

Sponsorship Agreement Holders Association's Questions on Resettlement for Candidates Running in the 2015 Federal Election

Introduction

The following questions are addressed to candidates in the upcoming federal election to seek out their views on what they would do to restore the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program (the PSR Program) to its former state of efficiency and compassion and respond effectively to the evolving Syrian refugee crisis without displacing sponsorships of refugees in other conflict areas of the world.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the world is in the midst of the worst refugee crisis since the Second World War. Every day the news media bring us new stories of human suffering and loss of life among the millions of our fellow human beings fleeing war and brutal regimes.

In the past Canada was a world leader in the resettlement of refugees. In 1978 the Government of Canada created the PSR Program to allow ordinary Canadians to sponsor refugees fleeing the conflict in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. The PSR Program was so successful that in 1986 the people of Canada were awarded the Nansen Medal for their humanitarian work, the only time the medal has been awarded to the people of a country.

The PSR Program has continued over the past 36 years and is the source of great pride to Canadians. It has also contributed significantly to reducing the cost of resettlement on the Canadian taxpayer. However, changes to the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act and the regulations under the Act have made the PSR Program more difficult for sponsors and less able to respond to the growing world crisis.

The following is a list of questions that are in order of priority, with the first 4 questions considered to be the high priority questions given the momentum building across the country in support of increasing the number of Syrians to be resettled in Canada.

Questions:

- 1. Expedient Processing of Syrian and Iraqi Refugees Fleeing the Conflict in the Middle East:** In July 2013 the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration announced that Canada would resettle 1100 Privately Sponsored Refugees and 200 Government Assisted Refugees from Syria by the end of 2014, i.e. in 18 months. Citizenship and Immigration Canada has said that approximately 2300 Syrian refugees have been resettled since that first announcement. This suggests that Canada has been resettling less than 90 Syrian refugees per month. However, all parties are now talking about resettling tens of thousands of Syrian and Iraqi refugees in 2015, 2016 and 2017. To achieve these targets the rate of resettlement will have to increase to over 500 refugees per month.
If elected will you immediately commit your government to a minimum 5-fold increase in personnel in the visa posts processing Syrian and Iraqi refugees in order to meet the new resettlement targets?

- 2. Government commitments to an increased number of Syrian and Iraqi Refugees Fleeing the Conflict in the Middle East:** Each year the government, by way of an immigration plan, makes a commitment to resettle a certain number of refugees. With the refugee crisis in the Middle East, all parties are talking about increasing the numbers of Syrian refugees to be resettled. If these increases are not additional to the immigration plan, they will displace refugees in other conflict zones in the world who are also in need of resettlement. Also, in July 2013 when then Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, Jason Kenney, announced the resettlement of 1,300 Syrian refugees, he stated that 1,100 would be resettled by private sponsors and only 200 would be resettled by the government. In January 2015, when Minister Chris Alexander announced that an additional 10,000 Syrian refugees and 3,000 Iraqi refugees would be resettled, he suggested that 60% would be resettled by private sponsors. This has placed a huge burden on private sponsors and reduced their ability to resettle refugees from other parts of the world.

If elected will you ensure that any commitments made by your government to increase the number of Syrians and Iraqis resettled in Canada will be:

i. In addition to the resettlement number contained in the immigration plan and will not displace other refugee populations in need of resettlement?

ii. Fully funded as Government Assisted Refugees?

- 3. Requirement of UN Refugee Status Determination Document for Sponsorships by Groups of Five and Community Sponsors:** In the effort to reduce the backlog of sponsorship applications in visa posts around the world, in 2012 the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration added the requirement that refugees sponsored by Groups of Five and Community Sponsors hold a UNHCR Refugee Status Determination document or equivalent document from their country of refuge. Since very few of the world's 14,000,000 refugees hold a Refugee Status Determination document, Citizenship and Immigration Canada has refused most sponsorship applications by Groups of Five and Community Sponsors since this regulation came into effect. This has resulted in many families in Canada being unable to help their relatives overseas safely flee persecution and civil war through private sponsorship. Many of these families are turning to Sponsorship Agreement Holders to sponsor their relatives, placing an enormous administrative burden and financial liability on Sponsorship Agreement Holders and slowing down the resettlement process, particularly for Syrian and Iraqi refugees.

If elected will you immediately revoke the requirement for refugees from Syria and Iraq sponsored by Groups of Five and Community Sponsors under the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program to have a UNHCR Refugee Status Determination document or equivalent, thus removing a large obstacle to private sponsorship and bringing more Syrian families to safety?

