

**Submission to Toronto Office of Recovery and Rebuild  
by OCASI – Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants  
July 24, 2020**

OCASI – Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants is the umbrella organization for the Ontario immigrant and refugee-serving sector.

This OCASI submission draws from a virtual discussion by 30 Toronto member agencies on July 8, 2020, and from discussions at previous regional meetings.

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**Question #7: What has your agency learned from the COVID-19 response that can inform preparation for a possible second wave of COVID-19? (e.g. importance of funding flexibility to respond quickly or list of essential services):**

- Refugees, immigrants and migrants face very specific challenges. They face many of the same challenges all other residents do, but have other specific needs related to language, unfamiliarity with systems and more. It has been a challenge to have governments recognize this and respond accordingly. It should be a priority in preparing for a possible second wave of COVID.
- People with precarious immigration status have been left out of virtually every kind of support. The City of Toronto excludes people with precarious immigration status from accessing social assistance, despite the fact that the Social Benefits Tribunal has ruled in favour of the applicant on appeal. Precarious immigrants who have lost their jobs have no other financial supports. They should be allowed to access social assistance.
- The federal government had declared early on newcomer services essential, but the Ontario government and municipalities did not. City of Toronto should recognize newcomer services as essential.
- Flexibility of funders was important - particularly in allowing agencies to use slippage to buy personal protective equipment, laptops and cellphone and in some cases pay for internet and telephone use for staff working from home; and recognizing that service targets will not be met.
- Most if not all immigrant and refugee-serving agencies were able to transition to virtual service delivery, with most staff working from home. This was possible in large part due to flexibility from the federal funder of settlement services. (Although this wasn't mentioned in the discussion, the reality was likely different for agencies that don't receive federal settlement funding). Agencies expect to find it easier to deal with a second wave now that some infrastructure is in place, as well as experience with virtual service delivery. Many agencies have adopted a fluid approach to service delivery, which will allow them to respond according to circumstances.
- However virtual service delivery cannot address all client needs, and is not a viable option for many agencies and workers. Many workers do not have the

resources at home to provide virtual services or the appropriate environment – eg. many people at home competing for the same resources and access, lack of privacy (especially to protect client confidentiality), distraction from family members especially young children. Some agencies were not able to provide resources to all workers. Agencies will need more resources to support all their staff in the event of a second wave.

- Many clients do not have the resources or ability to access virtual or telephone services. Service to many vulnerable and marginalized people must be provided face-to-face, including women facing gender-based and domestic violence, people facing challenges with language and literacy (and computer literacy), war-affected refugee and others experiencing trauma. Addressing social isolation is particular challenge. Agencies are interested in hearing about how others have reduced social isolation for clients. If there is a second wave agencies will need more support for infrastructure and technology.
- OCASI had distributed a continuity plan to member agencies which agencies reportedly found very useful. Most agencies are now prepared for a second wave, despite ongoing challenges for some as described above. Agencies are interested in sharing good practices and resources. One agency had created an internal pandemic community across all departments and programs that met regularly for risk assessment, health and safety and service delivery.

**Question #9: Given existing long-standing constraints and the potential financial impacts of COVID-19, where do you see an opportunity for the City, other levels of government, and community partners to work differently and to improve programs or services to better serve vulnerable residents?**

- Provide a universal basic income to all residents, regardless of immigration status.
- The minimum wage should be a living wage to all residents.
- Other important services that should be provided by government – Legal, health and mental health, more programs to address gender-based violence and domestic violence
- Governments must establish a rent relief fund for tenants and legislation to protect them from eviction. A disproportionate number of renters are refugees, immigrants and people with precarious immigration status; and they are over-represented among low-income residents in Toronto. A significant number of low-income renters are in rent arrears of thousands of dollars, despite paying what they can to landlords. They will not be able to repay all the rent owed once eviction restrictions are lifted. There is tremendous fear that landlords will begin proceedings to evict tenants as soon as they can, as well as take them to court for unpaid rent. Agencies are reporting that it is a massive concern in low-income neighbourhoods. For

instance, almost 50% of tenants in a rental tower in a low-income neighbourhood are in rent arrears. There is tremendous fear of eviction and homelessness. It is critical that government acts now to provide a rent relief fund for tenants (not landlords), instead of waiting until they are evicted and homeless, and at risk of exposure as we head into fall and winter.

