

# Small Gestures Project 2009 - 2010

## **Introduction**

*Small Gestures* was a project to improve the educational and settlement options for Deaf and hard of hearing immigrant adults. Bow Valley College (BVC), Deaf and Hard of Hearing Society and Center for Newcomers worked together on this project. The project was funded by Calgary Learns.

We would like to thank Calgary Learns for the generous contribution which made this project possible.

## **Background Information**

The Small Gestures project emerged from a Symposium on settlement and education options of DHH newcomers at Bow Valley College on May 11, 2009. The symposium shared the findings of BVC's Deaf Adult Literacy research projects about some of the effective teaching approaches and tools for DHH adult immigrants to learn American Sign Language and English. The research project had two phases. In the first phase, the teaching approaches and tools that worked well were identified from Deaf Adult Literacy practitioners in some colleges across Canada. In the second phase, the teacher and students at BVC piloted the approaches and tools. The research projects are available on National Adult Literacy Database: [www.nald.ca](http://www.nald.ca).

The symposium participants also identified relevant issues which impact settlement and education options of DHH newcomers. The issues were:

1. Lack of programs and services to adequately address settlement and education needs.
2. Lack of awareness of current education and settlement programs and services.
3. Sense of unfounded shame that heightens social stigma barriers and isolates DHH individuals.

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## Objectives of Small Gestures

The relevant issues identified became an action plan in *Small Gestures*. The action plan had four objectives:

1. Develop and Implement Community Engagement Plan.
2. Develop an awareness workshop for DHH Immigrant adults and their families as well as immigrant agencies.
3. Pilot the awareness workshops with DHH immigrant adults and their families as well as immigrant agencies.
4. Promote connections across sectors and literacy groups to build networks and seek opportunities to develop recourse and tools.

## Small Gestures as a Foundation Building Project

Symposium participants recommended two key elements, *Partnership and Collaboration*, and *Understanding Literacies* needed to be viewed as foundational in order to build in order to improve educational and settlement options for DHH adult immigrants. These two foundations were described as structured networks that would provide and share resources among organizations and individuals. It gave agencies, service providers and schools quick and effective access to available resources.

## Partnership and Collaboration

The title of the project, *Small Gestures*, came from a participant at the symposium who said:

*“We can encourage collaboration among our [symposium] participants [to address these issues]...These are **small gestures** of acknowledgement and support that can build the foundation for long-term relationships and cooperation.*

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Deaf and hard of hearing adult immigrants are hard to reach. Symposium participants agreed that partnership among agencies and organizations is the most effective way to reach DHH immigrant adults through building relationships with immigrant agencies, community and cultural organizations, and educational institutions. They also agreed that collaboration is the most effective way to identify and share existing resources and assets to reduce barriers for DHH adult immigrants.

### **Understanding Literacy**

Understanding literacy is another important foundation to improve educational and settlement options of DHH adult immigrants as symposium participants shared that stigma about Deaf people were barriers to literacy opportunities. There is a common definition of literacy as the ability to read and write. But, literacy is:

*“...more than reading and writing – it is about how we communicate in society. It is about...relationships, about knowledge, language and culture. Literacy...finds its place in our lives alongside other ways of communicating. Indeed, literacy itself takes many forms: on paper, on the computer screen, on TV, on posters and signs<sup>1</sup>.”*

Many immigrant agencies, service providers and other schools are not aware that literacy also includes sign language. Sign language provides an important and natural base to lead communication about information people see every day. Though this way, DHH immigrants can become much more active participants in society. The message of sign language literacy skills needs to be shared; it will open the doors for DHH immigrants to build other literacy skills.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://portal.unesco.org/education/> (Accessed on September 2010)

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## Project Results

In *Small Gestures*, the objective of creating a *Community Engagement Plan* was to start building partnerships and collaboration. A survey was sent out to 25 organizations. 18 responded, stating their interest in participating in the project and contributing to the engagement plan. Throughout the project, the plan was more of a work in progress. There was a momentum to build the foundation; People began to think and talk about the barriers DHH immigrants face in Canada and acknowledged the importance of a community engagement plan.

A steering committee worked together and planned 3 workshops for immigrant adults and their families, as well as staff from immigrant services, DHH support and education programs in Calgary. The steering committee consists of members from Bow Valley College, Deaf and hard of hearing society and Center for Newcomers. The workshops were learning events for staff members and DHH immigrants and their families together. The focuses of the workshops were:

- Educate that Deaf people are part of a language and cultural community; there are many literacy opportunities as members of the Calgary Deaf community.
- Share the services available at Deaf and Hard of Hearing Society with various immigrant agencies
- Share the education programs and learner success services available at Bow Valley College

The 3 workshops had approximately 54 participants including DHH individuals and their families, immigrant agencies and schools. The outcomes of the workshops were:

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- 100% of workshop participants were happy with the information, 100% of them would recommend the workshops to other agencies, immigrants and families and 100% of them felt that they increased their awareness about Deaf community and how to access the services available at DHHS and Center for Newcomers.
  
- As of August 2011 there is a newly formed Deaf New Canadians club supported by a settlement agency. Members have an opportunity to socialize in an informal setting, connect with service providers, and be able to advocate for themselves about issues that impact DHH immigrants. The club provides mentorship for recent Newcomers and gives DHH immigrants a direct voice.