



SYRIAN REFUGEE OPERATION TO BRITISH COLUMBIA: ONE YEAR IN – A ROADMAP TO INTEGRATION AND CITIZENSHIP

December 2016

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This survey could not be done without the participation of our valued clients who shared their knowledge and experience with us, as well as the staff who conducted the survey. While confidentiality prohibits us from naming our clients, our sincere thanks to all of our participants, as well as Hanan Abdelkader, Lama Jamous, Mahi Khalaf, Majd Agha, Mohammed Alsaleh, Mustafa Hasan, Rami Alkishawi, and Rasha Youssef for conducting the survey.

شكر و تقدير

هذه الدراسة الاستقصائية لم تكن لتنفيذ بدون مشاركة عملائنا الأعضاء الذين شاركونا خبراتهم و معرفتهم الحياتيه بالإضافة الي العاملين في ISSofBC الذين اجرؤا الاستطلاع. بما ان قواعد السرية تمنعنا من شكر عملائنا بالاسم هنا نود ان نشكر كل المشاركين شكرا جزيلاً. و ايضاً نود ان نشكر كل من حنان عبد القادر و لمى الجاموسي و ماهي خلاف و ماجد اغى و محمد الصالح و مصطفى حسن و رامي الكيشاوي و رشا يوسف لجهودهم في اجراء الاستطلاع.

Chris Friesen — Director, Settlement Services

Kathy Sherrell — Associate Director, Settlement Services

“We feel that we are all equal here regardless of religion and ethnicity; we are respected regardless of our backgrounds”

“We want to care about Canada like our own country”

“Thanks for giving us [a] safe life”

“I want to thank Canada so much for everything. We have not seen this kind treatment in our own countries”

“We want to say that Canada is the best country in the world. We are working very hard to integrate”

“Canadians did not make us feel like we were refugees; it was a very welcoming experience with lots of support and well wishes”

Some of the many words of gratitude from Syrian families settling in British Columbia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



A sampling of the many words of gratitude from Syrian families settling in British Columbia

The year 2016 marks the largest refugee resettlement movement in Canadian history. This year alone over 44,800 resettled refugees will settle in this country through Canada’s humanitarian immigration stream. The response from Canadians towards refugees has been extremely positive, unleashing a wave of compassion and humanity unseen in recent years. Through *Operation Syrian Refugee*, the public has an increased awareness and insight into the current global refugee crisis. In addition, Canadians have a greater understanding of the challenges faced by low-income families on provincial income assistance. The resettlement of refugees has highlighted income support rates provided during the first year by the Government of Canada to government assisted refugees and/or raised by the public for privately sponsored refugees. The federal income support rates and guidelines provided to refugee sponsors reflect the base rates of provincial income assistance rates. The challenges faced by families, including Syrian refugees, on limited income are daunting as they respond to increased housing, food and transportation cost pressures.

As of November 27, 2016 over 35,000 Syrian refugees arrived in Canada. 2,100 government assisted refugees (GAR’s) settled in BC. In addition, as of August 31, 2016 (the latest available IRCC stats) 424 Syrian privately sponsored and 326 Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) cases have settled in over fifty (50) communities throughout BC.

With the unprecedented arrival of Syrian GARs to BC, ISSofBC took the opportunity to mark their first year in Canada by systematically probing some of their early settlement experiences and outcomes. This process, conducted under two separate consultation initiatives, focused on approximately sixty (60) Syrian youth and young adults between the ages of 15 and 24 years and on a telephone survey that reached out to three hundred and ninety-five (395) GAR head of households who had arrived between November 4, 2015 and February 28, 2016. Between November 1 and 18, 2016, more than three hundred (300) adult head of households participated in the telephone survey undertaken, representing seventy-six percent (76%) of total targeted respondents.

This report highlights the findings of both consultations, identifies key themes, and provides recommendations intended to better facilitate the settlement and integration of refugees in BC, and Canada more broadly.

Some of the key findings from Syrian GARs during their first year in British Columbia indicate that:



76% Seventy-six percent (76%) of Syrian GARs are currently attending a federally funded adult English language class or Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) classes;

51% Fifty-one percent (51%) of individuals who are not attending LINC classes have been on a waitlist on average of four (4) months;

20% Twenty (20%) of survey respondents indicated that they have taken training and/or education other than English, another indicator towards economic integration;



17% Less than one year after arrival seventeen (17%) of respondents are employed on a full-time or part-time basis;

59% Manufacturing, Construction and Trades [fifty-nine percent (59%)] and Food, Retail and Hospitality [thirty-one percent (31%)] are the two main sectors in which Syrian respondents have found employment;

64% Sixty-four percent (64%) of respondents who are not working stated that they were actively looking for work;



16% When asked about their family’s emotional health, sixteen percent (16%) of respondents indicated that, overall, their family members felt depressed and fourteen percent (14%) reported as sad. Treating mental illness and anger issues, especially after living through the ongoing civil war, was identified as a priority during the youth consultation. The ability to fully rebuild their lives in Canada is tempered by ongoing concern about the well-being of family abroad;

51% Fifty-one (51%) of respondents reported their children were doing excellent or very good in school;

66% Two-thirds, sixty-six (66%) of respondents reported they regularly use the food bank (e.g. on a weekly basis). These are similar findings to the experience of other low-income British Columbians;



62% Sixty-two (62%) of survey respondents reported that their housing is comfortable for their family. Nonetheless, Syrian families have faced significant challenges in finding affordable housing that meets the needs of their larger families;



74% Almost three-quarters, seventy-four (74%) of survey respondents indicated that they had immediate family members that they wanted to be reunited with in Canada;

85% In an open-ended last question on the survey where Syrians could state anything, over eighty-five percent (85%) simply wanted to say “thank you”.

PART 1: INTRODUCTION

In October 2015 Prime Minister Trudeau announced Canada would resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees, a commitment that has since been surpassed through the combined efforts of Operation Syrian Refugee (OSR) and ongoing resettlement efforts. Operation Syrian Refugee welcomed 25,000 Syrian refugees to Canada through a combination of private sponsorship (PSR), government-assisted (GAR) and Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) streams in the period from November 4, 2015 to February 28, 2016. Ongoing resettlement efforts will see an additional 10,000 government assisted refugees resettled to Canada by December 31, 2016.

As of November 27, 2016 over 35,000 Syrians have arrived in Canada, of whom approximately 2,100 GARs settled in BC. In addition, as of August 31, 2016 (the latest available IRCC stats) 424 Syrian privately sponsored and 326 Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) cases have also settled in over 50 communities throughout BC.¹

Syrian refugees arriving in Canada have met with an outpouring of support from all levels of government, civil society and employers. Over the course of their first year in Canada a great deal of attention from government and employers has focused upon labour market integration. It is important to remember, however, that refugees are selected upon a criterion that differs significantly from economic immigrants. As such, their initial settlement needs and integration pathway may not parallel that of other immigrants.

Refugees resettled to Canada do so under Canada's humanitarian protection stream. Unlike economic immigrants who make the decision to apply to

¹ Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) has provided regular updates on Syrian arrivals through both their website (#WelcomeRefugees: Key figures), as well as through data on the Open Data Portal.

PROFILE OF SYRIAN ARRIVALS TO BC

Most Syrian GARs resettled to BC originated from the southern city of Daraa and its surrounding region.

Prior to their arrival in Canada, most Syrian GARs had spent 3 – 5 years in urban settings or refugee camps located in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon.

Syrian GARs have larger than Canadian average size families, with arrivals to BC having an average of 6 members. Further, many have very young families. Almost 60% of Syrian GARs resettled in BC are under age 19, with 50% age 12 and younger.

Adults arrived with a range of education and work experience backgrounds ranging from university educated professionals to farmers. The majority arrived with lower levels of education and limited or no English. Many had previously been employed in the construction and agricultural sectors (e.g. as truck drivers, construction workers and small scale farmers).

