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TSUNAMI IMMIGRATION SETTLEMENT SUPPORTS

The Community Services and Housing Committee recommends adoption of the recommendations contained in the following report, May 25, 2005, from the Commissioner of Community Services and Housing, with the addition of Recommendation No. 4 as follows:

- 4. That the Human Services Planning Coalition be requested to engage their Government Relations Committee on this issue.**

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that:

1. The Regional Chair and CEO write to the appropriate federal and provincial Ministers to request a fair share of the funding available for new immigrant settlement services for York Region agencies in order to address the current shortfall as well as the projected increased need for funding.
2. Regional staff continue to work with the federal and provincial governments, community agencies and the Inclusivity Action Plan Steering Committee to attempt to secure appropriate funding and address the concerns expressed by local agencies regarding settlement services.
3. This report be shared with the Human Services Planning Coalition (HSPC) to inform and support their Inclusivity Action Plan efforts as well as with other stakeholder agencies and local municipalities.

2. PURPOSE

To update the Community Services and Housing Committee and Council on municipal, provincial and federal activities taking place to support the expected increase of immigrants coming to York Region from tsunami affected areas.

To outline the funding issues, need for fairer funding and the recent potential opportunity for fairer funding from the federal government for new immigrants who make York Region their home upon first arriving in Canada.

3. BACKGROUND

Due in large part to immigration, The Regional Municipality of York remains one of the fastest growing municipalities in Canada. York Region is also one of the most ethno-

culturally diverse communities in Canada and has a large population of residents from the areas affected by the tsunami disaster in December 2004. As of 2001, approximately 39% (or 288,890) of York Region's population was born outside of Canada, which is more than double the prevailing rate in the rest of Canada and the fourth largest rate behind Toronto, Vancouver and Peel Region. Of this, 40,780 York Region residents were immigrants born in Southeast or Southern Asia – those parts of the world impacted by the tsunami. A large portion (40%) of these residents arrived in Canada between 1991 and 2001 and 94% (or 38,295) of these people live in Vaughan, Markham or Richmond Hill.

It was originally estimated that Canada would receive up to 2,000 new immigrants as a result of the tsunami, the majority coming from Sri Lanka. This was in addition to the 1,000 cases already being processed. Furthermore it was estimated that 60% to 80% of these new immigrants could come to Ontario with the majority settling in York Region and Toronto. While consultations have taken place with the federal government and community agencies, the exact number of new people expected is still unknown. However, the federal government is indicating that number will be within their established target numbers for immigration and that people will begin to arrive in the Spring and continue to arrive through the rest of the year.

On January 25, 2005, in preparation for the arrival of new immigrants resulting from the tsunami, the Commissioner of Community Services and Housing was invited to join the Settlement Strategy Leadership Team. This group, which includes eight provincial ministries, the federal government, the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI), and Social Service Commissioners from York Region, Peel, Toronto and Durham, met to confirm terms of reference, identify priority issues related to settlement, and establish next steps and several action teams. One of the key priorities identified was the need for York Region, Peel, Toronto and Durham to quickly get a sense of immigrant support services as well as identify any service gaps in these communities.

4. ANALYSIS AND OPTIONS

On February 18, 2005, a meeting with key community groups in York Region was organized by regional staff to assess the different human services supports that would help potential tsunami refugees adapt to life in York Region. It was clear that the needs for the tsunami refugees were part of the entire system of settlement support for immigrants in York Region.

Representatives from the Community Services and Housing Department's Social Assistance and Policy and Program Support Services Divisions and the Health Services Department were joined by nine partner agencies/groups in an information gathering session. Agencies/groups included the Catholic Community Services of York Region, COSTI Immigrant Services, Family Life Centre, Human Services Planning Coalition (HSPC), Ontario Trillium Foundation, The York Region Rapid Response Initiative

(RRI), United Way of York Region and the York Region Catholic and District School Boards. A list of key human services supports was drawn up as a result of this meeting.

These key community groups made it very clear that while there are some limited supports, York Region lags far behind Toronto, Vancouver and Peel Region in meeting current and projected future challenges for ensuring that immigrants settle and quickly take part in contributing to York Region's economy. The biggest challenge is that York Region has grown and changed rapidly – and continues to do so – while community funding for these services has not necessarily followed suit.

4.1 Anticipated Impact on Current Settlement System

Settlement agencies help newly arrived immigrants and refugees settle in Canada by providing community orientation, and by providing guidance and support for accessing government support and community services. These agencies can help individuals and families find information on social services, schools, health care, housing and recreational facilities. They can offer assistance in completing forms and arrange for interpreters and translators. They can also provide basic job search help, resume preparation and employment counselling and provide information about English as a Second Language (ESL) classes if needed.

