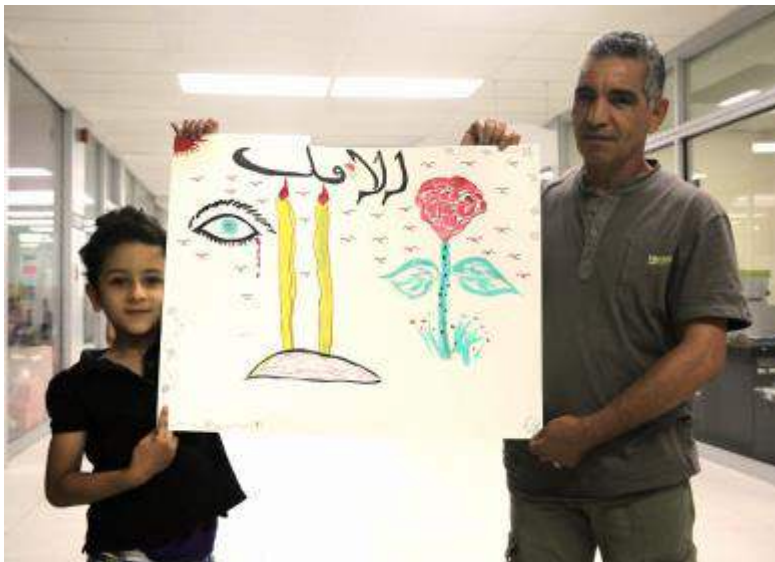




# How Are We Doing? Syrian Refugees, Sponsoring Groups, and Service Providers

April 2017



## Acknowledgements

AWO would like to acknowledge the following AWO staff members for their contributions to this report: Sogol Zand, Mona Awwad, Nadya Weber, Salwa Bazrah, Sarah Saad, and Noura Zaina.

Image on cover: Father and son holding a drawing entitled, “Hope”.

## Message from AWO's Executive Director

On Saturday, November 12, 2016, AWO brought together over 300 people to share their experiences of: settling in Canada as refugees; sponsoring Syrian families; and supporting the Syrians' settlement process. This was a unique occasion for individuals from the refugee community to share their knowledge and to learn from each other's experiences in the Greater Toronto Area and Mississauga.

Participants were delighted with the traditional Syrian welcome, *Arada*, performed by Sooriana, that opened the afternoon's events, and a first viewing of the video, *How Are We Doing?: A Snapshot of How Syrian Newcomers Feel in Their New Homes* ([click here to link to video](#)). AWO's President, Asma Faizi, and myself welcomed the crowd. Remarks from Premier Kathleen Wynne were followed by greetings from local MPs, Yasmine Ratansi (Don Valley East), Rob Oliphant (Don Valley West), and Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre).

Prior to the event, AWO had collected information from sponsoring groups, settlement organizations, and refugees to understand the current opportunities and challenges within the settlement sector in Ontario. Highlights from the initial data analysis were presented and further discussion on lessons learned and the challenges and successes of Syrian newcomer settlement were fleshed out during a panel discussion which opened up to include participants in the audience. The information collected over the past 6 months has been compiled into this report.

On behalf of AWO, I would like to thank all the Syrians, sponsoring group members, and settlement agency staff who participated in the study, along with the AWO staff who brought this report together. This past year has given us at AWO an opportunity to strengthen our collaborations with community partners, government agencies, and Canadians eager to welcome refugees to their new homes.

We look forward to building these relationships and ensuring that settlement services in Ontario meet the needs of all newcomers and refugees, especially the most vulnerable.

In gratitude,

Adeena Niazi  
Executive Director, AWO

## Introduction

Since the decision to open Canada's doors to 25,000 Syrian refugees was made in November 2015, settlement service agencies, sponsoring groups, and thousands of newly-arrived Syrians have been focusing their efforts on achieving the best possible settlement outcomes. Canada's commitment to refugees has been re-energized, encouraging Canadians from all walks of life to engage, participate, and support Syrian refugee newcomers. For those of us working in settlement services, this last year of expanded activity has re-invigorated the sector, creating opportunities to forge new partnerships, develop effective programming that meets the needs of an expanding newcomer population, and to continue to learn from one another. It is with this last point in mind that the AWO decided to take the time to reflect on the past year to try to get a deeper understanding of how the settlement process has been working and how to move forward beyond "Month 13".

The AWO was founded in 1990, by Adeena Niazi, a refugee from Afghanistan who was determined to find a way to meet the special needs of Afghan women refugees. The AWO's provision of a supportive network to vulnerable and isolated newcomer women gradually expanded to services for all newcomers, with a special focus on women, their families, refugees and people who have experienced war and persecution. Many of the staff at the AWO are also refugees giving them a strong foundation for understanding the struggles that our clients are facing. Over this past year, we have sponsored and settled nearly 300 refugees and provided support to sponsoring groups.