Syrian GARs to BC arrived with a range of physical and mental health conditions, including untreated trauma, chronic medical conditions, significant dental issues, and physical impairments.

(data from IRCC and ISSofBC)

immigrate to Canada, refugees are forced to flee their homes and have been recognized by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as meeting the Convention definition of a refugee. Resettlement is one of three durable solutions put forward by the UNHCR to enable refugees to rebuild their lives with peace and dignity. Individuals selected for resettlement do not have any other durable solution available to them, including local integration into the country of first asylum or ability to return to their home country.

Economic immigrants are selected upon factors which are seen to increase the likelihood of economic self-sufficiency, including age, language ability in one of Canada's two official languages, education, skills training, and previous work experience. By contrast, GARs are assessed upon established UNHCR vulnerability and an urgent need for protection. GARs arrive in Canada as permanent residents and receive initial assistance – including temporary accommodations – and one year of financial support from the Federal Government. Most GARs do not have pre-existing family connections in Canada. The characteristics exhibited through the vulnerability criteria were reflected by the Syrian GARs that settled in BC.

UNHCR VULNERABILITY CRITERIA INCLUDES:

- single mothers,
- families with young children,
- individuals with a medical pre-condition due to war or untreated trauma
- survivor of torture
- individuals with special needs – physical limitations, and
- length of time spent in protracted refugee situation

With the unprecedented arrival of Syrian GARs to BC, ISSofBC took the opportunity to mark their first year in Canada by systematically probing some of their early settlement experiences and outcomes. This process was conducted through two separate consultation initiatives, one focused on youth and young adults, the other a survey of adult head of households.

This report explores the findings of both consultations, identifies key themes, and provides recommendations intended to better facilitate the settlement and integration of refugees in BC, and Canada more broadly.

PART 2: SYRIAN REFUGEE YOUTH CONSULTATION

On September 17, 2016 almost sixty (60) Syrian youth, representing approximately one (1) out of every three (3) Syrian government assisted refugee youth (ages 15 to 24) who settled in BC, participated in a full-day consultation. Syrian youth came from throughout Metro Vancouver and Fraser Valley including both boys and girls from Surrey, Delta, Langley, Vancouver and Burnaby. Most youth had been in Canada less than eight (8) months. The event was organized in partnership with the Fresh Voices Initiative of the Vancouver Foundation; activities were created and facilitated in Arabic collaboratively with Arabic-speaking youth workers from ISSofBC and the Fresh Voices Initiative. During the consultation, youth responded to questions such as: “What has worked well for you so far in Canada? What could be done better? How can things be better managed for future refugees coming here?” This event marked the first time former refugee youth were brought together in a systematic manner within their first year in Canada and asked about their thoughts, hopes, aspirations and feedback on the programs and services they’ve accessed since their arrival to Canada. As part of the report back process, youth developed a social media campaign and spoke on camera for a short video to ensure that their voice was heard as part of policy and program discussions directly impacting them and their future peers. A final report was prepared and recommendations presented to community stakeholders at an October 2016 event.² A graphic facilitator recorded the day (see Figure 1).

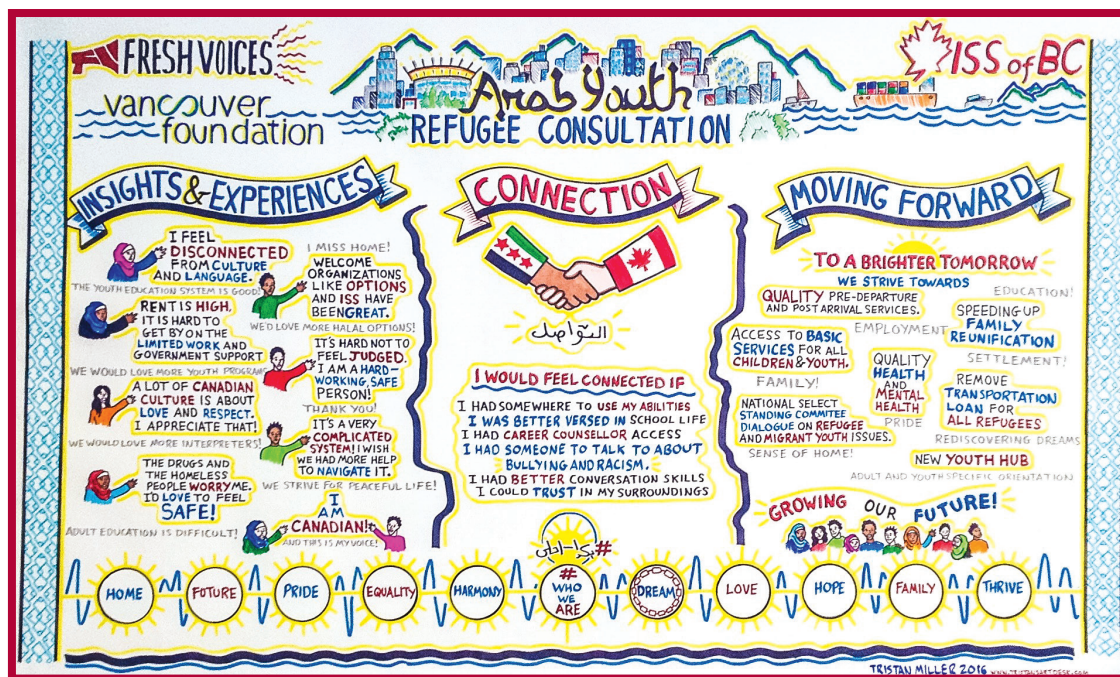


Figure 1: Syrian Refugee Youth Consultation — graphic recording

2 See <https://issbc.org/our-work-with-refugees/whowear/> for more information or links to report and videos.

PART 3: INITIAL SETTLEMENT OUTCOMES SURVEY

METHODOLOGY

Three hundred and ninety-five (395) GAR head of households who had arrived between November 4, 2015 and February 28, 2016 were invited to participate in a telephone survey undertaken between November 1 to 18, 2016. The purpose of the survey was three-fold:

- Assess initial settlement outcomes as individuals approach the one year anniversary of their arrival in BC;
- Provide a better understanding of issues facing newly arrived Syrian GARs; and,
- Enable Syrian GARs to identify issues of concern to themselves.

Syrian GAR households initially destined outside the Lower Mainland (e.g. to Abbotsford, Prince George, Vancouver Island or the Okanagan) as GARs were not included in this survey as this began after the initial phase, starting March 2016. Only clients who received initial Resettlement Assistance Program and temporary accommodations directly from ISSofBC were included in the survey.

Syrian head of households were contacted by phone by trained Arabic speaking personnel and asked to take part in the survey. If consent was provided, the individuals were asked a series of 25 questions addressing a range of settlement related issues, including:

- English language and education/training,
- employment,
- housing,
- health and family well-being, and
- family reunification.

Clients were provided two open-ended questions to identify their most pressing need, as well as provide an opportunity to provide feedback to ISSofBC or the Government of Canada.

The survey was conducted in Arabic and responses were entered into Survey Monkey, ensuring no identifying information was included.

PARTICIPANT PROFILE AND FINDINGS

Three-hundred and one (301) Syrian head of households provided consent to participate in the telephone survey, representing seventy-six percent (76%) of total targeted respondents.

Over eighty (80%) of respondents were initially settled in four cities: Surrey (51%), Coquitlam (12%), Burnaby and Vancouver (11% each) (see Figure 2 for a map of initial settlement locations of respondents). A small number of respondents (<5) who were initially destined to Vancouver before being re-destined to smaller centres across BC participated in the survey.

