



VOLUNTEERING WITH REFUGEE CLAIMANTS

Welcome Group Program



WHO ARE REFUGEE CLAIMANTS?

In Canada, refugee claimants refer to people who claim refugee protection. Also called “asylum seekers,” these are individuals who have applied for refugee protection status in Canada, and are waiting for a decision on their claim from the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada.

Refugee claimants come from many walks of life. They arrive in Canada with differences in pre-migration education, health and mental health, and levels of proficiency in English or French.

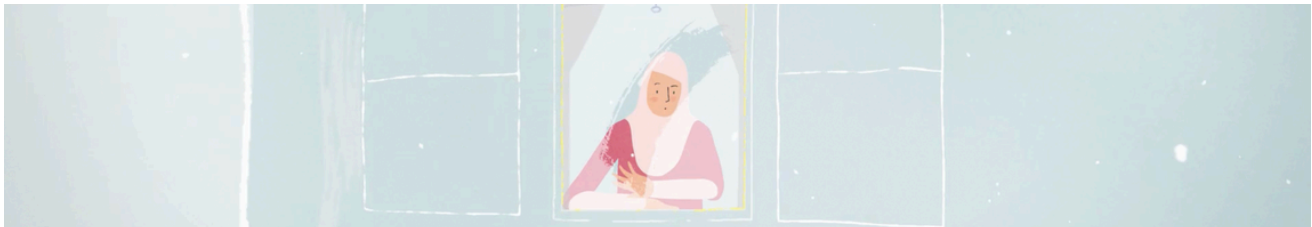


When I got into the program, I wasn't too sure what to expect. Of course, I expected a couple of things, but I would say that as we went along, my expectations were surpassed. Initially, I was kind of like, 'These are people who don't know me, how will they be able to support me?' But as we went along, that really wasn't an issue anymore. We became like friends, they became like family. I could talk to them about anything. My expectations were surpassed." - Ngozi

THE REFUGEE CLAIMANT JOURNEY TO CANADA

The journey of a refugee claimant is different from other refugees in Canada. While Government-Assisted Refugees (GARs), Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSRs) or Blended-Visa Office Referred (BVOR) Refugees land in Canada as Permanent Residents, refugee claimants have a separate legal status.

There are several pathways through which refugee claimants can make a claim for refugee protection once they arrive in Canada. They can make a claim with the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) at an official port of entry at an airport, seaport, or land border, or they can make a claim [online](#) after arriving in Canada. If they cross the American border irregularly, they are typically intercepted by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, put through a background check by the CBSA, and then screened by a CBSA or Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) officer to determine their eligibility to file a refugee claim.



Each refugee claimant seeking protection in Canada must show that they meet the legal definition for a Convention Refugee or a Person in Need of Protection by making an application for refugee protection and going through the claim process. If a claimant passes basic security, criminality, and eligibility checks, they are put into a queue for a hearing with the Immigration and Refugee Board to determine whether or not they meet this definition. The Basis of Claim (BOC) form that refugee claimants fill out when making their application is the primary document used as evidence in their hearing.

If you are interested in more information about Canada's refugee protection process, see [My Refugee Claim - Free Resource Guide for Refugee Claimants](#). Created by Kinbrace, this free website has a glossary, community resources, guidance for getting legal representation, and much more. It is available in multiple languages.



It was a perfect match, because I remember during the intake, I was asked about my interests, and what I would want from the group. And when I connected with the volunteers, I wouldn't say one person has it all but it was a perfect mix. Everybody complemented everyone in different ways. Right from the first day, we hit it off. We just flowed into it right from the first time." - Hanna

SERVICES FOR REFUGEE CLAIMANTS

While waiting for their hearing at the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, refugee claimants are eligible to apply for a Social Insurance Number, a work permit, and an adult study permit.

In addition, here are some of the programs and services they can access:

- English as a Second Language adult classes
- Schooling for elementary and secondary students aged 18 and below
- Multilingual settlement services for adults
- Newcomer programs for children and youth
- Services at the public library

Read on for descriptions about health care, housing, legal aid, employment, and more.



"I'm resilient, but there is no smoke without fire. So the fire is the Together Project. When you get someone who tries to support you, you also have to support yourself. They have tried to support me, so the only way I can say thank you is to produce results. So I make sure that I do what I can, and when I get stuck, I ask them, and they keep pushing me, supporting me." - Mary



REFUGEE CLAIMANTS AND HEALTHCARE

Refugee claimants receive health coverage under the Interim Federal Health Program (IFHP). The benefits covered by the IFHP have certain limits, including maximum dollar amounts. Claimants may also access Community Health Centres for their health and mental health needs.

The Interim Federal Health Program (IFHP) provides the following coverage:

- basic healthcare services (such as doctor visits, hospital care, lab tests)
- supplemental services (such as limited vision care, urgent dental care)
- prescription drug coverage (medications and products)
- in some cases, one Immigration Medical Exam (IME)
- dental services under the IFHP are provided by clinics like Toothworks

Despite having access to healthcare, refugee claimants must also deal with finding housing, applying for a work permit, attaining employment, managing culture shock, and learning a new language, among many other potential challenges, such as trauma from war and other forms of violence. While many refugee claimants may have had limited access to healthcare before coming to Canada, healthcare may not be a top priority, resulting in late intervention and potential healthcare risks and complications.