In discussions with our Syrian clients, service partners, supporters, and friends in the wider community, we came to realize that all of us have found ourselves, at one time or another, feeling overwhelmed. It became clear that we had all done a tremendous amount of work in a relatively short period; that we needed to celebrate that work; and we needed to learn from it. From there we set about collecting feedback from our Syrian refugee clients, the sponsoring groups we have supported, and from other settlement agencies and then over 300 people gathered together to celebrate and discuss those findings at the event on November 12<sup>th</sup>. This report summarizes the information gathered and provides recommendations based on the findings. Although this report focuses specifically on recently settled Syrians, we believe that the issues and recommendations resonate through all refugee populations and will benefit current and future refugees from all countries of origin.

*The year has gone by so fast, what's going well, what can we do better?*

We are looking at this research from the perspective that we are all working on this together – Syrian refugees, sponsoring groups, settlement agencies, and community and government partners. We are all responsible and want to make the settlement journey as smooth, welcoming, and successful as possible.

## Background

The current level of Canadian support for a refugee crisis has not been witnessed on this scale since the period between 1979 and 1981 when Canada accepted 60,000 refugees. The refugees were known as “The Boat People”. They were Southern Vietnamese and ethnic Chinese who had been expelled from Vietnam on dangerously overcrowded boats. Over a half a million of them died at sea. During that period, 25% of all immigrants to Canada were refugees (Meyer & Enright, 2015; Beiser 2006). In 2015, according to the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR, over a million refugees crossed the Mediterranean to escape war and persecution. Half of these people were Syrians, 20% were Afghans, 7% were Iraqis. Approximately 3,375 are believed to have perished at sea (Clayton et al, 2015). Harkening back to 1979, the Canadian Government made a bold announcement in November 2015 that they would settle 25,000 Syrian refugees before the end of the year. As of December 4, 2016, Canada has settled 36,363 Syrian refugees (IRCC, 2016). The Migration Policy Institute (MPI) noted the success of Canada’s embracing the private sponsorship model allowing “individuals, groups, corporations, and/or civil-society organisations [to] help deliver refugee settlement services” (Benton, 2016). In the MPI’s report on working towards a “whole-of-society approach” to settlement, they identify the following overarching principles as key to an integrated way forward:

- Being employment focused, but not at the cost of opportunities for social and community engagement and belonging. Whether employed or not, all should have the opportunity to engage fully with society.
- Map newcomers’ skills and determine their needs as early as possible.
- Coordinate and collaborate with all levels of government and across departments to ensure integration objectives are embedded across policy portfolios.
- Collaborate across civil society with new partners from private sector and social enterprises to newcomers themselves as part of a whole-of-society approach (Papademetriou & Benton, 2016).

As the numbers of refugees fleeing dangerous conditions in their countries of origin continues without abatement it is imperative that Canadians continue the important work of welcoming and settling refugees.

## Methods

Due to the organic process of the data collection, the methods are not entirely aligned. The three participant groups: the Syrian refugees; the sponsoring groups; and the service providers, all provided different amounts of information using different methods. The 43 Syrian refugee participants were interviewed either in focus groups or individually. Members of 9 sponsoring groups were interviewed either by phone or via email. In four cases, one member of a sponsoring group was interviewed; one focus group had three sponsoring group members participating; one phone call had two members; and other sponsoring groups submitted their responses via email. The service providers (settlement agencies) were surveyed anonymously through Survey Monkey. There were 14 respondents from a possible 14 service providers (settlement agencies), however, there is the possibility that more than one respondent was from the same agency. As much information as possible was collected about the participants in terms of gender, age, profession, etc., but because the service provider/settlement agency participants were anonymous, and not all members of sponsoring groups participated (often it was only one member speaking on behalf of the group) some participant demographic details are patchy/incomplete.

The questions varied within each participant group. In the case of the Syrian participants, some participants were asked more or slightly different questions than other participants. Because the data collection was done intermittently in between priority settlement counselling sessions, there was at times inconsistency. Despite there being some slight differences between the interview protocols, the types of questions all generally fell within the same areas. The questions asked of all three participant groups and their responses were clustered into these five categories: general or overall experience; most important settlement services; positive experiences / what facilitated the process; challenges or barriers; and moving beyond Month 13. Within each of the participant groups specific themes arose that were then clustered into the five overarching categories. The Syrian refugee participant section also includes reflections from AWO's settlement workers' notes. These reflections have been incorporated into the same five broad categories mentioned above.

