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RESEARCH REPORT

REFUGEE HOUSING INFORMATION NEEDS:
RESEARCH CONDUCTED IN THE REGION
OF NIAGARA



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Refugee Housing Information Needs: Research Conducted in the Region of Niagara

Prepared for:

**Policy and Research Division
Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation**

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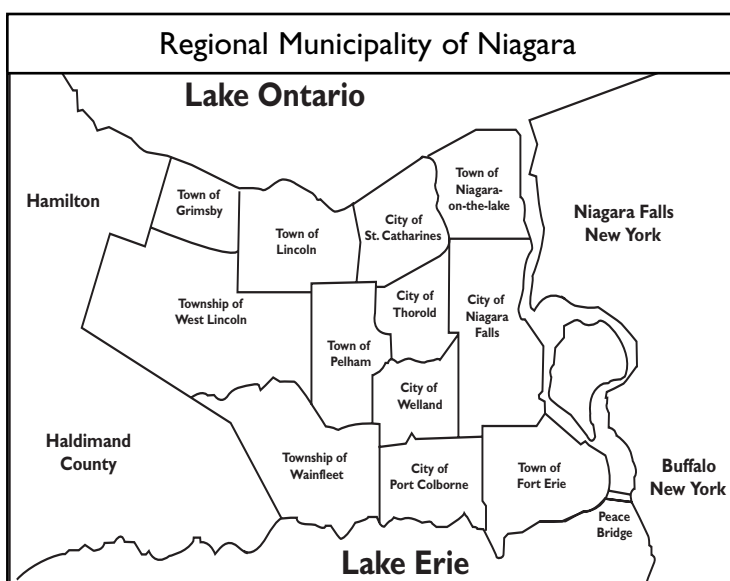


REFUGEE HOUSING INFORMATION NEEDS: RESEARCH CONDUCTED IN THE REGION OF NIAGARA

INTRODUCTION

The Peace Bridge between Canada and the United States at Fort Erie, Ont. is Canada's highest-volume entry point for refugees seeking asylum in Canada. Since 2000, an average of more than 5,000 refugees per year have entered the country at Fort Erie, with a peak in 2001 of 7,070 the largest number at any point of entry in Canada. Since 1998, the number of refugees entering Canada at Fort Erie has climbed by approximately 400 per cent, compared to a Canada-wide increase of about 60 per cent.

The increase has put tremendous pressure on the demand for low-cost rental housing in the region. The four objectives of this research were: to identify the current housing situation of refugees who choose to stay in the Niagara region (Fort Erie, Welland, St. Catharines and Niagara Falls), the housing options available to them, their housing information needs, and how these needs can be met.



METHODOLOGY

There were three components of the study methodology.

1. **Secondary data analysis:** The work included analysis of refugee data from Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC), population and labour force data from Statistics Canada, housing data from Niagara Regional Housing and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) Rental Market Survey, data on refugee characteristics from the Fort Erie Reception Centre and client statistics from non-profit organizations.
2. **Consultations:** Most of the information for the research was collected through 37 in-depth interviews with representatives of 15 local and federal governments, 11 multicultural centres and others in the network of service providers and 11 housing and housing-information providers.
3. **Focus groups with refugees:** Researchers conducted two focus groups in Fort Erie with 15 refugees representing several countries of origin. The discussions covered their current housing situation, experiences finding housing and housing information needs.



FINDINGS

Profile of refugees arriving at Fort Erie

Numbers of refugees—Fort Erie is the busiest entry point in Canada for refugees. CIC statistics show that the number of refugees claiming asylum at Fort Erie has increased from 1,229 in 1998 to an average of over 5,000 per year since 2000:

- 4,705 in 2000;
- 7,070 in 2001;
- 5,013 in 2002; and,
- 3,293 for the first seven months of 2003.

Country of origin—In the last three years, the top six countries of origin for refugees were Colombia, Pakistan, Turkey, Bangladesh, Argentina, and Sri Lanka.

Number of refugees who stay in Niagara—Using respondent reports and data collected by the Fort Erie Reception Centre, an estimated 15 to 25 per cent of refugees entering Canada at Fort Erie remain in the Niagara region. Most of the rest go immediately to Toronto or other centres in southern Ontario.

Educational achievement—Most of the recently arrived adult refugees are well educated. Data from the Fort Erie Reception Centre for the first six months of 2003 show the following levels of educational achievement (the numbers total 99 per cent because of rounding):

- 34 per cent have a university degree;
- 19 per cent have a college degree;
- 25 per cent have a high school diploma; and,
- 21 per cent have some high school, primary school or trade school (or did not list an educational level).

Employment and income in the first year—Acquiring medical and immigration approvals for work eligibility takes a minimum of six months. Most refugees do not work within the first 12 months after arriving in Canada. The length of time depends on factors such as language ability, recognition of foreign credentials and the local job market. During pre-employment, individual or household income comes from social assistance (Ontario Works), which includes a housing allowance.

HOUSING OPTIONS

Temporary shelters provide short-term housing—

Most refugees remaining in the Niagara region stay in temporary shelters and hostels on their first night and typically stay in a shelter for one to two months. Five shelters in the region, with approximately 80 spaces, operate with formal funding agreements with the Regional Municipality of Niagara. Several other shelters operate without funding agreements. Shelter space has not been sufficient to meet demand in recent years and refugees are often sent to hotels and motels. Most shelters provide support services, such as settlement counselling and help finding longer-term housing and employment.

The private rental market provides most longer-term housing—

Almost all refugees find housing in the private rental market once they leave a temporary shelter. The shortage of rental housing in the Niagara region that refugees can afford is acute, particularly in the smaller communities. Few new rental units have been built in recent years and market rents have increased, particularly in Fort Erie (by 5.3 per cent in 2002).

CMHC Rental Market Survey statistics show that market rents for about three-quarters of the units in the region are higher than refugees' shelter allowances, which have not changed for several years. Service providers identified the gap between market rents and shelter allowances as the biggest obstacle to better housing for refugees. Settlement counsellors estimate that they have great difficulty finding housing that meets basic needs and standards for about 20 to 25 per cent of refugees. The affordability problem is most serious during the transition period after refugees leave temporary shelter until they find employment and earn enough to pay market rent.

Subsidized housing plays a limited role in the first year—

Few refugees live in publicly subsidized housing during the first year after arriving in Niagara. Some units in Niagara Regional Housing properties, the Region's public housing authority, are available almost immediately for refugees with special needs, such as disability or those in situations with family violence. Refugees are encouraged by service organizations to apply for subsidized housing as soon as possible, with the expectation that it might meet the longer-term needs of refugees with poorer employment prospects.

A strong local support network provides housing and other services to refugees—The Niagara region offers a strong local support network for refugees. This network includes the housing shelters, the Fort Erie Reception Centre (receiving all new arrivals at the Peace Bridge), three multicultural centres, local school boards, partners in the Niagara Homelessness Initiative, Niagara Regional Housing and many other service organizations. These organizations operate without assistance from Citizenship and Immigration Canada, which does not provide funding for refugees. Active involvement by the Ontario government in refugee services also is very limited. Ontario's main contribution is funding 80 per cent of the *per diem* allocation for temporary shelter spaces (with the Region of Niagara providing the other 20 per cent).

The support network services include temporary shelter, settlement counselling, searching for rental housing, assistance with health and legal matters, English language training and school placement for children.

HOUSING INFORMATION NEEDS AND SOURCES

Information for refugees—Once short-term shelter needs have been met, refugees want up-to-date information on rental housing options, the rights and obligations of tenants and landlords, total rental costs, subsidized housing options and housing availability in their current city and other cities. Many refugees want information, simply presented, in languages other than English. Information about purchasing a home is not an immediate priority for refugees, although many see homeownership as an important goal to be achieved after they have found employment and become more settled.

Information for service providers—Service providers want better access to translation and interpretation services to improve their capacity to deliver services in the languages spoken by refugees. They want to reduce the risks to refugees of problems related to language barriers and cultural differences. Mental health services also are a priority, with better information about available services and how to access them needed for refugee clients. Service providers said that they would benefit from more information about CMHC products, services and programs.

Counsellors are the most useful source of housing information—Most refugees rely on the temporary shelters and multicultural centres for information about housing during their first few weeks. Refugees and service providers alike strongly agreed that direct communications between refugees and settlement counsellors and other service providers is the most effective means of helping refugees to make a successful early transition to life in Canada. Printed information becomes more useful once refugees are ready to enter the private rental market. Municipal libraries, which provide access to newspapers and the Internet, are an important source of information about Canada and Canadian culture. Informal communications networks among friends, other refugees and members of the same ethnic or national community are strengthening as communities of former refugees become better established in the region.

Service providers see a valuable role for CMHC as an information provider—Service providers say CMHC can contribute to refugee settlement and affordable housing in two ways:

- Providing expert knowledge and practical information on experience with affordable housing projects to help the local housing sector develop an affordable housing strategy; and,
- Supplying service providers with CMHC housing information that could be useful to refugees and to organizations assisting refugees.

CONCLUSION

Higher numbers of refugees arriving in the Niagara region over the last five years have increased the demand for lower-cost housing in the region—a demand for which the supply has not kept pace. Market rents for the available stock have increased and little new rental stock has been built. With shelter allowances fixed for several years, increased rental housing costs have made it more difficult for refugees to make the transition from shelters to the private rental market.

Service providers and community leaders strongly believe that better housing is an essential component of any plan to encourage refugees and other newcomers to stay in the Niagara region. They are confident that improved housing will increase the proportion of refugees entering Canada at Fort Erie to stay in Niagara communities instead of leaving for other centres such as Toronto. Improved housing information and communications between refugees and service organizations are important within a broader strategy to meet local affordable housing needs.

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BESOINS DES RÉFUGIÉS EN TERMES D'INFORMATION SUR LE LOGEMENT : RECHERCHE VISANT LA MUNICIPALITÉ RÉGIONALE DE NIAGARA

INTRODUCTION

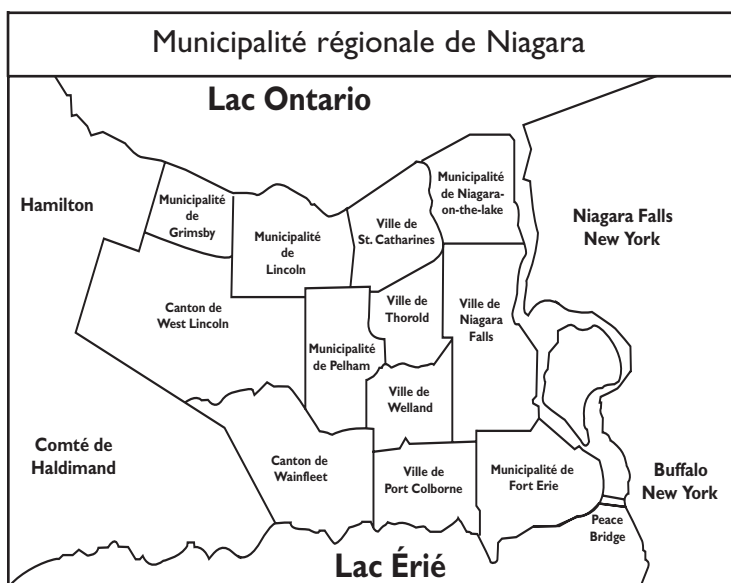
Le Peace Bridge qui relie le Canada et les États-Unis, à Fort Erie, en Ontario, est le plus important point d'entrée canadien des réfugiés qui viennent chercher asile au Canada. Depuis 2000, on a enregistré une moyenne annuelle de plus de 5 000 réfugiés arrivant au pays par Fort Erie, et le sommet a été atteint en 2001 avec 7 070 réfugiés, ce qui correspond au compte le plus élevé parmi tous les points d'entrée du Canada. Depuis 1998, le nombre des réfugiés qui arrivent au Canada par Fort Erie a grimpé d'environ 400 %, par rapport à une hausse d'environ 60 % à l'échelle du Canada.

Cette augmentation s'est traduite par une hausse extraordinaire de la demande de logements locatifs à coût modique dans la région. Les quatre objectifs de cette recherche étaient de préciser la situation de logement actuelle des réfugiés qui ont choisi de demeurer dans la municipalité régionale de Niagara (Fort Erie, Welland, St. Catharines et Niagara Falls), les choix de logements qui s'offrent à eux, leurs besoins en information sur le logement et la façon dont ces besoins peuvent être satisfaits.

MÉTHODOLOGIE

La méthodologie de l'étude comportait trois éléments.

1. **Analyse de données préexistantes** : Le travail comprenait l'analyse des données sur les réfugiés de Citoyenneté et Immigration Canada (CIC), des données sur la population et la main-d'œuvre de Statistique Canada, des données sur le logement de la Niagara Regional Housing et de l'Enquête sur les logements locatifs de la Société canadienne d'hypothèques et de logement (SCHL), des données sur les caractéristiques des réfugiés du Fort Erie Reception Centre et des statistiques sur les clients des organismes sans but lucratif.
2. **Consultations** : L'essentiel de l'information a été recueilli au moyen de 37 entrevues approfondies avec des représentants de 15 gouvernements fédéral et locaux, 11 centres multiculturels et autres organismes faisant partie du réseau des fournisseurs de services, et 11 producteurs de logements et fournisseurs d'information sur le logement.
3. **Groupes de discussion réunissant des réfugiés** : Les chercheurs ont organisé, à Fort Erie, deux groupes de discussion auxquels 15 réfugiés représentant plusieurs pays ont participé. Les discussions ont porté sur leur situation de logement actuelle, sur ce qu'ils ont vécu pendant qu'ils cherchaient un logement et sur leurs besoins en termes d'information sur le logement.



CONCLUSIONS

Profil des réfugiés qui arrivent à Fort Erie

Nombre de réfugiés—Fort Erie est le point d'entrée qui connaît la plus forte affluence de réfugiés au Canada. Les statistiques de CIC démontrent que le nombre de réfugiés qui demandent l'asile à Fort Erie s'est accru pour passer de 1 229 en 1998 à une moyenne de plus de 5 000 par année depuis 2000 :

- 4 705 en 2000;
- 7 070 en 2001;
- 5 013 en 2002;
- 3 293 au cours des sept premiers mois de 2003.

Pays d'origine — Au cours des trois dernières années, les six principaux pays d'origine des réfugiés étaient la Colombie, le Pakistan, la Turquie, le Bangladesh, l'Argentine et le Sri Lanka.

Nombre de réfugiés qui demeurent dans la région de Niagara — Selon les rapports des répondants et les données recueillies par le Fort Erie Reception Centre, on estime que de 15 à 25 % des réfugiés qui arrivent au Canada par Fort Erie demeurent dans la municipalité régionale de Niagara. La plupart des autres se rendent immédiatement à Toronto ou dans d'autres centres du sud de l'Ontario.

Niveau d'instruction — La plupart des réfugiés d'âge adulte qui sont arrivés récemment sont instruits. Les données du Fort Erie Reception Centre pour les six premiers mois de 2003 révèlent les niveaux d'instruction suivants (le total est de 99 % parce que les chiffres ont été arrondis) :

- 34 % ont un diplôme universitaire;
- 19 % ont un diplôme collégial;
- 25 % ont un diplôme d'études secondaires;
- 21 % ont fréquenté l'école secondaire, l'école primaire ou une école de métiers (ou n'ont rien indiqué concernant leur niveau d'instruction).

Emploi et revenu au cours de la première année — Il faut au moins six mois pour obtenir les approbations requises sur le plan de la santé et de l'immigration, et ainsi avoir le droit de travailler. La plupart des réfugiés ne commencent pas à travailler au cours des douze premiers mois suivant leur arrivée au Canada. La période qu'il faut dépend de facteurs comme leurs aptitudes linguistiques, la reconnaissance des titres de compétences étrangers et le marché du travail local. Avant que les réfugiés commencent à travailler, leur revenu individuel ou familial vient de l'aide sociale (programme Ontario au travail), laquelle comprend une allocation-logement.

