

Community Readiness for Newcomer Integration

The Alberta Urban Municipalities Association (AUMA) Community Readiness for Newcomer Integration project is an opportunity for municipalities to learn about the strengths, weaknesses, and gaps of local services and supports for newcomers, and challenges the communities to develop a plan to address gaps and weaknesses.

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1. Summary

As a hub for the region, Slave Lake has many amenities that other communities of similar size may not enjoy, like medical services, recreational facilities and educational opportunities. When the wildfire destroyed much of the town, the people came together to support one another to regroup and rebuild. That being said, this event is present in the minds of many residents and the community continues on a path of recovery. Passionate people are the heart of many businesses and organizations in Slave Lake that offer a broad range of services to residents.

While economic opportunities play an important role in attracting people to Slave Lake, the town is seeing that social needs must also be addressed in order to retain residents in the longer term. There will likely be an influx of newcomers to town when the Temporary Foreign Worker (TFW) program restrictions are lifted to fill available positions in the service and hospitality industry, which struggles to find local employees as wages cannot compete with the resource sector. Fortunately the town can benefit and learn from various business owners that have extensive knowledge and experience working with the TFW program. There is a desire to set newcomers up for success upon arrival by understanding their needs and which services exist in the community to meet them, address any gaps or barriers in support, and improve communication with stakeholders and the community to reinforce that everyone has a role in the successful integration and retention of newcomers. Efforts toward building a strong sense of community and belonging in Slave Lake, improving collaboration, and optimizing available funds will pave the way for newcomer retention and therefore more sustainability in projects, groups and initiatives.

2. Introduction to the Project

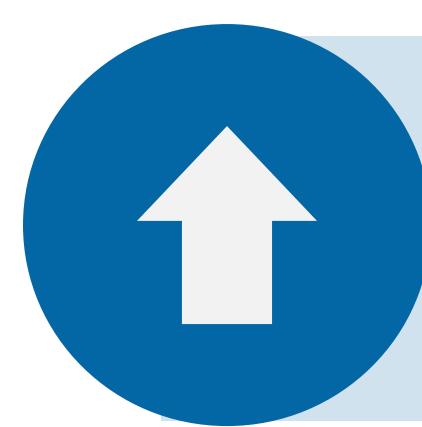
The Alberta Urban Municipalities Association (AUMA) Community Readiness for Newcomer Integration project is an opportunity for municipalities to :

- learn about the strengths, weaknesses, and gaps of local services and supports for newcomers, and challenges the communities to develop a plan to address gaps and weaknesses
- help municipalities assess challenges for newcomers
- provide information about the immigration process

Key strengths, weaknesses, and gaps in services and various challenges for newcomers are identified in this report through the lens of the newcomer journey and the newcomer developing a sense of belonging. In preparation for the town's action planning sessions, key opportunities identified by the community through literature, interviews, and observation, were also compiled. Community partnerships were also laid out to start the conversation on what collaborations might help advance the Slave Lake Action Plan for improving newcomer integration.

The Town of Slave Lake aims to better understand their newcomer population in order to effectively allocate resources, improve available supports and build strong relationships in the community. The town recognizes that newcomers are an important growing part of the community and wish to improve their experience here. Key strengths, weaknesses, gaps, are identified in this report through the lens of the newcomer journey and the newcomer developing a sense of belonging. In preparation for the town's action planning, key opportunities identified by the community, through review of existing literature and through observation, were also compiled. Community partnerships were also laid out to start the conversation on what collaborations might help advance the Slave Lake's action plan.

2. Slave Lake Community Profile



7,024 (2020)

Adapted from Statistics Canada, Population Estimates

A Brief Overview of Slave Lake

Slave Lake, incorporated as a town in 1965, is located 255 km northwest of Edmonton, Alberta. With the Northern Lakes College campus, Slave Lake Healthcare Centre, various retail opportunities, services providers and recreational opportunities, and its location along a major transportation corridor, the town is considered to be a hub for many smaller northern communities. The community was in the Canadian spotlight when a wildfire destroyed nearly 30% of the town, the Sawridge First Nation and the MD of Lesser Slave Lake over the span of 2 days in 2011. Over 500 buildings that were destroyed or damaged, including Town hall, the government centre, the library and churches, houses and apartments. Fortunately no lives were lost, but 732 people were left homeless and the damage was estimated to be \$750 million. The recovery effort, partly funded by the Alberta government, was overseen by the Lesser Slave Lake Region Tri-Council. Within 2 years, the government centre and 80% of the homes were rebuilt. Of the 6,782 people living in Slave Lake in 2011 (which is more than the current population) it is believed that most came back, but several years later some left again when there was an economic downturn in the oil and gas industry. The boom & bust nature of this and other resource-based industries in the region have contributed to the challenge of retention in the community. Outdoor recreation, the value-added sector and vibrant business community continue to attract visitors, new residents and entrepreneurs alike.

