



# Conseil canadien pour les réfugiés Canadian Council for Refugees

## Renewing Canada's Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program

Unique in the world, Canada's Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program has allowed Canadians to offer protection and a new home to more than 275,000 refugees since its beginning in 1979. Despite its historical success, the Program has faced dramatic challenges in recent years.

In response to the Syrian refugee crisis, thousands of groups are now springing up across Canada eager to sponsor refugees. There is enormous potential here to renew the program; however, to take advantage of this new momentum, important changes must be made to the program. Thanks to special measures, it is relatively quick and easy to sponsor Syrian refugees, but huge barriers remain for other refugees.

### Private sponsorship: the basics

- Privately sponsored refugees are resettled refugees. In other words, they are approved overseas and arrive in Canada as permanent residents. (In addition to resettling refugees, Canada protects refugees who come to Canada and make a successful refugee claim here.)
- Private sponsors are groups of Canadians or organizations. Many sponsors represent faith-based communities. Others are ethno-cultural groups and settlement organizations.
- Private sponsors provide financial support for the refugees they sponsor and help them settle, usually for one year after arrival.

### Fundamental principles of private sponsorship

The strength of the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program depends on its core principles:

- **ADDITIONALITY:** Privately sponsored refugees are **over and above** the refugees resettled by the government (Government Assisted Refugees). Canadians want to know that their government is fulfilling its responsibility, on behalf of all Canadians, to protect refugees through resettlement, and that any refugees they sponsor are **additional** to those resettled by the government.
- **NAMING:** Sponsors can propose the individual refugees they wish to resettle. Naming means that Canadians can respond to the needs of individual refugees or particular refugee communities that concern them.

### Recent changes making it difficult to sponsor non-Syrian refugees include:

- Very slow processing, especially in some regions of the world such as Africa.
- Restrictive rules limiting which refugees can be sponsored, from where and how many.
- Burdensome paperwork: forms are extremely complicated and sponsors no longer have access to government officials locally to guide them.

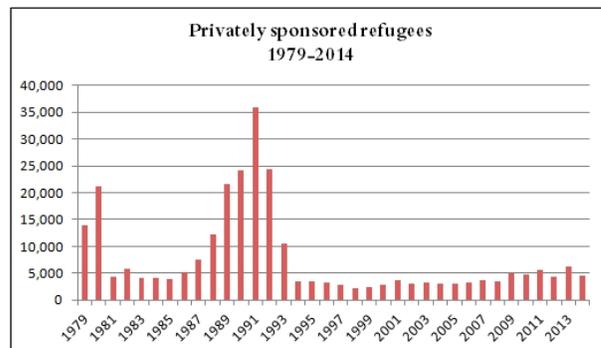
### Renewing the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program

In order to maintain a strong private sponsorship program beyond the current focus on Syrian refugee resettlement, we need solutions to the restrictions, bureaucracy and delays that have been undermining the program.

## Origins

Canada's Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program got off to a dramatic start in 1979 when Canadians responded in massive numbers to South-East Asian refugees. 35,000 Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laotians were privately sponsored in just two years. In 1986 this response earned the "people of Canada" the Nansen Medal, a United Nations award given for service to refugees. It is the only time an entire country has been given the award.

In the decades since, the program has grown to respond to numerous refugee crises around the world, as well as to displaced groups left languishing for years, and individual refugees with no other durable solution. The numbers resettled have been smaller than in the early years, apart from another peak at the time of the fall of the Iron Curtain. In the past five years, about 5,000 privately sponsored refugees have been resettled each year.



## Strengths of Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program

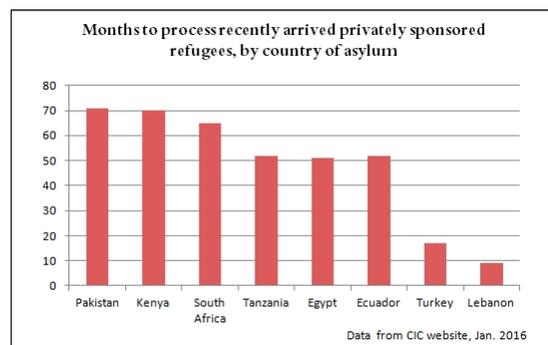
The Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program has many benefits – for the refugees resettled, for the sponsors and for Canada as a whole. The program:

- Engages individual Canadians, giving them an opportunity to connect with the world through personal relationships with people who have survived persecution and violent conflict in various corners of the globe.
- Offers the refugees sponsored the direct support of Canadians in settling. Statistics show that privately sponsored refugees find employment faster than Government Assisted Refugees.
- Brings refugees to all regions of Canada, not just the major centres.
- Adds to Canada's capacity to offer refugees safety and a permanent home, through the contributions of private resources from the community. (Sponsors must cover the financial needs of refugees for one year following their arrival.)
- Responds to situations around the world and to refugees who have been forgotten or who do not fit the priorities of governments or the UN.

