

The Strathcona Employment Assistance Services (SEAS) Story

In 2008 the Strathcona Employment Assistance Services (SEAS) celebrated its 35th year of service, a landmark accomplishment for any community agency. The following is an account of SEAS successes beginning in 1973, initially serving the non-English speaking Chinese community in the Strathcona/ Chinatown area but growing to serve clients in the larger Metro Vancouver region. Throughout the years SEAS has developed a legacy of effective service delivery, responding to substantial changes in Chinese immigration to Metro Vancouver as well as changes in federal program funding.

SEAS exemplifies long-standing partnerships between the federal government, board members and staff, employers, and the community. It pioneered cultural responsive services to evolving groups of Chinese immigrants and has generously shared these learnings and experiences with government and other community organizations. A summary *Top 10 Best Practices* from SEA's 35 years of successful community services is offered at the conclusion of this account.

Formation and Early Years; 1973-1978

In the fall of 1973, the Strathcona Manpower Outreach Project (SMOP) opened its doors to community services at a basement office in the Lee Association Building in the heart of Vancouver's historic Chinatown. SMOP, which was to change its name to Strathcona Employment Assistance Services (SEAS) in 1996, was the result of discussions amongst Outreach staff from the federal Department of Manpower, and members of the Strathcona Area Services Team - a group of social service professionals and Strathcona community area residents. Drawing from the successful experience of the local Pender Street YWCA's Women-in Training program for immigrant Chinese women, was a recognized need by government and community to provide the increasing numbers of Chinese immigrants with employment services, counseling, and job training information in a community setting to promote their successful integration and settlement.

The establishment of SMOP in 1973 was timely and important to the growing Chinese community in Vancouver as more immigrants arriving were in need of employment and settlement assistance. This had resulted from immigration amendments in 1967 which finally removed discriminatory barriers based on ethnicity against peoples from Asia, Africa and the Caribbean. For these groups, family reunification and independent applications would now be assessed similar to all other immigrants to Canada. At this same time, China's "cultural revolution" resulted in major civil unrest and rioting in Hong Kong, creating political and economic instability. These factors contributed to substantial increases in Chinese immigration following the 1967 amendments.

For example, total numbers of immigrants from Hong Kong to Canada during 1968-76 was 60,527; and for 1977-84 was 50,785; but for 1985-1994 the numbers jumped to 243,888, much of which was precipitated by Hong Kong's impending return to China in 1997. The increases were also reflected in newcomers from Taiwan and China.

Country of Last Permanent Residence	1968-76	1977-84	1985-94	1968-94
Hong Kong	70,527	50,785	243,888	355,200
Taiwan	5,063	5,455	41,176	51,694
Mainland China	24,278	22,986	67,903	115,167
Total	89,868	79,226	352,967	522,061

Source: Li, 1998, p. 99.

Nearly 800,000 Chinese immigrants were admitted to Canada between 1980 and 2000, mostly from Hong Kong (45.6%) but also from Mainland China (27.7%), Taiwan (11.8%) and Vietnam (5.2%), (Wang, 2004). The large majority of Chinese immigrants choose metropolitan areas as their destinations with Toronto receiving 40% and Vancouver 31%. While the Hong Kong newcomers spoke Cantonese, those from Taiwan and Chinese spoke Taiwanese and Mandarin, and the latter group used modernized versus traditional Chinese language texts. Vancouver's Chinese population which was about 32,000 in 1971 grew to 103,000 by 1991, a three-fold increase in twenty years.

SMOP was one of several initial projects developed through Canada Manpower's Outreach Program whose goal was to provide community-based employment projects to disadvantaged groups. These included people with physical and mental disabilities, women, First Nations, rural communities, Vancouver's eastside, youth, seniors and other marginalized groups. SMOP was registered as the first outreach project in British Columbia, number one in the BC regional office files. The Outreach program worked well in its initial years in developing community-based projects and peaked with some 40 projects throughout the province. However, as will be discussed, within its program criteria was also the requirement of service integration into federal Canada Manpower operations, something which was to threaten SMOP's survival.