245

- Slave Lake had 245 new temporary residents in 2014. The number of new temporary residents in Slave Lake declined -3.92% year-over-year, and increased 206.3% in the last five years. Slave Lake is the 18th fastest growing municipality in the province.

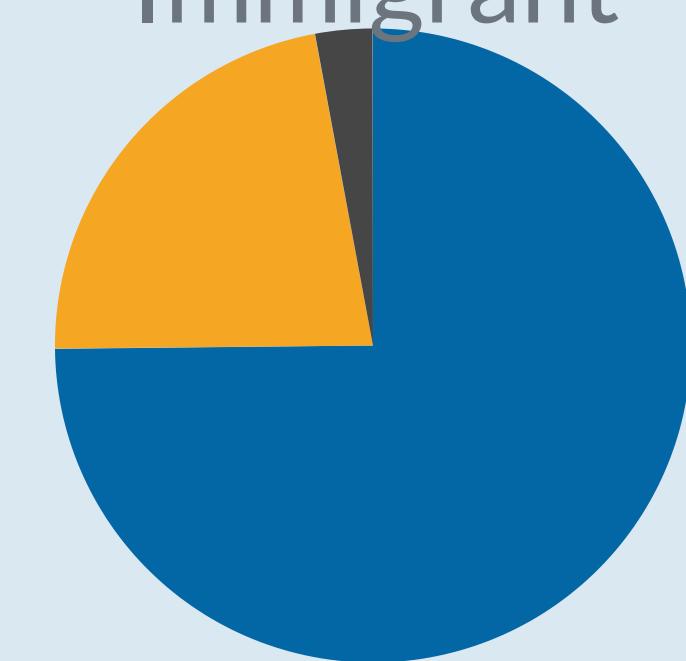
55

- Slave Lake had 55 new permanent residents in 2018. The number of new permanent residents in Slave Lake greatly declined -45.0% year-over-year, and decreased -31.3% in the last five years.

16.2%

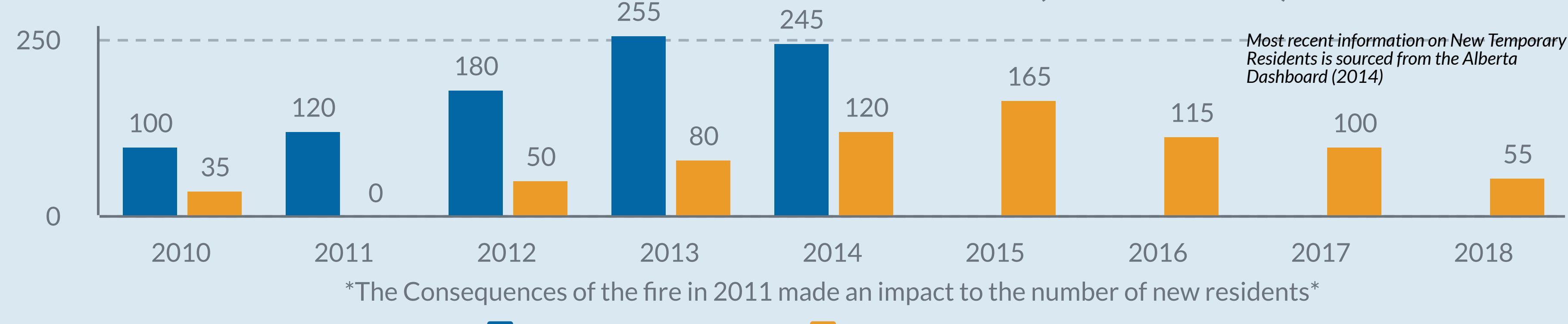
- In 2016, 16.2% of the general population of Slave Lake identified as a visible minority, the 13th highest in the province. The percentage of the population identifying as a visible minority in Slave Lake greatly increased 92.2% in the last five years.

