


HALIFAX

P.O. Box 1749
Halifax, Nova Scotia
B3J 3A5 Canada

Item No. 14.1.7
Halifax Regional Council
November 24, 2015

TO: Mayor Savage and Members of Halifax Regional Council

Original signed by 

SUBMITTED BY:

Richard Butts, Chief Administrative Officer

Original Signed by 

Mike Labrecque, Deputy Chief Administrative Officer

DATE: 15 September

SUBJECT: Support for Refugees

ORIGIN

Whereas the humanitarian crisis unfolding in the Mediterranean has captured the attention of people across Canada and around the world, Regional Council request:

1. The Mayor to write a letter to the federal Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, assuring that Halifax will provide a welcoming environment for refugees, and calling on the Government of Canada to act urgently in response to the unfolding Syrian refugee crisis;
2. The Mayor to write a letter to the Nova Scotia Minister of Immigration, supporting the provincial government's call to take in more refugees, and assuring that Halifax will provide a welcoming environment for refugees; and
3. A staff report outlining what additional measures the municipality may take, within the municipal mandate, which would further assist in the resettlement process, including assistance to community partners involved in refugee resettlement and settlement, should Halifax receive a sudden and significant number of refugees.

LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY

Halifax Regional Municipal Charter Power to expend money 79 (1) The Council may expend money required by the Municipality for (av) a grant or contribution to (v) any charitable, nursing, medical, athletic, educational, environmental, cultural, community, fraternal, recreational, religious, sporting or social organization within the Province.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that Halifax Regional Council:

1. Authorize on-going discussion and advocacy with the federal government in support of receiving an increased number of refugees to Halifax;

RECOMMENDATION CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

2. Endorse the proposed activities of the Halifax Regional Municipality in support of refugee resettlement and settlement as outlined in the "Settlement Support - Municipal Response" and "Resettlement Support – Municipal Response" sections of this report; and
3. Direct staff to consider the possibility of a municipal contribution to an assurance fund to support increased private sponsorship of refugees.

BACKGROUND

- Who is a refugee?

According to the 1951 Refugee Convention, a refugee is a person who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country".

- The Global Picture

By the end of 2014, 59.5 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced from their countries of origin—that is 42,500 people per day. Of this 59.5 million people, 19.5 million were refugees. These were unprecedented numbers, which, in 2014, reached the highest annual increase in a single year.

The six largest refugee-hosting countries worldwide in 2014 were Turkey (1.59 million refugees), Pakistan (1.51 million), Lebanon (1.15 million), The Islamic Republic of Iran (982,000), Ethiopia (659,000), and Jordan (654,100).

More than half of the individuals seeking refuge worldwide, however, only came from three countries:

- The Syrian Arab Republic (3.88 million)
- Afghanistan (2.59 million) and
- Somalia (1.11 million)

More than half of the refugees were children under 18 years old.

- The Syrian Crisis

The number of refugees fleeing the Syrian Arab Republic has increased exponentially since the current civil conflict started in 2011. From an estimate of 25,000 Syrian refugees at the end of 2011, this increased to an estimate of 3.2 million of Syrian individuals seeking protection by the end of 2014. The total estimate of displaced Syrians since 2011 is 6.5 million people. This number represents more than a quarter of Syria's total population in 2011.

According to the United Nation's High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), there are currently over 4 million registered Syrian refugees. As the war in Syria enters its fifth year, the UNHCR predicts a substantial increase in this number by the end of 2015.

- Pathways for refugees in Canada

Canada's response to the Syrian refugee crisis has mostly taken the shape of humanitarian support. On June 16 2013, Foreign Minister, John Baird, pledged 100 million dollars, over three years, in support to Jordan to help them cope with the massive numbers of refugees that they continue to receive in their camps.

Responding to UNHCR's appeal to the international community, 2,406 Syrian refugees have been resettled in Canada as of early September 2015.

In Canada, there are three resettlement programs for refugees:

- Government assisted refugees, selected and supported by the federal government
- Privately sponsored refugees, selected and supported by private citizens, organizations and groups, and
- Blended visa-office referred refugees, on a joint responsibility of CIC, Sponsorship Agreement Holders (SAHs) and the UNHCR

The majority of Syrian refugees that are expected to be resettled in Canada between 2015 and the end of 2017 will be privately sponsored. It seems plausible that Canada will increase its commitment to resettle Syrian refugees.

