, or running a tech workshop, you're part of something bigger — a network of care, dignity, and impact.

Final Thoughts

In a world that's always changing, one thing remains constant: the power of people coming together to help one another. Whether they're behind the scenes or leading workshops, ***CICS volunteers*** are not only giving back — they're building bridges, lifting spirits, and lighting the path for those finding their place in a new home.

To every volunteer at CICS: thank you. You are the heartbeat of our community.

CICS in the **Media**







Giving Voice to the Community

This year, CICS was featured across various media platforms — in print, on air, and online. Through these appearances, CICS continues to amplify the voices of those often unheard, highlighting the concerns of immigrants and marginalized communities.

Our outreach goes beyond advocacy. We share vital information about the services and support available to different groups, including seniors, newcomers, and low-income families. Topics we've addressed range from employment and housing to food banks, senior benefits, and the tax system — all essential to the well-being of the communities we serve.

As we move forward, CICS remains committed to raising awareness, informing the public, and standing with immigrants in need. We believe that every voice deserves to be heard.

Medscape Medical News

How Can Canada Promote Immigrants' and Seniors' Well-Being?

Liz Scherer
August 28, 2024

Add to Email Alerts

The Centre for Immigrant and Community Services (CICS) has provided language, settlement, job search assistance, and training to immigrants in Canada for more than 50 years. Executive director Alfred Lam noted that the organization's service offerings have shifted.

"More and more, we're seeing ourselves as community builders, as opposed to just advocates," said Lam. "Among the different vulnerable populations, among newcomers, seniors often face the most barriers in their integration journey. One thing that is unique is that they immigrated when they were already more advanced in age, and very few did so because it was their decision," he said.


Alfred Lam

Lam explained that families immigrate to Canada for various reasons. Some seek a better future for their children, and others seek better career opportunities. But few families consider seniors' needs, he added. "This puts them behind the eight ball from the get-go, psychologically and emotionally speaking," he said.

To address these needs, CICS has implemented programs to help foster human connection. At the beginning of the pandemic, it partnered with restaurants and volunteers to deliver fully cooked meals to senior immigrants living alone. In the spirit of meeting people where they are, CICS started delivering services by phone. "Everything became virtual and online, which became a huge barrier due to the lack of digital literacy," said Lam. "So, we had people here taking phone calls from seniors."


Alfred Lam · 2nd
Executive Director at Centre for Immigrant and Communi...
5mo ·
This week, I had the honour and privilege of delivering the welcome remarks at the National Conference on Equity and Racial Justice Across Canada. The Canadian Network for Equity and Racial Justice (CNERJ) is an tri-lateral initiative that advances equity and racial justice in Canada, US and Mexico. OCASI, or Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants is a foundational partner in this effort, working together with Colour of Poverty-Colour of Change, the Chinese Canadian National Council for Social Justice, South Asian Legal Clinic of Ontario as well as the Black Legal Action Centre.
So if you feel weighted down by the negativity, meanness and darkness that seem to permeate social media and the news, please be reminded that is not the reality. Keep up the good fight. You are NOT alone. #OCASI #CNERJ #humanrights Centre for Immigrant and Community Services #SALCO #blacklegalactioncentre
2025 NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON EQUITY & RACIAL JUSTICE ACROSS CANADA
65
6 comments


Fairchild Ra
加拿大中文
vancouver
416




安省註冊專業會計師學會CPA與服務機構合作 60 名會計師義助合條件人士報稅
CPA ONTARIO – TORONTO & YORK REGION
cics
cpa
Carefirst
CICS
Crosslinks
註冊專業會計師義助報稅


Media Record
Weblink of 01_YorkRegion.com
'Invisible shackles': How cultural stigma hinders immigrant women from seeking help for intimate partner violence
A prevalent misconception among victims is the fear that leaving their sponsor will jeopardize their immigration status.
Monday, July 15, 2024
2 min to read
Article was updated 5 mins ago
Also from an immigrant community, Kula Kulasegaram prefers to stay out of the public eye to avoid potential judgments about her service and remarks.
Scarlett Liu Metroland photo


