

Fall 2020 Pre-Budget Submission to Ontario Ministry of Finance OCASI – Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants

October 16, 2020

OCASI is the umbrella organization for Ontario's immigrant and refugee serving sector. We have 234 member agencies across Ontario.

Immigrants and refugees to Ontario are increasingly racialized, and this racial diversity is reflected among convention refugees, refugee claimants, migrant workers and international students. The health pandemic has shed light on a second pandemic of racism-especially anti-Black racism and the racialization and feminization of poverty. In fact, Black and other racialized immigrant and refugee women are bearing the economic brunt of these dual pandemics.

Immigrants, refugees and other newcomers accounted for almost 44% of all COVID-19 cases in Ontario¹. Meanwhile they are only 25% of Ontario's population, and have lower testing rates compared to their Canadian-born counterparts. A disproportionate number of workers at high risk of COVID exposure are in healthcare and long-term care homes. They are predominantly Black and racialized immigrant and refugee women. A disproportionate number of immigrants and refugees are in jobs that pay minimum wage or less, and are living in poverty. A significant number live in rental housing, and face over-crowding and inadequate facilities that don't permit distancing and sanitation to prevent COVID exposure and spread.

In this environment, the role OCASI member agencies play in the settlement and integration of newcomers, as well as survive the pandemic is ever more critical.

1. Newcomer Settlement Program and Language Training

The Newcomer Settlement Program and English and French Language Training programs are important investments by Ontario to support the settlement and integration of newcomers. These programs have offered critical supports prior to and during the pandemic. We anticipate increased demands as the pandemic takes its toll on newcomer communities. NSP funding comes to an end on March 31st 2021 and agencies have been given no indication if this funding will continue.

- Extend agencies' contracts for one year with the required increases for salaries, program costs and overhead; and issue a call for funding in 2021 with the new funding cycle to begin April 1, 2022 for a five- year period.

¹ COVID-19 in Immigrants, Refugees and Other Newcomers in Ontario: Characteristics of Those Tested and Those Confirmed Positive, as of June 13, 2020. ICES. 2020.
<https://www.ices.on.ca/Newsroom/Announcements-and-Events/2020/ICES-releases-report-on-COVID-19-in-Immigrants-Refugees-and-Other-Newcomers-in-Ontario>

- Increase the funding envelope for immigrant and refugee settlement and integration services.
- Contract directly with community based service agencies to deliver the ESL/FSL program as per the Auditor General's recommendation in 2018/19. Currently language training is funded through school boards who then subcontract to service agencies, which is unwieldy and unnecessary.

2. Women's Futures Program, Immigrant and Refugee Communities Newcomer Friends and Families Program

These programs are critically needed especially now to ensure women's safety and well-being in Ontario. Violence against women and girls was already at high levels, and has increased by more than 20% in some regions during the pandemic. More than ever, we need reliable ongoing funding for women's centres, especially those providing services and supports to immigrant, refugee and racialized women, and for shelters, and health and mental health services for women.

- Increase funding for programs for women, especially the Investing in Women's Futures Program which has not had an increase in funding for over two decades.
- Sustain and expand funding for the Language Interpreters Service program to support survivors of domestic and sexual violence and trafficking who are deaf or hard of hearing or have limited English or French skills.

3. Employment

These programs are needed to ensure immigrants can become employed in their field at a level consistent with their experience and skills. Immigration has a positive effect on firm productivity and becomes stronger over a longer period². Meanwhile all newcomers continue to face systemic barriers in finding decent work, including racism and discrimination. Affordable childcare is critically needed to support parents, particularly racialized women, to secure and sustain employment and access education and training to get out of poverty.

- Invest in employment programs for newcomers and ensure that the new Employment Ontario service prototypes being developed will address their needs, particularly newcomer women who face unique barriers to employment; and ensure they incorporate principles of equity and fairness before they are scaled across Ontario.
- Implement a mandatory and comprehensive provincial employment equity program in Ontario, to level the playing field for First Peoples, peoples of colour, women, persons with (dis)abilities and LGBTQ community members and work to ensure merit-based employment practices for all across the province.

² The positive effects of immigration on firm productivity. Statistics Canada. September 2020. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/200914/dq200914c-eng.htm>

- Restore childcare funding and invest in an Ontario childcare strategy to provide affordable and appropriate childcare, while ensuring childcare workers are paid a living wage.

4. Legal Aid

Access to justice is a fundamental right and should not be limited by poverty or other factors. Cuts to Legal Aid Ontario funding and refugee and immigration legal services have made it more difficult – in some cases virtually impossible – for low-income newcomers to get the legal support they need. That support is important especially now as many people, including newcomers, have become vulnerable to risk of homelessness and worse.

- Provide adequate funding to Legal Aid Ontario.
- Restore funding for refugee and immigration law services.

5. Anti-Racism Directorate

The Directorate needs increased investment to support Ministries and other departments including police services, healthcare services and learning institutions on how race-based data can better inform public policy decisions. This expertise is needed especially now to support the Ontario government's commitment to collecting race-based health and other data.

- Provide adequate financial and other resources for the Anti-Racism Directorate to provide for the collection and analysis of disaggregated data across Ontario Ministries and public institutions – including the Ministry of Health.
- Work with community informed experts on creating a robust data governance regime for the collection, analysis, reporting and storing of data.

6. Healthcare

Ontario responded to the pandemic by covering medically necessary health services for uninsured people who do not meet the criteria for provincial health care coverage, as well as suspending the 3-month residence requirement. Making this change permanent would save lives and overall costs in the long-term.

- Extend the current provincial healthcare coverage beyond the pandemic to provide healthcare access without restrictions of immigration status or period of residence in Ontario.
- Invest in culturally appropriate health and mental health services so residents get the services they need.

We have also contributed to and fully support the recommendations in the joint submission by Colour of Poverty – Colour of Change.

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