

**A Search for Home:
Refugee Voices in the Romero House Community**

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This project is the coming together
of conversations with refugees who had the courage
to share their stories with us.

It is our hope that we have maintained the integrity of these voices and that
their words challenge us to welcome the stranger.

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A Search for Home: Refugee Voices in the Romero House Community

Executive Summary

When you come to Canada as a refugee, a house won't help you very much because you need help in adjusting to the culture and the language, but Romero House was a home, it provided a warm environment for us. Refugees need personal support, people to talk to, a community. - Jaffet, Eritrea

Romero House! It has a familiar name - the modern day martyr, Archbishop of San Salvador, assassinated for being the voice of the voiceless, the poor and oppressed, in his efforts to accompany the people. The name seems fitting for a refugee resettlement centre, a cluster of three houses located in west Toronto, which provides transitional housing, advice and expertise within a safe, supportive community. Here, some refugee claimants find a sense of home amidst the experience of being homeless on a global scale.

This report is based on interviews with refugees and refugee advocates who are members of the Romero House community, and with refugee advocates affiliated with other organizations in Toronto. Forty nine refugee men and women, young and old, took the time to share their experiences of home and homelessness in their homeland and here in Canada, in a hopeful effort to contribute to a better world. The focus of the study is to identify determinants of homelessness, and to identify strategic interventions which nurture a sense of home, with a particular focus on key elements of successful transitional housing strategies using Romero House as a model.

The report is organized into 5 sections:

- A. "Home" and "Homelessness" in the context of refugee resettlement
- B. Forced Eviction: Leaving Home
- C. Experiences of Homelessness in Toronto: Obstacles to refugee resettlement
- D. Experiences of Home: the practice of Romero House
- E. Recommendations to facilitate the transition from homelessness to home for refugee claimants.

The refugee experience of homelessness is not contained in the common definition of being without shelter. Homelessness means separation from their family, history and culture, lack of security, physical and emotional isolation in Canada, lack of meaning in their life and lack of hope for the future - essentially a loss of home. Often, this experience of homelessness begins long before their arrival on Canadian soil. Alesya, of Georgia, recalls, "*I have felt homeless all my life, because I was running and hiding, always being persecuted because of my race.*"

Through interviews, refugees identified factors which caused their experience of homelessness to continue in Canada: a lack of information and orientation, inadequate refugee specific shelters/transitional housing, poor treatment from Immigration and other members of the public (racism and anti-refugee sentiment), inland claim delay, insufficient shelter allowance from social services, inadequate lawyers, landing application fees and delays, a lack of English skills, barriers to employment, and a lack of community and professional support to address mental and emotional health.

As a signatory of the United Nations Convention relating to the Status of refugees, it is our responsibility as a nation to provide protection to those fleeing persecution from which they cannot find safety within their homeland. Certainly the integrity of this Convention requires a system which determines the validity of a refugee claim. Unfortunately, local factors unrelated to the experience of persecution jeopardizes the refugee claimant's right to a fair hearing,

My lawyer didn't know anything about Eritrea, he should have referred me to someone who did. He was not prepared; no information was submitted. He fell asleep at the hearing, and instead of addressing this, the panel closed the case and issued a deportation order. - Medhanit, Eritrea

To make any attempt at ensuring that refugees do not remain homeless, one must understand the complex elements that holistically support someone to feel "at home" in society. Nurturing a feeling of home builds a foundation which may be able to withstand determinants of homelessness, such as financial poverty.

Romero House is one model of housing that provides a sense of home for refugee claimants. Through the interviews, it is clear that the fundamental best practice of Romero House is the living out of a community based vision of accompaniment - living together as good neighbours. Khalaf, from Egypt, describes the impact of this,

Maybe I'm bad or she's bad, you (the volunteer) always see us as good, and trust us. You don't know me and you open your house, your heart ... At Romero House, I have learned to trust people again.

Key expressions of this commitment to accompany refugees are:

- genuine welcome
- refugees and volunteers (full time staff) living together
- volunteers listen with compassion and act in response to any problem,
- supportive relationship continues after a refugee moves out of Romero House
- the active community life, made up of board members, volunteers and refugees.

In the words of Neelan from Sri Lanka, "*Romero House treated any problem anyone had as Romero House problems*".

The core practice of accompaniment is evident in its organization as well:

- operation depends on full time volunteers who live and work for room and board and a monthly stipend
- services develop out of this relationship of accompaniment, i.e. commitment is to provide what is needed, not to provide x, y, and z,
- a shared vision promotes flexibility and responsiveness and attracts volunteers who are genuinely interested in developing relationships of solidarity and care.

