

YEAR
THREE

2023

Hidden Lives and Unheard Voices: The Experiences of Undocumented Migrants and Privately Sponsored Refugees in Edmonton

The State of Immigration
and Settlement Report - Year Three

Edmonton

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We Are All Treaty People

This home we call Edmonton has been a gathering place for many cultures since time immemorial. It is the traditional lands of so many diverse Peoples: nehiyaw (cree), Dene, Nakota Sioux, Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabe, and Niitsitapi, and many others, as well as the traditional homeland of Inuit and Métis people. There has been a long history of migration to this rich and fertile land, and we acknowledge that those of us with settler and immigrant backgrounds truly are newcomers here. It is an honour to share this land with the people who came before us and to learn from them. We believe we have a sacred duty, bound by Treaty, to ensure we give back to this land and to its people, and together, to co-create a safe and welcoming home for all.

Acknowledgments and Credits

This report is the product of many, many people who have had a wide diversity of experiences.

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The Story Continues...

As Edmontonians, we are bound together by common hopes: we all want to live in a community where we can be safe, happy, prosperous, and feel like we belong. This is the shared dream many newcomers bring to Canada, but as we've explored in previous State of Immigration and Settlement reports, this dream can be tough to realize, for reasons beyond newcomers' control.

In this year's report, we explore the experiences of two particularly vulnerable groups of newcomers: migrants who have lost their legal status to live and work in Canada, and refugees who are sponsored by private groups. While their paths and reasons for coming to Canada are different, both of these groups frequently find themselves

living precariously on the fringes of our society. Both groups face significant settlement challenges, particularly around employment and housing. They often come here from challenging contexts in their home countries that make returning difficult or dangerous. There is a lack of support, preparation and oversight provided to them to inform them of their rights in Canada, which opens them up to exploitation and abuse. As such, both groups often experience mental health challenges, for which support is difficult to come by, or non-existent.

In 2024, we live in a new municipal reality. One out of four Edmontonians is a newcomer, and this number is growing every year. Climate change, war and conflict, natural disasters, and

“We dream of a society where families are not broken up by the urgent need for survival. We dream and will actively work for a homeland where there is opportunity for everyone to live a decent and humane life.”

—Migrante Alberta, 2023

economic uncertainty across the globe are all driving migration to our city. Global events, like war in Gaza and Ukraine, impact Edmontonians and people seeking to settle here. And of course, living in an age of the COVID pandemic means people everywhere are struggling in new and profound ways.

Even though immigration and settlement are ultimately under the purview of the federal government, cities are responsible to their citizens. Indeed, migrants are citizens of our city, regardless of their legal status. They may be immigrants to Canada, but cities are where they *live*. They use city services, and contribute to our economy and our communities. This is why it's essential to rethink how we handle settlement and immigration at the municipal level.

After all, migrants aren't just statistics. They are our neighbours, family members, friends. They are us. We are we. One community. ■



DID YOU KNOW: Language on this Subject Matter is Complex

Newcomers, migrants, immigrants are all words with slightly different connotations and limitations. We're choosing to use the word “newcomer” to refer to people who have recently moved to Canada. “Immigrant” refers to all people who were not born in Canada; they may be new to Canada, or have lived here for decades. While “migrant” may refer to people who move interprovincially, we're primarily using the term to refer people who have arrived here internationally, but noting that they may also have moved from other provinces before they settle in Edmonton.

Look for the following icons throughout this report:



SYSTEMIC BARRIERS
Current structures and policies that affect the experiences of real people.



BIG IDEAS
Ideas that offer context and potential positive impacts for newcomers and migrants.



PERVASIVE MYTHS
Ideas, stories and narratives about newcomers, refugees and immigrants that are untrue and harmful, but continue to be part of the social landscape.



PROMISING PRACTICES
Positive approaches to be explored further to enhance the lives of newcomers and migrants.



WHAT WE HEARD
Quotes from migrants about their personal lived experiences and perspectives.



BY THE NUMBERS
Relevant statistics from trusted sources about issues that affect migrants.



DID YOU KNOW
Information about immigration that may surprise or counter traditionally held narratives.

Immigration by the Numbers

The last four years have seen unprecedented numbers of immigrants arriving in Canada. Attracted by our stable economy, and the relative peace and safety of our communities, Canada is a very attractive place for many people seeking a new home. Indeed, Canada relies on immigration to fill gaps in our growing labour market and to contribute to our economy. Immigrants bring tremendous wealth to our country, financially and culturally. In Edmonton, immigrants make up more than a quarter of our entire workforce, and when we increase migration to our city, we bring skilled and talented people who help our economy to grow — especially important as our population is living longer, having fewer children and aging with Baby Boomers set to retire. For more information about why immigration matters in Canada, [click here](#).

The most recent data available from the 2022 *Annual Report to Parliament on Immigration* reported*:

405,999

permanent residents were welcomed into Canada in 2021.

416,846

Temporary Foreign Workers entered the country under two programs:

445,776

Study Permit Holders were admitted as international students.

198,641

Ukrainians have arrived under the CAUET (Canada-Ukraine Authorization for Emergency Travel).

103,552

with the Labour Market Impact Assessment

and **313,294**

under the International Mobility Program.

52,537

new permanent residents were welcomed to Alberta.

40,000

Afghan refugees have arrived in Canada.

30,000

are expected to be resettled in Canada, many of them will be in Alberta.

962,506

migrants entered Canada using visitor visas.

*Data reflective of 2021, as per the 2022 *Annual Report to Parliament on Immigration*.

Government of Canada Future Immigration Targets:

2024: **485,000** 2025: **500,000** 2026: **500,000**

Most of the newcomers currently coming to Canada are arriving through either the Skilled Worker or Family Class programs. Refugees, in spite of vast global need, are a small percentage of immigration totals.

Here is a breakdown of the percentage of refugees, as per total immigration targets, who will be coming to Canada in the next three years.* GAR refers to the Government-Assisted Refugee Program, and PSR refers to the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program. You can find more information about these programs on page 32.

- 2024: 10.1% (4.4% GAR, 5.7% PSR)
- 2025: 8.8% (3.1% GAR, 5.7% PSR)
- 2026: 8.8% (3.1% GAR, 5.7% PSR)

In 2025/2026, GAR targets go down from 21,115 (2024) to 15,250 (2025, 2026). This is almost half of the PSR targets for those years (28,250).

*Many thanks to the Settlement Agreement Holder Council for providing this data.

Immigration to Edmonton

Immigration has increased by more than 25% since 2016. **↑25%**

82%

Edmonton has a retention rate of newcomers of almost 82%, which is the highest of any city in Canada.

5th

Fifth city of destination in Canada for newcomers.

>30,000

More than 30,000 newcomers made their homes in Edmonton in 2023.



BIG IDEA: Increasing Resettlement Targets

The immigrant-serving sector is advocating for an increase to refugee resettlement targets across all government programs to account for 15% minimum of total immigration levels, instead of 8–10%. This will help reduce the backlog of applications and the wait times refugees experience, where additional harms to them often occur. The sector is also advocating to ensure that Government-Assisted Refugee (GAR) numbers are at least equivalent to those who are privately sponsored (PSR), if not higher. In the next two years, GAR numbers are expected to be roughly half of PSR targets. By opening a dialogue with the federal government, the City of Edmonton could join the sector in advocating for an increase to these resettlement targets.

Migrants with Precarious Status An Overview

What does it mean to be a migrant with precarious status?

A migrant with precarious status means that they have already lost, or run the immediate risk, of losing their legal status to live and work in Canada. In the vast majority of cases, this status loss is due to issues beyond their control, such as policy changes, unethical employers, or court decisions. Occasionally, they may be the victim of a crime, such as human trafficking.

Who is most likely to be affected?

Migrants come to Canada through many different paths, and they all face potential barriers and risks. However, there are four groups of migrants who experience the most insecurity, and are more likely to become undocumented:

TEMPORARY FOREIGN WORKERS

Temporary Foreign Workers are recruited to fill short-term labour and skill shortages when no Canadians are available to do the job. They most typically work in low-paying roles in hospitality, construction, agriculture, cleaning and domestic labour sectors.



PERVASIVE MYTH: Undocumented People are Criminals

There is a perception that people without legal status enter the country illegally. This couldn't be further from the truth. While there are many reasons why a migrant might lose their legal status and become undocumented, the common denominator is that they all entered Canada legally, and want nothing more than to stay, and to become legal residents of Canada again.

VISITOR VISA HOLDERS

Visitors or temporary residents can enter Canada and stay for up to six months. After six months, they need to reapply for a temporary resident visa. A person will likely be granted a visitor visa twice, but may be denied thereafter. Some visas allow for visitors to enter Canada once, others allow for multiple entries during the period the visa is active.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

International students can apply for a study permit so long as they are enrolled at a designated learning institution, and have enough money to pay for tuition and living expenses, and also have enough money to return to their home country.

REFUGEE CLAIMANTS OR ASYLUM SEEKERS

A refugee claimant or asylum seeker is a person who is seeking protection in Canada because they fear persecution, or their life is at immediate risk, in their home country. Refugee claimants are typically detained at their port of entry, and undergo thorough security and background screening, before they're allowed to enter Canada. Then they need to await a decision from the Canadian government to determine whether their refugee claim will be upheld. ■



BY THE NUMBERS: Hidden Lives

There's no way of knowing how many undocumented people live in Edmonton, as they are forced to live hidden lives. Estimates from advocacy organizations anticipate there could be 20,000–50,000 undocumented people living in Alberta, and the majority live in Alberta's major cities.



BIG IDEA: Undocumented People are Our Community Members

Undocumented migrants are our family, friends, and community members. They are not nameless, faceless "others." The City needs to take an active stance and extend services to them, as they are residents of Edmonton.



DID YOU KNOW: Why They Stay

As stressful and challenging as it is to live as an undocumented person in Canada, people stay here because it's better than returning to their home countries. Very often, they have little choice. If they were to return home, many people would face extreme poverty, violence, and risk of death. Others choose to stay because they have children or family here, and are seeking pathways to become permanent residents for a better future.



SYSTEMIC BARRIER: Abuse and Exploitation

The desperation that many undocumented people experience opens them up to abuse and exploitation. They are frequently unwilling to approach any authorities for fear of deportation, and so are particularly vulnerable to scammers, abusive labour practices, and exploitation.

Our Stories **Mauricio**



Mauricio stares at the ceiling, watching a spider overhead spin its web. He's always liked insects. At home, when he was a kid, it was his job to rid his mother's house of creepy crawlies, and instead of killing them, he'd take them outside and set them free. His mother used to cluck and shake her head at him. "Just squish them," she'd say. "They're dirtying up my clean house!"