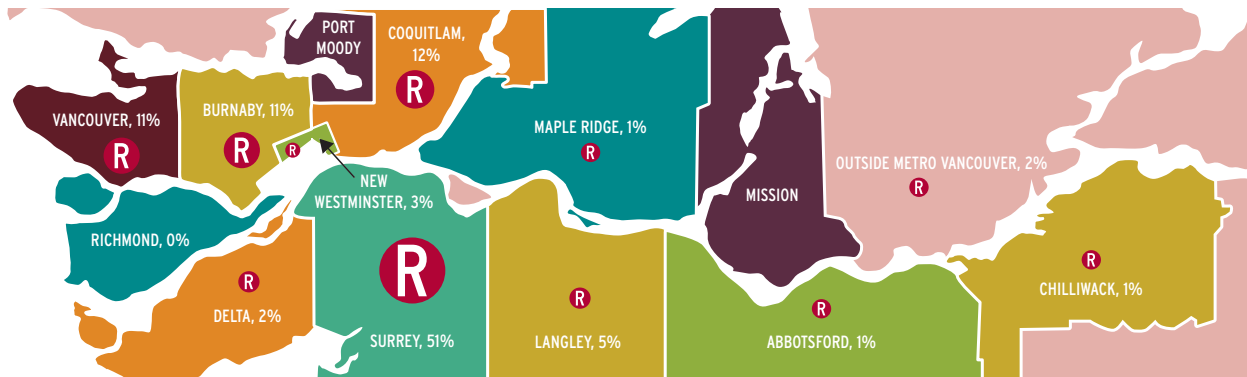


Figure 2: Initial Settlement Locations for Respondents (%). (Not to scale)

The majority of participants had been in Canada between nine (9) and ten (10) months, with the highest number of arrivals in January 2016 (see Figure 3 for detailed arrivals).

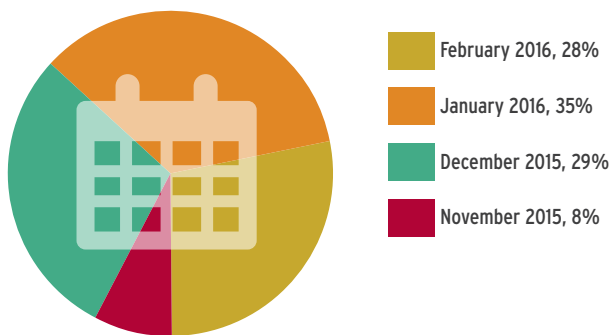


Figure 3: Month of Arrival (%)

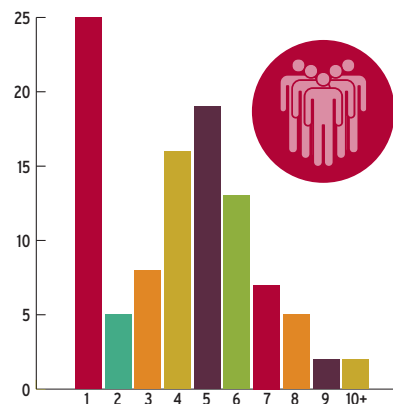


Figure 4: Unit Size of Respondents (%)

Under the Government of Canada’s overseas resettlement program, a ‘unit’ includes the head of household, spouse and dependent children. Single adults age 19 and older (including adult children) are considered a unit of one (1) by IRCC. As such, multiple units may form a family (e.g. a couple and their dependent children as one unit, their adult child as another) and a unit may be smaller than the family size.

Syrian GAR arrivals to BC included a significant number of larger units (see Figure 4). Over one (1) in four (4) arrived as part of a unit of six (6) or more individuals. Almost three quarters seventy-three (73%) of respondents arrived as part of a unit of 1 – 5 individuals, including 25% who arrived as an individual unit. It should be noted, however, that many of these single units arrived as part of a larger family.

Given adult children are counted as a unit by IRCC, multiple respondents may have participated from a given family (e.g. father, 1+ adult children living at home).

ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION/TRAINING

The majority of Syrian refugees arrived in Canada with lower levels of English language. Almost one year after arrival, eighty-one percent (81%) of Syrian respondents self-assessed as having no or beginner level English (see Figure 5). Seventy-six percent (76%) reported they are currently attending LINC classes which is very encouraging, particularly given long waitlists for federally funded English language classes in British Columbia.

At the time of the survey, over half - fifty-one percent (51%) of individuals who are not attending LINC classes are on waitlist that ranges from one (1) to eleven (11) months (average 4) (see Figure 6). Of concern, almost one (1) in three (3) respondents who are currently on a waitlist self-identify as having no English language ability.

Besides English language training twenty percent (20%) of survey respondents also indicated that they have taken training and/or education other than English, another indicator towards economic integration.

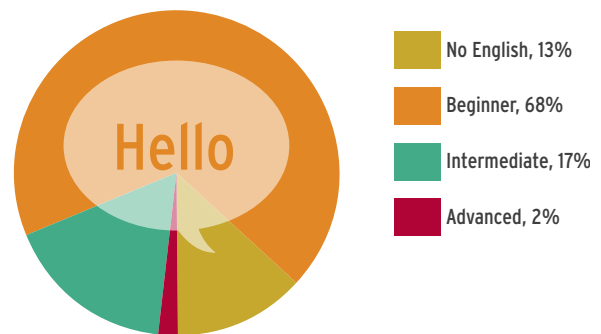


Figure 5: Level of English (%)

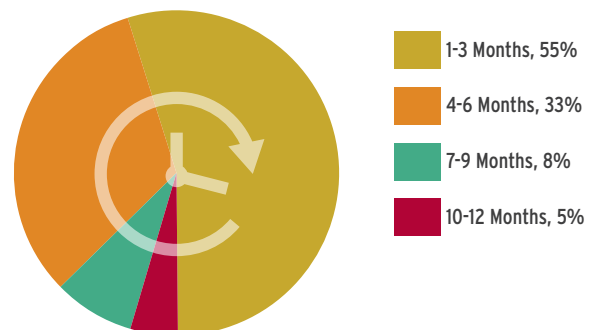


Figure 6: Time on Waitlist for LINC Classes (%)

EMPLOYMENT

Less than one year after arrival seventeen (17%) of respondents are employed on a full-time or part-time basis.

Manufacturing, Construction and Trades (fifty-nine (59%) and Food, Retail and Hospitality (thirty-one (31%) are the two main sectors in which Syrian respondents have found employment (see Figure 7). Individuals working full-time were more likely to work in Manufacturing, Construction and Trades (sixty-eight (68%) full-time, fifty-three (53%) part-time), while part-time workers were more likely to work in Food, Retail and Hospitality (thirty-four (34%) part-time, twenty-six (26%) full-time).

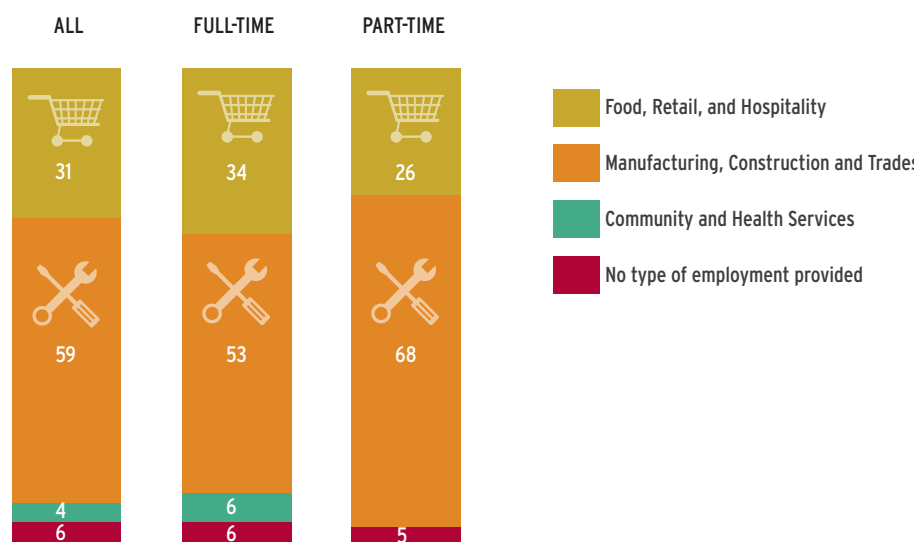


Figure 7: Employment by Sector (%)

A small number of individuals have been able to obtain part-time employment within the Community and Health Services sectors.