While many refugees experience a sense of home in the Romero House community, they also painfully experience homelessness here in Toronto and fear for the many refugees, who have not connected with an organization like Romero House. With no information or orientation offered at the Port of Entry and no resource centre downtown, and not enough refugee specific shelter space to meet the demand, many refugees end up depending on unreliable sources of information and worse, may be victims of "scoopers" and corrupt immigration

consultants. Without a community, refugees remain alone and disoriented. This lack of social support, information, and supportive shelter upon arrival prolongs refugees' experience of homelessness and may create insurmountable obstacles to ever being at home in Canada.

Accordingly, we recommend the following initiatives:

- Arrive Right Information Centres for refugees at all Ports of Entry
- Downtown Refugee Resource Centre
- more Refugee Claimant specific transitional housing
- "Welcome the Stranger": Faith based refugee support program
- Public Education of Service Providers (social service workers, community health workers, emergency shelter staff, police officers, etc...)
- "Networking to Work" Employment Assistance

We call on:

The Federal Government of Canada to:

1. Fund Arrive Right information centres for refugee claimants at all Ports of Entry.
2. Remove the Processing fee for the Application for Landing Status.
3. Reduce the processing time of inland claims and provide financial assistance and health care to those who are waiting and are not eligible for government support or for a work permit.
4. Develop a functional grievance procedure within CIC where refugees can lodge complaints and CIC can be held accountable for its actions.

The Provincial Government of Ontario to:

1. Fund non-profit refugee specific transitional housing
2. Continue to fund legal aid for refugee claimants
3. Increase the shelter allowance to levels of market rent and appropriate for family size
4. Reinstate Rent Control legislation
5. Develop regulation and certification procedures for Immigration Consultants

The Municipal Governments of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA)

1. Fund a refugee resource centre in the downtown core with current multilingual information and staffed by knowledgeable settlement and housing workers.
2. Fund HEART proposal for creation of more home-like refugee specific shelters
3. Fund interpreters who can serve refugees at welfare, legal aid, and medical appointments.
4. Fund daycare at ESL classes for refugee claimants in the GTA
5. Fund professional mental health services geared to refugees to cope with struggles and heal from trauma.
6. Include community based accompaniment initiatives which seek to develop relationships of solidarity and support between settled Canadians and marginalized individuals in proposal call for funds.

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Full report available at www.maytree.com and www.Settlement.org.

Introduction

Romero House is a small organization that has provided subsidized housing and services to refugee claimants in the spirit of good neighbours since 1992. A strong supportive community integrates refugees with Canadian volunteers. The three houses which make up Romero House blend into the neighbourhood and staff and refugee claimants live together.

The founder, Mary Jo Leddy, has made a voluntary long term commitment to this community where she lives. The Board of directors is made up of five people: a judge, a Jesuit professor, a teacher, a nurse and a high school principal. In addition to meeting monthly to discuss the operation of Romero House, they are active members of the community and have built strong relationships with refugees over the years. The bulk of the daily work is done by full time live in volunteers who make a one year commitment to living and working at Romero House. They receive room and board and a monthly stipend of \$125.

In February 1999, the City of Toronto gave funds from Provincial Homeless Initiatives Fund to Romero House to extend services to refugee claimants awaiting eligibility documents and to convention refugees seeking permanent housing. The City of Toronto Refugee Housing Task Group chose to give significant funds to one organization, rather than small amounts to several with the condition that one organization could serve as a test model project whose success and practices could educate others.

Romero House proceeded to develop a study which would meet the specific mandate to study strategic interventions which prevent homelessness in the refugee community, with particular focus on key elements of successful transitional housing strategies using Romero House as a model. After several months of discussion with the Maytree Foundation and with the City of Toronto Refugee Housing Task Group¹, a proposal was accepted for funding by the Maytree Foundation for this project.² Particular emphasis was spent on identifying grassroots initiatives in the early stages of development which address the identified obstacles.

¹City of Toronto Refugee Housing Task Group includes representatives from the City of Toronto, the provincial government and numerous community groups who provide services for refugees. The community groups that are represented include shelters, housing help centres, community health centres and temporary housing. The primary mandate of the group is to develop strategies to deal with settlement, shelter and affordable housing issues for refugees.

²The mission of the Refugee and Immigrant Program of the Maytree Foundation is to reduce barriers and improve conditions for refugees and immigrants through the support of programs and policies that are effective, just and compassionate. www.maytree.com

Methodology

49 refugees of the Romero House Community were interviewed. The majority of the sample was made up of current and former residents, while some had become connected with Romero House in their search for advocacy or housing search support. (see Appendix 1 re:sample) The interviews focussed on experiences of home and homelessness, the role of Romero House in their settlement and their recommendations (Appendix 2). Quotes from interviews have been edited for grammar where necessary.

