



Operation Compassion
Society of British Columbia

Evaluation of Umoja's Literacy and Life Skills Program

Final Report

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Intellectual Property and Acknowledgements

This evaluation report has been prepared by external independent evaluators, Alix Wadeson (alixwadesonconsulting@gmail.com) and Michelle Naimi (michellenaimi@gmail.com), summarizing the results of an external evaluation of the Literacy and Life Skills Program of Umoja Operation Compassion Society of British Columbia. It is the intellectual property of Umoja; however, the consultants are granted to use and share it as part of their portfolio and for professional purposes such as papers, blogs, and conferences.

We wish to acknowledge the several stakeholders who contributed to this evaluation. Firstly, we want to recognize Umoja staff's utmost dedication to their work and support for this evaluation. They actively engaged in the evaluation design and implementation, organizing the workshops and interviews with clients and translators. They helped develop the Theory of Change; provided documents and their time for interviews; and reviewed the content of the report and validated key recommendations. We also wish to acknowledge the invaluable contributions of clients and volunteers of Umoja, without which the evaluation would not have been possible - we are inspired by their courage and resilience and the strong solidarity we witnessed in our time with them. We thank peer/partner organizations that supported us in this process through interviews and sharing of resources from their programming.

The images of artwork included in this report have been shared with the consent of the clients that produced them. This report may be circulated amongst staff and peer organizations for learning purposes. It is not to be published externally or online without Umoja's written consent.



Figure 1: Art-based client workshop at Umoja, Surrey BC, January 2020

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Executive Summary

Background

A considerable number of **immigrants and refugees face extreme barriers to settlement, integration, and development due to a lack of basic language and numeric skills.** Actively engaging in the community and entering the workforce are challenging for newcomers when English language skills have not yet been acquired. Furthermore, **obstacles such as poverty, low levels of literacy, unemployment, language barriers, isolation, feelings of hopelessness, and depression can exacerbate these barriers to settlement** (Umoja, 2019).

Program Summary

To help **overcome these barriers and support meaningful settlement for immigrants and refugees in Surrey, Umoja delivers a Literacy and Life Skills (L&LS) program.** It aims to equip newcomer immigrants and refugees with **reading, writing, and listening skills, in conjunction with practical life skills** needed to function effectively as parents, employees, community members and leaders. The course is designed to offer a basic foundation of English. The program began in 2005 and now serves approximately 25-30 people per year. Currently providing **levels 1 & 2 classes,** the program includes components of **basic computer and Internet classes; safety and emergency awareness; home and community-based literacy and life skills training; promotion of parenting skills; financial literacy; information and referrals to resources; support-focused activities for clients to discuss and relate** about their experiences and life in Canada. The **provision of on-site childminding** is especially relevant for clients' access as a high proportion of clients are women with young children and are the primary caregivers in their homes.

Evaluation

The **L&LS program has not been formally evaluated since it was launched nearly 15 years ago.** The aims of this evaluation are to **assess the program in order to use findings for learning and improvement,** as well as to begin **developing a culture of evaluative thinking** within Umoja and build related capacity amongst personnel. This report documents the evaluation process and findings, as well as provides recommendations for improvement based on evaluative data.

Two independent evaluators conducted the evaluation between September 2019 and May 2020. They led a **consultative and collaborative process with input from Umoja's personnel with the leadership of a Steering Committee.** The evaluation focuses on the following key criteria:

- **Relevance:** The extent to which the program is suited to the culture, capacities, needs and priorities of the clients.
- **Effectiveness:** The extent to which the program attains its objectives and intended results for the clients and community.
- **Impact:** The positive and negative changes produced by a development intervention, directly or indirectly, intended, or unintended.

The **process included several components**: a literature and document review, a staff workshop, partner interviews, a client art-based data collection workshop with current clients; former client interviews; and staff/volunteer interviews. **Key limitations were also identified** and include the small sample size, potential for bias, and Umoja's limited program and client documentation.

Key Findings

The content of the program is found to be **highly relevant to the needs of the clients**, with its focus on literacy and numeracy in conjunction with practical life skills (i.e., clients are learning the types of phrases they need to do practical daily tasks such as banking and shopping). The **curriculum is continuously updated in an adaptive manner** to include themes identified as useful and relevant based on interactions with students and as the client demographics change. The style of client engagement and classroom/learning environment promoted by the L&LS program are also found to be highly relevant in terms of demonstrating **strong cultural awareness, sensitivity and compassion while recognizing clients' needs for social ties and community building**. However, the evaluation identified a few gaps that could increase relevance in key areas, such as **strengthening capacity for a trauma-informed approach** given the demographic and context of clients. Program components, such as **free childminding and a location close to transit, are critical** as they help to reduce barriers to client participation. Still, **a long waitlist to enter the program and a limited number of classes and levels are identified as barriers** to covering the high level of needs for L&LS programming in the growing newcomer community in Surrey. Both of these limitations stem from primarily resource-based constraints of Umoja that prevent expansion at this time.

In terms of **effectiveness**, the evidence provides a **reasonably good indication of broad positive effects** participating in the L&LS program has on clients' lives related to their **capacity, mood, life outlook, cultural exposure, and social life**. While further systematic data collection is needed, based on the available evidence, it appears the blend of teaching vocabulary and content required for accessing the community around them **supports increased confidence and independence, particularly for many of the female clients**. Importantly, the program is deemed to have a **strong positive effect on clients' social lives and mental health**, often acting as a lifeline to bring them out of isolation; meet people, both from their own backgrounds and others; and offer a sense of community and belonging.

Due to data limitations, **it is not possible to draw conclusions on impact within this evaluation**. However, **on a very anecdotal level**, some examples emerged that could be plausibly linked to the program, including the **development of lasting social connections** as former clients stay in touch after leaving the program. Additionally, **active volunteering with Umoja by former clients** may also demonstrate that the program has an impact in terms of becoming a long-term part of people's lives and is **successful at harnessing these sustainable relationships amongst its clients and volunteers**. Lastly, **the impact on personnel (staff and volunteers) was communicated as being transformative**; they expressed reciprocal benefits of **insights gained and meaningful relationships with clients**.

As part of this evaluation, representatives from partner organizations in Surrey, who are **peers in the sector, were consulted to ascertain information about similar programming in**

Surrey. Similarities found between Umoja's L&LS program and peer organization programming include areas related to **program objectives and effective elements; program improvement needs; barriers for clients accessing and succeeding in the program; and the need for systematic monitoring and follow-up.** Several ideas and offers of support for Umoja's L&LS program received from peer organizations could serve as important building blocks moving forward.

Recommendations

The recommendations that emerged from this evaluation pertain to three key domains:

1) L&LS programming:

- Keep doing what the program does well! The grassroots, warm, 'family feel' is a critical characteristic built by Umoja. It is therefore important to ensure that the 'spirit' and ethos of the program are retained while the program develops.
- Integrate more levels as well as specific sessions for learners with different capacities and aims.
- Increase the capacity and roster of volunteers to support the program, for childminding especially, would increase access for clients. Explore new avenues for volunteer recruitment.
- Provide more opportunities for clients to imagine the future, to inspire hope, and to reinforce positive visions for clients' future from a strengths-based perspective.

2) Resourcing and capacity development:

- Explore ways to offer more opportunities to strengthen trauma-informed practice.
- Develop referral systems for trauma counseling and relationships with other service providers in Surrey.
- Seek out learning partnerships with other organizations.
- Through a formal scoping exercise, identify potential donors and eligibility requirements for funding for this program.

3) Monitoring, evaluation, and learning:

- Input attendance and retention figures and client demographic details into the existing database system to track and learn more about clients and the program.
- Conduct client follow-up to learn about potential program impacts.
- Engage more regularly with other organizations in the sector for coordination, cross-learning and information sharing purposes.
- Include a budget line for monitoring, evaluation and learning in program budgets to allow time and resources so these activities do not become deprioritized.

While it is recognized that it will take time and resources, if these gaps are addressed, the benefits of Umoja's L&LS program could increase the impact for clients and the organization's work in the future. Therefore, **it is also recommended that Umoja L&LS staff with the management develop a prioritized action plan** as a means to address some of these recommendations and track progress against it in the long-term.

1. Background

The [Umoja Operation Compassion Society of British Columbia](#) is a charitable organization formed in 2002 to work with low-income immigrants and refugees living in Surrey, BC. The Society seeks to help promote unity, respect, and dignity amongst minority immigrants and refugees. New immigrants and refugees can find it difficult to integrate due to obstacles such as poverty, low levels of literacy, unemployment, language barriers, isolation, feelings of hopelessness, and depression. Umoja provides a variety of culturally sensitive programs to help families, children, and youth integrate successfully into their new social environment. Umoja exists to serve those that are in need in pursuit of its Vision and Mission as follows.

Vision: “Building strong communities; moving from newcomers to neighbours.”

Mission: “To empower immigrants and refugees to successfully integrate into an inclusive Canadian society. Internationally, we support initiatives to improve the quality of life in global communities.”

