



Pre-Budget Consultations, CCR comments

October 2016

The following is the submission of the Canadian Council for Refugees to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance, as part of its **Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the 2017 Budget**.

Introduction

The Canadian Council for Refugees (CCR) is a national non-profit umbrella organization committed to the rights and protection of refugees and other vulnerable migrants in Canada and around the world and to the settlement of refugees and immigrants in Canada. The CCR's over 175 members are organizations involved in various ways in the settlement, sponsorship and protection of refugees and immigrants. The Council serves the networking, information-exchange and advocacy needs of its membership.

In this submission the CCR will address the committee's first question: What federal measures would help Canadians generally – and such specific groups as the unemployed, Indigenous peoples, those with a disability and seniors – maximize, in the manner of their choosing, their contributions to the country's economic growth?

A. Ensure federal policies and programs support newcomers' participation in economic growth

Many federal immigration policies and practices directly or indirectly prevent newcomers from contributing economically, or compromise their ability to maximize their potential.

○ Speedy family reunification

The long delays for family reunification even with immediate family members (spouse and dependant children) severely compromise families' ability to establish themselves economically in Canada. The long separation means that those in Canada are unable to move forward economically to their potential: not only do they lack family support, but they are psychologically and financially stressed by the separation. Even after the family is at last reunited, the impacts of the long separation can take a toll on the cohesion of the family.

The government's commitment to speed up Family Class sponsorships is welcome but no such commitment has been made for refugee family reunification or Live-in Caregivers' family reunification, even though their wait times are even longer.

Note that the government does not post the processing times for refugee family reunification on the IRCC website and has recently ceased posting the times even on the <http://open.canada.ca/> website.

As of March 2016 processing times were:

- Family Class (spouses and children overseas): 17 months
- Live-in caregivers: 49 months
- Dependants of refugees (DR2): 34 months

Recommendation: The CCR calls on the government to commit to reuniting children with their refugee parents in six months or less.

○ ***Transportation loans***

Refugees resettled to Canada must pay for their medical exam and their travel to Canada. Since most refugees of course can't afford these expenses, Canada offers them a loan. As a result, refugee families start their new life in Canada with a debt of up to \$10,000. They must repay this loan with interest.

These loans undermine refugees' ability to integrate and to contribute to their full potential in their new home. Refugee youth are forced to work long hours while going to school, or even postpone further education, because of the need to pay back the debt.

The government's own evaluation report recently found that the burden of the loan was compromising some refugees' settlement and recommended making adjustment to loan repayments to ensure that the loan program is aligned with resettlement, settlement and integration policy objectives.¹

Recommendation: The CCR calls on the government to absorb the costs of the transportation expenses for refugees.

○ ***Access to work permits***

Many people in Canada face long delays in getting a work permit (either a first one or a renewal). This problem can affect, for example, refugee claimants, survivors of trafficking and persons who cannot be removed due to a moratorium on removals to their country of origin. The delays and the sometimes short validity prevent them from working to their capacity, and in some cases lead to them losing their job.

The current system of requiring refugee claimants to apply for work permits is very inefficient and forces people to rely for months on provincial social assistance when they could be working. Refugee claimants used to receive work permits which excluded work in specified areas (e.g. involving food preparation) until they had passed their medical. This provision could be reinstated.

Recommendation: The CCR recommends that work permits be speedily issued and have a length of validity that corresponds to the situation of the applicant. The CCR also recommends that work permits be issued to all adult eligible refugee claimants automatically.

○ ***Access to permanent residence***

Many people who end up being allowed to settle permanently in Canada spend years without permanent status, which seriously impedes their ability to advance themselves professionally. This problem has become worse in recent years, with the expansion of categories of temporary admission and restrictions on permanent status.

¹ Evaluation of the Immigration Loan Program, September 2015, www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/evaluation/ilp/2015/index.asp

Among those affected who are often living in Canada for years before they are able to become permanent residents:

- Temporary Foreign Workers
- Survivors of human trafficking
- Caregivers
- Persons from countries to which Canada does not remove
- Legacy claimants (i.e. those who made a refugee claim before Dec. 15, 2012)

Recommendation: The CCR urges the government to amend policies to favour access to permanent residence on arrival in Canada or as early as possible.

○ *Access to citizenship*

Recent changes have led to increased barriers to citizenship for newcomers. Some of these barriers, such as period of residence and expansion of age requirements for language testing, are addressed by Bill C-6, currently before Parliament.

However, other barriers have not been addressed and contribute to the recent dramatic decrease in citizenship applications.² The huge increase in fees as well as the recent additional requirement of providing upfront proof of language proficiency³ disproportionately affect refugees.

Without citizenship, newcomers are unable to contribute to their full potential to the Canadian economy.