Applicant Type of Immigrant

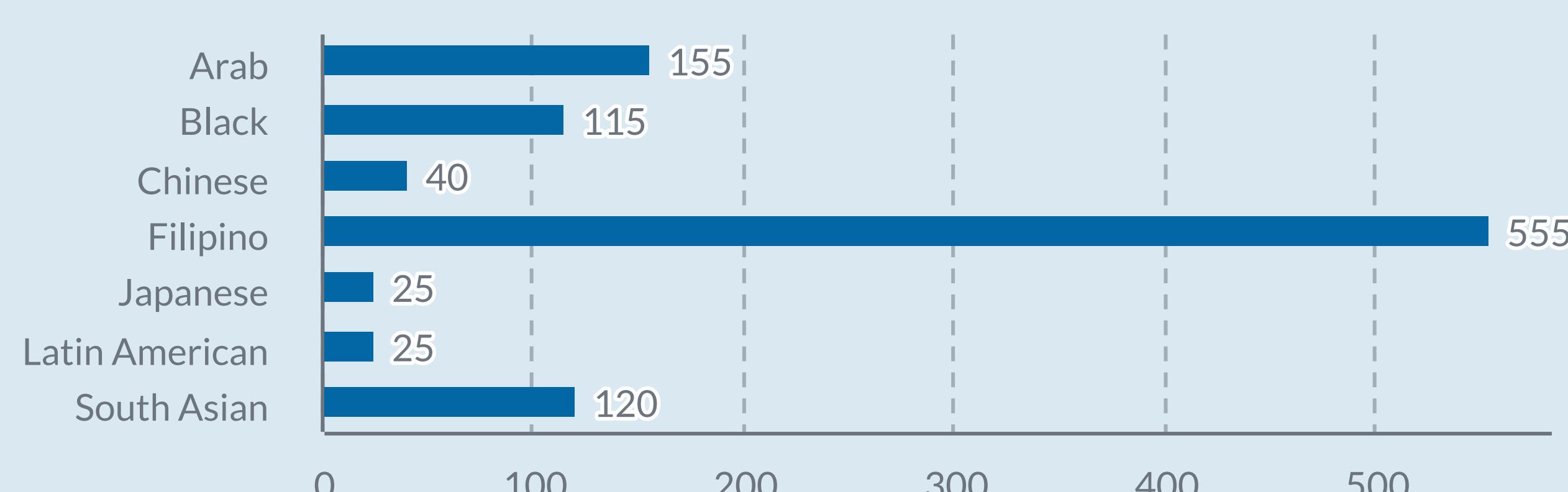


Economic Immigrants (74.85%)
Immigrants sponsored by family (22.22%)
Refugees (2.92%)

New Residents from other countries (2010-2018)



Visible Minorities (2016)



