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Resettling Refugees' Social Housing Stories

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Introduction

This paper is a companion piece to the report, *Making Social Housing Friendly for Resettling Refugees*, published earlier this year by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (Silvius, Halldorson and Ataan Al-ubeady, 2019). The intention with the present paper is to build on our assessment in the previous work. There, we demonstrate the significance of housing to the process of refugee re-settlement and consider the role played by transitional housing agencies, housing service providers, social housing providers and property management organizations in assisting resettling refugees in obtaining social housing.

In this report, we use the term “resettling refugees” to refer to people who were displaced to a country outside of their country of origin, attained refugee status, and have been resettled to Canada, attaining permanent residency in the process. In our study, this includes government assisted refugees and privately sponsored refugees. We also use the term “former refugees,” which includes the above and may also include refugee claimants whose claims to residency in Canada were successful. However, refugee claimants are not included in our study. Hence, for practical purposes, resettling refugees and former refugees are synonymous here.

By social housing, we refer to dwellings that are subsidized by government bodies and/or other entities, including community-based organizations, and operated by both government and non-government entities. Social housing includes but is not limited to public housing — those buildings and units that are directly administered by government bodies. We choose the term social housing because it is more expansive than public housing and includes a number of buildings and dwellings that are important options for resettling refugees in Winnipeg.

The present report is part of a long-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, paralegal and settlement supports for newly arrived refugees in Winnipeg. We outline the parameters of this project in the aforementioned companion piece. For this project we recruited 21 individuals or families comprised of resettling refugees who had been in Winnipeg for between 3 and 24 months with the intention of charting their housing trajectories over approximately a three year period, although this length of time varied from participant to participant, depending on their (and, if

necessary, the interpreter's) availability. We interviewed participants a maximum of 5 times depending on their availability and interest in remaining involved in the project.

Ultimately, we are interested in understanding the relationships between cost of housing, suitability of housing, and the resettlement process. In many respects, the parameters and conditions of resettlement vary from family to family and individual to individual. However, for many former refugees, resettlement trajectories will involve important considerations like employment, social supports, acculturation, family reunification, language acquisition, education and employment training, establishing new forms of community, and providing care for self and family

(including family that remains overseas). These commonalities are what make refugee resettlement a matter for social policy: we as a society can do better to welcome former refugees into our communities and provide the supports needed to help them get their lives in Canada off to the best possible start. Obtaining adequate and affordable housing is central to this undertaking.

While the full findings of this project remain forthcoming, our present purpose is to sketch out the experience that our participants have had with social housing so as to continue to answer the question posed in our 2019 work — how can social housing be made friendly for resettling refugees? In order to perform this task, we will turn to experiences of resettling refugees.

Experiences of Resettling Refugees

Beyond some of them having spent their first weeks in Winnipeg at Welcome Place, which provides a finite amount of transitional housing for government assisted refugees upon their arrival in Winnipeg, we had no guarantee of what sorts of experiences our interviewees would have with the non-private housing market. Some would have no experiences whatsoever, living only in private market apartments. Below, we have included the accounts of nine interviewees who have desired to have, applied for, or attained social housing.

Neten¹

Originally a government assisted refugee from Bhutan, Neten was displaced to Nepal before arriving in Winnipeg. He first lived in a two-bedroom apartment in Winnipeg's inner city with his father and two teenage nephews (sons of a brother for whom he is the primary financial provider). Now, Neten lives in Winnipeg with his wife, infant daughter (who was born in Winnipeg), father, and nephews. He expressed

considerable frustration with his first apartment building, stating that the fire alarm went off in the complex "25 or 26 times" during their first winter there and that the caretaker did not respond to his requests for maintenance. He was also frustrated by having to pay rent to three separate management companies at his first home. One of these companies lost his rent payments, and he incurred a penalty as a result.

He sought a social housing unit and was surprised when he did not get one. He expressed frustration at this and at being unable to apply for public housing himself due to a lack of familiarity with the process.

In his second interview, Neten told us that he believed that:

when you live in Manitoba Housing, it is cheaper. From what I understand for [a] newcomer family when you first come to Canada, it is better to live in Manitoba Housing because you don't have to worry about rent that much. You can focus on your studies and go to school. That is why I think for newcomers, it is

¹Neten's account is derived from an account that originally appeared in Silvius 2019. All names have been changed to ensure anonymity of the interviewee.

good. But if you live in private housing from the beginning, you have to worry about paying rent.