Six percent (6%) of respondents live in households where one or more other family member(s) are employed.

Sixty-four percent (64%) of respondents who are not working stated that they were actively looking for work.

HOUSING

Sixty-two (62%) of survey respondents reported that their housing is comfortable for their family. When asked why their current housing is not comfortable, the top three responses were the high cost of rent (53%), the housing is too small for their family (46%), and the housing is dirty/old (25%) (see Figure 8).³ These findings are not unlike those experienced generally by low-income BC residents.

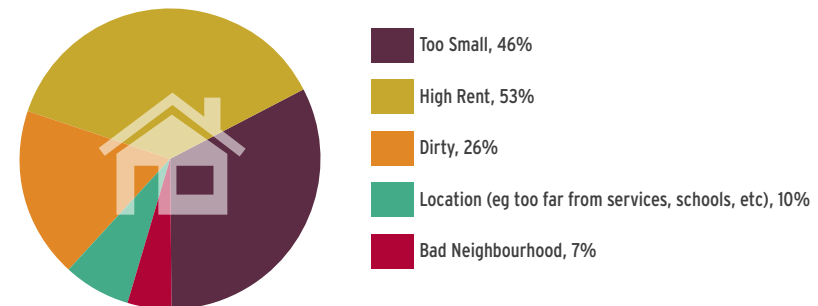


Figure 8: Housing (%)

Other respondents identified issues related to accessibility concerns (e.g. for wheelchairs), concerns about neighbours (e.g. inability to communicate) and/or their pets. Two clients noted their building will be demolished in the coming months so they will have to move.

Forty-one percent (41%) of respondents live in households of six (6) or more people. Thirty-seven percent (37%) live in 2 bedroom units and 43% in 3 bedroom units. Although a small number of large (6+) families live in 2 bedroom units, the majority live in larger units (3+ bedrooms). A number of clients have been successful in accessing subsidized housing (e.g. BC Housing, co-ops).

HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Respondents were asked a series of questions on the health and well-being of their family. Overall respondents reported the physical and emotional well-being of their family to be positive, as well as how their children are doing in school.

One in three (1 in 3) respondents reported their family overall was in Fair or Poor physical health (see Figure 9).

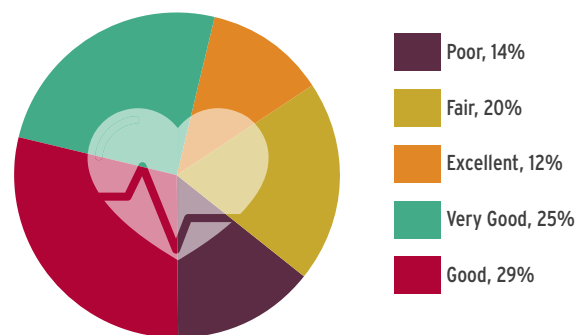


Figure 9: Physical Health of Family (%)

³ Multiple responses were allowed. Further, a small number of individuals who had indicated their housing is comfortable for their family responded to this question – usually in relation to the high cost of housing.

When asked about their family’s emotional health, sixteen percent (16%) of respondents indicated that overall their family members felt depressed and fourteen percent (14%) as sad (see Figure 10).

Positive responses about the mental health of families, however, was tempered by the anguish revealed in open-ended questions. Respondents expressed concern about the physical well-being of family left overseas and alluded to the impact on their own well-being.

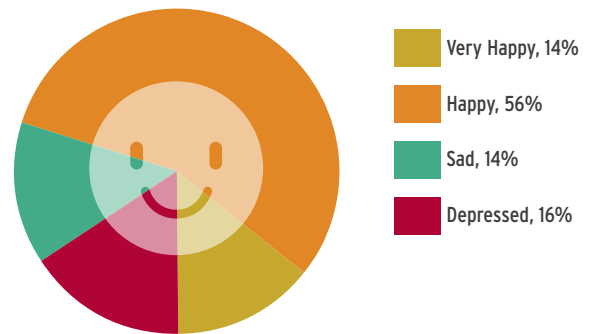


Figure 10: Emotional Well-Being of Family (%)

Responses to the question of the most pressing need or concern, for example included:



The ability to fully rebuild their lives in Canada is tempered by ongoing concern about the well-being of family abroad.

Parents are generally thrilled about their children’s experience in school especially as many of the children were not able to regularly attend school during their time in exile. Fifty-one (51%) of respondents reported their children were doing excellent or very good in school (see Figure 11).

Our final question around well-being centred upon income security. Two-thirds (sixty-six (66%) of respondents reported they regularly use the food bank (e.g. on a weekly basis). This is similar to other low-income British Columbians.

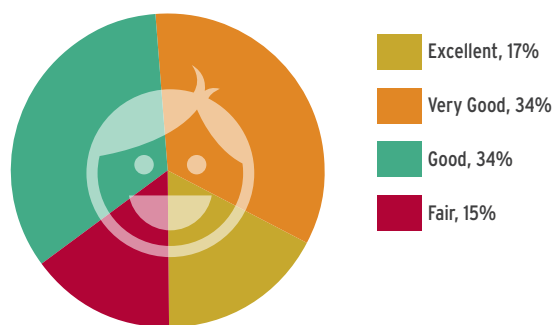


Figure 11: Children's Well-Being at School (%)

FAMILY REUNIFICATION

Almost three-quarters (74%) of survey respondents indicated that they had immediate family members that they wanted to be reunited with in Canada. This includes spouses, adult and dependent children, siblings, parents, and grandparents (see Figure 12).

When combined with information provided in open ended questions on the most pressing needs, as well as information to be provided to the Government of Canada or ISSofBC the picture is one of families

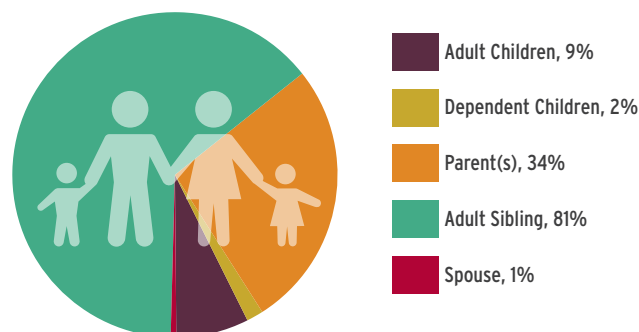




Figure 12: Immediate Family Members for Potential Reunification

separated by war and suffering from ongoing anguish of their well-being. Parents spoke of the need to bring children to help support them as they aged, adult children of the need to bring adult siblings to provide support to their children/parents, and adult children concerned about their parents.



“I am desperate for help. I take care of my sick mother and I need my brother to come to Canada from Jordan to support me as soon as possible”



“I hope with all my heart that the Government brings my children to Canada”



“My most pressing worry is I want to bring my daughter to help me with my two disabled daughters”

Integration in Canada takes place in the context of ongoing concerns about family abroad. Continued separation and – in some cases – need for assistance and support as clearly identified by many respondents.


