

VOLUNTEERING WITH GOVERNMENT-ASSISTED REFUGEES

Welcome Group Program





WHO ARE GOVERNMENT-ASSISTED REFUGEES?

Government-Assisted Refugees (GARs) are Convention Refugees who were selected and referred to the Canadian government for resettlement by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) or another designated organization. The Canadian government sponsors their initial resettlement and provides one year of financial assistance and other support through Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). Refugees who are resettled through the Government-Assisted Refugee Program become permanent residents of Canada.

GARs come from many walks of life. They arrive in Canada with differences in pre-migration education, living conditions, health and mental health, and levels of proficiency in English or French.

Research on GARs has demonstrated that approximately two-thirds have complex needs. This is consistent with the mandate of the GAR Program which seeks to resettle the most vulnerable refugees as referred to Canada by the UNHCR.



“We might have big hearts, and can sense other people’s feelings and truly understand what they’re going through, but we need to take action to change their reality, or at least by making it acceptable, easier and bearable. Volunteering with Together Project has enabled me to do that.” - Sara



HOW GLOBAL REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT WORKS

Before arriving in Canada, GARs undergo medical and security checks known as the pre-arrival screening. While some receive pre-departure information sessions, Welcome Groups should expect GARs to have limited knowledge about daily life in Canada.

Keep in mind that most refugees do not live in camps, and might have lived in precarious or dangerous situations in urban or rural areas before resettlement. Many GARs will have built a life in their country of displacement, and may have more ties to it than to their country of origin.




GAR ARRIVAL IN CANADA

Staff from settlement agencies help GARs navigate the airport, complete their Permanent Resident application, go through a final interview with the Canadian Border Services Agency, and bring them to a Reception Centre or a hotel.

At the Reception Centre or hotel, GARs meet with a counsellor who assists with information and referrals. Adults attend orientation sessions that explain their rights and responsibilities as resettled refugees.

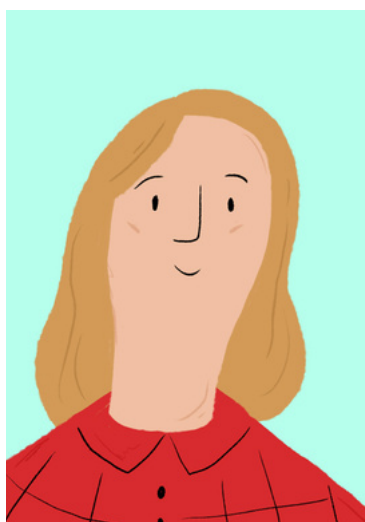
Staff also help GARs open bank accounts and apply for OHIP, SIN numbers, GST/HST rebates, Canadian Child Tax Benefit, etc. They also arrange for immediate medical services when necessary and book language assessments for adults.

After orientation, GARs begin the process of securing more permanent housing through the support of Housing Workers. This is no easy task, especially in cities like Toronto where housing vacancy tends to be lower than the national average. Families can expect to stay at the Reception Centre or hotel for a minimum of two to three weeks, often more than month, until permanent housing is secured.



Once GARs have housing, furniture is ordered and provided through the federal government according to pre-determined packages based on family composition, and the GARs are assisted with moving to their new home. Depending on the settlement agency, they may be assigned a caseworker based on their new address and languages spoken.

At this point, Together Project's partners may refer GAR households to Together Project to be matched with a Welcome Group, connecting the newcomers with volunteers soon after they've moved to their new home.



"For a very long time in my life, I struggled with my sense of belonging. I was told that I was the exclusive possession of the land I had left behind over a decade ago. Yet I also craved to belong to the place in which I was living in at that time. Speaking the language as good as the locals unfortunately did not earn me the acceptance that I needed in order to go to build my life and build a future for myself as a young person-- to build a home." - Aya


THE RESETTLEMENT ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Familiarity with settlement sector terms can help Welcome Group volunteers interact with caseworkers and effectively advocate for GARs.

The main source of financial and settlement support for GARs is the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP), which is funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). Settlement agencies that are responsible for GARs and thus for administering RAP are called RAP Service Provider Organizations (RAP SPOs).

RAP provides 12 months of financial and settlement support. One of the goals of the Welcome Group Program is to ensure that newcomers take full advantage of available services in their first year of settlement.

