

Immigration Emergency Rooms

Constituency Offices and Assistants
as the Front Line of Immigration
in Canada

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in collaboration with
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HIGHLIGHTS

In 2021, the team of the Canada Research Chair in Global Migration Processes examined the work of constituency office assistants at the federal level in order to better grasp their role in supporting Canadian residents in the context of immigration-related services. Assistants from 117 of 338 (35%) constituency offices across Canada answered an online questionnaire, and 31 then took part in an in-depth interview.

The assistants were given the opportunity to share their experience related to their immigration work. The study highlighted the unique role that constituency offices play for those in need of immigration assistance. All the assistants in our study, who work with federally-elected members of parliament in their ridings, speak up for the first time about their work on immigration, which has become essential to the migration pathways of thousands of people. This report outlines the key findings of the study.

01 **Constituency offices are hubs** for migrants, family members, friends, employers, and intermediaries, such as lawyers, consultants, and community organizations, who require administrative services pertaining to immigration.

02 **Constituency assistants specializing in immigration connect with different groups of people** through their collaborations to provide services to their constituents. This report uncovers an entire support network, with constituency office assistants at its core.

03 **Constituency assistants have unique resources** that make them crucial to constituents in complex administrative situations relating to immigration.

04

Many assistants have extensive expertise in Canada’s immigration system. This expertise that enables them to meet the growing needs of people who are experiencing administrative difficulties with federal government immigration and border service agencies. Whether at the beginning of their journey or in the event of a delay, obstacle, blockage, error, or emergency, assistants are on the front lines helping immigrants, sponsors, and others who support or provide services to immigrants. More than 90% of the assistants surveyed feel that their work is highly valuable.

05

Assistants provide administrative services, along with emotional support, to constituents who are often dealing with situations involving prolonged wait times that can result in family separations, uncertainty, and anxiety. Over 80% of the respondents believe that empathy, interpersonal communication, and listening skills are key to the quality of their work.

06

Constituency assistants who process immigration requests have a range of perceptions of their mandate. Some see themselves as a conduit for information, while others, who are more experienced, will regularly intervene to ensure that something is done in a given case. For example, assistants will make requests for administrative reconsideration on behalf of constituents who have received a negative decision or appeal to the media to bring visibility to an individual facing imminent expulsion that is deemed unjust or puts their life at risk.

07

Assistants who handle immigration-related requests are dedicated individuals who train themselves in a complex administrative and legal field. Most had no knowledge of immigration before starting in their position. Assistants develop resources over time through relationships with colleagues or other experts they call upon. Nearly one in six assistants choose to take outside training to better fulfill their mandate (e.g., immigration consultant training or courses on immigration law).

08

The COVID-19 pandemic ushered in significant changes to the work of assistants in immigration services, both in the way their work is organized and the types of cases they handle. During the massive repatriation of Canadians and permanent residents initiated by the federal government in March 2020, assistants played a central role, often working long hours in evenings and on weekends.

INTRODUCTION

Paul has been waiting for his study permit for six months and has been out of status for a month. Antoine has been waiting for news on his application for permanent residence for two years and has become desperate. Pamela who applied for family reunification is being asked for documents she already provided and is baffled. Joseph applied for asylum, but still does not have his work permit, so he is unable to feed his children. Marc has received a notice about a removal order and has to leave Canada, but he fears for his life in his country of origin. An immigration consultant attempts to get a work permit application unblocked, but to no avail. An immigration lawyer needs information about a client's case without delay. A farm owner learns that 10 foreign workers she hired are stranded at the Mexico City airport. What do all these people have in common? They sought help from their MP's constituency office, and it was an assistant who greeted them, listened to them, and attempted to solve their problem often in an emergency situation.

In the shadow of the MPs, constituency assistants specializing in immigration go to great lengths to help people in their constituencies (also called electoral districts or, more colloquially, ridings) who have questions or are experiencing difficulties with immigration issues. These people may be immigrants, individuals who help immigrants, including friends and advocates, people who hire immigrants, or representatives of educational institutions. In fact, anyone can turn to their MP's office with an immigration question or issue. Even those without residence status in the country can obtain services, on a free and confidential basis. In many constituency offices across the country, immigration is the first sought-after sector among services to constituents. Research conducted with constituency office assistants has highlighted their crucial, yet all-too-often overlooked, role in mediating between Canadian residents and the various immigration-related government programs and policies.

All MPs are responsible for representing the residents of their constituency to the various branches of the Canadian government. Their offices often serve as a conduit between these individuals and federal government programs and services. In this context, a significant portion of constituency assistants' work is to inform residents about the 'ins and outs' of various programs. Assistants may also help residents better understand the time frames for certain procedures or program issues, contact various branches of government to enquire about individual cases, or draw attention to errors in processing cases. In extreme situations, MPs and their staff will ask a minister to intervene in a case to request exceptional treatment or avoid a serious injustice.



In sum, federal constituency offices and their assistants play an important role in maintaining not only Canadian democracy, but also the relationship between the residents of Canada and their government. Increasing difficulties with accessing a number of government branches and services directly related, for example, to the digital shift or the closing of points of service underscore the importance of assistants as the public's point of contact with the federal government.

Immigration cases are an important facet of assistants' work, especially in urban constituencies, where the proportion of the immigrant population is higher than elsewhere. In many constituency offices, one or more assistants are devoted to immigration full-time. For many residents, their MP's office represents a unique opportunity to access immigration services. In addition to offering in-person service, regardless of the individual's legal status, constituency offices provide privileged access to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), as well as information on individual cases. Many assistants develop and accumulate knowledge and expertise in immigration programs, both of which are valuable, if not critical, to processing cases that involve their constituents. It is, therefore, not uncommon anywhere in Canada for a constituency office to serve as a hub between residents, community and religious groups, educational institutions, or employers, on the one hand, and IRCC and other federal government bodies involved in immigration cases, on the other.



Our aim through this research is to contribute to recognizing and acknowledging the immigration work done in federal constituency offices, with special focus on the assistants who handle immigration cases.

