

MAKING AN IMPACT

Through HCF Grants

Integrating Young Newcomers through Sport

Hamilton welcomes more and more people from around the world every year. The 2001 census found that almost 30,000 Hamiltonians had immigrated in just the previous 10 years. Many are refugees and many of the newcomers are children.

Faced with a new culture, a new climate and a new language, on top of all the usual childhood stresses of new school and new friends, immigrant kids can have a very rough time getting used to their new home. Settlement is further complicated by issues of low income and other barriers.

SISO, Hamilton's long-time provider of settlement services (with more than 30 languages in house and 70 more covered by a network of translators and interpreters), has been partnering with youth-serving agencies to reach out to recently arrived children through a HCF-funded program called KICK-START.

The idea began with soccer – a sport that most immigrant children know well from their homelands. SISO created a twelve-team league in 2005 where 130 young new immigrants (many from war-torn Sudan, Somalia, and Afghanistan) used a familiar activity to ease into an unfamiliar world. Through organized soccer, children made new friends and learned about the recreational facilities available to them. Like all sport, the program increased participants' fitness, improved their skills, and kept them busy and away from risk behaviour.

But soccer was just the beginning. In the winter, KICK-START moved indoors (first to the gym at Philpott Memorial Church) to tackle other sports like basketball and volleyball. More than 200 youth, age 5-17, participated year-round. And over the years, SISO has expanded KICK-START into other recreational programs, working with partners across the community. Organized activities now include swimming, indoor soccer, basketball and volleyball, girls-only gym time and other recreation activities, outdoor soccer, and more. Plans are underway to introduce the kids to quintessential Canadian experiences like tobogganing and skating.

To make the most of these opportunities for integration, and in response to research from Hamilton's Social Planning & Research Council and OCASI (Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants), SISO has built in some unique features:

- Host youth – kids who have lived here all their lives – are matched with the newcomers to help them navigate their new world.
- Adaptation to cultural differences – girls-only programs are developed, for example, to allow Muslim girls to participate.
- Transportation: bus tickets are provided and charter buses are organized to make sure kids can get to the programs.
- Subsidies, free introductory memberships, and help filling in financial assistance forms for recreation fees. Cost is a barrier, since many new immigrant families are struggling with low income.

How HCF is Helping

- *Hamilton Community Foundation has been supporting SISO's work with immigrant youth since 2004.*
- *In 2004 and 2005, the program received grants from the HCF Ontario Endowment Fund for children and Youth in Recreation. Tackling Poverty Together grants were made to the KICK-START program in 2006 and 2007.*
- *SISO says that HCF's continued support has helped attract other funders, like the Ontario Trillium Foundation and the Ministry of Health Promotion, to expand and build on the programs on which HCF took the lead.*

- Parent involvement. KICK-START reaches out to parents. New immigrant families are often isolated by language, cultural differences and low income. The adults are fully taken up with settlement tasks, such as finding employment. KICK-START brings parents together to not only support their children's recreation, but also to receive information about services and support available to them.
- Training in coaching, refereeing, and team management. KICK-START gives kids the chance to take their skills to a new level. Young people are training in coaching and will soon receive certification which can lead to job opportunities.

What are the Recreation Barriers for Young Immigrants?

- Language: most young recent immigrants speak little or no English.
- Income: recreation programs have fees. Recent immigrant families are much more likely to live with poverty than other Canadians (their poverty rate is as high as 50%).
- Cultural sensitivity: Canadian recreation programs don't generally take account of cultural differences like gender and dress; they often lack knowledge about the challenges immigrants face.
- Transportation: public transit is a mystery for newcomers of any age and is a barrier for all low-income Hamiltonians.
- Newness: families in their first year or two in Hamilton have limited information about what opportunities are available to them, and they are overwhelmed with the challenges of adaptation. They need sensitive support to become part of the Hamilton community.

Through KICK-START, SISO is working creatively with the City of Hamilton, the school boards and individual schools, Sport Hamilton, YSAN-GROW, YMCA, North End Soccer, Soccer Planet, and other organizations to help new immigrant families access recreation programs for their children. They are addressing barriers of language, culture, transportation and income to open the world of sport and recreation to these young, new citizens of Hamilton. In doing so, they are helping recent immigrants find their feet in an unfamiliar landscape.

Who Wins with SISO's KICK-START Program

- *Young immigrants develop self-esteem and confidence that spills over into all aspects of their new life.*
- *They gain new skills, fitness, friends, and social networks.*
- *Newcomer kids begin to integrate into Canadian society and feel a sense of belonging.*
- *Immigrant families connect to their community and learn about services available to help them settle.*
- *Neighbourhoods gain engaged youth and families.*
- *Partner organizations learn about the cultural differences of immigrant communities.*
- *Recreation programs develop a pool of trained coaches and leaders.*
- *Hamilton begins to integrate its recent immigrants and helps them access the programs and services available to all residents.*

As one mother of a 13-year-old girl, recently emigrated from Ghana, put it: "Since my daughter started playing soccer at SISO, she smiles more and helps more in the house. She has something to look forward to and friends made through the program."