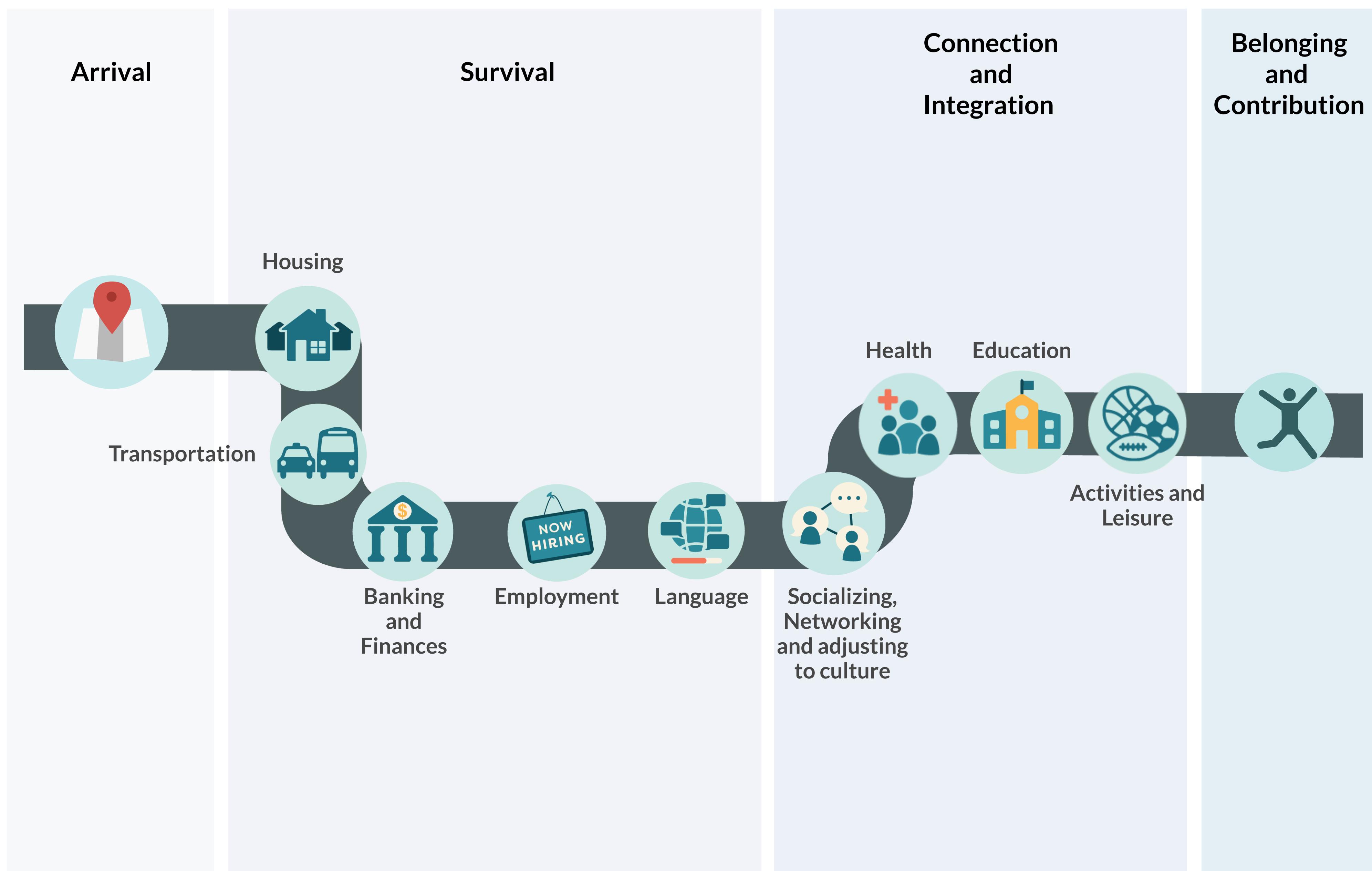
14.2%

14.2% of the population are immigrants (2016)

4. Typical Newcomer Journey

This diagram illustrates a newcomer's typical journey starting from their first point of interaction, and moving towards the end goals where a newcomer gains a sense of belonging and contributes to the community. It is important to note that every newcomer's journey is different, does not necessarily follow this order, has a wide range of challenges and needs, and all steps are interdependent. For example, survival depends on connecting with people.

In order to gain an understanding on how a newcomer might navigate through these services and how they might be welcomed into the community, strengths and gaps in each of the areas shown in the diagram is outlined below.



5. Overall Assessment of Community Strengths, Weaknesses, and Gaps to Support Newcomers in Settlement and Integration

a. Community Assessment Methodology

Information for the Slave Lake Community Assessment was drawn from existing literature, visiting the community, and interviews with some service providers, businesses and community organizations. The Community Interview Guide, developed by CCIS and Insightrix Research, asked about the organizations themselves, newcomer attraction, familiarization with the community upon arrival, support systems that exist in the community, and community relationships to understand potential barriers for successful settlement and integration of newcomers in the community. to gain an understanding of local factors (e.g., infrastructure, transportation, housing, programs), two community outreach liaisons connected with 15 service providers, organizations and businesses in Slave Lake, and 4 immigrants by phone and in person over a period of 1 month. It is important to note that several factors may have influenced the findings, in particular COVID restrictions leading to the closure of many in-person services, availability, etc.



Definitions:

Newcomer

Someone who has recently arrived in Slave Lake who may have migrated intraprovincially, interprovincially, or internationally.

Immigrant

Someone who has moved to Canada from another country

Permanent Residents

Permanent residents come in three main categories: economic, family sponsored and refugees.

Economic Immigrants

Have Permanent Resident (PR) status because they are/have:

- High level English
- Highly educated
- Highly skilled
- Young age

Immigrants sponsored by family

Have PR status for family unification.

- Strong but small support network

Refugees

Forced to flee from persecution from their home country.

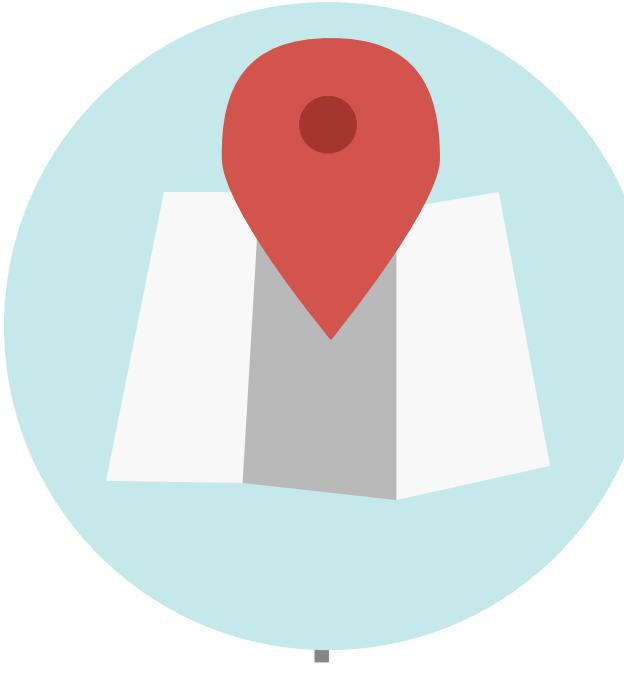
Temporary Residents

Temporary Residents are those with temporary work permits.

