



Resettlement Issues Related To Yezidi Women and Girls

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and Immigration

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About COSTI Immigrant Services

COSTI Immigrant Services is a non-profit organization based in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), which works to empower people from diverse communities to succeed by providing educational, employment and social services. COSTI's vision is for a prosperous and inclusive Canada built on the success of every individual. As such, the organization is centred on values of leadership, diversity, empowerment, compassion, innovation and accountability. Since its inception in 1952, COSTI has been there for those in need. Over the decades as the GTA has changed, so too has COSTI's responses to the needs of newcomers resulting in a multicultural organization that offers a range of services and opportunities.

COSTI has a long history of supporting the needs of resettled refugees. At the Ralph Chiodo Immigrant Family Reception Centre in downtown Toronto, government-assisted refugees (GARs) are provided temporary shelter as they begin the settlement and integration process. Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) staff provide information, initial settlement services and orientation to newly arriving GARs, as well as assistance in finding permanent housing. Once housed in communities across the GTA, our Client Support Services (CSS) program provides 12-18 months of intensive case management services, bridging refugee families to services in their immediate communities and empowering them with the information and skills required to begin to integrate successfully in Canada.

Yezidi Resettlement in the Greater Toronto Area

Working closely with our government counterparts at Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), COSTI has received 145 Yezidi refugees from February to December 2017. Of these, 42 people have relocated to London, Ontario, where another large Yezidi population resides.

Of the 103 Yezidi refugees (28 families) that COSTI continues to support in Toronto we highlight the following:

Client profile

- Approximately 70% originate from Iraq with the remainder from Syria
- 25% are 1-parent families (women that are separated or widowed raising children on their own)
- Over 60% of the clients are children under 16 years old

Prior to the arrival of Yezidi refugees resettled to Canada as part of this special initiative, COSTI planned and prepared to deal with a significant number of highly traumatized, high needs cases. Upon their arrival to Canada, COSTI staff observed that the majority of Yezidi clients seemed comfortable interacting with both staff and other refugee clients, and quickly adapted to the social setting in the temporary accommodations. A number of Yezidi clients have also been actively volunteering to assist other refugees with their needs. While they have experienced and witnessed significant violence, their overall attitude and obvious resilience and strength has greatly facilitated the initial settlement process.

Client services

- Two (2) families arrived in December 2017 and remain at our Reception Centre
- With the assistance of COSTI Housing Counsellors and the support of community volunteers, the other twenty-six (26) families have all found permanent housing in the GTA; the majority of these clients now reside in Richmond Hill with a few other families living in Etobicoke and Scarborough
- For the clients that have moved into permanent housing, we can report the following:

- They have all completed their English-language assessments and have registered for Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) classes
- School-age children have registered in local nearby schools
- Families have been connected to primary care physicians, settlement workers and community supports and services, including but not limited to childcare, food and clothing banks, etc., in their immediate communities
- Case Managers have also provided assistance and advocacy with Canada Child Benefits, Immigration Loans, in-Canada Joint-Assistance-Sponsorship applications, and other follow-up and supports with IRCC and others, as necessary

COSTI's RAP and CSS programs continue to work in collaboration with IRCC and the multitude of community organizations, settlement agencies and volunteer groups to provide clients with the information and tools needed to settle successfully in their new community. Despite all this, we acknowledge that there remain hurdles to the integration of these families. Language barriers, disincentives/challenges to access services, and lack of accessible community resources have all played a role in the settlement process for Yezidi clients. We explain these challenges in further detail below.

Challenges and Issues for the Resettlement of Yezidi Refugees

Language

Delivering services in first language or with interpretation

The Yezidi families that arrived in Toronto have very limited proficiency, if any at all, in an official Canadian language. Two-thirds of the group speak varying levels of Arabic, however prefer to communicate in Kurmanji (a Kurdish sub-dialect). The remaining one-third speak Kurmanji only.

