

Live-in caregivers in Fort McMurray: A socioeconomic footprint

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Format: Report

AVAILABILITY

Full report (pdf) [2]

Executive Summary:

The oil sands industry of northern Alberta, sometimes dubbed the "economic engine" of Canada, does not run on oil workers alone. Many thousands of people provide the services that keep Fort McMurray running, allowing the industry workforce to eat, sleep, bathe, dress, learn, play, volunteer, commute, and work. Among them are hundreds of live-in caregivers who are in Canada under the conditions of the recently reformed Live-in Caregiver Program (LCP). These caregivers move to the region for many of the same reasons as other people in Fort McMurray—to take advantage of economic opportunity, to fill a labour demand, to provide for family, and to save for the future. And like many other workers in Fort McMurray, they experience it as a culturally challenging but economically exciting and busy place where people work long hours. At the same time, our evidence shows that live-in caregivers form a distinctive component of the Fort McMurray workforce in at least three important ways:

- Live-in caregivers are crucial to bridging work-family relations for their employers, especially those who work in the oil sands industry. How? By working long and irregular hours (they work longer hours on average per week than the local population, including trades workers), performing a broad range of duties for busy households working unpredictable schedules, and bringing substantial cost savings to their employers, especially in a context where child care options are limited and expensive.
- Live-in caregivers are highly educated and experienced. They have attained more postsecondary degrees on average than the Fort McMurray population as a whole, and have career aspirations in a number of high-demand areas including business, education, health care, and the trades. In other words, they have the potential to continue to contribute much to the Canadian economy.
- The pathways that bring live-in caregivers to Fort McMurray, and the pathways that would allow them to capitalize on the socioeconomic opportunities it promises, are strewn with obstacles. Like other categories of workers under the broad Temporary Foreign Worker Program, live-in caregivers invest substantial amounts of money and time to move to Alberta and face multiple bureaucratic and systemic barriers to their goal of becoming permanent residents so they can sponsor families and build lives and careers in Canada. These include prohibitions against participating freely in the labour market, limited opportunities to work or build skills when moving from one status to another, precarious employment conditions and poorly regulated employers (on whom receipt of permanent resident status depends), and long waiting times for the paperwork required at multiple stages of their journey.

Radical changes to the LCP effective January 2015 remove the distinctiveness of the LCP by making it simply another stream within the TFWP, where legal limits to free labour market participation and inadequate monitoring of labour standards remain core problems. By also removing the incentive and promise of citizenship, these changes diminish the life chances of the many thousands of live-in caregivers who make significant contributions to Fort McMurray and other economic centres in Canada.

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