But Mauricio would always scoop them up with his hand or in a cup and deliver them to the earth outside, and he'd feel good about it for the rest of the day, like he'd earned his place in heaven because of all the lives he'd saved.

But clearly heaven didn't place much value on bugs, because of the hell he's found himself in today.

He closes his eyes, trying to sleep again through the weak early morning light. Beside him, in the single bed, Marta shifts her ever-growing bulk beside him, pulling the thin blanket with her. Now in her eighth month of pregnancy, her sleep is hit and miss, and there's less and less room for him in the bed. He doesn't know what they'll do, and where he'll sleep, when the baby comes.

He opens his eyes again to see the spider hanging inches above him, suspended on a single thread. He imagines it's watching him with all eight eyes, observing, wondering what he's doing in this small bed in this cold room. It's something he's asked himself many times over.

Two years ago, it all sounded like a wonderful adventure. When the recruiters came to his town and showed him a pamphlet of a big city with shining tall towers and white winter snow, it seemed like the chance of a lifetime. Big money. Real money. Enough money for him to live well, with extra to send back to his mom every month. And a North American city like he'd seen in the movies, with fast cars and big malls, and restaurants and clubs. Fast-paced, exciting. So much more so than his sleepy little island town.

But for some reason, it didn't occur to him that snow meant cold. Biting cold. So very, very cold and dry, and his hands would crack and tears would freeze on his eyelashes. And dust and smoke in the summer, with air so thick and orange he could scarcely breathe.

Or that the city was so much more expensive to live in than he could ever imagine. Even when he was working, he could barely cover his own expenses, let alone send money back to his mom. The money the company paid him was always short of what he was expecting. "Deductions," they'd say vaguely. But deductions for what? He always went to work on time, didn't take breaks, did exactly what was asked of him. Even worked late without extra pay. When he asked his boss, she'd just get mad at him, so he learned not to say anything.

And then, one day, she called him into her office and handed him a paper. "Termination," she'd said coldly. "Why?!" He'd asked. She said nothing, but told him to leave, and to pack up his things from the house he shared with seven other workers. They had new workers flying in that day, and his bed was needed for someone else.

That day, he cried, the first time since his dad had died. He told Marta, who was already months into her pregnancy, and she cried too. Then she raged and threw a pot on the floor, and her downstairs neighbour pounded on her ceiling with a broom handle, threatening to call the police if they weren't quiet.

He moved his two bags of things into her apartment that day, grateful he had her, relieved he had a place to go. But there wasn't much room for him there. She also worked on a temporary contract, and shared the two-bedroom apartment with five other people. They had hung sheets in the bedrooms to try to give each person some privacy, but there was barely room for Marta, let alone him, and someday soon, a baby.



DID YOU KNOW: **The Long Road to Permanent Residency**

Regardless of the way a person entered Canada, it takes a long time and an outlay of money in order to become a permanent resident of Canada. While newcomers wait, life happens, and any number of things can go wrong: loss of job, ending a relationship, policy changes, inflation and money struggles — all of which may impact their application. Newcomers are particularly vulnerable during this time.



SYSTEMIC BARRIER: The Unethical "Undocumented Immigration Industry"

It is all too easy for desperate people to get caught in scams, or be exploited by unethical predators. Unscrupulous immigration consultants, travel agents, labour recruiters, brokers, smugglers, immigration lawyers, landlords, employers, and even, at times, family members and friends have all been known to take advantage of migrants' desperation. Many people pay exorbitant fees, both in their home countries, and in Canada, to help them take care of aspects of their immigration. In some cases, costs are highly inflated. In others, people are scammed out of their life savings.



DID YOU KNOW: Few Resources at Their Disposal

Undocumented people don't have access to schools, healthcare, income support, AISH, or any of the social programs that we count on as Albertans. In fact, it wasn't until 2017, when the *McKenna Rose Law* came into force, that Alberta-born children of undocumented migrants could even access healthcare.



PERVASIVE MYTH: Undocumented People are Unworthy

Legal status is very much a colonial concept. Just as the colonial Canadian government bestows Indigenous "status" or "non-status," it imposes similar structures around immigration. Status cannot — or should not — be confused with personhood, or human rights.

A baby who would be born here, in this city. A baby who would be a Canadian citizen.

He feels the burn of anxiety pit his guts. A baby. A baby he will love. He's always wanted to be a dad. He feels love tug his heart for Marta and the baby, both. And a tear seeps out of his eyes, as he knows that he might not get to see this baby grow up.

Because without a job, he can't afford to stay. Who will hire him? He's sent out dozens — hundreds — of resumes, and no one ever responds. And he knows once his work permit expires in just a couple of weeks, he'll lose his legal right to stay in Canada.

But he can't leave Marta. And he can't leave the baby who will make his entrance in just a few weeks' time.

He needs work, money, because soon, Marta won't be working either. He knows she'll lose her job as soon as she gives birth, and then they'll both be homeless, and he'll be undocumented.

Could they go back home? Maybe. But neither of them can afford the flight, and even if they could, it feels too overwhelming with a newborn. A newborn Canadian, who will have a much better future in this country, rather than back home.

Staying put feels like his only option. So what can he do? It's a question he's asked himself a hundred times an hour. He'd like to pick up some work under the table, maybe. Surely someone would hire him? He's young and fit and can do anything he sets his mind towards. He'll learn, he'll work hard.

But he's scared to even leave the apartment. To leave this room. Scared that someone will find out he's less than two weeks away from losing his legal status, and that he'll be deported. Sent back to a place where he has no future, just as his new family is starting to live.

What do I do? He silently directs the question to the spider, wishing for ancient wisdom from the arachnid. But the spider just hangs there, swinging lightly on a draft.

It's how Mauricio feels too. He also is hanging by a thread.

Marta shifts once again, and moans in her sleep. She'll be waking up soon.

Mauricio reaches up and gently cups the spider in his hand, knowing that Marta wouldn't take kindly to waking up to an insect in her face. He quietly pads out of bed, careful not to wake anyone, and takes the spider down the hall to their patio door. He releases it to the concrete pad outside.

For a moment, he's envious of the spider. It's free now to do as it pleases, to live the life it was meant to live. Once again, he's saved a life.

Now, how to save himself? That's a whole other question. ■



DID YOU KNOW: Changes to International Student Visas

The federal government recently announced several changes impacting the International Student Visa program. Starting January 2024, prospective students must prove that they have access to \$20,645 instead of the \$10,000 requirement that has been in place for the last two decades. The government has also waived the cap on work hours, which means international students can now work for more than 20 hours per week off campus, but only until April 30, 2024. While these changes are ostensibly in place to protect students and to provide a more realistic context for cost of living in Canada, it does limit opportunities for students to study here.



WHAT WE HEARD

"There was a big gap between the promised salary in the contract and what was actually paid (\$25 vs. \$11), and not enough hours given to work."

"I ran out of money to pay for tuition fees. I could not get full-time hours to work because I had to go to school and study, and less work hours meant less money to pay for school. It was not sustainable."

"We met an immigration lawyer who promised to help us with a work permit, paid him \$5,000 and discovered that there was no work permit. We are still looking for other opportunities."

"I would rather live here — first to live freely and be accepted as LGBTQ person. I know that if I go back I wouldn't be able to find a job and risk being arrested and sent to jail."

Migration Map: How Migrants Come to Be Undocumented

Here are the most common paths by which migrants lose their legal status in Canada:

TEMPORARY FOREIGN WORKERS

 **The vision:** a good job, enough money to live well and support family at home, an adventure in an exciting and rich country.

The reality: an often abusive work environment, at the mercy of one employer, poor working conditions, low pay, expensive and crowded living conditions, precarious legal status. Policy changes can leave them stranded.

- In their home country, they may pay high fees to a recruiter to help them find work, arrange permits and travel. 
- Enter the country legally, through a temporary work contract.
- Contract obligations may not be met by the company that hires them. 
- Policy changes, like the Four In, Four Out Rule, affects their ability to renew their work permit (see page 17 for more information). 
- They can try to switch their permit to a visitor visa, which works for up to two years. After that, their permit is denied. 

VISITOR VISAS

 **The vision:** a path to enter Canada, an opportunity to find work and eventually settle permanently.

The reality: no path to citizenship. Visitor permit may not be renewed if the extension is denied. Policy changes can leave them stranded.

- Enter the country legally, through a visitor visa.
- Depending on the kind of visa, they are allowed to stay in Canada for six months, with either one-time or unlimited entry during that time. 
- They may renew their visa for up to two years. After that, their visa is denied. 

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

 **The vision:** an opportunity to study at a western university, paving the way for a great job and future, and the possibility of permanent residency.

The reality: an expensive city to live in, with high tuition costs on top of living expenses. Policy changes can leave them stranded.

- In their home country, they may pay high fees to a recruiter to help them arrange their course of study, permits and travel.
- Enter the country legally, on a study permit.
- They have often been given inaccurate information by recruiters, and are unprepared for how expensive it is to live here. They may have difficulty paying for their schooling based on the savings they've brought with them. 
- They struggle to find work in order to pay for school, or may need to prioritize work over school. However, their work permit is tied to their student status. 
- Academic status is tied to their permit. If their academic status changes — for example, if they need to take a break from their studies in order to work to pay for school, they lose their permit. 
- They may switch to a visitor visa during this time, for up to two years. After that, their visa is denied. 

REFUGEE CLAIMANTS

 **The vision:** living in a safe and open society, the opportunity to escape violence and persecution, and a path towards permanent residency and a strong future.

The reality: an uncertain future that depends on so many factors beyond their control.

- They leave their home country, escaping violence and persecution.
- They declare themselves asylum seekers upon entering Canada, and face immediate investigation, and possible detention. 
- They must wait for the Canadian government to decide whether or not to accept their refugee claim. In the meantime, they have few resources at their disposal. 
- They often find themselves alone, without work, friends, family, or a network, and are forced to live in uncertainty. 
- If their claim is denied, they face deportation and must return to the danger they were trying to escape, or live without legal status in Canada. 

Factors That Contribute to Precarity

No one intends to lose their legal status. But there are a number of factors that make life more challenging for newcomers with precarious status, both before and after they lose their legal status.

The Precarity Begins at Home

For many newcomers, the precarity of their journey starts in their home country. They may be facing political or social unrest, or challenging economic circumstances that they're trying to escape. Many newcomers are forced to sell all of their assets — family land, homes, other goods — or borrow money from family, in order to gather the resources to come to Canada. They may pay huge sums to unethical recruiters or immigration consultants — both in their home country and here in Canada — to help ease their way into the country, only to find themselves very short on funds when it comes to actually living here.

“I am so afraid of the police thinking that they would arrest me if they see me.”

