

# Filipino Canadians fear end of immigrant dreams for nannies<sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

Ottawa's recent rhetoric about an "out-of-control" live-in caregiver program has prompted outrage in some quarters - and fear that the days of a pathway to permanent residency for foreign nannies are numbered.

Critics of the government's approach, including some Conservative loyalists, warn that the growing Filipino Canadian vote could also be at stake in next year's federal election if the government removes access to immigration from the live-in caregiver program (LCP) - 90 per cent of those participating are from the Philippines.

"This is a defining issue for the Filipino Canadian community," said Chris Sorio of Migrante Canada, an international advocacy group for Filipino migrants.

"This is something very close to our hearts. It is worrying us because we feel this could be a smoke-screen for changes that are coming to the LCP program. Our concern is they are going to further restrict family reunification under the program."

In recent meetings with the media to discuss Ottawa's planned reforms to the controversial temporary foreign workers program, Employment Minister Jason Kenney criticized the LCP as being "out of control" and having "mutated" into a program of family reunification.

At a closed-doors consultation in Vancouver last week, Immigration Minister Chris Alexander said the government intends to "modernize" the program and asked participants what they thought of the "automatic PR" (permanent residency) afforded to caregivers under the LCP.

The program grants permanent status after the caregiver meets the two-year full-time live-in employment requirement, and allows their spouses and children to join them at that point - a key incentive for caregivers to choose to work in Canada despite the family separation of up to four years or more.

Although Kenney is unlikely to abolish the program, given Canada's shortage of childcare spaces and growing need for elder care, his allegations about abuse of the program sound similar to claims he made about other immigration and refugee programs before major overhauls were introduced.

Inquiries to Kenney were directed to Alexander, who did not respond to the Star's request for comment.

Kenney said he had met with 70 nannies at a seminar in Manila who were "all" going to work for relatives in Canada. But that claim doesn't jibe with the findings of a two-year research project led by Gabriela Ontario, a Filipino women's rights group, and funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

"We're actually surprised by the number of individuals who were hired by an employment agency," said lead researcher Ethel Tunongan, a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Alberta. "The direct hires by relatives have actually increasingly decreased."

The project surveyed more than 630 current and former live-in caregivers in six cities, followed by 55 focus groups, to explore the demographic profile of the caregivers and their transition into Canada.

It found that 88 per cent of the Filipino caregivers who arrived in Canada over the past five years were hired through recruitment agencies (61 per cent) or hired directly by unrelated employers, through referrals (27 per cent). Of those who arrived more than 10 years ago, only 36 per cent came in through recruiters, and 47 per cent through a direct hire.

"It perplexes me where Minister Kenney got his information and why he made the statement now," said Tunongan, adding that the 660,000-strong Filipino Canadian community would be up in arms over changes to the LCP's permanent residency provision.

This month, even the right-leaning Ontario Filipino Ministerial Fellowship, a group of 70 pastors with 40,000 parishioners, condemned Kenney's comments.

"Characterizing LCP participants in general in such a negative light by claiming that they are using and abusing the program to the extent that it has mutated into a family reunification program is grossly unfair," said Rev. Tec Uy.

In 2009, a parliamentary community conducted a thorough review of the LCP and recommended issuing open work permits, allowing caregivers to work for any employer and granting them permanent status upon arrival.

When Judith Gonzales completed the live-in caregiver program and became a permanent resident, her boss hired her sister, a teacher from

the Philippines, to replace her, who was in turn replaced by a physiotherapist niece, then a computer programmer niece. Each eventually brought in their families.

"I came here by myself more than 10 years ago. Now, I have more than 20 family members here," said Gonzales, a mother of four who now works in corporate marketing. "It all started with me. We are all working and building Canada. What's wrong with that?"

Researchers surveyed 631 Filipina caregivers about their jobs, recruitment, education, use of community supports and health, in the first national study of Canada's live-in caregivers [3].

It found:

- Caregivers' average age on arrival was 34
- 86% had university education or above.
- Nearly 90% arriving in the past five years were recruited by employment agencies or directly hired by unrelated employers.
- Two-thirds had children; about half experienced continued separation because their children had grown too old to be considered dependants for immigration.

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- Read the full article online at Toronto Star [2]

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