CHOIX DE LOGEMENTS

L'hébergement temporaire, source de logement à court terme

— La plupart des réfugiés qui demeurent dans la région s'installent dans des centres d'hébergement ou des centres d'accueil dès le premier soir et y restent en général un ou deux mois. Cinq centres d'hébergement de la région, offrant quelque 80 places, fonctionnent au moyen d'ententes de financement formelles conclues avec la municipalité régionale de Niagara. Plusieurs autres centres d'hébergement fonctionnent sans ententes de financement. Depuis quelques années, les places des centres d'hébergement ne suffisent pas à répondre à la demande, et il arrive souvent que les réfugiés soient envoyés dans des hôtels ou des motels. La plupart des centres d'hébergement offrent des services de soutien, comme des conseils pour les aider à s'établir et de l'aide à la recherche d'un logement et d'un emploi à plus long terme.

Le marché locatif privé est la source de la plupart des logements à long terme — Presque tous les réfugiés trouvent un logement sur le marché locatif privé quand ils quittent un centre d'hébergement temporaire. Dans la région de Niagara, la pénurie de logements locatifs que les réfugiés peuvent se permettre est aiguë, particulièrement dans les collectivités de plus petite taille. Peu de nouveaux logements locatifs ont été construits au cours des dernières années, et les loyers du marché ont augmenté, surtout à Fort Erie (de 5,3 % en 2002).

Les statistiques de l'Enquête sur les logements locatifs de la SCHL démontrent que les loyers du marché des trois quarts des logements de la région environ sont supérieurs à l'allocation-logement que reçoivent les réfugiés et qui n'a pas augmenté depuis plusieurs années. Les fournisseurs de services ont donné l'écart entre les loyers du marché et l'allocation-logement comme étant le principal obstacle à de meilleurs logements pour les réfugiés. Les conseillers qui aident les réfugiés à s'établir estiment qu'ils ont énormément de difficulté à trouver des logements répondant aux normes et aux besoins essentiels d'environ 20 à 25 % des réfugiés. C'est au cours de la période de transition, entre le moment où le réfugié quitte le centre d'hébergement temporaire et celui où il trouve un emploi et gagne suffisamment d'argent pour payer le loyer du marché, que le problème d'abordabilité est le plus sérieux.

Le logement subventionné joue un rôle limité au cours de la première année

— Peu de réfugiés vivent dans des logements subventionnés par le secteur public dans l'année qui suit leur arrivée dans la région de Niagara. Certains logements appartenant à la Niagara Regional Housing, l'organisme public de logement de la région, sont disponibles immédiatement pour les réfugiés ayant des besoins spéciaux, notamment les personnes handicapées et les personnes qui vivent une situation de violence

familiale. Les organismes de services encouragent les réfugiés à faire une demande de logement subventionné dès que possible; on espère ainsi trouver une réponse aux besoins de logement à long terme des réfugiés dont les perspectives d'emploi sont moins bonnes.

Les réfugiés bénéficient de services de logement et d'autres services grâce à un solide réseau local de soutien — La région de Niagara offre un solide réseau local de soutien aux réfugiés. Ce réseau inclut les centres d'hébergement, le Fort Erie Reception Centre (qui accueille tous les nouveaux arrivants au Peace Bridge), trois centres multiculturels, des commissions scolaires locales, des partenaires de l'initiative pour les sans-abri de Niagara, la Niagara Regional Housing et de nombreux autres organismes de services. Ces organismes fonctionnent sans l'aide de Citoyenneté et Immigration Canada. En effet, ce ministère ne verse pas de fonds pour les réfugiés. L'intervention active du gouvernement ontarien en ce qui concerne les services aux réfugiés est également très limitée. La principale contribution de l'Ontario est le financement de 80 % de l'indemnité quotidienne destinée aux places dans les centres d'hébergement temporaire (la municipalité régionale de Niagara fournit le 20 % restant).

Les services offerts par le réseau de soutien sont, notamment, l'hébergement temporaire, les conseils dispensés pour aider les réfugiés à s'établir, la recherche d'un logement locatif, l'aide relative aux questions de santé et de droit, l'apprentissage de l'anglais et l'inscription des enfants à l'école.

BESOINS EN MATIÈRE D'INFORMATION SUR LE LOGEMENT ET SOURCES D'INFORMATION

Information à l'intention des réfugiés — Une fois qu'ils ont trouvé une solution à leurs besoins d'hébergement immédiats, les réfugiés souhaitent de l'information à jour sur les choix de logements locatifs, les droits et obligations des locataires, le coût total du loyer, les choix de logements subventionnés et les logements disponibles dans la ville où ils se trouvent ou dans d'autres villes. De nombreux réfugiés veulent de l'information présentée simplement et dans des langues autres que l'anglais. L'information relative à l'achat d'une habitation ne représente pas une priorité immédiate pour les réfugiés, bien que nombre d'entre eux voient l'accession à la propriété comme un objectif important à atteindre une fois qu'ils auront trouvé un emploi et qu'ils seront mieux établis.

Information à l'intention des fournisseurs de services — Les fournisseurs de services souhaitent un meilleur accès à des services de traduction et d'interprétation, afin de pouvoir mieux servir les réfugiés dans leur langue. Ils veulent réduire les risques que courent les réfugiés de rencontrer des problèmes causés par les obstacles linguistiques et les différences culturelles. Les services de santé mentale sont également prioritaires, et il faut aux clients réfugiés des renseignements de meilleure qualité sur les services disponibles et sur la façon d'y accéder. Les fournisseurs de services ont indiqué qu'il serait avantageux pour eux d'avoir plus d'information sur les produits, les services et les programmes de la SCHL.

Les conseillers sont la source la plus utile d'information sur le logement — La plupart des réfugiés comptent sur les centres d'hébergement temporaire et sur les centres multiculturels pour obtenir de l'information au cours des quelques semaines qui suivent leur arrivée au pays. Les réfugiés et les fournisseurs de services s'entendent tous pour dire que les communications directes entre les réfugiés et les conseillers qui les aident à s'établir et autres fournisseurs de services constituent le moyen le plus efficace d'aider les réfugiés à réussir tôt leur transition à la vie au Canada. Les imprimés qui fournissent de l'information deviennent plus utiles une fois que les réfugiés sont prêts à accéder au marché du logement locatif privé. Les bibliothèques municipales, où l'on peut avoir accès aux journaux et à l'Internet, sont des sources importantes d'information au sujet du Canada et de la culture canadienne. Les réseaux de communication informels, entre amis, réfugiés et membres d'un même groupe ethnique ou national, se consolident au fur et à mesure que les collectivités d'anciens réfugiés s'implantent plus fermement dans la région.

Les fournisseurs de services estiment que la SCHL peut jouer un rôle précieux en tant que source de renseignements — Les fournisseurs de services disent que la SCHL peut aider les réfugiés à s'établir et à trouver des logements abordables de deux façons :

- en mettant à profit ses connaissances approfondies et ses renseignements pratiques au sujet des ensembles de logements abordables afin d'aider le secteur local du logement à concevoir une stratégie visant le logement abordable;
- en donnant aux fournisseurs de services de l'information sur le logement qui pourrait être utile aux réfugiés et aux organismes leur venant en aide.

CONCLUSION

Les nombres accrus de réfugiés qui sont arrivés dans la région de Niagara au cours des cinq dernières années ont fait grimper la demande de logements à coût modique dans la région, demande que n'a pas suivi l'offre. Les loyers du marché exigés pour les logements disponibles ont augmenté et peu de nouveaux logements locatifs ont été construits. Compte tenu des allocations-logement qui n'ont pas changé depuis des années et des loyers qui ont augmenté, il est devenu plus difficile pour les réfugiés de passer du centre d'hébergement temporaire à un logement locatif privé.

Les fournisseurs de services et les dirigeants communautaires croient fermement que l'offre de meilleurs logements fait partie de tout plan visant à encourager les réfugiés et autres nouveaux arrivants à demeurer dans la région de Niagara. Ils croient que les réfugiés qui arrivent au Canada par Fort Erie seront plus nombreux à demeurer dans les collectivités de la municipalité régionale de Niagara plutôt que de partir pour d'autres centres comme Toronto s'ils peuvent y trouver de meilleurs logements. L'amélioration de l'information sur le logement et des communications entre les réfugiés et les organismes offrant des services est importante, dans le cadre d'une stratégie plus globale de réponse aux besoins locaux de logements abordables.

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Recherche sur le logement à la SCHL

Aux termes de la partie IX de la *Loi nationale sur l'habitation*, le gouvernement du Canada verse des fonds à la SCHL afin de lui permettre de faire de la recherche sur les aspects socio-économiques et techniques du logement et des domaines connexes, et d'en publier et d'en diffuser les résultats.

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Executive Summary

Research Objectives - This research examined the housing situation of refugees crossing into Canada at Fort Erie and staying in the Niagara region. Fort Erie is a major entry point for asylum-seeking refugees who cross into Canada, with over 5,000 refugee claims in 2002 and more than 7,000 in 2001. The number of refugee claims at Fort Erie has increased by more than 300 per cent in the last few years and this has put tremendous pressure on the demand for low cost rental housing in the region. The objectives of this research were to identify housing options available to refugees in the Niagara region, their housing information needs, and how these needs might be met. The research focused on the housing cycle and housing information needs of Fort Erie and the surrounding communities in the Niagara region including Welland, St. Catharines and Niagara Falls.

Methodology - There were three components of the study methodology.

1. *Secondary data analysis*: Analysis of refugee data from Citizen and Immigration Canada (CIC), population and labour force data from Statistics Canada, housing data from Niagara Regional Housing and CMHC's Rental Market Survey, data on refugee characteristics from the Fort Erie Reception Centre, and client statistics from various non-profit organizations.
2. *Consultations*: Most of the information for the research was collected through a series of 37 in-depth interviews with representatives of local and federal governments (15), multicultural centres and other organizations in the network of service providers (11), and housing and housing information providers (11).
3. *Focus Groups*: Two focus group discussions were conducted in Fort Erie with 15 refugees from several countries. The discussions covered their current housing situation, experiences finding housing, and housing information needs. Participants in the two groups were divided according to whether they had been in Canada for less than or more than six months. English-Spanish interpretation services were provided for each discussion group.

Refugee profile

Numbers of refugees - Fort Erie is the busiest entry point in Canada for refugees. CIC statistics indicate that the number of refugees claiming asylum at Fort Erie has increased from 1,229 in 1998 to an average of over 5,000 per year since 2000: 4,705 in 2000, 7,070 in 2001, 5,013 in 2002, and 3,293 for the first seven months of 2003. These numbers represent approximately 15% of all refugee claims for Canada (including government-sponsored refugees).

Country of origin - In the last three years, the top six countries of origin for refugees are Colombia, Pakistan, Turkey, Bangladesh, Argentina, and Sri Lanka.

Numbers who stay in Niagara - Comprehensive data on migration patterns and the numbers of refugees who stay in the Niagara Region are not available. Based on respondent reports and some data collected by the Fort Erie Reception Centre, an estimated 15% to 25% of refugees entering Canada at Fort Erie remain in the Niagara region. Most of the rest travel immediately to Toronto or other centres in southern Ontario.

Educational attainment - A majority of adult refugees are well educated. Data from the Fort Erie Reception Centre for the first six months of 2003 indicate that 34% of refugees have a

university degree, 19% have a college degree, 25% have a high school diploma, and 21% have some high school, primary school or trade school (or did not list an educational level).

Short-term housing in shelters - Most refugees remaining in the Niagara region stay in temporary shelters and hostels on their first night. Stays at these temporary shelters typically range from one to two months. There are five shelters in the region, with approximately 80 spaces, that operate with formal funding agreements with the Regional Municipality. Several other shelters operate independently without these funding agreements. Because the number of shelter beds has not been sufficient to meet demand in recent years, refugees often are sent to hotels and motels to deal with the overflow. The shortage of temporary shelter spaces is one of the most important housing problems for refugees, with one shelter director estimating that another 20 to 30 spaces are needed in Fort Erie alone. All respondents said that good shelters provide supports like settlement counselling and help finding longer-term housing and employment.

Longer term housing in the private rental market - Almost all refugees must find housing in the private rental market once they are ready to leave a temporary shelter. The shortage of rental housing in the region that refugees can afford with their housing allowance is acute, particularly in smaller communities. The gap between what refugees receive as a shelter allowance and market rents in the region is the biggest problem reported by service providers, with about three-quarters of rental units in the region having rents that are higher than the shelter allowances. All respondents described the housing situation for refugees and other lower income households as a serious problem. While the number of refugees arriving in the region has increased substantially, few new rental units have been built. Settlement counsellors estimated that they have great difficulty finding housing that meets basic needs and standards for about 20% to 25% of refugees. The affordability problem is most acute during the transition period after refugees leave temporary shelter to the time when they find employment and earn enough income to pay market rents. This takes at least six months and usually 12 months or more, with the length of time depending on factors such as language ability, recognition of foreign credentials, and the job local market.

The role of subsidized housing - Few refugees live in publicly-subsidized housing managed by Niagara Regional Housing in the first year of their arrival in Niagara. Some units are available almost immediately for refugees with special needs or circumstances such as disability or family violence. Refugees are encouraged to apply for subsidized housing as soon as possible, with the expectation that it might meet the longer-term needs of refugees with poorer employment prospects.

Housing services available to refugees - There is a strong local support network for refugees in the Niagara region that has evolved over the last 20 years from its origins with charitable and faith-based organizations. This network includes the housing shelters, the Fort Erie Reception Centre, the three multicultural centres, school boards, partners in the Niagara Homelessness Initiative, Niagara Regional Housing, and many other service organizations. In addition to

temporary shelter, some of the important services provided to refugees include settlement counselling, ESL training, assistance with health and legal matters (e.g. interpretation, completing forms, arranging and transportation to appointments), searching for rental housing, and school placement for children. The local support network operates without assistance from Citizenship and Immigration Canada, which does not provide funding for asylum-seeking refugees. Active involvement by the Government of Ontario in refugee services also is very limited; its main contribution is funding 80% of the per diem allocation for temporary shelter spaces (with the Region of Niagara providing the other 20%).

Housing information needs

For refugees - The most important types of housing information identified by refugees, once their short-term shelter needs have been met, include up-to-date information on rental housing options, the rights and obligations of tenants and landlords, understanding total rental costs (including utilities), information on subsidized housing options, and information about housing availability in other centres. Refugees emphasized the value of information, simply presented, in languages other than English (little translated information is available now). A few refugees in the discussion groups said that they would like to know more about purchasing a home in Canada.

For service providers - Service providers want to improve their capacity to deliver services and information in alternative languages. They would like better access to translation and interpretation services to reduce the risks and problems related to language barriers and cultural differences. Mental health services were also identified as a priority, with better information about available services and how to access them needed to serve refugee clients. Service providers would benefit from increased information on CMHC's products, services and programs.

Sources of housing information - In the first month or two, most refugees rely mainly on staff and counsellors of temporary shelters and the multicultural centres for information about housing. Both refugees and service providers strongly agreed that settlement counsellors and others who communicate directly with refugees are the most valuable and effective means of helping refugees to make a successful early transition to life in Canada. Printed information such as local newspapers and directories become more useful once immediate needs have been met and refugees are ready to make the transition to the private rental market. Most printed information is useful only to refugees who are proficient in English. Any information available in alternative languages is generally found at the a multicultural centre. Municipal libraries, which provide access to both newspapers and the Internet, serve as an important source of information about Canada and Canadian culture. Informal communications networks among friends, other refugees, and members of the same ethnic or national community are strengthening as communities of former refugees become better established in the region.

Role for CMHC as an information provider

Service providers identified two areas where CMHC can make a contribution:

- ▲ provide knowledge and expertise, which could include helping the Region of Niagara develop its affordable housing strategy (e.g. “sit at the table”); and
- ▲ tell service providers about the types of housing information produced by CMHC that could be useful to refugees and to organizations assisting refugees.

