



# Corporate Report

NO: R052

COUNCIL DATE: March 31, 2008

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## REGULAR COUNCIL

TO: Mayor & Council DATE: March 28, 2008

FROM: General Manager  
Parks, Recreation & Culture and  
General Manager, Planning & Development FILE: 1850-01

SUBJECT: First Steps Program – Early Childhood Development-Focused Refugee  
Settlement Service in Surrey (Pilot Project)

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## RECOMMENDATION

The Parks, Recreation and Culture and Planning Department recommends that Council:

1. Receive this report as information; and
2. Support in principle a City contribution of \$25,000 per year for each of 2009, 2010 and 2011 to support the *First Steps* – Early Childhood Development (ECD)-Focused Refugee Settlement Service in Surrey and White Rock; and
3. Direct staff to include appropriate allocations in the 2009-2013 Five Year Financial Plan when it is prepared for Council consideration later this year.

## BACKGROUND

In June 2002, the federal government shifted to a new humanitarian-focused criteria for selecting government-assisted refugees but made no corresponding shift in settlement services for refugee children, youth or families. By April 2005, the various early childhood partners in Surrey, through the active lobbying of UMOJA, became aware that a growing number of refugee families with young children were presenting significant and diverse health, mental health, poverty, literacy, school readiness, parenting and developmental challenges because of their protracted experiences with war, trauma and refugee camp life in Africa and Asia. With few appropriate Early Childhood Development (ECD) services available, mainstream Surrey ECD and settlement agencies attempted to adapt some of their existing services, but funding was extremely limited and service provision inconsistent.

By April 2007, a new and alarming phenomenon became evident. Those children born in Canada, but of refugee families, were presenting at school entry, many of the same risk factors as their refugee camp-born peers. Also, the Ministry of Children and Family Development was becoming increasingly aware of emerging child protection concerns and Fraser Health was uncovering serious physical and mental health concerns. To address this crisis situation, 12 different Surrey-based agencies, including the City of Surrey, came together to research and develop an entirely new and unique "First Steps" strategy and to raise awareness of the needs of young refugee children amongst various funders.

The *First Steps* initiative has undertaken a community development process led by the Surrey/White Rock Office of Early Childhood Development, Learning and Care (ECDL&C). Partners include those who are engaged in providing other new settlement initiatives in the Surrey area to ensure 'value-added' co-ordination of services.

Through multi-agency collaboration, the *First Steps* project is designed to meet the settlement and early adaptation needs of young refugee children, aged birth to 5 years old, through a family-centred approach. This project will focus upon both new refugee arrivals and those young children whose families arrived as refugees within the last five years. Because of the young age of the children, *First Steps* relies on the age appropriate power of attachment, bonding, play and social interaction as the key activities to achieve the project goals.

The funding agencies identified with strong commitment to this project include the Surrey Board of Education, Ministry of Children and Family Development, Fraser Health Authority, United Way of the Lower Mainland and Settlement and Multiculturalism Division Ministry of Attorney General. In a recent meeting, Settlement and Multiculturalism indicated that they are willing to be a major contributing funder to the *First Steps* project if the other local partners are also willing to make shared funding commitments. The City has been requested to contribute \$25,000 a year for 3 years, for a total of \$75,000, beginning in 2009. In turn, the City's contribution will leverage over 3 years, approx \$1.7 million from Settlement and Multiculturalism, \$375,000 from United Way of the Lower Mainland, \$135,000 from the Vancouver Foundation, \$110,000 from the School District, \$114,000 from MCFD, specific public health nursing time from Fraser Health and donations from the University Women's Club and, hopefully, the Surrey Foundation. OPTIONS, DIVERSEcity and UMOJA will also be committing in-kind resources to the project.

## **DISCUSSION**

As of 2007/08 Surrey has become home to the largest influx of government-assisted refugees in BC. Funding from government for settlement has in the past, primarily focused on settling immigrants and refugees as adults and labour force entrants, but not as parents or as young children or students. This oversight means that refugee children and Canadian-born children of refugee parents, who together constitute a significant proportion of all refugees, have not been getting the support they need prior to school entry thus affecting their lifelong development and learning trajectory. In addition many refugee parents, especially those with low literacy levels in their home language, often remain isolated in their homes and continue to lack the basic skills needed to support their children's health, safety, learning and well-being within the Canadian context. Most telling is that children born in Canada several years after their parents' departure

from a refugee camp may still be exhibiting similar levels of developmental vulnerabilities as their refugee camp-born peers.