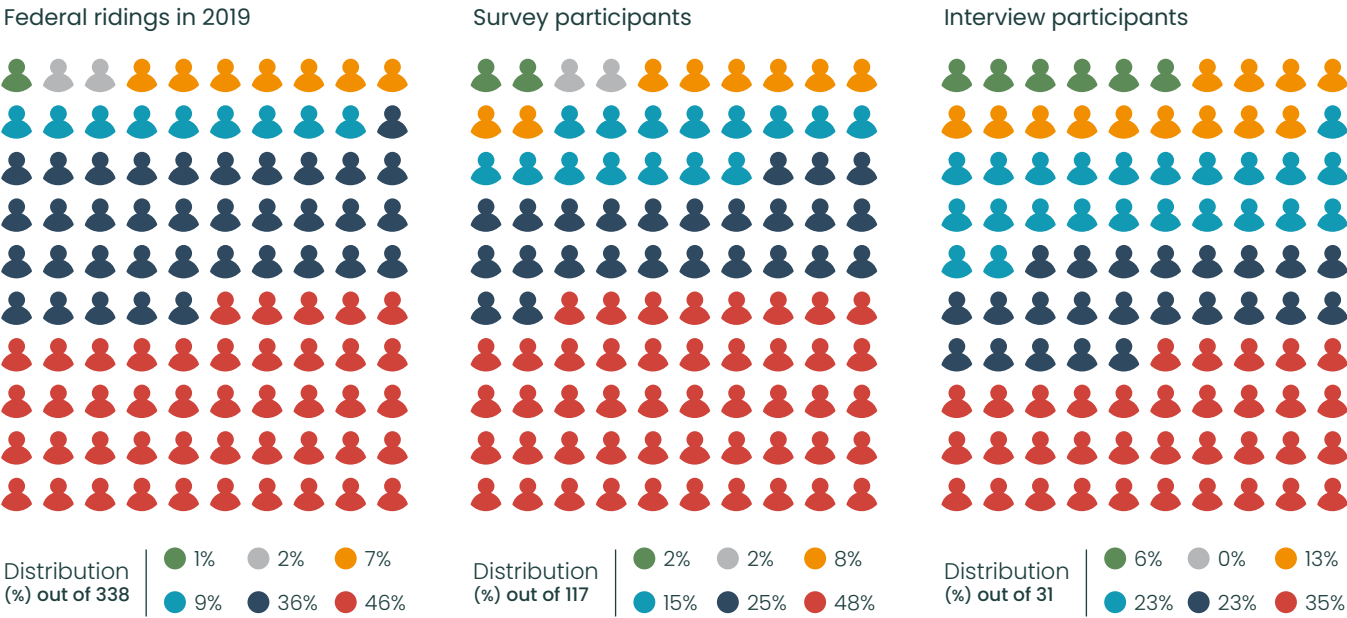
METHODOLOGY

Our research focuses on the constituency offices of MPs, specifically how they meet the immigration-related needs of their constituents. The data in this report are drawn from an online survey and semi-structured interviews conducted in 2021. In 35% of federal ridings (117 out of 338), an office assistant responded to the online survey sent to all constituency offices. Of these 117 assistants, 31 also participated in a semi-structured interview with a researcher on the team. In the interest of confidentiality and protecting the identities of the respondents, no constituencies will be identified in this report. All quantitative data presented here is from the survey and all quotations are from the interviews. Quotations from French interviews were translated.

The following figures describe our sample according to three variables: political party distribution, geographic distribution, and location. While our sample is not entirely representative of the political party distribution of federal MPs in Canada in 2019, it is diverse and all political parties are represented. The same is true of the geographic distribution (by province) of our sample, as shown in the figures below. Finally, regarding the location of constituency offices, we divided survey participants' constituencies into three categories: those located in census metropolitan areas (urban areas) according to Statistics Canada's geographic divisions; those located outside these areas — in rural or remote areas; and those that span both an urban and a rural area. Further methodological details on the online survey and interviews can be found in Appendix 1.

Participant distribution by political party (%)

Green Party Independent NDP Bloc Conservative Liberal



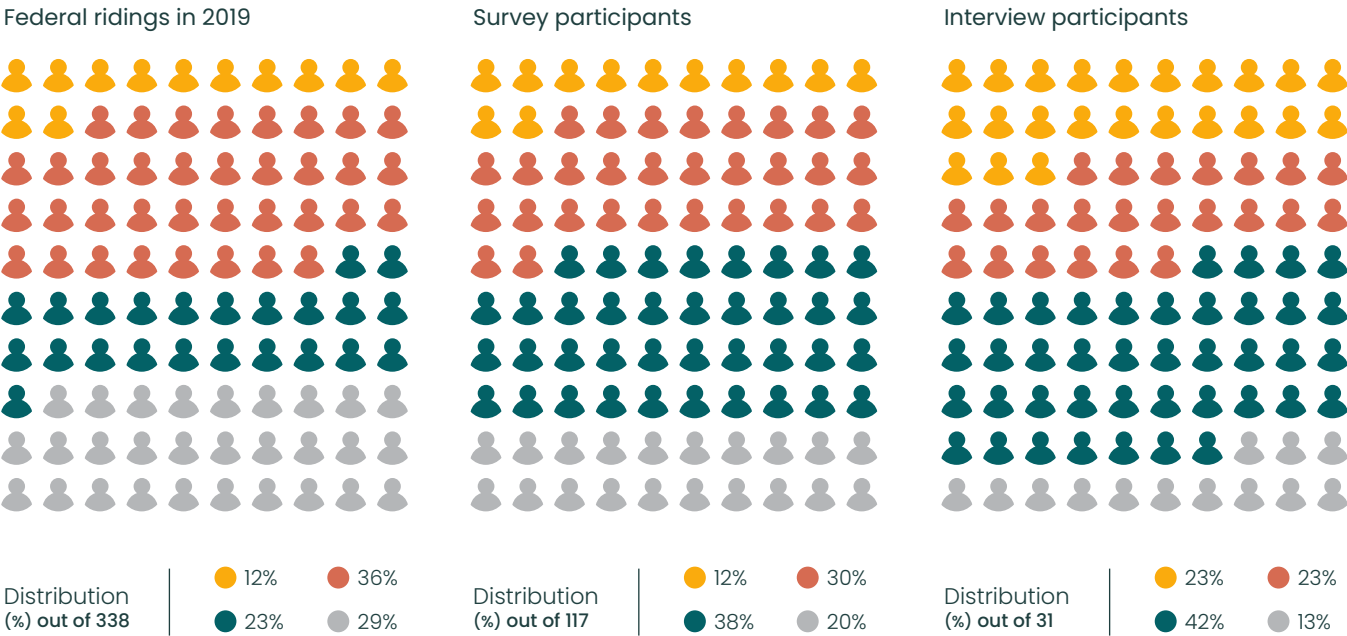
The percentages presented have been rounded off; the total may not add up to 100%.

Survey participation rate:
35% of 338 constituencies

Interview participation rate:
9% of 338 constituencies,
26% of 117 survey participants

Participant distribution by province (%)

British Columbia Ontario Quebec Other



Survey participant distribution by constituency location



11 According to Statistics Canada, “A census metropolitan area (CMA) is formed by one or more adjacent municipalities centred on a population centre (known as the core). A CMA must have a total population of at least 100,000 of which 50,000 or more must live in the core.”

THE CONSTITUENCY OFFICE : A HUB OF IMMIGRATION SERVICES

In a typical workday as constituency assistant, Josée examined eight new cases of immigrants seeking assistance from the office: she reassured a family that had been awaiting permanent residence for more than 18 months; she discussed with a social worker the case of a mother waiting to welcome her children, who were still abroad, to Canada through family reunification; she took a call from an immigration lawyer asking if she could obtain information from IRCC regarding the status of her client's case, as it was urgent; she communicated with the office of a provincial MP regarding a constituent who was ill and still waiting for her health insurance card; she received an impromptu visit from a rejected asylum seeker in a panic after having received a notice of a deportation order; and she spoke with federal immigration officials and the Canada Border Services Agency several times. Throughout the day, Josée worked in a context of urgency and under pressure as she attempted to solve a multitude of administrative issues while remaining attentive to the needs of constituents and maintaining an empathetic attitude.

