Inter-Cultural Association of Greater Victoria




# Stories of Change

## Impact Report 2025-26

# A Year of Change, A Future of Possibility

This past year was a year of significant change for ICA. Like many organizations across the settlement sector, we faced a shifting landscape. Changes to immigration policy that resulted in reductions in federal funding required us to make difficult decisions about programs, staffing, and where we could have the greatest impact during this time of funding contraction. Some valued colleagues moved on from ICA, and we experienced the reality that many community organizations are facing: the need to do more with less.

Yet when I reflect on this year, what stands out most is not what changed; it is what we accomplished together.

What made this year's progress possible is worth naming plainly: this community showed up. You showed up! Through the generosity of donors, the commitment of volunteers, the financial contributions of funders, and the support of community partners, newcomers found opportunities to connect, learn, contribute, and belong. More than 5,100 newcomers turned to ICA this year as they built new lives on Vancouver Island. This year, donors stepped up with 11% increase in gifts which has preserved programming and helped keep ICA strong. At a time of funding uncertainty, that support helped ICA keep essential programs within reach, so people and families could continue to find guidance, connection, and care when they needed it most.

Throughout this report, you will meet people like Alpha and his family, whose story reminds us that settling into a new country is much more than leaving one home and arriving in another. That is only the first step in building a new life, finding the confidence to navigate unfamiliar systems, learning a new language, entering the workforce, supporting children in school, building relationships, and rediscovering a sense of independence and belonging.

When people have the opportunity to contribute their talents, skills, and ideas, entire communities benefit. Together, we helped create the conditions for that future to take shape.

This year, ICA provided 23,689 services to 5,183 clients across Vancouver Island. Eighty-two percent of clients reported that ICA had a positive impact on their settlement journey, and 89% would recommend ICA to others.



We also celebrated ten years of private sponsorship of refugees, marking a decade in which more than 500 refugees have begun new lives in our region through the support of community sponsors, volunteers, donors, and staff.

Beyond direct services, we also worked upstream with the broader community through our Tools for Equity programming. ICA equipped individuals, employers, and organizations with practical tools to recognize and respond to incidents of hate, racism, and discrimination, and to build policies and everyday practices that create safer, more inclusive spaces for all. And through community programs like ICA's Sewing Program, language classes, youth programs, mentorship, and family supports, newcomers found places to build confidence, share skills, form friendships, and experience belonging in everyday ways.

These efforts reflect an important truth: building a welcoming and inclusive community takes all of us. It takes teachers who help children feel seen and supported, employers who recognize talent and potential, healthcare providers who reduce barriers to care, volunteers who offer friendship and guidance, donors who invest in stronger communities, and neighbours who lead with welcome. It takes all of us.

Thank you for being part of the ICA community.

**Shelly D'Mello**

Chief Executive Officer, ICA

## Impact in Numbers

**5,183**
clients served

**23,689**
services delivered

**5,000+**
hours of volunteer support

**1,120**
participants in workplace equity programming

**838**
language learners supported

**~600**
clients enter or return to the workforce each year

# Ten Years Strong

**This year, we are celebrating the 10 year anniversary of the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program at ICA.**

**600+** sponsors raised **$7.8M+** supporting **504** refugees



*Abagaro Alpha with his wife Bontu and their two daughters Naomi and Sephora at Sephora's graduation.*

# The Keys to a New Life

When people flee, they often carry their keys, holding onto the hope that one day they will return to the people, places, and familiarity of the home they left behind. But war, persecution, conflict, and climate emergencies can make returning difficult, if not impossible. In 2023, through Canada's Private Sponsorship of Refugees program, Bontu, Alpha, Naomi, and Sephora arrived in Victoria to begin making a new home.

## Here is Alpha's story in his own words

Because of my family's status and influence in our community, we became targets of persecution in our home country of Ethiopia. Three of my paternal uncles and my brother were taken in a single day. To this day, our family does not know what happened to them, and we never had the chance to bury them or find closure. As the situation became increasingly dangerous, I eventually had to make the painful decision to leave my country for my own safety.

