

Presentation to [HUMA](#) on Monday June 22, 3:00 pm – 4:00 pm
Debbie Douglas

Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the committee for the opportunity to appear before you today.

I am joining you today from Tkaronto, the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples.

I will speak to you about three priorities that must be considered in the Government response to COVID.

1. Regularization of immigration status

Canada has a large and growing population with precarious immigration status living and working here. That includes refused refugee claimants from Haiti, working in long-term care and other essential services in the Greater Montreal area, and undocumented people working in the food supply chain, in personal care work, cleaning and more. They pay taxes and fees, and some even pay personal income tax, but they cannot access government benefits or programs.

Because of their precarious immigration status undocumented workers are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Given the nature of our temporary worker programs, the majority of such workers are racialized. In these COVID times, many are working in unsafe conditions, feeling they cannot say or do anything for fear they would lose their job. And clearly they are needed because employers continue to employ them, and most likely also pay them lower wages. Undocumented women are among those most vulnerable to exploitation, including domestic and intimate partner violence. These women are also predominantly racialized.

We think these unprecedented times present Canada with an opportunity to seriously consider a broad immigration status regularization program, to allow people with precarious immigration status to gain permanent residence.

Canada already has at least two pilot programs of this kind – one in the GTA focused on workers in the construction sector, and another more recent program for certain agricultural workers.

While there are only estimates of how many people are here with precarious immigration status we know those numbers have grown over time – particularly when there are changes to various immigration programs and people have fallen through the gaps. A number of such residents have been living and working in Canada, sometimes for many years. They are already established, they have networks and likely even family members here who may be permanent residents or Canadian citizens. Families with mixed citizenship and Canadian children with undocumented parents are not unusual in Canada, and these Canadian children are often denied benefits.

Refugee claimants, migrants workers, international students, and people who are undocumented or otherwise have status present a good pool of candidates to draw from to meet the immigration targets already set by government, and which we know we will not meet this year, and most likely will not meet next year either because of the pandemic. People with less than full residency status or citizenship are member of our community and contribute to our

economy. We gain far more from their presence here than we get back. Let's do the right thing and let them gain full permanent resident status.

2. Access to benefits for everyone

Building on my earlier point, – people with precarious immigration status pay taxes and fees, and some even pay personal income tax, but they cannot access government benefits or programs. Research shows they put far more into our economy than they use in publicly funded services. During the COVID crisis may have lost their jobs in the informal economy and thus their income. They have no financial support or access to any benefits.

Recently, OCASI collaborated with some of member agencies and other groups across the province, Toronto and southern Ontario in particular. Working with two private foundations we were able to secure some dollars to provide some support to those without any income. It wasn't a lot of money, so you can imagine it went very quickly. Agencies have also privately fundraised to address the urgent need they are seeing for financial support and basic resources. But these efforts are small; they are highly localized; they don't reach all those that need help; and they are not sufficient.

We appreciate the fact that the government gave a boost for the Canada Child Benefit. This is very welcome for many low-income families with minor children, but it is a benefit that is not available to people with precarious immigration status – even if they have Canadian-born children.

We also welcome the one-time top up to Old Age Security and Guaranteed Income Supplement. These benefits are not available to permanent residents who have lived here for less than ten years, even if have lived and worked here for say 9.5 years. At this time when even their own family members may have suffered loss of income, there may be literally no one else they can rely on for support.

These are very difficult times for so many residents – but especially for people with precarious immigration status. I urge you to call for an extension of government benefits and programs to all residents regardless of immigration status until we can weather this crisis. Government can do this by issuing a temporary Social Insurance Number that people can use to apply. We will come out stronger as a society and be in a better place to start rebuilding the economy, working safely and together.

3. Immigration selection

My final point is to urge you to open up economic immigration selection. If there is one thing we have learned during this pandemic, it is how much of what we consider essential work is unseen. We notice it only when it is missing – where there is no food on our table, when there is no one taking care of elderly Canadians in long-term care homes – cooking for them and cleaning up after them; when there is no one to package and deliver the food, medicine, toilet paper and other essential supplies we need.

But these are not the jobs in our immigration selection program – which is skewed to highly skilled workers and highly educated students in certain sectors. Yes we need people with those skills, and we also need these who grow and harvest food, work in meat and fish plants, build our homes, who work as caregivers, cleaners, general labourers, in call centres.

Let us learn from this experience and open up immigration selection to match the reality of what we are seeing on the ground in labour markets across Canada. In the interim, we should start giving people who are already here an opportunity to become permanent residents if that is what they are interested in doing. Some may not – they may prefer to return to their home countries. But there are many others who want to stay and have already started taking the steps towards that by working and building a life here.

Conclusion

I want to acknowledge the positive work relationship that has been happening in the sector with the federal government. It underlines the importance of consistent relationship building and joint work as happens through our sector's National Settlement and Integration Council.

OCASI is the umbrella for 237 agencies across Ontario who provide services and program to newcomers to Canada.

We were relieved and encouraged that the federal government declared our sector an essential service. There are two reasons why we see this as good policy.

The primary role of immigrant and refugee serving agencies is to support newcomers in the process of building a new life in Canada.

During the pandemic newcomers turned to our agencies for assistance in accessing income support, filing income tax, translation of information about income support.

We want to acknowledge IRCC for their support in keeping the sector going by having workers stay on the job, and by being flexible in allowing agencies to be responsive to the needs they are seeing in their local communities.