



**St Thomas the Apostle Church
Community Consultation on Refugee Issues, May 18, 2016
Final Report**

Purpose and Description of the Consultation:

On May 18, 2016, the Church of St Thomas the Apostle invited representatives of agencies actively concerned with the issues of food security, affordable housing, and immigrant/refugee settlement in the Alta Vista and south Ottawa community, to participate in a breakfast at which five questions were discussed:

- From your organization's perspective, what are the most pressing challenges you see in food security, affordable housing, and immigrant/refugee settlement in our area?
- In the specific context of community housing, what challenges are posed by the anticipated arrival of significant numbers of refugees?
- What opportunities present themselves for solutions to these various challenges?
- What roles could individual community agencies (including both faith communities and secular organizations) play in addressing these needs, either alone or in partnership?
- What else is needed?

Conversations were informal, around small tables of 10 people. Table discussions were led and recorded by St Thomas members. About 35 guests participated, representing housing organizations, immigrant/refugee settlement bodies and groups, faith communities, community groups, and local politicians' offices.

The major points emerging from the discussions have been summarized in pages 1 - 4 of this report. Appendix 1, pages 5 – 10, includes more detail on the table discussions. Appendix 2, on page 11, lists the table participants.

Summary of Table discussions:

There are significant differences between federally sponsored refugees and those who are privately sponsored by individual community or faith groups. Federal financial support of refugees stops after 1 year. During this year, government-sponsored refugees receive support for rent, food and transportation. They are looked after by one case worker who has other families to look after as well. In contrast, the private sponsor groups seem to have more financial resources that cover a broader range of needs, and more volunteers who can provide other forms of day-to-day support. Privately sponsored refugees also tend to be better educated

than government-sponsored refugees, which can increase their chances of finding employment and integrating into Canadian society.

In the first three months of 2016, there was a substantial inflow of refugees, primarily Syrians, sponsored by the federal government. Many were accommodated temporarily in hotels. In February and March, the number of refugee families using the Heron Road Emergency Food Centre rose to over 50, but that number has since fallen off. As of May 2016, fewer refugees were arriving and they were coming more gradually. There are about 1,200 Syrian refugees in Ottawa and a further 800 may arrive by the end of the year. Refugees will also continue to arrive from other countries at the same time. It is thought that it will be easier to accommodate newcomers since the flow is slower. No temporary hotel rooms will likely be necessary, and the extent of reliance on food banks may lessen somewhat.

Affordable housing and food security: In Ottawa, the cost of housing is high and continues to increase. There is also a long waiting list for social housing – five to seven years for all applicants. While there has been much concern about the possibility of refugees ‘jumping the line’ and getting housing ahead of those who have been waiting for years for public housing, in fact the refugees are not eligible for public housing for their first year.

Housing issues are thus currently less critical than earlier in 2016, although local governments and immigrant settlement organizations are anticipating some stress in the future ‘13th month’, when refugees have been here one year and are then expected to be able to fend for themselves.

Employment and skill challenges: Once the one year of sponsorship is over, refugees must have jobs if they are to become self-sufficient. To prepare to work in Canada refugees need:

- Language training appropriate to individual literacy levels and job needs;
- In some cases, an adult ‘make-up’ high school level education program;
- For immigrants with a trade or professional qualification, an evaluation of existing skill levels, followed by prescriptive gap-filler training to bring the individual’s qualification into line with Canadian practices and requirements.

This will pose a significant challenge. Many of the Syrian refugees have little education and speak virtually no English. This low literacy rate also applies to Arabic. They may first need to learn to read and write in their first language before they attempt English or French. They also seem to possess relatively little entrepreneurial experience which might help them reach self-sufficiency by creating small businesses.

Support challenges: Ottawa housing authorities are encouraging discussions/conversations with private developers to assign a certain percentage of their units as affordable housing for refugees, but this appears difficult in practice. There is a need for a group to lobby builders and landowners to be part of a solution that enhances affordable housing. Examples exist in other cities. Faith groups might be positioned to step in and make that connection, since difficult pre-existing government-private sector relationships may pose obstacles to such collaboration.

