

A FOCUS ON REFUGEES

Opening Statement

The United Nations Refugee Agency says Canada has admitted the largest number of resettled refugees in recent years and has had the second highest rate of refugees who gained citizenship. Canada accepted 28,100 of the 92,400 refugees who were resettled across 25 countries in 2019.¹ British Columbia became home to 510 of asylum claimants, who settled in Canada in 2019.² 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 Progressive Intercultural Community Services (PICS), Options and DIVERSEcity have done their best to accommodate these refugees, but wait lists for services, English Language training, basic job-skills training can take multiple weeks.

Background

The concern is that Federal support for publicly sponsored refugees is only for one year. Refugees then apply for Provincial funding, which in BC is much less than the funding that was available from the Federal government for the average family. Funding varies based on size of family and housing needs, as well as health, language instruction and employment services; however, provincial funding, though similar in base amount, does not include transportation allowances and supplements, leading to a substantial decrease in support especially in the tight housing /rental market of the Lower Mainland.³

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 by a value that to help mitigate the impact of transitioning funding sources.

Benefits

A number of 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 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 themselves of BC income assistance (BC IA). For those BC IA recipients living outside communities without public transit 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 language and job-related training. The other policy area relates

1 <https://www.unhcr.org/statistics/unhcrstats/5d08d7ee7/unhcr-global-trends-2018.html>

2 <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/asylum-claims/asylum-claims-2019.html>

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

to the wage claw back mechanism while on BC IA. The wage claw back portion should be increased to fifty percent (50%) or higher to enable refugee newcomers to gain Canadian work experience without a 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 and did not become a drain on the taxpayer—they *were* taxpayers.

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.⁴

Canada has a rapidly aging population. Over 6 million Canadians are aged 65 or older, representing 15.6 percent of Canada's population. By 2030—in less than two decades—seniors will number over 9.5 million and make up 23 percent of Canadians. Additionally, by 2036, the average life expectancy at birth for women will rise to 86.2 years from the current 84.2 and to 82.9 years from the current 80 for men⁵. 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. According to a Conference Board of Canada report we'll need to attract 350,000 immigrants annually by 2035, up from 260,404 in 2014.⁶

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. 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 provide support – in the form of money, increased English classes, additional training, funding for transportation, and career planning – for families that the federal government have accepted until they are sufficiently employable through English and other training. This will be a drain on provincial resources.

There is a need to ensure refugee 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. Policy should include bringing back bus passes for all BC IA recipients or cash equivalent where no public transit exists and increase the amount that BC IA recipients can earn without claw back.

4 <https://www.vancity.com/AboutVancity/News/MediaReleases/RefugeesBoostLocalEconomy-Dec2-15/>

6 https://www.conferenceboard.ca/commentaries/immigration/default/hot-topics-in-immigration/2015/04/08/Why_Canada_Needs_a_National_Immigration_Action_Plan.aspx

Recognizing the challenge to provincial resources, once employed, refugees 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 to:

1. Extend the federal financial support of refugees from one year to three years;
2. Enhance funding to include transportation and housing support; and
3. Enhance various education services and career planning supports for refugees.

Submitted by the Surrey Board of Trade