



Housing Stability for High-Needs Newcomers in Waterloo Region

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About the Problem

Housing is a key social determinant of health. The current housing crisis is being felt by the majority of Canadians; however, we know many of its impacts are disproportionately affecting newcomers.

At Reception House, we see this impact firsthand. We serve the most vulnerable and highest needs newcomers. The majority of our clients live in market-rent housing that is inadequate for their family size, unsuitable for their accessibility needs, and extremely unaffordable (over 50% of income spent on housing).

We see this problem most acutely for government-assisted refugees (GARs). GARs receive federal income support during their first year in Canada. This income support is higher than Ontario Works rates. The majority of GARs have low to no English language skills, have high and complex medical needs, and require intensive supports, such as Case Management and life skills training, to adjust to independent living in Canada. Few are employed by month 13 when they make the transition to Ontario Works.

We are seeing the impacts of severe income insecurity, primarily driven by the cost of housing, unfold in the lives of our clients. Families are coming to us for support navigating evictions, unpaid utilities, and homelessness. To compound the problem, some Regional housing and homelessness services have eligibility criteria that exclude people who have lived in the Region for under 1 year or who are not receiving *provincial* income support. We know this is happening, but do not have the data to quantify the problem.

However, we don't only want to better contextualize the problem. We want to reimagine a better system. What would an adequate resettlement system that promotes housing stability look like? What would its impacts be? How could we design it so it meets the needs of the most vulnerable newcomers to our Region?





About the Community Partner

About Reception House

Reception House is a non-profit, community-based organization that delivers quality settlement, integration and support services to government-assisted refugees (GARs) and other high-needs newcomers in Waterloo Region. Since 1987, Reception House has assisted thousands of refugees rebuild their lives in Canada through specialized programs and services designed to help them become established in their new communities.

Reception House is committed to providing a welcoming, positive and successful settlement experience to newcomers through its core services of temporary accommodation and housing support; health and well-being support; employment services; and integration skills training.

Impact on the Organization

Reception House is embarking on building a new housing development in the City of Kitchener. This project will create 30 units of affordable housing, plus on-site wrap-around services. Some of the units will be dedicated to temporary accommodation for government-assisted refugees (federal funding dictates that GARs can only stay in temporary accommodation for 21 days and must move to rental housing as quickly as possible). However, other units will be deeply affordable (ODSP-rates) transitional housing units for the highest-needs newcomers.

We anticipate an occupancy date of Fall 2027.

The impact on the organization will be two-fold:

1. This will be the first transitional housing owned and operated by Reception House. We anticipate that the need for these units will outweigh the number available. We want to create guidelines and transparent eligibility criteria that will ensure our transitional housing units target the most vulnerable families we serve.
2. We have launched a Capital campaign to support the development of this project. We need data-driven research that shows the impact of our project to donors and the community. This is particularly crucial given we are at a moment in time when public support for immigration is souring and immigrants are facing blame for Canada's housing crisis.





Potential Connections & Data Sources

Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba (IRCOM)

To our knowledge operate one of the only transitional housing programs for refugees and newcomers in Canada. They have received funding from CMHC to study the impact of their model on the long term impacts on the population they serve.

Immigration Partnership Waterloo Region

Has published research on the needs of newcomers to our Region, including yearly newcomer surveys with questions about housing.

Region of Waterloo – Community Services

Have begun journey mapping families in the Region's Housing Stability System. Their focus is on families in general. Recent newcomer families also face additional barriers to accessing this system (language, immigration status, residency requirements, length of tenure on the community housing list, etc.).

Region of Waterloo – Homelessness and Supportive Housing

Run a Refugees in Shelter Working Group. They collect some HIFIS data about refugees in the shelter system. However, "refugee" may not be well defined (ex. Not distinguish between refugee claimants, government-assisted refugees, refugee vs. Newcomer, etc.).

Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada

In 2024, IRCC released an evaluation of the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) for GARs. The evaluation touches on the impacts of insufficient income support rates for GARs and lack of housing suitability and affordability.

<https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/reports-statistics/evaluations/evaluation-of-the-refugee-resettlement-program.html#toc-11.6>

Balsillie School of International Affairs

A new multi-year study that tracked newcomer Somali, Syrian and Afghan families through the pandemic indicates food insecurity in the region is not just a matter of insufficient food — it is linked to housing pressures, transportation gaps, unstable employment, rising prices, gendered labour and mental health.

