

# Syrian Refugee Operation to BC: Taking Stock Two Years after Arrival



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This survey report could not have been done without the participation of our valued participants who shared their knowledge and experience with us, as well as the research assistants and staff who conducted the survey. While confidentiality prohibits us from naming our clients, we give our sincere thanks to all our participants. As well, thanks go to Nadine Kallas, Dania Kallas, Ahmed Fadhil, Ahmed Abdulrazak, and Muna Zaidalkilani for undertaking the survey.

Chris Friesen — Director, Settlement Services


Kathy Sherrell — Associate Director, Settlement Services



“I’m thankful for coming to Canada and will work hard and pay taxes like any other Canadian.”



“Thank you for letting us live like actual human beings and protecting our children.”



**“We are grateful for the Government of Canada as they made us feel that we are here to be part of this country and not alienated like a refugee. We want to offer our full service to this country.”**

A sampling of the many words of gratitude from Syrian families, two years after arriving in British Columbia.

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## Executive Summary

Between November 4, 2015 and February 28, 2016, an unprecedented number of Syrian Government Assisted Refugees (GARs) arrived in BC. To follow up on these refugees who resettled through Operation Syrian Refugee (OSR), ISSofBC conducted a telephone survey to determine how they are faring after two years in the province.

Two hundred and forty-one adult Syrians who arrived as GARs participated in this survey. Interviews were conducted by phone by Arabic-speaking research assistants.

Almost 80% of respondents arrived in January and February 2016, with the highest number of arrivals in February 2016. Although most respondents were head of households within family units, in some cases the individual's spouse answered the survey questions instead.

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

### Key findings from Syrian GARs after two years in British Columbia:

Eighty-seven percent reported their English has improved since coming to Canada to be somewhat better (55%) or much better (32%).



Sixty-nine percent are attending free LINC (language instruction for newcomers to Canada) classes (which is a decline from the 76% reporting in the year-1 survey). Three-quarters of those *not* attending LINC classes reported they are not on a waitlist. For those who are on a waitlist, respondents wait between 3 to 18 months, with the majority waiting less than one year (80%).

The major barriers to participating in LINC classes reported included work and education (43%), health (23%), and lack of space in class (11%). As well, smaller numbers named transportation, age, and lack of childcare as barriers.

**27% of all respondents are working on a full-time basis and 13% on a part-time basis.**



Fifty-six percent of respondents regularly rely on the food bank (i.e., weekly).

Thirty percent of regular food bank users are employed full-time (18%) or part-time (12%) suggesting that while employment among Syrian refugees is increasing, incomes may be insufficient to meet basic needs.

**Two years after arrival, over 69% of Syrians continue to live in the same housing units they moved into from temporary housing.**



Eighty percent reported their current health to be good (32%), very good (39%), or excellent (9%). Further, 50% reported their health as having improved, and 31% as staying the same over the last year.

Eleven percent feel their family is depressed. Of these, **62% reported their emotional health had worsened over the last year.** Most respondents who identified their physical health as poor and emotional health as being depressed indicated both measures had deteriorated over the last year. Approximately one-third of those reported having no English language proficiency.

**97% of respondents with school-age children feel their children are doing well in school.**



Two-thirds of respondents have made non-Syrian friends, and 65% know their immediate neighbours.

Ninety-six percent are glad they came to Canada, and all but three people intend to become a Canadian citizen in the future.

## Introduction

In October 2015, Prime Minister Trudeau announced that 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. In 2016, Canadians witnessed the largest refugee resettlement movement in the country's history, with over 46,700 refugees resettled through Canada's humanitarian immigration stream. The response from Canadians to OSR was extremely positive, unleashing a wave of compassion and humanity unseen in recent years.

As of February 28, 2018, close to 52,000 Syrian refugees have arrived in Canada, and between November 4, 2015 and February 28, 2018, 4,400 of those refugees settled in over 65 communities throughout BC, the majority of whom were Government Assisted Refugees (GARs). (Of the total, 2,890 were GARs, 590 blended visa office referred [BVOR] cases, and 920 privately sponsored refugees.)

To determine how these refugees were faring, ISSofBC conducted a year-1 telephone survey in 2016, and a follow-up year-2 survey this year, in 2018.<sup>1</sup>

This report explores the findings of our 2018 telephone survey, identifies key themes, and provides recommendations intended to improve the settlement and integration of refugees in BC, and in Canada more broadly.

## Methodology

Phone surveys were conducted by Arabic-speaking research assistants to ensure language was not a barrier to participation. Interviewers faced several challenges in attempting to survey potential participants, including finding phone numbers no longer being in service, calls not being answered, and clients being unable or unwilling to participate (e.g., due to illness or hospitalization). While the number of individuals who clearly indicated they were not interested in participating was low (fewer than 20), we

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<sup>1</sup> This report builds upon a series of reports released in late 2016 and early 2017 exploring settlement outcomes after one year. These reports are available at <https://issbc.org/our-resource/special-reports-publications-refugees>.

cannot determine if people who did not answer the calls were actively choosing not to participate.

The majority of respondents were heads of households within family units, but in some cases the individual's spouse was asked to answer the questions instead. Respondents were asked to provide verbal consent prior to beginning the survey; those who declined were thanked for their time and the calls were ended.

## Participant Profile and Findings

In total, 241 adults participated in this survey.

Almost 80% of the respondents had arrived in BC in January and February 2016: 37% in January and 40% in February (see Figure 1).

The top three areas of initial settlement for respondents were Surrey (54%), Vancouver/Richmond (12%), and Coquitlam/Port Coquitlam/Maple Ridge (12%). Two respondents settled in the Okanagan Valley.<sup>2</sup>

A significant number of Syrian GAR respondents were part of larger units.<sup>3</sup> Two-thirds (67%) lived in units of one to five people, including 19% who arrived as an individual unit. Almost 20% arrived as part of a unit of seven or more people. The average unit size of respondents was 4.5, although single adult children may have skewed this finding owing to their living within larger households.

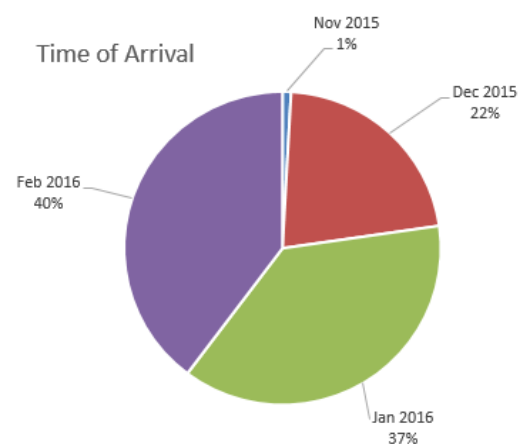


Figure 1: When respondents arrived in Canada

<sup>2</sup> To avoid identifying individual respondents, cities have been combined where fewer than five respondents settled in one or more cities combined.

<sup>3</sup> 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 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. Further, with respect to this study, the tendency for adult children to live within a larger family unit means multiple respondents may have participated from one household.

## English Language and Education and Training

Most Syrian GARs arrived in Canada with little or no English language proficiency.

Two years after arrival, English language proficiency has increased for most. When asked if their level of English has improved since coming to Canada, 87% reported their English is somewhat better or much better (55% and 32% respectively; see Figure 2). Five percent continue to self-identify as having no English. Slightly more respondents in Metro Vancouver (33%) reported significant language improvement compared to those in the Fraser Valley and Okanagan together (20%), while those in Fraser Valley and Okanagan (65%) reported their language as “somewhat better” compared to Metro Vancouver (54%).

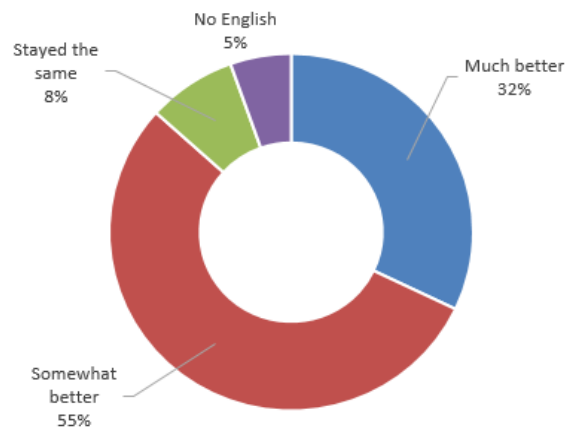


Figure 2: Self-reported language proficiency

Sixty-nine percent of respondents reported attending free LINC (which is a decline from the 76% reporting in the year-1 survey). Three-quarters of those *not* currently attending LINC classes reported that they are not on a waitlist. Three-quarters of those *not* attending LINC classes reported they are not on a waitlist. For those who are on a waitlist, respondents wait between 3 to 18 months, with the majority waiting less than 1 year (80%).



Figure 3: Barriers to participating in LINC

Reported barriers to participating in LINC classes included work and education (43%), health (23%), and lack of space in class (11%). Other barriers reported in smaller numbers were transportation, age, and lack of childcare (see Figure 3).<sup>4</sup>

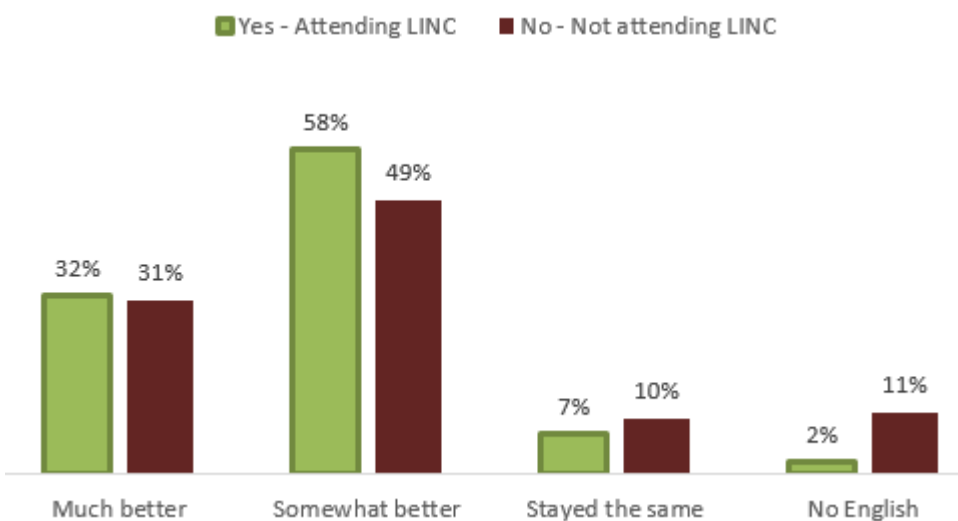


Figure 4: Language Improvement: LINC classes versus no LINC classes

Reported language improvement was similar between those who attended LINC classes and those who did not (see Figure 4). Of those respondents who attend LINC classes, 90% feel

their language is much better (32%) or somewhat better (58%) than last year. Of those respondents *not* attending LINC, 80% reported similar improvement (31% much better and 49% somewhat better).

