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Honourable Ministers Fraser and McNaughton:

Open Letter re: Urgent support for shelter, housing and services for refugee claimants

We are calling on you to provide urgent support to municipalities in Ontario to shelter and house new refugee claimant arrivals.

A significant number of refugee claimants continue to arrive in Ontario communities, including via Toronto Pearson Airport. The number of refugee claimants arriving in Toronto in particular continues to be high, even after the expansion of the Safe Third Country Agreement to irregular crossings of the Canada-US border. We are calling on both the federal and provincial governments to sufficiently resource municipalities in Ontario as follows:

- Ensure refugee claimants at Toronto Pearson Airport and other international airports are received appropriately;
- Resource municipalities to provide emergency shelter in Toronto with support to transition to long-term housing;
- Resource community-based organizations to provide shelter and housing, and support services.

The issue

- Refugee claimants continue to arrive in Ontario communities – particularly Toronto - in significant numbers despite the closure of irregular crossing points such as Roxham Road in Quebec from March 24, 2023. Claimants are arriving primarily via Toronto Pearson Airport, and some continue to be sent on to Ontario from Quebec. For instance, from January to mid-June 2023 Ontario Refugee Coalition members received and assisted 911 newly-

arrived refugee claimants. More than half had arrived at Toronto Pearson Airport, while others had arrived at other ports of entry across Ontario and Canada.

- The shelter system in Toronto and other municipalities don't have the capacity to respond effectively, and refugee houses continue to see a high demand for shelter from new arrivals. A growing number of refugee claimants are left unhoused and sometimes on the streets, and without supports.
- Newly-arrived single refugee claimants in Toronto are typically provided emergency accommodation in homeless shelters where available. The City is using hotels to provide emergency shelter to refugee claimant families.
- In both homeless shelters and hotels, refugee claimants are left without the critical legal support they need to submit their refugee claim within deadline – a deadline that if missed can leave them with almost no options to seek refuge in Canada and may result in their deportation. Further, homeless shelters are not equipped to provide unique services and supports for refugee claimants, including awareness and training for staff to provide even appropriate and important referrals to other services.
- The hotels used for emergency shelter lack even the basic services provided at homeless shelters. The lack of supports has a significant negative impact on children as well as their parents, and violates the Best Interests of the Child.
- Further, the City of Toronto has also begun to locate people without immigration status in hotels. They too are not provided information or necessary supports critical to their immigration status and health and well-being.
- The City of Toronto has begun referring single refugee claimants to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship (IRCC) funded hotels in other municipalities. But the IRCC-funded hotel-program is being wound-down following the closure of irregular crossings of the Canada-US land border.
- Where such IRCC-funded hotel-based shelters do exist, the City of Toronto has made no provision to transport newly-arrived refugee claimants to those locations. The claimants are expected to make their own way to the hotel, in an unfamiliar environment where they may not speak the language and are without resources. People of African descent among the newly-arrived refugee claimants – including people from Ethiopia and Sudan – often must also contend with anti-Black racism and discrimination.
- A significant number of single claimants are children, below the age of majority. Refugee claimant children may be left literally stranded on the streets, vulnerable to abuse and exploitation and in complete violation of Canada's obligations to uphold the Best Interests of the Child.
- The only culturally appropriate settlement service and referrals available for refugee claimants are by the Ontario-funded Newcomer Settlement Program (NSP). While there was

a small increase to the provincial funding envelope, NSP funding for Toronto-based organizations has remained at status quo while service demand and cost of service delivery have both significantly increased. Refugee claimants and people without immigration status are denied access to federally-funded settlement services because of the eligibility barrier.

- The only available resource that assisted refugee claimant families and singles to move out of emergency shelter to long-term housing was the Canada Ontario Housing Benefit (COHB) as it covered 70 percent of the rent. This has now been discontinued since March 2023. However, this critically needed Benefit was only accessible by homeless shelter staff and clients.
- Ontario is estimated to be home to the largest population of people without immigration status, including denied refugee claimants. There is an urgent need to create a status regularization program, which would ultimately allow people without status to live in safety and security with their families and in their communities, and effectively participate in economic and social life in Canada.

### Request to IRCC and MLITSD

We are calling on Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada and the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development to implement the following:

#### Federal and provincial governments

- Sufficiently fund the City of Toronto and other municipalities to create a reception centre and additional shelters for refugee claimants that will also provide legal support, health and mental health support and other services;
- Reinstate and expand the critically needed Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit to include all refugee claimants and people without immigration status; and
- Build new housing or convert existing housing to provide rent-geared to income long-term housing units for refugee claimants and people without immigration status, as well as other low-income residents.

#### IRCC

- Remove eligibility criteria for federally-funded settlement services and allow all those who need such services to access them including refugee claimants and people without immigration status; and
- Urgently introduce an immigration status regularization program that will allow those without immigration status and those with precarious immigration status to access permanent residence in Canada. This would allow the government to meet the new, higher immigration

targets more easily as these refugees and migrants are already living and working in the country.

MLITSD

- Increase Newcomer Settlement Program (NSP) funding across Ontario, and particularly for agencies funded in the City of Toronto to provide NSP;
- Support the federal government to implement an immigration status regularization program that will allow those without immigration status and those with precarious immigration status to access permanent residence in Canada. Such a program will significantly benefit Ontario as these refugees and migrants are already living and working in the province.

We await your positive response to our urgent request.

Yours truly,

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