The provision of settlement services is a federal government responsibility. Municipalities do not directly fund these services, but are involved in the settlement process by ensuring immigrants have access to community services in addition to settlement services.

It is important that the right and sufficient supports are provided to new immigrants so that they can quickly become active economic and social contributors to their community. This helps ensure that social services that municipalities fund are not unduly challenged.

In the past new immigrants would arrive first in Toronto and make the move to York Region once they had become more settled. This is known as secondary migration. However this pattern has changed in recent years and York Region now receives many immigrants immediately upon their arrival to Canada. Concerns have been raised by York Region settlement agencies and service providers about the capacity of the settlement sector to provide the increased level of service required to support new immigrants.

Federal funding traditionally was directed to areas where immigrants first arrived. However at the same time that the immigration patterns began to change, federal funding levels decreased. As such York Region has not received adequate funding to reflect the new immigration patterns. New funding is needed, especially in York Region, because of these changes. Federal and provincial funding for immigrant services in York Region has declined from \$416.72 per capita in 2001/2002 to \$179.26 in 2004/2005.

On May 8, 2005, the federal and provincial governments reached an agreement to quadruple immigration settlement funding for settlement programs, language training and employment assistance in Ontario over the next five years. Under the agreement, the average annual spending on settlement services will rise from \$819 per new Canadian to approximately \$3,400 per immigrant. It is unclear how much of the new funding will be directed to agencies and services in York Region. It is important however, that York Region get its fair share of this round of funding.

A coordinated strategic approach, involving local community groups, York Region and senior levels of government is required to plan and implement the necessary supports to ensure that new immigrants and their sponsors can settle and adapt quickly to life in York Region. The recently launched Inclusivity Action Plan is an important step in achieving this strategic approach.

Two distinct types of service gaps were identified by local agencies. These service gaps can be divided into two categories, namely those that are the responsibility of or require the support of provincial or federal levels of government and those that can best be met through the collaboration of service providers within York Region.

4.1.1 Service Gaps that may Hamper Support For New Immigrants from Tsunami Affected Areas

Local agencies identified that the provincial and federal governments must recognize that both new immigrants and current residents with family members still living in the tsunami-affected areas will need Trauma and Grief Counselling for both children and adults. Any counselling provided needs to be culturally and language sensitive. Currently this is being delivered, in part, by community faith groups, but more clinical help will be needed.

Staff in existing local agencies could serve as first point of contact for referrals to counselling services, but a shortage exists of counselling services in the necessary languages, especially Tamil.

Schools also need additional financial support from the provincial government to restore English as a Second Language (ESL) services for existing and incoming immigrant children. There are schools in Markham for example where more than 63% of children are of South Asian and South East Asian origin.

Agencies also need tools to develop a proactive approach to identify those in need of counselling, supports or services because individuals may not be able to self identify or may not appear to be in distress.

Additionally agencies need a mechanism for staying in touch with and supporting those affected long after the disaster to monitor long-term needs, such as societal adjustments, family conflicts, parenting issues, etc.

Communication and Information Sharing

Two-way communication between provincial/federal governments and social/community agencies during a crisis will also need to be enhanced.

It was further suggested that a “Welcome House” approach be developed to provide a neutral, convenient location for residents because new immigrants may not know how or where to access services and supports. Information needs to be made more accessible and available to existing agencies as well as community groups, school boards and new residents.

Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) is waiving the processing and right of landing fees for tsunami related cases and is fast-tracking their applications. Visas will be valid for up to one year.

The Ontario government has a three-month waiting period for OHIP services for new immigrants. The Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care is considering waiving this waiting period.

4.1.2 Community Needs and Service Gaps that Require Local Action

Establishing open and ongoing communications between community groups will be important to helping new residents. Community groups recommended:

- Access to information could be made available to existing agencies as well as community groups, school boards and new residents through:
 - Information meetings with community leaders, principals, superintendents;
 - YorkLink, which is available in print, on the Internet and in libraries
 - Advertising on multilingual TV channels; and
 - An information kit in all appropriate languages with information of services available and how to access them.
- Volunteer corps could be created to tap unused community capacity.
- Contributions in kind, for example, could also be encouraged and organizations could second their staff in a crisis.

