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What Does it Take to House a Syrian Refugee?

Supporting Refugee Housing and Resettlement Beyond the Syrian Refugee Crisis

By Ray Silvius, Hani Ataan Al-Ubeady,
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JANUARY
2017

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ISBN 978-1-77125-325-3

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the generous financial support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada through the Manitoba Research Alliance grant: Partnering for Change – Community-based solutions for Aboriginal and inner-city poverty. We would also like to thank the University of Winnipeg for providing funding through their Work-Study Program to support this project. Finally, we would like to thank Rita Chahal and the entire staff at Welcome Place for their ongoing support for this research.

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Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en
sciences humaines du Canada

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Introduction

In this work we demonstrate the specific constellation of events, initiatives, and supports that contributed to housing refugees from Syria who arrived in Manitoba beginning in November 2015. Relative to those of other recent refugee arrivals to Canada, the ‘Syrian Case’ has been unique, insofar as a considerable amount of national attention was devoted to the matter. The arrival of Syrians has been politically polarizing — indeed, it became a decisive issue during the 2015 federal election in Canada and served as a touchstone for arguments for and against immigration to Canada, in general, as well as supportive and reactionary sentiments about the presence of Muslims in Canadian society. We are of the opinion that even in such a climate of polarization, the arrival of Syrians has unleashed a considerable amount of good will and support in official government structures and Canadian society alike. Such good will and supports have translated into some positive housing and settlement outcomes for Syrian refugees.

Nonetheless, in this work we critically assess the Syrian case in Canada’s refugee resettlement initiatives according to two lines of analysis. The first concerns the presence of private and voluntary initiatives towards the welcoming and

resettlement of Syrians. We commend the selfless and kind-hearted acts of the large number of Canadians who, through direct sponsorship, donations of time, money and materials, or cultivating a welcoming environment, have made the resettlement of Syrians in Canadian society possible. However, while the private initiatives of Canadian citizens towards sponsoring, resettling, and in myriad ways, simply supporting incoming Syrian refugees are to be lauded, we argue that the scope of such initiatives must be considered alongside an investigation into the roles played by government to support the housing and resettlement of refugees. In short, the public sector, public funding, and ‘political will’ were crucial to ensuring positive experiences for the first Syrian arrivals, and they will be central to ensuring similar experiences for those who arrive in the future.

A second and related line of analysis concerns the possible role of provincial policy mechanisms in producing positive housing outcomes for resettled refugees. We wish to move beyond private and charitable contributions to demonstrate the central role of housing supports in achieving successful housing outcomes for Syrian refugees. This necessitates reconsidering what is now a rap-

idly closing — if not already closed — window of housing support for Syrian refugees that existed during the immediate aftermath of the initial influx of Syrians. This influx can be dated roughly from the end of December 2015 to April 2016. We document the effects of such supports throughout the paper with a focus on both *transitional housing*, on the one hand, and *rent-supplemented long-term housing*, on the other.

We also wish to situate the labour performed by Community Based Organizations (CBOs) and demonstrate the indispensable role of housing supports in Syrian refugee housing and resettlement. In this work, we focus on the efforts of Welcome Place, the housing arm of the Winnipeg-based Manitoba Interfaith Immigration Council (MIIC), which was responsible for receiving and finding housing for many Syrian Government-Assisted Refugees (GARS) who resettled in Winnipeg (Accueil Francophone also settled Syrian GARS). As the first point of contact for many GARS arriving in Winnipeg, Welcome Place is responsible for both providing their transitional housing upon arrival and helping to find their first long-term home. This is done best through supports to the organization and the provision of subsidized units for incoming GARS, which are crucial towards securing adequate and affordable housing for the all important period of resettlement. Our argument is that refugee resettlement and finding adequate housing situations for incoming refugees necessitate public and social resources that exceed purely voluntary initiatives.

The intention behind this piece is to demonstrate that Welcome Place's achievements in resettling and housing Syrian refugees in Manitoba were augmented by the increase of resources devoted towards staffing, infrastructure, and rent supplementation. Our concern, which in our experience is echoed by many within Winnipeg's refugee-serving community, is that the temporary nature of such supports has jeopardized the community's ability to serve ongoing arriv-

ing Syrian refugees. Moreover, in demonstrating the successes achieved by Welcome Place in their efforts towards resettling and housing Syrian refugees, we wish to contribute to efforts to improve the housing outcomes for *all* refugees, irrespective of country of origin, provincial jurisdiction, or political climate. In other words, with the initial influx of Syrians now over, we run the risk of having exited the 'honeymoon period', in which public attention, good will, and the voluntary provision of resources were at their respective peaks. In such a climate, durable supports and public commitments towards transitional housing, long-term housing, and the necessary labour to administer refugee housing and settlement are required.

The Syrian case demonstrates some key elements. First, it demonstrates an unprecedented number of arrivals in a compressed period of time. Second, it differs from previous trends in Manitoba, whereby Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSRs) were outpacing GARS in recent years. Third, it was met with a surge in budgetary support from the provincial and federal governments. Fourth, there was a large mobilization of private supports for government programs intended for GARS. The long-term consequences of the 'privatization' of public programs, and the stability of such mechanisms should be scrutinized. Finally, there is fear of settlement limbo, if not regression, should initial supports not be made permanent. With organizations such as Welcome Place set to administer the housing and settlement supports for a new influx of Syrian refugees, the positive effects of those initial supports and the challenges faced by Syrian home seekers and organizations that serve them in the absence of such supports must be considered.

Following this introduction, the work proceeds as follows. We first outline our methodology and describe the larger research of which this piece is a part. We then sketch the national political climate surrounding the arrival of Syrian refugees beginning in 2015, as well as federal

commitments towards the housing and resettlement of Syrian refugees. We also highlight the housing experiences of Syrians in other (non-Manitoban) jurisdictions and consider private and charitable mechanisms that were established to govern the resettlement and housing of Syr-

ian refugees. In the following section we provide details of the Manitoba case, with a particular focus on the efforts and initiatives of Welcome Place. The conclusion includes recommendations for addressing the housing needs of GARs, from Syria and elsewhere, moving forward.

Methodology and Project Description

Our specific initiative to explore the housing and settlement initiatives targeted at Manitoba's incoming Syrian refugees originated in a dilemma. Our research team was in the midst of another, much larger initiative: a three-year study, which is funded by the Manitoba Research Alliance (MRA), in which we document the housing experiences and trajectories of twenty-one newly arrived PSRS and GARS. This larger research initiative is complex and involves the efforts of employees at Welcome Place to provide information, assist with interpreting, assist in the recruitment of interview subjects, and provide general expertise. In December 2015, we realized that Welcome Place employees were being inundated with requests from the federal and provincial governments to help coordinate the arrival, housing and settlement of incoming Syrian refugees. The number of incoming Syrian refugees relative to the number of refugees that Welcome Place was accustomed to settling and housing was staggering and prompted an immediate response from the organization. We elaborate on these numbers and the effects that incoming Syrian refugees, as well as the expectations of expedient settlement of them, had on the organization in a subsequent section. It was both ethically challenging and

practically impossible to request the same level of support from the organization towards our research endeavor at such a time. Indeed, this reflects a reality of community-based research: the research itself rests on a foundation of expertise and inputs from already busy employees of community-based organizations, and yet the day to day professional obligations that such employees have to their organization and constituents served by their organization make it difficult to find time to devote to research endeavours.

