

News release
3 December 2015

Newcomer serving organizations welcome plans to resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees

The federal government's plans to resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees to Canada over the coming months are warmly welcomed by ten national, regional and provincial umbrellas of organizations serving newcomers across Canada. The umbrellas have a combined membership of over 550 organizations with approximately 40 years' experience and expertise in welcoming newcomers, including refugees.

The organizations are confident in Canada's capacity to welcome the Syrian refugees who will be joining our communities. As a country, we have a great deal of experience in welcoming refugees. We have existing programs to support resettled refugees and the organizations directly involved are eager to expand their capacity to respond to the increased numbers in the coming months.

The situation in the countries surrounding Syria is urgent, because refugees don't have enough to eat, children are not in school and winter is coming. It is therefore important that we act quickly. We are privileged in Canada to have the resources to welcome 25,000 refugees in the coming weeks without creating any crisis. Compared to the two million refugees hosted by Turkey, or the million refugees in Lebanon, the number to be welcomed by Canada is very modest.

Everyone needs to play a role in the response to the Syrian refugees: all levels of government, institutions, community organizations and individual citizens. The many offers to volunteer and contribute in various ways are gratefully received and underline the desire of Canadians across the country to welcome refugees.

It is important for Canadians to expect a great diversity among the refugees to be resettled. Some will be Muslim, others Christian, others entirely secular. We anticipate that some will be LGBT. They may be highly educated or have minimal education. Some are likely to be highly traumatized, while others may be able to integrate quickly into the job market. We should look forward to the many ways in which they will contribute to our communities, showing courage and resilience.

As we welcome Syrian refugees to Canada, it is important that we remember refugees from elsewhere. According to the UNHCR, a third of the more than a million refugees in need of resettlement are in Africa.

Acknowledging that Syrian refugees will join other Canadians in settling on the lands of the Indigenous Peoples, the organizations note the importance of moving quickly to implement Recommendation 93 of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which calls for newcomers to be given better information about diverse Aboriginal Peoples, including about the Treaties and the history of residential schools.

It is also crucial for Canadians to address the issues of racism, sexism and Islamophobia within Canadian society that compromise our ability to be a welcoming country for refugees.

Some of the Syrian refugees who will be resettling here already have family in Canada. There is

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continuing concern, however, for Syrian Canadians with affected family members for whom there is still no avenue to bring their family members to safety.

The organizations welcome the federal government's decision to exempt arriving Syrian refugees from the burden of the transportation loans (i.e. the obligation to repay the Canadian government for the cost of their travel to Canada and their immigration medical exam). The transportation loan has a devastating impact on resettled refugees, undermining their settlement process in Canada. The organizations hope that the elimination of the loan for the Syrian refugees may be the first step to abolishing it for all resettled refugees.

Canadian Council for Refugees (CCR)

Affiliation of Multicultural Societies & Service Agencies of British Columbia (AMSSA)

Alberta Association of Immigrant Serving Agencies (AAISA)

Saskatchewan Association of Immigrant Settlement and Integration Agencies (SAISIA) Manitoba

Immigrant and Refugee Settlement Sector Association (MIRSSA)

Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI)

Table de Concertation des organismes au service des personnes Réfugiées et Immigrantes (TCRI)

Atlantic Region Association of Immigrant Serving Agencies (ARAISA)

Multicultural Centre of the Yukon

Canadian Immigrant Settlement Sector Alliance - Alliance canadienne du secteur de l'établissement des immigrants (CISSA-ACSEI)

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Media suggestions for member organizations

- Keep messaging positive. Focus on welcoming the initiative and underlining our country's capacity to resettle refugees. Be very cautious about sharing with media any concerns about some of the challenges involved (e.g. affordable housing) – we can discuss these internally without raising them in the media.
- Use the points in the press release as the key messages to repeat to media.
- Remember that you do not need to answer every media query, or every question that a journalist may ask.
- Welcome offers to volunteer, contribute etc. Celebrate Canadians' enthusiasm. We can ask for patience in getting back to people as we try to manage the outpouring of offers.
- For questions around security issues, you may refer to CCR's statement <http://ccrweb.ca/en/statement-response-attacks-paris-and-beirut>
- Plan in advance for media interest around the arrival of Syrians and work out how to protect refugees from unwanted media attention. We need to consider refugees' privacy and the impact on them of media.

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