

VICTORIA IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE CENTRE SOCIETY



Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre Society

# 35 years empowering newcomers

ANNUAL REPORT 2023-2024



# VIRCS is grateful to our generous funders and partners



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Transition  
House  
SOCIETY



AMSSA  
Strengthening Diversity In BC



Quadra  
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Community  
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MH  
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VANZOUR



la coopérative d'immigration  
Le Relais  
Francophone  
de la Colombie-Britannique

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CHAMBER.

GREATER VICTORIA  
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Inter-Cultural  
Association  
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Christian Kluzen, Music Director

Legal Aid BC



Victoria Sexual  
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## **Territorial Acknowledgement**

We acknowledge with respect that our work at VIRCS takes place on the traditional territories of the Lək<sup>w</sup>əŋən (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 Lək<sup>w</sup>əŋən (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  
Dignity**

# Annual General Meeting 2022-2023 Minutes

## October 25th, 2023.

### 1. Call to Order

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

### 2. Confirmation of Quorum

- BOD attendees:

1. Liza Sehic, President of the Board.
2. Osaro Ezomo, VP of the Board.
3. Zaheera Jinnah, Secretary of the Board.
4. Ye Li, Treasurer.
5. Patti Grey, Member at Large.

### 3. Territorial Acknowledgement:

- Liza Sehic. VIRCS acknowledges and respects the lək' wəŋən peoples on whose traditional territory the organization sits and the Songhees, Esquimalt and W SÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

### 4. Welcome and introduction:

- Liza Sehic.

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

- Zaheera Jinnah moving the motion.
- Seconded by Haixia Liu

### 6. President's report:

- Liza Sehic (attached)

### 7. Executive Director's message:

- Luis G. Aguirre (attached)

### 8. Managers' report:

- Presented by Program Managers and staff. (attached)

### 9. Treasure's financial report:

- Hammuda Abdulsalam. (attached)

Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre Society Annual General Meeting 2022-20223 Minutes October 25th, 2023.

### 10. Appointment of Accountant 2023/2024:

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

### 11. Appointment of New Directors:

- Zaheera Jinnah: A nominating Committee was struck by the BoD pursuant to our ByLaws Clause. 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.

- a. Andrea McCoy
- b. Kaveh Sarmast
- c. Karen Iturbide
- d. Bushra ALQuadayri

- Zaheera Jinnah moving the motion.
- Unanimously supported and seconded by the attending Members.

### 12. Adjournment of meeting

- Liza Sehic: 7:00 PM
- Nasim Hamed moving the motion.
- Seconded by Hammuda Abdulsalam.

## Board Chair Message

# Leading with Resilience

**V**IRCS 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



## Executive Director Message

# Empowering lives: 35 years of dedication and progress

**V**IRCS reaches its 35th Anniversary this year. As we review the long journey of our organization assisting immigrants and refugees in Victoria, I am profoundly moved by the collective effort and resilience that have enabled VIRCS to advance our vital mission.

Our amazing and dedicated staff, volunteers and Board of Directors have worked tirelessly to support newcomers, helping them navigate the complexities of settling in a new country. It has been through their dedication, caring approach, creativity, and empathy, that we have supported the lives of countless individuals and families, providing essential services in settlement, employment, social integration, women's empowerment, children and youth belonging, language training, and anti-racism initiatives. The steadfast commitment of VIRCS' staff has been proved to profoundly impact the lives of newcomers and attest we can achieve higher when we come together with a shared purpose.

This work is made possible by the generous support of our funders and donors. Their contributions have allowed us to be part of a comprehensive network of care that directly addresses the multifaceted and compounded challenges



faced by immigrants and refugees. Our funders and donors have played a crucial role investing in these programs and services, enabling us to contribute meaningfully to our community and preserving their unique cultures, identities, and achieving integration without assimilation.

We are also immensely grateful for our community partners and service providers who let us collaborate in this endeavour. We have been working along with organizations that address critical areas such as housing, employment, education, food security, English language learning, and legal and public services, to strengthen a holistic support system. This network ensures that newcomers have access to the resources they need to thrive, fostering an environment where they are welcomed and also can build fulfilling lives for themselves and their families.

In carrying out this important work, we are ever mindful of the land on which we serve and live. It is a land with deep roots in the cultures, knowledge, and wisdom of the Indigenous Peoples who have called it home for millennia. Our commitment to engaging with and learning from Indigenous Communities is integral to our mission. We are committed to honour their traditions and contribute to the ongoing efforts toward Truth and Reconciliation, we hope to build a community where diverse cultures can coexist fostering mutual respect and understanding, enriching the fabric of our society, and creating the safe space needed for sharing and learning from each other.