1. Introduction

1.1 Study Objectives

Fort Erie, a city with a 2001 population of 28,140, located in the Niagara Region which has a population of 410,575, is a major entry point for asylum-seeking refugees who cross into Canada in Ontario. There were over 5,000 refugee claims made by people who crossed the Peace Bridge at Fort Erie in 2002 and more than 7,000 in 2001 - more than the number of refugee claims made at Pearson International Airport in Toronto during these years. The number of refugee claims at Fort Erie has increased dramatically in the last few years, putting tremendous pressure on the available housing. Refugee claims have increased more than threefold since 1998-1999 when there were just over 1,500 claims.

The broad objective of this research is to provide practical information that can be used to improve the housing situation of refugees. CMHC initiated the project with three specific research objectives:

- ▲ to identify the types of housing options available to refugees;
- ▲ to determine the housing information needs of refugees; and,
- ▲ to identify types of information products that should be developed, and the distribution channels that could be used, to meet the identified needs.

The research focused on the housing cycle and housing information needs of Fort Erie and the surrounding communities in the Niagara region including Welland, St. Catharines and Niagara Falls. The primary target audience for the research report includes municipal leaders, service providers and policy analysts - groups that also were important contributors to the research.

1.2 Research Issues and Challenges

There were many challenges and issues to consider for the planning and conduct of this project. Some of the important ones are as follows.

- ▲ There is an extensive refugee support network with a large number of organizations and service providers. In an effort to be responsive to their clientele, many of these organizations have developed their own information and referral networks about housing in the area.
- ▲ The refugee population crossing into Canada at Fort Erie is large, mobile, diverse and changing. Recently there has been a large increase in number of refugee claims at Fort Erie. The refugee population is a moving target and this makes it difficult for any

organization, official or expert to make valid generalizations about it. For example, changing countries of origin has an impact on the languages required for translating information on housing, expectations for housing sizes, types and locations, and the life skills of newcomers.

▲ It is a dynamic environment for public sector funding of affordable housing. New federal and provincial money for affordable housing will have as yet unknown impacts on the housing options available to refugees and other low income households in the Niagara region. In the future new funding may be available to support enhanced agreements between service providers and provincial and municipal governments.

▲ There is a wide variety of types of housing information, including informal networks of friends, relatives, and extended social networks. Service organizations fulfill a crucial role as channels for housing information and interpreters of the information for refugees.

▲ It is very difficult to compile a complete quantitative refugee profile using a “bottom-up” approach. The quality and completeness of data that can be provided by municipal governments and service organizations varies widely.

1.3 Methodology

The research methodology was designed to deal with these challenges, mainly by taking advantage of the knowledge and experience of individuals in the network of public sector and non-profit organizations providing services to refugees in Niagara. Three main sources of information were used in the research: in-depth consultations with representatives of service providers, a secondary data analysis of data on refugees collected by the federal and regional governments, and focus groups with refugees.

Secondary Data Analysis

Several sources of data were analyzed to develop profiles of the Niagara region and its communities, the numbers and characteristics of refugees entering the region at Fort Erie, and the services provided to refugees by government and non-government organizations. These sources of data include the following:

- ▲ Statistics Canada: 1996 and 2001 Census; Labour Force Surveys;
- ▲ Citizenship and Immigration Canada: Point of entry refugee statistics
- ▲ Niagara Regional Housing: Annual Report
- ▲ Fort Erie Reception Centre: statistics from refugee management reports
- ▲ Various non-profit service organizations: annual reports, tabulations of client statistics

Consultations

Most of the information used for our analysis was collected through consultations with locally-based organizations and with the range of governments and other organizations providing services to refugees and the refugee support network in the area. These consultations provided information both from interviews with one or more organization representatives and from documents and other materials (e.g. for communications) collected from the organizations.

A total of 37 interviews were conducted for the research. Most of the interviews were conducted in-person, including almost all interviews with representatives of municipalities, refugee settlement services, multicultural centres, other major service organizations, and housing information providers. Other interviews were conducted by telephone. The following table presents the number of interviews completed by type of organization. A more detailed respondent list is appended to this report.

Type of Organization	Number of Interviews
Federal government	5
Municipal and Regional governments	10
Multicultural centres, Refugee Reception Centre	4
Other community organizations in the service provider network	7
Housing and housing information providers	11
Total	37

Focus Groups with Refugees

Two focus group discussions were conducted for the research: one with recently-arrived refugees who had been in Canada for only six 6 months or less, and one with refugees who had arrived in Canada at least six months earlier. Participants in both focus groups were recruited through the Fort Erie Multicultural Centre; most were residents of Fort Erie. The discussions were held at the Multicultural Centre on October 6, 2003. A total of 15 refugees participated in the discussions: nine from Columbia, two from Turkey, one from Indonesia, one from Costa Rica, one from Pakistan, and one from Venezuela. English-Spanish interpretation services were provided for each discussion group.

Discussion topics included their housing history since arriving in Canada, current housing situation, housing information needs, sources of housing information, usefulness of various types of information, preferred information sources, and other issues related to employment and living in the Niagara region.

2. Profile of Refugees Arriving at Fort Erie

2.1 Community Characteristics

The Region of Niagara is located in Southern Ontario, just south of Hamilton, bordered on the North East by Lake Ontario, the South West by Lake Erie, and to the South East by the United States (Buffalo and Niagara Falls). The Region is composed on a number of municipalities, including Niagara Falls, St. Catharines, Niagara on the Lake, Fort Erie, Port Colbourne, Wainfleet, Pelham, Welland, and Thorold.

According to the Statistics Canada 2001 Census data, the population in the Niagara Region is 410,574 individuals. This represents an increase of 1.8 percent over the 1996 figures. The median age in Niagara is 40 years. Compared with the population growth rate of 6.1% and a median age of 37.2 years for the province of Ontario as a whole, and the numbers for Niagara reinforce anecdotal evidence of an aging population whose youth are leaving the region for opportunities in other parts of the province.

The population and median age figures are presented in Exhibit 2.1 for some key municipalities in the region.

Exhibit 2.1: Population Statistics for the Region of Niagara

Municipality	Population 2001	Percent change from 1996	Median Age
Niagara Falls	78,815	2.5	39.6
St. Catharines	129,170	-1.3	40.3
Fort Erie	28,143	3.5	40.5
Welland	48,402	0.0	40.0
Thorold	18,048	0.9	38.0
Total – Region of Niagara	410,574	1.8	40.0
Comparison – Total for Ontario	11,410,046	6.1	37.2

Source: Statistics Canada, 2001 Community Profiles.

The Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) of St. Catharines-Niagara, as depicted by Statistics Canada Census 1996 data, is one that appears to be less well-off than other nearby CMAs (e.g., Hamilton, London or Kitchener) on a number of measures (see Exhibit 3.2, below). For example, the average amount of government transfer payments to families is highest in the St. Catharines-Niagara CMA at \$7,565. As well, the average family employment income is lowest in this CMA (\$39,766) – almost \$6,000 lower than the next lowest CMA (at \$45,530 in London). As well, we see that more than a quarter own their homes and just over one in five (21.3%) rent. Of those renting, St. Catharines-Niagara CMA has the highest percent (44.6%), after Toronto, whose gross rent exceeds (or equals) 30% of the family income. This implies that the rents in the CMA are generally high and not affordable (given family incomes).

Exhibit 2.2: Selected Characteristics for Five CMAs

	St. Catharines -Niagara	Hamilton	Kitchener	London	Toronto
Total census families	105,190	173,120	104,915	107,515	1,135,140
Ave. government transfer payments to families (\$)	7,565	6,525	5,884	6,658	5,763
Average family income – all sources (\$)	53,674	60,899	59,658	58,671	64,044
Average family employment income (\$)	39,766	47,984	48,466	45,530	52,355
Families living in owner-occupied dwellings* (#)	81,550	129,270	74,590	75,545	772,415
Families living in owner-occupied dwellings* (%)	77.5%	74.7%	71.1%	70.3%	68.1%
Families with mortgage (%)	53%	56.5%	61.1%	60.5%	58.4%
Average owner's (with a mortgage) major payments (monthly) (\$)	1,117	1,326	1,245	1,215	1,586
Owner's (with a mortgage) major payments >= 30% of family income (#)	10,710	19,695	11,170	11,075	18,530
Owner's major payments >= 30% of family income (%)	13.1%	15.2%	15.0%	14.7%	23.8%
Families living in renter-occupied dwellings* (#)	22,400	42,950	29,815	30,660	360,875
Families living in renter-occupied dwellings* (%)	21.3%	24.8%	28.4%	28.5%	31.8%
Average gross rent (monthly) (\$)	651	698	679	692	835
Gross rent >= 30% of family income (#)	9,990	17,750	11,515	13,120	164,750
Gross rent >= 30% of family income (%)	44.6%	41.3%	38.6%	42.8%	45.7%

* Non-farm, non-reserve

Source: Statistics Canada 1996 Census

Recently the Town of Fort Erie undertook their own survey of their local housing situation. The Fort Erie Social Capital Survey (undertaken in January 2003) found that 73.7% of respondents own their home and that 81.6% of respondents live in a house. For the balance of respondents, the survey found that: 6.6% live in an apartment within a house; 6.3% live in a townhouse; 4.6% live in an apartment; 0.3% live in a trailer or mobile home; and, 0.3% have some other housing arrangement.

The survey also found that Fort Erie has 890 people on social assistance or requesting social assistance for housing. This represents 3.2% of the population, the same proportion of the population for the Region of Niagara as a whole. As well, it was found that 55 people in Fort Erie are considered homeless (March 2003), which is reported to be the third highest number in the region.

2.2 Number and Key Characteristics of Refugees

Rationale

Understanding the key characteristics of refugees entering Canada at Fort Erie is important as it helps provide service providers with an idea of the types of services, information and interventions that may be required for this population. For example:

- ▲ Language provides an indication of interpretation requirements for in-person services and translation requirements for brochures and other printed information. As well, language ability determines language training requirements upon arrival and is an important indicator of when a refugee will be ready to look for work.
- ▲ Country of origin provides an indication of the type of environment refugees are accustomed to, which will in turn inform service providers of the types of services and extent of interventions that will be required: e.g., is the refugee arriving from an urban centre and are they accustomed to high density multi-family housing and the associated norms for behaviour and tenant practices?
- ▲ Household composition provides housing providers with information on the types of housing that will be required (i.e. bachelor units for singles, three bedroom units for large families).
- ▲ Education and/or occupation provides service providers with information about the types of services that likely will be required (e.g., language instruction, job seeking services, resume writing, qualification equivalency services), as well as whether these refugees require housing that is close to schools or certain industries to facilitate school or work without requiring a car.

Data Quality Issues

We have endeavoured to provide the most comprehensive data on refugees over the five year target period from 1998 to 2003. This often means reporting from different sources, depending on the measure. We have stated the source where data are presented in the rest of this section.

In developing a profile of refugees, a significant challenge emerged in finding reliable data sources. Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) were able to provide data on the number of

asylum-seeking refugees entering at Fort Erie and for Canada as a whole over the five year period from 1998 to 2003. However, these data were not always consistent with other sources (for example, local refugee-serving organizations) for reasons such as differences in reporting periods. In cases where there are such differences, this report presents the CIC data, assuming it to be collected consistently and since it is the only source to provide data for the five year target period.

However, CIC data with respect to refugee occupation and education were provided only for landed refugees who remained in Fort Erie, and these variables were not collected routinely for these refugees. For these characteristics, the data collected by the Fort Erie Reception Centre are considered to be superior, although for only two discrete time periods rather than the desired five year period from 1998 to 2003.

Numbers of Refugees

Total numbers of refugees - According to CIC, the number of refugees claiming asylum at Fort Erie climbed steadily from 1,229 in 1998 to a peak of 7,070 in 2001. It appears that 2003 will likely be another busy year for the border with 3,292 already crossed before the end of July (see Exhibit 2.4). Figures for Canada as a whole also reflect the same trend as for Fort Erie with a steady climb to the peak of 44,714 in 2001. The Fort Erie Refugee Reception Centre reported total clients of 4,392 for the fiscal year 2002/2003. The Reception Centre data for April 1 to September 30, 2003 report 2,083 total claimants for the six month period.

Comparative numbers across points of entry - Data from CIC (reported to the Regional Municipality of Niagara Community and Health Services Committee in October, 2002), indicated that 21,219 or 49% of the refugee claims made in Canada in 2001 were made in Ontario. With 7,070 claims, Fort Erie processed the largest percent of claims in 2001 in both Ontario (32%) and Canada (16%). (Excluding the 9,658 inland claims handled at Etobicoke, Fort Erie handled 47% of refugees crossing at U.S. - Ontario border points in 2001.) For comparative purposes, Pearson Airport processed 6,131 claims, Montreal processed 5,298 claims and Vancouver processed 1,735 claims for the same period. Exhibit 2.4 presents the numbers of refugee claims for Canada and Fort Erie for 1998 to 2003.

Refugees who remain in Niagara - There are no comprehensive quantitative data on the numbers of refugees who stay to live in the Niagara Region. However, all the respondents interviewed for this study indicated that a majority of refugees leave the region, with some estimates being as high as 85%. According to data provided by the Fort Erie Reception Centre for 2001/2002, about a quarter of refugees (26 percent) reported that they would stay in Fort Erie. This number decreased to only 9 percent according to the 2003 figures - although Fort Erie remained the number two destination of choice by refugees. These and other destinations and the proportion of refugees migrating are outlined in Exhibit 2.3. It is very difficult to know if refugees travelled to the destinations they indicated to the Reception Centre since movements of asylum-seeking

refugees are not tracked, except to the extent that they are present at their IRB hearing and submit to their medical examination.

Transit through Fort Erie to Toronto - Of the refugees who arrive in Fort Erie, more than a third move on to Toronto to await their hearing with the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB). This figure is based on data collected by the Fort Erie Refugee Reception Centre, which indicate that 36% of newly-arrived refugees left immediately for Toronto over a six month period in 2003.

Exhibit 2.3: Migration Patterns of Refugees Processed by Reception Centre

Destination	01/02 (%)	2003 (%)	Destination	01/02 (%)	2003 (%)
Toronto	38	36	Hamilton	3	3
Fort Erie	26	9	Brampton	2	2
Scarborough	3	8	North York	7	2
Montreal	-	6	Kitchener	-	2
Vineland	-	6	Etobicoke	2	1
Mississauga	4	6	Other Ontario	3	4
St. Catharines	2	5	Other Quebec	-	1
Welland	-	5	Other Canada	-	1
London	10	3	Total	100	100

- = Not available or recorded

Source: Fort Erie Refugee Reception Centre, data collected between December 10, 2001 and March 31, 2002 and April 1 and September 30, 2003.

Characteristics of Refugees

According to CIC, the most commonly reported country of origin for 2003 (to date) is Pakistan with 1,113 refugees calling it home (or 34%). Columbia is next most frequently reported home country at 552 refugees (17%). Columbia was ranked number one in 2002 as country of origin (27%).

The Fort Erie Reception Centre also tracks country of origin and, for the fiscal year 2002/2003, reported the top three countries of origin to be: Columbia (1,079), Pakistan (1,053) and Turkey (319). More recent numbers from the Reception Centre for the six month period from April 1 to September 30, 2003 reveal that the top three countries are Columbia (599), Pakistan (255) and Bangladesh (211). There are two main reasons for the discrepancy between the CIC data for 2003 and the Reception Centre Data for the same year: the reporting periods are not the same, and the Reception Centre data do not include refugees claiming the United States as their country of origin and the CIC data do include this country as a reporting option.

No data is specifically available from CIC for language. The top three languages captured by the Reception Centre for 2002/2003 are Spanish (1,817 or 41%), Urdu (1,092 or 25%) and Turkish (200 or 5%).

