

# CLOSE NEIGHBORS

## *Understanding the Experience of Moving Between the US and Canada*

Dwellworks conducted a study in collaboration with The Interchange Institute (a non-profit research and training organization) on **US-to-Canada** and **Canada-to-US** transfers, in light of the often noted but rarely studied difficulties during moves between similar cultures. Using interviews and an online survey tool, in-depth information was gathered regarding the practical and emotional challenges facing over 150 relocating employees and the destination services providers hired to help them.

One of the most consistent challenges reported by employees and providers in both US-to-Canada and Canada-to-US moves was the subtle but strong belief that since the countries were so similar, help and attention was not needed. Providers reported frustration that their offers of assistance were often rejected until problems (e.g., car importing, visa delays) were encountered. Employees revealed the root of this pattern in their frequent expression of surprise that moving between these two countries was actually difficult and required much bureaucratic maneuvering. An unspoken message from both Canadians and Americans was that they didn't really consider this an international move. Many had easily driven back and forth over the border numerous times on business or personal trips and were surprised that this time, for an expatriate move, they suddenly were "importing a car," with all the paperwork and delays that entailed.

Differences in fundamentally important aspects of daily living – notably healthcare, banking, education, and amount of choice – required much explanation from providers and adjustment on the part of employees moving in both directions. Superficial similarities between the countries (e.g., language, dress, building style, food) clearly camouflage important differences in daily life that can be taxing for newcomers who arrive without sufficient information.

US and Canadian employees also reported different social values and communication styles in the two countries. Americans in Canada reported perceiving more negative reactions – saying they felt they were often perceived as pushy, rude and arrogant – compared to Canadians in the US – who felt that Canadians were generally perceived as nice, friendly hockey fans. Canadians in the US especially appreciated the career opportunities their move provided them; Americans in Canada especially appreciated the chance to raise their children in Canada. The more differences employees perceived – in practical and social ways - the less smooth was their transition and the less satisfactory was their overall experience.

Providers can successfully help their employees navigate the surprising challenges of moving to a "close neighbor" by educating them early in the relocation cycle about the legal, practical, and cultural differences they will encounter.