- We need a cross-sector solution to address the growing and deepening social isolation that women – particularly refugee and immigrant women who do not have official language ability or literacy – are facing, which has left them vulnerable to heightened risk of gender-based and domestic violence.
- All levels of government funders must continue to be flexible around funding and targets to allow agencies to respond effectively and appropriately to community needs. Continued government investment in community services and programs is critically needed, during the second wave and the recovery/restructure period.
- All governments must come together to provide supports for people with precarious immigration status, who have been largely forgotten during the pandemic shutdown.
- Provide affordable childcare to enable parents, especially single parents and women in particular (who are over-represented among caregivers) to return to work.
- Provide resources and programs to reduce isolation among seniors and other residents. Refugee and immigrant seniors are especially vulnerable to isolation and loneliness because of language barriers, and lack of computer literacy.
- Strengthen mental health programs and supports. The pandemic closure has been especially hard on people who are already isolated to some degree, such as refugees and immigrants, and who are facing an uncertain future in their new life here.

**Question #10: Do you have any recommendations on how to create jobs and boost local economic development in the COVID-19 recovery and rebuild process? How can the City and/or other levels of government support these solutions?**

- Ensure that refugees, immigrants and precarious migrants are explicitly included in all economic initiatives.
- Community benefits and jobs to local residents must be a condition to all developed constructing developments in Toronto. Developers can collaborate with community agencies to train marginalized residents in construction and related fields. The government can support creative programming such as catering partnerships by community agencies to provide food to construction worker onsite.

- Governments should collaborate with community agencies in creatively influencing new job creating and supporting their clients to access those jobs.
- Provide affordable childcare so that women in particular and single parents are not left behind.
- Partner with universities, colleges and private sector to create opportunities in technology and bio-technology for vulnerable youth.
- Invest in community and private sector partnerships where youth can apply their technical skills to help small businesses transition to doing business online. The focus should be on providing internship, jobs and entrepreneurship opportunities for marginalized youth, including refugee and immigrant youth.

**Question #11: What are critical issues and needs you see for your clients related to climate change and resilience related to COVID-19 recovery over the short and long term?**

- Accessible and affordable transit is a priority. Transit must also be safe and reliable.
- Refugees and immigrants are over-represented among those who are low income, and have fewer resources to access housing with adequate heat in the winter and survive heat in the summer. They need specific support deal with the challenges of climate change.

**Question #12: Do you have any other comments or input that you would like the City to consider in planning for the COVID-19 recovery and rebuild process?**

- The City must recognize newcomer services as essential. The federal government has recognized it but provincial and municipal governments have not. Refugees and immigrants are completely reliant on these services.
- Access to internet is a human right, particularly as the City of Toronto and other orders of government move most if not all their services online. Many refugees and immigrants as well as other residents face particular challenges in accessing online information and services for many reasons, such as lack of connectivity, lack of access to devices, privacy, lack of computer literacy and language literacy or fluency in the official languages. Government must provide internet access as a fundamental right.
- The City must develop easier service access, particularly to remove barriers that refugees and immigrants might face because of language barriers and unfamiliarity.
- The City can create a sub-committee or a working group to develop strategies ahead of the second wave to support refugees and immigrants, particularly those with precarious immigration status and other marginalized and vulnerable residents.

- Many migrant workers and other residents with precarious immigration status do not have a bank account or meet the necessary criteria to open one. Some agencies that work with precarious migrants had to look for creative ways to provide financial support to precarious migrants (using donated funds) that did not rely on having a bank account or payday lenders (exorbitant charges for cheque cashing). In the long term, the City must work with communities and financial institutions to develop better solutions for precarious migrants.
- This point was made earlier but is repeated here because it is a critical need – develop a rent subsidy fund to aid tenants in rent arrears before they are evicted; invest in affordable housing to accommodate different family types and sizes (such as large extended families). The City has an important role to play in taking this message to other levels of government.