The Catch-22 of Agency Support

There are many settlement agencies and grassroots ethnocultural organizations that are run by compassionate Edmontonians who want to help people who are struggling. But based on current

models, these organizations are only funded to support people with current legal status. If a person without legal status reaches out to an agency, it's possible that they may find support, but that support is inconsistent and dependent on the kindness and compassion of individual support workers, who may be fudging the rules at their own detriment, in order to help. And within the current funding model, to help people who are undocumented often means stretching meager resources at agencies across that many more people.

Lack of Awareness

Too often, undocumented people fall through the cracks. They are rarely aware of the inherent human rights they hold in Canada, and as such, don't know how to advocate for themselves if they're in abusive or exploitative situations. There are so few official avenues of support, and as they live in fear of discovery and deportation, it takes tremendous courage for them to reach out for help — if they can find it.

Intersectional Challenges

Recognizing intersectional challenges means acknowledging how various aspects of identity compound to make life more challenging for people experiencing oppressions like racism and sexism. Indeed, legal status is just one intersectional challenge that migrants with precarious status

“I live in constant fear — afraid to be caught by the police while driving, my children not allowed to attend school, and not being able to take the baby to the daycare and ineligible for government assistance.”

experience. Precarious migrants are almost always racialized, and many have limited English skills. Women, especially if they're young or seniors, face additional risks and barriers, as do people with disabilities, and those who identify as LGBTQ2IA+. These intersectional challenges can lead to disproportionate impacts on individuals and groups, leaving them further marginalized by our institutions.

Temporary Foreign Workers

Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker program is rife with challenges and abuses. As workers' permits are tied to a single contract, the employer holds all the power. It has been called a “breeding ground of modern slavery” in the latest report of the United Nations Rapporteur, and policy changes have left many people, all of whom come to Canada with valuable skills, stranded and destitute.

- **Labour Abuses:** For many temporary foreign workers, the promises made in their contracts

don't come to fruition. They may be paid less than expected, work longer hours than contracted, or terminated with no cause. And due to power imbalances, they often feel that they can't stand up for their rights.

- **The Four In, Four Out Rule:** In 2011, the Canadian government implemented a rule that stipulated no temporary foreign worker could work in Canada for longer than four years, and must take a four-year break before returning. This created havoc for thousands of foreign workers who had been here for longer than four years — many of whom had had children and put down roots in Canada — who were facing sudden job loss and deportation. Many chose to stay, because even life as an undocumented person in Canada was better than what they had to go back to.

The Four In, Four Out Rule was repealed in 2016, but not without causing lasting ripples that still impact undocumented Edmontonians today. ■

Our Stories Yonis



Walking through the snow, Yonis can't shake the fear in the pit of his stomach, a feeling that has become a permanent fixture, it seems. He looks over his shoulder to see if the man in a suit who got off the bus after him is still behind him, the man who seemed to look at him with his full attention. No, he's not there. Relieved, Yonis breathes out as though for the first time, as he weaves through downtown Edmonton's icy sidewalks.

The paranoia that one day someone will tap him on the shoulder and ask for his papers and discover his visa has expired never leaves him. He heard this happened to his cousin's friend a few years ago. She was put on a plane back to East Africa. Every time Yonis leaves his cousin's apartment, he fears he will suffer a similar fate.

Yonis came to Edmonton from Ethiopia on a visitor visa just last year. He sold his parents' humble home to be able to afford the cost of the visa and his flight, and to show he had enough money to take care of himself for the duration of his six-month visa. He arrived in Canada and applied for refugee status, just like his cousin told him to, but his claim was denied. He used the rest of his savings to hire an immigration lawyer to appeal his status. And now, he waits in limbo, with no job, no healthcare, and down to his last \$100. To make matters worse, his cousin moved up north for a new job, so now he is all alone. He wishes he could tell someone, find some help somewhere, but he wouldn't dare. Who knows who might turn him in to the authorities.

He pushes open the door to the library, wishing for the calm he always feels in the bright, welcoming space. The library is his favourite place in the city and the only place he feels like he can relax a little bit. He has spent hours at the library, taking free classes, borrowing books and movies, and learning how to use the computers. Some of the staff have gotten to know him, and even though he has limited English, they are friendly and help him find the things he needs.

But today, he is at the library for another reason. A letter was shoved under his apartment door, and he needs to find out what it says. The English words are meaningless to him, but the bold black font and the red numbers scare him. It can't be good. Does it have anything to do with not having papers? How can he translate the letter? Staring at the blank computer screen, the feeling of fear he has been carrying rushes back.

He feels a tap on his shoulder and it's Muna, his favourite librarian. "Hi, Yonis, how are you? Is everything OK?" she asks.

She must notice how scared and stressed I look, he thinks. Should he tell her he needs help? What if she finds out he has no papers and calls the police?

His instinct is to shake his head, to look down, so that she doesn't see how worried he is. But unbidden, a tear slips from his eye. He brushes it away quickly, but Muna has noticed. She gives his shoulder a gentle squeeze.

And that gentle touch is his undoing. He slides the paper towards her, and she scans it quickly, reading.

"Oh, Yonis," she says. "I'm worried that this is bad news." Through Google Translate, she tells him that the letter is a notice that his rent will be increasing by \$200 a month.

"Do you have any support, someone to help you?" Muna asks, seeing the devastation on his face. Yonis shakes his head. And before he can stop himself, the English words pour out of his mouth, more English than he's ever spoken aloud before: he is appealing his denied refugee application but his visa expired, leaving him undocumented. "No one can help me," he says, "and I can't go back." The English words feeling fat on his tongue.

Muna holds eye contact with him, her brown eyes swimming. He sees himself reflected in them, and for a quick moment, doesn't feel quite as alone. Muna thinks for a minute, and then types furiously

on the computer, hitting "translate" at the end of her sentence.

Yonis reads in his own language. "You have some options," she's written.

Yonis feels a faint glimmer in his heart. He reads what else she's written. "Many City services are still available to you, even without documentation: recreation centres, food bank, public transit, libraries. And there is a strong Ethiopian community here. Maybe they could help you get work, make some friends, while you wait for a court decision. Let me introduce you to my Ethiopian friend. He might be able to help you make some connections."

He feels relief flood his veins, like he's just stepped into a warm bath. He feels like he could sleep or cry or laugh. Maybe he's got a chance in the city after all.

And then he remembers. The letter with the red numbers in it. \$200. It might as well be a million dollars, he'll never be able to pay it. He glances down at it, his brief moment of joy gone in an instant.

Muna looks at it too. Then, as though she has read his mind, she says. "But you need a job right now, don't you?"

He nods. "I will work," he says. "I will work hard."

"I know," she says. "Look, I don't know of anything right now, but let me think on it. And in the meantime, call my friend Ajani, ok?"

She hands him a piece of paper with a phone number on it. "Call him," she urges once more.

He folds the piece of paper carefully and puts it in his shirt pocket, next to his heart. "I will call him," he says.

"Thank you, Muna. Thank you."

He's never meant the words more than he means them today. Somehow, he will find a way. ■



DID YOU KNOW: How Undocumented People Make a Living

Everyone needs money to survive. When legal means of making money are denied to an undocumented person, their only option is to work underground. This often means making less than minimum wage, working long hours, with no protection from labour standards. They often work in poor conditions, can be terminated at any time for any reason, and are frequently abused and exploited.

Edmonton Through a Precarious Migrant's Eyes



LIBRARIES

The library feels safe, quiet and peaceful. It's free, and I can access the internet and other resources. Librarians are helpful, trustworthy people.



TRANSIT

Transit is expensive, inconvenient, and frequently scary. I feel uncomfortable waiting at transit stations alone, and I've been harassed before. But I have no other way of getting around the city.



POLICE

Where I come from, police are to be feared. Here, I'm afraid that the police will report me to immigration authorities, and I'll be deported.



FAITH COMMUNITIES

My faith community is so important to me. I've been welcomed and accepted there, no one questions my status, and I've found real friends and connection there.



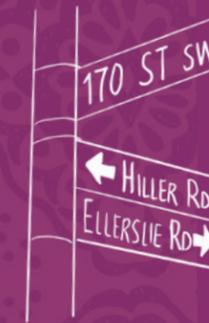
HOUSING

Housing is very difficult for me. It's so expensive, and I live in a crowded and run-down home in an area that feels unsafe. While I'm glad I have a roof over my head, every month I struggle to make rent, and I'm very scared of being evicted.



WORK

I have to work under the table because I don't have a work permit. That means I have to constantly look for work, and I'm often paid under minimum wage, and I have no way to stand up for myself when I feel that I'm being taken advantage of. I don't always know what my rights are, or if I even have any.



CITY SIGNAGE

I find it difficult to navigate our city, because I don't speak the language. It's very intimidating and scary. I'm a smart person, but I often feel overwhelmed and like I'm missing a lot. But I don't have the money to take English classes, and I really struggle with even basic tasks.



THE FOOD BANK

I'm grateful for resources like the food bank – it helps me survive. But I don't always know if I can access these kinds of places, because I'm worried they'll ask me for ID, or find out that I'm undocumented.



GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS

I avoid tall buildings and anything that looks like it's part of the government. I'm very afraid of people with authority, and being found out and deported.

RECREATION CENTRES

I'd love to use rec centres, but I can't afford them. I've heard there might be programs available for people with a low income, but I'm afraid to register for them, and I don't want people to ask me about my background.



LANGUAGE CLASSES

I want to improve my English skills, but the wait list is very, very long, and I can't afford to pay for classes.



What Precarious Migrants Want Us to Know

Bound by the fear of being deported, migrants with precarious status often lay low. Their opinions and experiences rarely get shared and they suffer in relative silence.

Thanks to the research of AWARE, Migrante Alberta, and Lucenia Ortiz, we have insights into their stories, their fears and hopes, in their own words.

“We have the same rights as everyone else — (to be) treated fairly and equally.”

“I had to sell my only property to pay the price of leaving for Canada and arrived at the airport alone and spent the night waiting for my employer who never came. I found out that the employer I was supposed to be working for does not know about me.”

“Afraid to get sick because I don’t have healthcare coverage. Medical services are expensive. I had an injury and decided to stay home.”

“I subcontracted work but when the contractor knew of my status, he refused to pay me.”

“I separated from my partner because he started abusing me; I lost my eligibility to apply for permanent residency.”

“The most difficult thing to deal with is not being able to defend yourself against injustice for fear of being deported.”

“I contacted lawyers who have not helped me much and they have abused me by not doing their jobs. I lost all my savings paying them to help get legal status.”

“I was able to find housing through someone from our cultural community. They are my source of information getting around the city such as public transit, library. They also helped get connected to community networks to get leads on jobs.”

“Got connected to the Pride Centre and EMCN helped me to apply as a refugee claimant that allowed me to get an open work permit. Waiting for my hearing hopefully for my claim to be approved and start my permanent residency application.”

