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LGBT in B.C.: Project addresses gaps between Vancouver's LGBT and immigrant groups

by [Craig Takeuchi](#) on February 16th, 2015 at 3:04 PM

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While Vancouver may celebrate our multicultural society at the Pride parade, the city's organizations have many issues to address in assisting LGBT newcomers.

CRAIG TAKEUCHI

There are rainbow crosswalks on city streets. There are same-sex couples holding hands in public. There gay people coming and going freely from LGBT nightclubs and establishments. All of these are things that most Vancouverites may take for granted as daily realities.

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To many LGBT newcomers, immigrants, and refugees, however, these may be things that they could only hope in vain to see in their homelands.

Vancouver may seem like quite the LGBT paradise to many who come from over 80 countries where LGBT people are condemned, criminalized, and persecuted.

For those who do arrive in Metro Vancouver, however, there are a number of cracks that they can easily slip through that can turn the dream into a nightmare.

On the line with the *Georgia Straight*, MOSAIC's Roja Bagheri explained that while Vancouver has services and communities for both cultural and LGBT groups, these two worlds often remain separate, without much overlap. That gap can become an unbridgeable chasm to LGBT immigrants that can compound their challenges.

"There are some spaces where as a newcomer, you immigrate and then you want to go to your cultural community but then your cultural community may not accept you as a queer person so that part of you is silenced," she said. "And if you want to go, let's say, to a settlement agency, that settlement agency may not be aware of...your sexual orientation and your unique needs so that part of you is silenced. And then you might go to an agency that is for LGBTQ folks, but then they're not aware and understanding of unique needs of newcomers."

Bagheri is the program coordinator for a six-month pilot-program called [I Belong](#), which is funded by Citizenship and Immigration Canada and conducted in conjunction with [Rainbow Refugee](#), a community group for LGBT refugees. The project, which began in October and is being conducted in Burnaby and New Westminster, was designed to raise LGBT awareness within MOSAIC, a non-profit organization for immigrants and newcomers, as well as within other organizations too.

She explained that the program is hoping to determine how organizations can "see a person as a whole and provide support and services to a person as a whole and not only see a part of them".

For instance, Bagheri pointed out that LGBT agencies may be well-versed in sexual orientation or gender sensitivities, but they may not necessarily understand the unique needs of those who

are also newcomers, immigrants or refugees. Accordingly, LGBT newcomers may become a minority within a minority.

An additional problem, she said, is that most LGBT services are located in downtown Vancouver but many immigrants aren't able to afford living near there. Thus, many move to the suburbs (such as Coquitlam or Surrey) and aren't able to readily access services downtown, she said.

Another pervasive problem is that many LGBT immigrants often have difficulty finding non-homophobic or non-transphobic shelters or housing. Transgender people can particularly face problems when trying to access gender-specific shelters, and may also experience discrimination in finding employment.

What's more, these issues occur in addition to experiences of racism, xenophobia, classism, or language and cultural barriers that newcomers may face after arriving in Vancouver.

Consequently, the I Belong project is taking a multifaceted approach to conduct research to find out the needs and barriers that LGBT newcomers face.

The project has included online surveys and in-person interviews, a community dialogue meeting (held on January 26 with over 80 people in attendance), a 10-week support group (that began on January 21), one-on-one support, and an advisory committee.

The research will be compiled, along with recommendations of how to address these unique issues, in a report that will be released in March.

Although the core program will end on March 31 and some elements of the program will continue on, Bagheri said they are searching for further funding so that more parts of the program can continue on into the future.

This article is the third part of a series looking at new LGBT initiatives across British Columbia. See the sidebar for links to the other articles in the series.

You can follow Craig Takeuchi on Twitter at twitter.com/cinecraig. You can also follow the Straight's LGBT coverage on Twitter at twitter.com/StraightLGBT.

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