

Written Submission for the Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the 2024 Federal Budget

By:

OCASI – Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants

To Standing Committee on Finance

August 2023

LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1 - Eliminate inequalities for refugees and im/migrants and appropriately invest in the immigrant and refugee-serving sector.

- a. Fully realize the promise of higher immigration targets by increasing and expanding sector capacity and resources to provide quality services;
- b. Expand sector capacity to provide settlement, integration and language training services to all who need them, regardless of immigration status;
- c. Establish a minimum core funding threshold that will ensure quality services, decent work and sector stability;
- d. Make permanent the de-coupling of administration from program spending, and cover technology and equipment purchase, repair and maintenance costs to support online delivery of settlement services. These measures were introduced during the pandemic and are set to end by March 2024;
- e. To be efficient and prudent in managing funds allow agencies to carry unspent funds from one year to the next;
- f. Provide adequate funding so that the sector can attract, recruit and retain qualified staff;
- g. Create a National Housing Strategy stream with additional supports to rapidly develop affordable housing for refugees and im/migrants.
- h. Invest in emergency shelter and housing supports and services to be provided by sector organizations to all refugee claimants, refugees and im/migrants;
- i. Provide funding support for a reception centre for refugee claimants at or near Pearson airport in Toronto to be managed by Refugee Houses/Agencies, and sufficiently resource refugee claimants' reception services at other ports of entry;
- j. Any federal funding to private developers must be tied to conditions - no displacement guarantee, targeted at people in core housing need, affordable term perpetuity; and minimum maintenance and energy efficiency standards.
- k. Mandate rent control across all provinces which will take away the financial incentive financialized landlords have in evicting tenants.
- l. Ensure equitable funding support for Black-led and Black-focused organizations, racialized ethno-specific organizations, women's organizations, trans organizations, 2SLGBTQ+ organizations, and disability organizations and services in the sector; and
- m. Exempt non-profit organizations and their employees from sanctions for providing free immigration services to their clients, as per IRCC's interpretation of Section 91 of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA).

Recommendation 2 - Bring fairness and equity to the immigration and refugee system.

- a. Establish an independent racial equity and anti-racism review and revamp of the immigration and refugee system;
- b. Establish a comprehensive and inclusive immigration status regularization program;
- c. Expand economic immigration selection criteria to include all skill backgrounds regardless of skill level or education, give permanent resident status to all migrant workers on arrival, and make all pilot economic immigration programs permanent;
- d. Increase and expand family reunification by:
 - increasing family class immigration to 35% of annual targets
 - removing the numbers cap and end the lottery system for the parents and grandparents' sponsorship program and remove minimum necessary income;
- e. Withdraw from the Canada-US Safe Third Country Agreement;
- f. Remove criminal inadmissibility double-punishment provisions in immigration law and regulations;
- g. End all immigration detention;
- h. Expand eligibility criteria to allow access to settlement and language training services for all who need them;
- i. Provide direct federal funding to organizations across Canada for immigration and refugee legal services;
- j. Eliminate citizenship fees; and
- k. Eliminate processing backlogs including by increasing IRCC staffing.

Recommendation 3 - Advance racial equity and eliminate racial discrimination.

- a. Eliminate racialization of poverty including by allowing all residents in Canada to access income supports regardless of immigration status and residency period (eg. Canada Child Benefit, Old Age Security and Guaranteed Income Supplement);
- b. Ensure access to Employment Insurance for all migrant workers who pay into the program;
- c. Create an Anti-Racism Act that will name and address all forms of systemic racism, racism, and hate, and that will provide a legislative foundation for an independent Anti-Racism Secretariat that reports directly to parliament and has its own budget;

- d. Ensure a whole-government disaggregated race-based data collection, supported with sufficient budget allocations;
- e. Collect and report on the percentage and dollar values of federal funding to Black-led and focused organizations and racialized led and focused organizations, and federal contracts to Black-owned and racialized-owned businesses; and the diversity of senior management and boards within the federal government and federally regulated organizations.
- f. Strengthen the federal Employment Equity Act and attach employment equity measures through Community Benefit Agreements to all federal investment and recovery programs to ensure racialized groups and other historically disadvantaged and under-represented groups have equitable access to all labour market opportunities across Canada;
- g. Integrate Community Benefit Agreements within infrastructure and housing spending to ensure the inclusion of racialized workers, apprentices, and businesses within the supply chain.

Recommendation 4 - Advance gender equity for racialized, refugee and im/migrant women through targeted investments and concrete policy changes.

- a. Increase funding for women-led women-focused organizations and trans organizations – with priority for women’s centres, women’s shelters, and language and interpretation services across all women’s services;
- b. On an ongoing basis, make a budget commitment to multi-year capacity building grant funding for women’s, trans and gender-equity organizations;
- c. Make targeted investments in racialized, refugee and im/migrant women’s organizations and trans organizations and programming to appropriately address gender-based violence;
- d. Set a clear federal budget line for the implementation of commitments in the National Action Plan on Gender-based violence with measureable targets and timelines;
- e. Establish a permanent residence program for people in Canada facing gender-based-violence to safely leave situations of violence without fear of removal and/or loss of status in Canada.

BACKGROUND

OCASI is the umbrella organization for immigrant and refugee-serving agencies in Ontario and the collective voice of the sector. Our mission is to achieve equality, access and full participation for immigrants and refugees in every aspect of Canadian life.