This illustrates how the constituency office is a veritable hub of activity where people facing various situations interact. For assistants, workdays are generally very busy and emotionally charged, especially when assisting constituents facing long administrative delays or negative decisions.

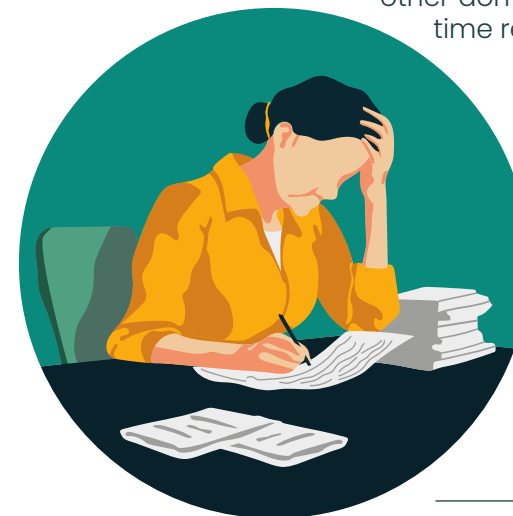


Distinct hubs

In half the offices that participated in the survey, two or three assistants handled immigration assistance requests, while, in the other constituencies, only one assistant was assigned to this task. In 25% of the offices surveyed, every assistant spent more than 35 hours per week on immigration cases, and, of those, 7% spent more than 50 hours per week on such cases. In the majority of offices (57%), from 10 to 35 hours per week was spent on immigration cases.

Demand for immigration services is unevenly distributed across constituencies: 73% of the offices surveyed had fewer than 20 new requests per week, while 4% of the offices had more than 50 new requests per week.

The volume of immigration service requests tends to be higher in large cities and their suburbs, where immigrant populations reach significant proportions. At the urban constituency offices, the assistants in charge of immigration services specialize in requests of this nature. Those who develop particular expertise in this realm will sometimes be approached by colleagues in other ridings whose MPs usually belong to the same party. The fact that there is little such cooperation in other domains reflects the complexity of immigration cases and the time required to resolve them.



I often pick up cases from my colleagues' constituencies. We divide the cases according to our skills. Since I know a lot about immigration, I can take the cases from the neighbouring constituency and give them simpler cases, such as Employment Insurance. They'll take care of it for me as a trade.

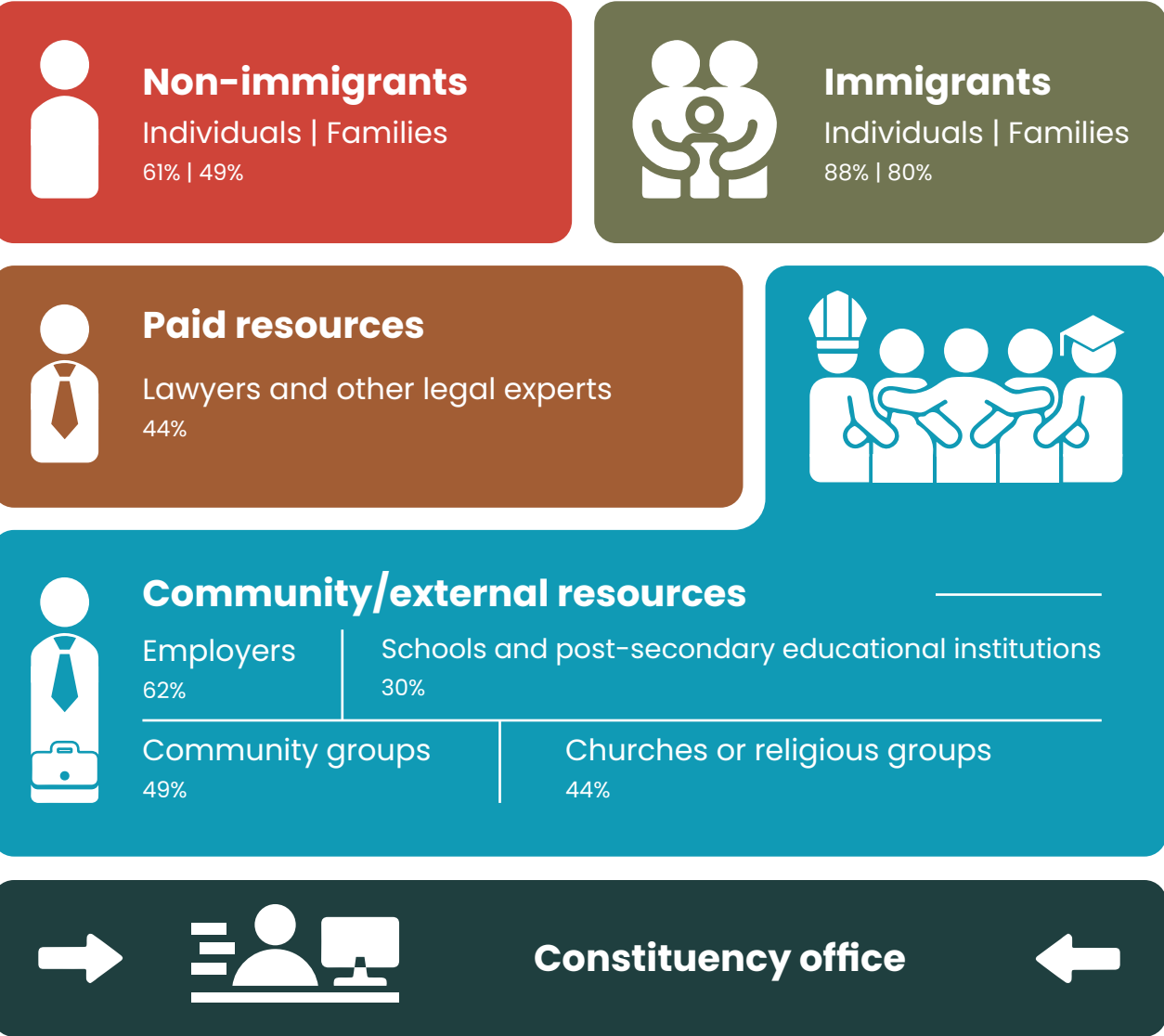
A variety of services

The following figures show the percentage of respondents in each category who reported either consulting an office on their own behalf or referring someone to a constituency office. Roughly 10% of the respondents preferred not to answer the series of questions on this topic.

For example, for each category of people, the respondent had to say whether or not these people consulted them, or if these people were referred to them by someone to consult them. About 10% of respondents preferred not to answer the series of questions on this subject.

