

POLICY BRIEF

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Expanding Refugee Pathways to Canada: Strategies for welcoming Afghan and other refugees

INTRODUCTION

Canada has a strong history of welcoming refugees through humanitarian programs. This trend continues with the federal government's recent commitment to welcome [40,000](#) government-assisted or privately sponsored refugees under two new programs for Afghan refugees. The government has also begun to explore bringing in skilled refugees as economic immigrants through the [Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot](#). The current goal is to bring in up to [500](#) skilled refugees and their families during the second phase of the Pilot.

This paper recommends strategies for implementing the new Afghan programs and strengthening the impact of the Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot. It also recommends ways to keep refugee families together and to open up refugee pathways through educational opportunities.

The recommendations build on the concept of complementary pathways for refugees, as embodied in section 3.3 of the [Global Compact on Refugees](#). The Compact encourages member states to employ a range of pathways, over and above traditional government resettlement. As a member state with multiple pathways already in place, Canada is a leader in this regard, but more could be done to make the most of each pathway.

Figure 1: Complementary pathways under the Global Compact for Refugees



TWO NEW AFGHAN REFUGEE PROGRAMS

The situation for many Afghan nationals remains dire. It is challenging to leave the country and even those who manage to get to a third country, such as Pakistan, are not able to stay for long. Time is of the essence in finding durable solutions. The Government of Canada has responded by establishing [two new programs](#) for Afghan nationals. It is through these programs that they plan to welcome 40,000 refugees. As of Nov 12, 2021, the government reported [3,385 arrivals](#).

Special Immigration Program for Afghans Who Assisted the Government of Canada

The first new program is for Afghans who have had a significant or enduring relationship with the Government of Canada, including interpreters who worked with the Canadian Armed Forces and local staff who have worked at the Embassy of Canada in Afghanistan. Eligible individuals and their family members can apply from within or outside Afghanistan. People arriving under this program fall under the Government-Assisted Refugees Program.

Special Humanitarian Program for Afghans from Vulnerable Groups

The second program is for Afghans from vulnerable groups, such as women leaders, human rights advocates, persecuted minorities, LGBTI individuals, and journalists. Eligible individuals and their families must be outside Afghanistan. Under this program, refugees can resettle as government-assisted or privately sponsored refugees if they have been referred by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), another entity designated by Canada, or a private sponsor.

Bringing people to Canada as government-assisted refugees is a good way to provide durable solutions for large numbers of refugees quickly and to provide them with financial support for up to one year. These refugees are supported by resettlement service providers who do an excellent job of helping refugees to get the supports they need to thrive in their new

communities. There is concern, however, that bringing in large numbers of government-assisted refugees over a short period of time will exceed the service providers' capacity.

Unfortunately, the private sponsorship route is now virtually blocked. Large backlogs exist due to 70,000 sponsorship applications already in the system for refugees from across the world. New sponsorship applications are restricted due to annual caps that [Sponsorship Agreement Holders](#) cannot exceed. And [community organizations](#) or [groups of five or more](#) are constrained by the requirement that individuals they sponsor must have been formally recognized as refugees by the UNHCR or another state.

One solution to these challenges would be to involve interested community groups in helping government-assisted refugees in their settlement and integration, including the search for affordable housing. The refugees would then benefit from the personal connections and wrap-around supports which private sponsors typically provide. This would be similar to the blended ([Blended Visa Office Referred](#)) approach to refugees, but without a financial commitment from the community groups. Many such groups are already financially committed to previously sponsored refugees who have not yet arrived, but are eager to assist others.

Recommendations

1. Work with allies in efforts to enable people to leave Afghanistan for their safety and to benefit from refugee programs.
2. Commit to bringing in over 50% of eligible refugees as government-assisted refugees in the Special Humanitarian Program for Afghans from Vulnerable Groups.
3. Match interested community groups to government-assisted refugees to provide complementary settlement support, building on the community volunteer component of the government's former [Host](#) program.
4. Ensure that annual caps do not prevent Sponsorship Agreement Holder organizations from submitting applications for Afghan or other refugees.
5. Find alternatives to the requirement that community organizations and groups of five can only sponsor formally recognized refugees.

EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

International students have become an important element in the achievement of Canada's economic immigration targets due to their knowledge, experience, and ability to hit the ground running after graduation. The Canadian Experience Class and Provincial Nominee Programs, for example, have facilitated the transition of many international students from temporary to permanent residence. International students contribute to the economy of local communities while they are studying (through part-time jobs) and after they graduate.

Coming to Canada as an international student is currently not an option for refugees, even though many post-secondary institutions are interested in providing admissions, scholarships, support, and work opportunities for refugee students. This is because refugees cannot demonstrate a willingness or ability to leave when their student permit expires. Other barriers include the impossibility of providing certain required documents, such as valid passports and original transcripts, due to turmoil in their home country. Some refugee students have entered Canada

on a permanent basis through private sponsorship by [World University Service of Canada](#), a sponsorship agreement holder, but that is not a speedy or widely used practice.

Canada needs mechanisms to bring refugee students to Canada quickly and to provide viable paths to permanent residence. A quick process would get refugee students out of harm's way and permit the resumption of academic pursuits that were disrupted due to turmoil in their home country. With permanent residence, refugee students would have a durable solution and be able to contribute to local economies on an ongoing basis. Universities would also benefit from the enrichment of the learning environment for all students.

Recommendations

6. Develop accessible mechanisms that allow refugee students to enter Canada quickly, with supports, and expedited pathways to permanent residence in consideration of humanitarian factors.

Hypothetical Scenario: Farzaneh

Before the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, Farzaneh was a graduate student in economics at Kabul University. Along with all women students and faculty, she is no longer welcome at that institution. Farzaneh went into hiding after receiving death threats for her activities in promoting education for girls. She was able to escape by land into neighbouring Pakistan but was told she could not remain there for long.

Farzaneh's friend Hajira immigrated to Canada several years ago and now lives in Hamilton, Ontario. Hajira began desperately seeking ways to bring her friend to safety. Although involved in women's issues, Farzaneh was unlikely to be considered a "woman leader" for access to one of Canada's new refugee programs, but her involvement had nonetheless put her at risk.

The two women's hopes rose after Hajira found a local university that was willing to admit Farzaneh to its economics program on a full scholarship, with free housing in residence, and other supports.

Fortunately, Canada had introduced a pilot to allow refugee students to enter the country quickly, provided they had an offer of admission to a college or university and a settlement plan. The pilot program included a defined pathway to permanent residence to ensure a durable solution.

Farzaneh was pleased that the pilot accepted alternatives to a current passport and original transcripts from Afghanistan, which she would not have been able to obtain.

With a good friend nearby and a supportive university, Farzaneh was able to settle well. She has since graduated, is working in her field, and has submitted a sponsorship application for her parents and brother to join her in Canada. Farzaneh is proud of her academic success and the positive contribution she is making to the Canadian economy.

FAMILIES

Keeping refugee families together and facilitating family reunification are vitally important. Without that, anxiety about family members left behind can be debilitating and detrimental to mental health, impeding the ability to successfully resettle. Survivor guilt and not knowing how to help can be devastating.

In response to the Indochinese and Bhutanese refugee crises, extended families were selected for admission to Canada as a group. Generally, however, refugee programs only allow people to arrive with spouses and various categories of dependent children. The new refugee program for Afghans who assisted the Government of Canada also allows “de facto dependents” who depend on a specific family for emotional or financial reasons and may live as a member of the family’s household. De facto family members can also be considered for visas on [humanitarian and compassionate](#) grounds.

After arrival, resettled refugees have a [one-year window](#) to request reunification with spouses and dependent children who could not travel with them to Canada. If eligible and financially able, individuals can also apply to the [family class sponsorship program](#) which extends to parents and grandparents. Many people seek out private sponsors as their only hope to become reunited with extended family members – including siblings, nieces, nephews and others – who remain overseas in dire circumstances.

Recommendations

7. Explore ways for extended family members who are ineligible under current program criteria to come to Canada together as refugees or to be reunited with family already in Canada.

