



VIRCS

35 years

Empowering Newcomers

ANNUAL IMPACT REPORT 2023-2024



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VIRCS is under the distinguished Patronage of The Honourable Janet Austin, OBC Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia.

Photo: Office of the Lieutenant Governor

Territorial Acknowledgement

We acknowledge with respect that our work at VIRCS takes place on the traditional territories of the Lək̓ʷəŋən (Lekwungen) Peoples known today as the Esquimalt and Songhees Nations. These lands, located in Greater Victoria, have long been a place of gathering and home to the original families who made their home a long time ago. As we continue our mission to assist those new to this region, we recognize the enduring presence and deep traditional knowledge of the Lək̓ʷəŋən (Lekwungen) traditional families' territory.

We are committed to learning from and respecting Indigenous peoples' rich history, culture, and wisdom as we support our staff to provide services and help clients build their new lives as guests on these unceded lands. We are also committed to respectfully contributing to the ongoing mutual learning and healing process needed by acknowledging Indigenous peoples' suffering under colonization and its devastating effects to date.

Our Vision:

Empowered newcomers flourishing in their communities with a sense of belonging.

Our Mission

Assist immigrants and refugees in settling and integrating through comprehensive services for their evolving needs.

Our Values:

Fairness, Inclusion, Trustworthiness, Commitment, Respect, and Dignity

VIRCS' Team:

Abena Ayepah; Ava Shabestari; Brennan Crabb; Bernardo Roisenberg; Cenit Munoz; Charis Tazumi; Daria Klimaseva; David Bradley; Fayrouz Mohammed; Haixia Liu; Hammuda Abdulsalam; Iman Skati; Jayanthi Rajkumar; Jennifer Rawlinson; Kyoungmi Lee; Kimia Yousefian; Luis G. Aguirre; Marcelo Rojas; Michael Carrow; Michael Luk; Natasha Pakula; Nasim Hamed; Nahlah Jabra; Phuong Nguyen Le; Rashed Alsadek; Roberto Alberto; Sahar Mansourian; Shennan Li; Simplicio 'JR' Sumauang; Soolin Yang; Yoko Izawa; Zeinab Hammoud

2023-2024: Board of Directors

Zaheera Jinnah, President.
Andrea McCoy, Vice President.
Kaveh Sarmast, Treasurer.
Bushra AlQudayri, Secretary.
Patti Grey, Member at Large.
Karen Iturbide, Member at Large.
Sara Alasaly, Member at Large

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Board Chair Message

Leading with Resilience

VIRCS cares for some of the most vulnerable people in our community. At the best of times, this is hard work, requiring dedication, empathy, agility, resilience and creativity to help families not just navigate new surroundings and rebuild their lives but thrive in their new home, while holding on to their culture, and values and embracing new challenges. This last year our work has been tougher still. The wars in Ukraine and Gaza have killed tens of thousands of people and displaced millions more, around the world, countless other conflicts rage on. For many of our staff and clients, these global events affect them personally, even while they steer through other challenges closer to home – the ever rising cost of living, precarious housing, a mental health and substance use crisis, and climate change.

Yet, through all these difficulties and trauma, VIRCS has continued to serve immigrant and newcomer communities as best it can. There is still an immense amount of work to do: improving our financial stability, providing more financial security and support to staff, streamlining our services for clients, and deepening our own understanding and commitment to anti-racism decolonization

and Truth and Reconciliation as a settlement agency.

Throughout this report, you will read more about the ground-breaking work being done by VIRCS in settlement services, employment and training, ESL, anti-racism and more. This is possible because of the hard work and commitment of our staff, the leadership of our ED, and Managers, and the support of our volunteers, members, sponsors, funder and Board of Directors. Most of us who work or volunteer at VIRCS are immigrants and newcomers ourselves, and this care for people is at the heart of the work we do. I am proud to lead an agency that puts people first.

Thank you to all of you who contributed in some way this past year, and who will continue serving VIRCS in the years ahead.

*Zaheera Jinnah,
President of the Board. Executive Director
Message*



Empowering lives: 36 years of dedication and progress

This year, the Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre Society (VIRCS) celebrates 36 years of dedicated service to immigrants and refugees in the Greater Victoria Region. We are deeply inspired by the collective efforts of many who have contributed to our mission of creating a welcoming and inclusive community. VIRCS has become a necessary support for newcomers, a place where resilience, hope, and opportunity thrive.

Our extraordinary staff, volunteers, and Board of Directors have been at the core of this work. Their unwavering commitment, empathy, and creativity have transformed the lives of countless individuals and families. Through programs spanning settlement, employment, social integration, women's empowerment, youth belonging, language training, and anti-racism initiatives, we have provided critical support to those navigating the complexities of starting over. Together, we have shown the profound impact of collaboration and shared purpose, building a community where every newcomer can thrive.

None of this would have been possible without the generous support of our funders and donors. Their investments enable us to address newcomers' multifaceted challenges, from economic barriers to social integration. These contributions have allowed us to deliver

essential services that honour the unique identities of those we serve, ensuring integration without assimilation. By partnering with us, our funders and donors have played an indispensable role in fostering a community rooted in diversity and inclusion.

We are also immensely grateful for our community partners and service providers, whose collaboration strengthens the support network for newcomers. In these challenging times of rising costs, these collaborative partnerships have ensured newcomers have the tools and resources to build fulfilling lives.

We are mindful of the land on which we live and work. We acknowledge the Indigenous Peoples, original and current inhabitants of this land that has been their home for thousands of years and commit to learning from their traditions and contributing to the ongoing journey of Truth and Reconciliation.

VIRCS's accomplishments over the past year contained in this Annual Impact Report showcase the collective efforts of our staff, Board, funders, community partners, and the broader community. Every contribution—time, resources, or expertise—strengthens our mission of building a more inclusive and welcoming society.

