

# **Housing for refugee claimants in Canada: Potential policy pathways**

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## **Context**

Housing for refugee claimants in Canada poses specific public policy challenges due to lack of coordination amongst municipal, provincial and federal governments on housing, and asylum as a “complex intergovernmental problem” (Paquet and Schertzer 2025). Big city mayors have expressed frustration about the on-going confusion regarding jurisdiction and funding.<sup>1</sup> The premiers of Quebec and Ontario have publicly called out the federal government (Paquet and Schertzer 2025). In turn, former Prime Minister Trudeau has suggested that housing is not a federal jurisdiction, but researchers and experts disagree (Flynn 2023). Housing is a human right and interrelated with other rights. However, it is also politicized in a context of overlapping “crises”<sup>2</sup> of housing and migration, and scarcity mindsets.

Refugee claimants are caught in the middle, forced to live in inadequate shelter or on the streets, in some cases causing illness and death (Katz and Gouin 2013; Paradis et al. 2008; Swadden 2023). Civil society organizations have attempted to fill the gap, and have successfully done so for decades, but recently they are stretched beyond capacity (Chanie et al, forthcoming). City-run shelters report high numbers of newcomers using their services (Williams-Stupar and Honvari 2025) while the federal government has provided some funding for hotels and specific initiatives under the Interim Housing Assistance Program (IHAP).

## **Scope of this research project**

This research focuses specifically on short-term, immediate and transitional housing for refugee claimants when they first arrive in Canada. Our interest is on finding policy pathways for refugee claimants, who, unlike resettled refugees, do not benefit from housing provided by the Government of Canada, Government of Quebec or private sponsors. We base our analysis on the existing peer-reviewed and grey literature and data in French and English, that is publicly available through the internet and the University of Ottawa library system. No empirical research with human subjects was undertaken for this project. Our focus is primarily on pathways to solutions. For more in-depth literature reviews and analysis, we refer readers to the studies cited in our references section (Paradis et al. 2008; Kissoon and Hebert 2010; Matthew House Ottawa 2024; Clark-Kazak 2024; Rose 2019; Farooqi 2020).

## **Some key questions when considering policy options<sup>3</sup>**

The policy options we consider below have been developed in consultation with Anne Woolger, Patrick Fafard and analysis by housing and asylum researchers. We aim to provide a range of possible policy responses that build on existing infrastructure and initiatives, but also leverage creativity to move beyond the current intractability. In developing these options, we have considered practical and political questions, including:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ontariobigcitymayors.ca/ontarios-big-city-mayors-statement-on-lack-of-municipal-capacity-to-support-newcomers-to-canada-2/>

<sup>2</sup> We acknowledge that the use of the term “crisis” is politicized. See Benhadjoudja, Clark-Kazak, and Garneau 2025.)

<sup>3</sup> We gratefully acknowledge insights from Patrick Fafard, email communication, May 6, 2025.

- Where will federal leadership come from? While housing is a shared jurisdiction, Canadian asylum policy and processes are managed exclusively by the federal government. Successive federal governments have attempted to deflect the responsibility for housing asylum seekers to provincial and municipal governments. However, a new cabinet in 2025 with a new prime minister and new ministers at both Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) and Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada (HICC) offer potential opportunities for new ways of thinking and doing.
- Who will pay? This question is at the heart of municipal-provincial-federal tensions. It should be noted that federal costs for refugee claimants and resettled refugees - including housing - are counted as Official Development Assistance (ODA). This means that the budget comes from a different funding envelope than for similar services for Canadian citizens.<sup>4</sup> It is also worth highlighting here that emergency responses, including hotel rooms and hospitalization, cost much more per capita than long-term solutions, such as wrap-around supports provided by community organizations. For example, Peel region and the City of Toronto estimate that overflow hotel rooms cost \$220 per night, compared to \$90 in an asylum claimant shelter and \$45 for housing subsidies (Williams-Stupar and Honvari 2025).
- What are the policy and programming precedents? In the face of what appears to be an intractable problem, it is helpful to turn to analogous programs to draw lessons learned and reimagine what is possible. We draw inspiration from Philpott's (2024, 38–39) 10 conditions for making Syrian resettlement possible to show what is needed for coordinated action.

#### Policy option 1: Expand and institutionalize IHAP

IHAP was first introduced in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic when refugee claimants were quarantined on arrival. Conceived of as a temporary policy, it is ad hoc, discretionary and unpredictable (Paquet and Schertzer, 2025). The federal government funds provinces or cities to provide temporary housing to asylum seekers once they have submitted their claim. Government of Canada data indicate that the majority of this funding went to the Province of Quebec, Peel region, and the cities of Toronto and Ottawa.<sup>5</sup> Given the short-term funding model, some municipalities did not feel it was worth their while to put in proposals, fearing that they would be left to continue programming once the federal funds ran out (Williams-Stupar and Honvari 2025). IHAP also funded contracts between IRCC and 34 hotels in six provinces to provide temporary accommodation in approximately 4,050 rooms.<sup>6</sup> However, these hotels are costly and sometimes far from legal and social services. Internal discussions reveal that IRCC is looking for an “exit strategy”.

We suggest that IHAP could be made permanent and expanded to all providers, including non-governmental organizations that have been providing wrap-around supports for decades (Chanie et al. Forthcoming; Simpson 2001; Boudreau 2016). While some have indirectly received IHAP money through municipalities and provinces, there is no direct way to access funding.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/topics/policy-issue-focus/in-donor-refugee-costs-in-oda/oda-in-donor-refugee-costs-canada.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2023/07/more-federal-housing-support-for-asylum-claimants.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/transparency/committees/cimm-feb-28-2024/interim-housing-assistance-program.html>

#### Advantages:

- Funding wrap-around supports in community structures will be much cheaper than IRCC hotels, so the current funding envelope will go further.
- Institutionalized, long-term funding will allow providers to invest in sustainable solutions.

