



**Ontario Coalition of Service
Providers for Refugee Claimants**

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The Ontario Coalition of Service Providers for Refugee Claimants calls on the Government of Canada and all of the Provincial Governments to ensure that refugee claimants housed in federal accommodations have adequate access to legal and settlement supports.

June 1, 2023

The Ontario Coalition of Service Providers for Refugee Claimants calls on the federal government and the various provincial governments to ensure that refugee claimants in federal accommodations across Canada are receiving adequate settlement and legal support.

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 in Ontario. We, as service providers to refugees—many among us refugee houses and shelters— provide temporary housing and support 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 critical need for immediate settlement services and access to qualified legal support for newly arrived claimants.

We are aware that 2022 and the first quarter of 2023 saw growing numbers of refugee claimants arriving in Canada. We are supportive of the Federal Government's efforts to provide emergency accommodation to new arrivals, as this is a crucial basic need. However, we are very concerned about the lack of access to essential settlement and legal services for refugee claimants being placed in temporary federal accommodations.

Since the summer of 2022, IRCC has been transferring refugee claimants who have arrived in Quebec to hotel accommodations in Ontario, and more recently, in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and



Newfoundland. Access to services in the host communities varies widely. IRCC has made it clear that the provinces are responsible for providing legal aid and settlement services. This poses a number of problems:

- **Most federally and provincially funded settlement organizations do not have experience in meeting the needs of refugee claimants**, as funding rules have historically discouraged them from serving this population. As a result, many involved organizations lack the knowledge and expertise to meet the particular needs of claimants. However, many other organizations in host communities across the country are experts in service provision to this population. In Ontario, for example, members of our Coalition bring decades of experience in providing settlement services for refugee claimants. Coalition members have reported great difficulty in gaining access to claimants in Ontario hotels, even though they are willing and equipped to provide high quality services. We know of similar difficulties for refugee claimant serving organizations in other regions, particularly in Quebec.
- **Not all provinces have equitable legal aid programs**, which disadvantages claimants based on the region to which they are transferred. In particular, New Brunswick does not provide legal aid certificates to refugee claimants. IRCC has put forth the solution of providing early work permits for claimants arriving to this region, allowing them to pay legal fees. This is not a viable solution. It is extremely difficult for newly arrived refugees to secure employment so they can pay legal fees. Recently arrived claimants often have limited English or French and may be experiencing physical or mental health issues related to their trauma and dislocation. They are also likely preoccupied with finding permanent accommodation and keeping up with legal demands related to their refugee claim. It is unreasonable to expect them to find employment and pay for counsel to support their legal needs, particularly given the tight timelines required to complete the IRCC portal. Lack of access to legal counsel has very serious implications for a claimant's ability to put forth their refugee claim.

Our Coalition members know from experience that a lack of settlement and legal supports can have serious consequences for the long-term well-being of refugee claimants who are seeking safety and beginning their lives in Canada. Early access to health care, education, English or French language training, mental health supports, permanent housing, social support and employment services are critical for setting individuals and families up for success. Approximately 60% of refugee claimants are granted status as protected persons in Canada, and many others end up becoming permanent residents through other pathways. Therefore it is in the federal and provincial governments' best interest to prioritize early settlement support for refugee claimants, not only because we have a humanitarian commitment to them, but also to ensure they become thriving, contributing members of our communities as quickly as possible.

In addition, our Coalition is extremely concerned about the impact of the recently adopted additional protocol to the Safe Third Country Agreement (STCA) on access to services for refugee claimants. The provision that requires a person who crossed our border irregularly to be in Canada for 14 days before making a refugee claim has serious consequences for access to emergency shelter, health care and other



essential services. It puts them at risk of grave exploitation and danger. We stand in firm opposition to the expansion of the STCA in general, and to the 14-day rule in particular.

We call on the Federal government—via IRCC—and relevant provincial governments who host refugee claimants to do the following:

- Identify existing refugee claimant serving organizations in host communities where IRCC is providing accommodations and facilitate the ability of these organizations to provide direct settlement supports in hotels.
- Expand eligibility to access IRCC funded services to refugee claimants, increasing knowledge and experience in serving refugee claimants within the settlement sector and making IRCC funding available to experienced refugee claimant serving organizations.
- Allow people who have entered Canada irregularly to access settlement services without fear during the new 14-day period in which they are ineligible to make a refugee claim.

We call on the Government of Canada and the various provincial governments to ensure that refugee claimants in federal accommodations have access to the necessary settlement and legal supports. All levels of government have a responsibility to do better to ensure that the needs of refugee claimants are adequately met.

If you desire assistance from us to help identify agencies with expertise in refugee claimant support in various regions across Canada, we would be more than happy to assist. Thank you.

Sincerely,

The Ontario Coalition of Service Providers for Refugee Claimants

Member Agencies:

Adam House, Toronto

Angela Rose and Oak 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

IAFR Canada/Open Homes Hamilton, Hamilton

Kitchener-Waterloo Multicultural Centre, Kitchener

Matthew House, Fort Erie

Matthew House, Ottawa

Matthew House, Toronto

Matthew House, Windsor

Micah House, Hamilton

Peace Bridge Newcomer Centre, Fort Erie

Quaker Refugee Committee, Toronto

RCEC Diocese of London, London

Romero House, Toronto

Sojourn House, Toronto

The 519 Church Street Community Centre, Toronto

The Peoples House, Toronto