While it is not possible to link these findings to level of English language upon arrival (self-reported or test-based), they do raise questions about the need for other forms of English language learning and practice, particularly in response to the ongoing challenges related to a lack of childcare spaces and/or the need to care for isolated family members dealing with health-related issues. One respondent noted “*My English level [is] higher than the level they put me in and they refuse to put me in a higher level that’s why I did not learn anything,*” while two others noted LINC classes were “*not helping.*”

Another respondent noted that “*from the first month of 2016 until today my wife needs to go to school but the reason [is] there is no daycare for children.*”

<sup>4</sup> In Figure 3 and other “word cloud” figures, the size of each word or phrase is correlated to the frequency of responses.

Approximately 18% of respondents have participated in additional training and/or educational programs other than English (Figure 5). These include academic courses (e.g., high school, adult education, community college, university), employment-related courses (e.g., work ethics, work search), job-specific training (e.g., forklift, roofing, customer service), first aid, and computer courses. One respondent spoke of having participated in English-in-the-workplace classes.



Figure 5: Training and further education

## Employment and Income Security

To understand participation in the labour market, respondents were asked about both employment since their arrival in Canada and current employment. Forty-six percent of all respondents reported having had paid employment since arriving in Canada.

**Twenty-seven percent are currently working on a full-time basis and 13% on a part-time basis, more than double the year-1 findings (17%)** (see Figure 6). The difference between overall participation in the labour market

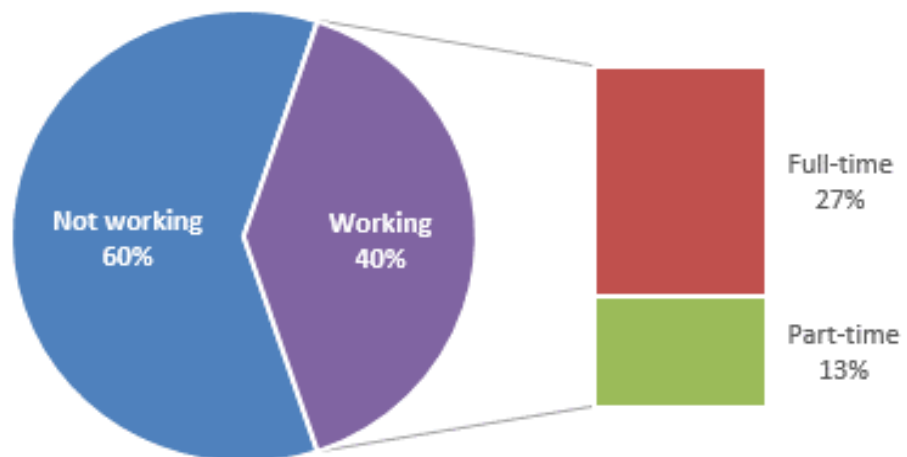


Figure 6: Work in Canada— current

(46%) and current participation (40%) reflects individuals' movement in and out of workforce (e.g., owing to seasonal demand or other changes in employment status).

Almost half (47%) of all respondents indicate they are actively looking for work, including some individuals who are currently employed.

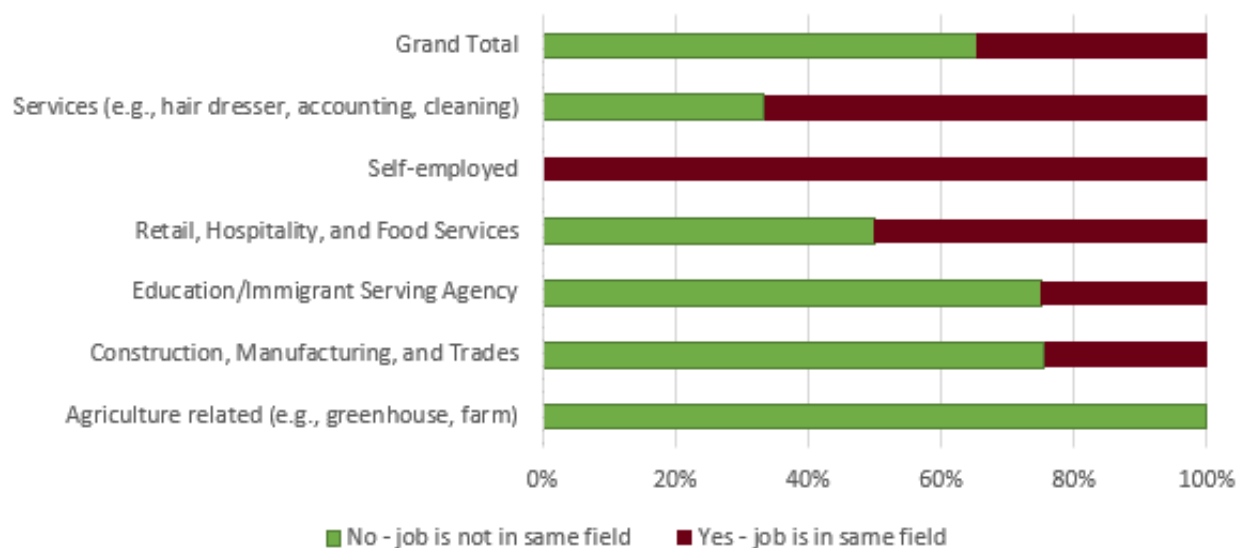


Figure 7: Respondents who are working in same or different fields as before arrival

Thirty-four percent of respondents who are currently working are in a job similar to the one they had before coming to Canada (see Figure 7). There was no significant variation between those working full- and part-time.

Syrian refugees are employed primarily in construction, manufacturing, and trades (63%, which is an increase from 59% in year 1). Retail, hospitality, and food services accounts for another 19%, and a small percentage are employed in services such as hair dressing, accounting, and cleaning (11%).

While this survey did not explicitly explore self-employment, two people reported having opened their own businesses over the last year. Anecdotal evidence, as well as early results from ongoing research with Syrian refugees across Canada, show the emergence of diverse Syrian-owned businesses, including those in the catering, flooring and restaurant sectors. Self-employment presents an important opportunity for Syrian refugee newcomers to build on previous experience and specialized skills to provide for their families, without facing barriers associated with needing “Canadian experience.”

With the percentage of respondents who have obtained employment has increased, there has been a notable reduction in the percentage of households reporting regular

reliance on the food bank (i.e., weekly), down from 66% in year 1 to 56% in year 2. Further analysis, however, shows that 30% of food bank users are employed either full-time or part-time (18% and 12% respectively), suggesting that while employment among Syrians is increasing, incomes may be insufficient to meet basic needs.

## Housing

**Two years after arrival, over 69% of Syrians continue to live in the same housing units they moved into from their temporary housing.** Almost one-quarter (24%) of those who have moved since arriving in Canada have been able to obtain subsidized housing through BC Housing. Reasons for moving were varied, as Figure 8 show. Other than obtaining BC Housing, the most common reasons included finding less expensive housing and bigger housing (16% each), better location (10%), and landlord issues and housing condition (9% each). A few individuals reported having moved to another province, and one noted that their family had moved away from the Syrian community so they could improve their English.

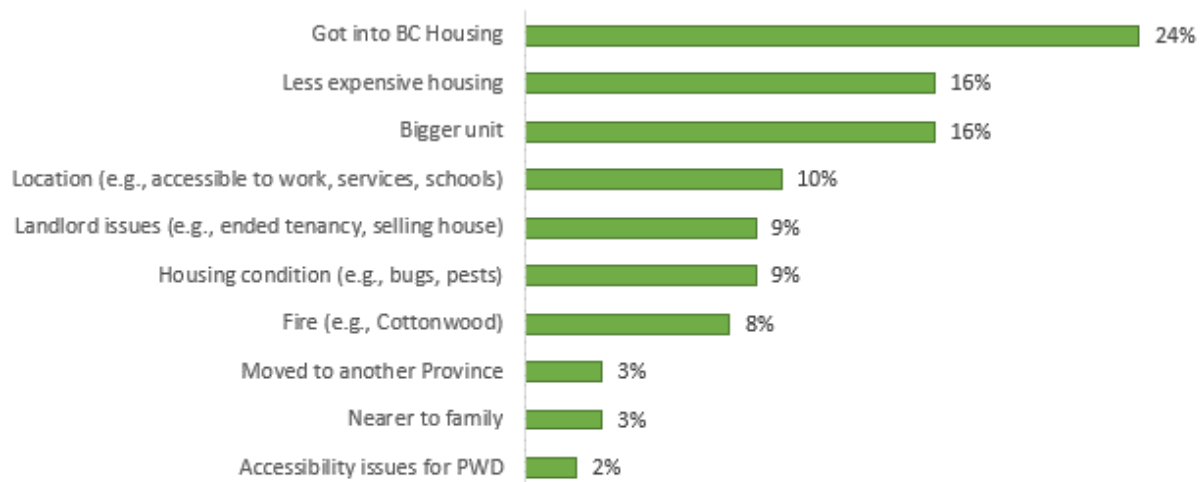


Figure 8: Reasons for moving

Half of the respondents who are no longer living in their initial housing have moved once, but a small percentage have moved three or more times since arrival (9%). Over three-quarters (78%) of respondents who have moved report the condition of their housing as much better or somewhat better (39% each) (see Figure 9). When considering housing condition in relation to the number of moves since arrival, most

individuals who have moved one or two times report continued improvement, with 80% and 87% respectively indicating their housing as much better or somewhat better. Those who have moved three or more times tended to be more equally distributed, though still positive (27% each reporting conditions as much better or somewhat better, and/or staying the same). Only one individual who has moved three or more times since arrival reported their housing situation to be much worse than it was a year ago.

