



Canada's National Settlement Program: Moving Forward

A Submission to Citizenship and Immigration Canada By the Canadian Council for Refugees December 2013

Following the National Settlement Conference, the Canadian Council for Refugees welcomes the opportunity to provide a written submission to CIC's National Headquarters regarding CCR's priorities and recommendations for the future of Canada's national settlement program.

There are four priority areas we would like to underline in this submission:

- The importance of responding adequately to vulnerable people
- Protection of refugees and others in need of protection
- The need for an expansion of eligibility criteria for settlement services
- Support for access to citizenship

Vulnerable newcomers

The CCR believes that the national settlement program should place a strong emphasis on responding to vulnerable newcomers.

By "vulnerable" we mean newcomers who, for reasons stemming from a variety of intersecting socio-economic factors, including discrimination, may find themselves isolated or marginalized in Canadian society. These people may thus experience challenges in accessing the support and resources they need to adapt to life in Canada.

Vulnerable people include newcomers with disabilities, youth, isolated seniors and women, refugees and refugee claimants and people facing domestic or sexual violence. They should be offered specialized case management and innovative, responsive and flexible programming.

Access and inclusion are core values of the sector identified in the Best Settlement Practices report published by the CCR in 1998. By not prioritizing vulnerable populations, we will only make them more vulnerable and impede the settlement and integration process. Some groups of newcomers such as refugee claimants and migrant workers, particularly those in the "low-skilled" categories, are made vulnerable by their lack of access to services, including the information and referral services available from settlement agencies.

With the recently announced new directions in resettlement commitments and practices, and overall reduction of source countries, the CCR believes it is time to review the Resettlement Assistance Program in order to make it more responsive to the needs of resettled refugees.

Protection

Protection is a fundamental concern of the immigration program, as is clearly expressed in the title of the governing legislation, the “Immigration and Refugee Protection Act”. The CCR believes that the federal government must give high priority to the principle of protection in its selection of, and response to refugees and others in need of Canada’s protection.

The CCR remains troubled by long processing times, especially for privately sponsored refugees and for refugee family reunification. These delays undermine investment in settlement services, as no services can adequately make up for years unnecessarily spent in dangerous and unhealthy situations overseas, or with children separated from their parents.

The CCR is also very concerned about the sharp drop in government-assisted refugee arrivals over the past two years, as well as the cuts to the Interim Federal Health Program for many refugee claimants, accepted refugees and privately sponsored refugees.

The CCR is very alarmed to see that language around economic integration outcomes is being used with regards to selection of refugees for resettlement. Integration outcomes should under no circumstances be considered a selection consideration for a protection program. Our members are very concerned about the new directions in refugee resettlement, including the reduction in number of source countries and the exclusion of Somali refugees.

The protection principle must remain an important context for the design and delivery of settlement services. Many of those receiving services are here because they need Canada’s protection. Often they have suffered serious human rights abuses before coming to Canada, and they struggle with dealing with those experiences, in addition to adapting to a new country.

Program Eligibility

Barriers to eligibility have long been a shortcoming of Canada’s settlement program. The national settlement program needs to adapt to an immigration landscape that has been changing rapidly as a result of the many recent changes in Canada’s immigration policy. Eligibility criteria must be reflective of today’s realities as well as tomorrow’s needs. It is also important to mention that settlement services must remain free of charge.

CIC eligibility criteria remain one of the biggest barriers to inclusion and access, especially for refugee claimants, migrant workers and trafficked persons (unless they have been issued a Temporary Resident Permit). These groups are currently largely ineligible for settlement services – a gap that must be addressed. Providing services to particularly vulnerable groups that are currently ineligible is not only in the interest of these newcomers, it is in the interest of Canadian society because it facilitates both social and economic integration. Some members of other ineligible groups, such as citizens and international students, have similar needs for settlement services and should not be barred simply on the basis of status.

Five years ago the number of Temporary Foreign Workers present in Canada surpassed the number of immigrants entering the country on a permanent basis, and these numbers continue to balloon. Lack of access to services, including the information, referral, language training and support services available from settlement service providers only serves to exacerbate the vulnerability of these workers, particularly those in the low-skilled stream. The fact that low-skilled migrant workers lack access to permanent status in Canada makes them extremely vulnerable to exploitation and abuse in Canada. Migrant workers should be eligible for the services offered by settlement agencies, regardless of whether or not they are able to access

pathways to permanent residence, although the CCR believes that permanent residence should be available, without discrimination, to all migrant workers.

Citizenship support

Recent changes to citizenship application rules and processes have presented new barriers, especially for some vulnerable populations, including refugees and others with literacy challenges, financial constraints, or visual or auditory disabilities. Overall, the increased delays mean that citizenship is more difficult to obtain. Access to citizenship, once one of Canada's key strengths in facilitating the integration of newcomers, has been significantly narrowed.

The CCR believes that vulnerable newcomers should receive additional support in obtaining citizenship, in order to ensure that marginalized groups have equitable access to Canadian citizenship. Some suggestions include offering citizenship preparation classes as a component of the national settlement program, making the citizenship application process less cumbersome, and broadening the list of documents that can be used to show citizenship language requirements have been met.

Community Collaboration

A crucial strength of many organizations that provide settlement services to newcomers lies in the fact that they are community organizations. It is important that service-providing organizations maintain close links with the communities they serve, and that they have flexibility to assist those who require their support.