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FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

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The Unique Social Housing Needs of Resettling Refugees

War and persecution force refugees to leave behind all that they know to embark on new and challenging experiences of resettlement. In Winnipeg, they meet a web of service providers willing to assist them in this process. Some of these organizations assist resettling refugees in finding and maintaining housing, which they identify as integral in building a foundation for successful resettlement. For resettling refugees, access to social housing is important, especially right after arrival when their incomes are the most constricted and their social networks are not yet established. The new Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Manitoba report *Making Social Housing Friendly for Resettling Refugees* asks the questions: Do resettling refugees get social housing when they need it? And is social housing 'resettling refugee-friendly'?

Resettling refugees interact with a variety of housing-related entities during their resettlement. Government-Assisted refugees stay at Welcome Place or Accueil Francophone for a limited time upon arrival. All classes of refugees can apply for second stage transitional housing through Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba (IRCOM), although there are a limited number of units available. Most resettling refugees turn to staff at these organizations, and others like housing resource centre New Journey Housing, and Neighbourhood Immigrant Settlement Worker Programs

like the one hosted by West Central Women's Resource Centre, for assistance in finding housing. Since privately-owned rental housing is often unaffordable or inadequate for resettling refugees, many of these agencies look to social housing as an alternative. Staff assist resettling refugees in applying for social housing, dwellings that are subsidized by government bodies and/or other entities, including community-based organizations, and operated by government or non-government entities. This includes Manitoba Housing, Winnipeg Housing, and smaller non-profit agencies and cooperatives, which all low-income Winnipeggers are eligible to apply for, as well as housing providers like Naomi House and Marie Rose Place, which are specifically for newcomers.

Agencies experience challenges accessing social housing for resettling refugees. The number of units available is limited, and resettling refugees often experience long waiting periods before they are offered a unit. This puts financial stress on families and added burden on service providers, as resettling refugees must move from temporary housing into the private market while they wait for a social housing unit. Agencies also find it particularly challenging to find social housing units for single people and large families, for families that include a member with a disability, or for people who have a preferred neighbourhood in which they want to live. These characteristics reduce

there is an alternative.

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the number of units that particular resettling refugees are eligible for, and can increase waiting periods for social housing.

Resettling refugees experience other challenges accessing social housing in Winnipeg. Many have low levels of literacy and all arrive without local rental histories. Navigating the housing system is difficult, and this is compounded by language barriers. Most social housing providers do not employ interpreters, and sometimes resettling refugees miss important opportunities to access social housing or maintain their tenancy because of communication challenges. Many agencies also indicate that information about the range of social housing options available in the city is not easy to find, especially smaller community-based social housing providers, co-operatives, and rent-supplemented units. Application costs can be prohibitive, including the fees for credit checks required by some social housing providers. Agencies also note that resettling refugees who secure social housing units sometimes experience challenges with pest infestations, safety concerns, poor housing quality, and negative relationships with neighbours.

Despite these challenges, service providers stress the benefits of social housing and their successes in accessing it for clients. Sometimes social housing providers are very responsive to families experiencing urgent needs, such as severe pest problems or overcrowding. Social housing providers differ in the supports they provide, but they can foster a community for resettling refugees. Many provide integrated supports, including program workers at the neighbourhood level. The affordability of social housing has profound impacts on the trajectory of resettlement. Since most resettling refugees are on a fixed income at first, having access to social housing means that they can turn their attention to other needs, such as education and training, employment, paying off government-provided transportation loans, and supporting the daily needs of their families both locally and overseas.

Social housing is a key resource for resettling refugees and the agencies

which support them, but it can be made better. Service providers indicate that existing social housing stock should be maintained, but that additional units should be constructed, especially for single people and larger families. Although rent supplements are important, they should not be provided at the expense of maintaining and expanding the existing social housing stock. These efforts should seek to reduce waiting periods for social housing so that resettling refugees can access it when they need it most, particularly immediately upon arrival in Winnipeg. Building off of the successes of supportive housing providers such as IRCOM, service providers indicate that social housing should provide community supports and programming, and access to interpretation to assist in the resettlement process. It should also address literacy and system literacy barriers experienced by resettling refugees.

Resettling refugees' experiences navigating Winnipeg's housing market are unique, and social housing can mitigate some of the challenges they face. This requires that social housing providers consider resettling refugees in the design of their policies and procedures, and make efforts to better support the resettlement process. It's possible for social housing to be made 'resettling refugee-friendly' in Winnipeg, and for social housing providers to lead this transformation.

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The authors are involved in a three year project, sponsored the Social Sciences Humanities Research Council through the Manitoba Research Alliance "Partnering for Change – Community-based Solutions for Aboriginal and Inner City Poverty", studying the housing situations of resettling refugees in Winnipeg.

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