GLOBAL REFUGEE REALITIES: ENHANCING RESETTLEMENT AND INTEGRATION OUTCOMES OF REFUGEES

From the local level to international, **Fariborz Birjandian** has served on many committees, boards and task forces related to immigration, refugees, diversity, equal rights and the cultural arts. He became a refugee when he left his home country of Iran with his family and settled for a brief time in Lahore, Pakistan, where he began his work with refugees through the UNHCR. When Fariborz resettled in Canada, he volunteered with Calgary Catholic Immigration Society (CCIS) and soon worked as a Settlement Counselor for the organization. For the past 22 years, he has been the Chief Executive Officer of CCIS, the fourth largest immigrant serving organization in Canada, and is responsible for 300 staff and 1,600 volunteers, overseeing approximately 70 programs.

Fariborz has received numerous awards and recognitions for his involvements including, *Government of Canada's Citation for Citizenship*, *the Alberta Centennial Medal*, *the Queen's Gold Jubilee* and *the Queen's Diamond Jubilee*.

While we, as a global community, still have work to do in preventing the creation of refugees, and in developing a resettlement process that facilitates the integration of refugees into our communities, there are many best practices that we can build upon. As a refugee and the CEO of CCIS, Fariborz Birjandian outlines how a collaborative, holistic approach is fundamental to resettlement, and how providing a seamless system of support, which begins upon arrival and ends with integration, is key to helping refugees overcome their past traumas, confront their fears, and realize their hopes of a new life.

I believe that people become refugees when humanity fails them, locally and internationally. In my own experience, as someone who never dreamt of becoming a refugee, humanity failed me when my family and I were stripped of our basic human rights, simply because we refused to convert to the dominant religion in the country where I was born. I lost the right to employment, to education for my children, and to any opportunity to appeal for, or expect, justice. Every day, people around the world are treated as less than human because of their political views, religious beliefs, the way they show love, or their stance on war.

Refugees undergo a painful process of losing everything and becoming stateless, without any protection from governments whose primary obligations should be to protect their citizens. They have their properties taken away and their basic human rights violated; they are tortured, raped, and murdered. The only resolution to this painful journey is the restoration of their faith in humanity, and the restoration of their own human rights. To heal and move forward, these individuals must be provided with a loving environment, wherein they can regain their dignity and self worth.

When I became a refugee in 1987, I was forced to reconcile with my new identity. I realized there were 12.2 million refugees or displaced people around the world, and I now numbered among them. The number in 1987 was staggering; imagine 12.2 million men and women, including the elderly and children,

homeless and going to sleep without knowing what the next day would bring, or if we would be alive the following night. Every day these people were crossing borders, risking their lives, and living in camps with little hope that they would ever restore their lives as dignified human beings. I have devoted my life to understanding the psychological and emotional experiences of refugees, and to identifying how someone who has lost their safety, their belongings, their homes, their rights, and even their hope, can rediscover their faith and trust in humanity, and begin to look forward to their futures.

Today, as a refugee advocate, I see that the number of forcibly displaced people around the world has increased. In 2014, this number reached a record high of 59.5 million, 19.5 million of whom were recognized as refugees. UNHCR has reported that, by the end of 2014, the number of people assisted or protected by UNHCR had reached a record high of 46.7 million. This leads me to question: are we, as a whole, failing to learn from the past? Are we losing the battle in preventing the creation and plight of refugees? Despite all of the advancements we have made in establishing a world-wide human rights protocol, and enforcing accountability for heads of state, this number has increased by 500%. Looking to the future, the outlook for these numbers remains grim as political and religious persecution continues in countries all over the world. Individuals with diverse sexual orientations are being persecuted, treated as less than human, and placed in jail or even killed, simply for being themselves. In some regions, it seems that war and the destruction of cities has become the norm, and is somehow accepted as an inevitability by the global community. In addition to political strife, we add disasters and the effects of global warming, such as droughts, creating environmental refugees. Although I still have a lot of hope in our humanity, I believe the challenges are becoming more severe, and public interest and resources are spread thin.