Exhibit 2.4 also present data for age, gender and marital status. Overall, asylum-seeking refugees appear to be quite young: about one in four refugees is under 18 years of age and just under half are between 18 and 35 years old. No significant trends are recognizable in the data with the exception that the proportion of asylum-seekers who are aged 36 to 55 seems to be increasing steadily, from 18% in 1998 to 27% in 2003. Reception Centre data for the most recent six month period (April to September 2003) are generally consistent with the CIC data and report that 30% of claimants are under 19 years.

Exhibit 2.4: Demographic Characteristics of Refugees (Asylum Claimants)

	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003*
Number of refugees						
Canada	25392	30898	37853	44714	33452	20151
Fort Erie	1229	3015	4705	7070	5013	3293
Proportion processed at Fort Erie	5%	10%	12%	16%	15%	16%
Countries of Origin (rank)						
Pakistan	39 (7)	77 (11)	87 (9)	512 (5)	466 (3)	1113 (1)
Columbia	12 (21)	140 (7)	393 (3)	934 (2)	1374 (1)	552 (2)
Bangladesh	19 (17)	11 (29)	11 (36)	34 (27)	27 (24)	224 (3)
USA	8 (26)	29 (20)	37 (19)	52 (19)	135 (8)	199 (4)
Turkey	8 (26)	30 (19)	65 (13)	608 (4)	475 (2)	76 (8)
Sri Lanka	284 (1)	487 (1)	1038 (2)	1270 (1)	359 (4)	96 (7)
Argentina	29 (11)	393 (2)	1129 (1)	905 (3)	363 (5)	32 (17)
Somalia	159 (2)	143 (6)	279 (5)	312 (6)	81 (12)	28 (18)
Age (%)						
Under 18	35%	27%	29%	29%	28%	29%
18 to 35	42%	50%	47%	45%	43%	42%
36 to 55	18%	19%	20%	21%	26%	27%
56 and over	5%	4%	4%	4%	3%	2%
Gender						
Male	57%	56%	57%	58%	57%	59%
Female	43%	44%	43%	42%	43%	41%
Marital Status						
Married/Common-law	35%	37%	34%	37%	40%	40%
Single	63%	60%	61%	61%	60%	60%
Unknown	2%	3%	5%	2%	0%	0%

* Data for 2003 represent only the first seven months (i.e., up to July 31).

Source: Citizenship and Immigration Canada, special runs, August 2003.

There appears to be more male than female refugees with the proportions being approximately a 60/40 percentage split, with slight variations by year. Marital status has also been fairly stable with a slight increase in the number of married or common-law refugees, and a slight decrease in those reporting to be single or not reporting any status at all.

Neither CIC nor the Reception Centre have data related to household size.

Occupations

In terms of occupation, the most reliable data come from the Fort Erie Reception Centre (CIC data are only available from a small sample of landed refugees). Exhibit 2.5 presents the findings from the Reception Centre. Overall, the data paint a picture of individuals who were likely employable in their country of origin. Qualitative evidence from interviews and focus groups reinforce these numbers with their perception that many refugees are highly skilled and they are willing and eager to work in Canada. According to key informants, the most significant barriers to employment include:

- ▲ language skills;
- ▲ no Canadian experience;
- ▲ no recognition of their credentials/qualification/educational certifications; and,
- ▲ shortage of jobs in Niagara requiring their skills.

More recent statistics from the Reception Centre show an increase in the proportion of refugees with a background in professional and technical occupations (from 9% to 15%) and a decrease in the proportion from manufacturing and trades (from 17% to 10%).

Exhibit 2.5: Self-Reported Occupations of Refugees

Occupation/Sector	01/02 (No. / %)	2003 (No. / %)	Occupation	01/02 (No. / %)	2003 (No. / %)
Business/Office	119 (26%)	353 (25%)	Hospitality/Personal Services	17 (4%)	65 (5%)
Agricultural	12 (3%)	18 (1%)	Homemaker	37 (8%)	148 (10%)
Manufacturing/Trades	78 (17%)	141 (10%)	Unemployed	3 (1%)	14 (1%)
Professional/Technical	40 (9%)	216 (15%)	Student	88 (20%)	209 (14%)
Health/Social Service/ Government	40 (9%)	155 (11%)	Other	15 (3%)	125 (9%)
			Total	449 (100%)	1442 (100%)

Source: Fort Erie Refugee Reception Centre, December 10, 2001 to March 31, 2002 and April 1 to September 30, 2003.

Educational Attainment

Data for the level of education are available for 2003 from the Reception Centre. Of the 1,442 cases recorded for the six month period, 495 (or 34%) reported having a university degree, 280 (19%) reporting having a college degree and 362 (25%) reporting having a high school diploma. The balance (305 or 21%) reporting having some high school, primary school, trade school or did not list an educational level.

2.3 Labour Force Characteristics of the Region

Employment and Unemployment Rates and Trends

The unemployment rate in Southern Ontario as of May 2003 was 6.1%, a decrease from 6.4% in April. The gains were largely realized in construction and other goods-producing industries. The Portrait Highlights Report for Southern Ontario (HRDC, June 2003) attributed much of the gain to “seasonal expansion”.

Despite this improvement, the employment growth of 1.7% over the year from June 2002 to May 2003 was below the provincial rate of 3.0%. In Niagara this represented 35,300 new jobs and 30,300 more individuals entering the labour force. The industries enjoying the largest gains were finance, insurance, real estate and leasing, construction, and manufacturing.

The Portrait (HRDC, June 2003) also includes breakdowns by CMA and Economic Region. The St. Catharines-Niagara CMA’s unemployment rate decreased from 7.2% in April to 6.5% in both May and June, 2003. Compared to June 2002, unemployment decreased by half a percent (from 7.0% in June 2002) and employment only increased by one percent (well below the Ontario average increase of 3.0%). The largest employment increases were noted in manufacturing, accommodation and food services, information, culture and recreation, and health care and social assistance. Employment in wholesale and retail trade was markedly down, offsetting the gains in the other sectors.

Employment news in the economic region of the Hamilton-Niagara Peninsula was good from May to June and in the last year (from June 2002 to 2003). Seasonal gains in June in construction and accommodation and food services moved the unemployment rate for the region down to 6.1% from 6.3% in May. For the 12 month period, the region posted higher than average employment gains with a 3.2% increase (compared to 3.0% for the province). The unemployment rate also dropped over the same period, from 7.2% in June 2002 to 6.1% in 2003. Job gains were realized in construction, manufacturing and most industries in the services-producing sector (although the wholesale and retail trade industry was down significantly).

Implications for Refugees

The implications for refugees are that, once they have achieved an adequate level of language capabilities, those refugees with experience in manufacturing/trades and hospitality services may have an easier time finding work - especially for those in hospitality with the new Niagara Casino opening soon. However, refugees with work experience as professionals, in the business/office sector, or in the health/social services and government sectors may have more difficulty finding work. Of course, refugees face the additional hurdle of convincing Canadian employers that their credentials and qualifications are valid and that their skills are transferable to the Canadian context.

Recently these difficulties finding employment were discussed by Jeffrey Simpson, a national affairs columnist for the Globe and Mail. In his article on August 27, 2003, he referenced the Canadian Labour and Business Centre (CLBC) findings that in 2001, the first year unemployment rate for immigrants was 23 points higher than the national average and that after five years, the rate remained five points higher. This gap remained higher for newer immigrants and refugees than for those a generation ago and many questions arise as to why newcomers are having a more difficult time finding a job. The Centre's findings for 1981 where that first year unemployment rate was 10 points higher, but had dropped to the national level after five years. The CLBC report suggested the following possible factors as ones that may be affecting the ability of more recent arrivals to find a job: changing countries of origin, fewer with proficiency in English or French, and lower levels of educational achievement.

3. Review of Housing Issues

3.1 Short-term Accommodation for Refugees

Temporary shelters and hostels

Refugees staying in the Niagara region generally stay in local temporary shelters. Each Municipality has at least one agency that offers housing support to refugees: for example, Casa el Norte and Matthew House in Fort Erie; the Multicultural Centre, Housing Help Centres and Folk Art Council in St. Catharines; the Welland Heritage Council and Community Action and Resource Centre/Housing Help in Welland; and Project Share in Niagara Falls.

Some shelters operate with specific funding agreements with the Region. There are approximately 80 spaces in facilities operated by five providers who are eligible for the daily shelter allowance for residents: i.e. up to \$38 per day for shelter only, up to a maximum of 30 days, with 80% paid by the Province and 20% by the Region. The per diem allowance cannot be averaged across residents.

Three of these facilities with approximately 60 spaces qualify as “emergency hostel shelters”: the YWCA and Salvation Army in St. Catharines and the Holy Family Boys Home in Niagara Falls. These facilities mostly serve local homeless people. The two other facilities in Fort Erie, Casa el Norte and Matthew House (with approximately 20 spaces) are temporary residences intended specifically for refugees.

Casa el Norte - Casa el Norte was set up as a charitable organization approximately 13 years ago. Data provided by the hostel show 861 refugee clients served in 2002. Demand for Casa el Norte has been high and all 12 spaces are usually occupied. There have been some periods when refugee numbers have spiked (e.g. June 2002), which was described as a “crisis” for temporary shelter. Casa el Norte receives most of its clients from the Fort Erie Reception Centre, which directs refugees who want to stay in the Niagara region. Residents usually stay for four to six weeks and receive some counselling and settlement services from staff. They are referred to the Fort Erie Multicultural Centre for more counselling and settlement services. Casa el Norte has one person working full-time to help residents find housing.

Matthew House - Matthew House is the second important emergency shelter in Fort Erie located just down the street from Casa el Norte. Matthew House is incorporated as a charitable organization and is approximately three years old. It has operated under the umbrella of the Baptist Church for the last 15 months, although it has a multi-faith board and receives good support from several different churches as well as a network of volunteers. The house has three bedrooms and is limited to eight guests at a time. Matthew House relies on donations to pay for activities that support resettlement such as their a van, modest counsellor salaries, and furniture and other goods for people moving into apartments. Operators have calculated their costs to provide shelter and related services at \$46 per day. Unlike many charities in the Niagara region, Matthew House made a decision not to accept any gaming money from the region. They feel vindicated in this decision because many charities are suffering with the downturn in tourism and gaming and a reduction in the amount allocated to local charities. Matthew House also receives most of its clients by referral from the Fort Erie Reception Centre. Again like Casa el Norte, demand for space at Matthew House has been high in recent years and all places/beds are usually occupied. The director said that they turn people away “almost every day”, many of whom have to stay in local motels or hotels. Residents who have to stay longer than the 30 day maximum allowed under the hostel agreement with the Region are changed to a “room and board” arrangement under Ontario Works that pays \$11 per day.

Several other facilities that are not eligible for the \$38/day shelter allowance also provide temporary residence spaces for refugees and local homeless people. For refugees, two of the more notable ones include the Welland Multicultural Centre and Chez Marie Refugee Assistance Centre. The Salvation Army in Fort Erie also sometimes provides overnight accommodation for refugees.

Chez Marie Welcome House - Located in St. Catharines, Chez Marie Welcome House (also called Chez Marie Refugee Assistance Centre) provides a temporary residence for refugees.

Chez Marie opened in 1994 and is operated as a not-for-profit organization by the School Sisters of Notre Dame in a home provided by the Roman Catholic Diocese of St. Catharines for refugee ministry. The shelter capacity is 7 - 12 persons depending on whether the residents are singles or families. Normal stays at the shelter are from one to two months. From January 2000 through to July 2003, there were 212 residents at the centre: 159 adults and 53 children aged 16 and under. The majority of residents were from African and Latin American countries. Chez Marie also served a total of 107 non-resident clients between January 2001 and July 2003. Chez Marie provides a wide range of service for clients including facilitating all steps in the refugee legal process. The centre has 50 to 60 active volunteers, including some former residents, who help with translation (e.g. at legal aid appointments), driving and counselling. There is an ongoing demand for services after residents move from Chez Marie (e.g. for medical administration). Chez Marie is self-funded. Residents pay rent for their rooms - usually from their social assistance (Ontario Works) shelter allowance - and the centre receives \$500 a month from the diocese. The centre also receives some cash donations, along with other contributions in goods and services (e.g. furniture, food).

The Salvation Army - The Salvation Army centre in Fort Erie provides shelter accommodation for up to 15 homeless people per night in a single large room, with a separate smaller room for women. Most people stay for only one to three nights. Other services provided include counselling (e.g. substance abuse, employment, housing), day care, meals, a food bank, and some ESL training. The centre operates with one paid staff member, who also does some work with Matthew House, and many volunteers. An estimated 20 percent of users of the Salvation Army's services are refugees. They help some refugees directed to them by the Fort Erie Reception Centre by providing an overflow service. Generally they try to refer refugees to other hostels that are able to provide a more suitable range of services.

Temporary shelter in subsidized housing

Publicly-owned and non-profit housing in the Niagara region does not provide shelter housing for refugees. Some refugees stay in an 80-bed shelter owned and operated by the City of Toronto in Vineland, which is located on the boundary of the Niagara region. Some refugees may move quickly into subsidized housing if there are compelling circumstance such as family violence or a serious disability.

Shortages of Shelter Spaces

There has been a shortage of temporary shelter spaces in the last two to three years for refugees arriving in Fort Erie. Because demand for spaces has exceed the supply, the Fort Erie Reception Centre and all of the emergency shelters have referred refugees to local hotels and motels. Most of the time, the shelters also provide services to refugees staying in hotels and motels: for example, providing meals and transportation to the shelter and multicultural centres. Serving

clients who are staying off-site is time consuming and more expensive for the shelters, as well as being more difficult for the refugees. The director of Casa el Norte indicated that they referred clients to motels 12 times in the previous month alone (July 2003). The Matthew House director estimated that there is a need for another 20 to 30 shelter spaces in Fort Erie. A representative of the St. Catharines Multicultural Centre said that temporary housing is the most important housing problem for refugees in St. Catharines.

Representatives of the Niagara Homelessness Initiative strongly agreed that there is serious lack of space in temporary shelters. They described the overall need for affordable housing in the Niagara region as “a desperate situation.” The respondents said that the most urgent need for is for more emergency hostel space for the homeless, including refugees. In their view, good shelters also provide supports like counselling, help finding housing and employment.

3.2 Market Housing Options

Once refugees move from temporary shelters - usually after two to eight weeks - the vast majority move into private market rental housing.

3.2.1 Housing Market Statistics

According to the October 2002 CMHC Rental Market Report for the St. Catharines-Niagara CMA, the rental market vacancy rate increased to 2.4% from 1.9% a year earlier. This is based on a total number of 16,193 rental apartment units and 928 row units in the CMA of St. Catharines-Niagara. These vacancy rates should be treated with caution, however, since vacancy rates for 2003 are not available and it is possible that the vacancy rates have changed since October 2002.

The Fort Erie Municipal Housing Plan (2002) reported that, in the past 11 years, only 5.4% of new housing built in the town was for rental purposes. This is much lower than the regional average of 15% new housing for rental purposes. The overall housing mix in Fort Erie, again according to the Housing Plan, is as follows: 87% singles and semi-detached, 6% medium density (townhouse), and 7% high density (apartment units).

These findings for Fort Erie in terms of new housing intended for rental units were reinforced in the first quarter of 2003 (CMHC, Housing Now, St. Catharines-Niagara, 2003 Q1). CMHC found that no city or town in the CMA had new housing starts intended for rental in the quarter. Moreover, no units were reported in the CMA for the year 2002 for assisted rental and only 22 units were reported completed in 2002 for private rental.

Exhibit 3.1 presents the breakdown of rental type and number of bedrooms for the three main centres under study (i.e., Fort Erie, Welland and St. Catharines), as well as for the

St.Catharines/Niagara CMA as a whole. Note that these figures do not include shelter units or rooms for rent in private households.