## Syrian Refugees

In relating the content of these interviews, we try to give voice to some of the important individual variations in experience along with the experiences that appear to be shared among the majority of participants. We interviewed 43 Syrian refugee clients who came to the Greater Toronto Area or Mississauga between November 2015 and February 2016. The Syrian refugee participants interviewed for the study ranged in ages between 24 and 55 years-old. Twenty of the participants were men and 23 were women. In addition to the information collected from Syrian participants during interviews, experiences and information have been gleaned from settlement workers' daily feedback reports from Syrian clients.

During the interviews, participants were asked to comment on the following areas related to settlement: being selected to come to Canada; early arrival experience; sponsoring groups; service providers / settlement agencies; social and health services in Ontario; and Canadian lifestyle and culture.

### Being selected to become a permanent resident of Canada

Tens of thousands of Syrian refugees have settled in Canada. Each person will have a unique experience of settling into a new country, depending on a variety of factors including their previous experiences in their country of origin and in refugee camps. The majority of the Syrian refugees came from refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. Some of them came to Canada through the Government-Assisted Refugee program (GAR) and others through private sponsorships. Few of the Syrians who are now permanent residents of Canada specifically chose Canada as a resettlement option while registering with the United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). They listed their names for any resettlement option and waited for a phone call. Reactions to being chosen to resettle in Canada varied and changed over time. For some there was immediate relief mixed with apprehension over whether they would ever make it to Canada.

*When we received the phone call, I told her there is no way it's going to work. Who would take us? Even after the interview, I told her, I'm sure they're not going to pick us.*

*Syrian Participant #2*

Many had families who had settled in Europe and most had loved ones in Syria and in the refugee camps. Everyone was concerned about the distance from their loved ones.

### The arrival experience

All the participants reported feeling very welcome from the moment they have arrived in Canada. COSTI acted as their main service provider and first point of contact. Despite communication challenges between settlement counselors and Syrians, they were registered for their basic needs and benefits: housing, financial aid (child care, government financial assistance, etc.) and applied for health cards.

The newly arrived GARs were placed in a temporary transitional place until better housing was found. The transitional place was either an immigration reception center, or one of the downtown motels. They receive a monthly income from the Government determined by family size. During this transitional phase, the participants reported quality of life issues including, over crowdedness, isolation from the rest of society, and the length of stay there, which for some, was up to three months. These months ended up being lost time that diminished their settlement experiences, as they were not able to attend English classes, nor did they feel stable enough to begin integrating into the new society. One young man was brought to tears by an Arabic-speaking support staff member who told him that it would be difficult for someone like him to settle in Canada and that he might not have taken the right decision. Many families were also worried about the food offered to them. They ended up having to buy food from the outside, but some were not allowed to bring it to their rooms. Another issue was that some of the transitional places had shared washrooms, causing extreme discomfort to the women.

The Syrians found the transitional locations moderately to extremely uncomfortable. It was difficult for them to find suitable housing, but due to the discomfort of the transitional space, they felt forced to accept any housing option that came along despite factors that would negatively impact them in the long term, such as high rent or the quality of the apartment. Due to families having many children and needing bigger and more child-friendly spaces, housing continues to be a major challenge. Single people can barely afford a shared space with roommates.

Uneven services caused some unexpected issues. One example of these unexpected issues stemmed from the first batch of Syrian newcomers being offered a 2-year phone contract, the result of an NGO-private company partnership. All other newcomers faced great challenges obtaining phone and internet services as they were not able to provide enough identification and / or a credit history. The Syrians who were delayed in the transitional stage for three months were without phone service for that entire period making the settlement process even more difficult.

## Sponsoring groups

While most of the feedback given by the GARs was similar, privately sponsored refugees had varying experiences. For privately sponsored refugees, the sponsoring group members were responsible for supporting the welcoming and settlement process, in addition to the sponsored refugees' financial needs. Participants experiences ranged from extremely satisfied, to "can't complain", to extremely dissatisfied with the level of attention given by the sponsoring group. In the most positive experiences, sponsoring groups were fully supportive of refugees and never made them feel neglected. Participants reported their sponsoring group members helping them finish their paperwork, explore the city, register in schools, and even helping them find jobs while also supporting them emotionally by always taking them out and spending time with them. With a little support from settlement organizations, the sponsoring groups could meet all the needs of the Syrian families. It was essential to have the settlement organizations involved.