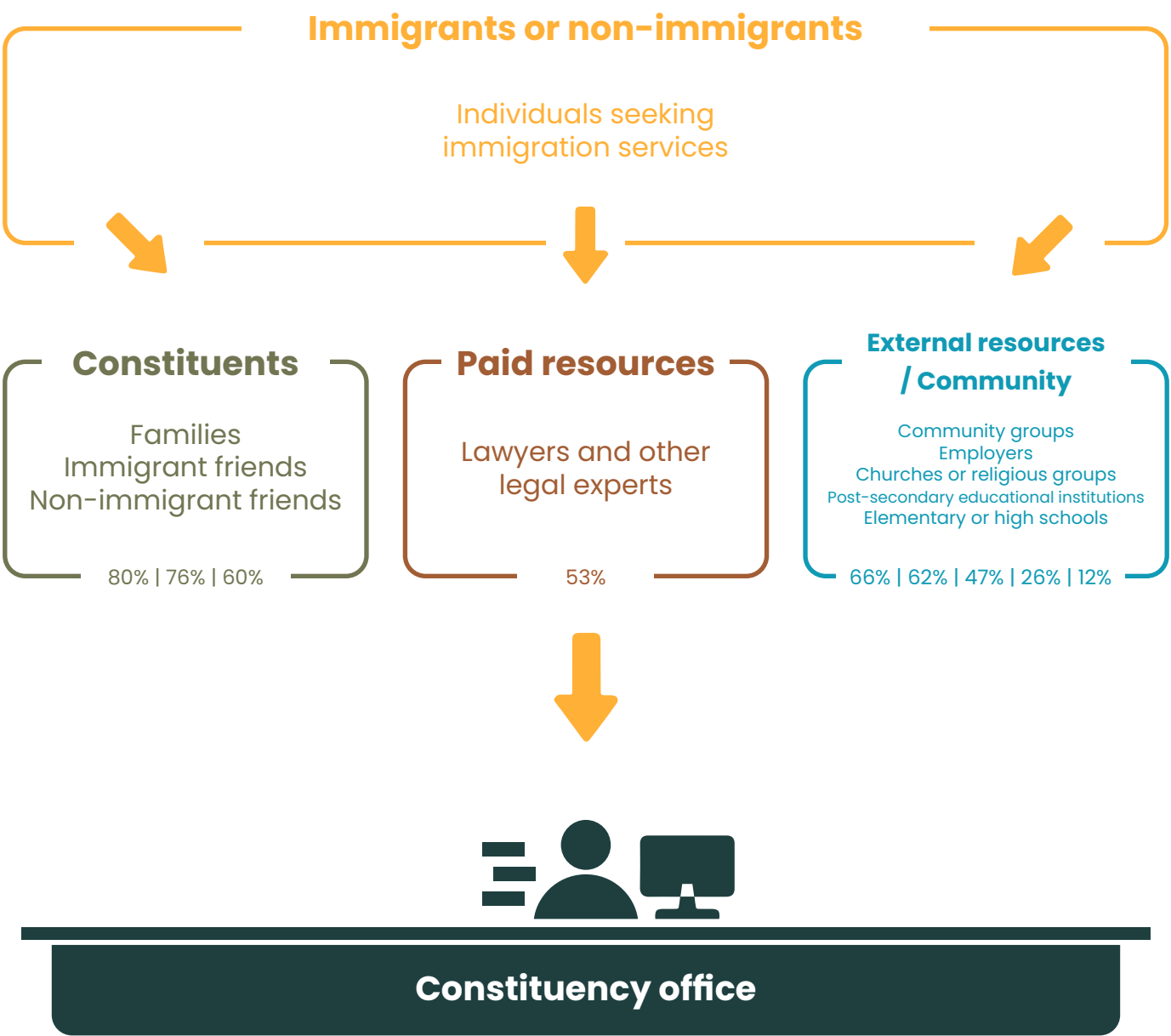
Access network | Who turns to constituency offices for services?

As one would expect, a wide majority of constituency offices received requests for immigration services from migrant families or individuals, 80% and 88% respectively. However, requests also came from non-migrant families and individuals, employers, community and religious groups, lawyers, immigration consultants, schools, and post-secondary institutions, among others. This wide range of people in need of assistance attests to the importance of constituency offices in Canada's immigration landscape.



Access network | Who refers people seeking immigration services to constituency assistants?

In most offices, those seeking immigration services have generally been referred to their MP and their assistants by family members or friends (immigrants and non-immigrants). Other groups and organizations also refer individuals to federal constituency offices for such services: most often, community groups, employers, lawyers, and other legal professionals; sometimes, churches and religious groups; and, more rarely, post-secondary schools and educational institutions.



In addition, individuals, families, or groups may approach federal constituency assistants on behalf of a third party. In nearly 35% of the offices in the sample, more than half of the requests for immigration services were made for someone else.

Frequency of each type of immigration-related request received by a constituency office assistant

Assistants received a wide variety of requests that could include criminal appeals and pardons, applications for permanent residence on humanitarian and compassionate grounds, stays of removal, or assistance with eligibility for provincial immigration, health coverage issues, and social service programs, among other things. Certain types of applications are more frequent and regular in most offices, such as those related to family reunification or temporary residence (including work or study permits).

The characteristics of the constituency will, in large part, determine the categories of people who approach an office for immigration services, the types of cases presented, and, in the case of applications for a third party, the relationship to the migrant in question. The location (a major city or not), the proportion of the immigrant population, the local economy, and the presence of educational institutions, employers, and community services are also important elements.

Frequent

Between **73%** and **94%** of offices report handling this type of case often or regularly.



Study permit



Family reunification



Application for permanent residence



Temporary residence visa ¹



Work permit

¹ A temporary residence visa authorizes entry into Canada. This is a document for international travel. The document itself does not confer any particular rights on Canadian soil.

Somewhat frequent

Between **39%** and **61%** of offices report handling this type of case often or regularly.



Temporary residence permit ²



Permanent economic migration



Provincial assistance to understand eligibility for provincial immigration and health and social services programs



Application for permanent residence on humanitarian and compassionate grounds

Infrequent

Between **2%** and **28%** of offices report handling this type of case often or regularly.



International adoption



Procedures for stay of removal



Request for asylum



Private sponsorship of refugees



Remedies (e.g., appeal, criminal pardon, authorization to return to Canada)

² A temporary resident permit, like a study permit or a work permit, grants specific authorizations to the holder while in Canada. These documents are not entry permits and may not be used for international travel.

Constituency offices as emergency rooms

More than half of new applications were generated in 25% of the offices consulted, although this changed with the COVID-19 pandemic (See the COVID-19 section of this report). Those seeking immigration services often show up at the constituency office without making an appointment beforehand. The workload in the busy offices, combined with the fact that requests for assistance often arrive very or too late in the immigration process, can make constituency office assistants feel like they are working in an emergency room environment. In keeping with this metaphor, some of the interviewed assistants reported adopting a triage system to determine the urgency of the requests they received and using a gradient to determine how to process cases.

The emergency room metaphor is particularly apt in the case of critical situations, for example, when people arrive at the last minute to an office as a last resort, such as in cases of deportation or loss of migration status. The assistants we met with were quick to intervene and provide assistance, regardless of electoral or partisan politics.

