

A FOCUS ON REFUGEES

WHAT IS IT:

The Surrey Board of Trade is the co-chair of the Surrey Local Immigrant Partnership (LIP) coalition of local service providers focusing on the needs of new immigrants and refugees. We are the only LIP coalition in B.C. with business at the table in a leadership capacity.

In 2016, after much debate, Canada accepted approximately 40,000 Syrian refugees through a mix of public and private sponsorship programs. Surrey became home to nearly half of those arriving in BC: 44% of 1,700, up 23% of all refugees combined the previous year. Approximately 60% are under the age of 18. (Immigrant Services Society of BC – NB, figures do not include privately sponsored refugees in Surrey.)

Most of the refugees do not speak English, have varying levels of trauma and medical needs, and are learning how to adapt to Canadian society. Their day-to-day settlement needs – finding appropriate housing, furniture, appropriate clothing, food and living costs, enrolling children in school, figuring out the public transit system, finding their way to medical appointments, and finding social and emotional support networks – takes the majority of their time in the first year. In addition, the emotional toll of having left loved ones behind has an understandable impact on their resettlement efforts. Service providers such as Options and DIVERSEcity have done their best to accommodate, but waitlist for services, English Language training, basic job-skills training are long.. A new Syrian-Canadian association was developed in Guildford to help alleviate the pressure on services, providing food and translation assistance. The Surrey School District's Welcome Centre is working with the Syrian students (approximately 600 expected to be enrolled by end of year). The Surrey Food Bank experienced a jump in requests with Syrian refugee families signing on.

Progress is slow to move Syrians off supports and in to stable employment. According to a recent survey of Syrian refugees by the Immigrant Services Society of BC, 76% of respondents are in federally funded adult English classes or LINC classes, 51% on waitlists have waited an average of 4 months, 20% are taking training/education other than English towards economic integration. Only 17% are employed either full or part time, with 59% of those in Manufacturing, Construction and Trades. Of those not currently employed, 64% are actively looking. A majority of respondents, 66%, are using the food bank regularly.

The concern is that the Federal support for publicly sponsored refugees is only for one year. Refugees then move to Provincial funding, which in BC is much less with the average family losing roughly \$348/month. Funding varies based on size of family and housing needs, as well as health, language instruction and employment services. However, the provincial funding, though similar in base amount, does not include transportation allowances and housing supplements, leading to a substantial decrease in support especially in the tight housing /rental market of the Lower Mainland.¹

Given that it is unreasonable to expect refugees to find sustainable employment within a year of arrival due to waitlists for language and job skills training, as well as family health and emotional needs and the challenges of integration to a very different society, service providers are now advocating for the provincial support to be increased to help mitigate the impact of transition funding source.

As reported in the Globe and Mail, December 4: The B.C. government said it is continuing to look at the issue. The province said its supports for low-income individuals can include subsidized housing and child-care subsidies. It said refugees who are eligible for disability assistance could also receive more support than they did under the federal government.

These measures, if implemented, will help. Employment and English language training, essential for economic integration, however, are still Federally funded and waitlists are long. BC currently has the highest waitlist with over 5,000 permanent residents looking for spaces, the majority in Surrey (ISS of BC report), and this prior to the influx of Syrian refugees.

¹ http://www.conferenceboard.ca/commentaries/immigration/default/15-04-08/why_canada_needs_a_national_immigration_action_plan.aspx

BENEFITS:

A number of the Syrian refugees have various education backgrounds such as engineering, or other professional credentials. Many have had their education interrupted and would like to continue. However, with lengthy waitlists for English instruction that will expedite employment opportunities, a provincial “top up” of the income assistance (IA) funding will assist Syrian and other refugee families transition until their English becomes relatively proficient. Two key areas are being suggested including the reinstatement of bus passes for all employable income assistance recipients including refugees who must avail of BC income assistance (BC IA). For those BC IA recipients living outside communities without public transit eg Syrians have now settled in 69 different communities throughout BC then a cash equivalent would be provided. Without a transportation allowance it makes it extremely difficult for people to find work and/or attend English and job related training. The other policy area relates to wage claw back mechanism while on BC IA. The wage claw back portion should be increased to fifty percent (50%) or higher in order for especially refugee newcomers to gain Canadian work experience without significant claw back of benefits. Currently the federal government provides all government assisted refugees with the ability while on federal income support to earn fifty percent (50%) of their monthly income support without claw back.

It should be noted that between 1979 and 1981, Canada accepted 60,000 “boat people” from Southeast Asia. Within a decade, 86% of those former refugees were working, healthy and spoke English with some proficiency, achieving the basic criteria for success set out by academic Morton Beiser in his landmark study of their integration into Canadian society (*Strangers at the Gate: The Boat People*). They were less likely to use social services and more likely to have jobs than the average Canadian. One in five was self-employed. They weren’t a drain on the taxpayer—they *were* taxpayers.

This mirrors the experience in Germany, where a 2012 study found residents with foreign citizenship paid \$218 billion more in taxes than they received in social benefits. German officials have been smart to cast their willingness to accept a half-million asylum seekers each year as not just a humanitarian gesture, but as wise economic policy. In December 2015, Vancity Credit Union released a report entitled *From Crisis to Community: Syrian Refugees and the B.C. Economy*. The report outlined that Syrian refugees settling in British Columbia would generate at least \$563 million in local economic activity over the next 20 years.²

Like Germany, Canada has a rapidly aging population. Two hundred and fifty thousand (250,000) Canadians are currently retiring annually with future projections to reach 400,000 in the near future. In fact, in December 2016, the Department of Finance released a report that indicated that the federal debt could double to \$1.5 trillion by 2050-51. The report points to the major economic challenge caused by the gradual retirement of baby boomers. The demographic shift is expected to shrink work-force participation, erode labour productivity and drive up expenditures for things like elderly benefits. At the same time, the Advisory Council on Economic Growth advised the Government of Canada to increase immigration levels to 450,000 annually as one step to address the projected challenges to the Canadian economy. On October 31, 2016 Minister McCallum announced a new immigration baseline of 300,000 per year starting in 2017 along with a signal of future higher immigration levels and a multi-year three-five (3-5 year) immigration levels plan. According to a Conference Board of Canada report we’ll need to attract 350,000 immigrants annually by 2035, up from 260,404 in 2014.

What’s needed is not just a discussion of how to facilitate immigration—of refugees and others—but how to ensure our new residents integrate swiftly into the economy. Germany has had success with an “early intervention” model that identifies skilled refugees and pairs them with opportunities as soon as possible. But all of this requires a shift in thinking. Done properly, bringing refugees into our country isn’t about charity. It’s about investing in the future of business —both theirs and ours.

CHALLENGES:

Statistically, only about 10% of refugees find employment in their first year in Canada. The concern is the need for the Province to support families that the Federal government have accepted until they are sufficiently employable through English and other training. This will be a draw on provincial resources.

² <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/refugees-are-an-opportunity-for-the-german-economy-a-1050102.html>

There is a need to ensure Syrian families continue to be supported beyond the one year federally-funded period at a level that provides sufficient economic security to continue with English and employment related training. Recognizing the challenge to provincial resources, once employed, Syrians will be able to contribute back to BC and Canada through taxes as well as economic activity in their community.

THE CHAMBER RECOMMENDS

That the Provincial Government works with the Federal Government:

1. To extend the Federal financial support of refugees from one year to three years.
2. To enhance education and career planning supports for refugees.

Submitted by the Surrey Board of Trade

Policy adopted by the BC Chamber of Commerce members, May 2017