“I want a better life for me and my children — my biggest motivation to stay. I want to study again. I wish for my Canadian-born daughter to make sure she grows up in a safe and stable environment, unlike in my home country. We want our children to grow up in a country with less violence and better education.” ■



BIG IDEAS: Urban Citizenship

Citizenship, and all the rights and privileges (and obligations) gained by it, is often determined by jus soli (citizenship by soil, or place of birth) or jus sanguine (citizenship by blood, or inherited from one’s parents).

Another form of citizenship that could be recognized is jus domicilli — citizenship by domicile or place of residence. Sanctuary cities often use this form of citizenship to enable full municipal participation by any resident of their city. This form of “urban citizenship” could manifest as a municipal ID, which would allow for participation in municipal services (such as recreation centres) without questions about legal status. It would enable people who are mired in the ongoing process of obtaining legal status to more fully participate in and contribute to the communities in which they live, without fear.

Sanctuary Cities

Migrants without legal status continually live in fear: fear of being discovered, detained, and deported. This means they frequently won’t report a crime or access municipal services that could improve their quality of life because they feel that silence is a safer option. In a sanctuary city, all municipal services are offered to people without needing to prove their identity or immigration status. Full sanctuary city designation involves comprehensive training for staff, and implementation of best practices to support people with precarious status. Currently, Toronto, Hamilton, London and Montreal all have sanctuary city designations. Vancouver and Edmonton both have Access Without Fear policies, but these fall short of the official designation.

All Residents Benefit from Sanctuary Cities

Our economy benefits when all citizens are empowered to live freely and earn a living. Non-status migrants pay property taxes through rent, GST on the goods and services they buy, and boost the local economy through their work. They are contributing to our city, both economically and culturally, and we all benefit from that.



SYSTEMIC BARRIERS: Transit Challenges

Many newcomers, especially those with precarious status, rely on public transit. However, many find that transit schedules are not conducive to shift work, especially in industrial areas, and areas outside the city core. Even with transit restructuring, there are many challenges with the system, including frequency, scheduling and safety, that disproportionately impact newcomers.

Inequities in Recreation

Recreation is an important part of mental health. However, many newcomers, especially those with precarious status, struggle to access recreational programs, services, and resources offered by the City — because of costs associated with them, the need to present proof of ID or residency, and/or lack of linguistically relevant information. There is also a lack of sufficient green space in the densely populated core neighbourhoods where newcomers frequently live, which limits access to outdoor recreation opportunities.

In Her Own Words:

A Q&A with Evangeline Cayanan

Evangeline (Vangie) Cayanan came to Canada in 2011 through the Temporary Foreign Worker Program. Vangie experienced harassment and exploitation in several workplaces, and she became undocumented in 2015, just after the birth of her daughter. For eight years, she fought to stay in Canada, before finally being granted permanent residency. This is her story. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

How did you come to Canada?

An agency came to my workplace in the Philippines and asked if I wanted to work in Canada. They said Canada is the land of opportunity and you can get your residency after two years. That the salary was good. So I came here in 2011 to work as a restaurant and bakery manager, but only for six months. The agency told me that the work permit is renewable. As long as the employer likes your work, they will renew it.

I borrowed money to process my papers. I paid for the agency and expenses. I think, converted to Canadian dollars, it was about \$5,000 in all. They said you can bring your family and you can settle for good. Back home, even if you graduate with a degree, the salary is not enough to cover our needs.

But our employers didn't follow the written contract. They were supposed to give us 40 hours a week, but they only gave us 20 hours. We were renting a room from the owner's mother-in-law. There was no transportation to work, so she would bring us, but we needed to pay her. Rent was \$500 each for a shared room for two. Transportation was \$400 per month.

During that time, we were so naive about services that the community could give us. Our employer didn't allow us to talk to other people around us. He kept threatening to send us back home.

The third month, when the restaurant was slow, he would put us on the farm to cut trees. That wasn't in our contract and we didn't know how to do it. We complained to the agency and they called the employer. He got mad at us. That was during our probationary period, and he fired all six of us. We didn't have health cards and we could not get employment insurance. We didn't have anything at all because we could not even save money.

After we got fired, the agency said they were not obligated anymore to us. We connected with a Filipino priest, and then the Filipino community helped the six of us to rent one apartment. We worked under the table to pay rent, but for just \$6 per hour.

How did you lose your legal status?

I was sponsored by another employer, but there was also harassment. Some workers ignore it just to get their papers, but I didn't. I filed a complaint and there was an investigation. We had evidence. But because my employer got fired, my papers for permanent residency got refused.

I applied for a work permit with another employer in 2015. During that time, I was pregnant. One month after giving birth to my daughter, my application was refused, so that's when I became undocumented. When I gave birth to my daughter, my healthcare was not active because it took a year for the work permit to be processed. So when I gave birth, I got a large bill for just one day. I was standing up one hour after birth.

What was it like when you were living undocumented?

I did mostly cleaning jobs. Working under the table is illegal, but how can we survive without working? We are denied services because we don't have proper documentation and government ID. So our only means of survival is to work under the table. Even if it's unsafe because we don't have safety gear, or if our pay is below minimum wage. We don't have healthcare or protection. You cannot get access to housing. You can only get a room with the help of a friend, because you don't have documents. It was really hard for me to work because my daughter was still a baby. I brought her to the workplace sometimes.

I submitted my humanitarian application for permanent residency in 2018. The reason for refusal was that my daughter was still a baby, so she could adapt back home. They said I have a degree, so it's not hard for me to get work back home. So I applied again. My second application was refused in 2020. The process of deportation started. Every week I had to check in, for almost two years. My deportation was supposed to be in July 2022.

What was your path to permanent residency?

Migrante Alberta [a non-profit migrant advocacy group] said we needed to do a campaign against my deportation. When my daughter was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), I said I cannot bring her back home because I don't have any support for her needs. So we did a campaign, and two days before my deportation, it was halted.

For more than eight years, I was living undocumented. Living in fear of being deported. Living in fear of being caught at work. In May 2023, my permanent residency was granted. Now I can go back home to see my eldest child. I cannot bring her anymore because she is older than 21.

I'm still a single mom, so childcare is a struggle for me. But I have healthcare, and my daughter can access benefits and support. That's the important thing for me.

If you were to have a conversation with the Mayor and City Council, what would you tell them?

Undocumented people and migrants are not a burden to the community. They work hard and they don't have protection. They need support and safety. They are being abused and exploited. If they get sick, they cannot call in. If they don't go to work, they get fired. They need access to services, to healthcare.

They cannot socialize. They want to be active in the community, but they're scared.

Make them feel safe and welcome. They are human. They might be your neighbour. They are the ones shoveling snow, serving your coffee and cleaning your houses. They need to feel that they belong. ■

What the City Can Do To Help: Protect, Support, Advocate

Like all immigrants, migrants with precarious status bring with them a wealth of valuable knowledge and skills that are an asset to our city. They are worthy of support and protection, and they have good ideas for how to make their existence better in our city.

The participants in the “In Our Voices” report had concrete suggestions about the steps that the City of Edmonton could take to make the most significant difference to their lives.

Protect

- Ensure that undocumented migrants are accepted as residents of Edmonton. Part of this could be accomplished through establishing a municipal ID to recognize undocumented migrants as Edmonton residents (see sidebar about Urban Citizenship on page 22).
- Provide accessible access to information about city services relevant to their needs — which may mean more application of translation services.
- Invest in making downtown safer for all citizens.
- Continue to find ways to make undocumented migrants feel like part of the community, because they are.

Support

- Ensure affordable rental properties are available to people without status.
- Make public transit subsidies and recreation centre passes accessible to those without legal status (again, possibly through municipal IDs).
- Increase access to legal services, English classes and healthcare.

Advocate

- Declare Edmonton a true sanctuary city.
- Expand the Access Without Fear policy to support people to be able to “Work Without Fear.”
- Find ways to support people’s pathways for regaining legal status.
- Use any tools available to hold abusive employers accountable for their actions.
- Advocate to other levels of government to provide better protections and support for migrants with precarious status.

Agenda for Action

How to get started? The City of Edmonton could pursue the following recommendations to start improving the lives of migrants with precarious status.

• Align the Mandate

- The City could review and expand its Access Without Fear policy to encompass transit, recreation and safety in terms of the experiences of undocumented migrants.

• Immediate Actions

- A meaningful and authentic engagement process with undocumented migrants, to learn from their lived experience about the best ways to protect and support them.
- Develop culturally aware information and resources in multiple languages that responds to the needs of undocumented migrants, as determined through the engagement process.

• Embrace Innovative Ideas

- Look into how Edmonton can embrace the concept of Urban Citizenship, and consider an Edmonton approach to becoming a sanctuary city.
- Consider creative ways that the City of Edmonton can encourage, support and actually provide positive outcomes for undocumented migrants in areas that are traditionally outside of the municipal jurisdiction. ■



Spotlight on Refugees and Evacuees

Refugees come to Canada through one of three programs. Government-Assisted Refugees and Blended Visa Office-Referred Refugees both receive some support from the Canadian government for up to their first year in Canada, during which time they are expected to find housing and employment, and settle into their new communities. Privately sponsored refugees are assisted by private groups, often family members, and these groups are responsible for all of the refugees' financial obligations for one year. It must be noted that for all refugees, the settlement process takes significantly longer than the one year that they receive support, and refugees frequently struggle to find adequate, affordable housing and employment, even several years after they arrive.

Ukrainians who have escaped the war are known as evacuees, and they have come to Canada through a special program called the Canada-Ukraine Authorization for Emergency Travel

(CUAET). Almost one million applications for this program have been approved by the Canadian government, and more than 220,000 evacuees have arrived in Canada to date. Nearly 50,000 Ukrainians have made Alberta their home, with close to 15,000 people settling in Edmonton.

Refugees and evacuees are particularly vulnerable groups of migrants — many have experienced significant trauma in their homelands, which complicates their settlement process in Canada. In this spotlight on refugees and evacuees, we meet two courageous young women, Razia Saramad from Afghanistan and Veronika Ivanystka from Ukraine. Both were forced to leave their home countries due to conflict and war, and both have bravely built new lives here in Canada.

These are their stories.



In Her Own Words:

An Update from Razia Saramad, Afghan Refugee Featured in Last Year's Report

In last year's State of Immigration and Settlement Report, we introduced you to Razia Saramad, a young woman who escaped Afghanistan in August 2021. Here is an update, in her own words, about her second year in Edmonton.

Kabul collapsed to the Taliban after President Ashraf Ghani fled the country on August 15, 2021. Like me, millions of young and hopeful people's lives were thrown to the darkness of the Taliban era once again. Thousands of educated people, who had the ability to make changes and lead Afghanistan to a better place, were forced to flee to other countries; some directly from the Kabul airport, others by crossing the border legally or illegally to one of the neighbouring countries.