Refugees have experienced persecution. Often, this has entailed being interrogated by their persecutors and the solicited information being used against them and their families. The extent of disclosure in the interviews was only possible through the relationship of trust that has been built between the refugees and us as members of the Romero House community over the past two years. To ensure the safety of those interviewed, pseudonyms were used.

Fifteen people who have worked with refugees at Romero House (volunteers, former volunteers, director, Board of Directors) and five staff members of other refugee organizations: Sojourn House, Hamilton House, Matthew House, Brottier House and Salvation Army's Refugee and Immigrant Services were also interviewed. It should be noted here that a volunteer refers to the staff of Romero House made up of full time volunteers who live and work with refugees for a small stipend and room and board. These interviews focussed on identifying strengths of their organization, identifying obstacles to resettlement which refugees face, and making recommendations (Appendix 3).

Three feedback groups were conducted with three groups:

1. City of Toronto Refugee Housing Task Group³
2. Coalition of Shelter Providers for Refugee Claimants⁴
3. Members of the refugee community at Romero House.

At each session, the themes from the interviews were presented and discussion revolved around: Does this sound right? Is anything missing? What can be done? With the first two groups, particular emphasis was placed on identifying grassroots initiatives in the early stages of development that address the identified obstacles.

The draft of the paper was read and revised with comments from the director of Romero House, Mary Jo Leddy and Professor Shahrzad Mojab in the Department of Adult Education and Community Development at OISE/UT.

³This feedback group was a joint initiative of an ad hoc group who are documenting refugees' experiences in Toronto, Robert Murdie (Ph.D.) and Priya Kissoon (M.A.) at York University (comparing the difference in experience of Sponsored refugees and refugee claimants), Hannan Abu Zeid at North York Housing Help (developing materials for settlement workers) and Lori Ryan.

⁴The Coalition of Shelter Providers for Refugee Claimants includes Southern Ontario, Buffalo and Detroit. Their aim is to share their experiences, information regarding services for refugee claimants and to develop strategies to work together to address problems which face refugee claimants.

This study was conducted and analyzed by Jennifer Woodill and Lori Ryan. They were both full time volunteers at Romero House in 1998-1999 and continue to be members of the Romero House Community. The aim of this study is not to create a text to sit on a shelf, but rather first, to provide a space for refugees to voice their experience, second, to ensure that these voices are heard and considered when decisions are made which impact their lives, and thirdly, to make recommendations which are both imperative and feasible to levels of government, social services and Canadian society.

As our motivation is to educate others in order to improve the situation for refugees coming to Canada, we are very committed to disseminating the findings widely. Aspects of this report were presented at the 4th International Metropolis Conference in Washington, DC in December 99 and at the National Metropolis Conference in Toronto in March 2000. Several months will be spent presenting these findings and recommendations to key players and educating appropriate professionals and service providers.

"Home" and "Homelessness" in the Context of Refugee Resettlement

I think that I felt the most homeless during the three months here when I did not know anyone in Toronto. It was just terrible. When we first met that Albanian family, I felt like I had touched the sky. Oh my God. I said to her, "please come every Sunday". When you do not have relations with other people, it is bad. -
 Art, a mother from Albania

In speaking with refugees who are a part of the Romero House community, our overall objective is to recommend ways to prevent homelessness for Toronto's refugee population. We begin our research by recognizing that refugees are forced out of their country because of persecution and danger, and they arrive homeless at Canadian borders. Alesya, a Kurdish woman from Georgia, recalls, "*I have felt homeless all my life, because I was running and hiding, always being persecuted because of my race.*" Refugees have been forced to become isolated from their family and cultural community, and they enter Canada as strangers in this country.

The Anne Golden Report of the Mayor's Homelessness Action Task Force defines homeless people to include:

- those who are "visible" on the streets or staying in hostels
- the "hidden" homeless, who live in illegal or temporary accommodation
- those at risk of soon becoming homeless.⁵

This is the definition that we will use.

When we asked refugees to speak about their experiences and feelings of "homelessness", some spoke about their experiences living on the streets, and sleeping in "*dangerous*" Toronto shelters where they had to sleep in a chair because there were no beds. However, most of the refugees we interviewed can be classified in the second two categories. Those living at Romero House are living in temporary accommodation, as they must move out once they have received Convention Refugee status. Refugees who have moved out of Romero House and have found "permanent" housing, spoke of feeling homeless. Their experience of feeling homeless despite being housed indicates their risk of soon becoming homeless. The Ann Golden Report clearly states that physical and sexual abuse, isolation and loss of support from family and friends increase the risk of homelessness.⁶ We have to recognize that refugees have been forced to leave their support network of family and friends and many refugees have suffered through physical, sexual abuse, and torture.