ECONOMIC MOBILITY PATHWAYS PILOT (EMPP)

This section recommends a bold new strategy for the [Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot](#) to strengthen the impact and reach of this innovative pathway.

Evolution of the Pilot

Many refugees have skills that make them strong candidates for economic immigration but face barriers in pursuing that option. In recognition of this reality, the federal government launched the Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot in 2018 to test a model for helping refugees to gain access to federal or provincial economic immigration programs. This approach is consistent with the [Global Compact on Refugees](#) which encourages member states to provide “labour mobility opportunities for refugees, including through the identification of refugees with skills that are needed in third countries.”

EMPP serves as a conduit between skilled refugees, employers, and economic immigration programs. The government contracts with non-profit organizations (such as [Talent Beyond Boundaries](#) and [RefugePoint](#)) who conduct outreach with employers, identify required skill sets, search for talent overseas, and assist eligible refugees in submitting applications. [TalentLift](#) is a new organization doing similar work, often in collaboration with Talent Beyond Boundaries and other non-government organizations.

The first phase of EMPP focused on skilled refugees living in Kenya, Jordan and Lebanon, facilitating access to permanent residence pathways such as provincial nominee programs, the [Atlantic Immigration Pilot](#), and the [Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot](#). The first phase showed that economic programs can be used to bring refugees to Canada, although the numbers were modest, with the arrival of six skilled refugees and nine family members. The second phase will focus on scaling up results from the first phase.

The second phase will benefit from positive policy changes the government has [announced](#), including expedited federal processing of permanent residence applications. The [Public Policy to Support EMPP Phase 2](#) outlines measures designed to remove barriers that skilled refugees face. Under the policy, for example, the visa application processing fee may be waived and applicants may be exempted from requirements regarding recent work experience and the need to produce a current passport. EMPP clients will also be eligible for settlement and integration services, including pre-arrival orientation.

A “Cluster” Model

We recommend a model for EMPP that features clusters of skilled refugees, with job offers, arriving in communities that need their skills. This will help to achieve economies of scale in recruitment and in supporting refugees, employers, workplaces, and communities. It will also be a valuable tool to help meet the second phase target of bringing in 500 refugees and their families, or the higher target of 2,000 promised in the [Liberal Party platform](#).

The cluster model would follow the EMPP process, with the following additional features.

Recruitment Organizations

- Non-profit recruitment organizations retained and funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) will find employers who are interested in hiring 20 or more refugees in a Canadian city or rural community and are committed to providing a supportive work environment.
- The recruitment organizations will obtain information about the skills needed to fill the positions.
- At least one recruitment organization will have expertise and networks in first asylum countries with large numbers of Afghans, such as Pakistan. This will ensure that Afghan refugees are included in the initial clusters.
- Once an employer’s need for multiple workers has been identified, the recruitment organization will find a cluster of refugees, from the same world area, who possess the range of skills the employer needs.

- The recruitment organization will facilitate interviews and job offers. They will also assist in the preparation and submission of permanent residency applications for all members of the cluster, including family members, and help them to get documents for travel to Canada.

Refugee Liaison Workers

- IRCC will fund local settlement service providers to hire Refugee Liaison Workers as coordinators and problem solvers in communities receiving clusters of refugee families through EMPP.
- The refugee liaison worker will work with Local Immigration Partnerships to coordinate supports and services for the cluster of refugee families and to foster welcoming communities before and after arrival.
- They will also work with employers and other organizations to secure transitional and permanent housing, promote a welcoming workplace, and provide onsite language training.

Expedited arrival and processing

Each cluster will arrive quickly to meet employer needs. Their applications for permanent residence will be finalized on an expedited basis while in Canada to provide a durable solution.

Figure 2: Clustered approach for Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot



Benefits of the Model

The proposed model is well worth pursuing due to the anticipated benefits and economies of scale.

Targets

Recruiting clusters of 20 or more refugee families will make it more likely to reach the target of 500 skilled refugees under the second phase of EMPP, or the Liberals' more ambitious target of 2,000. It will also enable Canada to admit more Afghan and other refugees than it could accommodate if relying solely on traditional humanitarian resettlement pathways.