Denis

Denis came to Winnipeg in 2013 with his wife and four of his children. After arriving in Canada, they had a baby, and they also have a child in another African country for whom they have an open immigration application. Denis is originally from Congo but he and his family lived in another African country before they came to Canada as government assisted refugees. He and his family stayed at Welcome Place for two months before moving to a privately-owned apartment in downtown Winnipeg. They applied for Manitoba Housing in 2013, but by the time we first visited them in 2015, they had not been offered a unit. When we visited them in 2016 we learned that they had been offered a subsidized unit in a housing co-op (\$530 monthly) in Winnipeg's North End, which they accepted. Their application with Manitoba Housing had remained open for three years — in other words, they spent three years on a waiting list without receiving a unit. In terms of costs and size, the subsidized co-op housing unit was helpful, and the family believed they were unlikely to find a unit of comparable size and cost on the private housing market. The relatively low cost of the unit helped to offset some of the financial difficulties the family faced: Denis had difficulty finding work in Winnipeg, and he and his wife remained financially responsible for a child who remained in Africa as they awaited family reunification. While he noted the safety of the dwelling itself, the lack of safety in the neighbourhood was a considerable source of stress and the family also reported not having a sense of community with their neighbours.

Sahra

Sahra came to Winnipeg in 2014 with five of her children. She is a single mother and has three

other children living overseas who she would like to sponsor to come to Canada. She is originally from Somalia but she and her family were living in another country overseas before they came to Canada as government assisted refugees. Sahra and her family lived at Welcome Place for one month before moving to a privately-owned duplex in downtown Winnipeg. Sahra feels that securing adequate and affordable housing has been the biggest problem her family has faced in Winnipeg. She has had negative experiences in the private housing market. She has applied to many social housing providers and not received any offers. Some of her friends have suggested her 18 year old daughter should move out. They told her that she will have a better chance of getting a three bedroom unit than a four bedroom one.

Samira

Samira came to Winnipeg in 2014 with her younger daughter. She is a single mother and originally from Somalia, but she and her younger daughter were living in another African country before coming to Canada as government assisted refugees. Samira and her daughter stayed at a hotel for 10 days, and then Welcome Place, before moving to a unit in a downtown social housing complex that specifically houses newcomer women and assists their tenants in obtaining rental subsidies through Manitoba Housing. The rent for the unit is \$487, which includes all utilities, internet access and furniture. The building offers a sense of community, positive relationships, and supports for single mothers. Despite the relatively low cost of the apartment, after transitioning to Employment and Income Assistance her budget was strained and she was unable to support her older daughter who remained overseas as they awaited family reunification. Samira's daughter arrived in Winnipeg in 2017. She reports that in the midst of the challenges of resettlement and family reunification,

having a relatively affordable and quality apartment in a supportive building meant has helped her considerably.

Ibrahim

Originally from Sudan, Ibrahim had lived in Egypt before coming to Winnipeg as a privately sponsored refugee in 2014. He lived with his sponsor for eight months before moving to a privately-owned apartment in downtown Winnipeg, wishing to be more independent and closer to downtown. He has family and friends in Sudan to whom he sends money when he can. Ibrahim has experienced a lot of challenges related to lack of employment, financial stresses, and ineligibility for EIA when taking high school-level classes. Although he wanted to apply for subsidized housing, he was told that social housing providers would not allow him to live with a roommate, whom he refers to as his nephew and extended family.

In his second interview, Ibrahim said:

Before my nephew was coming here I was thinking for that [applying to MB housing]. Because I [was] lonely and I spent a lot of money [on rent] for myself. So I thought if I applied to Manitoba Housing, I can pay less. After he has come, I just cancelled my application because if I go to Manitoba Housing, I would still be in the same situation. At Manitoba Housing, they cannot give you two guys in one bedroom.

At times, he has had no income at all, and has had to live off his meager savings from summer employment. Although relatively happy with his first apartment, he was not happy with his second because he felt the area was unsafe.

Bisrat

Bisrat came to Winnipeg with her husband and four children in 2014. She is originally from Eri-

trea, but she and her family were living in another African country before coming to Canada as privately sponsored refugees. They did not stay with their sponsor after arriving in Canada. Instead, family members rented an apartment for them in a privately-owned building located in downtown Winnipeg, which they soon found to be inadequate for their needs. By the time of our second interview, they had been offered a Manitoba Housing unit, but they turned it down due to its location: it was too far from downtown.

In our third interview, Bisrat said that she and her family had been on the waiting list for public housing for approximately three years. They were first offered a place in the suburbs but declined because it was too far away: the children had been in school for some time now and she went to English classes in the area. She was of the impression that if you decline opportunities for units within public housing, your waiting time for each subsequent opportunity is longer. In our second interview, she mentioned how the waiting time seemed to be longer for larger families.