I fled to Pakistan and from there tried to find a final, permanent destination. Luckily, my application was accepted by the Canadian immigration office and now it has been almost two years since I arrived in Canada. To have been given a chance to live in peace, I cannot express how happy, loved, cared about, and supported I feel. But, of course, I also cannot neglect a lingering feeling of shame, guilt, loneliness, hopelessness, disappointment, desperation, and anger. Although these two types of emotions seem contradictory to each other, they often come to me together.

In the past year, my life has had lots of ups and downs, full of challenge and opportunity, and full of hope and hopelessness. Searching for a job is one of the examples. I was not asked for a single job interview despite having sent out many applications for months. The day I received a call for an interview, I was shaking with happiness. It was a new window that opened and let in a new light to shine on me. Of course, for integration, I needed to work on my language skills, understand different cultures

and values, become familiar with the city and people, participate in camping activities with the people I would meet for the first time, participate in different programs, volunteer for charitable activities and so forth, which were unique sources of motivation.

Every opportunity I was given here reminded me of all the people of my generation back in Afghanistan who do not even have the right to have a right. Also, the opportunities inspired me to be a good, beneficial, and active citizen and follow my dreams. Meanwhile, I had to adapt to and relearn so many new things: workplace, environment, language, habits, and, most importantly, people.

I also had to deal with and fight my hopelessness by receiving discouragement from others. As an instance, on the first week of arriving to Canada, I asked someone how long it would take me to find a job in a place like Catholic Social Services. The response was "ten to fifteen years." "You first start with the cleaning or doing the dishes," he added.

I somehow accepted that this might be the reality of each immigrant life and it really made me feel a deep hopelessness and sadness for the past 18 years of my life that I had put so much effort on my education trying to prove what I could do, unlike what the society and traditions believed. In fact, it might have been one of the biggest reasons why I tried so hard, and came this far. I got my first job as a settlement support worker in my fourth month of living in Canada, although it was only a casual position.

Ten months later, I earned a full-time job at Catholic Social Services. In addition to that, I also should say that I have had the privilege of participating in the Metropolis Conference in March 2023, and together with my colleague, I delivered a presentation that was titled, “Supporting Newcomers to Access the Canadian Outdoors.”

Alongside all of the other challenges [I faced], the transit system is rendering me powerless, especially during the winter season. Waiting for the bus for more than 45 minutes in the bus station while many buses pass by and are “not in

service” is frustrating, which I hope gets better in the future.

Despite all of the disappointments and frustrations, I feel proud of reviewing the challenges and difficulties I had to pass. Even though the outcomes were not what I expected, I worked hard enough to have the right to thank myself.

Additionally, I would like to use this opportunity and thank all the people who gave me a hand and supported me in this journey.

In Her Own Words:

An Edmontonian’s Story of Violence in Gaza

As the situation in Gaza grows ever more dire, this Edmontonian is working with Islamic Family & Social Services Association to help her family find safety in Edmonton. Her name and identity have been withheld to protect her privacy.

I’ve been in Canada for six years, and recently got my citizenship. I have one daughter, she’s my only child. My daughter and her husband and kids are in Gaza, where death is faster than thunder. I’m afraid that I will die without seeing them, or that they will die before they make their way to me.

I’m in desperate need for them to be near me, and they’re in desperate need for safety. Right now my daughter and her family are without a home, they were displaced multiple times. They’re living in a torn-up tent in Rafah where they’re battling the cold weather, rain, disease, lack of food, along with the genocide itself.

I submitted an application for them when the public policy was announced with the 1,000 person cap, and I am still waiting to hear back. I don’t sleep at night thinking about them and what they’re facing. They’re all I have.

The application process was difficult, I needed to find a lawyer, I had to rush to submit everything, and the questions they were asking were really invasive. We had to recount all the jobs my daughter and her family have ever occupied since they were 16, link all their social media accounts, and even provide a detailed account of all the scars and injuries on their bodies with an explanation on how they sustained them. The application fees were not waived, and the cost really added up. I’ve never seen anything like this before. I asked my friends who also tried to apply, and no one knows what to expect next. Many of them received emails telling them their applications were missing information, which set their applications back. I’m really worried about my daughter and want help getting her here but I don’t know where to seek help anymore.

In Her Own Words:

Veronika Ivanytska’s Story (Ukrainian Evacuee and University of Alberta Student)

Veronika Ivanytska arrived in Edmonton in August 2022 at the age of 18. It was a trip of many firsts for her: her first time on an airplane, her first time traveling alone, her first time in an English-speaking country. She is a student in the Media Studies program at the University of Alberta.

I am from southeastern Ukraine, Zaporizhzhia city. When the Russian full-scale invasion started, military action appeared in my region from the first days. I had to decide to move out of my city, being 17, on my own. I spent half a year in the western part of my country. Then I was admitted to the University of Alberta and came to Edmonton.

At first, I had to deal with a lot of things that were unfamiliar to me. It included all the paperwork that the newcomer needed and study permit peculiarities. Then I started my journey at the University of Alberta as a Bridging Program student to improve my English level. At the same time, I continued my studies at the Ukrainian university asynchronously. Time flew fast, and I started my main program in the winter term after celebrating my first Canadian Christmas. That was a time of many firsts for me. I made my first flight on an airplane with three layovers. I experienced what it is like to live in an English-speaking country. I transferred to a much bigger university. I tried to find my first job in Canada and got scammed. When it happened, I felt lost, stupid and helpless. It taught me to be more cautious and shook my trust towards Canadian systems to some extent. In the end, I found a summer internship at a wonderful company. It coincided with the receipt of the research award from the U of A, and I worked on my autoethnographic project that I am looking to publish.

When I write this, I can’t believe that I was able to do all of this in English. Language adjustment was one of my biggest challenges. The university support was crucial for me as a newcomer. I received an opportunity to study for free for one

year and then continue my studies at a domestic fee rate, and it’s hard to describe in words how grateful I am. Apart from the financial aspect, there was also personal support from advisors and professors who helped me psychologically, and helped me find a job.

Edmonton has also become a home-from-home for me. I enjoy the local nature, where it’s easy to meet a rabbit or squirrel during the walks through one of the large parks. Edmonton proudly bears the title of “city of festivals,” and not without a reason. I learned a lot about Indigenous history after I visited Fort Edmonton Park. And, of course, I like Edmonton because of its people. I got to know people from different backgrounds from all around the world and discovered the features of their cultures and languages. I was supported by incredible people here, including the Ukrainian Canadian community. The Edmonton Food Bank and the Free Store for Ukrainians came in handy in the first months after my arrival, thanks to the tireless work of volunteers.

Of course, there is always room for improvement. There is still a lot of work needed to make a public transit system more accessible so that people who cannot afford a car would be able to get to the different parts of the city without layovers and long delays, especially in winter. Homeless people were a culture shock for me when I first came downtown, as well as the smell of cannabis. I am sure that, with joint efforts and a positive attitude, these problems will be solved to make the experience of Edmonton even more liveable.

Privately Sponsored Refugees An Overview

What Is the Private Sponsorship Program?

There are three refugee settlement programs in Canada: Government-Assisted Refugees (GAR) Program, Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) Program, and a Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) Program. This report focuses on the PSR Program, of which there are three types:

- Group of Five Sponsorship (G5): a group of five or more Canadian citizens or permanent residents who sponsor refugees to settle in their community. Often, these are family members or friends of the refugee.
- Community Sponsor (CS): organizations, associations or corporations that sponsor refugees.
- Sponsorship Agreement Holder (SAH): these groups sign an agreement with the Government of Canada to sponsor several refugees. They are often religious, ethnic, community or humanitarian organizations.

“My husband was kidnapped, imprisoned and tortured and left for dead in the streets.”



PERVASIVE MYTH: All Refugees Receive Government Support

While Government-Assisted Refugees and, to a lesser extent, refugees sponsored through the Blended Visa Office Referred program do receive some limited government support up to their first year in Canada, privately sponsored refugees do not receive government funds.

“It was a calming experience arriving in a peaceful city and welcomed by my sister and relatives. My sister provided me with all the information I needed, connected me to people who can help us such as food and clothing. Being treated well exceeded my expectations with lots of support from people.”

What Do Private Sponsors Do?

Private sponsors, whether they are a Group of Five, a Community Sponsor, or a Sponsorship Agreement Holder, are responsible for providing all living expenses for the refugee for one year. This includes, but is not limited to, rent, food, clothing, furniture, school supplies, etc. They are also expected to help the refugee build their network, find employment, and navigate our various systems, from healthcare to education to transportation and beyond. Ultimately, the sponsors are the refugee’s lifeline, and are expected to provide all necessary financial and emotional support to help them settle successfully. ■



BY THE NUMBERS: Private Sponsorship vs. Government Assisted Refugees

Nearly 8,000 people settled in Edmonton through private sponsorship in recent years (2011-2021). This is contrasted with Government-Assisted programs, which settled close to 6,400 people in the same time period. Since 1980, Edmonton has welcomed almost 18,000 privately sponsored refugees.



DID YOU KNOW: Month 13 Stress

Refugees receive financial support for 12 months upon their arrival to Canada, and after that, they are expected to manage all of their responsibilities on their own. However, it takes far more than one year to settle in a new country. Wait lists for English language classes, for example, are often seven to eight months long, and many refugees spend much of their first year in Canada waiting. Therefore, Month 13 looms large in many refugees’ lives, and the stress can lead to significant stress and mental health challenges.

Sponsors are Often Newcomers Themselves

It is very common for sponsors to be new to Canada themselves, and this often leads to positive outcomes for the refugees they sponsor. In many instances, it’s a case of family reunification, so refugees arrive with strong family connections already in place. Newcomers are also often very familiar with the various systems they need to interact with, since they’ve recently navigated them for themselves. However, the experience of finding home in a new country is never easy, and many newcomers are still experiencing challenges settling themselves, so they may have limited bandwidth to support others as well.

Our Stories Hadiza



Hadiza tosses restlessly on the bed edged into the corner of her small room. She went to bed last night well past midnight because she couldn't sleep, and now, in the early morning hours, she doesn't want to wake up to face her troubles.

She closes her eyes once more, willing herself to sleep. In her mind, she counts the dollars she has left in her bank account, a perverse version of counting sheep. She watches the dollars dwindle, as she imagines paying rent and buying food. There just isn't enough left, and she can't ask Idris, her sponsor, for more. She knows he would give her more if he could, but she can't let herself be a burden on him. For if she is a burden, how will he ever be willing to sponsor her mother and sisters?

The thought does nothing to help her sleep. She opens her eyes once more to the gloom of her darkened room.

