

We may have them Refugees may not.

SPONSORSHIP REPORT

Processing time is long Is there a faster way?

By Ariana Yaftali

Long processing times have become very frustrating for both refugees overseas and their relatives in Canada.

In some Canadian visa posts it takes a few years before a case moves forward to the interview and medical examination stage. This creates uncertainty and disappointments for sponsored refugees and their Manitoba relatives.

For example, refugees keep waiting in uncertain situations and face many difficulties in the host/asylum country as well as here in Winnipeg. Local relatives of sponsored refugees feel helpless. There is nothing they can do to reduce the processing time. Due to the long processing times, refugees often think that their families in Canada no longer care about them. This creates more frustration for co-sponsors (local relatives and friends) who already try their best to help their relatives and their friends.

On a daily basis, we, at Manitoba Interfaith Immigration Council, receive inquiries from relatives and friends who have sponsored them a long time ago, but there is no word yet on a scheduled interview date. This is something that no one can help as cases have to go through the usual processing channel. Here are a few examples of what families in Winnipeg have shared with us.

"My family has been sponsored by my church almost three years ago. They still have not heard anything from the Canadian visa post. What can I do?" expressed Adam.

In the May/June 2007 issue of West Central Streets when Carol Barton asked a few people what kind of recreation activities they liked to do, one refugee newcomer Dad replied, "I think of my family back home. If they were here, they would be interested in talk. I don't do anything. I send all my money to them. My kid likes soccer. I cry every day because they aren't here."

"I cannot concentrate on my daily life. I get a call from my family in the refugee camp every day asking me for help. I submitted a sponsorship through my community and am sending them money every month. I do not really know what else I can do for them," said Majok, a concerned family member in Winnipeg.

"I do not enjoy my life in Canada. I think of my family day and night to come and join me but there is no word on their interview yet. They have been sponsored two years ago. They have been in the refugee camp for almost ten years now. Please do something about it," expressed Halima who is asking for a faster way.

As you can see, families and friends in Canada are extremely concerned about the refugees they have sponsored. First they seek help to find a local sponsor to submit a sponsorship application for their families/friends. Next, they work hard to take care of themselves as well as their sponsored refugees. For

"I sponsored my family nearly three years ago through my community, but they have not heard anything yet. I am worried about them staying in the refugee camp in Kenya for a long time," said Kifle, a worried family member in Winnipeg.

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For comments/questions/suggestions please contact

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The genius of Canada's refugee sponsorship program

Eighteen years after escaping Vietnam, 13 stateless Vietnamese families are coming to Ottawa through Project Freedom at Last. So writes Cassandra Drudi in the November 6, 2008 issue of the Ottawa Citizen. Under Humanitarian and Compassionate (H&C) provisions Canada is allowing these families to settle in Ottawa. And this is not by mere coincidence.

Thirty years ago Canada's Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) program came into being to rescue many so called Vietnamese boat people. Marion Dewar, the then Mayor of Ottawa, and Flora MacDonald, the then Minister of Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC), were largely instrumental in bringing the PSR program to life.

In his recently published book entitled Gift of Freedom: How Ottawa welcomed the Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian refugees, Brian Buckley pays tribute to Mayor Marion Dewar's vision, and to all the people in the Ottawa area who helped make it happen. In all, approximately 4000 South East Asian refugees were sponsored by groups in the Ottawa and Hull region.

Since the inception of this program, 190,000 refugees have been sponsored by faith and community groups across Canada. The genius of the PSR program is evinced in that it has endured the test of time, and in that, by now, it has benefitted so many refugees from so many parts of the world. The program has expanded far beyond what anyone imagined.

It is noteworthy that to this day it is indeed rare for a privately sponsored refugee newcomer to require social assistance, and that the transportation loan program for refugees has the highest rate of repayment of all Government of Canada loans programs.

Over the past 30 years, groups throughout Manitoba have sponsored thousands of refugees from many parts of the globe. Through the PSR program local groups have come to the aid of vulnerable, uprooted people urgently in need of protection and a safe place to live.

Through the PSR program refugees have been rescued from their plight and, in many cases, reunited with family members, relatives and friend already living in Manitoba. Wives and husbands have been reunited. Close relatives have been found and brought to join refugee newcomer families already living in our province.

For refugee newcomers, adapting to our culture may, in some ways, be as tough as becoming acclimatized to our harsh winters, but refugee newcomers have, with their indomitable spirit and resilience, prevailed. Not only have they endured, they have firmly embraced what living in Manitoba is all about. Soon after arriving, most refugee newcomers thrive in what for them is a new and very different cultural context and they are proud to contribute to our society as the loyal and appreciative citizens they have become.

But, not only the sponsored refugees have benefitted. On numerous occasions members of sponsoring group have asserted that they gained as much or more than did the refugees they sponsored. Members of sponsoring group often feel privileged to have gotten to know a person or a family from another culture. Many sponsoring group members feel that sponsoring refugees is a tangible and personal way of putting their core beliefs into action. It gives members of sponsoring groups the opportunity to be in solidarity with refugees – refugees who surely deserve to be recognized as quintessential survivors.

In 2007 a total of 671 privately sponsored refugees arrived in Manitoba. This number includes 25 individuals who were members of refugee newcomer families with special needs.

Groups who sponsor refugees can justifiably be proud of their accomplishments, and can count themselves fortunate to have had the opportunity to assist those who have overcome the very real fear of persecution and are now rebuilding their lives.

Local faith groups, "teams" of faith groups, community groups, and groups of interested individuals regularly undertake to sponsor refugees with special needs, refugees referred to them by Canadian visa posts, refugees identified through Canada's group processing projects, and refugees with strong family ties in Manitoba.

How will you be involved in sponsoring refugees this year? For more information about sponsoring refugees, talk to the people in your local faith or community group; contact the head office of your religious organization; or call John at 977 1000, Manitoba Interfaith Immigration Council (Welcome Place).

Processing time ... (continued)

example, most of these families in Canada provide financial support to their families overseas. Those refugees rely on the support of the families here in Canada. Yet, there is no faster way to bring them!

Giving protection to refugees is the responsibility of all of us. The host/asylum country is responsible for the well being of refugees. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is also responsible for ensuring the basic needs of the refugees are met, monitoring their situation, and finding durable solution to the needs of this uprooted population.

The families and friends in Canada have sponsored their refugee families. But they cannot do anything to expedite the cases to protect the refugees.

We can only seek our government's help to provide permanent protection to sponsored refugees sooner by expediting their cases. Protection for refugees needs immediate attention. Therefore, processing time should be consistent with the essence of timely protection and immediate attention to reduce processing time!