Since being notified of their expected arrival to Canada, COSTI began working with former clients to identify Kurmanji-speaking individuals that could support the language needs of the clients. We are currently working with a small pool of interpreters and/or volunteers that assist with language support. However, the biggest challenge we have faced is that these individuals are not always available when needed. COSTI has recently received funding from the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration (MCI) to hire Kurmanji-speaking staff to assist our intensive case management program for refugees.

English language instruction

While Yezidi clients have all had their language assessments and have registered in classes, they face certain barriers in participating in English language instruction in their communities. This is particularly true for families in York Region where the majority of Yezidis reside. While programs do exist, there are barriers in actively participating in these programs, such as hesitation to use public transportation, medical and mental health needs and difficulty in accessing childcare, especially for children under 2 years of age. We have been addressing these issues by continuously educating and encouraging clients to use public transit, providing supports and services to address basic and medical needs, and by advocating when necessary for access to local childminding services.

In addition, COSTI recognizes the value of innovative approaches to language instruction that have established best practices in supporting newcomers with low literacy. For example, home-based programs and conversation circles have proven to be a valuable compliment to classroom-based instruction. Programs like the Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPI), a program that teaches newcomer mothers basic literacy in order to support the education needs of their children, are uniquely placed to support the needs of Yezidi mothers. Unfortunately, access to this program is only available in the City of Toronto and is not available for clients living in York Region.

Mental Health and Trauma

Yezidi refugees have suffered through severe intergenerational trauma. Repeated genocide, violence towards adults, youth and children perpetrated at the hands of Daesh, systemic and chronic discrimination and poverty, as well as instances of rape and torture, have all been reported by Yezidi refugees arriving in Toronto.

Based on COSTI's extensive experience with GARs, we have observed that refugees are generally ready to address mental health needs 10-11 months post-arrival, once the basic and medical needs of the families have been stabilized. This too has been the trend among our Yezidi clients, with many of the first arrivals now requesting mental health supports and services, including an expressed interest for individualized and confidential support for children.

In identifying appropriate mental health supports, we are cognizant that other factors play a role in a client seeking services. These include language (ideally the service is provided directly in Kurmanji or Arabic), cultural stigma and concerns regarding mental health, support with transportation and childminding services, and the availability of both male and female service providers.

Language and availability of resources

To our knowledge, there are no Kurmanji-speaking mental health professionals in the GTA, and the Arabic-speaking services are already consumed by the large volume of recently arrived Arabic-speaking refugees. Investment in this area will go a long way to support the longer-term integration process of Yezidi refugees.

Addressing stigma and cultural interpretations of mental health

COSTI believes in a two-pronged approach to address mental health needs of our clients. First, alternative interventions are used to introduce the concepts of mental health and well-being. For example, discussing topics related to mental health and wellbeing in individual and group sessions on settlement and life skills helps to normalize and bridge cultural gaps and encourages the uptake of mental health services. Once clients express an interest in accessing mental health services, they are connected to service providers for individual supports.

Mental health and wellbeing interventions and support provided by allied health professionals (such as psychologists, psychotherapists and counselling therapists) and social workers are vital to the long-term integration of refugees. Unfortunately, under the Interim Federal Health Program (IFHP) provided to refugees, allied health professionals must request prior-approval to provide mental health care, creating an additional barrier in accessing services. Furthermore, social workers that provide counselling services are not covered by IFHP. Providers are reluctant to register for IFHP citing challenges with timely payment for care, making access to vital mental health support challenging for newly arrived refugees. Finally, challenges in finding suitable supports are compounded by the fact that families lose access to IFHP benefits once their RAP income supports have come to an end, with long waitlists under provincial social assistance. This inconsistent and fragmented approach to mental health care seems counter-intuitive given that we know individuals who have suffered such trauma will require ongoing long-term mental health services.

