



# Sport for Settlement

March 2023 - August 2025

Final Program Report

December 31, 2025

# Calgary Catholic Immigration Society (CCIS)

## Sport for Settlement Program Pilot: Executive Summary

Background: Recognizing a gap in programming for refugee youth navigating the early stages of settlement in Canada, CCIS' Sport for Settlement pilot uses sport to support positive settlement outcomes and to bridge the gap to Canadian sport participation for multi-barriered refugee youth in Calgary. The Sport Canada-funded pilot ran from March 2023 through August 2025, with programs running from September 2023 through August 2025.

Sample: The pilot sample population was newcomer (within five years from arrival to Canada), refugee youth, 14-24 years old<sup>1</sup>, who faced barriers to participating in mainstream sports opportunities. 22 different countries of origin were represented among participants and a majority were learning English at the time of registration. The main avenue for recruitment of eligible participants was through CCIS's existing service relationships with newcomer refugee youth<sup>2</sup>; this was supplemented by external referrals, word of mouth, and drop-in program days.

Pilot Methodology: The Sport for Settlement Pilot included a series of [free, 6-10 week \(1-2x / week\) registered sports programs](#) (N=20) - including swimming, volleyball, soccer, badminton, and basketball. This included [co-ed and gender-specific](#) programs. Sports were selected based on youth feedback and on knowledge of sports that youth would likely encounter in Canada.

All programs were [co-delivered by CCIS Sport for Settlement staff and a sports-specific coach](#), at various indoor and outdoor sporting facilities throughout Calgary. Programs were [adapted to skill level](#), with some being introductory and others being advanced.

To facilitate engagement while also providing official language exposure, sessions were [delivered concurrently in both English and in key client first languages](#). When needed, the program provided transportation support to ensure youth could access program locations.

Monitoring and measurement: In addition to demographic, registration, and attendance tracking, CCIS integrated ongoing feedback from youth, coaches, and facilitators into the program implementation. An external evaluator, Habitus Collective, was engaged to monitor sport and settlement outcomes for youth, using a mixed methods approach. This included:

- Baseline and post-session surveys to youth participants;
- Focus Groups with youth participants (N=5);
- Interviews with coaches (n=7) and facility partners (N=2);
- Interviews (N=1) and focus groups with program staff (N=3)
- Interviews with Youth Case Managers (N=3)<sup>3</sup>;

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<sup>1</sup> Original eligibility was 15-24 but was widened to 14-24 to accommodate demand.

<sup>2</sup> As the service agreement holder for the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP), CCIS is the first-point of contact and provides temporary accommodation for all GAR families settling in Calgary. CCIS also has programs to support PSRs (and sponsors), as well as Claimants.

<sup>3</sup> Case Managers working with the program youth through other CCIS Resettlement and Integration (RIS) Programs.

- Program observation and informal conversation with youth and staff.

Observations: Overall, the pilot rolled out as designed with some key adaptations. Recruiting staff who possessed the unique combination of skills and attributes required for the success of this pilot program was a challenge. Additional time was required to upskill coaches and staff in areas such as working with refugee youth, sport programming, and trauma-informed practices.

Although CCIS anticipated gender-specific programming from the outset, this was of greater importance and more nuanced than originally expected. Staff observed that boys tended to join the program sooner in their resettlement than girls, who often joined several months to a year after their initial arrival. Fewer girls had participated in sport prior to arrival in Canada and many discussed household responsibilities as barriers to community participation. Staff noted that girls were more often motivated by the social aspect of sport whereas boys were more performance-focused overall.

Many youth faced competing priorities that impacted their registration, attendance, or completion rates. This included work, family obligations, and community responsibilities. Staff found it was important to reach out to youth who were absent to address any emergent barriers and to encourage their continued participation. Girls' level of engagement also benefitted from consistent communication between program staff and families, who tended to want more oversight over what the girls were doing outside the home.

Small adaptations were made to the survey tool and approach, early on, to support survey completion and comprehension. However, qualitative data was critical to capturing a more fulsome picture of impact and the diversity of ways youth engaged and benefitted.

Findings: The program was effective in identifying, recruiting, and engaging eligible youth - with [1,108 program registrations by 347 unique refugee youth](#) across 20 registered sessions. 59% of youth participated in two or more sessions during the pilot period and 41% participated in only one; with an [average of three registered sessions per youth](#).

Based on post-survey data and qualitative themes, the program achieved the following sport and settlement-related outcomes:

Sport related outcomes for youth participants:

- 79% [learned how to do a new sport](#) through the program (another 7% said 'somewhat')
- 85% [improved their sport-specific skills](#) (9% said 'somewhat') & 83% [increased their confidence](#) in their physical abilities (13% said 'somewhat').
- Staff and coaches observed that youth [increased their sport-readiness](#), with improvements in discipline, teamwork/sportsmanship, motivation, and time management.

- 57% were encouraged to join or try out for a team (7% said 'somewhat'); and
- 17% were participating in a mainstream sport upon the conclusion of the program.

Settlement related outcomes for youth:

- 82% met friends to do sports with (9% said 'somewhat').
  - Youth described how being surrounded by others with shared lived experiences made them feel more understood, accepted, and supported.
- 87% felt more welcome and comfortable in Calgary (13% said 'somewhat').
- By offering dual language facilitation and building in opportunities for gradual language acquisition through informal, low-pressure interactions, youth gained exposure to and confidence in speaking English.
- 87% reported improvements in their mood (13% said 'somewhat') & 83% felt healthier (7% said 'somewhat').

Coach and facility outcomes:

- Coaches increased their capacity to deliver accessible, culturally responsive, and youth-led programming, along with greater patience and improved ability to work with teens and refugee youth from diverse backgrounds.
- In several cases, strong partner buy-in enabled meaningful adaptations to built-spaces.

Conclusion and Recommendations: Overall, the pilot found that, yes, tailored sports programming is an effective modality for engaging with newcomer, refugee youth early in their arrival. The pilot supported positive settlement outcomes and increased readiness to participate in or to make connections to mainstream sports opportunities. Furthermore, offering programs in-community and in partnership with community facilities and coaches was effective in enhancing the awareness and readiness of those involved.

Key recommendations for programs seeking to engage newcomer refugee youth through sport include consistent staff who are familiar with the needs of the population group (or have lived experience) and are skilled at relationship-building with youth, dual language program delivery, co-facilitation with program staff and community coaches, readiness to adapt to skill levels, exposure to both new and familiar sports, gender-based programming considerations, and strategies to actively mitigate known barriers to participation. In addition to working directly with youth to increase readiness, systems also need to enhance the cultural responsiveness of programs, facilities, and coaches to ensure they promote equitable access and outcomes.

Looking ahead, CCIS aims to permanently integrate sport-based programming into their settlement services for newcomer refugee youth. They also intend to leverage the learnings of this pilot within the sports and the settlement sectors to advance systems change.

