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# Making Social Housing Friendly for Resettling Refugees

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Although their stories are not directly cited in this research, it is important that we also acknowledge all of the former refugee families who are participating in our broader research. What they have told us is invaluable in helping us to identify where to direct our research efforts. We would also like to thank all of the interpreters without whose expertise has been indispensable to this research.

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# Introduction

This work is an extension of a longer-term project that began in 2015, in which we partnered with Welcome Place, the housing arm of the Manitoba Interfaith Immigration Council (MIIC), which provides housing, legal and settlement supports for newly arriving refugees in Winnipeg. Three main objectives animate this larger research project. The first is to demonstrate the challenges and successes that resettling refugees (a term described below) have in obtaining adequate and affordable housing after arriving in Winnipeg. The second is to demonstrate the relationships between the cost and availability of housing, social supports and employment in the context of settlement. The third, related objective is to demonstrate how social, public or otherwise ‘supported’ housing can positively affect the lives of resettling refugees.

In this larger project, which remains ongoing, we recruited 21 individuals or families comprised of resettling refugees who had been in Winnipeg for between 3 and 24 months. These participants represent diverse countries of origin, religious backgrounds, gender and marital status, with roughly equal numbers of Government Assisted Refugees (GARS) and Privately-Sponsored Refugees (PSRs). In this part of the

larger study we focus directly on the household situations of resettled refugees. The body of data that we use is derived from multiple interviews with each individual or family over time. To date, this has yielded up to five interviews per individual or family, depending upon the availability of both the interviewee, and when applicable, an interpreter, as well as the individual’s or family’s desire to remain a part of the project. Preliminary results from this longitudinal research have been published (Silvius 2016; Silvius 2019), and additional research based on the entirety of the research results is in development. A supplementary component to this long term research has been to consider the government and community response required to house the large influx of Syrian refugees in 2015–16 (Silvius et al. 2017).

If much of our larger project is ‘resettling refugee centered’, in which the narratives and housing trajectories of individuals and families take centre stage, with this work we shift the focus towards the broader refugee-serving community in Winnipeg, particularly those organizations that are responsible in various ways for assisting former refugees to find housing at different stages of their settlement experience.

We also include housing providers or facilitators who may work with resettling refugees.

We focus on the question: how is it that social housing can be made friendly for resettling refugees in Winnipeg? Two separate objectives are animated by this question. The first is to demonstrate how refugee-serving agencies and housing facilitators have considered the social or public housing sector as options for their clients, and the successes and impediments they have had in this regard. The second is to demonstrate the centrality of housing to refugee resettlement, and to consider how social or public housing may play a part in refugee resettlement. We build on the work of others who demonstrate the positive role that social housing can have in the lives of low income Winnipeggers (Brandon & Silver 2015; Cooper 2016; Klassen 2018; Silver 2011). We proceed on the assumption that social housing can have a positive effect on refugee resettlement efforts. Particularly successful in this regard are those forms of social housing that not only cost less

than prevailing rental rates in private rental markets, but also provide comprehensive services and supports for refugees in their efforts at resettlement (Bucklaschuk 2016 and 2019). Taking such works as our starting point, our focus in this report is not to restate the benefits of social housing. Rather, we: 1) consider the broader challenges that resettling refugees face with respect to settling in Canadian housing markets; 2) map out major agencies in Winnipeg to understand the supports that are available to former refugees in their attempts to attain affordable, dignified, and adequate housing in Winnipeg; and 3) consider how social housing can be made more accessible for both agencies and resettling refugees themselves. This exercise is not exhaustive in that we do not claim to locate every organization responsible for assisting resettling refugees to find housing in the city. Nonetheless, we have attempted to identify major agencies for whom assisting former refugees to attain housing (including housing them in their units) is a core responsibility.

# Methodology and Structure of Report

Following this section, we clarify the terminology at the heart of this project (Section 3). Such a clarification is necessary to demonstrate the social and legal right that resettling refugees have in their context of resettlement. In Section 4 we demonstrate findings from a literature review that was conducted in order to further frame the particular ways in which housing factors into the settlement trajectories of former refugees, and the difficulties they may have in securing affordable, dignified and adequate housing, including social and public housing. In Section 5, we demonstrate findings from background research conducted on the organizations that appear in our study in order to map out the field of refugee-serving organizations, housing

service providers and housing management organizations.

Beginning in February 2018 we approached personnel within local refugee-serving organizations and organizations that assist former refugees to attain housing to determine their interest in participating in our study. Upon gauging interest we sent participants a brief survey (See appendix A). A list of respondents appears in the acknowledgements section. Responses to this survey form the informational backbone of this report and a summary of key findings from these surveys can be found in Section Six. Section Seven serves as the conclusion and offers recommendations on the basis of our research findings.

# Refugees, Former Refugees, and Resettling Refugees: A Note on Terminology

A note on terminology is warranted here. We prefer the term ‘resettling’ refugees to ‘refugees’, as this is precise terminology that has two specific connotations regarding legal and social processes.

On the one hand, in a legal sense, displaced people cease being refugees upon permanent resettlement to Canada, as they receive permanent residency at this time. Resettled therefore refers to the act of attaining permanent residency in a country of refuge. As the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees indicates: “Resettlement is the transfer of refugees from an asylum country to another State that has agreed to admit them and ultimately grant them permanent settlement.” (<https://www.unhcr.org/resettlement.html>). Refugees who seek to resettle in Canada must be referred by either the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), a designated referral organization, or a private sponsorship group (<https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/help-outside-canada.html>). In the Canadian context, this means GARS, PSRS, and Blended Visa Office Referred (BVOR) refugees. We focus on the first two groups due to their prevalence in Manitoba and due to the fact that they are central to our research.

