



Refugee
Response Team
FRASER VALLEY

ONLINE SURVEY: FIRST QUARTER Key Findings and Recommendations Report



DIVERSECITY
community resources society



BRITISH
COLUMBIA

WelcomeBC

*B.C. Refugee Readiness Fund is part of the WelcomeBC Umbrella of services,
made possible through funding from the Province for British Columbia*

fraservalleyrrt.ca

About The RRT-FV

The Refugee Response Team – Fraser Valley (RRT-FV) works with local communities to identify, prioritize and address the needs and challenges of refugees in the Fraser Valley.

Background

Recognizing the severity of the crisis in Syria, the Province of British Columbia set up a one-time investment to enhance federal and provincial refugee programs and provide additional resources for communities welcoming refugees. Refugee Response Teams (RRTs) were formed in five regions of the province, including the Fraser Valley.

Purpose

- » To develop and implement a *Community Refugee Response Action Plan*
- » To act as a local resource for information and communications about refugee resettlement in the Fraser Valley

Vision

Fraser Valley service providers, sponsors, stakeholders and refugees will have access to the information, services and supports they need in order to facilitate the resettlement of refugees and ensure their successful integration into the community.

Community Refugee Response Action Plan

Through a community consultation process, six priority issues were identified for the *Community Refugee Response Action Plan*, including data collection and information sharing, public education, housing, healthcare access, language assessment and training, and employment and labour market attachment.

For more information, please visit fraservalleyrrt.ca.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	4
Introduction	6
Methodology	6
Respondents	7
Key Findings and Recommendations	9
Housing	9
Healthcare Access	11
Language Assessment and Training	14
Employment and Labour Market Attachment	18
Other Service Needs	22
Appendix I – Overview of Syrian Refugee Arrivals in the Fraser Valley	25
Appendix II – RRT-FV Online Survey Questions	26
Appendix III – List of Organizations / Private Sponsors	29
Appendix IV – New Refugee Programs / Supports	30

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The *Refugee Response Team – Fraser Valley (RRT-FV) Online Survey* was created to better understand the service needs, challenges and issues of refugees in the Fraser Valley. Responses were obtained from a variety of service providers and stakeholders involved in the resettlement and integration of refugees in the Fraser Valley, and this report summarizes the key findings and recommendations that emerged from the survey responses. The results will be used not only to inform the work of the RRT-FV, but also by government and community partners in their planning and delivery of refugee services and supports throughout the region.

The online survey was divided into six sections to match the priority areas of the RRT-FV's *Community Refugee Response Action Plan*:

- » Background Information
- » Housing
- » Healthcare Access
- » Language Assessment and Training
- » Employment and Labour Market Attachment
- » Other Service Needs

It was open from May 20 to June 1, 2016, and received a total of 74 completed responses from individuals representing 41 organizations / private sponsor groups and two local residents in the Fraser Valley.

Summary of Key Findings:

The majority of **Syrian refugees settling in the Fraser Valley have complex settlement needs**. Many have large families with 5+ children. Many speak little to no English, have eight years or less of formal education in their home country, have complex health / dental issues, and are experiencing some degree of trauma and/or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

It is a challenge for refugees, especially those with large families, to find **safe and affordable housing** in the Fraser Valley. Many refugees pay high rent for their income levels, which consumes most of their monthly income and leaves very little money for food and other basic necessities. They are also concerned about how they will pay for their housing costs after their first year in Canada, once their resettlement assistance runs out, especially those who will not be employment ready or have secured a job.

Access to healthcare services is a major issue in the Fraser Valley. There is a shortage of doctors and dentists accepting new patients, not all medical professionals are willing to take on or register for the Interim Federal Health (IFH) program, and there are limited mental health services / supports available in the region. Language is also a barrier to accessing healthcare services for refugees, and better access to professional interpreters and/or healthcare professionals who speak the first languages of refugees is needed. Some refugees are not receiving the medical services they need, even in emergency cases.

Access to language training has become a major issue for refugees in the Fraser Valley. An increase in refugee arrivals over a short time period, coupled with a decrease in funding, has led to long waitlists for Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) classes, especially for lower level classes. There is a need to ensure that all new refugees, including those participating in non-LINC language training programs, undergo language assessment to ensure allocations for language training funding match the need in the region.

The majority of Syrian refugees who have settled in the Fraser Valley are **not yet employment ready**. While they would like to find a job right away, they are still in the process of settling in their new community and addressing various issues. To become employment ready, they require access to English language training, which in many communities of the region is at capacity, as well as specialized pre-employment and employment programs, skills training and/or work experience opportunities. There is also a need to develop a mechanism to better connect employers who are interested in hiring refugees and refugees who are employment ready.

The influx of Syrian refugees over a short time period has been **challenging both for service providers and systems** in the Fraser Valley. It created large caseloads and made logistics on the ground very challenging. There were too many families for support to be provided in a timely manner, and clients became frustrated with the long wait times for their settlement needs to be met. Service providers are also increasingly being called to deal with more complex cases, as well as to respond to the growing number of community members wanting to volunteer or support Syrian refugees.

Each of the findings is further explained in the body of the report, along with related recommendations.

INTRODUCTION

The *Refugee Response Team – Fraser Valley (RRT-FV) Online Survey* was created to better understand the service needs, challenges and issues of refugees in the Fraser Valley. The survey was distributed to a broad range of service providers and stakeholders involved in the resettlement and integration of refugees in different communities of the Fraser Valley.

This report summarizes the key findings and recommendations that emerged from the survey responses. Respondents also shared information about new services, supports and resources that were developed in response to the recent influx of Syrian refugees, and a list can be found in *Appendix IV*.

The survey results will assist the RRT-FV in bringing forward information and making recommendations to different levels of government and other key stakeholders in support of refugees in the Fraser Valley, and will also help to measure and demonstrate any improvements to services for refugees over the next year.

METHODOLOGY

The *RRT-FV Online Survey* was open from May 20 to June 1, 2016, and responses were collected via Fluid Surveys, an online survey tool. To ensure broad distribution, the survey was sent to the RRT-FV membership, which includes representation from service providers and stakeholders involved in the resettlement and integration of refugees in the Fraser Valley. Each RRT-FV member was asked to distribute the survey within their networks.