CICS 獎學金及燃動青年獎接受報名
【明報專訊】移民與社區服務中心（CICS）與燃動青年（Across U-hub）昨天（17日）推出重要兩項計劃。第一個是鄭氏家族社會服務課程獎學金，資助準備從事社會和社區服務事業的學生每人2500元，截止報名日期是8月1日。第二個是Across U-CAN青年獎，表彰克服生活挑戰的年輕人，每位獲獎者將獲得500元獎金，截止報名日期是8月15日。
移民與社區服務中心行政總監林承昌博士說：「今年，我們慶祝移民青年中心成立15周年，這項獎學金支持準備從事社會和社區服務事業的學生，體現了CICS長期以來培養未來社區領導人的承諾。」
燃動青年行政總監黃鳳玲（Nicole Wong）說：「這是Across U-hub第二年推出Across U-Can青年獎。華裔青年往往比較內斂，他們的傑出成就和需求經常被忽視，這個獎項目的是表揚他們默默耕耘的努力和貢獻。」
第一屆Across U-Can傑傑獎獲得者是陳子晴（Sylvia Chan），她說：「獲得這個獎項不僅驗證了我的努力，也激勵我繼續倡導文化團結與理解。」查詢兩個計劃可到https://app.cicscanada.com/cics-chengfamily Scholarship/和 https://acrossuhub.com/auc-2024-application-form/
新聞會合照，前排左4是獲獎者陳子晴。（明報記者攝）