Nonetheless, the influx of a large number of refugees from Syria offered us an opportunity for a 'natural' social experiment: given that there was a large degree of political will and popular attention towards the situation faced by Syrian refugees in Canada, what would the corresponding effect be on the refugees' settlement and housing experiences? How might these compare to the experiences of non-Syrian refugees? As we argue throughout this work, the Syrian case prompted unprecedented, albeit differentiated, responses and supports from multiple governments and private organizations/individuals in Canada. Moreover, should such attention subside, would there be a longer-term legacy of supports and initiatives devoted to the settlement and housing of Syrian

refugees in Manitoba, specifically, and Canada, in general? Finally, what lessons could be learned from the Syrian case to support the settlement and housing outcomes of all refugees arriving in Manitoba/Canada? Realizing that quickly grasping an understanding of the Syrian case could have an important contribution to make to wider discussions within the refugee serving community, we decided to study it to the best of our abilities.

We faced a methodological and ethical dilemma in executing this research, given how overwhelmingly busy Welcome Place personnel were with the day-to-day business of housing the incoming refugees from Syria and coordinating aspects of the settlement response: how could we continue to be of service to the organization, and the sector, without becoming a burden or a distraction? As organized statistical data and representative information on such new arrivals did not exist, we came to the conclusion that the best way to understand the phenomenon was ‘from the ground up,’ with a focus on the day-to-day efforts by staff at Welcome Place and within the sector to house Syrian refugees. We have no pretense to having comprehensive knowledge of the situation faced by organizations and employees within the refugee serving sector in their collective attempts to settle and house incoming Syrian refugees. However, we sought to gain access to the ground level discussions and initiatives pertaining to the housing of Syrian refugees happening within Welcome Place and MIIC. Not only would such day-to-day occurrences ultimately determine the success and failure of efforts to house Syrian refugees, it is through the prism of work at MIIC that we are privy to the complex, subtle, and sometimes seemingly innocuous decisions that are made on the matter of housing Syrian refugees. To answer the question ‘what does it take to house a Syrian refugee’, we wanted a glimpse into the work of those who were charged with the professional responsibility for doing so.

One way that we were able to access the organization was by placing our researchers in po-

sitions in which they first participate in the act of seeking housing for Syrian arrivals and then later reflect upon these experiences. For ten Fridays, two of our researchers (Emily Halldorson and Dylan Chyz-Lund) spent time with Welcome Place housing personnel performing different tasks. All of this occurred under the direction of another one of our authors, Hani Ataan Al-Ubeady, who had served as a Housing Counsellor at Welcome Place. The benefit of this approach is that our insights are derived from the ‘habitus’ within which decisions pertaining to housing were made (see Wacquant, 2011: 81–92; see also Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994: 248–261). One of the tasks for our researchers was to assist in the development of a housing inventory of available units that would be provided to the Manitoba government and subsequently available to Welcome Place’s clients. Specifically, their job was to develop an inventory of available units whose landlords were agreeable to having their units inspected for admittance into the rent supplement program. They created a list that was forwarded to the province weekly. Once accepted, those units would be available to Welcome Place by accessing the province’s database of rent-supplemented units. Another task was to accompany the housing teams, which were recently established, to assist in finding housing for Welcome Place’s Syrian clientele. We expand upon the parameters of these housing teams below.

During their time spent with Welcome Place, our researchers observed housing initiatives and efforts being undertaken by Welcome Place staff while participating in work themselves. The methodological advantage of doing this was that it enabled us to become privy to and document ongoing housing initiatives and efforts without being more obtrusive and demanding of Welcome Place staff members’ time. With such insights developed, we could proceed with more direct and specific lines of questioning to enable us to map out the MIIC model of Syrian refugee housing initiatives.

Syrian Arrivals in the Canadian Context

The issue of resettling refugees in Canada from the Syrian conflict became politicized prior to the 2015 federal election. Then Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his Conservative Government had received pressure, including from within his own cabinet, to increase the amount of Syrian refugees being resettled in Canada. In January 2015, the Conservatives pledged to resettle 10,000 Syrian refugees over the next three years, an increase over the quota of 1,300 that the government had already allotted. However, Harper's condition was that the focus be on particular religious minorities from within the country (Levitz 2016b). In January 2015, "areas of focus" were made part of a refugee triage system, effectively circumventing United Nations legislation prohibiting discrimination in the selection of GARS, by allowing certain cases to be expedited while others were not. "Areas of focus" included ethnic and religious minorities (ie. Christians, Yazidis, etc.), people identifying as LGBT, people who speak English or French, people who have family in Canada, and people who have run a business (see Levitz 2016c and Petrou 2015).

The admittance and resettling of Syrian refugees in Canada became a significant issue dur-

ing the 2015 federal election, particularly after a picture of the body of a Syrian child named Alan Kurdi washed up on a Turkish beach exploded on social media. The three major national parties — the Conservatives, New Democrats, and Liberals — all campaigned on policies committing to increasing the intake of Syrian refugees. The Liberals promised a minimum of 25,000, however this number would be reached with significant collaboration with the private sector, through private sponsorship, and by way of the Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) Program¹ (see Levitz 2016a). Arguably, such a commitment to Syrian refugees during the federal election created a political imperative for the eventually victorious Liberals to act upon once in office. The federal Liberals made a series of moves to facilitate the resettlement of Syrian refugees.

- On November 9, 2015 a new Cabinet Ad Hoc Committee was created to help facilitate the resettlement of Syrian refugees (Office of the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship 2015).
- On November 24, 2015, the government announced a five phase plan to resettle 25,000 refugees (identification, selection/

processing, transportation, welcoming, and settlement/integration). Furthermore, they committed up to \$678 million over six years toward the resettlement of Syrians, of which \$325–377 million was allocated for settlement and integration. The government promoted the hashtag #welcomerefugees with the intention of increasing public dialogue and involvement in the matter of Syrian refugee resettlement (Government of Canada 2015).

- On January 26, 2016, the federal government announced the Syrian Family Links Initiative in partnership with Catholic Crosscultural Services to help connect Syrian refugees abroad with private sponsors through the help of a refugee's family in Canada (Government of Canada 2016a).
- On February 5, 2016, the government encouraged municipalities outside traditional GAR resettlement locations to develop a Community Partnership Settlement Plan and apply to join the Refugee Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP). Communities outside of major cities have traditionally not administered RAP and been locations for the resettlement of GARS. During the Syrian response, these communities were encouraged to develop a plan for the resettlement of GARS in partnership with social service agencies and other community partners. Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) facilitated an application process in which a community had to demonstrate how they would meet the educational, employment, housing, social, and other needs of refugees. If accepted, that community could then begin welcoming GARS (Government of Canada 2016b).
- The Canadian Forces spent \$6.4 million to renovate and upgrade housing units on five

military bases to accommodate refugees (as a last resort option). The money was absorbed by the Department of National Defense's regular budget, and as of February 29, 2016, none of the housing had been used (Zimonjic 2016).

- On May 9, 2016, more than 40 additional staff in the Middle East were devoted to processing Syrian PRS applications up to March 31, 2016. The target for processing cases opened before March 31, 2016 is late 2016 or early 2017 (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2016a).