Responses were obtained from a variety of service providers and stakeholders, including settlement service providers, employment service providers, language service providers, healthcare service providers, school districts, employers, municipalities, private sponsors and community partners. The survey was divided into six sections – background information, employment and labour market attachment, language assessment and training, healthcare access, housing and other service needs – which match the priority areas of the *Community Refugee Response Action Plan*. Each section (except background information) included five qualitative questions; the full list of survey questions can be found in *Appendix II*. Respondents had the option of completing one or more sections, depending on their knowledge of the subject area.

The survey received a total 74 completed responses from individuals representing 41 organizations / private sponsor groups from across the communities of the Fraser Valley as well as from two local residents. The list of organizations / sponsors can be found in *Appendix III*.

RESPONDENTS

Survey respondents represented the different communities of the Fraser Valley, as well as the various sectors involved in the resettlement and integration of refugees to the region. They are also involved in providing services or supports to one or more “categories” of refugees.

Communities

COMMUNITY	COUNT	PERCENTAGE
Abbotsford	14	18.9%
Chilliwack	23	31.1%
Delta	13	17.6%
Langley	18	24.3%
Maple Ridge / Pitt Meadows	19	25.7%
Mission	5	6.8%
Surrey	30	40.5%

Sectors

SECTOR	COUNT	PERCENTAGE
Settlement	35	47.3%
ESL / LINC	19	25.7%
Employment	24	32.4%
Education	6	8.1%
Healthcare	6	8.1%
Local Government	1	1.4%
Private Sponsor / SAH	9	12.2%
Business Community	2	2.7%
Other	15	20.3%

Types of Refugees Served by Respondents

TYPE OF REFUGEE	COUNT	PERCENTAGE
Government-Assisted Refugee	62	83.8%
Privately Sponsored Refugee	51	68.9%
Blended Visa Office Referred Refugee	35	47.3%
Refugee Claimant	33	44.6%

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Responses from the *RRT-FV Online Survey* were compiled and organized to match the priority areas of the *Community Refugee Response Action Plan*. The following section summarizes the opinions and perspectives of survey respondents.

Housing

Key Findings

Access to safe and affordable housing

Access to safe and affordable housing for refugees has become more challenging with the increase in refugee arrivals and limited availability of low-income housing in the Fraser Valley. Low-income housing that was \$900 a month two years ago is now \$1,400–1,500 a month, with rates increasing by \$300–400 in the last three months. Because of low availability, bidding wars are taking place, with potential tenants offering to pay above the asking price and putting homes out of reach for refugees.

Access to appropriate housing for large family units

There is a shortage of housing to accommodate large families in the Fraser Valley, especially housing that is affordable, near transit / service hubs, pest-free and “to code”. It is hard for refugee families with 5+ members to find rental housing, as they usually require a minimum of three bedrooms. There is heavy competition for houses, and most landlords are less willing to rent to large families. Many refugee families end up living in illegal basement suites because it is all they can afford.

Large proportion of income spent on housing

Many refugees pay very high rent in relation to their income levels. Rent consumes most of their monthly income, leaving families very little money for food and other basic necessities.

Access to subsidized housing

Refugees would benefit from access to subsidized housing. However, there is a general lack of subsidized housing options available in the Fraser Valley. Any kind of subsidized housing, such as BC Housing, is limited and has long waitlists.

Discrimination and abuse by landlords

There are reports of racism and discrimination by some landlords, who are unwilling to rent their properties to refugees. In Langley, for example, a landlord decided that he would no longer rent to refugees, and eight refugee families were evicted from a housing complex, some of whom had been living there for years. In some cases, landlords are requiring credit checks and letters of reference from previous landlords, which are documents that refugees cannot supply.

Need for affordable housing in month 13

Refugees are concerned about housing costs after their first year in Canada, when they will no longer be able to receive resettlement assistance, especially those who will not be employment ready or have not yet secured a job.

Clarification around maximum occupancy vs. cultural norms

There is confusion about whether there are maximum occupancy guidelines for housing. For example, it seems that an eight-member family is expected to pay for a four-bedroom house. Many refugees come from cultures where several children share a bedroom. For some families, houses feel too big and they end up closing off part of the house. Naturally, they are still required to pay the full rent, which is especially challenging when living on income assistance levels.

“We have rented a townhouse in Langley City for a family of seven from Eritrea. We are very pleased with the housing itself, however, because of the high rent, it will not be realistic for the family to remain there unless we financially support them beyond the one-year support period.”

Recommendations

Resettle refugee families in waves, not all at one time

It is very challenging on the ground to support a large number of refugee arrivals at once, especially given the limited availability of safe and affordable housing options in the Fraser Valley.

Connect newly arrived refugees to subsidized and/or affordable housing

Some refugees are unaware of the different resources in the community. Create settlement staff or volunteer positions that deal directly with housing and build better connections with landlords in the community.

Provide refugees with better access to affordable housing

Create more inventory or other mechanisms for refugees to access housing that is appropriate. Adapt by-laws or rules about requiring a specific number of bedrooms or that allow for larger families to live in basement suites. Create large, purpose-built housing for refugees within urban centres with support from government.

Better engagement with BC Housing

BC Housing needs to become more involved and create more opportunities for refugees to access subsidized housing.

Create a Housing Task Force or National Housing Strategy

Canada needs to develop a National Housing Strategy that is funded. Measures need to be put in place to protect existing affordable / social housing stock, and incentives are needed for developers to build affordable rental stock.

Healthcare Access

Key Findings

Complex health issues

There has been an increase in the number of refugees arriving with complex medical and/or dental needs, many of which were undisclosed prior to arrival. Chronic disease management, disabilities and lack of healthcare before arrival in Canada have an impact on the care needed upon arrival. Trauma, mental health issues and developmental delays, especially in children, are ongoing issues in the Fraser Valley. Among Syrian Government Assisted Refugee (GAR) families, dental care is the most urgent and pervasive medical need.