Bisrat told us that “When I turned down the first option ...it took a long time [to be offered another unit]. I was calling and calling... Finally, she [someone working for Winnipeg Housing] called me and said there is one but you have to move as soon as possible. Just 2 weeks.”

Fortunately, she and her family were able to find a subletter — another newcomer — for their previous unit, which enabled them to move to the new home. By the time of our third interview, Bisrat and her family had moved into a new three bedroom apartment downtown. After three years on the waiting list, they were finally offered a unit by Winnipeg Housing. Bisrat credits this to her persistence in following up on the application regularly. Their new place is clean, bright and spacious, and the building has on-site staff and an outdoor play area for the children. The rental rate is \$666 per month.

Jamila

Jamila came to Winnipeg with her husband and two children in 2015. After arriving in Canada she gave birth to their third child. She was born in Ethiopia but is of Eritrean descent and she and her family were living in Eritrea before coming to Canada as privately sponsored refugees. When they arrived in Canada, they lived with their sponsor for one week and then with other family members for an additional two months, before moving to a privately-owned apartment in Osborne Village. Jamila said housing is the most important aspect of settlement. She feels more transitional housing is needed for newcomers, and that it is very stressful and problematic for newcomers to have to deal with lengthy waiting lists for social housing. By the time of our second interview, the family had moved into a new three bedroom unit, in a Manitoba Housing building in St. Vital. The rental rate is \$400 and all utilities are included in the cost of the rent. Manitoba Housing was responsive to her requests for modifications of the unit, taking out carpeting in many of the rooms and replacing it with linoleum tiles. This has helped with her son's asthma. The family also purchased a vehicle. She likes the area because there are services nearby and she is close to the mall and other shops. Despite all this, she still experiences challenges financially, including finding affordable daycare. Unable to find daycare for her youngest, she has delayed her re-entry into the labour market.

Gebre

Gebre came to Winnipeg with his wife and three children in 2013. He is originally from Eritrea but he and his family lived in another African country before coming to Canada as privately sponsored refugees. They lived with their sponsor for one month before moving into a privately-owned apartment in downtown Winnipeg. In our first interview, we discussed some of the challenges Gebre faced securing housing in Winnipeg. The family's first lease application was denied because

they did not have a rental history. They had to pay for three months in advance in order to secure an apartment. Gebre talked about some of the challenges of integrating in a new country, and the inadequacy of tenants' rights. By the time of our second interview, they had experienced significant challenges with their landlord, including a disagreement regarding who was responsible for paying the utility bills. They had also purchased a home. Gebre still has an ongoing claim with the Residential Tenancies Branch regarding the utility bills from their last apartment, which he feels he was forced to pay unfairly. One of the issues he sees with the rental system in Manitoba, is that landlords have more rights than tenants, mostly through the use of lease agreements. He also discussed how Manitoba Housing is not effective because it is not available when newcomers need it most, upon arrival.

Elodie

Elodie came to Winnipeg with her five children in 2013. She is a single mother. Originally from Congo, Elodie and her family lived elsewhere in Africa before coming to Winnipeg as privately sponsored refugees. She has an adult child who was living in Africa at the time she came to Canada, but approximately four years after her arrival, her daughter moved to the US with her family. Elodie's sponsor rented and paid for the family's accommodations during the first year, after which time they moved to a privately-owned apartment building in St. Boniface. Since coming to Canada, two of Elodie's children have moved out of the family home and are living independently in the city. Throughout the time we have known her, Elodie has experienced financial troubles related to increasing housing costs, transportation loan payments, and her adult children moving out. In a discussion about Manitoba Housing, Elodie mentioned to us that she was informed that Manitoba Housing does not allow single adults to live together, excluding her and her adult children from applying.

The Significance of Housing to the Resettlement Experience: Lessons From Our Interviewees' Stories

Former refugees experience complex tradeoffs during the common experience of resettlement. During this period, while becoming accustomed to a hitherto foreign social and economic system in a new city and country, they must tend to their material and emotional necessities: acquiring housing, finding a source of income, whether through paid employment or social supports, learning, or enhancing their capabilities in, a new language, providing care for family members located both here and abroad, and enhancing their employment prospects through training, education or certification. Moreover, such needs must be tended to in the context of displacement, and, potentially, dispossession of home and material assets.

