

REFUGEES

Getting Syrians here was easy. Now comes the hard part.

What happens when the refugees have to start supporting themselves? Officials are bracing for 'month 13'

by Michael Friscolanti Aug 9, 2016



Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau shakes hands with a Syrian refugee during Canada Day celebrations on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, July 1, 2015. (Wattie/REUTERS)

When Syria was still his home, Shaher Kattaf worked as a farmer in the northern city of Raqqa, picking mostly cucumbers and tomatoes for two daughters, his family lived in a modest house that matched his modest wage. "It wasn't a perfect home," says Kattaf, now 36, speaks Arabic. "But it was good enough for us."

Like thousands of civilians, Kattaf could only watch as Islamic State terrorists seized control of his city in 2013, transforming Raqqa into the group's de-facto capital. Public executions became a daily ritual, with beheading the preferred method. "We saw too many things," says Kattaf, his voice growing softer as he shares his memories. "Killings. Destruction. We saw everything. It was so hard for us."

His family's next home would be across the border in Lebanon, in one of hundreds of informal refugee settlements scattered throughout the Bekaa Valley. For more than two years, night after night, they slept under a plastic tarp, unsure when, or if, they would ever return to Raqqa.

Then came the text message that upended their lives yet again: it was the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), asking Kattaf if his family was willing to move to Canada. "I will never forget that date," says his wife, Zahara Hasham, wearing a light green hijab and a wide smile. "The message came on Oct. 6, 2015 at 5:00 p.m."

A few months later, the family of four — Mom, Dad and girls Jihan, 11, and Nisreen, 10—touched down in Toronto, part of the Liberal election promise to welcome 25,000 Syrian refugees by the end of February. Today, home for the family is a ninth-floor, two-bedroom Mississauga, Ont., in a bustling neighbourhood close to everything they need: schools, grocery stores and a Tim Hortons.

“The best thing is when I sleep, I can sleep,” says Kattaf, sitting on his living-room couch, dressed in black pants and a golf shirt with black stripes. “It is a safe country. Nobody can just come into your house. Nobody can kidnap your kids.”

By every sentimental measure, Canada’s Syrian refugee program has been a resounding success. Driven to act by a single heartbreaking three-year-old boy, dead on a beach—Canadians rallied in droves to #WelcomeRefugees, as the hashtag said, offering safe haven to the desperate, grateful people like the Kattafs. Every day, it seems, headlines tell the story of yet another Syrian family soaking up the joys of their new home, from summer camp to Blue Jays games to the Calgary Stampede. (When wildfires ravaged Fort McMurray in May, in Alberta were among the first to donate what little they could. “It’s time to return the favour,” one said.)

Amid so much anti-migrant rhetoric bubbling around the world (including south of the border, where the U.S. has struggled to resettle Syrian refugees in the face of extreme political backlash), Canada has literally redrawn the blueprint for how a Western country can respond, to a refugee crisis halfway across the world.

But booking all those plane tickets was the easy part. The real slog — helping these newcomers learn the language, find work and integrate into Canadian society — has only just begun. And as more Syrians continue to arrive (at last count, more than 29,400 since the day Justin Trudeau moved into the Prime Minister’s Office), the questions loom: Now that they’re here, will all of them thrive? Are we doing enough to ensure long-term integration? And if not, what are the consequences years down the road?

“I think, in the short term, we can pat ourselves on the back,” says Debbie Douglas, executive director of the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, an umbrella group that represents more than 200 community-based organizations. “But I think there are a lot of challenges ahead. The hard work begins now.”

According to a recent Nanos poll, 61 per cent of Canadians do not believe there are enough resources in place to ensure a smooth resettlement of Syrian refugees — and early indications have bolstered that perception. Food banks across the country have reported a sharp increase in Syrian refugee clients. Language classes, essential to successful integration, are beset by long waiting lists. And during recent testimony on Parliament Hill, front-line settlement workers lobbied for more resources, including much-needed money for job training and mental-health initiatives.

One doctor warned the Senate’s standing committee on human rights that his colleagues have seen only “the tip of the iceberg” when Syrian refugees battling post-traumatic stress disorder and other emotional scars stemming from the war. “Immediately after migration, there is frequently a period of elation, and it may take months before mental-health issues actually declare themselves,” said Meb Rashid, who works with Canadian Doctors for Refugee Care. “We need to be ready for this.”

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The Senate standing committee (one of two parliamentary committees studying the integration of Syrian refugees) was so disturbed by the testimony from witnesses that it issued a list of interim recommendations last month, urging the feds to, among other things, boost funding for and work with provinces and territories to “draft a comprehensive plan” to address the mental-health needs of Syrian newcomers.

“It will take more than a hashtag and good intentions to make the Syrian refugee program a success,” wrote Sen. Jim Munson, the Liberal deputy chair, and Sen. Salma Atallahjan, the Conservative deputy chair.