As we demonstrate below, as a highly visible political issue to which the federal Liberals devoted significant political capital, the Syrian refugee crisis has prompted mechanisms, tools, supports, and methods for public engagement for which there is no parallel in Canada's recent history of refugee resettlement. In retrospect, the attention that Alan Kurdi's tragic death garnered provided a stimulus to the private sponsorship of Syrian refugees in Canada and thrust the specific case of Syrian refugees into the national spotlight (CBC News 2016c). Arguably, Syrian refugees specifically became a matter of greater national attention than had been the matter of refugees *as such* and contributed to a spike in material, financial, and political support for Syrian refugees in particular. The disproportionate attention granted to resettling Syrian refugees relative to resettling those of other countries of origin is evidenced in the discrepancies devoted to each at the level of public awareness and engagement. Indeed, the hashtag #welcomerefugees, which is actively promoted by the Government of Canada, denotes the welcoming and resettling of Syrian refugees alone in government campaigns. Such is evidenced in a prominent webpage of the Government of Canada (<http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/refugees/welcome/index.asp>), wherein one can get the latest updates on the government's efforts to resettle Syrian refugees, including the

number that have arrived in Canada since November 4, 2015 (which total 30,862 at the time of writing September 2016). The Government of Canada has developed a comprehensive map to detail the destination communities for incoming Syrian refugees (<http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/refugees/welcome/map.asp>). From the best of our discernment, there is no comparable website, index or tool available to the public for refugees resettling in Canada *in general*.

At the time of writing (September 2016), 317 Canadian communities had welcomed Syrian refugees in some fashion or another under federal programs, a figure which excludes Quebec, which is responsible for approving refugee sponsorships to the province under the Canada-Quebec Accord. This figure includes eleven communities in Manitoba (Altona, Arborg, Brandon, Carman, Dauphin, Flin Flon, Kleefeld, Morden, Steinbach, Winkler, and Winnipeg). Of these, only Winnipeg has admitted Government Assisted Refugees (a total of 840, compared to 74 Syrian PSRs which have arrived to the city since November 4, 2015). Eight of the communities have relied exclusively on the BVOR Program (Winnipeg has also received 53 Syrian BVOR-class refugees).

At a national level, significant federal resources were devoted to mechanisms to promote civic engagement on the matter of Syrian refugee resettlement. Such civic engagement, and the corresponding private and voluntary mechanisms through which settlement is facilitated, may be thought of as part of trends towards the 'privatization' of refugee resettlement, wherein the government's role becomes less of a direct funder of core supports as it concentrates its efforts on facilitating and mobilizing private initiatives and resources for the purposes of refugee resettlement. In Manitoba, the recent tendency has been to increase the number of Privately Sponsored Refugees relative to the number of GARS, a tendency we demonstrate later in this paper. This reflects a longer legacy of community-based advocacy:

private sponsors and community groups have long sought greater autonomy vis-à-vis government structures to select and sponsor refugees. Nonetheless, the success of private sponsorship is predicated on the willingness and ability of voluntary associations to support the social and financial needs of refugees during resettlement (see Silvius forthcoming).

The Syrian case in Manitoba challenged such privatization insofar as: 1) Syrian refugees arriving in Manitoba have been predominantly GARS to date; and 2) Considerable government funding and support was mobilized at both the provincial and federal level. In such a scenario, successful settlement is predicated on the availability of adequate, affordable housing, and the corresponding financial support to facilitate initial housing and settlement. As we demonstrate, mechanisms established during the first group of Syrian arrivals led to a larger range of options than those experienced by other GARS in recent years.

The Government of Canada retains 'conventional' government roles in refugee administration and settlement. The former is beyond the scope of this paper. We can consider direct funding to refugee serving organizations or the use of rent subsidies and/or public housing as evidence of the latter. An emerging governing function as it pertains to Syrian refugee resettlement can be found in the organization of informational resources that may assist Canadian citizens, community-serving organizations, and private entities to participate in the Syrian refugee settlement effort (see Province of Manitoba 2016a). For example, the Refugee Sponsorship Training Program is funded by IRCC and administered by Catholic Crosscultural Services. In its own words,

The Refugee Sponsorship Training Program (RSTP) is a program designed to support the Sponsorship Agreement Holders (SAHs) of Canada, their Constituent Groups, Groups of

Five and Community Sponsors on a national level (excl. Quebec). The objective of the RSTP is to address their information and on-going training needs as well as the initial information needs of sponsored refugees.

Source: Refugee Sponsorship Training Program 2016

Similarly, government has played a partnering and coordinating role at the level of housing practices. On January 20, 2016, Canadian Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship John McCallum announced that the Government would be partnering with Lifeline Syria to temporarily house GARS with sponsors waiting for their PSRS to arrive, taking pressure off settlement agencies and avoiding hotel use (CBC News 2016d). McCallum later cancelled this plan citing the government's "duty of care" and a desire not to move refugees to one home only to have to move them again later (The Canadian Press 2016).

However, our focus here is on how the private/community side of Syrian resettlement exceeds that which is contained within existing private sponsorship mechanisms. One such initiative is the Welcome Fund — a large private and charitable initiative established for the purposes of resettling Syrian refugees. Through the Welcome Fund, an entity called Community Foundations Canada (CFC) disburses funds to community organizations across Canada, mostly through the local community foundations. For example, the Winnipeg Foundation disburses Welcome Fund grants to Winnipeg-based organizations. The CFC represents a network of 191 such foundations. The Welcome Fund was established on December 10, 2015 with a \$500,000 donation from Manulife Financial. This amount was matched by Community Foundations of Canada (Venn 2015). On December 16, 2015, Canadian National Railway donated \$5 million to the fund. Donald Arthur Guloien, President and Chief Executive Officer at Manulife, stated at the time that "CN has

showed tremendous leadership and generosity with its support of the Government's plan to settle 25,000 Syrian refugees in Canada" (Bervoets 2015). John McCallum indicated in March 2016 that the goal of the fund was to raise \$50 million for the purposes of supporting Syrian refugee settlement efforts. At that point, the fund had attracted \$30 million, with donations coming from banks, insurance companies, and the automotive industry (CBC News 2016e).

In addition to lauding contributions from the private sector, the Welcome Fund's architects envision the fund as being capable of responding to settlement needs identified by local settlement agencies. The five stated principles of the fund are as follows:

- "Do what's best and align our resources with refugees arriving in our communities;"
- "Use funding for the highest priorities, recognizing that there's not enough to fulfill all needs;"
- "Stay true to the purpose of the Welcome Fund, but be nimble enough to respect and respond to local needs shared by communities;"
- "Look for opportunities to build a legacy of lasting relationships and best practices;"
- "Respond to the urgent nature of the situation, while keeping an eye on sustainability and a focus on the long-term" (Lyons 2016).

On the fund's own webpage, a promotional article written in June 2016 describes the fund's impact in the following manner:

Now, 150 days since the Welcome Fund's creation we have activated our community foundation network to support Canadian organizations helping government-sponsored refugees settle in 28 communities in every province through rent subsidies, emergency loan funds, urgent mental health care, start-

up kits of household goods, language and employment training, and much more.