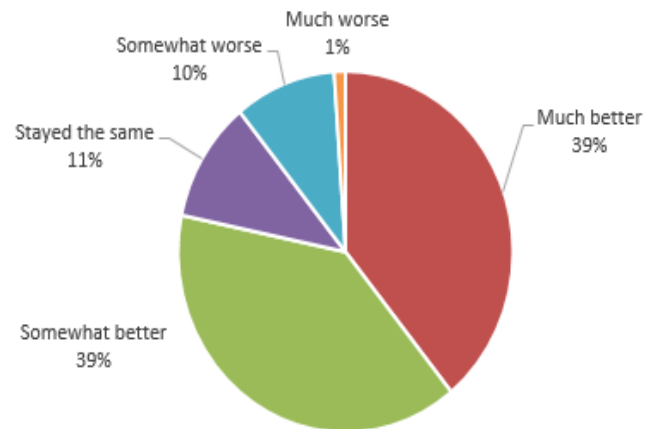


Figure 9: Comparative housing conditions for those who have moved

## Health and Well-being

Overall, participants reported that they and their families are in good physical and emotional health, with many indicating health and well-being having improved over the last year.

More specifically, the vast majority of respondents reported their current health to be good (32%), very good (39%), or excellent (9%). Further, 50% reported that their health has improved, and 31% said it had stayed the same over the last year.

When considering current health status by improvement over the last year broken down by reported health status, the numbers change. Of those who identified as having good, very good, or excellent health, 60% reported improved health and 29% reported the same health. For those in fair or poor health, the news is not as positive. Alarming, almost half (46%) of respondents who reported they and their family are in fair or poor health indicated their health has worsened over the last year.

Almost three-quarters of respondents (72%) reported their family to be very happy or happy. Eleven percent said their family is depressed, which is consistent with larger literatures that indicate 10% to 15% of refugees may require clinical counselling. When asked to compare their current emotional state to that of the previous year, 63% of all

respondents indicated the situation had improved. **Of concern, 62% of individuals who indicated their family is depressed indicated their emotional health had worsened over the last year.**

While physical and mental health are largely positive, the situation facing the small number of individuals who reported being in poor physical and/or mental health is concerning. Half of those indicating their family is in poor health rated their emotional health as depressed, while another 30% rated emotional health as sad. **The vast majority of respondents who identified their physical health as being poor and emotional health as being depressed indicated both measures have deteriorated over the last year. Approximately one-third of those reported having no English language proficiency.**

More encouraging are reports from parents on their children's well-being and integration. Most parents with school-aged children believe their children are doing well (97%) (see Figure 10). Further, the majority of respondents who reported their family being depressed indicated their children are doing well in school.

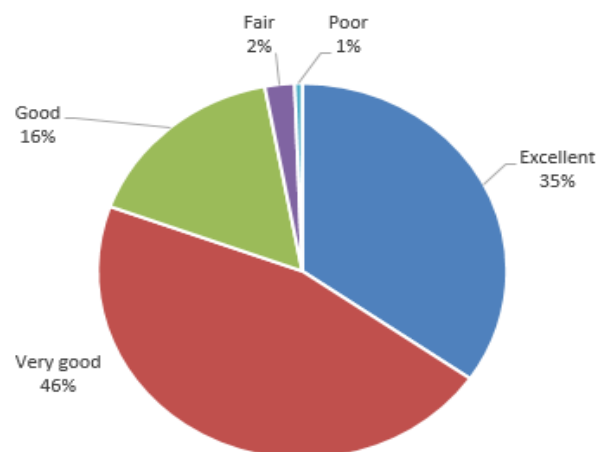


Figure 10: How are children faring in school?

### Community Involvement and Early Indicators of Integration

Respondents were asked a series of questions relating to broader involvement with the community, as well as citizenship, in order to obtain a sense of early integration (see Figure 11). Two-thirds of respondents reported having made non-Syrian friends since their arrival in Canada, and 65% know their immediate neighbours. Approximately half reported accessing their local library and 53% accessing their local community centre. Almost three-quarters (74%) attend mosque regularly. **Ninety-six percent (96%) are glad they came to Canada.** All but three participants intend to become a Canadian citizen in the future.

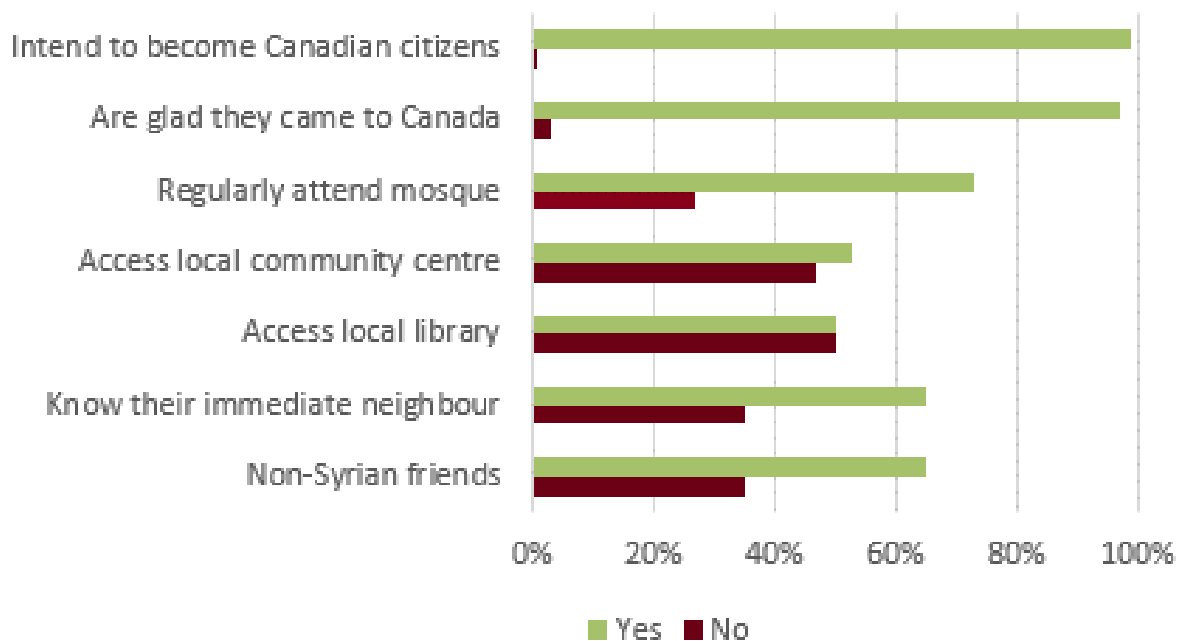


Figure 11: Early integration indicators

While integration is difficult to measure, the survey responses indicate Syrians are making connections with others in the community, including with their neighbours and non-Syrian friends, as well as accessing supports and services in the local community.

Even as they do so, however, ties to family and friends in Syria and abroad remain strong. Sending money back to family is one way refugees can provide necessary supports to family and friends abroad. At the time of the survey, 34% were financially supporting family/friends in Syria or in neighbouring countries (see Figure 12).

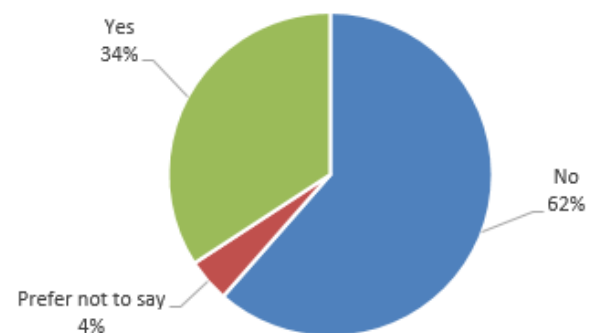


Figure 12: Respondents providing financial support to friends/family abroad

## Open-ended Questions

To better gauge how Syrians are faring two years after arriving in Canada, respondents were asked three open-ended questions:

- What information would be good to have received before coming to Canada?
- What is their most pressing concern?
- What message they would like to provide to ISSofBC or the Government of Canada?

Analysis of the responses to open-ended questions identified seven major themes:

- Gratitude and thanks
- Learning English
- Employment and income security
- Housing
- Health and mental health
- Family reunification
- Education

Highlights of responses to the three open-ended questions are presented below, followed by discussion of the main themes overall.

Where possible we have included participants' words in order to honour their experiences.

### *Important information: pre-arrival*

Participants were asked to reflect on what information would have been helpful to receive prior to arriving in Canada in order to ease their subsequent integration. Perhaps not surprisingly, the need to learn English, obtain information on housing, general information about Canada (e.g., lifestyle and culture), and employment were the most frequently mentioned topics (see Figure 13). A number of individuals also identified a need for information about the nature of life and culture in Canada yet did not provide specific suggestions on what should be provided.<sup>5</sup>



Figure 13: What information would have been helpful to receive before arrival?



Figure 14: What is the most pressing worry?

### *Most pressing worry*

When asked about their most pressing worry, Syrians provided insight into the daily challenges they faced in their new homes. The most frequent issues named were health/mental health, housing, learning English, reuniting with family members abroad, finances, and employment (see Figure 14). Further, people spoke of multiple challenges within the family unit.

<sup>5</sup> The decision to rapidly resettle Syrian refugees to Canada meant the majority did not receive any pre-arrival orientation services provided by the International Organization of Migration (IOM) Cultural Orientation Abroad Program.

### *Message for ISSofBC and/or Government of Canada*

Resettled refugees may not often get an opportunity to be heard by those in government or to provide feedback to the organizations they access. To give survey participants an opportunity to “speak” to these groups, they were asked if they had any message they would like to give to the government and/or ISSofBC. While some focused on the need for improvement and change, the overwhelming message from Syrians two years after arrival was one of thanks (see

Figure 15). Almost 70% of responses to this question were explicit thanks to the Government of Canada and Canadians for welcoming them to the country, expressing gratitude for the ability to begin a new life in safety.




*Figure 15: What message do you have for ISSofBC or the Government of Canada?*

## Major Themes

The responses to the open-ended questions highlighted a number of common themes that ran through all of the questions, including gratitude and thanks, English, employment and income security, housing, health and mental health, and education. These themes are presented separately here, but it is important to remember they are often interrelated.

### *Gratitude and Thanks*

The predominant sentiment Syrians expressed throughout the open-ended responses was one of gratitude and thanks. Appreciation for being welcomed by Canada and Canadians to begin a new life was accompanied by a deep commitment to contribute to the country, as well as to help others in need.




“Canada is making the world a better place by helping the people in need and bringing over refugees”




**“Through the Canadian government assistance, we have been able to integrate into Canada very well. Our mental health has improved.”**

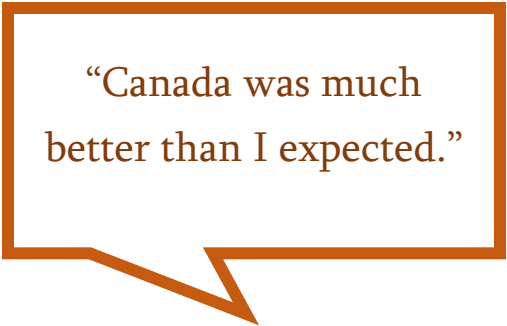
Reflecting on their time in Canada, as well as what would have been good to know before their arrival, respondents suggested it would have been helpful to provide information to refugees demonstrating that Canada is a welcoming and tolerant country.