Since the 1951 Convention, which introduced an international commitment to protect refugees, we have seen a great deal of effort on the part of governments, organizations, and institutions to provide protection and support to displaced peoples in need. International protocols have been signed, research projects have been undertaken within the academic realm, and we have developed many best practices for healing the psychological and emotional wounds of refugees and facilitating their resettlement and integration in their new communities and new lives. At the same time, when we look at the number of countries that have actually agreed to play an active role in this refugee resettlement (27 countries), we see that few nations are willing to step up and take action in preventing people from becoming refugees, and offering them full protection and assistance when they do.

Research and practices have taught us that refugee protection and resettlement is a complex and lengthy process. A number of factors impact the failure or success of the refugee resettlement process. The three remedies that the UNHCR applies to refugee crises (repatriation, local integration, and resettlement) are moderately successful but, overall, they are simply not enough. In recent history, repatriation has failed as authorities have forced millions of people to live in refugee camps and return to harsh, inhospitable environments with little infrastructure or protection (for example, the repatriation of Afghani refugees). As for local integration, many refugees are never recognized as full citizens and live with daily discrimination, racism, and treatment as second-class citizens (for example, the Palestinian refugee situation). The third approach, resettlement, has been successful in many instances and has garnered worldwide attention. The numbers for resettlement, however, are limited, with about 100,000-120,000 individuals resettled each year, compared to the 19.5 million refugees recognized globally.

I give full credit to countries now involved in the refugee resettlement scheme, but the fact that there are only 27 countries out of 193 United Nations members taking part in this process is highly discouraging. While the UNHCR and a number of countries such as Canada have made a concerted effort to bring other countries on board as willing partners in refugee resettlement, these efforts have had little impact.

Of the 27 countries that are actively engaged in resettlement, Canada has emerged as a leader in the successful settlement and integration of refugees. I attribute this success to three best practices. The first is the engagement of grassroots groups in the sponsorship and settlement of refugees; Canada is unique from other countries in that it boasts 106 Sponsorship Agreement Holders that have been actively engaged in sponsoring refugees for 35 years. Second is the extensive network of community-based volunteer organizations in Canada's settlement sector that facilitate the integration of both Privately Sponsored and Government Assisted Refugees (GARs) into the community. The third is the collaborative and full-spectrum approach, from policy-making to service provision, wherein all three levels of government, public institutions (in areas such as health and education), service providers in the settlement sector, and the Canadian public at large, work together to ensure that systems and supports are in place which will make refugee resettlement a positive experience for refugees and their host communities alike.

Having gone through my own experience as a refugee, and having learned from 30 years of hands-on experience as a refugee advocate and a practitioner in the field of resettlement and integration, I can simplify all of the complex literature and research studies on the topic by stating: refugees arrive in their new communities with trauma from their pasts as well as fears and hopes for their future; when developing new policies and practices, our main focus should be the identification and elimination of these fears, and the creation of a condition wherein their hopes and dreams can come true.

In order to anticipate the needs of refugees, and to ensure

that appropriate policies, programs, services, and supports are established to holistically address these needs, we must understand the complexity of the refugee journey, including the reasons they became refugees, the process they underwent to be eligible for resettlement, and their refugee status. Further to this, it's important to understand the complex needs of refugees, as well as the barriers they will face upon their arrival. These needs and barriers include the trauma they endured in their own countries, their language skills, and their cultural backgrounds and beliefs.

Once the needs and barriers of refugee groups have been identified, it is essential to offer a net of support immediately upon their arrival, followed by a package of customized programs and services to help them overcome their personal barriers to integration. This creation of a welcoming environment, wherein immediate needs are met, is fundamental to ensuring a positive and successful settlement and integration experience. Mitigating the expectations of refugees is an important step; many arrive with skepticism and resistance to life in Canada, while others arrive with a great deal of hope that life here will offer an abundance of opportunity. Helping these individuals to recognize the arduous road ahead of them, but assuring them that they will be assisted along the way, is key to a successful settlement process wherein the refugee is "on board" with the services and systems that are available. Based on Calgary Catholic Immigration Society's (CCIS) extensive experience, once refugees feel welcomed, supported, and accepted, the settlement and integration work can begin.