Therefore, the refugee experience of homelessness is not necessarily contained in the common definition of being without shelter. Many refugees define "homelessness" in terms of their loneliness, living far from their family and culture, physical and emotional isolation in Canada, a loss of security, and a lack of meaning in their life and a lack of hope for the future.

⁵ Golden, Ann. Taking Responsibility for Homelessness: An Action Plan for Toronto, January 1999

⁶ Golden, Ann. Taking Responsibility for Homelessness: An Action Plan for Toronto., January 1999.

I started to feel homeless in Angola since I was facing political problems...it was hard to sleep, what will happen tomorrow? - Afonso, Angola

I felt the most homeless when we were traveling to Canada and not knowing what will happen to our future. - Alba, Mexico

When there is no one there to say it will be alright, you may as well give up... You need people who will encourage you, who will say, today things are very rough, but tomorrow may be better.- Esther, Nigeria

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines "home" as, "one's residence; the social unit formed by a family living together; a congenial environment". In comparison, "house" is defined as "a building for human habitation".⁷ Similarly, when we asked refugees to speak about "home", their experiences and feelings of "home" reach far deeper than "a building for human habitation". As Aziz, who has lived in Canada for four years, speaks, "*Home is back home and a house is just where you live*". A house is where you sleep and eat, but feeling at home has emotional and psychological components. Most often when they were solicited for examples of feeling at home, memories of childhood and their family back in their country was articulated.

In their examples of "home" in Canada, refugees speak of experiencing moments of feeling at "home" in times of community and celebration, when they feel safe, when they find meaningful work, and when they know that there are people who care that they are alive and can give hope for tomorrow.

Therefore, we write this research paper with the strong belief that provision of shelter is essential, but not sufficient to end homelessness. To make any attempt at preventing homelessness, one must understand the complex elements that holistically support someone to feel at "home" in society. These elements include hope in the future, meaningful work, and a community of support and love ("family"). Nurturing a feeling of home builds a foundation, which may be able to withstand determinants of homelessness, such as financial poverty. The nurturing of home must recognize the genuine experience of loss and homelessness on a global scale and design services appropriately.

⁷ The New Merriam-Webster Dictionary. Springfield, Massachusetts: Merriam-Webster Inc, 1989.

Forced Eviction: The Loss of Home

When I was leaving Alabama, none of the women I worked with could understand why I was moving. They did not understand the word, 'refugee'. They said, 'you have good clothes, you speak good English...' implying, you are not a refugee. They thought of refugees as people suffering in a desert. - Esther, a Nigerian refugee whose claim was rejected in the United States

Before we can look at refugee resettlement in Canada, we need to explore and understand the diverse experience of being forced to leave one's country and search for refuge elsewhere. There are a variety of reasons that cause people to leave their country in search of refuge, and Amnesty International estimates that there are over 15 million refugees who have uprooted themselves to search for safety outside of their country⁸ The 1951 Geneva Convention defines a refugee as someone who:

owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country...

As understood within this definition, refugees are survivors of persecution, and are fleeing places of horror, danger, and torture. Although they fear remaining in their country, they are also fearful of leaving their home; the place of their family, culture, religion, employment and history. Once they leave their country, they are homeless on a global scale. Therefore, their act of leaving to find refuge in Canada is both relieving, because they need safety, and yet, so very painful, because they must leave their home and try to find a new home in a strange land.

Refugees Remember Childhood

When we ask refugees about their sense of home, many refugees respond with memories of feeling secure and loved within their family, and especially during their childhood. Although some of the refugees interviewed have lived in Canada for over seven years now, the majority still immediately speak of home being back in their country, surrounded by family. In our interviews, we asked refugees to compare the definitions of "home" and "house", and most often, the distinction centered on the people who lived in their house. A "house" is only a physical structure, where one sleeps and eats. "Home" is defined, over and over in the interviews, as being a part of your family, and living with a sense of safety:

*Living with my parents, I did not have to fight for breath. I was accepted.- Afonso,
Angola*

⁸ Amnesty International. Refugees: Human Rights Have No Borders. New York, NY: Amnesty International Publications, 1997, p.4.

I felt at home in Angola, at my mother's house, with my brothers, sisters, uncles, because I grew up with them, we knew each other very well. - Pucha, Angola

I felt most at home when I used to go visit my Grandmother, near the border with Algeria. She took care of me, we would visit with her brother and his farm... she understood me as a child. - Houcine, Morocco

In the interviews, refugees spoke of the sense of safety, protection and relaxation in the childhood home. Massud who spent over eight years of his adult life running from the Revolutionary Guards in Iran, speaks, "I only had a normal life when I was a very young child."

Aziz, has been here four years, but still does not feel at home in Canada, "Home is back home and a house is just where you live. I always think about home in Algeria. One day, Canada will feel like home, but not now." For many refugees, it takes many years to feel at home in Canada.