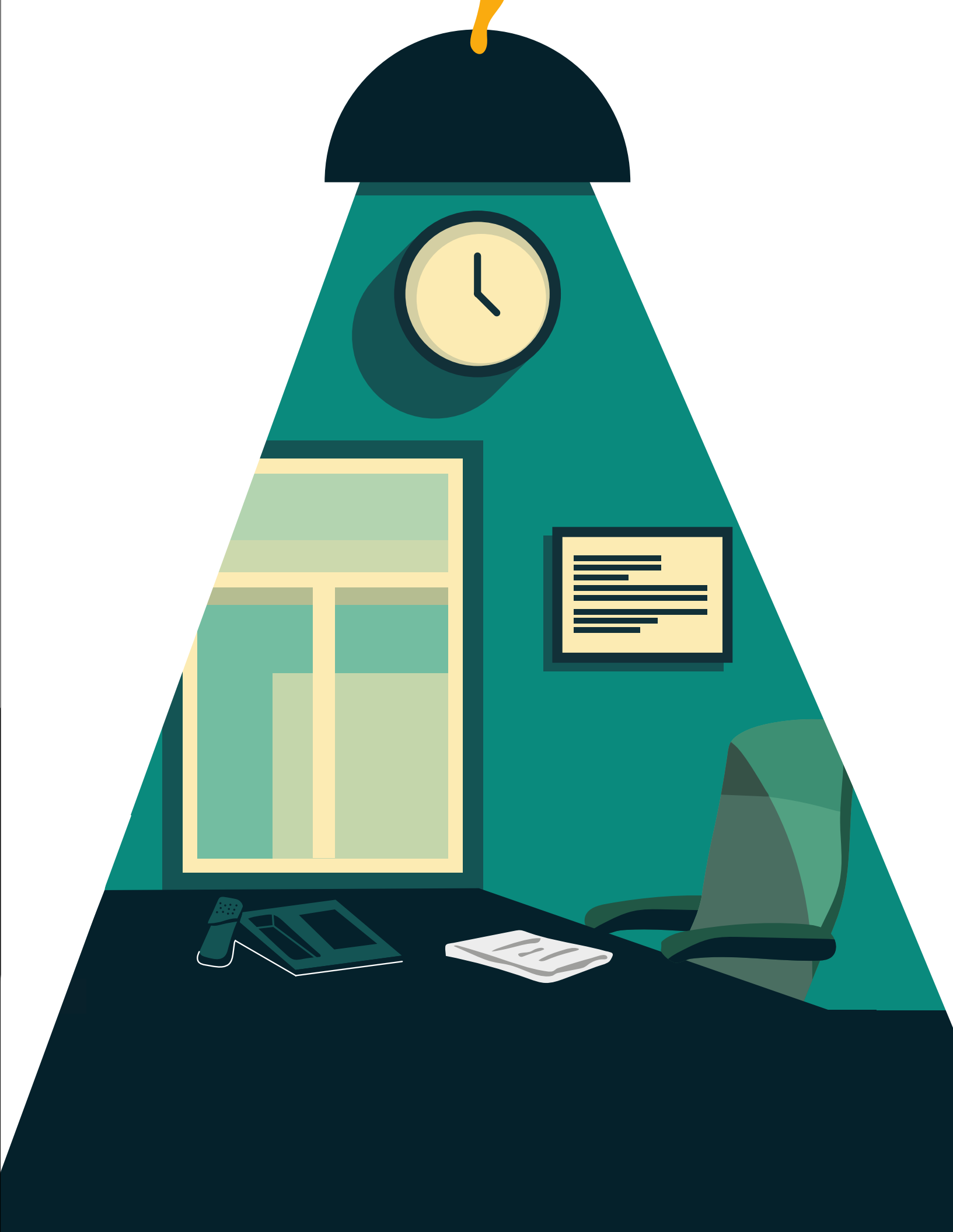
I give myself a four-hour window to act on urgent cases. In some cases, it is happening now or tomorrow, like in removal orders. In these cases, I need to stop everything and be concentrated on that case.

It doesn't matter which party constituents belong to. At the end of the day, it is just like the doctor seeing patients: it is care, constituents' care. When our office is open, it is very busy. It starts at 10:00 until 4:00. It goes on and on, and we have a full room of people all the time. It's like a doctor's office, and, you know, we are trying to get resolutions. But they do not have to wait for 3-4 hours!



In summary

In summary, the federal constituency office is a key point of convergence for a multitude of actors, individuals (both migrants and others), situations, and needs. Among the types of requests that constituencies's citizens and residents make to their MP's office, immigration-related requests are especially numerous and complex. Assistants find themselves acting as intermediaries between constituents and federal immigration and border control authorities.



ASSISTANTS :

ATTENTIVE, SKILLED, CONNECTED, AND DEDICATED INTERMEDIARIES

Immigration service delivery

Constituency assistants generally take their role very seriously with all their constituents, and, in particular, those with immigration concerns. A full 90% of the consulted assistants placed very high value on the immigration services they provided in the course of their work.

The assistants interviewed all noted how different immigration work is from other types of work. Immigration is characterized by 1) uncommon complexity, given the high number of different cases, administrative categories, programs, and pathways; 2) long delays in application processing by the IRCC; 3) the need for assistants to keep their knowledge up to date in spite of the limited supply of available training; and 4) limited influence over decisions made, except in exceptional cases.

Immigration cases often span a long period of time, unlike most other types of help and support requests that assistants receive. Although the length of cases varies significantly, it is not uncommon for an immigration case involving a 'simple' application to remain active for weeks or even months. On average, simple applications remain open for three months, while complex applications may take a year or more to reach an outcome. These delays were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. One common characteristic of the assistants in our study is that they will remain involved in immigration cases as long as there are possibilities for further intervention.

The actions of assistants in their immigration cases can take many forms. **Assistants inform** the individuals, families, and groups who consult them about immigration programs and procedures, eligibility criteria, average wait times, contact information for various administrative units, etc.

Assistants offer support to constituents. That is to say, after having assessed the situation and the problem encountered by the person or group, they gather information from administrative units (IRCC, border services, etc.) and suggest potential strategies (e.g., various programs).

Assistants also provide direct support by calling on administrative units to take action or correct errors in a given case, writing letters of support, or asking their MP to intervene directly with other political actors.



I provide constituents with immigration advice and the results of case-status enquiries. Usually, because I think it's worth it, I try to fight on their behalf, like, for example, when I write a letter of support.

People come here because they hope to get the help they need. In a small number of cases, there is no solution; [but] most cases will be resolved. They come to us because they've tried with consultants and every avenue they could. And now, they've come to us because they have not yet found an answer and that is what they expect from us. My job is to support them and solve their problem.

I support IRCC 99% of the time, but this does not mean they are infallible! I've seen it myself. And when that happens, we try to fight for people and say [to IRCC], "No, no, you really need to look at this."