This *First Steps* ECD refugee settlement project will pilot an innovative, multi-agency integrated service delivery model for approximately 150 refugee children per year (birth through 5 years old) and their primary caregivers living in Surrey.

- Two unique ECD service centres will be developed and managed by OPTIONS, in collaboration with DIVERSEcity and UMOJA, plus the in-kind resources and expertise of several other agencies, including the City of Surrey. The *First Steps* Centre, based at DIVERSEcity, will welcome, assess, orient, support and connect newly arrived refugee young children & their primary caregivers for up to 18 months to assist with learning about the Canadian child-rearing context and to transition the children to mainstream early childhood services, including kindergarten.
- The Hand-in-Hand program located at UMOJA, will focus on young refugee children and their caregivers who have been in Canada for up to 5 years, yet still face multiple settlement and developmental issues. These families have the opportunity to receive support for up to 3 years.

Families in both programs will be matched up with trained ECD volunteers to play a bridging role once transition to mainstream services occurs. As well, the project will focus on building the capacity of existing ECD and settlement staff through professional development, so there is increased competency to meet refugee needs across Surrey. This is a three-year multi-agency-funded project.

The ultimate goals of the *First Steps* program will be to provide intensive early childhood-focused settlement and developmental support to young refugee children (birth through five years old) and their primary caregivers, so as to:

- Minimise the impact of trauma and the refugee experience on the growth and development of the young refugee children.
- Facilitate successful transition of the children into mainstream ECD services including kindergarten.
- Build the capacity of the children's caregivers about parenting and child development within the Canadian context.
- To build the knowledge, expertise and capacity of existing settlement and early childhood development agencies regarding how best to meet the needs of young refugee children and their families in an integrated, comprehensive, culturally competent way.
- To share the learning's from this project with other community agencies, funders and policy makers in BC, so a new provincial ECD settlement-funding stream can be developed.

The *First Steps* program is consistent with the Plan for the Social Well-Being of Surrey Residents, adopted by Council in February 2006. Children and Youth and Community Development and Diversity were two of the five themes or social issue areas identified as priorities by the City of Surrey. The *First Steps* program represents a “made in Surrey” model for supporting the healthy development of our community's most vulnerable children - refugee children who are growing up in families that have survived traumatic experiences overseas and are now facing multiple barriers as they settle in Surrey.

## CONCLUSION

The strength that Surrey brings to the ECD refugee settlement issue is the unprecedented level of collaboration and shared commitment to action amongst child and family serving agencies and key public partners over the past five years. Through the Surrey/White Rock Make Children First coalition and the Early Childhood Partners group, front line service providers, program managers, agency directors, school district, City, regional and provincial staff have worked together to improve the health, well-being and learning opportunities for young children and their families. By sharing resources, expertise and maintaining a strong focus on a common ECD vision and priorities, a number of innovative ECD projects and partnerships have evolved in Surrey. Thus, this *First Steps* project is not the idea of one agency that has then brought other partners to the table, but rather has emerged from collective multi-agency, cross-sector commitment.

By the end of this pilot, the capacity of the settlement and ECD sectors will be significantly enhanced and the existing backlog of refugee children facing ongoing multiple barriers will have been reduced to manageable levels, so less monies will be required. The partner agencies do, however, see the *First Steps* centre for newly arrived refugee children as an ongoing service. Thus, it is anticipated that the *First Steps* program will inform and influence Settlement and Multiculturalism funding policies, so as to create an ongoing sustainable ECD-focused settlement-funding stream.

It is recommended that Council support in principle a contribution of \$25,000 a year for each of 2009, 2010 and 2011 to support the *First Steps* – Early Childhood Development (ECD)-Focused Refugee Settlement Service in Surrey and White Rock and direct staff to include appropriate allocations in the 2009-2013 Five Year Financial Plan that will be prepared for Council consideration later this year.

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