

# Navigating Language Supports for Refugee Claimants in British Columbia

## Introduction

This is a resource for frontline workers, service providers, instructors, volunteers, and refugee claimants. Language access is an important settlement need, yet many refugee claimants continue to face barriers around eligibility, assessments, and referral pathways. This factsheet provides clear, practical guidance on available language supports, how to access them, and informal options when formal classes are not immediately available.

## Understanding Language Supports for Refugee Claimants

Language supports in BC include a mix of formal, structured programs and informal, community-based options. Access depends on several factors, including immigration status, documentation, location, and program funding.

Refugee claimants may be eligible for certain language programs funded through BC Safe Haven or other provincial and community-based programs. However, eligibility criteria, intake processes, and wait times can vary by region and provider.

**Community-Based ESL (English as a Second Language):** Community-based ESL programs are free or low-cost English learning options for adults, often offered through community organizations and local spaces such as settlement agencies, schools, libraries, and faith-based settings. These programs may be supported through government funding, provincial initiatives, donations, or volunteer-led models.

Refugee claimants may be able to access the following types of language supports, depending on location and availability:

Language supports can be grouped into three main categories:

- Formal language training
- Informal language learning
- Community Adult Literacy Program (CALP)

### 1. Formal Program Options

BC Safe Haven–funded language programs: Safe Haven supports refugee claimants and other vulnerable newcomers in British Columbia who may not be able to access federally funded services. The program helps eligible clients settle and participate in their communities by connecting them to supports through a network of service providers across the province, including language services, which includes language assessment and English Language Training (ELT) for different skill levels and professional needs. Eligibility includes individuals living in BC (and their spouses/dependents) with statuses such as refugee claimants, asylum seekers, CUAET visa holders, protected persons and resettled refugees, and people supported through other humanitarian pathways under specific IRCC policies. Services and language supports vary by region and are delivered through local providers.

➔ For a list of providers, please see the [BC Safe Haven Service Directory](#) for organizations providing languages services and contact information for referrals

The BC Newcomer Services Program (BCNSP) provides supports for some newcomers who are not eligible for federally funded services, including limited formal language training for Refugee Claimants. To qualify under for formal language training under BCNSP, Refugee Claimants must reside outside of Metro Vancouver and hold a valid work permit of at least one year in length, as well demonstrate their intention to reside in the community long-term. Refugee Claimants who require formal language training should always first be referred to a Safe Haven provider if one exists in their area.

## 2. Informal and Supplementary Options

When formal language classes are not immediately available, informal supports can help refugee claimants build confidence and strengthen day-to-day communication. Community-based language programs can be offered through settlement agencies, community organizations, or local partners. Availability and eligibility vary by region.

These may include:

- Informal language training such as English conversation circles under the Safe Haven program.
  - *Refugee Claimants across the province, including those who reside within Metro Vancouver or those who do not hold a valid work permit may access BCNSP informal language training such as group conversation circles, provided there are no Safe Haven providers available in their area.*
  - Community-based language groups hosted by faith-based groups and libraries
    - Many libraries host local English Conversation circles that support with social connection and conversational English practice with peers. For example:
      - In [Kelowna](#), multiple library locations offer these sessions on different days of the week and all sessions are free.
      - The [Vancouver Public Library](#) can support English-language learning through a variety of programs and services.
  - One-to-one tutoring (peer-led or volunteer-supported) – connect with the United Way BC “[iVolunteer](#)” website for more information.
  - Community connections programs hosted by settlement organizations that support learning through social activities and real-world practice.
- Virtual or online language platforms. Examples of these tools are included below:
    - The [Vancouver Public Library](#) has a large English as a Second Language (ESL) collection that includes physical resources such as books, CDs, and DVDs as well as digital resources that can be accessed online with your library card.
    - [Mango Languages](#) offers interactive online language courses you can use at home or on your mobile device, with a focus on everyday, real-life conversations. Learners can choose from over 70 languages, plus English courses for speakers of more than 20 different languages, while building vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and cultural understanding.
    - [Tense Buster](#) offers English courses from beginner to advanced, with interactive presentations, exercises, tests, and tips. The courses help learners build reading, writing, listening, speaking, vocabulary, and grammar skills, with a strong focus on using English in real-life situations.
    - The Coquitlam Library offers [Transparent Language Online](#) (library card required) that offers courses in over 110 languages, including regional dialects and English as a second language. Learners can build vocabulary and practice reading, listening, speaking, and writing skills.
    - [NewtoBC](#) has also compiled a list of resources available through the libraries.

These informal options can be especially helpful for clients balancing legal appointments, childcare, transportation barriers, or other settlement priorities.

Eligibility and availability vary by region. Frontline workers are encouraged to confirm current options directly with local language providers or regional coordination tables.

## 3. Community Adult Literacy Program (CALP)

The Community Adult Literacy Program (CALP) offers free, informal learning opportunities to support adults with foundational skill development. Programs may include literacy, numeracy, digital skills and English language learning, and are intended to support pathways to employment and further education.

CALP includes three streams: adult, family, and Indigenous literacy. Eligibility criteria, program structure and available supports vary by provider and region.

- ➔ The 2025/26 CALP Contact List is available [here](#).

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# Language Assessments: How Refugee Claimants Register

Most formal language programs require a language assessment before enrollment. The assessment process helps determine language level and appropriate class placement.

## Steps:

- 1 Registering with a language assessment centre or designated provider
- 2 Presenting available immigration or identification documents
- 3 Completing an in-person or virtual assessment
- 4 Receiving a language level result that can be used for program registration

## Common barriers:

- Lack of clarity about required documents
- Limited appointment availability or wait times
- Transportation or childcare challenges
- Language barriers during the registration process itself

Frontline workers can support clients by helping them understand what documents are accepted, advocating for flexibility where appropriate, and identifying interim language supports while clients wait.