Integration and co-ordination of resources between support groups is also a work in progress. There are many groups working on solutions for affordable housing and to provide newcomers with support but there is as yet a lack of an integration point or organizations which bridge the gaps between groups. Community foundations are competing with each other for donations for the refugees. People are willing to give, but are conflicted where to give, because so many groups are raising funds. But the “Refugee 613” organization has accepted the challenge of acting as a coordinating body for the various community agencies addressing refugee needs. The organization (3 paid staff and many volunteers) seeks to support sponsorships, donations, volunteering and advocacy. It maintains a sponsorship registry for private groups which, while not public, is shared with a small number of key settlement agencies and service providers.

Private groups also find it hard to plan for their families’ arrival as they don’t know exactly when they are arriving. There are currently many groups in the Anglican diocese whose sponsorships are stalled. When that happens, it becomes more difficult to maintain interest in the sponsoring parish.

New approaches for refugee support: There is substantial energy in the Ottawa community, including people wanting to sponsor, donate, etc. Financial donations, while significant, can be episodic and uneven. Individual faith communities nevertheless seem to be coming together to better address common needs, through such initiatives as the Multifaith Housing Initiative.

It is critical for community organizations to look at ways to encourage employment opportunities. On June 16 there will be a Job Fair organized by Refugee 613. It is hoped there will be employers there with jobs for employees where lack of English or French is not a problem. There is a need to get word out for employers.

There are hopeful examples of more formal refugee housing approaches. These include:

- The conversion of St. Matthew’s Anglican Church in Winnipeg demonstrates what can be done with existing underused facilities. St. Matthew’s is now the West End Commons, a comprehensive neighborhood resource centre which includes subsidized housing for low to medium income families, as well as worship/assembly space, a commercial kitchen, meeting rooms and office space.
- The Norberry Residences apartment complex in Ottawa near Mooney’s Bay Park is an example of privately owned affordable housing. They have two and three bedroom units with a maximum of six occupants in the three bedroom units. Two bedroom units rent for \$1,079/month including heat and hot water. Their welcome package is available in Arabic.
- The involvement of churches in refugee settlement provides a opportunity for evangelism by example.

The considerable land and resources of faith groups could be used for housing. Assets are available and should be looked at. Community consultations such as this one can ensure that linkages are made between local churches with land available and community housing representatives who can explore its possible use.

Welcoming refugees: Children find it much easier than adults to make friends, and opportunities are being developed to help this happen. But for adults, there is a challenge to establish the conditions that will encourage them to mix with strangers, make a contribution and build their own network. Informal approaches have included:

- Inviting attendance at a neighborhood/building/street BBQ;

- Developing a community garden and invite newcomers to participate. Gardening is a universal activity that bridges cultural differences.
- Inviting one or more members of a refugee family to participate as a volunteer in a neighborhood or community activity, or a Spring cleanup of a local park.
- There are increasing examples of local children taking the initiative to help their new refugee classmates adjust to their new school environments.

Further informal opportunities to address refugee challenges could include:

- Using churches' space to bring together mothers and children. A playgroup was suggested, and a singing circle. One participating minister offered to organize a singing circle, something she has had much experience in.
- ESL offered to women sometimes cannot be taken up because there aren't enough day care spaces for their young children who are not yet in school. It was suggested that there could be some more informal ESL groups in neighbourhoods where classes could be in groups and mothers could look after each other's children.
- More camps geared to ESL students need to be set up, and more general programming in the summer needs to be provided. The YMCA/YWCA and the City are meeting some of these needs. They provide subsidized places but even those may cost too much for many parents. Community organizations might provide donations to sponsor free places for refugee children. Perhaps organizations such as the Boys/Girls Clubs might be willing to share their venues.
- Community volunteers could provide informal English language groups and homework clubs.
- There is a general need to communicate the availability of the programs to new immigrants in a language that they understand. Some places have Arabic services, but many others do not.

Newcomers also need to get together periodically to share experiences and knowledge. Churches can provide space and other support for such meetings.

