

POLICY BRIEF

THE IMPACT OF THE SYRIAN REFUGEE INFLUX ON LOCAL SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT



A Collaborative Research Project in Waterloo Region
June 2017



Acknowledgements

This policy brief is based on a research project developed in response to a targeted call on Syrian refugee arrival, resettlement and integration issued by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) and Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). The project was led by the Centre for Community Based Research (CCBR) in collaboration with community partners in Waterloo Region, Ontario.

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Introduction

This policy brief summarizes the policy recommendations emerging from a research project called “The impact of the Syrian refugee influx on local systems of support”.

The purpose of the nine-month research project was to collaboratively explore the disruptive impact of the recent Syrian refugee influx on the way local communities support newcomers. This was done to: 1) determine innovations in how local communities can better support refugees, and then 2) determine how public policy can reinforce these innovations.

Waterloo Region in Ontario was the focus of the research study. The research included an online survey filled out by 38 local organizations and individuals, and conversations with 25 key settlement leaders. More information about the study, including its methodology and findings, can be found [here](#).

The recommendations summarized in this policy brief are informed by study data and were developed through discussions among advisory committee members. The views expressed in this policy brief are those of the individuals on the research team and the advisory committee, and do not necessarily reflect the positions of their corresponding organizations.

The recommendations are directed at senior levels of government, primarily the federal government but some applicable to the provincial government as well. Some recommendations address **refugee-specific policy reinforcements** that would help local communities directly support refugees in their community. Other recommendations address **broader policy reinforcements** that would help to create conditions in which newcomer settlement and integration would more broadly be encouraged.

The term “refugee” in this policy brief refers to all persons coming to Canada who have been forced to flee their country because of persecution. This includes refugee claimants as well as those within the Government-Assisted Refugee (GAR) Program, the Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) Program, and the Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) Program. The journey for refugees to successfully belong and contribute to their new homeland may take years. Recommendations in this brief may therefore apply to the range of government policy aimed at newcomer resettlement, settlement and longer-term integration.

Policy Recommendations

1. Reinforce community ownership of the resettlement process

Shifting refugee resettlement from the responsibility of one primary agency towards a community-wide response proved to be a main innovation resulting from the Syrian refugee influx in Waterloo Region. The new resettlement structure engaged new and old players alike, with municipal government, service provider organizations, other local institutions and citizens becoming leaders and actors in a coordinated and collaborative refugee settlement response. The resulting accomplishments were significant in helping refugees settle in the region, even though many challenges were experienced that resulted from the unprecedented levels of arrivals. There were two main policy factors that hampered the shift towards broad-based community ownership. First was the lack of active involvement of the federal government in support of local efforts. Second was inadequate resources that did not match need (causing great stress to the local settlement system). Finding an appropriate balance between local players and senior levels of government can be tricky, compounded by the unpredictable nature of global refugee fluctuations. Still, federal policy could be more intentional in helping to bolster community-wide ownership of refugee resettlement by:

- Ensuring that Immigrants, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) provide provincial ministries, municipalities, Local Immigration Partnerships, and re/settlement organizations with consistent, timely and accurate information about refugee arrivals (from all streams: GAR, PSR, BVOR) and other updates in federal refugee policy.
- Providing adequate and predictable resources for refugee re/settlement that matches the number and need of refugee arrivals, including resources for both direct service and system-wide coordination (see LIP recommendations below).
- Providing more detailed information about privately-sponsored refugee arrivals within the community (perhaps to the Local Immigration Partnership or equivalent network) and connecting sponsor groups to at least one local settlement agency.
- Encouraging and empowering local IRCC representatives (in tandem with provincial representatives) to be involved as partners in the local refugee response; clarifying *how* they are to be involved and *who* from IRCC would be involved.
- Developing frameworks of local refugee support that annually clarify refugee targets and arrivals, provide adequate levels of resources, establish an engaging community structure, and clarify a consistent role of federal/provincial involvement.