Refugee claimants — those who make claims of refugee status in Canada or at the Canadian border, but are not referred by the agencies listed above — are largely excluded from our larger study, as they became a prevalent phenomenon in Manitoba after we began. Nonetheless, we consider the specific housing needs of refugee claimants in this paper. Upon entering the province and amid the uncertain landscape of service provision that awaits them while they are having their claims heard by Canadian authorities, refugee claimants require housing solutions (Ahmed, Al-ubeady and Silvius 2017). Moreover, should they be successful with their claims and be granted permanent residency in Canada, they will encounter many of the same settlement challenges experienced by GARS and PSRS. Hence, many of the claims we make in this paper may be applied to the settlement experiences of former refugee claimants who have become permanent residents. Therefore, we use the more generic term ‘former refugees’ to refer to a wider group of individuals and families who have left their home countries due to a well-founded fear of persecution or actual persecution and in this case gain permanent residency in Canada.

On the other hand, upon reaching a new home country and city, former refugees undergo complex processes of resettlement, whereby they seek to establish their lives and tend to their economic, social, familial, cultural, educational and health needs. It is in this sense that we use the term ‘resettling refugee’ to refer to the processes inherent in establishing life in a new environment. Saying resettling instead of resettled demonstrates that for many former refugees, the act of (re)settling is a protracted and ongoing affair. Each former refugee individual or family unit experiences both similar and unique challenges during this period. Settlement challenges may include, but are not limited to, attaining adequate and affordable housing, finding meaningful and well-compensating employment, learning English and/or French, tending to health needs, including mental health needs derived from trauma, learning social and cultural systems, establishing cultural and religious communities, tending to the needs of family members that remain abroad, including initiating and successfully completing family reunification processes. We argue that assisting former refugees during their resettlement experiences in Winnipeg is a public matter and necessitates the broad support of municipal, provincial and federal levels of government, as well as the community as a whole. Moreover, obtaining affordable and adequate — in that it meets the needs of the family in terms of size, quality, location, and amenities — housing is central to the resettlement process.

Using the terms ‘former refugee’ or ‘resettling refugee’ is preferable to simply ‘refugee’ because these terms emphasize the legal entitlement that such individuals have to live in Winnipeg, Manitoba and Canada. Such an emphasis is important in an era of increased stigmatization of refugees and is made here to demonstrate that resettling refugees have a right to be here and that we have a collective obligation as a society to ensure successful re-

settlement. Nonetheless, retaining the idea of ‘refugee-ness’ is important, as it demonstrates common experiences of displacement regardless of the bureaucratic designation — GAR, PSR, or Refugee Claimant. As the Canadian Council for Refugees states, “Using a term that includes “refugee” helps to highlight the commonalities between refugee claimants and resettled refugees. Conversely, omitting the term “refugee” can reinforce misperceptions that refugee claimants are not refugees or are less deserving of Canada’s protection” (<https://ccrweb.ca/en/refugee-claimants-comment-use-terms>). Moreover, retaining the term refugee emphasizes the settlement challenges that displaced individuals may face in their new home despite increased stability in their legal status.

When referring to secondary research, we attempt to retain the language contained in the work in question — hence, ‘refugees’ may appear throughout our piece. We are cognizant that referring to former refugees as simply refugees has the capacity to obscure their legal status and may be misleading to the general public with respect to their ability to permanently reside in Canada. Nonetheless, we are also cognizant that upon settlement, many former refugees will experience challenges that are not experienced by the Canadian population as a whole, nor, necessarily, by other categories of newcomers.

A further note on terminology is warranted. In this study, we use social housing to refer to those dwellings which are in some way subsidized by government bodies and/or other entities, including community-based organizations, and may be operated by government or non-government entities. An example here would be Winnipeg Housing, a non-profit entity that manages not for profit housing in Winnipeg. Public housing — those buildings and units which are directly administered by government bodies — are an important component of social housing, and, in the context of Win-



nipeg, includes Manitoba Housing.<sup>1</sup> As Silver (2011) demonstrates, public housing in Canada has been subject to long-term decline over the course of the latter half of the twentieth century to the present day, as the federal government abdicated its responsibilities for directly funding and managing public housing. The broader use of social housing instead of public housing more accurately reflects the landscape affecting former refugees, wherein they may have access to forms of social housing that are supported by government or community but not directly managed and operated by government bodies. The key aspects in social housing as we have

defined it is that renters are not responsible for paying prevailing market rates for their homes and social housing units exist in larger complexes. For our purposes, we exclude programs like Rent Assist, in which the (provincial) government provides a subsidy for renters to rent in a privately-owned unit. In this work, we consider how refugees, particularly those who experience low incomes and insufficient social supports to meet their needs during settlement, can benefit from a larger amount and wider array of social housing than is currently available. Moreover, such housing can be made more ‘resettling refugee friendly,’ as we demonstrate below.

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<sup>1</sup> This distinction largely follows the convention adhered to by the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (<https://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/about-cmhc/social-housing-information/social-housing-programs>). See also Cooper (2016).



# Housing and Refugee Resettlement

In this section, we summarize existing research on the housing experiences of former refugees and immigrants, and the relationship between housing policy, the housing market and refugee resettlement. It is important to note that the experiences of immigrants and refugees differ, and where information pertains to immigrants this is indicated. Nonetheless, insofar as both groups will experience certain similarities in obtaining housing in a new country and city, a consideration of the research on refugee and immigrant housing experiences is warranted. The term newcomer is used when referring to studies whose subject is both refugees and immigrants. In summarizing research findings, we acknowledge that while each refugee resettlement experience is unique in many ways, it is possible that former refugees will have similar encounters with housing markets, and that these can contribute to or impede their ability to successfully resettle.

## Effects of Poor Housing

Securing safe and affordable housing is one of the first challenges former refugees face while settling in Canada in general, or Winnipeg specifically. It is also one of the most important. Sev-

eral studies have pointed to the negative effects that poor housing situations have on resettling refugees. The inability to access housing is related to, and reinforces, broader patterns of social exclusion experienced by former refugees. Francis (2010: 59) writes that

The characteristics of social exclusion occur in multiple dimensions simultaneously and are mutually reinforcing; thus, people living in low income areas are also likely to experience substandard housing, inequalities in access to education and employment, social service deficits, disconnection from civil society, increased health risks, discrimination in the criminal justice system, stigmatization and isolation

Discussing newcomers more broadly, Carter et al. (2009: 305) indicate that without stable housing, newcomers “have limited security of tenure, compromised health, jeopardized education and employment opportunities and impaired social and family choice.” Danso and Grant (2000: 21) explain that housing has a particularly important role for individuals and families going through adaptation and change, such as that of resettling in a new country, stating that “housing, and especially

its accessibility, [...] structures immigrants' access to scarce resources including occupational, educational, medical, recreational and leisure facilities.”