One of Umoja’s core programs, **Literacy and Life Skills** (referred to onwards as L&LS) aims to equip newcomer immigrants and refugees with reading, writing, and listening skills needed to function effectively as parents, employees, community members and leaders. In Surrey, a considerable number of immigrants and refugees face extreme barriers to settlement, integration, and development because of a lack of basic language and numeric skills. Parents are challenged in participating in the broader community and entering the workforce when English language skills have not yet been acquired. Parents are unable to engage with their children in learning English and interacting with teachers for a more comprehensive understanding of how their children are doing in school. They can also be intimidated in taking steps to access community services and better integrate without language skills. As conversation, literacy and numeric skills improve, families will be one step closer to becoming contributing members of their communities. Umoja seeks to ensure that newcomers can improve their English skills, so they are better able to reach their goals as new Canadians.

There are approximately 25-30 people per year registered in the program however attendance and retention fluctuate. In 2018, 15 people graduated from the program. Clients are individuals who cannot access mainstream services due to multiple barriers, which are physical, mental, or social; as well as those who are unable to access other services due to long waitlists.

Implemented in 2005, the program is supported by funding from Gaming BC’s Community Gaming Grant, charitable foundations, and in-kind contributions from volunteers and Surrey Libraries. The program includes the following activities:

- Literacy classes levels 1 & 2 at Umoja to prepare for higher level and/or LINC courses
- Basic computer and Internet class at the library (once per week)
- Safety and Emergency Awareness
- Home and community-based literacy and life skills training
- Promotion of parenting skills
- Support-focused activities for clients to discuss and relate their experiences of life in Canada

- Information and referrals to resources for skilled trades and further education for newcomers
- On-site childminding

2. Evaluation methodology and process

2.1 Evaluation Rationale

While Umoja reports to its donors on expenditure and activities as required, the program has not been formally evaluated in its almost 15 years. The opportunity to evaluate Umoja's programming is limited as there is often a lack of resourcing to enable evaluative activities. As literacy and life skills are essential for newcomers to Canada, it was deemed as beneficial to assess the program in order to use findings for learning and improvement. It was envisioned as a useful process to understand more about client experiences and how the program suits their needs as well as information about clients who have graduated the program, to understand if there are longer-term program impacts and any contribution to clients' future adaptability and well-being in Canada.

Since the program is funded through a combination of donors and unrestricted funds and is operated by Umoja independently (without other partners), there is flexibility to revise elements of the program for improvement related to design and potential for impact. For example, updates for relevance and structure to better meet the needs and priorities of clients (which can shift over time). Evaluations can provide a source of reliable evidence to inform such changes.

Lastly, the participatory process promotes evaluative thinking and culture within Umoja and is itself a capacity building exercise for L&LS staff and volunteers who have not been engaged in evaluations or Theory of Change (ToC) development previously.

2.2 Evaluation scope, objectives, criteria, and key questions

The **scope** of the evaluation was focused specifically on the L&LS program. This was selected in consultation with the Executive Director and Program Director based on an assessment of feasibility, access to clients, flexibility of programming and potential for learning.

The **objectives** of the evaluation were to:

- assess program results and quality (i.e. what works and needs improvement).
- enable learning about the evaluation process as a capacity-building exercise.
- use findings to inform program design and implementation improvements; and
- share information with key stakeholders about the findings (staff, board, clients, peers, donors) which can also support fundraising and communications purposes.

The evaluation was designed in a consultative and collaborative manner with input from Umoja's staff and volunteers with an aim to be participatory, qualitative, inclusive, and utilization-focused in nature. Additionally, the evaluators chose to integrate arts-based data collection techniques as a means for an accessible and dynamic way to engage with clients and promote self-expression (see more in Section 2.3 below).

A Steering Committee comprised of the evaluators, the Executive Director and Program Director acted as the stewards of the evaluation and supported the overall review and approval of plans,

findings, and deliverables. The following criteria and questions were selected in consultation with the L&LS staff and Steering Committee.

Relevance: The extent to which the program is suited to the culture, capacities, needs and priorities of the clients.

Guiding Questions:

- What is the status of program attendance and retention?
- What are the reasons for good or poor attendance and retention (success and failure factors)?
- Is the program missing anything crucial in terms of learning components or the structure that would enhance the client experience?
- Are there barriers to participation and access for the most vulnerable to participate, and if so, what are they?

Effectiveness: The extent to which the program attains its objectives and intended results for the clients and community.

Guiding Questions:

- Is the program effective in preparing clients with a basic foundation of life skills and literacy as intended?
- How many/what percentage of clients go on to participate in other programs that build on what they learned in the Umoja program?
- What could be done differently by Umoja/the program to deliver a more effective program and client experience?

Impact: The positive and negative changes produced by a development intervention, directly or indirectly, intended, or unintended. This involves the main impacts and effects resulting from the activity on the local social, economic, environmental, and other development indicators.

Guiding Questions:

- What are the longer-term impacts and results of the program for Umoja's clients (i.e. within 1 to 3 years after finishing the program)?
- What if any, is the contribution of the program to clients' wellbeing and success in Canada?
- Are there any unintended positive or negative impacts of participating in the program, and if so, what are they?

2.3 Process undertaken

The following steps were undertaken to design, conduct and finalize the evaluation between September 2019 – May 2020.

- Design of evaluation Terms of Reference (ToR) (see Annex E) and meeting with the Steering Committee. Consultation with staff on the evaluation focus and ToR finalization (September 2019).
- Desk-based literature review of program documents and publicly available documentation of similar programs and relevant research in the refugee settlement sector to assess the status of L&LS programming and current evidence base. See Annexes A and B for the full report and references. (October 2019).

- A participatory workshop with Umoja staff/volunteers to present the literature review findings, explain more about evaluation and ToC, inform the evaluation design, gain initial responses to key questions, and develop the draft L&LS ToC (November 2019).
- Key informant interviews with four peer organisational representatives to obtain information about similar programming and their reflections on learning and recommendations (see Annex C). (December 2019).
- An informal workshop with current Umoja L&LS clients in which the evaluators asked participants to draw pictures in response to questions, after which they shared information about their artwork (January 2020). The questions were:
 - *What did your life here in Canada look like before you started the Umoja program?*
 - *How has your life changed since starting this program? What does it look like now?*
 - *What do you see for your life after the program? How do you envision it?*
- Key informant interviews (KIIs) with four previous clients about their recollection of experience in the L&LS program and their current life (January-February 2020).
- Key informant interviews with two Umoja staff and one volunteer working on the L&LS program to draw out further information about their experience, learning and recommendations for the program in line with the evaluation objectives criteria and questions (March 2020).
- Data analysis and report drafting by the evaluators (March-April 2020).
- Sharing of the draft with Umoja L&LS staff and the Steering Committee followed by a validation meeting to gather feedback, discuss findings and validate recommendations (April 2020).
- Finalization of the report and presentation to the Umoja Board of Directors and Members at the Annual General Meeting (May 2020).

For evaluation utilization, it is strongly recommended that the report findings be transferred to an accessible format for sharing back with clients. Furthermore, a meeting with peer organizations to discuss the report and facilitate discussion on L&LS programming in Surrey and reflections and learning is also recommended.

2.4 Ethical considerations

Evaluators implemented the evaluation in line with [Canadian Evaluation Society evaluation standards](#). They also referred to the [refugee evaluation website](#) as a useful resource and attended a Vancouver workshop held at ISS of BC which focused on good practices and guidance in evaluating refugee programs. The evaluators tried as best as possible to obtain meaningful and informed consent of participants and respect their confidentiality, taking steps to communicate and confirm ongoing informed consent in consideration of the diverse cultural and language backgrounds of participants. The evaluators requested and obtained permission for the use of artwork and other information provided by clients and staff included in this report.

2.5 Limitations

While the evaluation process and methodology generally went as planned and envisaged, there are a few key limitations to note that impact findings and methodological rigour.

- **Limited evidence on results and impact of L&LS programming in general and within Umoja’s program documentation.** Based on the literature review and documents provided by partners interviewed, the evaluators found a dearth of relevant reports or rigorous evaluations on similar programming geared at newcomers of Umoja’s client profile (i.e. more vulnerable refugees and those with extremely low levels of literacy in mother tongue and in English; and those with limited formal career/work experience and previous education). Some reports reviewed were therefore for programs that were less relevant while the most relevant study of an intensive program through a Douglas College Foundations Workplace Skills Project included two reports of high quality but the profile of participants and the program were too dissimilar to make solid linkages to Umoja’s work. This points to a need for impact-level evaluations that can guide and inform organizations, budgeting, and policy for L&LS programming. Furthermore, the documents provided by Umoja from the L&LS programming did not provide information on impact or results and were more output and activity-focused, while certain data points such as for client retention, attendance, levels of literacy capacity, etc. were unavailable.
- **Sample selection and size of former clients for interviews:** Due to the accessibility and language constraints of reaching former clients, the interviews were selected based on Umoja’s L&LS staff advice and connections between clients and the evaluation. The sample size for former clients was also quite small (4). These factors must be considered when drawing conclusions about any findings.
- **Potential for bias:** As in all research involving questions and interviews, there is a risk of social desirability and respondent bias in the data collected from key informants, especially clients. As noted above, sampling also had limitations that increase potential for bias. However, the evaluators also triangulated client interview responses with their observational evidence of the clients and interactions with Umoja staff whilst at the L&LS program, to confidently conclude that the positive nature of client accounts are genuine. That said, it is important to consider contextual, vulnerability and power dynamics when reviewing any evidence of this nature.
- **Findings on impact:** The points above resulted in insufficient evidence to rigorously evaluate the criteria of impact as intended. Thus, findings on impact presented in the report are extremely limited and inconclusive overall. It is important to highlight that a lack of evidence does not equate to a lack of impact. However, a deeper exploration with more interviews and other relevant data from former clients would be necessary to draw strong conclusions on the impact of the program on long-term well being and success.
- **Theory of Change (ToC):** ToC is a new concept and approach for Umoja and therefore more time would be necessary to build staff understanding about ToC as well as further develop a ToC that reflects a deep experience with and understanding of Umoja’s L&LS program. Constraints to time for staff engagement and feedback on the ToC development means that the ToC should be seen as a working document that is not ideal or complete, but rather as a starting point from which to build.