With gratitude,

*Luis G. Aguirre,
Executive Director.*



Program Highlights

VIRCS Annual Report Highlights (2023-2024)

The 2023-2024 fiscal year marked a period of growth and impact for VIRCS, as we served over 4,000 clients, strengthening community partnerships and delivering programs that empower newcomers to settle and thrive in the Greater Victoria Region.

Key Achievements

- **Resilience BC Anti-Racism Network Hub:** Supported 35 network members through initiatives such as the "Taking Action!" lecture series, decolonization training for participants from 11 communities, and bystander intervention workshops attended by over 100 individuals. Developed the Communities of Care Mental Health Toolkit to address racism's impact on mental health.
- **BC Newcomer Services Program (BCNSP):** Relaunched in April 2024, serving over 800 clients in its first quarter. Services included settlement support, employment assistance, and English language classes, delivered in collaboration with local partners like libraries and mental health organizations.
- **Newcomer Wraparound Support Program (NWSP):** Provided tailored support to nearly 400 clients through individual consultations and group sessions. The START initiative supported over 30



newcomers with disabilities, offering access to education and financial assistance.

- **Enable Program:** Supported nearly 500 women, children, and youth with programs like Homework Club, Sparks, art therapy, and youth nights. Expanded services to new communities in Langford, Colwood, and Sooke.
- **Pathways to Professions, Trades, and Entrepreneurship (P2PTE):** Reinitiated a new contract. In the past period served over 160 youth achieving an 86% success rate in transitioning participants to employment or education.
- **English as a Second Language (ESL) Program:** Offered accessible language training to hundreds, from beginner to advanced levels, including a free pronunciation workshop, helping clients improve essential communication skills.
- **Welcome Gardens:** Delivered food literacy education and gardening resources to hundreds of participants, distributing fresh produce and hosting workshops on topics like food conservation and multicultural crops

Resilience BC Anti-Racism Network Hub

Strengthening Anti-Racism Efforts Across British Columbia

A Year of Empowerment, Education, and Community Engagement

Since 2020, the Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre Society (VIRCS) has hosted the Resilience BC Anti-Racism Network Hub, funded by the Ministry of the Attorney General, Multicultural Anti-Racism Branch of the Province of British Columbia. The Hub supports the Resilience BC Anti-Racism Network's 35 members, providing resources, training, and a platform for collaboration to address and combat racism across the province.

In partnership with SFU Public Square, the Hub hosted four instalments of the "Taking Action!" Lecture Series. A highlight of the series was the lecture by renowned speaker Len Pierre, who discussed the "tyranny of efficiency" and the importance of centring cultural safety through an Indigenous worldview. The event was well-received, garnering significant positive feedback from attendees.

The Hub prioritized education and training to empower Network Members. In

collaboration with *Hummingbirds Rising Consulting*, the Hub offered a comprehensive six-part Decolonization training series, which was attended by participants from 11 communities.

Despite the intensity of the sessions, feedback was overwhelmingly positive, highlighting the depth and impact of the content.

Additionally, the Hub facilitated Bystander Intervention Training sessions in collaboration with various local spokes. Notably, 25 high school students and 15 community members in Prince George, and 85 registrants from Courtenay, Comox, and Campbell River participated. These sessions were instrumental in equipping community members with the skills to effectively intervene in and address racist incidents. Recognizing the emotional toll of anti-racism work, the Hub organized monthly debrief sessions as a safe space for Network Members to express their experiences and emotions. Facilitated by experts such as Dr. Lisa Gunderson and Dr. Rebecca Nelems, these sessions provided critical support, with an increasing number of participants appreciating the safe, reflective environment.

The Hub's monthly meetings served as a vital forum for Network Members to share insights, discuss challenges, and learn from each other. These meetings also facilitated connections with external organizations and experts, enhancing the

anti-racism efforts within local communities.

Weekly emails, alternating between community members and Network Members, kept the network informed about relevant resources, training opportunities, and upcoming events, fostering continuous engagement and awareness.

The Hub actively used social media to share inspiring content and educational resources. A notable initiative was the educational series, which defined and explained terms like "bias" and "intersectionality," providing followers with a deeper understanding of anti-racism concepts.

Throughout the year, the Hub responded promptly to various urgent requests from Network Members and the public, including incidents of racist graffiti and support in addressing discrimination by public officials. These responses were integral in maintaining the trust and effectiveness of the Hub-Spoke relationships.

The Hub engaged in consultations, such as focus group discussions with the BC Prosecution Services and sessions with the Anti-Racism Policy Team, to address critical issues like the definition of hate crimes and anti-racism legislation.

A significant achievement was the development of the Communities of Care

Mental Health Toolkit, an interactive resource aimed at helping newcomers understand and navigate racism in Canada. Although temporarily on hold due to staffing and capacity shifts, this toolkit received positive feedback and represents a valuable resource for the future.

Over the past year, the Resilience BC Anti-Racism Network Hub has made significant strides in supporting Network Members, providing critical training, and fostering a collaborative and supportive environment for anti-racism work.

Despite challenges, the Hub's dedication to advancing anti-racism initiatives across British Columbia remains steadfast, with a focus on continuous improvement and community empowerment.

VIRCS thanks the Resilience BC Network team:

Abena Ayepah Atta-Gyan

Zeinab Hammoud

Roberto Alberto

A significant achievement was the development of the Communities of Care Mental Health Toolkit, an interactive resource aimed at helping newcomers understand and navigate racism in Canada.



BCNSP Staff Wing Le and Serena Lee Photo: Courtesy of The Chamber of Commerce.

