

## Standing up for newcomers

Chris Traber

Published on Jul 19, 2008

Tuesday, two hours into his first day as executive director of the Social Services Network, Dr. Charanjit Bambra is in top gear and sharing his vision for the non-profit organization.

A PhD in molecular immunology from the University of Nottingham, England, with training at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota, the 54-year-old Markham resident brings three decades of academic and clinical research experience to the network.



Dr. Charanjit Bambra works with summer student Sanvir Singh at the office of the Social Services Network. "Social service has always been a driver for me," the Markham resident said.

Dr. Bambra is entrusted to advance the network's mission, linking York Region's South Asian community to service providers, help newcomers and provide information and assistance.

Born in Kenya, he speaks five languages and has published more than 200 professional papers, two educational texts and was featured on the BBC.

Q: How did you, so experienced in academia, business and leading edge research, come to join the network?

A: Social service has always been a driver for me. I've been a Rotarian all my life. I arrived in Markham in 2001 and looked around to see how I could use my skills. I joined the network's board in 2006.

Q: What is the network's number one priority?

A: Poverty. In Markham, for example, 55.6 percent of the population are immigrants. Statistics Canada reports 70 per cent of immigrants live on the poverty line or below.

Q: You're also an advocate for children. Please explain.

A: Many children of immigrant parents are going to school hungry. The use of food banks is increasing. Many schools have meal programs, but they're parent-funded and that goes back to those who can't afford it.

Q: What other issues are on your mandate?

A: Homelessness. It's also important for people to have time to adapt and for new arrivals to embrace Canadian values without relinquishing their culture. We try and make that easier.

Q: What are newcomers' major challenges?

A: Certainly there are employment barriers. We need to recognize (foreign) education and help with the transfer of skills. There are many educated and trained newcomers who took any job to put food on the table. Once there, it's difficult to get out of that system.

Q: What are some of the fixes?

A: We have to look at policies and decent salaries. Many professional organizations, engineers, nurses and so on, are helping with programs for newcomers. Established newcomers, first and second generations, also have a moral obligation to help from their own house, based on the principle of giving back. I'd like to see more of that.

Q: Newcomer health is also a concern. Can you elaborate?

A: Much has to be done because immigrants are susceptible to various disorders, including diabetes, cardiovascular issues and mental health.

Q: Why are newcomers at risk?

A: Stress, for one. Some newcomers also adapt to bad lifestyle choices such as fast foods. We need a prevention, education and outreach strategy.

Q: You've only been on the job a few hours, but you have a blueprint for the network. Can you share?

A: Fortunately, as a board member I was involved in developing a plan. Most important, we have to mobilize the community, create awareness and increase the profile of the network. We want to make sure all immigrants have access to services and convince them they can take charge of their destiny.

Q: What do you do for recreation?

A: I love long walks, doing things around the house, washing the car, cutting the lawn or any task that gives exercise. My passion is cooking. It's very relaxing. I like to mix multicultural cooking and develop new tastes and explore culinary fusion.

Q: What else inspires you?

A: I like to read autobiographies and listen to classical music. I'm also interested in nano technology.

For network information, how to donate or be a volunteer, check out [www.socialservicesnetwork.org](http://www.socialservicesnetwork.org) or call 905-940-7864.