Denial of needed medical services

Some refugees are not receiving the medical services they need, even in emergency cases. For example, some refugees were turned away at ER because they were not accompanied by an interpreter, even though interpretation services are available through the Provincial Language Service (PLS). It was reported that for some refugees, they now feel discouraged and are reluctant to try to access medical services.

Shortage of medical professionals

There is a shortage of doctors and dentists accepting new patients in the Fraser Valley, as well as a lack of medical professionals willing to take on or register for Interim Federal Health (IFH) coverage. There is also a lack of female doctors and gynecologists for Syrian women.

Availability of mental health services / supports

There is a lack of mental health services and supports available in the Fraser Valley. It is especially challenging for refugees needing access to trained professional therapists. Some mental health supports are available, but they are often too far away, time limited or based on a peer-support model.

Complexity of navigating the healthcare system / services

It has been a challenge for refugees to access professionals in the healthcare system. For example, to obtain mobility equipment or daily living aids, refugees are required to get a loan from the Red Cross before purchasing these items, as well as book Home Health Occupational Therapist time to obtain them. It is also unclear about how or where to access pro-bono services.

Transportation to / from medical appointments

Some refugees need to travel to Vancouver to access services from the Bridge Clinic¹, and transportation costs are not covered. Some refugees also need to see specialists located in different parts of Greater Vancouver that are difficult to access by transit. Frequent trips back and forth to appointments can be taxing on refugees, sponsors, volunteers and staff.

Long waitlists / wait times

It takes too much time to get full access to the healthcare system, as there are long waitlists and/or wait times for some services. The Patient Attachment Mechanism (PAM) seems to be working well, but refugees get frustrated because of the long wait time to get a call back.

¹ The Bridge Clinic, located in East Vancouver, provides public health screening and short-term primary health care for sponsored refugees and refugee claimants until they find family doctor in their community. Interpreters are available for booked appointments. The clinic is open to sponsored refugees during their first year in Canada, and refugee claimants through the end of their legal process.

Language barriers

Language is the biggest barrier to accessing medical services in the Fraser Valley. Many services are only available in English, such as mental health group therapy. Some refugees are being turned away because they are unable to understand consent forms. It is also a challenge to communicate important specialist appointment information to refugees with complex needs, especially when these appointments are booked on short notice. There is a need for more doctors, pharmacists and mental health professionals who speak refugee first languages. In a few communities, Arabic-speaking doctors and dentists have stepped forward to assist Syrian refugees.

Access to professional interpretation services

There is a lack of professional interpretation services for healthcare appointments, particularly outside of hospitals. Not all clinics have interpretation services, and access to interpreters is not provided at community medical offices for specialist appointments. Finding interpreters to go to medical appointments is a challenge, especially with the influx of refugees. Professionally trained interpreters are needed to accompany patients to medical appointments, particularly Arabic interpreters, but only a few are available and only in some communities. Some doctors are not willing to have interpreters at appointments. In other cases, refugees are forced to attend appointments with an English speaking family member or their settlement worker as physicians are insisting on interpretation of consent forms.

Confusion about services covered under IFH

It is a challenge to find doctors and pharmacists who understand IFH and the new rules for payment. There is confusion about what services are covered / not covered, such as walk-in clinics, prescription drugs, etc. Some medical facilities listed on the Blue Cross website are turning down refugees with IFH coverage. In some cases, it is difficult for refugees to find the medical services they need, as IFH is not accepted by all medical facilities.

Access to MSP

The processing time to access the BC Medical Services Plan (MSP) is long, with some refugees having to wait more than three months.

Lack of planning / preparation

Local doctors, pharmacists and dentists were not prepared for the influx of Syrian refugees. In some cases, they did not have the health number set up in their system, causing major problems for access to care. Fraser Health was not ready for increased need for vaccinations. There is also no process in place for transition from Bridge Clinic to Nurse Practitioners (NPs) or Care Collaborators.

Recommendations

Ensure that adequate medical and dental services / supports for refugees are in place

Increase doctor counts in communities and provide each refugee with a doctor and healthcare card. Open a clinic specifically for refugees. Ensure support services are available so that refugees can access needed medical and dental services (e.g. transportation, accompaniments, Registered Nurse Care Collaborators who assist with booking and communication). Increase community physiotherapist and occupational therapist staff. Provide fluoride treatment clinics for children.

Ensure that needed interpretation services are available and accessible to refugees

Interpretation at ER should be mandatory under the law. Give community specialist physicians access to PLS / medical interpreters. Have over-the-phone interpretation services available as much as possible.

Provide more funding for interpreters and interpretation services

PLS needs to have more interpreters available to do last minute calls. Sometimes it is not possible to book an interpreter for an appointment three days in advance.

Provide access to mental health services

Settlement services should include access to psychological counselling to address trauma and adjustment issues, both for adults and children.

Support healthcare professionals in registering for IFH

Provide information for healthcare providers on assisting refugees and the process for registration to accept IFH. Bring together dentists for training on IFH, what is covered and how easy it is to work with the system. Try to increase the number that are willing to help.

Provide education to refugees on healthcare services in the Fraser Valley

Provide workshops to refugees about the medical system care / navigation in BC, including limitations, and wait times. Provide simplified information and translated documents on IFH and MSP, including what services are covered and not covered. Work with public health and settlement agencies to provide more education to refugees on healthcare services, dental hygiene, healthy eating, family nutrition, etc. Find an Arabic speaker who can present health information in each community.

“Some of the staff have been going to healthcare professionals to explain how to set the IFH into their system. Many medical professionals who were not registered to take IFH have now done so, such as the local pharmacy.”

Language Assessment and Training

Key Findings

Increase in lower level LINC clients

Large numbers of refugees with very low language, education and/or literacy skills have recently settled in the Fraser Valley. Many Syrian refugees are illiterate in their mother tongue or have limited schooling, usually up to grade eight. The majority have English language skills ranging from pre-literacy to Canadian Language Benchmark (CLB) 2. It has been a challenge for language service providers to reconfigure existing classes to accommodate the influx of low level learners and at the same time provide quality programming for other learners. In one community, the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) 1/2 class, which had never been full, got filled in February 2016 and now has 14 clients on the waitlist.