**"There is nothing to worry about in terms of practising religion and getting assistance from people when in need. There are mosques/churches, etc., and resources to use when needed."**



"Thankful to be in a country where all races are accepted and there is no discrimination against minority groups."



"Canada was much better than I expected."



"All is good. We saw support more than our own country. At least we are respected in Canada."

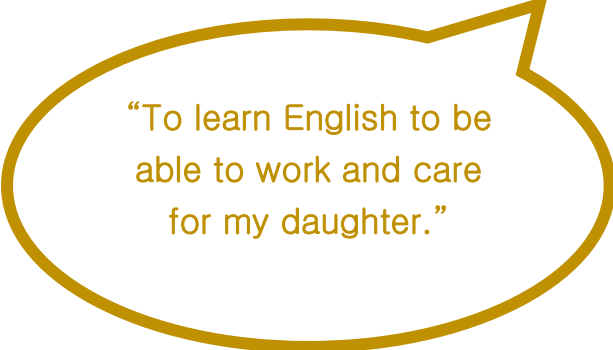
The portrayal of Canada by Syrian newcomers as a respectful and tolerant country is important given current global tensions, and it reflects positively on the refugees' experiences during their first two years in Canada. One individual expressed a desire to see an emphasis on family reunification when selecting future arrivals.

**“Thank you for helping us and bringing us to Canada. We are very happy. I would like to suggest that instead of bringing in new families to Canada to help the existing ones bring their stranded family members here first.”**

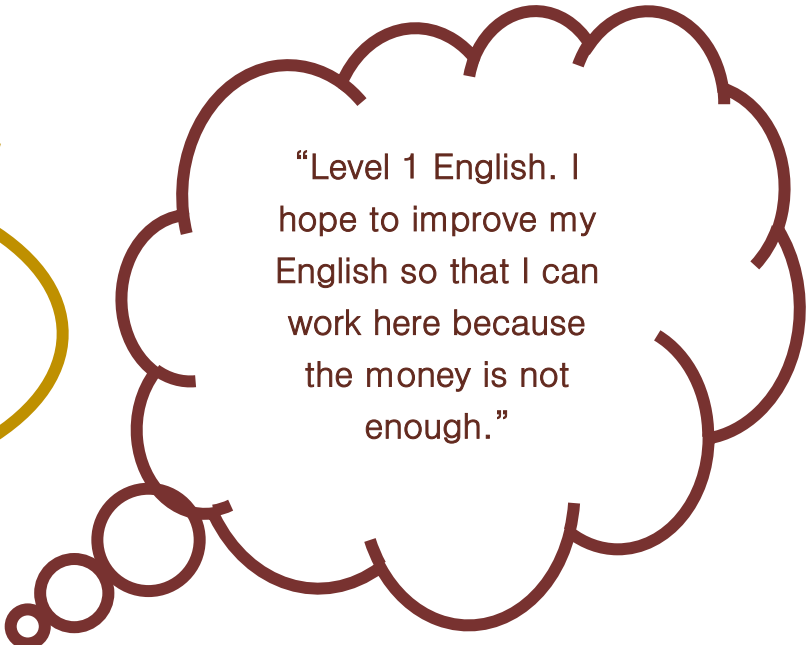
### *Learning English*

Respondents recognize that learning English is a key aspect of both social and economic integration—increasing their access to employment, enabling them to function more comfortably in Canadian society, and ultimately contributing to their success in obtaining Canadian citizenship. For many, increasing language skills was the most pressing concern, with respondents indicating their focus continues to be *“learning English and being comfortable communicating with others”* and *“improving my English so that I can apply for citizenship.”*

Linkages to the impact of English language skills on the ability to access better paying job opportunities and increase income security was evident in a number of responses.




“To learn English to be able to work and care for my daughter.”




“Level 1 English. I hope to improve my English so that I can work here because the money is not enough.”

Although 87% of respondents reported their English skills to be much or somewhat better, English is one of the most difficult languages in the world to learn and progress may be slow.

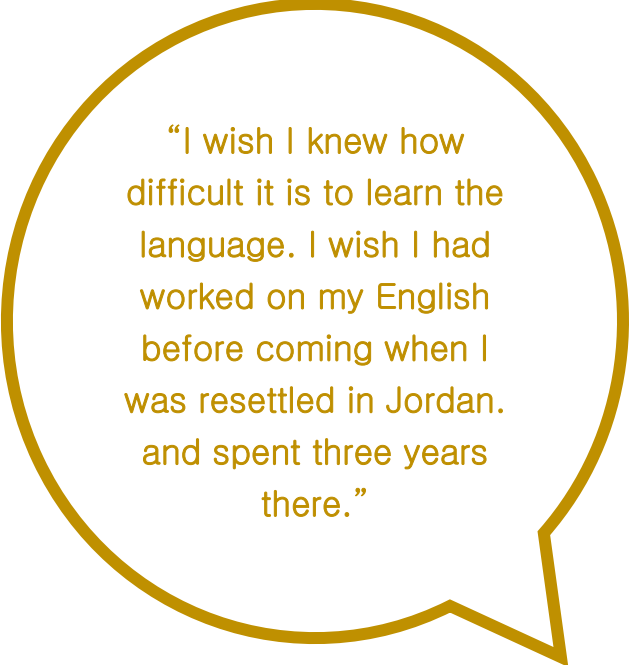


“Struggling with integrating in Canada because lack of language.”




**“Learning English is taking time. We go five days a week and it’s hard to see some improvement. I wish there was a way to make things easier.”**

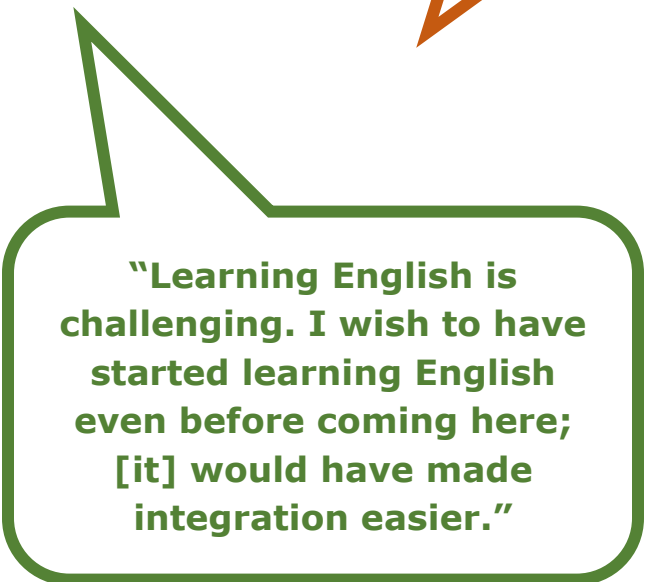
Given the challenges and time required to learn English, some respondents suggested it would be beneficial for refugees to begin learning English *before* arriving in Canada.



"I wish I knew how difficult it is to learn the language. I wish I had worked on my English before coming when I was resettled in Jordan. and spent three years there."



"I have been going to English school for three months and I have not improved at all so struggling to learn the language."



**"Learning English is challenging. I wish to have started learning English even before coming here; [it] would have made integration easier."**

Currently, years may pass between a person being told they have been selected for resettlement to Canada and actual travel to Canada. Therefore, it would be good to consider implementing English language training abroad for refugees destined to Canada.

The challenges of trying to balance learning English with other aspects of daily life, including work, education, and family responsibilities, make it difficult for some people to continue taking LINC classes as they are currently structured and made available. For large families with many young children, for example, it can be difficult to obtain sufficient childcare spaces and/or transport children to and from school, a burden that generally falls on female refugees.

“There should be more opportunities for women with children to learn English. For example, if I was guaranteed daycare for my children, I would have been able to go to school earlier and would have a better level of English at this point. I should have the right to also get my education like other women and my young kids should not be a burden.”

**“I can’t attend English classes now because I am working full-time and it’s hard to spare time to go daily to class at night after work. I am looking for a more convenient time to learn English on weekends and I cannot find a place.”**

“I want to improve my English but I can’t go to school because I am working full-time. Also my wife can’t go because we have young kids.”

**“Learning English has been a continuing struggle. As a result I am not able to work. I got a job previously, but it did not work out because I had poor English skills. Currently I have had difficulty to find the time to learn English because I am responsible for taking my kids to school and daycare.”**

“Providing better ways to improve language other than evening classes for people who work full time.”

Reflecting on the struggle of trying to balance work and learning English with parental responsibilities, one parent lamented:

**“My worry is I can’t see my own children because during the day I go to work and in the evening I go to learn English.”**

A number of individuals who indicated they are unable to attend LINC classes and/or learn English owing to their primary health issues requested home-based English language learning.

**“Because of my health and back injury, I stopped working and cannot go physically to school. This is a burden on my learning the English language. It would be helpful if someone came over to teach me English because my level is very poor.”**

**“My knee, I am currently injured and can’t leave the house. Need an English teacher to come teach me.”**

**“My shoulder injury has prevented me from working so I am now at home until I recover. I also haven’t been able to continue with my English classes. Would really appreciate it if there was a teacher that would come and teach us English at home as my wife has recently given birth and I cannot go to classes.”**

The structure and timing of LINC classes does not work for all newcomers. The profile of Syrians arriving in BC indicates that a large percentage have multiple children under the age of six, along with a plethora of health issues (e.g., cancer, physical and mental impairments, heart and kidney disease). If we are to increase accessibility of language classes and improve learning, we need to rethink the traditional classroom-based approaches. The pilot program HIPPY: Enhanced English Language Learning may provide important insights into alternative methods of English language learning service delivery for isolated women with small children. The integration of a language instruction component alongside the HIPPY curriculum and programming provides opportunities for increased language learning through both instruction and practice.<sup>6</sup> While other informal language learning (e.g., conversation circles) may increase opportunities to improve English language proficiency, they are not officially recognized (i.e., CLB tested).

Rethinking our approach, such as providing language classes on weekends, in non-traditional spaces and through different means may facilitate better access to services and improved settlement outcomes (e.g., holding classes in community rooms in apartment complexes, offering computer and classroom-based learning geared toward low level learners).

