



Refugee
Response Team
FRASER VALLEY

HOUSING FACILITATED DISCUSSION Summary Report



DIVERSECITY
community resources society



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fraservalleyrrt.ca

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INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

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 the newly arrived Syrian refugee families, many of whom have large families and/or require their homes to accommodate physical disabilities. It has often come at the cost of families sacrificing other needs.

In November 2016, the Refugee Response Team – Fraser Valley (RRT-FV) organized a facilitated discussion on housing for refugees in the Fraser Valley. The purpose of the discussion was to bring together service providers and key stakeholders to:

- » Share information amongst stakeholders
- » Identify short-term, achievable solutions to housing challenges faced by refugee families
- » Contribute to the development and/or improvement of housing supports for refugee families in the Fraser Valley

The discussion was informed by 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. A total of 25 individuals took part, representing 17 organizations such as immigrant serving agencies, housing services, and different levels of government. The full list of participants can be found in *Appendix II*.

The information and input gathered in the discussion has been summarized and themed and is presented in the following report. The short-term, achievable actions that were identified will be shared with RRT-FV members and other stakeholders for further review and examination in order to shape and determine next steps in addressing refugee-specific housing issues.

Background

In recognition of the arrival of Syrian refugees, the Province of British Columbia created the BC Refugee Readiness Fund, a one-time investment to enhance federal and provincial refugee programs and provide additional resources for communities and private sponsors working to bring refugees to BC. Refugee Response Teams (RRTs) were formed in five regions of the province, including the Fraser Valley. The RRTs were designed to support and coordinate the work of community stakeholders and to develop additional supports and resources as required.

In March 2016, the RRT-FV was established to develop and implement a *Community Refugee Response Action Plan* to address urgent, short-term needs and issues in support of refugees, and to act as a local resource for information and communication about refugee resettlement in seven communities of the Fraser Valley (Abbotsford, Chilliwack, Delta, Langley, Maple Ridge / Pitt Meadows, Mission and Surrey). That same month, the *Community Refugee Response Action Plan* was developed through a community consultation process with input from 25+ stakeholders involved in the resettlement of refugees in the region. Six priority issues were identified for the action plan, including housing. For more information about the RRT-FV, please visit the RRT-FV website at fraservalleyrrt.ca.

A Housing Working Group was established to support Fraser Valley service providers and private sponsors assisting refugees in finding permanent housing and bring forward refugee-specific housing service needs and issues. Members identified the need to bring together service providers and other key stakeholders to find ways to address some of the housing challenges faced by refugees in the region and work toward improving access to affordable and appropriate housing for refugees.

Since the beginning of Canada's response to the Syrian refugee crisis, the Fraser Valley has welcomed close to half of all Syrian refugees to BC, the highest number of the five RRT regions. Between November 4, 2015 and October 30, 2016, 1,371 out of 2,988 Syrian refugees to BC settled in the region. A breakdown of these numbers, both by community and refugee category, has been included in *Appendix I*.

Project Overview

The Housing Facilitated Discussion took place on November 15 at the Sheraton Vancouver Guildford Hotel in Surrey, BC, and was facilitated by Jody Johnson of PEERs Employment and Education Resources. The objective was to identify doable, short-term actions to address some of the housing challenges faced by refugees in the Fraser Valley. To this end, attendees were presented findings from research already conducted, which identified key issues and challenges. Rather than discuss or identify additional issues and challenges, the discussion focused on identifying solutions. The agenda that guided the session can be found in *Appendix III*.