## Table of Contents

I. Background	7
II. Sample Population	8
a. Participant profiles	8
b. Knowledge of official languages	8
c. Participant identification and recruitment	9
III. Methodology	11
a. Pilot design: approach and structure	11
b. Measurement, evaluation and learning	13
IV. Observations	17
V. Findings	19
A. Sport-related outcomes	19
a. Increased access and exposure to sports	19
b. Increased level of physical activity	20
c. Increased sport-specific knowledge, skills, confidence, and motivation	20
d. Increased familiarity with sports opportunities in Calgary	21
e. Increased rates of participation in sport (outside of pilot program)	22
B. Settlement-related outcomes	23
a. Social connection	23
b. Sense of belonging	24
c. Language learning and confidence	24
d. Physical and Mental Wellbeing	25
e. Familiarity with local community	25
f. Academic motivation	26
C. Coach and facility outcomes	26
VIII. External recommendations	29
1. Recognize and leverage sport as a vehicle for settlement and integration	29
2. Settlement-Mainstream partnerships as a bridge to sports-equity	29
3. Address persistent structural barriers to access and inclusion	29
4. Program-specific recommendations for engaging newcomer, refugee youth	30
VIII. Next Steps	33
X. Conclusion	35



## I. Background

Calgary Catholic Immigration Society's (CCIS) Sport for Settlement program (March 2023 - August 2025) was developed in response to an observed lack of youth sport programming in Calgary targeted towards refugee youth in the early stage of the settlement journey and to a lack of attention in the settlement system to sport as a tool for integration. The aim of the pilot program was to address several known, intersectional barriers to participation in sport - including financial, cultural, and linguistic - by offering a free, low barrier, culturally responsive option to engage newcomer youth in both novel and familiar sports as a way of bridging them to the local sporting system. At the same time, the project hypothesized that access to accessible, fun, culturally affirming sport programming would have positive impacts on youths' overall settlement and wellbeing. The Sport Canada-funded project leveraged CCIS' extensive experience working with newcomer refugee youth and families, including learnings from past sports and recreation programming for refugee youth.

This pilot sought to trial a new intervention model that uses sport to support positive settlement outcomes and bridge the gap to Canadian sport participation for multi-barriered refugee youth.

## II. Sample Population

The pilot sample population was newcomer (within five years from arrival to Canada at time of program registration), [refugee youth](#), 14–24 years old<sup>4</sup>. In particular, the program sought to support youth who were otherwise likely to face barriers to participating in mainstream sports opportunities - including financial, cultural, and linguistic barriers.

### a. Participant profiles

- A total 347 unique youth participated in the pilot, including:
  - 281 Government-Assisted Refugees (GAR)
  - 65 Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSR; and)
  - 1 Refugee Claimant
- 60% of participants identified as boys and 40% identified as girls
- 22 different countries of origin were represented among participants. Main countries were:
  - Afghanistan (38%);
  - Syria (18%);
  - Democratic Republic of Congo (14.5%);
  - Eritrea (6.6%);
  - Sudan (6.6%);
  - Somalia (5.5%); and
  - Ethiopia (4.4%)
- The main home/preferred languages spoken by youth were Dari (35%) and Arabic (24%).
- The most common [barriers to sport identified by youth at the time of registration included cost \(23%\), lack of information \(21%\), limited team availability \(11%\), language barriers \(10%\) and competing priorities \(10%\)](#). Additional challenges included time constraints, language barriers, and limited access to equipment or skill-building opportunities—while lack of interest was cited by only 1% of respondents.
  - Notably, [62% of participants reported not having been involved in sports prior to arriving in Canada](#).

### b. Knowledge of official languages

A majority of youth who participated in the pilot had little to no knowledge of an official language of Canada at the time of registration or were in the process of gaining fluency. Only 3% (n=9) of participants spoke English as their preferred language/mother tongue and 1% (n=2) spoke French.

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<sup>4</sup> Original eligibility was 15-24 but was widened to 14-24 to accommodate demand.

For youth already connected to CCIS' settlement services, official language assessment was completed as part of organizational intake processes and this information was shared with the Sport for Settlement team. For others, levels of English comprehension/fluency typically emerged through direct conversations and informal interactions between youth and CCIS staff. At the time of registration in the pilot, youth's preferred language was asked as first-language facilitation (or access to an interpreter) was part of the program design.

Recruitment materials can be found here: [Appendix A: Recruitment materials](#)

### c. Participant identification and recruitment

Recruitment and identification of eligible participants included several strategies:

Internal referrals: The main avenue for recruitment of eligible participants was through CCIS's existing service relationships with newcomer refugee youth<sup>5</sup>. The Sport for Settlement team regularly shared program details and eligibility criteria across CCIS departments working with families from refugee backgrounds. This internal communication ensured that staff throughout the organization could refer eligible youth to the program.

In most cases, participants were recruited by Resettlement staff working with Government-Assisted Refugee families and youth upon their arrival to Calgary<sup>6</sup>. Case workers introduced the program during initial orientation and assessment services, or during case management activities as appropriate. This proactive approach ensured all eligible families - based on an understanding of demographic eligibility and intersectional barriers to accessing mainstream sport - were made aware of the opportunity.

Because demographic information is collected by the Resettlement team at intake and needs assessments are completed with all clients, this eased identification of eligible youth and reduced the burden of data collection (meaning youth did not have to provide their personal information again to confirm eligibility or to register for the program). Staff verified immigration status via official documents when needed; although this occasionally required youth to retrieve paperwork from guardians, it did not hinder participation.

Direct program introductions: Some youth living in CCIS' Temporary Accommodation were directly introduced to the program through on-site sports programming and informal, sport-related outings hosted by the Children and Youth team (such as attending a Calgary Wild game). These experiences served as a low-pressure introduction to sport in Canada, offered opportunity for relationship-building between youth and staff, and ultimately helped generate program interest.

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<sup>5</sup> As the service agreement holder for the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP), CCIS is the first-point of contact and provides temporary accommodation for all GAR families settling in Calgary. CCIS also has programs to support PSRs (and sponsors), as well as Claimants.

<sup>6</sup> All GAR families settling in Calgary first live in CCIS' Temporary Accommodation.

Drop-in programming: Drop-in program days were offered throughout the program cycle as a recruitment and engagement strategy. These drop-in sessions provided exposure to different sports to encourage interest in the registered program.

External Referrals: Although most participants were referred internally, the pilot also accepted referrals from community organizations that work with newcomer refugee youth, including Trellis and the Calgary Bridge Foundation for Youth (CBFY). These partnerships represented a smaller share of overall recruitment but demonstrated valuable community collaboration.

Word of mouth: Over time word of mouth became an important source of recruitment, as youth would often bring friends or family members with them to program. When new youth attended or expressed interest in the program, the Sport for Settlement team conducted eligibility screenings to ensure alignment with program criteria.

### III. Methodology

#### a. Pilot design: approach and structure

Approach: This pilot was conducted by CCIS<sup>7</sup> and focused on the city of Calgary. It was led by the Program Coordinator and Program Manager of the Newcomer Child and Youth Connections (NCYC) program, with additional, dedicated staff hired to co-facilitate the program in collaboration with sports-specific coaches recruited from the wider community. The program was designed with the following principles in mind: accessibility, cultural safety, cultural responsiveness, developmental appropriateness, and trauma-informed practice. Youth feedback played a key role in refining and shaping the program over time.