Recommendation 1 – Eliminate inequalities for refugees and im/migrants and appropriately invest in the immigrant and refugee serving sector:

Refugee and im/migrants, especially those who are Black and racialized, continue to face disproportionate socio-economic disadvantage and inequities in Canada. They are among those hardest hit by the effects of accelerated climate change. Recent arrivals are over-represented among those facing housing and food insecurity, as well as poor health outcomes, systemic barriers to labour market access, and limited access to justice.

The 2024 Budget must prioritize equitable outcomes for all residents, regardless of immigration status and period of residence.

The non-profit sector, including the immigrant and refugee-serving sector, was hit hard by the pandemic. Even before the pandemic the non-profit and charitable sector had faced decades of neglect and underfunding, while grappling with counterproductive funding guidelines and operational rules, such as a 15% cap on administration and funder demands for resource-intensive administrative reporting without the resources to carry out the work. Organizations must rely on project-based funding which does not let them build core capacity or long-term sustainability. They are limited in their ability to improve services or develop new programming to meet community needs, or to innovate. Recommendations in the 2019 Catalyst for Change Senate Report that address streamlined reporting requirements, project length, and full coverage of associated administrative costs have not been fully implemented.

Certain organizations face additional exclusions and systemic barriers rooted in racism and prejudice and are severely under-resourced – specifically organizations led-by, or serving historically disadvantaged groups including Black and racialized communities, women, trans people, racialized people with disabilities and racialized 2SLGBTQ+ groups.

The immigrant and refugee-serving sector is staffed predominantly by women, racialized people, and those of refugee and immigrant backgrounds. Jobs in the sector, especially those in frontline and supports roles, are among the lowest-paid in the human services sector. While the cost of living has risen exponentially, wages in our sector have not kept up. Sector agencies are unable to staff critically needed positions, in large part because they cannot pay competitive wages nor meet decent work standards.

Recommendation 2 – Bring fairness and equity to the immigration and refugee system:

The COVID-19 pandemic and response by all orders of government more clearly exposed the persistent and ever-deepening inequities and contradictions in Canada's immigration program. Most severely affected were people with precarious immigration status and without immigration status (undocumented), including migrant workers, international students, refugee claimants, and those without a work permit, study permit, or another temporary resident status. Among these groups, people who are Black and otherwise racialized, women, 2SLGBTQ+, and people with disabilities were disproportionately affected.

Canada is set to meet expanded permanent immigration targets. Meanwhile Canada has also accelerated the growth of people with precarious immigration status by bringing in more people as migrant workers or migrant students; and continues to expand existing programs to bring in even more workers as temporary residents.

Systemic barriers, inequities and gaps in the immigration and refugee system have contributed to loss of permanent resident status for many, and have increased the number of people without status in Canada. In 2007 an RCMP environmental scan estimated there were more than half a million people without status in Canada. In the intervening 15+ years, that number would likely have increased significantly. People without immigration status are denied basic rights to housing, health and education, more likely to face discrimination, abuse and exploitation, and have no access to income support or services. Canada must establish a broad and inclusive regularization program to allow everyone without immigration status in Canada to gain full legal resident status, and live in dignity and without fear of deportation.

Application processing is severely backlogged across the entire system, including the refugee system, all permit applications, all sponsorship applications and all citizenship applications. While the process is seemingly race and gender neutral, due to socio-

economic reasons there is a disproportionate impact on Black and racialized applicants and women.

Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) has taken certain steps to begin to address anti-black racism and racism within the department. These measures may be effective in addressing certain discriminatory practices. But they are not meant to, and will not - identify and dismantle the deeply-embedded structural racism and systemic discrimination across the entire immigration and refugee system, including in laws, regulations, policies and practices. OCASI is calling for the establishment of an independent review to identify and dismantle systemic racism and racial inequities in the system.

Recommendation 3 – Advance racial equity and eliminate racial discrimination:

Indigenous, Black, and racialized communities have always been among the most marginalized in Canada. Structural racism - deeply rooted in Canada's settler-colonial origins and the enslavement of African peoples - produced laws and policies to restrict their social, economic, and cultural rights, and often exclude them from Canadian society. Despite the enactment of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982), systemic racism persists in Canadian society.

COVID-19 has focused attention on and exacerbated the longstanding inequities faced by racialized residents. Black communities faced much worse health outcomes compared to others. Almost all racialized communities have reported an increase in hate crimes. Most notably, there has been a dramatic spike in anti-Asian racism and anti-Muslim hate, in addition to the continued high numbers of ongoing anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism.

Some governments in Canada are now taking steps to collect race-based disaggregated data, but significant gaps remain. Lack of data, particularly lack of comparable disaggregated data makes it almost impossible to measure the true impact of systemic racism on all life outcomes for racialized people.

Recommendation 4 – Advance gender equity for racialized, refugee and im/migrant women through targeted investments and concrete policy changes:

Racialized and migrant peoples, particularly women and trans people, and those who are living on low-incomes and experiencing intersecting inequalities based on race,

class, disability, education, and migration and immigration status continue to experience deep economic, social and health impacts of COVID-19.

The gender pay gap has a disproportionate impact on racialized women. Violence against women increased significantly during the pandemic and continues to increase. Racialized and refugee and im/migrant women often face significant systemic barriers in accessing safety and needed supports and resources.