The insights provided by Syrians on the need to learn English prior to coming to Canada, as well as the need for general information on life in Canada, offer possibilities for a new approach. Given that individuals destined for Canada may remain in camps for years prior to arrival, the Government of Canada should consider providing these people with an adapted version of LINC in the camps. Building on the current use of settlement themes to learn English in Canada, teachers abroad could use high-level information on life in Canada (e.g., lifestyle, culture) to begin teaching English and increasing their knowledge of their life ahead.

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<sup>6</sup> For more information on HIPPY (the Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters), see <https://222.mothersmattercentre.ca/program/>.

### *Employment and Income Security*


Employment continues to be a key concern for many respondents. For those who have obtained employment, wages may be insufficient to meet household needs.

**“Income for husband and me is very little. Being financially unstable is stressing.”**


“Employment payment does not match living standards. Everything is expensive. My son is paralyzed and only one son supports me financially and the rest of the family.”

“I am a single mom and I’m working full time. Half [of my] salary goes to daycare for my kids. I wish to bring my sister from Turkey so she can help me here to take care of the children.”

Financial insecurity goes beyond worries of access to food and housing; it places additional stress on physical and mental health. As with other newcomer groups, Syrians seeking employment have encountered employers who require job applicants to have prior Canadian experience in order to obtain employment. Frustration with this requirement prompted some Syrians to call on government to look at ways of mitigating this barrier.



**“Government should be able to accommodate the expertise that the Syrian people have in the Canadian market. Having Canadian experience is very tough. Hard to sustain a family when these requirements are needed.”**



“The government should look into how Syrian people can find employment in their field since they have the expertise but lack Canadian experience.”

Concerns about the lack of sufficient employment services and supports, as well as having little knowledge of employment standards, emerged in some responses. While obtaining employment is one aspect of integration and financial security, understanding workplace rights and responsibilities is another. *“There needs to be more support/resources for Syrians looking for work and currently employed. I and other Syrians have been taken advantage of in the workplace and as a result I’ve lost thousands.”*

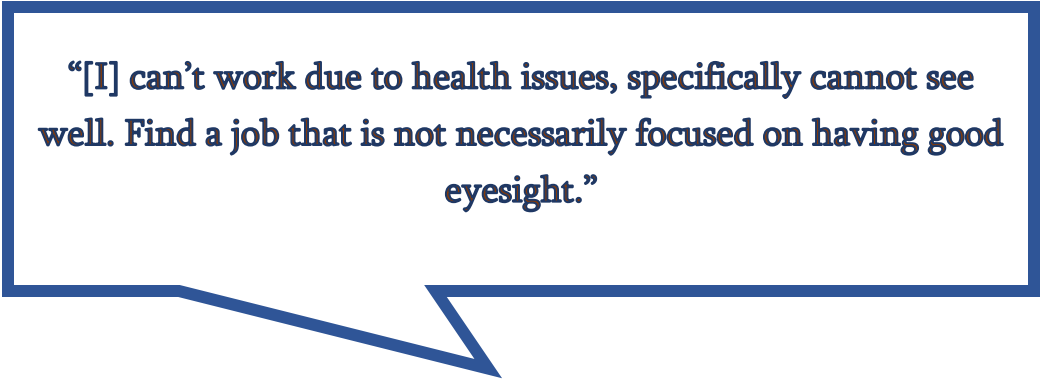
As people have become more settled in Canada, concerns about obtaining employment and the challenges associated with the need for Canadian experience have been accompanied by frustration by trying to find employment in a position similar to what they had before coming to Canada. While many of the GARs arriving in BC had low levels of formal education, individuals who have arrived with university education or other certifications face significant barriers in having their previous experience or credentials recognized, which can be very demoralizing.

**“Not working in my field. Every job needs you to be licensed or have Canadian experience.”**

“Currently volunteering in an engineering firm to gain experience. I am trying to get licensing to become an electrical technician. It’s very hard to update education and experience in Canada.”

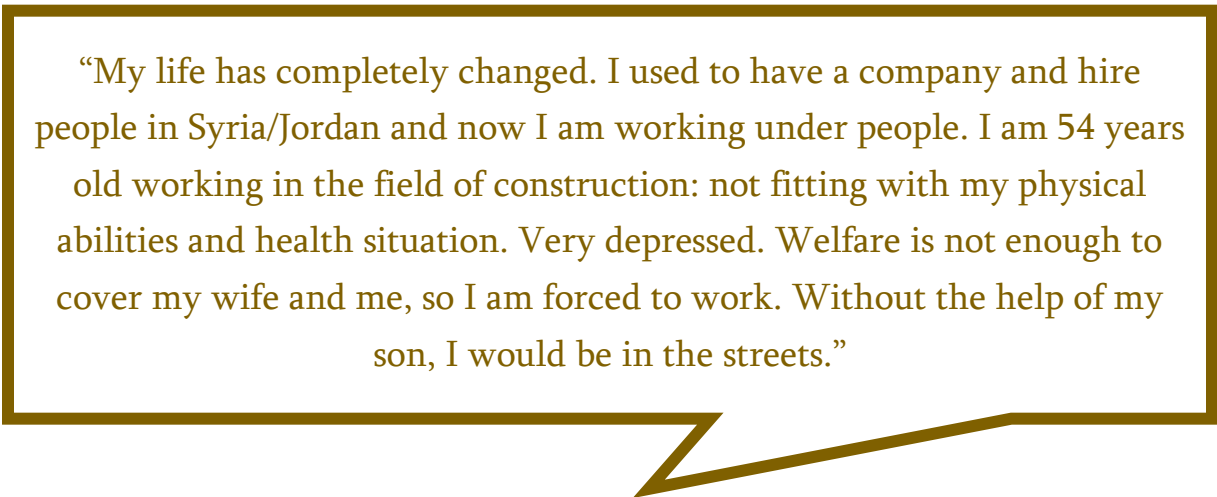
“Trying to finish your education in pharmacy and engineering but have to start from scratch. Can't work in my field as I don't have the Canadian experience.”

Individuals with accessibility challenges (e.g., poor eyesight, physical disabilities) face additional challenges in obtaining employment. One respondent identified this as the most pressing issue.



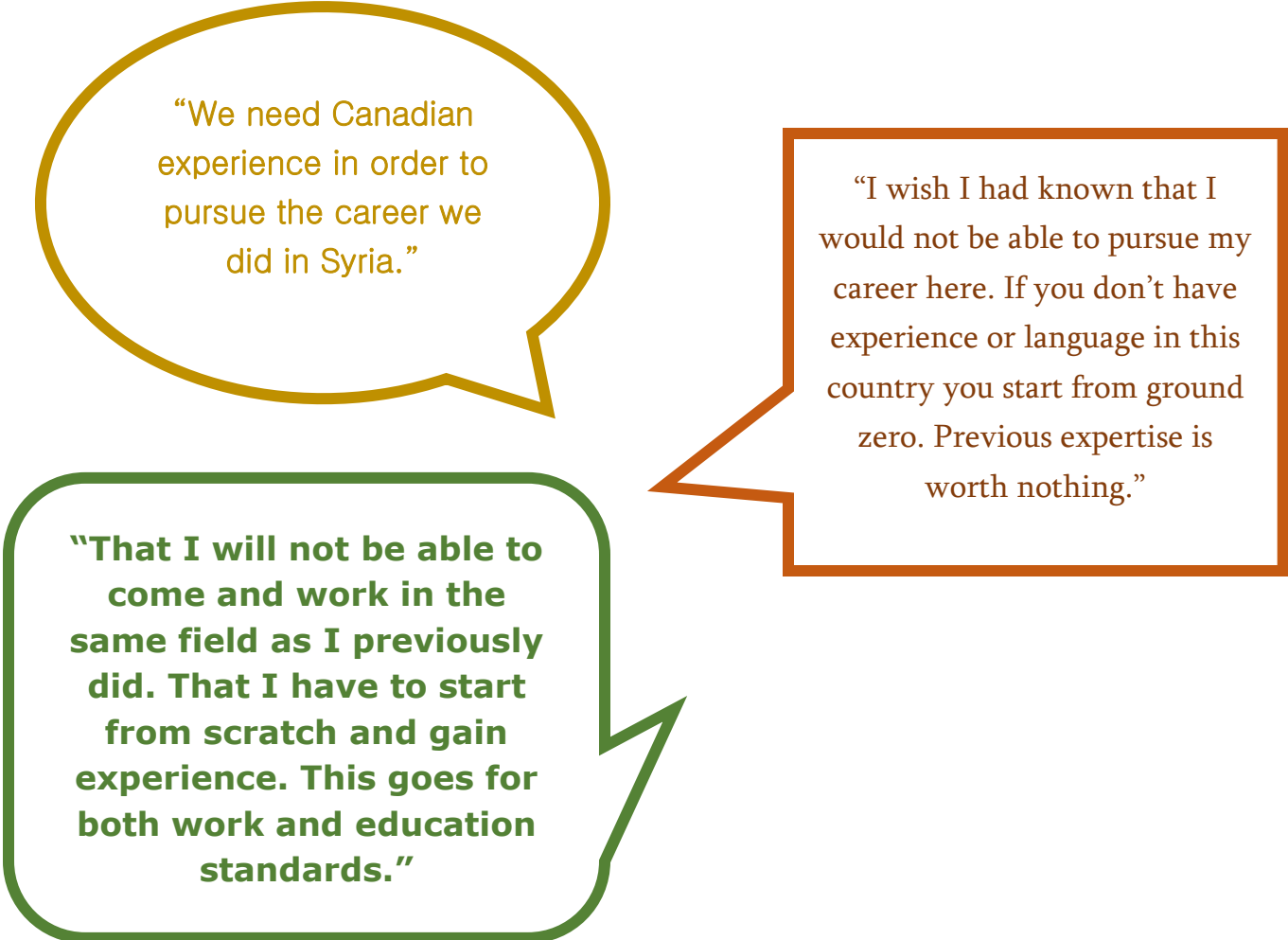
**“[I] can’t work due to health issues, specifically cannot see well. Find a job that is not necessarily focused on having good eyesight.”**

Another spoke poignantly about how life has changed since coming to Canada two years ago.



**“My life has completely changed. I used to have a company and hire people in Syria/Jordan and now I am working under people. I am 54 years old working in the field of construction: not fitting with my physical abilities and health situation. Very depressed. Welfare is not enough to cover my wife and me, so I am forced to work. Without the help of my son, I would be in the streets.”**

Frustration with the pre-arrival information provided—or lack of it—relating to employment, education, and credential recognition was evident in several responses.



"We need Canadian experience in order to pursue the career we did in Syria."

"I wish I had known that I would not be able to pursue my career here. If you don't have experience or language in this country you start from ground zero. Previous expertise is worth nothing."

