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Resettling Refugees: Canada's Humanitarian Commitments

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RESETTLING REFUGEES: CANADA'S HUMANITARIAN COMMITMENTS

1 INTRODUCTION

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that almost 960,000 refugees are currently in need of resettlement in a third country.¹ These are refugees who, according to the UNHCR, can neither return to their country of origin nor integrate into their country of first asylum.

Together, the international community has committed to resettle around 80,000 refugees each year. Historically, Canada has resettled approximately 10% of this total; the government's current goal is to resettle between 8% and 12%.² In 2010, the government committed to increase the number of refugees resettled each year from abroad by 20% (2,500 people). For 2015, the government has agreed to accept up to 14,500 resettled refugees, out of a total of 285,000 new immigrants.³

Canada admits refugees for resettlement on a humanitarian basis. Resettlement also provides a way for Canada to alleviate the burden for host countries and share the responsibility for displaced persons. In addition to commitments to resettle refugees, Canada has international obligations to those who come to Canada on their own and are found to be in need of protection (refugee claimants or asylum seekers).⁴

This publication provides an overview of Canada's refugee resettlement programs, explaining who is eligible for resettlement and the different programs in place. Finally, it concludes with some of the operational issues involved in refugee resettlement.

2 WHO IS ELIGIBLE FOR RESETTLEMENT?

In order to be eligible for resettlement in Canada as a refugee, a person must meet the criteria of the 1951 United Nations *Convention on the Status of Refugees*: he or she must have a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion. Further, the person must be outside his or her country of nationality or habitual residence and not able to find protection there.

In addition, the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations* stipulate that those outside their country who are "seriously and personally affected by civil war, armed conflict or massive violation of human rights" are eligible for refugee resettlement.⁵ The regulations also state that the applicant must be without a reasonable prospect, within a reasonable period, of a durable solution in a country other than Canada.⁶ Finally, the applicant must normally show potential to become successfully established and must meet admissibility criteria related to medical condition and security screening.⁷

Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) visa officers stationed overseas generally determine if an individual is eligible for resettlement and admissible to Canada. Some refugees are referred to CIC for consideration by a designated referral organization (primarily the UNHCR), while others are referred by private sponsors. Applications are generally considered individually, except where the mass movement of refugees (i.e., as a result of conflicts or generalized violence) has caused the UNHCR to declare a group “*prima facie*” refugees.⁸

3 CANADA’S RESETTLEMENT PROGRAMS

Resettled refugees come to Canada in the following ways:

- through the federal Government-Assisted Refugee (GAR) Program (which includes the Joint Assistance Sponsorship Program);
- with the assistance of civil society groups through the Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) Program; or
- through the Blended Visa Office–Referred Program, which combines government and private support.

The main differences between the four resettlement programs are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 – Resettlement Programs at a Glance

| | Government-Assisted Refugee Program | Joint Assistance Sponsorship Program | Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program | Blended Visa Office–Referred Program |
|--|---|---|---|---|
| Referred to CIC by: | UNHCR | UNHCR | Private sponsors ^a | UNHCR |
| Funded by: | CIC, through the Resettlement Assistance Program | CIC, through the Resettlement Assistance Program | Private sponsors | CIC and private sponsor, each of which is responsible for 6 months of income support. Private sponsor covers start-up costs. |
| Settlement support by: | Resettlement Assistance Program | Private sponsors | Private sponsors | Private sponsors |
| Coverage under the Interim Federal Health Program ^b | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic coverage • Supplemental coverage • Prescription drug coverage | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic coverage • Supplemental coverage • Prescription drug coverage | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic coverage • “Public Health or Public Safety Prescription Drug Coverage” | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic coverage • Supplemental coverage • Prescription drug coverage |

Notes: a. Refugees referred by Groups of Five and community sponsors must have documentation showing that the UNHCR or a foreign government has determined that they are refugees.

b. Government of Canada, [Interim Federal Health Program: Summary of Benefits](#).

Source: Table prepared by the author, based on Nadine Nasir, *Overview of the Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) Program*, Webinar, Refugee Sponsorship Training Program, 29 January 2015.