Limited access to LINC

Access to language training has become a major issue in the Fraser Valley. An increase in refugee arrivals and decrease in funding has led to longer waitlists for LINC classes. The length of time between language assessment and class placement is an issue. A considerable number of refugees require access to lower level LINC classes, but there has been no increase in funding for instructors or classroom space. Many refugees require language training at a level lower than what is currently provided or available in the region. For example, it is a challenge to include literacy clients in a LINC 1/2 class, as the learning needs are very different and thus additional teaching assistance is required. There is also a limited availability of evening LINC classes. In one case, a client had to choose between getting a job or continuing with language training, as both were during the day. More language services are also needed in some communities, such as North Langley (Walnut Grove, Willoughby).

“With many refugees settling in communities outside of Vancouver proper, the waitlist for English training (LINC) is very long and demoralizing for these newcomers to cope with. Many of them would like to communicate with the core society but the lack of English training prevents them from doing so and further marginalizes and silos them.”

Limited availability of non-LINC language supports

Informal language training can be a bridge to formal language training and / or employment. Volunteers could be trained to work with refugees to prepare them for formal language training programs or the workforce, or could supplement current class offerings. Requests for informal language training are increasing, such as one-to-one tutoring, but supports are not available to meet this demand, especially in some of the smaller communities in the Fraser Valley.

Access to language assessment

Some communities have been experiencing challenges with language assessment. During some periods, the influx of Syrian refugees led to a large number of refugees requiring language assessment at the same time. It was a challenge to find extra space to accommodate the increased client load. Depending on residency, the assessment location is far and requires coordination of transportation and childcare. Private sponsors or GAR supports are required to drive clients to the assessment site. It would be helpful if language assessment services were available at LINC delivery sites in all communities of the Fraser Valley.

Language assessment for non-LINC clients

There is a need to conduct language assessments for all refugees, not only those participating in the LINC program. Many refugees do not have a formal language assessment done before starting literacy or language training programs, so the number of refugees requiring English language training in the Fraser Valley is inaccurate. This could play a huge role in determining funding that is allocated for language training to the region.

Absenteeism in LINC classes

Some refugees have been missing LINC classes for various reasons, which interrupts the learning process and is causing programming challenges for service providers. In some cases, they are dealing with complex health issues and need to attend medical or dental appointments. In other cases, there is a lack of understanding about attendance / commitment.

“Refugees in Chilliwack need to get assessed in Abbotsford or Surrey by Surrey Language Assessment Centre. This is causing delay for learners to get into class and/or being realistic about language needs. Chilliwack has the capacity to assess learners but not a contract for refugees specifically.”

Access to childcare for LINC clients

Many refugees with lower levels of English require childcare in order to attend LINC classes, as they often have large families with 5+ children. However, there is a lack of childminding space and support, which prevents parents from enrolling in classes.

Access to transportation

Access to transportation is a challenge for many refugees, impacting their ability to participate in language training programs.

Cultural differences

Some Syrian refugees don't feel comfortable being in a mixed gender classroom. This is a challenge for service providers that do not have the capacity to segregate classes. It is important to ensure the participation of both men and women in language training programs.

Portfolio-Based Language Assessment

All LINC programs switched to a Portfolio-Based Language Assessment (PBLA) system on April 1, 2016. The new system has created more work and challenges for LINC instructors. It has been a challenge for instructors to complete the required assessments to progress existing learners and at the same time meet the many needs of new learners, especially for those instructors who had new learners join late in the program (i.e. May).

Staff burnout / turnover

The influx of refugees has increased pressure on LINC instructors. In some cases, there has been huge turnover because they feel overworked and underpaid. Managerial time and effort is being put into hiring and training new instructors rather than building stronger and more responsive language training programs. The new waitlist management protocols have also created a new level of administrative duties that are not adequately resourced.

Recommendations

Increase access to language assessment

Language assessment should be made available online or in more locations so that refugees do not need to travel as far to have their language skills assessed.

Increase funding for additional LINC classes

More funding is needed for LINC in the Fraser Valley, especially LINC 1/2, to accommodate the language learning needs of refugees and other newcomers in the region.

Increase supports within LINC

There is a need to provide additional childcare spaces, as well as provide transportation support, so that refugees that can attend LINC classes. Interpreters could also be placed in lower level language classes to support instructors.

Adopt a more learner-directed approach to LINC

While the LINC program works well for some refugees, others do not benefit from its current structure. It can be challenging for learners to sit and learn in a classroom for several hours at a time, especially for those with limited education experience. Some refugees may learn faster using a computer on their own or in other types of learning environments.

Increase supports for informal language training

Some refugees may benefit from informal language training programs. In some communities, informal language training is being provided by untrained and unsupported volunteers, which is a concern. There is a need to fund the coordination of informal or volunteer-based language training programs through faith communities and/or community-based groups, as well as training for volunteer tutors / instructors.

Develop workplace language training programs

There is a need to develop workplace language training programs for refugees with limited language and/or literacy skills in partnership with employers, work environments or industries known to have work opportunities for this client group. It would give refugees the opportunity to learn and practice what they have learned on the spot. Employers could also allocate spots within their company to give practical experience.

“Language learning is of utmost importance – it affects everything involved in settlement: employment and employability, acculturation, sense of well-being in a new place, children’s well-being and future.”

“We should have a few sessions to set up refugees with laptops, connections and strategies to learn on their own. The classroom should be seen as part (maybe the core) of a larger, more learner-directed program that continues at home. Learners could be linked with ‘language friends’ who come to their home and just converse together. There are many different, creative, efficient and real-life language learning opportunities that could be pursued.”

More accurate regional data

There is a need for more accurate regional data around LINC waitlists, as it would provide a more accurate description of the service needs by community and support a stronger case for additional classes in the Fraser Valley.