We also recognize the rich and complex heritage and cultures of traditional communities of colonial ancestry in our region. The legacy and contributions of these communities have significantly shaped the social landscape of Greater Victoria. We acknowledge this heritage, and strive to foster a spirit of inclusivity with values from all cultural narratives. This inclusivity is essential to our vision of a community where diverse histories and experiences live together, and where generations of newcomers can integrate without losing their unique identities. In recognizing these histories, we must also acknowledge the importance of justice in addressing the profound impacts of colonization. The legacy of colonialism, while contributing to the cultural landscape and development, has also led to deep injustices faced by Indigenous Peoples. As we recognize the traditions and heritage of Indigenous Communities and colonial ancestry, we at VIRCS, as an Agency supporting newcomers, remain committed to the ongoing efforts of Truth

and Reconciliation. This process is vital not only for healing historical wounds but also for advancing decolonization, which ensures that Indigenous voices and perspectives are at the forefront of shaping our shared future. We contribute to mutual respect, inclusivity, anti-racism and justice, and strive to create a community where all narratives are shared, where we can continue to learn and grow together. The combined efforts of our Board, staff, funders, community partners, and the broader community can make an enormous and meaningful impact on the lives of newcomers, immigrants, and refugees. Each contribution—whether it be time, resources, or expertise—helps to build a stronger, more inclusive community. During these 35 years, VIRCS has contributed to creating a place where diversity is celebrated, and where every individual has the opportunity to find a sense of belonging and to flourish. Thank you for your continued support and dedication to this mission. It is only through our shared efforts that we can continue to make a difference in the lives of those we serve.

With gratitude,

Luis G. Aguirre

**The combined efforts of our Board, staff, funders, community partners, and the broader community can make an enormous and meaningful impact on the lives of newcomers, immigrants, and refugees.**



## 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.

**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.**

## BC Newcomer Services Program (BCNSP)

# Empowering Newcomers for Successful Integration

## Supporting Social and Economic Inclusion Across British Columbia

**T**he 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.

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

**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.**

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

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



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

**BCNSP employs a client-focused approach, ensuring that services are customized and efficiently delivered.**



## Recognition of Excellence: Nasim Hamed



**W**e 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*.

**We extend our heartfelt congratulations to Nasim for this well-deserved honour, recognizing her exceptional commitment to supporting newcomers and fostering an inclusive community.**

**Newcomer Wraparound  
Support Program (NWSP)  
Comprehensive  
Support for  
Newcomers with  
Complex Needs.**

**Fostering Community  
Connections and  
Empowering New Lives**

**T**he 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



Rajiva Oza

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.**

## Newcomers Women's Projects (NWP) Addressing Workplace Sexual Harassment for Newcomer Women

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



**T**he 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

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 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.

## Success Stories

### Empowerment through

**Knowledge:** A participant expressed gratitude for the support and knowledge gained through the workshops, which significantly impacted her job security and confidence in the workplace.

### Building Trust and Support:

Another participant shared her

appreciation for the trust and support she received, which helped her navigate the challenges of seeking refugee status due to religious oppression.

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.

## Looking Ahead

**VIRCS remains committed to continuing and expanding these efforts, ensuring that all employees, especially those from vulnerable groups, have the knowledge and resources to protect themselves from workplace harassment. Ongoing workshops, enhanced outreach, and strengthened partnerships will be key to achieving these goals.**





## Enable for Women, Children & Youth

# Supporting the Next Generations of Newcomers

**E**nable 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 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 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 programming 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."





## Pathways to Professions, Trades, and Entrepreneurship (P2PTE)

# Empowering Youth to Overcome Barriers and Succeed

**T**he 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

## Description of Participant Supports

The project provides participants with individualized wrap-around supports that respond to individual youth needs by addressing intersectional barriers to employment. Participant supports may include:

- Coaching Mentorship
- Client assessment
- Case management
- Health supports
- Social supports
- Culturally appropriate supports for Indigenous people
- Support for childcare or dependent care
- Support for transportation or relocation costs
- Support for living expenses
- Completion bonus

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 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*