PART 3: DISCUSSION

The following discussion derives from both the telephone survey and youth consultation. Consideration of findings from both consultations have been clustered into seven (7) key themes, including:


- Income Security, with emphasis on Month 13,
- Education and English Language,
- Housing,
- Health,
- Dental,
- Mental Well-Being, and
- Family Reunification.

Each will be addressed in turn.


INCOME SECURITY



“Finding a job opportunity after finishing language training in order to support my family is my most pressing need”



“I am worried that we cannot find employment because of my wife’s illness; therefore, we won’t be independent”



“Also sorting out before and after school care for my child as I recently started working”

Income security, or lack thereof, is the primary concern of many Syrian refugees both at present and as they contemplate the transition to BC Income Assistance in month 13. The stress associated with concerns about finding employment, supporting their families, paying for housing, and becoming independent emerged in both the youth consultation, as well as the phone survey.

In their December 2015 report, *From Crisis to Community: Syrian Refugees and the B.C. Economy* Vancity Credit Union projected Syrian refugees in BC will boost the local economy by \$563 million over the next 20 years. While immediate labour market attachment may be concurrent or secondary to learning or improving English language skills, securing employment is a goal shared by all able-bodied Syrians.

Less than one year after arrival in BC approximately one (1) in six (6) survey respondents (17%) have obtained employment on a full-time or part-time basis. Although the majority of individuals reported working in either the Manufacturing, Construction and Trades or the Food, Retail and Hospitality sectors, a small number have been able to obtain employment in the Community and Health Services sector. Only six (6%) of survey respondents, however, live in households with one or more other family members have obtained employment; in all but one case there is only one other person employed within their household. Almost two-thirds (64%) of respondents who are not working stated that they were actively looking for work.

Previous research has demonstrated there are a number of key factors that may impact a refugee's ability to secure employment including:

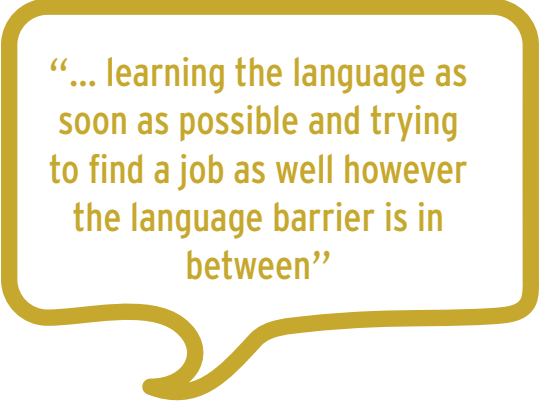
- cost and availability of public transit (e.g. ability to get to work sites owing to start/end times and/or location in underserved area, cost of bus passes);
- unfamiliarity of Canadian employment search techniques;
- lack of Canadian work experience;
- lack of English language skills;
- untreated pre migration trauma; and,
- a lack of child care.

Participants in the Syrian Refugee Youth Consultation identified a need for specialized employment interventions to address the barriers faced by refugee youth and young adults in entering the labour market. Suggestions included programs targeting job search and skills development, mentorship and one-on-one support, Canadian workplace cultural orientations, and placement opportunities. It is encouraging to note that some specialized employment interventions are emerging to meet this need.

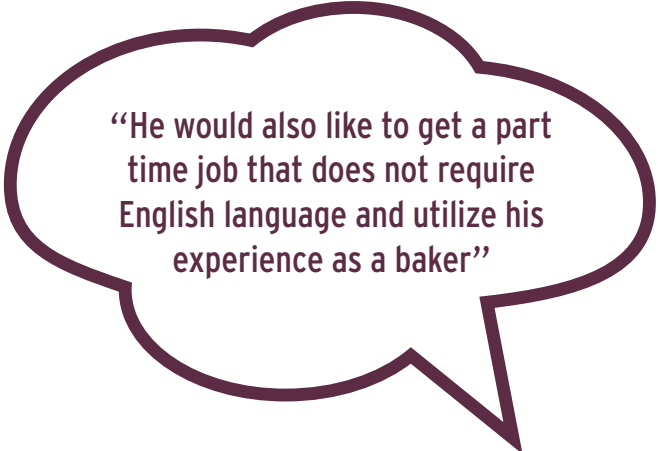
Recognition of the difficulties in obtaining employment within the Canadian labour market led one respondent to suggest it would be good if “an organization could help us in placing us in jobs, that they have contact with employers and can place refugees for certain type of jobs that can help number of people with a common job skills”.

Concerns about household income security were evident in the youth consultation as well. Securing employment is a main priority for youth in order to contribute to the financial well-being of their family, a finding supported by previous research in BC. A number of Syrian youth reported that some of their peers and/or siblings had begun to drop out of high school in order to work and contribute towards their family's income with the hope of returning to school through adult education programs at a later date.

The desire for employment and concerns about challenges in being hired were evident in adult and youth respondents. Certainly a large number of adult and youth respondents spoke of the desire to find employment – a finding supported by the number of individuals who reported seeking employment – though the ability to do so was often interlinked with language proficiency.



“... learning the language as soon as possible and trying to find a job as well however the language barrier is in between”



“He would also like to get a part time job that does not require English language and utilize his experience as a baker”

There is great concern and fear among Syrian families as to the next steps after their first year in Canada.

Although the overall concerns are not unlike those of previous refugee populations the sheer numbers and compressed arrival patterns have necessitated a different approach. ISSofBC in partnership with the Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation (MSDSI), with the financial support of the Ministry of Jobs, Tourism and Skills Training's Refugee Readiness Fund, has launched a multi-pronged approach to ease the transition for the families that will be transitioning onto BC Income Assistance (IA). This multi-pronged approach includes:

- the creation of a specialized MSDSI team deployed to community agencies frequented by Syrians in four key cities where Syrians have settled,
- translation and distribution of key MSDSI and transition-related materials for service providers and clients,
- training for front-line settlement workers and private sponsors on BC Income Assistance program, and
- first language workshops on BC Income Assistance for all Syrian adults who will be transitioning to BC IA.

Preparing families who need to continue income assistance support during their settlement process is seen as critically important in order to minimize any potential disruption.

At present, the federal income support allowance (RAP) mirrors the base rates of BC IA. However, there are two key differences which impact government-assisted refugees' initial settlement experiences. All adult GARs are provided a monthly transportation allowance to ensure GARs can access settlement services, community resources, language classes and undertake employment search. The provision of a monthly transportation allowance or bus pass, for example, enables individuals to travel to job interviews and/or retain employment.

The other main difference between the federal and provincial income support systems relates to the ability of individuals to earn additional monies without penalty. Unlike those on BC IA, GARs on federal income support can earn up to fifty (50%) of their monthly income support without any claw back. This is seen as an incentive without penalty for those that are able to immediately work obtain their first job in Canada, build work experience, increase their professional and social network while learning or improving their English language skills. By contrast monies earned on BC IA are deducted on a dollar for dollar basis.

While youth participants spoke of 'claw back' as a potential disincentive to obtaining employment during their first year in Canada, the ability to earn any monies is far more constrained under provincial IA. Further, the elimination of monthly transportation allowances for adults will increase the financial burden facing refugee families.

During the youth consultation the issue of the federal governments' transportation loan program was discussed as another impact on overall family income security. The Government of Canada currently bundles together the cost of overseas medical examination and the one-way airline ticket to Canada into an interest bearing transportation loan.⁴ This interest-bearing loan can be as high as \$10,000 per family or even higher in the case of adult children. Although most Syrian refugees were exempted from the loan program youth participants during the consultation urged the Canadian government to offer the loan waiver not only to Syrians but also to all refugees resettling in Canada. As already noted, refugee resettlement is based on humanitarian immigration objectives. These humanitarian objectives do not align with refugees incurring an immediate debt upon arrival in Canada while on federal income support allowances that reflect provincial income support rates in most cases.