To provide context for the facilitated discussion, the session was kick-started with a panel presentation. The following five panelists provided information from a variety of backgrounds and perspectives:

- » **Jennifer Basu, Project Manager, RRT-FV**
Overview of Syrian refugee demographics across the Fraser Valley. The demographic information can be found in *Appendix I*, as well as on the RRT-FV website at fraservalleyrirt.ca/communities/fraser-valley.
- » **Jennifer York, Senior Manager, Settlement Programs, ISSofBC, and Chair, RRT-FV Housing Working Group**
Overview of housing support needs, challenges and issues identified through RRT-FV research and consultation. Key findings are provided below and full reports of this research can be found on the RRT-FV website at fraservalleyrirt.ca/resources/reports.
- » **Mohammed Alaorfi, Syrian Refugee and Surrey Resident**
Recently arrived Syrian refugee perspective on finding suitable accommodation for a family of nine, including one child with a disability.
- » **Palwinder Kelay, Manager, Immigrant Youth and Adult Programs, Abbotsford Community Services**
Service provider perspective focusing on extraordinary efforts required to locate and negotiate suitable housing.
- » **Kate Lambert, Strategic Program Manager, Ready to Rent BC: Education and Support for Tenants and Landlords**
Overview of the Ready to Rent BC Program and how it supports both tenants and landlords to engage in successful tenancies. Information about the program can be found on the Ready to Rent BC website at readytorentbc.org.

Following the panel presentation, participants were divided into small groups. A note-taking template, including the following three questions, was used to guide the small group discussions:

- » Are there any examples of practices that are working well to support the housing needs of refugees and/or other client groups?
- » What can be done to address this issue in the Fraser Valley?
- » What agencies or institutions must be engaged to plan and implement the action?

Each small group discussion was guided by a facilitator. Promising practices and actions shared were captured by note-takers.

At the end of the session, an on-site evaluation was conducted. For a detailed summary of the evaluation, please see *Appendix IV*.

HOUSING NEEDS AND CHALLENGES OF REFUGEES IN THE FRASER VALLEY

The following section lists the key housing needs and challenges of refugees in the Fraser Valley that were identified through research conducted by the RRT-FV and presented to attendees of the Housing Facilitated Discussion. Research included 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.

NOTE: *As previously stated, the goal of the session was to tap into the collective knowledge of attendees to identify solutions to the refugee-specific housing needs and challenges in the Fraser Valley. To support this goal, time was not spent on identifying further needs and challenges; rather, attendees were guided to focus their discussions on the identification of doable, short-term solutions.*

1. Access to safe and affordable housing

In the RRT-FV Online Survey (Second Quarter):

- » 87.0% of respondents agreed that it continues to be a challenge for refugees to access safe and appropriate housing with the financial assistance provided.
- » 69.6% of respondents agreed that there is a lack of incentives for landlords to rent their properties to refugees.

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.

2. Access to appropriate housing for large family units

In the RRT-FV Online Survey (Second Quarter):

- » 91.3% of respondents agreed that it continues to be a challenge for refugees with large family units to find appropriate housing.
- » None of the respondents feel that the situation has improved.

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.

3. Large proportion of income spent on housing

In the RRT-FV Online Survey (Second Quarter):

- » 90.5% of respondents agreed that it continues to be a challenge for refugees to access subsidized housing or rent subsidies.
- » Only 8.7% of respondents feel that the situation has somewhat improved since the spring.

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.

4. Discrimination / abuse by landlords

In the RRT-FV Online Survey (Second Quarter):

- » 77.3% of respondents agreed that refugees continue to face discrimination and/or abuse by landlords.
- » 21.7% of respondents feel that the situation has somewhat improved since the spring.
- » 47.8% of respondents have not seen any improvements.

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.

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.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

The following section lists recommended actions to address some of the key housing needs and challenges of refugees in the Fraser Valley. 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, some key recommendations emerged, which were shared with attendees. For the purposes of this report, these overarching recommendations were used as thematic categories to organize the input and recommended actions put forth by attendees during the session.

NOTE: *These actions have emerged from preliminary and limited research and consultation and a half-day dialogue. The actions presented below are offered to stakeholders of the Fraser Valley for further review and examination, not only to determine what actions will be given priority but also which stakeholder(s) should assume lead roles. As funding for the RRT-FV will end in March 2016, it is the hope of the RRT-FV that key stakeholder groups, such as government, refugee and immigrant service providers, housing and tenancy-related associations or Local Immigration Partnerships (LIPs), will lead the examination and determination of next steps.*

1. 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.

Recommended actions:

- » Establish a committee of refugee assisting organizations to produce a policy brief to submit / present to the federal and provincial governments and other key stakeholders.
- » Advocate for providing rent subsidies for refugees.