#### Pilot structure and components:

The Sport for Settlement Pilot included a series of [free, 6-10 week \(1-2x / week\) registered sports programs](#) (N=20), hosted between October 2023 and August 2025. Each program focused on a single sport - including swimming, volleyball, soccer, badminton, and basketball. This included [co-ed and gender-specific](#) programs. Sports were selected based on youth feedback and on knowledge of sports that youth would likely encounter in Canada; this was to both facilitate engagement and bridge to mainstream opportunities, such as school teams.

Programs were [co-delivered by CCIS Sport for Settlement staff and qualified community coaches](#), at various indoor and outdoor sporting facilities throughout Calgary, including Vivo, Genesis Centre, the Calgary Soccer Centre, Calgary Central Sportsplex, Sunridge Badminton and the Volleydome.

Programs were [adapted to skill level](#), with some being introductory and others being advanced. For example, most youth in the pilot had no prior exposure to swimming and many were advanced soccer players (though they may not have played in a formalized/structured setting).

To facilitate engagement and official language exposure, registered programs were [delivered concurrently in both English and in key client first languages](#) - including Arabic, Dari, Tigrinya, Amharic, Somali, French, Kinyarwanda, and Swahili. This was made possible by hiring Sport for Settlement facilitators who were fluent in a non-English language and, as needed, other CCIS staff were engaged to support first language facilitation. Program [locations were selected based on accessibility](#) by public transit and neighbourhoods where a large number of newcomers settle. Transportation by chartered bus, Uber, or Taxi, was provided by CCIS for difficult-to-access program locations, and youth were also supported to navigate public transportation (including escorting them to the bus stop).

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<sup>7</sup> Resettlement & Integration Division.

Registered Programs were offered [year round](#) with registration periods in fall, winter, spring and summer. Youth could participate in as many registered programs as they liked during the course of the pilot, so long as they remained eligible at the time of registration.

Most programs were held in the evenings, on Friday afternoons<sup>8</sup>, or on weekends, with adjustments based on school calendars, facility availability, and seasonal considerations. [Programs were scheduled with attention to key cultural and community events](#) such as Ramadan, school holidays, the Calgary Stampede, exam periods, and Black Friday. For example, some cycles began after Stampede week, while others included breaks during Ramadan to respect fasting practices.

Staffing: The program was supported by a small, committed team. Six core staff were involved in day-to-day operations, supplemented by additional support from the broader CCIS Children and Youth team. These extended team members assisted with participant referrals, transportation coordination, and logistical support such as escorting youth to bus stops.

A rotating pool of facilitators provided critical on-the-ground support, offering language interpretation, logistical assistance, and gender-inclusive representation. Facilitators were intentionally selected to reflect the gender, language, and cultural backgrounds of participants, helping to ensure a safe and welcoming environment that responded to the diverse needs of the youth. Knowing that it would be important to form meaningful relationships with youth, facilitators were also selected based on their experience and enthusiasm to participate and engage alongside the youth.

Coaches: [Coach recruitment was intentionally flexible and community-driven](#), tailored to the needs of each sport and the cultural backgrounds of participants. Rather than relying on a single approach, coaches were recruited through multiple pathways that emphasized cultural connection, lived experience, and relevance to the communities served.

Staff prioritized recruiting coaches from the same cultural or linguistic communities as program youth or those with experience working with refugee and newcomer populations. In some cases, particularly when facilities were highly invested in the program, coaches without this background were still engaged and were supported by CCIS staff. For example, in basketball and soccer, coaches who already had strong connections with youth were often referred to by trusted community members. In contrast, badminton coaches were typically assigned through the partner facilities where programs took place.

Most programs were staffed by two coaches, allowing for small-group instruction and stronger relationship-building. Coaches varied widely in age and background—from young adults to folks in their 70s—many of whom reflected the linguistic and cultural diversity of the participants they served.

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<sup>8</sup> Many Calgary schools have early dismissal on Fridays.

## b. Measurement, evaluation and learning

Monitoring: To ensure effective program delivery and address any challenges in real time, a combination of monitoring methods were used. These approaches helped track participant engagement, program operations, and overall implementation quality.

- Registration and attendance tracking: CCIS staff systematically recorded registration (including participant demographics) and attendance data for each sport and session. Youth not attending programs were promptly contacted to understand reasons for non-attendance and to facilitate solutions as needed.
- Youth voice: CCIS staff gathered ongoing feedback from youth in real-time, ensuring program options, timing, and logistics were aligned with their needs and interests. Youth also shared feedback through formal evaluation activities during the course of the program; this also informed real-time quality improvements.
- Developmental, evidence-informed feedback: Initial evaluation activities included a review of literature to support evidence-based programming decisions. As the pilot was implemented, the evaluation team facilitated discussions with staff to provide emergent evaluation findings and document/discuss emergent challenges and learnings. The evaluation team also attended the program on occasion to understand operations first-hand and become a familiar face to participants and staff.
- Coach voice: CCIS staff engaged consistently with coaches to ensure smooth program delivery and address emerging needs. Coach interview findings were shared with CCIS staff by the evaluation team in support of ongoing quality improvement.

Measurement and evaluation: A mixed method approach was used to measure the success and outcomes of the Sport for Settlement Pilot. Methods included:

- Baseline Survey (N=205)
  - Before starting the program (first registration), youth participants completed individual pre-program surveys to establish a quantitative baseline of their engagement in sport, both prior to and since coming to Canada. Feedback on the sports they were interested in trying, their motivations to participate, and any barriers they currently faced in accessing sport were also asked. Surveys were in plain-language English and were often completed orally with interpretation support.
- Post Program Surveys (N=219):
  - Upon completion of each registered program cycle, participants completed a post-survey to measure outcomes and to gather general feedback on the program. Some measures matched to the baseline survey to track change over time, such as increased engagement in mainstream sport. For outcome analysis, only the final post survey completed by an individual youth was used.

- Youth Focus Groups (N=5; 52 youth): Youth focus groups were facilitated at key timepoints throughout the pilot, to gather qualitative insights and feedback. These were hosted in Arabic and in English, or with interpretation, and were gender-specific.
- Interviews (N=1) & Focus Groups (N=3) with Program Staff: Program staff/facilitators provided qualitative perspective on program effectiveness, key learnings and adaptations, and observed participant outcomes. Regular meetings were also held with the evaluation team and program leads to facilitate real time learning and monitoring.
- Interviews (N=5) & Focus Groups (N=2) with Coaches (total 7 participants): Coaches provided additional perspective on program effectiveness and participant experiences, as well as their own learnings.
- Interviews with Youth Case Managers (N=3): Youth case managers are colleagues of the Sport for Settlement team who provide wrap-around support to refugee families in their first years from arrival to Calgary. Case workers provided perspective on the observed benefits of the program for youth they were working with.
- Interview with facility partners (N=2): Facility partners shared feedback on partnership effectiveness and their own learnings.

Assumptions: The pilot was developed on the assumption that building a program that intentionally prioritizes and is tailored to the refugee youth's culture, needs, and context – in part by strengthening intercultural competencies of coaches, providing no cost programming and flexible delivery, and by sharing decision-making power to the target group – would successfully navigate the complex and dynamic factors that intersect to influence refugee youth's participation.

The program assumed that newcomer refugee youth would otherwise face barriers to accessing or participating in mainstream community sports opportunities; and that those youth are interested in targeted sports programming. It also assumed access to qualified staff and coaches as well as the availability of facility space and equipment needed for specific sports.

