

2024 Ontario Pre-Budget Submission

OCASI – Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants

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LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Immigrant and refugee settlement services

1. Increase investment in the [Newcomer Settlement Program \(NSP\)](#) and [Language Training Program](#) by a minimum 5% to meet higher real costs due to inflation and ramp up program scale to fund more organizations; in addition, make permanent the September 2023 investment of a further \$13.25 million in NSP.

Women's services

2. Increase investment in women's organizations, including women's centres and shelters and language interpretation services, to support women facing multiple systemic barriers in employment, income support, housing, access to childcare, unsafe work, and violence.
3. Increase investment in initiatives to address gender-based violence, including the Immigrant and Refugee Neighbours, Friends and Families initiative.

Labour Market Integration

4. Ensure that Employment Ontario provides targeted services for refugee, immigrant and racialized women, and OW and ODSP clients; and ensure the Employment Ontario assessment is inclusive of and appropriately responsive to immigrants, refugees, women, racialized people and other workers facing systemic labour market barriers and disadvantages.
5. Make targeted investments in employment and entrepreneurship programs for immigrants and refugees - particularly women, racialized workers and workers with disabilities.
6. Invest in services to remove systemic barriers to credentials recognition and support the licensure of internationally educated professionals and tradespeople.
7. Use Community Benefits Agreements (CBA) as a lever to create and improve economic opportunities for residents facing systemic disadvantage, including racialized and refugee and im/migrant women.
8. Introduce equity or fairness in hiring legislation to eliminate employment barriers, build more transparent and accountable hiring practices, improve access and fair distribution of opportunities for all groups and create a culture of equity and inclusion in the workplace; and establish a fully mandated and adequately resourced Equity in Employment Secretariat to implement a comprehensive and mandatory employment equity program in Ontario.

Poverty reduction

9. Increase the minimum wage to a living wage, and index to inflation.
10. Raise ODSP and OW entitlements to reflect the cost of living in Ontario and meet the needs of users.

11. Ensure that all people in Ontario have access to social assistance support regardless of immigration status; and remove systemic administrative barriers that prevent them from accessing support.

Housing

12. Provide rent relief by way of recurring subsidies for low-income renters.
13. Enact rent control across the province for all rental housing.
14. Develop new permanent affordable housing, and immediately repair existing units.

Access to justice

15. Work with the Federal Government to establish a long-term, sustainable funding model for Immigration and Refugee legal aid in Ontario.

Anti-racism Directorate

16. Increase funding to the Anti-Racism Directorate (ARD) to enhance its capacity for ongoing monitoring, analysis and program development for comprehensive anti-racism policies and practices; and to provide for the collection and analysis of ethno-racially and otherwise appropriately disaggregated data across all provincial Ministries and public institutions – including the Ministry of Health.

Health

17. Provide universal health coverage for all people in Ontario, regardless of immigration status.
18. Fund targeted and culturally tailored approaches to improving health outcomes for Black, Indigenous, and people of colour, who continue to face poorer health care outcomes in Ontario.
19. Increase funding for public and community-based mental health services and coverage.

INTRODUCTION

OCASI is the umbrella organization and collective voice of the Ontario immigrant and refugee-serving sector. OCASI was established in 1978 and now has more than 240 member agencies across the province.

Ontario's immigrant and refugee serving sector does the important work of facilitating the settlement and integration of refugees and im/migrants. Across Ontario, the sector supports refugees and im/migrants to find jobs, access workers' rights, housing, education and training, health and mental health services, food security, safety for women and girls facing violence, access to justice, and much more. We are part of the larger non-profit sector that contributes over \$50 billion to Ontario's GDP and employs more than 850,000 people.

This is an especially difficult time for many Ontario residents, particularly those who are low-income, from historically disadvantaged groups including Black and other racialized people and refugees and im/migrants. They must grapple with systemic discrimination and structural disadvantage as well as labour market barriers (access to jobs, decent work and credentials recognition), a crisis in housing (availability and affordability), massive cost of living increases, food insecurity, access to education, insufficient health and mental health services and access to justice.

We urge the government to lift the floor on basic rights and entitlements, and deliver a budget that will provide equitable opportunities and outcomes for Ontario residents.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Immigrant and refugee settlement services

1. Increase investment in the [Newcomer Settlement Program \(NSP\)](#) and [Language Training Program](#) by a minimum 5% to meet higher real costs due to inflation and ramp up program scale to fund more organizations; in addition, make permanent the September 2023 investment of a further \$13.25 million in NSP.

There is widespread recognition from government and multiple stakeholders that immigration is critical to Ontario's economic growth and prosperity. Immigrant and refugee Settlement services and language training are important resources that can support refugees and im/migrants to access services and find resources to build a new life, and to help Ontario realize the full potential of immigration.