Communication with refugee clients

Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) service providers should communicate information about LINC access / waitlists to refugees as part of their orientation. This should be done in their first language so that they better understand the reality of the resources available for them. There is also a need to provide information about the amount of time and hard work involved in learning a new language, as some clients may have unrealistic expectations.

Employment and Labour Market Attachment

Key Findings

Employment readiness

The majority of Syrian refugees who have settled in the Fraser Valley are not yet employment ready. While they would like to find a job right away where they can use their skills and experience and support their families, they are still in the process of settling in their new communities. The majority speak little to no English and there are few jobs that do not require some level of English. They may also need to build other skills, such as computer literacy, before they are ready for the Canadian workplace.

Access to English language training

As described in the section above, the majority of refugees require English language training, but many Language Instruction for Newcomers (LINC) classes in the Fraser Valley are at capacity and have long waitlists, or are not offered over the summer. Without at least basic English, workforce entry is nearly impossible.

Access to skills training

Many Syrian refugees are in need of short-term skills training to enter the workforce. However, most programs require a certain level of English that will take years for refugees to reach. While there are some skills training programs available for refugees with lower levels of English, most are located in Vancouver, which is too far.

Access to transportation

Transportation is a major challenge for refugees in the Fraser Valley. The high cost of transportation in the region takes away from limited daily living funds. Some refugees would like to get a driver's licence and vehicle, but costs are prohibitive. It can be challenge to get to / from work without access to public transit or a vehicle, especially for those living far from the city centre, as communities in the region are spread out. Industrial areas, where many employment opportunities are found, are especially difficult to access by public transit, such as the Gloucester area of Aldergrove.

Recognition of foreign credentials, qualifications and skills

It can be especially challenging for refugees from war-torn countries to have their credentials and/or qualifications assessed, including university credits from their home country, as they may not be able to produce certificates and/or other documents. Some refugees may have been employed in jobs that do not exist in Canada. For example, some building trades are very different in Syria than here and so although many refugees have skills and experience, their skills and experience are not easily understood by local employers.

“Everybody wants to work, but our experience is that with most jobs once someone starts working their English learning plateaus or drops off. In the GAR family we are helping, the father got a job almost immediately, but quit after a few weeks because he could see that his language learning was dropping off. He knows he has to have a good grasp of English to get ahead. Working all day, then going to English class in the evening is grueling and take the parent away from their family during a difficult time of transition.”

Access to work experience / employment opportunities

It is a challenge for refugees to gain Canadian work experience and find jobs that pay a decent wage, especially those with limited English language skills. Many employment opportunities are unreliable, such as low-paid seasonal work in greenhouses or construction-related jobs, with workers regularly having hours cut back or getting laid off. It is also difficult for refugee youth to find employment opportunities, as many work placements are only available to youth not currently in school. In one community, 22 male refugees are currently in need of work.

Connections between employers and refugees who are employment ready

There is a need to develop a mechanism to connect employers who are interested in hiring refugees and refugees who are employment ready. Some refugees are experiencing challenges finding a job or resources to help them break into the labour market. At the same time, employers with job vacancies and a desire to hire refugees are experiencing challenges connecting with refugees who are employment ready.

Cultural norms / expectations

In some cultures, traditional gender roles still prevail and women are expected to stay at home to take care of their family. This seems to be the case amongst many of the Syrian refugees settling in the Fraser Valley; that is, Syrian women are not encouraged to enter the workforce because of internal community / cultural pressures and instead are expected to stay at home and care for their family. This may have an impact on the number of refugees who will be looking for employment in the region.

Capacity of Service Providers

A large number of refugees settled in the Fraser Valley within a short timeframe, and it was a challenge for service providers to complete needs assessments around employment for that many clients at one time.

“We need to bear in mind there is a difference between a refugee and a “normal” immigrant to Canada. The barriers remain the same (language, culture, housing, etc.) while challenges are different. Refugees escape war, abuse so the needs are increased. We need to bear this in mind. The settlement process might take longer, which means employment readiness might also take longer.”

Recommendations

Prioritize language training over employment in the early stages of settlement

Language training should be prioritized over employment in the early stages of settlement. Staff should emphasize the need to first acquire English language skills in light of employer / employee roles and responsibilities, health and safety. For example, enrollment in formal language training should be required for the first six to nine months for refugees at a pre-literacy or Canadian Language Benchmark (CLB) 1/2, along with one-to-one tutoring or mentoring, before entering the workplace. More funding should be invested into language programs, rather than employment programs, for refugees' first year in Canada.

Ensure recognition of foreign qualifications and experience

It is important to promote the recognition of previous trade and/or educational experience of refugees. Once English language skills are achieved, refugees with five or six years of university studies should not be made to start again in first year university. There is a need to work on a better way to determine equivalency.

Develop language training programs with an employment focus

More English language programs are needed with an employment focus, such as on-the-job language training (“English at Work” model), English for the Workplace (“Bridge to Work” model), English classes that help to explore employment goals, job search skills and job opportunities, and intensive listening and speaking classes specific to employment or training environments. An employment readiness program could be developed that includes English language and employment training, resume and interview preparation, Canadian workplace culture and cultural sensitivity, or that addresses occupation-specific language skills along with workplace safety and essential skills.

Develop skills training programs / services for refugees

More skills training programs should be provided, including those specifically for low-skilled refugees, to ensure that they have sufficient access to job training or skills development required for their interest of work. Skills-specific training could be provided for certain occupations, such as cashier or chainsaw operator. Programs could also be developed with local universities to provide funded skills development in market-need areas, such as web development or IT systems. Information and/or access to re-training or re-certification programs is also needed.

Develop specialized employment programs / supports for refugees

An employment orientation should be provided to refugees during the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) period or shortly thereafter. Workshops should also be provided to refugees on rights and responsibilities in the Canadian workplace and intercultural communication. A job developer position, either community or regionally based, should be created specifically for refugees.

“In my opinion, the most effective way to integrate refugees into the Canadian society is for refugees to begin gainful employment ASAP. Wage subsidy and unpaid work experience programs are important programs for refugees to access.”