⁴ Note: effective April 1, 2017 the Interim Federal Health (IFH) program will cover costs associated with overseas medical exams, eliminating the need for families to repay this amount.

EDUCATION – ENGLISH LANGUAGE TRAINING

Respondents spoke of both the need to learn English, as well as obtain further education and training in order to facilitate their integration process.



Besides employment and immediate settlement supports, learning one of Canada’s official languages is key to economic and social integration for refugees. Currently BC has the highest waitlist in the country for federally funded English classes (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) classes). Over 5,000 permanent residents (PRs) in BC are currently on English language class waitlists with the majority of those PR’s living in Surrey. As of November 18, 2016 over fifty-two (52%) of Syrian GARs to BC have settled in Surrey. In general, the diversity of education and employment backgrounds is evident in the concerns identified by adult survey respondents. While some were focused on the need to learn English in order to obtain employment, others spoke of the desire to obtain targeted training in Canada, or have foreign credentials recognized. A key need for larger sized families and in recognition of the fact that fifty percent (50%) of Syrian GARs are under 12 years old is the critical need for additional childcare spaces. This is particularly critical for single mothers. If we cannot increase the capacity of child care spaces in order for mothers to attend language classes, Syrian women will face greater challenges in their settlement and integration process as well as face greater degrees of social isolation.

Eighty-one percent (81%), over three-quarters of Syrian GAR respondents reported they are currently attending federally funded Adult English language classes or Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) class. While this is encouraging – particularly given long waitlists in BC – it is likely the majority of Syrian GARs will require prolonged access to language classes given over the fact that eighty (80%) of Syrian respondents indicated that they had no or beginner level English.

“His (My) progress in learning the language is very slow”

“I am worried about my English and how to communicate with people”

Having permanent residents (PRs) waiting considerable periods to access English language classes directly impacts their ability to attach to the labour market and become economically self-sufficient. For some, the challenges of learning English are amplified by the need to balance employment.


For that of children, youth and young adults the school system acts as an accelerated integration into Canadian society and values. In general, children are settling in well into school after years of disruption in their education and not surprising, children are learning English at a much faster pace than that of their parents. Eighty-two (82%) of Syrian head of households who responded to the survey stated that their children were doing good to excellent in school.

“I’m unable to balance between studying English and working. My type of work is so tiring and I’m struggling with some health issues”


On the other hand, Syrian youth and young adults expressed confusion and lack of understanding of the education system in Canada. Many felt lost and unsure of what their next steps would be after completing high school. Older youth, for example, expressed that there was a lack of information on how to gain accreditation for courses and diplomas completed prior to arriving in Canada. This is an area that many immigrant serving agencies are beginning to respond to. Syrian teenagers spoke about the relevance of some of their schoolwork and how it often did not align with what other students were learning or at their academic level.

HOUSING

Sixty-two (62%) of survey respondents reported that their housing is comfortable for their family. Nonetheless, Syrian families have faced significant challenges in finding affordable housing that meets the needs of their larger families. Adult and youth respondents shared similar concerns about the availability of adequate and appropriate housing options, high rental prices and lack of sufficient space for their larger size families. Further, the tendency for Arab families to live in multi-generational households – even when children are over the age of 18 – creates additional challenges in obtaining adequately sized housing.




“If we do happen to find somewhere to rent that meets occupancy regulations, it is usually too expensive to afford, leaving us stuck”



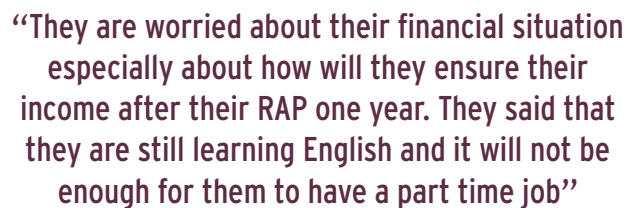
“Finding a home that is suitable for a large family is nearly impossible”

While not part of this survey the cost of housing in relation to shelter allowances was noted throughout BC communities where subsequent GARs were destined outside of the Lower Mainland. Two clients noted their building will be demolished in the coming months so they will have to move. Similarly, youth participants indicated that the housing crisis in the Lower Mainland has affected many of the participants’ families since arriving in Canada.

For many, concerns about their housing were intertwined with fears about the transition to BC IA at the end of their first year in Canada.



“[The most pressing need or concern is] Very high rent ... the client is worried about how to pay for his rent after his RAP year finishes”



“They are worried about their financial situation especially about how will they ensure their income after their RAP one year. They said that they are still learning English and it will not be enough for them to have a part time job”

The impending reduction in household income as well as ongoing demolition of existing stock of rental housing in Coquitlam and Burnaby poses additional challenges for GAR families as they transition onto BC IA.

PRIMARY HEALTH

Syrian families stated their appreciation for the care and attention provided to them from medical practitioners. As noted there were some Syrian GARs that arrived in BC with pre-existing medical conditions, including war related injuries. One in three (1 in 3) respondents reported their family was in Fair or Poor health. Not unlike many Canadians, adult and youth participants noted difficulties in accessing medical system owing to inability to find family doctors, long waitlists for specialists, and a lack of interpreters.

“Everything is great; (my) health has improved in a remarkable way thanks to Canada”

“The main problem (I’m) he is facing is mainly the lack of interpretation services during medical appointment especially with family doctors and specialized doctors”

Further, a number of respondents spoke of physical and mobility impairments (e.g. deafness, blindness) that further impaired their ability to access language classes and/or obtain employment. Those who are deaf or blind, for example, are unable to access language classes, while individuals with mobility impairments requested home-based language supports.

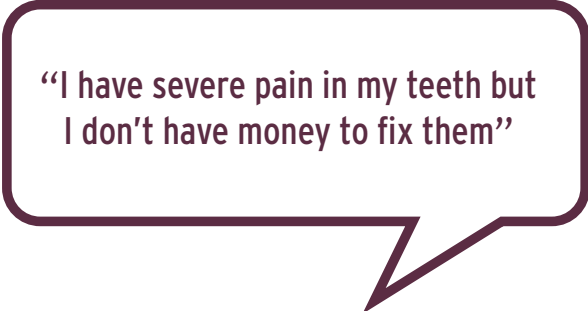
In BC GARs are eligible for provincial Medical Services Plan (MSP) coverage from the moment they land in the province. During the first phase of Operation Syrian Refugee (Nov 4, 2016 to February 28, 2016) there were considerable delays in applying for and processing of BC MSP coverage and Care Cards.

Both Vancouver Coastal Health and Fraser Health Authority responded in a timely manner in increasing their capacity to meet the immediate primary healthcare needs of Syrian GARs destined to BC. All GARs received a primary health care screening and assessment through the deployment of mobile medical teams that outreached to Syrian GARs during their stay in one of the temporary reception facilities that were opened to accommodate the arrival influx. While the dedication and commitment of the medical team was unquestionable, often going over and above to assist Syrian families with their immediate medical needs, the Syrian operation raised larger issues in the provision of immediate healthcare for refugee newcomers to BC. Beginning March 1, 2016 Syrian GARs were destined to communities throughout BC, including Vancouver Island, Interior, Okanagan and Northern regions necessitating the development of new approaches in these health regions. Further, almost 800 Syrian PSR and BVOR individuals now reside in over 50 communities across the province.

DENTAL

Although respondents were not asked questions specific to dental health, the issue emerged as a key theme in both adult and youth consultations.