Visible Minorities

Persons, other than aboriginal peoples, who are non-caucasian in race or non-white in colour.

b. Arrival & Survival

	Strength	Weakness	Gap
 • The Slave Lake Municipal Library has supported newcomers with referrals to businesses and organizations within the community, access to computers, etc. They are keen to collaborate with other organizations in the community to improve this informal referral service. • There are business owners in the community who employ TFW and there is an Immigration Consultant. They have helped other business owners in the community to understand how to navigate the TFW process and support the newcomers they are bringing into the community. • Newcomers who get connected with established cultural groups (ie. the Filipino Community Association of Slave Lake) from the same country of origin, either prior to or upon arrival, are supported in settling into the community. The same can be said of newcomers who belong to one of the denominations represented in the 13 churches that exist in the area.	 Arrival	 • The Slave Lake Region website was created as a Recovery Initiative after the fire in 2011. When there was no new funding to sustain the page, maintenance was dropped and access to resources created for new residents that were previously available on that page was no longer available. • While FCSS is working to develop a service directory for the region (that should help newcomers to become aware of and navigate existing services), there is currently one on the town website but it could use improvement and could be offered in other formats. • Town hall has a few printed information resources available, at one time providing items like a business directory. Since adopting a digital communication strategy, and moving away from print resources (ie. pamphlets/brochures), Town resources are available mostly on their website. This may be challenging for people who do not have access to computers/smartphones or who struggle with digital literacy. • The Slave Lake Municipal Library previously provided resources from the federal government (pamphlets/brochures), including information for newcomers. Due to the library's COVID safety protocols these are not currently available. • If newcomers need to set up utilities, the town office may be their first point of contact, but if they are not responsible for this because they are renters, it is not clear who their first point of contact would be in the community. For TFW it would be their employers. • In the past, the Town of Slave Lake had a Recruitment and Retention Coordinator who undertook some welcoming initiatives in the community (not specifically targeting newcomers) but this position seems to have ceased to exist in 2016. • There is a Visitor Information Centre, which could provide some relevant information to newcomers to the community, but it is not open year round and it was unclear what they may be offering, if anything, for newcomers.	
 • No specific place, person or entity in Slave Lake exists to connect newcomers with information and resources they may need to support their settlement in the community. The Town of Slave Lake website lacks information specifically for newcomers. • Several organizations interviewed did not seem to have a strong understanding of which services/resources are available in the community, what supports exist for newcomers in navigating services, and did not offer much in the form of written material. • While in the past there was a Welcome Wagon in the community, this is no longer the case. There has been talk amongst the Town Administration of developing a Welcome Package to provide people who are new to the community information and helpful resources.			

b. Arrival & Survival Continued...



- TFW have housing provided by their employer. In several cases the business owner who is employing these newcomers owns one or more rental properties in town for this purpose.
- The Tri-Council Regional Growth Plan has several goals that they hope to accomplish in the near future for improving housing options in the region by working to “establish the baseline supply of affordable housing units to different segments of the population” and establish targets for the development of new affordable housing types”.
- Due to the visibility of unhoused people in Slave Lake, a Homeless Coalition was formed and is composed of members of the public, representatives from various service organizations and members of Town Council. It recently (August/September 2021) asked the community to fill out a housing and needs survey. The Rural Development Network will be analyzing the results in order to establish a housing and needs estimation for the area.



Housing

- In the 2021 Alberta Apartment Vacancy and Rental Costs Survey, bachelor apartments (\$1300) in Slave Lake were listed in the highest rental range for the province. The rental vacancy rate also dropped from 6.1% in 2018 to 0% in 2021. It was reported that some newcomers wanting to come to the community were unable to due to a lack of rental accommodations.
- According to the 2016 Census, 29.6% of the tenant households surveyed were spending 30% or more of their income on shelter costs, and another 21.6% were in subsidized housing.
- Lesser Slave Lake Regional Housing Authority provides subsidized housing to seniors, moderate income individuals and families. There are 77 subsidized family units in Slave Lake, but there is a waitlist.
- One of the goals outlined in the 2015 Tri-Council Regional Growth Plan was to collaborate on promoting housing, facilities, programs and support that respond to the social needs and quality of life for all residents. The intent of this goal is to support and encourage a variety of quality housing choices that are affordable and accessible to people of all ages, abilities and income levels. It was not clear whether there has been progress made toward achieving this goal.
- Some newcomers choose to live in shared rental accommodations with other members of their community. This is likely motivated by the high rental accommodation costs and lack of availability in Slave Lake.