In the cases in which Syrian families had challenges with their sponsoring groups, they reported issues around communications and feeling isolated and ignored. One of the most troubling issues was around language and having difficulty finding translators, especially in time-sensitive situations. One family's sponsoring group did not come to see them until a week after their arrival, was not



taking their calls and only got back to them after calling repeatedly over many days, even when there was an urgent situation such as a doctor's appointment. Another family's sponsoring group placed them in an area far from an Arab community and never visited them, leaving them feeling doubly isolated. They had to postpone important appointments until they could find an agency with Arabic speaking staff to help them. Other families had difficulties with the perceived level of commitment of their sponsoring group and how the sponsoring group communicated with them, especially with regards to how the Syrians chose to allocate their money. There were differences of opinion about priorities and in one case, the sponsoring group was requesting to see receipts from the family. While this group was resentful about the infringement on their financial independence, they made it clear that their sponsoring group was a reliable, genuine support to them for which they felt deeply grateful. Another family was unable to buy food because their sponsoring group had still not paid the family the full amount they committed to. The family has contacted the sponsoring group repeatedly, receiving the response, "we will consult with each other and get back to you", but they never got back to the family. Other families commented on lack of communication on both sides regarding major decision-making. For example, a privately sponsored family asked for a service from a settlement agency that required consultation with the sponsoring group members, who were "shocked" by the families' interest in receiving the particular service.

### Service providers / settlement agencies

Both Government and privately sponsored Syrian families received various services from many service providers, including settlement agencies, food banks, furniture banks, and the Salvation Army. Syrian newcomers appreciated the many activities and training programs offered by settlement agencies that helped them integrate into the Canadian society, apply for Government services, understand the laws, and get training and certification in various areas. The AWO's culture and arts programming introduced newcomers to sites around Toronto, including the Royal Ontario Museum and civic engagement programming with EcoSource. Women's sewing and knitting groups, children and youth summer camps and homework clubs, along with the AWO's annual picnic were some of the programming that encouraged newcomers to expand their networks and develop new skills.

One of the most essential services, that the Syrians listed as the highest of priorities, is English language classes. Becoming fluent in English is considered a key component of fully integrating into Canadian society. If an adequate level of English proficiency is not reached, it becomes one of the biggest barriers to successful integration. Newcomers who are also illiterate in their mother tongue have increased difficulties acquiring a new language as adults. For most Syrians Arabic is their first language, but for others it is Kurdish. Of the Syrians interviewed, almost all of them said that learning English was a day-to-day concern, impacting everything in their lives, from being able to obtain a good (or any) job to understanding letters sent home from their children's schools.

*I found a job for three weeks. He is Canadian; but I couldn't stay because I don't know the language. He told me I won't be able to keep you without language. You need to improve and come back. I just started learning a month ago. I need time.*

*Syrian Participant #30*

The pressure to find employment and to look after children meant that many refugees could not fully commit to attending English classes. Without English, prospects for employment are limited mainly to Arab shops and restaurants. Larger families with newborn and young children and no extended family, may expend most of their time caring for their children, or working long hours in low paying jobs leaving them no time to take English classes. Those attending English classes qualify for a child services subsidy. However, some families did not take this seriously, which cost them their subsidized child services. They had to place their children back on the waiting list, making it even more difficult, yet crucial for them to attend the English classes. Those whose English is not proficient enough after Year One are advised to collect welfare until they have improved their English and can find employment. This brings up further concerns among the Syrians who are already stretched to provide for their families and are not sure how they will manage on welfare, which they believe will be less than the funding they currently receive and affect the amount of Child Benefit Tax they receive. Many also believe that larger families, with five or more children, are better off financially because they can collect the Child Tax Benefit.

*I feel sorry for those families who don't have kids. I'm sure they cannot afford a decent living.*

*Syrian participant #22*

One of the more pressing issues under the umbrella of communications, is that of accessing reliable interpreters and translators. Most families complained that their main service provider sometimes does not answer their phone calls to arrange interpreters for them forcing them to seek interpreters elsewhere. Due to high demand, Arabic speaking interpreters are not always available for all appointments. In many cases, Syrians would go to their doctor appointments and wait for an interpreter that has been booked, but never showed up; sometimes having to wait for month or more to get another appointment with that same doctor. Interpreters working with agencies are not allowed to provide personal cell numbers or work outside of regular hours. Refugees feel that their lives can only operate from 9-5, but they often need important or emergency interpretation assistance after regular hours.

Syrian newcomers commented on the strict appointment system at some settlement agencies. They have needed an urgent matter resolved, but can only see an agent with an appointment, which might be set for a month later. The needed service might be a simple translation of a letter, or an ad posted by their building management. Some Syrians admitted that agencies vary in that respect, as some of them are open for walk-in questions without prior appointments. Syrians always highlight their appreciation of settlement agencies for leading them through such crises with state agencies, and many other obstacles, as there is a high demand for interpreters who will both help them to understand and who will advocate for their rights.

In relation to settlement agencies, families expressed feeling guilty about leaving one agency to access the services at another agency. They get the feeling from settlement workers that there is some competition between agencies even though some of them offer different kinds of services. The heads of families spoke about having to carry around such a large amount of papers during the settlement process and the safest, most efficient means of transporting the documents.