- 4. Resettlement of Refugees from Europe:** Citizenship and Immigration Canada does not accept applications to resettle asylum seekers from Europe because European nations are signatories to the United Nations 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol. As well, Citizenship and Immigration Canada maintains that refugees who have managed to get to Europe can avail themselves of a “durable solution” in Europe and therefore do not qualify for resettlement to Canada. Given the hundreds of thousands of refugees that are flooding into Europe, the idea that they have a durable solution is not realistic. Canada has a duty to share the burden with our European friends and allies and therefore should resettle asylum seekers from Europe.

If elected will you commit to reversing Canada’s policy of not accepting asylum seekers from Europe and immediately begin to resettle large numbers of refugees who have sought asylum in Europe through the Government Assisted Refugee program, the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program and the Blended Visa Office Referred Program?

- 5. Interim Federal Health Program:** On June 30, 2012 the government implemented cuts to the Interim Federal Health Program (IFHP). The IFHP covers basic health care for refugees. These cuts have placed an increased financial burden on private sponsors and exposed them to potentially catastrophic financial liability. In July 2014, the Federal Court struck down the cuts to the IFHP as unconstitutional, calling the cuts “cruel and unusual treatment”. In response, the government introduced temporary and partial measures. It did not restore the level of coverage that was available to refugees before the original cuts. Instead, the burden has been transferred to private sponsors.

If elected will you immediately restore basic health care benefits for refugees to the level they were prior to the cuts?

- 6. Complex Bureaucratic Processes for the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program:** Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) requires numerous and lengthy forms to be completed by the refugees to be sponsored and by the sponsors under the Private Refugee Sponsorship Program. These complex forms take many hours – as many as 100 hours - to complete. CIC also expects refugees to use a computer to complete the forms and requires the forms to be in English or French. The incredible amount of detail persecuted and traumatized refugees are supposed to remember is astonishing. Small errors can result in forms being returned and unreasonably diminish credibility. The excessive and complex bureaucratic process that now characterizes the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program prevents private sponsors from being able to quickly respond to any refugee need, much less the urgent needs of Syrian refugees.

If elected will you immediately take measures to simplify and streamline the process of sponsoring refugees under the Private Sponsorship of Refugee Program?

- 7. Caps and Sub-caps on Refugees fleeing Conflicts other than Syria and Iraq:** By 2011, i.e. prior to the escalation of the war in Syria, the backlog of sponsorship applications in visa posts around the world had grown to the point that it was taking up to 6 years to process a refugee sponsorship application. To alleviate this backlog, the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration imposed caps on the number of applications that Sponsorship Agreement Holders could submit in a given year, as well as additional stringent sub-caps on several visa posts, specifically the Nairobi, Cairo, Pretoria and Islamabad visa posts that process cases from the largest refugee-producing countries after Syria (i.e. Afghanistan, Sudan, Eritrea and the Democratic Republic of Congo). However, despite the caps and sub-caps, processing times for Afghan, Sudanese, Eritrean and Congolese refugees remain in the order of years.

If elected will you immediately commit your government to an increase in personnel in visa posts with backlogs such that no resettlement application takes more than 18 months to process?

- 8. Blended Visa Office Referred Program:** As a result of cuts to the 2012 federal government budget, Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) introduced the Blended Visa Office Referred sponsorship program through which private sponsors are invited to sponsor refugees selected by visa officers overseas. In this partnership between CIC and the private sponsoring community, CIC agrees to pay for 6 months of income replacement for these government-selected refugees and to provide prescription drug, vision, dental and prosthetic coverage under the Interim Federal Health Program. Many private sponsors have participated in the BVOR program, both because it reduces the financial burden and it ensures that the refugees will arrive in a period of months rather than years. However, the private sponsoring community is concerned that their efforts through the blended program are subsidizing government contributions, rather than adding to the overall number of refugees that can find a home in Canada.

If elected will you ensure that the Blended Visa Office Referred Sponsorship program will not be used to decrease the government's commitment to resettle refugees under the Government Assistance Refugee Program?

- 9. Consultation:** Sponsorship Agreement Holders collectively hold Canada's expertise in the private sponsorship of refugees. In July 2013, when Minister Kenney announced that Canada would resettle 1,100 Privately Sponsored Refugees from Syria and in January 2015, when Minister Alexander announced that 60% of the additional 13,000 Syrian and Iraqi refugees would be resettled by private sponsors, they did so without consulting the private sponsorship community. While Sponsorship Agreement Holders welcomed the government's expressed intent to resettle more refugees from the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, they were ill prepared to respond to the Ministers' targets because they had not been notified or consulted.

If elected will you commit to early and effective consultation with the Sponsorship Agreement Holders Association with regard to all government initiatives affecting the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program?

10. Additionality: The Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program was founded on the principle of additionality which provides that private sponsorship is additional to government assisted refugees. Each year the government makes its commitment, on behalf of Canadians, to resettle a certain number of refugees. Anything that Canadians do through private sponsorship is on top of that commitment.

If elected will you commit to respecting the principle of additionality in all regulations concerning the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program?