Refugee Settlement Research Study

Summary Report

November 2019

Prepared by Rebecca Sutherns PhD CPF
Sage Solutions

For

GUELPH | WELLINGTON
Local Immigration Partnership
Creating a caring, equitable community where everyone thrives.

Funded by:
Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada

Financé par :
Immigration, Réfugiés et Citoyenneté Canada

Contents

Purpose

The purpose of the study was to improve knowledge and understanding of refugees' experiences, needs and, aspirations, and to gather their recommendations on improving the settlement process in Guelph and Wellington County. Previously, the Guelph-Wellington Local Immigration Partnership (GWLIP) commissioned a similar community conversation and survey with refugee sponsors and settlement service providers. This study was intended to hear newcomers' experiences and opinions directly.

Background

In Canada and internationally, a 'Convention Refugee' describes a person who meets the refugee definition in the 1951 Geneva Convention related to the Status of Refugees. A person must be outside their country of origin and have a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.

The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), along with private sponsors, identify refugees for resettlement. A person cannot apply directly to Canada for resettlement. The Resettlement Operations Centre in Ottawa (ROC-O) works with Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) visa offices abroad to learn about the background and unique needs of government-assisted refugees coming to Canada.

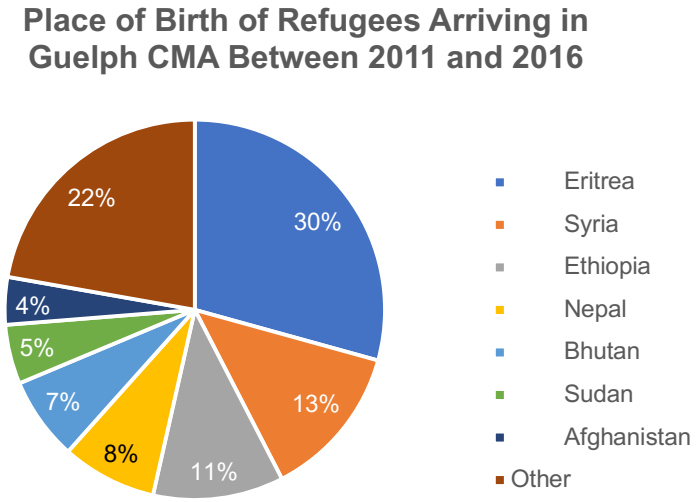
There are three different types of refugee sponsorship programs in Canada: Private, Public and Blended Sponsorship. The type of sponsorship determines who provides financial support. In Private Sponsorship, sponsors such as community groups or individual philanthropists cover 100% of costs, while Public/Government Sponsorship has the government covering 100% of costs. Blended Sponsorship splits financial support between the government and a private sponsor, each committed to financially supporting the individual or family for six months of a 12-month settlement period. Though three distinct categories exist, two categories are in widespread usage: private and public. It is important, however, to acknowledge that the distinctions between the three categories do matter, as different challenges arise in service eligibility based on sponsorship type.

A 'Refugee Claimant' is a person who has fled their country and is asking for protection in another country. In Canada, a person making a refugee claim has a hearing at the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB). If the claim is accepted, the applicant receives a "protected person" status, can stay in Canada, and apply to become a permanent resident. Refugee claimants can apply for government social assistance through Ontario Works, upon demonstrating they have filed a claim.

Guelph-Wellington Context

In 2016, 4,050 people were living in the City of Guelph who immigrated as a refugee between 1980 and 2016.[1] Between Jan, 2015, and July, 2019, Guelph admitted 0 government-sponsored refugees, 470 privately sponsored refugees and 145 blended sponsored refugees.[2] The actual number of refugees in the Guelph-Wellington area is much higher though, as there is no data that tracks secondary migration patterns. Thus, if Guelph was not an individual's first destination, it is not tracked.

The 2016 census also shows that refugees that arrived in Guelph between 2011 and 2016 were born primarily in Eritrea, Syria, Ethiopia, Nepal, Bhutan, Sudan and Afghanistan.



There is little reliable data tracking the number and countries of origin of refugees in Guelph Wellington since 2016, which is the time period covered by this report. For example, GWLIP reports hearing from service providers that there has been an influx of Eritrean refugees to Guelph in recent years. The 2016 Census noted a population of 265 Eritreans, while the 2011 Census indicates 0 Eritreans in Guelph.[3] It seems likely that a significant portion of the 300 people are refugees. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Eritrean refugees are moving to Guelph from other Canadian cities because of the perception that there are ample opportunities for work here.

There is also limited data on the number of refugee sponsor groups in Guelph Wellington. From GWLIP's own attempts to find sponsorship groups in this region, they identified 25 to 30 sponsor groups. The list of these groups is confidential. From those on this list, half are from the city and half from the county. Anecdotally, most sponsor groups (at least half) are organized by a church.

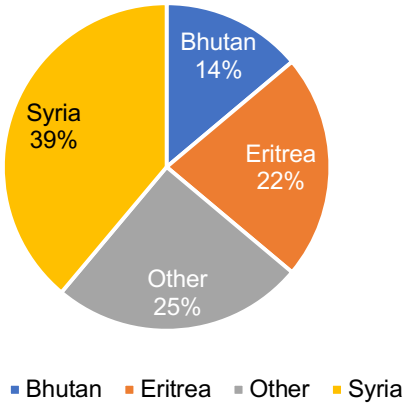
One unique opportunity in Guelph has come from a local business leader, Jim Estill, CEO of Danby, who privately sponsored 220 individuals plus an additional 18 families through the blended sponsorship program.[4] [5] Danby is the only Guelph Wellington "Sponsorship Agreement Holder" (SAH). SAHs assume overall responsibility and liability for the management of sponsorships under their agreement. SAHs can authorize other Constituent Groups in the community to sponsor refugees under their agreements.

Who We Talked To

This project ran from June to August 2019, beginning with the creation of a stakeholder engagement plan, which included in-person interviews and focus groups. These conversations were facilitated by a team from consulting firm Sage Solutions in Guelph, under the leadership of Dr. Rebecca Sutherns.

