

SPECIAL BULLETIN: RESETTLEMENT OF SYRIAN REFUGEES TO BRITISH COLUMBIA

Issue 1: November 23, 2015

*AMSSA has created the following special bulletin series, **Resettlement of Syrian Refugees to British Columbia**, to provide our members, partners and stakeholders with the latest information and facts about the Government of Canada's response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis, and to assist organizations in preparing for the resettlement of Syrian refugees to British Columbia.*

CONTEXT

Syria's civil war is the worst humanitarian crisis of our time. Since 2011, it is estimated that 12 million people have been killed or forced to flee their homes, representing over 50% of the country's pre-war population. As of November 2015, over 4.2 million Syrians have registered as refugees, most of them women and children. The Government of Canada has committed to resettling 25,000 Syrian refugees by the end of the year, the largest refugee resettlement plan since 1980 at the height of the Southeast Asian refugee crisis. Over the last decade, British Columbia has resettled approximately 11% of government-assisted refugees (GARs) to Canada. Based on these calculations, up to 3,000 Syrian GARs could be destined for British Columbia.

FEDERAL AND PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT

- The Government of Canada has identified internal capacity requirements for the resettlement of 25,000 Syrian refugees. These include additional funding for settlement support, government support for frontline services within the regions, and government staff to provide the required supports. A proposal is currently before Cabinet.
- The Government Operations Centre (GOC) is providing assistance and oversight to ensure all aspects of the operation are being considered, including identification of refugees, overseas processing, transportation to Canada, processing in Canada, and resettlement, settlement and integration. A strategic plan is being developed, which will be finalized before the announcement is made. The Minister is expected to make an announcement on Tuesday November 24.
- Discussions are underway with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) regarding orientation abroad options. Canadian Heritage will put together welcome packages, which will include information about Canadian culture, sports, etc.

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- An engagement strategy is being developed. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship John McCallum will continue to connect with stakeholders across the country.
- Current community capacity for settlement and resettlement is being mapped.
- A Summit is being organized with federal, provincial and municipal elected officials, likely before Parliament returns in December.
- The Government of British Columbia has created a \$1 million Syrian Refugee Readiness Fund for Syrian refugees settling in British Columbia. It is anticipated that the Request for Proposals (RFP) will be released in November.

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ARRIVALS

- The Government of Canada has not yet determined the breakdown of Syrian refugee arrivals to each province. More details are needed about the anticipated number of Government Assisted Refugees (GARs), Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSRs), Sponsorship Agreement Holders (SAHs), Groups of Five (G5) and Blended Visa Office Referred Program (BVORP) refugees.
- The Red Cross, International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) are involved in discussions on how to increase the number of Syrian refugees to Canada.
- To maximize the number of Syrian GARs to Canada by the end of 2015, Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) service providers have agreed in principle to receive GARs on weekends and after December 16 (the usual cut-off date for GAR arrivals).
- Syrian refugees arriving before the end of the year will be a mixture of GARs and PSRs. The first refugees will likely arrive in early December. Details will be confirmed in the formal government announcement.
- Syrian refugees destined to Canada will be referred by the UNHCR and are among the most vulnerable cases – children, single mothers and persecuted minorities who are in desperate situations demanding urgent protection and safety.

APPLICATIONS

- A newly established operations centre in Beirut will process 7,000 Syrian refugees by the end of 2015.
- Barriers to G5 sponsorship of Syrian refugees have been reduced through a streamlined process and reduced paperwork. Approximately 200 new sponsorship applications are being received each week, and the federal government has committed to processing them within 10 days. The Centralized Processing Office (CPO) in Winnipeg is being supported by staff in Vancouver.
- The amount of processing done overseas will determine whether Syrian refugees will arrive as Permanent Residents (information collected and processed overseas) or Temporary Residents (information collected overseas and in Canada). Syrian refugees arriving as Temporary Residents will be processed immediately upon arrival (likely within hours) to ensure they are eligible for programs and supports.
- The Government of Canada has a well-established system for thorough background security checks that use the latest technology, including biometrics, finger printing, data sharing, etc. Rigorous screenings are also conducted on all refugees by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) and the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA), which have been in place for decades.