Recommendation: The CCR recommends that the government:

- Introduce a process by which applicants, including social assistance recipients, can seek a waiver from the citizenship fees, on the ground that no one should be excluded from democratic civic participation because of inability to pay.
- Alleviate the burden of costly language testing for those seeking a fee waiver by re-introducing the pre-2012 oral examination of citizenship applicants who are otherwise unable to provide documentary proof of language proficiency.

² See for example, Toronto Star, “Citizenship applications plummet as fees soar”, Nicholas Keung, 12 October 2016, www.thestar.com/news/immigration/2016/10/12/citizenship-applications-plummet-as-fees-soar.html

³ The cost doubled from \$200 to \$400 in February 2014, and then increased again to \$630 in January 2015. Applicants who must undergo private language testing can expect to pay approximately \$200 for the test, as well as travel costs if they live outside a major city.

B. Provide newcomers with effective support so that they can integrate quickly and contribute economically

○ **Settlement services**

The CCR believes that the government needs to invest in adequate settlement and integration services so that newcomers are properly supported as they adapt to life in Canada. Providing inadequate services or excluding some newcomers from the services is a false economy, since newcomers affected are not able to contribute economically, or take longer to reach their full potential.

The government's recently published *Evaluation of the Resettlement Programs* found that not enough time is allocated to the provision of services for Government Assisted Refugees with greater needs.⁴

Recommendation: The CCR recommends that the government:

- expand eligibility for settlement services to include refugee claimants, Temporary Foreign Workers and citizens.
- Increase resources for settlement services, especially for refugees with high needs and who may require different levels of support over a longer period of time.⁵
- Commit to the recommended practices in the 2006 Blue Ribbon report on Grant and Contribution programs in order to manage settlement funding allocations in a manner that is respectful of the organizations providing services and sensitive to the impact on the newcomers served.⁶

○ **Mental health**

Newcomers to Canada show great adaptability. Although some, especially those who come to Canada as refugees, have endured traumatic experiences before arriving in Canada, they respond with resilience to those experiences, as well as to the stress of settling in a new country. Family and community support, spiritual and cultural practices, art, recreation and other non-medical interventions play an important role in promoting positive mental health.

Nevertheless, mental health issues for refugees need to be better addressed by Canada. We must create the conditions that provide refugees with the best opportunity to be mentally healthy, and offer better support for them in overcoming mental health challenges. Refugees and other newcomers with mental health challenges are not able to contribute economically to their full potential.

The government's recently published *Evaluation of the Resettlement Programs* found that “there is a lack of mental health services available for refugees.”⁷

⁴ Evaluation of the Resettlement Programs (GAR, PSR, BVOR and RAP), 7 July 2016, www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/evaluation/resettlement.asp

⁵ CCR Resolution 1, June 2013, ccrweb.ca/en/res/refugee-resettlement-program-changes

⁶ CCR Resolution 5, May 2007, ccrweb.ca/en/res/blue-ribbon-report

⁷ See note 4, Finding #18.

Recommendation: The CCR recommends that the government provide adequate support for mental health interventions, including through community-based programs and supports, and through the development and provision of alternative, culturally-appropriate approaches to addressing mental health problems.⁸

○ **Housing**

Finding adequate housing is a serious challenge for many newcomers to Canada, particularly those arriving as refugees who are generally surviving on a very limited income. Like others in Canada living in poverty, they face the problem of the lack of affordable housing.

Recommendation: The CCR recommends that more resources be allocated to making affordable housing available to all in Canada.⁹

○ **Income support for Government-Assisted Refugees**

The income support levels for Government Assisted Refugees, based on provincial welfare rates, are inadequate.

This was also the finding of the government's recently published *Evaluation of the Resettlement Programs*: "RAP income support levels are inadequate to meet essential needs of refugees."¹⁰

Recommendation: The CCR recommends that the federal government review the provision of adequate income to newly arrived refugees and encourage provinces to increase social assistance levels.

C. Combat racism and discrimination

Racialized newcomers are prevented from contributing fully economically due to racism, which continues to be a serious problem in Canada. Islamophobia is also prevalent.

Recommendation: The CCR recommends the government report periodically on how it is countering racism, xenophobia and Islamophobia with specific attention to the impact on immigrants and refugees.¹¹

⁸ Mental health and refugees: position paper, March 2016, ccrweb.ca/en/mental-health-and-refugees-position-paper

⁹ CCR Resolution 5, November 2005, ccrweb.ca/en/res/right-access-safe-secure-and-affordable-housing

¹⁰ See note 4, Finding #20.

¹¹ CCR Resolution 3, May 2007, ccrweb.ca/en/res/racism-and-xenophobia