BC Newcomer Services Program (BCNSP)

Empowering Newcomers for Successful Integration

Supporting Social and Economic Inclusion Across British Columbia

The BC Newcomer Services Program (BCNSP) is designed to support newcomers to British Columbia who are not eligible for federally funded settlement services. Our primary funder, the Ministry of Municipal

Affairs of the Province of British Columbia, is committed to extending Settlement and Integration Services to key newcomer groups, ensuring they receive the support necessary to integrate successfully into society.

Provincially, BCNSP provides direct settlement services across approximately 100 communities throughout the province, focusing on supporting most temporary residents.

The objective of BCNSP is to facilitate the social and economic integration of newcomers by delivering tailored settlement services. These services aim to help clients achieve strong settlement outcomes, benefiting not only the individuals but also the broader community economically and socially.

Newcomers served by BCNSP face unique challenges and barriers to integration, making targeted support essential.

BCNSP employs a client-focused approach, ensuring that services are customized and efficiently delivered. This approach results in meaningful and lasting settlement outcomes for newcomers, host communities, and workplaces. We focus on the specific needs of each client group, ensuring that newcomers can integrate effectively and contribute positively to the community.

Following the conclusion of the BC Settlement and Integration Services (BCSIS) program in March 2024, which had been providing essential services since July 2018, we are pleased to announce the launch of BCNSP. Thanks to secured funding from the Ministry of Municipal Affairs, BCNSP will continue to provide support over the next five years, starting in April 2024. This funding ensures ongoing

assistance to clients across various locations, supported by partners such as the Greater Victoria Public Library (GVPL) and the Vancouver Island Regional Library (VIRL) and many other community partners.

During the last quarter (April – June 2024), BCNSP served over 800 clients throughout Greater Victoria, from Sidney to Sooke. Services provided include settlement support, employment assistance, and English language classes. We have also expanded our network of community partners, incorporating the invaluable support of volunteers and organizations such as Masoud Manzouri, an immigration consultant providing legal clinic support; Mental Health Recovery Partners South Island (MHRP), offering peer support; and Swan Lake Christmas Hill Nature Sanctuary, hosting family activities.



Weaving wellness workshop participants with Oasis Spiritual Society staff. Photo: VIRCS



Beneficiary clients of community care kits from United Way. Photo: VIRCS

The success of BCNSP would not be possible without the significant contributions of our community partners and volunteers. Their dedication and collaboration have been instrumental in delivering essential services to newcomers. We extend our sincere gratitude to the Ministry of Municipal Affairs for their generous funding and unwavering support, which enables us to continue making a positive impact in the lives of newcomers in British Columbia.

Success Stories

"I hope this message finds you well. I wanted to take a moment to express my heartfelt gratitude for all your help and support over the past few years. Your help,

with volunteering, food safety, and first aid, has been invaluable and instrumental in my current employment. Your input has truly made a difference in my job security. Thank you once again for everything. Your continued support means a lot to me, and I am grateful to have you as a support."

Giulietta, BCNSP Client, Monday, July 22, 2024

"I was so grateful to meet you yesterday. I haven't met anyone like you since facing such a crisis. Your genuine and wholehearted trust meant the world to me. The two times I cried like a child, it wasn't merely because I was afraid to deal with the problems or stressed out (maybe a little), but because I was deeply moved by your sincerity. Not many people believed or understood that I left my country due to religious oppression and the profound wounds inflicted by the government. Seeking refugee status is my least preferred option, but I truly appreciate your trust and help. Meeting you has become one of my greatest sources of encouragement to pull myself together and face these challenges."

Chong Lin, BCNSP Client, Friday, June 7, 2024

VIRCS thanks the BCNSP team:

Nasim Hamed, Serena Lee, Wing Le, Jayanthi Rajkumar, Natasha Pakula, Zahara Dehini, David Bradley and Michael Carrow