She reluctantly stands and wobbles towards the fridge, knowing there is nothing to eat. But maybe she can scrape together some leftovers as she has done in the past days. She opens the fridge and scans the empty white racks. She ate the last spoonful of peanut butter for dinner. She opens the cupboard beside the fridge to see if there is any food left. She sees only the two cans of the luncheon meat she cannot eat because it is made from pork, and she is a Muslim. She feels the sob come from deep in her stomach, fueled by hunger. She cannot believe her Canadian dream has become such a nightmare.

A couple of years ago, she lived a perfectly normal life in Borno State, Nigeria. She was a successful community health practitioner working with Action Aid to improve the health of marginalized people. She chuckles softly amidst tears, "I guess now I know what it is to be marginalized."

Like a swing of an axe felling a tree, her life changed when Boko Haram insurgents swept in and disrupted her peaceful existence. No one felt safe. The government moved everyone in her village into refugee camps, and they had to live on aid from international humanitarian societies.

"A lot of folks that are coming through private sponsorship are not being connected to any informal or formal services."

Gone was her normal life, her chance to help other people. From that day forward, she was the one who needed help.

She moved to the Bakassi camp with her mother and two sisters, but life did not get easier. Meals were rationed, they slept in makeshift huts, and she did her best to repress the trauma of displacement and insecurity. When the call came from her cousin, Idris, in Canada, and he said he could sponsor one member of the family, she felt like he handed her a rope to save her from drowning. Even though she thought her mother should have been the first to escape, everyone elected her to go. She has the most education, they reasoned, and her elder sister has a daughter. Idris wanted the easiest candidate first, so that she could pave the way for everyone else. She'd be lying if she didn't say she was relieved and excited for the opportunity, though she still feels terrible to be without her family. But once it was decided, she could not think of anything else but her life in Canada. While the sponsorship was processed, she counted days, hours, minutes, and even seconds.

But standing in her kitchen in Canada, still as hungry as she used to be in the camp, makes her feel hopeless. She cannot complain because others back home have it far worse. She has no friends in Canada except for Idris, because she doesn't know who she can trust.

Indeed, every part of her journey in Canada has been hard. She cannot work in public health because she needs to take a bridging program that she cannot afford, so she's taken a casual job as a healthcare aide, which doesn't pay nearly enough to meet her expenses. Idris pays her rent for the time being, but he complains bitterly about the rising cost of everything – groceries, gas, utilities, rent. He is gaining Canadian experience

with transitional jobs, so even he is living from paycheck to paycheck.

She knows she cannot ask him for anything more. He's given her everything as it is. And she cannot jeopardize his plans to get her sisters and mother from the camp in the coming year. Things are much worse in camps now; Halima told her the last time she called that some of the abducted girls are now suicide bombers, and two camps have been hit already.

She works her fingers through her phone scrolling through her notes to see all the newcomers' centre information she has saved. They can possibly help her, offering food, clothing, subsidized transit and more.

These centres can provide support, but at what cost? Idris has told her that everything she does leaves a paper trail, and no one can hide from the



SYSTEMIC BARRIER: Inflation

Since 2020, the cost of living in Canada has increased by nearly 10 percent. Even though Alberta has a strong economy and lower house prices, we still saw an increase of 3 percent over 2023, and money isn't going as far as it used to. This can cause a huge challenge for private sponsors, as the money they raised or saved won't go as far as it had pre-pandemic. Monthly costs, like utilities and gas, are inconsistent, and it's very difficult to know if they've saved enough.

government. She's scared of the government, and wants nothing to do with them.

So she stays hungry. She cannot be ungrateful. She cannot ask Idris for more help. And she cannot ask anyone else for help either, should it get back to the government and make them believe that Idris isn't a good sponsor. Idris once told a joke about how law enforcement agencies will courteously and politely take your information, shower you with smiles as they pull out handcuffs, and lead you to what might as well be your destruction. She believes him. She knows it's not actually a joke.

But she's so very hungry.

Her family will never forgive her if she gets Idris into trouble. They believe she is in a better place, but she would rather starve and cry with her family in the camps than starve and deal with fear, anxiety, and alienation by herself.

And she has no food to eat. What is she to do?

She stares at the phone number for the food bank. She feels so weak as she dials. Tears claw at the back of her throat as the phone rings and a voice on the other end greets her.

She swallows, hoping she's not signing her family's death warrant.

"Hello," she says. Shaking and stuttering, Hadiza manages to speak, "Please, I have no food to eat." ■



SYSTEMIC BARRIER: Lack of Equitable Federal Emergency Response Framework

There is currently no consistent, equitable response from the federal government in terms of how they address emergent issues that affect immigration and refugees. As such, some populations are prioritized over others for the Government-Assisted Refugee program. This means some people escaping violence have few other options than to hope for private sponsorship or seek asylum as individuals (rather than through a formal government program), which can lead to loss of legal status if their claims are denied. It creates tremendous stress and upheaval in people's lives, through no fault of their own.

Challenges Privately Sponsored Refugees Face

Even though we have a system to privately sponsor refugees in Canada, it is far from perfect, and the promise of a new prosperous home in a safe country is often unfulfilled when newcomers encounter the various challenges, barriers and failings of our system. This is merely a sampling of the reality that privately sponsored refugees face as they try to make their way here in Edmonton.

Employment and Credential Challenges

It's so hard to find work, because no one accepts my credentials from back home, and everyone wants Canadian work experience. How can I get experience if no one will hire me?

System Navigation

I've heard there are supports available to me, but it's almost impossible for me to find them. Everything is in a language I don't read that well, and I keep getting passed from one person to the next, and nobody seems able to help me find what I need. The system is very dense and confusing.

Childcare

I'd love to work more hours, but childcare is expensive and it's hard to find someone I can trust and communicate with, and who understands my culture. In some ways, it makes more financial sense for me to stay home with my kids, and yet, Edmonton is an expensive city, and I need to contribute to my family's livelihood.

Transportation and Access to City Services

I depend on public transit. It feels unsafe, but it's the only way I can get around the city, and I use city services a lot — libraries are my refuge, and my kids love the recreation centre. But we have to take the bus, and we've all been harassed at transit centres. I feel anxious every time we leave the house because of this, and I don't want my kids to ride it alone.

Waiting Times

It took so long to process my paperwork in order for me to come to Canada. And during that time, I was stuck living in awful circumstances. I experienced a lot of trauma during that time — it was the worst period of my life. If it hadn't taken so long to get my papers in order, I might not have gone through so many terrible things.

Language and Literacy Challenges

My English is slowly improving, but it was really hard at first to get around a city where I don't speak or read the language. I depended on pictures a lot, and on my family members who sponsored me. Even they have trouble with the language sometimes, so we all felt uncomfortable — especially filling out forms and doing business online. It took a long time for me to be able to get into an English class — the wait lists are very long.

Affordable and Appropriate Housing

My biggest challenge, other than finding a job, is finding appropriate housing. It's so expensive, and a one-bedroom apartment, which is all I can afford, is way too small for my family of six. My landlord keeps raising the rent and doesn't ever fix things that are falling apart. But I don't feel like I can say anything, because we have nowhere better to go.

Trauma and Mental Health Challenges

I've been in Canada for 11 months. It's been way harder than I expected. I was relieved to escape the violence back home, but even though I'm safe here, I find it hard to be happy. I cry a lot. My body is so tense, I can't stop shaking sometimes. And even though I have family here, I've found it hard to meet other people. I'm used to a much more social culture, and I find it very isolating, especially when I have to stay inside because of the cold weather. And what happens after my support runs out in a couple of months' time? I have no idea. It stresses me out beyond belief.

Exploitation

I tried to go to a school where they promised I could get a degree in a short time, and then get a good job. I paid tuition with the very last of my savings, but I found out it was just a scam. Then, when I finally got a job, they made me work 13 hours a day, but only paid me for 7.5. They told me that I volunteered to do the overtime for free, but I know I didn't. They took advantage of me, but I can't say anything because I need the job in order to survive. I have no other choices.

Lack of Network

I don't know anyone in Canada, other than my sponsors, and they don't know many people either because they haven't been here very long. Not only is it hard to make friends, it's even harder to find a job without a network.

Food Insecurity

My sponsors raised lots of money in order to help me in my first year. But food costs have gone up a lot since I arrived, and I don't have enough money to both pay my rent and eat enough food every day. But I don't want to tell them because I don't want to seem ungrateful. I am very grateful to be here, but I'm really struggling.

Lack of Orientation to Edmonton and Canada

There's so much about this place that I don't understand. I find it hard enough to get around and do what I need to do day-to-day, but not only that, I don't really know much about Canada. I think I heard about a Prime Minister, maybe? Or is it President? If I'm going to live here, I'd like to know more, but I can't afford to go to school to learn, and I don't even know where to go to find things out, because I don't read English very well. The family who sponsored me has only been here a short time too, so they don't know how to answer my questions.

Fear of Getting into Their Sponsors Into Trouble

When I'm at school, some of the other students have noticed that I never eat lunch. I tell them that I'm not hungry, but the truth is I don't have enough food or money for lunch. I don't want to go to the food bank, because I don't want anyone to know my plight. My sponsors have promised me that after my year is up and I'm independent that they'll sponsor my mother to come to Canada too. I want this more than anything, so I don't want to say anything that will rock the boat, or that will get them into any trouble. If I admit that they haven't given me enough money for food, I'm worried that they — or the government, or somebody — will change their minds, and my mom won't be able to come to Canada.

Lack of Trust in Institutions

Where I come from, there's a lot of corruption. Government officials can't be trusted, neither can the police. I've heard it's different in Canada, but I don't want to find out the hard way that it's not.

Impacts of our Winter Climate

I've never experienced winter before. I thought it would be fun, like in movies. But it actually makes life so much harder. I don't want to leave my bed, let alone my apartment, on cold days. My clothing and shoes aren't warm enough, I freeze at bus stops, and when it's slushy outside, it's impossible to keep my only pair of shoes dry and clean. And it's not just the practicalities of winter that get me down. In my home country, I'd spend free time with my friends on the beach. Here, when it's cold outside, I feel so isolated and demoralized, because I can't spend time with people outside.

Children's Schooling

My son is 14, and he was placed in a junior high English class, where they're reading long and complicated chapter books. Before we came to Canada, we lived in a refugee camp for seven years. He's never been to a real school before, let alone read books in English. Of course he's falling behind, and he's frustrated and losing interest in his learning. I don't know how to encourage him or help him, but I know he needs extra support. ■

Challenges Sponsors Face

The current system for privately sponsoring refugees not only fails many newcomers, but also puts their sponsors in precarious situations and potential jeopardy. Any policies, processes, or solutions put forward to improve the system must consider the following realities about how it currently operates.