Assistants inform, support, and provide direct assistance

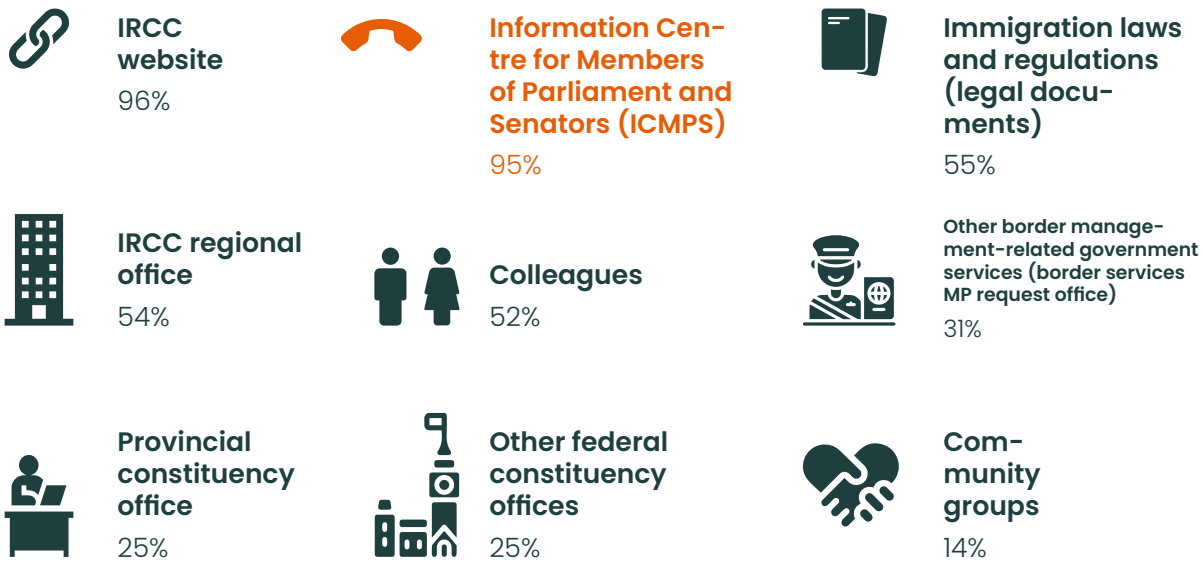


‘Connected’ assistants

The constituency office assistants utilize various resources from across the federal government in their immigration-related work. In addition to the IRCC website, which almost all assistants reported referring to frequently, **they also use their privileged access to various immigration-related government bodies, namely the IRCC’s MP/Senator Information Centre, and, to a lesser extent, the Canadian Border Services Agency MP helpline.** Most of the assistants also consult immigration laws and regulations and speak regularly with those responsible for regional cases at the Office of the Minister of Immigration or the Minister of Public Safety.

A number of assistants have also developed a network of support and resources within and around their constituencies. In processing their cases, the majority of assistants regularly seek help from their colleagues and less frequently from assistants in other federal or provincial ridings. Some assistants also turn to community groups, churches, or religious groups, as well as immigration lawyers and consultants, to help resolve cases.

Access network | What resources do district assistants use when responding to requests for immigration services?



% Percentages indicate the proportion of respondents who said they consulted this resource.



Information Centre for Members of Parliament and Senators (ICMPS) | 95%

Resources for constituency assistants at Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC)

Constituency office assistants are able to do their work thanks to their privileged access to IRCC. Since at least 1994, assistants have been able to contact visa offices, processing centres, and local IRCC offices with questions, but a need emerged for a single point of contact.

Around 2011, the Canadian government opened the Information Centre for Members of Parliament and Senators (ICMPS), a call centre under IRCC, to handle requests from constituency offices of Canada’s MPs and senators. The new entity was created to prevent MP office communications from disrupting or influencing the normal operations of the visa offices and application processing. For more complex cases, at the time of data collection, assistants could also contact the IRCC Ministerial Enquiries Division, where former immigration officers have some discretionary authority over cases brought to their attention.

According to administrative data we obtained under a Freedom of Information and Privacy request to the IRCC, these two IRCC constituency office points of contact answered 229,493 phone calls and emails between September 2018 and October 2019 (a 13-month period averaging 17,653 calls per month), primarily regarding temporary immigration cases (49%) and family reunification cases (29%). This represents an average of more than two calls per office per business day.

In analyzing these data, we can see that the volume of calls received per office is determined primarily by the characteristics of the constituency population, not those of the MP (political party, gender, or immigrant origin). The more immigrants there are in the riding, the more the offices turn to the IRCC call centre. This observation underscores the critical, non-partisan nature of the immigration work done by constituency office assistants across the country.

For assistants, the two above-mentioned points of contact are central to their case evaluation work. A call can be made to request an update on a case, confirm all required information has been submitted, check that there are no issues to report, or even request administrative reconsideration.

In all our interviews, assistants spoke highly about how these resources made their jobs easier, since they provide a single gateway for them to assist constituents struggling with standstills, long delays, and, sometimes, administrative errors. In addition, these direct points of contact are a source of information for assistants, who learn about the ‘ins and outs’ of decision-making, which enables them to better inform and equip constituents. However, since the completion of our study, access to these resources has diminished and been significantly revamped, as we will explain in the conclusion of this report.

Finally, some assistants leverage their local networks to support the services they provide to constituents. Approximately one third of the assistants refer their constituents either to community groups, professional legal resources, or the office of another federal or provincial constituency. Few assistants (10%) reported referring constituents to employers, student support services, or churches and religious groups.



Access network

To what resources do constituency assistants refer people seeking immigration services ?



Percentages indicate the proportion of respondents who reported referring individuals to the resource.

Multiple roles and versatility

Consistency assistants have varying perceptions of their mandate, as the figure below illustrates. In general, they view their work as highly specialized, requiring extensive knowledge and experience. At the same time, many express feelings of powerlessness and uncertainty regarding the impact of their interventions on case outcomes. Indeed, in most cases, assistants have no certainty that their intervention is directly linked to the outcome of a case.



Multiple roles and versatility

Their perception depends on several factors: the number of years of experience primarily or solely handling immigration cases, the MP's preferred approach to immigration cases, prior training, investment in training outside working hours, willingness to invest in administrative justice, and, more generally, ability to handle often difficult and highly emotional situations. Some assistants essentially see themselves primarily as social workers who lend an ear and provide reassurance, while others define themselves more as intermediaries for the federal bureaucracy who must clear up problems and unblock cases. They all mentioned these different facets of their work.

Most assistants expressed a sense of dismay at the long wait times and the impact on the lives of the constituents they meet. They are firsthand observers of the effect of policies on the population. Some especially committed assistants compile their observations and pass them along to their MP, who may decide to make a policy case to the House of Commons or write a letter to the Minister of IRCC.

I am more than a liaison with IRCC; I am a problem solver. I can't sit quiet here. Most people who come have tried with their consultants; they have tried every alley they could find. They were not able to get an answer and that's what they are looking for. I solve their problems.

I provide non-partisan, compassionate, and caring support to constituents. And I aim to be really good and give a really fast responses. When answering the phone people are like, "Wow! There's a person on the phone!"

We consistently provide the gold standard of service. That's kind of been our motto: to serve constituents to the best of our ability, thoroughly, and to leave no stone unturned. So really, give it all that we can because constituents come to us with the hopes that we can perform a miracle.

We are not here to defend the government or explain why the government was right ... we are here to understand the person and say "Listen, it does not make sense; we are going to help you." So, we find ourselves being the defender of the constituent. We say "Okay, we'll see what we can do. We'll go fight to help you with this, and we'll get back to you on that quickly."

The famous line from our chief of staff is that all we can do is provide status updates. I try to go beyond that and definitely advocate for some people. If we think a situation could be rectified, or it does not make sense, we definitely try to help with those cases. If necessary we will take the case to IRCC's Minister's Office.