If the Immigration Refugee Board renders a positive decision on their refugee claim, claimants can apply for a health card, such as the [Ontario Health Insurance Program](#) (OHIP) in Ontario, or the [Medical Services Plan](#) (MSP) in British Columbia. If their claim for protection is refused by the IRB, the claimant's Interim Federal Health Program health coverage will continue until they leave Canada.



“I had a medical procedure, and they were there to calm my nerves, to provide support. When I was going into surgery, they were sending me chats, and I just knew that there were people waiting for me to come out of this. And after that, they came visiting. They came to see my kids. I cried, you know? I was so emotional about it. Because these are people that I met here in Canada. I call them my family members.” - Jane

ACCESSING FOOD AND CLOTHING BANKS

There are many places where refugee claimants can access support from food banks. To learn more about the services available, check out our Together Project Guide to Food and Clothing Banks [here](#).



“You see the headlines about the war in Ukraine, the trouble in Afghanistan, and you think, ‘What can I do way over here?’ But you can do something practical that widens your perspective. You’ll understand the headlines a bit more: how expensive accommodation is; how someone on Ontario Works still has to go to the food bank; how with healthcare, they can’t get everything they need. It becomes a lot more real.” - Kathleen

REFUGEE CLAIMANTS AND HOUSING

Housing is a top priority for many refugee claimants. To identify a refugee house/city shelter for a refugee claimant, housing workers will review claimants’ unique needs and factors such as country of origin, language proficiency, and health needs, to help them find emergency housing.

- In Toronto, refugee claimants can call the [City of Toronto’s Central Intake](#) at 416-338-4766 or 1-877-338-3398. This is a 24/7 phone service for homeless individuals and families requiring emergency shelter
- In Ottawa, refugee claimants can call the [City of Ottawa’s Emergency Housing and Shelter Department](#) at 613-560-6000, 1-866-261-9799, or 311 outside of business hours
- In Surrey, refugee claimants can access a list of shelters by the [City of Vancouver’s Shelter and Winter Response Strategy](#), or dial 211

After refugee claimants are receiving shelter services, staff will link them to supports like health care, settlement, education, and income, as well as initiate the search for housing. Staff can also refer them to service providers who can assist with the filing of their refugee claim.



REFUGEE CLAIMANTS AND LEGAL AID

Refugee claimants in Ontario and British Columbia can access free legal services to help eligible clients apply refugee status.

[Legal Aid Ontario](#) and [Legal Aid British Columbia](#) provide free legal aid lawyers who can provide a range of services to refugee claimants, including: assisting with the Basis of Claim, preparing the claimant for their IRB hearing, compiling and organizing documents related to the hearing, assisting with hearing appeals, and/or preparing the Permanent Residence application, and more. Legal Aid Ontario pays for lawyers, and may also pay for medical and psychological reports, interpreters, and document translation.

In addition, across Canada, refugee claimants can use [My Refugee Claim](#). This is a free, multilingual online resource to guide applicants through the refugee protection process.

If a positive decision has been rendered by the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, a refugee claimant's status changes to that of a "Protected Person" or "Convention Refugee," and they may start the application for their Permanent Resident status.



THE LEGAL ROLE OF VOLUNTEERS

While it is useful for volunteers to have an understanding of refugee claimants' legal pathways to becoming Permanent Residents, actual legal advice, especially with regards to an IRB hearing, should be provided to refugee claimants solely by trained legal professionals. Please note that volunteers are legally prohibited from making suggestions or providing any legal advice about how refugee claimants should present their claim at their hearing.



REFUGEE CLAIMANTS AND EMPLOYMENT

Refugee Claimants are eligible to apply for an Open Work Permit, typically valid for 24 months, that can be renewed for 12-month periods. A work permit enables claimants to apply for jobs here in Canada, once they have undergone a medical examination. Refugee claimants are eligible for a variety of free employment services provided by settlement agencies. To find out more, you can look at our Together Project [Resources](#) page under Employment to see some of the many programs available in your area, such as Work in Culture, which provides free career guidance for Ontario newcomers who are interested in careers in the arts.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIALIZING

While refugee claimants may face many challenges when finding their way in Canada, keep in mind that for most newcomers, socializing with their Welcome Group volunteers is a top priority.

While you may be mainly connecting with them on WhatsApp, you can ask your matched household to meet you over a meal, a community event, a trip to the park, or a Together Project event. It's always a good idea to combine practical support with in-person interactions to ensure that social connections form naturally over the course of the match.

For a description of the volunteer role in the Welcome Group Program, feel free to refer to our Volunteer Training Guide [here](#).



“I am a very independent person. I used to think I could do everything, but when you're in a new country, you need a support system. You need people to help you navigate the system. You need social connections. Social isolation is a big issue, you know, for newcomers. But I learned to open up. I learned to speak with them. They taught me how to advocate for myself, how to speak. With that, I was able to get the kind of support that I did.” - Jane