



Multicultural Health Brokers Co-operative

As part of Saskatchewan Co-operative Association's ongoing series of co-operative profiles, we interviewed Yvonne Chiu. Yvonne is one of the founding members, and current Executive Director, of the Multicultural Health Brokers Co-op in Edmonton. As a member of the Co-op, Yvonne has spent the past decade exploring a variety of participatory processes to engage immigrants/refugees in making visible their struggles and aspirations for the purpose of community actions and social change. Areas of concerns include immigrant/refugee health, early parenting, early childhood development, youth issues and community relations with mainstream institutions.

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Where is your co-operative located?

Edmonton, Alberta

When was it established? By whom?

It was created in 1996 by twelve immigrant women who became involved in a culturally responsive peri-natal health outreach and community development program for immigrant communities. This was part of a pilot project of the Public Health Department, with a three year national demonstration project funded by Health Canada.

The MCHB Co-op was formally registered with the Alberta Government under the Co-operative Act on November 30, 1998.

What is the Multicultural Health Brokers Co-operative Ltd?

The Multicultural Health Brokers Co-operative Ltd. is a workers co-operative, with a mandate to support immigrants and refugee immigrants and families in attaining optimum health care. It includes relevant health education, holistic family support, community development and system advocacy.

What community need does the co-operative address? Who accesses the services of your co-operative?

The MCHB Co-op has been established to address the social, economic and political inequities that negatively impact the health and well-being of immigrants and refugees.

It seeks to provide culturally and linguistically relevant information and support that enhances family health and well-being, bridges and mediates between immigrant/refugee families and the mainstream system, builds community capacities for health and well-being, and affects incremental change within systems towards equity and cultural responsiveness.

The primary recipients of the MCHB Co-op services and support are immigrant and refugee families from 18 local communities (Afghan, Arabic-speaking, Chinese, Ethiopian, Eritrean, Filipino, Former Yugoslavian, French-speaking African, Kurdish, Karen, Korean, Iraqi, Iranian, South Asian, Somali, Sudanese, Spanish, Vietnamese).

Who are the members of the co-operative? How do they participate in the co-operative?

The members of the MCHB Co-op are immigrant and refugee workers who are also members of the communities that they serve. They are front-line service deliverers, community developers as well as joint owners and operators of the co-op.

Many of the members of the MCHB Co-op are highly educated and skilled professionals whose credentials are not recognized in Canada, and/or trusted natural leaders with extensive networks and skills in community development within their respective communities.

What have the greatest successes of the co-operative been? How do you feel they were achieved?

Successes include that fact that the MCHB Co-op:

- currently provides employment for 40 workers/ Brokers
- has an annual budget that grew from \$200,000 to \$2 million
- has collaborative relationships and contracts with four essential sectors (health, children services, education and employment)
- connects with and serves 2,000 families each year, involving roughly 8,000 individuals (children, youth, parents and grand-parents)
- formally established the Multicultural Health Brokering practice (to address social/economic inequity and build immigrant/refugee communities' capacities) that has been replicated in three other Canadian cities.

- has received numerous awards of excellence from multiple sectors: social work, health promotion, community economic development and children services.

What do you find inspiring in your work at the Multicultural Health Brokers Co-operative?

The dedication and commitment of the Co-op members/workers towards social change, their caring devotion towards the immigrant and refugee families that they serve, their capacities to dream and pursue such dreams in spheres of affecting systemic changes and community activism.



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What challenges did the co-operative face during its development or does it continue to experience now?

The formal systems still do not recognize the unique needs and strengths of immigrants and refugee families/communities. In the absence of relevant policies (public and institutional) and a funding formula to address the social and economic inequities of immigrant/refugee populations, the MCHB Co-op struggles with shouldering the care of a multitude of families without the resource/funding support.

What do you envision for the co-operative in the next five years?

To support immigrant and refugee families/communities in uncovering their unique “cultural/ social” capital and strength, and engaging such capital and strength in creating community solutions, as well as affecting change within systems through direct dialogue and collaborative actions.

How can people find out more about your co-operative?

By contacting Yvonne Chiu, and other members of the MCHB Coop, at (780) 423-1973 or through our website at www.mchb.org.