FILLING THE GAPS IN HOUSING FOR REFUGEE CLAIMANTS: THE ROLE OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS ACROSS CANADA

Bantayehu Shiferaw Chanie is a Visiting Professor and IIE-SRF fellow at the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs and a Research Associate at the Center for International Policy Studies, both at the University of Ottawa. His research interests include state-building, conflict, political transition, ethnic politics, forced displacement, and diaspora politics.

Christina Clark-Kazak is Professor of Public and International Affairs at the University of Ottawa. Her research focuses on age discrimination, migration, and interdisciplinary methodologies.

Azar Masoumi is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Carleton University. She studies the politics of state-controlled refugee protection (particularly in relation to gender-based and queer refugees) and the affective and everyday life of revolutions (particularly in relation to Iran).

Delphine Nakache is a Full Professor in the Faculty of Law, French Common Law Section, at the University of Ottawa. She is also a lawyer and member of the Law Society of Ontario. She holds a University Research Chair on Migrant Protection and International Law.

Allan Reesor-McDowell has held leadership roles in politics and nonprofits for over 20 years and is currently Executive Director of the John Howard Society of Ottawa. At Matthew House Ottawa, he led a major expansion of shelter and support services to help divert refugee claimants from homelessness.

Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 20 representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working with refugee claimants across Canada, this article analyzes their role in shelter and settlement support. While these organizations have been filling the gaps left by municipal, provincial and federal governments for decades, their capacity to respond to current levels of refugee claimant homelessness is limited by constrained human and financial resources. We conclude by proposing closer collaboration between all levels of government and NGOs to develop a triage and referral system to better serve all refugee claimants, including families, unaccompanied minors, and those with mental health needs.

INTRODUCTION

Increased homelessness of refugee claimants across Canada is a manifestation of structural problems in both housing and asylum policy. While non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have stepped in to provide shelter and settlement support for decades, the current situation is unsustainable, as demand far exceeds supply. Drawing on a community-based research project with twenty NGOs in BC, Manitoba, Ontario, and Quebec, this article analyzes models of support and

ways to build on promising practices, while ensuring that civil society does not bear primary responsibility for government inaction. In particular, instead of short-term, ineffective responses like renting hotel rooms, all levels of government need a coordinated approach to receive and refer refugee claimants, while creating specialized programs for people with specific needs.

CONTEXT

The right to seek asylum is protected by the UN 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 protocol, as well as the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* in Canada. Because of Canada's geography — bounded on three sides by oceans, and bordering the United States, with whom we have signed the Safe Third Country Agreement to severely limit refugee claims — historically, relatively small numbers of people have sought asylum in Canada. However, in the context of growing global displacement (UNHCR, 2024), there have been significant increases in refugee claimants recently. For example, in 2023, 143,435 people filed refugee claims in Canada (IRCC, 2024b), a 50% increase compared to the record high of 91,670 people in 2022 (IRCC, 2024a).

The right to housing is also protected by international law, and the Canadian *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, which, with certain exceptions, applies to anyone physically present in Canada, regardless of citizenship and immigration status. Housing is a shared responsibility across all levels of government, but no clear division of powers exists because housing was absent from the 1867 *Constitution Act*. The result is a fragmented and complex system (Annor, 2019; Rose, 2019, 2022). The federal government is responsible for the National Housing Strategy, but its role is limited to providing funding to provincial and municipal governments for affordable housing and homelessness programs. Provinces provide funding to housing non-profits, build and operate social housing, and regulate landlord-tenant relationships. They also delegate powers to municipalities, which then decide on the size and location of housing through their planning and zoning decisions. Since the 1980s, there has been an underinvestment in affordable housing in Canada, resulting in chronic housing shortages.

In contrast to resettled refugees arriving through government-assisted or private sponsorship routes who receive housing upon arrival, there is no national strategy to address the housing needs of newly arrived refugee claimants. Complicating the federal-provincial-municipal jurisdictions highlighted above, refugee protection falls within the federal government's responsibility but many of the services are delivered locally, by the refugee claimant's province or city of residence. There is no coordinated plan between various levels of government to welcome refugee claimants, resulting in a patchwork of services across Canada. For example, in Quebec, the provincial government runs the Regional Program for the Settlement and Integration of Asylum Seekers (PRAIDA) providing a limited number of beds for 6 weeks and referrals to some settlement supports, while no such program exists in other provinces.

The homelessness experienced by refugee claimants results from housing shortages and lack of access to settlement information and expertise. As a result, tens of thousands of refugee claimants are ending up homeless each year (Swadden, 2023). The federal government has responded with expensive, short-term, and ineffective emergency measures like renting hotel rooms, but these only temporarily house a small number of refugee claimants and lack consistent and adequate integration support. While non-governmental organizations across Canada have filled the gaps in housing and settlement supports for decades, there is little peer-reviewed research that analyzes the effectiveness of current approaches, as well as their capacity to respond to expanding demand.

METHODOLOGY

This article is based on data collected from an interdisciplinary, community-based research project involving Matthew House Ottawa (MHO), the University of Ottawa, and Carleton University to map and analyze non-governmental housing and settlement supports for refugee claimants in Canada. In spring 2023, MHO completed a mapping of organizations across Canada to identify existing initiatives (Matthew House Ottawa, 2024). After receiving ethics approval from the University of Ottawa (S–09–23–9570 — REG–9570) and Carleton (Project #120131), we surveyed all organizations identified in the mapping exercise to provide baseline data on programming, basic demographics of clients served and scope of services (Clark-Kazak and Reesor-McDowell 2024). Subsequently, we conducted twenty semi-structured interviews with representatives of organizations housing refugee claimants to better understand their models of support. Using a rights-based approach, our analysis documents models for welcoming and supporting refugee claimants and identifies policy and programming gaps.

