

'It was the worst time of our lives'

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When Alessandro Tassinari immigrated from Brazil to Sussex last fall, he said he never imagined he would be separated from his wife and two young children for almost a year.

Tassinari and three other men moved to New Brunswick last November to work as machine operators in Kings County. Their families were supposed to follow them in March. But then the pandemic hit.

The four newcomers, including Cleverson de Oliveira Munhos, Wdson de Rocha Mosca and Samuel Oliveira-Poleto, all have work permits under the Atlantic Immigration Pilot program, which means they are on the path to permanent residency. However, they are still considered temporary workers until their permanent resident applications are approved, a process that could take two or three years.

On March 19, with the virus spreading rapidly across Canada, the federal government imposed travel restrictions for international flights,

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including prohibiting non-essential air travel. Premier Blaine Higgs closed the province's borders to non-essential travel, even banning seasonal foreign workers from entering until the end of May.

"It was the worst time of our lives," said Tassinari, adding he had never been separated from his family for that length of time. "Without a doubt, living without [knowing] when I would see my family again impacted me."

According to Alex LeBlanc, the executive director of the New Brunswick Multicultural Council, family separation during the immigration process is a common issue facing new immigrants to the province during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"There are many people who were planning to reunite with family much sooner, but experienced delays because of the pandemic, LeBlanc said. "That's been incredibly difficult for those families and there haven't been easy answers for them from the federal government or those agencies serving them."

Family separation has a significant impact on a newcomer's mental health and ability to focus on their own integration process in a new country and culture, LeBlanc said.

"Their bodies are here but their hearts and minds are somewhere else," he said. "That's profoundly difficult for the people immigrating here ... It's



From left, Cleverson and Melissa de Oliveira Munhos and their son Hendrius, Wdson and Evelyn de Rocha Mosca and daughters Cecilia and Clara, Samuel and Erika Oliveira-Poleto and their sons Arthur and Levi, and Alexandro and Imilia Tassinari and their daughter and son, Narallyne and Murilo. The families from Brazil were recently reunited after spending almost a year apart because of COVID-19. PHOTO: MULTICULTURAL ASSOCIATION OF SUSSEX/SUBMITTED

something we all need to be collectively concerned about and working toward in the coming months."

Despite the challenges of COVID-19, Leigh Watson, a communications officer with the Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, said the province nominated 1,466 applicants across both the Provincial Nominee Program and Atlantic Immigration Pilot, as of Sept. 27. This represents a slight increase over the same point last year when 1,418 had been nominated.

The happy day for Tassinari finally came on Sept. 17.

His wife, Imilia, and son and daughter, Murilo and Narallyne, landed at the airport in Moncton. After a two-week

quarantine, the families reunited.

"They all came into the office the day after and it was like they were walking on cloud nine," said Tara Thorne, the integration services co-ordinator at Multicultural Association of Sussex.

"I don't think you could have taken the smile off of their faces."

Thorne said immigrating to a new country requires an extraordinary amount of resiliency, and is a process that is made even more difficult and uncertain during a pandemic.

"Immigration is never an easy task, even under normal circumstances," Thorne said. "It's expensive and it's lengthy and I think COVID amplified that."