**The BC Safe Haven Service Directory outlines which organizations provide language supports and assessments in each region:**

REGION	ORGANIZATION	CONTACT INFORMATION	WEBSITE
Abbotsford, Chilliwack, Langley, and Mission	Archway Community Services	Jen Romero, 778-344-5415, <a href="mailto:jen.romero@archway.ca">jen.romero@archway.ca</a>	<a href="http://archway.ca">archway.ca</a>
Delta, Surrey and White Rock	DIVERSEcity Community Resources Society	General Program Line at 604-799-0798 or <a href="mailto:safehaven@dcrs.ca">safehaven@dcrs.ca</a>	<a href="http://dcrs.ca/safehaven">dcrs.ca/safehaven</a>
Burnaby, New Westminister, North Vancouver, Richmond and Vancouver	ISSofBC	Biss Jordahl, BC Safe Haven Language Program Manager, 604-363-0013, <a href="mailto:biss.jordahl@issbc.org">biss.jordahl@issbc.org</a>  General inquiries mailbox: <a href="mailto:bclanguage@issbc.org">bclanguage@issbc.org</a>	<a href="http://issbc.org">issbc.org</a>
Tri-Cities: Coquitlam, Maple Ridge, Pitt Meadows, Port Coquitlam and Port Moody	S.U.C.C.E.S.S.	Yan Cheung, Program Manager, 236-880-1527, <a href="mailto:safehaven@success.bc.ca">safehaven@success.bc.ca</a>	<a href="http://successbc.ca/safe-haven">successbc.ca/safe-haven</a>

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REGION	ORGANIZATION	CONTACT INFORMATION	WEBSITE
Interior and North: Basin-Boundary, Kamloops, Kelowna, Penticton, Prince George, Salmon Arm and Vernon	KCR Community Resources (KCR)	Alan Gonzales, 250-763-8008 ext. 285, <a href="mailto:alan@kcr.ca">alan@kcr.ca</a> Warren Bongers, 250-763-8008 ext. 145, <a href="mailto:warren@kcr.ca">warren@kcr.ca</a>	<a href="http://kcr.ca">kcr.ca</a>
	Columbia Basin Alliance for Literacy (CBAL)	Desneiges Profili, 250-512-1249, <a href="mailto:dprofil@cbal.org">dprofil@cbal.org</a> Alana Murdoch, 250-304-7446, <a href="mailto:amurdoch@cbal.org">amurdoch@cbal.org</a>	<a href="http://cbal.org">cbal.org</a>
	Immigrant and Multicultural Services Society (IMSS)	Lili Yang, 250-562-2900, <a href="mailto:lili@imss.ca">lili@imss.ca</a>	<a href="http://imss.ca">imss.ca</a>
	Kamloops Immigrant Services (KIS)	Sage Chang, 778-470-6101 ext. 117, <a href="mailto:sage@kcris.ca">sage@kcris.ca</a>	<a href="http://immigrantservices.ca">immigrantservices.ca</a>
	Vernon & District Immigrant & Community Services Society (VDICSS)	Martin Friedrich, <a href="mailto:martin.friedrich@vdicss.org">martin.friedrich@vdicss.org</a>	<a href="http://vdicss.org">vdicss.org</a>
Vancouver Island: Cowichan Valley, Nanaimo, and Victoria	Inter-Cultural Association of Greater Victoria (ICA)	Daniela Cadenas, Coordinator, <a href="mailto:dcadenas@icavictoria.org">dcadenas@icavictoria.org</a> , Anastasiia Konstantynova & Patricia Lopez-Medina, Settlement Worker Specialists, 250-388-4728, <a href="mailto:nsp-safhavn@icavictoria.org">nsp-safhavn@icavictoria.org</a>	<a href="http://icavictoria.org/bcnsp-saf-havn">icavictoria.org/ bcnsp-saf-havn</a>
	Central Vancouver Island Multicultural Society (CVIMS)	Charlee Touchette, 250-753-6911 ext. 165, <a href="mailto:ctouchette@cvims.org">ctouchette@cvims.org</a>	<a href="http://cvims.org">cvims.org</a>
	Cowichan Intercultural Society	Olha Kuzemko, 250-748-3112, <a href="mailto:olha@cis-iwc.org">olha@cis-iwc.org</a> Elissa Smith, 250-748-3112, <a href="mailto:elissa@cis-iwc.org">elissa@cis-iwc.org</a>	<a href="http://cowichanintercultural.org">cowichanintercultural.org</a>

Language assessment services are delivered through designated providers across British Columbia. Availability and processes may vary by region.

➔ See [here](#) for the most up to date edition of the BC Safe Haven Service Directory.

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## Referral Pathways: Who Can Refer and How

Referral processes differ across programs and regions. In some cases, refugee claimants can self-register, while in others an agency referral is required.

Referral considerations:

- Confirm whether self-referral is accepted
- Clarify whether an agency letter or intake form is needed
- Support clients in booking appointments or completing online forms
- Follow up if clients experience delays or barriers
- Where needed, connect clients to a local Safe Haven-funded organization for additional support navigating language services

## Common Myths and Clarifications

### Myth

Refugee claimants are not eligible for any language programs.

### Clarification

Some language programs are open to refugee claimants, including those funded through the provincially funded BC Safe Haven program.

### Myth

Language assessments are only available after permanent residence.

### Clarification

Refugee claimants are eligible for assessments through the BC Safe Haven program. Providers in different regions can conduct these assessments.

### Myth

Language assessment guarantees immediate class placement

### Clarification

Assessments determine level, but placement depends on availability and waitlists.

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