A next step? It was pointed out that this type of community consultation meeting is very good, since it brings the various agencies and individuals together, often for the first time, to discuss these issues and explore potential responses, individually or collectively. One suggestion was to invite and facilitate a discussion among a group of people who would like to take the discussions to the next level.

Appendix 1: Detailed Synopsis of Table Discussions:

Context: Federal vs privately sponsored refugees:

There are significant differences between federally sponsored refugees and those who are privately sponsored by individual community or faith groups. Refugees' experience may be significantly affected by the source of their sponsorship.

Federal financial support of refugees stops after 1 year. During this year, government-sponsored refugees receive support for rent, food and transportation. They are looked after by one case worker who has other families to look after as well. In contrast, the private sponsor groups seem to have more financial resources that cover a broader range of needs, and more volunteers who can provide other forms of day-to-day support.

Reflecting these government limitations, organizations like the Catholic Services for Immigrants try to find housing that is within the social assistance limits so that the families will find it easier to transition when they are on their own after a year. Some federal government refugees nevertheless require supplemental non-government assistance. By way of contrast, if the private sponsors give families more than the government rate, they risk overwhelming the family with 'too much love', since at the end of the first year, when the amount of support drops, the family can have problems adjusting to this.

Privately sponsored refugees tend to be better educated than government-sponsored refugees, which can increase their chances of finding employment and integrating into Canadian society.

Affordable housing and food security issues:

Securing affordable housing and food security are essential starting points for successful resettlement. Learning English and finding a job follow closely. Complicating factors are the increasing costs of housing and waiting lists for affordable housing. These are discussed in turn.

Affordable Housing:

In Ottawa, the cost of housing is high and continues to increase. There is also a long waiting list for social housing – five to seven years for all applicants. While there has been much concern about the possibility of refugees 'jumping the line' and getting housing ahead of those who have been waiting for years for public housing, in fact the refugees are not eligible for public housing for their first year.

Syrian refugee families often represent a new challenge due to the size of many family units. In contrast to the smaller family units of earlier groups of refugees (from Vietnam, Kosovo, etc.) current refugees often include families of ten, making adequate, affordable housing a very great challenge.

Housing for those who suffer with mental illness is a potentially growing, unattended problem. This has to be looked at, since the population of incoming migrants is bound to be very traumatized, although the extent of this is as yet difficult to tell. Many also have significant health and dental issues.

Tradeoff between food security and affordable housing:

Refugees have used the resources of the Heron Emergency Food Centre (HEFC) and the pattern of use reflects the large flow of Syrian refugees early in 2016. In January 2016 no refugees used the HEFC Food Centre for emergency food supplies, but this number rose to 54 families in February, and 50 families in March. In April, numbers had fallen to 11 families, as the early-year influx of government-sponsored Syrian refugees was reduced.

As of May 2016, fewer refugees were arriving and they were coming more gradually. There are about 1,200 Syrian refugees in Ottawa and a further 800 may arrive by the end of the year. Refugees will also continue to arrive from other countries at the same time. It is thought that it will be easier to accommodate newcomers since the flow is slower. No temporary hotel rooms will likely be necessary, and the extent of reliance on food banks may lessen somewhat.

The 'Thirteenth Month'

City governments and immigrant settlement organizations are therefore looking with concern at the future '13th month', when refugees have been here one year and are then expected to be able to fend for themselves. Some may leave Ottawa to rejoin family elsewhere. Others may be transferred to Ontario Works. While this provides a different bundle of services, the income portion tends to be a little lower than that of the federal government. In addition, any direct housing subsidy would be 'clawed back' from the family by Ontario Works.

One suggestion was that the government should extend its support for a further six months in order to increase refugees' opportunities for self-sufficiency.

Employment and skill challenges

Once the one year of sponsorship is over, refugees must have jobs if they are to pay for housing and food and become self-sufficient. For many refugees, obtaining a job is also critical to the maintenance of an individual's sense of self-worth. Respect for the father in the family structure can depend upon his ability to be a breadwinner. During their first year, and possibly extending thereafter, individuals must acquire the necessary occupation-specific knowledge and language skills. Some may have to start 'at the bottom' even though they were well-paid professionals in their home country.