I feel like our mandate is to make sure we liaison between IRCC and the constituents. And the mandate is to make sure that we — as a liaison — get the feedback. We get at what the issue is. We have to try to find out the cause, or what is the reason, and then convey it to the constituent. I think the main thing is to make sure they understand what the issue is and then they can overcome it.

The qualities they judge to be the most important:
**empathy,
listening skills and
problem-solving ability.**

In general, constituency assistants consider their work to be highly specialized, requiring a great deal of knowledge and experience. At the same time, many expressed a sense of powerlessness and uncertainty about the impact of their interventions on the outcomes of cases. Typically, assistants have no assurance that their efforts are directly connected to an outcome. Finally, the assistants' perceptions of their jobs were aptly summed up by their answers to questions about the qualities they felt were most important in a future immigration assistant. An overwhelming majority (over 80%) mentioned empathy, listening skills, and problem-solving, while knowledge of immigration and government programs was the least important quality when recruiting.

ASSISTANTS : PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUNDS AND TRAINING NEEDS



Constituency assistants have widely diverse profiles and professional backgrounds, as reflected in their professional experience and training prior to working with an MP. Just over one third of the assistants consulted had been previously involved in a political party, 30% had a university education in social sciences, and over 20% had worked in the community. They less frequently mentioned having studied law or social work, having worked in the health or social services fields, or even having been a political candidate or member of parliament.

Few assistants came to the job with experience in immigration processes. In only 13% of the offices surveyed did one or more assistants have immigration training when they started their job as a constituency office assistant. However, 21% of the assistants had some previous experience working in immigration, and 40% had worked with immigrants.

There is no formal or systematic training for federal constituency assistant work or for providing immigration services. The assistants in our study generally expressed a strong need for training on immigration programs, policies, and legislation, as well as related updates. Approximately 70% accessed training offered by IRCC, although they considered it too limited and sporadic. Just over half the assistants reported receiving immigration training paid for by their MP's party, again on an ad hoc basis. In all, only 35% of the assistants said they were satisfied with the immigration training available to them. In the interviews, many also cited the need for training in psychological and emotional support, an aspect of their daily work that made many assistants feel helpless.

If I had training to do my job as an immigration assistant?
What do you mean? There is NO training!

The interviewed assistants reported that they had acquired the knowledge and tools to provide immigration services on their own over time by working on the different types of cases they encountered. Many learned from their more experi-



enced colleagues by, for example, studying the cases that their colleagues had resolved in the past. Many conducted regular online research, developed an informal network of experts to consult on difficult cases, and accumulated knowledge through interactions with their contacts at IRCC. Moreover, in 11% of the offices surveyed, one or more assistants had begun immigration-related studies since starting the job.

The most formative files are when you are able to talk about the reasons for refusal with an agent who looks at the analysis of the visa officer and says, “between you and I there is a problem; here is why it was written.” When we can understand, we can apply our knowledge to other files. It is very formative to get through refusals.

Because constituency office staff are employed during the term of their MP, it is difficult for constituency offices to retain skilled, knowledgeable assistants who can be trained over the long term because, after an election, it is very rare for a newly-elected MP to keep the office assistants from the former MP. A break occurs in the transfer of information and experience, and the new team must start from scratch, a situation that results in an unfortunate loss of expertise. In ridings where seats frequently change hands from one election to the next, it is very difficult for new assistants to acquire much specific knowledge, even as they struggle with the complexity and multiplicity of immigration programs and policies.

Why, when their boss [the MP] doesn't get [re]elected, would you want to just erase that institutional knowledge [accumulated by the constituency office assistants]?

We asked survey respondents what they found to be the most difficult and most satisfying aspects of their work.

Most difficult

The most difficult challenges that assistants face have three sources. The first is the work itself: namely, the very high case volume, the high speed of multi-tasking that is required, and the feeling of always being overworked and lacking training. The second is the Canadian immigration system, which brings its share of frustrations, due, in particular, to the very long delays and apparently groundless blockages in case processing. The third is the hub where assistants are located, i.e., at the intersection of policy and constituents, which entails many emotionally difficult times. These include confirming a negative decision, managing constituents’ overly high expectations, being unable to fix a situation, witnessing a deportation, feeling powerless in the face of IRCC bureaucracy, and having a front row seat to the negative impacts certain policies can have on people’s lives. Several assistants reported feeling ill-equipped and wished they had access to more training in order to better support their constituents in difficult times and to help manage the emotional burden of their work. As one assistant put it simply, “the hardest part of the job is the stories, [because] they are painful to listen to”.

We are the ones that deal with the actual people, see the actual effect of government policy on these people, and we can sometimes see a simple solution to the problem, but we cannot use our judgment to say, for example, “in this case, this application needs to be expedited; this permanent resident card needs to be sent out as soon as possible; or this person’s work permit should have been issued by now, [so] let’s get it done.” I find I am constantly making excuses in these cases, and it is difficult because even I do not know why we cannot provide solutions to these problems.

Most satisfying

When asked about their job satisfaction, 85% of the assistants stated being satisfied or very satisfied with the work they did. They value their work for a variety of reasons. Some report being satisfied with constituency work in general, including the enjoyment of meeting with constituents, the gratification of helping them in their dealings with the Canadian government bureaucracy, and pleasure of helping people solve their problems. They also report the satisfaction of serving their Member of Parliament and to be constantly learning new things at work.

In addition, the assistants report taking great satisfaction in the positive decisions rendered by IRCC on cases in which they had been involved for several months or even years, particularly in situations involving family reunification, children, stays of removal, and permanent residence or Canadian citizenship approvals. Assistants are moved by the gratitude constituents express for their work, which motivates them to continue.

What is most satisfying in this job is people’s gratitude when we solve a case. Especially when we successfully advocate for a stay of removal or we manage to accelerate a family reunification case. But, I’d say the most rewarding piece is when we halt the deportation of adults because we made the case that it was in the best interest of the child.



COVID-19 :

THE REORGANIZATION AND INTENSIFICATION OF WORK

The COVID-19 health crisis has transformed not only the work of assistants, but also the way constituency offices operate. According to 75.6% of the respondents, COVID-19 ushered in a reorganization of their office and of the services that are offered. The most frequently reported consequence was higher application volumes (64%). This is consistent with the findings of the Samara Center for Democracy's March to August 2020 survey on the transformation in MPs' work, which found that 80% of MPs reported an upturn in work at their constituency offices.

The border closing in 2020 and the decrease in immigration led to changes in the types of cases presented by constituents. Assistants who were able to compare their work before and after the pandemic noted a drop in temporary immigration cases and a rise in cases involving an extension of stay in Canada, and, more particularly, deferred removals. Assistants also reported that constituents contacted them because of long delays in processing their cases, which led to feelings of panic and frustration.

I think that the caseload has increased since [the pandemic] — like I didn't work pre-pandemic! But I think people are calling us more now because there's the delay in Immigration. So people get panicked and even people who wouldn't have previously turned to their MP are definitely turning to us.

... constituents are very frustrated with COVID ... it brought everything to a stop for 5-6 months. ... the citizens understand it, but up to a point ... It's a lot of psychology, making them understand that things are still taking time. ... A sponsorship application used to take 14, 16, 18 months. Now, in May [2021] about 30 months.