Under the *Canada–Québec Accord relating to Immigration and Temporary Admission of Aliens*,⁹ the Quebec government selects refugees from the pool of CIC-approved cases for resettlement and administers its own private sponsorship program.¹⁰

3.1 GOVERNMENT-ASSISTED REFUGEE PROGRAM

The federal government bears complete responsibility for refugees who arrive through the GAR program.¹¹ CIC's Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) provides settlement support for GARs through a network of service provider organizations. This support includes:

port of entry services, assistance with temporary accommodations, assistance opening a bank account, life skills training, orientation sessions, and links to settlement programming and mandatory federal and provincial programs.¹²

Eligible refugees may also receive income assistance through the RAP to cover start-up and ongoing costs, usually for the first year in Canada.¹³

Some refugees selected for resettlement by the government are in need of special assistance, so the government works to meet their needs for a longer settlement period with private sponsors through the Joint Assistance Sponsorship (JAS) program. The JAS program is for refugees who need a higher level of support due to:

- trauma from violence or torture,
- medical disabilities,
- the effects of systemic discrimination, or
- a large number of family members.¹⁴

3.2 PRIVATE SPONSORSHIP OF REFUGEES PROGRAM

The PSR program is unique among resettlement programs in that sponsors may refer refugees for resettlement to CIC. The sponsors assume all of the financial costs for the initial resettlement period.

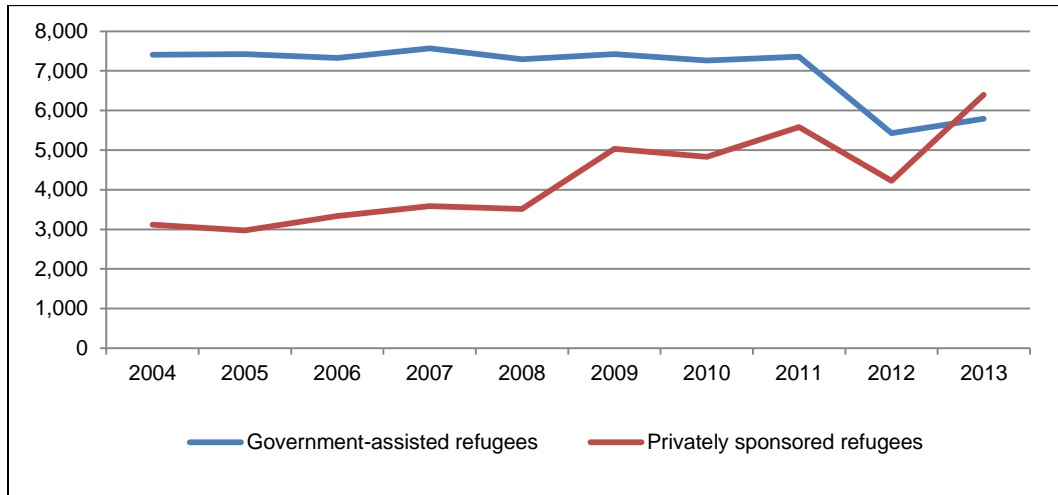
In the PSR program, private sponsors provide initial settlement support similar to that provided by RAP, as well as emotional and social support. Total estimated costs for sponsoring a single individual in 2014 were \$12,600, while sponsoring a family of six was estimated to cost \$32,500.¹⁵ Because the private sponsorship program draws on private resources, it allows more refugees to be resettled to Canada without increasing government costs.

Private sponsors in the PSR program¹⁶ include:

- incorporated groups with an on-going agreement with CIC to sponsor refugees (Sponsorship Agreement Holders);¹⁷
- five Canadians or permanent residents (Groups of Five);¹⁸ and
- community sponsors.¹⁹

The number of resettled refugees assisted by the government compared with the number of those sponsored by private groups is shown in Figure 1. As most of the government's increase to the resettlement target is allocated to private sponsorship (2,000 out of 2,500 spots), the trends evident in Figure 1 are likely to continue.

Figure 1 – New Permanent Residents Admitted Through the Government-Assisted Refugee Program and the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program, 2004–2013



Source: Figure prepared by the author using data obtained from Government of Canada, [Facts and Figures 2013 – Immigration overview: Permanent residents](#).

3.3 BLENDED VISA OFFICE–REFERRED PROGRAM

The Blended Visa Office–Referred program²⁰ is a partnership program between the UNHCR, CIC, and private sponsors targeting certain refugee populations, which started in 2013. It is a cost-sharing program with private sponsors that replaced 1,000 GAR resettlement spots in the annual immigration levels plan.²¹

4 OPERATIONAL ISSUES

4.1 RESETTLEMENT PRIORITIES

The UNHCR generally prioritizes resettlement for people who are particularly vulnerable and/or facing an imminent risk, and sometimes refers the entire refugee population in a given country, if warranted.²² The UNHCR and the international community recognize that resettlement places should be given to individuals experiencing both urgent unfolding conflicts and “protracted refugee situations,” where the refugees have been displaced for many years.