From the time they move into permanent housing, GARs receive monthly financial assistance through direct deposit to the Head of Family's bank



account. The amount varies based on family size and composition. However, financial support is limited, and is roughly equivalent to the social welfare support people receive under Ontario Works. GARs are also entitled to an Assistance Loan to help with the cost of rental and telephone deposits.

Resettled refugees are entitled to public health insurance (like OHIP) as well as 12 months of supplementary benefits under the Interim Federal Healthcare Program (IFHP). IFHP covers basic pharmaceutical, dental, vision, and paramedical care. GARs can also receive mobility devices or extended physical therapy. More information on the coverage can be found on the service provider's website.

GARS are also registered for a language assessment so they can access either Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC), which are language classes funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), or English as a Second Language (ESL), funded by some provincial governments.

It is important that GARs are clear about how systems (and wait-times) work, and that they have realistic expectations of timelines for services.




“The fact that I do have many relatives who are still in Syria— to feel that something could happen to them anytime, to sort of hear about the news, what is happening in Syria-- it’s a bit overwhelming to think and to deal with two things: to deal with your life here, and remembering and dealing with what is happening in Syria.”

-Joudy

MONTH 13

Month 13” refers to the transition from the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP)– which is in place for 12 months from the date of entry to Canada — to self-reliance on more general social services.



While much of the news coverage is focused on Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSRs) and private sponsorship groups, it is worth recalling that GARs are resettled on the basis of vulnerability. While around half of PSRs find work by the end of year 1, statistics show that over 85% of GAR newcomers will not have found full-time work, and will therefore transition to Ontario Works and also rely on tax credits for daily expenses.

The transition also means the end of certain housing credits and other supports, which may make life more difficult just as newcomers are getting settled. It also means the end of expanded health insurance through the Interim Federal Health Program and, in most cases, the end of their relationship with their RAP provider caseworker.



"I really got help finding the information I need. I got a lot of information about the kinds of careers that are in demand in the city. I also got information about housing options in the city. They help me figure out the documents I need to fill out for the government. This was so helpful. Even after my Together Project match ended, my Welcome Group still checks on me."


-Felicia

TALKING TO GARS ABOUT MONTH 13

Welcome Groups can play an important role in helping GARs prepare for Month 13 well in advance of this transition.

A key message Welcome Groups can help communicate is that receiving social assistance in Month 13 does not mean being reliant on social assistance for the rest of their lives, but that this is a period for them to continue building the skills necessary to enter the labour force, especially skills related to language.

On average, while around 90% of GAR newcomers will use social assistance at Month 13, only around 70% will still use it by the end of year two, though a significant proportion will require longer-term social assistance support.



Additionally, while GARs will end their relationship with their RAP provider caseworker, they will still be able to access a wide range of other professional settlement services that may be offered by other newcomer-serving agencies, often right in their own community. Welcome Groups can help make this connection, if needed.

Month 13 is a point at which the work of fostering autonomy rather than dependence will become vitally important, and the Welcome Group Program is an important way to prepare them for this transition.

FAMILY REUNIFICATION AND GARS

Family reunification can be a long, complicated, and often disappointing process for GAR newcomers, and it is a priority that is outside of the scope of Welcome Group volunteers' support. However, volunteers should still have a basic understanding of what it means for families interested in it.

Some newcomers who arrive to Canada as Government-Assisted Refugees do so without one or several of their immediate family members, parents, and other family members, who may have been resettled elsewhere, are still waiting for their resettlement, or are not refugees themselves. The process of bringing these family members together again is referred to as family reunification.

For immediate family members (spouse or common-law partner, dependent children, and children of dependent children), the Government of Canada offers the One-Year Window (OYW) provision to assist with family reunification under certain circumstances. It permits resettled refugees in Canada to identify immediate family members who are abroad for resettlement within one year of their arrival in Canada. Other relatives (such as parents and grandparents) may be sponsored by family members already in Canada, through the Family Class. However, the fees are often prohibitive. If the relatives are refugees, they can also try to access refugee sponsorship programs, although this is a challenging process.

These different avenues are normally explored with GAR newcomers by their RAP SPO caseworker. If the family you are matched with expresses an interest in family reunification, you can bring it to their caseworkers' attention, as well as discussing it with your match supervisor.



THE VOLUNTEER ROLE IN WORKING WITH GARS

For a description of the volunteer role in supporting refugee newcomers, please refer to our Volunteer Training Guide [here](#).

"People can get so much help from social services, government, and so on. But as a human being, what you need is some social support, you know, some love, kindness. And people around you to share your joy and your worries with."

-Hanna