To prepare to work in Canada refugees need:

- Language training appropriate to individual literacy levels and job needs;
- In some cases, an adult 'make-up' high school level education program;
- For immigrants with a trade or professional qualification, an evaluation of existing skill levels, followed by prescriptive gap-filler training to bring the individual's qualification into line with Canadian practices and requirements.

There is a mistaken belief that the recent Syrian refugees are all well-educated English speakers. This is not the case, at least with those whom HEFC has helped. Most of these have little education and speak virtually

no English. This low literacy rate also applies to Arabic. As with the previous Somali experience, they first need to learn to read and write in their first language before they attempt English or French.

Many previous refugees had entrepreneurial capabilities and experience, which allowed them to open a variety of small businesses. This helped them reach a level of independence and self-sufficiency fairly quickly. Unfortunately, those opportunities seem to be fewer for this refugee group, many of whom have limited entrepreneurial experience.

Budgeting is an essential skill set. Where refugees are unable to establish and maintain a budget, they may overspend on non-essentials and have difficulty paying the rent at the end of the month. This can lead to eviction, or spending food money on housing.

Isolation and integration issues

There is some tendency for refugees to congregate in 'ghettos'. Unfortunately, maintaining the language and ways of the old world does not help them assimilate into the new world. More importantly, it slows the acquisition of the knowledge and skills needed to find a job. Those who do not progress can find themselves in trouble at the end of their one year sponsorship.

Isolation problems can also vary according to the time of year of migration, due to the nature of the Canadian climate. Winter may keep people indoors and limit contact with others. Government-sponsored refugees may face this problem more intensively since they often lack a support system and may have lower levels of education.

Private sector involvement

Some private sector companies have approached the city saying that they want to be involved with refugee housing. But their profit motives are difficult to reconcile with social objectives. Ottawa housing authorities are encouraging discussions/conversations with private developers to assign a certain percentage of their units for refugees, but this appears difficult in practice. In general, developers/landlords are not yet sufficiently engaged in looking at affordable solutions and do not always include affordable housing in new projects. But if one landlord/company gets involved, then they can challenge others to get involved.

Integration of support resources

Integration of resources between support groups is a work in progress. There are many groups working on solutions for affordable housing and to provide newcomers with support but there is a lack of an integration point or organizations which bridge the gaps between groups. For example, there may be land available but the housing support organizations may not be aware of the potential opportunity.

Community foundations are competing with each other for donations for the refugees. People are willing to give, but are conflicted where to give, because so many groups are raising funds. It was suggested that if we are going to help the new immigrants with housing etc., then we have to include the 'community foundations'.

There is also a need for a group to lobby builders and landowners to be part of a solution that enhances affordable housing. Examples that were mentioned were Calgary and Edmonton. Calgary used a “guilt approach” and Edmonton and “awards approach” to garner support from the private sector. They are both good examples. One suggestion was that faith groups could step in here and make that connection. There may be too much mutual government/private sector suspicion to have governments play this role.

Private sponsorship issues

It is estimated that that \$25,000 is the bare minimum needed for private sponsorship – more realistically it should be \$30,000 per family. For food for two adults and 3-4 children a monthly food cost would be approximately \$534. However, as noted, many families are much larger and this would be more like \$1,500 monthly.

Private groups find it hard to plan for their families’ arrival as they don’t know exactly when they are arriving. There are currently many groups in the Anglican diocese whose sponsorships are stalled. In one particular case of sponsorship, the money has been raised but it is not yet known when the family will arrive. It is has been difficult generating interest in the parish but there is faith that this will be forthcoming when there are some tangible jobs to perform and a more definite arrival date.

Learning from past experience

Some observers felt that we failed to fully integrate some earlier Somali refugees and that as a result there is a large group of Somalis in the Herongate area with little education, and who do not see the need for education. There have been dropouts and early marriages. It is thus urgent that women amongst the new refugees be able to access ESL programmes. It seems that there is little need to convince the Syrians of this.

How can community agencies help in addressing these needs, either alone or in partnership?