Syrian newcomers highlighted that while they appreciate the assistance of service providers, their most critical needs beyond immediate shelter and orientation have not been met. They are gravely concerned about finding a sustainable source of income. Agencies can assist with job training and help facilitate connections with potential employers, but cannot guarantee job offers. That being said, many of the Syrian newcomers who have started working, connected with their employers through settlement agencies and service providers.

For almost all the Syrian families, the most pressing concern was about family who had been left behind in Syria, in refugee camps, and in other countries. Participants in this study and the Syrians who attended the AWO's How Are We Doing? Event on November 12, 2016, all were concerned about how to initiate the family reunification process.

### Social services and public institutions in Ontario

Generally, feedback from newcomers regarding Ontario's municipal and provincial services has been positive. Although many of them feel that participating in Ontario's health care system is often a lengthy and complicated process, they also mention the excellent care, attention, and follow up they have experienced. They appreciate the free health care, but were used to getting medical treatment immediately in Syria and did not have to get doctor referrals to specialists with months of waiting. As mentioned in the previous section, one of the most critical issues was interpretation, especially for emergencies, and / or finding an Arabic-speaking doctor. Wait times and certain medications not being covered by insurance were also a common complaint.

For Syrians with school-aged children feedback has been mainly positive. Families place education for their children and themselves, at a high level of importance. There was mention of how caring teachers were towards their children:

*Seeing our kids go back to school after they were forced to leave education for months due to war is a very positive thing.*

*Syrian participant #39*

*Kids are so happy in school. They take care of them even more than we do. We love how much attention they get in school.*

*Syrian participant # 38*

*School kids here are learning how to be accepting to other cultures because school here is so diverse.*

*Syrian participant #41*

There have been obstacles, one of which was schools not accepting newcomer students at their original level of education. Students would have to take an exam to go into a certain level, but the English language barrier caused many newcomer youth to be set back by one or two levels. Newcomer youth were have typically been more open to integration than adults; but they do have

concerns about being unable to achieve good grades in school because of their English proficiency. A challenging problem facing the youth is confrontations with groups of youths from different backgrounds. This was an issue raised by all the Syrian families living in a specific area who reported fights at school and a lot of bullying. Syrian youth fight among themselves if they come from different ethnic backgrounds.

Almost all the Syrian participants commented on how safe they felt here, that they could freely walk on the street, send their children to school, trust police officers, go to malls, and feel safe in their homes.

*It's the first time in years that I haven't once closed my balcony doors out of fear of airstrikes or missiles. It has been 6 months now.*

*Syrian participant #18*

At the same time, in Syria, they were used to letting their children go out on their own. Here they fear for their safety:

*I worry that they might be in danger when they are out without my supervision. I worry about predators who try to lure and take advantage of young kids. I also worry about them hearing about marijuana and other drugs at school when other students talk about them so publicly.*

*Syrian participant #35*

They also find parenting norms unfamiliar. One parent is dealing with a teenage son who goes out without permission and threatens to call 911 if his parents try to stop him. The newcomers understand that they must commit to the parenting norms or they run the risk of having their children taken away. It upsets them when the school sometimes attributes their child's unhappy mood to their parenting.

As mentioned previously, the Syrians have many concerns about their ability to find viable employment. Those who already have skills and experience are desperate to get a chance to work in their own fields. Others are eager to improve their employment prospects by attending English classes, volunteering, and taking on low-level jobs, even if they are much lower than their previous employment status. Some Syrians said that their employment situation in the country they were refugees in, such as Jordan or Lebanon, was much better than here in Canada; but they affirmed that they would never go back because they felt that Canada was a safer and healthier place for their families to live.

Many Syrian newcomers spoke of their appreciation of the transportation system in Toronto. They also commented on long wait times and lengthy rides because services (shopping, medical appointments, schools, etc.) are all at a distance. In their previous life, pre-war, transit was flexible, faster, and cheaper; however, it was not very organized.

## Canadian lifestyle and culture

The diversity of the GTA and Peel region helps eliminate feelings of isolation among minorities. For this reason, Syrians, especially Muslims, have, for the most part, not felt isolated or different. They moved into neighbourhoods where there are lots of other Muslims or people of the same culture. The only Syrians who were interested in living downtown or in “trendy” areas of the city were those looking for a different cultural experience, mainly single young males, or Syrian members of the LGBT community. Syrian families are uncomfortable with LGBT rights or sex education being introduced to their school-aged children. Families highly objected to that and asked for help to prepare a memorandum to the school outlining their concerns. They agreed with topics such as equality, anti-racism, and other issues they might not be as familiar with in their own country; but felt that their children were too young to be exposed to any sexual-related education or information.

