



No shortage of helpful hands for refugees

Volunteer support is unprecedented as individuals, businesses pitch in

By Alia Dharssi, National Post | December 3, 2015

As the government ramps up efforts to bring 25,000 Syrian refugees to Canada, immigrant settlement agencies across Canada are seeing an unprecedented surge in volunteer support for refugees.

Individuals and businesses are offering everything from midwifery services for pregnant refugees to trucks to move furniture into their new homes.

"Very quickly it's just got too much," said Stephan Reichhold, director general of TCRI, the coordinating body for immigrant settlement agencies in Quebec. "The voice mail is full after 15 minutes."

In recent days, TCRI has fielded thousands of calls and emails offering assistance to incoming Syrians from groups as diverse as a maple syrup co-operative that wants to give a can of the sweet stuff to every Syrian landing in Quebec to a group of grandmothers in Montreal that plans to knit them toques.

Reichhold's experience is not unique. Speaking on the sidelines of the Pathways to Prosperity Conference, which brought immigration experts together in downtown Toronto on Monday and Tuesday, representatives of settlement agencies from big cities and small towns across Canada said they've been inundated with offers of support.

While welcome, the swelling public interest, which includes several knitting groups involved in an effort to knit 25,000 toques, adds logistical challenges to the to-do list of settlement agencies that are already busy co-ordinating housing and other necessities for Syrian refugees.

"All of us are feeling very grateful that people are interested and madly trying to figure out how to handle this upsurge," said Jean McRae, who represents the settlement sector at Pathways to Prosperity, an alliance of Canadian organizations that promotes immigrant integration.

Chris Friesen, chairman of the Canadian Immigration Settlement Sector Alliance, called it "the great Canadian National Project." The Immigrant Service Society of British Columbia, where Friesen directs settlement services, has received more than 5,000 calls from people and organizations across B.C. that want to lend a hand. It typically works with 1,000 volunteers in a year.

COSTI Immigrant Services in Toronto has been similarly inundated, though it hasn't tabulated the numbers, while Fariborz Birjandian, chief executive of the Catholic Immigration Society in Calgary, reported that his organization has heard from about 2,000 potential helpers, doubling their volunteer base.

Small cities also see a spike in volunteers. More than 1,400 concerned citizens have signed up to a Facebook page to help refugees who end up in Moose Jaw, Sask., population 33,000.

"The bigger challenge is just to get back to the people," said Reichhold, whose five-person staff is drowning in emails and phone calls.

Volunteers across Canada will help with a range of tasks, including providing support for refugees as they settle in, conversation circles during which newcomers can practice English and French, employment mentorship and, if they speak Arabic, translation for refugees.

In addition to matching volunteers with jobs, agencies are preparing orientation materials for volunteers and planning to vet those who want to work with families and children with interviews and criminal record checks.

"When we're matching people up and they're not necessarily being supervised, we want to ensure that there's no criminality in the background of the volunteers," said McRae. She added that the Intercultural Association of Greater Victoria, which she runs, may hire additional staff to do the job.

Then there's the logistical challenge of divvying in-kind donations, which range from welcome baskets to offers from rental car companies to provide transportation for refugees. Some items, such as second-hand clothes, may not be useful. Adding to the logistical puzzle, the government still hasn't finalized the details of the refugee resettlement plan.

In spite of the hiccups, agency staff hope they can channel the goodwill into support for refugees from other countries, such as the Central African Republic and Myanmar, who are landing in Canada.

Even though Thunder Bay is likely to receive few, if any, government-assisted Syrian refugees, Cathy Woodbeck, executive director of the Thunder Bay Multicultural Association, said she received 400 offers of help from communities across Northern Ontario over just two days last week.

Some of the generosity may be redirected toward private sponsors in the region or refugees elsewhere in Ontario, while some backpacks being filled with school supplies by local school groups for Syrian children may make their way into the hands of Burmese refugees settling in Northern Ontario.

Source: <http://tinyurl.com/pf66t2z>