Agency **Statistics**

Client interactions
154,840

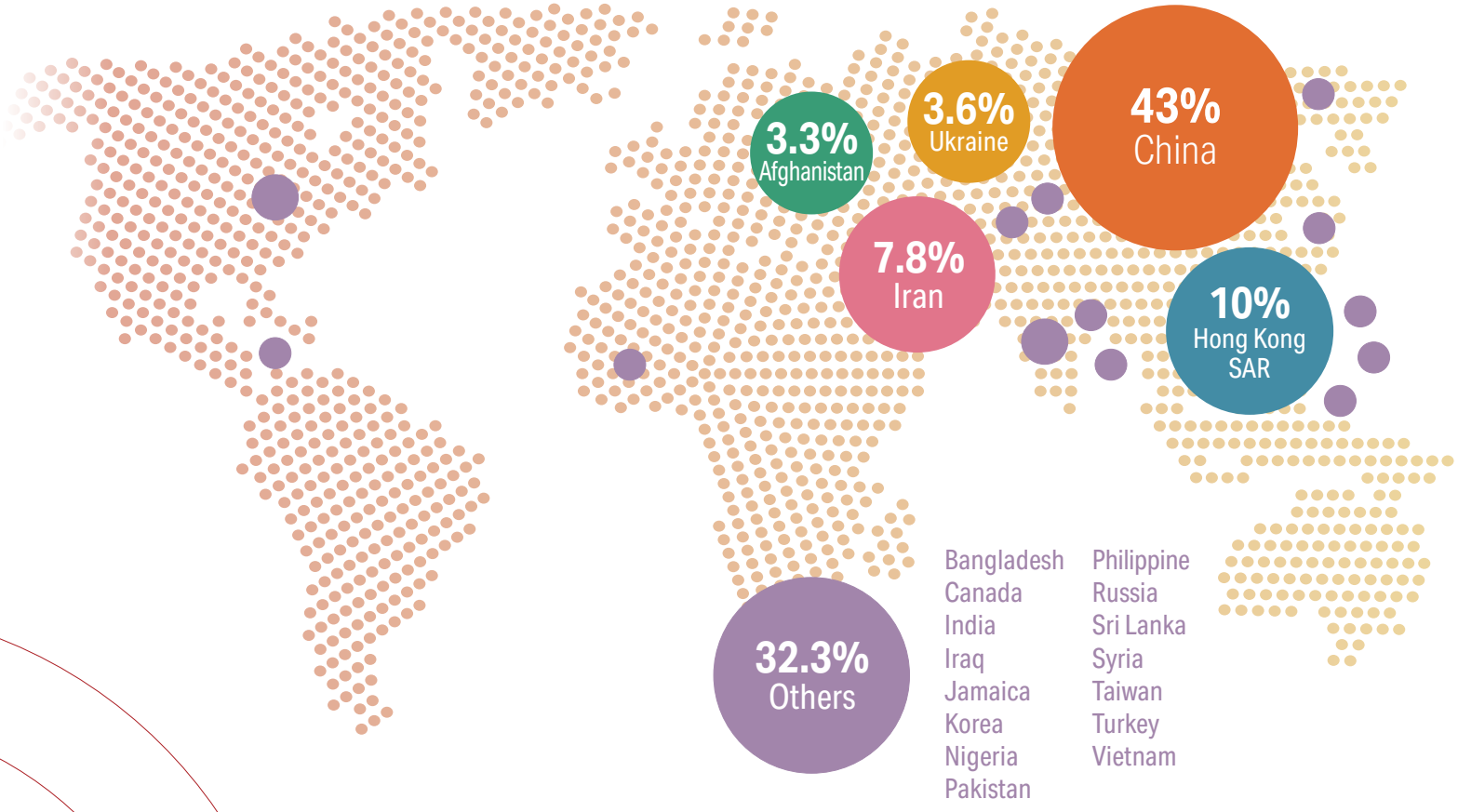
Active Volunteers
541

Volunteer Hours
19,862

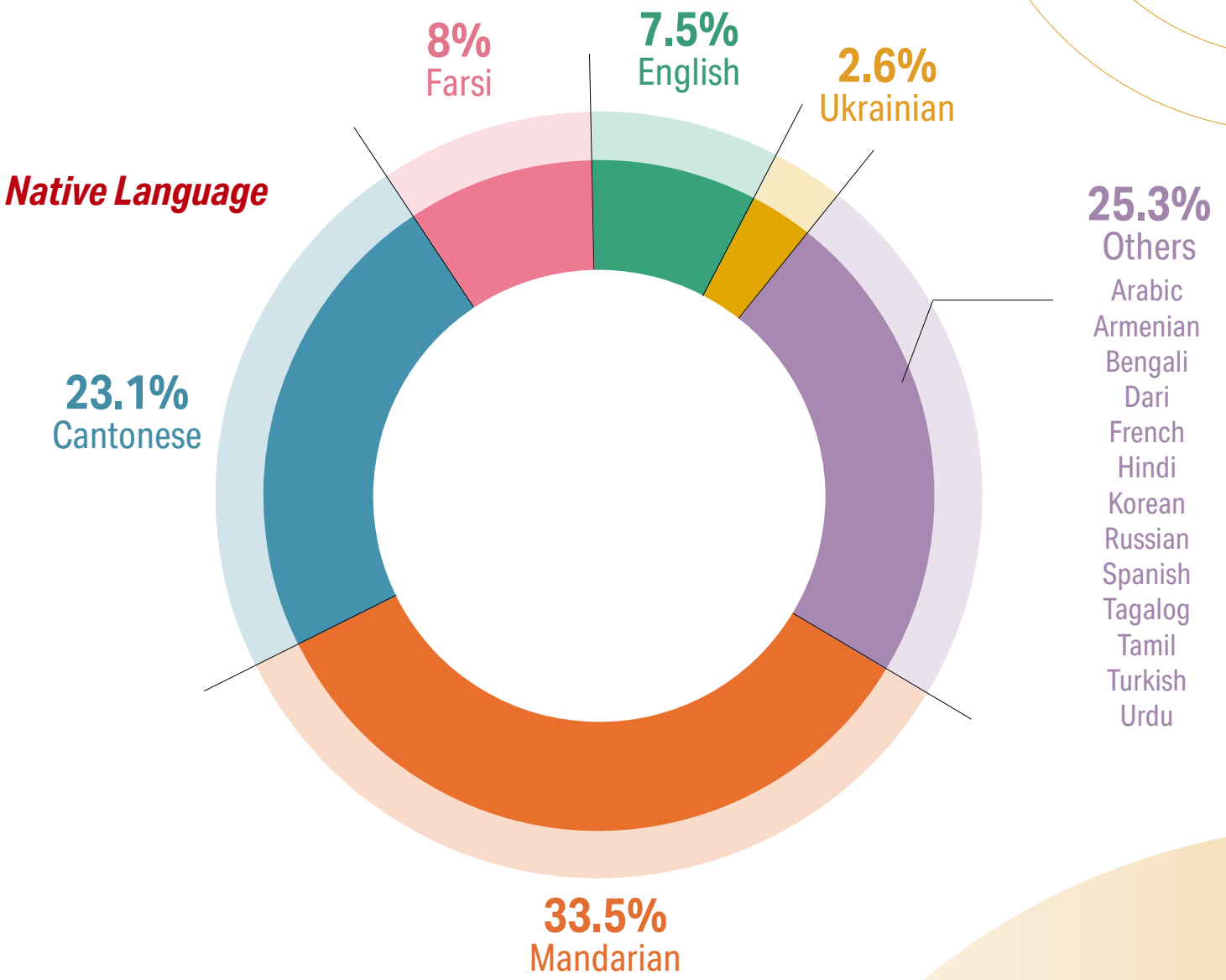
Community partners with ongoing collaboration
125

