

A Call to Address the Worsening Housing Crisis in Ontario

The Ontario Coalition of Service Providers for Refugee Claimants Calls on All Levels of Government to Address the Worsening Housing Crisis in the Province and Its Impacts on Refugee Claimants and Precarious Migrants

The challenges related to securing and maintaining housing for residents in Ontario have significantly intensified over the past number of years. For refugee claimants, precarious migrants and newcomers arriving in the province, securing housing has shifted from an important settlement priority to the pre-eminent challenge. Difficulty in accessing and maintaining affordable housing has led to prolonged periods of homelessness and more severe levels of poverty among these groups, and the barriers to securing housing have adversely impacted other areas settlement and the overall wellbeing of refugee claimants across Ontario.

The agencies of the Ontario Coalition of Service Providers for Refugee Claimants are on the frontline when it comes to responding to the needs of refugee claimants and precarious migrants in Ontario. We, as service providers to refugees—many among us refugee houses and shelters—support and provide temporary housing for thousands of individuals and families each year as they navigate the refugee determination system and settle into communities across the province. In our work, we have witnessed the increasingly difficult challenges that refugee claimants face in securing housing.

Currently, there are several issues under the jurisdiction of different levels of government that contribute to the lack of access to housing for refugee claimants across Ontario, including:

- **Immigration delays:** Many refugee claimants are waiting for extended periods for the scheduling of eligibility interviews by both the Canada Border Service Agency (CBSA) and Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). These upfront immigration processing delays lead to prolonged waits for work permits to be issued. Without work permit, refugee claimants cannot secure employment to assist with increased housing costs.
- **Social assistance rates:** Ontario Works and ODSP levels have not kept pace with inflation and rising housing prices. A \$390 monthly shelter allowance for a single person simply cannot secure safe, stable accommodations in Ontario's housing market. This has forced refugee claimants and other social assistance recipients into using some or all of their basic needs allowance on housing, leaving them with inadequate resources for other essential needs.
- **Inadequate shelter capacity:** The unliveable social assistance rates and immigration-related delays impact access to the income required to secure private market housing. This leaves many with no option but to rely on emergency and temporary housing, of which there simply is not enough capacity for refugee claimants arriving in Ontario. As a result, individuals and families end up sleeping in bus shelters, train stations, and other unsafe and precarious circumstances.

For the most part, the Ontario Coalition of Service Providers for Refugee Claimants is made up of small non-profit organizations. Already operating above capacity, our organizations are becoming increasingly overwhelmed as we work to triage increased demands for shelter, basic needs supports and settlement services for refugee claimants who are now arriving in the province after being unable to access safety and protection in Canada throughout much of the COVID-19 pandemic. While we will continue to keep our doors open to individuals and families, we need help. More needs to be done to ensure access to adequate shelter and housing for all those residing in the province who are in need, and all levels of government must do their part to ensure access to housing is provided. We are calling for the following two-pronged approach:

- An immediate increase to emergency shelter and temporary housing capacity across the province to ensure that accommodations are available for newly arrived refugee claimants. These are individuals and families arriving in search of safety and protection, and we simply must not add to their suffering by refusing the fundamental human right for safe shelter.
- Targeted investments to improve access to housing for refugee claimants so they can move into permanent accommodations more quickly after arrival:
 - Augmented service levels at CBSA and IRCC to ensure timely processing of refugee claims and work permit applications, improving access to income support programs and employment for newly arrived refugee claimants. Providing refugee claimants with the ability to move forward and contribute to the communities they live in benefits everyone.
 - A meaningful increase to monthly social assistance rates, particularly the shelter allowance rate provided by provincial social assistance programs (Ontario Works and ODSP) so that refugee claimants and ***all low-income individuals and families*** across the province can secure and maintain housing.
 - Timely access to housing benefits and financial support programs for refugee claimants and precarious migrants administered by all levels of governments.
 - A public education campaign regarding rental housing discrimination and better protections against exploitative practices.

We call on the Government of Ontario, the Government of Canada and municipal governments across the province to acknowledge the barriers to housing that refugee claimants continue to face upon arrival in Ontario, and we ask you to take concrete steps to ensure access to housing for those who are seeking safety and protection in our province. All levels of government have a responsibility to do better, and we stand ready to work alongside government and community partners who are committed to doing their part to improve access to housing for the individuals and families we support.

Sincerely,

The Ontario Coalition of Service Providers for Refugee Claimants



Member Agencies:

Adam House, Toronto
Angela Rose House, Windsor
Carty House, Ottawa
Casa El Norte, Fort Erie
Casa Maria Refugee Homes, Peterborough
Centre for Refugee Children, Toronto
Chez Marie, St. Catherines
Christie Refugee Welcome Centre, Toronto
COMPASS Refugee Centre, Kitchener
COSTI Immigrant Services, Toronto
FCJ Refugee Centre, Toronto
Fort Erie Multi-Cultural Centre, Fort Erie
IAFR Canada/Open Homes Hamilton
Matthew House, Fort Erie
Matthew House, Ottawa
Matthew House, Toronto
Matthew House, Windsor
Micah House, Hamilton
Quaker Refugee Committee, Toronto
Romero House, Toronto
Sojourn House, Toronto
The 519 Church Street Community Centre, Toronto
The Peoples House, Toronto