

# **Affiliation of Multicultural Societies & Service Agencies of BC**

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## **RESETTLEMENT OF REFUGEES IN BRITISH COLUMBIA**

### **BACKGROUND**

AMSSA member agencies from across the Province of British Columbia are reporting strong public interest, support and generosity aimed at addressing the needs of Kosovar refugees arriving or destined to arrive in this Province. British Columbians, being made aware of the plight of these displaced persons, have indicated that they are ready to respond in tangible ways to address this issue. AMSSA believes that this increased awareness and goodwill undoubtedly will be directed towards other refugee groups and displaced persons from around the world.

For over 25 years newcomers to BC have benefited from a relatively strong infra-structure of settlement and integration services that include: assessment, orientation, information and referral; service linking and accompaniment; adjustment counseling and support; life skills and education; volunteer host and buddy programs, adult English language services and labour market preparation and access. AMSSA's *Immigrant Integration Coordinating Committee (IICC)* represents over 30 immigrant serving agencies and community-based associations throughout the Province of British Columbia that provide an array of culturally-appropriate, cost-effective services and indirect supports addressing the unique needs of all immigrants, refugees and refugee claimants. These important services are primarily funded through the Ministry Responsible for Multiculturalism, Human Rights and Immigration.

Over the past number of months, our agencies, in collaboration with staff from MRMI, have identified a number of systemic barriers and operational deficiencies that restrict access to critical services required by the refugee community in British Columbia. We have identified a number of recommendations that, if implemented, would ensure essential supports are available to assist in the successful integration of BC's refugee population. It is our sincere hope that the Government of British Columbia will take a pro-active approach in addressing these identified barriers and deficiencies in the current system that will ensure successful refugee resettlement in this province.

**AMSSA therefore recommends that the Government of British Columbia, through the Ministries identified within this brief, immediately implement the following:**

## **MINISTRY OF EDUCATION**

- 1. Designate funds to immediately establish critical response teams at specific public schools to address vicarious traumatization and post traumatic stress syndrome experienced by refugee children within the public school system.**

Refugee children, even those who have been in this province for several years, are being affected by the graphic scenes depicted through the media that have rekindled the traumatic memories of their refugee migration experience. These children are in pain, but they can not speak out because neither they nor their parents speak English. Employees of immigrant serving agencies and others have identified this as an urgent issue especially within schools with high numbers of refugees.

According to the latest CIC projected arrival information for fast-track family reunification, it appears that the majority of Kosovar children and youth will be destined for Burnaby, an area with a high concentration of Serbian immigrants. There must, therefore, be opportunities for specialized intervention in place before the Kosovar children enter our school system.

The Vancouver Association for Survivors of Torture (VAST), in particular, has expertise in facilitating this type of intervention. Funding should be allocated to them to support Outreach School Workers for this purpose.

- 2. Utilizing existing professional development opportunities such as the cross-boundary teacher training initiative in the Lower Mainland, school boards must be encouraged to support training that assists teachers in understanding the refugee experience.**

We feel strongly that teachers receiving refugee children should be provided at least one full day of training on such things as working with traumatized refugee children and a cultural profile of the refugee group. It is important that teachers be aware that simple things like the ringing of the school bell or earthquake preparation exercises can traumatize refugee children, regardless of their ethnicity. In fact, the ringing of the school bell in some war-torn countries is the commencement of bombing air raids.

Also, it appears that incidents of racism and discrimination are continuing to increase within our school system. Refugee and immigrant students are 'ghettoizing' in several schools which, in some cases, is leading to an increase in gang activity. We believe that school boards and government must acknowledge this problem and commit additional resources to address this issue.