Family Reunification

Reuniting families is a key area of concern for all refugees resettled to Canada. Yezidi families, along with other refugees arriving through other special resettlement initiatives, have unique issues of concern when it comes to family reunification. Immediate family members that are either presumed dead and/or have disappeared are often undeclared in official IRCC documentation. Should they be located within their first year in Canada, it is not possible to include them under the One Year Window provision

(known as section 117(9)d exemption). Second, it is not unusual for missing family members to be located *after* the One Year Window provision has passed, leaving few avenues for resettlement other than submitting a Humanitarian and Compassionate claim, which not only costs money to apply but also requires a lawyer to complete the application. Lastly, for extended family members still living in their home country (such as Iraq and Syria), there exists no mechanism to resettle refugees who are internally displaced, other than family class sponsorship, which has inherent barriers for refugees. UNHCR and the Refugee Sponsorship Training Program (RSTP) have confirmed that without official refugee documents, it is not possible to recommend Yezidi extended family members for resettlement in Canada. Needless to say, the stress of being disconnected from family overseas, especially when those family members continue to be in precarious situations, contributes to poorer health and settlement outcomes and makes it much more difficult for refugee newcomers to focus on the task of integrating into Canadian society.

Canadian Child Benefits

During the Canadian Child Benefits (CCB) application process, we have observed a trend whereby Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) asks single-headed refugee families for proof of marital status and/or spousal income. This is particularly difficult for Yezidi single-headed households who, like other refugees, have either had spouses die or disappear as a result of their persecution. We are grateful to the local IRCC RAP team who have provided necessary support to our staff when required. Nonetheless, there remains a need to address systemic barriers for refugee families and others who depend on the vital supports of the CCB to make ends meet.

On a more positive note, in February 2017 CRA agreed to accept letters of support from settlement agencies on behalf of their clients. We are encouraged by this new development and look forward to greater coordination between CRA and the settlement sector.

Recommendations

In summary, COSTI makes the following recommendations for the settlement and integration of Yezidi women and girls.

Language

- Enhance community capacity to deliver Kurmanji language services, where possible
- Ensure access to English language instruction that uses innovative approaches to address the unique needs of refugee women, including but not limited to Yezidi refugee women and girls; such approaches might include home-based programs, conversation and social circles, online instruction and the like.

Mental health

- Support alternative approaches to integrate and normalize mental health needs in the settlement sector by promoting one-on-one and group sessions that focus on overall well-being in the initial settlement stage; such sessions should gradually introduce concepts related to mental health, destigmatize the subject matter and offer clients the opportunity to be referred at a later stage should they be interested in pursuing individualized counselling
- Build capacity of allied health professionals, including social workers, in supporting the needs of newcomers, including but not limited to ensuring more timely and flexible access to the IFHP
- Consider extending Interim Federal Health Program (IFHP) mental health coverage beyond the eligibility period for the program to ensure seamless access to mental health support

- Ensure culturally and linguistically appropriate mental health services are in place for long-term support of traumatized refugees, including Yezidi refugees

Family reunification

- Recognize the unique barriers and challenges that Yezidi and other special IRCC populations face with respect to family reunification and provide alternative mechanisms that address their unique circumstances; possible options might be increasing the committed level of 1200 Yezidi refugees to include family members in the next wave and/or connecting overseas family members with private sponsor groups.

Canada Child Benefit

- Address systemic challenges faced by single-parent and widowed spouses that continue to exist in the Canada Child Benefit program with the Canada Revenue Agency
- Promote greater communication and coordination between CRA and settlement organizations to ensure that any outstanding issues for a specific file are quickly resolved and that the family is provided with the adequate and timely support they require, regardless of family composition.

COSTI acknowledges the support of IRCC, MCI, RAP service providers throughout the country, local community organizations and volunteer groups that have partnered with us and shared information and resources in an effort to better address the needs of the Yezidi community.

Finally, we would like to thank the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration for this opportunity to share our experience with the Yezidi population with Members of Parliament.