

[Jennifer Moreau](#) / Burnaby Now

December 16, 2014 01:02 PM



Solmaz Mehrabani, a Farsi-speaking settlement worker with MOSAIC, encourages immigrant families to celebrate the holidays and refers them to the Burnaby Christmas Bureau. ††Photograph By Larry Wright

For many of Solmaz Mehrabani's clients, celebrating Christmas is a new concept. The Farsi-speaking MOSAIC settlement worker mostly helps newcomers from Iran and Afghanistan, people who are more likely to celebrate Nowruz, the Persian new year, than Christmas.

But that doesn't stop her from selling them on the idea of Santa, toys for kids and the message of hope.

"I believe in integration. You don't have to put away your own culture, but you should be open to the culture of the people you are living with," Mehrabani says. "I think it's important to be open."

The Christmas conversation often evokes a shy reaction at first, but Mehrabani tells people there will be toys for kids, snow and lights - it will all be very beautiful. But many of her clients are refugees with little money, and that's where the Burnaby Christmas Bureau comes in.

"Even though they are Muslim, they don't follow Christmas, I've talked about Christmas and there's a place you can go to get toys for your kids," she says. "They get really happy. ... I see their faces when they come in our offices and when they leave, it's all about giving them hope."

Mehrabani refers many clients to the Burnaby Christmas Bureau, which supplies local, low-income families with gifts and food for the holidays. Registered families can peruse the bureau's toy room on Kingsway and pick out gifts for their kids.

According to Stephen D' Souza, executive director of Burnaby Community Services, approximately 20 per cent of the Christmas Bureau's clients have arrived to Canada within the last year.

"Most newcomers typically use the Christmas Bureau for two to three years," he said. "Then, as they become settled, find work and connect to other services, they tend to become donors rather than recipients. The Christmas spirit becomes part of their Canadian experience."

While newcomers appreciate gifts for their kids, the bureau is limited in helping the adults, who often need food, furniture and clothes.

"We try to match them with sponsors, who can sometimes fulfill some of these needs, as often as we can," D'Souza said. "Language barriers sometimes hinders the relationship between the sponsor and client, but with a lot of patience on both sides new bonds are created. It is this sense of connection - a helping hand and giving heart when you are overwhelmed by a new country and foreign people - that makes the Christmas Bureau an important service for newcomers."

D'Souza said the bureau often refers clients to other community services or settlement groups, but over the past year, funding for these services has changed, and they are now they are only available to permanent residents.

"This change has been detrimental to a large number of newcomers, such as refugee claimants, temporary foreign workers, naturalized citizens still struggling with settlement," D' Souza said.¶¶¶¶

The bureau is always looking for donations of cash or new, unwrapped toys. To find out how you can get involved, go to [www.burnabycommunityconnections.com](http://www.burnabycommunityconnections.com) or call 604-299-5778.

© Burnaby Now

**Burnaby**now