Source: Lyons 2016

Indeed, numerous immigrant and refugee serving organizations across Canada have received CFC funds to enable various aspects of Syrian refugee housing and resettlement. A timeline of organizations receiving CFC funds looks as follows. On February 11, 2016, the Calgary Catholic Immigration Society received \$600,000 for the purpose of providing ‘housing supports’ (Bervoets 2016a). On March 11, 2016 the London United for Refugees received \$250,000 for loans for renters and housing subsidies (Bervoets 2016b). On March 15, 2016, the Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia (ISANS) and the Community Foundation of Nova Scotia received \$200,000 for housing support for people with disabilities or need for larger units (Bervoets 2016c). On March 16, 2016, the Foundation of Greater Montreal received \$750,000 (Bervoets 2016d). On March 17, 2016, the Winnipeg Foundation received \$500,000 to disburse to local agencies. The first disbursements included \$150,000 to Welcome Place and \$75,000 to the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba (IRCOM). With these funds, Welcome Place established the Bed in a Bag Program, which provided families with linens and utensils. IRCOM used the funds to support families in their transitional housing complex (Bervoets 2016e). On March 18, 2016, the Immigrant Social Services of BC received \$500,000 (Bervoets 2016f). On April 11, 2016, \$250,000 went to Hamilton’s Wesley Urban Ministries for housing allowances and emergency funding to support housing stability and prevent evictions (Bervoets 2016g). On May 4, 2016, the Community Foundation of Ottawa received \$450,000 to distribute to the Catholic Centre for Immigrants, Ottawa Community Immigrant Services Organization and World Skills (Venn 2016a). On May 10, 2016, \$175,000 went to the Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership through the Kitchen-

er and Waterloo Community Foundation (Venn 2016b). On May 24, 2016, \$750,000 was granted to a new ‘cross-sectoral leadership group’ (business, City, landlords, settlement agencies) led by the Toronto Foundation addressing the housing affordability gap (Barton 2016).

A brief analysis of the CFC, its funding sources and its methods of disbursement demonstrates a prevailing trend within refugee resettlement: the increased significance of private funding in the total fiscal and budgetary outlook of refugee serving organization, including funds and programs which are intended to serve GARS. The argument in favour of such funding mechanisms is that they provide a way to diversify an organization’s funding base in a context in which baseline public funding is insufficient to tend to myriad organizational and client needs.

However, the state of insufficient public funding and the itemized nature of private funding, whereby it is attached to specific, individual components of a refugee serving organization’s overall resettlement and housing services, warrant greater scrutiny, as the services which are provided by way of such mechanisms remain contingent on ongoing private donations. Moreover, our fear is that the public attention and enthusiasm devoted to the welcoming, resettling, housing, and supporting will wane as Syrian refugees continue to arrive in Canada, leaving a vacuum of material, social, and emotional supports. Such a vacuum can only be prevented by persistent and durable government funding.

The CFC is one of several non-profit organizations that initially accepted and administered donations for the purposes of Syrian refugee resettlement (see *Philanthropic Foundations Canada 2016*). Since that time, individual initiatives have proliferated to a staggering degree, and this warrants a deeper analysis than is possible here. However, one illustrative example is the following. IKEA Canada established a program to transfer funds to enable settlement organization to purchase IKEA home furnishings for Syr-

ian families (IKEA Corporate News 2015). IKEA's Refugee Settlement Support Program committed \$180,000 to support refugee resettlement in Canada. Registered charities could apply online for up to \$5000 worth of IKEA products. In order to be eligible, the charity must be supporting at least one household living within 100 km from an IKEA store. The campaign closed on March 31, 2016 (see Chan 2015 and Lum 2015).

Further details of this example are not publicly available; however, the known parameters help illustrate the idea that temporary corporate good will is insufficient for the sustained housing, settlement, and integration needs of refugees. Moreover, organizations such as Welcome

Place have had to devote a considerable amount of time, energy, and human resources to coordinating the private contributions made by individuals for the purposes of assisting Syrians. As we will see in the next section, the success of this coordinated response was dependent on increased resources being made for the purposes of transitional housing, longer-term housing, and human resources. As organizations like Welcome Place anticipate a 'second wave' of Syrian refugees in the near future, it is important that we revisit the dynamics of the initial response, the supports it took to house Syrian refugees, and what it took to place incoming Syrian GARS in 'homes, not hotels.'

‘Homes, Not Hotels’: The Manitoba Experience in Housing Syrian Refugees

The cornerstone of successful refugee resettlement remains access to quality and affordable housing. Nonetheless, such housing is difficult to secure for refugees. Both points are well substantiated in academic literature. Immigrants and refugees, regardless of category or classification, experience overcrowded and inadequate housing, precarious rental status, and unsustainable amounts of income dedicated to housing (Carter, Garcea and Enns 2010; Fiedler et al. 2006; Francis and Hiebert 2011; Murdie and Logan 2011; Preston et al. 2009; Preston et al. 2011; Sherrell et al. 2007; Teixeira 2009). Carter, Polevychok and Osborne (2009: 305–322) assert that of all newcomers, refugees face the largest numbers of barriers in attaining adequate and affordable housing, and that such housing is a pre-requisite to the successful resettlement of refugees (see also Carter and Osborne 2009: 308–327).

The Syrian case demonstrates that a refugee family’s successful settlement is dependent on the amount of dedicated transitional housing available for the purposes of accommodating newly arrived refugees, and following this, quality and affordable long-term housing options. Moreover, it is dependent on a sufficient amount of skilled staff at refugee receiving organizations,

such as Welcome Place, to coordinate the complex processes involved with housing incoming refugees. We deal with these ideas in the context of the Syrian case and will demonstrate the extent to which Welcome Place’s success in assisting Syrian refugees resettle and find homes was predicated on an increased amount of support from provincial and federal governments towards staffing, infrastructure, and rent supplements. With the first large cohort of Syrians having arrived, and with more forthcoming, it is imperative that such supports are restored if similar successes are to be realized for incoming Syrians. Moreover, the supports offered during the first arrival of Syrians must be regularized and rendered permanent for the benefit of *all* refugee homeseekers.

Manitoba’s initial successes in housing Syrian GARS were anomalous in the wider Canadian experiences with Syrian refugee resettlement. Settlement agencies in multiple Canadian jurisdictions reported difficulties in finding affordable long-term housing for incoming Syrian refugees (Brosnahan 2016). One result was the placement of Syrians in hotels. Settlement agencies in Toronto, Ottawa, Halifax, and Vancouver asked for a temporary pause on, or a slow down of, the

arrival of new GAR Syrians on January 20, 2016, as those arriving were experiencing prolonged hotel stays (Mas 2016). The Islamic Social Services of BC cited problems finding permanent housing in Vancouver. On January 14, 2016, only three families within the 680 GARS that had arrived had settled into permanent homes, and the rest were waiting in hotels (CBC News 2016f). In Richmond, refugees reported being abandoned in a hotel for over a month (Thom 2016). In Hamilton, incoming Syrians stayed in hotels due to the shortage of affordable housing (Craggs 2016). IRCC reportedly spent over \$15 million on 17 hotels in major Canadian cities for Syrians from mid-December 2015 to the end of March 2016 (Moore 2016).

