



Information Sheet: Housing Challenges of Refugees (Part 2)

Affordable housing for all BC residents is an issue. While housing is more affordable in the Fraser Valley than in other parts of the Lower Mainland, vacancy rates are at an all-time low and monthly rent fees at an all-time high. Landlords have no reason or incentive to rent their properties below market value; that is, at a rate that low-income residents, including refugees, can afford. Finding affordable and appropriate housing has been a tremendous challenge for newly arrived Syrian refugee families, many of whom have large families and/or require their homes to accommodate physical disabilities, and it has often come at the cost of families sacrificing other needs.

Housing Challenges Faced by Refugees in the Fraser Valley

The following housing needs and challenges of refugees in the Fraser Valley were identified through research conducted by the Refugee Response Team – Fraser Valley (RRT-FV), including two online surveys of local service providers and stakeholders, input from refugee clients, and consultation with RRT-FV members and the RRT-FV Housing Working Group.

Access to safe and affordable housing

There is a shortage of housing in the Fraser Valley, which is driving up monthly rents and competition. Because of low availability, rental bidding wars are taking place, with potential tenants offering to pay above the asking price and putting homes out of reach for refugees. This is making it even more challenging for refugee families to secure housing in the region. Refugees who arrived last winter are realizing that their housing costs are too high, especially those who will soon be transitioning from federal resettlement assistance to provincial income assistance. While settlement staff can assist refugee families in finding new housing, there is a lack of more affordable or appropriate options available in the region.

Access to appropriate housing for large family units

There is a shortage of housing to accommodate large families in the Fraser Valley, especially housing that is affordable, near transit / service hubs, pest-free and “to code.” It is hard for refugee families with 5+ members to find rental housing, as they usually require a minimum of three bedrooms, as per the National Occupancy Standards. There is substantial competition for housing, and most landlords are less willing to rent to large families. Many refugee families end up living in illegal basement suites because it is all they can afford.



Large proportion of income spent on housing

Many refugees pay very high rent in relation to their income levels. In some cases, they are using their child tax benefits to cover some of the cost. For many, rent consumes most of their monthly income, leaving families with very little money for food and other basic necessities. Refugees would benefit from access to subsidized housing. However, there is a general lack of subsidized housing options available in the Fraser Valley. Any kind of subsidized housing, such as that provided through BC Housing, is limited and has long waitlists.

Discrimination / abuse by landlords

There are reports of racism and discrimination by some landlords, who are unwilling to rent their properties to refugees. There are also reports of an increase in number of landlords trying to evict tenants; the reasons are not always legitimate and/or proper notice is not always given. More and more clients are needing to go to court to resolve tenancy disputes.

Tenancy and cultural norms

The roles and responsibilities of tenants and landlords vary by country. What may be acceptable in another country may not be acceptable in Canada (e.g. how properties are used / maintained). Some landlords have not had positive experiences with Syrian families as tenants, and settlement staff are receiving complaints. There is concern that landlords will be less receptive / supportive as additional refugees continue to be resettled in the region. There is a need for education / awareness building in this area.



Recommendations

The following recommendations emerged through research conducted by the RRT-FV, including two online surveys of local service providers and stakeholders, input from refugee clients, and consultation with RRT-FV members and the RRT-FV Housing Working Group.

Review policies for resettlement and income assistance

There is a need to conduct a policy review to ensure that refugees are able to afford safe and appropriate housing in the communities in which they are resettled. The majority of refugees cannot afford the housing in which they are placed. Resettlement assistance and provincial income assistance does not provide enough support to cover the current costs of rent, utilities and other expenses. Moreover, Government Assisted Refugees (GARs) are selected on humanitarian grounds, not their ability to settle. Many GARs will not be employment ready for several years. This needs to be taken into consideration when developing policies and timelines for resettlement assistance.

Develop a long-term housing strategy for refugees

There is a need to develop national or provincial housing strategy that includes measures to protect existing affordable / social housing stock and incentives for developers to build affordable housing stock, as the current inventory does not meet the needs of the Fraser Valley region. It is also important to ensure that refugees are included in municipal, provincial and federal housing strategies. For example, in *Housing Matters BC – Housing Strategy for BC: A Foundation for Strong Communities* (January 2014), there is no mention of refugees.

Identify opportunities for collaboration and/or investment

There is a need to identify opportunities for collaboration and/or investment with different stakeholders in the community to increase access to subsidized housing and rental subsidies for refugees. Incentives / opportunities need to be equitable to avoid resentment or backlash in the community. For example, three refugee families in one community were able to secure housing through BC Housing despite the long waitlist. Other families became aware and now expect the same for their families.



Develop resources for refugees

Settlement service providers should continue to include housing as a topic in workshops and resources for refugee clients (e.g. roles and responsibilities of tenants and landlords, checklists for maintaining a home). Resources should include diagrams and be translated in different languages.

Provide information / incentives for landlords

Information should be provided to landlords about the housing needs and challenges of refugee families. They should be reminded of the benefits of supporting refugees who are resettled in their communities. Incentives, such as property tax grants, should be provided for landlords who rent their properties at a reduced rate to refugees.

Acknowledge landlords who support refugees

Some landlords are very supportive and go out of their way to assist their refugee tenants. They should be acknowledged for their efforts, such as through media recognition and/or awards.

What You Can Do

Community members:

- » Share this information and other RRT-FV resources with your colleagues, friends, politicians, etc. in your community
- » Engage with property managers or landlords – ask them to consider renting just one unit to a refugee family at a reduced rate



Property managers or landlords:

- » Consider renting your apartment or house to a refugee family
- » Contact a settlement organization in your community – find out how you can work together to support a refugee family in your community



Government:

- » Acknowledge and/or provide incentives, such as property tax grants, to landlords who rent their properties at an reduced rate to low-income residents
- » Develop an affordable housing strategy that includes refugees and other low-income residents
- » Review policies for resettlement and income assistance so that recipients are able to access safe and appropriate housing



Client Story: Abdul*



Abdul and his family had arrived in the Fraser Valley and needed to find a home. Amandeep, a local settlement worker, offered to help them and found them a potential home. She contacted the landlord, who was asking \$2,000 a month, and negotiated the cost down to \$1,300 a month, as it was all they could afford. The landlord agreed, provided they would accept the home “as is,” as it had been destroyed by previous tenants. Abdul and his family visited the home and accepted the offer. Amandeep and a group of other newly arrived refugees in the community got together and helped Abdul and his family clean, restore and set up their new home, which included painting and renting a truck to pick up donated furniture. In the end, Abdul and his family were happy with their new home. Since they moved in, they have developed a close friendship with their landlord. The landlord bought them a bed and dining table and drives the children to school every day. And recently, when his landlord needed to have surgery, Abdul drove him to/from the hospital and helped him during the recovery period.

***NOTE:** All names and identifying details have been changed to respect the privacy of the individuals.



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