

Starting on solid ground: the municipal role in immigrant settlement

Report Overview

Our economy:

Canada's economic future is tied directly to our ability to successfully attract and retain new immigrants. Every immigrant's arrival is an economic and social investment in our future.

Effective, efficient settlement of new immigrants is essential to filling gaps in our workforce and ensuring that Canada remains a destination of choice for skilled workers around the world. The sooner newcomers can establish themselves in our communities and contribute their skills to our economy, the better off everyone will be.

In recent years, new immigrants have struggled. They are falling behind the rest of the country in terms of income and job opportunities. Many will never catch up.

The municipal role:

Getting immigration policy right has never been more crucial to the success of Canadians, this country and the communities we live in. Locally delivered services such as housing, public transit, recreation and library services play a key role in helping new Canadians succeed. As well, these services help create quality communities that attract and retain newcomers.

Municipalities are the front-line, first responders to many immigrants' needs – yet have been given no formal role in developing federal immigration policies and programs.

In 2010, Canada's cities and communities welcomed a record 281,000 permanent residents and an additional 278,000 temporary workers and students. To give these new Canadians every opportunity to become successful contributing members of our cities and towns, we need to engage the municipalities they are coming to.

Access to adequate housing and reliable public transit are just two examples of the critical municipal services newcomers demand. These services are also integral to our economic growth. Traffic gridlock and a crumbling transportation network are the greatest barriers to growth in the Greater Toronto Area, the top destination for new immigrants to Canada.

Growing challenges:

Housing affordability is a problem facing cities and communities across the country. Without stable housing, immigrants and their families have a harder time finding jobs and enrolling in school. Nearly one-half of recent immigrant renters live in core housing need (paying more than 30% of income on housing).

New immigrants are also taking longer than previous generations of immigrants to catch up to their Canadian-born counterparts. Immigrants with university degrees earn less and are more than twice as likely to be unemployed than Canadian-born university graduates.

Successful recruitment efforts by smaller cities and towns, and a shift in settlement trends toward the suburbs, demonstrate how immigration helps our economies and communities grow. Still, Ottawa's language and job-training settlement programs are falling behind these changing settlement patterns. Communities big and small are left without resources to meet shifting local needs.

Municipalities collect just eight cents of every Canadian tax dollar. They do not have the long-term funding tools to support population and economic growth, while meeting new downloaded demands by other governments.

The road ahead:

The federal government is taking positive steps forward. They are reforming the rules and procedures for admitting new immigrants, and recognizing their employment credentials. This summer, the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration launched a national discussion on Canada's future immigration strategy.

The government has also started working with municipalities to repair some of the damage done to core infrastructure and public services by decades of underinvestment and offloading. New federal affordable housing agreements and recent investments in roads, bridges, water systems, and public transit will benefit all Canadians for generations to come.

The federal government must work with municipalities, provinces and territories to build on these gains.

The government must protect and build on recent investments in Canada's infrastructure and public transit, and fix the growing cracks in our housing system.

The time for action is now. Without a decent place to live, an affordable and reliable way to get to and from work, and communities that embrace what newcomers have to offer – immigrants will continue to fall behind and Canada will not meet its economic and social objectives.

Recommendations

1. Put settlement services on a longer-term, expanded track

Federal and provincial and territorial governments must expand settlement services to include the broad range of settlement needs, and ensure that their immigrant settlement programs and funding are put on a longer-term track to match five- to ten-year settlement time frames for newcomers

2. Set clear targets for successful immigrant settlement

The federal government must work with all orders of government and relevant stakeholders to develop a range of indicators beyond employment, that better measure the outcomes for new immigrants, including access to adequate housing, transit and other identified quality of life measures.

3. Recognize municipalities as key partners

Building on its successful relationships with Toronto and other Ontario municipalities, the federal government should engage municipalities in immigration policy development to tailor solutions to local needs and recognize the work municipalities are currently doing to support successful immigrant settlement.

4. Fix the holes in the housing market

Canada must consider tax and other incentives to increase the supply of rental housing; renew expiring federal housing programs and subsidies; and design policies and programs to support provincial, territorial and municipal 10-year housing and homelessness strategies.

5. Cut commute times and improve public transit

The federal government must renew dedicated funding for public transit; set targets to stop rising commute times; and implement transit-supportive tax policies, including a tax-deductible, employer-provided public transit passes.