

Creating a dedicated shelter system for refugee claimants and/or asylum seekers

Consultations with providers

April 2023



Toronto's shelter system continues to experience record high occupancy pressures

- Since September 2021, re-opening of Canadian borders have resulted in an increase in demand for shelter services from refugee claimants and/or asylum seekers in Toronto.
- The number of refugee claimants and/or asylum seekers in Toronto's shelter system has **increased by more than 2,000 people per night**, from a low of about 530 in September 2021 to over 2,600 per night in April 2023.
- Increasing number of refugee claimants and/asylum seekers clients continues to impact local referrals into the shelter system.

Creating a Dedicated Refugee Shelter System

In April 2022, SSHA received Council direction ([EC28.9](#)) to create a dedicated system for refugee claimants and/or asylum seekers as part of the COVID-19 Shelter Transition and Relocation Plan, which would operate in parallel to the existing base shelter system. This will allow:

 Refugee claimants and/or asylum seekers to access appropriate services and supports, increasing the likelihood of their ability to exit the shelter system;


 SSHA to better understand and monitor demand for services needed by refugee claimants and/or asylum seekers; and

 SSHA to free up capacity in the base shelter system to support local referrals into the base shelter system.

SSHA continues to plan for the creation of a dedicated refugee shelter system

As part of the development process, SSHA is

- Conducting consultations
- Putting in place necessary interim measures
- Planning for operationalization
- Planning for evaluation and ongoing monitoring



What We Heard

Refugee shelter providers support the creation of a dedicated refugee shelter system. Opportunities include:



Create a refugee sector table to support refugee providers in:

- Bringing consistency to the way programs and services are delivered
- Enhancing coordination and collaboration amongst programs
- Information sharing (best practices, training, resources)



Create a centralized hub to ensure refugees receive:

- Relevant services and resources in a timely manner (e.g., legal aid, settlement supports)
- Information on how they can contribute to their new community, if they are interested



Enhance programs and supports for **refugee youth** (aged 16-24, but prioritizing youth aged 16-18)



Continue **landlord engagement** to help move refugees from shelters to housing



Enhance communication with **key partners** such as Ontario Works, Toronto Employment and Social Services (TESS) division, and the Canada-Ontario Housing Benefit (COHB) team to reduce delays in processing time

Refugee shelter providers anticipate facing common challenges as the number of refugees seeking shelter in Toronto increases:



Program stability

- Refugee shelter providers have indicated that they will need time to stabilize their staffing and programs especially after the influx of refugees in the past year



Space in the refugee shelter system

- Refugee shelter providers have indicated that there is a need to identify what happens when the refugee system is full (e.g., will refugees be put on a waiting list? Will refugees be referred to a base shelter program?)



Cost of housing

- The increased costs of living in Toronto have made it more challenging to move refugees from shelter to housing, and for refugees to integrate into society

Client Eligibility

- **Some providers indicate that refugee program eligibility includes newcomers who have been in the Canada for less than 6 months**
 - This is the time period when clients benefit most from refugee-specific services (e.g., settlement and legal services)
- **Refugee shelter providers have demonstrated flexibility with client eligibility criteria, serving clients for longer than 6 months, based on system needs**
 - Refugee shelter providers are currently serving refugees who have been in Canada for up to 5 years, including those who are in the process of a refugee claim, or the appeals or applications on humanitarian grounds – until they are housed
 - Refugee shelter providers also noted that those refugees experiencing chronic homelessness typically face concurrent challenges (e.g., mental health and addictions)

Referral Sources

Central
Intake

Red Cross

The 519

Walk-in /
Self-referral
(heard from past
or current clients)

Walk-in /
Self-referral
(heard from lawyer
or consultant)

Walk-in /
Self-referral
(heard from
hospital)

Walk-in /
Self-referral
(heard from
airport)

Operational Considerations

- **Service restrictions are rare** among refugee clients, and can typically be managed by the agency
- It can take between a 1 hour (congregate settings) to 3 days (family units) to turnover a bed after planned discharge
- Most sites have limited or no capacity to support additional overflow at this time
- Opportunity for central hub/centralized coordination of refugees across a dedicated refugee shelter system