4.1.3 Activities to Support People Impacted by the Tsunami

York Region continues to be involved in several areas of tsunami-related activity in affected communities in York Region. Community Services and Housing staff have been working with community agencies and coalitions in assessing community needs, available services, and ways to address service gaps at the local level. The Commissioner of Community Services and Housing continues to meet with the Settlement Strategy Leadership Team to raise these concerns and to gather information that can be shared with local groups.

Both the Community Services and Housing and Health Services Departments have surveyed regional staff to determine what language skills are available in an emergency

on a voluntary basis and a number of Health Services staff have volunteered to provide trauma counselling services to affected individuals.

The York Region Rapid Response Initiative (RRI) was created to help victims of the tsunami. Since its initial response to provide assistance it has changed its focus to look at the longer-term policy and program responses to catastrophic events. A new Social Services Network has been created to reach out to the South Asian community and help them with access to support services. COSTI Immigrant Services has offered to move some services up to York Region as needed in the short-term. COSTI Immigrant Services could serve as first point of contact for referrals to counselling. Catholic Community Services of York Region continues to provide support services to assist new immigrants to settle and integrate into York Region's communities and also provides job search workshops and cultural interpretation services but is also stretched to capacity.

4.2 Next Steps

An Information Kit for Sponsors is being developed in partnership by several organizations including the federal government, the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI) and the YMCA. The kit is intended for anyone who has been approved to sponsor a family member wishing to immigrate to Ontario. Each section in the kit describes the different stages of the sponsorship experience. The kit may be used in any sponsorship situation. The kit is available on line at www.settlement.org and is available in English, French, Somali and Tamil.

Given the lack of funding generally for immigrant supports and the opportunity that may exist with the recent provincial/federal agreement, it is suggested that the Regional Chair and CEO write a letter to the federal and provincial Ministers to request a fair share of the funding available for new immigrant settlement services for York Region agencies in order to address the current shortfall as well as the projected increased need for funding. This letter is aligned with the HSPC Policy and Priorities Action Group.

Regional staff continue to work with the federal and provincial governments and community agencies to secure appropriate funding and address the concerns expressed by local agencies regarding settlement services.

4.3 Relationship to Vision 2026

The work initiated by the Region to communicate with community agencies, other regional governments and the provincial and federal governments to discuss the settlement and long-term issues that may arise because of an influx of new immigrants clearly supports the Region's goal to build strong, caring and safe communities.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Generally, new immigrants quickly become active economic and social contributors to their community when settlement supports are in place. However, funding for settlement

supports has not kept pace with the rate of growth and changing demographics of the Region and many agencies are already stretched to capacity. As part of the Community Services and Housing Commissioner's involvement with the Settlement Strategy Leadership Team, discussions will take place with the federal and provincial governments to understand how the new funding for settlement services will be divided. Staff will advocate for York Region to receive funding that reflects the changing immigration patterns and meets the needs of the new immigrants arriving in the Region. Staff will also work with the HSPC's Inclusivity Action Plan and local agencies to identify opportunities for partnerships.

Without early intervention by upper levels of government through adequate settlement services, there may be a greater likelihood that new immigrants will need social services in the future. The Region would shoulder this cost.

6. LOCAL MUNICIPAL IMPACT

As stated previously, it is anticipated that the majority of new arrivals from areas affected by the tsunami could settle in York Region and in particular in the southern parts of the Region as indicated by previous settlement trends.

While the numbers are likely to be modest and arrivals will occur over time, it will be important that the necessary community supports are in place to support the new arrivals and to support the existing residents who may have also been impacted by the tsunami disaster. Regional staff will continue to work with local agencies and other levels of government to identify the services that are needed and ensure that open communication exists to help people find the necessary supports.

7. CONCLUSION

Supporting new Canadians in participating in York Region's community and economy is critical. Due to low birth rates and an aging population, the growth of York Region's work force and continued prosperity are dependant upon immigration.

In the case of immigrants affected by the tsunami, it will be particularly critical that appropriate supports are in place to for both newcomers and their sponsors. These immigrants may be particularly vulnerable given the impact of the disaster on their lives.

York Region staff will continue to actively work with community agencies, the HSPC Inclusivity Action Plan Steering Committee and the Inter-governmental Settlement Strategy Leadership Team to prepare for the arrival and support of new immigrants including those affected by the tsunami and their families. It is important that the upper levels of government recognize that York Region's settlement funding generally has not kept pace with the change in immigrant settlement patterns and work quickly so that a

portion of the funding that was recently announced is directed to agencies in York Region. This is an important step in helping all new immigrants to settle quickly and adapt easily to life in their new community.

The Senior Management Group has reviewed this report.