



Faith & Welcoming Communities Forum

ADDRESSING HATE & STRENGTHENING BELONGING

**Tuesday March 24, 2026
North York Memorial Hall**



**NORTH EAST TORONTO
Local Immigration
Partnership**

Funded by:



**Immigration, Refugees
and Citizenship Canada**

Financé par :

**Immigration, Réfugiés
et Citoyenneté Canada**

INTRODUCTION

The 7th annual Faith & Welcoming Communities Forum brought together faith leaders, community organizations, service providers, and residents to explore the important role faith communities play in supporting newcomer settlement and building inclusive, welcoming neighbourhoods across North East Toronto.

The forum aligned with NET LIP's strategic priorities: strengthening collaboration, advancing equity, improving access to services, and fostering inclusive communities. It created space for meaningful dialogue, knowledge sharing, and collective action in response to emerging community needs and ongoing social challenges.

OBJECTIVES

The forum aimed to:

- *Strengthen relationships between faith communities and the settlement sector*
- *Highlight the role of faith-based organizations in supporting newcomers*
- *Identify systemic barriers and opportunities for collaboration*
- *Promote inclusive practices that foster belonging and reduce hate*
- *Generate actionable strategies to inform future NET LIP initiatives*

EVENT OVERVIEW

The forum featured an interactive and participatory format, including:

- *Opening remarks from NET LIP and community leaders*
- *Facilitated roundtable discussions*
- *Cross-sector dialogue and knowledge sharing*
- *Networking opportunities to support relationship-building*

Discussions were designed to encourage both reflection and action. Participants shared insights on key challenges, promising practices, and next steps.

PARTICIPATION

The forum brought together a diverse group of stakeholders, including:

- *Faith leaders representing multiple traditions*
- *Settlement and social service agencies*
- *Community-based organizations*
- *Institutional and public sector partners*

The event demonstrated strong cross-sector engagement. Faith-based organizations represented 50% of participants, exceeding the initial target of 35%. This reflects growing trust, interest, and engagement from faith communities within the NET LIP network.

KEY THEMES, INSIGHTS, AND STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

Roundtable discussions reinforced NET LIP's strategic priorities and highlighted opportunities to strengthen systems, partnerships, and community outcomes.

ADVANCING EQUITY AND ADDRESSING SYSTEMIC BARRIERS

Participants identified several interconnected challenges contributing to exclusion and inequity:

- *The local impact of global conflicts, contributing to Islamophobia, antisemitism, and other forms of hate*
- *Misinformation and social media reinforcing division and bias*
- *Housing instability, poverty, and the rising cost of living*
- *Language barriers and cultural disconnects*
- *Intergenerational trauma and differing settlement experiences*
- *Funding constraints and limited policy responses*

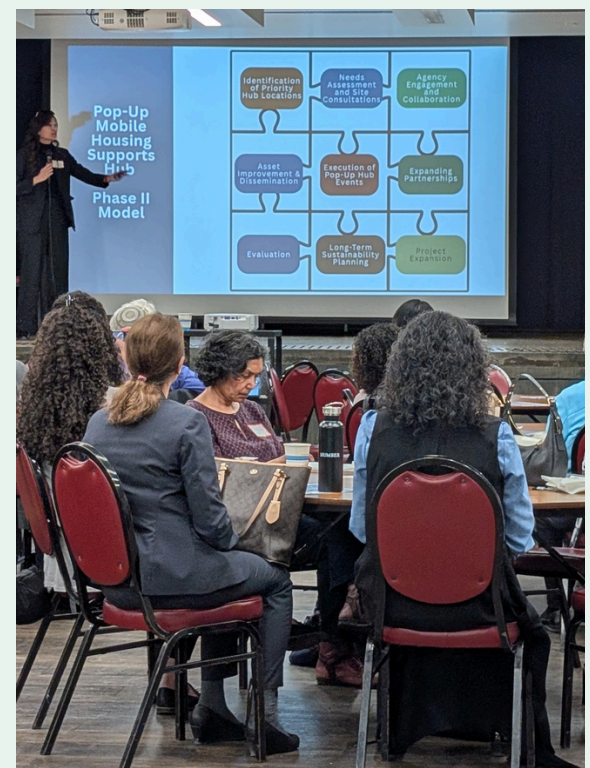
These challenges contribute to fear, isolation, and, in some cases, scapegoating. Addressing them requires coordinated, equity-focused approaches that respond to both immediate needs and root causes.

STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND SOCIAL COHESION

Participants emphasized that strong relationships are foundational to a sense of belonging. Promising approaches include:

- *Interfaith gatherings (e.g., community dinners, iftars, prayer circles)*
- *Food-based initiatives (e.g., community kitchens, potlucks)*
- *Arts and storytelling as tools for connection*
- *Hosting events in neutral and inclusive spaces*

These initiatives help build trust, reduce isolation, and create meaningful opportunities for intercultural dialogue.



ENHANCING ACCESS TO SERVICES AND INFORMATION

Despite strong community assets, barriers to access remain. Key gaps include:

- *Limited awareness of services within faith communities*
- *Individuals falling through the cracks (e.g., those with precarious status or limited access to technology)*
- *Mistrust of formal systems*
- *Fragmented communication across sectors*

Opportunities include:

- *Using trusted community spaces as access points*
- *Expanding and promoting service directories and tools*
- *Translating and adapting resources for diverse communities*

Improving access requires localized, culturally responsive approaches and stronger information-sharing systems.

STRENGTHENING SECTOR COORDINATION AND COLLABORATION

Participants highlighted the need to move from informal collaboration to more structured and sustained coordination.

Challenges include:

- *Competitive funding environments*
- *Duplication of services alongside unmet needs*
- *Lack of formal coordination mechanisms*
- *Burnout among leaders and frontline staff*

Opportunities include:

- *Establishing regular engagement structures (e.g., annual forums, ongoing meetings)*
- *Creating working groups with clear roles and accountability*
- *Strengthening referral pathways and joint initiatives*
- *Improving communication through shared platforms*

INCLUSIVE ENGAGEMENT AND EXPANDING PARTICIPATION

Participants emphasized the importance of engaging a broader range of stakeholders, including:

- *Indigenous communities and leaders*
- *Youth*
- *Policymakers and government representatives*
- *Educators and school systems*
- *Business sector stakeholders*
- *Grassroots organizations*

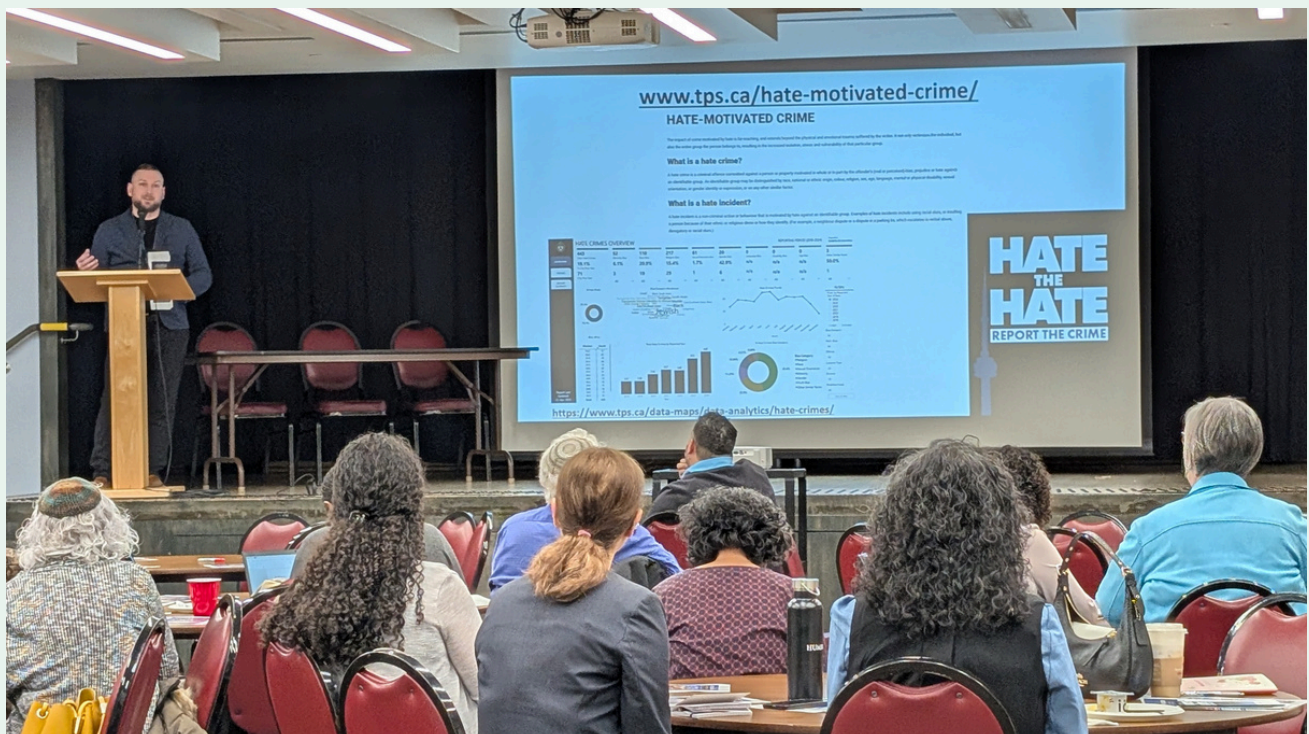
Expanding participation will support more inclusive, community-informed solutions and stronger collective impact.