In the Winnipeg context, studies demonstrate how challenges accessing safe and affordable housing affect resettlement, including the ability to focus on English language training (Magro & Ghorayshi 2011), provide household necessities such as food, medicine, and clothing (Madariaga-Vignudo & Miladinovska-Blazevska 2005), or tend to the immediate needs of family members who remain in conflict zones or otherwise precarious situations (Silvius 2019). Moreover, the negative consequences of poor housing situations may persist beyond the initial years after arrival. While former refugees' housing circumstances in their new communities seem to improve with time, several trends have been documented that show that life in Winnipeg can remain challenging for many years. Refugees may attain more *affordable* housing by their third year in Canada; however, this is often by sacrificing housing quality and location, and in many cases higher debt levels (Carter & Osborne 2009). Although only 15 percent become homeowners after three years, those who do experience affordability issues as well, with 75 percent spending more than 30 percent of their income on housing (Carter & Osborne 2009).

Neighbourhood attributes are as significant as attributes of the home itself in facilitating or impeding successful resettlement. Rose (2001: 496 & 321) notes that “housing status [...] cannot be divorced from the neighbourhood context” and “the struggle to recreate a sense of home involves much more than the search for a physical shelter”. Refugees may prefer to live in areas in which there is a high concentration of others with similar ethnic or linguistic backgrounds. As described by Allen and Goetz (2010: 339; see also Novac 1999):

For refugees, who tend to have less English fluency and lower levels of educational attainment than other immigrants, living

in public housing that concentrates poverty undoubtedly has costs, but also may carry significant benefits, including the opportunity to live in close proximity to coethnics that they can count on for support.

In Winnipeg, former refugees' challenges obtaining affordable housing often result in their locating in the low-income inner city. Although there are many aspects of life in the inner city that refugees enjoy, such as proximity to settlement services, amenities, friends and public transportation, Carter and Osborne (2009; see also Garang 2010) found that close to 90 percent would prefer to live elsewhere if affordable housing could be obtained. Moreover, they explain that safety and security concerns lead to high levels of mobility. Over a quarter of newly-arrived refugees participating in their study moved three or more times in their first year. Nonetheless, frequent moves may themselves contribute to stress and fear and prevent former refugees from achieving a sense of security (Fozdar and Hartley 2014).

### Barriers to Obtaining Housing

Although resettling refugees experience many of the same challenges as other low-income groups, they also experience their own unique barriers to securing safe and affordable housing. Along with other racialized newcomers, they are prone to experiencing discrimination in the housing market, including being falsely told by landlords that a unit has been rented or being accused by neighbours of decreasing local property values as a result of moving to the neighbourhood (Danso & Grant 2000; see also Anderson et al. 2013). Experiences of discrimination can lead newcomers to locate in poorer areas of the city, reducing their access to quality education, employment, health care and transportation, and contributing to residential segregation (Dion 2001; see also Somerville & Steele 2002).

The discrimination experienced by former refugees is exacerbated by having to learn new and often unfamiliar laws and power structures pertaining to tenant and landlord responsibilities and the Canadian housing system more generally. Some have limited education and poor language skills impeding employment and making access to housing more difficult, and others have health problems that make finding and retaining a suitable home more difficult. Refugee families are also often in need of larger units which are few in number and rarely available, and as a result of such challenges are more likely to live in overcrowded situations (Carter & Osborne 2009). They may rely heavily on settlement agencies to help them find housing and support them in learning their rights and responsibilities as tenants. Also, they do not necessarily know all the housing options available to them, especially smaller community-based social housing. They also need guidance to understand the basics of renting in Canada, including what security deposits and leases are, and what they can expect to pay in utility costs (Madariaga-Vignudo & Miladinovska-Blazevska 2005). Former refugees, like all newcomers, may rely heavily on ethnic networks of family, friends, and cultural groups for information and support in the initial stages of resettlement and beyond. However, the quality of the information gleaned through these informal connections can hinder their resettlement efforts (see Teixeira 2011).

Former refugees are also affected by economic conditions that make obtaining affordable and adequate housing difficult for all low-income families. Housing problems are exacerbated by unemployment and low-paying jobs that put newcomers in precarious financial situations. Low social assistance rates and high unemployment also put newcomers at risk of homelessness (Anucha 2006). Newcomer homelessness is often not visible on the street or in the shelter system as it tends to be 'hidden homelessness,' in the form of overcrowding and unsustainable rent-to-income

ratios (D'Addario et al. 2007: 109; Fiedler et al. 2006: 215; Murdie & Logan 2011).

Former refugees are disproportionately affected by adherence to the National Occupancy Standards in the allocation of social housing. The National Occupancy Standards that require a minimum number of bedrooms be provided based on family size, and do not allow children of the opposite sex to share rooms. This limits the availability of social housing for large families, can increase wait times, and can force families into crowded and unaffordable housing in the private market (Francis 2010).

#### Government-Assisted and Privately-Sponsored Refugees

In our own work, we have demonstrated how social provisions and support for housing and resettlement differ with refugee status (Silvius et al. 2015; Silvius et al. 2017; Silvius 2016). For example, GARS can access Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) supports for up to a year upon arrival. RAP supports are provided by the Canadian federal government and are intended to cover housing and basic needs. While these supports are valuable and helpful, they have not kept pace with developments in housing markets. In Manitoba the GAR housing allowance has not increased at the same rate as rental rates found in local housing markets (Silvius et al. 2015). Over time, therefore, renting a dwelling has come to account for a larger portion of the support offered GARS in the first year of settlement, meaning that an increasing percentage of GARS' household budgets must be drawn from other means, including child-tax benefit, savings or other forms of income. Moreover, for GARS the requirement to repay transportation loans to the Government of Canada can contribute to financial stress and restricted housing budgets. As Francis (2010) notes, a single parent with five children could owe over \$10,000 which must be paid back within three years of arrival. If left unpaid, interest begins to accumulate and

the government may deduct payments from the family's child tax benefit.