The repatriation operation launched in March for Canadians and permanent residents wishing to return home, but unable to do so because of the border closure, led to assistants playing a key role in facilitating hasty returns by establishing channels of communication between separated family members and individuals located abroad. These tasks were not, however, in their mandate, given that they only usually served those living in their constituencies.

We're not supposed to deal with people from abroad, but ... when people were stuck in different parts of the world during this COVID period and there were repatriation flights that were coming during that time, we had a lot of calls from abroad and they were all people who lived in Canada ... like citizens and permanent residents.

While staff mostly worked from home, constituency offices maintained their services by being accessible almost around the clock, serving constituents without necessarily meeting them.

Currently, I'm alternating between telecommuting and the office. Sometimes, when I'm at the office, they come knocking at the door, so I can welcome them. We arranged the rooms to follow the rules [health measures]. Otherwise, people call me to make an appointment and then we can do a Zoom call, if that works for them.



COVID-19: The reorganization and intensification of work

Some assistants expressed frustration with what they described as IRCC's failure to adapt to telework, for example, the false 'COVID excuse' was used even though IRCC staff were fully capable of providing their services, albeit in a different way.

We've certainly done our share of telecommuting. ... The three of us [assistants] don't feel that we've been more useless or lazy or slow to handle cases. We've handled them with the same thoroughness. For someone diligent, whether they work at home or in the office [it's the same thing]. ... COVID often gets blamed for things, and I'm tired of hearing COVID being cited [as an excuse]. Well, not just me, my colleagues too ... At some point you get paid, well ... you have to work.

For those constituency assistants who started their job just before or in the course of the pandemic, their work experience was very different from that of their long-time colleagues. The shift to remote or telephone work limited their opportunities to learn from colleagues. While the pandemic left many assistants feeling isolated and overworked, they generally appreciated the creation of forums and online meetings to inform them of changes or new programs. However, some reported that they had to reorganize on their own, without much government support, as authorities kept changing the regulations in force.

The government [is] implementing a new ... directive, [it's] applying a law, [it's] changing the rules. During COVID, this happened a number of times; nobody ever warned us. ... We have a page [on a social media platform], we've been calling it the '[party] crisis unit', since the beginning of the pandemic. It's an incredible forum because we use it to talk amongst ourselves: "Oh! I've come across such-and-such case" or "Someone asked a question." We do this on our own because if we wait for the government to give it to us, we're not going to get it"

In sum, in the field of immigration, COVID-19 did not only amplify certain existing problems (shortcomings in access to services, delays in processing cases, and constantly changing rules). It also created new ones (isolation, unprecedented emergency situations, and the mobility crisis). Constituency offices, having been on the front lines of these issues, were able to mobilize many resources and demonstrate empathy, creativity, and resourcefulness in overcoming them.

As such, these offices have remained key players in the democracy, serving Canadian citizens and non-citizens throughout the pandemic.



CONCLUSION

Federal constituency offices are a pillar of democracy in Canada, providing citizens and non-citizens with access to their elected officials. Through the assistants who represent the MPs, people knocking on the doors of these offices can seek and obtain assistance in their dealings with government authorities. Constituency offices play a key role in the realm of immigration in a context where people in need of assistance or simply information do not have to struggle to communicate with IRCC on their own and can find their way through complex administrative processes without professional help. Constituency office assistants become essential intermediaries given their unique role in the immigration services landscape.

The recent situation resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic raises new issues that may further transform the work of assistants. More and more of them are faced with refusals of immigration applications, particularly in temporary immigration cases, due to the automation initiatives implemented by IRCC over the past few years. New artificial intelligence tools sort, classify, and organize applications before submitting decisions to immigration officers. The drafting of refusal letters is now semi-automated. This makes assistants' work more difficult, as the decision-making processes have become more opaque, leaving few traces. Constituents may see their right to appeal diminished in the event of a negative decision. In addition, selection may be tainted by biases caused by the algorithms.

Additionally, this report highlights the transformation of privileged access to IRCC in constituency offices. For example, in August 2021, the Ministerial Centre for Members of Parliament and Senators (MCMPS; since 2021, this is the new name of the former Information Center for Members of Parliament and Senators previously mentioned in the report) had its well-trained staff (accustomed to dealing with complex cases) assigned to emergency phone lines

and email inboxes to assist in Canada's major evacuation efforts for its employees and Afghan partners. A skeleton crew remained on duty to handle other urgent cases by phone. Email service, for its part, came to a standstill. Overnight, in the fall of 2021, while the MPs were out of their offices due to an election campaign, their assistants were cut off from their main access to IRCC for resolving problems. By early 2022, the service was beginning to recover, but each constituency office could handle no more than five emails per day and wait times to speak to an agent on the phone remained long. However, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a decision was made to re-establish a helpline, and, once more, MCMPS staff were the ones assigned to it. The service has still not recovered at the time of writing.

In August 2022, after a year of crisis, IRCC, struggling to re-establish a satisfactory level of service, awarded a contract to Deloitte to design a liaison interface between MCMPS and the constituency office assistants. After a brief pilot project, the new model was introduced across all MP offices in September 2022. Since then, constituency office assistants have been required to use a modified Salesforce platform to schedule appointments (15, 30, 45, or 60 minutes) with MCMPS. An officer will call assistants at the agreed time and answer questions during the agreed period. In the fall of 2022, MCMPS offered 170 appointment hours on this platform per week, which amounts to about 30 minutes per MP office. Although the email service has been partially restored, it is only used to add missing documents to applications (using a new automated process) and to report complex or urgent cases. MCMPS may, however, refuse to recognize the complexity or urgency of a case, and assistants have no recourse to appeal the decision. Consequently, we are currently far below the level of access observed in our study (more than two calls per day per office, on average, in 2018-2019).

APPENDIX 1:

METHODOLOGY



Online survey

The online survey was conducted between March and May of 2021. The email introducing the survey, written in both English and French, was first sent to the general addresses of all constituency offices of federal MPs across Canada. It was intended to recruit offices providing immigration services. It contained a link to the questionnaire, using Lime Survey software. The survey consisted of 41 closed-ended questions and 3 open-ended questions. A reminder email was sent four times every two weeks to constituency offices that had not yet responded. The online survey was completely anonymous and was also written in French and English. Only one assistant per federal riding answered the survey. A total of 117 responses were received, amounting to 35.2% of the 338 ridings. Of the questionnaires received, 90 were completed in full, representing 26.6% of the constituencies. The information contained in all questionnaires, whether complete or incomplete, was taken into account in the analysis of the quantitative and qualitative results.



Interviews

Between May and July of 2021, the interviews were conducted remotely — using the Zoom platform — due to the pandemic. In the first wave of recruitment, all assistants who participated in the survey by completing the online questionnaire were then sent an email requesting their participation in an interview with a researcher on the team. The second wave of recruitment was conducted by phone, via the general constituency office number, with the call being used to contact assistants who had participated in the online survey. During the interview period, specific offices were recruited when certain political parties were underrepresented in the sample to ensure diversity in the sample.



For questions regarding the survey, the interviews, or the research project data, please contact Dr. Danièle Bélanger, principal investigator of this project and Canada Research Chair in Global Migration Processes, at :

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