2. Invest in Local Immigration Partnership (LIP) infrastructure

The Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership (WRIP) emerged as an important catalyst in initiating and maintaining a community-wide response to the local Syrian refugee influx. Hosted by the regional government since 2010, the WRIP was instrumental in engaging municipal leadership (across 8 municipalities) and harnessing regional government resources for a rapid refugee response at a level not seen before. Yet the Syrian Refugee Resettlement Preparedness Plan (see appendix) that was newly created was a “community-owned” structure that actively engaged and coordinated the many existing and new supporters of refugees, while at the same time recognizing the central role of Reception

House Waterloo Region. The result was a dynamic and flexible structure in which the WRIP infrastructure, expertise and members were leveraged to initiate broad-based collaborative planning and action. While many communities across Canada already have similar Local Immigration Partnerships (LIPs), federal policy could invest in LIP infrastructure for refugee resettlement by:

- Continuing to fund existing and new LIPs across the country, including in those communities with emerging refugee populations.
- Exploring funding arrangements that include all three levels of government (federal, provincial and municipal) while maintaining existing investment from the federal government.
- Ensuring that a proactive refugee resettlement strategy is a part of LIP operations (see policy brief on Syrian refugee research related to Local Immigration Partnerships: <http://imrc.ca/>).

3. Build on the strengths of separate refugee programs to provide equitable support to all refugees

The two main refugee streams (Government Assisted Refugees – GARs, and privately sponsored refugees - PSRs) each bring strengths and weaknesses to the re/settlement process. PSRs tend to have better informal support systems compared to GARs. Yet many PSRs (and their sponsors) are not aware of the formal re/settlement services available within their community. On the other hand, GARs have direct access to government-funded resettlement services in their first year, even if case workers were overwhelmed in providing needed support during the Syrian influx. GARs also often lack the longer-lasting informal support networks of their privately sponsored peers. While the research did find that creative “hybrid” supports are emerging that cross the GAR and PSR divide, resettlement policy could better leverage the respective strengths of each stream to ensure equalization of supports for all refugees by:

- Ensuring that PSRs and their sponsors are better aware of, and have better access to, the range of re/settlement services available to refugees in their local community, including developing new refugee reception centres in communities as needed.
- Ensuring that GARs are supported in building informal support networks upon arrival (e.g., IRCC and/or provincial governments fund a “circle of support” for each refugee family).
- Exploring other holistic re/settlement models (beyond those listed above) which are independent of the refugee selection process (i.e., offering all refugees similar local support regardless of how they are selected overseas).

4. Improve federal re/settlement services in support of all refugees

The federal government took on a sizeable commitment when it made its initial promise to resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees by the end of 2015. Today, over 40,000 Syrian refugees have come to communities across Canada. The intensity of the Syrian refugee influx put a spotlight on local refugee resettlement not seen in a generation. In response, new community-based services emerged that filled specific service gaps, often relying heavily on volunteer efforts. Reception centres also increased their capacity to receive larger numbers of arrivals. Through it all, much

was learned about how local communities can better support refugees and refugee claimants, regardless of refugee stream or country of origin. Such may be one legacy of the Syrian refugee influx. Included in these learnings were insights about how federally-funded re/settlement services themselves impacted the ability of local communities to support refugees. Drawing attention to these services may be an important piece in building sustainable and robust supports in local communities for all refugee groups. Specific recommendations include:

- Providing pre-arrival information to refugees that includes local support options.
- Maintaining refugee targets at levels that meet current capacities of reception centres.
- Providing funding to emerging community-based organizations that fill gaps in the re/settlement system.
- Ensuring that local re/settlement organizations can contact sponsorship groups to facilitate connections between refugees and the local web of support.
- Developing an expanded and more rapid process for family reunification, and one that ensures local “echo supports” are in place for sponsored family members.
- Ensuring that support of GARs, PSRs and BVORs does not divert community resources away from refugee claimants (a particularly vulnerable group with already limited access to resources), by funding community-based organizations to adequately assist claimants throughout the claim process.