From its basement office the three person SMOP staff reached out to serve clients in the Strathcona/Chinatown and adjacent neighbourhood. The SMOP Board had strong community connections and included Joanne Lee, co-coordinator of the Women-in Training Coordinator and social workers from the local Ministry of Human Resources office. It also included Mary Chan and Anne Chan, area residents who had been successful in community challenges against the urban renewal destruction of Strathcona in favour of a housing rehabilitation program. These two women also spoke village Cantonese dialects and were to later become staff.

Board and staff provided important linkages to employers in the garment industry, Chinatown stores, food processing companies, the hospitality industry, training programs and community agencies. SMOP's service philosophy was to acknowledge client needs, recognize their experiences, and support their integration and settlement. Its clientele was non-English speaking Chinese immigrants most of whom were wage earners, unskilled or semi-skilled who had little or no English.

Canada Manpower provided much support and training to outreach staff on employment services, job search, education programs, training opportunities, and employer contact strategies. As part of the Outreach program an annual review was held with federal program administrators, project board and staff, and community representatives. This process served to augment

partnerships, community linkages and accountability. Outreach administrators were impressed with how SMOP consistently exceeded annual service goals in job placements, training referrals, counseling, and employer contacts.

For SMOP the annual reviews also served to extend its community network and recruit new board members. It was a SMOP tradition to host a dinner in Chinatown for all participants after the review to celebrate another year of successful operations. This tradition enhanced the working partnerships between federal officials, SMOP and community participants.

The first few years of federal funding worked out well for SMOP, however, the Outreach program only provided for one year funding at a time and had a built-in sunset clause. According to the program criteria, after services had been developed and confirmed, they were to be “integrated” into Canada Manpower Centres. This was particularly challenging to clients who were employment disadvantaged due to a lack of English language skills and unfamiliar with government offices. For SMOP’s clients, English language training would take many years, if not a life time, given their basic needs to work and support families.

In the 1970’s there emerged a new SMOP clientele, Sino-Vietnamese refugees. As a result of the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, thousands of ethnic Chinese left Vietnam to seek refuge in other lands including Canada. Hostilities between China and Vietnam in the following years accelerated the departure of even more Sino-Vietnamese refugees. Canada accepted 9,060 refugees from Vietnam between 1975-1978, but this increased to 60,000 in the following two years (Wong, 2008). Many spent long periods of time in refugee camps awaiting acceptance by a host country. Thousands of Sino-Vietnamese refugees arrived in Vancouver in need of settlement services, employment and education programs and SMOP played a supportive role for this new group of arrivals.

Major Challenges and Responses to Community Growth: 1979 -1990

In 1979 SMOP was informed by Canada Manpower that its funding would cease and its programs and services “integrated” into the Canada Manpower Centre in East Vancouver through a yet-to-be hired Chinese speaking staff member. It should be noted that there were no Chinese-speaking front line staff at any Manpower Centres in Vancouver at that time. The SMOP Board was extremely concerned over this decision to essentially curtail employment services to the ever increasing numbers of Chinese immigrants in Vancouver. It argued that effective employment service delivery to non-English speaking Chinese could not be offered through a Canada Manpower Centre. It appealed to the Canada Manpower regional director but his decision remained unchanged. SMOP then appealed directly to the Minister of Employment, the Hon. Ron Atkey. In response to these representations and community concerns, the Minister agreed to provide continued funding; the project and its services were saved.

With its immediate future assured SMOP was able to plan for the needs of a growing and diverse Chinese community. In 1980 the project moved into the second floor of the commercial wing of the Chinese Cultural Centre (CCC), a new community complex in Chinatown which offered language classes and cultural programs. A CCC vice-president was invited to join the SMOP board. Other board members during these years included instructors and counselors from

Vancouver Community College, a Burnaby home-school worker, a City seniors' worker, a lawyer, nurse, realtor, Vancouver ESL teacher, and community development workers from the Strathcona area. The resources and networking of board members complemented those of staff for effective service delivery and community connections.