- **Art-based workshop experience:** It is important to note that the evaluators are new to the use of art-based evaluation methods; this evaluation was therefore a capacity-building experience for them as well. To prepare and mitigate risks, they consulted the current literature available and another evaluation expert with experience with this method. They also participated in a professional workshop session on art-based data collection prior to the Umoja client workshop. Furthermore, the workshop was attended by clients in multiple languages. While volunteer translators were kindly provided, limits on time and capacity for translation meant that there was inevitably a loss in translation of aspects of the explanations of the exercise, questions, and drawings.

Despite these limitations, the evaluators and Umoja staff reviewers are confident that it provides a reasonable and credible account of staff, volunteer and client views and experiences with L&LS and that the findings on relevance and effectiveness are useful for the intended purposes. Recommendations are based on these findings and were validated by key Umoja stakeholders.

3. Theory of Change

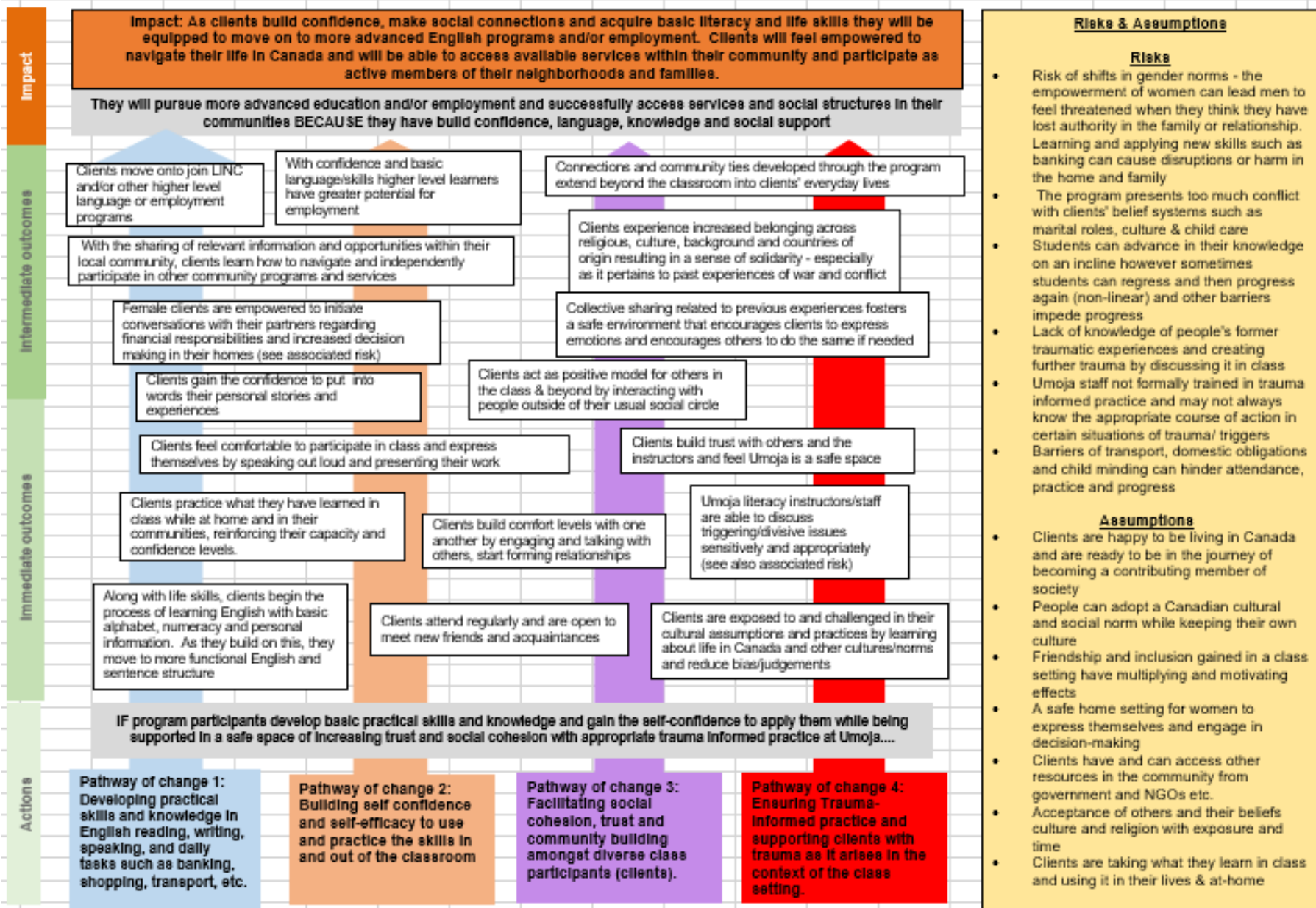
A **Theory of Change (ToC)** *“explains how activities are understood to produce a series of results that contribute to achieving the final intended impacts. It can be developed for any level of intervention – an event, a project, a program, a policy, a strategy or an organization.”* (Better Evaluation, 2020). A good ToC is context-aware and accounts for the inter-relationships between different causal assumptions and pathways for change. It should answer:

- **Who** are you seeking to influence or benefit (**target population**)?
- **What** benefits are you seeking to achieve in the long-term (**impact**) and shorter term (**immediate & intermediate results**)?
- **When** will you achieve them (**time period**)?
- **How** will you and others make this happen (**activities, strategies, inputs, etc.**)?
- **Where and under what circumstances** will you do your work (context and pre-conditions)?
- **Why and how** do you believe your theory of change will work (assumptions and risks)?

The evaluators aimed to develop a ToC for the L&LS program as a basis for understanding the program better and articulating the way that the staff envisions the “what, how and why” of changes that the L&LS program contributes. It can also serve as a useful element to include in future program documents to inform stakeholders such as donors, members, and partners.

A short workshop with staff and volunteers was held in November 2019 during which ToC concepts were explained (in brief) and then the components program ToC were jointly drafted. The evaluators worked on it after and sent it for feedback from the L&LS staff. However, it is important to note that the feedback from staff reflected that more time is required to better develop their thoughts and ideas around the questions that led to the resulting ToC. They are not completely satisfied with what is represented and view it as somewhat restrictive and limiting – as such, it should be viewed as ‘part of the picture’ but not the whole. The ToC presented herein should be seen as a working version, which should be adapted and improved over time.

A lesson for both Umoja and the evaluators is that in order to create a ToC that is detailed enough and that accurately reflects the program from the point of view of staff and key stakeholders, would require a more time-intensive back and forth process. While the process was participatory, it required more time. Had time allowed, an additional workshop to review the draft together and refine it further would have been beneficial. Additionally, revising the format to a visually appealing one (using available software options) could also make it more accessible.



Pre-Conditions: Adequate ongoing funding to run programming 3 times/week in Sept-June; enough child minding services for class time; clients that are willing and able to register; enough staff and volunteers to organize and teach the program and child minding; access to the space for teaching in Umoja and at the library.

4. Evaluation Findings

4.1 Relevance

This subsection is dedicated to findings of L&LS program relevance vis-a-vis the culture, capacities, needs and priorities of the clients, using the guiding questions in Section 2.2 as a starting point.

The two long-term L&LS staff members created the program in its current form virtually from scratch since 2013 when Umoja was facing financial issues and threat of closure. The program has been developed as an organic and evolving program over time without formalized processes for curriculum development or staff training. Therefore, the L&LS program has taken an ‘on-the-job’ and ‘trial and error’ approach to staff and program development. Umoja does not have specific or formalized needs assessments conducted for the program as a whole; however, staff noted that the needs and vulnerabilities of clients are noted when new clients enter the program and they conduct a written and oral assessment to determine their level (levels 1 and 2 provided). The program promotes a needs-based approach to meet the clients where they are and as one staff mentioned, they do their best to *“figure out what it is they need for support.”* Another staff member explained that they *“try to understand students on a personal level first; want them to feel confident and secure to practice and make mistakes.”*

This holistic view of supporting a wide range of client needs has increased over the years as staff try to integrate more time on supporting clients to address barriers they face in their lives, for example providing help to access services, translate and make appointments (as is possible with the staff’s limited available time). They are continuously updating the curriculum to include themes they identify as useful and relevant based on interactions with students and as the client demographics change. For example, a computer class at the library was added one day a week to teach basic digital literacy in recognition of this as an essential part of being able to succeed in Canada. Additionally, in response to difficulties clients face in their daily routines and capacity to move forward from past trauma, the program developed a new theme around Health and Wellness that includes topics like nutrition, exercise, and meditation. However, the staff also note their own limitations in terms of providing support for clients with trauma as they are not formally trained to do so. They have brought in specialists before and are trying to implement a trauma-informed approach; however, staff identified this as a key area where they need support for capacity strengthening in order to enhance the program’s relevance and ensure a ‘do no harm’ approach, to be more adept in the handling of sensitive discussions or emotional/traumatic triggers (within the limits of what is appropriate for their role and experience).