Limiting factors of the pilot design: Identified limitations of the pilot design included:

- Sample limitations: Not all privately sponsored refugees or refugee claimants in Calgary access CCIS services. Although community partners supported recruitment, there was less opportunity for refugees from these backgrounds to be connected to the program and therefore are not proportionately represented in the sample. A majority of youth in the pilot sample were from Afghanistan and/or identified as Muslim. Though in alignment with immigration flows at the time, program learnings may not reflect other cultural or faith groups.
- Focus on youth over system readiness: The program focused on providing youth with the tools, knowledge, skills, and targeted programming they needed to bridge their

access to mainstream sports opportunities. Although there were some learnings for coach and facility partners who were supported to work with the target population within the bounds of the program, the pilot did not systematically address the capacity of mainstream services to provide culturally responsive programs. Thus, the program found evidence of some persistent systemic barriers, such as cost, that prevented mainstream sport participation despite the pilot intervention.

- Short-term measurement scope: The evaluation of the pilot focused on immediate outcomes of program participation. The pilot period did not allow for systematic tracking of the longer term or sustained impacts of the program, such as future engagement in a sport as a result of pilot program learning or skill development. That said, some youth showed evidence of medium-term outcomes.
- Appropriateness of quantitative measurement: The program embedded a quantitative measure of increased sport participation as a key data point, using matched pre and post surveys from youth. This was challenging as it was difficult to establish a shared understanding of 'participation in sport' when pre-migration experiences did not necessarily align to a Canadian understanding of formal sport participation. Furthermore, the meaningful data point was the final of the post program surveys for a given youth, however, as many youth participated in several sessions over the course of the pilot period, there was survey fatigue for some. In the final months of the program, post surveys were no longer collected, with an increased focus on qualitative data instead. Lastly, as these were online surveys, it was sometimes hard to get a matched survey as youth recorded their name inconsistently between time points or inconsistency to their registration data file; thus, not all youth participants are included in quantitative measures.

Expected results: The pilot expected to increase the frequency of participation in sport and create engagement in sport earlier in the settlement journey, for newcomer refugee youth to Calgary. The pilot also expected to support the achievement of refugee youth's settlement goals. Specific outcomes that were expected included:

Sports-related outcomes for youth:

- Increased participation in sport by newcomer youth
- Increased readiness to participate in sport, including increased familiarity, improved skills, confidence, and interest
- Increased participation in mainstream sport opportunities as a result of program engagement
- Better awareness of local sports and recreation resources

Settlement-related outcomes for youth:

- New and strengthened social connections
- Increased sense of belonging
- Mental & physical wellness

- Language learning
- Increased knowledge of local resources.

Coach and sports organization/facility outcomes:

- Greater capacity to offer accessible, culturally responsive, and youth-led programming.



## IV. Observations

This section presents key observations of the pilot as it was implemented. Key learnings and how the program adapted are outlined. Overall, the pilot rolled out as designed, with some key adaptations to timing or approach early in the pilot:

- Delays in facility access: At the outset of the program, there was difficulty accessing suitable program space in the short-term. Though facilities were ultimately accessed, many months' lead time was needed to secure bookings, therefore the program did not launch until September 2023 (a few months later than planned).
- Staff readiness & structure: Finding and hiring program staff who possessed the unique combination of skills and attributes required for the success of this pilot program was a challenge. First-language skills and lived experience were prioritized for facilitators and sport-specific coaching experience was prioritized for coach-instructors; therefore, additional time was required to upskill staff and coaches in areas such as working with refugee youth, sport programming, and trauma informed practices. While the original staffing plan proposed one full-time coordinator and two part-time facilitators, staffing evolved over time. A full-time coordinator was initially hired but later left the role. Rather than replace the position, core responsibilities were absorbed by the Newcomer Child and Youth Connections Coordinator and Manager.
- Gender-based programming: Although CCIS anticipated gender-specific programming from the outset, this was of greater importance and more nuanced than originally expected. In response to participation patterns (lower for girls) and youth and parental feedback, the program focused more on gender-based than co-ed programming. Staff highlighted that offering separate programs for boys and girls significantly improved participation among female youth. This was an area that also required additional awareness and education for facilities and coaches as gender norms were often tied to faith-based protocol.

*“Having a mixed group or even [boys and girls] on the same field, decreases the number of girls that attend. So we've seen really high participation among girls in girls only programming. So having it gendered has been really successful, like in swimming...We see between 25 and 40 girls that show up basically every week just for that girls only space.” (CCIS Staff interview)*

- Readiness and skill levels: Staff observed that youth arrived with varied relationships to sport, often shaped by limited access in their home countries, experiences of forced migration or trauma, and gender norms. These histories influenced their comfort and confidence in Canadian sport environments. Other youths were familiar with sport and, even if they played frequently or competitively previously, it was not always in the structured way that is common in Canada. Others were high level athletes but faced barriers and/or a general lack of awareness of their options to participate. Though CCIS

anticipated this, it did mean that there were different pathways for different youth and adaptations had to be made in some programs to accommodate different levels of familiarity, confidence, and/or skill. Certainly, past experience facilitated engagement in the program and mainstream opportunities; however, the program noted benefits for youth regardless of previous exposure, skill, or experience.

- Youth engagement observations: Staff observed that boys tended to join the program sooner in their resettlement than girls, who often joined several months to a year after their initial arrival. Fewer girls had opportunities to participate in sport prior to arrival in Canada and many discussed household responsibilities as barriers to community participation. Staff noted that girls' were more often motivated by the social aspect of sport than boys who were more performance-focused overall. In general, it did take some time for youth to feel comfortable and engage in the program, especially for a new sport.

CCIS always took a relational approach and reached out to a youth when they were absent from a program. This facilitated re-engagement and understanding of persistent barriers.

*"Part of the role is reaching out to ask why they haven't been coming. Some people might be saying I don't have a friend or didn't have help with siblings and some people just don't want to say they don't want to come. Some aren't familiar with the sport and then they are just scared to go. They are scared if they don't know how to play something.. it takes them a while to feel comfortable." (CCIS staff focus group)*

Staff observed that many youth faced competing priorities that impacted their registration, attendance, or completion rates. This included work, family obligations, and community responsibilities. Staff also noted that girls' attendance was more susceptible to minor disruptions, such as poor weather or scheduling conflicts. Girls' level of engagement also benefitted from consistent communication between program staff and families, who tended to want more oversight over what the girls were doing outside the home.

- Survey comprehension: Although the program evaluation took into account first language and cultural responsiveness, quantitative data gathering was not ideal for the population group. Conception of sport as a formally structured or competitive pursuit did not necessarily transfer across cultures therefore the reliability of survey data may have been affected. Furthermore, youth had different baselines of readiness and the same youth could have a different baseline readiness for each program/sport - however baseline data was gathered only at the first registration. This was to reduce the burden of data collection on the participant and to focus on change over time. Small adaptations were made to the survey and approach, early on, to support completion and comprehension. However, qualitative data was critical to capturing a more fulsome picture of impact and the diversity of ways youth engaged and benefitted.