Culture shock also emerged regarding gender roles. For example, the protective system in Ontario that prohibits domestic violence enabled a Syrian woman to ask for a separation, something which was never an option before that family, with five children, came to Canada. Women have typically had a limited role and their identities were usually unified with their husbands, fathers, or brothers, who are the household leaders and breadwinners of the family. Other families are starting to accept the fact that the woman might be forced to work if they want to cover their living expenses. In some cultures, in certain Syrian provinces, women typically do not work. It was a culture shock for many that child care benefits are deposited into the mother’s account. Men accept it because they had to, it continues to frustrates them, but they are getting used to it. A group of Syrian focus group participants, all women, said:

*We love Canada because it is multicultural and there’s equality – especially between men and women.*

*Syrian participants #6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13*

Another participant, a 34-year-old man, said:

*Canada is giving my daughters a chance to make very strong personalities which is something great.*

*Syrian participant #28*

Almost every client has and is still enduring culture shock from this cold, vast country, with diverse backgrounds, and a dominant foreign language. The entire system is different for them. Everything they do and must apply for requires their personal identification and immigration papers. Most come from small villages and towns where everyone knows the authorities and a driver’s license is the easiest and simplest form of identity. They worry about their identity and are protective of their traditions, religion, and culture knowing that Middle Eastern and Muslim traditions can be different and often opposing or in contradiction to Western values. They struggle to find the balance as they try to adjust.

The participants' main concerns and issues are clustered around the following areas:

- Communications (e.g., translation, interpretation, and English language ability)
- Family reunification
- Cultural norms (e.g., laws, lifestyle, parenting, and gender roles)
- Safety
- Financial issues (e.g., budgeting, income, and Child Tax benefit)
- Employment (e.g., job training, credential assessment, and long hours)
- Education and child care
- Housing and transportation
- Sponsoring groups
- Settlement agencies / service providers

Syrian Refugee Families	
Overall Experience?	Positive; feel safe and security; good home for children; felt isolated in hotel; most have good relationships with SGs, some have been ignored and neglected (no oversight of SG process)
What facilitated your settlement process?	Financial aid/Govt support; Canadian friendliness & respect for others; safety and security here; freedom of speech; service providers helpful; education for children; LINC; learning transportation system; making friends in community & through LINC
What were the barriers / challenges?	Unemployment (due to lack of English); Language – difficulty learning English; access to translators (for health appointments and children's school); Family reunification (those left behind & need families' help here); transportation (expensive); high rent, finding housing in appropriate neighbourhood; overwhelmed by expectations appointments, child care, language learning – not enough time; lack of services for minorities (especially Kurdish group who do not identify as Arab).
Concerns moving forward / Month 13	Worried about financial support especially for GARs whose integration started later due to their long stay in hotels, finding work, language learning (need more time to learn English) and housing; many have faith that God will provide; some asked for more child care to be able to go to school F/T, stress relief sessions, and more access to translation / interpretation

## Sponsoring Groups

The Canadian Government's support and encouragement of individual citizens joining forces with community organizations and churches to form private sponsoring groups is a phenomenon that has earned Canada kudos around the world. In March 2016, the High Commissioner of the United Nations Refugee Agency, Filippo Grandi, called Canada's private sponsoring groups "a model for the world" (Levitz, 2016). In December 2016, the Government of Canada officially launched the *Global Sponsorship Initiative*, with the goal of training and advising other countries on developing private sponsorship programs (Harris, 2016).

Canadians have been privately sponsoring refugees since the 1979 during the time of The Boat People refugee crisis, and collectively have sponsored over 288,000 refugees since the program began (Government of Canada, 2016). Over the past year, the private sponsoring program has been an important means of enabling Canadian citizens to contribute their time, knowledge, skills, and resources towards resettling Syrian refugees. This grassroots model provides a space for genuine engagement and understanding between Canadian citizens and the refugee families and individuals they are sponsoring. With the assistance of community organizations, churches, private industries, and institutions, and guidance from settlement agencies, private sponsoring groups have provided the necessary support for refugee newcomers' first year in Canada.

The private sponsorship group has been undeniably successful, but it not a one size fits all solution, there have been challenges. Over the past twenty-five years the AWO, as both a settlement agency and a sponsorship agreement holder (SAH), has had the pleasure to support and advise many private sponsoring groups. Almost all the groups participating in this study have formed over the past year to support Syrian refugees (#9 has been involved in sponsoring groups for a few years). The nine private sponsoring groups varied in size and in members' backgrounds.