My journey has taken me from Ethiopia, through more than a decade of uncertainty as a refugee in Egypt, and eventually to a new beginning here in Victoria. ICA helped my family understand unfamiliar systems, access services we did not know existed, connect with our new community, and begin establishing ourselves in Canada. The assistance ICA provides may sometimes look like filling out an application, making a referral, registering for a class, booking an appointment or simply having a conversation. But to a newcomer beginning again, those individual acts can become the building blocks of stability, confidence, belonging, and hope.

One of the things I have learned from my journey is that receiving kindness creates a responsibility in me to extend kindness to others. Through Oak Bay Volunteer Services, I spend time visiting seniors, sometimes simply sitting with them and sharing an hour of conversation and companionship. These moments may appear simple, but they mean a great deal to me. After arriving in a country where people helped my family feel that we belonged, I now have the privilege of offering companionship to others.

**Abagaro Alpha**
ICA Client

# The Power of Language Learning

Language learning is one of the most powerful stories of change at ICA. It begins in everyday moments: reading a school email, understanding a bus route, speaking with a doctor, applying for work, or helping a child feel at home in a new classroom.

For some learners, that story begins with foundational literacy. Through Opening Doors, ICA provides highly personalized classes for adults with low literacy in English and, in some cases, limited literacy in their first language. With the support of teachers and volunteers, students build confidence step by step. Within months, they begin to navigate daily life with greater independence, from riding the bus and shopping for groceries to understanding workplace texts and becoming more involved in their children's education.

As confidence grows, many learners continue into Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada, known as LINC, where they develop English skills connected to national benchmarks for employment, education, and citizenship. For parents, this progress is made possible by ICA's free childminding program, which gives them peace of mind to focus fully in class while their children are safe, cared for, and learning nearby.

Kherat's journey brings this story of change to life. When she was new to Canada, she had limited English and everyday communication felt stressful. When she and her young son Youssef came to ICA, things began to change. She enrolled him in ICA's childminding program just one floor below her classroom, allowing her to attend English classes regularly, practice speaking in a supportive environment, and connect with classmates and the ICA community. Her world grew, and Youssef's did too, as he enjoyed school-readiness activities, routines, and time with friends.

Now, as Kherat nears completion of LINC Level 4, an important milestone connected to citizenship and future opportunity, she feels more confident and hopeful about her family's future. For learners like Kherat, language learning is not only about English. It is about confidence, independence, connection, and the ability to take the next step in a new life.




**52**
children thrived in ICA's daycare

**838**
language learners supported

# Building a Strong Canadian Workforce

Many newcomers arrive in Canada with years of professional experience and a strong desire to contribute. But finding work in their field, or even in a related role, can be much harder than expected.

Doctors, engineers, IT specialists, teachers, and other internationally trained professionals are needed across our communities, yet many face long pathways back into their fields. When newcomers cannot find work that reflects their skills, Canada risks losing the talent it worked so hard to attract, especially in sectors like health care, where newcomers make up 40% of the workforce.

ICA helps to change that story. Through employment bridging, mentorship, training, and job search support, newcomers learn how to translate their experience for Canadian employers, build local networks, and move toward work that reflects their skills and goals. Since 2021, nearly 3,000 ICA clients have entered or re-entered the workforce through ICA programs.

## Daniel's story shows what change can look like

Before coming to Canada, Daniel had built a 30-year career as an engineer. After more than 100 applications, long periods of silence, and jobs that did not reflect his background, he began to wonder if his experience still mattered.