The study interacted with 36 participants who chose to participate individually or as a family. Participants originated from:

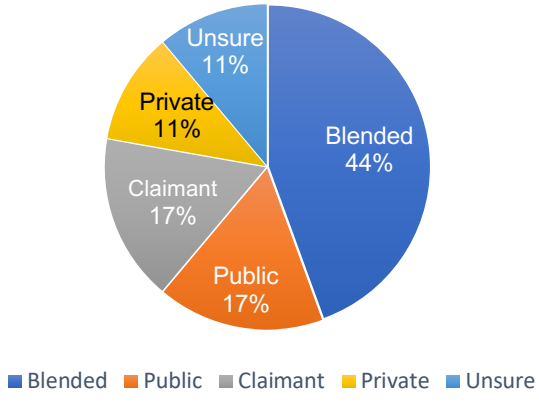
- Bhutan (5)
- Eritrea (8)
- Iraq (2)
- Mexico (2)
- Nepal (1)
- Palestine (2)
- South Sudan (2)
- Syria (14)



Of those 36 people, four were privately sponsored, six participants were publicly sponsored, 16 participants had blended sponsorship and six participants were refugee claimants. Four participants were unsure of the type of sponsorship they received. Sponsors of the participants included local religious organizations (churches and mosques), and a private business, Danby.

Methodology

Participants were notified and recruited through GWLIP partner agencies. GWLIP also canvassed for participants through posters in the community at grocery stores, community centres and spiritual organizations.



Participants were invited to choose the style of participation that worked best for them. In-person interviews were held at a safe space selected by the participant, including homes, local libraries, and coffee shops. Translation was provided upon request. Four focus groups were hosted at Immigrant Services Guelph-Wellington (ISGW), organized according to language groups: Arabic, Nepali, Spanish, and Tigrinya. Groups were limited to five participants at a time and involved an interpreter. Focus groups ensured access for participants who would not have been comfortable participating in a one-to-one in-person interview. Yet focus groups may not yield the nuances of a one-on-one interview, as some participants may need more time to speak and a different setting in which to feel comfortable, especially if sharing dissenting views.

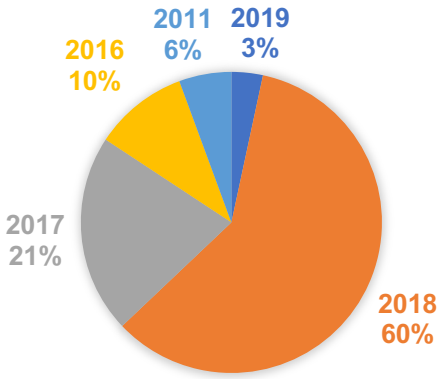
Access and availability of interpreters to help facilitate the conversation was extremely helpful, though posed a challenge as well. Interpreters would often ask their own clarifying questions without translating the conversation to simplify the answer. This made it difficult for the research team to capture and prompt more detailed responses.

The majority of the participants arrived in Canada in the last two to four years; the data is thus limited to participants' experiences with settlement in Guelph-Wellington area from 2016-2019.

It was common to hear participants compare their own experiences not just to others in the Guelph area, but to those arriving in different cities around the country, which would have a different private sponsorship ecosystem than Guelph-Wellington does.

44% of participants in this study were refugees sponsored by Danby. This is reflective of the proportion of Danby-sponsored refugees in the wider community. Other private groups in Guelph-Wellington region sponsored 14%. Amongst Danby-sponsored participants, there were perceived difference in the care and support given by the sponsor depending on when the family arrived in Canada. Participants noted that those who were amongst the first families to arrive received more financial support, more time with sponsors, better quality furniture, and better temporary housing situations when they first arrived. Those participants who arrived within the last two years noted that families who came before them did not have to pay for their flights and received a more substantial sum of money at the beginning to make their settlement easier. Participants who arrived in the last two years noted they felt there was a divide between those who arrived first and those who came later.

The support systems, service providers, access to resources, and challenges for refugee claimants are slightly different from those of sponsored refugees. ISGW refers and connects refugee claimants to various programs and services such as Legal Aid, Ontario Works, Welcome to Guelph Programs, and Mennonite Coalition for Refugee Support. However, when sponsored refugees arrive in Canada, they become permanent resident cardholders, while claimant refugees are just starting their processes, and do not share the same feeling of security. A refugee claimant can file a claim upon arrival in Canada, but they do not become a refugee until they support that claim at a hearing. The Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada estimates the current wait time for a hearing to be 21 months. Outcomes of individual claims can be hard to predict. In 2017, the overall acceptance rate was about 67%.[6]



Findings

This section outlines the challenges and experiences at various points on participants' settlement journey, organized according to their pre-arrival, arrival, and first year (and onwards).

Pre-Arrival

Process from application to arrival

The pre-arrival period is marked by a wide range of emotions, from anxiety to anticipation. Most participants journeyed from their home countries to Jordan, Turkey, Kenya, and Ethiopia, to wait for the next part of the journey. The timeline from application to arrival varied for each family; 63% of the participants waited for one to two years, while 37% waited between 3-5 years to arrive in Canada.

One participant who waited three years to come to Canada stated that the process was faster than expected, as he has known people who have waited 10 to 15 years to move to a place like Canada. Another participant shared that a lot happens while you are waiting, ***"long wait… kids grow up, kids grow up fast in that time that you are waiting to move, and you come here, and everything is different because of it."***

Ties to the region in the form of family or friends of relatives were the main reasons why the majority of participants settled in the Guelph-Wellington area. Other participants stated that they did not choose Guelph, but this is where their sponsors lived.

Pre-arrival information

As previously mentioned, the application process, journey, and information provided differed greatly depending on the status of the refugee (e.g. claimant or sponsored). All sponsored participants stated the information they received before arrival came from formal channels (e.g. orientation hosted at the UN) and informal channels (e.g. family, friends, sponsor, social media, word of mouth). Claimants stated they received no formal information and relied heavily on informal channels.

Formal orientation sessions were hosted by the Canadian Orientation Abroad (COA) to visa-ready refugees bound for Canada prior to their departure. COA sessions consisted of three to five days of pre-departure group orientations, helping prepare participants for what to expect when they arrive in Canada. Sessions were held in permanent training sites across the world and mobile sessions in refugee camps. Each session gave a brief overview of the Canadian immigration process, housing, employment, health care system, social services, education, as well as the laws, social-culture rules, politics, and geography of Canada. Sessions also covered practical aspects such as how to dress for different seasons, what Canadian currency looked like, and how to use western style kitchens and bathrooms.