Exhibit 3.1: Number of Rental Units by City and Area

Area	Bachelor	1 Bdrm	2 Bdrm	3+ Bdrm	Total
Apartment Units					
Fort Erie	-	187	181	12	394
Welland	93	1000	1455	260	2808
St. Catharines	318	3237	3909	596	8060
St. Catharines/Niagara CMA*	587	6037	8436	1133	16193
Row Units					
Fort Erie	N/U	N/U	-	-	24
Welland	N/U	-	-	172	194
St. Catharines	-	N/U	118	220	339
St. Catharines/Niagara CMA*	-	-	222	682	928
Total Apartment and Row Unit Rental Housing					
Fort Erie	-	187	181	12	418
Welland	93	1000	1455	432	3002
St. Catharines	318	3237	4027	816	8399
St. Catharines/Niagara CMA*	587	6037	8658	1815	17121

* Totals for the CMA include other centres including Niagara Falls and therefore do not represent an addition of figures for Fort Erie, Welland, and St. Catharines.

- = Not available due to reliability or confidentiality

N/U = Not in Universe; that is, no structures in universe

Source: CMHC, Rental Market Report, St. Catharines-Niagara, October 2002 Survey.

The preceding table clearly shows that there is a paucity of both the smaller and larger units that are suited for singles and large families, respectively. These shortages translate into problems for the sizeable proportion of single or large family (i.e. three or more children) refugee households arriving at Fort Erie.

3.2.2 Housing Affordability

A crucial question is the affordability of the existing rental market stock to newly-arrived refugees. In other words, how affordable are these units to refugees? Given that the income for almost all refugees comes from social assistance payments from Ontario Works for at least six months before they are able to work, what are the market rents compared to the social assistance provisions for shelter allowances? (It is important to note that refugees cannot work and must depend on Ontario Works until the entire family's medical conditions have been eliminated: e.g. if wife or child is sick, the husband will not be given a work permit.)

Exhibit 3.2 presents the number of apartment units within each rental range and the average rent for each centre and the CMA as a whole. Social assistance rates are outlined in Exhibit 3.3.

Exhibit 3.2: Market Rents for Apartments

Unit Type Community	Number of Units in Rental Range (2002)								Total Units 2002	Avg. Rent 2002	Avg. Rent 2003
	< \$400	\$400 - 439	\$440- 479	\$480 - 539	\$540- 619	\$620- 699	\$700- 799	\$800+			
Bachelor											
Fort Erie	-	-	0	-	-	-	0	0	13	\$374	-
Welland	50	-	-	-	-	0	0	0	89	\$398	-
St. Catharines	47	36	103	63	25	-	0	0	292	\$457	\$458
St. Catharines/ Niagara CMA*	183	102	115	80	35	-	0	0	538	\$431	\$434
One Bedroom											
Fort Erie	-	23	16	40	33	45	0	0	185	\$524	-
Welland	44	84	135	140	238	273	44	0	970	\$553	\$564
St. Catharines	-	121	157	379	866	1204	455	54	3249	\$607	\$619
St. Catharines/ Niagara CMA*	194	323	436	924	1485	2033	576	54	6025	\$583	\$600
Two Bedrooms											
Fort Erie	0	-	-	22	70	34	27	0	178	\$591	\$618
Welland	13	17	28	73	314	277	563	74	1405	\$659	\$668
St. Catharines	0	-	46	60	344	840	1647	901	3854	\$731	\$742
St. Catharines/ Niagara CMA*	45	87	142	283	1324	2089	3120	1212	8313	\$696	\$704
3+ Bedrooms											
Fort Erie	0	0	0	0	-	-	0	-	12	\$695	-
Welland	0	0	0	0	106	55	35	54	257	\$681	-
St. Catharines	0	0	0	0	0	-	175	364	556	\$857	\$909
St. Catharines/ Niagara CMA*	-	0	-	11	122	125	305	491	1063	\$786	\$813

* Totals for the entire CMA include other centres including Niagara Falls and therefore represent more than an addition of figures for Fort Erie, Welland, and St. Catharines.

- = Amount too small to be expressed.

Source: Special tabulations from the Housing Market Information System (October 2002 Rental Market Survey), CMHC. Average rents for 2003 are based on first results from the October 2003 Rental Market Survey.

An analysis of the preceding table shows that Fort Erie has the lowest average rents, Welland has the next lowest, and St. Catharines has the highest for all but rental units with three or more bedrooms. For these larger units, Welland has the lowest average rents, followed by Fort Erie and then St. Catharines. As well, Fort Erie has the fewest rental units and St. Catharines has the most. Welland typically falls into the middle for both average rents and numbers of units.

Average market rents have been increasing in the Niagara region. In particular, Fort Erie experienced the highest growth in rents in one bedroom and two bedroom units over the one year period: a large increase of 8.5% for one bedroom units and an increase of 5.4% in two bedroom

units. The next largest increases in these types of units was experienced in the core of St. Catharines with a growth of 3.5% in one bedroom rents and approximately 3.7% in two bedroom rents. The core of St. Catharines experienced the highest growth in 3 bedroom units at 5.9%. Fort Erie also experienced a high growth in 3 bedroom rents at almost 5%.

Exhibit 3.3: Social Assistance Rates - Shelter Allowance

Household Size	Maximum Monthly Shelter Allowance (\$)
1	\$325
2	\$511
3	\$554
4	\$602
5	\$649
6 or more people	\$673

Clearly, a comparison of data in Exhibits 3.2 and 3.3 shows that there is a serious issue of affordability of rent for individuals receiving social assistance in the region. For a single person, for whom a bachelor apartment would be appropriate, receives a monthly shelter allowance of \$325, but the average rents range from \$374 in Fort Erie to \$457 in St. Catharines - significantly beyond the shelter allowance limit. Supply of bachelor apartments is also an important issue in some areas, with just 13 units in Fort Erie and 89 in Welland.

A similar analysis can be done for households requiring one bedroom apartments. Household sizes appropriate for a one bedroom unit would be those with two or three members (assuming a couple with a child or a couple with a dependent parent who could sleep in the living room). The shelter allowance for two people is \$511 and for three people is \$554. One bedroom rents, however, average \$524 in Fort Erie, \$553 in Welland, and \$697 in St. Catharines - outside the affordability range for all but Fort Erie. But again, the overall shortage of one bedroom units in Fort Erie would be problematic when trying to find affordable accommodations since the city only has 185 one bedroom rental units compared to almost 1,000 in Welland and over 3,000 in St. Catharines. Moreover, in Fort Erie, 78 of the 185 units have rents over \$540 and the majority of the units in Welland and St. Catharines also have rents over \$540 (with the largest number falling in the \$620 to \$699 range).

For two bedroom rental units, the problem is more pronounced as it becomes necessary to have larger families sharing accommodations. For a two bedroom unit, the appropriate household size would be three or four people (assuming a couple sharing one room and the remaining one or two people in the other room). Maximum shelter allowances for these household sizes are \$554 and \$602, respectively. Rental averages for two bedroom units are \$591 in Fort Erie, \$659 in Welland and \$731 in St. Catharines. Again, all these averages are outside the affordability range

except for Fort Erie for families of four. Again, Fort Erie has very low numbers of two bedroom units: 178 compared with 1,405 for Welland and 3,843 for St. Catharines.

Finally, for three bedroom units, there is more significant gap in the average rents and the maximum shelter allowances. As well, the numbers of apartments available in all locations drops significantly for three bedroom units (only 12 in Fort Erie, 257 in Welland and 556 in St. Catharines). The shelter allowance for households of five is \$649 and for households of six or more is \$673. However, average rents are \$681 in Welland, \$695 in Fort Erie, and \$857 for St. Catharines - all outside the affordability range. Also, there are zero units St. Catharines and only 106 units in Welland below \$620 (the number for Fort Erie is not available); and only 55 units in Welland below \$699 (numbers for Fort Erie and St. Catharines are not available).

3.2.3 Service Provider Views about Housing Affordability

Reports from service providers helping refugees find housing highlight the gap between the shelter allowances and the rents charged for many of the “decent” rental apartments in the region. The effect is to reduce the rental stock accessible to refugees in the first months of their residence in Niagara. This problem is relevant for all refugees until they have received their work permit and are able to find work. This gap between affordable housing and shelter allowances from Ontario Works was discussed by many respondents who indicated that affordability is the biggest housing problem for refugees. All of the direct service providers said that they cannot find suitable housing for at least some portion of their refugees clients. One respondent pegged the number at 20 percent who do not finding suitable housing.

Following are some of the comments made by service providers about the availability of affordable housing for recently-arrived refugees.

▲ Market rental housing in Fort Erie was described by a shelter operator as “an abysmal housing situation” and poor housing was identified as a serious problem for homeless and inadequately housed people. They identified several factors that contribute to the short supply of affordable rental housing including “the huge U.S. presence”, the housing needs of seasonal workers at the Fort Erie race track, the low amounts of money people on social assistance receive for a shelter allowance, and landlords who are “not responsive.”

▲ A settlement counsellor expressed frustration with the financial gap between what refugees and others receive on social assistance and market rents in Fort Erie. She said that one local building has many empty apartments with rents in the \$700-\$800 range and the landlord wants refugees as tenants. Unfortunately, most refugees are unable to afford this level of rent.

▲ Unlike the other centres in the Niagara region, St. Catharines has a reasonable supply of affordable housing and, according to a representative of the Multicultural Centre, refugees can find affordable housing fairly quickly. There are seven or eight mid-sized

and larger private market rental buildings in the area that refugees can afford with their Ontario Works shelter allowance. A combination of low interest rates and relatively low house prices in the Niagara region contribute to high rates of home ownership among modest income households. Consequently, landlords of several buildings have come to depend on the refugee population for their tenants.

▲ Cultural barriers or discrimination based on race or ethnicity were not identified by respondents as a major problem affecting access to affordable housing. However, several service providers commented that, in their experience, some landlords do not want to rent to refugees and that race or ethnicity, along with lower incomes (i.e. social assistance), likely are factors in these landlords' attitudes. Several respondents said that the leadership of some Niagara communities is cautious about acknowledging publicly the recent influx of refugees in their communities and the changing face of the community.

3.3 Subsidized Housing Options

Characteristics of subsidized housing stock

There are approximately 7,700 subsidized housing units in the Niagara region. Niagara Regional Housing (NRH), an agency of the Regional Municipality of Niagara, operates about 300 buildings with 2,600 units. There are also about 550 Rent Supplement units. Another 4,500 units are operated by 69 different providers. Niagara Regional Housing manages the Central Waiting List for the entire region, including eligibility assessment and offers of units to Rent Supplement landlords and the 69 housing providers (both non-profit and co-operatives). NRH also provides Rent-Geared-to-Income (RGI) housing.

Niagara Regional Housing does not track statistics on refugees living in subsidized housing units in the region. Although NRH does not make refugees a specific priority, managers indicated that a significant number of residents in NRH-operated buildings are new arrivals to Canada (both refugees or immigrants). Based on their recent impressions, NRH managers indicated that the largest refugee claimant groups currently living in subsidized housing are Colombians, followed by Turkish and Congolese refugees.

Availability of spaces for refugees

Public sector housing in its various forms is not a short-term option for most newly-arrived refugees because the supply is limited and the waiting lists are too long to meet their immediate needs for housing. Despite these barriers, most service providers advise refugee clients to apply for public housing, even though it may take one to two years to get a space. This is viewed as something of a housing insurance policy for those refugees who will require more time to become established in the region. Several service providers said that many refugees ask about

public housing but most just want low cost housing during the period of time while they are getting established.

Over the longer term, publicly subsidized housing plays an important role for refugees. A representative of Ontario Works based in Fort Erie estimated that up to one-third of her refugee clients are housed in Niagara Regional Housing units. Also, refugees with special needs or those facing situations of family violence may move up more quickly on the priority lists.

New affordable housing initiatives

Several respondents reported that municipal governments in the Niagara region do not have a history of involvement in social housing. NRH stock was inherited recently from the provincial government and the Region does not yet have a housing strategy or plan: one is still in development at the conceptual stage. NRH, in consultation with other regional government officials, are currently working to secure funding offered by both the federal and provincial governments for affordable housing units. For example, NRH has a proposal before regional council for Niagara to become one of the municipalities eligible for some of the remaining 800 units allocated to Ontario as part of the joint federal-provincial agreement (3,200 of the 4,000 total units available for Ontario in the first major budget allocation have already been allocated to 12 communities; up to 35 communities are potential recipients of the remaining 800 units).

Niagara Regional Housing has established a Housing Initiatives Committee in consultation with community and municipal partners. Through the Committee, NRH is actively involved in exploring opportunities to develop new affordable housing in the region. Senior NRH representatives reported that they are looking at new affordable housing options that would involve both the private developers and service agencies and could potentially provide more affordable housing that would also serve refugee clients. In their view, the current housing crisis for refugees has escalated because of low vacancy rates in the private housing market and the affordability gap between Ontario Works maximum shelter allowances and the combined costs of market rents and utilities.

NRH officials have made several recommendations to their regional government to increase the supply of affordable housing:

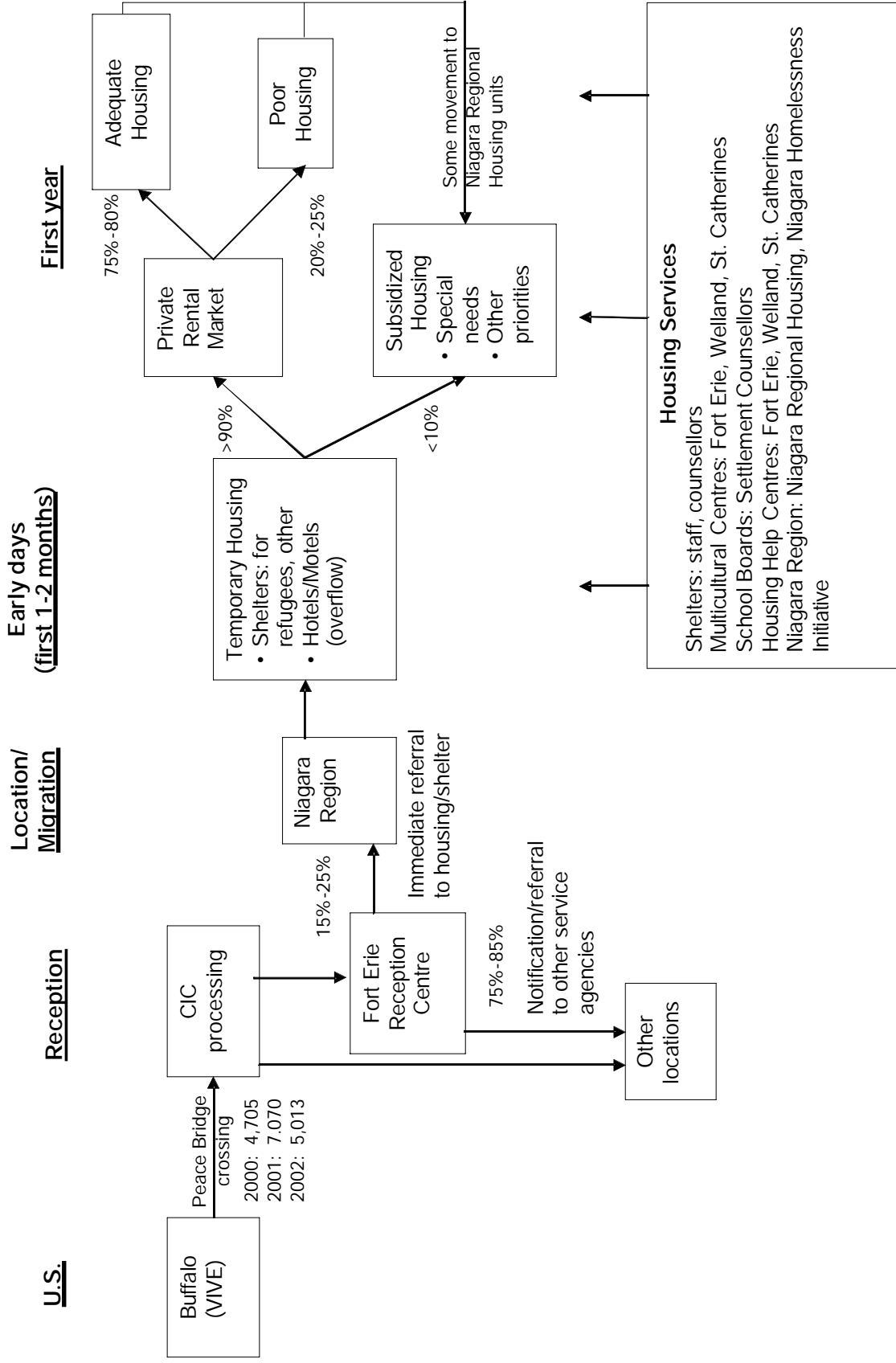
- ▲ maintain the budget for NRH;
- ▲ identify surplus land in the Niagara region for affordable housing projects;
- ▲ identify vacant buildings for potential use or conversion to affordable housing; and,
- ▲ make a commitment to affordable housing.