Privately-Sponsored Refugees, meanwhile, are to have needs met by their sponsors for one year or until the PSR has achieved self-sufficiency (whichever comes first). PSRs may be subject to 'sponsorship failure', wherein sponsors do not adequately meet their needs, including housing (Hyndman et al. 2016: 16). In a Winnipeg-based study, 30 percent of sponsored households experienced problems with their sponsor, and 14 percent of sponsorships failed due to multiple factors, including: a desire to avoid overburdening or reflecting poorly on sponsors with additional requests for support; being unaware of additional avenues of support within the sponsorship program; and little oversight within the program to determine if problems were occurring (Carter 2009).

Should PSRs seek housing independence from their sponsors, which is a reasonable goal for both individuals and families and an important component of their settlement trajectory, they too are subject to expensive rental markets. The structural conditions of housing rental markets are such that regardless of the means at their disposal, both GARS and PSRs are increasingly expected to compete for homes in the private rental sector. In most Canadian urban jurisdictions, including Winnipeg, housing rental markets have experienced diminished public, social and subsidized housing stock, as well as historically low vacancy rates. As we demonstrate in a previous study (Silvius et al. 2015), staff at Welcome Place responsible for locating transitional and longer-term housing for resettling GARS in Winnipeg have suggested that since the early 1990s, housing options for former refugees are fewer, of poorer quality, insufficient for their needs and more expensive relative to their financial means.

### Refugee Claimants

Refugee claimants experience heightened challenges securing housing due to their precari-

ous legal position. Refugee claimants are those refugees who claim refugee status after arrival in Canada. More likely to arrive in Canada alone and less likely to have a support network in place upon arrival, and less likely to connect with settlement services soon after arrival, refugee claimants may experience additional challenges obtaining housing when compared with refugees supported by government or private sponsors (Murdie 2008).

Moreover, refugee claimants experience difficulties in accessing services before their refugee claims have been adjudicated. During this period they may be ineligible for social housing, emergency shelters, food banks, provincial health care, social assistance and work permits, rendering refugee claimants the most vulnerable to homelessness (Kissoon 2010). Claimants experience housing discrimination at both the individual level by landlords and housing agencies and at the systemic level through government policy affecting claimants. In an analysis of Ontario Human Rights Commission complaints related to housing discrimination, Reid (2009) finds that like other refugees, claimants were discriminated against based on country of origin, race, source of income (social assistance) and family size. The unique experiences of refugee claimants are primarily a result of systemic discrimination, which Reid (2009: 35) explains, "results from the establishment of application procedures, screening requirements, eviction processes, and so forth that while not intended to discriminate, adversely affect particular vulnerable groups, reinforcing their exclusion." According to Reid, government policies contributing to systemic discrimination towards claimants include social assistance rates, unavailability of social housing and unwillingness of government to prioritize claimants on waiting lists, as well as costs of legal counsel in claims processes, work permits and permanent residency applications.

Refugee claimants experience immediate and longer term effects of housing precarity.

One year after receiving a positive response to their claim, over 75 percent of participants spent more than 30 percent of their income on rent, due to the combined effect of low social assistance rates, low vacancy rates and high rents in the private market and lack of access to social housing. During their first year in Canada, refugee claimants' situations were even more precarious, with 100 percent of claimants spending more than 50 percent of their income on rent, a rent-to-income ratio which Canada Housing and Mortgage Corporation characterizes as critical housing stress (Sherrell et al. 2007).

### Refugees and Social Housing

In research studies conducted in Winnipeg, refugees who lived in social housing were happier than those who did not (Carter et al. 2008) and experienced fewer problems with housing affordability (Madariaga-Vignudo & Miladinovska-Blazevska 2005). However, in one study they were more likely to cite safety as a concern in their neighbourhoods (Madariaga-Vignudo & Miladinovska-Blazevska 2005). This study recommends building more social and cooperative housing, but also advocates for live-in caretakers to address problems between tenants and break-up 'cheque day' parties, so that refugees will feel safe living in social housing (Madariaga-Vignudo & Miladinovska-Blazevska 2005). In studies conducted by Mackinnon et al. (2006) and Ga-

rang (2010), immigrants and refugees themselves have called for more social housing, especially in convenient and safe areas outside the downtown core. In a Toronto-focused study conducted by Teixeira (2007), both government-owned and community-based social housing were perceived by newcomers to be devoid of the problems of discrimination they had experienced in the private sector, despite higher concentrations of immigrants in these neighbourhoods. Refugees may also be subject to discrimination within social housing allocation processes. In a UK study, refugees were more likely to end up in the older and less desirable buildings of the social housing stock, while White families exercised a greater degree of choice in social housing selection processes (Robinson 2010).

The foregoing review of existing research on refugees and housing demonstrates that refugees face a wide range of challenges when seeking adequate and affordable housing in their new homes. Moreover, it demonstrates that difficulties in attaining such housing can negatively affect a family's or individual's efforts at successful resettlement. If social housing is to serve as a piece of the resettlement puzzle, how can it be made more 'resettling refugee friendly'? To answer this question, we first turn to the landscape of Winnipeg-based organizations that facilitate the housing experiences of resettling refugees in order to determine how the latter are connected to social housing systems and housing markets in the city.