Provincially funded settlement services fill the critical gap left by eligibility restrictions for federal settlement services. Service costs have increased beyond the average inflation rate, while funding levels have remained the same. Many unfunded organizations across Ontario provide support to migrant workers, migrant students and refugee claimants. Their work is an important component of the immigration process in which Ontario is a major and active participant – a process that draws from migrant workers and students for both the Ontario Immigrant Nominee Program and the general economic immigration program.

In September 2023 the Ontario government invested an additional \$13.25 million for settlement services, language training and labour market integration supports to help refugee claimants settle, achieve stability and find employment. The investment was timely, and critical in ensuring that services and supports reached those who need it the most. It must be made a permanent part the settlement funding envelope and investment in NSP and Language Training must be further increased by a minimum of 5% to meet higher real costs driven by inflation and increased service demand.

Women's services

2. Increase investment in women's organizations, including women's centres and shelters and language interpretation services, to support women facing multiple systemic barriers in employment, income support, housing, access to childcare, unsafe work, and violence.
3. Increase investment in initiatives to address gender-based violence, including the Immigrant and Refugee Neighbours, Friends and Families initiative.

Violence against women and girls increased by up to 20 per cent during the pandemic. Women who were already facing systemic barriers were disproportionately impacted, particularly Indigenous, racialized and refugee and im/migrant women. In general, women faced greater social and economic hardships, including an increase in unpaid caregiving responsibilities,

unsafe work, job loss, and housing precarity, all of which disproportionately affect racialized women.

Labour Market Integration

4. Ensure that Employment Ontario provides targeted services for refugee, immigrant and racialized women, and OW and ODSP clients; and ensure the Employment Ontario assessment is inclusive of and appropriately responsive to immigrants, refugees, women, racialized people and other workers facing systemic labour market barriers and disadvantages.
5. Make targeted investments in employment and entrepreneurship programs for immigrants and refugees - particularly women, racialized workers and workers with disabilities.
6. Invest in services to remove systemic barriers to credentials recognition and support the licensure of internationally educated professionals and tradespeople.
7. Use Community Benefits Agreements (CBA) as a lever to create and improve economic opportunities for residents facing systemic disadvantage, including racialized and refugee and im/migrant women.
8. Introduce equity or fairness in hiring legislation to eliminate employment barriers, build more transparent and accountable hiring practices, improve access and fair distribution of opportunities for all groups and create a culture of equity and inclusion in the workplace; and establish a fully mandated and adequately resourced Equity in Employment Secretariat to implement a comprehensive and mandatory employment equity program in Ontario.

The specific challenges racialized refugees and immigrants - particularly those experiencing multiple barriers - face in getting jobs are not addressed by Employment Ontario (EO) The EO Common Assessment should place all immigrants and refugees in streams B and C, thus enabling them to have the highest level of support available; and transparency should be increased by sharing the Common Assessment Tool with all employment service providers across Ontario, and collaborate with service providers to better understand client data trends and use findings to improve access for those who are disadvantaged in the labour market.

Data shows that Black and other racialized people, and refugees and im/migrants continue to have worse labour market outcomes in Ontario, complicated by systemic racism and discrimination within employment. Internationally trained professionals and tradespeople continue to face systemic barriers to licensure and to working in their field at a level consistent with their training and experience.

Fairness in hiring legislation, together with the appropriate structural support such as an Equity in Employment Secretariat can help to eliminate systemic barriers to labour market access. The legislation would require employers to implement transparent and fair hiring practices, ensure that employment opportunities are made widely known and available, and collect and provide

demographic data disaggregated by grounds listed in the Ontario Human Rights Code and listed in the Ontario Anti-Racism Directorate Data Standards.¹

In 2022, the employment rate for those aged 16 to 64 with disabilities was 65.1%, compared with 80.1% for those without disabilities. Median hourly wages for persons with disabilities (\$26.00) were 5.5% less than for those without disabilities (\$27.50) in 2022.²

Although racialized people are generally more likely than their non-racialized, non-Indigenous counterparts to earn a bachelor's degree or higher, they are less likely to find jobs that offer the same pay and benefits in the years following graduation.³

In general, two years after earning a bachelor's degree, the employment income was lower among racialized graduates than non-racialized, non-Indigenous graduates. It was also lower among women than men. Employment income averaged \$45,700 per year for racialized women and \$47,800 for non-racialized and non-Indigenous women, compared with \$51,600 for racialized men and \$54,100 for non-racialized and non-Indigenous men.⁴ These differences are greater for immigrants.

Fair hiring legislation would go hand-in-hand with proposed legislation that would ban the use of Canadian work experience as a requirement in job postings or application forms, announced recently by the Ontario government. It would also support fair access to employment opportunities and employment for all workers from under-represented and disadvantaged groups.