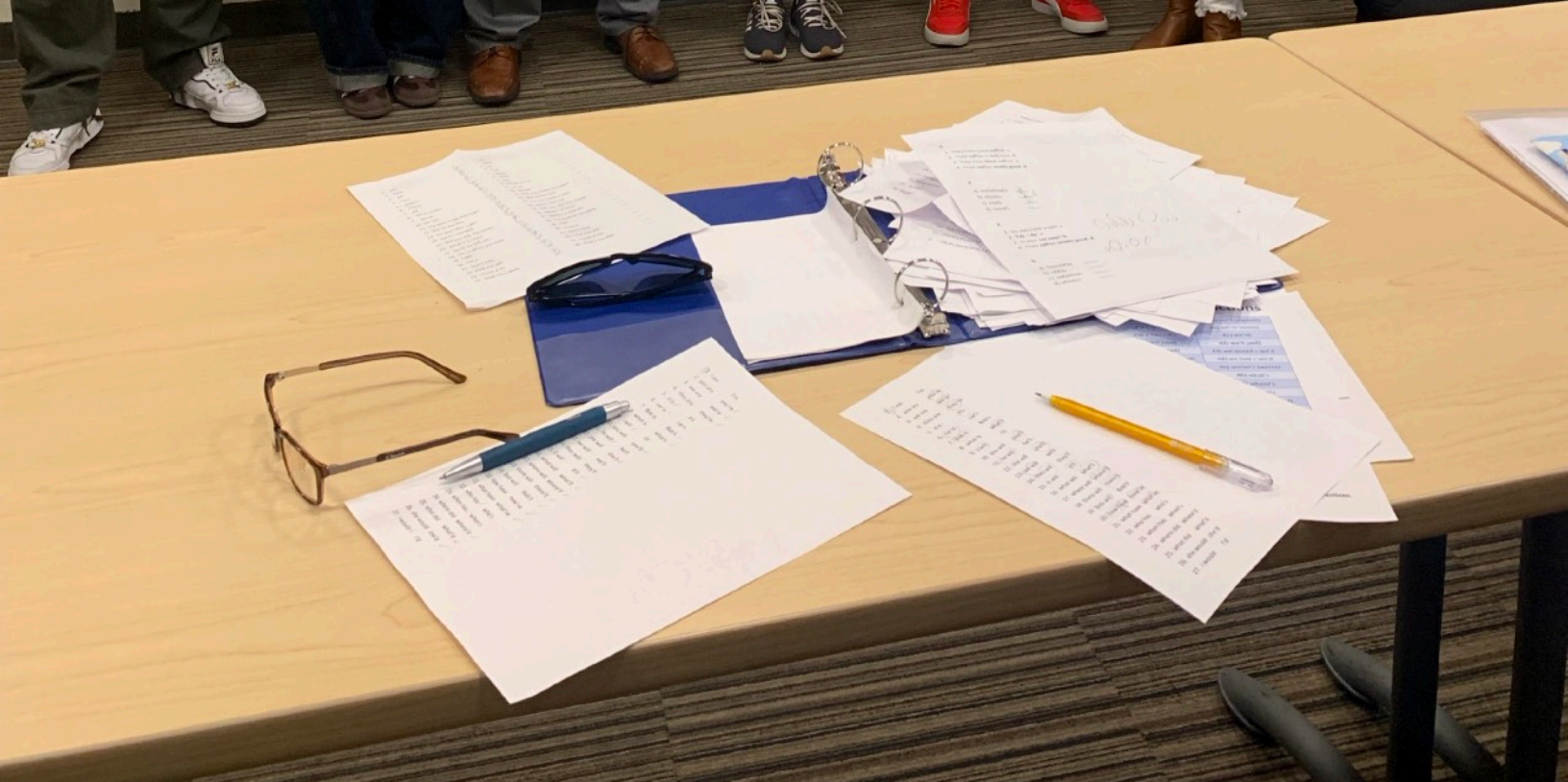
**We were excited to start the new program on August 19, 2024 with our first cohort starting September 3, 2024.**



How do you say this word?  
I don't understand.  
I don't know.  
I don't know how to say it in English.  
What's the difference between \_\_\_ and \_\_\_?  
What does \_\_\_ mean?

\*cat /cut  
\*word  
six  
Sahar  
Abu  
Luan  
Mint  
Bah  
Mahar

I know, but I can't explain.  
How do you spell \_\_\_?



## English as a Second Language Program (ESL)

# Enhancing Communication Skills for Newcomers

**V**IRCS 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.

**Canadian Language Benchmarks Placement Testing: VIRCS is a licensed CLBPT Centre and we have two trained assessors on staff. We have partnered with Cambria College, Sprott Shaw College and recently Edison College to provide testing for their Health Care Assistant applicants which generates revenue for the ESL program allowing us to offer more free and low-cost programs to our newcomer 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.