- 3. Provide additional funds for those familiar with international refugee movements to work in collaboration with representatives from the Provincial Intermediate Teachers Association and the Social Studies Teachers Association to develop curriculum that specifically addresses refugees and displaced people.**

Efforts should be made to complete the development of this curriculum by this summer and then place it on the K-12 on-line website so that it is accessible to all teachers in British Columbia this fall. Also, during the course of a school year, immigrant-serving agencies in BC would be available to assist teachers in discussing refugee issues with their students. These resources would greatly assist teachers in instructing their students on issues facing refugees and displaced people. It is important to note that the curriculum is not just for use by ESL teachers but should be considered a core subject area in the school system. It is our sincere belief that all teachers and students should benefit from this proposed resource.

- 4. Provide funds to ensure free access to summer ESL K-12 programs for newly arrived Kosovo refugee children to begin their orientation to the school system.**

Several continuing education departments currently offer five mornings classes per week in July at an approximate cost of \$300 per student. These fees should be waived to enable refugee children to participate. These programs would be of tremendous value to newly arrived refugee children who may be waiting at home for 3 - 4 months before entering the school system. This early intervention approach/opportunity would greatly enhance these children's ability to more successfully integrate into our school system. This opportunity, however, would depend on whether the child/youth is psychologically ready.

## **MINISTRY OF ADVANCED EDUCATION, TRAINING AND TECHNOLOGY**

- 1. Immediately change eligibility criteria that restricts refugees from participating in employment training programs.**

Systemic barriers prevent sponsored refugees (government, group and family), as well as refugee claimants, from developing marketable skills so they can contribute to BC's economy. These refugees cannot access employment training or job search programs because their source of support is not recognized by current MAETT policy. They are neither on Income Assistance or Employment Insurance. In addition, government-assisted refugees, who are entitled to receive RAP income support for up to 12 months, must then go on Income Assistance for 9 months before they can access employment training interventions.

The *Working Group on Poverty*, a coalition of over 120 groups in BC, recently released a report entitled, '*Unfulfilled Expectations, Missed Opportunities: Poverty Among Immigrants and Refugees in British Columbia*' that suggests:

*'In most cases poverty is the consequence of forces beyond the control of individuals. Very simply many people, whether born in Canada or elsewhere, are poor because they do not have adequate or equitable access to good schools, housing, jobs and income. And the once resilient social safety net is no longer able to support them adequately while they work to improve their situation.'*

It should be noted that there is currently an initiative in the regions being piloted through the Ministry of Human Resources that allows clients to access training earlier than 9 months. This type of initiative by a Provincial Government Ministry must be supported.

**2. *Designate funds through the Ministry of Advanced Education, Training and Technology to support the development and delivery of 'bridging programs' targeting refugees and multi-barriered immigrants.***

One recent initiative, the '*Partners Forum for the Labour Market Integration of Multi-barriered Immigrants*', has brought together representation from client groups; community workers; employment service providers; federal, provincial and municipal government staff; and various funding bodies to address specific issues relating to multi-barriered immigrants. This group is attempting to identify the needs of individuals facing significantly greater barriers than most. They have observed that current government-supported language programming ends prior to many individuals achieving a reasonable language proficiency that would enable them to successfully enter and complete existing employment preparation and training programs.

The members of the *Partners Forum* recommended that 'bridging programs' - designed to further develop an individuals language proficiency while also introducing them to the Canadian job market through in-class training, field trips, work experience opportunities and other supports - are a critical component to successfully securing employment for these individuals.

## **MINISTRY FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES**

**1. *Designate funds through the Ministry of Children and Families to support targeted children and family services to address the needs of refugees through programs such as multicultural family support programs and multicultural youth workers.***

Refugees often experience increased incidence of family breakdown, violence, trauma, drug and alcohol abuse, and unemployment because of the traumatic experiences they have endured. These individuals primarily seek support through community-based immigrant serving agencies throughout the province.

Although the Ministry for Children and Families currently has \$1.1 billion available through its grants and contributions budget, we estimate that less than 0.1% is specifically targeted to immigrants and refugees through immigrant serving agencies in the Province of British Columbia. Unfortunately several of these contracted agencies recently were notified that this amount would be further reduced by an additional 1.5% for this budget year.