The Canadian government identifies priorities for refugee settlement, both in terms of particularly vulnerable groups and specific refugee populations. For example, the government has a long-standing program for women at risk²³ and in 2011 started a pilot government–private organization sponsorship program to resettle refugees persecuted on the basis of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.²⁴

In the past few years, the government has shifted from a global resettlement program to a more targeted approach that includes multi-year commitments to particular refugee groups.²⁵ Most recently, the government announced that it would resettle up to 10,000 refugees from Syria over three years.²⁶ CIC says that multi-year group resettlement commitments allow it to realize administrative efficiencies and provide consistency for receiving communities, who can tailor orientation information and other supports to the refugees being resettled.²⁷ However, organizations such as UNHCR also continue to value global resettlement programs, because these ensure “that resettlement is responsive as a mechanism of individual protection.”²⁸

Private sponsors may have different priorities for resettlement, because the refugees put forward often have family connections in Canada or are from a particular region. For instance, private sponsors have a strong interest in supporting refugees from East Africa (accounting for up to a quarter of new resettlement places requested).²⁹

4.2 COMPLEX OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

The refugee resettlement program exists in a complex operational environment, as evidenced by CIC's shortfall in meeting the targeted number of GARs for 2014. Some of the difficulties relate to poor security conditions, which prevent visa officers from reaching refugees in camps for interviews and, in certain cases, have led to embassy closures, which impact CIC services on the ground. In some circumstances, the UNHCR may also face operational constraints that limit its ability to make an adequate number of referrals.

In recent years, the PSR stream of resettlement has also faced operational challenges, such as long processing times in some regions and a relatively low approval rate. Administrative and regulatory changes implemented in 2012 were intended to address these issues in the long run.³⁰ However, recent reports suggest that some private sponsors remain concerned about processing delays. The reports also point out that some sponsors have raised new concerns related to aspects of the 2012 administrative and regulatory changes and to their increased liability for the health care expenses of the refugees they support.³¹ These reports suggest that such difficulties hamper efforts to recruit and retain the volunteers and financial commitments that make private sponsorship successful.

5 CONCLUSION

The government has indicated that it is increasing the number of refugees resettled in Canada from abroad by 20%, or about 2,500 a year. In delivering on this target, it continues to be reliant on a number of partners, the UNHCR and private sponsors in particular.³² At the same time, increasing the target opens up possibilities – for new actors to become involved in private sponsorship and for the renewal of long-standing cooperation with civil society groups.

NOTES

1. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], [UNHCR Projected Global Resettlement Needs 2015](#), 20th Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement, Geneva, 24–26 June 2014, p. 9.
2. Citizenship and Immigration Canada [CIC], "[Program 2.2: Refugee Protection](#)," *Report on Plans and Priorities 2014–2015*.
3. CIC, [Notice – Supplementary Information to the 2015 Immigration Levels Plan](#). The levels plan includes the following targets: 4,500–6,500 Privately Sponsored Refugees, 5,800–6,500 Government-Assisted Refugees, and 700–1,000 Blended Visa Office–Referred refugees.
4. Specifically, Canada has ratified the United Nations [Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees](#) and the United Nations [Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment](#). The in-land refugee determination system is addressed in Julie Béchar and Sandra Elgersma, [Refugee Protection in Canada](#), Publication no. 2011-90-E, Parliamentary Information and Research Service, Library of Parliament, Ottawa, 15 July 2013.
5. *Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations*, SOR/2002-227, ss. [144](#) and [147](#).
6. *Ibid.*, [s. 139](#).
7. Refugees admitted to Canada under the Urgent Protection Program and those determined by visa officers to be vulnerable are not required to demonstrate an ability to establish successfully in Canada. See UNHCR, "[Country Chapter CAN: Canada, by the Government of Canada](#)," August 2014, p. 9. (The Country Chapters are an addendum to UNHCR, [UNHCR Resettlement Handbook](#), 2011, and were revised at various dates, depending on the country.)
8. As explained by the UNHCR:

Situations of mass influx frequently involve groups of persons acknowledged as refugees on a group basis because of the readily apparent and objective reasons for flight. ... The immediate impracticality of individual status determinations has led to use of a *prima facie* refugee designation or acceptance for the group.