The figure below outlines the way in which CCIS supports refugees, from creating a welcoming environment immediately upon their arrival at the airport, to the provision of temporary accommodations where they receive orientation to life in Canada, to the transition into programs and services that support their language learning, employment preparation, and ultimate integration into the workplace, the community, and Canadian society at large. This network of programs and services provide refugees with holistic support (addressing areas such as language, housing, health, and education) and relies on the collaboration and engagement of multiple partners (such as community volunteers, public institutions, the private sector, and government bodies). This collaborative, full-spectrum, holistic approach is the key to CCIS' and- in many ways- Canada's successes in assisting the refugee resettlement process.

Looking back at my own experience, and reviewing the settlement success of refugees in Canada over the past 35 years, (beginning with the experience of the Vietnamese refugees all the way to the recent Syrian refugee resettlement) I can say that the resettlement in Canada has been a positive and productive experience for refugees and Canadian society alike. As a result, many countries are looking to Canada's experience to help them improve their own resettlement policies and processes. There is, however, room for improvement in our policy development, community engagement, and services delivery. Following are some ideas on how we could improve our short and long-term outcomes:

- Strategic planning for engaging smaller communities in refugee sponsorship and destining more GAR's to smaller centers

- Increasing investment in treating refugees who are suffering from trauma and mental health issues

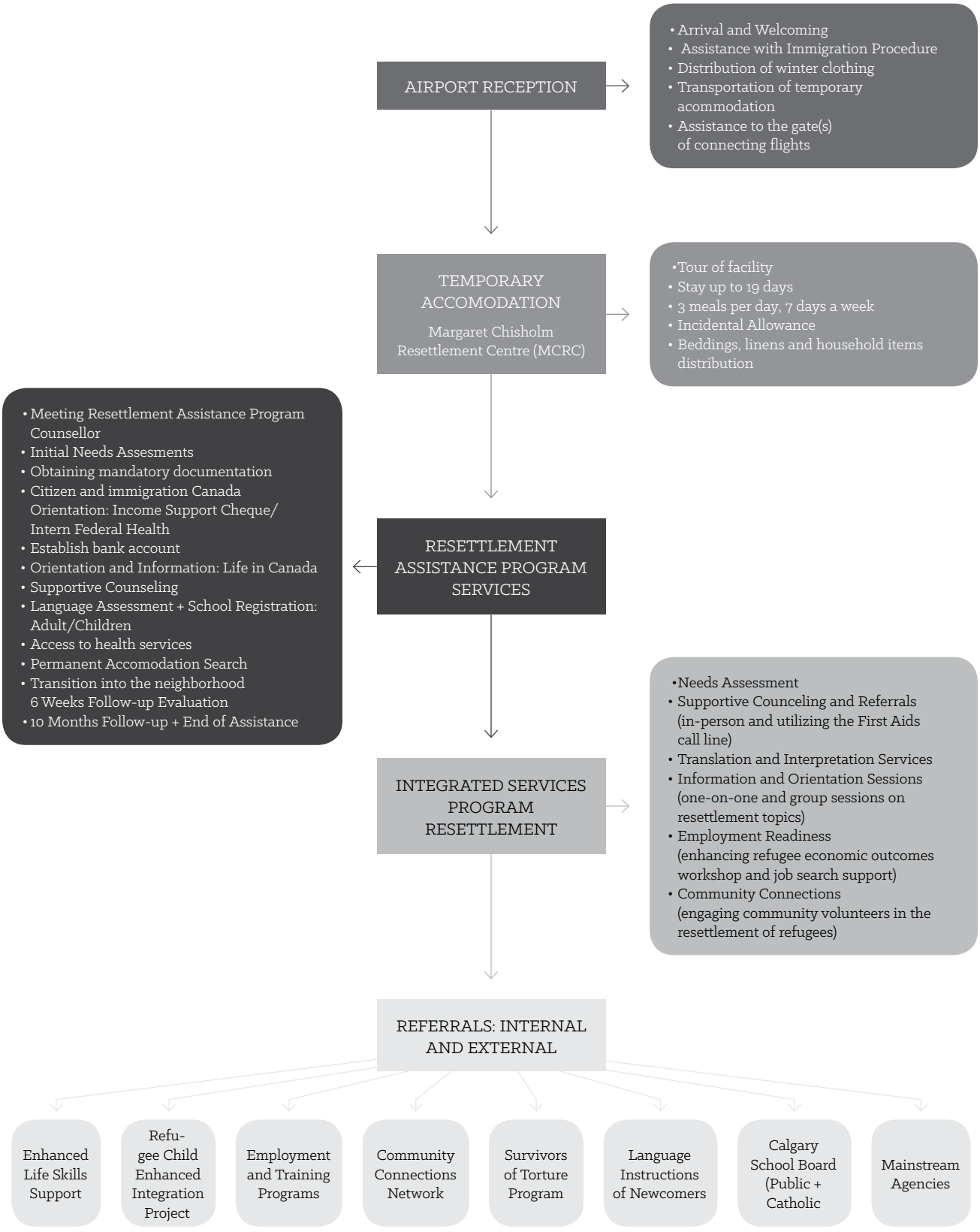
- Conducting more research to capture the challenges and successes we have had in refugee resettlement in order to build upon these lessons learned

