

Finding refuge in Canada: A Syrian resettlement story^[1]

Report of the Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights

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Executive summary

The war in Syria has given rise to the largest refugee crisis in recent history. Not only have Syrians been forced to seek safety in neighbouring villages and cities, but many have left their country in the hopes of finding a safe refuge until the war comes to an end. While Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt have welcomed their neighbours in their time of crisis, the sheer number of Syrian refugees and the duration of the conflict have overwhelmed their capacity to help.

As refugees lose hope of soon being able to return home, many are looking to start their lives over in an area that can provide safety and stability for their family. For many, Europe is the solution. Reaching European countries, however, does not guarantee safety or stability and getting there can be treacherous.

Last year, Canadians were moved by the stories of Syrian refugees putting everything on the line to escape the Middle East. Many were eager to help and wanted their government to step up. As a result, the Government of Canada endeavoured to resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees between 4 November 2015 and 29 February 2016 through its #WelcomeRefugees initiative. While the program reached its objective, resettlement is only the first step. Getting refugees to safety is an important achievement and should be celebrated, but ensuring that they integrate successfully is a long term goal that will benefit refugees themselves and Canada at large.

On 14 April 2016, the Senate tasked the Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights with studying and reporting on steps being taken to facilitate the integration of newly-arrived Syrian refugees and to address the challenges faced by refugees, the various levels of government, private sponsors and non-governmental organizations. The Committee heard from numerous witnesses including the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship as well as officials from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, a number of resettlement organizations, private sponsors and Syrian refugees.

The Committee was moved by the willingness of Canadians to welcome Syrian refugees and the eagerness of Syrian refugees to become contributing members of Canadian society. It was concerned, however, that the Government of Canada is not allocating enough resources to help them integrate:

- Many refugees are welcomed to Canada with monetary debts to the Canadian government, which must be repaid with interest after a certain time. Given the uphill battle of integration that refugees face, the Government of Canada must replace these loans with grants or introduce a debt forgiveness mechanism for those who are unable to repay them. At the very least, the Government of Canada should stop profiting from their hardship and not charge interest.
- Many refugees are struggling to meet their basic needs because they are not receiving certain benefits in a timely manner. It is important that the Canada Revenue Agency maintain timely disbursements of the Canadian Child Benefit. Refugees must be able to support themselves without resorting to food banks.
- The ability to speak English or French is a basic requirement to participate in Canadian society. It is imperative that the Government of Canada fund language classes appropriately and secures spaces for all refugees upon arrival. Coupling more day care spaces with language training classes would remove a significant barrier for many refugees, especially women, who are too often left behind.
- Refugee youth face unique challenges when it comes to integrating. The Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship must provide funding for programs that address their needs.
- Despite surviving the traumas of war and starting their lives over, refugees are tremendously resilient. The Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, however, should work with provincial, territorial and municipal partners to develop a comprehensive plan that addresses the mental health needs that may arise for a minority of Syrian refugees, such as ongoing trauma and PTSD. Any programing should be culturally appropriate. The Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship should also strive to eliminate any barriers to appropriate treatment services.
- The Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship should intensify coordination with civil society partners to develop ways in which issues of domestic and gender-based violence can be addressed in a culturally sensitive way. Any outreach and information products developed for this purpose should be designed to reach the most vulnerable and isolated members of the refugee population.
- Syrian refugees were relieved to finally arrive in a safe and stable country like Canada, but many were forced to leave their family members behind. Knowing that some of their family members face persecution and other serious risks to their safety is causing refugees here a lot of guilt and anguish, making it difficult for them to fully participate in Canadian society. The Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship should increase efforts to reunite refugees with their family members left behind in a way that is timely and considers extended family members.

With this in mind, the Governments of Canada needs to gear its policies to benefit refugees in the longterm. Refugees are under tremendous pressure to become self-sufficient within the first 12 months of arrival. At the end of those 12 months, often referred to as 'Month 13,' the direct financial obligations to Syrian refugees undertaken by sponsors and the Government of Canada come to an end. From that point on, refugees who are not yet self-sufficient depend on the assistance of the provinces and territories. It is important that refugees are given all of the opportunities necessary to succeed.

Related link: Syrian refugees face challenges accessing childcare in Kamloops^[3]

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