More than anything, though, refugee stakeholders are bracing for one event: “month 13.” Whether privately sponsored or government-sponsored, refugees receive one year of financial support; after that, they are expected to support themselves—or apply for welfare. John McCallum, minister of immigration, refugees and citizenship, has already conceded that some Syrians will end up on provincial social assistance rolls, unable to support themselves after one year. How many? Nobody knows quite yet, but if previous refugee cohorts are any indication, it could be as high as 10 per cent.

“Month 13 is a big issue for us and it’s very much on our radar,” says Michael Qaqish, an Ottawa city councillor who is quarterbacking to resettle Syrian refugees. “We have to be realistic. A good number of them, there is no question, are going to be needing assistance for months.”

Sorting out the numbers (and the promises) can be a confusing endeavour. Here is the condensed version: Trudeau’s Liberals campaigned on a commitment to “expand Canada’s intake of refugees from Syria by 25,000 through immediate government sponsorship.” In other words, 25,000 refugees would arrive under the government-assisted stream, in which Ottawa provides monthly financial support, for up to one year equivalent to provincial welfare rates. (A family of four who settles in Vancouver, for example, receives approximately \$1,350 per month.)

The Liberals quickly “broke” that promise, announcing shortly after the election that those 25,000 refugees—originally slated to arrive in 2015, then by the end of February — would actually be a mix of government-assisted and privately sponsored. (As the name suggests, privately sponsored refugees have their living costs covered by generous citizens, not the state.) At the same time, though, the Trudeau government would continue welcoming government-assisted Syrian refugees after the initial wave until it fulfilled its campaign promise of 25,000.

All told, Canada expects to welcome approximately 44,000 refugees this year: 25,000 government-assisted, and the rest a mix of privately sponsored and so-called “blended” cases, a third stream in which the feds and private groups split the cost.

Bottom line: 44,000 refugees represents a drastic increase from years past. Consider 2014, the latest figures available: Canada resettled only 11,000 that year — nearly four times fewer.



Government sponsored Syrian refugees (from left) Shaher Kattaf, Jihan Kattaf, Nisreen Kattaf and Zahara Hasham at their two-bedroom apartment in Mississauga, Ontario. (Photo by Nick Iwanyszyn)

“There was endless focus on whether we were on track: ‘Are the Liberals going to fulfill their promise by the end of 2015? Are they going to fulfill their promise by the end of February?’” says Dan Hiebert, a University of British Columbia geography professor who researches the impact of refugee populations on Canadian cities. “To me, these were absolute side issues. The real issue was whether the systems were in place that are needed for integration to happen.”

On paper, at least, those systems were in place. Canada boasts a well-respected suite of settlement agencies and service providers that welcome thousands of newcomers every year. But never have so many refugees arrived so quickly, creating inevitable clogs. “A lot of people are complaining because everybody is very excited about the project, happy overall that it happened, and nobody wants to be the ‘victim’,” says Chantal Desloges, a Toronto immigration and refugee lawyer. “But people are really stressed out that this has been downloaded suddenly with almost no notice and no extra funding.”

When the Trudeau government unveiled the expected cost of its Syrian refugee plan last November — \$678 million over six years — it included up to \$377 million for settlement and integration services. As of June, only \$32.6 million of that allotted money had actually been spent.

“We haven’t yet scaled up in the way that we need to,” says Leslie Emory, executive director of the Ottawa Community Immigrant Services Organization, which serves up to 10,000 newcomers in the capital region every year. “The resources have yet to be applied. We got the resources which is great, but needs are high — language being one of them. Now we need to put in place the programs and the resources to settle the group over several years.”

In Vancouver alone, more than 800 refugees are on a waiting list for English classes. In Toronto, meanwhile, the main settlement agency had to cancel all summer language lessons because of insufficient funding. “Our hands are tied,” said Mario Calla, the executive director of COSTI Immigrant Services, while testifying in June at the House of Commons immigration committee (the other committee that is looking at integration efforts).

“If you look at language as a unifier and one of the chief roadblocks to obtaining employment—which is a big integration factor — that’s the concern,” says Michelle Rempel, the Conservative immigration critic who sits on the House committee. “And it is very clear that this is a concern for the refugees as well as service providers.”

To understand just how big a concern, look no further than Amer Alhendawi. A Syrian father of five, he arrived with his family shortly after the 25,000 cohort, settling in a two-bedroom apartment in Surrey, B.C. “We have been here, as a family, for almost a year, but up to now we haven’t attended English class,” he told the Commons committee in May, speaking through a translator. “Every time I go, they say there is no room. I’ll have to come back in two to three months.”

One MP asked the witness if he’d found a job yet. “How can I work if I don’t know the English to communicate?” he replied.