Provide work experience and networking opportunities for refugees

Once ready, work experience opportunities should be provided for refugees, including job shadowing, wage subsidy for employers, paid internships and/or unpaid work experience. Networking and community connections are also important for refugees to prepare for and gain employment.

Develop programs / services in partnership with employers

There is a need to establish strong partnerships between language training, employment service providers and employers. Potential trainers and employers could visit classrooms or become involved in other ways. Workplace language training programs could be developed specifically for refugees with limited language and/or literacy skills in partnership with employers, work environments or industries known to have work opportunities for this client group. Strengths-based needs assessments should be conducted to determine both the needs of employers and employees. Opportunities for job creation partnerships should be explored.

Develop tools / incentives to engage employers

An online tool should be developed for refugees to create a skills and occupational experience profile, which could be accessed by employers interested in hiring refugees. Government should provide incentives to employers to hire refugees.

Create opportunities for information sharing

Sharing information is key, both with refugees and the community. A central clearinghouse should be developed that includes information about programs, services and supports, as well as educational materials, related to the employment of refugees. It is important for everyone to be aware that refugees are facing many challenges. It is a learning process both for refugees and the community. Other suggestions for information sharing include: information to refugees about limitations and funding issues, breakdown of labour market information and careers in different areas, and information from a variety of employers on hiring challenges.

“Although many refugees have settlement services and sponsor relationships, working with a trained volunteer as well can create a network for the refugee as well as help with employment readiness.”

Conduct research

More research should be conducted around the employment of refugees. For example, a statistical report could be developed to look at the correlation between level of English, employability and income. It was also suggested that labour market information research be done to identify if the employment needs of refugees could be met prior to their resettlement in the Fraser Valley.

One respondent's advice for newly arrived refugees:

- » We want to respect the individual's right to choose how they will proceed, but it might be helpful to have some guidelines to give newcomers (especially refugees) regarding taking some months, up a year, to settle, learn about the culture and community, and most of all to focus on language learning.
- » Be transparent about the challenges faced by any newcomer in the labour market and how this gets even more complex for refugees who may have multiple barriers – language, literacy, physical or mental health issues, etc.
- » Refugees need to be given more information and clear information with regards to employment and what is and is not realistic. This needs to be done through information sessions or online resources in the refugee's mother tongue in order for it to make clear as to what is realistic with regards to employment.
- » They should be told that they may not find a job right away. They need to know that jobs are hard to find in Canada – even for Canadians. They need to know that volunteering and getting Canadian references is very important. They also need to know that they may need to choose a different career path and get a “survival job” at first.
- » Refugees also need to understand the importance of gaining work experience in any industry to attach to employment and then understand the Canadian workplace demands better. Canadian workplace protocol and standards is also an important factor in gaining and maintaining employment.
- » A conversation through many of the service providers prior to arriving as well as during their job search. Their willingness to take on any position to start is imperative. Many companies start people below their ability and determine their work ethic and reliability before moving them forward in the company. This process can take 6-12 months.

Other Service Needs

In addition to addressing the priority areas of the *Community Refugee Response Action Plan*, respondents provided input on other issues impacting refugees in their respective communities. The following is a summary of those responses.

Key Findings

Capacity of service providers

The influx of Syrian refugees within a short time period was challenging for service providers. It created large caseloads for settlement workers and made logistics on the ground very challenging, causing many service providers to feel overwhelmed. There were too many families for support to be provided in a timely manner, and clients became frustrated with the long wait times for their settlement needs to be met. Some clients also accessed multiple agencies with the same needs, which caused confusion both for the clients and frontline settlement workers.

Complex cases for settlement workers

Settlement workers have been required to deal with many cases involving domestic violence, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental health issues, as well as provide information and awareness on these issues.

Overwhelming response from the community

It has also been a challenge for service providers to deal with the overwhelming response from community members wanting to volunteer or support Syrian refugees. Support is needed to assist service providers in managing this response.

Client expectations

Some recently arrived refugees may have unrealistic expectations, and a few have a sense of entitlement about the services and supports that they should be receiving, which has been a challenge for service providers. In some cases, misunderstanding around expectations has led to some confusion around whether or not adequate services have been delivered.

High need for specialized supports

Various specialized supports are needed for refugees in the Fraser Valley. Trauma support is high in need, as always with refugee communities, and continues to be underfunded. Additional supports are needed for families with children aged 6–12 years old, particularly Syrian and other refugee families that have recently fled conflicts, as chaos has been a constant in their childhood and settling in a structured Canadian school system is very challenging. There are also gaps in programs for older refugee youth who have not had enough time in the school system to graduate, such as employment and adult education programs.

Lack of space and supports in schools

School districts have been challenged to provide space and/or needed supports for new refugee students, especially for those who arrived mid-year, because of cutbacks. There are a number of language and behaviour challenges that staff have needed to address. There is a need for homework assistance and after-school programs for refugee students, as well as cultural education about Canadian social norms for refugee youth in the school system to avoid misunderstanding and conflicts.

Arrival of refugees in waves

In some communities, such as Langley, refugees have been arriving in waves and rather inconsistently. It is difficult to create and keep classes and programs going in schools when a large influx of refugees arrives once every several years.

Social isolation of refugees

Some Arabic-speaking refugees are socially isolated, particularly older adults, women with small children, and widows. The lack of connection to their ethnic community or the mainstream community may be the result of settling in a community with few / no members from their ethnic group, difficulties accessing transportation, community programs or needed services, or a sense of being overwhelmed. It is especially difficult for refugees who are living far from the city centre.

Lack of public transit options

There is a need for good public transit options in the Fraser Valley so that refugees can access affordable housing, services and employment.

Lack of insurance

Many volunteers want to help refugees by giving them rides to services, but are unable to provide assistance due to lack of insurance. In some cases, staff and local residents are providing rides without being adequately insured and this is a concern for service providers. There is a need for more flexibility and support in this area.

Incorrect birthdates in passports

Several Syrian boys have the wrong birth dates in their passports in order to delay / avoid conscription in the military, which has led to some confusion around accessing services in schools.

Diversity of needs

The needs of refugees are diverse, making it a challenge for service providers to develop programs that address them all.

