



## **WEBINAR TRANSCRIPT**

### **Community arts for newcomer mental wellness in Canada May 13, 2026 from 12 – 12:30 PM (Zoom)**

#### **Christen Kong**

Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome. As you settle in, we invite you to introduce yourself in the chat by sharing your name, location, and role. It's wonderful to see people joining us from across different communities and sectors today. Please get comfortable, tune in, and join the conversation.

#### **Have you ever wondered how community arts can support the mental wellness of newcomers in Canada? Or perhaps you're an arts facilitator curious about the impact of your own work?**

My name is Christen Kong, and I'm a Health Promoter at Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services, where I focus on advancing newcomer mental health and wellness through the arts. One of the greatest joys of this role is supporting capacity building and mobilizing knowledge in ways that can meaningfully shape everyday practice and community care. Through our Arts for Family Health digital platform, we collaborate with partners to co-create knowledge and explore how the arts can be integrated into healthcare and settlement services.

I would like to acknowledge the land where many of us are gathering today. Those of us in Tkaronto are on the traditional lands of the Huron-Wendat, Anishinaabek, Haudenosaunee, and the Mississaugas of the Credit. As an organization serving immigrants and refugees facing systemic barriers, we recognize the ongoing impacts of colonialism on Indigenous, Métis, and Inuit peoples, and we honour the resilience and resistance of Indigenous communities across Turtle Island. We also recognize our shared responsibility to continue learning, building relationships, and practicing solidarity.

We are gathered today because of a shared curiosity about community arts and their impact on health and wellbeing. This webinar has been many months in the making through a collaboration with FLOURISH: Community-Engaged Arts for Social Wellness, an arts-led initiative launched in 2020 at University of Toronto Scarborough exploring how creative arts strengthen social connection and wellness across the lifecourse.

I'm pleased to introduce today's speakers. **Andrea Charise** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Health and Society at the University of Toronto Scarborough, whose work focuses on the connections between arts, health, and community wellness. **Esty Joelle Asare** is a public health professional committed to advancing health equity through community-based approaches and research-informed practice. And **Mariangela Castro Arteaga** is a PhD candidate in Human Geography at the University of Toronto.

Together, our team conducted a scoping review and environmental scan exploring how participatory, community-based arts practices foster connection, self-expression, and cross-cultural understanding — and why these approaches are essential for building healthier and more inclusive communities.

Throughout the webinar, we invite you to share your questions and reflections in the Zoom chat. We'll gather questions as they come in and leave time for discussion at the end of the session.

Now, I'd like to invite my colleagues, Esty and Mariangela, to join the conversation.

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### **Esty-Jo Asare**

And this is where community arts comes in.

While definitions may vary widely, community arts have been described as an umbrella practice that shelters many arts disciplines, populations, and social contexts of cultural activity, usually involving groups and communities with diverse identities.

Importantly, research suggests that creative and expressive practices can be especially meaningful in supporting well-being in minoritized communities.

This led us to our central goal: to assess the state of the evidence for community arts initiatives targeting mental wellness improvement among newcomers to Canada.

Our research question asks: *What does current research indicate about the impact of community arts interventions as an approach to improving mental wellness outcomes for newcomers in Canada?*

To do this, we began a partnership with Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services, who were interested in the outcomes of this question as a way to ensure their programming aligned with evidence.

More frankly, our colleagues in the settlement services sector had informally reported struggling to make the case for arts-engaged programming for newcomers and wondered whether a research project like this could help support that case.

Our team decided to take two separate but parallel approaches to this research question: a scoping review led by the university team and an environmental scan led by Access Alliance.

The scoping review allowed us to map published, peer-reviewed research found in academic journals and databases. This involved discussions with a research librarian to formulate a search strategy that enhanced reproducibility, rigor, and transparency.

Correspondingly, the environmental scan located publicly accessible sources, such as reports and toolkits from community-based organizations across the country.

Together, this dual approach illuminated the role of community arts in fostering wellness for newcomers.

Here is a snapshot of our scoping review results. We started with 778 initial records, and 31 studies met our inclusion criteria.

Most studies were based in Ontario and Quebec. Participants were typically mixed-gender cohorts, though one study focused specifically on men and boys.

Programs took place across diverse settings, though most were school-based.

Photovoice was the most common arts approach, alongside other mixed and multimodal practices such as embroidery, dance—including Bollywood dance—and forum theatre.

Participants also represented a wide range of languages and countries of origin.

What I'd like to provide now is a brief overview of our analysis describing how community arts can serve as a viable and supportive mental wellness practice for this demographic.

Our third theme, *"I'm Part of the Community: Empowerment Through Arts and Community,"* highlights how community arts foster mental wellness through collective experience.