With funding assistance from Britannia Community Centre which hosted language and training programs for immigrants, a study was commissioned to survey the composition of SMOP clients and to take an inventory of existing training/upgrading programs available for non-English speaking Chinese. In her *Study of the Adult Education Needs of Non-English Speaking Chinese*, the consultant identified new training program opportunities; and recommended inclusion of employment related curriculum in English language training and more flexible federal support in training programs for new immigrants (Kosonen, 1981). Amongst her findings was that SMOP's service area had expanded much beyond Strathcona/ Chinatown to include all parts of Vancouver and even neighbouring suburbs of Richmond and Burnaby.

In 1985 China and Britain announced the repatriation of Hong Kong to China in 1997. As stated earlier this resulted in substantial immigration of Chinese from Hong Kong to Canada and in particular to Metro Vancouver. It was also in the 1980's that Canada pursued a more aggressive campaign to encourage Asian foreign investment through its business immigration program; and as a result Vancouver caught the attention of major Hong Kong investors. While this influx of Asian business professionals was not part of the SEAS target clientele, their investments created new employment opportunities and contributed to the changing Asian demographics of Metro Vancouver.

The influx of more Chinese immigrants to Metro Vancouver was recognized by SMOP and its network of community organizations. At the invitation of the Burnaby Chinese Association, Burnaby Multicultural Society and the Richmond Chinese Cultural Society, SMOP staff commenced weekly visits to those communities. As a group, these newer suburban Chinese immigrants were more skilled and educated from those before, but they were also challenged in employment and settlement because of limited English and Canadian work experience. SMOP provided leadership, assisting with employment training workshops with other service organizations in Vancouver including the Taiwanese Canadian Cultural Society, Immigrant Services Society, MOSAIC, SUCCESS, OASIS and the Progressive Intercultural Society (PICS). The latter two agencies served the South Asian community.

Serving a Growing Vancouver Chinese Canadian Community: 1990 -2000

In 1989 the Social Planning and Research Council of BC (SPARC BC) undertook a study on the major social and cultural demographic changes in Richmond resulting from the substantial increase of immigrant Chinese in that city. For example, Richmond's Chinese population increased from 6,000 in 1981 to over 20,000 in 1991, and to 65,000 in 2001, a ten-fold increase in twenty years. SMOP utilized the report to request federal funding for an office in Richmond to meet the needs of the growing immigrant Chinese community there. Board members met with Richmond's Member of Parliament, the Hon. Tom Siddon, who was very supportive. In 1992 SMOP opened a Richmond office with a staff of six to serve the growing Chinese community there. Through new networks of Chinese community resources and employer contacts, the office

provided employment services in that community until 2000 when federal funding changes resulted in the services being delivered by a new agency in that city.

In 1990 as part of departmental reorganization, the federal government replaced its Outreach program with a new initiative, the Canadian Job Strategy (CJS). This program emphasized partnerships with community organizations and provided for three year funding. CJS operated until 1996 when outreach programs were switched to the new federal Department of Human Resources Employment Assistance Programs. SMOP took the opportunity to change its name to Strathcona Employment Assistance Services, a name more reflective of its programs and services, and incorporated as a non-profit society.

Community Services in the New Millennium and New Funding Partner: 2000 - 2010.

In 1999 SEAS moved into the Channel M Television building at 88 East Pender Street (now Omni Television) which provided a key location and ready access to Chinese language Cantonese and Mandarin media. In September 2002 a major reception was held at the office as it celebrated 30 years of community service. This was a special gathering of board members, staff, federal officials, and community friends who had been involved with SEAS spanning three decades.

The new millennium also signaled again another shift in the composition of Chinese immigrants. Nationally, immigration from Hong Kong since 2001 had been less than 2,000 per year, while that from Mainland China averaged over 35,000 per year (Wang). For the last several years about 25% of new arrivals in Metro Vancouver have been from China. This group of Chinese immigrants is linguistically and culturally different from those who had arrived in previous years from Hong Kong. Speaking Mandarin, some are highly educated and skilled professionals, though with limited English. Some of these professionals are being assisted through other agencies as SEAS' target group remains unskilled and semi-skilled non-English speaking Chinese. The large continued Chinese immigration keeps the SEAS staff of five occupied with services and programs. In its most recent fiscal year, the project took in 946 new clients, assisted with 600 individual action plans and held 21 group sessions involving some 250 people.