> "What surprised me most was that the Canadian job market is not only about qualifications or experience, it is also about understanding the local hiring culture, building trust, networking, and learning how to present your value in a way employers here can connect with.
>
> Over time, I learned something very important: rejection does not always mean you are not capable. Sometimes it means you are still learning how to translate your experience into a new market. About a month into my role as a Project Coordinator at BC Ferries, I can say this opportunity means a lot to me. But it did not happen quickly. It took four years.
>
> **Daniel Bustamante**
> ICA Employment Program Client




**88%** of multi-barriered adult clients found employment or relevant training

**82%** of employment program participants secured employment in their field

**96%** of youth employment program participants found employment or relevant training

*Daniel Bustamante currently works as a Project Coordinator at BC Ferries.*

# Transforming Workplaces and Communities

ICA's equity programs build on decades of trusted leadership in racial equity, newcomer inclusion, and community education. Through workplace training programs and tailored consultations, ICA helps employers and employees alike move beyond good intentions toward real, practical change.

*Tools for Equity* supports organizations ready to make racial equity a daily practice. Through paid training, consultation, and coaching, ICA helps teams recognize racism, discrimination, and harassment, respond with confidence, and strengthen the policies and workplace cultures that make inclusion real. *Bystander Intervention Training* builds the confidence and capacity people need to respond when racism or discrimination happens in their workplaces, schools, and communities.

Participants from organizations like KIA Victoria, the University of British Columbia, the Department of National Defence, and other nonprofit organizations learned how to recognize harmful behaviour, intervene safely, and hold difficult conversations about race with greater care and accountability.

Programs like these help shift the conditions within which newcomers live, not only by supporting individuals, but by changing workplaces, systems, and community spaces they enter. When organizations learn to recognize bias, interrupt harm, and build more equitable practices, newcomers are better able to participate, lead, and belong.

> "Workplaces hire us when they need practical, culturally relevant, and equity-centered services that drive systemic workforce changes.

**Billie Tes**
Manager of Equity Services





**5,500** people participated in ICA's Tools for Equity programs.

"Parker's intentional storytelling and lived experience brought so much to this training. He truly brought so much intention and heart into the content, and humanized the skill building portions so effectively.

**Participant**
Bystander Intervention Training at ICA

*Parker Johnson, ICA's Engagement Coordinator, leads Bystander Intervention Training.*

# Care That Helps Families Feel at Home

After so much change, this is what it looks like to rebuild and renew purpose. None of this exists without you. Every program in this section is made possible entirely by private donors and foundations. Combined with strong partnerships with health and wellness partners, ICA provides a range of support for people's health and wellbeing.

## Stitching confidence and connection

The Sewing Program at ICA is one of a diverse suite of community programs centered around social connection and essential life skills. For many women in the Sewing Program, it's the first time they've had the opportunity to make something of their own. They learn basic sewing machine operation and move on to constructing complex garments. With every stitch, confidence increases, stress decreases, and glimmers of self-reliance appear.



"I stay home, and I think about the war in Ukraine. I worry for my family and friends. When I'm here, I'm not thinking about the war.

**Nadiia Koretska**
ICA Sewing Program Participant

**500+** workshop sessions hosted by ICA, each one a place to find solace and friendship

## Support at school, joy at play



> We work with ICA to help design and bring programs of interest to newcomers– activities like rock climbing or learning to swim. When children and their families connect to the community through physical activity, they feel connected to Canada. ICA understands that physical activity directly supports newcomers' well-being.




**Kabir Hosein**
Community Partner, Co-Play Hub/Sport For Life

Starting school in a new country is challenging for a lot of students and their families. Young people are learning new routines, new expectations, and often a new language, while parents try to support them through an unfamiliar system. ICA's Settlement Workers in Schools help families and teachers work together, so students feel safer, parents feel less alone, and children and youth have more people cheering them on.

After so much change, kids need chances to play, laugh, try new things, and feel like they belong. With support from community partners like Sport for Life and programs like Learn to Swim, ICA helps children and youth make friends, build confidence, learn lifesaving skills, and enjoy the simple fun of just being a kid.

## A place to be heard

Trauma, grief, and stress can feel heavier in a new country, especially when people are far from familiar supports. Through private therapy and community support groups for men, women, and youth, ICA creates safe spaces where people can talk, listen, heal, and remember they are not alone. These circles of care help transform isolation into connection, and shared experience into strength.