2. 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.

Recommended actions:

- » Collect and distribute information and data to ensure that refugees are included in municipal, provincial and federal housing strategies.
- » Organize and facilitate a large-scale housing dialogue.

3. 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.

Recommended actions:

- » Review and consider the establishment of a multi-stakeholder collaboration, including federal government, provincial government, municipal government, community social services sector, and immigrant service providers. The “Ontario Housing First” initiative was provided as an example.
- » Identify the various roles of NGOs that offer advice and training on rental rights and develop a consistent message / resource for settlement workers to access.
- » Develop a relationship with BC Housing (to be a resource of refugee housing needs).
- » Identify already existing tenancy groups and build relationships / synergy with them.
- » Build relationships with landlords and realtors to identify housing that can accommodate large families.
- » Work with municipalities to provide handouts, stories and marketing to those who have second homes.
- » Work with municipalities to identify legal suites.
- » Create a video about refugee housing and how to become involved.

4. 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 into different languages.

Recommended actions:

- » Develop and distribute an inventory of all Fraser Valley housing support resources (BC Housing, Ready to Rent, New Hope Community Services, etc.)
- » Develop a resource that includes information on what to expect in the rental market, what is affordable / value for money on the Resettlement Assistance Program, understanding basement suites are a Canadian norm, etc.
- » Develop a resource that provides information on the appropriate use of utilities.
- » Develop a resource that provides information on household budgeting and money management.
- » Develop a resource for youth on housing supports to ensure they have an understanding and can interpret / assist their parents.
- » Ensure pre-arrival messages received by refugees in refugee camps and other recruitment / orientation grounds reflect a realistic picture of what housing / life looks like in Canada.
- » Develop a program or workshop on rental issues and realities; have “Ready To Rent” trainers trained and able to adopt or translate materials for refugees.

5. 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.

Recommended actions:

- » Institute property tax breaks as incentives to landlords to rent to refugees.
- » Provide incentives to landlords to rent empty homes (to large refugee families).
- » Reach out to landlords through the BC Landlords Association.
- » Host an information session with property managers and refugee clients (with interpretation) on rights and responsibilities so that all parties are on the same page.
- » Advertise the need for large units in municipal bulletins or through BC Housing newsletters, realtor bulletins, BC Landlords Association newsletters, etc.

6. 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.

Recommended action:

- » Recognize landlords for renting to refugees. E.g. Christmas cards could be sent to landlords or events could be hosted where refugees bring food and/or give plaques (example from an event in Coquitlam organized by a City Councillor).

7. Develop resources for settlement and other community workers¹

Recommended actions:

- » Create a resource for settlement workers to equip them to handle conflict resolution and mediation, which could be facilitated by the RRT-FV and/or AMSSA in a webinar format.
- » Support more settlement and community workers in the Fraser Valley to become Ready to Rent BC trainers.

¹ This theme and associated recommended actions also emerged during the guided discussions.

CLOSING STATEMENT

The housing issues and challenges faced by refugees in the Fraser Valley are complex. While affordability is the largest challenge and difficult to address in today's housing market, there are many other issues that may be addressed through awareness raising, resource development, information sharing, training and collaboration.

The recommendations and actions in this report will be shared with the RRT-FV membership and other key stakeholders, including different levels of government, for review and consideration. It is the hope of the RRT-FV that these recommendations and actions assist in determining the role of different stakeholders and actions they will take on to improve housing for refugees in the Fraser Valley.

APPENDIX I – SYRIAN REFUGEE ARRIVALS TO THE FRASER VALLEY

November 4, 2015 to October 30, 2016

Syrian Refugee Arrivals to Canada

Government Assisted Refugees (GARs):	17,627
Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSRs):	12,651
Blended Visa Office Referred (BVOR) Refugees:	3,445
Total:	33,723

Source: Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada #WelcomeRefugees.

