

**OCASI – Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants
Submission to Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration
2011 LGBTQ Refugee Pilot Project
May 2017**

Introduction

OCASI is the umbrella organization for immigrant and refugee-serving agencies in Ontario. Established in 1978, OCASI has more than 200 member agencies across Ontario, including several that provide specialized programs and services for LGBTQIA+ refugees and immigrants.

OCASI recommends that Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) should make the LGBTQIA+ Blended Sponsorship pilot project, sometimes referred to as the Rainbow Refugee Assistance Project (RRAP), a regular, ongoing program with a multi-year funding commitment.

While the project has not been formally evaluated, there are many reasons to continue this investment, specifically:

- The organizations involved in the pilot, as well as resettled LGBTQ refugees testified to this Committee about the success of the initiative in facilitating the resettlement of LGBTQIA+ refugees, including several in urgent need of protection, and supporting them to build safe and fulfilling new lives in Canada.
- The pilot engaged LGBTQIA+ individuals, groups and communities in refugee resettlement to a greater degree, and supported the building of welcoming communities.
- New relationships were established between LGBTQIA+ sponsors and immigrant and refugee-serving organizations, which increased knowledge and awareness of resettlement challenges as well as the experience of discrimination and persecution faced by SOGI (sexual orientation and gender identity and experience) refugees.
- It will sustain Canada's important role globally in protecting and promoting the human rights of LGBTQIA+ individuals. This is particularly important given the growing human rights violations against LGBTQIA+ individuals in many countries, tightening borders and heightened danger for sexual and gender minorities. In fact there is a need for Canada to continue to demonstrate its leadership by sustaining and expanding its commitment to the resettlement of LGBTQIA+ refugees.
- According to IRCC witnesses to the Standing Committee, the costs of the pilot were negligible, and therefore sustaining it does not appear to present a financial challenge to the Department.
- OCASI's experience in building sector capacity through the Positive Spaces Initiative shows that LGBTQIA+ refugees and immigrants often experience marginalization from within cultural communities and mainstream LGBTQIA+ communities. As a result this has left individuals feeling that there are few options for obtaining services. It demonstrates the need for continued and ongoing work to build positive and welcoming spaces within the immigrant and refugee-serving sector as well as community services in general and in public service organizations.

OCASI Positive Spaces Initiative

A Positive Space is a welcoming environment where LGBTQIA+ newcomers are able to access culturally inclusive services with dignity and respect and service providers can work free from discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression.

OCASI provides training in English and French for frontline refugee and immigrant service workers centered on creating welcoming and equitable services for LGBTQIA+ newcomers, and within a human rights framework. OCASI also provides a toolkit that equips practitioners with the appropriate terminology and best practices when providing services to LGBTQIA+ newcomers and refugees. Additionally through various initiatives we have supported campaigns intended to bring greater visibility to the specific needs and experiences of only LGBTQIA+ newcomers and sector workers.

Some OCASI member agencies have taken further steps to create positive spaces in their agencies, such as the creation of a professional development module for interpreters by Kitchener Waterloo Multicultural Centre. The module will serve as a useful tool for interpreters when working with Newcomer LGBTQIA+ clients.

Recommendations

1. The LGBTQIA+ Blended Sponsorship, also referred to as Rainbow Refugee Assistance Program (RRAP) should become a regular, ongoing program of the IRCC with a multi-year funding commitment.
2. IRCC should allow RRAP to continue sponsorship outside the allocated spaces for the Private Sponsorship of Refugees program.

Experience with the pilot has demonstrated the benefits of collaboration between LGBTQIA+ community and SAHs. The RRAP has engaged LGBTQIA+ Canadians with no prior experience refugee settlement. Faith based SAHs (who constitute the majority of SAHs, and are often the only SAH in the region) are building LGBTQIA+ capacity. If SAHs caps were impacted, SAHs would have no incentive to work to engage LGBTQIA+ community members in sponsorship. Sponsorships of LGBTQIA+ refugees would likely decline at a time when they are urgently needed.

3. Reduce processing times for sponsorship and remove some of the systemic barriers against LGBTQIA+ refugees seeking protection by incorporating a sexual orientation and gender identity analysis across all relevant IRCC operations.
4. Develop and implement initiatives to resettle internally displaced LGBTQIA+ persons, particularly those facing elevated risk in their current geographic location because of sexual orientation and gender identity and expression. Development of such a program should be undertaken in consultation with experienced and knowledgeable civil society organizations.
5. IRCC should continue to invest in its many ongoing initiatives to build and sustain the capacity of immigrant and refugee-serving organizations to support the settlement of LGBTQIA+ individuals, particularly refugees. This should include:
 - ongoing targeted professional development and training to sector practitioners;
 - support service provider capacity to address the specific vulnerabilities that may result from intersecting identities and experience – particularly ethno-racial background, as well as (dis)ability and other factors;
 - support service provider capacity to build and sustain partnerships and collaborations with other necessary sectors such as healthcare, mental health, housing and other social services;
 - support participating organizations to build and sustain networks and collaborations that facilitate effective LGBTQIA+ refugee resettlement