> ***"The orientation shared how to live and learn how to get a job. It was helpful but brief."***
>
> ***"During the orientation, I learnt that if you respect the rules and regulations of Canada, you can live peacefully and freely."***

80% of the participants attended these sessions, 75% found them informative though too brief, skimming many useful topics, but never explaining anything in great depth. Specifically, more

information on Canadian social and cultural rules, as one participant described it, “what not to do when living in Canada,” would have helped. Further, some participants wished they received information on how to receive mail, as that this would be the primary way the government would communicate with them. Majority of the participants felt the information was removed from the context. It would have been more beneficial to do an orientation when they finally arrived in Canada.

Participants stated that they sought out informal information from friends or family who had experience with coming to Canada, from social media (in particular Facebook groups for refugee families), as well as sponsors. ***“We communicated with our sponsor over email, he told us about how to start coming, house, everything. We were also curious about how we can start upgrading our certification (accreditation for the degrees we had). Everything he told us was true, and he was very helpful.”***

Claimant refugees stated that anything they knew came from family, friends, the news, and social media. What they learned made them motivated to come to Canada. There was some frustration, as information was sometimes inaccurate, for instance ***“friends and relatives told me it would be a quick process, but it took a very long time.”***

> ***“Most information is not completely correct, it’s not the whole picture.”***

Flights

The cost of travel, especially with an entire family, is a significant barrier for families. Of the participants in this study, 65% received a transportation loan for the cost of travel to Canada. This group was made up of privately sponsored and blended sponsorship categories. Meanwhile, 28% of the participants paid for their flights, often with the assistance of family members. This group was made up of predominately refugee claimants and a few privately sponsored participants. The remaining participants, 7%, had their flights paid for either by the government or by their sponsors.

To alleviate the barriers caused by the expense of travel, the Government of Canada offers financial assistance (up to $10,000) in the form of transportation loans to eligible applicants. The loans are meant to cover the costs of transportation for the applicant and their beneficiaries from overseas to the final destination in Canada (excluding secondary resettlement to a new city, should they choose to move). The repayment schedule commences 30 days after the recipient arrives in Canada, with monthly installments calculated based on the amount borrowed, and payback schedule varying between 12 to 72 months. Loans are offered to all categories of resettled refugees (government, private, or blended) who, based on an assessment, demonstrate that they will be able to remunerate upon resettlement.

Some exceptions exist. Privately sponsored refugees are subject to an interest-free grace period between one to three years depending on the size of the loan. The federal government waived this loan for Syrian refugees arriving between November 4, 2015, and February 29, 2016. The impact of these various exceptions was expressed by participants who arrived after this time, who stated it was unfair for certain families to have loans waived while others were incurring debt from the outset of their settlement in Canada. ***“We didn’t know we had to pay for our flights. We’d heard of other groups that didn’t have to pay for their tickets, and we did not understand why we didn’t qualify for that same treatment.”***

Of the participants who received transportation loans, 50% expressed confusion or uncertainty around the parameters of the transportation loans or that the money received for transportation was, in fact, a loan. ***"When I signed the paperwork, I didn't know that I had agreed to pay for flights. They went over everything so quickly. It was a big shock when we received our first payment deadline."***

The IRCC is responsible for informing sponsored persons of their travel loan once they have their address in Canada. If a newcomer does not update their address, they will not receive their bill and might miss an important payment deadline. The majority of the participants stated that this caused a problem when they were waiting for housing and could not yet provide a permanent address. Or the method of communication was not relayed to them, as they did not know that such important information comes through the mail; they therefore did not receive important notices from the IRCC.

Arrival

Upon arrival, the majority of sponsored refugees stated that most of the information they received came from their sponsors, sponsor volunteer groups, and service providers. Feedback was exceptionally positive about the level of involvement, support, and assistance sponsors provided in the first few weeks.

Sponsors played an integral role in helping people navigate various systems, supporting them to obtain social insurance cards, health cards, library cards, school registration for children and youth and personal bank accounts. They brought them to language assessments at Immigrant Services, picked up bus passes from City Hall, and taught them to go grocery shopping.

> ***"The sponsor (Jim at Danby) helped us access our bus card, medical assessments, bank account, health cards. There was also a group who helped when we arrived. They assisted with temporary housing. Everything was prepared for us. They even provided an interpreter."***
>
> ***"Upon arrival, several sponsors from the church took them out during the first week, to assist them with obtaining social insurance card, health card, registering children in school."***
>
> ***"We were picked up from the airport by the sponsor and taken to a hotel. Volunteer group talked to us about how to find housing, how to do grocery shopping, finding a family doctor, opening a bank account, and getting our health cards."***
>
> ***"Sponsor helped us a lot with banking, language assessment, school registration, health centre."***

Though participants shared their gratitude for sponsors and volunteers, there is a limit to how much information sponsors and volunteers can provide. Some participants stated they did not form a close relationship to their sponsor, and that their sponsors were only helpful for the first few months. Another participant stated that ***"not a lot of information was provided. Volunteers from Danby helped with transportation and showing us the city. But there was no communication with anyone for further instructions. The language interpreter from Danby helped us with securing our various documents."***

One participant expressed that after the first six months, responsibility lies with the individual to seek the information and services needed, ***"to find things out, to participate, you need to initiate it. You need to go to Immigrant Services and ask. If you stay at home, you are not initiating, and you may not get the information you need."***

Participants who were claimants relied more on family and friends (if they were in the area) and service providers, or neighbours who spoke the same language, to assist with accessing information, networks and resources. Assistance with accessing legal aid and beginning the paperwork for obtaining refugee status was crucial during this period. Claimants are potentially eligible for support in their cases from Legal Aid Ontario. All claimant participants utilized Legal Aid for support on their cases. Two participants stated they lost access to Legal Aid once they moved from Vancouver to Guelph, which made them no longer eligible. In 2019, funding was completely eliminated for claimants' cases. Shortly after, the federal government stepped in to provide some additional funding to cover the loss.[7]

> ***"Immigrant Services provided helpful, general information, language assessment, transportation, and child tax benefit, but not job or housing."***
>
> ***"Received a lot of information from family friends. There was also an orientation at the Immigration Centre in Niagara, Fort Erie, which explained how to access legal aid, and how to approach the application."***
>
> ***"We were supported by a Mennonite Coalition for Refugee Support who helped with our paperwork and provided us with the number for Legal Aid. Settlement Services supported us in finding ESL classes."***

First Year

Across all experiences, the most significant challenge mentioned by all participants was language and the inability to communicate and understand other people. This barrier was intensified by factors such as age, gender, and individual expectations versus the reality of finally being in Canada. Both in the experience of individuals and families, the first year also illuminates ongoing challenges in finding meaningful employment, earning a suitable living, establishing stable housing, addressing health concerns, and feeling a sense of connection with community.