Public education

There is a need for more public education in some communities. There is a need to raise awareness that refugees have been settling in the Fraser Valley for many years, and that agencies have been providing services to newcomers, including refugees, for decades.

Recommendations

Additional supports for settlement services

Funding should be enhanced for settlement agencies to hire more staff, particularly for home visits and programming for older adults, women and children, and to work more with mainstream services.

Additional supports in schools

Funding should be enhanced to support refugee children and youth in the school system, in particular for language supports. More resources are needed for interpretation to help refugee students and their parents adjust to the Canadian school system.

Case management for new refugee families

It would be beneficial to implement a case management system for refugee families. A regular and consistent case manager could support refugee families in their first two years in Canada and be the point of contact and referral to other services. A similar system is currently used for new refugee families in the United States.

Adequate training / preparation of staff and volunteers

There is a need to ensure that service provider staff and volunteers are adequately trained and prepared to work with refugee clients. In some cases, there seemed to be a disconnect in terms of communication and/or services provided to refugees.

Engage refugees in decisions

It is important to create opportunities to bring together refugees and stakeholders. For example, service providers and/or stakeholders could work together with refugees to determine their needs and formulate a plan.

Community connections

It is important to organize ongoing events to bring together refugees and community members in order to build relationships within the community and reduce isolation. Intentional events could be used to build cross-cultural understanding, language connections, relationships and respect.

“Really need to encourage and commend those in the community (relatively few) who are providing all of this, and hope the ripples grow wider, include more Canadians who will reach out to newcomers.”

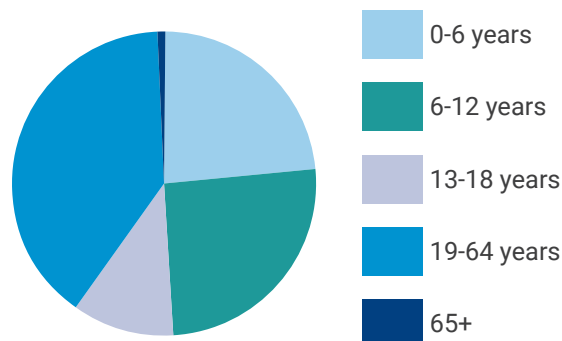
APPENDIX I – OVERVIEW OF SYRIAN REFUGEE ARRIVALS IN THE FRASER VALLEY

Syrian Refugee Arrivals to BC (November 4, 2015 to May 24, 2016)

Total

Syrian GAR individuals	1,874
Syrian GAR units	439

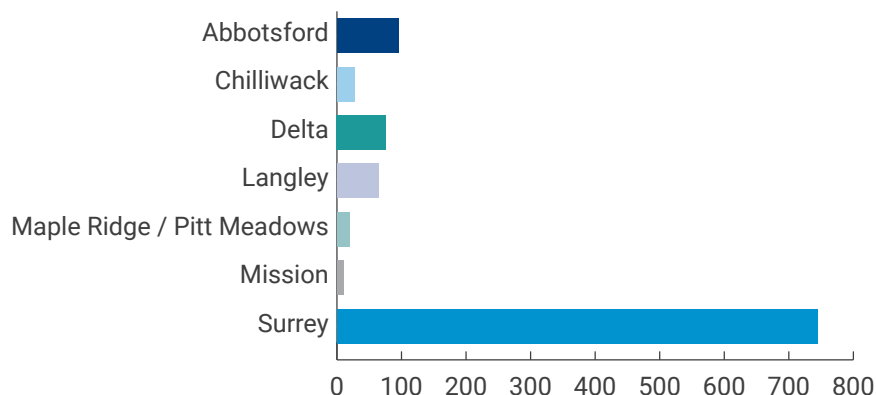
Age of Syrian GARs on Arrival in BC:



Syrian Refugee Arrivals to the Fraser Valley (November 4, 2015 to May 24, 2016)

Government Assisted Refugees (GARs):	1,088 (91% of Syrian refugee arrivals to the Fraser Valley)
Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSRs):	63 (5% of Syrian refugee arrivals to the Fraser Valley)
Blended Visa Office Referred (BVOR) Refugees:	44 (4% of Syrian refugee arrivals to the Fraser Valley)
Total:	1,195 (49% of total Syrian refugee arrivals to BC)

Syrian GAR Settlement Patterns in the Fraser Valley (November 4, 2015 to May 24, 2016)



Source: ISSofBC "Refugee Readiness Fund Newsletter #10" and Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada #WelcomeRefugees.

APPENDIX II – RRT-FV ONLINE SURVEY QUESTIONS

Background Information

1. Personal information:
(NOTE: This information will be kept confidential. It will only be used if additional information or follow up is required)
 - a. Name
 - b. Organization
 - c. Email
 - d. Phone
2. Sector:
(Please check all that apply)
 - a. Settlement
 - b. ESL / LINC
 - c. Employment
 - d. Education
 - e. Healthcare
 - f. Local government
 - g. Private sponsor / Sponsorship Agreement Holder (SAH)
 - h. Business Community
 - i. Other (please specify):
3. Community(s) Served:
(Please check all that apply)
 - a. Abbotsford
 - b. Chilliwack
 - c. Delta
 - d. Langley
 - e. Maple Ridge / Pitt Meadows
 - f. Mission
 - g. Surrey
4. Types of refugees served:
(Please check all that apply)
 - a. Government Assisted Refugees (GARs)
 - b. Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSRs)
 - c. Blended Visa Officer Referred (BVOR) Refugees
 - d. Refugee Claimants
 - e. Other (please specify):

Employment and Labour Market Attachment

1. Since April 2016, what **new** refugee-specific employment needs, challenges and/or issues have emerged in your community / sector?
2. What are the **ongoing** refugee-specific employment needs, challenges and/or issues in your community / sector?
3. Have any **new** employment programs or services been put in place for refugees in your community / sector? Please explain.
4. Do you have any recommendations on how to address the above refugee-specific employment needs, challenges and/or issues?
5. Do you have any recommendations on how to ensure that expectations of refugee clients or stakeholders with regards to employment are realistic?