Syrian Refugee Arrivals to BC

Government Assisted Refugees (GARs) Individuals:	2,088
Government Assisted Refugees (GARs) Units:	508
Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSRs):	N/A
Blended Visa Office Referred (BVOR) Refugees:	N/A
Total:	2,988 Syrian refugees

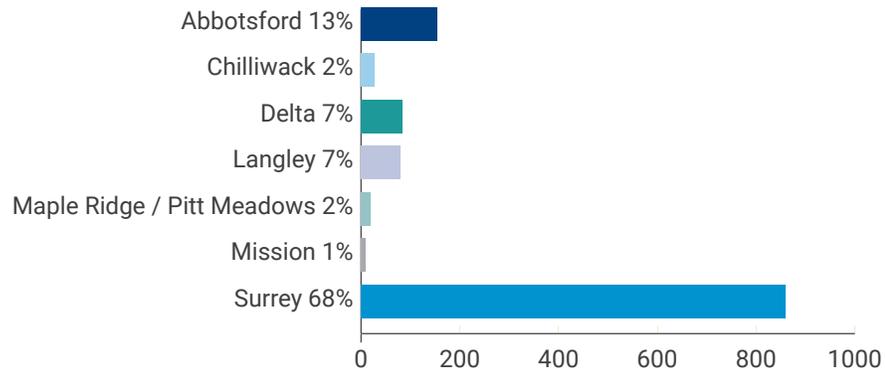
Source: ISSofBC and Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada #WelcomeRefugees.

Syrian Refugee Arrivals to the Fraser Valley

Government Assisted Refugees (GARs):	1,243 (91% of Syrian refugee arrivals to the Fraser Valley)
Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSRs):	84 (6% of Syrian refugee arrivals to the Fraser Valley)
Blended Visa Office Referred (BVOR) Refugees:	44 (3% of Syrian refugee arrivals to the Fraser Valley)
Total:	1,371 (46% of total Syrian refugee arrivals to BC)

Source: ISSofBC and Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada #WelcomeRefugees.

Syrian GAR Settlement Patterns in the Fraser Valley



Source: ISSofBC

APPENDIX II – LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

Facilitator

Jody Johnson, PEERs Inc.

Presenters

Kate Lambert, Ready to Rent BC

Mohammed Alaorfi, Refugee Client, DIVERSEcity Community Resources Society

Peal Jok, DIVERSEcity Community Resources Society (interpretation for Mohammed)

RRT-FV Project Team / Housing Working Group

Jennifer Basu, DIVERSEcity Community Resources Society

Jennifer York, ISSofBC

Kwenu Turkson, Mennonite Central Committee of BC

Laura Mannix, DIVERSEcity Community Resources Society

Ninu Kang, MOSAIC

Palwinder Kelay, Abbotsford Community Services

Tahzeem Kassam, DIVERSEcity Community Resources Society

Settlement Service Providers

Bob Gabriel, ISSofBC

Khim Tan, Options Community Services

May Rezaei, Abbotsford Community Services

Nada Elmasry, Pacific Community Resources Society

Saba Alam, Mission Community Services

Sakina Kamani Keshvani, Muslim Food Bank and Community Services

Tamam Hasan, Progressive Intercultural Community Services Society

Private Sponsors

Jan Denham, North Delta Refugee Project

Ron DeKroon, Settlement360

Local / Provincial / Federal Government

Darcy Bromley, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC)

Erin Smandych, BC Housing

Gillian McLeod, Corporation of Delta

Leah Campo, Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation

Sheila D'Albertanson, BC Housing

APPENDIX III – AGENDA

Date: Tuesday, November 15, 2016

Time: 9:00am – 12:00 pm

Location: Sheraton Guildford Hotel, 15269 104 Ave, Surrey, BC

Facilitator: Jody Johnson (PEERs Inc.)