The style of client engagement and classroom/learning environment promoted by the L&LS program, staff and volunteers are found to be highly relevant in terms of demonstrating strong cultural awareness, sensitivity and compassion while also recognizing clients’ needs for social ties and community building. Connection with others reflects a key component the program offers to clients, beyond and perhaps more so than literacy and life skills development. Isolation, loneliness, and sadness were frequently cited by clients as challenges they faced before entering the Umoja L&LS program. Many expressed that being in the program has helped with

these immensely (see more in effectiveness below). The following quotes highlight this and exemplify the value that Umoja's program offers to clients:

- *"Clients often come to us in despair. They may be isolated, single parents, in need of a safe place, a community, to think about something other than their trauma"*
- *"Staff really care about the students. It's not just about learning English. We are taking care of more than English lessons, we are helping them in other ways – we visit them, offer supports when they need it, we are becoming friends even."*
- *"As staff, we are very hands-on, we do all of the initial interviews and always interact with clients with compassion and understanding. In the past, we have tried to be hard-nosed about attendance but when someone tells you why they can't come we are completely understanding. At the heart of Umoja is the warm space. Staff are all on the same page about what we're here to do."*

Furthermore, the staff understand that there are cultural and contextual differences (i.e. type of trauma or environment that clients come to Canada from) and that not all of them will express their needs in the same ways – some are more reserved and will not ask for anything while others are more assertive and open. Therefore, the approach of getting to know clients as individuals with non-judgement and compassion and building trust holds a significant emphasis in the L&LS program, which is found to be highly relevant for serving the diverse population of Surrey's newcomers.

Other aspects that make the L&LS program relevant are small class sizes to be able to cater to different needs and the fact that Umoja allows anyone to enter without asking questions about their status in Canada (many other programs reviewed for the evaluation have certain restrictions on who can attend). The location of Umoja in a high-density area of Surrey (Guildford) with a large number of lower-income/more vulnerable newcomers means that the program can be accessed by many on foot since Umoja cannot offer bus fare or transportation due to financial limitations of the program. Bad weather can be a barrier to attendance, however. The presence of some multi-lingual staff and volunteers from different backgrounds who can relate to the newcomer experience is also positive in terms of relevance and potentially effectiveness, and this is backed up by literature review findings. However, perhaps the most impactful aspect of the program is the offering of childminding during the two classes per week at Umoja. Both the literature reviewed and interviews with clients and staff emphasize a lack of childcare as a major barrier to access and provision of it as a major incentive for enrolment and attendance. With these positives comes limits on the number of people Umoja can serve in the program since many clients have multiple children and Umoja has a limited number of staff and volunteers available to provide childminding services and can only offer one class (for levels 1 and 2) from 10 am - noon three times per week at present. Long waitlists to enter the program is a barrier to covering the high level of needs for L&LS programming in the growing newcomer community in Surrey.

It is not possible for the evaluators to make overall conclusions about the level of attendance and retention or related trends for instance pertaining to certain client population groups because there are not any overall datasets available for these purposes. While attendance and enrolment figures are recorded on paper, this is not aggregated or analyzed by the staff, or available for the evaluators to review in a format that would allow for this. This is linked to wider gaps in monitoring, evaluation and learning about programming within the L&LS program and at

Umoja more generally. However, the new Apricot database system recently put into place by Umoja offers an opportunity to track this more systematically and the compiled data could be extremely useful for reporting, donor, learning and planning purposes.

Without having the level of detail or expertise to evaluate literacy from the perspective of an experienced English Speakers of Other Language (ESOL) educator, the evaluation finds that the literacy content on offer are found to be of good relevance overall as Umoja is working with many clients who are pre-literate English learners, having no or limited literacy in their mother tongue. Accordingly, the L&LS program also focuses on building clients' ability to 'learn to learn' topics such as punctuality, daily routines, tolerance/respect in the classroom, attendance, etc. since many students are not used to a classroom environment and there are differences in cultural expectations around attendance and being on time for class. As a bridging program between no exposure to a more formalized and structured LINC program, Umoja's L&LS program fills a need and is relevant. That said, the literacy content and pace of the program is a bit less relevant for those with high literacy in their mother tongue and previous education who learn and level out quickly as Umoja cannot provide more levels at present. While Umoja is inclusive in its classes with an 'everyone welcome' approach, those with different learning needs such as older persons may struggle to keep pace with the rest of the class while those with higher capacity may not receive enough challenges. A few people interviewed (both clients and staff) noted that providing separate classes for certain groups and more levels would be useful to address these issues, however, it is mainly a question of time and resources available. Therefore, within these limits the program is doing its best to meet a wide range of literacy needs of clients from many different backgrounds.

The life skills content is also found to be relevant to the needs of the clients, generally speaking. Staff explained the importance of focusing on skills, not just language and on functional phrases for daily life, not just ABCs. Therefore, the literacy content and thematic areas for life skills are matched in the syllabus so that clients are learning the types of phrases they need to do practical daily tasks such as go to the bank or shop, for example. The literature reviewed highlighted that the more practical the learning content (on employment and citizenship for example), the more learning is retained and the more people are motivated to practice, so this combination works well and should be enhanced as much as possible. In particular, financial literacy and employment are key areas that staff mentioned as relevant and this is supported by the workshop artwork and discussions with clients. Many of them, when asked about their future, emphasized the desire to work and gain employment, help others, and give back. However, many clients in the program are at the beginning of their literacy and learning journey and there are limits in what Umoja can provide in this regard. Still, it would be beneficial to continue integrating these types of sessions and components as much as possible with perhaps more sessions on future planning. Also, Umoja should facilitate linkages between clients that demonstrate high potential with training and employment programs, including Umoja's new IRCC funded program for employment for visible minority newcomer women.

Umoja is providing a client-centred approach that demonstrates an adaptive management style of programming, continually testing new things and adjusting to the evolving context of the Surrey newcomer landscape within the limits of internal funding and resources available. This seems to have worked well to date with clients and staff expressing satisfaction with the content and style of the program. However, as Umoja continues to evolve into a larger organization with

aims to expand, it may be useful to have in place more formalized processes and resources for curriculum and staff development; client needs and capacity assessment and tracking; and more options for levels and types of classes. That said, the evaluators stress that the adaptive approach, individualized attention and informal ‘family’ feel of the program should be retained as it is clearly appreciated, serving the needs of clients to feel a sense of belonging and decrease isolation while building practical skills for life in Canada and a basic literacy foundation. One staff expressed this view as follows, *"I think what clients like most is the promise of finding a place of belonging, hope and refuge - which is really at the heart of the program."*

Areas that would enhance client experience to help make it more relevant and to better meet their needs include the following, which are also noted further in the recommendations:

- Building capacity of staff/volunteers on a trauma-informed approach with skills and techniques for addressing sensitive issues or emotional triggers as well as continuing to increase activities/sessions for processing trauma in a safe and responsible way.
- Guest speakers and field trips are noted as well-received and great opportunities for clients to apply their learning in the real world and increase exposure to different types of people and resources. It also lessens the burden on staff time for planning to have someone present and lead a session. However, there are barriers to increasing these as it is difficult to arrange guest speakers because of the heavy translation support required while field trips come with logistical barriers of transport (buses are not an option for clients with young children).
- Increasing levels offered and separate classes that are more tailored for specific groups would strengthen the program’s relevance and coverage, if resources and funding allow for it in the future. In addition to this, more resourcing of volunteers and staff for childminding is clearly a priority to emphasize.

4.2 Effectiveness

The findings on effectiveness are aimed to understand how effective the L&LS program is at achieving its intended objectives, per Umoja’s L&LS webpage, to:

1. Build English conversational skills.
2. Learn to read basic English and do basic mathematics.
3. Gain enough confidence to eventually access LINC or career programs.
4. Learn about and understand life in Canada.
5. Increase confidence in listening, reading, speaking, and writing in English, accessing community resources, and taking care of their family members.

Other benefits on the website for the program linked to assessing effectiveness are:

1. The clients are brought out of isolation and equipped with the necessary skills to read, write, and communicate in English.
2. The clients have the opportunity to make friends and relate with people from other countries and different cultures.

We used the guiding questions in Section 2.2 as a starting point. As mentioned in the limitations section, it is important to highlight that these findings are based on a limited qualitative dataset

consisting of a small sample size of interviews and one workshop with clients. Furthermore, concrete literacy outcomes are not possible to draw with the evidence available (i.e. regarding progress attained or if the majority of clients progress to LINC or more advanced literacy programs). Although we cannot be as specific on these points, the evidence on hand still provides a reasonably good indication of broad effects participating in the L&LS program has on clients' lives related to their capacity, mood, life outlook, cultural exposure and social life.

Literacy: The accounts provided in both the workshop and interviews with clients and staff/volunteers indicate that partaking in the program supports clients to develop their English language skills in terms of basic literacy and numeracy, with a focus on practical themes such as transportation, health and wellness, job readiness/searching, financial literacy and citizenship. The extent and pace at which clients develop seems highly dependent on several different variables, including prior exposure to formal education and language study; time and motivation to practice; consistency of attendance, etc.; age is highlighted as a factor as well (which is also supported in the literature reviewed). The emphasis on the program is to support people who are pre-literate or have little to no English, however, beyond the two levels provided, Umoja does not stream clients in other ways to meet different capacity or special needs. If a student were to attend every class, they would receive over 300 hours of exposure, which is a good foundation especially if they practice regularly and complete their homework. However for most students, it is highly likely that they would need several more hours and continued exposure in the long-term to reach an intermediate or advanced English level that is required to be accepted to a post-secondary/vocational program in English, or to work in a job requiring this level of English.