Retention

Refugee families will be more likely to stay in their new communities when at least one family member has secure employment, there are others from their home country and culture in the community, and dedicated supports are available for settlement and integration.

Support

Refugee families will receive support both overseas and in Canada with the help of non-profit recruitment organizations, refugee liaison workers, employers, the settlement sector, and local services. This will support their settlement and promote their best interests.

Employers

Many large employers have expressed interest in hiring skilled refugees to fill positions they desperately need across Canada. The proposed model can help employers to obtain needed skills at various levels while contributing to humanitarian efforts. Swift arrival will be key to meeting employer needs.

Communities

Refugee families will contribute to the social, economic and cultural vibrancy of local communities across the country.

Expedited arrivals and processing

Quick arrivals and finalization of permanent residence applications in Canada will remove barriers that prevent skilled refugees from immigrating to Canada to meet labour market needs.

Leadership

The model will enhance Canada's leadership role in furthering the Global Compact's [objectives](#) for refugee self-reliance, expanding access to third-country solutions, and easing the pressure on host countries. It will also contribute to Canada's ability to achieve its rising economic targets, meet demographic needs, and strengthen humanitarian objectives.

Hypothetical Scenario: ABC Manufacturing

A recruitment organization on retainer with IRCC has learned that ABC Manufacturing wants to hire 100 people for a variety of positions in a newly built facility in Winnipeg, Manitoba. ABC is interested in filling 25 of the positions with refugees but only if they can arrive relatively quickly.

The recruitment organization has ties to Pakistan where large numbers of Afghan refugees are in search of durable solutions in third countries. In consultation with the United Nations Refugee Agency, the recruitment organization finds 25 refugees who have the range of skills ABC is looking for and are interested in immigrating to Canada with their families. The organization liaises with the refugees, ABC, federal government authorities, and Manitoba's provincial nominee program to ensure that all the paper work is done to secure job offers, travel documents for early arrival in Canada, and permanent residence applications.

IRCC provides funding for a Winnipeg settlement service provider organization to hire a refugee liaison worker to coordinate support for the 25 refugee families in the cluster. The refugee liaison worker works with local organizations to help the families secure transitional and permanent housing along with health, recreation, and other services that they need.

The refugee liaison worker also reaches out to the ABC facility manager and cross-cultural and language trainers. Together they design onsite training programs that will help to make the facility a welcoming environment and to enable refugees to improve their English or French language skills.

Recommendations

8. Develop a model in which clusters of 20 or more skilled refugees and their families can immigrate to Canada through EMPP, with support for the clusters from approved recruitment organizations and local refugee liaison workers.
9. Ensure that one or more recruitment organization retained by IRCC has networks in countries of first asylum for Afghans, including Pakistan, so that the initial clusters will include a strong Afghan component.
10. Increase the EMPP target from 500 to 2,000 in keeping with the [Liberal campaign commitment](#), using the cluster model to help reach that target.
11. Bring EMPP participants to Canada quickly to meet employer needs, with expedited approval of their permanent residence applications.
12. Remove the requirement for employers to obtain a formal Labour Market Impact Assessment before making a job offer to refugees under EMPP.
13. Use EMPP to facilitate access to all economic immigration programs and pilots. For programs that require applicants to express their interest as a first step, ensure refugees are among those invited to submit full applications, for example through refugee-specific draws.
14. Increase spaces in Provincial Nominee Programs to admit more refugees, and dedicate a portion of the spaces to provincial EMPP streams.
15. After a sufficient period of experience with the cluster model, evaluate its success with a view to making EMPP a permanent program that facilitates both clustered and individual applications.

CONCLUSION

The Afghan crisis has brought renewed political and public attention to Canada's role in welcoming refugees. This is an opportune time to pursue strategies to strengthen refugee programs, enhance economic and educational pathways, and keep extended families together. With sustained government commitment, funding, and collaboration to implement the strategies recommended in this paper, Canada will be better able to achieve its humanitarian, demographic and economic objectives. Most importantly, refugees will have more accessible pathways to a welcoming country where they can find stability and rebuild their lives.

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