Fear and Internal Flight: Persecution and Homelessness

Although many experience home within their families, refugees also speak of their profound experience of homelessness within their home country. Persecution causes refugees to feel homeless. Some refugees experienced persecution throughout most of their lives. For example, Alesya speaks of being a Kurd in Georgia, "I have felt homeless all of my life, because I was running and hiding, always being persecuted because of my race". Others experienced persecution after a major event, which forced their flight and uprooted an otherwise secure life:

I felt at home in Iran until the revolution. After the revolution, we were not safe. I can only feel at home when my family is protected. - Neina, Iran

I started to feel homeless in Angola because I was facing political problems. I had to move from one place to another place to be out of danger. It was hard to sleep because I wondered what would happen tomorrow. Angola is a society in which we can't speak the truth. To stay alive, you must pretend that what you see isn't real. - Afonso, Angola

As "home" is defined as safety and comfort, homelessness is defined as living in fear and anxiety. For refugees, the concept of "homelessness" is not a metaphor, but it is a reality of constantly moving from place to place, and living in hiding with the fear of being found. The desire to remain in one's home country and/or the huge barriers to fleeing one's country force many to spend months or even years fleeing internally. Amnesty International estimates that there are an estimated 25 to 30 million people who have been forced to leave their homes because of human rights violations or threats to their lives, but have not crossed an international border.⁹ They are displaced within their own counties. Neelan

⁹ Amnesty, p. 4.

spent the last ten years moving from place to place in Sri Lanka, always with the fear of bombs or death threats. Carlos spent the last five years in Colombia living in hiding and constant fear. He estimates that he moved 10 times. When he was found out, people would follow him, they would phone him with threats, and he would move again.

In Iran, I moved many times. For six or seven years, I had a secret life, so I had to keep moving. As soon as the government knew my address and I felt in danger, I would move. I have lived in over ten places in Iran. - Massud, Iran

You cannot call 911. Wives are just killed because their husbands were above the law. I left where I lived for 14 years and went up north to hide. He sent officers to hunt me down. - Esther, Nigeria

And sometimes, refugees were unsuccessful in eluding their captors. People are caught and forced to experience detention and torture. Many of the people who we interviewed did suffer at the hands of a torturer, and the underlying terror is utterly apparent in their eyes and in their words. Houcine from Morocco states clearly, "I lost home a long time ago, so I lost emotion. You are talking to someone who has been dead for a long time." Asha speaks of the possibility of being deported back to her country, "I will cry if I have to go back. I never lived like this before. Nobody press on me, like in Kazakhstan. There is no nationalism, nobody hurts me in Canada." Brahim, from Algeria, expressed his political views, changed apartments 3 or 4 times, and yet was caught and imprisoned and tortured by government officials in prison. He walks now with a metal plate in his leg; a daily reminder of his torture. Many of the refugees are not at the place to speak openly about their torture, and we did not push the subject, as it was not our place to ask either. But behind many people's words and hard faces, were unseen scars of their horror.

Therefore, it is clear through our interviews that the refugees lived in their home country with realities of both security and insecurity, and these complex realities are carried with them to Toronto. Elsa clearly illustrates this complex reality:

In Columbia, I felt at home with my family, but I never felt at home in my country because I didn't feel safe... Now, we don't have our family and we are always thinking about them because they are not safe. But, we feel at home in Canada because we are secure, we feel safe.

The Long Journey Out

Many of the refugees we interviewed traveled through different countries before coming to Canada, and felt homeless once they left their home country. For example, Ali speaks of leaving Iran and feeling completely confused in a new country:

We felt so homeless when we left Iran and came to Germany. We were refugees.

Before, we had never left our country. We didn't know how to talk to people. I realized that our country is very closed, the people inside do not know about the outside, I felt like I had been in jail after I left Iran.

Many of the refugees interviewed, spent a long time in other countries before they made their way to Canada. They may have lived in hiding in another country, or tried to make a refugee claim in another country, but this time spent in limbo, and sometimes in unsafe conditions, prolongs the sense of dislocation before they are able to try and create a new home in Canada. For example, Fawzia fled Eritrea and lived in Kenya and Sudan, before coming to Canada. Ruth, from Eritrea, fled her country and spent one year living and working illegally in Saudi Arabia before coming to Canada. And Haileab from Eritrea had to stay at a refugee camp in Kenya and speaks about this experience, *"There was no place to sleep, no proper food, fear of persecution, fear of the military in the camp, and I was always worried about what will happen?"*

Many refugees interviewed made refugee claims in other countries and began a new life there, but were forced to leave for a variety of reasons, and ended up in Canada. Arta's story illustrates that crossing national borders does not always protect refugees from their persecutors. She fled Albania and lived in both Italy and England before coming to Canada. In England, they (her husband, herself and a one-year-old baby) made a refugee claim, but left because someone from Albania knew that they were in England and they were not safe. Arta tells the story:

I found my husband with a piece of paper. It was written, 'Call Jim at Compton newspaper'. I asked the hotel manager 'Who is this Jim?' and he said that this man Jim was looking for my husband and me... I was too scared. At night in England, I slept with one eye open and one ear open to be sure my daughter was there...so we left. I wanted to go far away.