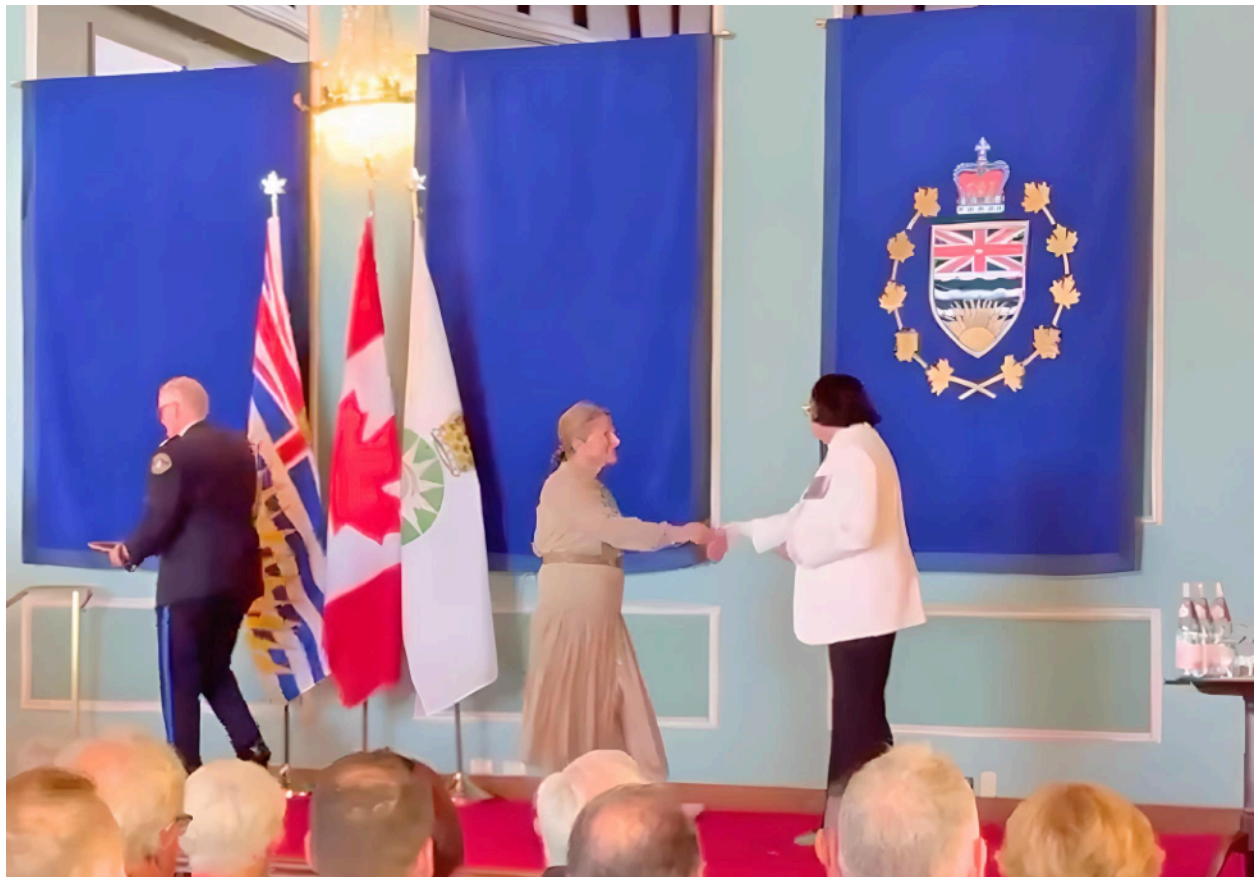
Recognition of Excellence: Nasim Hamed

We are proud to announce that Nasim Hamed, Program Manager of the BCNSP Program at the Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre Society (VIRCS), has been awarded the *King Richard III Coronation Medal*.

Nasim immigrated to Canada from Iran 35 years ago and has significantly contributed to the settlement and integration of thousands of newcomers in the Greater

Victoria Region for over 20 years. Her compassionate and unwavering dedication and deep understanding of the challenges faced by immigrants and refugees have left a lasting impact on the community, embodying the values of service, diversity, and sustainability.

Nasim received this prestigious medal on July 18, 2024, directly from the hands of *Her Honour Lt. Governor Janet Austin* during the official ceremony at *The Government House*.



Nasim Hamed receiving the King Richard III Coronation Medal from Her Honour Lt. Governor Janet Austin. July 18, 2024. Government House. Photo: Courtesy of Nasim Hamed

Newcomer Wraparound Support Program (NWSP)

Comprehensive Support for Newcomers with Complex Needs.

Fostering Community Connections and Empowering New Lives

The 2023-2024 year marked a period of impactful work for the Newcomer Wraparound Support Program (NWSP). Funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), NWSP's wraparound approach provides newcomers with tailored, comprehensive support to help them navigate the often complex journey of settling into a new community in the Greater Victoria Region. This year, we witnessed the profound difference that personalized care and community engagement can make in the lives of individuals and families facing significant challenges.

At the heart of NWSP's success is a collaborative effort that involves not just our dedicated staff, but also volunteers, practicum students, and community partners. Each newcomer is unique,

bringing their own strengths, dreams, and aspirations. Recognizing this, our team works closely with clients to develop personalized wraparound plans, ensuring that each individual's needs are met with empathy and precision. Through one-on-one information and group orientation sessions, we empower clients to build confidence, connect with others, and take meaningful steps toward integration.

Our team goes beyond addressing immediate needs; we foster a sense of community and belonging. Through group activities and workshops, we provide newcomers with essential life skills, an understanding of Canadian laws, cultural awareness, and employment readiness. By focusing on holistic growth, we aim to assist our clients in the short term but also to set them on a path toward long-term success and fulfillment in their new environment.

This past year, NWSP has served almost 400 clients through individual consultations and group orientations. We organized nearly 231 information and orientation sessions covering a wide range of topics. These sessions, which include topics such as healthcare systems, crisis intervention, and tenancy rights, are designed to equip newcomers with the knowledge and skills they need to thrive. We have also collaborated with various organizations to provide specialized workshops, further enhancing our clients' ability to adapt and find their footing in Canada.

Despite our successes and commitment, we are acutely aware of the ongoing challenges our clients face. Affordable housing, access to healthcare, support for individuals with disabilities, and assistance for those fleeing domestic violence remain critical areas of focus.

Our Intake Coordinator is often the first point of contact for newcomers, providing crucial support through managing intake, referrals, and personalized action plans. Wraparound Case Managers for Adults and Families and Youth Case Managers continue to advocate for clients, offering assessments and counselling tailored to each individual's circumstances. Enhanced Youth Workers guide young newcomers through employment services, career counselling, and skill development, while our Workshop Coordinator ensures that clients have access to essential information and resources.

START program, funded by Disability Alliance BC.

In addition to our core services, NWSP proudly introduced the START program, funded by Disability Alliance BC's Accessibility Project Grants for 2023/2024. This initiative offers specialized wraparound support to 20 newcomers with disabilities, helping them access education and financial assistance. By providing targeted support, we aim to

break down barriers and open up new opportunities for these individuals.

Our work would not be possible without the invaluable support of IRCC, community members, and our many partners. The collaboration with experts and agencies has been crucial in addressing the complex barriers that newcomers face. At VIRCS, we are committed to building a network of resources, partnering with nonprofits, government agencies, and educational institutions to offer holistic, client-centred services.

The contributions of our volunteers and practicum students have been vital to our efforts, bringing diverse perspectives and expertise that enrich our programs. Together, we strive to create a supportive, inclusive environment where newcomers are not just welcomed, but are also empowered to lead fulfilling lives as part of the Greater Victoria community.

VIRCS thanks the NWSP Team:

Fayrouz Mohammed, Haixia Liu, Iman Skati, Soolin Yang, Shennan Li, Rashed Alsadek, Marcelo Rojas, Bernardo Rosenberg, Charis Tazumi, and Kim Yousefian.