Participants were asked to share their experience in the first year (and afterwards) with respect to: education, employment, housing, health care, settlement services, transportation, child care and family services, language training, financial support, interactions with government and government services, connection to others and the community, and their personal well-being.

Language Training and Adult Education

To assist in learning, advancing and practicing English language skills, ISGW provides language assessment testing (Canadian Language Benchmark Assessment). Upon completion of the test, clients are signed up for the appropriate English as a Second Language course at St. George's Centre.

Across various experiences, 90% of participants shared positive feedback regarding the classes, reflecting on the good atmosphere and the friendliness and helpfulness of teachers.

There was an appreciation for free lessons and the ability to learn with other students from all over the world. Participants attending the program at St. George's Centre stated that their language skills were improving, and they were delighted to feel progress in their ability to understand other people.

Participants appreciated the variety of classes offered at different times in the day and evening. The Centre works hard to provide lessons in the mornings, afternoons and evenings to accommodate various life and work schedules. It also offers childcare for people who are enrolled in the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program.

Challenges with Language Training

"Learning English is very difficult; it is very different from our home language," affirmed one participant. Learning a new language is difficult by itself, but is made even more difficult as it intersects with age, varying work schedules, raising children, the weather, the first few months of settling in, and waitlists to access language classes (which takes about one to two months). Those with claimant experience stated they were not eligible for language lessons until their paperwork was processed. Of the participants in this study, 44% described current English fluency as CLB 1-3, 16% as CLB 4-6, and 40% as CLB 6-8. Those participants who completed higher education correlated to CLB 6-8.

> ***"Age is a factor in the ability to learn a new language. It is hard to learn a new language."***
>
> ***"I started working right away and was on rotational shifts, but I am optimistic about getting a language assessment and going to school soon."***
>
> ***"The school accepted me immediately, but I could not go because my children just started attending school. However, it's challenging to cope without being able to speak English."***

New mothers shared that since having their newborns, they were no longer able to attend classes. ***"I loved attending classes, but once I had my daughter, it was difficult to attend as frequently. The winter weather also made attendance difficult."*** Similarly, participants who worked rotating shift schedule were also unable to attend classes, based on the timing of their shifts. Some employers, such as Linamar, mitigate this by providing in-house language courses for employees. St. George's also offers a LINC Home Study program for participants who are unable to attend in-class LINC sessions due to illness, disability, maternity, work schedule conflicts or a lack of classes in the area. However, only one participant in this study reported utilizing this program.

Other participants found that though the program provided basic comprehension, they felt the class did not feel serious or well organized and were used more so for social opportunities than learning. A few participants decided to pursue English Language Studies programs at Sheridan and Conestoga Colleges so that they could more easily continue studies upon completion of their ESL studies. These participants were concerned that by staying at St. George's, they would not receive the English Studies certification needed to continue on their educational path.

Children's Education

Registering children and youth in primary and secondary schools in Guelph-Wellington was easy with the assistance of sponsors and service providers. Almost all participants with children

(both sponsored and claimant) praised school communities (teachers, administration, and students) for being welcoming, friendly, and very helpful in supporting their children to integrate into educational environments.

Children experienced a full spectrum of emotions and reactions, including apprehension about being away from family, difficulty and uncertainty caused by a language barrier, and the ease by which playing with other children their age enabled them to learn English informally quickly.

> ***"When children are younger, it is easy for them to adapt, but when they are older, they have already been in a different school system for most of their lives."***
>
> ***"One child did not want to go to school and had great difficulty adapting. Not only was it her first time going to school, but it was also her first time away from us. The school was immensely welcoming and had prepared computer tabs for the kids to use to communicate with their teacher and class. The computer tablets had access to Arabic google translator."***
>
> ***"Daughter is doing well. She did not have any English experience when we arrived, but now is communicating very well. When transitioning from grade eight to Our Lady of Lourdes High School, the high school gifted her uniforms."***

Challenges with Children's Education

The biggest challenges faced by families pertained to the difficulty of transitioning to school and adapting to a new culture without knowing the English language. As a result of this barrier, some older students found managing what to study, how to study, and how to plan out their educational futures (especially regarding university or college) very challenging.

One participant explained the challenges that she experienced with her daughter—who hated school and stopped going entirely. As her daughter was a minor at the time, the school called to say that her daughter needed to attend. ***"They told me that they would send the police and that they could take my children away from me. So, we left, it was too stressful. We went back to Jordan. There are so many things that we did not know about, and no one explained it to us. We returned to Canada a few years later."*** They did not always know how to find the answers to their problems; they did not know how to ask.

Employment

Due to the financial support they receive for their first year, sponsored refugees do not have to find work immediately upon arriving in Canada. However, half of the participants wanted to start working right away because they did not want to feel dependent on the government or be a burden on their sponsors. The other half of the participants mentioned it was essential to prioritize learning English in the first year, to increase prospects of employment in the future. At the time of the study, 33% of the participants were actively seeking employment, 30% identified as underemployed, 7% stated they were employed, and 30% said they were currently focusing on English fluency or staying home with children.

Participants who arrived as refugee claimants stated they had to wait six months to receive work permits; some participants experienced additional delays amounting to an extra three months. No reason was provided to the participants for why the work permit was delayed. This was an incredibly stressful time. Four of the six participants relocated from other Canadians cities

(Toronto, Kitchener and Edmonton) to Guelph, having heard of employment opportunities in Guelph's manufacturing sector.

The participants who were sponsored by Danby received a unique opportunity to work for three months at the plant in Guelph within their first year. This would allow them to accumulate Canadian work experience, making acquiring a job easier in the future. Participants who have had success with the three-month program have gone on to work in other companies in Guelph, including Danby, Linamar, and Synnex.

The majority of participants shared frustration over their inability to find steady employment. One of the greatest barriers is that most jobs require "Canadian work experience." 80% of participants mentioned that even if one has Canadian experience, it does not guarantee success in finding a job. Participants also identified challenges in earning a suitable living. Most of the jobs that participants were accessing were entry-level positions that paid a minimum wage, and/or jobs with inconsistent hours.

Participants shared the disempowerment they felt from not working in their professional fields. Approximately 45% of the participants stated they held a university or college degree, 36% had completed primary school and 19% had completed high school. The majority of participants shared frustrations over having studied for many years, earning high-level degrees, diplomas, and certificates, only to find that it is difficult to have foreign credentials recognized in Canada. Though a process for assessing credentials exists, all of the participants in this study who sought to do this have yet to complete the assessment process.