BUILDING CAPACITY FOR ADVOCACY AND SYSTEMS CHANGE

There was strong interest in strengthening collective advocacy efforts. Priority areas include:

- *Sustainable funding for community and faith-based initiatives*
- *Housing affordability and income security*
- *Recognition of faith communities as key partners in the settlement ecosystem*

Coordinated advocacy will be essential to advancing long-term systemic change.



ACTION-ORIENTED NEXT STEPS

Participants identified clear and practical next steps.

Short- to medium-term actions:

- *Continue regular faith and community engagement forums*
- *Increase outreach to underrepresented groups*
- *Expand intercultural and interfaith community events*
- *Promote and enhance service maps and directories*
- *Support collaborative initiatives across sectors*

Long-term system actions:

- *Establish steering committees and working groups*
- *Strengthen cross-sector communication strategies*
- *Deepen partnerships with institutions and policymakers*
- *Advance coordinated advocacy efforts*

A COLLECTIVE PATH FORWARD

Participants highlighted the importance of:

- *Leading with empathy and cultural humility*
- *Building trust through consistent engagement*
- *Moving from dialogue to coordinated action*
- *Celebrating diversity while fostering shared understanding*

These insights will guide NET LIP's ongoing work to strengthen systems, build partnerships, and improve outcomes for newcomers.

KEY OUTCOMES

- *Strengthened relationships between faith communities and service providers*
- *Increased awareness of community assets and challenges*
- *Identification of shared priorities and opportunities for collaboration*
- *Exceeded participation targets, with 50% representation from faith-based organizations*
- *Clear direction for future engagement and system coordination*

EVALUATION RESULTS

An evaluation survey was completed by 32 participants to assess the forum's effectiveness and identify areas for improvement. The evaluation results show the forum was highly successful in:

- *Building meaningful cross-sector relationships*
- *Increasing awareness of newcomer needs and resources*
- *Strengthening the foundation for ongoing collaboration*

These findings reinforce the importance of continued investment in faith-based engagement and community-driven approaches.

CONNECTION BUILDING AND COLLABORATION

- *84.38% reported making new connections*
- *15.63% reported potential new connections*
- *0% reported no new connections*

Participants identified opportunities for:

- *Interfaith engagement and community events*
- *Volunteer training and capacity building*
- *Partnerships across sectors*
- *Use of informal community spaces (e.g., salons, grocery stores, gyms) to reach underserved populations and those who may fear accessing support due to receiving misinformation*
- *Increased collaboration with police, legal services, and social supports*

OVERALL SATISFACTION AND USEFULNESS

- *81.26% rated the event as "very or extremely useful"*
- *Average rating: 4.09 out of 5*
- *No participants rated the event as "not useful"*

These results indicate that the forum was highly relevant and valuable to participants' work.