5. Ensure smooth transition towards independence and stability

The groundswell of support from local community members was instrumental in helping many Syrian refugees resettle in their initial year. Yet challenges emerged as refugees transitioned to living more independently beyond the first year and as refugees navigated new systems of support typically provincially or municipally funded. The “month 13” challenges were felt both by privately sponsored refugees whose private sponsorship formally ended, and by government assisted refugees whose federal government assistance ended. A smooth transition towards independent living (i.e., avoiding dependency on any one system of support) is critical in making sure that refugees can successfully integrate in the long-term. Part of this smooth transition may be linking refugees earlier into those support systems offered to the general population. A smooth transition also requires an ethic of collaboration and planning among different levels of government that provide a range of support systems (e.g., employment, healthcare, education, social assistance). More concretely, a smooth transition could be facilitated by:

- Altering the source of income support for refugees from the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) directly to relevant provincial social assistance programs upon arrival to ensure appropriate support is provided for the duration of need without disruption.
- Creating professional ‘System Navigator for Refugees’ positions within service sectors serving the general population (e.g., employment and health) that would help refugees navigate the full spectrum of local services and supports.
- Equipping private sponsors with strategies that minimize refugee dependency, and provide them with information about other available local community supports that are needed.

- Resourcing “Hubs for Refugees”, similar to “Hubs for High-Tech Innovation” serving as a magnet to spark innovative approaches towards independence, employment, and belonging for refugees.

6. Address false expectations and negative narratives about refugees

The Liberal government’s plan to resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees by the end of 2015 was met with widespread public support amidst heightened media attention. The result was both a motivated public and one that had unrealistic expectations about the resettlement process. Many people engaged the immigration system for the first time and without much prior knowledge of its workings. Frustrations emerged, from anger about delays in the arrival of privately sponsored refugees, to demands for refugees to be ready for the workforce upon arrival. In addition, negative narratives emerged which were fearful of refugees, particularly Muslim refugees, and which hampered refugee integration. Public policy could address these false expectations and negative narratives by:

- Ensuring that private sponsors and other citizens have accurate orientation to the refugee selection and resettlement process.
- Reminding Canadians of our country’s global commitment to refugees (including aiding the most vulnerable refugees) and the positive contribution of refugees in nation-building.
- Addressing myths about refugees and countering Islamophobia, racism and other forms of discrimination through public education.
- Continuing to fund local initiatives that address negative narratives and stereotypes of refugees.

7. Evaluate local systems of support to enable evidence-based decision-making

This research project in Waterloo Region was a rare opportunity for a community to collectively take stock and learn from its experience of supporting refugee resettlement. Although the research was not a formal evaluation, it did give general insights into some the successes and challenges that were faced over the past year and a half in supporting Syrian refugees. Moving forward, more systematic evaluation of the processes and outcomes of a community’s system of refugee support would be helpful to inform evidence-based decision-making for all refugees. Government can support ongoing local evaluation efforts by:

- Resourcing local evaluations that consider process and impact at both the individual refugee and community level of analysis.
- Resourcing local evaluations that improve system integration (i.e., considering the intersection of resettlement, health, education, business and social systems).
- Building the evaluation capacity of Local Immigration Partnerships in collaboration with post-secondary institutions and other research centres.