Some may put a positive spin on the hotel experience of Syrian refugees in jurisdictions such as Toronto. For example, writing in the *Toronto Star*, Keung (2016) noted that while as many as 600 Syrians were in Toronto's Plaza Hotel at one time, settlement services and halal food were offered on site (Keung 2016). Furthermore, hotel stays were a response within an environment in which refugee settlement service providers were stretched beyond capacity in attempting to house and settle a large and accelerated influx of Syrian refugees. Nonetheless, hotel stays were not inevitable, and some jurisdictions managed to be more successful in finding a broad range of temporary and long-term housing solutions for incoming Syrians. While one may be sympathetic to the need for expediency in light of the tremendous pressure faced by settlement agencies to find any place for incoming Syrians amid structural housing crises, one cannot help but think that what amounts to a \$15 million purchase order from hotel chains can be put towards more durable solutions that can benefit future refugee resettlement efforts.

In the case of Winnipeg, Welcome Place reports that no incoming Syrians were housed temporarily in hotels. A closer examination of how this occurred is therefore warranted. Much at-

tention rightly has been given to the abundance of community efforts towards welcoming Syrian refugees. Such a welcoming disposition on the part of Manitobans is an essential component of resettled refugees' comfort and security in their new communities (see CBC News 2016a, Maloney 2016, Manitoba Islamic Association 2016a and Perrier 2016). Considerable 'private' and voluntary energy was devoted to raise funds and/or donate goods deemed helpful for the purposes of Syrian resettlement, including numerous community events, crowdsourcing campaigns, and the solicitation of private contributions (see CBC News 2016b, CTV News 2016, Keele 2016, and Manitoba Islamic Association 2016b). Nonetheless, in order to assess the ability of Manitobans to ensure that incoming Syrians were resettled in homes, not hotels, specific focus must be given to the mechanisms which increased temporary/transitional housing, rendered a broader range of housing available for the re-settlement of Syrians, and supported the housing and resettlement work performed by Welcome Place. Such mechanisms were predicated on the mobilization of government support at the provincial and federal levels.

MIIIC, through Welcome Place, assumed considerable responsibility to assist Syrian GARS find transitional housing and their first longer-term housing. As a result, they saw their infrastructural and human resource capabilities increase dramatically during this period. This section documents the new capabilities that Welcome Place developed in order to house incoming Syrian GARS. Such capabilities, combined with the provincial policy mechanisms and commitments outlined below, contributed to Welcome Place's abilities to house incoming Syrian GARS. However, the challenge now faced by Welcome Place, and that experienced by other settlement organizations, is that the unprecedented national political support dedicated to re-settling incoming Syrian refugees has dissipated, while the provincial policy mechanisms enabling a

wider range of housing options for Syrians are now diminishing. Therefore, we must seriously consider the extent to which the added capabilities afforded to organizations such as Welcome Place for the purposes of refugee housing and resettlement can be rendered more durable, as well as extended beyond the case of incoming Syrians refugees so as to benefit all refugees being resettled in Canada.

Rita Chahal, the Executive Director of MIIC/Welcome Place, recounted the environment at Welcome Place at the end of December 2015, when the organization was beginning to have an inkling of the magnitude of both Syrian arrivals and the expectations to house them. She stated:

The surprise element that happened around Christmas was that, like other cities, we had planned as we have always that whenever there is an additional surge and we are unable to accommodate people in our temporary accommodation, we would normally put them in hotels. The Manitoba government and Premier Selinger at the time, made a decision that no one was going to stay in hotels so that was something we had to quickly respond to. There was discussion at various high levels. Over the Christmas holidays, the 26th or 27th, we received word that we were not going to put people up in hotels and that we had to accommodate them in a secondary or temporary location, because they were coming on the following Monday. We literally had about 72 hours before that first surge during Christmas week that we had to get apartments ready to welcome new clients. It was very exciting. We had a lot of faith and confidence in our staff that regardless of how much work there was and what had to be done, it was going to get done. I have to say that is what got us through.²

Welcome Place has documented this initial 'surge' of Syrian refugees into Manitoba as occurring between November 4, 2015 and March 11, 2016.³ During this period 928 Syrian refugees arrived

in Manitoba. Of these, 766 were GARS, and eligible to receive one year of federal government income support; 37 were PSRS, and eligible to receive one year of private sponsor support; and 125 were BVOR-class, and eligible to receive one year of shared government and sponsor support. All incoming Syrian GARS (to Manitoba) received temporary accommodation and settlement services from Welcome Place, and some PSRS accessed settlement services from Welcome Place as well.

It should be noted that the overwhelming number of GARS relative to other categories of refugees evidenced in the case of the Syrians stands in contrast to a previous trend in Manitoba in which the number of PSRS grew considerably, whereas the number of GARS remained stagnant. While a full analysis of this trend is beyond the scope of this paper, some illustrative figures may be useful.⁴ In 1998, Manitoba resettled 517 GARS and 80 PSRS. In 2013, Manitoba resettled 384 GARS and 979 PSRS. The point worth emphasizing for present purposes is that while the general trend in refugee resettlement in Manitoba has been towards having the immediate resettlement costs (housing, etc.) borne by private sponsors as opposed to government, the Syrian case demonstrates the opposite. Arguably, with GARS entitled to receive a greater degree of government support than PSR or BVOR class refugees, this demonstrates the greater degree of mobilization of government budgetary resources for Syrian housing and resettlement compared to incoming refugee cohorts from previous years.

The regional distribution of all categories of Syrian refugees in Manitoba during this period is as follows: 840-Winnipeg; 34-Altona; 15-Dauphin; 12-Winkler; 8-Steinbach; 7-Morden; 7-Arborg; and 5-Kleefeld. As of June 21, 2016, Welcome Place had anticipated targets of 1072 additional Syrian GARS and 429 non-Syrian GARS for the period of March 1, 2016 to December, 2016. Of all Syrian refugees arriving in

TABLE 1 Annual Manitoba GAR Arrivals — 1998–2013⁶

| Year | Number | GARS as % of total MB refugee arrivals | Year | Number | GARS as % of total MB refugee arrivals |
|------|--------|--|------|--------|--|
| 2013 | 384 | 26 | 2003 | 539 | 44 |
| 2012 | 327 | 29 | 2002 | 439 | 45 |
| 2011 | 444 | 34 | 2001 | 518 | 45 |
| 2010 | 460 | 45 | 2000 | 603 | 59 |
| 2009 | 490 | 45 | 1999 | 554 | 72 |
| 2008 | 439 | 45 | 1998 | 517 | 80 |
| 2007 | 517 | 44 | | | |
| 2006 | 522 | 42 | | | |
| 2005 | 492 | 45 | | | |
| 2004 | 548 | 44 | | | |

Manitoba, 41 percent were adults aged 18 and above, and 59 percent were children and youth aged 0–17 years old.

Welcome Place and Accueil Francophone are the initial points of contact for GARS arriving in Manitoba. The initial surge of Syrian GARS during the four-month period from November 4, 2015 to March 11, 2016 represented an unprecedented number of arrivals for Welcome Place in an incredibly short period of time. Hani Ataan Al-Ubeady states the following:

In terms of the service model we used to have in place for the regular flow of refugees, which is around 500–600 refugees a year, that model cannot be sustainable to serve such a huge number of people arriving in such a short period of time. To put that into context and to make people understand exactly what we are going through in terms of challenges, the number of people arriving within three days from the 15th of November up till the 19th, we would receive up to 130 people, so you can only imagine how much work would go into that. The staff, [the] number of people being hired, I would say is triple the usual number of people that can deliver the regular services we had in place. The operation itself is unpredictable because we have daily arrivals as I mentioned earlier and therefore we

have to be creative enough to come up with new models to accommodate such changes.⁵

The speed and number of Syrian arrivals should be put in the context of previous annual GAR arrivals in Manitoba so as to demonstrate the unprecedented numbers in need of housing and resettlement assistance from Welcome Place in an accelerated time period. Moreover, the following numbers demonstrate the prevailing trend in recent years towards GARS becoming a smaller amount of overall refugee arrivals in Manitoba.