INCOME SUPPORT

- Syrian GARs will have access to financial assistance from the federal government through the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) for up to one year after arrival, provided they do not have their own financial resources or income.

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- The exact rate will depend on the size of the family. In British Columbia, a family of four would receive \$1,349 per month to cover the cost of shelter, food and transportation.
- In addition, GARs are entitled to a one-time set up allowance to cover the cost of items such as clothes, basic household effects and staples, and telephone installation. For a single person there is a maximum one-time allowance of \$905, plus a \$564 loan for house rental and telephone line deposits.
- PSRs from Syria will not have access to financial assistance from the government; instead, they will receive support from their sponsors for their living expenses.
- Both Syrian GARs and PSRs will likely receive an interest-bearing loan from the Government of Canada to cover the cost of their flights to Canada, as well as their overseas medical examinations. These loans can be \$10,000 or more, depending on the size of the family and age of the children. They will need to start making loan repayments within their first year in Canada.
- The government has committed to changing the approach to the Interim Federal Health Program (IFH), though details have not yet been confirmed.

PREPARING FOR SYRIAN REFUGEES

Settlement service providers across Canada can actively prepare for the arrival of Syrian refugees. Preliminary preparations could include:

- Meeting with local governments, school boards, health authorities, etc., to develop coordinated response systems
- Locating permanent rental housing at the provincial social assistance rates
- Locating registered clinical counsellors to help address trauma-related cases
- Locating Arabic and Kurdish-speaking interpreters
- Location employment leads
- Ensuring the necessary supports are in place for the large number of refugees arriving in a short timeframe

NEXT STEPS

- November 24 – Announcement of the Government of Canada Resettlement Plan for 25,000 Syrian Refugees
- November 24-25 – Sponsorship Agreement Holder (SAH) Meeting
- November 26-28 – Canadian Council for Refugees Meeting
- November 28-29 – Syrian Refugee Working Group Meeting
- December 7 – BC Syrian Refugee Settlement Working Group Meeting

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Web Links

- AMSSA Webinar: [Escaping Conflict The Syrian Refugee Crisis Explained](#)

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- UNHCR: [Resettlement and Other Forms of Admission for Syrian Refugees](#)
- CISSA-ACSEI: [News and Updates](#)
- Government of Canada: [Helping Syrian and Iraqi Refugees](#)
- WelcomeBC: [Syrian Refugees Readiness Fund](#)
- ISSofBC: [Refugee Crisis](#)
- Cultural Orientation Resource Centre: [Refugees from Syria](#)

Documents

- [CISSA-ACSEI: Press Release](#)
- ISSofBC: Key Phases for Syrian Refugee Movement to Metro Vancouver
- ISSofBC: Backgrounder – Impact of Resettlement of 25,000 Syrian GARs on BC?

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PROFILE

SYRIAN REFUGEES

From: Cultural Orientation Resource Centre, Refugee Background: Refugees from Syria, November 2014

The great majority of the Syrian refugees are Sunni Muslim Arabs, but the population also includes ethnic and religious minorities, such as Kurds, Druze and members of various Christian and Shiite Muslim sects. Syrians are known for their hard work ethic and entrepreneurial spirit. Education levels will vary greatly among Syrian newcomers, but it is expected that most adults will arrive in their new communities with at least some elementary school education and a basic ability to read and write in their own language. Syrians under the age of 30 tend to be very technology savvy, using social media applications to communicate with friends and family, share information and organize activities. Older Syrians are also likely to have a basic knowledge of email and Skype.

CROSS-CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Clothing

- Syrian women generally dress very conservatively. Many Muslim women use a headscarf to cover their hair.
- While Syrians tend to wear the same clothes two or three days in a row, their clothes are always clean and neatly pressed. Access to an iron and ironing board is very important.

Communication Style

- Syrians may stand closer to one another when they talk, speak in louder voices and use more gestures. Those not used to this communication style may think that two Syrians are in a heated argument when in fact they are simply having a normal conversation.
- Syrians exchange many niceties in conversations. It is an everyday courtesy to inquire about another's health, even when people are not well acquainted.