Private Sponsoring Groups				
	# of Members	Gender / Age	Professions	Syrian Family
SG#1	Initially 40, now only 10-12, with 6 most active	N/A	N/A	Family of 6, mother and 4 children (10, 11, 15, & 16), father has not arrived yet.
SG#2	11	5 women 6 men Mid-30s to mid-40s	4 doctors, 3 lawyers, & an administration manager	Family of 6, children (4,5,8, & 9)
SG#3	10	5 women 5 men	retired teacher, assistant to pastor, principal, 2 housewives, 2 engineers (one retired), an office worker, and an electrician	Family of 4, mother and 3 children (17, and 2 younger siblings)
SG#4	5	Mainly women Ages 45 - 55	All teachers	Family of 4, mother and father, 2 children
SG#5	9	5 women 4 men Ages 45 - 60	Social worker, engineers, home daycare provider, and a teacher	N/A

SG#6	2	1 woman 1 man Late 50s	doctors	N/A
SG#7	14 + actively involved spouses = approximately 24	12 women 12 men 10 in their 30s 12 in their 40s 2 in their 60s	5 engineers, 3 doctors, 2 finance, 2 dentists, 1 teacher, 1 scientist, and 2 business owners	N/A
SG#8	45 contributed financially, of that group, 5 are actively involved with family (see them more than once a week), 4 see the family once every 2 weeks, 12 see the family once per month, and a few others from time to time	40 women 5 men Ages range from 15 to over 55	5 most active (2 retired nurses, 1 retired doctor, 2 small business owners) 4 moderately active (education administrator, business writer, music exec, teenager (15 years old)) 12 monthly active (philanthropist, 2 marketing industry, 1 teacher, 3 music industry, 1 engineer, 1 accountant, 1 technology, 1 logistics, 2 retired)	N/A
SG#9	Works with 5 sponsored families through several G5 groups	1 woman 25 or more other members	Interviewee is a consultant who coordinates private sponsoring groups - matching sponsors with Syrian families	N/A

Overall experience as a private sponsoring group

Sponsoring groups typically described their overall experience as equal measures of rewarding and challenging. Some of them even described the challenges as being a positive experience. They described themselves as having to be flexible with time to spare (e.g., ready to take time off work at a moment’s notice), energetic and ready to work hard, trusting and trustworthy, and patient.

*The level of trust needed to be earned, and nurtured during every interaction we had.*

SG#7

*Wonderful, kids great, lovely, warm, lots of love.*

SG#4



*Overall positive, but a lot of work. Massive commitment - time, resources, emotions.*

SG#4

The groups commented how it was helped when a solid core group of people 5 to 10 regularly contributed to supporting the family. Others spoke about the experience being “life changing” (SG#9), “exciting with ups and downs” (SG#8) and how it was an emotional experience.

*Humbling experience to witness the overwhelming journey of a family’s initial days, weeks, months in a new country.*

SG#7

### What facilitated the process?

It was most helpful to have both sponsoring groups and Syrian families demonstrating commitment, flexibility / accommodation, and good communications skills. An highly-functioning sponsoring group would be flexible, multi-skilled, cohesive as a group, and have easy access to Arabic translators (ideally having one within their group). Some of the group members could contribute pro-bono professional work: dentistry, legal, medical, and financial (SG#7). Others had easy access to Arabic translators, within and outside their group (SG#8). Social media, especially Facebook, was considered helpful for communicating within groups and for rallying for further support, e.g., looking for donations. Donations and in-kind support from the wider community, corporations, and private businesses helped the Syrian families out with mobile phone packages, moving, furniture and many other items and services. The sponsoring groups sought out varying levels of support and guidance from settlement agencies and SAHs. Teachers, guidance counsellors, and schools were also mentioned as being supportive and welcoming to the families.

### What were the barriers and challenges?

By far the most frequently mentioned challenges by the sponsoring groups involved communications. Sponsoring groups with infrequent access to Arabic translators or whose families were Kurdish-speaking, spoke of ongoing frustrations, especially when family members needed important (letters or documents translated) or emergency services. A few commented on the unreliability of the translators. One group used the children to interpret for them, which had positive and negative aspects. The communications issues were varied, some acknowledged that they had “different style of communication” (SG#2), but still understood the family. The language barrier has also impeded the family reunification process, which is a critical issue for all the families. Communications about finances, budgets, funding etc. was an issue mentioned by a few sponsoring groups. Expectations around budgeting and understandings about how the funding works were sometimes difficult to communicate. Additionally, sponsoring groups and families often had different priorities for spending. There were cultural misunderstandings that were not anticipated by some groups, e.g., woman not being able to accept a ride alone with male sponsoring group member and family not going out because food was not Halal (SG#1).

Many of the sponsoring groups were frustrated by their inability to access information from the Government and other agencies regarding timeframes and services.