- Syrian refugees in Nova Scotia

From 1994 to 2014, 4,423 refugees have been resettled in Nova Scotia, averaging 218 refugees per year. Most of these refugees are government assisted.

Since 2014, of the almost 2,500 Syrian refugees that have been resettled in Canada, about 20 have arrived in Nova Scotia.

Nova Scotia's provincial government has expressed its will to take more Syrian refugees, and have been pressuring the federal government to implement immediate measures to bring more refugees to Canada. Additionally, the provincial government has pledged \$50,000 to aid relief.

In Nova Scotia, a refugee can be sponsored by:

- A Group of Five private citizens or permanent residents
- A Community Group (organization, association or corporation that does not need to be incorporated)
- Sponsorship Agreement Holders (SAHs), which can directly sponsor refugees and work with Constituent Groups to sponsor refugees under their agreement. There are currently three local Sponsorship Agreement Holders in Nova Scotia, they are:
 - a) Anglican Diocese of Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island
 - b) Immigration Services Association of Nova Scotia (ISANS)
 - c) Roman Catholic Episcopal Corporation of Nova Scotia

There are also National and Regional SAHs that operate in Nova Scotia. These are:

- a) Canadian Unitarian Council
- b) United Church of Canada
- c) Convention of Atlantic Baptist Churches
- d) Presbyterian Church

As of September 2015, the Canadian Government has temporarily exempted Syrians and Iraqis from the requirement to provide proof of refugee status to be sponsored. Consequently, a Group of Five or a Community Sponsor can submit an application without a document proving recognized refugee status.

An accurate number of refugees expected to arrive in Nova Scotia has been difficult to ascertain. Staff's working estimate was slightly more than double the number of refugees that Nova Scotia typically receives (i.e. approximately 500 persons). With the federal government pushing to resettle 25,000 refugees this number may increase. The number of government assisted refugees that Nova Scotia would receive, if proportional to population would be 650 persons with the majority likely to settle in Halifax. This is in addition to privately sponsored refugees. It is not currently known whether government assisted refugees will be settled in numbers proportional to host populations.

Given that the greatest number of refugees tends to settle in large urban areas, as they find there a greater network of accessible services as well as a greater number of established ethnic communities, it

is likely that most of the Syrian refugees arriving in Nova Scotia will settle in Halifax.

DISCUSSION

Though the number of Syrian refugees that will resettle to Halifax is still unclear, it is clear that the municipality needs to take action to prepare for their arrival. Furthermore, given Halifax and Nova Scotia's current and anticipated demographic challenges, in addition to responding to an intense global need, the attraction and retention of refugees is also likely to contribute to the strength of Halifax's economy and community and align with previous Council direction.

On 25 June 2013, Halifax Regional Council approved an updated Welcoming Newcomers Action Plan. The plan outlines the following outcomes:

- HRM communications tools are developed to serve and represent diverse groups,
- HRM programs and services support a welcoming community,
- HRM celebrates and enables a variety of cultural and creative opportunities,
- HRM maximizes opportunities for increased stakeholder alignment, engagement and newcomer retention through partner organizations, and
- HRM staff value diversity and are provided with the appropriate tools to serve diverse client groups.

Halifax's Regional Plan and Economic Strategy both speak to the important of attracting and retaining people and to creating a welcoming community where talented persons can find great opportunities.

Evidence suggests that newcomers are more entrepreneurial than Canadian born populations.¹ Furthermore, a recent study released by the Brookings Institution found that the economies of countries that have been recipients of very large numbers of persons displaced by the Syrian crisis have in fact been growing beyond expectations over the past two years.

Finally, while the Syrian refugee crisis is particularly intense and the subject of a great deal of current media and community attention, the proposed municipal responses would extend to all refugees resettling to and settling in Halifax.

Following outreach to a number of other municipalities, Toronto appears to be most active among those surveyed in terms of response to the crisis. Toronto's response includes coordinated resettlement and settlement support among municipal departments, coordinated activity among immigration settlement stakeholders in Toronto, an anti-rumours campaign to address islamophobia, xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment, and exploration of an assurance funds for sponsorship agreement holders.