Restaurant Etiquette

- Syrians do not divide up a check in a restaurant. Instead, one person – usually the oldest or wealthiest man – pays the entire check.

Smoking

- In Syria, smoking is common, including indoors in homes, offices and restaurants.

Parenting

- Syrian parents often do not provide the same level of adult supervision that is the norm, and in some cases the law, in countries such as Canada.
- It is customary to discipline children physically.

Affection Toward Children

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- In Syria, it is considered completely normal for someone to walk up to a stranger's child, pick them up, kiss them on the cheek, give them candy, and exclaim how cute they are.

Same-Sex Relations

- Syrian men and women show public affection for members of the same gender, e.g. men hold hands and greet one another with kisses on the cheeks. This behaviour should not be understood to indicate sexual orientation.
- Among Syrians, there is a general stigma against gays and openly gay behaviour. LGBTQ+ individuals are likely to keep their sexuality very private.

Polygamy

- Although polygamy does not appear to be widely practiced in Syria, it is legal.

Domestic Violence

- Domestic violence is not illegal in Syria, and victims of spousal abuse have very limited recourse.
- Due to the extraordinary pressures of life in Syria and countries of first Asylum, domestic violence may have occurred in families, either between spouses or between parents and children.

TIPS FOR PROVIDING INITIAL RESETTLEMENT SUPPORT

Community

- Syrian refugees will most likely find comfort and support in established Syrian and other Arab communities, such as resettled Iraqi refugees, with whom they share not only a common language and culture, but also a similar history of hardship.

Caseworkers

- Gender is likely to be more important than ethnicity and language background. Especially for women, who will usually prefer a female caseworker.

Interpreters

- If a Syrian interpreter is not available, then a non-Syrian Arabic speaker (e.g. Iraqi, Palestinian) can be used.
- For Kurdish refugees, an Arabic or Kurdish interpreter can be used. A Kurdish-speaking interpreter will need to know the same dialect of Kurdish (Kurmanji or Sorani) spoken by the refugee.
- An interpreter who is the same gender as the refugee is generally preferable, particularly in health care situations.

Employment

- Many Syrians will be eager to work as soon as possible.
- Professionally trained Syrians will be eager to return to their professions and should be told as soon as possible about any recertification processes.
- Syrians in white-collar occupations may be reluctant to accept manual labour jobs.
- A job placement that considers a person's background is more likely to succeed. For example, a former government worker could be placed in a cashier rather than janitorial position.

Language and Education

- Language classes will be high priority for Syrians since most will arrive with little or no proficiency in English or French.

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- Most children will arrive with little or no ability to speak, read or write in English or French. Some will have very limited previous schooling and will need special support in subject matter areas and language.

Social Support

- Social isolation can be an unfamiliar and unsettling challenge. Syrians are not used to spending long periods of time alone.
- Community centres and events that bring refugees together can lessen the sense of loneliness.
- Housing placements that are near Arab-speaking communities can reduce isolation as well as provide opportunities to share information and coping strategies.

Health Care

- Syrians are used to medical care that reflects their religious and cultural preferences.
- Medical treatment is more likely to be effective when health professionals provide culturally sensitive care, such as same-sex health care providers, long gowns that cover lower legs, and hospital food that follows Islamic dietary laws.
- It is essential that reproductive health be provided to refugee women by female gynaecologists and nurses.

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Mental Health Support

- Syrian refugees have suffered torture and violence, including sexual violence. Almost every refugee will have lost family or friends in the war. High rates of children who have experienced torture or trauma, some aged five or younger, are being reported.
- Survivors of trauma should be identified as soon as possible so that culturally sensitive support can be provided.
- Syrian refugees who need psychosocial support may not openly request it. They may also be unfamiliar with different forms of treatment.
- Female refugees may not want to talk about sexual abuse in front of their families. However, many may reveal abuse in a healthcare setting.
- For treatment to succeed, confidentiality and trust will be critically important. An Arabic-speaking social worker who is the same gender as the patient can be extremely helpful in building a trusting therapist-patient relationship.
- Syrians are likely to prefer individual or group therapy.

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