> ***"It is very difficult in working in field that you worked in back home. Even more difficult is getting your certifications accepted. It seems like if the degrees we have are not appreciated, and it is impossible to find out how to upgrade them. It seems like no one has answers (including the universities)."***
>
> ***"I need a job where you can use my experiences and knowledge. It's a waste not to utilize it. Right now, I am working for survival. Canada needs to use the skills and knowledge of people wisely."***
>
> ***"We would feel satisfied if we could contribute to our professional fields (engineering and finance)—we can share over thirty years of experience."***
>
> ***"I left an office in Dubai, where I had worked for a year and a half, in which I was building and designing buildings. Now it feels like I am starting from scratch, and it's not a comfortable situation. They say I have the work experience, but it is not Canadian experience. Here, if I go down the architecture track again, it will take me another four years to get to a point where I can work in an entry position. I'm not sure it's worth it. It's a new adventure of figuring out what I want to study now."***

Housing

Finding housing

Securing stable housing is a major challenge in Guelph due to a general lack of available, affordable housing options. All participants mentioned that finding suitable and affordable housing was an immense difficulty that required time and knowledge of the city. For the first couple of weeks, all participants who had sponsors stayed in sponsors' homes, in hotels, or

temporary housing arranged by sponsors. Refugee claimants stated they stayed either in a hotel or with friends and family until they could find their own place. During this time, all participants stated they looked for housing options through online search engines, Kijiji or Google, sometimes with the assistance of the sponsor group or service providers.

> ***"We lived with mentor group member for free, and with no contract, they said we could stay as long as we needed. No rush."***

All participants stated the difficulty of finding a place to live, particularly affordable rental options with a good location, proximity to amenities like grocery stores and transportation. Five participants rented newly built homes in newer subdivisions and found living away from the city hubs to be difficult, as it required longer bus rides with more bus changeovers to access grocery stores, service providers, daycare, schools and coffee shops.

> ***"We moved into a new house that has just been built, which is exciting. But it is too far from any place. We are still feeling very crowded, as three girls share one room."***

Most of the apartments available require references, a credit history check, as well as first and last month's rent. ***"Landlords require proof of income***," one participant stated, ***"if you are utilizing Ontario Works, they won't accept it."*** These were huge barriers for participants who were unable to provide all of the requirements without the support of a sponsor, family or friend, who could sign the lease with them.

> ***"We came during Christmas holidays, and many landlords were on vacation, which made finding an apartment difficult. We spent one month in a hotel, another month in another apartment before we finally found the apartment, we currently live in."***

> ***"A lot of people did not want to rent to us because we are seven people. Landlords wanted credit history and references. Jim sent them an email and said he would pay for the first 12 months, but the landlord said no."***

> ***"Housing difficult to find. It took five months to find an apartment because we did not have someone to sign on our behalf. A friend helped us to sign, which made a big difference."***

> ***"The government needs to reach out to specific communities and figure out what would work for them culturally. Eritrean families are big, and the apartments and townhouses can't accommodate them. We culturally live very intergenerationally. There is a need for more creative ways to resolve the housing issue."***

Participants who lived with up to four other people (including children) spent an average of $1,300 per month on for their housing including utilities. Participants who lived with more than five people spent a monthly average of $2,170 on housing costs. Participants mentioned that the salaries they received from sponsors or the government are inadequate considering the housing situation in the area.

About half of the participants shared they felt comfortable in their current homes, while the other half expressed that their homes felt overcrowded. Further, 85% of the participants stated their current house was not in need of any repairs, while 15% expressed their house needed minor

repairs. No participants stated their home was in need of major repairs. Those who were privately and publicly sponsored were provided with furniture and kitchenware that made moving in much easier. Some participants expressed that the furniture was quite worn and mismatched when they received it.

> ***"Home is comfortable, but people in Syria have big living rooms because we always have lots of family over. Living rooms here in Canada are very small."***

Access to Medical Care

Though there was ease in securing health cards upon arrival, navigating health care systems can be difficult. Approximately 65% of the participants expressed difficulty in finding a family doctor who would take them on as a patient, with wait times ranging from two to four months to a year. Once they were accepted, the majority expressed that they felt taken care of and were treated well. Accessing dentists was also reasonably manageable. During the first year, refugees have access to subsidized cleaning and fillings, but covering the cost of additional procedures is a challenge.

Approximately 31% of participants explicitly stated the greatest challenge in accessing healthcare is communication with healthcare professionals; this was especially the case for aging adults and new mothers. One participant explained, ***"the biggest obstacle for seeing a doctor is the language barrier. You do not always receive a language interpreter, as there are not enough Nepali translators. I try to fix the appointments for when the kids can come and translate for me, but I can't always ask them to leave work for me."*** Another participant shared that sometimes, when he is at an appointment, he asks his sister to be on the phone so that she can translate what the doctor is saying. Some doctors are not comfortable with that. However, he recently found a doctor who is comfortable with it—which has made a huge difference.

Currently, Guelph has a few doctors who speak Arabic, which has been immensely helpful to Arabic speakers in the area. However, Nepali, Tigrinya, and Spanish speakers found the language barrier with their healthcare providers to be amplified by the lack of available interpreters in the region.

Accessing Specialist Care

In accessing healthcare specialists, participants had positive experiences with being referred to specialists in the surrounding areas. Amidst the complexity of addressing physical and mental health concerns, participants spoke highly about the quick referrals made by family doctors, and the level of care received while accessing healthcare specialists.

> ***"Our daughter requires monthly treatment at McMaster. When she goes, she usually is assigned a language interpreter."***

> ***"My wife was pregnant when we first arrived, but it was affecting her health. Our sponsors helped to navigate the system by going to ultrasounds and then to Hamilton for an emergency procedure. The aftercare and follow-up appointments were efficient and helpful in a very stressful situation."***

Settlement Services

Settlement Services such as ISGW are an essential resource for both sponsored refugees and refugee claimants. ISGW is generally funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), though it also receives funding from the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration for the Newcomer Settlement Program to support Guelph and Wellington citizens, international students and immigrants (including sponsored refugees and refugee claimants).