# Refugee-Serving Organizations and Social Housing: The Winnipeg Landscape

A web of agencies deliver housing-related services to former refugees in Winnipeg. The purpose of this section is to provide an overview of some of the key organizations involved in locating, maintaining and/or providing housing for former refugees. Four types of agencies are described here: transitional housing agencies, housing service providers, social housing providers and property management organizations. There is significant overlap between these categories, and many agencies fill multiple roles. While this is surely not a complete list of all the actors involved in housing former refugees in Winnipeg, it does provide a snapshot of the complexity of providing settlement and housing services for the resettling refugee population.<sup>2</sup>

## Transitional Housing Agencies

For many GARS, **Welcome Place**, a transitional housing facility and settlement organization, is their temporary home for a few weeks upon arrival. Welcome Place is an initiative of Manitoba Interfaith Immigration Council, whose mission

is “to welcome and provide settlement services for refugees and immigrants living in Manitoba” (MIIC 2017b). Welcome Place does not just provide housing services. While some services, including transitional housing, are reserved for newly-arrived GARS only, others are available to all classes of refugees. Settlement services include interpretation, orientation and life skills and referrals to other agencies (MIIC 2017d). They also assist refugee claimants in working through the claims process (MIIC 2017a), and facilitate private sponsorship through partnerships with ethno-cultural organizations in Manitoba (MIIC 2017c). Staff assist GARS in obtaining and moving to a permanent home. In addition to finding homes on the private rental market, staff members also help GARS apply for social housing. However, as social housing waiting lists are lengthy, most GARS must find housing on the private rental market while they wait for a subsidized unit (Madariaga-Vignudo & Miladinovska-Blazevska 2005).

**Accueil Francophone** provides similar settlement and housing services to the Francophone community. Newly-arrived GARS can live in their

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise stated, information about each organization in this section came from the respondent(s) from the organization.

transitional housing facility for up to 21 days, while the agency assists them in finding a permanent home. Again, this may include applications to social housing but usually clients must find rental housing in the private market while they wait for offers from social housing providers. Like Welcome Place, Accueil Francophone provides orientation programs which include information on the housing system in Canada, eligibility for social housing, and tenant and landlord rights and responsibilities.

Second-stage transitional housing, or housing that newcomers can access upon leaving their first home but is not deemed permanent, is available to former refugees of all classes through the Immigrant and **Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba (IRCOM)**. IRCOM runs two Manitoba Housing-owned transitional facilities with wrap-around supports, described below. IRCOM limits stays to three years, at which point clients are supported to find privately-owned or social housing. IRCOM's facilities are open to both immigrants and refugees, and there is always a waiting list. As their mission statement explains, "IRCOM strives to empower newcomer families to integrate into the wider community through affordable transitional housing, programs, and services" (IRCOM 2018). Settlement services and supports that IRCOM provides include English language training, a driver's education program, an afterschool program for youth, financial literacy programs and a childcare program which cares for kids while their parents participate in programming. Bucklaschuk (2016 and 2019) demonstrates that resettling refugees benefit from the supportive community and wrap-around supports that IRCOM offers.

### Housing Service Providers

While Welcome Place, Accueil Francophone and IRCOM provide transitional housing and settlement services, there are other agencies in Winnipeg that focus primarily on service provision. While these agencies are not housing providers themselves, they are key in assisting former refu-

gees with referrals to housing providers, education about rights and responsibilities, completing applications, and troubleshooting problems that may come up after moving into a new dwelling.

**New Journey Housing (NJH)** is a housing resource centre with a mandate to assist all types of newcomers with housing-related challenges. Key to NJH's philosophy is an understanding that successful settlement and integration can take many years, and that settlement services should be available indefinitely. Since Welcome Place and Accueil Francophone are responsible for assisting GARS during their first year in the city, NJH extends its services to GARS only after they have been in Canada for one year. While NJH provides housing education, support and referrals, clients ultimately make their own choices about where they want to live. Some of the services NJH provides are help in filling out applications for affordable and social housing, and for Rent Assist; referrals to social housing providers, including co-ops and smaller non-profit housing organizations; workshops on home ownership, rental rights and responsibilities, pest prevention and money management. NJH also does advocacy and education with government, social housing providers, landlords and the public to increase awareness of newcomer housing issues and how newcomers can be better-supported throughout the settlement process.

**West Central Women's Resource Centre (WCWRC)** is one of the organizations in Winnipeg that hosts the Neighbourhood Immigrant Settlement Worker (NISW) Program. The NISW Program provides settlement services to newcomers living in the areas that surround the host agency (in this case, WCWRC). Housing services provided include referral to social housing providers, housing education, help with applications, and advocacy with social housing providers to secure tenants.

### Social Housing Providers

**Manitoba Housing** is both a provider of housing and a funder of non-profit housing initia-



tives delivered within community. As a funder, it provides funding for many non-profit housing cooperatives and agencies that provide subsidized housing (Manitoba Housing 2018a). As a provider of housing, Manitoba Housing operates the largest social housing program in the province, the Social Housing Rental Program, which “provides low-income Manitobans in the greatest need with subsidized housing. Manitoba Housing provides a range of quality housing such as apartments, townhouses, duplexes and houses for individuals, families and seniors” (Manitoba Housing 2018b). Manitoba Housing conducts an intake interview with all applicants to ensure that families and individuals are placed in suitable housing with the desired community supports nearby. Many of the transitional housing agencies and housing service providers mentioned above refer their clients to Manitoba Housing.

**Winnipeg Housing** owns or manages over 40 residential properties in the city, most of which are apartment buildings (Winnipeg Housing 2011c). Their vision is “to lead the way to bring positive change to the lives of individuals and families throughout Winnipeg neighborhoods by providing affordable housing” (Winnipeg Housing 2011b). The rent in Winnipeg Housing units is set at 28 percent of a household’s income (Winnipeg Housing 2011d). Tenant resource staff provide built-in supports and programming (Winnipeg Housing 2011a).

Many smaller cooperative and non-profit housing providers offer housing for low-income Winnipeggers, including former refugees. Some small housing providers, particularly several associated with faith-based organizations, serve only immigrants and/or refugees.

#### Naomi House and Marie Rose Place

Naomi House provides temporary housing for privately-sponsored refugees and refugee claimants for up to one year. Established by City Church,

the 7-bedroom facility also offers settlement services including conversation circles, trauma counseling, a sewing program and assistance finding employment. An optional host family program helps residents build relationships with other Winnipeggers, and is supported by the participation of local faith-based organizations.