As per the discussion on relevance above, Umoja does not systematically collect or track data on progress in numeracy and literacy, or test to formally 'pass' clients at the end of their time in the program, therefore we cannot draw conclusions about the percentage that continue onto more advanced programming. This is reserved for more formal programs such as LINC. While it is not necessarily recommended that Umoja integrate heavy testing given the program's focus, it would still be useful to track different indicators of client attention, retention, and learning; this could be done with the Apricot database. It would also be useful to hold exit interviews as a chance for client feedback and to gain insight into their experiences. Without this, it is difficult to know what elements of the program are most and least effective for literacy especially, and to make targeted improvements, if there is not any way to track or assess this more robustly. While trial and error and a more organic approach have worked well for developing and updating L&LS program themes and content, it is not as useful for understanding more granular details about effectiveness, such as what works for teaching literacy to Umoja's target population; how the program affects reading, writing, speaking or comprehension skills differently; or who progresses well (or not as well) and why.

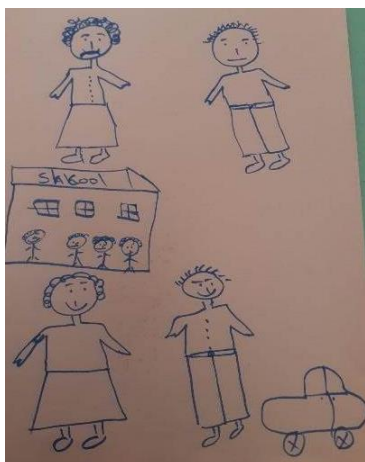
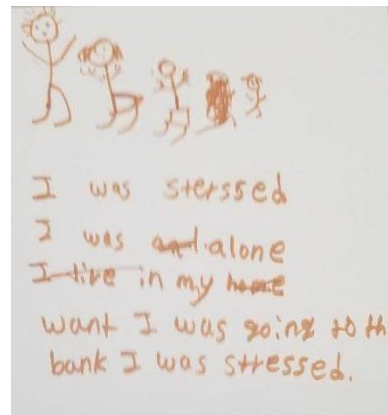
Furthermore, the staff recognize their own limitations in terms of teaching English in that they were not teachers prior to working at Umoja and did not receive formal training to do so. Umoja did however partner with Mosaic a few years ago (a larger peer non-profit offering similar programming) who provided coaching and support to Umoja for their L&LS program development. A similar program could be beneficial to build on this for continued professional development and to support the program as Umoja continues to grow as an organization. One interviewee explained that, *"Maintaining consistent structure in lesson planning has been a*

challenge. I feel we are at a bit of a stalemate...need to strategize about what's most beneficial for clients. Right now, we are defaulting to the basics, but we really need resources and tools to help us grow." They would therefore welcome opportunities for capacity strengthening in this regard which could serve the purpose of motivating staff as well as creating an even better program experience.

With those caveats in mind, the program is judged by the evaluation as effective for the purpose of being a stepping stone to more formal and robust literacy education, offering clients a basic foundation and exposure to English in a safe and encouraging setting that they would not have access to otherwise. It is this enabling environment and the related social aspects that the evaluation deems to be more effective in terms of positive changes to clients' lives.

Life skills: As mentioned, the practical themes help anchor the program to be most useful and effective for making a difference in the daily lives of clients. By teaching vocabulary and content required for accessing the community around them, the aim is for Umoja to support clients in building the confidence and understanding to participate in daily life and build self-efficacy, contributing to their well-being, and potential for long-term success in Canada. Increased independence is also a positive change expressed by many of the women clients, since oftentimes their husbands are finding employment and learning English first. The images and explanations below are examples:

"When I came here, I didn't know anyone, only my husband knew English. I was very stressed and had no one to talk to, I was lonely. When I went to the bank, I got very stressed. No words to express myself... The picture is of my husband, myself, and my kids. Her husband first and they are all following him in a line [she said this, in a literal and metaphorical way]. I am happy now; I have made friends (here) from my country and we meet outside of class." (Translated explanation from client workshop).



"The top half of the picture represents me and my husband, shortly after arriving in Canada. I am tired, sad, depressed, and too shy to talk to anyone. In this new country, I didn't know where to go shopping, how to access a doctor. [In the drawing] my husband also has a sad face because he had no job and no car. Our children were not in school as we did not know about the education system. In the bottom half of the picture, me and my family are smiling and happy. My children are now in school and are doing well. My husband has a job and it pays well enough that we have been able to buy a car. I am becoming more confident and can communicate with others in English. We now have a better life and I am happy." (Translated explanation from client workshop).

Finances and employment are a significant concern for many clients, as they are often members of lower-income and high vulnerability populations of newcomers upon arrival in Canada. Therefore, the decision to focus part of the course on themes of job readiness and financial literacy makes sense. There is a limit to the amount Umoja can prepare clients in this area, since the language and skills training required for formal employment is much higher than what Umoja can offer within the scope of L&LS program.

However, the more that Umoja can integrate these topics in feasible, relatable ways with guest speakers, role models, and exposure, the more clients may be able to see potential for their future and pursue other language and education programs or training after finishing at Umoja. It is worth noting that when asked about envisioning their future in the workshop, clients were quite excited and animated, offering many ideas and hopes for their future employment and ways they want to help others in their life in Canada. Even for those who did not see employment for themselves, volunteering (at Umoja) was highlighted. This is plausible given that many of Umoja's current volunteers were once clients themselves. A couple of clients also expressed that they had not been asked about this before and were pleased to have the chance to talk about it. This highlights the importance of the program as a source of empowerment and confidence; clients bring several skills to offer and a drive to support their community, not just receive support themselves. As one staff noted,

"Our clients are living with enormous amounts of stress, pressure and trauma. We must deliver our program with a trauma-informed awareness. ...[but] as much as clients are arriving to Canada with trauma and a great deal of stress, we also need to recognize they carry with them individual hopes and dreams for the future that we can help to nurture and breathe life into!"

In reference to hopes and dreams, the clients responded very positively to the workshop drawing exercise and discussion about their visions for their future. They expressed a wide array of aspirations for employment, helping others and contributing to Canadian society, demonstrating their capacity, resilience, and compassion. Some examples are below:

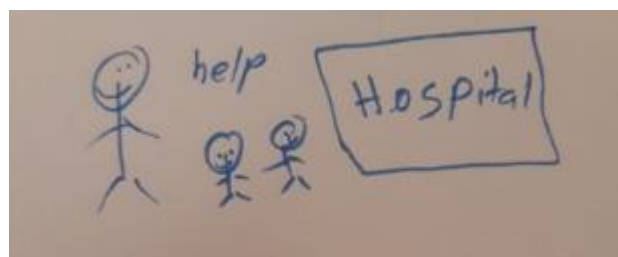


(Left) This is a picture of one client cleaning and minding children. *"When I graduate from Umoja, I want to help clean and cook and childmind at Umoja [because] I feel like I want to help Umoja. It feels good when I think about the future because I want to help take care of people.*



(Right) *"These are all the career options [I have in mind]. I like to style people. I studied foreign languages before, in my home country, so I think I could be a translator. I want to go to college to get certified. Before I worked at home in*

telecoms customer service. I imagine my future is bright and happy because I have the capacity and can improve."



"I would like to work as a translator in a hospital. Usually, people in hospital are not happy because they are sick or injured. So, if I can be a translator, I can help people. I really enjoy helping people and making them happy. I will likely have to go to school to become a translator...I know will have to improve my English before I can be accepted to school."

Teaching style and environment: Despite not bringing formal ESOL teacher education or experience (with the exception of one volunteer who worked as a librarian), it is clear that the staff and volunteers are effective at creating a safe and supportive learning environment while also demonstrating a high degree of care and compassion in their teaching style and engagement with clients. This is evidenced in several ways throughout the evaluation – the accounts of both former and current clients and the staff themselves; evaluator observations of the class in session and the staff-students interactions; the artwork from the workshop which highlighted the improvements in mood that clients attributed to being a part of the L&LS program.

It is difficult to express or place a value on the significance of this on people’s lives, as this can impact a range of feelings and perceptions such as around trust, confidence, humanity and belonging which can, in turn, contribute positively on several domains of behaviours and practices such as integration and community building; helping others/’giving back’; tolerating/embracing differences, etc. The L&LS program is deemed highly effective at fostering an enabling environment, the impact of which should not be underestimated, even if it cannot be quantified. As a staff explained, *“What has to happen for learning to take place is you have to provide a safe, comfortable, nurturing environment - that is what Umoja does best.”*

Social relationships and mental health: A consistently repeated and tangible effect that the program brings based on the evidence reviewed is around the impact on clients’ social lives and mental health, often acting as a lifeline to bring them out of isolation; meet people, both from their own backgrounds and others; and offer a sense of community and belonging. While the literacy and life skills components can be valuable (while the level of progress is individual and dependent on several factors) and are the likely the ‘draw’ for many people to enter the program, it seems likely that the effectiveness of the program is strongest from a social perspective, at least when speaking in a more general sense. As one interviewee said, *“Many clients come here to learn English, but they end up developing a community with other clients and staff.”*

Almost all clients’ accounts, when asked about life before and after Umoja, focus heavily on the social exposure and access, helping to improve their mood, make social connections and reduce stress, isolation, and loneliness. Many drawings depicted a before and after change in this way, as reflected in the examples below:

“Before I was alone with my daughter and husband. When I came to Umoja made friends and learned some English. The white on the picture before is because I was sad and lonely before coming. Then the other part of the picture is coloured because I am happy now. Before I didn’t go out; coming here helped me to go out and do things.” (Translated explanation from client workshop).

