

# BECOMING CANADIAN

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IMMIGRATION LAWYER

SETTLEMENT MANAGER

CITIZENSHIP JUDGE

CARLOS VIALARD



Settlement Manager, Carlos Vialard

## Carlos Vialard, Settlement Manager

Simple activities such as going to the grocery store can be a bewildering adventure for newcomers to Canada.

"The pet food section is particularly interesting," says Carlos Vialard, manager of settlement services at Welcome Place in Winnipeg. "When they see pictures of cats or dogs on the package, they think that is actually what's *in* the package, that we're selling cat or dog meat."

Shopping for food is just a minor example of the adjustments refugees go through settling into their new country.

Vialard oversees a staff of eight full-time settlement counsellors, a part-time counsellor and two volunteers. Together, they expect to help 1,400 refugees in 2002.

"At the grocery store, we show them how to put the coin in the shopping cart, how to price things, buying in bulk to save, and for Muslims, distinguishing between pork and non-pork products."

"At the grocery store, we show them how to put the coin in the...cart, how to price things (and) buying in bulk to save"

Settlement counselling includes greeting refugees the moment they arrive, putting them in temporary accommodations and then providing them with all the information they will need to survive in Canada.

Welcome Place is primarily funded by the federal and provincial governments with additional grants from foundations. The Manitoba Interfaith Immigration Council runs the centre, which is located on the main floor of an apartment high-rise in downtown Winnipeg. The centre uses two floors of apartments in the building to house refugees when they first arrive.

Vialard's counsellors walk refugees through all aspects of functioning in Canadian society. That means budgeting, housing, rent, healthcare, education, language classes, transportation, legal issues and nutrition.

"When people first arrive, their main concern is getting accommodation. We know we're throwing a lot of information at them and we often have to repeat it over and over until it sinks in."



The nine staff... speak a total of 17 languages such as Bulgarian, Serbo-Croat (and) Swahili

## More refugees from Middle East and Africa showing up

Welcome Place deals only with refugees. Another settlement service across the park from the centre is open to immigrants.

One of the first tasks for a counsellor is to help the refugee register at the local Canada Immigration Centre, where they will be issued their first monthly cheque. They will be given a second cheque on their first visit to cover household items, phone installation and food staples.

"The first four to six weeks are where it's most intensive," says Vialard. "They're learning everything from how to dress to how to open a bank account."

Dealing with a bank, Vialard says, "is a weird concept to some of them: this paper (cheque) is your money and you're going to give it to someone else and never see it again. But you get a card with numbers and you plug it into a machine and get the money out."

Vialard has been in settlement services since 1987, when he graduated with a degree in social work at the University of Manitoba. He says the countries that refugees come from change every few years. In the 1980s there were a lot of Vietnamese, Central Americans and Eastern Europeans from places such as Poland or Romania. When the '90s rolled around, refugees from the former Yugoslavia were escaping the war by the hundreds and increasingly, many refugees from the Middle East and Africa are showing up.

As a result, settlement counsellors are required to speak more than two languages. The nine staff at Welcome Place speak a total of 17 languages such as Bulgarian, Serbo-Croat, Swahili, Arabic, Italian and Amharic, the language of Somalia.

"Ideally, a counsellor would be one with a background in social work," says Vialard. "My counsellors come from all walks of life. They are people who understand what it's like to move from culture to culture and have good, general knowledge of the Canadian system."

"We had one woman who... said she thought her milk was being poisoned"

## Severe emotional distress

Vialard, whose parents emigrated from South America, says he feels he can identify with people adjusting to a foreign land. When he first started in settlement services, Vialard was a counsellor to many Latin American immigrants.

"I remember walking on the street downtown with this one family and the little boy said he had to go to the bathroom and he couldn't hold it in anymore. His mother told him to go off to the side and pee against the building," laughs Vialard. "I had to tell them that it wasn't something you should do here."

Vialard emphasizes that his counsellors deal mostly in referrals: how to apply for a driver's licence, where to go to school and how to find employment services. While they are not mental health counsellors, they deal with many people suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder or severe

emotional distress.

Vialard says other issues start to emerge when refugees have been in the country for four to six months, after they have dealt with "bread-and-butter" issues such as housing and money.

"We had one woman who, shortly after moving into her apartment, said she thought her milk was being poisoned and didn't want to feed her kids the milk. Then she said there were ghosts in the building."

Vialard says counsellors will call in child and family services to investigate such problems and then try to get help for the person, sometimes sending them to the NEEDS Centre for War-Affected Families.

"It's almost a given with the population we're dealing with. Many of the people have been tortured, raped or abused or they witnessed it," points out Vialard. "I think witnessing is sometimes worse."

Vialard says his staff go through life's ups and downs with the refugees they serve. They are there to see them through deaths, terminal illnesses, divorces, the birth of babies and sometimes, standing in as best man or maid of honour at weddings. He says counsellors become an integral part of a refugee's life for up to three years.

Vialard says the counsellors also get a few lessons of their own. They end up with a greater understanding of Canadian life because they have to teach newcomers how to navigate the system.

"I think its one of the best jobs in the world," says Vialard. "We offer a lot of hope. We take in people who have lost all humanity and when they see us, they are very grateful with what they get here. I just happen to be in a position to get personally thanked for doing my job."

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