According to their website, Marie Rose Place “provides a safe, affordable, supportive environment for single newcomer women and their children in which their cultures are honoured and by which they have a stable home foundation to pursue their other goals” (Marie Rose Place 2018a). While most of the families served are immigrants or other women at risk of homelessness, refugees are also eligible to apply. Completed in 2014, the downtown apartment building contains 40 units. Tenants are supported to apply for rental subsidies through Manitoba Housing (Marie Rose Place 2018b), and social opportunities, counseling and referrals to community agencies are offered.

#### Property Management Organizations

Although not housing providers, property management organizations interact with tenants on a daily basis. In Winnipeg, **S.A.M. Management** is a property management corporation used by many affordable housing providers. As their website notes, “S.A.M. Management is a non-profit property management corporation that provides socially responsible property management in partnership with organizations offering affordable housing options in the community” (SAM Management 2018b). Housing organizations that SAM works with include Westminster Housing Society, WestEnd Commons, Manitoba Housing, Greenheart Housing Co-op and Payuk Inter-Tribal Housing Co-op (SAM Management 2018a). The organization manages a range of buildings throughout the city including apartments and townhomes for families, single adults and seniors.

# What Organizations Say: Housing Former Refugees in Social Housing

Having surveyed the landscape of transitional housing agencies, housing service providers, social housing providers and property management organizations this report will now describe how respondents envision social housing playing a role in housing former refugees and how it can be made ‘refugee friendly.’ Positive housing outcomes are central to facilitating the settlement experience of former refugees (Silvius et al. 2015). However, the challenges are myriad. Agnieszka Sheehan of IRCOM informed us that:

In Winnipeg there are not enough housing supports for newcomers, no access or not enough access to interpretation, as well as education about the system and what housing looks like here. A lot of housing units are not big enough to hold some of the large families and there is a lack of suites for singles that are given very limited budget for rent and might not be able to rent privately.

Our research participants have substantiated this idea in various ways. Sally Nelson of New Journey Housing stated that “good housing is [the] foundation to successful settlement of all newcomers, especially former refugees.” One of our respondents explained that:

It needs to be understood that refugees are people who are victims of war and violence in their home countries and in refugee camps. They come here traumatized and need safe and affordable places with support services, or close to support services, to rehabilitate themselves and be able to be contributing members of the society here.

Social housing can be an important component of facilitating the settlement experience of former refugees. However, in order for this to be done to the greatest extent possible, social housing must be made more (resettling) ‘refugee-friendly’. In the remainder of this section we document both the successes and challenges that organizations we consulted have experienced in either placing former refugees in social housing, or referring them to social housing.

## Challenges Accessing Social Housing

### **Limited Availability**

Many service providers in Winnipeg face challenges accessing social housing for their clients. Several said that the limited availability of social housing makes it difficult to assist their clients

in locating subsidized units. Erika Frey of West Central Women's Resource Centre notes that "waitlists are common across all social housing. We have seen some success where families are placed quickly but overall most families are waiting for a very long time and feel stress from this." Long waits for social housing add an extra step in the housing trajectory of former refugees, since they must find a place to live in the private market while waiting for a subsidized unit to become available. This puts financial stress on families who have to pay market rents, and means that subsidized housing is not available during the time when families need it most.

Upon arrival in Winnipeg, GARS are temporarily housed at Welcome Place or Accueil Francophone, while newly-arrived PSRS often live with their sponsors. Less likely to have access to temporary housing or social networks, many refugee claimants stay in shelters. All of these initial accommodations are temporary, and former refugees are soon looking for a permanent home. As Sally Nelson of New Journey Housing notes, "we would discourage applying for subsidized housing if a client needs to move very quickly, then a subsidized housing application [...] may not be worth it as generally it takes much longer than a month to be accepted." This is one of the factors contributing to the high number of moves that former refugees experience in their first few years after arrival. It also puts some families in the unfortunate position of having to break a lease when subsidized housing becomes available, tarnishing their rental record.

According to both service and housing providers, single people and large families face particular challenges accessing social housing in Winnipeg. Single people, especially those who want to share housing with others, are poorly served by social housing. Many social housing providers adhere to the National Occupancy Standards which provide guidelines for the number of bedrooms which should be provided for each family

size. While the guidelines prevent overcrowding, they exclude many larger families from accessing social housing since few subsidized units of three or more bedrooms exist. Many single people and large families are forced to rent in the private market for these reasons. Families who have a member with a disability also experience challenges accessing social housing. Carlos Vialard and Mohamed Mustafa Mohamed of IRCOM note that:

Our challenge is assisting our families who have individuals who use wheelchairs due to a disability. Our location at Isabel has six four-bedroom accessible apartments. Similar options in social housing are difficult to locate as there are few four-bedroom apartments, and even more difficult to find four-bedrooms that are accessible.

The limited supply of social housing reduces the ability of former refugees to make choices about where they want to live. Many decide to move to a subsidized unit in any area of the city, rather than wait for a unit in their desired area. One social housing provider explained that negative perceptions of an area can also make some areas a hard sell to newcomers. She said, "there have been times when the area that I worked in and had units in were not the first choice for the client, and it has been difficult to communicate the positives of the area." She noted that despite the fact that refugees are hesitant to move to a given area, the community in that area "can benefit from diversity and inclusion."

The limited availability of social housing can have disastrous effects in times of crisis. Refugee families in Winnipeg sometimes experience family separation or violence, or find themselves living in unsafe or inadequate housing situations. For these families, long wait times can mean that social housing is not a suitable alternative. As a result, they may have to remain in these poor housing situations, find housing in the private market or with friends, or even become homeless.

