

Councillor Jennifer McKelvie
Deputy Mayor, City of Toronto
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June 21, 2023

Dear Madam,

Open Letter re: Urgent action for emergency and long-term shelter for refugee claimants in Toronto

We are writing to you to call for urgent action on shelter for refugee claimants arriving in Toronto.

The City of Toronto recently made the alarming announcement that single claimants would be directed to federally-funded hotel-based emergency housing for refugees outside Toronto. This decision leaves the City on the wrong side of our humanitarian obligations to refugee claimants, as well as in violation of the Best Interests of the Child.

We are calling on the City of Toronto to establish a reception centre that would:

- Receive refugee claimants arriving in Toronto
- Provide emergency shelter in Toronto with support to transition to long-term housing
- Provide support services

The issue

- Refugee claimants continue to arrive in Toronto, primarily via Toronto Pearson Airport. Refugee houses in Toronto, as well as elsewhere in Ontario continue to see a high demand for shelter from new arrivals, despite the closure of irregular crossing points such as Roxham Road in Quebec on March 24, 2023. 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 majority of arrivals were received at organizations based in Toronto.

- Newly-arrived **single** refugee claimants are typically provided emergency accommodation in homeless shelters where available, but that leaves them 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. 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.
- City of Toronto has decided to refer single refugee claimants to federal government funded shelters outside the City, funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). 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 without resources.
- 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.
- Refugee claimant families currently have access to more appropriate emergency accommodation where they also receive the necessary supports to submit a refugee claim and other services to meet their unique needs.
- Refugee claimant families and singles both require ongoing access to the Canada Ontario Housing Benefit (COHB), which would allow them to move out of emergency shelter to longer-term housing.

Request to the City of Toronto

We are calling on the City of Toronto to establish a reception centre that would:

- Receive refugee claimants arriving in Toronto, regardless of family status
- Provide emergency shelter in Toronto with support to transition to long-term housing
- Provide support services including legal support to submit a refugee claim or other legal matters, health and mental health support, and other services

We also call on the City of Toronto to urge the governments of Canada and Ontario to provide essential resources needed to support refugee claimants. In particular, to reinstate and extend the Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit (COHB) plan to not only City shelter clients but also to the

Refugee Houses. The COHB covers 70% of the rent and its absence would significantly impede the movement of refugee claimants out of both shelters and refugee houses. In fact, without COHB the relocation of refugee claimants would slow down considerably, or come to a virtual halt. This is a critically-needed resource without which refugee claimants cannot move out from emergency shelters.

We await your positive response to our urgent request.

Yours truly,

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and

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