*Timeframes, the waiting - this discourages Canadians. Especially booking an apartment and then having to cancel (SG#9)*

The uncertainty of when a family would arrive is an enormous barrier to many and is one of the primary reasons that sponsoring group members give up on the process. They noted frequent arrival cancellations and surprise arrivals of Syrian families without prior notification as two difficult and frustrating barriers. There was also concern that families had little to no understanding of the sponsoring process or in some cases, of Canada, before they arrived. For sponsorship agreement holders (SAHs), one of the major concerns is the cap on number of sponsorships and the additional sub-cap on some visa posts. These caps limit the SAHs ability to sponsor some of the most vulnerable refugees from visa posts. Another concern is that the perceived inequality between Syrian refugees and refugees from other parts of the world who are equally at risk may cause a backlash against the Syrians.

### Moving Forward / Month 13

In moving forward into Year 2, the sponsoring groups expressed concerns about their families' ability to become independent. Their concerns were almost identical to the Syrian refugee participants, focused on financial independence, employment, acquiring English proficiency, and being able to find appropriate housing.

### Anything you wished you had have known before starting the process?

Sponsoring group members reflected that they would have liked to have had a better sense of the time commitment in order to plan better. The sponsorship process timeline from the visa posts was unpredictable, causing the sponsoring groups a lot of stress (SG#1). Many would have appreciated knowing more about their specific families, their education, language, work backgrounds, cultural and religious beliefs, and what their lifestyle was like in Syria. Another member mentioned the need to suspend expectations, as all families are different.

Private Sponsoring Groups	
Overall Experience?	Positive / challenging / rewarding
What facilitated your settlement process?	Flexible, multi-skilled, cohesive group with access to Arabic translators; Community / private donations and help/Facebook groups
What were the barriers / challenges?	Communications – access to translation (esp. Kurdish); Cultural – misunderstandings (traditions / faith / expectations / family structure / financial traditions); Access to information from Govt and other agencies re: timeframes and services; managing expectations especially discussions around budgeting; uncertainty from the Gov. when the family arrive (frequent arrival cancellations, surprise arrivals of Syrian families without prior notification)

Concerns moving forward / Month 13	Concerned about family's finances, and their ability to access solid employment, good housing, continued language learning, and other supports.
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## Service Providers – Settlement Agencies

Settlement services agencies are the service providers that have provided key supports to private sponsoring groups and Syrian families. For this study, we sent out a survey with five questions to be filled out anonymously by settlement service agencies in the Greater Toronto Area and Peel region. A link to the survey, produced in Survey Monkey, was sent out to settlement worker contacts in the field who were encouraged to forward the survey on to others. A total of 14 settlement service employees responded. Because the survey was anonymous we do not know which agencies these responses originated from. This smaller section that looks at the experiences of settlement agencies gives us further insight as to how the settlement service process has been working from the perspective of staff who have had years of experience working within the wider settlement sector.

### Most important settlement services?

Settlement workers saw communications, language acquisition (LINC) and translation, along with cultural orientation sessions on different aspects of life in Canada, employment preparation, family reunification support, and health and mental health services as very important for successful settlement.

### Barriers and challenges?

Language barriers, not enough Arabic-speaking staff and translators / interpreters, were one of the biggest challenges to providing effective settlement services to Syrian clients. Another key issue was that there was a shortage of settlement staff in relation to the number of Syrian families needing service. One participant mentioned having difficulties with cultural barriers, but was not specific.

When asked about the differences between government sponsored refugees (GARs) and privately-sponsored refugees (PSRs), responses were contradictory. Some felt that GARs were much readier to settle, e.g., had more education, skills, language ability, while others thought that PSRs were better prepared for settlement. Others thought that GARs were only from refugee camps and PSRs were not. There seemed to be defining judgements being made about the two categories that were inconsistent.

### Moving forward past Month 13

Settlement service staff recommended that there be more training available for sponsoring groups and that there was a great need for more language support and translation services and for employment and housing support. They underscored the need for coordinated partnerships and collaborations across health and settlement sectors and with government, civil society organizations, sponsoring groups, and refugee families to engage in initial planning and to provide mutual ongoing support.

Service Providers - Settlement Organizations	
Most important services?	Cultural orientation sessions; LINC / translations; child care; family reunification; employment preparation; financial literacy; health and mental health services
What were the barriers / challenges?	Language barriers – not enough Arabic speaking workers/translators; cultural barriers; shortage of settlement staff vs. number of families served; GARs think PSR have more information/services and vice versa; need for more human resources for escorting and interpretation.
Concerns / needs moving forward / Month 13	More training for sponsoring groups; coordinated partnerships / collaboration; more language support/translation services; engage partners across health and settlement sectors for initial planning & ongoing collaboration; more employment and housing support

## Recommendations

1. Provide services that acknowledge the special needs of refugee women.
2. Provide on-site child-minding programs for LINC and settlement clients to ensure that both language classes and settlement meetings are accessible for both women and men.
3. Provide special support and culturally-competent programming for clients dealing with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).
4. Paid skills training would assist refugees in gaining sustainable employment.

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