An individual's or family's new home can be a further burden amidst resettlement, or it can provide an oasis of stability that enables them to focus on other pressing matters. Social housing may be an important piece of this puzzle, provided that it meets the needs of resettling refugee families. How, then, can social housing better serve the needs of resettling refugees in Winnipeg? The following insights are derived from the accounts of our research participants listed above.

While it must be remembered that resettling refugees represent a broad spectrum of incomes and employment type, many arrive in Winnipeg with poor employment prospects, precarious economic situations, and the need to connect to social supports. Moreover, Manitoba's shortage of social housing, and Canada's long term disinvestment from social housing, phenomena that are well documented (Silver, 2011), means that fewer dwellings are available for all Manitobans in need, including resettling refugees.

Transitional Housing, the Need for Housing Upon Arrival, and the Challenge of Waiting Times

Arguably, resettled refugees have the most acute need for supported housing and housing services during the initial period of resettlement. Transitional housing complexes — housing that is not intended to be a permanent solution but instead stabilizes a family's or individual's housing situation before a longer term option can be secured — are important options for resettling refugees. Government assisted refugees can stay at Welcome Place or Accueil Francophone for a limited period upon arrival in Winnipeg. How-

ever, dedicated options for resettling refugees after this period are limited. Those fortunate enough to receive a unit in one of the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba's (IRCOM's) two complexes can stay in a rent controlled unit and receive comprehensive, on-site, wrap-around supports for a maximum of three years (Bucklaschuk 2016 and 2018). Those who do not receive transitional housing or longer term social housing units are relegated to the private housing market, where they all too often do not have their housing needs met. Similarly, as a number of our research participants demonstrated, waiting times for social housing can be prohibitively long, and during this time a family may move multiple times to a number of inadequate dwellings. Doing so negatively affects a family's sense of rootedness in Winnipeg and can have significant effects on other aspects of resettlement.

Costs, Size, and Adequacy

With the considerable increase in the absolute cost of rental housing in Manitoba's private rental market over recent decades, paying for dwellings in the private rental market represent an increased burden on all Manitobans, and particularly low-income Manitobans. Since 2000, average rental costs in Winnipeg have increased by 60 percent (Brandon 2015). In this context, social housing represents a potentially attractive option in terms of cost, size and adequacy of the dwelling.

Neighbourhood Choice: Safety, Proximity to Services and Proximity to Ethnocultural Community

Unsurprisingly, like all Winnipeggers, resettling refugees exhibit preferences in terms of neighbourhoods. Their reasons for doing so may be similar to others — for example, a desire to live in safe neighbourhoods and those with amenities for families and children — or particular to resettling refugees — proximity to services that they require during resettlement, or proximity to ethnocultural communities as well as associated amenities, such as religious institutions or grocery stores that offer culturally-specific foods.

Achieving a Sense of Community and a Supportive Environment

As demonstrated above, achieving a sense of community and a supportive environment is crucial to former refugees' ability to resettle successfully. Some social housing providers demonstrate the ability to provide supports on site. Moreover, this sense of community can be obtained by the ability to live with friends, adult children, and extended family members, all of whom can provide a crucial support network for resettling refugees. Unfortunately, there is a perception among some resettling refugees that social housing providers do not prioritize and may even disallow adult relatives, friends, and roommates from living together. Although Manitoba Housing's policies do not indicate this (Manitoba Housing 2019), we were not able to review the policies of other social housing providers. In the case of some of the people we interviewed, these fears discouraged them from applying for social housing, and often resulted in them renting an unaffordable or inadequate unit in the private market.

Conclusions

As we demonstrated at greater length in our 2019 report, former refugees experience myriad challenges during resettlement: attaining adequate, dignified and affordable housing in neighbourhoods of their choosing, 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, including former refugees' responsibilities to uphold treaty relations, establishing cultural and religious communities, and supporting family members that remain abroad, including completing family reunification.

The accounts of former refugees included here further reaffirm the need for adequate, dignified, and affordable housing at each stage of the resettlement process, from immediately upon ar-

rival moving forward. Social housing can play a significant role when it is 'friendly' to former refugees. Positive housing experiences can help former refugees address the challenges implicit to resettlement. Negative housing experiences can prolong the feelings of uprootedness and uncertainty and force families into impossible decisions about what to prioritize and what to do without. Former refugees have experienced displacement and, often, dispossession due to circumstances not of their choosing; hence, stabilizing their home life in our community is a goal we should all wish to achieve. Doing so necessitates reinvigorating social housing systems through the broad support of municipal, provincial, and federal levels of government, as well as the community as a whole.

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