Raising Sufficient Funds

As a sponsor, I need to provide everything for my brother and his family for a full year. That means I have to pay for their rent, their food, clothing, transportation costs, everything. That's a lot of money I need to raise in order to fulfill my legal and financial obligations to them. It's worth it, but it's a huge financial burden on me and my family.

Time Needed to Support Privately Sponsored Refugees

My mom and dad are going to need a lot of support when they get here, as neither of them speak English, both are quite elderly, and my dad doesn't walk very well. I have to balance my full-time job and the needs of my own family with the time to care for my parents. I'm officially responsible to them for their first year in the country, and I will be doing everything for them during that time. And after that, it's my moral obligation to help them with whatever they need. They're my parents. What else would I do?

Complex Application Processes

I was hoping it wouldn't take so long to go through the application process to sponsor my sister and her daughter. But it's almost a full-time job to fill out all of the paperwork, and it's very confusing. I'm so worried about making a mistake and slowing down the process that much more. And meanwhile, while I fill out government forms and wait, my sister is in danger. I just hope we can file everything correctly so that she can be safe.

Lack of Orientation

When my church decided to sponsor a refugee family, I thought it was a great idea. I still do, from a humanitarian perspective. But I honestly had no idea what it would take. I'm not regretting getting involved, but I wish there had been some kind of information session I could have attended before I said yes. It has taken a lot of my time and energy to make this happen — from filling out endless forms, to raising funds, to gathering household goods, and a lot of waiting, and every step along the way has led to some unexpected challenges.

Rigidity of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC)

The immigration system in Canada is very difficult to navigate, and doesn't allow for any flexibility to accommodate my personal circumstances. I

keep hitting brick wall after brick wall — waiting for people to get back to me, and then not really answering my questions. It's been endlessly frustrating, and it's taking way longer than I expected.

Managing Privately Sponsored Refugees' Expectations

When the family we sponsored arrived here, they were so excited. Everything was new and wonderful for them, the kids especially. But as the months wore on, I could see everyone's energy was sapped. I'm sure they were processing the stress and trauma that they had experienced back home. But every little setback — and there were a lot of them — feels like a huge deal to them, and their mental health is suffering, especially during the winter. I try to explain that things will get better, but to be honest, I'm not sure if they will for a while yet. It's going to take them a long time — more than their first year, that's for sure — to really get on their feet.

COVID Impacts

I run a settlement non-profit, and during COVID, we decided to become a Sponsorship Agreement Holder in order to help several refugee families per year. Everything went well in terms of raising the money to bring people here, however COVID

caused so many delays and backlogs in the system. We were only able to help a couple of families in our first year, even though we could have handled more. Then, all of a sudden, the backlog cleared, and families started arriving quickly, with little notice. We had to really scramble to get our ducks in a row, and even though we had the money to help people, we didn't have the volunteers we needed to be good supports for the families in our care. A lot of details fell through the cracks.

Conflict Resolution Can Be Difficult

My parents, brothers and I sponsored my aunt and uncle to come to Canada. At first, everything was great. My dad and his brother used to be really close, but they hadn't seen each other for almost 10 years. Turns out they have some very different ideas about how to live, and it's been very hard on my dad because they now fight all the time. They lived with my mom and dad for the first few months, but my dad couldn't take it. So we moved them into our house. My wife and my aunt don't get along that well, but we have no other choice, as we have to take care of them for the first year at least. It's created tension in my marriage, and for my mom and dad. I almost wish we hadn't sponsored them in the first place.

Our Stories Rose

Lack of Clarity About Available Resources

My brother is having a hard time adjusting to life in Canada. I know what that's like — I just went through it myself a few years ago. But I don't know how to help him. I've heard that there might be something through the city government or other agencies, but when I ask around, no one knows. I have a hard time reading English websites, so I'm not that good at searching online. I wish I could help more, but I don't know what to do.

Group of Five Challenges

As part of a Group of Five, I've found the process very difficult. There is limited information online, and it's quite confusing, especially since English isn't my first language. It was also hard to find partners who were willing to financially contribute, and in the middle of our fundraising, I was laid off from my job, which meant I couldn't contribute to the savings for a number of months. And when my family arrived, I didn't always know how to help them find the services they needed.

Sponsor Agreement Holder Challenges

While my organization works with refugees all the time, I don't have an insider's perspective on the many different cultures of people we work with. I know how important it is to be culturally informed and sensitive, but since I haven't lived it myself, I know I have blind spots.

Community and Service Provider Challenges

I want to be a good supporter for the refugees we're sponsoring, but I feel stretched very thin. Everyone in my community needs support right now, and I don't have the bandwidth or the resources to give special support to just a few people, even though I know they really need it. If there could be three of me, maybe I could help more, but I'm just one person, and I'm overwhelmed. ■



Rose stands in the arrival lounge at the airport, a sign in one hand and a teddy bear in the other. She nervously paces, and checks her watch. Surely the plane has landed by now! How much longer must she wait?

Whitney, her wife, swaps the sign out of her hand for a cup of coffee, and sits in a nearby chair. “Come sit with me,” she says, patting the chair. “It’s going to be another half-hour at least, for her to deplane and get through customs.”

Rose sighs, and hugs the teddy bear closer to her heart. Resigned, she sits. Waiting, and more waiting.

It feels like that’s all she’s done this past year – wait. And fill out forms. So many forms. So much time spent on the computer, figuring out every angle, and continually sending variations on the same information over and over again to the government. She can’t even imagine the faceless person on the other end of all those forms, whose terrible job it must be to go through each endless piece of paper, double and triple checking, just trying to catch her in an error.

She remembers the sleepless night when she heard the panic in her sister’s voice. “Please, you have to help me,” she had cried, all the way from Uganda. “I can’t stay here anymore. They know. I have to get away.”

She mostly remembers the helplessness she felt because she was so far away. And the guilt because in many ways, Rose had had it so much easier than her sister. Rose had come to Canada on a university scholarship, had met Whitney, and had fallen in love. But for her trans sister, Sandra, Uganda’s anti-LGBTQ stance meant she was constantly in danger because of the way she looked, because of who she was.

Shortly after that conversation, Sandra fled Uganda, and was living in Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya. It took many months for her to get her official refugee status. All the while, Rose worried

and stressed in Canada, searching for a way to bring her to the country.

It seemed like she talked to every person in Edmonton who knew something about immigration, and every person had different information to share. She even consulted an immigration lawyer – a meeting that cost her \$500 without anything to show for it.

But she remembers another night, a joyful night, when she found the answer she had been searching for. A Group of Five sponsorship. All she had to do was convince four other people to help her. How hard could that be?

Rose remembers the next morning, when she offered Whitney a cup of coffee as a peace offering. The stress of trying to get Sandra to Canada had been putting a strain on their relationship. It felt like every free moment had gone towards researching and fundraising for the move. They hadn't had a date night in months,

and the added pressure to their relationship was starting to show.

“Good morning!” Rose had said, more cheerfully than she felt. Nervous, she felt tongue-tied in front of her partner, the thought suddenly occurring to her that Whitney might not agree with her plans. What if she said no?

But she didn't say no. Whitney just hugged her, and said, “Of course! Whatever it takes.”

“All we need are three more people who would do this with us,” Rose said.

“Well, my parents have said they want to help, so that's two people. For the third, maybe Sean?” Sitting at the kitchen table, they pulled out Rose's laptop and looked at her notes. Whitney's cousin Sean works for a bank.

“That's a good option,” Rose remembers saying, feeling like she could breathe for the first time in weeks.

“Or how about Khadija, as a backup?” Whitney started tapping out an email. “She does a lot of philanthropy work in the queer community, is reliable, and has said she would be happy to help out in any way she can.”

Tears welled up in Rose's eyes, overwhelmed by the support of the community they have in the city.

“How much money will we need to raise?” Whitney continued. “I can offer my digital pet portraits, and maybe we can do a GoFundMe, and...”

Rose remembers how she just stared at her wife in awe. She was the luckiest person in the world to have someone like her by her side.

And now, today, at the airport, she glances once more at her wife, and playfully ruffles her hair. Whitney smiles at her, and holds her hand.

And then, she looks away. Doors open in the distance, and she points and says, “Look! It's her!” She stands up with her “Welcome Home Sandra” sign and grins.

Rose feels her heart grow three sizes in her chest. It is her. It is Sandra. They did it.

She is home. ■



WHAT WE HEARD

“I can't speak English, which means less opportunities for work and feeling isolated. I don't socialize with neighbours that much.”

“They are being recruited into situations, — whether it be cleaning agencies that exploit them, or whether it be prostitution — very, exploitive situations with employers, with bad hours, bad pay, because they just don't feel that they have any other choice.”

“We are not funded to support private sponsorship and refugee claimants. So it's an extra job we do. Because you cannot refuse to support this human being. They are human and they are part of our community.”



SYSTEMIC BARRIER: Navigating Educational Systems

Many refugees go through a series of displacements, often first from their home country to a neighbouring country, and sometimes to a refugee camp, before they find a permanent home. This is a process that can take years. As such, many refugees have experienced education disruptions. When they come to Canada, it can be challenging to navigate our systems with limited English skills, not to mention low writing and reading skills in their primary language.



BIG IDEA: Supporting Newcomers' Business Ideas

Newcomers come to Canada with a wealth of experience, knowledge, and often entrepreneurial abilities. Indeed, starting their own business is one of the best ways they can build a strong and consistent income for themselves and their families. However, it's incredibly difficult to start a business without the necessary capital to do so, and frequently banks won't extend loans to people without a strong Canadian credit history. This is perhaps an area that the City could provide some backing and support.

What Privately Sponsored Refugees Need to Succeed

While life can be very challenging for privately sponsored refugees and their sponsors, there are some important factors that help to protect and insulate them from negative outcomes. Here are some key aspects that lead to success for everyone involved.

Strong Communities and Networks

Networks are how we connect to the city. They're how we find friends, employment, and many other resources. When refugees are able to connect to strong, established communities, they gain the social capital they need in order to succeed.

Faith Communities

It's essential that refugees have the opportunity to practice their own faiths, regardless of the faiths of their sponsors. Indeed, culturally relevant faith communities play an incredibly important role in many refugees' lives. They offer access to established communities, solace in familiar rituals and culture, shared values, and often, significant resources and support.

Access to City Services

Refugees rely on city services to navigate their new home. Very literally, they use transit to get around our city; libraries are a refuge, and sources of Internet access and valuable information; recreation centres provide social and physical outlets, as well as connections to the broader community. Festivals

and city celebrations help them to connect to the culture of their new city. Other infrastructure, like river valley trails and bike lanes, help them to traverse the city in healthy and affordable ways. And social services provide essential supports to help them integrate in

Warm, Supportive, Culturally Aware Sponsors

Sponsors make all the difference in the lives of refugees. When sponsors are welcoming, knowledgeable about local resources, well-connected, and culturally aware, refugees can thrive.

