



The Arrival and Settlement of Syrian Refugees in Ottawa System Responses, Lessons Learned and Future Directions Report Summary

Ottawa Syrian Refugee Research Initiative
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Between November 2015 and late 2016, more than 2,000 Syrian refugees arrived in Ottawa. Although refugees arrive in Ottawa every year, this was a large number and the very short time period during which the Syrians arrived constituted an exceptional situation. There was a vast and varied network of agencies and organizations that had a hand in welcoming and settling Syrian refugees, and they crossed many sectors. The settlement sector was naturally key, but it was not alone; housing, education, employment, health and three levels of government were all involved.

With funding from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, the Ottawa Local Immigration Partnership (OLIP) spearheaded a research initiative with the aim of creating a common understanding of the successes and challenges of the community-wide effort to settle the Syrian refugees in Ottawa and learning from this experience.

The research team interviewed 60 service providers and reviewed 160 documents over the spring and summer of 2017. Immigrant Women Services Organization, Somerset West Community Health Centre, and the Alliance to End Homelessness worked with OLIP to conduct sectoral data collection and analysis, all of which was compiled into one community lens analysis that forms the content of the *Ottawa Syrian Refugee Research Initiative Report*.

The research highlighted a large number of successes in the community response to Syrian refugees, including excellent partnerships, an exceptional commitment and level of effort from service providers, even when funding and resources were not commensurate with the task. Partnerships and collaborations criss-crossed this array of actors, including established collaboration tables and new relationships were formed. Many new practices and adaptation of existing services and programs took place in response to meet the unique needs of Syrian refugees, and the innovation and flexibility of service providers was noteworthy. The public response to the arrival of the refugees was overwhelming – more than \$900,000 was raised locally and over 5,000 community members offered their help as volunteers.

There were challenges and important lessons were learned, both from the successes and from the setbacks. The lessons learned, and the possible directions for the future flowing from them, were grouped into the following seven main areas.

- 1. Strengthen collaboration capacity within and across sectors**, including settlement, health, housing, youth and municipal services. Service providers need to better understand each

other's mandates and practices develop protocols for working together at the task level to support the same clients, and strengthen data sharing with adequate privacy protections. Improve dissemination of timely and accurate information about refugees who are arriving, in order to inform planning and preparation of necessary services. Strengthen the capacity of service organizations to communicate with private sponsors of refugees and share information on services available to privately sponsored families.

- 2. Develop a local settlement and integration strategy that is focused on newcomer youth**
60% of the government assisted refugees who arrived from Syria to Ottawa in late 2015 to end of 2016 were younger than 18 years of age. Unique challenges arose in their initial settlement period that may affect their integration. There is a need to build a common understanding of challenges and there is a need to identify and leverage good practices that support young refugees' successful integration in host communities.
- 3. Address service gaps and funding shortfalls** in areas such as wraparound services for refugees with complex needs, language and cultural interpretation across sectors, mental health counselling services, dental care, childcare (which is essential to allow parents to access services, attend language classes, and so on) and transportation (also essential to accessing services).
- 4. Ensure equity and fairness in policies, programs, and investments.** A number of measures were introduced by the government specifically for Syrian refugees, and it is suggested that these be extended to all refugees. The needs of specific groups of refugees (women, children, youth, seniors, those with disabilities, LGBTQ refugees and others) are to be taken into account. Equitable access to French language services, including schooling, is essential. Service providers across sectors need to be trained in equity, trauma-informed care, and cultural competency.
- 5. Improve the policy environment that governs supports for refugees.** Although the federal, provincial and municipal were highly effective in many areas, more coordination among them is needed, including transitions from supports available in the first 12 months and those that start in month 13. Refugees were offered supports from private sector landlords and others, and these gifts are subject to clawbacks. The period of funding for some programs needs to be extended to more realistically reflect the duration of actual need. It is important to ensure social assistance is commensurate with basic living expenses and to invest in affordable housing.
- 6. Leverage and strengthen community and public engagement.** The outpouring of public support for Syrian refugees was remarkably strong, but it often outstripped the capacity of community organizations to properly organize and channel it. Capacity needs to be built to engage volunteers and leverage public support. Public education campaigns on equity, anti-racism, and access to employment, contribution of immigrants will help sustain the current public support and extend sympathy and support for all newcomers.
- 7. Undertake a complementary local research that documents the experience of the Syrian refugees in their first year of arrival in Ottawa.** The report focused on the experience of service providers whose aim was to make the Syrian refugees' settlement experience easy and effective. Hearing directly from Syrian refugees themselves about the successes and

shortcomings of Ottawa's response will help inform service organizations' service planning. Furthermore, there are a number of research studies on the arrival of the Syrian refugees that are underway across Canada, and it will be important to ensure these results are widely shared and discussed to enhance community learning.