3.4 Housing Services Available to Refugees

This section reviews housing services available to refugees as well as some of the pressures and problems faced by service organizations to help refugees find affordable housing.

The chart presented on the following page summarizes refugee housing during the first year in the Niagara region and identifies the main housing services available to refugees.

Refugee Housing During the First Year



Note: The statistics presented in the table and the terms "adequate" and "poor" housing are based on consultations with service providers

Fort Erie Refugee Reception Centre

The Fort Erie Refugee Migration and Health Centre, commonly referred to as the Refugee Reception Centre, provides early reception and settlement services for almost all refugees who arrive in Canada at Fort Erie. In April 2001, a meeting was held with 68 participants at which all the key stakeholders agreed to the reception centre model for serving refugees. This model included having the Reception Centre assume the responsibility for meeting the immediate shelter needs of refugees. Previously, this work was done by CIC staff - who were happy to relinquish the task.

The Reception Centre has been in operation for close to two years, opening in December 2001 following the efforts of a core group of volunteers, working primarily with the support of the Town of Fort Erie and the Fort Erie Multicultural Centre. A large working group also contributed to the efforts to start the centre, including representatives of refugee shelters, municipal, regional and provincial governments, community service organizations (e.g. health, legal), and charities. The Reception Centre has an independent governance structure. Planning is ongoing to extend the reception centre concept to a planned "migration health centre." A centre representative said that "getting the health part of reception going was difficult" because of problems finding doctors who are available for the work.

Since its inception, the Reception Centre has received almost all refugees that pass through the CIC-run refugee processing centre. A representative of the Reception Centre estimated that it received, and provided services to, 98% of all refugees from December 2001 until June 2003. More recently, following a reduction of funding, the centre closed on weekends. In August 2003, they estimated that the Reception Centre was receiving approximately 80% of the total, with the rest probably leaving the Niagara Region immediately - most being sent to Toronto shelters by CIC.

Almost all refugees coming to Canada flow through VIVE, the refugee processing centre on the Buffalo side of the Peace Bridge. Canadian authorities only accept refugees at the Fort Erie processing centre for whom they have received advance notification from VIVE. The Fort Erie Reception Centre, the local CIC office, and VIVE have a close working relationship at the operational level. For example, they have monthly meetings and share information. Refugees in Buffalo staying with VIVE make appointments with the Fort Erie Reception Centre.

The Refugee Reception Centre produces a daily log ("Refugee Management Report") that shows the intake of refugees in the Niagara Region, the accommodation available in the different communities in the region, and known destination of the refugees (both within and outside Niagara). This log is produced in electronic format and is sent by email to partner organizations in Niagara as well as in other key centres like Hamilton, London, and Toronto.

The Peace Bridge Authority provides a place at the bridge adjacent to the processing centre for the Reception Centre. Currently the centre operates out of a converted trailer, although a

permanent facility is being planned as part of a larger expansion and upgrade of federal government facilities at the Peace Bridge (funded through the Border Infrastructure Fund).

The Reception Centre receives funding through the Niagara Homeless Initiative for one staff person to find shelter for homeless people - principally refugees in their case. They provide counselling to refugees, reviewing their legal obligations as refugee claimants, and giving guidance about how to get along in their first days in the community: e.g. shelter and housing, money, school and work options. The Reception Centre relies on the services of the Multicultural Centre for many settlement services for immigrants and refugees. The Reception Centre does not receive any of the \$7 million pool of gaming money distributed to charitable organizations and social services in Fort Erie.

Multicultural centres

All things considered, multicultural centres are probably the most important service providers for refugees in the Niagara region. Multicultural centres work closely with housing shelters to assist new refugees, provide language training, make referrals to other agencies, and provide counselling about many important subjects including settlement, housing, legal issues, and employment. For refugees who stay in the Niagara Region, multicultural centres offer valuable services on an ongoing basis and provide them with a focus in the community. Following are brief descriptions of the multicultural centres in the region, with an emphasis on the housing services.

The Welland Heritage Council and Multicultural Centre has a staff of 26 and provides a variety of services to refugees, including ESL (about 12 classes and 200 students), child care, legal advice, and settlement services (three full-time settlement counsellors). They produce a description of services in card format (in several languages). The Centre provides in-depth counselling to refugees, including about housing. The Centre sponsors a program called Canadian Access for International Professions and Apprenticeship. The program provides four, week-long workshops that helps clients to acquire Canadian accreditation for their qualifications and to find a job. The centre also serves as a hostel/shelter for newly arrived refugees; there are eight furnished, two-bedroom apartments. The longest stay usually is no more than two months. They charge by the room (\$545/month); residents pay with the housing allowance provided by the Niagara Region. Their shelter loses money on singles and receives no money if the rooms are empty. Currently they do not have a hostel agreement. They also house refugee clients in local motels. At the time of the interview in the summer of 2003, the Centre was able to meet the short-term shelter needs of their refugee clients.

The Folk Arts Council of St. Catharines Multicultural Centre also provides a wide range of services to refugees. The Centre receives 70 percent of its funding from CIC's Immigrant Settlement Assistance Program (ISAP) and 30 percent from the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Culture's Newcomer Settlement Program (NSP), which provides funding for refugee

claimant services. Centre services include some counselling for refugees on immigration issues and some housing services. The Centre provides “para-professional” counselling on education, health, social services, taxation and other issues. They provide refugees with an orientation to life in Canada and Niagara, including welcome information kits. The Multicultural Centre provided services to 1,653 refugee claimants between April 2002 and March 2003. There is a high demand for the Centre’s services and recently they have had to say “no” to refugee clients’ requests for services. Given the increased demand in recent years, they are having to limit their services to “official things” such as the refugee claims process, health and school matters.

The Fort Erie Multicultural Centre works very closely with staff at the Fort Erie Reception Centre and with the Town of Fort Erie’s Community Health and Wellness Initiative. The Multicultural Centre also works in partnership with many of the organizations serving refugees in Fort Erie, such as the two main shelters, as well as other organizations throughout Niagara. The Fort Erie Multicultural Centre offers a wide range of services for refugees including settlement counselling, language instruction, computer assistance (e.g. for language training), mental health services (including counselling and referrals), home visits, after-school homework assistance, and transportation. In 2001-2002, the Multicultural Centre served 2,330 first-time clients, including 1,663 refugees. One of the recent changes that was noted is the increase in the number of unaccompanied children arriving as refugees at Fort Erie. Helping refugees find housing is a very important service of the Multicultural Centre: “The biggest challenge is housing.” In addition to their resettlement counsellors, for much of 2003 they had one full-time staff member to help clients find housing, funded by the Niagara Homelessness Initiative.

The Niagara Homelessness Initiative Outreach Program

The Niagara Homelessness Initiative operates with the participation and support of the regional and municipal governments and many of the service organizations in the region. The homelessness initiative began as an outreach program of the Housing Help Centres and its staff works very closely with the St. Catharines Housing Help Centre, including sharing office space. The Niagara Homelessness Initiative became a separate entity two years ago and now has a staff of six. It is funded by the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services. Settlement counsellors and other staff with the Homelessness Initiative provide assistance to many refugees in their search for housing. They work closely with refugee shelters, particularly for refugees who must stay in hotels or motels when shelter space is not available.

Housing Help Centres

Housing Help Centres in Fort Erie and St. Catharines & Thorold assist homeless people to find housing. They provide a free and confidential housing referral and consultation service. Although the centres they do not track the numbers of refugees, they have some refugee clients. They provide a resource centre, help clients deal with landlords, and do what they can to make

their clients more independent. The Fort Erie Housing Help Centre now is open three days a week, down from five days since they no longer receive “Community Partners” funding (from gaming). Besides the decrease in funding for the Fort Erie centre, they identified the biggest change in the last few years as the increase in the number of clients.

The centres provide clients with listings of everything that is available for rent locally. Their sources include local weekly newspapers, listings from landlords with whom they maintain regular contacts, and listings they compile of available shared accommodation.

For refugee clients, the Housing Help Centres provide some counselling on topics like tenant protection. They also make referrals to other specialized service agencies for things like legal services. The centre will get involved in communications with landlords and mediate in some cases. Sometimes they will help clients write a payment plan to increase landlords’ confidence in them as tenants. In Fort Erie, most refugees have gone to the Multicultural Centre first and are looking for additional help. Recently, some refugees have looked for information about buying a home.

Niagara Regional Housing Services for Refugees

Most refugees apply for Rent-Geared-To-Income (RGI) Housing shortly after their arrival in Niagara and, since most are living in shelters, they qualify under the homeless criteria. Refugees may receive priority for NRH units if there are specific reasons that apply to everyone on the waiting list: for example, disability or family violence. Generally refugees are not immediately housed: waiting times tend to vary from six to 18 months. NRH provides multicultural centres and refugee services agencies with regular information updates about the housing communities that currently have shorter waiting lists so that they may encourage refugees to select those specific housing communities in their applications.

NRH managers reported that pressures for housing refugees are no different than for other applicants, including long waiting lists and low turnover. Recent increases in the numbers of refugees crossing at Fort Erie have increased the number of applications to NRH and lengthened the waiting lists. Once refugee applicants reach the top of chronological waiting list they are offered Rent-Geared-To-Income housing. NRH makes one of every 10 vacancies available on a priority basis to homeless people, which includes refugees. Generally refugees would only skip the waiting lists and be accepted for one of these priority units if they have special needs such as a disability or there is family violence.

Refugee families are often very large and require larger units. Because four and five bedroom units are in limited supply, local occupancy standards have included a clause to house large families that might otherwise exceed occupancy standards in the largest unit available unit within the requested municipality.

Shelters

Residents of Casa el Norte and Matthew House live in a “family-style” household and receive in-depth counselling from staff. The Matthew House director described the Fort Erie hostel model, with its small size and personal contacts, as “the right way.” He also said that the shelter works best when there is diversity within the house (e.g. by country of origin and gender). Residents may also be referred to the Fort Erie Multicultural Centre for more counselling there. A service provider serving homeless people in Fort Erie said that Matthew House, with its small-scale, supportive environment, coupled with counselling for residents, provides a “beautiful model” for a temporary hostel-shelter.

Other Issues Related to Housing Services

Mental health problems were one of the increasing problems identified by service organizations. The local separate school board now works closely with the Mental Health Unit of the Public Health Department to help address these needs for refugees.

Interpretation services were also identified as an increasing need. Information Niagara provides interpreters widely to service organizations throughout the region on a fee-for-service basis. The interpretation costs for many essential services (e.g. health, immigration) are paid for by the provincial and regional governments.

Generally speaking, refugees are not relying on family members for support such as housing or housing services. There is no family network to support refugees in the Niagara region.

3.5 Trends in Housing Supply and Demand

The increase in the numbers of refugees over the last five years has had a corresponding increase in their need for housing in the region. According to all respondents, this increase in demand has not been met by an increase in housing supply. Little new rental stock has been built, no secondary market for rooms for rent has emerged to meet the need, costs for the available rental stock have increased, and subsidized housing is generally not an option for refugees for at least a year.

Several respondents, including shelter operators and settlement counsellors, said that the most important change in the housing situation for refugees is the increase in the costs of private market housing (i.e. rents and utilities). Given the shelter allowances received by refugees, the costs of market housing make the transition from shelter accommodation very difficult for refugees. Since it is usually at least six months before refugees receive the approvals to work, the result of a gap between the time when they leave the shelter and when they can earn

employment income to pay market rents. Single mothers were identified as a particularly vulnerable group: they receive a lower shelter allowance than a married couple with children and they tend to have more barriers to entering the workforce and earning employment income. As a consequence, some single mothers stay in shelters for longer than the average stay.

Most service providers were uncertain about future trends and the pressures and problems they may face trying to meet refugee housing needs in the future. Predicting the number of refugees is difficult. As several respondents said: “It depends on what happens in the world.”

Some respondents expressed concerns that an increase in land and house prices in the region, which are significantly less expensive than in the Greater Toronto Area, could increase affordability problems by increasing the cost of building new rental housing and by keeping potential home owners in the rental market.

Following are some of the other trends identified by respondents.

▲ Niagara Regional Housing is working towards a plan to increase the supply of subsidized housing in the region and to make affordable housing a priority for local elected officials.

▲ The “safe third country” agreement negotiated between Canada and the U.S. was described as “a major concern” that may affect the numbers of refugees entering Canada and their well-being. This agreement would prohibit people from claiming asylum in Canada or the US if they have travelled first through the other “safe” country.¹ The prospective refugee would be required to claim asylum in the first safe country entered. CIC officials projected that this agreement could come into effect sometime in 2004.

▲ A positive development is that some refugees are becoming more established and are able to help new refugees. These support networks are occurring first in the larger Niagara communities. Fort Erie, for example, was said to be too small for any significant informal communications networks among communities of refugees to have developed yet.

¹ Countries are considered “safe” if they affirm their obligation to provide protection for refugees on their territory in accordance with UN conventions and protocols related to the status of refugees. The final draft text of the *Safe Third Country Agreement* between Canada and the US can be found at www.cic.gc.ca/english/policy/safe-third.html.

4. Identification of Housing Information Needs and Gaps

4.1 Refugee Needs for Housing Information and Services

Refugee needs for housing information on arrival in Niagara

For at least the first several days, refugees have a low need for housing information because all are referred to shelters by the Fort Erie Reception Centre. Refugees crossing from VIVE in Buffalo are not accepted by the CIC Fort Erie Processing Centre until temporary accommodation has been arranged by the Reception Centre (which can include accommodation in cities outside the Niagara region).

Refugees typically depend on staff and counsellors at shelters and the multicultural centres for information about housing (and most other matters). As one said: “we must walk them through all the requirements.” All of the respondents involved directly with newly-arrived refugees were emphatic that refugees need help directly from a real person to them get through the complex maze they face in their first few weeks in Canada. Face-to-face, personal contact was considered to be the “only way to provide really helpful information.” No other sources were considered to be important sources of information about housing, with the possible exception of the Housing Help Centre.

During the focus group discussions refugees discussed the types of information which are most important to them in the first few weeks in Canada once their immediate shelter needs have been settled. One of the first things that they are looking for is a general orientation to the region to give them some knowledge about their new community. For housing, discussion group participants identified the following types of information:

- the rights of tenants and landlords;
 - any information in their own language;
 - information on subsidized housing options;
 - up-to-date information on other housing options;
 - how to understand the total rental costs, including utilities, so that they do not get taken advantage of when landlords quote only the base rent without additional costs;
 - information about housing availability in other centres; and,
 - when they are in a position to buy a house, they would want to know how to purchase a home and their rights as homeowners.
-
- Refugees identified several other information needs that equal housing information in importance:
 - interpretation services, particularly for medical and hospital visits and other very important interactions;

- information translated into their language (e.g. orientation for newcomers regarding jobs and associations, how to start a business, programs available);
- how to get a driver's license;
- information about other towns in the region;
- information about other cities and provinces so they can make choices about where to live;
- more general information about Canada and Canadian culture;
- rights regarding employment; and,
- information about employment opportunities in other centres.