AGENDA ITEM	TIME
1. Registration and Networking Breakfast	9:00 – 9:30 am
2. Meeting Opening – Jody Johnson <ul style="list-style-type: none">» Welcome and introductions» Overview and purpose of the event	9:30 – 9:45 am
3. Fraser Valley Region – Refugee Overview – Jennifer Basu <ul style="list-style-type: none">» Fraser Valley refugee demographic and arrivals data	9:45 – 9:50 am
4. Panel Presentations and Q&A <ul style="list-style-type: none">» RRT-FV Identified Housing Support Needs / Challenges / Issues <i>Jennifer Basu, Project Manager, RRT-FV</i> <i>Jennifer York, Senior Manager – Settlement Program, ISSofBC and Chair, RRT-FV Housing Working Group</i>» A Refugee Perspective <i>Mohammed Alaorfi</i>» A Service Provider Perspective <i>Palwinder Kelay, Abbotsford Community Services</i>» Ready to Rent BC: Education and Support for Tenants and Landlords <i>Kate Lambert, Strategic Program Manager</i>	9:50 – 10:30 am
5. Roundtable Discussions <ul style="list-style-type: none">» Prioritization of housing challenges / issues faced by refugees in the Fraser Valley» Identification of promising practices» Identification of actions and stakeholders who need to be involved	10:30 – 11:45 am
6. Closing Comments, Next Steps and Evaluation – Jody Johnson	11:45 – 12:00 pm

APPENDIX IV – EVALUATION SUMMARY

Total participants = 22

Total responses = 18

Response rate = 82%

1. Please rate the following:

	1 STRONGLY DISAGREE	2 DISAGREE	3 NEUTRAL	4 AGREE	5 STRONGLY AGREE	NO RESPONSE
I had the opportunity to participate and provide input in the discussion.	1	0	0	4	13	0
	6%		0%	94%		0%
I had the opportunity to meet and connect with other stakeholders involved in supporting the housing needs of refugees in the Fraser Valley.	1	0	0	3	14	0
	6%		0%	94%		0%
I have an increased understanding of the housing support needs of refugees in the Fraser Valley.	1	0	1	10	6	0
	6%		6%	89%		0%
I am better able to articulate the specific housing issues faced by refugees in the Fraser Valley.	1	0	0	8	7	2
	6%		0%	83%		11%
I will consider implementing one or more of the actions identified in today's discussion in my organization and/or community.	1	0	1	8	7	1
	6%		6%	6%		6%

2. Please rate the following:

	1 NOT EFFECTIVE	2 SOMEWHAT EFFECTIVE	3 NEUTRAL	4 EFFECTIVE	5 EXTREMELY EFFECTIVE	NO RESPONSE
Pre-meeting communications and organization	0	1	1	8	6	2
	6%		6%	83%		11%
Organization of the day	0	0	0	8	8	2
	0%		0%	89%		11%
Facilitation of the discussion	0	0	0	7	9	2
	0%		0%	89%		11%
Overall effectiveness	0	0	1	8	6	3
	0%		6%	78%		17%

3. What is the most valuable thing you will be taking away from this discussion?

- » Networking with realtors, landlords and other stakeholders.
- » The need for a more structured and collaborative approach to addressing the housing needs of refugees.
- » Having input from other organizations that are not settlement based – sort of getting a picture on the other side.
- » Other settlement workers have been confronting same challenges and this conference connected us and brought us together. I love the connection.
- » Further knowledge of resources available.
- » The importance about communicating with other organizations.
- » The need to continue working together.
- » Building relationships with all stakeholders.
- » Ready to Rent.
- » The roundtable group work.
- » Always the stories! Learning from the frontline.
- » Contacts and organizations that deal with housing issues.
- » Mohammed's story and all the panelists. Action planning by promising practice.

4. What suggestions do you have for improvement?

- » Send out questionnaire in advance.
- » Feel that a number of groups missing. What about SDSI, MCFD, Health Authorities.
- » Connect frequently.
- » We would love to have a representative from BC Housing speaking about the challenges and opportunities for the refugees.
- » Including people from the local government.
- » Make it a day long workshop.
- » Maybe more firsthand (refugee) stories.
- » None.

5. Additional thoughts or comments

- » Overall, discussions are very valuable.
- » It is interesting how many agencies are involved and the need not to overlap and/or be aware of what other groups are doing.
- » Thank you for giving us the opportunity to meet with everyone in the room.
- » Excellent work. Keep it up.
- » None.
- » Thank you.