- The Town of Slave Lake is relatively walkable down main street and has adequate crosswalks and sidewalks.
- Slave Lake Registries help with driver licenses, motor vehicle registration, transfers, ownership correction, and other motor vehicle services.
- Grocery stores are fairly well distributed in the community so the absence of public transportation is not a barrier to accessing food as it is in other communities.
- Slave Lake Adult Learning offers a Learners Permit in Clear Language course that will cover the cost of taking the course at the registries office (\$40) and may be attractive for newcomers who are not fully proficient in English. A large print text version and an audio recording of the Alberta Driver’s Guide can support individuals with some challenges in learning. Tutoring is also available.



Transportation

- For those who do not live in the central part of town it could be difficult to get to services, especially in the winter if they do not have access to a vehicle and there is no public transportation. Some newcomers ride their bikes to work but have not yet encountered their first winter and were unsure of how they would get around once the snow comes.



b. Arrival & Survival Continued...

- Some banks offer specialized newcomer programs
- Some banks and colleges have provided some financial literacy learning opportunities
- Community Futures connects people with some educational opportunities for budgeting and personal credit as well as money management resources.
- FCSS has a volunteer tax program that is available to newcomer seniors.



Banking

- There is a Service Canada office in the community (with altered hours due to Covid at the moment). They also offer information about hiring foreign workers and provide access to their job bank.
- The Alberta Supports office offers job fairs, job postings, a job search library, employment training information, employment counselling, computers and photocopiers for job searches, resumé, job interview and job-search workshops. In person services are suspended due to Covid.
- Slave Lake Adult Learning can help newcomers looking for employment to build resumes and write cover letters.
- There is a desire from the business community and the Town to develop a more formalized newcomer strategy.
- North Lakes College provides some training in various fields and is expanding their trades programming.



Employment

- Members of the Slave Lake Public Library can access the Canadian Financial Literacy Database as one of the eResources they provide. This resource provides tools and information on budgeting, money management, insurance, saving, investing, and taxes from various Canadian organizations. This seemed to be an underutilized feature of the library and not well known in the community.



- There is a perception that some people coming into Slave Lake see it as a stepping stone for career advancement and financial stability rather than a long term place to call home. This is believed to be adding to the retention challenge in the community.
- The Slave Lake Municipal Sustainability Plan indicates that there is a need for a larger workforce with a broader range of skills. Challenges to the existing labour market include: inability to attract and develop enough skilled labour, occupational health and safety, etc.



- Ballad Northwest offers an Essential Skills to Success in Whitecourt (2 hours away) that is open to residents of Slave Lake who have access to transportation. This course contains employment preparation workshops intensive job skills training and is open to anyone 18+ seeking employment.
- Newcomers/New Canadians are not applying for jobs at the Town of Slave Lake despite there being multiple openings available. It is not clear why this is the case.
- Some companies are successfully involved in the TFW program, including some people who own businesses that are on town council and the mayor. Other businesses would like to do the same but require more information about the application process, employers' responsibilities, challenges and best practices.



b. Arrival & Survival Continued...

- There is an Alberta Works office in town /government office that can help newcomers with filling out forms and applications
- Slave Lake Adult Education is located inside Northern Lakes College. They offer 4 levels of English Language instruction face-to-face or online with courses to help improve listening, speaking and writing skills. There is free tutoring, computers for practicing, quizzes and participating in the courses and tutoring. Community members can volunteer to be English tutors with this organization.



Language

- There are no conversation practice groups available in the community for newcomers to come together to practice the English that they are learning.



- Slave Lake Registries previously offered translation services but now only refer people to an outside organization out of Edmonton.

- The Slave Lake Municipal Library has offered conversation classes and ESL materials in the past. This is not currently happening, for the most part due to covid.
- There is currently only 1 student enrolled in the English language course at Slave Lake Adult Education, and they have had fairly low enrollment in this program over the past 5 years. There are no upcoming English courses listed on their current course offerings.



c. Connection and Integration

- There is a newly emerging Multicultural Association started in Slave Lake
- There are numerous art and cultural activities available in Town including Ukrainian dancing, musical theatre, theatre productions, summer art camps, and dance clubs.
- The High Prairie and Area Family Resource Network provides service for children, youth and caregivers in the region including Information and referral services, home visitation and personal family support services, nutrition and basic needs support, parent education workshops, training and presentations, parent-child play and learn groups and community engagement events, networking and partnerships.



