



# REFUGEE CLAIMANTS IN ALBERTA

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE MINISTRY OF LABOUR

FEBRUARY 2019

### BACKGROUND

The province of Alberta has seen a sharp increase in the number of individuals seeking asylum over the past few years. Between 2011 and 2015, there was an average of 725 refugee claimants arriving annually in Alberta. In 2016 the number jumped to 1205 and continued to rise to 1730 claims in 2017. 2018 saw an unprecedented number of claims with 1760 individuals seeking asylum in the province, and as of July 2019, Alberta has already received 860 unique claims ([Government of Canada](#)). 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 Service Provider Organizations (SPOs) in the province have reported receiving an influx of secondary migrants from other provinces who are also 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 52 081 pending claims, the current average wait time for an IRB hearing is 21 months, but many cases have extended across several years ([Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada](#)). While IRB has recently implemented a fast-track processing pathway to alleviate some pressure ([Global News](#)), an immense amount of claims remain pending ([Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada](#)).

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 interim period leaves refugee claimants in an especially vulnerable position that is exacerbated by the current lack of systemic support available during this time. Furthermore, while 70% of refugee claimants will eventually become permanent residents ([CBC News](#)), the lack of initial support for this population concurrently impedes long-term settlement and integration outcomes while imparting irrevocable trauma and hardship.

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 funding restrictions, 46% of SPOs across the province continue to serve refugee claimants according to the 2018 *Alberta Settlement and Integration Sector Survey*. Under previous grants from the Ministry of Labour, funding was provided to seven organizations across six municipalities for basic settlement and integration services for refugee claimants through the 2017-18 Community Integration stream (Government of Alberta). However, this funding is nearing completion, creating an especially vulnerable situation for refugee claimants across the province.

Ultimately, the persistent lack of funding and supports for refugee claimants violates basic human rights and hinders integration into broader Canadian society, while also straining the capacity of service providers. These current policies are antithetical to Canadian multiculturalism and serve to systemically disadvantage refugee claimants vis-à-vis other newcomers to Canada. Furthermore, it is in the interest of the Albertan 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 FOR THE MINISTRY OF LABOUR AND IMMIGRATION**

- 1) Update Alberta Labour's strategic framework *Supporting Immigrants and Immigration to Alberta* (2005) to reflect the changing context of immigration to the province**

Alberta Labour and Immigration's current strategic framework for immigration to the province, *Supporting Immigrant and Immigration to Alberta* (2005) does not include refugee claimants. Alberta is a diverse province with a continuously evolving mosaic of newcomers who are integral contributors to the province's social and economic landscape. AAISA believes that collaborative, coordinated responses elicit effective outcomes for newcomers to Canada, and the Ministry of Labour should play a crucial role in strengthening the system of support for refugee claimants in Alberta. To effectively serve claimants, as well as all other newcomers, a strong foundational framework is necessary to guide investment and policy change related to these populations.

To address this gap, the Ministry of Labour and Immigration should:

- Replace the term 'immigrant' with 'newcomer' to be more inclusive of the various circumstances which lead people to settle in Alberta

- Under Section II, include refugee claimants as a category of newcomers that come to the province in search of asylum, employment, and opportunity
  - Mobilize information about the updates to the strategic framework to SPOs across the province and the wider community to build a welcoming, inclusive province
- 2) **Create a pathway for agencies to receive dedicated funding to support settlement services for refugee claimants**

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

To address this gap, the Ministry of Labour and Immigration should:

- Expand its eligible beneficiaries to include refugee claimants across all Alberta Labour and Immigration funded programs and services
- Provide funding and informative resources to agencies to ensure that they can support refugee claimants in filling out work permit applications
- Allow refugee claimants to access language assessments and therefore have placement in English classes
- Provide funding for basic settlement services specifically tailored to the needs of refugee claimants

## CONCLUSION

As a diverse, cosmopolitan, and progressive province, it is imperative that the Ministry of Labour undertake immediate steps to implement these recommendations as a conduit to creating a more inclusive, welcoming, and prosperous province. Moreover, the aforementioned recommendations will act to realize the objectives outlined under *Alberta's Settlement and Integration Program: Guidelines for 2018-19 and beyond* (Government of Alberta) by acting to better address "major barriers ... that will have the most impact on Alberta's settlement system" and to "fund services that do not duplicate existing resources provided by federal or other provincial programming" (Government of Alberta). Through these first steps, not only will refugee claimants' benefit, but Alberta's social and economic fabric will be strengthened.