CHALLENGES AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS IN FINDING HOUSING FOR REFUGEE NEWCOMERS: LEARNING FROM THE SYRIAN RESETTLEMENT OPERATION

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This article presents key findings of a study of the challenges and successes of the refugee-serving organizations tasked to find the first permanent housing for the 2015-2016 cohort of Syrian refugee newcomers. It draws on interviews conducted with Resettlement Assistance Program providers in 13 Canadian cities.

Cet article présente les principales conclusions d'une étude sur les défis et les réussites des organisations au service des réfugiés chargées de trouver le premier logement permanent pour la cohorte 2015-2016 de nouveaux réfugiés syriens. Il s'appuie sur des entrevues menées auprès de fournisseurs du Programme d'aide au réétablissement dans 13 villes canadiennes.

Moving into their first permanent home is a major milestone for newcomers to Canada. Beyond shelter, decent, suitable and affordable housing is an anchor point for a new start in a new country and new city, especially for those experiencing traumatic dislocation as a result of fleeing war torn areas or other crises around the world. Housing needs to be accessible to the services and resources they need to help them settle. Where it is located, and in what type of neighbourhood, may affect their social connections as well as their overall sense of inclusion.

Canada's resettlement policy for refugees acknowledges that they need intensive assistance finding their first housing, because of the unplanned nature of their migration, their lack of economic resources upon arrival, and because many have special needs. In each of the cities to which government assisted refugees (GARs) are destined,, the newcomer serving community organization holding the government contract for delivery of the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) must find and offer them suitable permanent housing as soon as possible.

The operation to resettle Syrian refugees was on a scale not seen for 35 years and was the first major resettlement of refugees since Canada strengthened the humanitarian component of its refugee selection process in 2002. The Syrian operation is an important opportunity to examine how the organizations and groups responsible for finding housing for

resettled refugees went about this challenging task.

In many cities, the arrival timetable was concentrated over a few weeks in midwinter 2016, requiring a major ramp-up of all aspects of refugee welcoming capacity by different levels of government and by local communities. The Syrian cohort had large and complex family configurations and/or major health issues or disabilities, and/or low mother-tongue literacy rates, which presented significant barriers to achieving economic self-sufficiency in the short- to medium-term. It also landed in Canada as cities across the country grappled with a lack of affordable rental housing.

For this study, we mainly focused on the process of finding the first permanent housing for GARs. We selected 13 cities varying in size and local rental housing market conditions: Victoria, Vancouver, Calgary, Winnipeg, Windsor, Hamilton, Toronto, Peterborough, Ottawa, Gatineau, Montréal, St. John, and Halifax. In each city, we conducted in-depth interviews with senior supervisory or management personnel of the organization holding the RAP contract, to understand the challenges they faced, the strategies they used, and the policy implications for welcoming future cohorts of refugee newcomers.

The study participants underscored that advance planning — involving an unprecedented degree of cooperation between different levels of government and local organizations as well as landlords and social housing providers in their city or region, over the weeks before the first arrivals of the intensified Syrian refugee operation—had crucial positive impacts on their capacity to manage the process of finding housing once the newcomers began to arrive. Planning meetings and housing tables helped all parties share their respective expertise and work out appropriate task division. The tables promoted buy-in by housing providers not previously involved in refugee resettlement, including private landlords and social housing providers. New or expanded housing portals or banks run by provincial, municipal or community organizations also helped coordinate the outpouring of ad hoc offers of accommodation.

Despite these concerted efforts at advance planning RAP providers found themselves facing major unforeseen contingencies once the refugees began to arrive. In the early weeks of the resettlement operation, insufficient advance information from the federal government on the timeframe of refugee newcomer arrivals and their family profiles hampered their housing search and placement work. Family sizes were far larger than expected, and 60% of GARs were minor children. These factors caused lengthy stays in hotels or other temporary accommodations in the tighter housing markets and where housing suitable for large families was scarce. Complex health needs also posed major housing challenges. Administrative log-jams stemming from the steep ramp-up of the operation also led to delays and even lost rental opportunities.

Nevertheless, whether it took less than two weeks or more than two months, RAP providers succeeded, with the support of housing providers, community based networks and citizen mobilization, in matching up all the newcomers with suitable housing. While generally quite basic, it was apparently almost always in good condition. Working with trusted landlords, and/or using lists of units whose quality had been checked by the city or province, seemed to be key to achieving this outcome.