Socializing, Networking, and Adjusting to Culture

- Volunteer burnout has increased in the community since there are high expectations on volunteers to "run things" in the community.



- Informal and formal cultural groups that are composed of people who share the same country of origin exist but are not well understood by the broader community. Some, such as the Filipino Community Association of Slave Lake, organize events that are open to non-filipino community members, such as a big cultural day in the past but this has not happened in years.
- While the High Prairie and Area Family Resource Network offers a toy and resource lending library, and their website mentions this becoming available in Slave Lake, it was unclear of when this will happen. This organization's website is somewhat outdated and challenging to navigate. COVID remains a factor in this.



- The Slave Lake Healthcare Centre is a fully integrated facility with acute care, continuing care and community health services, and more. There is also a Family Care Clinic, physiotherapy and massage services available.
- There is a drop-in wellness exchange group that meets weekly as well as the Slave Lake and Area Mental Health Network (SLAM), which are run through Alberta Health Services and is open for anyone to join.
- The physician recruitment strategy has gone well in the past.



Health

- According to the Primary Care Network's website, there are no doctors currently accepting new patients in the Town of Slave Lake. It was not clear whether there is a doctor focused recruitment strategy in place.



c. Connection and Integration Continued...



- Within Slave Lake there are three Public Schools (two primary, one secondary), a Public Outreach School, two Catholic Separate Schools, one Private School, and Northern Lakes Community College.
- Slave Lake Adult Learning offers a Learner's Test Preparation course for individuals wanting to get their driver's license. They also have courses in digital literacy, reading and writing, as well as working with numbers. They can assist with post-secondary forms, transcripts and applications
- The High Prairie and Area Family Resource Network offers some programming in Tagalog due to the significant Filipino population in the community.
- Early Childhood Education training is available through distance learning from Grant McEwan University to residents of Slave Lake.



Education



- Because of low international student enrollment (single digits), there are no dedicated supports for them available at Northern Lakes Community College.
- Some young people are leaving the community to pursue post-secondary programs that are not available within the community, moving to Edmonton to attend the University of Alberta for example.



- There are a number of recreation facilities such as the Multi-Recreation Centre, Northern Lights Aquatic Centre, Slave Lake Curling Club, Legacy Centre (Multi-purpose Hall, Childcare centre).
- The Multi-Recreation Centre hosts drop-in activities including basketball, soccer, pickleball and volleyball for all ages.



Activities and Leisure



- When it comes to activities, programming and opportunities to socialize, adults were identified as being an underserved group in the community.

- While the Town of Slave Lake is committed to working collaboratively with other partners in the community to support programs/events/initiatives, efforts have been hindered by staff turnover, limited resources and organizations that are somewhat siloed that hesitate to participate in initiatives involving the town or other organizations.
- In the past, the town had community information boards online to provide information to the community about programs and events going on in the community, hours of operation for businesses and organizations, etc. This may have been hindered by the effort required to enter information every time something changed, which itself is tied to high turnover, among other factors.
- What information that exists about events/programs is now almost solely available online, especially regarding Town information. The town also no longer provides information in the town newspaper.
- While the library has a number of activities and take home kits for children and some for adults, there is a lack of opportunity to connect in person as a community through events and programming. This is in part due to Covid.
- At times there is duplication of efforts in the community, such as two separate organizations offering the same activity for the same target audience but not together. Were they collaborating, resources could be used more effectively and the efforts of these organizations may have had a farther reach in the community.
- Some organizations in the community began work to create and share a Community Calendar that would share information about what's going on around town. This project is not currently active.

d. Newcomer Sense of Belonging Leading to Staying and Contributing

Community Competencies

- ✓ Roots of Empathy is a program that teaches students to develop a sense of empathy and a desire to build relationships with others who may be different from them.
- ✗ While the Native Friendship Centre has offered racism and discrimination training for organizations in the past, in collaboration with the John Howard Society of Canada. Unfortunately there was little uptake from the community.



Newcomer Competencies

- ✗ Newcomers focused on work may not be aware of the opportunities to, and benefits of, engaging with the community.