Newcomers Women's Projects (NWP)

Addressing Workplace Sexual Harassment for Newcomer Women

The Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre Society (VIRCS) has been actively engaged in initiatives aimed at addressing workplace sexual harassment, specifically targeting vulnerable populations such as newcomer women. This initiative is funded by Justice Canada under the

Workplace Sexual Harassment Initiatives program, which focuses on providing Public Legal Education and Information (PLEI) and Legal Advice to those most at risk. Our efforts aim to empower employees and employers with the knowledge to understand and fulfill their rights and responsibilities, ultimately creating safer and more inclusive work environments.

The primary objective of this initiative is to enhance workplace safety by developing and disseminating educational materials on sexual harassment. By increasing awareness and understanding among employees and employers, the program aims to empower individuals to recognize, prevent, and address harassment. Targeting vulnerable groups, including newcomer women and individuals in precarious



Wellness Mandala Series participants. Photo: VIRCS

employment, the program provides tailored support and seeks to improve access to legal resources for victims.

NWP hosted several workshops focused on workplace sexual harassment, specifically tailored for newcomer women. These sessions provided resources and information on recognizing and addressing harassment in the workplace. Engaged both employed and job-seeking newcomer women through interactive educational sessions, fostering a deeper understanding of their rights and the available support mechanisms. The workshops successfully created a safe space for open discussion, supported by experienced facilitators who guided the sessions with sensitivity and expertise.

NWP also developed comprehensive training materials, including PowerPoint presentations, facilitator notes, participant workbooks, and evaluation forms. These resources were disseminated to workshop participants and made available online, ensuring broader accessibility. Materials were created to address the needs of vulnerable populations, with specific adaptations to enhance relevance and impact.

We established channels for legal advice and support, making legal resources more accessible to victims of workplace sexual harassment. This included setting up email accounts for inquiries and updating online platforms to facilitate better communication and support. We collaborated with legal professionals to provide targeted advice and support,

ensuring victims receive the guidance they need to navigate their situations.

We also strengthened partnerships with local organizations and community groups, such as Mental Health Recovery Partners South Island (MHRP) and other support networks, to enhance the reach and impact of the program. Engaged volunteers, including immigration consultants and mental health professionals, who provided invaluable support in delivering services and resources.

This support has been a source of encouragement, empowering her to face her circumstances with renewed strength.

NWP at VIRCS acknowledges the critical role of our community partners, volunteers, and the Ministry of Justice Canada in the success of these initiatives. Their dedication and collaboration have been the key to deliver essential support to vulnerable populations, fostering safer and more inclusive workplaces.

VIRCS thanks Jenn Rubin for coordinating the NWP. NWP will be implemented in the future by consolidating with the Enable Program for Women, Children and Youth.



Enable program is grateful of our committed team of volunteers led by Ava Shabestari. Here, at winter celebrations. Photo: VIRCS

Enable for Women, Children & Youth

Supporting the Next Generations of Newcomers

Enable program is dedicated to supporting immigrant and refugee women of all ages, and children and youth, aged 6 to 19, regardless of their immigration status, as they settle and adapt to Canadian society. Our focus is on enhancing their emotional, educational, and social development, while providing a platform for them to share

their unique experiences, with the focus on mental and emotional support in all our programming, ensuring that our activities foster personal growth, community connections, and a sense of belonging.

Our mission is to create a nurturing environment where young people can build essential life skills and form meaningful relationships during their transition to a new culture. By offering a safe and supportive space, Enable aims to empower women, children and youth to express themselves confidently and thrive.

We are committed to celebrating diversity and promoting overall wellbeing, striving to make a positive and enduring impact on both individuals and the community.

For the fiscal year 2023-2024, Enable is thrilled to announce significant achievements and expansions in our programmatic offerings. We proudly report a total of 457 registered participants, reflecting our growing reach and impact. Our success this year has been largely due to the generous funders, strong partnerships we have established with community organizations, school districts, other non-profits, service providers.

This year, Enable continued to support immigrant and refugee children and youth through various key initiatives. Our Homework Club, which supports children, has been a cornerstone of our efforts, providing essential academic and 101 assistances with the support of our committed volunteers. We also expanded our Sparks programming to elementary schools within the Greater Victoria School District, helping students adapt and thrive in their new environment.

A major highlight of the year was our Summer Camp, which accommodated a large number of youth in collaboration with the Greater Victoria School Districts. This program provided a valuable opportunity for young people to engage in enriching activities and build connections with their peers during the summer months.

In line with our mission to broaden our reach, Enable extended its services to Langford, Colwood, and Sooke. In these new locations, we offered weekly Art



Art therapy participants and our great volunteers. Photo: VIRCS

Therapy sessions specifically designed to enhance the emotional and psychological wellbeing of students, particularly in School District 62. Additionally, we provided Sparks programming at Langford for newcomer students who need assistance with English, further supporting their educational journey.

Our Youth Night programming has also been a significant success, offering safe



Enable participants and our great volunteers and partner at PISE.
Photo: VIRCS

and nurturing environments for immigrant and refugee youth twice a month. These sessions, with their diverse approaches and programming, aim to provide a supportive space where youth can express themselves and build community.

Beyond these main activities, Enable undertook several smaller yet impactful projects. We organized a Multicultural Winter Celebration, engaged in a Community-Led Engagement Project.

In summary, the results of Enable's reflect our commitment to creating impactful and supportive environments for newcomer, Immigrant, Refugee children and youth. Through positive relationships, successful transitions, and increased empowerment and inclusion, leading to enhance the sense of identity and belonging within School, family and the community.

The program contributes significantly to the wellbeing and integration of these young individuals into Canadian society.