In this situation, Arta and her family's fear escalated because they felt unsafe, not only in Albania, but also in England.

Many refugees have experienced rejection of their refugee claim before they come to Canada. Renata and Pandeli, originally from Albania, lived in Germany for over six years, trying to obtain refugee status. In speaking about homelessness, they remember their rejection from Germany, *"I felt homeless when I received the paper in Germany which said that we must leave Germany; to start again for the second time."* Aziz claimed refugee status in England, and was denied status. He was also put in detention in England for seven months, and had to protest through a hunger strike to be let out of detention. Esther, from Nigeria, also made a refugee claim in the United States, and was denied status. The Immigration and Refugee Board in Canada has deemed all of these people's refugee claims as legitimate.

When refugees arrive in Toronto searching for refuge, they carry their diverse experiences of persecution, and they also carry their culture, language, religion, and the grief of leaving home. They may

arrive tired after a long journey through other countries. They may arrive alone or with some of their family. They may arrive shocked, as survivors of torture or rape, or witnesses of killings of their family. But, refugees come to our borders with great strength and hopes for a new beginning.

Experiences of Homelessness in Toronto: Obstacles to Resettlement

1. The Arrival

Refugees come to Toronto looking for safety, and yet from their moment of arrival and for many months and years to come, they face numerous demands and obstacles that threaten their status and security in Canada. The most immediate demand that refugees face is the need for food and shelter, which can prove to be difficult to find because many refugees come with very little money. Not only are they often financially strapped, but they often do not know English and lack necessary information.

Inadequate Shelter

In Toronto, there are five shelter providers specifically for refugee claimants: Brottier House, Matthew House, Hamilton House, and Romero House offer home-like settings, and Sojourn House offers a dormitory setting and is funded by the City of Toronto. They provide shelter and crucial information and orientation of the refugee process. Unfortunately, these refugee specific shelters are most often full, and many of the refugees must stay at an Emergency homeless shelter. Jacques, who came to Toronto from the Congo, shares his story,

I was referred to a shelter in Toronto by another Congolese man. I stayed there for one and a half weeks, disoriented. I didn't know where to go, how or what to do? I asked for help, and someone suggested phoning Sojourn House. They were full...The next night, I had to sleep on a chair at the shelter.

Many refugees spoke about their feeling of fear and danger when they stayed in homeless shelters that are not specifically for refugees. Massud, from Iran speaks, *“I felt the most homeless in the shelters in Canada because I was with people who were alcoholic and used drugs, and it was very dangerous.”* Debbie Hill-Corrigan, the Executive Director of Sojourn House, speaks about refugees who are not able to find shelter at Sojourn House,

Those who don't live at Sojourn House and seek assistance at Sojourn House are a mess. They come and cry in the office. They feel they can't stay in the shelter because they are afraid. They are desperate for assistance. They don't know how to get their papers, find a lawyer. They are scared of staying with people with addictions and mental health problems.

Refugee's fear of staying at homeless shelters is compounded by their past traumas in their home country.

Some refugees arrive in Toronto to find that all of the shelters are full. Neelan arrived in Toronto from Sri Lanka, searched for housing, but the Salvation Army and the YMCA were full, and heard about Romero House. When he came to Romero House, there was no space but he slept in the living room.

Esther, who came with three children from Nigeria to Toronto, tells her story of arrival,

A nightmare. ... When I ran out of money, I had to go through the phone book, looking for names that were familiar to my country and all that...I called the Salvation Army and they told me there was no room. They said to call back in two weeks. But I have no money and no place to stay.

Refugees suffer from misinformation and a lack of information about shelters. Haileab fled Eritrea and arrived in Toronto, not knowing where to sleep for the night. After receiving no advice from the Immigration Official at the airport, she found her way to downtown Toronto, and found an Ethiopian restaurant. Thankfully, the people in the restaurant could speak her language, and referred her to Romero House. Otherwise, she may have been forced to sleep in the restaurant, or worse, on the street. Loly Rico, who works at Hamilton House tells a sad story of homelessness, “*We know of a woman who came from Bangladesh and was given an address of a shelter that was actually under renovations at the time, and the woman went with her kids to the address, and slept all night on the street.*”

Lack of Information and Orientation

From the moment of arrival, refugee claimants need to understand the complicated immigration process that will determine their refugee status. Any mistake in filling out documents may be devastating for their case when their status is being decided. Refugee claimants need accurate, up-to-date information, and they need help from someone who reads and writes English and is knowledgeable of the immigration process.