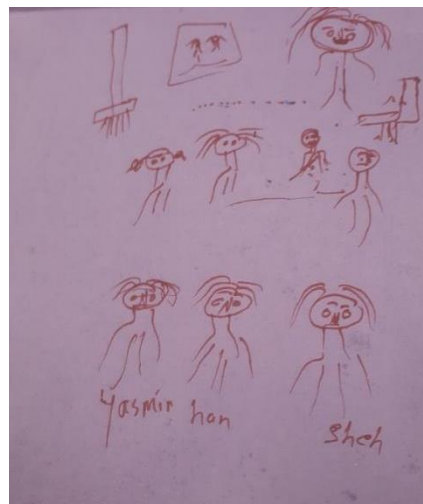




(Left) *I was very sad and stressed alone with my son at home while other kids at school. I heard about Umoja and started to have fun and meet friends from different places. When I remember this, I didn't have friends or know how to go anywhere.” (Translated explanation from client workshop).*

(Right) *“The image on the top half of the page is of me and my children when they first arrived in Canada. We are at home watching tv, feeling bored and isolated. The image on the bottom half of the page is my life*

now. There has been a dramatic change in my life since attending Umoja. My vocabulary is improving, I can count and knows some letters, and I have made friends. I like coming here, the teachers are helpful. I feel happy to think about my progress and I am sure my English will get better.” (Translated explanation from client workshop).



Trauma: Addressing trauma and sensitive topics or knowing how to handle related triggers is an area emphasized as a critical one to build capacity for staff and integrate into the program. Staff recognize the importance of a trauma-informed approach and are eager to ensure this, while they also know they have limitations here and that there are aspects only a relevant professional should tackle. The program is looking into ways it can integrate this responsibly. *“Once, we also brought in a clinical counsellor, however that backfired because clients shared some quite graphic stories and it was traumatizing for others, but the counsellor just left, and we didn't know how to respond. One thing we did try was hosting some art sessions to try to get clients to express their feelings around trauma: “I am more than my trauma”. It was an experiment on our part but was beneficial in the end, the clients did not want to stop the activity. We will certainly do it again.”*

When asked about this area, former clients did not recall any sensitive or difficult issues raised in class or experiencing trauma triggers. However, in the artwork and explanations, a few clients mentioned previous hardships faced before coming to Canada. It is therefore a complex area for staff to handle; there are risks to both doing nothing (i.e. not addressing trauma) or taking actions that could create more distress. Overall this is an area worth exploring and building upon to ensure the staff are confident in their ability to handle these issues if they arise, refer clients to available services (which are unfortunately limited) and ensure that clients feel supported to the extent that is possible in the program scope.

4.3 Impact

Impact refers to higher-level outcomes or changes for the lives of clients and their communities (economic, social, etc.) in the long-term to which the program contributes. The ToC above identifies impact for the L&LS program as follows:

“As clients build confidence, make social connections and acquire basic literacy and life skills they will be equipped to move on to more advanced English programs and/or employment. Clients will feel empowered to navigate their life in Canada and will be able to access available services within their community and participate as active members of their neighborhoods and families.”

The L&LS page on the Umoja website identifies different related program benefits as follows:

1. It gives the organization the exposure needed to help immigrants and refugee families from different countries to successfully settle down in Canada.
2. The program brings about well-informed members of the community that can easily exercise his/her civic rights and assume a position of responsibility.
3. It produces focused and fully engaged members of the community, having less time for anti-social activities

Impact was included as one criterion in the evaluation design and ToR, because it is an area that Umoja would like to know more about since there is no current means or system to track and assess this in L&LS or other Umoja programs. It is also beneficial for the immigrant and refugee settlement sector in general to better understand the added value and sustainability of results of such programming for newcomers' wellbeing and how this links to positive changes in their communities. Policymakers and donors can be better informed in their decision-making about support and funding for such programs if these impacts are well-evidenced and impact level data provides an anchor for civil society organizations like Umoja to advocate for more funding. The lack of impact level evidence, especially for more vulnerable populations of newcomers, is a gap found not only in Umoja's program, but within the literature reviewed for other similar programs in Canada. Furthermore, the partner organizations interviewed did not have any reviews or evaluations available either, apart from one (which was quite useful).

Unfortunately, the limited number of former clients interviewed due to limits on time and resources for the evaluation and lack of data on follow-up by Umoja with former clients to track what they are doing since leaving the program means that it is not possible to draw conclusions on impact within this evaluation.

On a very anecdotal level, the following relevant examples are provided based on the interviews conducted with the four former clients, which can be plausibly linked to the Umoja L&LS program.

- **Social connections:** One client spoke about friendships made in the program that continue to this day, a few years after and that they try to visit each other. Another mentioned keeping in touch with contacts through social media but that there is limited time due to work and domestic duties to see them in person. Another mentioned they made friendly contacts in the program, but they did not keep in touch because the relationships were not that strong, and they are busy.
- **Higher-level literacy programming:** Two of the four former clients interviewed pursued other literacy programming but have since stopped. One of them stopped because of a

lack of childcare in the LINC program they accessed which highlights the importance of this service and relevance of Umoja including it within the L&LS program.

- **Volunteering and civic engagement:** Three of the four former clients interviewed are engaged in volunteering – two at Umoja and the other social service non-profit organizations. For example, one explained that *“Now I volunteer with Umoja as a translator, which is another opportunity for me to practice English. The Umoja staff gave me the confidence to be a translator and I am very happy now that I can help others just as they helped me.”* It is relevant to note that several of the current clients (who engaged in the workshop) also expressed a desire to help others and volunteer with Umoja after graduating from the program.
- **Employment:** three of the four former clients interviewed are not working due to domestic demands of childcare and age (senior citizens), while one is currently employed.

Based on these accounts, one could make an unsubstantiated claim that the program may have contributed to these clients’ social life, progress to other literacy programs and their volunteer service. We could also logically assume that similar benefits *could* have materialized for others in the program, however, this would need to be tested and evidenced, and therefore such claims cannot be made at present. Furthermore, the distribution of impacts in terms of who benefits the most (or least) and why are not possible to make any inferences or conclusions about.

While impacts on clients and communities are not evidenced herein, we can offer insight on impacts of the L&LS program on the staff and volunteers based on the interviews:

- **People’s transitions between roles and long-term relationships with the program:** Both L&LS staff members started as Umoja volunteers several years ago while many of current volunteers in the program (including for childminding) started as clients, while many current clients expressed they want to volunteer in future with Umoja. This demonstrates that the program has an impact in terms of becoming a long-term part of people’s lives and is successful at harnessing these sustainable relationships amongst its clients and volunteers, at least to a degree (there is no data on other levels of volunteer retention). This is relevant to note as Umoja relies on volunteers for several aspects of programming and the retention of staff long-term is an asset to the organization for several reasons – institutional memory, client relationships and bonds, quality of service, etc.
- **Reciprocal benefits of program involvement for L&LS staff and volunteers.** The exposure of program staff and volunteers to clients and the sector in general have contributed to their awareness, compassion, and gratitude. For example, one interviewee explained that when starting at Umoja, *“I didn’t know anything about Umoja, I wasn’t passionate about working with immigrants and refugees. This role has taught me to be grateful to live in the country we do and that is reinforced every day.”* Another expressed that, *“Sometimes I complain about the little things but seeing that some people are struggling with something even bigger...puts things in perspective. That’s why I am still going and helping whenever I can. I think it is good for my soul too... the students have touched me, their situation touched me and I wanted to help...Every time after a volunteer session, I felt empowered and I look forward to go back again.”* This is

relevant to impact as it logically helps Umoja serve its wider purpose of building compassionate and socially cohesive communities comprised of both newcomers and citizens of Canada. This vision can be championed by staff and volunteers involved in these types of programs.

In order to assess impact and allow for more robust evaluations and learning around this topic, Umoja and its donors would need to prioritize internal systems for tracking relevant data as well as ringfence budgets for rigorous independent impact evaluations. While we recognize the high resource scarcity in the sector and that it is challenging to allocate funding for such purposes, it is the only way to credibly and reliably evaluate the long-term impacts and changes that Umoja's L&LS programming is contributing to, for its clients and their communities. Advocating to donors for the need for this type of resourcing in addition to sufficient core funding for staff, overheads and programming is recommended; it can also be done jointly with other civil society actors in the sector. The international development sector funding reflects a trend in this direction with donors showing a willingness to allow for healthy M&E budgets so that programs can learn, adapt, and improve. Perhaps Umoja could advocate to donors with other partners.