Having demonstrated the surge in incoming Syrian refugees, particularly GARS, relative to previous annual Manitoba GARS, we will now turn to an examination of *how* Welcome Place dealt with this increased number amid a strong political and social imperative to successfully house and settle Syrian refugees. The Syrian case witnessed an increased number of GARS, both absolutely (in terms of overall GARS resettled/year) and relatively (relative to the amount of refugees of other categories) compared to previous years in Manitoba. Such an increase in GARS necessitated a rapid governmental response at both the federal and provincial levels.

Temporary housing was one part of the equation. In order to resettle incoming GARS into longer term options, Welcome Place must match

their GARS clients with available, affordable, and adequate units while adhering to a variety of provincial regulations, including those pertaining to siblings and gender in a bedroom. Elsewhere (Silvius et al. 2015, 96–111; Silvius forthcoming), we have documented long-term trends — rental prices which have increased dramatically relative to GARS housing supports since the early 1990s, and insufficient social housing options, which, sadly, have made Winnipeg’s refugee housing crisis a seemingly permanent one. The first Syrians GARS were met by an unprecedented mobilization of housing subsidies, without which it is doubtful that Welcome Place would have been as successful in housing the incoming Syrian refugees. The task now is to understand these developments so that the refugee-serving sector may benefit in the future.

Welcome Place offered one month of temporary housing for incoming Syrian GARS at its main building or its two overflow buildings. However, Welcome Place staff report a strong imperative being issued from IRCC to move Syrians out of transitional housing and into more permanent options within 10 days of their arrival to Winnipeg. At a pragmatic level, such a rapid turnover was required to free up spaces for the large and rapid influx of Syrian GARS. The two overflow buildings were created explicitly and exclusively for the purposes of providing initial transitional housing for Syrians. In short, Welcome Place’s infrastructural capabilities increased for the purposes of resettling Syrian refugees, most notably in the funding and establishing of two new buildings.

‘Building A’⁷ was opened in late December 2015 with funding from the Manitoba provincial government and the federal government. The six-floor building contained thirty units dedicated explicitly to Syrian refugees, as well as two floors dedicated for use by terminally ill individuals or those with medical conditions. The building was chosen by the province to be a temporary residence and was rent-supplemented, which is

how Welcome Place clients accessed it. Initially, the province managed the property and coordinated the settlement of Syrian refugees there. Welcome Place then took over the coordination of settlement, while the province continued to manage the property. Hani Ataan Al-Ubeady says that ‘Building A’ served as a good option for temporary residence and was certainly preferable to hotels. Most notably, the building enabled incoming Syrian refugees to establish ties with one another, to cook their own meals, and to benefit from the existence of a community. However, he states that it is not a suitable solution for permanent settlement due to structural and mechanical issues with the building. As a result, some clients currently have cases before the Residential Tenancy Branch, alleging health issues have resulted from being there. At present, the building only houses a handful of Syrians who have made it a long-term housing option, but it is uncertain as to whether or not it will be available as temporary accommodation for those arriving in the future. Moreover, Al-Ubeady is concerned that the creation of such a Syrian enclave does not facilitate the families’ integration into broader Winnipeg society.

‘Building B’ was leased to Welcome Place by the province for three months at a time, renewable on an as-needed basis. The ten total units of ‘Building B’ were used as temporary residences for incoming Syrian refugees in early 2016. Following the initial Syrian arrivals, Welcome Place did not renew the lease, as the temporary housing was no longer required due to the low number of incoming Syrian GARS. It is no longer available for incoming Syrian GARS.

In total, the two temporary buildings provided transitional housing for approximately 740 resettling Syrian GARS in late 2015 and early 2016. The absence of such facilities would have strained Welcome Place’s ability to transitionally house incoming Syrian GARS. These temporary options were established with in-kind provisions from the provincial government, along

with additional funding. Welcome Place was able to fulfill the province's mandate to have incoming Syrians avoid staying in hotels upon arrival. As significant was the ability to settle Syrians in more permanent housing options. For this, rent supplements were required.

Welcome Place initiated the discussion on rent supplements with the province prior to the first wave of Syrian refugees, and personnel have long sought rent supplements for their GAR clients. Initially,⁸ Syrian GARs were able to access Rent Supplements via Manitoba Housing and Community Development and the Rent Supplement Program (RSP). While not a new program, the RSP was greatly expanded for the purposes of housing incoming Syrians. Rita Chahal puts the matter into perspective:

One thing that was very helpful for us during the first surge was that there was provincial support for rent supplement that allowed us to move people quickly within 10 to 20 days because we had a supplement that would get people into affordable, clean and sustainable housing during that time. There was a higher number of units on the market. Our concern right now is that there is a 'de-commitment' to the rent supplement by our provincial government so that will definitely impact our ability to move people quickly.⁹

Rent Supplements were mechanisms by which the province paid the difference between market rental rates and rent-gear-to-income paid by the tenant for approved units. Rent Supplements are applied to specific homes, unlike the portable Rent Assist subsidy. All housing in the RSP is inspected by the province, and Welcome Place also inspects rent supplemented units for its clients. Approved units are deemed livable, suitable, and affordable. In late 2015, the Province agreed to focus on the creation of rent supplements for 200 privately owned units by January. Hani Ataan Al-Ubeady reports that this target was not met; only 70–80 units were approved

for rent supplements in January. Al-Ubeady estimates that throughout the first wave, approximately 130 approved units were added to the list, with only a handful of these not being accessed by Syrian GARs in the end. Welcome Place continued to recruit new landlords to have their units approved for the RSP until March 2016.

The Province of Manitoba also ensured that 400 rent subsidies were available through the Rent Assist Program to support permanent housing solutions for Syrian refugees (Province of Manitoba 2016b). The Rent Assist Program enables successful applicants to receive a portable subsidy for private market housing, and the amount that eligible applicants received is calculated based on the difference between 75 percent of Median Market Rent and 25 percent of household income (see: <http://www.gov.mb.ca/fs/eia/estimator.html>). However, the Rent Assist Program was seldom used by Welcome Place, for reasons that we will elaborate upon below. In short, the RSP was the preferred mechanism to access housing subsidies for Syrian refugees, as it covered the cost difference between rent-gear-to-income and the market price of available units. Welcome Place staff also reported that this mechanism was easier to utilize than the Rent Assist Program, as the latter involved a more complicated calculus. Welcome Place staff reported applying for Rent Assist without knowing the precise amount they would be approved for and whether the resulting cost to the Syrian GAR client would be affordable. Moreover, Rent Assist was not approved in time to get Syrian clients out of transitional units into more permanent ones. In the meantime, Welcome Place personnel were able to secure rent supplement units for many of their Syrian clients.

It should be noted that both the Rent Supplements and Rent Assist were subsidies that were made available to low-income renters, including refugees, who do not receive other provincial housing subsidies. It is worth emphasizing, though, that the provincial government at

the time increased the amount made available for the purposes of resettling Syrian refugees. Moreover, more units were made available under the RSP overall. It is the opinion of the authors who were intimately involved with the RSP that Manitoba Housing increased their inspection program and admitted more units into the program, partly due to Welcome Place's help in creating the inventory of units and referring landlords to the program.