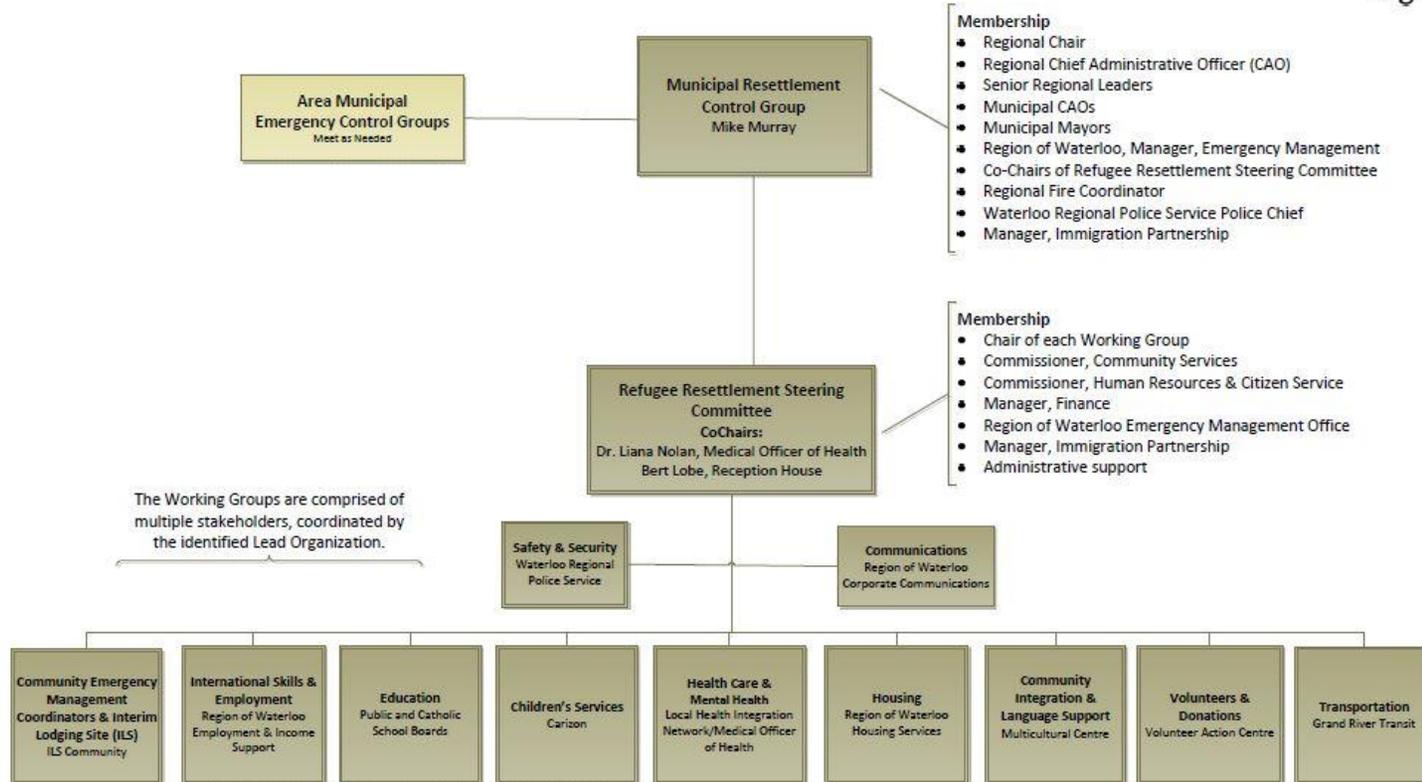
8. Recognize and address root causes of global refugees

This study focused on one Canadian community's reactive response to the influx of Syrian refugees. However, the global refugee context is obviously much larger (over 65 million displaced persons worldwide). Local community members can play a role in helping to address some of the root causes of global refugees (e.g., poverty, conflicts, persecution, discrimination, environmental disasters) that would enable people to remain in their homeland. These actions can add a more proactive and preventative local response to the global refugee reality. The government can help local communities to do this by:

- Resourcing local and national groups (e.g., Canadian Council for Refugees, Mennonite Central Committee) to equip individual citizens to work towards preventing causes of refugees including programs related to peacebuilding, conflict resolution, reduction of violence and climate change.
- Raising public awareness about root causes and complexity of refugee and migration issues around the world.
- Exploring international collaborations and linking local actions globally that address root causes of large movements of refugees.
- Developing clear policy alignment across federal departments for durable refugee solutions overseas and communicating these policies to the public.

Appendix

Waterloo Region Syrian Refugee Resettlement Preparedness Plan 12/7/2015



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