**"That I will not be able to come and work in the same field as I previously did. That I have to start from scratch and gain experience. This goes for both work and education standards."**

Having a refugee strength-based assessment tool conducted overseas in which key refugee assets (employment, education, other skills) are gathered prior to arrival and shared with service providers in Canada would help those to identify appropriate resources and supports and facilitate early interventions. Further, given the challenges of trying to balance work and language learning that refugees face, it would be beneficial to explore a program like English at Work developed and implemented in Manitoba.

### *Housing*

Perhaps not surprisingly, the high cost of housing and desire to obtain BC Housing accommodation were the most frequently cited housing concern among respondents, both from individuals living in Metro Vancouver and smaller centres in the Interior. Over half of housing-related concerns were about affordability, particularly given the

combination of low incomes and large family sizes. For many, the dream of getting into BC Housing has met with the reality of long waitlists and insufficient stock.

“I’ve been waiting two years to get into BC Housing because my current living situation is very difficult due to the high rent. We are paying nearly \$2,000/month in our current house and we are barely surviving. Before anything—even learning English—I wish to move to BC Housing.”

**“I want to get into BC Housing because my family and I are not comfortable in the current housing we are in, especially the kids who are very restricted in movement.”**

Themes of potential homelessness and dire income security were evident in a number of responses.

“We are struggling financially. Some months we run out of money in the middle of the month.”

“We need a bigger living space and more help financially. Currently [we] are borrowing money from other people.”

Overcrowded housing and a lack of financial security amplify the stresses of integration for low-income newcomers. Issues with landlords were mentioned by a number of respondents as both a reason for moving as well as the basis for rent increases. Some spoke of having been asked to leave or having had their agreements terminated by landlords who wanted to sell the housing, while others alluded to intercultural issues and personal disagreements. One respondent noted, “*Ramadan was inconvenient for the landlord.*” Tenuous affordability has been undermined by rent increases in year 2, some of which appear well beyond levels outlined in the BC Residential Tenancy Act.

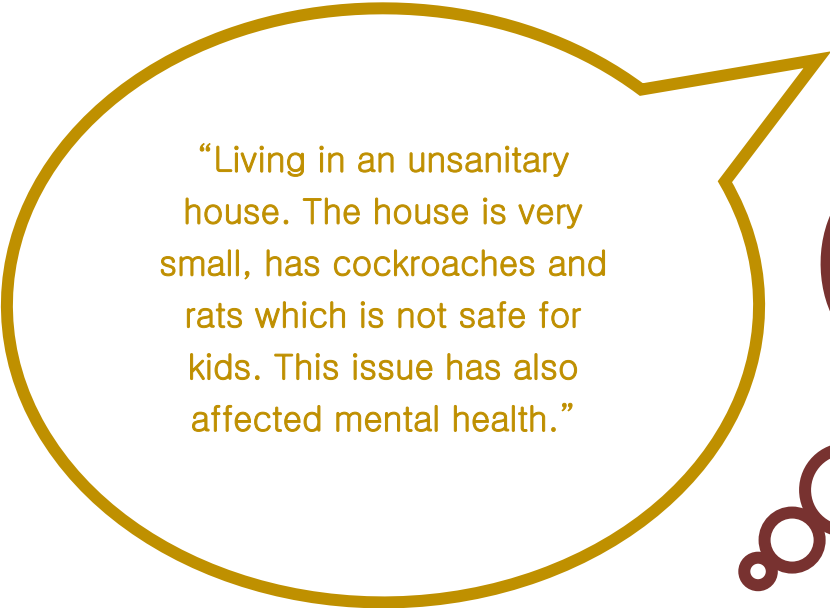
**“Housing [is my most pressing concern]. I have had issues with my landlord and he has raised our rent and I cannot afford anymore.”**

“The housing rent has gone up. We are currently struggling financially as a family because I [the father] don't have work. The rent for our house has increased from \$600 to \$900 and we are barely surviving.”

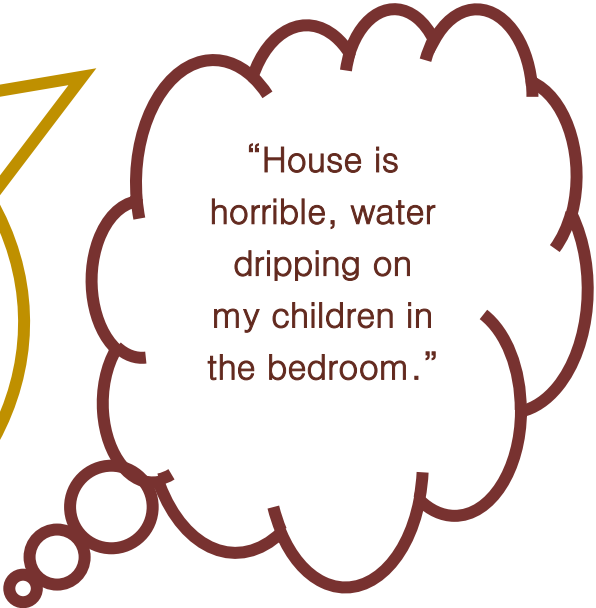
For singles, the challenges can be compounded by the need to have roommates to obtain housing.

“My housing and living space has been worrying me and I am not happy with it. I am currently living with seven other people in the same home (people I don't know) and we all use the same bathroom and kitchen.”

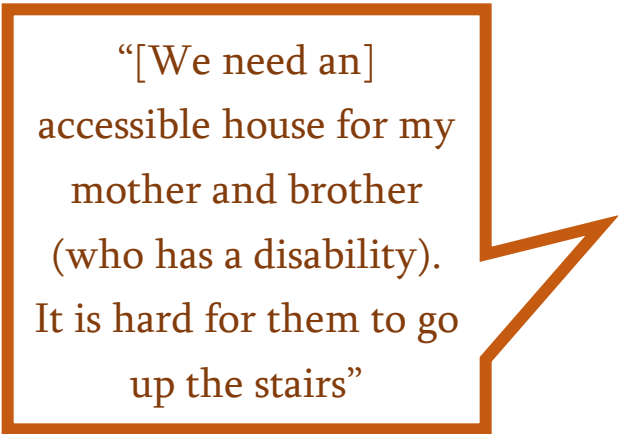
Respondents spoke of poor housing conditions, as well as units that are inadequate to meet their physical needs.



“Living in an unsanitary house. The house is very small, has cockroaches and rats which is not safe for kids. This issue has also affected mental health.”



“House is horrible, water dripping on my children in the bedroom.”



“[We need an] accessible house for my mother and brother (who has a disability). It is hard for them to go up the stairs”



**“In a wheelchair, have to go to community centre to shower because our washroom has not been renovated so that we can easily access.”**

Financial insecurity and tenuous housing, lack of private space owing to crowded living conditions, and the presence of pests and vermin may negatively impact both physical and mental health.

Others expressed challenges related to the location of their housing, as opposed to its size or affordability. The ability to move into non-traditional settlement locations (e.g., the West Side of Vancouver, White Rock, West Vancouver) has provided some

newcomers the opportunity to live in better accommodations, yet these units may be located at a distance from services and/or language classes, thus imposing additional time constraints and financial barriers for low-income newcomers.

“My wife can’t access any local schools or English classes so she hasn’t gone since we arrived in Canada. I travel after work daily to [another city to] ... attend English but the distance is not convenient. We hope to move to a more practical location.”

“A better housing that is close to school so that I can find work and have time to go to school.”

While issues of affordability and overcrowded housing tend to be associated with living in Metro Vancouver, it is important to bear in mind that these issues also emerged in survey responses from those living in smaller centres outside Metro Vancouver and the in the Fraser Valley in both the year-1 and year-2 surveys.

Looking to the future, one respondent indicated their most pressing need as a *“house. [I] wish to have my own house,”* expressing a desire for the Government of Canada to *“change mortgage rules to help Syrians with low incomes be able to own a house one day.”*

### *Health and Mental Health*

Primary and mental health are significant concerns for respondents, including disabilities, chronic diseases, injuries, and mental health challenges such as depression and nightmares, as well as stress associated with separation from family abroad.

Of the Syrians who arrived in British Columbia, many struggle with physical disabilities and chronic health conditions, including cancer, while others are receiving surgery or

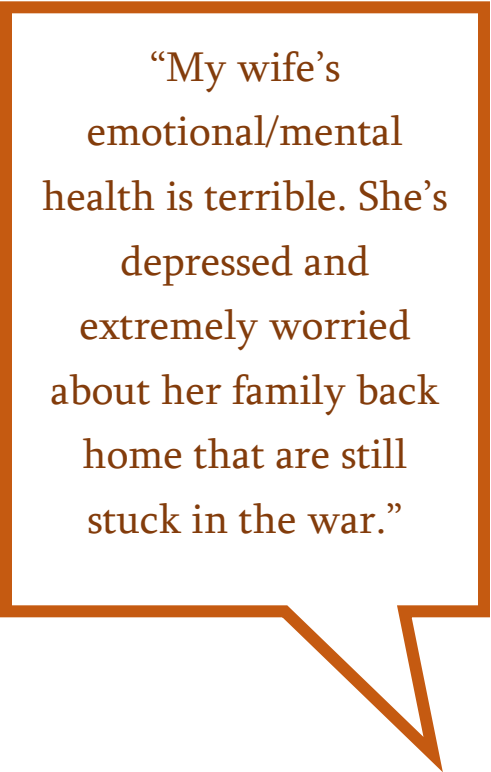
treatment for current and past injuries and conditions, including transplants, and some with long hospital stays.