KEY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Our survey and interview data reveal four significant findings:

1. **The central role of NGOs in providing housing to refugee claimants.** Many organizations we surveyed report an increase in the number of refugee claimants they shelter between 2019 and 2023, and most are actively working to increase their capacity to house more refugee claimants. However, their current models are insufficient to scale up to meet the demand. Importantly, the vast majority of

these organizations report receiving funding from private sources (such as donations) or municipalities, and in fewer instances, provinces. Despite holding primary responsibility for refugee claimants in Canada, the federal government appears to play very little active role in strategically and proactively planning for refugee claimants' housing.

2. **The desire to expand is hampered by funding and human resources constraints.** The majority, but not all, of the organizations we interviewed, expressed an interest in expanding their capacity to provide housing and support to more refugee claimants. However, both survey and interview data reveal inadequate funding and human resources as the biggest hurdles in the way of expansion. The two issues appear to be interlinked, as organizations report high levels of staff turnover due to at times unsustainably low salaries they can afford to pay their workers. The difficulty in finding and securing housing units is another major challenge faced by NGOs who wish to expand their capacity. Without the ability to accommodate the increasing number of clients, some organizations report regularly turning prospective residents away: "We have had to turn people away because we do not have the capacity to accept everyone. When we first started, we had to do some marketing to get the word out. But now the ramp is going up quite steeply." (Interview, Toronto, ON, May 1, 2024).

3. **NGOs receive many of their residents from homeless shelters.** The majority of the organizations we surveyed report receiving their residents from emergency shelters. Some organizations have dedicated staff working in or with shelters to identify and locate refugee claimants and divert them away from the shelter system. Emergency homeless shelters are ill-prepared to support refugee claimants with their specific needs, such as referring to refugee lawyers and submitting their claim for refugee status. This suggests that boosting dedicated housing and support programs for refugee claimants will both increase claimants' ability to successfully resettle in Canada, and alleviate the growing pressure on already overburdened shelters.

4. **The efficacy and success of the NGO model of housing and support for refugee claimants.** Despite the significant challenges faced by organizations that house and support refugee claimants, the organizations report supporting claimants with an impressively wide variety of needs, including legal, educational, employment, housing, health, cultural, social, food, and recreation. These supports are at times offered in multiple languages. The majority of organizations provide food, and some provide clothing, diapers, menstrual and hygiene products to residents. Most organizations continue to provide some form of support to their former residents after they have left their residences with furniture, clothing, or food, or provide occasional legal, social, and mental health support services. Our research indicates the importance of belonging to a network of support, as housing is connected to other settlement services.

Moreover, the organizations we interviewed report a relatively short length of stay for their residents, with the vast majority reporting stays of up to or shorter than 6 months. Our research finds that many former residents continue onto the path of independent living, with very few ever becoming homeless after leaving supported housing programs. This suggests that these organizations have succeeded in diverting homelessness and cultivating the conditions for successful integration.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While NGOs play important roles in housing and supporting refugee claimants in Canada, the current situation is unsustainable. In the context of growing and more complex needs, the federal, provincial, and municipal governments should collaborate to establish a triage and referral system to receive and orient refugee claimants, and then refer them to the most appropriate agency or service. In particular, many NGOs indicated that they did not have the capacity to serve claimants with specific needs, such as unaccompanied minors or people with severe mental health issues. A centralized system, including transitional housing and programming adapted to specific needs, would ensure that the most vulnerable do not fall through the cracks. The federal government could leverage its existing experiences with transitional housing for Government-Assisted Resettled Refugees. Building on successful NGO experiences in some areas, municipal shelters should have designated personnel to identify refugee claimants in the shelter system and refer them to more appropriate housing and settlement support.

Government funding would be better spent in investing in such longer-term, structural solutions, than in the current short-term hotel model. Municipal, provincial, and federal governments should provide core funding with streamlined reporting requirements to existing organizations that have decades of experience in community-based housing and support models. Any new structures should build on this expertise, rather than duplicate efforts.

REFERENCES

Annor, B. (2019) *Pathways to Homelessness: Exploring the Mental Health Experiences of Refugees Experiencing Homelessness in Canada*. University of Western Ontario. Available at: ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/6389.

Charter of Rights and Freedoms, s 7, Part 1 of the Constitution Act, 1982, being Schedule B to the Canada Act 1982 (UK), 1982, c 11 a.

Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, SC 2001, c. 27

IRCC (2024a) 'Asylum claims per year — 2022'. Available at: www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/asylum-claims/asylum-claims-2022.html.

IRCC (2024b) 'Asylum claimants by year — 2023'. Available at: www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/asylum-claims/asylum-claims-2023.html.

Matthew House Ottawa (2024) 'Mapping of organizations providing housing to refugee claimants'. Available at: www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=18WbAwb9vvu1dgsluraCTr8FZzYwZj2M&ll=50.71126121915633%2C-102.59581656531469&z=5.

Rose, D. (2019) Creating a Home in Canada: Refugee Housing Challenges and Potential Policy Solutions. Migration Policy Institute. Available at: www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/TCM-Canada-Housing-Refugees_FINAL.pdf (Accessed: 23 November 2022).

Rose, D. (2022) "Personnes immigrées et logement: le grand défi", *Nouveaux Cahiers du socialisme*, (27), pp. 36–42.

Swadden, P. (2023) "Asylum seekers left sleeping on Toronto streets amid funding stalemate between city, feds", CBC News. Available at: www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/toronto-asylum-seekers-shelter-stalemate-1.6903827.

The Constitution Act, 1867, 30 & 31 Vict, c 3.

UNHCR (2024) Global Trends. Available at: www.unhcr.org/global-trends.