

THE REFUGEES NEXT DOOR



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We are all Canadians

Since the First Nations gave Toronto the name “a gathering place”, this city and region have been the destination of choice for generations of immigrants and refugees who come with their skills and dreams of making a better life for themselves and their families.

Today, however, we are hearing more stories about threats to our society in the form of immigrants and refugees. As our airwaves fill with these stories aimed at painting them in a negative light, Labour Community Services believes it is important to take a look at refugees coming to Toronto today, and what their arrival means for our unions and communities.

Changing the Narrative

Have you noticed that, over the last few years, there has been a noticeable shift in the way stories about refugees are reported? We often hear tales of refugees arriving at the shores and borders of Europe and North America, along with a suggestion of a negative impact on the places they're seeking refuge. In the U.S., fearmongering has led to the president calling a state of emergency to fund the building of a wall he believes will stop asylum seekers and refugees from entering the country.

Closer to home, we are starting to see the same rhetoric applied to refugees arriving to Canada. As this narrative continues to ramp up locally, it is critical that we push back on stereotypes, false reporting and blatant racism.

It is not a coincidence that the same people who want to divide us are also those who oppose workers' rights, union security and strong employment standards. Solidarity is a core union value, and our workplaces and communities are better when we reach out to others to include them in our shared prosperity.





Who are the Refugees Moving to the GTA?

Refugees and refugee claimants are mothers, fathers, sons and daughters who simply want somewhere safe to live, learn and work. Canada has always had refugees – the definition of a refugee is “a person who has been forced to leave their country in order to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster.”

Long before the adoption of the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention, people came to our country seeking refuge – the Scots forced from their homes by the Highland Clearances; the United Empire Loyalists fleeing the American Revolution; the Irish fleeing the potato famine; eastern European Jews fleeing the pogroms or the rise of Nazism. Canada has accepted refugees from every major continent in the world.

For most of us, if our lives became unsafe, we too would take the same risks to protect our family. Many of the Canadians we know as our friends and neighbours are alive today because there was a time when their parents or grandparents came here as refugees or immigrants.

Refugees and Security

Refugee claimants all go through a rigorous front-end security screening. Through this process, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) checks all refugee claimants on arrival in Canada. Since the screening was put in place in 2001, the number of claimants found to represent any kind of security concern has been statistically insignificant.

It is far more difficult to enter Canada as a refugee than as a visitor, because we have a rigorous system in place to ensure fairness and safety – a system envied around the world. The Immigration and Refugee Protection Act excludes refugee claimants if they are found to be inadmissible on the basis of security, serious criminality, organized criminality or human rights violations.

In the face of major challenges, including the shock of a new country and oftentimes a new language, refugees and refugee claimants make immense contributions to our communities by sharing their skills, knowledge and cultures. Their stories and those of Canadians welcoming them to their homes inspire us and we can be proud that most refugees manage not only to survive but to flourish – making successful, meaningful lives for themselves and their families.

Contributions to our Society

Refugees and their families make significant positive contributions to Canadian society, economically and socially, as leaders, artists, community workers and elders. When employed, their incomes were on a par with economic immigrants, very much contradicting this notion that refugees are coming and acting as a drain for taxpayers and a drain on the Canadian economy.

Canada needs immigration to prosper. Our country has a rapidly aging and dwindling working-age population – in another decade, close to one in four Canadians will be 65 or older. In the same timeframe, the working-age population will decrease by more than 10 per cent. In 2014, the Conference Board of Canada predicted that Canada would need to increase annual immigration significantly to maintain our skilled workforce.

In addition to addressing shortfalls in today's labour market, refugees bring a longer term payoff. Recent Statistics Canada numbers have demonstrated that many of the children of refugees who came to Canada between 1980 and 2000 are excelling. They have similar graduation and university entrance rates as their Canadian-born peers.

In 2019, four people who arrived in Canada as refugees hold public office as Members of Parliament, including the Minister of Democratic Institutions and MP for Peterborough-Kawartha, Maryan Monsef, who is originally from Afghanistan.

Unions and Refugees

Unions have a long history of standing up to unfairness and promoting equality. By working with community allies and groups interested in helping refugees settle into their new homes, we can counter any discrimination and hostility when it happens.

Examples of these allies – individuals and organizations who share the goal of welcoming and helping newcomers build a new life in Canada – include settlement agencies, the local chamber of commerce, elected officials, faith and cultural groups, schools and youth organizations, service agencies, businesses and health and social organizations.

Toronto the Good

Communities in the GTA have long reflected the world. Our strength lies in our diversity, and our communities now boast people from every corner of the world. For decades, we have welcomed generations of people that have been forced to flee their homes due to violence, famine and other atrocities. Climate change is making matters worse. Despite the attempts from some quarters to fan the flames of division and intolerance, the overwhelming majority of people in greater Toronto support the resettlement of refugees. That generosity of spirit is what allows us to discover our common humanity – and is the compassion that will ensure our common prosperity.

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