## V. Findings

### A. Sport-related outcomes

The Sport for Settlement pilot was designed to support youth to overcome barriers to sport and increase their rate of participation in mainstream sport. As the evaluation focused on immediate outcomes, there is strong indication that youth increased and expedited their readiness to participate in sport and weaker direct evidence that this led to participation in sport outside the program. However secondary research suggests that these immediate outcomes will support the longer term impact of increased participation in sport sooner in the settlement journey.

#### Program engagement

In total, the program was effective in identifying, recruiting, and engaging eligible youth - with 1,108 program<sup>9</sup> by 347 unique refugee youth over the course of the pilot. This far exceeded the expected number of participants. 59% of youth participated in two or more registered sessions during the pilot period and 41% participated in only one; with an average of three registrations per youth. Rates of participation were similar for both boys and girls.

Rates of attendance and completion varied for each program cohort, as some sports had a stronger draw than others. For instance, soccer consistently had above-average attendance as it was a familiar and loved sport by boys and girls alike. There were gender differences in the sports of interest, however overall participation and attendance rates were comparable across genders. As discussed in Section IV. Observations, youth experienced many competing priorities that affected their attendance rates.

#### a. Increased access and exposure to sports

A primary output of the program that was also an outcome, was exposure and access to participate in new and familiar sports early in the resettlement journey. In qualitative discussions, youth reported that [were it not for this program, they would not have been able to participate in registered sports programming this early upon arrival to Canada](#), mainly due to lack of familiarity, competing priorities, and limited financial resources. Many girls had not had opportunities to participate in formal sport prior to arrival in Canada and this program was their first opportunity to engage in structured sport at all.

- 79% of youth reported that they learned how to do a new sport through the program (7% said somewhat).

*"[They] always wanted to do swimming but never had the chance to or didn't know where to go." (Caseworker interview)*

*"I was always interested in sports from back home and when I found out there was*

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<sup>9</sup> Youth that withdrew were removed

*something for girls I joined.” (Youth focus group) -*

*“Basketball, swimming and volleyball were new sports for me.”*

*“[I enjoyed] trying and learning sports that otherwise I would not have, like swimming and rugby.” (Youth focus group)*

- Access to a familiar activity or sport was an important form of cultural maintenance and cultural connection for youth. It was also a facilitator to initial engagement, which then encouraged youth to try novel sports.

#### **b. Increased level of physical activity**

Because they were provided the opportunity to participate in this program, youth increased their opportunities to be active and experience the benefits of movement. This was particularly important as many of these youths explained that they would not otherwise have had the opportunity to participate in sport and that it was a positive alternative to sedentary activities or the “boredom” they otherwise experienced. Furthermore, for many youth concepts around ‘physical wellness, activity, or wellbeing’ are not necessarily emphasized in their culture the way they are understood in Western society. The impact of this is further illustrated in “Section B; d. Improved mental and physical wellbeing”.

- 82% of participants said they spent more time being active as a result of the program (12% said somewhat).
- 89% understood more about why physical activity is important (7% said somewhat).

*“Staying physically active is a good thing, rather than staying on the screen all day.” (Youth focus group)*

#### **c. Increased sport-specific knowledge, skills, confidence, and motivation**

The Sport for Settlement pilot and evaluation design was attentive to facilitating or mediating factors that are likely to impact long-term participation in sport. This included learning sporting rules, sport-specific skill development, increased confidence, and a greater level of interest in or motivation to participate. Positive changes were recorded:

- 75% of youth increased their sport-specific knowledge (e.g. rules, norms) (7% said somewhat).
  - This finding was evident for both new and familiar sports. For example, many youth may have been familiar with a sport but there were still differences when playing that sport in a more structured setting - both in terms of rules and behavioural norms and etiquette. Engagement of coaches familiar with the rules, norms, and expectations of competitive play facilitated these outcomes.
- 85% improved their sport-specific skills (9% said somewhat).

*"Swimming is a survival skill everyone should have. Most newcomers don't have this skill, if an accident were to happen they don't know what to do. We need to prepare them to know what to do." (Coach interview)*

- 83% felt more confident in their physical abilities after program participation (13% said somewhat).

*"Have seen great improvement in the 8 weeks, most of them have improved their skills. The ones with experience before, their stroke wasn't great and breathing was an issue and now they have learned how to breathe and that has helped their endurance. That confidence and overcoming that fear of water is something to celebrate. To get someone to do something in water is a celebration." (Coach interview)*

*"They are gaining confidence with trying something new and learning that they can get better at something. Regardless of whether it is more confidence in the sport or other aspects of their life. The program has given them more confidence ...they are more likely to try things in the future because of the confidence they developed through sport." (Caseworker interview)*

*"One girl when she first started she was not going into the water, we kept encouraging her and after week 3 she started doing it." (Coach interview)*

*"I have seen a lot of improvements with the girls from when they started. There are some differences for the boys then the girls. With girls they tend to need more time to overcome the fear of water, once we do that and they become more comfortable that is when we see the progress." (Coach interview)*

*"Many have developed a love of the sport...They had the opportunity to go to watch a game at the University of Calgary...There are two girls who want to continue playing volleyball. I would take her on a team, she could play competitively if she wanted." (Coach interview)*

#### d. Increased familiarity with sports opportunities in Calgary

The Sport for Settlement pilot and evaluation design was attentive to facilitating or mediating factors that would help youth overcome barriers to participation in mainstream sport. This included learning about sports facilities and program opportunities in the local community and knowledge of how to navigate registration processes. Positive changes were recorded:

- 62% of youth said the program helped them learn where to play a sport competitively in Calgary (16% said somewhat)

This was also a theme in qualitative focus groups: *"We now also know where to go if we want to play these sports. It is a good program." (Youth focus group)*

Staff and coaches also reported positive behavioural outcomes that would support youth to participate in mainstream sports. This included improvements in discipline, and teamwork/sportsmanship. Though it took time, youth adapted to structure and began to show up to program on time, show commitment to their peers or teammates, and express a sense of motivation to improve or achieve sport-related goals.

*“..Now this year when there is a consequence for structured programming they can step up to the dedication.” (Caseworker interview)*

#### e. Increased rates of participation in sport (outside of pilot program)

A main hypothesis of the pilot was that youth would increase their participation in mainstream sport and do so earlier in their settlement journey. Although this was the case for many youth - the stronger outcome was around the interest to play a sport outside of the pilot program. Based on this and the above outcomes regarding readiness to participate in support, it is likely that increased participation in mainstream sport will be a medium or longer term outcome of participation in Sport for Settlement.

- 17% of youth were participating in mainstream sport after their participation in the pilot.

Qualitative findings showed that participation in sport was diverse - some youth played on a school team, others joined a club, some began volunteering or coaching, and one even gained a professional contract. In some cases it was the community coach of a sport that recruited a youth onto their club team. Mainstream participation was expedited for those with prior experience and skill; however many youth, including girls, with no prior experience also achieved this outcome.

- Notably, there was so much interest and skill level in soccer that two entirely new teams were created under Calgary's Minor Soccer League - team members were entirely made up of Sport for Settlement pilot participants.

It is also notable that some sports - such as swimming - were brand new for youth. Therefore, competitive participation was not necessarily aligned to their skill level - however they did report feeling excited to continue to engage in that activity recreationally. These sports had the added benefit of facilitating a sense of belonging in mainstream culture.