Number of employers with active involvement during the year
33

Country of Origin



Country of Origin	Number of Clients Served – Top 5
China	9,428
Hong Kong SAR	2,276
Iran	1,715
Ukraine	797
Afghanistan	720



Native Language	Number of Clients Served – Top 5
Mandarin	7,318
Cantonese	5,053
Farsi	1,751
English	1,633
Ukrainain	558

Financial Statement

	2025
REVENUE	
Grants and contributions	$ 12,185,425
Amortization of deferred capital contributions	370,180
Fees for use of space	147,372
Donations	106,138
Fees for services rendered	257,376
Amortization of leasehold inducement	16,000
Interest income	154,030
Membership fees	4,982
Productive enterprises	–
	13,241,503
EXPENSES	
Wages and benefits	8,961,518
Building occupancy and realty tax	2,070,896
Program	521,040
Office and general	341,321
HST	97,101
Purchased services	251,913
Term loan interest	–
Equipment maintenance and rental	32,283
Staff development and travel	69,707
Advertising and promotion	49,225
Amortization	593,334
	12,988,338
Excess of revenue over expenses	**$ 253,165**

Funder List
2024-2025

- Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada
- Ontario Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services
- Ontario Ministry of Health
- Ontario Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development
- Ontario Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility
- Employment Ontario
- Canada Revenue Agency
- City of Markham
- City of Toronto
- United Way Greater Toronto
- Daily Bread Food Bank
- Regional Municipality of York

CICS Locations & Contact Information

Immigrant Resource Centre (CICS HEAD OFFICE)
2330 Midland Avenue,
Toronto, Ontario M1S 5G5
416-292-7510

Kennedy Newcomer Service Centre
2075 Kennedy Road, Unit 703 and 705,
Scarborough, Ontario M1T 3V3
416-293-4565 (Settlement Services)
416-299-8118 (Language Training/LINC)

Woodside Square LINC Centre
1571 Sandhurst Circle, Unit 414, G/F,
Toronto, Ontario M1V 1V2
416-292-6558

North York Office
1761 Sheppard Avenue East, G/F,
Toronto, Ontario M2J 0A5
416-292-7510 By appointment only

Markham South Welcome Centre
7220 Kennedy Road, Unit 8,
Markham, Ontario L3R 7P2
905-479-7926

Immigrant Youth Centre
5284 Highway 7 East, Unit 2,
Markham, Ontario L3P 1B9
905-294-8868

Newmarket Centre
130 Mulock Drive, Unit 2,
Newmarket, Ontario L3Y 7C5
905-895-3789

Center for Learning
7220 Kennedy Road, Unit 3,
Markham, Ontario L3R 7P2
416-797-2353 / 647-882-0439

Langham Square, 8333 Kennedy Road, Unit 39,
Markham, Ontario L3R 4P8
416-797-2353 / 647-882-0439

www.cicscanada.com



Thank you for taking the time to read through the stories in this annual report. Even though it has been 56 years since CICS was born, one thing has not changed: we exist for one purpose and one purpose only: to bring together people who can help, with people who need help, and together we will create communities where everyone has a place, a place they can call home.

We live in a day and age where more and more people are at risk of being left behind. Every day our staff at the front lines come face to face with those who struggle with securing employment, finding a place to live, feeding their families, accessing health care, elements of everyday living that so many of us take for granted. For example, every Friday over 200 families line up outside our head office in Scarborough to access our foodbank services. Some of them are seniors who live alone, others are young families who come with their children as they can't make ends meet in our affordability crisis.

As we try to meet seemingly endless needs in our community, with very limited resources, we need your help. The QR code on this page will take you to our Canada Helps page where you can make a donation to support our work. Every dollar you give will go towards our vision that has burned bright and clear for 56 years: To create communities where everybody belongs, everyone has a place, and everyone can call home.

Support CICS

Thank you



CICS

Centre for Immigrant and Community Services

www.cicscanada.com