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## Refugee sponsorship can be a long, complex process - here's how it works

By JOE FRIESEN

*Finding a group of people to commit to the financial and other responsibilities of private sponsorship is just the start*

**1. How private sponsorship works:** Canadians can sponsor migrants as part of a group of five or more people, through community sponsorship, or through one of the roughly 90 sponsorship agreement holders (a mix of faith groups and secular organizations) that have signed agreements with the federal government to receive and sponsor refugees. In 1979, in response to the Indochinese refugee crisis, sometimes referred to as the boat people, Canada became the first country to create a system for private sponsorship.

**2. Refugee family:** They must have left their country of origin, meet the refugee definition, have no other "durable solution," and be able to settle in Canada. One of the sticking points is the requirement for a formal document proving designation of refugee status from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees or the state in which they are living. Although it might seem evident that Syrians in neighbouring countries are refugees, the volume of their arrivals mean that getting registered and assessed by the UNHCR is difficult or can take time. "It is possible to get UNHCR registration in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Egypt, but not individual determination, which is what Canada requires for group of five sponsorship. Nor is it possible in Turkey, which has its own system for handling refugees.

**3. Getting a group together:** Organizations such as Lifeline Syria and others are encouraging Canadians to form groups of at least five to work together to sponsor refugees. These people must all recognize that they are taking on a serious task and will be responsible for the refugee family and their costs for up to year after arrival. A husband and wife can count separately as members of the group for the purposes of the application. Assembling a group often takes weeks or months. Potential sponsors must be 18, have some financial means, have no criminal record and reside in the community where the refugees will settle.

**4. Choosing whom to sponsor:** Most citizens who come forward to sponsor refugees have a person or family in mind, often relatives in crisis zones. Those who do not can get connected to a family through a sponsorship agreement holder (SAH) or through Ottawa's Blended Visa Office-Referred program (BVOR), which places refugees already approved by the Canadian government after a referral from the UNHCR.

**5. Filling out forms:** Refugee applicants need access to a computer to get Citizenship and Immigration Canada's application forms. That can be a challenge. Then they have to be able to read and write proficiently in English or French. The forms are complex, typically with more than 150 questions. Applicants must complete the same form any immigrant fills out, an IMM 0008, plus two additional forms known as schedule A and schedule 2.

Inaccuracies in the information on the form would seriously undermine the application when it reaches the interview stage. Refugee applicants often omit dependent family members, thinking that might harm their chances of being accepted (although it would not). In the time between application and evaluation, families often change. People marry, have children, are reunited with dependents. Some people are also sometimes advised by others to submit a particular story of persecution or their escape even if it differs from the truth because another person used that story and was approved by a Western country. The inconsistencies are usually easy to spot at the interview stage and can lead to delays or rejection of the application.

The forms are often filled out collaboratively, with several weeks of back-and-forth writing and checking between the family and the sponsors in Canada. It often takes a month or more.

**6. Submitting application to Winnipeg office:** The application of the sponsor and the refugee are submitted together to Citizenship and Immigration Canada's central processing office in Winnipeg. Syrian files are supposed to be expedited, so it is typically a matter of days to weeks before the files are opened and assessed. Many prospective sponsors fill the forms out incorrectly, particularly those not working with a sponsorship agreement holder. If the forms need to be sent back, the process is delayed. It is not uncommon for sponsors to resubmit twice or more.

If the forms are filled out correctly, the file is assigned a number.

The prospective sponsors are assessed to ensure they have the financial means to support a refugee family for at least 12 months, and must submit current T4 forms. A scale is used to determine how much money needs to be raised to meet this requirement, but it is in the range of \$25,000 to sponsor a family of four. Sponsors must have a detailed plan for helping the newcomers adapt to Canada, with specific points such as who in the group will handle which aspects of the family's integration. The government's stated goal is to have an approved file out of Winnipeg and sent to an overseas visa office within 30 days.

**7. Application arrives at visa office:** Once the documents arrive at the visa office, for example, in Lebanon, Egypt or Jordan, they have to wait until a Canadian visa officer is ready to process them. When the envelope reaches the top of the pile, a visa officer schedules an interview.

**8. The interview:** This is a crucial step that typically take 45 minutes, during which a Canadian visa officer has the heavy responsibility of determining a family's fate. The interview is typically done in less-than-ideal linguistic circumstances, as visa officers and refugee applicants might have varying levels of fluency or have to use a translator. The interview verifies and tests the information submitted in the application. Stories sometimes change, new family members are discovered and that can cause delays or even greater problems for the applicant. If they are found to be not credible, their application can be rejected, with no formal appeal mechanism. If the refugee family is approved, they will usually be told at the end of the interview.

**9. Security screening:** Refugee applicants are checked for criminality in the country where they are living and with Interpol for warrants or other information that might cause concern. Anyone involved in war crimes is not admissible to Canada. The Canadian Security Intelligence Service also must determine if the applicant could pose a threat to Canada. If a flag is raised on security screening and it requires a CSIS interview to investigate, that can delay the process by 18 months to 24 months.

**10. Medical:** If a family passes the interview stage, they must go to an approved physician to get medical clearance to enter Canada. Few candidates are excluded at this point (refugees who would be a medical burden cannot be excluded), but someone with active tuberculosis, for example, must be treated before they can travel. Expectant mothers are sometimes not encouraged to travel late in pregnancy. Sometimes medical conditions are flagged that will require follow-up in Canada. This process can take a couple of months.

**11. Travel arrangements:** If all conditions for acceptance are met, Canada refers the refugee family to the International Organization for Migration, which handles travel arrangements for all refugees. Refugees are responsible for their travel costs, but since most have little money, they are eligible for a travel loan of up to \$10,000 from the government of Canada. The IOM sends a notice of arrival to sponsors two weeks to four weeks before the refugees travel. That leaves only a little time for the sponsors to prepare for the new arrivals.

**12. Integration:** The refugees become permanent residents on landing in Canada. The sponsors are responsible for meeting them at the airport, arranging their transportation and helping them find a place to live. They must also help them get the children into school, learn how to navigate their new communities, obtain identification and manage all the other basics of life in Canada, from language to finding a job. They are also responsible for costs such as food for the first 12 months.

## ----- The difference between government-assisted and privately sponsored refugees

While privately sponsored refugees make up the bulk of the current 2,374 Syrians Canada has accepted, that is not the only way refugees enter Canada.

Government-assisted refugees are entirely supported by the Government of Canada or Quebec for up to one year or until they can support themselves.

However, between 2004 and 2013, the number of government-assisted refugees declined in relation to the number of privately sponsored refugees. In 2004, Canada welcomed 7,411 government-assisted refugees and 3,116 privately sponsored refugees from around the world. By 2013, privately sponsored refugees numbered 6,269 and government-assisted refugees 5,661. In 2014, the last year for which numbers are available, more government-assisted refugees (7,573) entered Canada than privately sponsored refugees (4,560), according to Citizenship and Immigration Canada.

Refugees can also enter Canada through the government's Blended Visa Office-Referred Program, which matches refugees identified by the UNHCR with private sponsors here. The government provides up to six months of financial support, and private sponsors make up the remaining six months and provide up to a year of social and emotional support. In 2013, the first year of the program, Canada accepted 152 blended-visa refugees, and 177 in 2014.

According to Citizenship and Immigration Canada, of the 2,374 Syrian refugees resettled in Canada between January, 2014, and Aug. 24, 2015, 188 were government-assisted, 857 were privately sponsored and 29 were blended-visa-office referred.

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