

# Refugee Resettlement and Integration in Canada: Lived Experience, Lessons Learned, and Promising Practices

## Refugee Resettlement and Integration in Canada Series – Summary of Session 1

Between October 2020 and February 2021, the Ryerson Centre for Immigration and Settlement (RCIS) hosted a six-part digital series focused on Canada's approach to refugee resettlement and integration. The series aimed to engage stakeholders to consider Canada's approach to refugee resettlement and identify changes to policy and practice that will make Canada more inclusive and responsive to refugees' needs. Over the course of the six sessions, refugees, settlement workers and service providers, policymakers, researchers, and students were brought together to share insights and lessons learned from lived experience, settlement practice, and research.

The first session of the series took place on October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020 and featured four speakers discussing settlement and integration needs, challenges impacting service delivery, and the role of government. Jacky Tuinstra Harrison and Helton Achaye shared their experiences providing direct services to refugees, including the development of a program assisting refugee claimants to prepare for refugee hearings; Enrique Paraco spoke to the challenges of refugee settlement in Northern communities and the response from the City of Greater Sudbury; and Sara Asalya discussed barriers facing refugees, the limitations of the settlement sector, and empowering approaches to integration.

### **Presentation by Jacky Tuinstra Harrison, Executive Director of Matthew House, and Helton Achaye, Managing Director of Front Immigration Services Inc.**

- Mathew House is a network of five homes, including reception homes (short stay emergency shelter) and transition homes (long stay homes for vulnerable refugees, youth and minors). The only people that stay at these shelters are refugee claimants (also known as asylum seekers).
- Matthew House's mission since establishment has been to restore refugees' dignity and hope by providing emotional and physical support in a home-like setting, helping them heal from their journeys and establish new lives in Canada. Examples of the support they provide:
  - Filling out Ontario Works applications
  - Finding legal aid
  - Connecting with job training programs
  - Making counselling referrals
- Refugee claims in Canada have averaged about 25,000 per year since 2000 but spiked significantly in 2015. In 2019, there were 63,800 claims.
- Refugee claimants go through a painful journey upon arrival in Canada, as there is no system in place to welcome or assist them leaving them to navigate complicated systems and find affordable housing alone.
- The Safe Third Country Agreement (STCA) is an agreement between Canada and United States that has been in place since 2004. As a result of the STCA, most people

claiming refugee status at the US-Canada border are sent back, except in such cases where the claimant is a minor or has family in Canada.

- Mathew House also offers a refugee hearing preparation program. In order to assist refugee claimants in preparing for their hearings, the program runs simulations of the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) hearing, reviews refugee claimants' documents, and provides feedback.
- A growing number of refugee claimants are ending up in homeless shelter not geared toward their needs
- Unaffordable housing options leave claimants lingering in shelters for longer periods with few options
- More affordable housing is needed, as well as access to alternative housing options, including in smaller towns
- Major gaps in current settlement approach:
  - Delay in eligibility interviews
  - Delay in access to health coverage and work permits
  - Access to affordable housing

### **Presentation by Enrique Paraco, Immigration Development Officer, Sudbury**

- The Local Immigration Partnership (LIP) between the City of Greater Sudbury and Immigration Refugee and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) was founded in 2010 for indirect settlement purposes
- Partners with this LIP include settlement organizations, public services, private sector stakeholders, and all organizations directly and indirectly funded by levels of government
- Challenges encountered:
  - Limited federal funding between 2010-2018
  - A lack of community engagement
  - Limited understanding of the role of the LIP
- Why immigration matters in Greater Sudbury:
  - Adding 500 new immigrants to the workforce earning just average incomes is estimated to generate \$41 million in new spending
  - Healthy immigration rates can help to fill demand for certain occupations
  - 36,000 people are expected to retire from the workforce over the next 15 years, but there are currently only 25,000 people to replace those jobs
  - 1 in 5 people in Greater Sudbury were either born outside of Canada or have a parent who was born outside of Canada
- Current challenges of refugee claimants in Greater Sudbury:
  - A lack of resources to support asylum seekers
  - A lack of understanding from GTA-based shelters about the limitations of settlement resources in Greater Sudbury
  - Inaccessibility of virtual hearings for refugee claimants
  - Limited access to healthcare services
  - Rumors and misconceptions (e.g. belief that people will have more ready access to shelters and subsidized housing in Sudbury)

- Recommendations
  - Include Northern Ontario stakeholders in policy development
  - Increase awareness of Sudbury's geographical and community needs
  - Support secondary migration pre-arrival services

### **Presentation by Sara Asalya, Community Organizer, Public Speaker, and Top 25 Canadian Immigrant**

- Settlement and integration are multi-dimensional concepts and each individual has a unique and different experience
- Refugees should not be treated as one homogenous group as each group (e.g. international students, refugees, immigrants, etc.) is unique
- There are economic, social, cultural, and political dimensions to settlement and integration. Each dimension includes short-term (settlement) and long-term (integration) needs
  - E.g. economic settlement means entering the labour market and gaining financial independence, while economic integration means career advancement, income parity, and entry into a field commensurate with skills and experience
- Examples of refugees' settlement needs include information and guidance, employment, housing, language, health care, social and emotional support, and cultural integration.
- Refugee women face higher barriers and challenges:
  - Higher risk of being victims to gender based violence
  - Higher risk of being silenced out of fear of deportation
  - They follow a different integration pathway
- Limitations and exclusionary practices impacting settlement services:
  - The settlement sector suffers from financial instability
  - Refugee claimants are excluded from accessing federally funded services and programs
  - There is limited training and professional development for settlement workers
  - Settlement programs largely focus on short-term settlement rather than long-term integration
- Empowering approaches to refugee resettlement
  - Invest in refugees' talent
  - Focus on refugees' leadership
    - Promote refugees' mental health
  - Build refugees' confidence and self-authorship
  - Create safe and empowering spaces for refugees to share their stories

### **Discussion Notes**

- There is not enough support for refugee settlement. Increased funding from all levels of government is needed. This is due in part to different levels of government fighting over who is responsible for refugees and avoiding the responsibility for settlement.

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- More “mature” conversations between levels of government are needed to address the needs of people with precarious immigration status. Ignoring the existence of this population leads nowhere.
- Settlement and resettlement funding needs to be administered differently. Currently, organizations must meet very limited and specific conditions to be eligible for short term funding. In relation to resettlement, it can become difficult as it contains different and more difficult initiatives
- The GTA receives more funding than Northern communities and smaller cities
- Despite the clear link between immigration and economic development in Canada, there seems to be an underappreciation of this at the political level and a lack of political will to improve settlement service delivery.
- Many cities – particularly smaller communities – rely heavily on volunteers to assist with refugees. Newcomers should be encouraged to take up such volunteer roles because of their experience navigating settlement, however, more government support is needed to drive this type of engagement.
- People wanting to get involved in settlement should check in with their local MPP office and engage with boards of directors and organizations related to settlement.