(UNHCR, [Handbook and Guidelines on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status](#), December 2011, p. 103.)
9. [Canada–Québec Accord relating to Immigration and Temporary Admission of Aliens](#), February 1991.
10. For more information, see Immigration, Diversité, et Inclusion Québec, [Refugees and other clientele](#).
11. CIC, [Government-Assisted Refugee Program](#).
12. CIC, "[Sub-program 3.1.4: Resettlement Assistance Program](#)," *Report on Plans and Priorities 2014–2015*.
13. More information on the resettlement assistance program is available in Julie Béchar and Sandra Elgersma, [Assistance for Government-Sponsored Refugees, Chosen Abroad](#), Publication no. 2011-94-E, Parliamentary Information and Research Service, Library of Parliament, Ottawa, 29 August 2014.
14. CIC, [Joint Assistance Program – Sponsoring refugees with special needs](#).
15. Refugee Sponsorship Training Program, [Fact Sheet: Sponsorship Cost Table](#), March 2014.
16. CIC, [Guide to the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program](#).

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17. CIC, [Sponsorship Agreement Holders – Sponsoring refugees](#). The list of Sponsorship Agreement Holders [SAHs] is available at CIC, [Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program – Sponsorship Agreement Holders](#).
18. CIC, [Groups of five – Sponsoring refugees](#).
19. CIC, [Community sponsors – Sponsoring refugees](#). According to the Regulatory Impact Analysis Statement that accompanied the [Regulations Amending the Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations](#) (SOR/2012-225) in 2012, SAHs submitted 60% of all private refugee sponsorship applications, while Groups of Five submitted 40%, and community sponsors submitted only a handful.
20. CIC, [Blended Visa Office–Referred Program – Sponsoring refugees](#).
21. Refugee Sponsorship Training Program, [Blended VOR Program: Frequently Asked Questions](#).
22. For more on UNHCR resettlement priorities, see “[Chapter Six: UNHCR resettlement submission categories](#),” in UNHCR, *UNHCR Resettlement Handbook* (2011).
23. The women-at-risk program is described in UNHCR (August 2014), p. 9.
24. Government of Canada, “[Government of Canada to help gay and lesbian refugees fleeing persecution](#),” News release, 24 March 2011.
25. According to the Resettlement Sponsorship Training Program, the government has made the following multi-year group resettlement commitments:
 - 4,000 Iraqis out of the Middle East by 2015, toward an overall commitment of 20,000 Iraqis;
 - 1,000 Bhutanese out of Nepal by 2015, toward an overall commitment of 6,500 Bhutanese;
 - 5,000 refugees out of Turkey between 2013 and 2018 (mostly Iraqis and Iranians in the short term, to be followed by Syrians);
 - 200 Syrian GARs out of Lebanon and Jordan, in 2013 and 2014;
 - 900 Colombians out of Ecuador between 2014 and 2017;
 - 4,000 Eritreans out of Eastern Sudan and Ethiopia between 2014 and 2019; and
 - 2,500 Congolese out of Tanzania and Burundi between 2015 and 2018.(Refugee Sponsorship Training Program, [Multiyear Refugee Resettlement Commitments](#).)
26. Susana Mas, “[Canada to resettle 10,000 more Syrian refugees over 3 years](#),” *CBC News*, 7 January 2015.
27. CIC, [Evaluation of Government Assisted Refugees \(GAR\) and Resettlement Assistance Program \(RAP\)](#), March 2011, p. vi.
28. *Ibid.*, p. xii.
29. CIC, *2013 SAH Annual Reports: Key Results*, 5 November 2014, p. 8.
30. Through regulatory change, the application process was streamlined in 2012 so that sponsors submitted both their undertaking and the refugee’s permanent resident application at once, and Groups of Five and community sponsors were restricted to sponsoring only those people already recognized by the UNHCR or a foreign government as refugees. See *Regulations Amending the Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations*, [SOR/2012-225](#). Administrative changes at the same time included a new centralized processing centre in Winnipeg, and for SAHs, yearly allocations for new sponsorships and caps and sub-caps on new visa applications processed at certain foreign missions.

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31. Ashley Chapman, [*Private Sponsorship and Public Policy: Political barriers to church-connected refugee resettlement in Canada*](#), Citizens for Public Justice, September 2014; and Canadian Council for Refugees, [*Canada's Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program: Proud history, Uncertain future*](#), December 2014.
32. CIC, "[Backgrounder – Canada's Resettlement Programs](#)."