

Refugees face service gaps in York Region: sponsors



By Brock Weir

Syrian refugees are settling into their first spring in their new Canadian homeland, but as they plant roots and become acclimatized, refugees continue to come in from other parts of the world as well.

Recently, sponsors from Our Lady of Grace (OLG) Catholic Church welcomed families from Iraq and Cote d'Ivoire.

While many of them have found new jobs at counters across Aurora, and others explore post-secondary opportunities at Seneca's King Campus, they ? and their sponsors ? are finding some obstacles in their resettlement hard to overcome.

Earlier this month, members of OLG's sponsored families, along with their volunteer sponsors, hosted Leona Alleslev, MP for Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill, for a discussion on how these gaps can be best addressed.

These gaps include significant challenges in finding the best and most practical ways for these newcomers to get a handle on the English language, as well as navigating York Region's complex transit network to get to their jobs and their language classes.

According to sponsor Marina Nemat, a significant challenge is ESL classes at places like the Welcome Centre, which has locations in Newmarket and Richmond Hill, as well as more structured classes at places such as the Dr. Bette Stephenson Centre for Learning in Richmond Hill, which places an emphasis on adult learning.

?At any given time [you go into a Welcome Centre], they will do a basic assessment and put you in one of their levels,? says Ms. Nemat. ?[Some classes] turn more or less into a conversation group, more or less, for seniors; not that they call it that, but that is what it is in practicality. They were really happy and excited about that at the beginning, thinking, ?Oh, my gosh! We're going to learn English!' and then they go and think ?Oh?' Conversation groups aren't bad, but as a supplement it's great. They need something structured.?

That is one of the challenges of living in the suburbs, she adds. In Toronto, there are practically endless options for ESL but in York Region, particularly northern York Region, those opportunities are few and far between. Places like the Stephenson Centre have 90 spaces available for newcomers, which isn't bad, she notes, but they often fill up on the first or second day they are available.

With Welcome Centres, structured classes at the Stephenson Centre, as well as additional learning opportunities facilitated by the York Catholic District School Board, the basic infrastructure is there, she says, but that infrastructure needs a better underlying structure.

'We have all the possibilities, but we need to restructure,' says Ms. Nemat. 'Now that we have this huge influx of refugees, you know how it is with bureaucracy. It takes time to adjust, but if we can speed that up somehow? We don't want it to be too late for these people and [have them] fall through the cracks.'

'What happens for a lot of these people, even Downtown, especially the ones who are over 45, is they end up sticking with their own communities and then they don't learn English and end up working in stores that are owned by the same ethnic group and there is no advancement. The second generation does quite well. It is not a bad thing to start at one of these local ethnic stores just to get a foot in the door, but a lot of people, they feel comfortable there, and it is difficult to get from point A to point B and learn English. It is that vicious cycle that keeps going.'

Literally getting from Point A to Point B is also presenting something of a challenge for the newcomers, the group notes. Soon, the cost for a York Region Transit pass, which covers two-zone Viva service, will be \$185 per month. This two-zone pass will get the newcomers to the Stephenson Centre and back, but one for each of the refugees is a costly prospect.

Sponsor Catherine Falzone says they have canvassed area municipalities to see what supports are in place to help reduce those costs, but have come up empty.

'We get it, there are a lot of people in this community who still have trouble affording [transit], but even so, let's go a step further and say, for the people who have just come, their budgets are very minimal, what can you do to help? Right now, it is nothing.'

The group recently hoped to have a temporary lifeline through Mayor Geoff Dawe's office when it was suggested that some residual funds raised during the 2015 Mayor's Charity Golf Classic might be available for a handful of passes. It might have provided a temporary solution, but the group says they were prepared to accept what they could. Ultimately, this light 'if not at the end of the tunnel, but at the end of a nearby off-ramp' fizzled out.

'I was told the committee in charge decided that we didn't meet the criteria,' says Ms. Nemat. 'When I asked which criteria, I was told, "How would it serve the residents of Aurora on a broader level?" Most, if not all, past recipients provided programming/supports for a wide range of town residents and the community at large.'

'I am at a loss. "Broader level" is such a vague term. So, for example, if one wants to serve those with a disability, one would not get any money? Or the homeless? Or the hungry? A recurring nightmare I have is that I am standing at a busy intersection literally begging for money as people walk by like I am invisible. I hate asking for money, even though not a penny of it would go to me. It makes one feel small, very small, and undermines one's dignity, especially when people walk away.'

However, according to Tim Jones, who co-chairs the annual golf tournament, the committee met March 8 to begin planning for the event, reviewing each request one at a time to prioritize and identify successful applicants. The average amount each successful group receives, he notes, is between \$2,500 and \$5,000.

'Over the past number of years, with the growth of requests, not all applicants are successful,' said Mr. Jones. 'The Mayor asked the committee to consider a special request from the Our Lady of Grace ' Refugee Resettlement Committee for \$15,204 for specific transit pass purchases for the seven Syrian adult refugees.'

'It has been the past practice of the committee to support organizations who demonstrate open public participation opportunities for all residents in Aurora as opposed to addressing specific individual needs. On a vote, the committee respectfully declined the request.'

At this month's meeting, Ms. Alleslev took note of their issues and expressed sympathy with many of their concerns, noting that further supports need to be put in place for language and transit.

'This is a very real issue and I think if the objective is for people to be able to communicate in a second language and be positioned

to learn at a higher level in a second language so they can go to schools and get jobs, we're not giving them the best foundation on which to build," she said, asking the group for recommendations on what might change the status quo. "This is the beginning of a new chapter in Canada welcoming refugees, period. Let's put in some infrastructure that will stand the test of time."

But, it will take a bit of effort, they agree.

"Yes, it is going to take a little bit more time, but this is an investment we are making in our economy," said Ms. Nemat. "As soon as the people enter the job market, the less donations we are going to need from the community to cover this and cover that. It is something that will help all of us in the community in the long run because as soon as they become self-sufficient, the better off everyone is going to be at the end of the day."