

Effectively Communicating Legal Information to Newcomers in Saskatchewan

Executive Summary

October 2023



The Centre for Research, Evaluation, and Action Towards Equal Justice (CREATE Justice) contracted the Canadian Hub for Applied and Social Research (CHASR) to conduct an evaluation that would examine which formats of legal information are most effective for newcomers in Saskatchewan. In addition to planning the evaluation, three phases were completed to meet project objectives.

Evaluation Preparation

CHASR connected with seven service providers (across three organizations) who did, or had done, work with newcomers in Saskatchewan to ask for assistance with participant recruitment, feedback on the evaluation plan, and identifying some of the key barriers faced by newcomers in terms of legal information. The following resulted from these meetings:

1. Focus the evaluation on a subset of newcomers: It is too broad to condense newcomers into one group for a project about information resources. Some newcomers have higher English abilities and computer proficiencies, while others have lower. It is important to decide who to focus the evaluation on.
 - The research/evaluation team decided to focus on newcomers in Saskatchewan who had the English language and online navigation skills to participate in the planned evaluation activities. This decision was based on government interest in translating legal information online, as well as time and budget constraints. The hope is that more evaluation work will be conducted with other groups of newcomers.
2. Be thoughtful about the formats chosen to present information: Engage with newcomers through legal information formats that are culturally sensitive.
 - This supported the team's decision to speak with newcomers before developing informational resources.
3. Offer the survey in multiple languages: Surveys with newcomers tend to perform better when there are language options. At the minimum English and French should be offered.
 - CHASR was not able to offer translated data collection materials due to project time and budget constraints. This should be considered in future evaluation work.
4. Consider language level of the information materials: Aim for a Grade 5-6 level of language when creating data collection materials.
 - CHASR used an online tool to test word difficulty in the data collection materials and multiple individuals reviewed the materials before they were finalized.
5. There is a need for accessible legal information amongst newcomer populations: Sometimes there are misunderstandings when people from different countries have different norms about what behavior is allowed and not allowed. Further, there is sometimes mistrust in legal authorities. Some of the common topics newcomers have asked questions about include driver's licenses, consumer problems, contractor problems, debt collection matters, and introductory information about Canadian law.

Phase 1: Needs Assessment

CHASR hosted a 1.5-hour virtual focus group with eight self-identified newcomers, who were 18 years of age or older and reported living in Saskatchewan. The focus group was conducted to prepare for the development of legal information materials that would be tested for effectiveness. The objective was to determine a) a suitable topic to focus the information resources on, b) three formats of presenting the information, and c) ways to make the resources useful and accessible.

Some participants listed legal topics that they had already learned about since coming to Saskatchewan, including activism, police brutality, 2SLGBTQ+ individuals, workplace laws, insurance, renting, and mortgage. Knowledge about these topics varied by participant and certain topics were not relevant to

them. Some participants also shared legal topics that they personally wanted to know more about, such as family laws, workplace laws, rights when being stopped by police, and laws in general. Laws around renting, healthcare, and family, as well as laws in general, were identified by some participants as legal topics that are important for newcomers in Saskatchewan to learn about. These findings demonstrate the diverse informational needs of participants.

To explore newcomers' information presentation preferences and needs, CHASR showed participants examples of 10 different online formats of legal information, including:

- A flowchart
- A checklist
- Written materials (long)
- Plain language information (short)
- A worksheet
- A cartoon
- A workbook with step-by-step instructions
- An interactive, staged website
- A video
- An audio file

Most participants reported liking the flowchart and the video. They favored the flowchart because they thought it was concise, yet informative, presented information clearly, and was user-friendly. Participants enjoyed the video due to personal learning preferences, because they thought videos could help with understanding, and because videos are potentially an accessible option for newcomers with varying levels of English. Participants also discussed their preferences for mixing formats, which may help with language barriers and overall clarity.

Participants made recommendations to help make legal information resources useful and accessible to newcomers:

- Make the resources colorful
- Make use of visuals when possible (e.g., to represent what the content is saying)
- Use a larger font size
- Emphasize important words
- Add contact information to the resource
- Use plain, clear language at a lower level of English
- If there is someone speaking on a video, make the person's mouth visible

Phase 2: Development of Online Legal Resources

Based on the findings of Phase 1, and discussions with relevant stakeholders in the project, project partners made decisions about what legal topic to focus the resources on, and what formats to test for effectiveness in an experimental survey. Due to a small sample size in the focus group, and multiple participants joining the focus group late, no legal topic emerged as one in which there were the greatest knowledge gaps, or one that most participants wanted to know more about. The project team decided to focus on renting rights and responsibilities, since housing is a top area of need identified in the (forthcoming) study on *Legal needs in Saskatchewan, 2023* and the Saskatchewan-specific data from the *Canadian Legal Problems Survey, 2021*. The project team decided to develop materials in formats similar to those recommended in the needs assessment: a picture (i.e., infographic), a video, and a plain language summary.

CREATE contracted a graphic designer, Scott Mushens, to design the materials, based on legal information compiled by a Ministry of Justice lawyer from the project team, which included identical information that differed in presentation of information. See below for one screenshot from each resource:

Picture/Infographic



Video



Plain language summary

Renting a place to live in Saskatchewan?
 Know your Rights!

APPLICATION PROCESS

When you are applying to rent a place the landlord **CAN NOT** charge an application fee for selecting a person to live in their rental property.

A landlord **CAN** ask you for references. For instance, they might ask for the name of your employer.

Landlords **CAN** make reasonable rules which include rules about pets and smoking. They **CAN** also set the maximum number of people who can live in the rental property. These rules could affect whether the place is right for you. You may want to talk to other renters from the same building to find out if they have had any problems.