All participants found great assistance with filing tax returns, language assessment tests, registering children in school, accessing bus cards, informative information and assistance with housing, education and employment. All participants spoke highly of the workshops and programs offered. ***"When you come here, you are treated well and receive good information."***

As ISGW provides services to a large population of newcomers to the area, there can be difficulty in wait times for an appointment. Interpretation services are available, but due to the high number of newcomers in need of these services, participants reported extensive wait times for accessing these services. Over 30% of participants also wished that there was more information on how to manage finances, and how to obtain more general consultation and advice about personal life decisions. There was also a desire for more programming and resources for women's empowerment, and support for survivors of gender-based violence.

Five participants relayed positive feedback and gratitude for the services and staff at Lutherwood Employment, who assisted with resume writing, job applications, and interview preparation. The centre also provides helpful workshops on using LinkedIn, QuickBooks, and other skill-building courses.

Transportation

Access to transportation is vital to getting to know a new city and accessing essential services. To ease the transition into a new city, the City of Guelph provides individuals with a "Welcome to Guelph Pass," a free City transit bus pass for their first year in Guelph. When shown to a Guelph Transit bus driver or City employee, the card gives the individual temporary free access to ride Guelph Transit throughout Guelph, visit Guelph Museums, or participate in public swimming/skating across City facilities.

Once the year is up, the City of Guelph offers an affordable bus pass. Adults, youths and seniors living in low-income households can apply any time for a one-year pass. 80% of participants of the study shared that this was a great way to get to know the city, made it easier to get around, and most importantly alleviated the financial stress of transportation costs.

> ***"Inter-city connections are not very efficient. It is difficult to travel between Guelph, Kitchener, Waterloo, Cambridge or Hamilton using public transportation. Having access to a personal vehicle becomes extremely important. It also makes day-to-day tasks more efficient and manageable."***
>
> ***"The first year of transportation was difficult because the weather was very challenging. Our mentor group helped with rides, and lots of people volunteered to take us where we needed to go."***

Child Care and Family Services

The majority of participants did not access childcare services aside from the daycare offered at St. George's school, and stated that finding affordable childcare was difficult. If families or friends live in the area, participants said they felt more comfortable having their children be looked after by someone they knew. The majority of participants who were mothers shared that it was important for them to stay home with their children or be there for their children when they came home from school.

One participant shared that they received a subsidy for the daycare at a local Montessori School. His daughter has severe hearing loss, and this type of daycare was extremely helpful in transitioning her into junior kindergarten. KidsAbility acted as a useful resource and facilitator of this connection.

Financial Support

Due to the cost of rent and general high cost of living, the financial support provided during the first year of settlement is inadequate, particularly considering the complexity of people's journey and settlement process. Financial stress impacts the wellbeing of entire families. Families are allocated money in different ways, depending on the type of sponsorship they received (e.g. private, blended or public). All participants who talked about financial stress suggested that it would be helpful to receive a larger sum of money when they first arrived so that they could manage their own money and feel secure in the first months of settling in. Two participants mentioned they felt comfortable going to their sponsor to ask for a small loan when they needed it.

> ***"Problem is the money we are given is limited, and forces the whole family have to work (including the older kids)."***

> ***"When you are new and settling in, you need more to start with. My husband started to work right away but I preferred that he learnt English instead. He saw money as a more pressing need than language ability at the beginning. The financial support we received was not enough for all the needs of our family. It was quite a tight budget."***

The Syrian participants in the study reported feeling the tension in their community caused by the federal government's decision to waive transportation loans for families that arrived between November 4, 2015, and February 29, 2016. Five participants stated that the treatment of Syrian refugees who arrived during that time compared to post-2016 translated into differences in how much money families received at the airport and the places they stayed when they first arrived. Four participants also stated they felt the first families to arrive were treated better in comparison to families who came more recently and were brought by the same sponsor.

Interactions with Government and Government Services

Though experiences with government and government services are often plagued with long waits and confusing processes, the majority of participants shared that navigating systems with the assistance of sponsors or service providers allowed for positive results and experiences. Five participants also shared that compared to the government corruption back home, government services in Canada are fair and good.

> ***"It's a line and everyone is waiting their turn. Everything is with respect and no problems."***

Four participants spoke about the lack of explanation of how government sends mail and understanding the importance of this mail. Further, participants stated that sometimes information is missing, or things are not clear, and there is no one to ask to explain, especially when it comes to important documents. This was particularly important when awaiting messages regarding the transportation loan.

Two participants shared they experienced a lack of hospitality in government services, where people who are supposed to help, acted in discriminatory ways. ***"Sometimes, the people are not willing to try and listen and help you, and instead, when they hear your accent, instantly state they do not understand you."***

Two other participants shared encounters with law enforcement. Both felt apprehensive initially due to historical relationships with law enforcement in their home countries. However, both stated they had positive experiences.

> ***"Back home, we feel apprehensive about police authority. I was once at a park with my kids, and they were feeding the geese. I didn't notice the 'don't feed the geese' sign. When the police officer came by, I got very nervous, but the police got on one knee to get on the kids' level and explained to them in a very calm manner, why we shouldn't feed them. It was a really good moment for myself and my kids."***
>
> ***"We had an incident with the police recently. We had a leak, and the plumber came to fix it, I was trying to tell the plumber that it was from outside and not inside. I tapped on the plumber's attention, but he thought I was intimidating him and called the police. In reality, I was trying to get his attention because we had a language barrier. When the police arrived, they came with an interpreter, and I explained my intention. The police were friendly and tried to resolve the issue. They told the landlord that she should be the one dealing with the plumber instead of us. The kids were terrified to see the police."***

Connection to Others and the Community

Connection to others and to community varied across experiences, dependent on factors such as having existing family in the area, having young children who make it easier to connect with other families, or feeling connected to a sponsor group, so much so that they begin to feel like an extended family. Impressions of Canadians were positive—friendly, helpful and always smiling. Over half of the participants shared they had good relationships with neighbours. One participant shared, ***"our neighbours even helped drive my mom home once when they saw her walking home with heavy grocery bags."***

Across the board, all participants mentioned connecting to Canadians was difficult based on language barriers. Therefore, they relied heavily on connections to people who were able to speak the same language as them. There was an expression of deep isolation that is felt, especially by elderly participants who find it difficult to learn English in a classroom setting and are unable to work. Resettling to a new country brings different challenges based on gender and age. One participant shared that he felt immensely isolated as an elder adult. ***"I don't attend school and I don't go to work. Where do I fit in?"*** Another participant expressed the difficulty of meeting a spouse from the same nation, ***"the dating pool is small."***

Over half of the participants shared that public spaces such as parks, and services like the Guelph Public Library, YMCA and the West End Community Centre, were great ways to connect to the city and feel connected to the broader community. Churches and mosques were also excellent sources of friendship and a sense of belonging, especially when participants were able to volunteer. ***"My husband became very popular when he started facilitating pizza night at the mosque. It allowed our family to connect to other families and give back the support we had received."*** One participant stated that volunteering in the community with organizations such as the local Food Bank has also been a positive way to meet people and practice English.