- Strategic approach to engage Canadian corporations in the settlement and integration of refugees. (Momentum has been gained through the Syrian crisis that we could build upon in the future)

- Broadening the definition of settlement to include deliberate community engagement that reflects cultural reciprocity.

While we, as a global community, still have many steps to take in preventing the creation of refugees, and while there is room for improvement in developing a successful and efficient resettlement process that facilitates the swift, long-term integration of refugees into our communities, there are many best practices that settlement providers, and all stakeholders, can build upon. In my experience, as a refugee and as the CEO of CCIS, I can say that the work that has been done to ensure a collaborative, holistic, and full-spectrum approach to resettlement is an achievement that we should recognize and celebrate. Mobilizing multiple stakeholders and providing a seamless system of support, which begins upon arrival and ends with integration, is key to helping refugees overcome their past traumas, confront their fears, and realize their hopes of a new and prosperous life in Canada.

FIGURE 1


AIRPORT RECEPTION
• Arrival and Welcoming
• Assistance with Immigration Procedure
• Distribution of winter clothing
• Transportation of temporary acommodation
• Assistance to the gate(s) of connecting flights
TEMPORARY ACCOMODATION
Margaret Chisholm Resettlement Centre (MCRC)
•Tour of facility
• Stay up to 19 days
• 3 meals per day, 7 days a week
• Incidental Allowance
• Beddings, linens and household items distribution
RESETTLEMENT ASSISTANCE PROGRAM SERVICES
• Meeting Resettlement Assistance Program Counsellor
• Initial Needs Assesments
• Obtaining mandatory documentation
• Citizen and immigration Canada Orientation: Income Support Cheque/ Intern Federal Health
• Establish bank account
• Orientation and Information: Life in Canada
• Supportive Counseling
• Language Assessment + School Registration: Adult/Children
• Access to health services
• Permanent Accomodation Search
• Transition into the neighborhood 6 Weeks Follow-up Evaluation
• 10 Months Follow-up + End of Assistance
INTEGRATED SERVICES PROGRAM RESETTLEMENT
•Needs Assessment
• Supportive Counceling and Referrals (in-person and utilizing the First Aids call line)
• Translation and Interpretation Services
• Information and Orientation Sessions (one-on-one and group sessions on resettlement topics)
• Employment Readiness (enhancing refugee economic outcomes workshop and job search support)
• Community Connections (engaging community volunteers in the resettlement of refugees)
REFERRALS: INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL
Enhanced Life Skills Support
Refu-gee Child Enhanced Integration Project
Employment and Training Programs
Community Connections Network
Survivors of Torture Program
Language Instructions of Newcomers
Calgary School Board (Public + Catholic
Mainstream Agencies