Rather than centering the individual alone, these programs emphasize shared creative engagement while still allowing space for personal reflection and transformation.

This points to an important tension between Western ideals of independence and the interdependence that shapes many newcomer experiences.

Community arts become a space where these values are negotiated and lived.

One way this emerges is through what we call "personal monuments." Through practices such as photography, visual art, and performance, participants engage in creative self-documentation, authoring and sharing their own histories.

Community art becomes a way to maintain connections to culture, homeland, and values, even within new and shifting contexts.

At the same time, participants consistently described strong connections to both peers and facilitators, grounded in trust, inclusion, and mutual respect.

Facilitators, in particular, were often seen as approachable representatives of Canadian culture.

Even moments of conflict became productive, offering opportunities for creative expression and collective problem-solving.

Overall, these shared artistic spaces supported a growing sense of belonging, helping newcomers feel more connected and at home in Canadian society.

Our next theme, *“Hope Can Get Bigger and Smaller: Coping, Culture, and Creativity as Mental Wellness,”* highlights the ambiguous realities of hope and resettlement, and specifically how arts engagement can capture how hope expands and contracts over time.

Community arts create space for participants to negotiate who they are in relation to both external pressures—such as institutions and cultural expectations—and their internal worlds of memory, emotion, and identity.

Participants described identity as ongoing and shaped by trauma, shifting roles, and cultural memory, with art offering a way to process these tensions.

At the same time, creative practices supported expressions of hope and future possibility.

Participants used art to reframe difficult experiences, imagine new futures, and hold on to meaning even in the face of ongoing challenges.

Hope also emerged as deeply relational—sustained through community, shared with others, and often grounded in spiritual or religious practices that provided continuity, resilience, and a sense of purpose.

I would now like to pass it over to Mariangela to discuss the findings from our environmental scan.

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### **Mariangela Castro-Arteaga**

Thank you. Hi everyone, and thank you, Esty-Jo. We’re very happy to be here and share these findings.

Our environmental scan identified 41 community organizations across Canada delivering arts-based interventions specifically aimed at supporting newcomers’ mental health and well-being.

These interventions were highly diverse in format and reflected a broad understanding of what community arts can look like in practice.

We saw programs spanning visual arts, performing arts, literary arts, and physical or outdoor activities such as sports and gardening.

From this scan, several key themes emerged.

The first major theme was the cultural tailoring of community arts interventions.

Many organizations designed programs that were directly relevant to newcomers' lived experiences, often centered on themes such as migration, belonging, and self-reflection.

These themes created space for participants to process experiences related to displacement, adaptation, and rebuilding community in a new context.

We also observed a strong emphasis on intersectionality.

Most programs prioritized youth and women, recognizing both the unique challenges and strengths within these groups.

One organization specifically focused on BIPOC communities, and three organizations included programming for LGBTQ+ communities.

Another important finding was the inclusion of multiple artistic modalities within the same session or program—for example, combining visual art with storytelling or movement with music and reflection.

This approach allowed participants to engage in ways that felt most accessible and meaningful to them, according to organizational reports.

The second major theme focused on enablers that support engagement.

One of the most significant enablers was language accessibility.

Many organizations offered interpretation services or facilitators who spoke participants' primary languages, reducing barriers to participation and ensuring programs were inclusive and welcoming.

In some cases, bilingual or culturally matched facilitators were also involved.

Another key enabler was the inclusion of multidisciplinary teams.

These teams often included community and professional artists, cultural workers, mental health providers, and social workers.

This collaborative approach helped bridge artistic practice with mental health support and settlement services.

We also saw strong attention to accessible program delivery.

Organizations emphasized the importance of program duration, scheduling, accessible physical locations, and online participation options.

Some organizations also offered accommodations such as free art materials, transportation reimbursements, childcare services, and referrals to external support resources.

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## **Esty-Jo Asare**

Thank you, Mariangela.

Taking a step back, our findings from both the environmental scan and the scoping review can be understood through three intersecting paradigms: cultural humility, cultural brokering, and participatory arts as critical pedagogy.

Together, these suggest that community arts are not just expressive, but transformative—reshaping dominant narratives about migration, belonging, and identity.

I'll briefly highlight two of these paradigms.

First, cultural humility is an approach grounded in ongoing self-reflection and recognition of the limits of one's own perspective.

Unlike cultural competence, cultural humility does not assume mastery. Instead, it emphasizes openness to difference and continual learning.

This is especially important given the diversity of newcomer experiences shaped by migration histories, cultural backgrounds, and time in Canada.

In this context, arts engagement offers flexible, culturally responsive ways of supporting mental wellness.

Second, cultural brokering is traditionally understood as bridging cultural differences in healthcare and social services.

