

## Background

In this document we provide a summary of the community forum that took place in Ottawa on October 16, 2013 where 30 people engaged in dialogue about the challenges service providers face when supporting immigrants and recommendations for improving service delivery. Forum attendees included educators, front-line workers, management and volunteers who work in the areas of immigration and refugee settlement, immigration law, child protection/children's aid, health care services, adult education, anti-violence against women services and community development.

The forum panelists included:

- Rupaleem Bhuyan, Associate Professor, Factor – Inwentash Faculty of Social Work University of Toronto
- Jean Lash – Immigration Lawyer, South Ottawa Community Legal Services
- Lucy Spencer – Executive Director, Immigrant Women Services Ottawa
- Bernadette Ingungu – Transition and Housing Support Worker – Western Ottawa Community Resource Centre
- A facilitated discussion explored the following questions: How have recent & proposed changes to immigration policy shaped your work? How are you currently working with women with precarious status? What are your top priorities/concerns at this time? What strategies do you have in supporting immigrants with precarious status?

## Discussion Themes

### 1. Negative Impact on Women

Recent changes immigration policy have resulted in additional barriers for women with histories of violence and attempting to navigate the immigration system. It was discussed that these changes have resulted in strict timelines that make it almost impossible for women to provide the required documentation. Expensive lawyer fees and limited legal aid make it difficult for women to access adequate and sufficient legal support. It is these, among other barriers that have only made it harder for women and have contributed to barriers in submitting refugee claims or being able to access waivers for sponsored spouses

who have conditional permanent residence. Women are being further marginalized by policy that are not geared towards assisting them in any way, but make the already difficult systems even harder to navigate.

## **2. CIC Cost Reduction Measures Lead to Financial Hardship for Refugees in Ottawa**

The Ottawa forum included several examples of how budgetary cuts have impacted access to justice for refugees seeking asylum in Canada. The 2012 Federal Budget closed the Ottawa hearing office for the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB) as part of “cost reduction” strategy. Refugee claimants in Ottawa are now required to direct all case-related documents and inquiries to the Regional Office in Montreal. The forum provided the opportunity for several service providers to exchange examples of how closer of the Ottawa regional office has created financial burden for refugee claimants who must travel from Ottawa to Montreal for their appointments and hearings. Because appointments are often scheduled in the morning, in most cases refugees must spend the night, sometimes in the bus terminal; refugees have also been required to compensate their lawyers’ travel expenses and overnight lodging.

Forum attendees discussed possible ways to mitigate these negative effects through lobbying the Montreal regions office to at minimum, schedule appointments for Ottawa residents in the afternoon. This could reduce the need to spend a night in Montreal and thus reduce the travel costs for refugees and their lawyers.

## **3. Funding Cuts to Service Delivery**

The participants expressed their concern around the issue of the funding cuts that their organizations have been experiencing recently. This lack of funding has limited the services that they can provide to their clients. In addition, these budget cuts have also limited the amount and the quality of training that they receive since many of them are no longer able to participate in conferences and community forums, instead, they have been receiving their training through webinars, which are not found to be as helpful as forums. However, despite the fact that they have experienced these difficulties, they have found alternative ways to help women and their children by supporting one another and sharing their practices with their colleagues. In addition, the attendees appreciated the legal training that was provided at the forum, as with budget cuts, this too has been greatly diminished. At the forum, it was noted that the [University of Ottawa Refugee Assistance Project](#) provides up to date legal information that can assist service providers.

## **4. Accessing Exceptions from Conditional Permanent Residence for Victims of Abuse or Neglect**

In the year since Conditional Permanent Residence has been in effect for newly sponsored spouses (Since October 25, 2013), forum attendees have begun to work with sponsored spouses who are in abusive relationships and seeking safety, without jeopardizing their immigration status. Although CIC has established clear guidelines for victims of abuse or neglect, some service providers expressed concerns regarding confidentiality when calling

the CIC line to inquire about issues of sponsored women who are being victims of violence. It is unknown who will be accessing this information and if the contents of the abuse will be shared with the persona who is sponsoring the woman. Discussions around the difficulty of women disclosing this information for fear of being reprimanded took place. In addition, service providers also noted problems with accessing accurate information when contacting immigration officials who may not understand dynamics related to violence against women, or lack technical knowledge about CIC's exception for abuse and neglect.

## **5. Conclusion**

The Ottawa forum generated several discussions around the impact of immigration policies on women in the Ottawa region. Service providers are beginning to notice the effects of budgetary cuts on their capacity to delivery service to marginalized immigrants, as well as maintain current knowledge of immigration policy changes. Funding cuts have also impacted access to justice, with the closure of CIC regional offices for refugee hearings and appointments.

The Ottawa forum also identified several advocacy strategies to mitigate the negative impacts of funding cuts and policy changes. Legal advocates at the forum identified the potential to lobby CIC to schedule appointments for residents who have to travel from Ottawa to Montreal, as one small way to reduce travel costs. Service providers also shared strategies to provide support to immigrant women who have precarious status, but may not qualify for health care benefits, housing or income support.

There remains a strong need to gather information about how immigrants with precarious status are faring, in light of cuts to services and criminalization of immigration. In particular, forum attendees noted the need to better understand how newly sponsored spouses are impacted by the conditional status; and in what ways CIC protocol for exceptions based on abuse and neglect can be improved.