### **Understanding Rental Processes in Winnipeg and Manitoba**

Some former refugees have low levels of literacy, and all arrive in Winnipeg without local rental histories. These factors make navigating the landscape of housing providers in Winnipeg and understanding rental rights and obligations more challenging. As Agnieszka Sheehan of IRCOM explains, “for newcomers that might not live at IRCOM, and did not hear about New Journey Housing from someone, the system could be quite daunting.” Organizations like IRCOM, New Journey Housing and Welcome Place help former refugees understand the rental process, which is especially important for families for whom the concept of renting is completely new.

Language barriers also affect the ability of former refugees to access social housing. Most housing providers do not employ interpreters, so applicants who do not speak English must locate an interpreter to assist in filling out forms and translating at meetings. Many former refugees rely on service providers for this, and this type of assistance takes up a significant amount of their time. Language barriers also restrict their clients from calling housing providers directly, and can result in missed opportunities when a phone message or letter is not understood. Language barriers are also a challenge for those seeking to maintain their tenancy in social housing units. For example, New Journey Housing has served clients who have inadvertently put their tenancy at risk by not preparing for pest control procedures properly, which sometimes leads to eviction. A social housing provider we spoke with confirmed that language barriers are a challenge in providing housing for former refugees, and that having translation services available would make it easier for her to communicate effectively with refugee tenants.

### **Finding Information and Applying**

Many service providers also stressed that information about the range of social housing options

available in the city is not easy to find. While larger organizations like Manitoba Housing and Winnipeg Housing are well-known and have centralized intake processes, small community-based social housing providers, co-operatives and rent-supplemented units are more difficult to locate and require filling out multiple application forms. As Sally Nelson explains:

A major gap in the system is that it is very difficult to find out where ‘hidden’ social housing is available, for example rent-supplemented and affordable units that Manitoba Housing is supporting in private market or non-profit housing providers — how do we know where these are at any given time? And, for those not using service provider organizations like New Journey Housing, how do low-income folks themselves even know they exist?

Researching the social housing options available takes a considerable amount of time for both former refugees and service providers.

The costs of applying to multiple social housing providers can place a financial burden on former refugees. While some of the larger providers do not have fees associated with applying, others require applicants to complete credit checks, meaning that even submitting an initial application can have costs. As Diana Epp-Fransen of New Journey Housing explains:

Manitoba Housing has streamlined their application process, making the initial application very easy to fill out. Other housing providers require a lot of documentation at the time of application, and some also require \$22 per adult to perform a credit check, which can feel like a lot of money for those on a fixed income, or if the family has a number of adult children or grandparents living with them.

While it is uncertain how this contributes to the willingness of former refugees to apply for social housing, it certainly highlights a problem with accessibility, since most former refugees are on

fixed incomes during their first months in Winnipeg, when social housing is most needed.

### **Inequities in Housing Allocation**

Josh Brandon of the Right to Housing Coalition noted that there are inequities in how social housing is allocated to different groups of refugees. Refugee claimants experience challenges accessing social housing, particularly during the initial time period after their claim has been filed. This is because they are not eligible for Employment and Income Assistance, and consequently cannot access subsidized housing. During the Syrian refugee response, additional resources were committed to rent supplements and subsidized housing targeted towards that population (Silvius et al. 2017). While this is a welcomed development for the group positively affected by it, that such supports have neither become permanent nor regularized across all categories of refugees irrespective of countries of origin, is concerning.

### **Successes Accessing Social Housing**

While service and housing providers both experience challenges meeting the needs of former refugees, respondents also shared success stories. Although the number of social housing units of three or more bedrooms is limited, Erika Frey of West Central Women's Resource Centre expressed that social housing providers are more responsive to the unique circumstances of large families than private market landlords:

One great success we had this past year was a family of ten people who we supported to apply to Manitoba Housing. They were living in a private rental house with a severe pest problem. Within one month of submitting the application the family was offered a unit.

Housing providers highlighted the fact that social housing can provide important settlement and integration supports. One housing provider explained that in social housing “there is the

opportunity to become part of the community, learn from other tenants and have the children integrate in school.” Speaking about IRCOM, where she works, Agnieszka Sheehan explained,

The tenants who are lucky enough to find a spot at IRCOM, in general, have very positive experiences but that's because they are made to be a part of a community who is not only supporting them with their housing needs, but also other settlement essentials. IRCOM is not just a house; it becomes a home to many people. They have a chance to spend three years in a very supportive environment which gives them that time to relax and think about what they want.

Another housing provider discussed how staff at the agency where she works have assisted in many successful transitions:

There have been so many success stories, some families have used the opportunity to save, and have moved on to purchasing their own home, some have been able to keep their families together in the same neighborhood, which can be huge as a social support system. In the areas that I have worked in, staff has been very supportive of refugee and immigrant families, and in assisting them in integrating into the community, ensuring our new families understand that their concerns will be taken seriously, and that we will work hard to get supports in place if they are needed.

These success stories demonstrate some of the ways in which social housing is supporting former refugees in Winnipeg, and how social housing can serve goals of inclusion, integration and equality in neighbourhoods in which they settle.

### **Positive Attitudes Towards Social Housing**

Many survey respondents spoke about the benefits of social housing in the lives of former refugees, and how having access to social housing can allow newcomers to focus on other settlement needs.



### **Affordability**

It is generally more affordable to rent social housing than to rent comparable units in the private rental market. For former refugees living on a fixed income, having access to safe and affordable housing decreases financial stress. Agnieszka Sheehan of IRCOM explained:

Moving to a new country with nothing more than a suitcase is difficult and most people need time and help to get used to living in Winnipeg. Having access to social housing allows them a chance to live in a place that does not strain their limited resources.

Alleviating financial pressure in the lives of former refugees supports their successful integration. Some service providers noted that privately-sponsored refugees who are able to access social housing pay off their transportation loans faster, freeing up funds which can be used for other settlement needs. Service providers also felt that their clients in social housing were more likely to be able to save for their own home, and less likely to spend their food budget or child tax benefit on housing-related costs.