> ***"Kids have lots of friends from school that live nearby (Palestinian and Syrian families). At school, they celebrated Ramadan with them. My husband has friends here that he knew from Iraq; they live in Kitchener and Hamilton. When we arrived, we lived downtown and would go to the library almost every day. Our new home is too far from the library, so we don't go anymore."***
>
> ***"Community is difficult because of the language barrier. We found a Latino community through the Catholic Church on Victoria, which hosts a mass in Spanish every week. It is a hub for Latin American countries."***
>
> ***"Connected to Nepali and Chinese community in Guelph. Felt welcome, no one has shouted or said anything bad to us. We are connected the Royal City Church. We have neighbours from Syria, but we don't talk to each other because of language barriers. We say hello, but we all keep to ourselves."***
>
> ***"Met new friends who are also from South Sudan. They have started to attend a church in KW, which is S. Sudanese, where they preach in Arabic. It feels like home."***
>
> ***"It has been difficult to connect with people. You cannot find people easily that you agree with, very different cultures and traditions. Even people from the same nation had snubbed us before because we arrived a few months ago, and they have been here for a few years."***

Personal Wellbeing

There is a clear recognition that coming to Canada is extremely difficult, especially given the complexity and trauma of the experiences endured in their home countries and the journey to get here. Describing personal wellbeing was extremely difficult for many participants—a mixture of fulfilled and unfulfilled hopes, aspirations and expectations. On the one hand, the majority of the participants expressed gratitude for the Canadian government, for sponsors, for the ability to bring their families to a safe and peaceful country. Gestures of new winter clothing, rides to get groceries, or celebrating Eid, are only a few of many ways in which participants felt supported by sponsors.

On the other hand, they shared feelings of isolation and exclusion, along with friction in trying to integrate into the Canadian lifestyle while maintaining cultural traditions. Over 80% of participants felt discouraged by the lack of meaningful employment and barriers to the goals they sought to achieve for their families upon arrival.

> ***"We are not living for ourselves; we are seeing where the brightest future for children could be."***

> ***"Immigrants leave everything (friends, families, histories), and you are homesick for your country. Canada is nice and comfortable, but leaving your country is difficult."***

> ***"Hard not feel discouraged. Every job, every opportunity is not encouraging. Hoping to reunite with family in one or two years."***

During the study, the majority of participants did not explicitly discuss the need for counselling for trauma or mental health services. Often the topic was broached by mentioning how unsafe their home country felt or how the deep corruption of the government or the length of time the journey to Canada took while spending time in refugee camps. Two participants shared the concern for the mental wellbeing of their family members and their children.

> ***"Our physical health is good. We have access to good food. We have freedom of movement, freedom of work. But this is a big question to answer because it is complicated. Lots of things happened at home; rape was used as a weapon in war, our country wasn't safe."***

Over 80% of the participants also shared grief over family members who were still living abroad, not yet living in safety or peace. They expressed frustration with application processes, which made it difficult for them to bring their families to safety.

> ***"My mother passed away five days ago, and my father is 85 years old. He still lives in Syria. It's very difficult for him to be there alone. He really should be with his family. I want to bring him to Canada. When I lived in the Emirates, I couldn't visit them, and now that I live in Canada, I can't visit him."***

All participants who applied for refugee status in Canada expressed the stress and toll it took on their physical and mental health to recount what they experienced in a court forum, and to await the results over a few months. "***Constantly thinking, when are they going to accept us? When can we put our roots down?***" This uncertainty makes it extremely difficult to engage in Canadian society.

Moving Forward

Changes That Would Make the Biggest Impact

Participants highlighted several suggestions that would have helped them and their families settle more smoothly, including the following.

Priority needs of the first year upon arrival:

- ***Learning the language*** is foundational to operating in a new country and cascades into all aspects of the settlement experience—accessing housing, finding employment and dealing with social isolation. A strategy to address the barriers and difficulties of learning English needs to be improved.

- ***Increased access to translation services.*** There are a limited number of interpreters in the region, and the demand is greater than the supply. Many participants mentioned the difficulty of accessing translation services for urgent appointments. The strategy for language support needs to be increased.

- ***More money upon arrival.*** Participants mentioned that accessing more money upon arrival would help them feel more autonomous and in control of their settlement and make the initial transition easier.

- ***Expediting the claimant hearings, so that they can be completed in one year.*** The emotional turbulence of going through a hearing and awaiting the results of that hearing are immense. Refugee claimants noted that expediting this process would allow them to feel security and safety and enable them to transition more smoothly into their communities.

- ***The need for a strategy that addresses the lack of affordable housing for refugees and also acknowledges the cultural importance of intergenerational living.*** Finding affordable and stable housing for participants was a great challenge, therefore leveraging the cultural knowledge of the housing needs from community leaders is extremely important.

- ***New strategies in addressing the barriers to meaningful employment.*** This cascades into larger and holistic aspects of participants' lives. Participants mentioned that finding meaning and purpose in their communities was extremely important. Participants stressed they wanted to be productive contributors to society and wanted their experiences and knowledge to be levered and used by their communities.

Priority needs after the first year of settlement:

- Increased access to trauma-informed counselling and peer support groups
- Increased emotional support for grief and homesickness
- Fast-track processes for applications, especially when bringing family members
- New strategies for improving access to higher education
- More support for new mothers; regular programming and resources for those who would like to find work
- More guidance and support for those who wish to study at post-secondary school
- More fair and efficient foreign credential recognition

Recommendations from the Consulting Team

This section synthesizes the above input from participants with lived experience of the refugee settlement process in the Guelph-Wellington region and other sources into seven main recommendations for GWLIP to consider.

1. ***A compelling, shared vision for what Guelph Wellington wants refugees to experience when they come to this region*.** Service providers, sponsors and neighbours should all be working toward a similar goal, perhaps grounded in Guelph's new Community Plan.

