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Ottawa's new cap on refugee applications upsets sponsors

Private sponsors fear new 1,000-application limit for 2017 will prevent many refugees from escaping danger of war-torn Syria.



Immigration Minister John McCallum, right, watches in February as Syrian refugees seven-year-old Husam, left, helps his two-year-old sister Minisa try on jackets at Toronto's Pearson International Airport. McCallum's ministry is now implementing a cap on private sponsorship of refugees. (NATHAN DENETTE / THE CANADIAN PRESS)

By **SAMMY HUDES** Staff Reporter
Sat., Dec. 24, 2016

The federal government will cap new applications for private sponsorship of Syrian and Iraqi refugees at 1,000 in 2017, due to a backlog and long wait times faced by those whose applications are still being processed.

But some feel the move, announced earlier this week by Citizenship and Immigration Minister John McCallum, betrays the [positive global perception](#) Canada has seen since late last year when the Liberals took office and committed to accepting more refugees fleeing the conflict in Syria.

“The government’s playing politics here, on the one hand saying we should be celebrated for being welcoming, and then on the other hand stopping people from being able to get to safety,” said Lesley Wood, a sociology professor at York University who has sponsored two Syrian refugee families.

The [government’s policy](#), which came into effect Dec. 19, places a limit of 1,000 sponsorship applications for the next year by groups of five people or more and community sponsors such as organizations.

It “forms part of a broader strategy to address the large backlog and long wait times in the Privately Sponsored Refugees category,” according to the government.

Nearly 39,000 Syrian refugees have [arrived in Canada](#) since November 2015, of which 13,700 have been privately sponsored. But Canada4Refugees, which represents private sponsorship groups, [estimated earlier this month](#) fewer than one-third of refugees who applied before April have arrived in Canada, with more than 5,000 applications still being processed.

Wood helped sponsor a family of six who are from near Aleppo and arrived in Canada this past June. The Syrian government [took full control](#) of the city, once the stronghold of the rebellion, on Thursday, marking President Bashar Assad’s most significant victory over opposition fighters since the uprising began five years ago.

“They’re worried about their family members,” said Wood. “We’re just starting a new sponsorship to try and raise the money for the woman’s sister, who’s got six kids, so a family of eight. News like this makes us wonder whether we’re going to be able to bring her and her kids. It’s absurd.”

Wood also helped sponsor a second family of four individuals who lost two children in the war. However, she said, they are stuck right now in Jordan because their applications haven’t been processed.

“We were expecting them a year ago, so even when the numbers were moving fast, they weren’t moving fast enough for people whose lives are in danger,” she said.

Seher Shafiq of Lifeline Syria, an organization that matches Canadian sponsors with families trying to flee the war, said their group alone has a backlog of about 2,000 refugees.

“We’re [encouraging people to fundraise](#) so that we can match some of these cases to sponsor groups and put them in line to be processed by the government,” said Shafiq. “When the picture of

Alan Kurdi came out, we had overwhelming amount of sponsors, so many so that we couldn't match them quick enough to our cases, but now we have an opposite situation where we've had people, some of them almost a year, waiting for sponsor groups."

Shafiq said the organization has helped bring 400 privately sponsored refugees to Canada, while another 800 have been matched with sponsors and whose cases are being processed by the government.

"There's definitely a perception that we've done a lot and the job is done. We definitely should be proud," she said. "Canada has been recognized on the world stage for taking action for this crisis but at the same time the need is so great that we often forget there's still so much to be done."

Syed Hussan, an organizer with immigrant and refugee group No One is Illegal, called the government's new policy a "tweak" to an already "disappointing" system.

"The Liberal government has taken a piecemeal approach and has therefore been unable to adequately respond to the needs of global refugee flows," Hussan said. "There's millions of refugees, millions, and Canada's taking so very few either as percentage of its population or as a percentage of its size."

The backlog is because the Liberals "have simply not hired enough people to process the applications," according to Hussan. He said those trying to flee the war will face the harshest consequences because of this.

"The key challenge is going to be that people will keep looking for alternative venues for safety and dignity," he said. "Syrians . . . who are stuck, who are going to try and make the journey they can through the perilous Mediterranean crossing and face death."

While it's unclear how the government will select which 1,000 applications to process next year, the cap has would-be sponsors feeling that raising the necessary funds might be an urgent matter — if, for example, applications are picked on a first-come, first-served basis.

An application cannot be processed until a certain minimum amount is raised, depending on the number of refugees one wishes to privately sponsor. It takes at least \$12,600 to sponsor one individual and \$27,000 for a family of four, according to Shafiq.

Wood is aiming to raise about \$60,000 that will be needed to bring the family of eight to Canada.

"We know it's going to be a long process even when the numbers are favourable but this could really slow things down," she said. "The worry is that they're in a conflict zone and as their kids get a little bit older, they get dragged into fighting. They're in danger both from the bombing, but they're also in danger of being dragged in against their will."

Read more about: [Syria](#)

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