Testimonies from participants:

“Attending Youth Night has been a beneficial experience for me. I struggled with making friends and felt isolated, but this program gave me the confidence to connect with others and feel valued. It has been a place where I found my voice and realized that I am important.”

“The Art Therapy has been incredibly helpful for my child, who faced significant challenges at school due to language barriers. It has greatly improved his communication skills and has given him the tools to express his emotions more effectively. We have seen a positive change in his ability to interact with others and handle school life.”

VIRCS thanks Ava Shabestari for coordinating Enable Program for Women, Children and Youth.

Pathways to Professions, Trades, and Entrepreneurship (P2PTE)

Empowering Youth to Overcome Barriers and Succeed

The P2PTE program concluded its 3 year contract with Service Canada on March 31, 2024, serving 160 youth with barriers to employment through the Youth Employment and Skills Strategy program. Our success rate of placing youth in employment or education was 86% which allowed us to surpass the expected results of our funder.

P2PTE staff prepared a new proposal for a new contract for YESS program and submitted it in November 2023 and began delivering it in August 2024, with a gap of few months between contracts.

During the period when P2PTE was closed, Michael Luk and Sahar Mansourian ran the VIRCS Employment Café and delivered employment services for all VIRCS clients. We would like to continue this service but have not yet been able to secure funding for this extra service.

Program objectives

The objectives of the YESS Program are to help all youth develop the skills and gain the experience they need to successfully

transition into the labour market. These objectives are attained by supporting the needs of all youth, especially youth facing barriers, to develop skills, knowledge and networks through education, skills development, and meaningful work experiences.

Over 43 months, the Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre Society (VIRCS) will assist 150 youth facing barriers to employment to develop the skills and gain the experiences they need to find and keep quality jobs. The project will deliver 12 intakes consisting of up to 8 weeks of Employment Services and Employment Skills Training and up to 12 weeks of Quality Employment Experience to youth furthest from employment including 140 racialized youth, 6 youth with disabilities, and 5 Indigenous youth. Accredited Skills Training will be offered to youth when there are no other means of support available to meet identified skill requirements. The project will also provide individualized supports, such as childcare, transportation, coaching and living expenses that will enable these youth to benefit from the interventions more fully.

Participant Testimonials:

“I’ve had a truly positive experience with P2PTE. I really enjoyed how informative and helpful this program was. The opportunity to learn from such a well-structured and engaging curriculum has been invaluable. The instructors and everyone who helped



P2PTE cohort with Brennan Crabb, Course Instructor. Photo: VIRCS

with the program were incredibly nice and kind; any time I needed help with something, they were always there to support me. In addition to the educational benefits, I made new friends and learned so many different things that have enriched both my personal and professional life. One of the most amazing outcomes was finding a job here through the connections I made in the program, which has been a fantastic opportunity for me. I'm so grateful to have met these amazing people, and I believe that

everyone should participate in this program—they will never regret it. It's an experience that allows you to learn and gain so much.”

Shahed.

“To the P2PTE team at Vircs I would like to express my deepest thanks and gratitude for all the help you have given me in my job search. You have been so kind and helpful, and we couldn't have made this success happen without your help.

Through your valuable guidance and advice, I was able to set professional goals and run my business. You have given me valuable information on how to prepare my resume and write an effective cover letter.

You also shared valuable information with me on how to search for job opportunities and deal with job allowance.

I am grateful to you for taking the time to listen to my needs in cooperation with you.

I understand that you are efficient and interested in achieving my professional goals.

I look forward to hearing from you and knowing you in the future.

And I am sure that I will continue to grow and develop thanks to your valuable help.

Once again, I thank you with all my heart for all that you have given me. I am grateful to you and appreciate your great efforts.

Sincerely,”

Sakher Abazeid

“P2PTE really helped me understand the Canadian job market and gave me the confidence and all the insights to better my job search and land a job I am passionate about and truly enjoy. Not only did I learn so much from the material, but also

from our mentors and all the amazing people I have met in class. Everyone working with us in the program was so kind and helpful, I now have another family and support system in Victoria. Thank you VIRCS and P2PTE!

Kind Regards,”

Razan



P2PTE participants, learning parenting skills. Photo: VIRCS

VIRCS thanks the P2PTE Team: Jennifer Rawlinson, Brennan Crabb, Michael Luk, Nahlah Jabra, and Sahar Mansourian.

English as a Second Language Program (ESL)

Enhancing Communication Skills for Newcomers

VIRCS has been delivering English Language training since we opened our door in 1989. Over the past 35 years, our community-based ESL program has gone through transitions in order to meet the changing needs of newcomers in Victoria.

Our fee payer English as a Second Language classes have the following schedule and are designed to meet the needs of newcomers in our community who are not eligible for government funded English programs.

Monday and Tuesday afternoons: beginner

Wednesday and Thursday afternoons, intermediate/advanced

Thursday mornings, low beginner

Friday afternoons: Pronunciation (free and open to all VIRCS clients)

Each of these classes focuses on providing clients with English skills they need for daily life in Canada. Speaking and listening are the main skills developed, but some reading and writing is also included. Our pronunciation class on Friday afternoons introduces students to the sounds of English, from both a listening and a speaking standpoint.

The VIRCS ESL program is unique in its approach to student-centred learning. We

have adapted our program to meet the diverse needs of newcomers in our community. We offer the following:

Continuous intake: which means that a student may begin their program at any time as long as we have a seat available.

Flexible attendance: students may attend as many or as few classes as they choose. This flexibility has been a hallmark of our program, as it allows students to attend when they want. Many of our students have other commitments such as employment, family and other academic pursuits.

An Individualized Education Plan: Our program is flexible which requires a differentiated approach to learning. Our curriculum is based on individual needs because the classes are multilevel and multicultural.