Currently, there is no resource centre for refugee claimants and most of the work is done by refugee specific shelters. Staff in general shelters do not have the time, training or mandate to assist with these refugee specific needs. Pandeli from Albania speaks about his one month in a Salvation Army shelter, “*There was no help with papers, or to find an apartment, they only helped once with immigration medical address. The shelters only help us to eat, drink and sleep.*” The Salvation Army does employ one worker who assists with refugee and immigration issues of those living inside and outside their shelters, but one staff person is not sufficient to meet the demand.

The large population of refugee claimants who live with family and friends upon their arrival in Toronto also suffer from a lack of accurate information. At a feedback group, one refugee advocate told the story of a family who kept their relative in hiding in Canada, and they missed their refugee hearing.

Vulnerable to Scoopers

Currently, there is no program, like a reception centre, at the Ports of Entry, such as the airport or the Canada/US border, or in Toronto, that ensures that all newly arrived refugees receive accurate accessible information and assistance. So, alone and needing help, refugee claimants often depend on strangers for information. They are vulnerable to being victims of corrupt practices in their search for

safety. `Scoopers' prey on claimants arriving at the border and the airport. Typically, they promise to take care of everything as long as they use a particular lawyer. Some are left destitute and arrive at a shelter to tell their story, while others do not realise that their helper is a con artist until the hearing, when their lawyer is not prepared and their claim is refused.

There are no recorded statistics on scoopers in Canada, and very little formal research has been done to illustrate their destructive effect on refugee claimants' lives. However, at the Coalition of Shelter Providers feedback group, many refugee advocates told stories of scoopers. For example, one story was of a woman who gave a scooper in New York \$3000 to be set up with a lawyer in Toronto, and arrived to realise that this was a lie and her money was gone. Another refugee claimant was poorly advised by a scooper, arrived in Montreal, didn't understand the procedures, didn't show up for her hearing, and was subsequently deported from Canada.

Immigration: Lack of Respect and Inland Claim Delays

Refugees arrive in Canada relieved to have distance between their persecutors and themselves. However, the reality of the Immigration process is harsh. Refugees may face verbal harassment from Port of Entry immigration officers, who sometimes use their power to humiliate and degrade refugees who enter Canada. Brahim, who came from Algeria and made a claim at the Pearson airport, arrived in Canada to face violent hostility,

At the airport, the immigration officer yelled at me and was about to beat me, he threw a kleenex box in my face. I don't know why. I prefer to be dead, than humiliated. He killed something in my heart, a small hope of a life that will be safe.

Many refugees spoke about their lack of knowledge of the Canadian Immigration and Refugee system, and how this ignorance affected their lives. For example, one huge problem that came up in the interviews was that many refugees do not realise that they need to make a refugee claim when they reach the border of Canada. If a refugee does not make their claim at the border, they must make an inland claim, and the inland claim process is incredibly slow.

Arta, from Albania, did not know to make a Port of Entry Claim. She came with her husband and baby girl, and she speaks about this experience:

After living in Toronto for a few weeks, someone told us to go to welfare. We went and the lady said you need immigration papers. We said, "What is this?" We had no idea. We didn't know about Canada. We thought that if you had your own passport, then you could live a normal life. There are many refugees who don't know that there is an immigration office at the airport. Once you leave the airport, you are entering the country and you can't go back. This is a bad start when refugees come here. Because you don't feel sure without any papers. You feel like nobody.

Arta and her family ended up waiting for over six months to receive their eligibility papers, and had to wait another year for their IRB hearing to take place.

Refugees who make inland claims are at a huge disadvantage, because their eligibility papers often take many months to be processed, and without these papers, they cannot access welfare or health coverage. They are ineligible to work as well. They have no access to financial help, and so they are forced to remain in a homeless shelter. Money is needed, not just for food and housing, but also for clothes. Some families arrive in Canada with six children and need winter clothes and have no money to dress for the weather. Also, during this time of waiting, children have difficulties enrolling in school, because they don't have Canadian identification papers. Pandeli and Renata, a couple from Albania, waited six months before they could obtain their eligibility documents and begin the process, and during these six months, their two children had no access to school, and the family had no access to health or social services. In the past, processing inland claims took less than one month and CIC has not given any explanation for the current delays.