Language Assessment and Training

1. Since April 2016, what **new** refugee-specific language assessment and training needs, challenges and/or issues have emerged in your community / sector?
2. What are the **ongoing** refugee-specific language assessment and training needs, challenges and/or issues in your community / sector?
3. Have any **new** language training programs or services been put in place for refugees in your community / sector? Please explain.
4. Do you have any recommendations on how to address the above language assessment and training needs, challenges and/or issues?
5. Do you have any recommendations on how to ensure that expectations of refugee clients or stakeholders with regards to language training are realistic?

Healthcare Access

1. Since April 2016, what **new** refugee-specific healthcare access needs, challenges and/or issues have emerged in your community / sector?
2. What are the **ongoing** refugee-specific healthcare access needs, challenges and/or issues in your community / sector?
3. Have any **new** healthcare services been put in place for refugees in your community / sector? Please describe.
4. Do you have any recommendations on how to address the above healthcare access needs, challenges and/or issues?
5. Do you have any recommendations on how to ensure that expectations of refugee clients or stakeholders with regards to healthcare access are realistic?

Housing

1. Since April 2016, what **new** refugee-specific housing needs, challenges and/or issues have emerged in your community / sector?
2. What are the **ongoing** refugee-specific housing needs, challenges and/or issues in your community / sector?
3. Have any **new** housing services been put in place for refugees in your community / sector? Please describe.
4. Do you have any recommendations on how to address the above housing needs, challenges and/or issues?
5. Do you have any recommendations on how to ensure that expectations of refugee clients or stakeholders with regards to housing are realistic?

Other Service Needs

1. Since April 2016, what **new** refugee-specific needs, challenges and/or issues have emerged in your community / sector (that were not included in previous sections)?
2. What are the **ongoing** refugee-specific needs, challenges and/or issues in your community / sector (that were not included in previous sections)?
3. Have any **new** programs or services been put in place for refugees in your community / sector (that were not included in previous sections)? Please describe.
4. Do you have any recommendations on how to address the above needs, challenges and/or issues (that were not included in previous sections)?
5. Do you have any other recommendations on how to ensure that expectations of refugee clients or stakeholders are realistic (that were not included in previous sections)?

APPENDIX III – LIST OF ORGANIZATIONS / PRIVATE SPONSORS

1. Abbotsford Community Services	23. Mission Community Services Society
2. Act 2 Child and Family Services	24. MOSAIC
3. Avia Employment Services	25. Muslim Food Ban and Community Services Society
4. BC Ministry of Child and Family Development	26. New Directions Vocational Testing and Counselling Services Ltd.
5. Bethel Mennonite Church	27. Options Community Services
6. Chilliwack Community Services	28. Pacific Community Resources Society
7. Chilliwack Learning Society	29. Paladin Security
8. Coast Spas Manufacturing Ltd.	30. Private Sponsor Group
9. Corporation of Delta	31. Progressive Intercultural Community Services Society
10. DIVERSEcity Community Resources Society	32. REaCH
11. Douglas College	33. School District #35 (Langley)
12. Eastern Fraser Valley Refugee Committee	34. Settlement360
13. Fraser Health Authority	35. SUCCESS
14. Fraser Valley Regional Library (Pitt Meadows)	36. SUCCESS @ School District #42 (Maple Ridge / Pitt Meadows)
15. Group of 5 (Chilliwack)	37. Surrey Language Assessment Centre
16. GT Hiring Solutions	38. Umoja Operation Compassion Society
17. Immigrant Employment Council of BC	39. University of the Fraser Valley
18. ISSofBC	40. Vancity Credit Union
19. Jim Pattison Outpatient Centre	41. YMCA
20. Kwantlen Polytechnic University	
21. Maple Ridge Public Library	
22. Mennonite Central Committee of BC	

APPENDIX IV – NEW REFUGEE PROGRAMS / SUPPORTS

In response to the influx of Syrian refugees to the Fraser Valley, several new programs and supports have been developed. Below is a list of new programs and supports for refugees that were identified by survey respondents.

Housing

- » Staff housing support worker during Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) period

Healthcare Access

- » Arabic-speaking doctor who has agreed to take all Syrian refugees into his practice
- » All Nurse Practitioners (NPs) in primary care will see new Canadians
- » Dental screening through Fraser Health
- » Refugee mental health line
- » List of places that accepts Interim Federal Health (IFH)

Language Assessment and Training

- » Special summer Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) classes for Syrian refugees
- » Free, community-based English as a Second Language (ESL) classes for youth and adults (English clubs, conversation circles, conversation classes together with childcare services)
- » Volunteer-led English club for Syrian refugees on the LINC waitlist
- » Volunteer-led, pre-literacy class facilitated by a Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) trained language instructor and supported by an Arabic-speaking volunteer (who is also a LINC student)
- » Rosetta Stone computer class
- » Orientation at public libraries so that Syrian refugees can access Mango language curriculum online over the summer
- » Free language assessment for placement into the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program at some post-secondary institutions, which exists through funding from international student fees
- » “Parent and Child Together” program to meet the needs of moms with low levels of English and young children / babies

“Although [informal language training] is helpful, it can’t replace instruction by trained and experienced ESL teachers.”

New Employment Programs / Services for Refugees

- » Computer literacy / skills classes
- » Workshops on different topics
- » Drop-in classes (employment, connections to other resources)
- » One-to-one client services (with assistance of volunteers)
- » Individual-client job matching
- » Immigrant Employment Council of BC (IEC-BC) Onboarding Toolkit for Employers hiring Syrian Refugees
- » IEC-BC Webinars / Tip Sheets to support employers with the onboarding and retention of refugees

Other New Programs / Services for Refugees

- » Arabic-speaking settlement worker
- » Partnership between Mennonite Central Committee of BC (MCC-BC) and Muslim Food Bank to provide furniture, housewares and clothing to GARs in Surrey
- » New transition classes for children throughout the summer in School District #35 (Langley)
- » One-time activities / events for sponsors and sponsor groups to meet and exchange information and for refugees to meet and socialize