It is apparent that when a refugee family has easy access to an effective support group, it can make a considerable difference in their overcoming many integration barriers. There is substantial energy in the Ottawa community, including people wanting to sponsor, donate, etc. While donations are significant, they can be episodic and uneven, depending upon the urgency of each situation. They are thus not as reliable as regular ongoing monthly contributions. Individual faith communities also seem to be coming together to better address common needs. A good example is the growth of the Multifaith Housing Initiative.

Refugee 613

There is an ongoing need for enhanced communication of the specific needs of our refugee families to the greater community, as well as co-ordination of the efforts of private sponsorship groups. It was pointed out that “Refugee 613” has accepted the mandate of acting as a coordinating body for the various community agencies addressing refugee needs. The organization (3 paid staff and many volunteers) seeks to support sponsorships, donations, volunteering and advocacy. It maintains a sponsorship registry for private groups which, while not public, is shared with a small number of key settlement agencies and service providers.

It notes that while it is possible to get many volunteers, paid staff have to manage them. It also advises that donations of money are generally preferable to donations of things (clothing, etc.) It must also be on the lookout for new sources of volunteers. If sufficient volunteers cannot be found, who will pay to hire people to perform co-ordinating and coaching functions?

It is critical for community organizations to look at ways to encourage employment opportunities. On June 16 there will be a Job Fair organized by Refugee 613. It is hoped there will be employers there with jobs for employees where lack of English or French is not a problem. There is a need to get word out for employers. It is better if the job is part-time so that the new employee can continue with his ESL training. Might the Chamber of Commerce be approached to play a role in this regard?

Examples of more formal refugee housing approaches:

The conversion of St. Matthew's Anglican Church in Winnipeg demonstrates what can be done with existing underused facilities. St. Matthew's is now the West End Commons, a comprehensive neighborhood resource centre (www.thewestendcommons.ca) It houses 26 apartments for low to medium income families at subsidized and median market rates. Units are from one to four bedrooms. It also provides worship/assembly space for six diverse congregations, a commercial kitchen, meeting rooms and office space.

The Norberry Residences apartment complex in Ottawa near Mooney's Bay Park is an example of privately owned affordable housing. They have two and three bedroom units with a maximum of six occupants in the three bedroom units. Two bedroom units rent for \$1,079/month including heat and hot water. Their welcome package is available in Arabic.

The involvement of churches in refugee settlement provides a opportunity for evangelism by example. Unfortunately, most churches are experiencing a shortage of volunteers which limits their level of participation.

The considerable land and resources of faith groups could be used for housing. Assets are available and should be looked at. There also need to be more community consultations to ensure that the correct linkages are made. For example a local church mentioned that it had land available and community housing representatives noted that they would not have known about this without the consultation session.

Welcoming refugees

Making friends helps refugees integrate into a new (Canadian) culture.. Children find it much easier than adults to make friends, and opportunities are being developed to help this happen. But for adults, there is a challenge to establish the conditions that will encourage them to mix with strangers. Following are informal approaches that have been successfully employed:

- Acknowledge and greet new arrivals when met on the street, in a park or even in a building elevator;
- Invite participation in informal neighborhood activities such as the Spring cleanup of a local park;
- Invite attendance at a neighborhood/building/street BBQ;
- Develop a community garden and invite newcomers to participate. Gardening is a universal activity that bridges cultural differences. For assistance in developing a garden go to: <http://greeningsacredspaces.net/regional-chapters/ottawa-chapter/>
- Invite one or more members of a refugee family to participate as a volunteer in a neighborhood or community activity. It gives them a chance to make a contribution and to build their own network.

- While it is important for immigrants and refugees to adapt to Canadian culture and ways of doing things it is also important for those assisting to understand the values and traditions of the new arrivals.

