

# OUR REFUGEE SETTLEMENT PLAN

## A PROGRESS REPORT ON RESEARCH AND CONSULTATION

Uniquely among Canada's more than 50 Local Immigration Partnerships, Surrey has decided to produce a separate strategy and action plan for refugees. Why? Because Surrey receives more refugees than any other municipality in B.C., and it is highly apparent that refugees have very different needs than do other immigrants. The refugee settlement strategy and action plan are due Fall 2016 but the research, carried out by Simon Fraser University Surrey Campus, is largely complete.

To aid in organizing their findings, the researchers broke the settlement process into stages: Pre-arrival, Early Arrival and Longer Term, while also considering the blanket category of Service System Coordination. These are some of the research highlights, divided by category, that will be considered when developing the Refugee Strategy.

### Pre-arrival

**Over dreaming but under prepared.** Refugees left their countries with high hopes — sometimes too high. Pre-departure communications often created an overly optimistic picture of resettlement in Canada.

**Refugees are remarkably resilient.** Along with histories of trauma and hardship, refugees bring resiliency, resourcefulness, courage and survival skills.

**Fleeing difficult decisions.** Families are often divided, with children left behind. Alongside the guilt and grief, refugees experience the ongoing mental health consequences of trauma.

### Early Arrival

**Jet lagged but asked to focus.** Refugee participants described their early days as intensely emotional, a blur of confusion and excitement, all compounded by extreme physical exhaustion.

**Structural/systematic social barriers.** Poverty undermined the security of most. Social isolation became an issue for many—particularly those with limited English language capacity.

**Refugees do get support.** Community organizations, settlement agencies, and schools play an enormous role in the process and offer promising practices for early arrival.

**Lack of affordable housing and poverty.** The housing search is a bewildering and difficult process because of the lack of affordable homes for larger families.

### THE QUESTIONS INVESTIGATED

1. What are settlement barriers faced by refugees and how are they being addressed?
2. How do existing settlement practices support refugee integration, and are there gaps?
3. What level of understanding and awareness do civic stakeholders have of refugees?
4. What community settlement planning for refugees exists, and how does it impact refugees and the community?
5. How can provision and coordination of refugee settlement supports be improved to benefit refugees and the community?



## Early Arrival *(continued)*

### Importance of translation services.

Availability of interpretation and translation services is critical, helping refugees meet healthcare needs, communicate with potential landlords, enrol children in school, and decipher official documents.

**Focus on transportation.** Refugees depend on public transit. Learning a new city, and in an unfamiliar language is anxiety-provoking, and many refugees are using public transit for the first times in their lives.

**Support from co-nationals.** The first months are intensely challenging and a critical time for support, in particular from co-national communities.



**The many faces of trauma.** Mental health problems can sometimes be masked, and training is necessary to help service providers recognize the many faces of trauma.

**Transportation loan.** Families forgo basic necessities to repay transportation loans.

**Importance of work, lack of meaningful work.** Almost without exception, the pathway to employment is fraught with difficulties. Most refugees report discriminatory hiring practices and a lack of language capacity to carry out jobs they were otherwise capable of.

**Importance of education.** Refugee parents and youth value and appreciate the easy access to elementary and secondary schooling for children and adolescents. Schools became an important point of connection and belonging for parents and children.

**English language training.** Language capacity is central to successful settlement. Refugees are eager to develop their English language skills both for everyday living and for enhancing their employment prospects.

## Long term

### Still hard to focus (for good reason).

The impacts of family separation are significant and affect every aspect of life.

**A vicious circle.** The language training and credential or skills upgrading that would enhance employment opportunities is seen as the way forward, but very difficult to achieve due to multiple barriers: the inequities of the job market, trauma-related psychological impairment, poverty, and complex family care demands.

**Criminal record checks cannot be provided.** Many employers require a criminal record check or validation of education and experience that are unavailable to refugees.

## Service System Coordination

**Settlement agencies are greatly appreciated.** At the same time, many refugees described confusion and anxiety about service access. Hearing rumours about benefits others were receiving also fed confusion.

**How to enhance coordination?** There is a consensus that better integration and coordination of services among direct service providers would be desirable. However, there is a lack of agreement about how to achieve this goal.

### The challenge of the funding cycle.

The current funding model for agencies providing services to refugees is based on competitive applications made every few years, which can produce uncertainty and a lack of continuity.

## HOW THE RESEARCH WAS CARRIED OUT

Guided by 22 community stakeholders, SFU Surrey hired 12 research assistants, including five university students and seven refugees from Myanmar, Somalia, Iraq and El Salvador.

In a community consultation, 65 participants representing refugee and immigrant agencies, local government, healthcare, academia and recent refugees came together to review the literature, discuss current practices, and explore strategies for enhancing services.

A total of 16 focus groups (with 104 total participants) were conducted with recent refugees (both youth and adult) across five cultural groups: Karen, Arabic, Spanish, Swahili and Spanish (South America). Additional focus groups were held with diverse classifications of service providers, sectoral leaders and civic government representatives.