Information for making the transition to [market] housing

Respondents from service organizations said that most new refugees have fairly simple information needs about housing. They want to know what is available and in what type of dwelling they can afford to live. They also want to know the “do’s and don’ts” for tenants, their financial obligations (e.g. leases), features of the neighbourhood, and services available (e.g. schools, library, doctors). Niagara Regional Housing representatives said that the types of information needed most by refugees with whom they are in contact include types of subsidized housing available, locations, rent costs, amenities, and available services including transportation and schools.

Some respondents said that refugees have “special needs” for up to a year. Almost all recommend more affordable housing options for refugees during this transition period. Recommendations by service providers include:

- ▲ more public money for longer stays in temporary shelters (up to two months);
- ▲ more short-term units like those in the Welland Multicultural Centre (“whatever model ... they all work”); and,
- ▲ residences for refugees with flexible lease arrangements where they can stay until a determination of their claim is made (e.g. as in the Netherlands); tenant leases are for 12 months but the timing of the refugee claims process is uncertain.

The focus group discussions also gave refugees the opportunity to discuss the types of information that are most important to them as they become more settled and are ready to leave temporary shelter accommodation - usually after about one month. During this discussion refugees were much most interested in talking about how to find employment than about their housing needs. For most, finding work and earning a good income is the key to better housing. Lack of public transportation within the Niagara region was also identified as a significant barrier to finding both good housing and employment. Following are some of the more important issues and problems faced by refugees during this transition phase of their life in Canada. (Note that most of the focus group participants currently reside in Fort Erie.)

- ▲ Transportation is a major problem for refugees living in Fort Erie as public bus service is limited within the Town and non-existent for travel to other cities in the

region: e.g. travel to look at apartments, and travel to look for jobs or go to job interviews, and travel to meetings with lawyers.

▲ Job opportunities are very limited in Fort Erie. Many participants think they will have to move eventually. Most participants said they prefer to stay in Fort Erie and are afraid of Toronto.

▲ The time it takes before refugees are eligible for work is very long time – usually a minimum of 5 to 7 months is everyone in the family receives medical clearance. The first medical can take 1-2 months; refugees can apply for a work permit 2-3 months after that; then it takes 2-3 months to hear about the work permit and another 2-4 weeks to receive a Social Insurance Number.

▲ Acquiring proficiency in English is the top priority for refugees who want to work. Some focus group participants had acquired a work permit but are not yet proficient enough in English to find a good job.

▲ Recognition of foreign credentials and skills upgrading to meet Canadian standards are major concerns. Only one person in the groups had heard about CAPES, a federally-funded program run out of the Welland Multicultural Centre that assists refugees and immigrants to receive Canadian accreditation for their education and skills. College is expensive, especially since refugees must pay foreign student rates until they become Canadian citizens. Ontario Works will provide assistance to take short courses.

▲ Participants said that they could use more information related to employment (e.g. brochures) including how to get recognition in Canada for their skills, characteristics of the most common careers, and how to enter into these careers.

▲ Housing information concerns were related to their need for accurate information about costs: for example, deposits requirements for telephone or the last month's rent can be problematic.

Service provider need for information

The primary organizations providing services to refugees in the short term are shelters and multicultural centres. They help refugees to deal with their immediate needs, which are numerous and include the following:

- ▲ navigating through the refugee claim process, including meeting CIC and IRB requirements and finding a lawyer;
- ▲ dealing with medical needs, including physical and mental health needs;
- ▲ arranging schooling for children;
- ▲ settling into their temporary accommodation and acclimatizing to life in Canada;
- ▲ providing referrals to social services and other services: e.g. ESL training, housing, recreation and other municipal services;
- ▲ helping refugees to access these various services: e.g. providing transportation,

making contacts, especially when language is an issue; and,
▲ counselling on issues of concern to the individual refugee and his or her family.

During the period when refugees are living in temporary shelter accommodation, service providers are under a lot of pressure to meet refugees' wide range of needs. Most of their time is spent dealing directly with refugees: "it's front-line, hands-on work." As one respondent said: "We're not looking for brochures at this time."

Languages services are very important to service providers. Shelter operators said that there is always a need for documents in multiple languages for housing and other types of information. Many respondents with non-profit organizations agreed that better access to translation and interpretation services would be very useful. These services are costly for non-profit organizations when funding is not provided by government for specified purposes such as legal proceedings. In their view, better access to affordable interpreter services would reduce the problems and information gaps that can result from language barriers and cultural differences. Representatives of Niagara Regional Housing also identified interpretation services as their most pressing need for providing services to refugees (after more affordable housing units). They said that multilingual community workers assigned to assist refugees and attend at lease signings would be very useful.

Several service providers also identified better information about how to access mental health services as a priority for their ability to provide comprehensive services to refugees.

A shortage of affordable housing is considered by service providers to have a large impact on the ability of refugees to work and stay in communities in the Niagara region, particularly in smaller communities such as Fort Erie. All respondents identified a lack of housing and jobs as the two most important reasons why refugees leave Niagara. Some identified housing shortages as the top reason why refugees leave Niagara. A director of a Multicultural Centre said that "we need better housing to respond to any immigration or refugee strategy."

4.2 Sources and Usefulness of Housing Information

Service providers generally believe that they are able to meet the housing information needs of refugees. Increasing their capacity to provide information and services in different languages is an important issue. Time pressures and heavy case loads are also issues and their staff and counsellors would like to have more time to spend helping refugees.

Information sources used by refugees

Refugees identified the available sources of housing information and their usefulness during the focus group discussions. In general, the most important sources of information are the multicultural centres, municipal libraries, and housing shelter staff. (Again, it should be noted that the two focus group discussions were both held in Fort Erie.) For many refugees, the

usefulness of printed information is directly linked to its availability in languages other than English or French.

Multicultural centres

▲ Information provided by counsellors and staff at the multicultural centres was identified as the most helpful by far for finding housing. For part of 2002/2003, the Fort Erie Multicultural Centre had a staff member working as a housing counsellor and her services were highly rated (“she helped with everything”). There was a consensus in the discussions that someone dedicated to the task of finding housing would be very useful.

▲ Multicultural centres are the places where refugees are most likely to find information in alternative languages (“Canal” magazine in Spanish).

▲ The Multicultural Centre publishes a weekly list of available rental housing. This information is very useful, although often it is outdated, even when published this frequently.

Shelters

▲ Housing shelter staff are very helpful. Although they are very busy, they provide very valuable information and assistance to refugees. For example, Matthew House and Case el Norte help with “paperwork”, make calls and appointments on their behalf, sometimes take clients to look for an apartment, and arrange for landlords to come to the shelter or to the Multicultural Centre. Refugees said that shelter staff can be especially helpful when there is a language barrier.

Libraries

▲ Libraries provide access to newspapers, the Internet and have general information about Canada and Canadian culture. Libraries also provide a source of information about jobs and volunteer work opportunities.

▲ In Fort Erie, the municipal library was described as “huge ... very important” for refugees.

Printed information

▲ Newspapers were rated as useful for the housing listings and ads, although the information can be out-of-date and some are out of their price range. Refugees in Fort Erie use the local weekly “Shopper” to help them find housing because it is free and it provides practical information.

▲ Recently two Colombian refugees started a bi-monthly newsletter, *el Canal*, at the Multicultural Centre that has been useful for other refugees. Content is in both Spanish and English and includes topical articles of interest to refugees in the Niagara region, Hamilton and Buffalo (e.g., parenting in a new country, SARS, community life, the Organization of Colombian Professionals for Canada) and useful information for networking in the region.

▲ Information Niagara produces many brochures and pamphlets that multicultural centres, schools and others find useful for refugees.

▲ Favourable comments also were made about the following printed information

sources: The Multicultural Networks' *Newcomers Directory*; Information Niagara's *Directory of Services*; and a gambling addiction guide for newcomers.

Housing Help Centres

▲ To many refugees and service providers, the usefulness of listings provided by the Housing Help Centres and other printed listings depend on language ability: "Listings are OK for many people, if they know English and are independent."

▲ None of the focus group participants found the Housing Help Centres to be useful to refugees.

▲ A service provider said that the Housing Help Centres were not useful for refugees because they "lack a personal touch" in the way they provide assistance.

Other sources

▲ None of the participants has accessed information from government sources (i.e. Town of Fort Erie, Region of Niagara). When asked, no one could recall receiving information directly from the Town, Region or Information Niagara. The participants indicated that their priority is learning English (especially for employment), not information about recreation or other municipal services.

▲ A key service provider said Niagara Legal Assistance provides some good and valuable information such as their workshop on landlord-tenant issues and a document of "do's and don'ts" for renters.

Informal, verbal communications between refugees and their friends and members of their community are also an important source of information. Several respondents said that refugees learn from other refugees and friends who live in the community. Some respondents also said that the networks among communities of former refugees are strengthening as they become better established in the region. The director of one Multicultural Centre said that they discourage refugees from taking advice from people who offer to help but whom they do not know (e.g. people from their country of origin or those with a similar racial or ethnic background). Their experience is that the risk of abuse is too high and they have seen cases where people have taken advantage of newly-arrived refugees.

Information provided by key agencies in the region

Niagara Regional Housing - Niagara Regional Housing provides application forms in French and English, a list of rent-geared-to-income buildings by bedroom size and municipality as well as a pamphlet that outlines all frequently asked questions about the application process/ applicant appeals process. Private sector apartment listings are also posted in the NRH lobby on a weekly basis. NRH places applications and information pamphlets at all shelters and agencies offering support to refugees. NRH managers reported that they have regular communication with

multicultural agencies. The multicultural organizations also provide information and education to NRH staff by attending NRH staff meetings when asked.

NRH also provides information directly to refugees through occasional forums arranged in partnership with multicultural organizations. These sessions provided information about the NRH housing options available to refugees and how to submit an application. Attendees were provided handouts about NRH housing and given application forms. Interpreters were made available for participants who needed their services. Reports indicated that the sessions were very well-received.

Information Niagara - Information Niagara is a community-based non-profit agency that provides a wide-range of information services to people in the Niagara region. The Executive Director said that its primary mission is to provide information and referrals to government and community organizations. Information Niagara has been in the region for 30 years and has offices in St. Catharines and Niagara Falls. It is similar to other information centres across Ontario (the respondent said there are 60 in the province).

Some of the services provided by Information Niagara include a free telephone information line, a free broadcast fax line for voluntary organizations, and pamphlets and publications on many topics (including housing and tenant issues). They also produce a Directory of Community Services, which is sold in printed format and available free online. Directory production is financed by charging organizations to be listed and by selling ads. The database of organizations from which the directory is produced is made available to other organizations (accessed online by over 40,000 unique users last year). Information Niagara assembles and distributes to service organizations a wide range of information about housing and related matters that may be useful to refugees. This includes pamphlets on tenant rights and obligations (produced by Community Legal Education Ontario).

Information Niagara has an Interpreter Program funded by the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship (\$55,000 per year) that provides valuable interpretation services to social service organizations, including ones serving refugees. Demand for this program has grown significantly in the last few years - "the numbers have skyrocketed" - which is mainly attributed to the need by organizations serving refugees. Some of the interpretation services are provided on a fee-for-service basis. Because refugee service organizations do not have the budgets to pay much for interpretation services they often use their own volunteer interpreters. Refugee service organizations are eligible for subsidized Information Niagara interpretation services for certain categories of work such as family violence. These categories often are applied quite loosely to maintain eligibility. Ontario Works is a major client for interpretation services (over \$10,000 last year).

Information Niagara receives requests for housing information - mainly from people who cannot find housing - but these represent only about one percent of the total number of calls (which still is several hundred calls). In the view of Information Niagara, refugees are adequately served for

housing information, mainly because of the multicultural centres. However, these organizations are “very stretched” and they need more funding and support. While housing information is rated as adequate, the respondent identified affordable housing as a major problem in Niagara, with the smaller communities in particular having few rental units.

Niagara Catholic District School Board - The school board provides a wide variety of information, services and support to refugees, including an extensive ESL training program conducted in eight language centres across the region. The school board, through the work of their new full-time resettlement counsellor, is trying to create a network of former refugees to help newcomers.

The crucial role of settlement counsellors

Settlement counsellors play a crucial role in helping recently-arrived refugees find rental housing. There was a strong consensus among the various service providers interviewed for this research that direct communication between refugees and settlement counsellors is the most valuable and effective means of helping refugees to make a successful early transition to life in Canada. All respondents consider counsellors, whether they are the shelter operators themselves or specialized resettlement counsellors, to be by far the most important source of housing information. They said that the value of direct contact with knowledgeable counsellors cannot be overstated.

▲ A representative of a charitable organization serving homeless people said that counselling, recognized as being labour-intensive, is essential to help people find adequate housing.

▲ Representatives of the Niagara Homelessness Initiative indicated that, for refugees, one of the most valuable steps that could be taken would be to increase the number of trained resettlement workers: “Put more money into resettlement workers. We need more than buildings.” Resettlement workers “keep things moving ... refugees are anxious to move on. Just connect them. Don’t make them wait.”

Direct face-to-face counselling, though labour-intensive, is rated by both refugees and service providers as the most useful source of information to help people find adequate housing. Settlement counsellors often will assemble a list of potential accommodation for refugee clients and will sometimes help them by talking to the landlord. Fewer have the time or inclination to help refugees look for an apartment.

Helping refugees find housing is a very important service of the Fort Erie Multicultural Centre. In their view, “the biggest challenge is housing.” In addition to their resettlement counsellors, in the last year they hired a full-time staff member for 20 weeks to help clients find housing. The salary was funded by the Niagara Homelessness Initiative. To deliver information to refugees, a representative of the Multicultural Centre said that “nothing is a substitute for human contact.”

Their settlement counsellors are the key information providers: “There is so much to absorb ... repetition of information is what gets through.”

Many other respondents strongly agreed that one-on-one counselling is essential and that nothing can replace it as a means of conveying information. One respondent cited the initiative of the Fort Erie Multicultural Centre to hire a worker to find housing as a very good one. For meeting the housing needs of refugees, representatives of Niagara Regional Housing and the Niagara Homelessness Initiative recommended immediate funding for more one-on-one counselling, and for interpretation services to facilitate the counselling.

A representative of another multicultural centre said that a majority of refugees are very resourceful but that more counselling is needed to help refugees find suitable and affordable housing. To make a successful early transition from temporary shelters to market housing, most refugees need assistance to understand housing costs and landlord and tenant issues.

Information gaps

There is a consensus among respondents that more resources are needed for settlement counselling to help refugees find suitable and affordable housing. Respondents recommended an increase the number of trained resettlement workers and more funding for one-on-one counselling and associated interpretation services.

A representative of a Multicultural Centre said there is a “huge abyss out there” with respect to useful resettlement and housing information for refugees and other new arrivals. She cited the example of the *Newcomer’s Guide* that used to be produced by the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship for people in their first year of residence in Ontario (“comprehensive, easy to read”). Now, “nothing compares to this.” The best current source is www.settlement.org. She said that there is probably more for service providers: e.g. *Voice of Newcomer Families* from St. Stephen’s House which they use in an ESL program - “we can’t get enough of these.”

Representatives of several refugee service providers would like to have more mental health-related information: for example, a guide about who to speak to about mental health problems, and information about where people can go to receive mental health counselling. Niagara Public Health was cited as one of the possible sources for such information.