Many Syrian refugees have been far more fortunate, landing jobs in grocery stores and coffee shops and in the trades. Some have launched businesses of their own, anxious to rebuild what they lost to the war. In Nova Scotia, the Immigration Services Association has an especially successful program that teaches would-be auto mechanics and restaurant workers basic safety and language skills, allowing them to get on their feet as soon as possible. “The Syrian people are a very entrepreneurial group,” says Huda Bukhari, executive director of Toronto’s Arab Community Centre. “They are not a group who would like to be on social assistance, because to do that is shameful.”

But as accurate as that may be, the Trudeau government has no firm statistics on how many Syrian refugees are actually earning a paycheck. How much is certain, though: to expect that every family will be self-sufficient after 12 months is wishful thinking.

“Some will do better than others,” says Carolyn Davis, executive director of Catholic Crosscultural Services, a settlement agency that offers language training courses for private sponsors. “Some will probably be independent and no longer requiring assistance before month 13, some will be independent by month 13, and some will not be independent by month 13. It would be very hard for me to put any numbers or proportions on it, but there will be people in every single one of those circumstances.”

That some government-assisted refugees end up on social assistance is hardly new. Departmental figures show that in 2009 (the latest available data), 49 per cent of government-sponsored refugees who had arrived two years earlier were collecting welfare (compared to 19 per cent of privately sponsored refugees). Although most gradually wean off (50 per cent after the second year, 75 per cent by the fourth), a proportion stay on welfare for the rest of their lives.

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“I think, as Canadians, we need to wrap our heads around that,” Douglas says. “These are refugees. These are not people who made a choice to come to Canada. These are folks who have been running for their lives, who have experienced things we can’t even begin to imagine, and as a result, they absolutely have to understand that we will always have refugees who will never be able to work.”

Indeed, it’s important to remember that government-assisted refugees are specifically flagged by the UNHCR because they are considered the most vulnerable of the vulnerable. They aren’t chosen because of job skills.

“In general, people are going to need to have a realistic viewpoint of the maximum you can expect,” Desloges says. “There is so much joy around the program right now, which is wonderful, but not everyone is going to succeed. You’re going to have some superstars who grab this opportunity with two hands and become something wonderful, but we have to be realistic in our expectation. Just be grateful to save some lives.”

In the meantime, though, cities are bracing for month 13, well aware that a significant number of Syrians will soon transfer from federal assistance, at least temporarily. “It’s a big challenge, there is no way around it,” says Qaqish, the city councillor in Ottawa, which has more than 1,500 Syrians. “The province pays for social assistance but the municipalities administer it. We’ve asked the feds if they are open to extending federal assistance, maybe for another six months.”

Like others, Qaqish worries that some refugees will no longer be able to afford their rent because many landlords initially lowered prices in solidarity with the Syrian program. Some stakeholders also fear the optics: a refugee collecting a welfare cheque is hardly the stuff of pride.

“One refugee that fails resettlement is not acceptable, because it means we as a society failed to make sure those people integrated,” says the director of the Catholic Refugee Sponsors Council, an umbrella organization for private sponsorship groups. “You don’t want, a year or two down the road, for Canadians to become upset with the refugee program and believe that some people are abusing the system. They will say: ‘You know, let’s stop getting refugees in.’ This is the concern. We want the program to work so Canadians will continue this compassion toward refugees.”

Back on the ninth floor of that Mississauga apartment building, Shaher Kattaf is flipping through his smart phone, showing photos of a refugee camp where his family once lived. A few weeks ago, some of the tents caught fire, and a relative who still lives there sent him a video of the blaze.

“One of my daughters wishes to be a doctor, and the other wants to be a lawyer,” he says, the pride evident on his face. “People ask me if I’ll go back to Syria if the war ends, and I say: ‘No, my daughters’ future is here, not back home.’”

The girls are enrolled in elementary school, and both Kattaf and Hasham were among the fortunate to receive coveted spots in a language program. “Good afternoon,” he says in English, showing off what he has learned. “Welcome to house.”

In the months to come, Kattaf hopes to find work in the construction industry; he has some experience laying concrete. Hasham dreams of a flower shop, or maybe a clothing store. “We just want to be working, and to have stopped taking money from the government,” he says. “Six months is a short time. We may need more time.”

The same can be said for anyone trying to quantify the success of the Syrian refugee program: only time will tell.

“I’d love to have this conversation with you again in a decade,” says Munson, the chair of the Senate committee. Although he and his colleagues have sounded the alarm on inadequate resources—from language-class funding to mental-health programs—he has little doubt that history will be kind to him fondly on these past few months.

“I think we measure success every day, by watching these children grow,” Munson says. “It is these children who are going to be the backbone of the economy because it is these children who are going to grow up and do good things.”

Great things—if the right amount of supports are in place.

“To a certain extent, both we and the refugees are still in the euphoric phase,” says Emory. “Now is the time to really sit down and plan for the next three, four and five years as to how to effectively settle and integrate these folks so they can be contributing to society in a meaningful way.”