Tenants **SHOULD** view the property before signing a rental agreement.

SECURITY DEPOSIT

A landlord **CAN** require you to pay a security deposit that is no more than one month's rent. This is money you pay up-front that the landlord keeps until you move out. Landlords **CAN** only ask for a security deposit when you start to rent the place, however they can only require half of the security deposit up front. The other half must then be paid within two months.

Phase 3: Process and Outcome Evaluation

CHASR launched an experimental survey to evaluate the effectiveness of the developed legal information resources about renting rights and responsibilities in Saskatchewan. Participants needed to identify as newcomers living in Saskatchewan aged 18 years or older to participate in the survey. The survey included baseline questions about participants' knowledge and understanding about renting rights and responsibilities, and their perceived need for such information when newcomers arrive in Canada. The survey was designed to randomly assign participants to receive one format of the legal resource. Post-resource questions centered on satisfaction with the resource, perceived helpfulness of the resource, and post-resource knowledge/understanding about renting rights and responsibilities. CHASR designed the survey to assess program assumptions and short-term outcomes, effectiveness of the resources, and demographic differences.

The overall sample included 104 respondents, divided into the three conditions (31 picture, 37 video, 36 plain language summary). The overall sample represented the following demographics:

- Age: 18 – 56 years (average = 33 years)
- Ethnicity: Black (53.0%), South Asian (26.0%), White (7.0%), Southeast Asian (6.0%), Latin American (3.0%), East Asian (2.0%), Middle Eastern (2.0%), another ethnicity (1.0%).
- Origin Country: Nigeria (44.0%), India (12.0%), Bangladesh (12.0%), Pakistan (5.0%), Philippines (5.0%), another country (22.0%).
- Length of time living in Canada: Less than 5 years (90.0%), 5- 10 years (8.0%), 10 years or longer (2.0%).
- Area in Saskatchewan: Urban (91.0%), Rural (9.0%)
- First language: Not English (53.9%), English (46.1%)
- Level of English reading skills: Advanced (83.5%), Intermediate or Basic (16.5%)
- Level of English writing skills: Advanced (79.2%), Intermediate or Basic (20.8%)
- Level of Education: At least some university education (80.4%), no university education (19.6%)

Analysis provided evidence of program assumptions. Factors that were hypothesized to influence how much newcomers learned about renting properties were shown to be significantly related:

1. The more that respondents reported understanding what the resource was saying, the more they reported learning.
2. The more participants believed the information was true/accurate, the more they reported learning.
3. The more respondents viewed the resource as helpful, the more they reported learning.
4. The more respondents liked the resource, the more they reported learning.

Short-term outcomes were also met to varying degrees in the survey sample:

1. In the overall sample, there was a significant pre-resource to post-resource increase in test scores (68% - 79%), demonstrating that reviewing the resource led to increased knowledge about renting properties.
2. There was a significant improvement in self-reported understanding of renting rights and responsibilities, in which the median score changed from "mostly understand" to "clearly understand."
3. After viewing the resource, over 75% of respondents in each condition reported that they had improved understanding of the following topics: a) overall rights and responsibilities of tenants, b) the application process, c) security deposits, d) the moving in process, e) property

maintenance responsibilities, f) property access, g) the moving out process, and h) where to go with questions about renting rights and responsibilities.

4. Almost all participants in each group felt that they could explain all or most of the information in the resource to others (Picture Group – 90.4%; Video Group – 97.2%; and Summary Group – 94.4%).
5. After reviewing the resource, over half of participants in each group indicated that they would be willing to seek more information about renting properties (Picture Group – 58.1%; Video Group – 63.9%; and Summary Group – 52.8%).

CHASR compared experimental groups on multiple variables to determine which information format was more effective at conveying information. There were no significant differences in the amount experimental groups learned, nor on other dimensions of effectiveness:

1. There were no significant differences between experimental groups in the extent to which respondents gained knowledge about renting rights and responsibilities.
2. There were no significant differences on post-resource, self-reported understanding of renting rights and responsibilities.
3. There were no experimental group differences on self-reported knowledge gain on various property rental topics.
4. There were no significant group differences that resulted on helpfulness of the resource (to the self and to other newcomers), understandability of the resource, ability to explain the resource to others, and difficulty of the resource.

This suggests that, for the survey sample, the content of the resources mattered more than the format in which the content was communicated.

Finally, analysis revealed some significant demographic differences. Some differences were found based on how long respondents lived in Canada. For example, the longer the respondents lived in Canada, the less self-reported difficulty they had with the resource. Other differences were found based on English reading and writing abilities. Those who reported higher abilities were more likely to self-report having a better understanding. Education played a role in knowledge gain; those who completed any level of university reported greater understanding about renting rights and responsibilities than those who had not completed university.

Recommendations and Future Directions

CHASR made multiple recommendations based on the evaluation data to help develop and improve online legal information resources, so that they best meet the needs of newcomers in Saskatchewan. Most suggestions are to ensure accessibility and usefulness of newly developed resources, such as mixing formats, offering resources in multiple languages, and facilitating resource clarity by implementing newcomers' recommendations. It may also be helpful to create longer and shorter versions of resources to accommodate the diverse needs of newcomers who may access the materials. A number of future directions are suggested. For example, it would be beneficial to conduct a more comprehensive needs assessment to determine which legal topics to prioritize and how to make resources as accessible as possible. Including newcomers in the development of materials is also important, as their perceptions of the resources influence the extent to which knowledge is gained. It would be useful to test the effectiveness of other formats of legal information, conduct user-testing once there is a website that hosts the resources, and provide data collection materials in multiple languages. Continued evaluation will help provide materials that are relevant and beneficial to newcomers in Saskatchewan.