Other suggestions for addressing information gaps are as follows:

- ▲ more documents in multiple languages and which are culturally-sensitive;
- ▲ public education to improve awareness about the benefits of new arrivals to the region and of the problems faced by refugees, and to encourage the public to be more welcoming of refugees;

- ▲ an up-to-date list (updated annually) of the relevant agencies and service providers in Fort Erie and in the region: e.g. mental health, head injury association, food bank; and,
- ▲ more widely available interpretation services.
- ▲ reinstating a local “inter-agency” that used to hold monthly meetings to inform people about different service organizations’ programs and people.

The Fort Erie Multicultural Centre is setting up an in-house Information Centre to provide a more comprehensive, up-to-date and accessible information resource for both refugees and service providers. This project is being funded by Ontario Plura and the United Way. Their intention is to provide the most useful information, creating their own when necessary. They want to link this information with ESL training (e.g. include settlement issues like tenant rights and obligations in classroom sessions). The Multicultural Centre identified information in different languages as one of their primary needs for improving housing and settlement services for refugees.

Some refugees also share the dream of most Canadians to own their own home. However, this goal seems out of reach. A representative of a Multicultural Centre said that information about how to reach the goal of home ownership would be useful to many refugees, particularly those who are well educated or professionals with good earning potential.

4.3 Preferred Information Sources and Providers

Refugee opinions about preferred information sources

Focus group discussions reviewed refugees’ preferred sources of housing information. The Multicultural Centre was identified as the most trustworthy by far. Multicultural Centre staff work closely with refugees and provide valuable assistance in many areas that are important to successful integration into the community, including housing. Some of the types of assistance from the Multicultural Centre that refugees found most useful include the following:

- ▲ securing legal aid;
- ▲ helping to arrange medical appointments;
- ▲ coordinating with officials responsible for social assistance;
- ▲ providing interpretation services, both formal (through Information Niagara) and informal (e.g. other refugees who are clients of the centre);
- ▲ ESL training;
- ▲ assistance to find affordable housing; and,
- ▲ filling out forms.

Housing Help Centres were also identified as trustworthy sources of information, although none of the refugees found them to be particularly helpful to them.

When asked about the advice they would you give a friend about where to go for housing information, refugees identified three sources:

- ▲ Multicultural Centre;
- ▲ newspapers; and,
- ▲ Housing Help Centre.

Awareness of CMHC

Awareness of CMHC programs and activities ranged from low to moderate among both refugees and service providers. Refugees participating in the focus groups knew nothing or very little about CMHC, and none had any familiarity with the information about housing produced by CMHC. They expressed a strong interest in better housing information, particularly if it is available in different languages, and were intrigued at the idea that CMHC already might be producing information that would be useful to them. One participant said that CMHC could provide information to refugees about how they might reach the goal of home ownership.

Knowledge about CMHC among non-profit service providers tended to be limited to very general things: for example, that CMHC sometimes funds affordable housing, provides mortgage insurance, and produces housing market data. The response of a Multicultural Centre director was fairly typical when she described herself as “a little bit ignorant about CMHC”, and said that “information does not always flow down to the local sector.” Several respondents said that they could use more information from CMHC about the services and funding available. A manager of a Housing Help Centre said that they used to get rental survey data from CMHC (e.g. average rents, vacancy rates). They would like to get this information again but cannot afford to pay for it.

Officials with Niagara Regional Housing were more familiar with CMHC and its various activities. They indicated that it would be very useful to have CMHC participate in the initiative to develop an affordable housing strategy for the Niagara region. Representatives of two municipalities within the region agreed with the idea of bringing CMHC to the table in the affordable housing strategy discussions to provide their support, knowledge and experience with affordable housing in Ontario and across Canada.

Opportunities for CMHC to distribute housing information

Refugees rely on two main sources for housing information: front-line service providers such as shelters and multicultural centres, and print media including local newspapers and ad weeklies. Information resource centres like the one planned for the Fort Erie Multicultural Centre could present a very good opportunity for CMHC to provide housing information directly to both service providers and refugees. Providing information to this resource centre would also support shelter operators and residents since shelters work closely with the multicultural centres and have ready access to their resources.

Respondents with multicultural centres and school boards involved with ESL training reported that they are working to include lesson materials that provide practical information to refugees living in the Niagara region. They said that housing information dealing with topics such as how to rent an apartment, tenant and landlord obligations, housing expenses, and how to buy a home - topics on which CMHC produces some information - could be incorporated into ESL training programs.

Municipal libraries are very important sources of information for refugees and could provide a venue for housing information produced by CMHC. Libraries were not interviewed for this research so the feasibility of providing CMHC-produced housing information to municipal libraries was not assessed.

During their first few months in Canada, refugees have to deal with a great many things and are overloaded with information. Once their situations have stabilized, particularly after six to 12 months when many are ready to move to better housing, some of the consumer workshops developed by CMHC could be useful to refugees.

5. Summary and Conclusions

The Peace Bridge at Fort Erie is Canada's highest volume refugee crossing point - Since 2000, the number of refugees claiming asylum at Fort Erie has averaged over 5,000 per year. The numbers peaked in 2001 with 7,070 refugee claims - the largest number at any point of entry in Canada and about one-third of all the claims in Ontario for the year. Based on the first seven months of this year, it appears that another 5,000 to 6,000 refugees will cross the Peace Bridge into Fort Erie in 2003. Over the five year period since 1998, when there were 1,229 refugee claims, the numbers of refugees at Fort Erie have climbed by approximately 400 percent. Over the last five years, the countries of origin for the largest numbers of refugees have been Pakistan, Colombia, Sri Lanka, Argentina and Turkey.

Proportionately, the increase in numbers of refugee claims at Fort Erie has been greater than the increase in numbers for Canada as a whole, which have risen by approximately 60 percent. There were 25,392 refugee claims across Canada in 1998, with the numbers rising to an average range of 35,000 to 40,000 in from 2000 to 2002. The peak of 44,714 refugee claims was in 2001.

Subjective estimates by interviewees of the proportion of refugees who leave the Niagara region ranged from a "majority" up to 85%. The best quantitative data available at this time were provided by the Fort Erie Reception Centre; these data indicated that for 2001/2002, 26% of refugees reported that they would stay in Fort Erie. For the first part of 2003, this number decreased to only nine percent, although Fort Erie remained the number two destination of choice for refugees (after Toronto at 36%).

Education levels of recent refugees are high - The average levels of education of refugees arriving at Fort Erie are much higher than have been reported in some recent studies on refugees and immigrants. Reception Centre data for April to September 2003 on 1,442 refugees indicate that a majority have post-secondary qualifications: 34% have a university degree and 19% have a college degree. Of the remaining cases, 25% have a high school diploma and 21% have some high school, some trade school, or did not report their education level.

Refugees and service providers are eager to speed up the transition to the workforce - No comprehensive data is available on the employment rates of refugees who have stayed to live in the Niagara region. However, reports from service providers and refugees interviewed for this study indicate that the employment rate is low for refugees who have entered the region in the last two years. Within the first year, employment is low since it typically takes at least six months before refugees receive a work permit after passing the various immigration and health approval processes. In the medium to longer term, refugees must become proficient in English to get a job; for this reason language training is the top priority for refugees without English who want to enter the workforce. Problems related to Canadian recognition of education and training received in other countries is another important issue that has been well documented in other sources. Many of the service providers and local government officials said that a lack of

affordable housing and job shortages in most Niagara communities are related problems. Both are required for successful long-term integration into the region.

There is a serious shortage of short-term accommodation in shelters and hostels -

Housing providers in the region are hard pressed to meet the needs of refugees for temporary shelter. Shortage of temporary shelter space have developed in the last few years as demand from higher numbers of refugees has exceeded supply. Representatives of all of the shelters interviewed for this study reported that they frequently refer refugees to local hotels and motels because their spaces are full. Several respondents, including representatives of the Niagara Homelessness Initiative, said that a shortage of temporary housing is the most important housing problem for refugees. One shelter director estimated that there is a need for another 20 to 30 shelter spaces in Fort Erie alone. For all respondents, a good shelter also means providing supports like counselling and help finding longer-term housing and employment.

Shelters and hostels provide temporary accommodation for about a month for most refugees who decide to stay in the Niagara region. Depending on their circumstances and needs, some refugees may stay in a shelter for up to two months or even longer in a small number of cases. Across the region there are five shelters with a total of approximately 80 spaces that operate with specific funding agreements with the Regional Municipality. Several other shelters operated by faith-based groups and charitable organizations provide temporary accommodation to refugees without a funding agreement with the Region. Few refugees find accommodation in publicly-owned or subsidized housing managed by the regional government (Niagara Regional Housing) within the first few months of their arrival.

About one-quarter of refugees cannot find basic housing in the private rental market -

All service providers described the housing situation in Niagara for refugees and other lower income households as problematic. Some used strong terms such as “very difficult”, “crisis”, or “abysmal” to characterize the local housing market for needy households. The vast majority of refugees depend on the private rental market once they are ready to leave a temporary shelter. However, communities in the region, particularly the smaller ones, do not have enough affordable private market rental housing to meet the needs of refugees.

The biggest problem reported by service providers for finding housing for refugees is the gap between what refugees receive as a shelter allowance from Ontario Works and the market rents in the region. Only about 20% to 25% of the units have rents that are within the shelter allowances provided to refugees. This figure is consistent with reports of settlement counsellors, who said that they are able to find “OK” housing for about 80% of their refugee clients. The affordability problem is most acute during the transition period: the time between leaving a temporary shelter one to two months after entering Canada to the time when employment is found and enough income is earned to pay market rents, at least six months and usually 12 months or more later (the length of time depending on language ability, recognition of foreign credentials, and the job local market).

Publicly-subsidized housing is not an option for most refugees within the first year -

Most refugees do not have access to subsidized housing during the first year after their arrival in Niagara. The exceptions are some of those who have special needs. All service providers encourage refugees to apply for subsidized housing as soon as possible, but their expectation is only that it might meet the longer-term needs of refugees with poorer employment prospects. Those who are able to work will not want public housing, nor are they likely to need it, by the time a subsidized unit becomes available.

Several factors have increased the gap between housing supply and demand - The much higher numbers of refugees arriving in the Niagara region over the last five years has increased the demand for lower cost housing in the region - a demand for which the supply has not kept pace. Market rents for the available stock have increased and little new rental stock has been built. With shelter allowances fixed for the last several years, the increased rental housing costs have made it more difficult for refugees to make the transition from shelter accommodation to the private rental market. Pressures on the demand for rental housing have been lessened somewhat by a combination of low interest rates and relatively low house prices in the region: together these factors have allowed many potential renters to purchase a home.

Future trends and the demand and supply pressures that will influence refugee housing needs are uncertain. The common response among service providers was: “It depends on what happens in the world.” An increase in land or house prices in the region, which are significantly less expensive than those in the Greater Toronto Area, could aggravate affordability problems by keeping potential home owners in the rental market.

Service providers and other community leaders strongly believe that better housing is an essential component of any plan to encourage refugees and other newcomers to stay in the Niagara region. They are confident that improved housing will increase the proportion of refugees entering Canada at Fort Erie who stay in Niagara communities instead of leaving for other centres such as Toronto.

The affordable housing initiative led by Niagara Regional Housing is an important development for the region - Until recently, municipal governments in the Niagara region have not taken an active role in social housing. Although historically there has been a strong cooperative housing sector in Niagara, municipal governments did not play an active role and the housing stock managed by Niagara Regional Housing was devolved to the region only recently by the Government of Ontario. Given its new responsibilities, the Region is developing a housing strategy that is still in the planning stage. Niagara Regional Housing is working with regional government officials to secure federal and provincial government funding for affordable housing. To develop a region-wide housing strategy, Niagara Regional Housing has established a Housing Initiatives Committee to work with community, municipal, and private sector partners. By exploring new affordable housing options, involving both the private developers and service

agencies, it is hoped that the supply of affordable housing for refugees and lower income households throughout the region can be increased.

The Niagara region has developed a strong support network to provide housing and other services to refugees - A wide range of valuable services is provided to refugees by a network of service providers in the region. Non-profit, charitable, faith-based and public sector organizations work together towards the goal of successful settlement of refugees. In addition to the housing shelters, the key organizations in this network are the Fort Erie Reception Centre, the multicultural centres in Fort Erie, Welland and St. Catharines, separate and public school boards, the Niagara Homelessness Initiative, and Niagara Regional Housing. Housing and related services include referrals to shelters, shelter accommodation, settlement and other counselling services, language training, help finding housing, health services, and transportation. The local support network operates without any direct assistance from Citizenship and Immigration Canada, which does not provide funding for asylum-seeking refugees. (Federal government funding for settlement services is limited to government-sponsored refugees.) Active involvement by the Government of Ontario in refugee services also is very limited; its main contribution is funding 80% of the per diem allocation for temporary shelter spaces (with the Region of Niagara providing the other 20%).

Refugees are most interested in information about renting in the private housing market - Refugees do not need much housing information in the first few days in Canada because their first temporary accommodation is arranged by the Fort Erie Reception Centre in cooperation with the housing shelters. Once their initial emergency needs are met, most refugees rely on the multicultural centres for information about housing (and about most other matters). Discussions with refugees identified several types of housing information that are most important to them once their short-term shelter needs have been met. These include: the rights of tenants and landlords; up-to-date information on rental housing options; understanding total rental costs, including utilities, so that they do not get taken advantage of by landlords; information on subsidized housing options; and information about housing availability in other centres. Refugees who do not speak English well are particularly eager to see any information available in their mother tongue (at present there is little translated information). A few refugees, looking to the future, said that they would like to know what it takes to purchase a home in Canada.

Service providers want to increase their capacity to deliver information and services in different languages - Improving their capacity to deliver services and provide information in alternative languages is very important to most service providers working with refugees, including Niagara Regional Housing and refugee shelters. This includes better access to translation and interpretation services, which are costly for non-profit organizations, so that they can reduce the risks and problems associated with language barriers and cultural differences. Shelter operators, multicultural centres and some other service providers also would like better information about the mental health services available to their refugee clients.

The most important sources of information for refugees are the multicultural centres, temporary shelters, and municipal libraries - After they have passed through the Reception Centre, shelters and the multicultural centres become the most important sources of information for refugees. Multicultural centres provide the most useful housing information, mainly through direct consultations with settlement counsellors and staff. Housing shelter staff provide a very wide range of services and information to refugees when they need these services the most. Shelters advocate on behalf of refugees, make calls and appointments on their behalf, help with translation and interpretation, and sometimes take clients to look for housing and arrange for landlords to come to the shelter or to the Multicultural Centre to meet with refugees or staff.

Municipal libraries were identified by refugees as an important and ongoing source of information about Canada and Canadian culture. Through access to newspapers and the Internet, libraries provide a window on both the local community and the wider world. Libraries also provide sources of information about jobs and volunteer work opportunities. Newspapers are valued because they provide housing listings and ads. The usefulness of printed information for refugees who are not proficient in English is linked directly to the availability of the information in other languages. Refugees reported that they are most likely to find information in alternative languages at the multicultural centres.

Counsellors play a crucial role in refugee settlement - Settlement counsellors and other service providers who engage in direct communication with refugees provide the most valuable and effective means of helping refugees to make a successful early transition to life in Canada. Service providers were unequivocal that it takes direct face-to-face contact to help refugees navigate their way through the complexities of the first few weeks in Canada. The same applies to housing information once refugees are ready to move from temporary shelter. Counselling services were identified as by far the best and fastest way to provide refugees with the information they need to find housing. Representatives of the Niagara Homelessness Initiative, along with respondents from charitable organizations and multicultural centres, said that one of the most valuable steps that could be taken to help refugees adjust to life in Canada would be to increase the number of trained settlement workers.

Service providers see a role for CMHC as an information provider - Service providers identified two areas where CMHC can make a contribution:

- ▲ provide knowledge and expertise, which could include helping the Region of Niagara develop its affordable housing strategy (e.g. “sit at the table”);
- ▲ tell service providers about the types of housing information produced by CMHC that could be useful to refugees and to organizations assisting refugees.

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