Language and Literacy Supports

Refugees are frequently very motivated students. When they have access to language and literacy supports, they often learn very quickly.

Meaningful Employment and Ethical Employers

Refugees are deserving of meaningful work. Indeed, their international perspectives and life experiences are assets to a workplace. While it is far too common for refugees to be abused and exploited, when they are treated well by ethical employers, they can contribute significant value, and their loyalty and strong work ethic can make them very desirable employees.

Affordable and Appropriate Housing

It's hard to do anything in this world without a stable place to call home. When refugees find housing that is affordable, in good repair, and big enough for their family, they can truly start to settle into their new community. Housing always comes first.

Mental Health Support

Leaving your home and everyone you know because of war, or other forms of devastation is traumatic. As is the prospect of starting your life over in a foreign country, where you don't speak the language, nor understand the culture. Therefore, mental health support, that recognized both the pre- and post-migration context of refugees is vital for their success.

Financial Literacy Supports

Managing money in a new country comes with all kinds of new challenges. Refugees need support to understand our financial and tax system in Canada, and how to make dollars stretch as far as possible.

Understanding Rights and Canadian Culture

Many refugees come to Canada with very little knowledge of Canada, our legal system and our mainstream culture. They need a thorough orientation to our city, province and country, and the rights they hold as residents, so that they better understand how to advocate for themselves. ■



WHAT WE HEARD

Migrants see the importance of pushing the boundaries beyond service and assistance. It is crucial to acknowledge the significance of challenging the system that exploits migrants. By taking a stand and fighting this system, we can strive towards creating a fair and equitable society for all.

—Migrante Alberta, 2023

What the City Can Do to Support Privately Sponsored Refugees: Welcome, Support, Provide Access

The challenges that privately sponsored refugees face can vary, as can the access to supports and services.

However, these suggestions for the City of Edmonton can support privately sponsored refugees to find better lives in our city. While some of the recommendations are specific to the experience of private sponsorship, others will also enhance the supports for other newcomers too.

Welcome

- Develop a comprehensive strategy to welcome privately sponsored refugees in a proactive, rather than reactive, way.
- Develop and pilot a “pre-arrival program” for privately sponsored refugees.

Support

- Provide accessible, translated information about relevant community and City supports and services. This effort should be co-ordinated and applied to all relevant services for consistency.
- Improve transit safety, frequency, and accessibility (through translations and more visual information).
- Improve access to the City Leisure Pass.
- Address inequities in City services and hiring practices.

- Offer conversational language learning at libraries and recreation centres in communities throughout the city.
- Fund new or enhanced settlement support services.
- Develop accessible programs such as emergency food access, mental health and trauma support, as well as youth enrichment.
- Provide enhanced community development support for all newcomer communities.

Advocate

- Advocate to other levels of government for enhanced support for privately sponsored refugees, their sponsors, and the service providers that support them.
- Advocate to other levels of government for enhanced support to address housing accessibility, with a focus on privately sponsored refugees’ specific needs.
- Work with Edmonton area employers to address relevant employment barriers.
- Develop a public awareness campaign to change perceptions and correct misinformation the general public may have about refugees.

Agenda for Action

Wondering where to start? The City of Edmonton could pursue the following recommendations to start improving the lives of privately sponsored refugees.

• Develop a Comprehensive Strategy for Welcoming Privately Sponsored Refugees

- Proactively ensure ease of access to information, and ensure that enhanced settlement supports are extended to privately sponsored refugees. Reactive approaches can miss individuals, and people can experience significant consequences before they reach out for help. Therefore, to prevent people from falling through the cracks, develop materials and actively engage privately sponsored refugees upon their arrival to the city.

• Update the City’s Immigration Settlement Policy

- The policy should include a focus on increased engagement and meaningful collaboration with newcomers and communities.

• Regular Research

- Research should be regularly conducted with all newcomers, and should be shared broadly. This research should be disaggregated to include demographics, equity indicators, and emerging needs.
- Research should also engage private sponsors, many of whom are newcomers themselves.



BIG IDEA: Update to City Policy C529

Based on recommendations from the previous two *State of Settlement and Immigration in Edmonton* reports, in May 2023, Edmonton City Council requested that the City Policy C529: Settlement and Immigration in Edmonton be updated to appropriately reflect a more equitable approach to this work. Grounded in deep engagement with community members, thought leaders and City of Edmonton staff, the policy has been rewritten, with a strong focus on recognizing the barriers newcomers experience, and the factors needed for their equitable inclusion in all aspects of our city life. The new policy will be brought to Edmonton City Council for their approval in 2024.

Our Stories Yusef



Yusef picks up a slice of cake from the long table. Red candies form a maple leaf across a white sheet of icing, and he pops one into his mouth, enjoying the cinnamon as it warms his tongue.

Sana, his daughter, dashes past, bumping his leg and giggling as she's chased by three other kids. Her smile is so big, her whole face is full of light. He knows he should stop her, tell her to stop running inside, to be quiet and polite, but he doesn't. Running and laughing is good for her, he thinks. He sees Amira, his wife, look up from the conversation she's having across the hall, and frown in Sana's direction. He catches Amira's eye, smiles and shrugs. She shakes her head, but smiles too, indulgent just this once, and goes back to her conversation.

The hall is crowded. A plain room, with concrete walls and a wood floor painted with gymnasium lines. Voices echo all around him, a cacophony of celebration. Children of all ages run between the lines on the floor, playing a game they've just invented, Sana and Yusef's littlest daughter Yara amongst them. Older teens, like his son Hassan, stand in clumps along the walls, joking and nudging each other and passing around a phone. And everywhere, adults stand in twos and threes, a room full of colour and laughter and joy. Yusef's amazed to be a part of it. Amazed he's standing here in a room full of friends who were strangers not long ago.

"It'll be your turn soon," says the man beside him. Yusef turns to see Ibrahim, who claps him on the back, grinning. Ibrahim, the man who changed Yusef's life. His sponsor, and now, his friend.

"Inshallah," Yusef says, touching his heart. It's what he wants more than anything. To call himself Canadian, like his friend Hamza, who they are celebrating today. Ibrahim, through his mosque, sponsored Hamza's family too, just two years

before Yusef and his family came to Canada. And today, Hamza became a Canadian citizen.

"It's all because of you, my friend," Yusef touches Ibrahim's arm, and shakes his hand. "I don't know how to thank you for what you've done for me. For my family. For Hamza's family. I don't know where we'd be without you." Yusef clears his throat, fighting the sudden emotion.

Ibrahim is unfazed. He just smiles. "All I did was make it possible for you to come here. You did all the rest."

Yusef isn't surprised by his friend's modesty, but he shakes his head all the same. "No, no—" he starts to say, wanting to give Ibrahim the credit he feels he's due.

But Ibrahim quickly interjects. "No, no! You have done this, my friend. You."

Yusef is taken aback by Ibrahim's vehemence. He starts to protest, but he's silenced by Ibrahim pointing finger, and if he didn't know better, he'd mistake Ibrahim's passion for anger.

"Who worked hard on your English? You. You did. You did that so you could get a good job, and you did. And who got promoted, after just three months? You did. Because you're a good worker, and your boss can see it. And who made friends, and volunteered at the mosque? You did, because you're a good person, and everyone can see that too. You're a good father, your kids are kind and are doing well in school. You helped them do that. And be that. You should be very proud."

Yusef turns away, ashamed to be weeping openly at the party, but he can't hide his emotion. He's overwhelmed. The strain of the last three years bleeds out of him, along with his tears. From his perspective, he's only seen the struggle. The constant worry about money, his fears about his children finding their way, tensions with Amira

over their too-small apartment, and his stress around finding a job, and then keeping it. These are the things he's seen and felt for the last three years. He hasn't seen the triumphs. He realizes he hasn't even given himself the space to look for them.

Maybe that's something that needs to change.

Ibrahim puts a gentle hand on the back of his neck, and Yusef pulls himself together. "Shukran," he says softly. "Shukran."

"You really want to thank me?" Ibrahim says, his warm brown eyes fervent and steady. "There's something you can do."

Yusef nods. "Yes, anything, my friend. Anything."

"The mosque is sponsoring a new family. We need more people to help. You're a permanent resident now, on your way to citizenship. You can help someone else by joining us."

Yusef doesn't even need to think about it. He knows he should talk it over with Amira, but he's sure she'll feel the same way he does. It would mean so much to give someone else the same chance he was given.

"Yes," he says. "I can help." ■

The Time For Action Is Now

In the previous two reports, we've explored how much value newcomers bring to our city. Newcomers share with us a window to the broader world. They bring cultural wealth, a wealth of knowledge and ideas and perspectives that make Edmonton a very rich city. They contribute to our economy, and to our city's cultural makeup. They are our friends, our family members, our neighbours.

They are us. We are we.

But they also struggle. It's not an easy thing, even under the best and brightest circumstances, to leave your home behind and start over in a new country.

But especially in the case of migrants with precarious immigration status and privately sponsored refugees, these are not the best of circumstances. While, like all migrants, they bring with them valuable life experiences, they are also escaping the worst of what the world can throw at them. And they don't always find a warm welcome here in Edmonton, even though they are deserving of it.

So, now is the time to take action to change this. City leaders have an obligation to their citizens, and through this report, we, citizens, are speaking.

We are saying: use your power and privilege to make change, to help us live better lives, as citizens of this city.

Here are four strong steps that the City of Edmonton can take to make Edmonton a better city — for newcomers, and for everyone else.



BIG IDEA #1: Enhance understanding of newcomers' needs and experiences by regularly undertaking research, including

meaningful equity-centred engagement, with diverse community stakeholders and grassroots community members.



BIG IDEA #2: Provide culturally and linguistically relevant, low-literacy-friendly information about City services and resources, and collaborate with immigrant communities to disseminate this information.



BIG IDEA #3: Develop a comprehensive strategy for welcoming newcomers to the city, as per the Draft Updated C529 Policy on Settlement and Inclusion of Migrants. This should include a review of the C606 Policy: Access Without Fear, as well as other steps, addressing migrants both pre- and post-migration. For example, helping people access English language-learning classes before they arrive and providing orientations to Edmonton could help set people up for greater success when they get here.



BIG IDEA #4: Ensure that all departments are allocated a dedicated budget and/or resources for work towards supporting migrants and newcomers. This work requires commitment from leadership from all sectors of the City of Edmonton, so a coordinated, cross corporate approach is needed.

This is the time for action. We're looking to leaders at the City of Edmonton to welcome, support, protect and advocate for all newcomers. And we're here to help guide the decisions you make, every step of the way. For we are united in our shared dream of a home where we can all belong.

They are us, we are we. One community. ■



This report and supporting documents can
be found at edmonton.ca/newcomers