After locating suitable housing, RAP providers had to ensure it would be affordable. The challenge is the gap between the amount of funds allocated to housing in the government's calculation of RAP income support versus the actual cost of renting. The Syrian operation highlights how the Child Benefit has become a de facto housing allowance for low-income Canadian families with children. But while it can make housing much more affordable for larger families, it helps small families only marginally and excludes low-income singles and couples without children. Even with Child Benefit boosting their income support, however, a GAR family with two children will spend 40-50% of their income on rent not only in Toronto and Vancouver but also in many mid-size cities. Renting a self-contained unit at market rates is totally untenable for a single person on a RAP allowance, yet sharing or rooming may not be suitable for those with high needs. Moreover, clients often need to use the transportation allowance component of RAP income support to help pay their rent.

RAP providers deployed two main strategies for tackling housing affordability. In balanced local housing markets or for rental complexes with higher vacancy rates, they negotiated year-long rent discounts (commonly 15-20%) and/or free rent for shorter-term cases of extreme need. In tighter housing markets, they used the Welcome Fund, a special allocation from Community Foundations of Canada funded by corporate donations, to supplement rent. Although this Fund played a major role in helping to make the first housing affordable in some cities, it created ethical dilemmas for RAP providers, since these funds were earmarked for Syrian GARs whereas they also had clients from elsewhere who needed rent supplementation.

Certain provinces and cities made taxpayer-funded sources of rent assistance, such as rent supplement programs for approved private rental units and rent-geared-to-income public housing, available to the neediest GAR newcomers. In a few cases, housing was offered in mixed-income non-profits and cooperatives. However, in most cases, such potentially long-term options for affordable and stable housing could not be implemented for the first permanent housing due to intractably long waiting lists and/or eligibility criteria that exclude people domiciled less than 6 to 12 months in the province or city.

Making GARs' first permanent housing sustainable and plan-

ning for contingencies were also priorities for housing search and support workers. Keeping friends together mattered for social support and mental health. They also had to find housing that was accessible to public transportation, essential services and cultural or religious institutions. As well, they often needed to assist their clients in coming to terms with the limited range of housing options for families on a tight budget. Some newcomers also needed ongoing accompaniment (after the RAP program) with the legal and cultural aspects of rental housing and high-density living. Local organizations also reserved funds in case of an emergency requiring moving to a new place. Finally, RAP-providers tried to reduce the impacts of the transition to provincial social assistance, known as the "month 13" problem, on housing affordability for those cases where it would lead to a substantial drop in income support. Some managed to plan for this in advance when negotiating initial rent levels or by asking for some of the Welcome Fund allocation to be held over beyond year 1.

Cutting across this study's findings is the crucial role that volunteer efforts played in supporting successful housing outcomes. For interviewees, this is a propitious indicator of growing local community support to refugee integration. Nevertheless, the unprecedented upsurge in volunteer involvement generated by the Syrian crisis caught local newcomer support networks and RAP providers by surprise. It was challenging to work out how to integrate amorphous volunteer energies into established structures, especially in the larger cities, and to find the staff time and material resources to manage the volume of diverse offers of help. Promising practices in response to these challenges included newcomer support teams integrating professionals and trained volunteers, and municipal or private funding to manage donations of time, expertise, or goods.

ISSUES FOR POLICY AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The policy lessons stemming from our research address local, provincial and federal government stakeholders. Leaders of local newcomer support networks should make housing tables permanent components of the settlement infrastructure and ensure that they include private landlords and social housing providers. They should maintain the housing portals and protocols developed for managing volunteer offers, or at least retain the knowhow for reactivating them when needed.

During large-scale resettlement operations, the federal government should ensure that RAP providers receive timely information about arrivals and family profiles. Also, the housing component of pre-arrival orientation, in partnership with Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, needs strengthening. Most critically, this study underscores that the gap between RAP income support and housing costs in Canadian cities has become untenable, and that the Canada Child Benefit program is not an adequate solution.

This research also highlights the need for housing policy changes that would benefit not only high needs newcomers, but also other low-income Canadians. Both groups depend primarily on the older low-end rental stock, which suffers from under-maintenance. The impressive achievement of finding decent-quality first permanent housing for the Syrian GARs is no cause for complacency. Reinstating federal funding for rehabilitation programs is crucial, as are resources to meet the affordable rental housing needs of large and multigenerational families. Expanding access to non-profit affordable housing and rent-geared-to-income social housing offers a sustainable solution to housing stability for people relying on income support or precarious employment.

Finally, we identify several topics needing further research. These include how private sponsor groups deal with their housing-related responsibilities (which this study could only briefly touch on), and detailed tracking, over time and space, of the housing progress of newcomers in all refugee streams and in cities with differing housing market conditions.

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