However, according to recent calculations available through the Ministry Responsible for Multiculturalism, Human Rights, and Immigration an estimated \$300,000 in services funded through MRMI's Community Liaison Division actually falls within the mandate of the Ministry for Children and Families.

**2. *Ensure immediate access to culturally appropriate childcare for refugee and immigrant families.***

Culturally appropriate childcare is of critical importance to the well-being of refugee children as experienced childcare staff may be necessary to understand and address issues relevant to the traumatic events these children have experienced. In addition, immediate access to culturally appropriate childcare is essential for refugee parents to avail themselves of the needed supports to assist them in the transitional process.

As previously addressed in AMSSA's letter to the Attorney General, Ujjal Dosanjh, at present within both the general child care system and within programs specifically for immigrants, there are unnecessary funding and procedural barriers that particularly effect farm workers, rurally-based immigrant families, family sponsored immigrants, and refugee claimants. Research shows that funds spent on quality child care are among the most effective of all social service dollars in preventing later health, education, legal, financial, and social problems. Currently some of the families and children that could most benefit are those who have the most difficulty finding or affording appropriate services. Both the general provincial child care budget (including "non-capped" provisions for child care subsidy) and specific immigrant child care services should therefore be reviewed and revised to ensure better equity of access, and better support for culturally-appropriate care. Currently within the child care sector, groups are working to change regulations, increase training opportunities and pilot new initiatives relevant to these issues. Government must both encourage and support these initiatives.

**3. *Create a Minister's Multicultural Advisory Committee within the Ministry for Children and Families and formally adopt the cultural competency framework prepared by the MCF Vancouver Ethnocultural Advisory Committee.***

We believe that a Minister's Multicultural Advisory Committee within MCF would benefit the Ministry for Children and Families in that it would have the capacity and recognition to address specific issues such as those relative to the Chinese community and child protection.

Also, to ensure a consistent commitment to cultural competency across all regions in the Province of British Columbia, MCF Regional Executive Directors must formally adopt the '*Defining Cultural Competency – A Framework for Contracted Service Providers and the Ministry*', as compiled by the MCF Vancouver Ethnocultural Advisory Committee. This framework must be established as standard ministry policy to ensure cultural competency among staff and contracted service providers.

## **MINISTRY RESPONSIBLE FOR MULTICULTURALISM, HUMAN RIGHTS AND IMMIGRATION**

- 1. Immediately increase the amount of direct settlement service dollars available through the MRMI's Community Liaison Division by re-allocating existing Canada/BC Settlement Accord funds now going into general revenue.**

According to the report, 'Government Restructuring and Immigrant/Refugee Settlement Work: Bringing Advocacy Back In', Gillian Creese observes:

*'Since the mid 1990's government restructuring and downsizing has shaken the foundations of settlement work, created greater uncertainties around funding, new gaps in services for immigrants and refugees, pressures toward vendorism and bureaucratization, and increased stress for workers in the field. While cuts to health care, education and social assistance have produced wide-ranging public debates, the impact of restructuring in the immigrant/refugee settlement field has gone virtually unnoticed outside of the non-profits working in that sector. This lack of discussion is somewhat surprizing in the city of Vancouver where 35% of the population are immigrants.'*

Proven services that provide assessment, orientation, information and referral; service linking and accompaniment; adjustment counseling and support; life skills and education; volunteer host and buddy programs must continue to exist within communities receiving refugees. Unfortunately, government restructuring, funding cuts and changes in funding priorities have seriously undermined the existing settlement infrastructure in the province as well as negatively impacted the social safety net that we value as Canadians.

While the Ministry Responsible for Multiculturalism, Human Rights, and Immigration has committed to maintaining the 'status quo' with respect to the amount of direct settlement service dollars available, this amount is not adequate to address increased demands and reduced funding through other sources. It is our understanding that the limited funds available will not address the needs that have been identified by our agencies throughout the province. MRMI indicates that there is a gap of over \$2 million between what agencies have projected is required to meet community demands and the amount of available funds. This funding shortfall must be addressed to ensure on-going, quality programs are available to newcomers.