During the first phase of the Syrian refugee operation ISSofBC, Vancouver Coastal Health and the BC Dental Association collaborated to provide dental screening in conjunction with primary healthcare screening to all incoming Syrian GARs. This was the first time that systematic dental screening was conducted for all incoming GARs. While the integrated team approach worked very well, we quickly realized that the dental issues and subsequent necessary treatment needed were far more complex than anticipated and well over and above what was covered under the Interim Federal Health (IFH) program provided during the refugees' first year in Canada. As a result, dental screening was stopped as of March 2016 and only limited to cases where dental pain has been exhibited upon arrival. Dental related issues continue and were raised in both the youth consultation and telephone survey. Similar to low-income Canadians without employer supported dental benefit coverage and BC residents on IA the extent of dental coverage is limited to pain relief and extractions. Refugees living in protracted situations are unlikely to receive any dental care including for example, dental health promotion (e.g. regular cleaning and instruction in flossing).



“I have severe pain in my teeth but I don't have money to fix them”

The most immediate pressing need is coverage for stainless steel crowns for children and access to sedation to lower the demand on hospital facilities. For children and adults some basic coverage for preventative care such as a cleaning would be highly beneficial — fluoride especially for children but the cost towards cleaning helps when the dentist is providing restorative care.

MENTAL WELL-BEING

“The war in Syria and suffering of family members in Syria impacts me greatly”

“Learning how to cope with negative thoughts and sadness after losing our country, losing loved ones and losing stability is difficult.”

When asked about their family’s emotional health, 16% of respondents indicated that overall their family members felt depressed and 14% as sad. Treating mental illness and anger issues, especially after living through the ongoing civil war was identified as a priority during the youth consultation.

Youth, for example, spoke of the pressure and distress of trying to balance work, school, learning a new language, and trying to reconcile this with the emotional distress of [their] experiences.

While GARs are anxious to find work and learn English, contribute and build a life in this country it is important to remember that many refugees may have experienced excessive violence, destruction of personal property, arbitrary arrest and detention, family separation, torture and the death of immediate family members and friends. Although refugee newcomers bring to Canada tremendous resilience, life skills and many other assets, the emotional trauma exhibited by many refugees is unparalleled to the lived experience of most Canadians. The mental health needs of refugees are increasing as the global humanitarian crisis around the world worsens. Survivors of trauma and torture are at increased risk of physical and mental health issues directly impacting their ability to seek or retain employment and attend English classes. This trauma may include high levels of anxiety, grief and loss, hypervigilance, depression and – in the most severe cases – suicidality and/or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Further, physical and mental health issues may be associated with other health risks. Common conditions in survivors such as depression are associated with hypertension, cardiovascular disease and diabetes, while forty-four percent (44%) of those experiencing PTSD also experience depression (HPRT 2011; Rousseau 2011).

Although longitudinal research studies in Canada indicate that approximately eighty percent (80%) of refugees who have experienced high levels of pre-migratory trauma will heal spontaneously after reaching safety, the outcomes are not universally good. Evidence from a meta-analysis of twenty (20) studies that included 6743 adult refugees resettled in developed countries reported the prevalence of PTSD was nine percent (9%) and five percent (5%) had major depression, while a review of five studies of 260 child refugees revealed approximately eleven (11%) of refugee youth experience PTSD. Further, conditions are often comorbid. Torture survivors, for example, are at a higher risk of chronic physical and health problems; according to the longitudinal studies forty-four (44%) of those developing PTSD are likely to simultaneously have depression.

In Canada, refugees are selected based on ‘need for protection’ and vulnerability criteria. Recognition of the centrality of dealing with trauma during the initial settlement period in order to facilitate long-term integration has prompted the Government of Australia to include clinical mental health supports in their Federally-funded resettlement assistance program.⁵ Refugees resettled to Canada are selected based on vulnerability criteria and arrive having been exposed to significant trauma, loss and grief. For some individuals, failure to address the underlying trauma and grief has been shown to impair settlement and integration, including language learning as well as employment. Addressing the underlying conditions is critical to promotion of settlement and integration.

Social isolation was identified by Syrian youth and young adults as contributing to ongoing mental health struggles for both the individual, as well as others living in their household. Youth participants identified a need for various supports including “recreational trips for older parents because they can’t go on their own. They stay at home and are depressed which affects the youth living with them” (Youth participant).

FAMILY REUNIFICATION

As the Syrian civil war continues unabated after almost six (6) years the mental health and integration process of Syrian families is greatly impacted by the separation of family members. Almost three-quarters (74%) of survey respondents indicated that they had immediate family members that they wanted to be reunited with in Canada. This includes spouses, adult and dependent children, siblings, parents, and grandparents. Family reunification is viewed by many respondents as critical to emotional health, as well as long-term settlement.



“I hope with all my heart that the Government brings my children to Canada”

During the youth consultation many participants shared that they have left family members behind and that this was a significant issue impacting their mental health and that of their parents and siblings. Youth participants spoke of how being separated from their parents for a long time affected the relationship within their families and communities. They also raised that there were currently few opportunities to communicate the hardships that accompany family separations to federal immigration officials.

⁵ Note: Health is a provincial responsibility in Australia, as it is in Canada.

PART 4: RECOMMENDATIONS

The initial settlement experiences of Syrian GAR adults and youth in BC has identified a number of key issues and challenges that may hinder settlement and integration, including labour market attachment. While the survey and youth consultation focused upon Government-Assisted Refugees (GARs), the experiences may be similar to those of Privately-Sponsored Refugees (PSRs) and Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) refugees. Further, the challenges experienced with respect to housing and income security may reflect broader experiences of individuals on Income Assistance (IA) both in BC and across Canada.

Where appropriate, recommendations include the broader population, so as to ensure that refugees do not receive preferential treatment as compared to other Canadians.

The following recommendations are submitted for consideration to both the federal and provincial governments to explore ways to enhance the settlement and integration of refugees, including facilitating labour market attachment for GARs.

PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT

ISSofBC is forwarding six (6) recommendations to the BC Provincial Government for their consideration.

MINISTRY OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL INNOVATION (MSDSI)

We would urge the Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation (MSDSI) to consider the following recommendations for all BC residents on Income Assistance (IA):

RECOMMENDATION 1:

Adjust current regulations to allow all BC IA recipients to earn up to 50% of their monthly allowance without any claw back.

RATIONALE AND BENEFIT:

At present individuals' earnings are clawed back on a dollar for dollar basis in BC. Enabling individuals to earn up to 50% would encourage pathways to full-time employment as recipients could supplement existing IA to better meet basic needs.



RECOMMENDATION 2:



Provide a multi-zone bus pass – or cash equivalency in regions without public transit – for all IA recipients eighteen (18) years old and over.

RATIONALE AND BENEFIT:

Transportation costs create an additional barrier to searching for work, attending English classes and seeking necessary supports for recipients struggling to meet basic needs on existing IA rates. Provision of a monthly multi-zone bus pass – or cash equivalency for IA recipients living in regions of BC that do not have public transit – would reduce barriers to employment and ensure equitability regardless of where the recipient lives in BC.

RECOMMENDATION 3:



Adapt the innovative ‘Single Parent Employment Initiative’ to target supports for highly vulnerable refugee populations.

RATIONALE AND BENEFIT:

Within the Province of BC if you are a single parent receiving income or disability assistance, you may be eligible for training and support to secure a long-term job through the Single Parent Employment Initiative. We would urge MSDSI to consider adapting this innovative program to target supports to highly vulnerable refugee populations in order to remove barriers to employment such as linking employment training with English language classes.

MINISTRY OF JOBS, TOURISM, AND SKILLS TRAINING

We would urge the Ministry of Jobs, Tourism, and Skills Training to consider the following recommendation:



RECOMMENDATION 4:

Enhance education and career planning supports that target refugee youth and young adults.

RATIONALE AND BENEFIT:

WorkBC Centres exist to support the needs of unemployed BC residents, ensuring all British Columbians have access to equitable supports. Yet refugee youth and young adults may face additional barriers to employment, including interrupted education, little/no English language proficiency and a lack of transferable work skills and experience. As such, there is a need for a specialized pathway to employment for refugee youth and young adults that includes an education plan and career exploration component. We would like to suggest the MSDSI review ways, in collaboration with the settlement sector and the Ministry of Jobs, Tourism, and Skills Training, to enhance supports that target refugee youth and young adults.