In order to facilitate the housing of incoming Syrians, Welcome Place utilized two processes with respects to their housing inventory. In the first instance, the province listed and approved Rent Supplement Program units that Welcome Place could access for Syrian refugees. In the second, Welcome Place engaged landlords and identified potential units for the Rent Supplement Program, which, if approved by the province, would be added to the inventory. This project was initiated following a meeting with the province in which it was stressed that Welcome Place be proactive in creating their own inventory. The process for creating this inventory was as follows. The information was sent periodically to the province for consideration and follow-up. Some units did not pass inspection but some were added to the provincial RSP inventory and were used for Syrian refugees. It also enabled Welcome Place to keep ongoing communication with the province encouraging action on the identified units' admittance into the program.

Hani Ataan Al-Ubeady estimates that 95 percent of Syrian GARS coming through Welcome Place during the initial surge were able to access the RSP. He states, "the quality of housing that was accessed because of the RSP is incomparable to the places that we used to access through the private market without the RSP." The quality of housing improved because Welcome Place was able to access higher income and suburban neighborhoods which they were previously not able to access. This meant accessing neighborhoods where the housing stock is not as old as

that which exists in the inner city neighbourhoods which have served as the destination for much of Welcome Place's clientele in the past. Importantly, it greatly expanded the range of options available to larger families and/or those with mobility concerns or specific health needs. In Al-Ubeady's estimation, many homes are new or recently renovated and there are fewer slum landlords, and being able to access such units translates into a smoother transition for families and an easier job for Welcome Place staff as there are less problems to deal with.

Emily Halldorson, a member of our research team, notes that

When visiting units with housing counsellors and clients, I was impressed with the overall quality of housing the clients were being offered under the RSP. We took clients to family-oriented quiet neighbourhoods such as North Kildonan and the Maples, and parts of downtown.

The size of the units being offered to clients sufficiently accommodated the families as large as 8 or 10 people. The clients would be within walking distance of schools, daycares, parks and shopping. Most of the landlords I met and spoke with on the phone seemed eager to contribute to the successful resettlement of Syrians.

It is clear that the wide availability of the RSP contributed to Welcome Place's ability to house its Syrian GAR clients in a wider range of affordable and adequate housing than would have been possible otherwise. The ready availability of the program ensured that Syrians were quickly placed in more durable and, arguably, comfortable housing situations than the many in other jurisdictions who found themselves in hotels, sometimes for prolonged periods of time.

However, the RSP was put on pause in and around the time of the provincial election (April 2016). By this time, the majority of the 'first wave' Syrians had initiated or completed their housing searches and were moved out of transitional units. Following the election, the matter of rent

supplements for Syrian GARS, or all GARS, has not been broached openly by the new Manitoba Provincial Government. Since this time, Welcome Place has not been able to access Rent Supplements for its new Syrian or non-Syrian clients. The effect has been twofold.

First, as the organization prepares for the next wave of Syrian refugees, it does so expecting to have its range of housing options confined to units in the inner city and poorer neighbourhoods, which, although often grossly exceeding the budget of refugee home seekers, remain the cheapest in the city.¹⁰ Such housing often does not meet the needs of incoming families in terms of size, cleanliness, safety, and amenities. The few Syrians who arrived after the first wave have been stuck in resettlement limbo. After initially having been successful in moving most of their Syrian clients out of transitional housing and into more permanent options in the ten day window established by IRCC, Welcome Place now has Syrians living in their transitional housing for up to three months and counting, with few prospects in sight.

Second, many of the 'first wave' Syrians are approaching a period in which they are to plan their second year in Winnipeg without knowledge as to whether or not they will be able to continue to access a rent supplement for the following year. Al-Ubeady estimates that 85 percent of the 'first wave' Syrians were resettled in very good homes — those which were high quality, suitable in terms of space and amenities, and affordable. According to Al-Ubeady, the unknown status of the program has created discomfort and uncertainty amongst those who have settled while accessing the RSP. In particular, they are concerned that they will regress in their settlement trajectory by having to move from their existing homes into those that are substandard. Al-Ubeady suggests that such a move would prolong the transition shock felt by Syrian refugees and initiate new cycles of displacement, whereby families anticipate and experience new forms of

instability, stress, and dislocation. Welcome Place personnel anticipate that without an extension of rent supplementation the likely scenario in the overwhelming majority of such cases will be having to move to a less expensive unit, possibly in another part of a city, only a year after having initially arrived and settled in Winnipeg.

With a second wave of Syrians expected soon, Welcome Place requires a restoration of the supports that were available during the first wave if they are to have continued success in housing Syrians in affordable and adequate units. Increasing transitional housing infrastructure and providing readily accessible rent supplements were two key factors that contributed to successful housing outcomes for the first arrivals from Syria. A third was the increase in Welcome Place's human resource capacities. Much like in the examples of rent supplements and an increase in transitional housing infrastructure, that of human resources would suggest that initial successes in housing Syrians were based on additional capacity that exceeds voluntary contributions. Any comparable future success in housing Syrian refugees and all incoming GARS will be based on stabilizing and continuing such supports.

Welcome Place witnessed an increase in its human resource capacities as a result of the imperative to house and resettle Syrian refugees. Rita Chahal puts the enormity of the task into perspective:

We knew we would be needing people with language skills so we hired people in settlement, both assistants and counsellors. We hired additional housing counsellors and housing assistants who were able to support the work of the housing counsellors. We also hired more life skills trainers that were placed at each of those specific units. Our full time staff also shifted as well. We hired people like cooks and onsite caretakers, etc. We also had additional contracts. Our overall staffing component ... was funded in terms under the Syrian response,

by the federal government. I have to say the government was quite generous. Whatever was needed was provided. We had to identify what the needs were. We couldn't just go up and ask for money. We had to justify it of course, but there was a strong commitment to ensuring services were delivered. There were parameters around that and for us those commitments were only till the end of June, but now we will see what happens in the next phase.¹¹

From January 2016 to April 2016, Welcome Place staff effectively doubled from approximately 40 people to 79 people. New positions were predominantly funded by IRCC, and Welcome Place also received funding from additional sources. Welcome Place personnel received additional responsibilities, and in some cases new roles. Hani Ataan Al-Ubeady was given the position of Manager of Permanent Refugee Resettlement, and a larger housing department comprised of three experienced housing counselors and six new temporary hires was assembled. The nine housing staff members were broken into three teams, each consisting of one experienced staff and two new hires. Experienced staff members were given the new title of Senior Housing Counselor. The two new hires on each team were given titles of Junior Housing Counselor and Housing Assistant.

The added capabilities coincided with considerable demands placed upon the housing teams, which had to work under considerable pressure to house incoming Syrians in Winnipeg's tight rental market. IRCC would announce that X many Syrians were arriving on X day. The staff would have to keep the flow of families moving from Welcome Place into permanent accommodation in order to have suites available for the new arrivals. IRCC requested that staff move families from Welcome Place within 10 days of arrival to Canada. Moreover, it is worth emphasizing that the temporary labour which constituted the housing teams was immensely skilled. Amongst

those hired temporarily for Welcome Place's housing teams were a physician, an engineer, business owners, and the holder of a Master's of Peace and Conflict Studies. Such people had to work under pressure and stress and in situations where decisions had to be made quickly and effectively. Such staff also required the ability to quickly diffuse problems and conflicts. Within the housing teams were individuals with the capacity to speak English, Arabic, Farsi, and Kurdish. Also important in the case of resettlement are life skills counselors, who are tasked with providing information on banking, local weather, transportation, and so forth.