The 2006 census listed about 400,000 Chinese in Metro Vancouver including 168,000 in Vancouver, 76,000 in Richmond and 61,000 in Burnaby. As a result of major immigration, Greater Vancouver now has a substantial Asian community and is Canada's portal to the Asia-Pacific. The City's hosting of the 2010 Winter Olympic Games will further enhance its reputation as an international destination for investment, tourism and immigration.

Throughout the years SEAS has greatly benefited from a committed board of directors whose length of service average some 20 years. Current board members include businessmen, a lawyer, librarian, and retired social workers who provide strong networking for the agency with employers, training institutes and community organizations. Likewise, there has been much staff stability with the average tenure of 15 years, including the coordinator who has been with the project for 30 years.

As 2009 commences SEAS is preparing for a new funder, the provincial government, as the federal government is transferring training programs to Victoria. In 2010 it will be funded by the provincial Ministry of Housing and Social Development. While there may be a change in funding and reporting procedures, what should remain intact are services to the fastest growing and largest ethno-cultural community in Metro Vancouver. Through three and half decades of major changes in community demographics and funding programs, SEAS has responded to these challenges with professionalism and collaborative partnerships. Cost efficient client-centred community-based services have been delivered, achieving sustainable benefits for government and communities in Metro Vancouver.

Top 10 Best Practices from 35th Years of Service

Many factors have contributed to SEAS thirty-five years of successful services. The following can be considered a *Top 10 Template for Community Service Quality and Longevity*.

1. Government and Community Partnerships

The federal government was a full partner in supporting the creation of SEAS and provided much support for its success. SEAS staff members have received on-going training from the federal government throughout the years of changes in employment programs, informational technology, funding criteria, and reporting requirements. And SEAS, in return, has contributed its knowledge and experiences in effective employment service delivery to government to design and operationalize responsive programming.

2. Board Governance and Leadership

SEAS Board members have always taken a leadership role for the project, working in partnership with federal officials, project staff and community organizations. There has been strong confidence and support for staff. Board members are also involved in networks in the private, public and non-profit sectors.

3. Service Commitment at a Community Grass-roots Level

From day one, SEAS committed itself to providing community services at a grass-roots level. Board and staff have been sensitive to clients' employment needs and understand their larger settlement concerns and aspirations to fully participate in Canadian society.

4. Culturally Responsive Services

SEAS staff model the delivery of culturally responsive services of inclusiveness, valuing client needs and experiences. While the clientele may be ethnic Chinese, there is recognition and respect for their linguistic, cultural, social, educational and regional diversity and needs.

5. Networking and Sharing of Resources

SEAS staff actively network with other agencies and generously share their resources and expertise with other organizations. Through years of collaborations, SEAS has earned the respect as a contributing collaborative partner in numerous complementary programs and services.

6. Board Commitment

Board member commitment and longevity of support has greatly enhanced SEAS' services, adaptability and effectiveness. Several of the current board members have served for over 25 years providing consistency, expertise and extensive contacts.

7. Staff Commitment

SEAS staff members, likewise, have also provided commitment and longevity of service. The coordinator has been with the project for 30 years, another staff member for 20 years and the others about ten. This has provided consistency, expertise and continuity in services to clients who recognize and appreciate the familiar staff.

8. Responding to Community Changes

Through 35 years SEAS has responded to community changes through long-term planning in consultation with its many contacts and networks. SEAS was aware of the changing social demographics in Metro Vancouver's Chinese community and responded to these emerging needs.

9. On-going Evaluations of Programs and Services

SEAS provides on-going reviews of services and programs; feedback from clients on services offered are assessed. Many clients, because of language barriers, have been long time SEAS clients and value staff professionalism and familiarity.

10. Acknowledging Collaborative Partnerships

SEAS has always proudly acknowledged its many partners in the public, private and non-profit sectors who have collaborated throughout the years in community services. It is this recognition and celebration of service partnerships which has marked its 35 years of successful community services.

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Board and Staff of Strathcona Employment Assistance Services 1973-2009

With thanks to the dedicated board and staff throughout the years.

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