5. Comparisons and reflections from partner programming

This section is dedicated to findings from key informant interviews that were conducted with representatives from four partner organizations in Surrey, who are peers in the sector. Some are current partners on other programs. These interviews were undertaken with the intention of ascertaining information about similar literacy and life skills programming, focused specifically on their reflections regarding learning and recommendations that could be applied to Umoja's L&LS program. The sample of peer organizations was small; however, they represent a diverse range of literacy and life skills programming. Program types offered by these organizations range from conversation circles to structured class instruction. All programs offered by peer organizations are currently free and provide both literacy and life skills education. Some programs are open to all, including visitors to Canada, while others are targeted towards immigrants and refugees, and some offer group-specific programming, such as women-only classes. Some participants are newcomers while others have lived in Canada for years. They all require registration to attend and all were in-person programs (no online component) running over a range of times and days of the week, and overall duration. The list of organizations interviews is found in Annex C while the partner KII Questionnaire Tool is found in Annex D.

Program objectives and effective program elements: Overall, representatives from each partner organization indicated that their programs were effective in meeting their objectives. While the program specifics and contexts in which they operate differ from program to program, some key indicators of their success can be discerned, particularly as they relate to evaluation findings of Umoja's L&LS program. For many, the focus of the program goes well beyond literacy and numeracy skill development, as one representative stated: *"Practicing English is the last piece of the puzzle – clients are building relationships, they have smiles on their faces, they are happy to have an activity outside of the home where they can form social connections and decrease isolation."* Some described clients being happy to be in the program and feeling a sense of belonging and caring for one another, such as checking in with student peers when they miss a class. Others described the increased confidence experienced by clients when

interacting with others while shopping or applying for jobs, for example. It should be noted that half of the organizations interviewed are currently measuring indicators and objectives in a systematic way, while others drew conclusions through anecdotes and informal observations.

Program elements were explored, particularly as they relate to meeting objectives. Partner organization representatives noted that it was important for the program content to be relevant and geared towards clients' needs (i.e. banking, taxes, first aid, accessing community centres and libraries) and that the content is responsive to changing needs. It is also important that clients feel comfortable participating in the program, that they are encouraged when they make mistakes, for example. Representatives also discussed the importance of recognizing the multiple barriers clients face and that the program try to address these as a means of decreasing barriers to participation (i.e. volunteers in one organization take care of crying babies so mothers can participate in the class without feeling anxious about being separated from their babies, which helps to support their continued participation in the program). Lastly, it was noted that it is important to match participants with volunteers from similar language and cultural backgrounds to provide transition support during the program. Many of the aspects discussed here by peer organizations overlap with the evaluation findings of the L&LS program, suggesting that while program specifics differ, there are nevertheless some key areas that contribute to effective literacy and life skills programs, such as a relevant and flexible curriculum, and having a compassionate understanding of the multiple barriers faced by clients.

Identifying areas for program improvement: While the information in this section is certainly dependent upon the individual program and its context, there are also some notable similarities with those noted regarding Umoja's L&LS program. One issue raised was the long waitlists for people who want to attend the program, while concurrently, attendance for those already registered in the program is not always consistent. One organization has tried to address this by allowing drop-ins to the program since not all registrants attend each class; however it should be noted that this program is a conversation circle and therefore does not have a set curriculum like Umoja's program, so it may be more amenable to allowing drop-in participation. Another organization indicated they had the opposite issue, in that they had significant challenges in recruiting participants. They were unclear on why this was the case and were considering discontinuing the program as a result. This is interesting given the demand for this type of programming expressed by Umoja and others. However, they had not conducted any evaluative or learning exercises to determine potential to a lack of clientele in the program. This underscores the potential value of evaluative exercises to understand causal or contributing factors to a program's effectiveness, relevance, and general success along with challenges.

Other areas for improvement identified by peer organizations are similar to those emphasized by Umoja. They include recruiting and retaining volunteers; continual funding insecurity; staying informed of continually changing programs and services available in the area; and the need to collect (more) data and engage in (more) evaluative practices to help guide program improvement. Although one organization noted that current funding structures do not provide for evaluative needs or staff training to the degree it needs to be, highlighting an area for joint advocacy for funders. The Recommendations Section below provides actionable steps to begin to address some of these.

Barriers for clients in accessing and succeeding in the program: Family responsibilities were cited as a key barrier to participation, particularly for mothers. Access to programming and services has gendered implications and is often determined by household and cultural gender norms. For those with school-aged children, programs must take place during school hours, and for those with younger children, access to childminding is essential. Still, if their child is sick or another family member needs them, attendance will be impacted. This highlights the critical importance of the childminding Umoja provides for clients and the need to sustain and grow such support in order to ensure that women and the most vulnerable of clients can access essential programming like L&LS.

Financial constraints were also cited as a major barrier to participation, including the high cost of transportation to get to and from the program, insecure housing due to economic vulnerability - as some clients suddenly move and are no longer able to attend the program, in addition to employment and other time/schedule conflicts. Many of these barriers have also been discussed above in relation to Umoja's L&LS clients.

Peer organizations have tried various strategies to address low attendance rates and, in some cases, address barriers to participation. Similar to Umoja, several organizations noted that they contact clients who have missed several classes to find out about their situation. One organization provides clients who are vulnerable or experiencing a crisis with additional support through a Settlement Counselor. Another noted that they tried a refundable deposit system to encourage more consistent attendance, though they did not find this to be an effective strategy. Given the barriers to attendance, this strategy was likely ineffective because clients are not, for the most part, choosing not to attend; rather they have other responsibilities and time conflicts that prevent attendance.

Addressing client trauma and sensitive topics: As noted by one key informant “[it’s] always a risk that trauma can come up” and there was some variation in the ways in which partner organizations addressed this risk. Two representatives noted that all staff within its organization are trained using a trauma-informed approach so they are aware of how trauma works and present class material in a way that is mindful not only of trauma, but also about gender norms and cultural nuances. One organization also held a workshop on power and privilege to help instructors think more about their own perspectives and biases. The other has recently developed a new curriculum using a trauma-informed approach. It is important to note that these two programs are geared specifically towards immigrant and refugee women who are pre-literate or have low levels of literacy and are experiencing multiple barriers and therefore may be more likely to have experienced past trauma. Similarly, much of Umoja’s clientele are of a similar profile; therefore, such curriculum and training support would be a significant added value for L&LS and all Umoja’s staff in general. These organizations have a clear understanding of the barriers and have developed their programming in consideration of this. See the Recommendations section for more information regarding support for Umoja in integrating a more trauma-informed approach into its programs.

The practice employed by the other two partner organizations was to teach staff/volunteers about what topics to avoid and how to handle the conversation if a sensitive topic comes up

during class, for example by acknowledging with empathy and respect, then re-directing the class conversation. They are also able to refer clients to appropriate resources, if needed.

Monitoring and follow-up: Two of the four peer organizations are currently tracking student attendance and progress systematically during the program, collecting feedback at the end of the program, as well as conducting follow-up with students after they have left the program. This follow-up was noted as a priority for one organization, as they described having outreach volunteers to conduct follow-ups during which they recommend more advanced programs or refer to other types of programs, and encourage former participants to volunteer with the organization. A third organization stated that while follow-up was not possible, they were aware of some groups meeting up organically after the course. The fourth organization said they would like to do monitoring and follow-up but do not have the capacity for such activities. As mentioned in earlier sections, implementing systematic monitoring and follow-up practices could be particularly useful for reporting, donor, learning and planning purposes as well as to inform wider sector learning and advocacy. Like some partner organizations, Umoja is also experiencing resource constraints in this area, although the new Apricot database system recently put into place by Umoja offers an opportunity to collect and analyze this important data.

6. Key recommendations and concluding remarks

The recommendations below were generated based on staff and client inputs as well as the evaluators' professional insight from working with non-profit organizations. However, the evaluators want to emphasize that staff already recognize gaps in the programming and are aware of their own capacity. We also appreciate that several recommendations require resources, and therefore are a challenge to implement without additional staff time and funding. However, the main purpose of the recommendations is to document and evidence them based on credible evaluative data to support Umoja to advocate for these needs and growth in resources for this valuable program.

6.1 Recommendations for L&LS programming

Keep doing what the program does well: Part of the purpose of this evaluation is to validate what is working and celebrate it (based on credible evidence!). The grassroots, warm, 'family feel' is a unique selling point of Umoja. It seems to be one that is working effectively for clients and addresses their needs for comfort and compassion as they embark on their first steps to learning English and life skills for living in Canada. It is therefore important to ensure the 'spirit' and ethos of the program are retained whilst working to build in more technical skills for staff; systematic processes for planning, monitoring, and learning; and strategic thinking for future program development.

Levels: As resources allow, build upon the success of the current program to integrate more levels as well as specific sessions for learners with different capacities and aims, such as classes for seniors and others with more specialized learning needs taught at a different pace.

Childminding: The offer of childminding is identified as a significant enabler for access to the program and is key for clients, especially women, to attend. Increasing the capacity and roster of volunteers to support the program, for childminding especially, would increase access.

New avenues for volunteers: Linked to above, while volunteer recruitment and retention are challenges in general for Umoja, it is advisable to focus strategic attention and planning in doing so and exploring new avenues. This could potentially be done through a targeted outreach campaign for volunteers from the community especially former clients, retired education and/or childcare professionals and secondary/post-secondary students who need experience and volunteer hours. For example, advertising on social media and websites such as charity village, different universities/college programs (international development, social sciences, and non-profit sectors), the City of Surrey, and professional bodies that engage around similar issues such as the BC Council from international Cooperation (BCCIC) of which Umoja is a member. More targeted effort in identifying promising clients across all programs who can be asked to volunteer and using the board connections. Following another organization's model; an existing volunteer could reach out to former clients and ask about their interest and availability. Although volunteer coordination is a large task and it takes valuable staff time, shifting a bit more staff time for this purpose could yield a high return on investment.