**"My daughter's health [is my primary concern]: she had brain surgery and was hospitalized for seven months. This event has affected my wife emotionally and mentally. My other children are still in Turkey and Jordan. I am also worried about their well-being."**

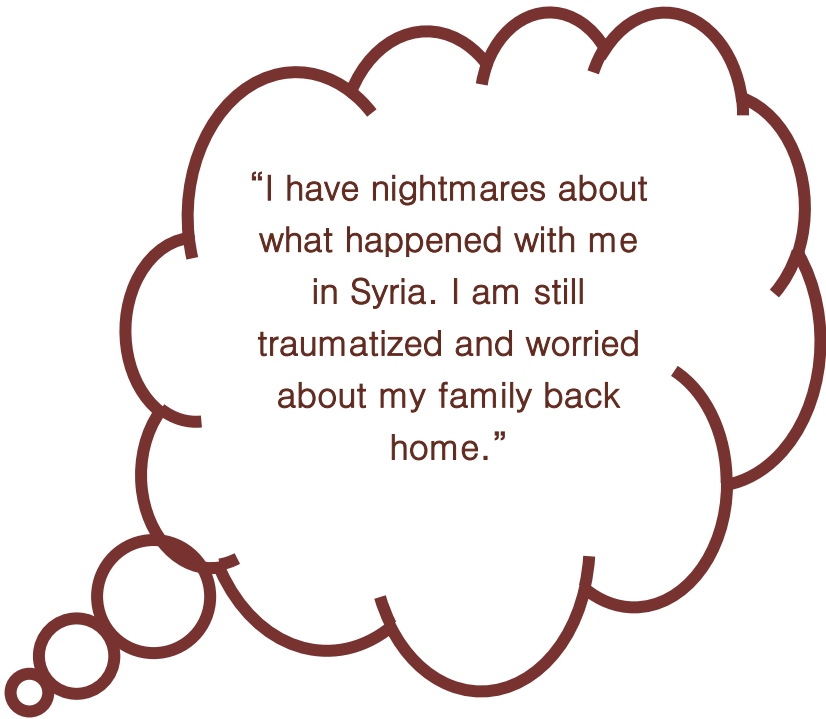
**"I am having open heart surgery soon ... that is why I have stopped working. I am not doing well mental health wise."**

**"My health is not that great (physically and mentally) as I had a recent surgery from a bullet and gone through depression. I want to move to BC Housing as I can't afford living now. I feel like I will be homeless if no one helps me."**

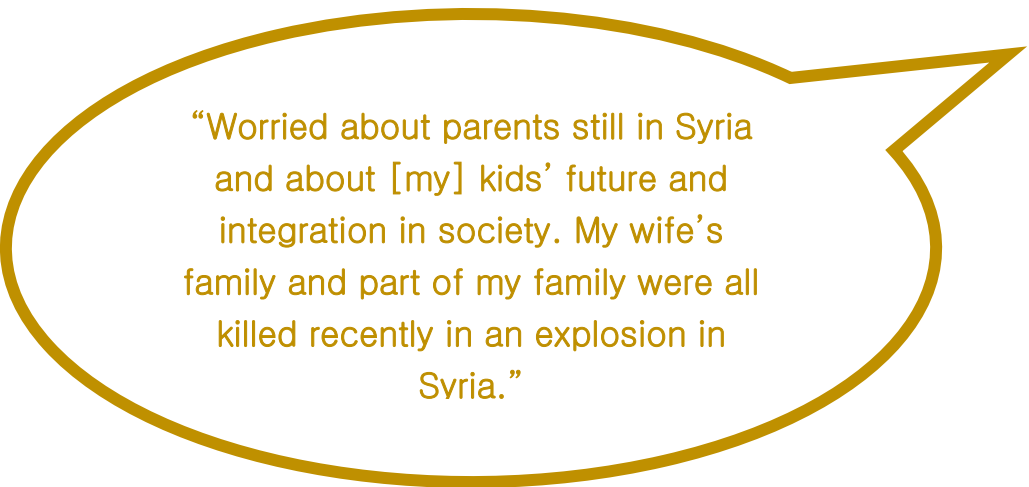
Stresses associated with separation from family and past and current violence compound the challenges of integration. As well, concerns about the safety of parents, siblings, adult children, and friends "back home" are amplified by news of current events, including bombings and other acts of war.



“My wife’s emotional/mental health is terrible. She’s depressed and extremely worried about her family back home that are still stuck in the war.”



“I have nightmares about what happened with me in Syria. I am still traumatized and worried about my family back home.”



“Worried about parents still in Syria and about [my] kids’ future and integration in society. My wife’s family and part of my family were all killed recently in an explosion in Syria.”

In some cases, undiagnosed, non-specific health issues intersect with larger challenges associated with income security, housing, and concerns for family members abroad.

"My health is not well, my family doctor is not helping. I have pain all over body and I am taking care of my children. Both of my girls are on wheelchairs and my son is looking for a job."

"My health is very poor physical and mental. My health issue has not been diagnosed, doctors cannot find the appropriate therapy for me. Life in Canada is very expensive."

Health concerns were cited as reasons individuals cannot attend language classes or work and—in one case—transport their young children to school.

"More support for health services, specifically access to dental health. Currently it is too expensive and I cannot afford to pay for dental services and hope to have access to this health service without the burden of such costs."

"Learning the language has been a challenge. Wife has cancer, medical procedures keep getting postponed. Wife unable to focus and enhance English."

**"Taking care of myself and my girls (both are in wheelchairs). I need assistance taking them and bringing them from school because my health is not the best (also my husband) as we are getting old. I am worried to take them out of school because I cannot take them anymore."**

A number of respondents commented on their lack of satisfaction with a health and dental system that they viewed as being too complicated and too expensive. Physical and dental health concerns often accompanied other stresses—in some cases, more serious mental health concerns such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) arising from migration-related traumas, as well as the challenges of resettlement and ongoing family separation.

### *Family Reunification*


Worries about the health and safety of family overseas, as well as a desire to bring family to Canada to help take care of individuals requiring support in Canada were widespread.

**“To bring my mother from Jordan to come live with us. She is sick and living alone there and I would like to take care of her.”**

**“If the government can help bring my family to Canada to assist me, since I have medical issue with my eyes.”**

**“Bringing families altogether so that we could support each other and not feel lonely.”**

For respondents, family members abroad represent an important source of social and emotional support. They report being frustrated by not being able to arrange for family to join them in Canada under the stress of ongoing uncertainty and continued violence in Syria, and the mental and physical health consequences associated with family separation.



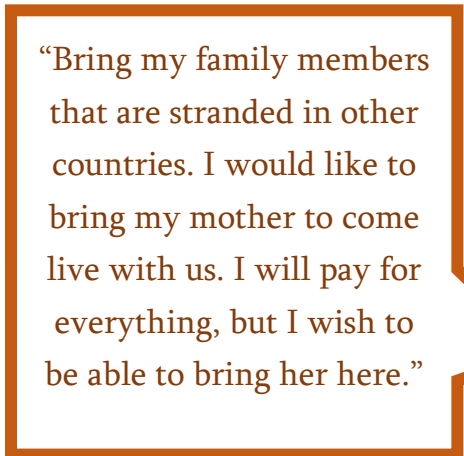
**"To bring my son to come live with us. He is still in Jordan. How can this be possible? We have applied several times but have not heard back from anyone."**



"Worried about my siblings in Turkey and how I'm supposed to get them here."

Given the speed with which Syrians were identified and brought to Canada, the slow pace of family reunification is both frustrating and maddening (in some regions it can take five to seven years).

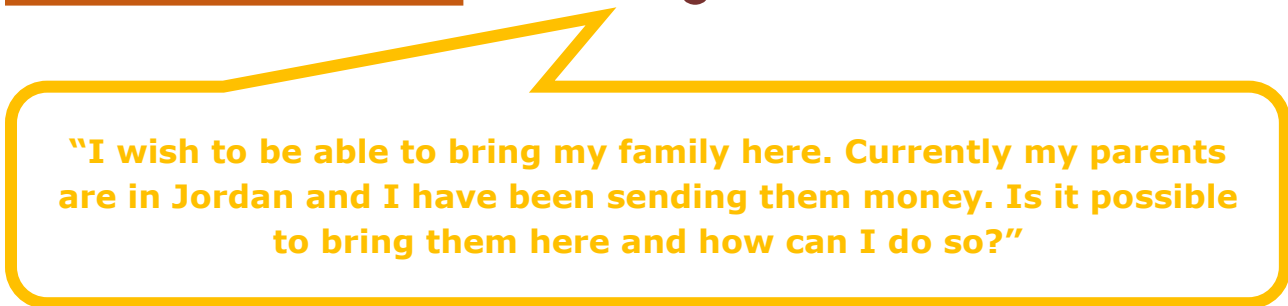
The desire for information on the sponsorship process was widespread among respondents.



"Bring my family members that are stranded in other countries. I would like to bring my mother to come live with us. I will pay for everything, but I wish to be able to bring her here."



"I want to sponsor/bring my family here from Syria, how can I do so?"



**"I wish to be able to bring my family here. Currently my parents are in Jordan and I have been sending them money. Is it possible to bring them here and how can I do so?"**

One respondent expressed a need that extended beyond their own immediate family to other Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

**“I would like to tell the government to bring more Syrian refugees from Lebanon. They are really struggling there and are in desperate need. I have family there and would like to bring them too, but I would be happy if the government can bring anyone from there because the people there need more help.”**

### **Education**

Education emerged as a theme in terms of both parents’ concerns about their children’s successful integration and young adults worries because their post-secondary education had been disrupted by the conflict in Syria.

Although 97% of parents with school-aged children reported their children are doing well in school, they continued to worry about the future. One parent, for example, identified their most pressing worry was ensuring *“the future of my kids and for them to do well in school and be successful,”* while another said, *“my son has been having problems in school because of other Syrian kids and I would like to move to another area so I can put him in a better school.”*

The challenges are exacerbated by school systems that may not be fully equipped to meet existing needs of children who have arrived with physical and mental health issues, including blindness, mobility constraints, and other impairments. As well, individual respondents may not be aware of the process to access necessary supports.

For young adults, the problem of having their education interrupted or their credentials recognized is amplified by the high cost of post-secondary tuition in Canada. These respondents recognize the need to upgrade their credentials to obtain better paying jobs, but that is offset by the immediate need to earn money to contribute to their family’s economic well-being and save for their education.

“Paying for school was difficult so I dropped out to work and make money so that I can continue going to university.”

**“How I will continue to higher education with respect to financially supporting my education. University here is very expensive.”**

**“Wish there was effort in allowing Syrians that have left their education midway to come here and continue without facing huge barriers. There are some that have a lot to offer to this country but are held back due to lack of educational counselling.”**

“Since I already have a university degree from Syria, I hope it is easier than it is to transfer my credits and receive a recognized degree from a Canadian university. The problem that I have faced with this is that I cannot afford to pay for courses that I must take to update my degree.”

Others spoke of the impact of family member’s health concerns on their own ability to pursue education and/or employment.

**"My mom has no one to look after her and I need to go to school and work. [I am] unable to handle going to school and work and taking care of my mother. It is only me and her living here, no support of other family. Wish my siblings could come from Jordan so they can help me as I concentrate on my future."**

**"The balance between maintaining my younger siblings' awareness about their native Arabic language as well as religion, but at the same time to learn English and do well in school."**

**"Take care of my mother who has severe health issues. I worked for a little bit but had to stop in order to take care of my mom. At the same time trying to continue my education. Doctors have not been able to diagnose my mom or help her in any way. Has affected her health even more and everyone else's mental health and worries."**

One aspect of access to education which is frequently overlooked by service providers, particularly in the first year following GARs arrival in Canada, is information and supports newcomers need to understand and accessing appropriate education. Some young adults may require access to adult education to finish high school, and others may be seeking information on access to post-secondary institutions.