### **Education**

A key goal for many former refugees in their settlement in Winnipeg is to further their education and the education of their children. Having access to affordable social housing allows newcomers to focus on pursuing this goal. One social housing provider explained, “refugee and immigrant families place a very high value on education and ensuring that their children are able to pursue their education. I really believe that secure housing is a huge first step in allowing this to happen.” Without access to affordable housing, many former refugees give up their dreams of continuing English language training or pursuing other training programs, high school or post-secondary education out of a need to work to support their families.

### **Community & Supports**

The service and housing providers we spoke to stressed the importance of the supports and sense of community former refugees enjoy in many social housing facilities. In contrast to former refugees who rent in the private market, many former refugees living in social housing have access to integrated supports, including program workers at the neighbourhood level. Several providers felt that such programs help former refugees make friends and feel that they are part of a community. Sally Nelson of New Journey Housing noted that their clients who reside in social housing express fewer complaints about their neighbours.

### **Negative Attitudes Towards Social Housing**

Despite the positives, many service providers also shared challenges their clients face living in social housing, highlighting poor housing quality, dealing with pest infestations, safety concerns and negative relationships with neighbours as key issues. Concerns about quality centred on the materials used in building construction, and problems with mold. Several service providers mentioned that pest infestations are common in many social housing buildings, and that dealing with this is stressful for former refugees. Diana Epp-Fransen of New Journey Housing explained, “Too often, families struggle with bedbug and/or cockroach infestation or keeping up with the treatment spraying that forces families to vacate their units for several hours at a time.” Preparation for the treatments can be time-consuming and expensive. Former refugee clients often express safety concerns to service providers, reporting feeling insecure either in the building they live in or the neighbourhood in which the social housing is located. Concerns here centred on the levels of crime, violence, and alcohol and drug use by other tenants and neighbours.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Settlement or resettlement is often a long and challenging process for former refugees. Making a home in a new Canadian community comes with attendant challenges — finding housing and employment, obtaining competency in one or both of Canada’s official languages, acculturation, transportation, obtaining child care, tending to the needs of family members that remain abroad and so forth. While one may have ceased to be a refugee in name, one may experience specific settlement challenges as a result of one’s experience of seeking refuge and creating a life in a new community—in our case Winnipeg. Obtaining adequate and affordable housing is central to positive resettlement experiences and therefore should be a priority for all levels of government as well as the community at large.

However, in order to do so there are steps that can be taken to make social housing more ‘resettling refugee friendly’, as we have demonstrated in this paper. It is the specificity of the resettlement experience for former refugees that we wish to address with this paper, with a primary focus on the way that housing may be supportive of or detrimental to this experience. We have demonstrated that former refugees face a wide range of challenges when seeking adequate

and affordable housing in their new homes, and have suggested that housing can make a central contribution to facilitating either positive or negative resettlement experiences. Social housing can make a positive contribution to refugee resettlement, however, there are many things that can be done in order to render social housing more ‘refugee friendly.’

In order to determine what can be done to this end, we consulted a range of organizations responsible for facilitating the housing experiences of resettling refugees. Many service providers provided suggestions about how social housing in Winnipeg could be improved and/or better supported. Below is a list of their recommendations for assisting social housing providers and governments in supporting refugees resettling to Winnipeg, as well as our own assessments derived from this research. While the provincial government remains the level of government with the greatest amount of oversight over, and, therefore, accountability towards social housing, the following can be best realized by cooperation between all levels of government.

- Maintain existing social housing stock, and keep all social housing in good repair.



- Build more social housing, particularly larger units for big families, and bachelor and one-bedroom units for singles. Housing designed specifically for seniors should also be prioritized. The Right to Housing Coalition suggests that 5,000 new social housing units are needed to bring social housing back to 2002 per capita level. Moreover, an additional 300 units per year are needed to respond to population growth (Right to Housing 2018).
- Continue to provide rent supplements to offset high market rents for former refugees renting in the private sector, however, not at the expense of maintaining and expanding the existing social housing stock.
- Reduce wait times for social housing so that housing is available for former refugees when they need it most, particularly immediately upon arrival in Winnipeg.
- Ensure social housing is safe, and located in communities in which newcomers want to live.
- Provide training for social housing staff to increase their understanding of the experiences of former refugees and how best to support them.
- Consider ways in which existing rules governing landlord-tenant relations in Manitoba (the *Residential Tenancy Act*) act as an impediment towards former refugees moving into social housing.
- Recognize diverse family structures and the need for communal spaces. This includes revising social housing policies to accommodate adult family members or those who share community ties who want to live together and support each other.
- Continue and expand embedded supports that address language, literacy and system literacy barriers for all former refugees.
  - Expand access to life skills workers who communicate in the clients' own language.
  - Increase access to interpretation services and English language training close to refugees' own homes.
  - Provide culturally-appropriate supports to help former refugees understand tenant and landlord rights and responsibilities.
- Continue and expand social supports and integrated programming for former refugees living in social housing.
- Continue and expand no cost and quality childcare and youth programming for all social housing residents.
- Provide programming and education which help build relationships between newcomer and Indigenous families, particularly in the context of social housing.
- Share and publicize the positive achievements of social housing providers in housing former refugees.
- Facilitate the spread of information on the range of social housing options available to former refugees, with an emphasis on smaller community-based social housing providers, as this information can be difficult to obtain.

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# Appendix A: Questionnaire

## Questionnaire:

### Refugee Experiences with Social Housing

The following are open ended questions. Please feel free to elaborate as much as you wish.

1. What experience does your organization have with placing refugees in social housing? Explain the depth and scope of your organization's experience in this regard.
  - Where (in terms of social housing) do you place/refer them? Why?
  - Is it easy to do so? Could it be made easier?
  - Do you refrain from placing/referring them in/to social housing? If so, why?
2. What challenges have you experienced in placing refugees in social housing?
3. What successes have you experienced in placing refugees in social housing?
4. In your experience, do social housing units/buildings adequately serve refugees' individual/family needs? Why or why not?
5. In your estimation, do your refugee clients have positive or negative experiences in social housing? Elaborate.
6. What concrete things could be done to make social housing more 'refugee-friendly' in Manitoba?
7. Do you have anything else to add on the subject?











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