



REFUGEE CLAIMANTS IN ALBERTA

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE MINISTRY OF HEALTH

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BACKGROUND

In Alberta, between the years of 2011 and 2015, there was an average of 725 refugee claimant arrivals annually. In 2016, 1205 individuals sought asylum and in 2017, this trend continued upward as 1730 individuals sought asylum in the province, marking a sharp increase from historical baselines. As of September 2018, Alberta has already received 1230 refugee asylum claims ([Government of Canada](#)), thus putting the province on track to receive an unprecedented number of individuals. Anecdotally, these trends are consistent with the experiences of Service Provider Organizations (SPOs) and key providers of refugee health services in Alberta, such as Mosaic Refugee Health Clinic in Calgary. Over the nearly two-year period from January 1, 2017 until December of 2018, Mosaic reported serving 824 refugee claimant patients who primarily originated from Turkey, Nigeria, and Venezuela ([Mosaic Refugee Health Clinic](#)). Furthermore, while these figures demonstrate a significant increase in refugee claimants, they fail to comprehensively capture the complexities of migration within Alberta and Canada at large, as many SPOs in the province, have reported receiving an influx of secondary migrants from other provinces who are refugee claimants.

Once individuals file a claim, they must wait for a hearing with the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) to determine whether they are eligible for official refugee status. IRB policy postulates that an asylum hearing should typically take place within 60 days. However, with 65 000 pending claims, in conjunction with a lack of financial resources, the current average wait time for an IRB hearing is 21 months, but many cases have extended across several years ([The Canadian Press](#)). While a claim is being processed, refugee claimants have limited access to services such as education, social assistance, emergency housing, health, and legal aid. This inability to access essential services not only violates basic human rights and hinders effective integration into broader Canadian society, but also imparts irrevocable trauma and needless hardship. This interim period leaves refugee claimants in an especially vulnerable position that is exacerbated by the current lack of systemic support available during this time.



Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) acts as the primary funder for the settlement and integration sector in Alberta, however, refugee claimants are ineligible to receive IRCC-funded services. Despite this restriction, according to the *Alberta Settlement and Integration Sector Survey* conducted by AAISA at the beginning of 2018, 46% of SPOs across the province are serving refugee claimants. Up until December 2018, Alberta Labour provided limited funding for refugee claimants to seven organizations across six municipalities (Government of Alberta) through Alberta Labour's 2017-18 Community Integration stream to provide services to refugee claimants and other IRCC ineligible clients, such as naturalized citizens. However, this Alberta Labour funding has reached completion, creating an especially vulnerable situation for refugee claimants across the province. Moreover, while Family and Community Support Services (FCSS) funding guidelines technically list refugee claimants as eligible beneficiaries, these programs are typically not settlement specific.

The persistent lack of funding has placed both SPOs and refugee claimants in a precarious position and has created unnecessary hardship and burden to both. Ultimately, these current policies are antithetical to Canadian multiculturalism, and systemically disadvantage refugee claimants vis-à-vis other newcomers to Canada. Furthermore, it is in the interest of the Canadian economy, and broader society, to seek to amend these policies to achieve a more equitable and mutually beneficial settlement and integration pathway for refugee claimants.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS IN ALBERTA

- 1) Communicate with Alberta healthcare providers on the process to register for IFH and the importance of access to healthcare as a basic human right for refugee claimants**

Healthcare for refugee claimants is covered under the Interim Federal Healthcare Program (IFHP) which provides limited, temporary coverage to individuals who are ineligible for provincial healthcare coverage (Government of Canada). Refugee claimants receive medical coverage under IFH as long as their refugee claim remains active. However, there is a persistent lack of knowledge amongst healthcare providers on how to register to become a Medavie Blue Cross provider and on how to administer services to individuals who are covered under IFH. Moreover, sometimes this lack of knowledge leads to refugee claimants being needlessly turned away from healthcare providers and left without appropriate supports.

To address this gap, the Ministry of Health should:

- Mobilize knowledge amongst healthcare providers on how to become a Medavie Blue Cross provider, and how to administer services under IFH to refugee claimants
 - Mobilize knowledge to ensure that refugee claimants are not turned away from healthcare providers through service coordination
- 2) Provide immediate and automatic coverage for the Alberta Health Care Insurance Plan (AHCIP) to accepted refugee claimants**

Upon IRB's successful review of a refugee claimants' case, an individual becomes immediately eligible for the full spectrum of IRCC funded settlement programs as a Protected Person. In Alberta, Protected Persons are not eligible for AHCIP coverage until an application for permanent residency has been submitted. In many cases, the cost associated with a permanent residency application hinders the ability of a Protected Person to immediately apply. In the interim period, a Protected Person's IFH coverage may expire, leaving them without any access to healthcare coverage (Canadian Council for Refugees).

To address this gap, the Ministry of Health should:

- Provide immediate and automatic AHCIP coverage to accepted refugee claimants without requiring that they have applied for permanent residence

3) Advocate to Alberta Labour to change its funding accessibility to broadly include refugee claimants as eligible beneficiaries

In 2017, Alberta Labour expanded funding eligibility to include refugee claimants as beneficiaries. However, in the 2018 Immigrant Settlement and Language Program's 2018 Call for Proposals, refugee claimants were removed as an eligible client category. Alberta Labour provided a limited amount of funding for services specifically for refugee claimants that expired in December 2018. Under the 2017-2018 Supports for Newcomer Integration Grants, seven different agencies across six different municipalities in the province received refugee claimant specific funding. This significant reduction in funding has created challenges and service gaps for this especially vulnerable population.

To address this gap, the Ministry of Health should:

- Advocate to Alberta Labour to expand funding eligibility to include refugee claimants for all Alberta Labour funded programs across the province
- Advocate to Alberta Labour to fund programs across Alberta specifically aimed at increasing the accessibility and availability of services for refugee claimant clients



CONCLUSION

Health is a basic human right of all Albertans. As a diverse and welcoming province, it is imperative that the ministry of health undertake immediate steps to implement these recommendations as a conduit to creating a more just and healthy province. In alignment with the 1946 constitution of the world health organization, the aforementioned recommendations will act to promote “the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health” for every Albertan as “one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition” (WHO). Ultimately, through these first steps, healthcare in Alberta will become more equitable, public health will be bolstered, and Alberta’s social and economic fabric will be enriched.