Al-Ubeady recounted that in addition to supervising nine full-time housing staff, a coordinated response to Syrian housing and resettlement necessitated engaging the wider community on two sides — service provision and public engagement. In the former, for example, Al-Ubeady mentioned working closely with the Manitoba Islamic Association to ensure that incoming Syrians were well informed of the housing and settlement processes and expectations. In the latter, Welcome Place staff — indeed, those of the wider refugee-serving community — were tasked with ensuring that the Winnipeg public understood the processes underway. Al-Ubeady stated that his engagement with the community consisted of explaining the differences between refugees and immigrants. He stated that ensuring that the public was engaged in the process was necessary and important work; however, it also took a considerable amount of time, particularly amid pressures to house incoming Syrians. In short, successfully housing and settling Syrians necessitated a multi-faceted community engagement strategy that exceeded the fundamental act of finding housing.

While increases in Welcome Place's funding enabled them to hire additional personnel, the hiring was done predominantly on a temporary basis. This is worth emphasizing for two reasons. The first is that it is important to dispel any notion

that the successful housing of incoming Syrians could have been accomplished on a voluntary basis. The second is that much of the highly skilled labour involved in ensuring successful housing outcomes was temporary and precarious. The temporary hires held term positions from January 20 to March 31, 2016, and they were funded

directly by IRCC. Welcome Place later extended their terms until the end of April. With Syrian refugees continuing to arrive, the organization faces uncertainty as to whether or not it will be able to fund longer term or permanent personnel to deal with expectations related to the housing and resettlement of incoming Syrians.

Next Steps and Conclusion

The tremendous upsurge in good will, effort, and resources offered by Canadian society for the purposes of welcoming and settling Syrian refugees is to be lauded. However, such a disposition cannot alone ensure the successful housing and settlement of GARS, whether they originate in Syria or elsewhere. The world is entering, or perhaps has been in the midst of, a series of prolonged refugee crises. Syria is but one of many examples of violent displacement to be found throughout the world. Should we continue to strive to provide refuge in Canada, we must think seriously about the mechanisms and resources we have at our disposal. We ought to change our thinking from singular, geographically specific crises to providing reliable and durable supports for refugee-serving agencies and re-settled refugees beyond the logic of elections cycles or when Canadian society's interest is piqued.

Much good work has been done on various levels of Canadian society to think through the myriad needs of Syrian refugees and to support or sponsor them. For example, the Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights emphasized six areas, which, if bolstered, could improve the integration of Syrians and indeed all refugees. These included accelerating the disbursement of child

tax credits; replacing transportation and associated loans with grants; increasing funding for language-training; developing a comprehensive plan to address mental health needs; eliminating different treatment across refugee categories in terms of processing times for applications and services; and increasing youth programming (Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights 2016). Addressing such concerns would make for an enormous step in improving the lives of re-settling refugees. However, attention to housing and housing supports is conspicuously absent from this list. It is our strong belief that insufficient attention to housing will jeopardize all other aspects of resettlement.

Moving forward, then, we call on federal and provincial governments to focus attention on the following:

- 1) Increasing the temporary/transitional housing capacity of refugee serving organizations;
- 2) Restoring rent supplements for resettled refugees' long term housing options;
- 3) Prioritizing the hiring and retention of skilled workers within the refugee serving sector beyond a temporary basis

Conclusions generally are not the time to introduce new statistics. However, we will do so here so as to reinforce the notion that refugee resettlement and housing must be articulated within Winnipeg's, Manitoba's, and Canada's low income housing crises. Regrettably, these crises are decades in the making. Winnipeg has been chronically short of affordable housing stock throughout the 20th century and into the 21st (Silver 2015). Canada has the second lowest amount of social housing of any Western nation (in terms of percentage of overall housing stock) at 5 percent (see Silver 2011: 33). Since the early 2000s, Winnipeg's vacancy rate has been extremely low, fluctuating between 1–2 percent (Brandon 2015: p. 34). Moreover, in 2011 over 50 percent of Winnipeg rental households had at least one of Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation's MHC's 'core housing need:' costing more than 30 percent of income, having an unsuitable number of rooms (family size); and being in need of major repairs (Brandon 2015: 29–30).

Often relegated to the cheapest housing stock in a city, we can expect re-settled refugees to reflect, if not exceed, such trends. Rent supplementation is a way to broaden the scope of available units for the purposes of refugee resettlement and offers the possibility of rendering better units more affordable for resettling refugees. However, the specific policy measure listed above must be put in the broader context of the long-term decline of social housing in Manitoba and Canada. While refugees demonstrate varying degrees of financial comfort, job readiness, and abilities to establish their lives in new environments, in the initial, critical states of resettlement, the overwhelming majority of them will not have their housing needs adequately served by purely market mechanisms. As such, refugee resettlement and housing must be reimagined as a part of a broader commitment to improved social housing options for all low-income families.

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Endnotes

- 1 The BVOR program is conceived of as a three-way partnership among the Government of Canada, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and private sponsors. For this category of refugees, the UNHCR are to identify the refugees and the Government of Canada is to provide up to six months of income support through the RAP. Private sponsors are to provide an additional six months of financial support and up to a year of “social and emotional support.” For the duration of the sponsorship (one year) BVOR class refugees are covered under the Interim Federal Health Program and receive provincial health coverage. See <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/refugees/sponsor/vor.asp>. Indeed, sponsors can select the refugee they wish to sponsor by viewing their profile on a Government of Canada website. See: http://www.cic.gc.ca/jas-pac/Default_lmenu_eng.aspx
- 2 Source: Interview with Rita Chahal, held on September 14, 2016.
- 3 The source of the following figures is a data sheet compiled by Welcome Place on June 21, 2016.
- 4 For a full analysis of this trend, see Silvius, R. Forthcoming. Neo-liberalization, Devolution, and Refugee Well Being: A Case Study in Winnipeg Manitoba. *Canadian Ethnic Studies*.
- 5 Source: interview with Hani Ataan Al-Ubeady. Held on February 19, 2016.
- 6 Derived from Government of Manitoba (no dates), *Manitoba Immigration Facts: 2013 Statistical Report; Manitoba Immigration Facts: 2010 Statistical Report; Manitoba Immigration Facts: 2007 Statistical Report; Manitoba Immigration Facts: 2005 Statistical Report*. See also Silvius, forthcoming.
- 7 We have changed the name of the units and provided neither address, nor street.
- 8 The following information on Rent Supplement and Rent Assist programs appeared in an expanded version of information that appeared initially in <https://www.policy-alternatives.ca/publications/commentary/unspun-supporting-refugee-resettlement-beyond-syrian-refugee-crisis>.
- 9 Source: interview with Rita Chahal. September 14, 2016.
- 10 For an extended demonstration of the growing gap between Winnipeg rental prices and refugee housing budgets, see: Silvius et al 2015.
- 11 Source: Interview with Rita Chahal. September 14, 2016.



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