



VIP: Calgary Health Region

To call Calgary an ethnically diverse city is an understatement. Almost 100 new people arrive there every day, making it fourth in Canada in attracting immigrants. Little wonder, Calgary Health Region is in the midst of a diversity overhaul.

“There’s a huge issue in terms of workforce and workforce needs. And not only do we need to be looking at bringing people in from out of country but we need to be tapping into our own communities, in terms of the underemployed,” says Susan Cassidy, executive director of workforce strategies, who admits that a lot of what they want to do is ‘in the mix’ right now.

Calgary Health Region definitely has its work cut out for it. We’re talking about an organization that provides services to 1.2 million Calgarians in over 100 locations, including 12 hospitals, 2 health centres, 41 care centres and a number of community and continuing care sites.

Although Cassidy confesses that the organization is “building the ship while we’re sailing”, she remains a realist. Calgary, she says, is blessed with an influx of newcomers eager to work, but delays in recognizing foreign credentials cause barriers and obstacles. Plus the city has challenges of its own, in terms of affordable housing, transportation and childcare. As well, the quite well in the years ahead.” job market is hot right now and the level of interest in working at Calgary Health Region is lower. Especially in light of the kind of money it pays.

“There needs to be a livable wage,” Cassidy stresses, adding that the government is drafting a workforce initiative that identifies healthcare salaries as one issue that has to be addressed.

Besides the immigrant population, Calgary also has a large aboriginal talent pool to draw from. And so the organization has hired an aboriginal workforce consultant who has laid out a three-year plan for recruitment and retention.

Cassidy acknowledges that whether the potential employee is aboriginal or immigrant, the key to success with any plan lies in integration.

“It’s not just about getting them in the door; it’s about working with them and their colleagues in the workplace to ensure their success,” she says, adding that the organization has been “largely passive” in terms of integration. “We know very well that the turnover rates will be very high if we don’t actively address the integration issues.”

To this end, Calgary Health Region has held workshops around the issue of cultural differences and has future plans for what it calls “misconception” training. Cassidy also knows that to have an extensive diversity training program, the organization can’t do it alone.

“As an employer we realize that we need to partner with the educational institutions and the governing bodies and the professional associations around helping to make this happen,” she says. “We don’t feel we need to reinvent the wheels in these areas, that there’s lots of very good groups out there that have done very good work. So we want to tap into that and partner with those groups.”

On the patient side, Calgary Health Region has been very active in serving the community in which it resides. Its Healthy Diverse Populations initiative proclaims Calgary Health Region will become a “model diversity competent organization demonstrating best practices.”

But Calgary Health Region with its 25,000 employees and access to the fourth largest immigrant talent pool in Canada isn’t sitting back and waiting. It’s working hard to make it happen sooner than later. And thanks to leadership and commitment, Cassidy can see that diversity model “rolling out quite well in the years ahead.” **DI**