Our findings suggest that community arts expand this idea.

Rather than a one-way process of adaptation, art spaces become sites of mutual exchange where community arts function as relational bridges, fostering connection, collaboration, and belonging.

Importantly, this reframes artists and facilitators as cultural brokers working not only through formal intervention, but through creative practice that cultivates social connection and expression.

Of course, there are limitations to this work, ranging from geographical clustering to varying definitions of community arts, which may have caused us to miss or exclude some relevant studies.

By excluding grey literature in the scoping review, we may also have excluded valuable insights from community-based organizations that lack the infrastructure to generate peer-reviewed publications.

However, this is one reason we conducted the environmental scan—to locate and include these types of resources.

I'll now pass it back to Mariangela to conclude with our recommendations.

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### **Mariangela Castro-Arteaga**

Thank you.

In terms of recommendations, it is important to continue enhancing language and cultural accessibility, including interpretation services and culturally responsive facilitation, to better accommodate diverse newcomer communities.

There is also an opportunity to expand programming for underrepresented groups such as seniors, individuals with disabilities, and a broader range of sexual and gender identities, as well as BIPOC communities.

Our findings highlight the importance of fostering long-term, sustainable programs rather than short-term or isolated initiatives in order to support lasting mental health benefits and community integration.

There is also a strong case for increasing collaboration with mental health professionals to ensure that arts-based programs are well supported and responsive to participants' emotional and psychological needs.

Finally, we recommend continuing to promote cross-disciplinary approaches, particularly through multimodal arts programming.

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### **Esty-Jo Asare**

The gaps in knowledge we identified tell us that there is both a need and an opportunity for this work to move to the forefront.

Our findings suggest that community arts are not just expressive spaces, but spaces where well-being, belonging, and possibility are actively created.

I'd like to briefly highlight where this work is going next and how you can stay connected.

This project will be featured in a *Healthy Debate* article series later this summer, helping bring these insights into broader public and policy discussions.

The full environmental scan is also now available on the new Access Alliance for Family Arts website so that this work can be shared and used in practice.

Ultimately, this project encourages us to see community arts not simply as an add-on, but as a meaningful pathway to mental and social wellness for newcomer communities.

I'll now pass it over to Dr. Charise to wrap us up.

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### **Andrea Charise**

Thank you so much, Esty-Jo and team. It has been a pleasure working together on this project.

As we move into the final minutes of our session, I invite all of us to consider: *How can researchers, policymakers, and community practitioners work together to make creative participation more accessible, sustainable, and culturally meaningful for newcomers across Canada?*

Three practical steps emerge for me from this work.

First, we need to recognize arts engagement as a legitimate component of newcomer wellness infrastructure.

The arts are not an extra; they are intrinsic to how belonging, connection, and social well-being are built.

From a policy perspective, this means embedding cultural and creative participation within public health and settlement conversations, rather than treating them as secondary or optional.

Second, we need to invest in long-term, community-led partnerships among researchers, artists, settlement organizations, and newcomer communities themselves.

Arts-based wellness initiatives must move beyond pilot projects and one-off programs toward sustained funding models.

Third, we need to expand how we define evidence in newcomer wellness research by valuing lived experience, storytelling, creative expression, and participatory methods alongside conventional clinical metrics.

This begins by ensuring that newcomers themselves are collaborators and leaders in program design, not simply participants or subjects of study.

Overall, this research shows us that if creative practices help people narrate identity, memory, and transition, then arts engagement should be understood as an intrinsic part of community care.

And if we want more equitable newcomer wellness systems, interdisciplinary collaboration is not optional—it is foundational.

I'll leave you with this question:

*What would change if we treated community arts not as peripheral to newcomer wellness, but as an integral part of the social infrastructure that makes wellness possible for everyone?*

Thank you all for being here today.

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## **Christen Kong**

Thank you Andrea, Esty and Mariangela.

Before we wrap up, we invite you to continue sharing your reflections, comments, and questions in the Zoom chat. We'd love to hear your thoughts and continue the conversation together.

### **Two upcoming announcements**

Thank you team for this valuable work. We hope those listening in take this conversation to your work and community.

Healthy Debate series called ***Arts is a Health Behaviour***. Co-written by some of us and our staff, the series explores how arts engagement can support the social determinants of health and wellbeing for newcomer communities.

And throughout June and July 2026, we'll be hosting weekly learning webinars to share findings and lessons learned from the Hubs of Expressive Arts for Life project, so we hope you'll stay connected and join us again. Emails will be sent to all attendees in today's webinar.

Thank you for being part of today's webinar session and for helping us imagine what healthier, more connected communities can look like through the arts.

Have a great rest of your day, until next time!

