Ontario Coalition of Service Providers for Refugee Claimants

The Ontario Coalition of Service Providers for Refugee Claimants calls on the Government of Ontario to reinstate access to social assistance for tens of thousands of vulnerable people awaiting CBSA invitations to the Pre-Removal Risk Assessment (PRRA) process

November 2026

We are writing regarding Ontario Works eligibility for individuals who are waiting for Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) to serve them an invitation to apply for a Pre-Removal Risk Assessment (PRRA). This includes all individuals who are awaiting an invitation to apply for a PRRA to assess their need for protection in Canada, including those individuals and families who have initiated refugee claims but have been found ineligible for referral to the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) because of recent changes to the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (the IRPA).

Under the application of the new Ontario Works regulations (O. Reg. 134/98, issued August 16, 2026), we are observing individuals who are awaiting CBSA's initiation of the PRRA process being determined ineligible for Ontario Works. This is because they have not been explicitly granted an exemption to the ineligibility of temporary residents alongside refugee claimants and people applying for Permanent Residency. However, during this time, individuals awaiting a PRRA invitation from CBSA do not have an enforceable removal order that can be actioned. We believe that depriving them of social assistance during this period is a grave error that would cause undue suffering for vulnerable people, including many children, and place additional strain on shelter systems across the province.

Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) estimates that 30,000 people across Canada who were already in the IRB system have been issued Procedural Fairness Letters that inform them that they are now ineligible for the refugee claim process. A substantial percentage of people receiving these letters likely reside in Ontario. Furthermore, we know that this number only includes claims that were already in the IRB system. It does not include more recently arrived people who claimed refugee status and were found ineligible, who will now also be directed to await the opportunity to submit a PRRA. So the actual number of people affected is even greater and will continue to grow.

To put it simply: thousands of vulnerable newcomers are at risk of losing access to Ontario Works due to application of these new regulations to the Ontario Works Act.

They will be stuck in a kind of limbo as they await CBSA's scheduling of an interview to initiate their right to a PRRA, which could take several months. In the meantime, they will have access only to work permits, removing the lifeline of Ontario Works from thousands.

As outlined below, the consequences of the Ontario Government's failure to provide support for these vulnerable newcomers will be serious:

- **Shelter overload and cost increases:** Many people currently in the shelter system, both in refugee-specific shelters and general population emergency shelters, will not be able to exit the shelter system. As we approach the winter months when shelter systems are particularly overtaxed, this will mean that many shelter beds that could have been freed up for the next person in need will instead be occupied. This will require urgent expansion of shelter systems.

- **A rise in returns to emergency shelters:** Those who had secured their own housing with the support of Ontario Works income could become unable to pay their rent, leading to evictions and the need to return to emergency shelters. This is a tragedy. Individuals and families who had began to build a life here and take meaningful steps toward successful integration will have the rug pulled out from under them if Ontario Works is cut off while awaiting an invitation to apply for a PRRA. This will create significant financial hardship and instability, impeding or even reversing their ability to be independent of the shelter system.

- **The Impact on Children**: Children will suffer needlessly as a result of this change in the application of social assistance eligibility. Ontario Works is an essential support for newcomer families seeking to keep their children safe, fed, and clothed, crucial as we approach the winter months.

While those awaiting CBSA's scheduling of an interview for PRRA will be eligible for work permits, we know from experience that even newcomers with strong resumes and fluency in English do not secure the kind of stable employment that can pay for rent and groceries quickly. It takes time to re-certify to Canadian standards, re-establish professional networks, and overcome language barriers and discrimination related to work experience outside of Canada. While people work to overcome these challenges and systemic barriers, access to Ontario Works is an essential lifeline.

Let us illustrate the situation with a story from one of our member organizations. Juan and Luisa arrived in Ontario in September 2026 and were ruled ineligible for the refugee claim process, due to a previous visit to Canada when their lives were not in danger in their countries of origin. Unable to return to their countries of origin, unable to make a refugee claim and awaiting an invitation to submit their PRRA application, they were deemed ineligible for Ontario Works. Juan was very employable as a drywaller but needed to work on his English language skills before landing a job. Their situation was made more dire by Luisa's pregnancy, since they would also be denied the Transitional Child Benefit. Juan and Luisa have skills that are needed in Canada but cannot secure jobs immediately; they will not be able to exit the shelter system and will wait in limbo there, uncertain of when CBSA will call them for an interview so that they can initiate the PRRA and access Ontario Works.

We call upon the Government of Ontario urgently, to amend Ontario Works regulation O. Reg. 134/98 to ensure that individuals who have been diverted to a PRRA process by IRCC and are awaiting their invitation to apply for a PRRA remain eligible for Ontario Works social assistance. No one fleeing persecution and seeking protection in our country should have to languish indefinitely in the shelter system or fall into poverty while they wait for their right to ask for Canada's protection.

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. Catharines
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
London Cross Cultural Learner Centre, London
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