Resettlement Support – Municipal Response. Resettlement refers to the active involvement of regions, governments and/or organizations in helping refugees come to a new region or community to settle. This support includes financial support, operational support (i.e., sponsorship) or military support (i.e., airlifts).

Halifax's community members have stepped forward to offer their support to help bring more Syrian refugees to Halifax. Many have offered their time, money or have committed to take on a sponsorship role. Sponsorship Agreement Holders have reported that they have received frequent calls from community members asking them more information as to how they can get involved or further support their services.

- The municipality can support privately sponsored refugees to Halifax by supporting communications and information sharing through the Local Immigration Partnership (LIP) and other communications channels to connect interested persons to any of the three local Sponsorship Agreement Holders (SAH).

¹ See for example "Immigrant Entrepreneurs: Creating New Opportunities in Nova Scotia", prepared by ISIS (now ISANS) on December 2011.

- Council has already indicated its interest in advocacy to increase government sponsored refugees to Halifax. On-going discussion, advocacy and a demonstration of Halifax's willingness to receive and support refugees to the federal government may also influence the number of refugees coming to Halifax.

As a future action, the municipality could potentially offer support of an "assurance fund" to ensure Sponsorship Agreement Holders against financial risk.

As noted above, a Sponsorship Agreement Holder (SAH) is an organization that has signed an agreement with Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC). A SAH works with Constituent Groups (CGs) that may sponsor refugees under the SAH's agreement. SAHs assume overall responsibility and liability for the management of sponsorships under their agreement. In order to manage this liability, SAHs set criteria for groups sponsoring under their agreement. Sponsors are responsible to support refugees for their first twelve months in Canada.

Currently, SAHs in Nova Scotia maintain trust funds or similar funds that they can access in case of unexpected costs during the first year of sponsorship during which they are ultimately responsible for refugees. Both ISANS and the Archdiocese of Halifax and Yarmouth indicate that they have not had occasion to access these funds to date. This said, lack of funds to guarantee or "underwrite" sponsorships is likely to become a limiting factor to the number of privately sponsored refugees that can be brought to Halifax.

Faced with a similar issue, an assurance fund was introduced by the City of Winnipeg on 2002. The City of Winnipeg entered into an agreement with Manitoba Refugee Sponsors and Manitoba Interfaith Immigration Council Inc. and supplied a grant of \$250,000 that would be available to SAHs in the event of a breakdown of sponsorship. The City also provided on-going support (\$30,000 annually) for five years to support the administration of the fund. The Winnipeg Private Refugee Sponsorship Assurance Program (WPRSAP) was credited in a 2012 staff report with making Winnipeg the largest refugee sponsorship centre in the country. Over eight years of the program, payouts totaled \$13,000 and the City of Winnipeg is expected to receive back its initial \$250,000 investment in 2017.

Discussions have taken place among SAHs and other potential partners to advance the idea of an assurance fund to support refugee sponsorship. SAHs would be eligible to make claims against the funds and claims would be adjudicated by a committee. Given the intense current focus on Government Assisted Refugees, staff anticipate SAHs and potential partners will revisit the idea of an assurance fund to support privately sponsored refugees in the medium term.

Settlement Support – Municipal Response. Settlement support refers to the delivery of services to help displaced individuals to adapt and integrate to and in their host country. Given that populations that are forcedly moved are often sent to distant regions that have different ways of life, languages, and values, displaced individuals need support to transition from their traumatic losses (i.e., property, networks, family, income, etc.) to functionally integrate in their host countries and often build their life in them.

The municipality can play a larger role in supporting the settlement of refugees coming to Halifax, first by helping coordinate services upon arrival and second by the provision of municipal services to support both refugee settlement and integration. Following are activities that the municipality proposes to provide to support the settlement and integration of refugees in our community:

- The Halifax LIP participate in and hold regular meetings with SAHs, settlement agencies and service providers to facilitate coordination as well as consistent information exchange and sharing. The municipality will provide information about municipal services to those involved in refugee settlement or directly to refugees. This information can be provided through 311, which is already available in 150 languages.
- Through Human Resources and the Diversity and Inclusion office provide sensitivity training for public-facing municipal staff. Such training will be developed to address stigma and stereotypes

which constitute significant barriers to greater newcomer participation and to a better integration.