MINISTRY OF HEALTH

We would urge the Ministry of Health to consider the following recommendations:



RECOMMENDATION 5:

Expedite the issuance of personal health numbers (PHNs) for newly arrived refugees.

RATIONALE AND BENEFIT:

Although newly arrived GARs are not subject to a three (3) month residency period before being eligible for MSP, there is a significant delay in the processing and issuance of Care Cards. At present the processing delay is approximately three (3) months for most individuals. Without a PHN or Care Card newly arrived refugees are delayed in accessing specialists and other critical supports, and – in some cases – have been charged as non-residents. ISSofBC has worked with the Ministry of Health to fast track MSP applications by submitting applications within GARs first week in Canada, but further work is needed by the Ministry to expedite the issuance of the personal health numbers (PHN#) in the period while Care Cards are processed and issued. The inability to immediately secure the GAR PHNs causes unnecessary delays in accessing specialists, and subsequently, impacts employment search and English language class attendance.

RECOMMENDATION 6:



Establish a province wide refugee health program.

RATIONALE AND BENEFIT:

A province wide refugee health program would ensure a common baseline, as well as establish necessary consistencies and approaches in the provision of primary healthcare screening, assessment and treatment of refugees regardless of where they land in the province.

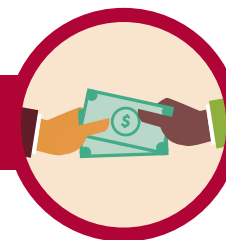
GOVERNMENT OF CANADA

ISSofBC is forwarding six (6) recommendations for consideration by the Government of Canada.

IMMIGRATION, REFUGEES AND CITIZENSHIP CANADA (IRCC)

We would urge the department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) to consider the following recommendations:

RECOMMENDATION 7:




Terminate the interest bearing transportation loan program for all refugees resettled to Canada.

RATIONALE AND BENEFIT:

Refugee resettlement is based upon humanitarian immigration objectives. Incurring an immediate debt upon arrival in Canada while on income assistance creates additional barriers to integration and settlement, necessitating families allocate scarce resources to repay debt before interest begins accruing and increasing the stresses of resettlement. Elimination of the debt for almost all Syrian refugees resettled to Canada has enabled families to begin the integration process without the additional financial burden.

RECOMMENDATION 8:



مرحبا
Hello

Increase the funding available for LINC classes in BC and establish a national waitlist operational guideline that limits the waitlists to three (3) months after a permanent resident has had an English language assessment. In addition, increase the funding for daycare spaces to meet the needs of mothers, in particular single mothers.

RATIONALE AND BENEFIT:

Learning one of Canada's official languages is key to economic and social integration for refugees. At present, however, newcomers to BC (including refugees) face the highest waitlist in the country for federally funded Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) English language classes. Early interventions would enable refugees and other newcomers to begin the integration process much earlier. Targeted investments should also be made in key cities, including Surrey, which are facing the highest waitlists in spite of receiving the highest number of Syrian GARs.

A key need for larger sized families and in recognition of the fact that fifty percent (50%) of Syrian GARs are under 12 years old is the critical need for additional childcare spaces. This need is particularly critical for single mothers. If we cannot increase the capacity of child care spaces in order for mothers to attend language classes, Syrian women will face greater challenges in their settlement and integration process as well as face greater degrees of social isolation.

RECOMMENDATION 9:



Adjust the Interim Federal Health (IFH) program dental coverage to refugee adults and children to include stainless steel, crowns and access to sedation as well as some basic coverage for some preventative care.

RATIONALE AND BENEFIT:

Untreated dental issues during the refugees' first year in Canada impacts their ability to attend English classes as well as retain employment.

RECOMMENDATION 10:



Amend Treasury Board terms and conditions of the national settlement program to allow for short-term (6-10 visit) clinical trauma counselling, and/or adjust the Interim Federal Health (IFH) program to reimburse trauma counselling delivered by registered clinical counsellors.

RATIONALE AND BENEFIT:

In Canada, refugees are selected based on ‘need for protection’ and vulnerability criteria. Recognition of the centrality of dealing with trauma during the initial settlement period in order to facilitate long-term integration has prompted the Government of Australia to include clinical mental health supports in their Federally-funded resettlement assistance program.⁶ Individuals requiring additional targeted supports would benefit from the ability to access short-term, first language, settlement informed clinical trauma counselling by accredited trained professionals in refugee trauma work.

⁶ Note: Health is a provincial responsibility in Australia, as it is in Canada.

RECOMMENDATION 11:



Consider the resettlement of intact extended family members when processing cases for resettlement to Canada.

RATIONALE AND BENEFIT:

We urge IRCC to consider the resettlement of all intact extended family members when processing cases for resettlement to Canada. This approach has been successfully used in the past, most recently in the resettlement to Canada of Bhutanese GARs out of Nepal.

CANADA REVENUE AGENCY

We would urge the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) to consider the following recommendation:



RECOMMENDATION 12:

Expedite the application process of Canada Child Benefit (CCB).

RATIONALE AND BENEFIT:

At the moment it can take three (3) month to receive the first cheque after an application has been submitted. Most GAR families use their CCB to augment the cost of housing and as such, they would benefit from having these funds as soon as possible.

PART 5: CONCLUSION

The Syrian refugee resettlement operation is the largest in Canadian history. The process of economic and social integration for Syrian refugees, not unlike previous refugee movements to Canada, e.g. Hungarians (1956) Ismaili's (1972), SE Asian (1979-80), Kosovar (1999), and many more, takes time given the horrific lived experiences associated by living in the civil war and subsequent years in protracted situations. However, over time, Syrians, like other former refugee populations, are making and will continue to make significant positive contributions to Canada. Syrians are well on their way to contributing to the local economy and host communities in numerous ways that highlight the richness and strength of our diversity as a nation. This report clearly indicates that within their first year in Canada Syrian adults overall, including young adults, are earnestly learning English, beginning and/or actively looking for work while children are integrating well into the public school system.

While most Syrians, if given the choice, would return to their homes if they could, they are nonetheless tremendously grateful to the Government of Canada and Canadians, in general, for providing them safety, hope, and the ability without fear to rebuild their lives in this country. They want Canadians to know that they see and treat this country as their home and as such, they are striving to work, contribute and build a better future for themselves and their children. They will cherish for the rest of their lives the tremendous kindness and generosity from Canadians who opened their door to them when other countries turned their back.

As outlined in this report there are ongoing concerns and some policy areas that should be reviewed to ensure current and future resettled refugees to Canada, whether they are GARs, PSRs or BVOR cases, can successfully settle, integrate and contribute to Canadian society. This includes proposed policy and operational guidelines to expedite labour market attachment and learning one of Canada's two official languages. All able-bodied Syrians stated consistently that they are striving to stand on their own two feet and want to contribute as quickly as possible to their new homeland. Through the Syrian refugee operation, we are reminded once again about:

- family abroad and a desire for family reunification;
- the need for improvements to address mental health and untreated trauma;
- increase targeted supports for refugee youth and young adults;
- expedited processing for certain government systems (e.g. PHN# within MSP and child family benefit programs);
- the need to address current language class waitlists; and,
- the need to improve income allowance benefits (e.g. bus pass and the elimination of the Government of Canada's transportation loan program).

If the suggested policy, government system and program improvements outlined herein were addressed, not only would future refugee populations benefit but in some cases also BC residents currently on income assistance.

The last word of this report go to Syrian newcomers to BC. In an open-ended survey questions where Syrians could state anything, over eighty-five percent (85%) simply wanted to say "thank you".