ACCESSIBILITY AND INCLUSION

- *70% indicated accessibility supports fully met their needs*
- *3.33% indicated supports somewhat met their needs*
- *26.67% indicated the question was not applicable*

Suggested improvements:

- *Live captioning and enhanced language supports*
- *Hybrid or virtual participation options*
- *Dietary accommodations*
- *Improved post-registration communication*
- *Better parking accessibility*

KNOWLEDGE AND AWARENESS OUTCOMES

- 77.42% reported increased understanding of newcomer needs
- 19.35% reported a moderate increase
- 96.77% learned about new programs, services, or resources

Participants highlighted increased awareness of:

- Legal and community support services
- Faith-based and cross-sector partnerships
- Local and regional newcomer resources

FUTURE TOPICS AND CAPACITY BUILDING NEEDS

Participants expressed interest in future sessions on:

- Trauma-informed and compassionate care
- Housing and newcomer supports
- Professional development and train-the-trainer models
- Cross-sector collaboration
- Support for specific populations, including refugees and 2SLGBTQ+ newcomers



PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

Feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Participants highlighted:

- *The value of relationship-building and partnership*
- *Opportunities for cross-sector dialogue and learning*
- *The importance of continuing this work*

Suggestions included:

- *More time for discussion and networking*
- *Continued focus on interfaith collaboration*
- *Expanded education on newcomer rights and integration*

SUMMARY

Evaluation results show the forum was highly successful in:

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NEXT STEPS FOR NET LIP

Building on the insights and momentum generated through the Faith & Welcoming Communities Forum, NET LIP will advance this work through the creation and implementation of a cross-sector network (name to be determined). This network will serve as the primary vehicle for ongoing collaboration, coordination, and collective action among faith communities, service providers, and community partners.

ESTABLISH AND LAUNCH THE NETWORK

NET LIP will initiate the development of the network by:

- *Re-engaging forum participants to confirm interest and participation*
- *Co-developing a clear purpose, mandate, and guiding principles*
- *Identifying a network name that reflects its shared vision and scope*
- *Establishing a regular meeting cadence (e.g., quarterly or bi-monthly), informed by participant feedback*

DEVELOP A COORDINATION AND ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

Through the network, NET LIP will:

- *Create a light coordination structure, including roles, responsibilities, and facilitation approach*
- *Identify and prioritize key focus areas (e.g., access to services, interfaith engagement, anti-hate initiatives)*
- *Establish working groups or task teams aligned with priority areas*
- *Ensure alignment with NET LIP's broader strategic priorities and initiatives*

STRENGTHEN COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION SHARING

The network will support improved communication across sectors by:

- *Providing a platform to share resources, events, and opportunities*
- *Promoting service directories and tools within faith and community networks*
- *Enhancing coordination to reduce duplication and strengthen referral pathways*

EXPAND OUTREACH AND INCLUSIVE PARTICIPATION

Through the network, NET LIP will work to broaden engagement by:

- *Conducting targeted outreach to underrepresented groups, including Indigenous communities, youth, and grassroots organizations*
- *Engaging institutional partners such as schools, municipalities, and policymakers*
- *Embedding accessible and inclusive practices (e.g., hybrid formats, language supports) to reduce participation barriers*

SUPPORT COLLABORATIVE INITIATIVES AND CAPACITY BUILDING

The network will serve as a platform to:

- *Advance interfaith and intercultural community initiatives*
- *Facilitate knowledge sharing and training opportunities (e.g., trauma-informed approaches, service navigation)*
- *Support partnerships that leverage community assets and trusted spaces*



ADVANCE ADVOCACY AND SYSTEMS CHANGE

Through collective action within the network, NET LIP will:

- *Identify shared advocacy priorities (e.g., housing, funding, access to services)*
- *Support coordinated messaging and engagement with decision-makers*
- *Strengthen recognition of faith communities as key partners in the settlement ecosystem*

MONITOR PROGRESS AND ADAPT

NET LIP will support the network in maintaining an adaptive approach by:

- *Tracking participation, engagement, and emerging outcomes*
- *Gathering ongoing feedback from network members*
- *Adjusting priorities and approaches based on evolving community needs*

Through this network, NET LIP will move from dialogue to sustained, coordinated action—ensuring that the relationships, insights, and momentum from the forum translate into meaningful and lasting impact across North East Toronto.



CONCLUSION

The 7th annual Faith & Welcoming Communities Forum highlighted the critical role faith communities play in supporting newcomers, fostering inclusion, and strengthening community resilience.

The forum also underscored both the urgency of current challenges and the strong potential for collaboration. By continuing to build partnerships, strengthen coordination, and centre equity, NET LIP and its partners are well positioned to advance more inclusive and welcoming communities across North East Toronto.