## Major recent challenges:

### 1. Long processing delays

The Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program has been plagued by extremely long processing delays overseas. Some refugees arrive quite quickly: some Syrian refugees have arrived after only a month or two. Other refugees, notably those from Africa, have waited four or five years before they are finally able to travel to Canada.



The excruciatingly slow processing times are completely unacceptable for a program that is supposed to protect refugees in danger. The long delays also discourage potential sponsors from getting involved.

## **2. Limits on how many refugees can be sponsored (and from which region)**

Starting in 2011, the government has imposed a complex system of caps and allocations on Sponsorship Agreement Holders, affecting which refugees and how many they can sponsor (most private sponsorship is done through established organizations that have signed an agreement with the government). The limits include very restrictive caps on sponsorship through the visa offices in Nairobi, Cairo, Pretoria, Dar es Salaam and Islamabad.



Countries highlighted are covered by capped visa offices.

Since 2012, Sponsorship Agreement Holders have each also had to work within an annual quota, or allocation, individually assigned. Syrian refugees are exempted from these quotas, so sponsors can apply for as many as they have the capacity for. However, for other refugees, Sponsorship Agreement Holders often find they cannot submit a sponsorship because they have reached their limit, either overall or for the specific visa office. This particularly affects African refugees as four of the five capped visa offices are in Africa.

## **3. More restrictive rules for Groups of Five and Community Sponsors**

In 2012, the government introduced new rules that bar Groups of Five and Community Sponsors from sponsoring refugees who have not been individually determined to be a refugee by either the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or the government of the country in which they are staying. A Group of Five is an ad hoc group of five Canadians who join together to sponsor a refugee. Since September 2015, Syrian and Iraqi refugees no longer require this documentation, but the rule continues to apply to other refugees. Many refugees, such as Afghans in Pakistan or Iran, do not receive individual refugee determination from either the UNHCR or the local government, so they cannot be sponsored by Groups of Five or Community Sponsors.

## **4. Centralization of in-Canada processing**

Traditionally, private sponsors submitted their applications to a local office of Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC). In 2012, processing was centralized in Winnipeg, leading to long delays. A 2013 internal evaluation reported that the Centralized Processing Office Winnipeg (CPO-W) had developed critical backlogs, largely due to being understaffed. Decisions on sponsorship applications were supposed to be made within 30 business days, but were taking nearly a year in most cases. Since then improvements have been made, but delays at CPO-W, as well as issues with inconsistent decision-making and communication, continue to be of major concern.

## **5. More burdensome paperwork**

The forms that sponsors need to complete have become more complex. Since April 2012, sponsors must submit all the forms together, including those filled out and signed by the sponsored refugees. This is challenging for refugees in precarious situations with little or no access to telephones or internet (especially as the refugee form requires a barcode only generated when completed electronically). While the paperwork has become more complex, sponsors have less access to help from immigration officials. In the past, they could speak to a local official: now it is difficult for sponsors to make contact with a person who can answer questions regarding their applications.

## 6. Cuts to the Interim Federal Health Program (IFHP)

Since the June 2012 cuts to the IFHP, most privately sponsored refugees are no longer covered for supplementary health benefits, such as prescription medications or prosthetics. This increases the financial burden on sponsors. It is also a strong disincentive: the fear of catastrophic costs discourages groups from sponsoring. Syrian refugees arriving since 4 November 2015 have access to supplementary coverage but the same does not yet apply to other refugees. It is expected that this will be resolved soon, since fully restoring the Interim Federal Health Program is a top priority according to the Minister's Mandate Letter.

## 7. Transportation loan

Resettled refugees, including those who are privately sponsored must pay for their travel to Canada, usually through a transportation loan from the federal government. The burden of the transportation loan has a devastating impact on resettled refugees, undermining their settlement process in Canada. The federal government recently decided to exempt some of the Syrian refugees from the loan, but others continue to pay. This works as a disincentive for groups to sponsor non-Syrian refugees.

Note : Quebec administers its own private sponsorship program. Some of the issues outlined here do not apply to sponsored refugees destined to Quebec.

## Recommendations

- Recommit to the fundamental principles of the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program: additionality and naming. (Blended Visa Office Referred refugees should not count towards the government commitment of 25,000 government-assisted Syrian refugees).
- Remove the limits (caps) on privately sponsored refugees, globally and regionally.
- Eliminate the refugee status document requirement for Groups of Five and Community Sponsors.
- Dramatically speed up processing by devoting the resources necessary, particularly in regions that have been a low priority for the Government, such as Africa.
- Restore the full Interim Federal Health Program for all refugees.
- Eliminate the transportation loan for all refugees.

