

A Focus on Refugees

DESCRIPTION

The concern is that Federal support for publicly sponsored refugees is only for one year. 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, and because the family health and emotional needs and the associated challenges of integrating to a very different society, service providers are now advocating for the provincial support services to be increased by a value that mitigates the impact of transitioning funding sources.

BACKGROUND

The United Nations Refugee Agency says Canada has admitted the largest number of resettled refugees in recent years to its country and has had the second highest rate of refugees who later gained full citizenship. Canada accepted 28,100 of the 92,400 refugees who were resettled across 25 countries in 2019.³ British Columbia became home to 3,850 of asylum claimants, who settled in Canada in 2019.⁴ Ontario had, in 2019, 225 Inland asylum seekers and 7,470 from all ports of entry (land, air, and marine), and Quebec had 195 inland and 19,825 at all ports of entry (land, air, and marine).⁵

Government Assisted Refugees (GARs) are referred by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for resettlement to Canada and are selected based upon "need for protection." The Government of Canada fully supports their initial settlement for up to one year. When they arrive, GARs receive Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) services, including temporary accommodations, assistance in finding permanent accommodations, orientation to life in Canada, and one year of financial support roughly equivalent to provincial Income Assistance rates.⁶ In a 2016 report evaluating the resettlement programs (GAR, PSR, BVOR and RAP), it was found that RAP is inadequate and recommended that:

"IRCC should develop policy options to ensure that refugees supported by the Government of Canada are provided with an adequate level of support (including RAP income support) to meet their resettlement needs in support of their successful integration."⁷

Many Government Assisted Refugees have limited English or French skills, 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 trauma of having left loved ones behind has an understandable impact on their resettlement efforts. Service providers across Canada have done their best to accommodate these refugees, but wait lists for services, English language training, basic job skills training can take multiple weeks.

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. Recognizing the challenge to federal resources, once

employed, refugees will be able to contribute back to Canada through taxes as well as economic activity in their community.

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. 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.⁸ This report can be extrapolated to be applicable to many regions across Canada.

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 men. 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.

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.

Statistically, Privately Sponsored Refugees are more likely to be employed in their first year of arrival than GARs. While GARs may transition onto provincial social assistance, funding for settlement services is federally funded. The Province provides limited funding for temporary migrants (e.g. TFW, RC, international students) and naturalized Canadian Citizens.

GARs also need to pay back their transportation loans. These repayment requirements are often made before saving for a home, or other necessities. The loans, the difficulty in securing stable

housing, and learning a new language all lead to the GARs inability to find adequate employment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Government of Canada:

1. Extend the federal financial support of GARs until they are financially stable; and
2. Work with employers to provide access to employment and English and French language training.

NOTES

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¹ <https://www.vancity.com/AboutVancity/News/MediaReleases/RefugeesBoostLocalEconomy-Dec2-15/>

² <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/reports-statistics/evaluations/resettlement-programs.html#toc7>

³ https://www.amssa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/AMSSA_RefugeeExperience-sm.pdf

⁴ <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/asylum-claims/asylum-claims-2019.html>

⁵ <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/asylum-claims/asylum-claims-2019.html>

⁶ <https://www.unhcr.org/statistics/unhcrstats/5d08d7ee7/unhcr-global-trends-2018.html>

⁷ <http://ceris.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/CERIS-Research-Synthesis-on-Refugees.pdf>

⁸ https://canada.metropolis.net/publications/aec_citc_fall2010_e.pdf