Potential further informal opportunities to address refugee challenges

- Churches have space to bring together mothers and children. A playgroup was suggested, and a singing circle. Singing songs can help them to learn another language. One church minister offered to organize a singing circle, something she has had much experience in.
- There is a dynamic group in Manor Park/Rockcliffe that wanted to volunteer in some way. They now fundraise for Manor Park/Rockcliffe Community Association.
- ESL offered to women sometimes cannot be taken up because there aren't enough day care spaces for their young children who are not yet in school. It was suggested that there could be some more informal ESL groups in neighbourhoods where classes could be in groups and mothers could look after each other's children.
- School boards are concerned about what will happen to the children of new refugees in the summer holidays. Many of these children were 'free range' for several years and have had to adapt to sitting at a desk and have a more regimented life at school. More camps geared to ESL students need to be set up, and more general programming in the summer needs to be provided. The YMCA/YWCA and the City are meeting some of these needs. They provide subsidized places but even those may cost too much for many parents. Community organizations might provide donations to sponsor free places for refugee children. Perhaps organizations such as the Boys/Girls Clubs might be willing to share their venues.
- There are growing opportunities for community volunteers to step forward to provide informal English language groups and homework clubs.
- There is a general need to communicate the availability of the programs to new immigrants in a language that they understand. Some places have Arabic services, but many others do not.
- For refugee children, attending school tends to be a little chaotic in the beginning. It is difficult for many of these new children whose educational experiences in their homeland have at best been seriously interrupted. But there are increasing examples of local children taking the initiative to help their new classmates adjust to their new environments.

It is also important for newcomers to get together periodically to share experiences and knowledge. This requires that someone find a meeting space, contact people with the details and overcome any transportation challenges. Churches can provide such spaces.

Newcomers will often need help to shop, find and travel to a doctor, and perform other essential functions during the first few months following arrival. They may also need help during first exposure to an unfamiliar season, e.g., winter. Refugee support groups can help here, although similar support may be missing for government-sponsored refugees.

A next step? It was pointed out that this type of community consultation meeting is very good, since it brings the various agencies and individuals together, often for the first time, to discuss these issues and explore potential responses, individually or collectively. One suggestion was to invite and facilitate a discussion among a group of people who would like to take the discussions to the next level.

Appendix 2: Table participants for Community Consultation May 18, 2016

Table 1

Discussion Leader	Joy Mighty
Recorder	Leroy Fevang
Pierre Chetelat	OMRA Refugee Housing
Naima Sidow	Cordova Centre
Rev. Arran Thorpe	Trinity Anglican Church
Leslie Emory	OCISO
Suzanne Le	Multifaith Housing Initiative
Saide Sayah	City of Ottawa Affordable Housing
Mary Frances Bell	Mt Calvary Lutheran Church
Indima Muthumudali	Office of David MGuinty MP

Table 2

Discussion Leader	Cathy Munroe
Recorder	Andrew Louis
Maria Rigby	Ottawa Mennonite Church
Arber Zaplluzha	Catholic Centre for Immigrants
Euphasie Emedi	SEOCHC
Rev. Dr. Floyd McPhee	St Timothy's Presbyterian Church
Stéphane Giguère	Ottawa Community Housing Corp
Michael Qaqish	Ottawa City Councillor
Janice Horton	Ellwood House
Peter Martin	St. Aidan's Anglican Church
Linda Thom	Ellwood House
Jamie Burr	Upper Marlowe Consultants Inc.

Table 3

Discussion Leader	Kim Chadsey
Recorder	Bill Watt
Lynne Bezanson	Riverview Park Community Association
Rev. Elizabeth Bryce	Rideau Park United Church
Nic Larouche	St Timothy's Presbyterian Church
Randal Goodfellow	Broadening the Base
Jean Cloutier	Ottawa City Councillor
Fred Sirotek	Alta Vista resident
Yvonne Stevens	Norberry Residences
Mike Bulthuis	Alliance to End Homelessness

Table 4

Discussion Leader	Derwyn Sangster
Recorder	Elizabeth Funnekotter
Louisa Taylor	Refugee 613
Rev. JoAnne Lam	Mt Calvary Lutheran Church
Louisa Simms	Heron Emergency Food Centre
Graeme Hussey	CAHDCO Affordable Housing
Susan Smith	St Thomas Refugee Group
Carol Burrows	Seniors Housing Consultant
Hilary Martin	Office of John Fraser MPP