Imagining the future: Staff already work hard to integrate practical daily life skills and topics around which to anchor English learning, and also bring in speakers on financial literacy for example. One session is geared towards preparing for life after the program and job opportunities. This is critical and should be expanded as much as possible, especially for Level 2. Even if many clients are not yet at an English level for employment, the art-based workshop demonstrated the value for clients in being asked to discuss their future plans and dreams. It is important to continually provide opportunities and space for such discussion, as a means to inspire hope and reinforce positive visions for clients' future from a strengths-based perspective. Many clients expressed they were glad to have the chance to express this and that they are not often asked. This highlights the common narrative and depiction (even if well-meaning) to victimize/pity certain groups such as refugees, rather than recognize their existing capacity and potential for contribution to society. Umoja plays a key role in our local society to transform that narrative.

6.2 Recommendations for L&LS resourcing and capacity development

Trauma-informed practice: Umoja, as an organization, should explore ways offering more opportunities to strengthen trauma-informed practice – through online courses, partnerships with peers with this expertise and/or external training. Other peer organizations in the sector may have similar capacity needs, therefore sharing of costing for professional development could be an option. In particular, Pacific Immigrant Resources Society (PIRS) staff have been trained in using a trauma-informed approach. They have developed a training manual and have indicated they are available to train Umoja staff. Similarly, Umoja has connections with an award-winning consultant who brings immense experience and expertise in this area. Umoja's senior leadership should strongly consider funding a curriculum review and a series of workshops for all staff over a six month to one-year period, thus enabling long term coaching and development. While there are costs associated with this, it is important for the organization's credibility and 'do no harm' ethos. A long-term consultancy means payments could be split throughout the year, and staff would be exposed to the material for an extended period of time (repetition is essential).

Referral systems and relationships with service providers: Linked to above, the staff expressed they would benefit from more information on the different service providers available

for trauma and counseling in Surrey which are accessible to clients (as this is changing regularly). A mapping exercise for referral pathways could support this and could be shared with staff and clients. Asking partners about their referral pathways could lighten the workload for this exercise as well. Further, Umoja could work to develop relationships with a couple of key local services and counsellors specializing in Umoja's clientele profile. For example, inviting a few providers to speak with staff at a meeting to explain their services and having staff communicate the different needs of Umoja's clientele, could be a first step in this process.

Capacity building partnership: In the past, a partnership model was developed between Umoja and Mosaic wherein Mosaic staff observed L&LS class sessions then provided feedback and developed training sessions specific to where the program was at that time. The partnership was described by staff as a successful one. Given that the program has evolved since this time and is now at another phase in its development, the program, with support of Umoja's senior management, should seek out another learning partnership similar to the one with Mosaic, to help the program grow and improve based on its current stage of development.

Resource growth: Staff cited a lack of information and understanding about how the program can access different/other sources of funding from the government for instance, and a desire to know what Umoja needs to do to be eligible. Together with Umoja's development manager, a formal scoping exercise should be undertaken to identify potential donors and eligibility requirements. For the program to be sustained (and hopefully grow), more emphasis and effort likely needs to be dedicated to resource mobilization planning and donor outreach.

6.3 Recommendations for L&LS monitoring, evaluation, and learning

Monitoring: Inputting attendance and retention figures into the Apricot database system along with client demographic details is an important step to increasing Umoja's understanding of who the program benefits the most (and least), and different factors that are associated with consistency and successful completion in the program. While staff time would need to be dedicated, Umoja could consider using volunteers to support this as well. Students from research fields and those who are looking for work experience in evaluation (for instance through the Canadian Evaluation Society BC Chapter) could be a good avenue to explore.

Client follow-up: Along with this, the Apricot database should include client contact information upon exit to allow for follow-up (i.e. to see how clients are doing/if they have progressed, ask for their participation as volunteers or guest speakers, and generally keep in touch with L&LS alumni). While it does create an additional task for staff, it can be managed during the less busy times of the program, for instance during the summer break, a few days of staff time could be allocated to client follow-up and an update be entered into their profile on the system.

Learning and evaluation: It is important that the program strengthens its data collection and analysis for learning and results purposes to inform improvements and gain insight into client experiences. It is highly recommended that exit interviews become regular practice where the notes are typed up and entered into the database under each client profile. While this likely means replacing a week of classes with such sessions, the value in terms of data and the learning generated can bring a higher benefit to improving the program for clients, outweighing the few more hours of language instruction reduced to allow for exit interview sessions. Furthermore, the space for staff to come together away from the busy pace of implementation

provides staff opportunity to discuss the program, to record reflections and learning, and to take space for strategic planning. This would ideally be done at least once per year at a minimum. It could be facilitated by a professional facilitator (some may be willing to do pro-bono), a staff member or volunteer, or an Umoja Board member (a rotation of expertise can bring different insights).

Coordination and sharing in the sector: L&LS staff do not currently coordinate with other partners to share learning or resources from their programming. Although most other programs are larger, do not operate in the same way, making comparisons difficult [by staff], there is still potential value in engaging more regularly with other organizations that deliver L&LS programming in formal coordination fora. This can also provide a means to increase Umoja's visibility and linkages to new resources or opportunities for the program. As Umoja grows into a larger and more professional organization, it is a natural step to become more active in such spaces. For example, using this evaluation as a starting point to engage in a round table with others to share findings could be a good opportunity and would also raise Umoja's visibility. There is an opportunity for incoming new Executive Director to benefit from such an exercise to become familiar with others in the L&LS space. As mentioned above, it is also important to share findings evaluation findings back with clients in an accessible way.

During interviews with peer organization representatives, several avenues to help Umoja coordinate and share learnings and resources with the sector were discussed:

- The **Settlement Language Working Group (SLWG)**, which includes managers from SUCCESS, Douglas College, Mosaic and Delview, meet once every four months to talk about updates and concerns, and to share resources. It is open to organizations doing the same type of work as Umoja and maybe a helpful resource to connect with. The DiverseCity representative noted that it would welcome Umoja to share the evaluation findings, for instance, with the SLWG.
- **AMSSA** was also noted as an active group that works on language-oriented issues. (Umoja is a part of these but it is more senior staff who generally attend.)
- The **Surrey Delta Immigrants Providers** meet and share information about programs. They also have a forum once a year with a guest speaker.
- The **Community Adult Literacy Programs (CALP)** through Kwantlen Polytechnic University (KPU) correspond regularly by email and meet once a year, though it was noted there is not a shared learning component.
- Both **PIRS and the City of Surrey** would be interested in developing learning and resource sharing partnerships with organizations offering similar programming, such as Umoja. The City of Surrey was open to pooling resources for an external training day for staff/volunteers.

While this can be done by the Executive Director and Development Manager, it is also useful professional development for L&LS staff to be engaged in fora relevant to the program.

Budgeting for learning: Future funding proposals for the program should include a budget line for monitoring, evaluation and learning to allow time and resources so these activities do not become deprioritized as so often happens with limited resource stretched non-profit budgets. Using this evaluation and explaining the tangible benefits of monitoring, evaluation and learning can help persuade donors of the value of providing targeted financial resources to support this.

6.4 Concluding Remarks

This evaluation has examined and drawn credible findings on the relevance and effectiveness of Umoja's L&LS program with a minimal assessment of impact due to the limitations discussed herein. This approach taken provided triangulated views of key stakeholders of the program – clients (former and current), staff, volunteers, partners, accompanied by observations and literature review, allowing for a well-rounded assessment of achievements, strengths and challenges within the framework of available evidence and sampling.

Overall, the conclusion is that Umoja's L&LS work is highly relevant to the needs of its clients, reducing barriers for attendance such as childcare (within the limits of the people and classes Umoja can provide with its funding and staff). Staff and volunteers demonstrate a compassionate, flexible and warm teaching style, creating an enabling environment for effectiveness around social inclusion (away from isolation) and mental health benefits (confidence, mood improvements, etc.), in addition to a basic foundation of literacy and life skills which can foster their progression onto more advanced programs. Tracking data on program statistics for current and former clients is not practiced and therefore definitive conclusions cannot be drawn here, however, it is plausible based on the evidence reviewed. An additional positive effect is the value for staff and volunteers; they expressed reciprocal benefits of their involvement through the insights gained and meaningful relationships with clients.

There are some gaps in terms of capacity, resourcing and monitoring, evaluation and learning which have been identified and validated by staff and management. If addressed, the benefits of Umoja's L&LS program could increase the impact for clients and the organization's work in the future. It is understandable that Umoja may not be able to invest in all or even the majority of recommendations at once. However, we suggest L&LS staff and Umoja management use this list to prioritize and identify short (quick wins), medium, and long-term goals accompanied by an action plan to move forward and keep track of improvement efforts.

List of Annexes *

- A. L&LS client workshop artwork
- B. Reference list
- C. Key Informant Interview table
- D. KII Questionnaire Tools (clients, staff, and partners)
- E. Evaluation Terms of Reference
- F. Literature review

**All annexes are provided in as attachments.*