Poverty reduction

9. Increase the minimum wage to a living wage, and index to inflation.
10. Raise ODSP and OW entitlements to reflect the cost of living in Ontario and meet the needs of users.
11. Ensure that all people in Ontario have access to social assistance support regardless of immigration status; and remove systemic administrative barriers that prevent them from accessing support.

The 2021 Census found that while there was a decline in poverty for most residents, those born outside Canada continue to experience poverty at higher rate. The poverty rate for refugees was almost double the rate faced by those born in Canada. Racialized im/migrants and refugees are disproportionately affected¹. Those without immigration status don't have access to basic program and services, and are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

Workers in Ontario are facing high levels of working poverty, made worse by housing unaffordability and the high cost of groceries as well as other basic necessities and services. The living wage calculated by the Ontario Living Wage Network is based on the cost of a basket of basic goods and services for three types of households: two parents aged 35 and two

¹ Disaggregated trends in poverty from the 2012 Census of Population; Statistics Canada; November 2022.
<https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/as-sa/98-200-X/2021009/98-200-X2021009-eng.cfm>

children aged 7 and 3, a single parent with a child aged 7, and a single adult¹³. The lowest rate was found in London – Elgin – Oxford and Southwest (Windsor) at \$18.65/hour. The highest was in the Greater Toronto Area at \$25.05/hour. This represents a significant gap between the living wage and the provincial minimum wage, currently at \$16.55/hour. The minimum wage should be increased to at least \$20/hour.

Housing

12. Provide rent relief by way of recurring subsidies for low-income renters.
13. Enact rent control across the province for all rental housing.
14. Develop new permanent affordable housing, and immediately repair existing units.

Recent im/migrants and refugees face the biggest barriers in finding affordable, safe and liveable rental housing. Racialized people in Ontario, particularly racialized refugees and im/migrants also face racism and discrimination in accessing and retaining housing. The housing crisis in Ontario includes both housing affordability and availability challenges.

Many residents are losing access to housing as they lose their sources of income, due to “renoviction” and “demoviction”, or as the cost of living increases without a commensurate rise in earned income or government assistance. Despite this, evictions continue to be enforced and rents remain due. The province has the power to eliminate rental replacement bylaws as a result of the enactment of More Homes, Built Faster Act 2022 - Bill 23. Rental replacement bylaws are essential in protecting existing affordable homes. The new powers acquired by the province will erode affordable housing in Ontario's major cities².

Access to justice

15. Work with the Federal Government to establish a long-term, sustainable funding model for Immigration and Refugee legal aid in Ontario.

Cuts to Legal Aid Ontario and refugee and immigration legal services have had a significant impact on access to justice for Canada's largest population of low-income racialized people. The lack of sustainable legal aid / legal clinic funding has meant a reduction in the capacity to provide legal services in all areas of poverty law. These services are regularly overtaxed by users.

Anti-racism Directorate

16. Increase funding to the Anti-Racism Directorate (ARD) to enhance its capacity for ongoing monitoring, analysis and program development for comprehensive anti-racism policies and practices; and to provide for the collection and analysis of ethno-racially and otherwise appropriately disaggregated data across all provincial Ministries and public institutions – including the Ministry of Health.

² Save rental replacement by-laws: Protect affordable housing. ACORN Canada. 2022. <https://acorncanada.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Save-Rental-Replacement-Bylaws-Dec-20-2022-.pdf>

The Anti-Racism Directorate (ARD) plays a critical role in identifying and eliminating systemic racism across government, and advancing racial equity in Ontario through facilitating disaggregated data collection and leading legislative and policy change to improve systemic barriers for Indigenous, Black and other racialized populations. The ARD must be sufficiently and appropriately resourced and supported to fulfil its important role.

Health

17. Provide universal health coverage for all people in Ontario, regardless of immigration status and length of residency in the province.
18. Fund targeted and culturally tailored approaches to improving health outcomes for Black, Indigenous, and people of colour, who continue to face poorer health care outcomes in Ontario.
19. Increase funding for public and community-based mental health services and coverage.

There is an escalating mental health crisis in many communities across Ontario, and an undeniable connection with the homelessness crisis, and staggering levels of hunger and food insecurity. The shortage in primary healthcare is felt across Ontario, and particularly among recently arrived refugees and im/migrants. A significant number of Ontario residents are uninsured, and a high proportion are racialized.

While residency requirements were suspended at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, they are back in force and have increased in length, going from a 3-month wait for coverage to 153 days. Recent immigrants will feel the deepest impact of the OHIP exclusion as they will not have any coverage, unlike inter-provincial migrants (people within Canada who are moving from one province to another).