A two- tiered payment schedule: We are able to offer a reduced tuition fee for our domestic students. Our international visitors pay a higher tuition fee, but it is still lower than other comparable programs. In addition, VIRCS offers four free seats per class to accommodate those who may face barriers to accessing English language training in our community. The duration of stay for each student is 6 months, so that we may offer the free seats to those who can't afford the tuition fees.

High quality programs: We offer beginner, intermediate and advanced classes at VIRCS. Our instructor, David Bradley, recently added a third level to accommodate the needs of the students. We are excited to announce that we are

offering a free Pronunciation class every Friday afternoon which is open to all VIRCS clients. In the fall, we plan to offer Saturday morning specialized English classes such as CELPIP Preparation, Medical Terminology and Business English. We are fortunate to have a bright, airy, comfortable classroom and an accessible location in the community.

The VIRCS ESL program is unique both in its accessibility and delivery. This quality fulfills a need in our community, as many other programs are structured, costly and often difficult to access because of reduced funding and long waitlists. We believe in delivering quality programs in a timely and efficient manner. Our flexible, continuous intake programs offer students an opportunity to improve their English

skills in a safe and community inspired space.

CELPIP

The Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre Society (VIRCS) is one of three CELPIP testing facilities in Greater Victoria. In 2023-2024, VIRCS administered the CELPIP test to several hundred individuals. By offering this test, VIRCS aids newcomers in integrating smoothly into Canadian life and reaching their full potential.

VIRCS thanks the ESL team: Jennifer Rawlinson, David Bradley.



David Bradley, ESL teacher with students. Photo: VIRCS

Welcome Gardens

Cultivating Community and Growth for Newcomers Building Connections Through Urban Agriculture and Environmental Stewardship

Welcome Gardens, operating under the VIRCS umbrella, has been a cornerstone of settlement services for eight years. This program delivers food literacy education, multicultural garden spaces, food-growing resources, food preservation training, and community connections to immigrants, refugees, Indigenous peoples,

Black individuals, and People of Colour across Greater Victoria. By providing essential tools and resources, Welcome Gardens empowers community members to grow nutritious, affordable, and culturally relevant foods while fostering intercultural collaboration that enhances Victoria's social, environmental, and economic resilience.

According to the 2021 Census by Statistics Canada, Greater Victoria hosts a substantial population of immigrants (73,345) and refugees (3,980). Among them, 64,775 belong to racialized groups facing persistent barriers in accessing affordable housing, education, and leadership roles. Many are also confronting food insecurity and other challenges as they establish new lives in Canada.

The Welcome Gardens program addresses these challenges through the principle of Food Sovereignty: "The right of people to define their own policies and strategies for the sustainable production, distribution, and consumption of food, ensuring food security for the entire population, based on small and medium-sized production, while respecting their own cultures and diversity" (World Forum on Food Sovereignty, 2001).

In 2024, the Welcome Gardens program made significant strides in supporting hundreds of immigrants, refugees, Indigenous peoples, Black individuals, and People of Colour in Greater Victoria. Through established community partnerships, the program hosted several impactful events during 2023-2024:



Welcome Gardens, a safe space for everyone. Photo: VIRCS

Get Growing Victoria: Held in North Park and coordinated with the City of Victoria and North Park Association. This initiative distributed hundreds of seedlings and soil-building materials, targeting VIRCS clients and ensuring resources reached immigrants, refugees, Indigenous peoples, Black individuals, and People of Colour with disabilities.

Gardening Educational Work Parties: Conducted year-round at our gardens in North Park, Yates Community Garden, and Saanich Community Garden.

Workshops: Covered topics such as Food Conservation, Seeds Saving, Composting, Pruning, Harvesting, Native and Pollinator Plants, Vancouver Island Gardening Techniques, and Growing Multicultural Crops.

Volunteer Harvesting Activities: In partnership with Harvest and Food Relief Society at The Government House, we organized volunteer activities for all ages, distributing hundreds of pounds of fresh organic vegetables to families from over 30 countries.

Multicultural Community Garden: Created with the *Saanich District*, this educational garden provides fresh food and hands-on learning opportunities for participating families.

Community Social Planning Council Collaboration: As part of the *Climate Equity by Design (CEbD)* project, we piloted best practices for integrating equity into climate adaptation planning. This project links local climate projections with community vulnerabilities to map resilience networks, catalyze adaptation

initiatives, and inform the City of Victoria's Climate Change Adaptation Plan.

Good Food Gathering 2023: We were honoured as a main speaker and Food Security Champion by the *Capital Region Food and Agriculture Initiatives (CFAIR)*. This event gathered a diverse group of stakeholders to advance equitable and sustainable regional food systems.

Seedy Sunday: We participated in this global seed celebration, discussing the significance of growing culturally preferred foods, focusing on gardening, community food resilience, and climate-adaptive practices.

Fundraising Events: Collaborations with *Aaron Hall, Cristina Lee, Odd Fellows, and the Bowker Creek Brush Up Art Show* helped us build relationships and highlight the positive impact of our work within the broader community.

Overall, the Welcome Gardens program has effectively delivered gardening literacy, emphasizing empowerment and leadership development. By offering free resources, mentorship, and materials, we have brought joy to participants, alleviated loneliness, and supported their transition to life in Canada. We are profoundly thankful for all the support received from all our sponsors, volunteers, program participants and local, provincial and federal founders.

VIRCS thanks Cenit Muñoz and the great team of volunteers for coordinating and participating in Welcome Gardens.

Annual General Meeting 2022-2023 Minutes

October 25th, 2023.

Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre Society.

North Park, 1004. Victoria B.C. V8T 1C6

1. Call to Order

Liza Sehic, President of the Board: 5:43 PM

2. Confirmation of Quorum

BOD attendees:

Liza Sehic, President of the Board; Osaro Ezomo, VP of the Board; Zaheera Jinnah, Secretary of the Board; Ye Li, Treasurer; Patti Grey, Member at Large.