**“I’d like to say to the government and settlement to have better resources and support for the youth. Coming here many people don’t know where to start, which schools to go to, and how to excel in Canadian society. This is very important for youth like me who want to improve English skills so that they can achieve higher education (college and university).”**

**“During the first year, I wish I had more support to get into university. I struggled to get in but found someone by luck to help me with my applications. It would be very helpful if the ISSofBC had someone to help getting Syrian youth into universities here because I had no idea.”**

The current Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) focuses on adults, with an emphasis on providing orientation to life in Canada (e.g., banking, housing). While recognition of the different needs of youth and young adults exists within the broader settlement programming, this is not the case for RAP. One program may prove promising: the pilot is funded by IRCC (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada) to develop a national youth RAP curriculum being developed through an ISSofBC-led partnership with Calgary Catholic Immigration Services (CCIS), Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia (ISANS), and N.E.E.D.S. in Winnipeg. Further, mitigating financial barriers to post-secondary education for low-income households—as has been done in several other provinces—would further enable refugee youth and young adults to thrive in their new homes.

### *General*

Responses from a small number of individuals suggest their decision to come to Canada may have been different if they had been provided more complete information. One respondent, for example, said that she wished she had known that she enjoyed a

*“better lifestyle [over there] because life is stressful here. I have kids and school and work and appointments. It’s very busy and I don’t have time for myself.”*

Although the various emerging themes have been presented separately here, the interconnected nature of them cannot be understated. Each one is part of an total challenge of integration.

“Rent is expensive and I’ve been trying to support my whole family through my part-time job. Cannot work full-time because I have to take care of my elderly parents who have bad health issues. Father has a disability and cannot walk.”

“Looking for a job so that I can make money for my family. I am struggling to find work without English language competency. I also need to change homes because the house is a terrible condition especially for my younger daughter who just had heart surgery. The condition in the house is not healthy for her.”

**“Struggling financially, rent has increased. I am unable to work due to health issues and disability. My son has PTSD, still hears the bombs and hides under his bed at night. This has been very worrisome.”**

Frequently the challenges of integration focus on specific issues, such as health, employment, or language proficiency. Sometimes overlooked in the analyses, however, are the broader challenges associated with learning a new culture and way of living. One respondent noted it is *“hard to come from a country with no policies to a country that is very organized and structured in everything.”* Another expressed desire to go back to their country.

A number of respondents said they were frustrated with service providers, particularly with respect to assistance and supports they felt should have been provided. In some cases, services requested are beyond the scope of both the RAP and Settlement Services, while in others clients provided insights on services that would have helped. A stronger service continuum between RAP and settlement case management including more robust service referral systems have subsequently been put in place, but waitlists for case management services exist in several IRCC-funded agencies.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations address both federal and provincial responsibilities and are offered as possible solutions to address the main survey findings.

### Pre-Arrival

**IRCC** is encouraged to invest in more enhanced in-person pre-arrival services for refugees destined to Canada, including:

1. *Implementing an asset-based pre-arrival assessment tool* for all refugees destined for Canada in order to identify previous work experience, skills, and abilities. Providing this information to RAP workers prior to arrival would allow staff to ensure appropriate supports are in place and referrals are made early after arrival.
2. *Introducing pre-arrival English language learning classes* that incorporate issues related to settlement in Canada. In addition to increasing refugees' English language capacity, such classes would provide a deeper understanding of Canadian culture and lifestyles prior to arrival.
3. *Considering a family-based resettlement model.* Once a refugee is selected for resettlement, IRCC should consider resettling the entire extended family, similar to the Bhutanese refugee resettlement operation out of Nepal. This policy change would go a long way in reducing some of the trauma and stress resulting from ongoing family separation.

### Post-Arrival Services and Supports

**IRCC** is encouraged to consider the following recommendations:

4. *Explore new models of formal language learning*, such as introducing video-based learning that would allow students to watch (and rewatch) lessons at times convenient to them. Using Skype or other technology would allow teachers to touch base with students at regular scheduled times as opposed to being limited to daily classroom-based sessions. Adapt online classes to include curriculum for low-language learners. Explore other non-technology-based language learning as home-based language outreach models that could be used as an early

intervention targeting socially isolated refugee families (due to a lack of child care and/or health and trauma). An expansion of workplace language classes as offered currently in some other regions of Canada should also be considered.

5. *Invest in a pan-Canadian settlement-informed refugee trauma program* that targets 4,000 to 5,000 refugees annually who cannot access a formal clinical intervention. Free first language, culturally appropriate clinical interventions are important contributions toward mental health and settlement, yet access to services is largely absent. As part of this multi-pronged approach, ensure that every RAP service-providing organization (SPO) has basic settlement crisis support-worker staffing resources and follows a national standard that includes the development and delivery of a common RAP orientation for every GAR on how to cope with change (mental well-being). This would mean that every RAP SPO would have some specialized in-house early intervention staffing resources to provide additional supports for GARs during their time in a reception centre or the temporary housing phase.

Also recommended is developing a national pre- and post-assessment tool for a settlement-informed trauma program to be conducted only by a clinical professional in order to evaluate the progress and impact of the clinical intervention on GARs. Finally, when IRCC decides to resettle new refugee special populations, provide RAP SPOs with a population health profile so they can prepare, in advance of arrival, any needed specialized interventions (e.g., trauma support team for refugee women survivors of sexual violence). Also helpful would be increased collaboration with provincial/territorial government partners on more effective co-planning for refugee trauma-related needs, especially for refugee children in the public school system.

6. *Expand mental health–related coverage under the Interim Federal Health (IFH) program.* At present, most refugees are usually only eligible for IFH coverage for their first year in Canada and, consequently, miss out on the mental health–related coverage because they are focused on their immediate stabilization and basic needs during this time. Extending the coverage under IFH for up to three years after arriving in Canada for GARs would improve settlement outcomes over the longer period. Most refugees have little or no mental health support when

they actually need it unless they pay themselves. Otherwise, they must wait months for an intervention.

The Government of Canada is encouraged to recognize and expand coverage to include all registered clinical counsellors, whether or not they belong to a provincial regulatory body or a volunteer membership association. Registered clinical counsellors should be recognized as a low-cost and effective mental health intervention, and their costs should be covered. Currently, they are covered under IFH in some but not all provinces.

The Government of BC is encouraged to explore the following suggestions:

7. *Mitigate financial barriers to post-secondary education* by introducing changes to the BC student assistance program (similar to those introduced in Ontario in 2017) that would make tuition free for low-income households (\$50,000 or less per year). Or consider following New Brunswick's program of offering "free tuition bursaries" that provide non-repayable grants to students with household incomes less than \$60,000 per year. Further, refugees would benefit from targeted information and orientation sessions related to post-secondary education in BC during the first year after arrival.

**Both IRCC and the Government of BC** are encouraged to:

8. *Target employment service interventions for job-ready refugees.* Besides implementing a refugee strength-based assessment tool, which includes documenting prior employment and skill sets prior to arrival in Canada, more targeted service interventions are needed to support job-ready refugees to integrate into the labour market. Some current gaps include supporting refugee entrepreneurship and self-employment initiatives, and culturally relevant career and alternative career assessment testing, similar to what exists on a fee-for-service basis for high school students and young adults unclear about their future. Funding for job-specific training programs that include a wage subsidy and English language component should also be considered for specific occupations.

**IRCC, the Government of BC, and TransLink** are encouraged to:

9. *Expand access to low-cost transportation options.* As noted, Syrian families tend to be larger than most Canadian-born families. There can be significant challenges of moving a family of 6 to 10 members throughout Metro Vancouver to access resources, attend medical appointments, and travel to work and school—especially as affordable housing options are increasingly found eastward within Metro Vancouver and the Fraser Valley. Under the federal government IRCC resettlement assistance program of income support, adults in Vancouver are provided with a monthly three-zone bus pass, but children and youth are not. We recommend that the IRCC provide GAR children and youth under RAP income support with a monthly bus pass.

Additionally, the Government of BC and TransLink are encouraged to implement a low-cost monthly pass for all low-income families, including refugees, similar to the Calgary Transit model, which is an innovative sliding-scale pricing system that assesses income and then assigns a purchase price. In short, the less an applicant earns, the less they need to pay. The monthly pass was as low as \$5.15 in 2018. The Calgary Transit model could provide important insights on the costs and benefits of such a system.

## Conclusion

After two years in Canada, Syrian refugees are showing significant positive developments associated with their settlement and integration. This is especially apparent in language acquisition and labour market attachment rates, and the more difficult-to-measure elements of feelings of welcome, inclusion, and community and civic participation.

However, we cannot lose sight of the minority of Syrians who continue to struggle for various reasons. Their experience of horrific migration-related trauma of living through a civil war and years in an urban or closed refugee camps call for new national models of support. If Canada continues to select special refugee populations for resettlement like the Syrians or, more recently the survivors of Daesh and the Yazidis, we urgently need a pan-Canadian settlement-informed refugee trauma program funded in large part by the federal government through Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada.

The timeframe of Operation Syrian Refugees did not allow for in-person pre-arrival services to be offered, but the importance of such services, especially for humanitarian immigration streams, cannot be overemphasized. Enhancements to pre- and post-arrival services need to be seriously considered. These include building a new refugee strength-based assessment tool and ways for service providers to participate in pre-arrival services from within Canada.

Further, although the fundamentals of Canada's settlement language program for newcomers are sound, there is a need to help the small minority of the refugee population who are not able to access classroom-based models. This is especially problematic for women with young children who cannot attend classes because of the lack of childcare options. New and emerging models being tested in other parts of Canada need to be expanded and brought into future adult English language approaches.

The last word must go to Syrian refugees themselves, showing the overwhelming sense of gratitude and eagerness to give back and contribute to their new home.

“Thankful at the Canadian government has treated as well as the Canadian people. No countries in the Middle East [were] willing to accept us.”

“Grateful for the government and to the Canadian people for their help and assistance.”

“I am very happy, and I am excited to have my kids grow up and integrate into a country like this.”

“It feels like everyone is trying to help us, it’s so nice. I feel like I can interact with people in all circumstances.”

“So happy to be here. I am willing to host a new Syrian family in my house: give a hand to a family, the same way Canada gave a hand to ours. Justin Trudeau is the best.”