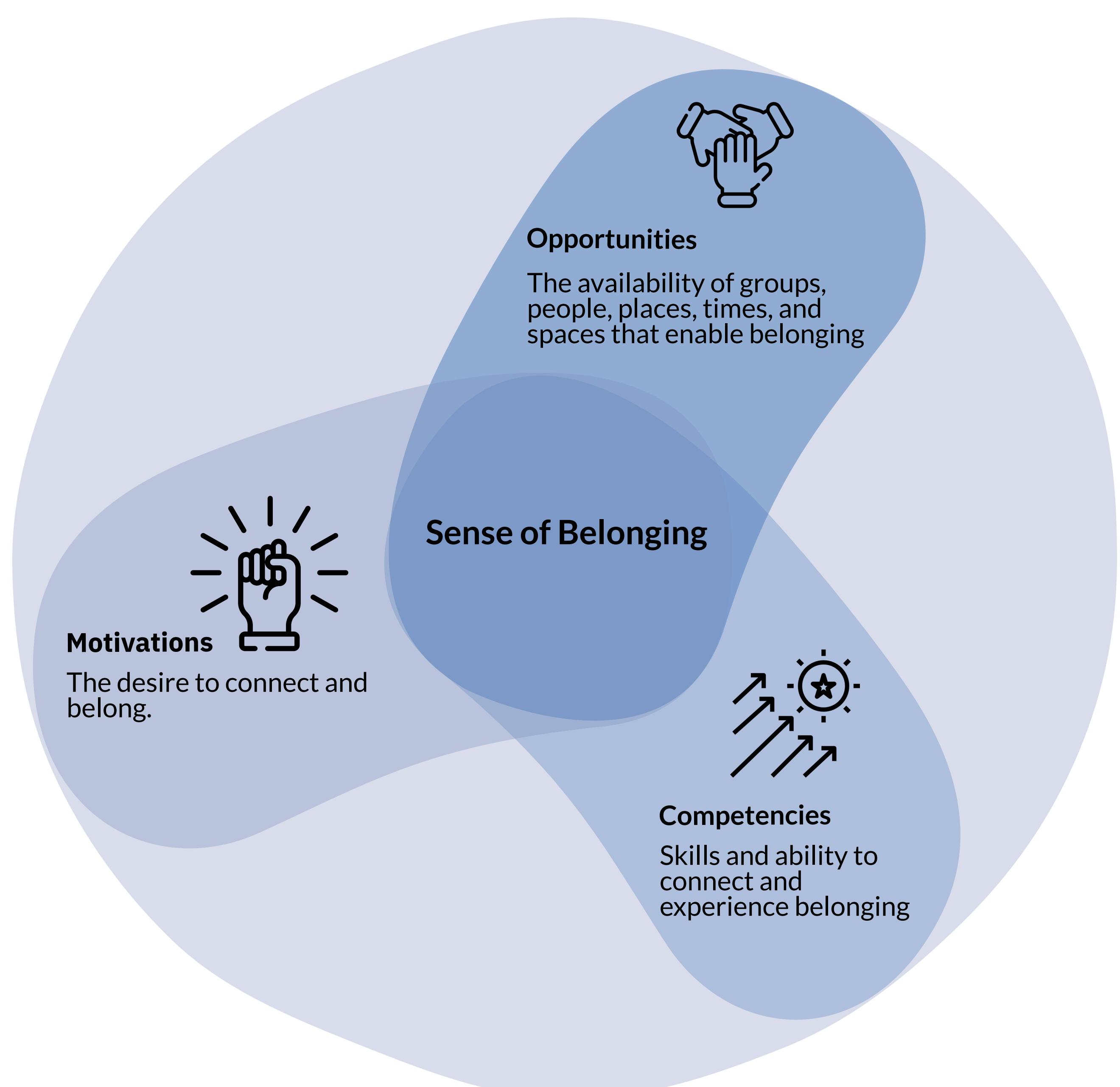
Opportunities

- ✗ There are no “meet and greet” activities - such activities could be a good opportunity for newcomers and other residents to come together to share stories and build relationships.

This diagram illustrates some of the factors that influence one's sense of belonging. When newcomers arrive, the community plays an important role in helping newcomers gain a sense of belonging. At the heart of successful retention is a strong sense of belonging. Below, we discuss how the community of Slave Lake has addressed, and could further address these factors.

Motivation

- ✗ Newcomers are not motivated to become a part of the community nor gain a sense of belonging —a key element contributing to the lack of retention. Some newcomers interviewed indicated that they were too busy to socialize as they were working a lot. They also indicated that doing so may be pointless as they didn't intend to stay in the community.



6. Conclusion

Slave Lake has proven that it is a dynamic, innovative and resilient community. There exists a strong framework of businesses, organizations and service providers in town, though there are some challenges when it comes to awareness and navigation. The region must continue its work toward a strategy that increases availability and affordability of housing options in order to be successful in the retention of newcomers. Slave Lake has an excellent opportunity for collaboration between existing stakeholders to map available services for newcomers to make for easier navigation, formalize their newcomer support system and develop resources for sharing information between existing organizations, groups and residents in the community. By fostering appropriate spaces, times and opportunities to come together, community leaders can help residents and newcomers to share stories and build relationships, leading to a strong sense of belonging and community spirit in the town.