- To promote a more diverse workforce, under the leadership of Halifax Human Resources (HR) Department, staff can provide or support workshops and/or information sessions to help refugees familiarize themselves with the municipality's employment culture and get support for resume and cover letter writing. Staff would work in collaboration with ISANS and the Diversity and Inclusion Office on delivery.
- Halifax Regional Police (HRP), in coordination with their diversity officer and alongside the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, conduct outreach sessions for refugees with the objective of overcoming the fear of police that some refugees may carry based on their personal experience. HRP will also offer and conduct other outreach efforts, such as informational sessions showcasing HRP's commitment to finding solutions to stigma and difficulties that refugees experience as they settle in their new home. These sessions will be related to HRP's involvement with the Romeo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative, which examines the connection between gangs, child soldiers, policing, police training and the displacement of peoples.
- Halifax Transit provide temporary transit passes to refugees for first year of settlement.
- Halifax Recreation offer relief on recreation fees for first year of settlement for their 28 HRM owned and operated facilities and, where possible, work with Multi-District and Community facilities with whom we have service agreements to do the same.
- Continue to work in partnership with Halifax Public Libraries as part of their Immigrant/Newcomer Services plan. Halifax Public Libraries is also a member of LIP. (Additional description of the Library's support to refugees is described below.)²
- Work with settlement agencies and others to facilitate access to above noted transit, recreation and library services, potentially through use of an ID card or municipal services card.
- The Halifax LIP play a coordinating role on the possible implementation of temporary emergency shelters with settlement agencies and service providers (these include, ISANS, Halifax Refugee Clinic, YMCA, YWCA, Shelter Nova Scotia).
- Include a portal for services to refugees in the Newcomers section of HRM's website. This portal will highlight existing information in the Newcomers Guide already as it applies to refugee services.
- Through the Halifax LIP, support continuous coordination of efforts between the municipality and the Provincial Government for matters related to affordable housing, accessible healthcare and inclusive education.
- Work with provincial government on provincially identified working groups to coordinate activities in various areas including: recreation, community preparedness and others.

² The library has a number of current programs and services that would be available to new refugees including free conversation group programs, free English language programs, free public computer and WiFi access, free programs for children and families, multi-lingual collections including Arabic and Farsi collections. The library has also been working with ISANS to deliver public information session on refugee sponsorship.

Staff anticipate that the above noted activities can be managed within existing budgets. If a significantly larger than anticipated number of refugees settle in Halifax this may impact HRM's ability to deliver within existing budgets.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Activities described in the "Settlement Support – Municipal Response" section can be implemented within existing 2015-2016 budgets. Should the number of refugees be significantly higher than indicated in this report, staff may have to return to Council for direction.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Consultations, research and advice was obtained through conversations with ISANS, the Province of Nova Scotia (Office of Immigration), LIP advisory Committee, Halifax Refugee Clinic, and YMCA.

Ongoing collaboration with key partners will continue: ISANS, Halifax Refugee Clinic, PNS, YMCA, YWMC, Halifax Partnership, United Ways, Salvation Army, Red Cross, Shelter Nova Scotia.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no environmental implications to the activities described in the report.

ALTERNATIVES

Status quo – Council could direct staff not to provide the targeted services to refugees as indicated in the report.

Council could endorse the activities described in the report but choose not to provide funds to an assurance fund.

ATTACHMENTS

Nil

A copy of this report can be obtained online at <http://www.halifax.ca/council/agendasc/cagenda.php> then choose the appropriate meeting date, or by contacting the Office of the Municipal Clerk at 902.490.4210, or Fax 902.490.4208.

Report Prepared by: Roberto Montiel, LIP Coordinator 902.292.0141

Report Approved by: _____
Tracey Jones-Grant Manager, Diversity and Inclusion 902.490.3677

Financial Approval by: _____
Amanda Whitewood, Director of Finance and Information Technology/CFO, 902.490.6308

Report Approved by: _____
Maggie MacDonald, Managing Director, Government Relations and External Affairs,
902.490.1742

Original Signed