Although the pilot did not systematically support youth to register for teams, staff did give help to identify opportunities and support registrations when there was interest and readiness. In some cases, youth wanted to register on a team but lacked financial resources, illustrating persistent barriers even with navigation support.

- 36% of youth said the program helped them learn how to register for a team (19% said somewhat)

*“It's our job to integrate [youth] and guide them into, for example, finding a club for them because they, they, they feel that they need that competition, right? Not only*

*amongst themselves here, but really what's out there? What can I do? Do I have, you know what it takes? (Coach interview)*

The evaluation found that interest or intent to join a sports team was a more meaningful immediate outcome measure than participation in mainstream sport: although many youth were not yet in a mainstream sport after the program, almost all were more interested and motivated. In some cases, they were not yet participating in mainstream sport because they were waiting for a tryout or for the season to start.

- 89% of youth reported increased interest in playing sports after participating in the program (3% said somewhat); and
- More than half (57%) of respondents shared that the program experience encouraged them to join or try out for a team (7% said somewhat).

Qualitative data further illustrated this. Many youth shared that they were looking to try out for a school team or to join a league when a sport came into season next. CCIS was intentional in offering sports, such as badminton and basketball, that youth would encounter in school, knowing that school sports teams were a likely avenue for mainstream participation.

*"Two girls have asked me about how they can go further with the program and play volleyball." (Coach interview)*

*"Now youth are training with the hope they will get better. Before it was just to play and it came with behavioural issues that come without structure. Now they are asking to join clubs and now they feel like they are 'part of it' which is cool." (Caseworker interview)*

The pilot also found that [engaging with qualified coaches attached to a club or facility also created pathways to mainstream sport](#). In some cases, coaches recruited youth from the program onto their teams or otherwise facilitated their participation in mainstream opportunities.

## B. Settlement-related outcomes

In addition to sport-related outcomes, the Sport for Settlement pilot was designed to test if participation in sport could help newcomer youth achieve settlement outcomes. Evaluation findings supported this hypothesis.

### a. Social connection

Social connections and a sense of community was a strong outcome of the pilot, evident in quantitative results and a main theme of qualitative findings. Youth and staff consistently spoke about how the program created safe, inclusive spaces where young people could open up socially and form meaningful connections.

- 82% said the program helped them meet friends to do sports with (9% said somewhat).

*“It is a good program for newcomers that are feeling lonely or depressed as you get to know people, places, and make friends. [...] It is a good program.” (Youth focus group)*

For many youth, these connections were especially meaningful when formed with peers who shared similar cultural backgrounds or migration experiences. Youth described how being surrounded by others with shared lived experiences made them feel more understood, accepted, and supported. For girls in particular, the swimming program offered a rare and empowering space to socialize freely in a culturally safe setting, deepening social bonds and trust. Others spoke of cross-cultural exposure as a benefit.

#### b. Sense of belonging

Post-survey responses show that the Sport for Settlement pilot had a strong impact on youth participants’ sense of connection and belonging in their new community - an important indicator of integration and connection to community.

- 87% of youth reported that they feel more welcome and comfortable in Calgary as a result of participating in the program (13% said somewhat).

This sense of belonging was closely tied to the relationships they made through program:

*“Connecting with others in the same situation and from the same country gives me a sense of belonging.” (Youth focus group)*

Participants also described how the program, in offering them access to community spaces, places, and connections, helped them feel more integrated into the broader Canadian community. As one youth expressed:

*“It is a benefit to be integrated and open in the community/society you are in.” (Youth focus group)*

#### c. Language learning and confidence

Although not a focused outcome for the program, by offering dual language facilitation and building in opportunities for gradual language acquisition through informal, low-pressure interactions, youth gained exposure to and confidence in speaking English. Youth described the program as a palace where they could comfortably practice English and staff and coaches observed this as well.

*“The youth are really good at picking up on language and the ones that don’t will help explain to the others.” (Coach interview)*

#### d. Physical and Mental Wellbeing

Overall wellbeing, including both physical and mental, is a significant challenge for refugee youth, who often face overlapping stressors such as past trauma, displacement, economic hardship, and uncertainty about the future. In this context, many youth experience isolation, boredom, and prolonged periods of inactivity, with mental health concerns that are often unacknowledged or unsupported. The Sport for Settlement pilot was designed in part to respond to these realities, offering newcomer youth not only opportunities to move their bodies, but also spaces where they feel connected, supported, and emotionally safe.

Survey findings show that participation in the program has had a clear and positive impact on youth wellbeing.

- 87% of respondents reported an improvement in their mood (13% said somewhat)
- 83% said they felt healthier as a result of the program (7% said somewhat)

This was also a theme in qualitative interviews and focus groups and staff observation:

*“Making new friends and playing sports increases your self confidence, and even causes my mood to improve.” (Youth focus group)*

*“In conversations they tell me that they love coming, that it helps them destress and take their mind off things, better than sitting at home, gives them a goal and objective.” (Facilitator interview)*

#### e. Familiarity with local community

Beyond sport-specific systems, the pilot also helped youth become more confident navigating the city and using public transportation - critical life skills that support broader independence. As participants shared:

*“The program allowed us to get to know other parts of the City. We learn about locations where we are able to go to play sports.” (Youth focus group)*

*“[It] gave us a chance to learn how to use public transportation.” (Youth focus group)*

*“Before, I did not feel safe using public transportation.” (Youth focus group)*

These experiences highlight the pilot’s broader contribution to mobility, autonomy, and place-based knowledge—key enablers of successful settlement. They also suggest that sport programming, when designed with intentional support, can serve as a practical platform for building both system navigation skills and personal confidence. At the same time, they underscore the need for additional support to bridge gaps in system literacy, particularly around registration processes and navigating community-based offerings. Strengthening this component could further empower youth with the confidence and independence to sustain sport participation well beyond the program itself.

#### f. Academic motivation

For highly skilled and competitive youth in particular, many had goals of playing at a high level such as semi-professionally or on a University team. Coaches supported youth to understand the pathways to their goals, for example, the benefit of quality academics to getting a scholarship, for example.

*They're like, what do you mean, what do I need the marks for? So we started to talk to them about, you know, that you need the marks so you can get accepted for a college, you might get a scholarship and then you can play soccer as well. So, you know, little processes like that. So, it's, again, it's more of a nurturing act and giving them the right information to make sure that they achieve that." (Coach interview)*

### C. Coach and facility outcomes

The Sport for Settlement pilot positively influenced not only the youth who participated, but also the coaches and local sport organizations that CCIS partnered with in delivering the program. Coaches reported increased capacity to deliver accessible, culturally responsive, and youth-led programming, along with greater patience and improved ability to work with teens and refugee youth from diverse backgrounds. These experiences have also contributed to a growing awareness and skillset within local sport organizations or facilities in accommodating the needs of newcomer youth.

#### a. Increased capacity to be culturally responsive:

Coaches shared examples of how they increased their capacity to deliver programming to refugee youth. Importantly, they recognized that diverse motivations, diverse skill levels, and diverse languages were key factors that they had to navigate successfully to help build comfort, be sensitive to their needs, and foster progression and ongoing participation.