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# Welcome Gardens

## Cultivating Community and Growth for Newcomers

## Building Connections Through Urban Agriculture and Environmental Stewardship

**W**elcome 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:

**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.



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**

**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

**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.



**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.**



# A Brief History



**1989**

The Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre Society (VIRCS) is founded by three former refugees (Viet, Hereity, and Carlos) as a result of two generous donations from the Catholic Foundation of Victoria and Saint John the Divine Anglican Parish.



**1994**

5 years after opening its doors, VIRCS is a pillar in the community. The centre receives federal and provincial funding allowing it to establish its Settlement Program, introduce an ESL class (2900 attendees in the first year) and citizenship preparation classes. VIRCS also implements a new federally-funded Settlement Program to assist African newcomers.



**1996**

VIRCS connects to the internet! This enables counselors to find more job openings, access employment opportunities, access training, and connect clients to community services. VIRCS organizes a 3-day Latin Music festival that brings in 600 attendees and VIRCS receives provincial funding to produce its TV show, 'Ethnivision', for Shaw Cable.



**2000**

By 2000, the demand for settlement services grows immensely and the number of clients served by VIRCS increases by an average of 20% annually, while inquiries rise by 40% to an incredible 50% in 2002. Staffing increases to 20 employees.



**2005**

In 2005, VIRCS completes "First Step", a multi-year project funded by Canadian Heritage to promote multiculturalism and anti-racism among children. VIRCS distributes 10,000 children's books and 5,000 parents' books to schools and community organizations.



**2010**

By 2010, VIRCS expands to include a program focused specifically on newcomer children and youth (Enable, 2006), a cultural bridging host program, and numerous ESL and employment programs. In 2010, VIRCS moves from its initial location on 535 Yates Street to 637 Bay Street to accommodate the organization's growth.



**2015**

In 2014, VIRCS celebrates 25 years by launching an annual scholarship of \$25,000 to sponsor newcomers seeking help with education leading to professional qualifications. By 2015, VIRCS begins a relationship with Paragon Testing to become the first CELPIP testing site on the island and secures funding to start the Welcome Gardens program.



**2019**

In 2018, VIRCS joins the Social Innovation Centre at its new location at 1004 North Park, signs an MOU with the District of Oak Bay to provide transitional housing to refugees, and secures two employment service contracts (BC SIS and P2PTE). In 2018, the Social Innovation Centre also secures funding approval for a trauma-informed daycare. At the end of 2019, VIRCS experiences its first pandemic and must adapt quickly to changing Provincial Health Orders and legislation. In Spring 2020, VIRCS closes the centre to clients, but continues to provide services online and via telephone. VIRCS expands previously-existing community Emergency Assistance Resources services and starts an Emergency Food delivery initiative.



**2021**

In 2020, the murder of George Floyd Jr. by a police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota, sparks global Black Lives Matter protests and in 2021, Covid-19 fuels anti-Asian racism and xenophobia. As a result, VIRCS organizes a local response. In 2020, VIRCS is selected by the Province of BC to serve as the provincial hub of the Resilience BC Anti-Racism network. The pandemic continues well into 2021; however, VIRCS is able to open to some limited in-person programming and continues to provide critical services to newcomers.



# Financial Statements

**VICTORIA IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE CENTRE SOCIETY**  
**Statement of Revenues and Expenditures**  
**Year Ended December 31, 2023**

	2023	2022
<b>REVENUES</b>		
Operating Grants <i>(Note 8)</i>	\$ 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	-	5,550
	<b>3,408,889</b>	<b>2,851,713</b>
<b>EXPENDITURES</b>		
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	-
Professional Fees	9,650	15,914
	<b>3,386,386</b>	<b>2,829,681</b>
<b>EXCESS OF REVENUES OVER EXPENDITURES</b>	<b>\$ 22,503</b>	<b>\$ 22,032</b>

In 2023, the Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre Society (VIRCS) demonstrated a healthy financial position, with total revenues of \$3,408,889 an increase from \$2,851,713 in 2022. This growth was primarily driven by operating grants and successful training programs, reflecting our sustained commitment to delivering impactful services to our clients. Our expenditures were managed effectively, resulting in an excess of revenues over expenditures of \$22,503, similar to the previous year.

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.



# 35 years empowering newcomers

**ANNUAL REPORT 2023-2024**

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VIRCS