*Yassmina, at the back (in red), joins members of ICA's Women's Circle for a day at the beach.*

> "Every time we meet, we help each other survive and thrive. For many of us, this Women's Circle is the only culturally safe, emotionally supportive, and empowering space we have. It plays a critical role not just in individual healing, but in building a stronger, more inclusive community for all.

**Yassmina Essebre**
ICA Client

## Care when it matters most

When people are building a new life in Canada, health care can be one of the most urgent and difficult systems to navigate. In March 2026, a simple paperwork error left a dying husband without MSP coverage and his wife facing overwhelming medical bills. ICA's Health Navigator supported this family from Ukraine through an unimaginably difficult moment. By helping them understand their options, advocating for a careful review from the insurance provider, and help navigating a system that can be confusing even in the best circumstances, retroactive coverage was finally granted, bringing overwhelming relief to a grieving widow.




*A family after getting vaccinated at ICA's Flu and COVID-19 vaccination clinic in October 2025.*

That same care shows up in quieter, everyday ways. This year alone, 71 children received dental care through ICA's partnership with Camosun College, and roughly 130 clients and 15 staff were vaccinated at ICA's first-ever vaccination clinic. By offering these services in a familiar place, ICA helped reduce language, transportation, and cultural barriers, making health care feel more personal and accessible for families who might otherwise go without support.



“Much of the work supporting families happens quietly behind the scenes. Behind every meeting is a person navigating a new country, a new language, and a new way of life. A newcomer who arrives hesitant and uncertain may, months later, walk into the office smiling, eager to share news of a new job, permanent housing, or a child’s success at school. These milestones become shared celebrations because every achievement represents countless moments of perseverance, courage, and support.

**Mona Zeid**
**Case Management Coordinator**

# Financial Snapshot

Fiscal 2025–2026 was a year of significant financial transition for ICA. Total revenue came in at $9.90 million, down from $11.49 million the year before, and we worked to bring expenses down to $10.07 million by adjusting staffing, programs, and overhead. Even with those changes, the year closed with a shortfall of $178,321.

Looking ahead to fiscal 2026–2027, that pressure is expected to deepen. Federal funding is projected to decline by about $1.93 million, roughly 28% against this year's budget, as government priorities for immigration and settlement funding continue to shift. Provincial funding is projected to decline by about $976,000, roughly 43%, following the end of two employment programs that helped newcomers build skills, find work, and contribute to the local economy. Altogether, ICA is budgeting for total income to decline by about $2.92 million compared with this year's budget, one of the most significant shifts in our funding model in recent years.

In response, ICA is continuing to adapt with care, protecting core services wherever possible while reducing costs and building a more balanced funding future. That means relying less on any single source and more on the individuals, family foundations, local businesses, and community partners whose generosity keeps essential services within reach for newcomers across Vancouver Island.

## Financial Overview: 2025/ 26

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|---|---|
| **Revenue** | **$9,895,185** |
| Federal | $6,288,848 |
| Provincial | $2,143,506 |
| Grants | $269,718 |
| Fee For Service | $226,756 |
| Donations & Other Income | $966,357 |
| **Expenses** | **$10,073,506** |
| Immigrant & Language Services | $6,437,977 |
| Refugee Services | $729,204 |
| Employment Services | $1,653,891 |
| Equity & Community Engagement | $632,414 |
| Strategic & Core Program Support | $620,021 |

**We acknowledge the Coast Salish Nations on whose traditional territories we do our work to support immigrants and refugees in the capital region. We are grateful to live, work and learn here, and we honour the Nations who have always cared for these lands, waters and air and continue to do so today. Our main office is located on the traditional territories of the Lekwungen-speaking First Peoples, the Songhees and Xwsepsum Nations. Our services extend into the territories of approximately 20 First Nations in the Capital Regional District.**

# Inter-Cultural Association of Greater Victoria


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## Get in touch

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