#### Disadvantages:

- IHAP does not have a good reputation with all actors and has historically been concentrated primarily in Ontario and Quebec.

#### Policy option 2: IFHP pay-for-service model applied to housing

The Interim Federal Health Program (IFHP) is an established federally-funded program through which refugee claimants, protected persons and resettled refugees are able to access applicable health care services until they become eligible for provincial coverage (IRCC 2025). Healthcare providers bill the federal government for eligible services according to an existing fee structure. We propose an analogous program for housing refugee claimants from the first night up to the end of the sixth month. A pre-approved list of service providers (ex. hotels, short-term rentals, refugee-specific shelters) would be available to refugee claimants, who could choose a temporary residence based upon what is available and the needs of the claimant(s), for example any requirements for children, large families or disability accommodations. All landlords and service providers would have to undergo mandatory training modelled on the Refugee Sponsorship Training Program (RSTP)<sup>7</sup>. The service provider would make a claim to the federal government for the costs associated with the housing of the claimant(s), up to a set maximum, which could be adjusted for local rental rates.

#### **Advantages**

- In provinces and cities with few refugee claimants, new infrastructure would not need to be built.
- The program would provide flexibility to scale up or down depending on the number of claimants in need of housing. However, scaling up would be dependent on the availability of units at the time.
- Allowing refugee claimants to select their provider gives them agency to choose what best suits their needs.

#### **Disadvantages**

- There would not always be the right amount of housing for claimants at any given time.
- This could not be a standalone system for housing refugee claimants during times with more claims made or in some major cities who see more claims consistently. In these cases, it could act as a supplementary system.

#### Policy option 3: National reception and referral centre system

The Canadian Council for Refugees (CCR) has proposed a national reception and referral centre system as a key plank of their asylum with dignity campaign.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Peel region and the City of Toronto originally proposed a GTHA reception centre model, which would have a managed discharge process (Williams-Stupar and Honvari 2025). While the federal government funded

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<sup>7</sup> The RSTP Is funded by the Canadian government and provides resources and information for people and groups who intend to privately sponsor refugees to Canada <https://www.rstp.ca/en/>.

<sup>8</sup> <https://ccrweb.ca/en/national-plan-asylum-dignity-five-key-pillars>

the reception centre until 2027, they did not finance the other components of the plan<sup>9</sup>. The province of Quebec has operated PRAIDA (Regional Program for the Settlement and Integration of Asylum Seekers) since 1956, which works as a central point of contact for refugee claimants (Bentayeb, Mallette, and Marineau 2021; Antifi 2022). Similar structures could be set up in other provinces, funded and coordinated by the federal government (Clark-Kazak and Reesor-McDowell 2024).

#### Advantages

- A coordinated, national system will provide claimants with a clearly identified point of first contact.
- Reception centres would not only provide temporary shelter, but would also refer claimants to legal, health, education, language training and other services.

#### Disadvantages

- PRAIDA has struggled to respond at the height of irregular entry through Roxham Road (Bentayeb, Mallette, and Marineau 2021; PRAIDA 2023), indicating that reception centres may reach capacity.
- Not all provinces receive the same number of refugee claimants, nor do they all have the same kinds of settlement infrastructure.

#### Policy option 4: GAR transitional housing made available to refugee claimants

Resettled refugees who arrive in Canada under the Government Assistance for Refugees (GAR) program are provided temporary accommodation upon arrival in reception houses. These are operated by resettlement assistance program (RAP) service provider organization (SPO). Because this infrastructure already exists, IRCC could expand access to these reception houses for refugee claimants, especially families and people with disabilities or complex health needs who are difficult to house in mainstream shelters (Chanie et al. Forthcoming).

#### Advantages

- Experienced providers can provide claimants with connections to longer-term housing and other settlement supports.
- Creative use of existing infrastructure

#### Disadvantages

- GARs arrive in Canada as permanent residents, so have different legal and settlement needs than refugee claimants.
- There will not be enough places in existing reception houses for all claimants; more would need to be established

#### Policy option 5: Private sponsorship model for refugee claimants

Canada has a world-renowned Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) program in which everyday citizens and permanent residents commit to financial and settlement support of resettled refugees for one year after arrival in Canada. In the context of rising rents and isolation of older adults, there have also been successful examples of matching older adults with students.<sup>10</sup> Drawing on these examples, refugee claimants could be matched with sponsorship

<sup>9</sup> <https://peelregion.ca/press-releases/peel-opens-largest-shelter-its-kind-serve-homeless-asylum-claimants-region#:~:text=In%20addition%20to%20providing%20shelter,Job%20Skills%2C%20College%20Boreal>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.spacesshared.ca/home>

groups and hosts, who would have to undertake mandatory training similar to the RSTP. The Together Project in Toronto already uses this model and could be scaled up and introduced in other communities.<sup>11</sup>

#### Advantages

- Leverages under-utilized housing and human resources that are already connected to communities and networks

#### Disadvantages

- Downloads government responsibility onto voluntary labour
- Lack of oversight could lead to increased vulnerabilities of people who are reliant on sponsors in unequal power relations

#### Conclusion

Our research indicates that there are a number of possible pathways out of the current situation. With leadership, coordination, vision and (reallocation of) resources, refugee claimants' right to housing can be realized. However, it will take political will and collaboration across all levels of government, civil society and private sector landlords.

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<sup>11</sup> [https://www.togetherproject.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/TP\\_Manual06\\_FA1.pdf](https://www.togetherproject.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/TP_Manual06_FA1.pdf)

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