Reported areas of increased capacity to deliver accessible and culturally responsive sport programming included: patience, capacity to work with different age groups, and capacity to work with refugee youth of diverse backgrounds.

*"There was a bit of a learning curve for coaches to stay involved, and everyone who has helped as a coach has been supportive and enthusiastic. Coaches will ask other coaches if they want to help as they feel everyone should be involved and have the opportunity." (Coach and partner interview)*

*"I found [the program] to be a good training group for new coaches or for those who want to learn something new as it presents different challenges that coaches wouldn't normally experience - this is a great side effect of having coaches do it." (Coach and partner interview)*

Patience was also related to being empathetic and coaching in ways that fit with youth's backgrounds, such as gender, migration history, and past traumas. For example, one coach reported that they came to better understand that youth are still connected to family members transnationally, some of whom are still in danger; they explain that where might typically ask a participant not to be on their phone, in some cases these youth were speaking to a family member in their home country and so they learned to accommodate that.

As one emphasized, trust building was a key part of their new coaching approach:

*"When they come here, you start to ask certain things like personal information [...] and with that because where they come from, the struggle, it's kinda, it's kinda hard. So you have to kind of gain their trust a little bit in that. I think with this program, it was almost the same thing at the beginning were, you know, they will say hi, but there was that distance that we're keeping because they didn't want you in right away. [...] So there's a different level of respect, but we had to earn that right. It's kind of different." (Coach interview)*

*"We are much more aware of physical teaching and physical cues since everyone won't understand the explanation the first time, we have to find different ways to show it. This is the first group with this level of varying English levels so we have learned to explain in different ways." (Coach interview)*

*"I learned how to explain things in different ways." (Coach interview)*

In several cases, strong partner buy-in enabled meaningful adaptations to built-spaces. For example, one facility implemented physical modifications such as using pipe-and-drape barriers and curtains to ensure privacy—to make their pool area safe and welcoming for Muslim girls and women. As one partner shared:

*"[To make it safe for muslim girls and women] we needed to have the area fully private. [We] had already installed a large curtain, blocking off the new pool and old pool. But we had to identify what we didn't cover. First we had to identify large floor to ceiling windows. We had to find a way to block off those windows. We have a combination of pipe and drape." (Partner interview)*



## VIII. External recommendations

Based on evaluation findings and staff, participant, and partner feedback, we offer the following recommendations to organizations seeking to facilitate the equitable engagement of newcomer, refugee, and/or culturally diverse youth in sport and/or seeking to embed sports programming into settlement programming:

### 1. Recognize and leverage sport as a vehicle for settlement and integration

The Sport for Settlement pilot demonstrated that sport can be a powerful tool for supporting newcomer refugee youth in their broader settlement journey - findings which would likely translate to other newcomer groups. Participation helped youth navigate their local community, build confidence and independence, practice English in a low-pressure environment, develop a sense of belonging through peer connection, and foster trusted adult relationships. In addition, sport was an engaging platform for building relationships with youth such that their settlement challenges could be identified and responded to.

### 2. Settlement-Mainstream partnerships as a bridge to sports-equity

The Sport for Settlement pilot demonstrated the value of a Settlement agency (CCIS) working in partnership with mainstream organizations (facilities and sports organizations) to find reciprocal solutions to access and inclusion for newcomer youth. By working in partnership with facilities, coaches, and organizations invested in the vision of the program, outcomes were achieved both for youth and for those working in mainstream sports systems. This approach, including co-delivery of the program, was effective in leveraging the expertise of each partner such that each was able to build long-term capacity.

Furthermore, collaborative relationships allowed for adaptive solutions. In one case, a facility modified its renovation plans to accommodate the needs of refugee girls, resulting in four months of preparation and ongoing adjustments during the program's initial rollout. These partnerships were critical. Without facility-level buy-in and a shared commitment to inclusivity, programming such as culturally safe swimming lessons for refugee girls would not have been possible.

### 3. Address persistent structural barriers to access and inclusion

The Sport for Settlement pilot identified several barriers that prevented youth from participating in mainstream opportunities, even when their readiness and motivation was enhanced. The following recommendations aim to address these persistent challenges.

- Simplify registration systems

Youth who are new to Canada may not yet know what opportunities are available, where to look for opportunities they want, or how to navigate unfamiliar registration systems. Forms and paperwork are often complex for newcomers, and may also be unfamiliar. Visuals, plain

language, and simple descriptions are recommended, as are investing in certified, first language translation of key forms and documents.

- **Remove financial barriers**

Cost was a main barrier identified to mainstream sport participation and a persistent barrier that the pilot observed when youth were seeking to participate in-community. Free and low-cost programs and equipment will further facilitate access and ongoing participation.

- **Adapt spaces and places to ensure access and inclusion**

Access to suitable facilities emerged as one of the most significant structural challenges in program delivery. Many community spaces were not originally designed with refugee youth in mind, particularly for gender-sensitive activities such as girls' swimming. Facilities can be designed with cross-cultural needs in mind, complemented by staff training to enhance awareness and responsiveness.

#### 4. **Program-specific recommendations for engaging newcomer, refugee youth**

- **Prioritize fun while responding to varying skill levels and motivations**

In the Sport for Settlement pilot, youth were most often motivated to make friends/socialize and to have something fun to do. At the same time, some participants do seek opportunities for skill-building and competitive growth. Programs should avoid a one-size-fits-all approach and instead offer parallel or flexible pathways that can meet all levels of familiarity, readiness, and skill. By doing so, organizations can retain a broader range of participants and use both "fun-first" and "competitive" models as gateways to sustained sport engagement. Importantly, regardless of their motivation, all youth benefit from gaining system knowledge (e.g., how to register), social networks, and confidence that can help them access community sport independently.

- **Implement gender-specific and inclusive programming**

Research shows that girls in general benefit from the options for girls only sports programs. This can be especially so for girls from different cultural or faith backgrounds. In our pilot, most girls were Muslim and/or from a culture with more traditional gender norms. Gender-specific programming was a key factor in increasing female participation in our pilot and a principle of providing culturally responsive programming that was attentive to participants early in their settlement in Canada. In the pilot, separate sessions for girls, with women coaches and facilitators, provided safer, more comfortable spaces for activities like swimming, soccer, and volleyball. Flexibility in structure, timing, and facilitation is critical to creating culturally safe spaces where girls and gender-diverse youth feel welcome.

- **Provide dual language facilitation:**

For youth new to Canada who were not English speakers, the opportunity to communicate in their preferred language *and* gain exposure to English supported engagement while also promoting language learning. First-language facilitators also supported the participation of English-speaking coaches as they helped to mitigate language barriers by offering both

linguistic and cultural interpretation of instructions. Many youth reported that the program was a safe and low-pressure opportunity to practice and build confidence in their English skills.

First-language is considered a critical factor in ensuring accessible and inclusive programming. By also including English exposure, participants were supported in their settlement journeys and readiness to connect to mainstream sports. To recruit first-language facilitators, providers may need to consider this as a priority skillset and explore ways to upskill in other areas. Though more resource intensive at the outset, this approach facilitates youth engagement, coach integration, and program outcomes.