2. ***Clearer community-wide connection points and pathways for support and integrated service delivery,*** so that people know where to go and what is available. Less reliance on word of mouth, which may provide dated, inconsistent or inaccurate information, would allow for more equitable and informative service delivery. Guelph Wellington has an opportunity to be more hospitable by providing customer service that anticipates refugees' needs proactively. Meanwhile, ensuring a consistent set of questions and resources no matter where people access various support systems within a context of a clear understanding of who is going to do what to achieve the community's vision.

3. ***Stronger emphasis on mental health supports.*** A story that includes moving from Syria to Jordan to Winnipeg to Toronto with a large family belies a great deal of uncertainty, transition, patience, adjusting etc., not to mention whatever unrest caused the family to have to leave home in the first place. There is a need for integrated health care that pays attention to the social determinants of health, as well as culturally appropriate, trauma-informed strategies for supporting refugees' mental health. Guelph's increasing attention to Adverse Childhood Experiences might be an asset in accelerating the implementation of this recommendation.

4. ***Enhanced training and support for sponsors.*** Both the Community Conversation in February 2019 and this report highlight the importance that sponsors play in the refugee settlement journey. GWLIP seeks to support, highlight and where possible enhance the resources available for sponsors, in order for them to feel confident and prepared in their roles. This work needs to continue so that sponsors can align their expectations with the requirements of the task, over the long term.

5. ***Language learning,*** with interpretation in the meantime, which is a precondition for so much else. Guelph Wellington agencies, including school boards, should consider how community resources might be better leveraged and coordinated to accelerate English language learning at scale.

6. ***Learning from the particularities of the Danby sponsorship experience.*** Elements of what appeared to be a unique opportunity in Guelph could perhaps be replicated elsewhere such that other corporations or communities could support refugees in more holistic ways.

7. ***Improved local data.*** GWLIP likely has the most comprehensive data sets regarding immigrants and refugees in the area. Courtesy of projects such as Toward Common Ground, Guelph Wellington is well-positioned to work with common and comprehensive social data sets. Yet the data is still limited. Organizations serving immigrant populations need to pool current, relevant, local and reliable data, which can supplement Statistics Canada census data to understand and serve refugees better.

Conclusion

Participants shared a good deal of positive feedback about their experience with the formal and informal settlement supports they received in Guelph and Wellington County, across a range of sectors and services. Participants reported that settlement services were immensely valued and informative; there was a high level of satisfaction with ESL and LINC services, which were well attended and utilized. Participants also shared exceptionally positive feedback on sponsor and volunteer support, with the Danby settlement program being well received by participants. Medical care was well regarded, once participants were accepted as patients. Participants also expressed gratitude for the 'Welcome to Guelph' bus pass, which was universally popular and utilized often.

Collectively, the experiences of all participants of this study also underscore the need and opportunity to further improve conditions for successful refugee settlement in the Guelph-Wellington region. Key areas identified as being in need of improvement included flexibility of language instruction delivery; access to meaningful employment commensurate with skills and education; access to adequate, affordable and suitable housing; service and supports to ease grief, trauma and isolation; access to translation and interpretation services; coordination of settlement supports and services and stronger wraparound supports for middle and secondary school students.

To meet the challenges of refugee settlement, service providers and local government in Guelph-Wellington should consider developing strategies which will promote a unified community vision, effective sharing of reliable information and easier system navigation. Furthermore, a stronger emphasis on mental health supports, better-integrated service delivery, and equipping of sponsors over a longer time period are needed to ensure consistent and efficient settlement so that refugee newcomers are in the best possible position to achieve their settlement goals and aspirations for the future. When underpinned by improved real-time, reliable, local data on refugees, these various supports can remain responsive over time and Guelph-Wellington can be a truly welcoming community.

---

[1] Statistics Canada. "Census Profile, 2016 Census Guelph, City [Census Subdivision], Ontario and Wellington, County [Census Division], Ontario." Census Profile, 2016 Census - Guelph, City [Census subdivision], Ontario and Wellington, County [Census division], Ontario, August 9, 2019. https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=CSD&Code1=3523008&Geo2=CD&Code2=3523&SearchText=guelph&SearchType=Begins&SearchPR=01&B1=Immigration%20and%20citizenship&TABID=1&type=0.

[2] "Resettled Refugees – Monthly IRCC Updates." Open Government Portal. Accessed October 21, 2019. http://www.cic.gc.ca/opendata-donneesouvertes/data/IRCC_Resettled_0001_E.xls.

[3] Statistics Canada. "Data Tables, 2016 Census." *Admission Category and Applicant Type (7), Period of Immigration (7), Place of Birth (272), Age (12) and Sex (3) for the Immigrant Population Who Landed Between 1980 and 2016, in Private Households of Canada, Provinces and Territories, Census Metropolitan Areas and Census Agglomerations, 2016 Census - 25% Sample Data*, Statistics Canada, 17 June 2019, http://www.census2001.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/dt-td/Rp-eng.cfm?TABID=2&LANG=E&A=R&APATH=3&DETAIL=0&DIM=0&FL=A&FREE=0&GC=550&GL=-1&GID=1341770&GK=10&GRP=1&O=D&PID=110558&PRID=10&PTYPE=109445&S=0&SHOWALL=0&SUB=0&Temporal=2017&THEME=120&VID=0&VNAMEE=&VNAMEF=&D1=144&D2=0&D3=0&D4=0&D5=0&D6=0
.

[4] Mann, Mark, and Dave Gillespie. “The Man Who Put up $1.5 Million to Save 200 Syrian Refugees.” Toronto Life, February 12, 2018. https://torontolife.com/city/life/jim-estill-the-man-who-saved-200-syrian-refugees/

[5] Seto, Chris. “Housing Needed for 18 Refugee Families Coming to Guelph.” Guelph Mercury, November 7, 2018. https://www.guelphmercury.com/community-story/9020810-housing-needed-for-18-refugee-families-coming-to-guelph/

[6] “'It's a Crapshoot': Asylum Seekers Fret over Fateful Day at Canada's Immigration Board | CBC Radio.” CBC News. CBC/Radio Canada, April 26, 2019. https://www.cbc.ca/radio/outintheopen/asylum-seekers-1.5095969/it-s-a-crapshoot-asylum-seekers-fret-over-fateful-day-at-canada-s-immigration-board-1.5112314

[7]“Refugee Lawyers Applaud Federal Funding after Ford's Legal Aid Cuts; Province Questions Timing | CBC News.” CBC News. CBC/Radio Canada, August 13, 2019. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/refugee-legal-aid-funding-ontario-1.5244717