3. Territorial Acknowledgement:

Liza Sehic. VIRCS acknowledges and respects the ləkʷəŋən peoples on whose traditional territory the organization sits and the Songhees, Esquimalt and W̱SÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

4. Welcome and introduction:

Liza Sehic, President of the Board.

5. Approval of AGM 2021/2022 minutes and Approval of AGM 2022/2023 agenda

Zaheera Jinnah moving the motion.

Seconded by Haixia Liu

President's report:

Liza Sehic (attached)

8. Executive Director's message:

Luis G. Aguirre (attached)

9. Managers' report:

Presented by Program Managers and staff. (attached)

10. Treasurer's financial report:

Hammuda Abdulsalam. (attached)

11. Appointment of Accountant 2023/2024:

Uvision Chartered Professional Accountants is ratified as Accountant for the period 2023-2024

12. Appointment of New Directors:

Zaheera Jinnah: A nominating Committee was struck by the BoD pursuant to our ByLaws Clause 26. We developed a screening criteria, invited applications publicly and shortlisted 5 nominees, we decided to move forward with 4 applicants. We are still actively recruiting members from the Black and African, Indigenous and youth communities.

1. Andrea McCoy
2. Kaveh Sarmast
3. Karen Iturbide
4. Bushra ALQuadayri

Zaheera Jinnah moving the motion.

Unanimously supported and seconded by the attending Members.

13. Adjournment of meeting

Liza Sehic: 7:00 PM

Nasim Hamed moving the motion.

Seconded by Hammuda Abdulsalam.



Financial Overview: Fiscal Year 2023

We are pleased to present the financial highlights of the Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre Society (VIRCS) for the year ended December 31, 2023. This past year reflects our commitment to prudent financial management and our focus on delivering impactful programs for the community.

In 2023, VIRCS achieved significant revenue growth, with total revenues increasing to \$3.4 million, compared to \$2.85 million in 2022. This growth demonstrates the ongoing confidence and support of our funders and stakeholders in our mission.

At the same time, expenditures reached \$3.39 million, reflecting strategic investments in programs and operations that align with our organizational goals and the needs of the communities we serve.

The financial statements were reviewed by an independent accounting firm, Uvision Professional Corporation, which confirmed that the financial records fairly present the organization's financial position in accordance with accounting standards for not-for-profit organizations. This financial stability underscores VIRCS's ability to continue providing critical support and programming to

newcomers, thanks to the generosity of our donors, funders, and the community's ongoing support.

We are also appreciative of the financial oversight of our Board of Directors, in the person of Kaveh Sarmast, Treasurer.

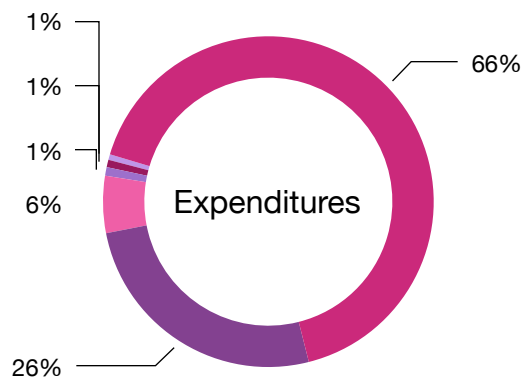
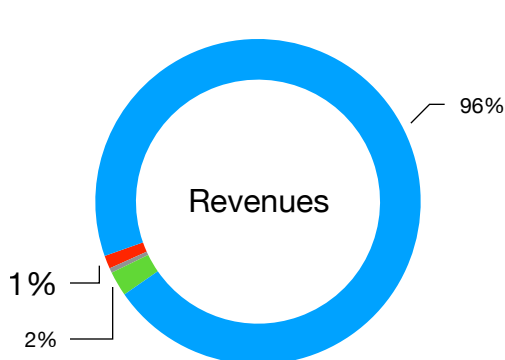
We remain deeply grateful to our funders, donors, and community partners for their invaluable support. Their contributions have been instrumental in helping VIRCS to deliver programs and services that make a meaningful difference in the lives of newcomers in the Greater Victoria Region.

Sincerely,

Hammuda Abdulsalam
Financial Controller, VIRCS

VIRCS_Revenues and Expenditures for 2022 and 2023

Category	2023 (\$)	2022 (\$)
Operating Grants	\$ 3,264,191	\$ 2,689,894
Gaming	\$ 84,260	\$ 86,516
Donations	\$ 15,856	\$ 32,853
Social Events	\$ 55	\$ 4,410
Training	\$ 44,464	\$ 32,470
Interest Income	\$ 63	\$ 20
Rental	\$ 0	\$ 5,550
Total Revenues	\$ 3,408,889	\$ 2,851,713
Wages and Contracted Services	\$ 2,240,193	\$ 1,865,822
Direct Program Costs	\$ 872,707	\$ 710,669
Building Occupancy	\$ 188,119	\$ 168,894
Office and Supplies	\$ 28,157	\$ 31,199
Travel and Transportation	\$ 24,453	\$ 15,319
Amortization	\$ 14,220	\$ 14,261
Recognition, Training, and Recruiting	\$ 5,439	\$ 7,603
Memberships	\$ 3,448	\$ 0
Professional Fees	\$ 9,650	\$ 15,914
Total Expenditures	\$ 3,386,386	\$ 2,829,681



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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Operating Grants ● Gaming ● Donations & Events ● Training ● Interest Income and rental | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Wages & Contracted Services ● Direct Program Costs ● Rental fees ● Office supplies ● Travel & Transportation ● Recognition, Memberships, Professional fees |
|--|--|

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Today**



vircs.bc.ca/donate

Your donation is a
community investment.



VIRCS



Empowering Newcomers

ANNUAL IMPACT REPORT 2023-2024