- **Offer both new and novel sports**

New sports opened up new pathways and oriented youth to local culture whereas familiar sports supported cultural maintenance and continuity between life pre and post migration, supporting a sense of wellbeing. Familiar sports were also helpful for engaging youth at the outset; once relationships were built, both between participants and with staff, youth were more willing to try new sports.

- **Design for flexibility, not uniformity**

Programs should be structured to accommodate varying ages, skill levels, and motivations. Unlike conventional sport programs that group participants by birth year, our pilot benefitted from open formats that welcome a wide range of experience levels. This approach allows skilled participants to act as informal peer mentors and supports newer players to develop confidence. It also allowed siblings to participate together, which was a facilitator to participation. Introduction to sport programs and programs focused on recreation rather than competition facilitation participation of girls specifically. Offering diverse sport options, adaptable session structures (e.g., shorter drop-ins *and* longer regular sessions), and culturally responsive facility arrangements (e.g., private swimming space for girls) were crucial to ensuring access and retention.

- **Leverage staff and coaches as cultural intermediaries**

A key programmatic adaptation involved positioning CCIS staff and coaches as trusted intermediaries who could bridge the gap between refugee youth and the broader world of sport and recreation. Through ongoing trust-building, staff and coaches played a critical role in introducing participants to both in-program and community-based opportunities. They provided personalized guidance, shared program offerings, and helped youth navigate unfamiliar systems. This relational approach not only facilitated participation but also expanded awareness of sport as a pathway to connection, confidence, and inclusion.

Future programs should see *relationships* as core infrastructure. Staff and coaches who build trust, speak the same language, and show up consistently made a profound difference in youth engagement and retention in the pilot. Many facilitators in our program went beyond their formal roles, acting as informal mentors, school advocates, or confidantes. These relationships build safety, belonging, and resilience—outcomes that extend far beyond the field or pool.

- **Facilitate transportation**

In Calgary, many facilities are difficult to reach by public transportation or on foot and there can be large geographic distances between a facility and where a youth lives. In the pilot, some youth did not have permission to travel independently, especially at night, or were restricted by family expectations. Options to facilitate or support transportation can not only facilitate participation, they can promote familiarity with local geography.

- **Account for competing priorities**

Youth often juggle caregiving roles, school, and work. Lack of engagement is not necessarily a reflection of interest or program quality - it is helpful to have formal mechanisms to reach out to youth and address persistent barriers or to adjust program timings as needed.

- **Engage parents**

Some families, particularly of girls, were hesitant to allow participation. Account for staff time and competencies to build trust with and inform parents through direct outreach, including home visits. This can also help to identify barriers and enhance cultural safety of programming.

- **Take a youth-led approach**

Taking a youth-led approach, wherein informal and formal feedback mechanisms are embedded in program design and delivery supports real-time adaptations that facilitate access, engagement, and responsiveness. Refugee youth are diverse - programming will benefit from hearing from them directly about what they want to do, what their hesitations are, and what their goals are.

- **Including siblings**

In the pilot, many youths were from large families. Participation often depended on being able to include siblings. Offering concurrent sessions for different age ranges or widening age eligibility can support whole families to participate.

- **Account for equipment needs when building budgets and partnerships**

A youth with barriers to accessing sport also likely has barriers in accessing equipment and proper clothing. In some cases, options available at a facility will not be culturally appropriate (such as with swimwear). Furthermore, youth in our pilot often needed equipment to practice or continue the sport outside of the program, which presented a persistent barrier to their mainstream participation.

## VIII. Next Steps

CCIS proposes to scale the program through a phased and adaptable approach:

- **Institutional Integration:** The program is already embedded within CCIS's Resettlement and Integration Services Division, providing immediate access to refugee youth, wraparound services, and an interdisciplinary staff network. This structure ensures that future scaling efforts will benefit from an existing system of internal referrals, coordinated support, and deep relationships with refugee families.
- **Evidence-Based Expansion:** Evaluation findings from the pilot offer an emerging best-practice model that can be adapted across different demographics and locations. The program's flexible design—accommodating diverse languages, cultural norms, and motivations—makes it scalable for:
  - Refugee youth beyond the 14–24 age range.
  - Newcomer youth with immigration pathways other than refugee status.
  - Communities beyond Calgary, through partnerships with RAP providers in both urban and rural centres.
- **Adaptable Design Principles:** Key adaptations such as gender-responsive programming, multi-lingual staffing, and the use of sport as a vehicle for trust-building and system navigation can be carried into future implementations. These approaches are transferable and can be tailored to suit the unique needs of other communities.
- **Partnership Mobilization:** Relationships with facilities, coaches, and community organizations formed during the pilot serve as a scalable blueprint for local adaptation. Facilities that demonstrate cultural flexibility—such as providing private swim times for Muslim girls—can serve as models for similar negotiations elsewhere.
- **Workforce Readiness:** The pilot has helped build a cadre of coaches and facilitators who understand the unique needs of refugee youth. As the program scales, CCIS can share recruitment and training models that prioritize lived experience, community language fluency, and cultural competence.
- **Knowledge Sharing and Sector Influence:** Learnings from the pilot will be shared broadly to inform both the settlement and sport sectors. Through conferences, working groups, and toolkits, CCIS will support other organizations in adapting inclusive, sport-based programming. This open dissemination fosters sector-wide learning and positions sport as a meaningful tool for refugee youth settlement.

In sum, scaling the Sport for Settlement pilot is not simply a matter of expansion, but of intentional adaptation grounded in tested strategies and trusted community relationships. With sustained support, CCIS is ready to mobilize this model to serve more youth, in more communities, with the same commitment to inclusive, impactful sport for settlement.

## X. Conclusion

The Sport for Settlement pilot program yielded valuable insights into the design and delivery of sports-based programming for refugee youth in Calgary. The evaluation of outcomes highlighted the program's impact on participant well-being, social integration, and sport-readiness. Furthermore, it underscores the effectiveness of sport-based programming as a tool for settlement.

Overall, the Sport for Settlement pilot was effective for introducing newcomer youth to novel sports and for familiarizing them to the sport system and sporting norms in Canada. It helped youth of various skill levels to build and/or enhance foundational skills, confidence, discipline, and interest in continued participation. Through a flexible, youth-led approach that embedded principles of cultural responsiveness, the program was effective in engaging youth at various levels of readiness and from diverse backgrounds to try new things and to continue spots that they were familiar with. Many increased their interest and readiness to engage in the mainstream sport system and others were fully integrated into a community or school club or team.

Sport also proved to be an effective tool for engaging with and building meaningful connections with youth early in their settlement journey. A fun, supportive, structured environment was effective for fostering social connections, providing a safe space for language practice, and promoting mental and physical wellbeing. By offering programs in the community, youth become more familiar with local resources and how to get around the city.

Co-facilitation with a qualified coach and CCIS facilitators was a strength of the program as it leveraged CCIS experience with the population group and first language capacity with quality coaching connected to mainstream sports organizations or facilities. As a result, coach and facility partners also report enhanced awareness and capacity to work with the target population.

Moving forward, CCIS hopes to mobilize the learning and outcomes from the Sport for Settlement project within the sports and settlement sectors, including to the partners worked with for recruitment and delivery, and to leverage the results to secure long-term funding for sports programming as part of ongoing settlement services for newcomer and newcomer refugee youth.