2. The Thirty-Day Stretch

Refugees are fleeing from persecution, and are stressed out, and when they find out that they have to pass a long, difficult process to get protection, this makes them more stressed and insecure. They are afraid of being sent back to their country. - Loly Rico, refugee from El Salvador, and founder of FCJ Hamilton House

Once a refugee makes a refugee claim, either at the border or an inland claim at an immigration office, they must wait for their Eligibility Documents. On average, Port of Entry claimants receive their documents in one month and inland claimants must wait for more than six months. Once they receive their Eligibility Documents, they are then able to begin the refugee process, and are eligible for welfare and Interim Federal Health coverage. They now have 28 days to apply for legal aid, find a lawyer to represent them, and fill out their Personal Information Form, which is used as the primary basis for their case in court. This is a very stressful time for refugee claimants, as each of their decisions must be well calculated. Twenty-eight days is a short time, especially considering that many refugee claimants must also find an interpreter to accompany them to apply for legal aid and welfare. The impact of these demands are observed by those who work with refugee claimants:

When you are going through a traumatic period, and you are fleeing and potentially have family still back in the situation and you've got an insane time period to get everything filed, to find housing, to find sources of food, shelter, it's totally overwhelming. - Shawn, former Romero House volunteer

You come here, and all of a sudden, boom, you have to fill out papers, get on welfare, find a lawyer. It almost feels like, I just came from a really bad place, and all of a sudden I've got to tell you why I left? ...It is hard to settle in, because they are being questioned all the time as to why they are here. - Karen, former

Romero House volunteer

From the beginning, refugee claimants must pass tests of their credibility, so they can receive legal aid to find a lawyer to represent them at the hearing.

The Welfare System

Welfare should make sure that refugees are oriented to Toronto... welfare knows that people are coming from different countries and they need to ensure community supports, they have ask people what they need?... there is no one to help you, you don't even know what to buy? I didn't know to buy winter clothes for my children, and I turned the heat up really high and we could not breathe. I didn't buy jackets until January. - Medhanit, a mother from Eritrea

As soon as they receive their Eligibility Forms, refugees need to apply to welfare, so that they can get out of the shelters and find more permanent housing until their claim is heard by the IRB. Many refugee claimants depend on welfare for their living during the time between their entrance into Canada and their hearing, which could be one to two years of waiting. During this time, many refugee claimants attend English classes full-time. In the interviews, refugees spoke about their experiences with welfare, and the lack of information provided by welfare workers, and many suggested that they need more help than just money. Refugees are directed to welfare for help, and this social service needs to do more than just issue a monthly cheque.

Many refugees were surprised about the Canadian welfare system. Asha speaks, “*Welfare is fantastic, there is nothing like it in Kazakhstan, even for seniors*”. However, many refugees also explain that welfare does not provide enough money to live in Toronto. As Ruth, from Eritrea, explains, “*We need more money to live, \$195 for \$90 metropass and \$100 for food, how can I buy a jacket or boots, or be able to buy a gift for a friend who gets married. If there is a party, I want to be able to bring something.*” Many of the refugees were thankful for welfare money, because they wouldn't survive financially without it. However, during this one to two year wait for their hearing, they cannot actively participate in society with such a small amount of money.

The other complaint given about the welfare system is that workers follow different rules for different people. Refugees feel vulnerable in this situation and don't know what their rights are. Gerry, who works at Brottier House, a shelter for refugee claimants, explains,

The welfare system is too arbitrary - it is up to the individual welfare worker to decide if they need an allowance to start work or not, some get it and some don't. In our house, it's supposed to be considered a shelter and they should get welfare for room and board, but sometimes, we have two people in the house with the same situation, but one is getting two hundred dollars more than the other person.

This situation may be that individual workers are aware of the inadequate resources which welfare provides and do their best to make up for this by being lenient in other ways.

Many refugees spoke about their difficulties with the welfare workers asking so many questions, and sometimes, being hostile towards them. Those who have been persecuted are often particularly sensitive to feelings of powerlessness in relation to authority, and sometimes interactions with welfare may tap into previous experiences of interrogation by torturers. Refugees are again in a vulnerable situation and feel threatened and judged by social services:

Going to legal aid and welfare, and being forced to tell my story over and over again, was so horrible. They made me feel not welcome.” - Saro, a mother from Sri Lanka

They ask too many questions. It was terrible, very hard. They come to visit your house. They make people feel like they live in a police state. I don't need them. I am working now. - Houcine, from Morocco

3. Preparing for the Refugee Determination Hearing

After the thirty-day stretch is over and refugees have submitted their Personal Information Form, they must wait for their refugee hearing. This is a time of immense stress, as the hearing will determine whether they will be allowed to stay and build a home in Canada, or whether they will be forced to leave. When we asked the refugees about their hopes, the ones who were still waiting to have a hearing continued to hope for acceptance. During the first year of living in Toronto, acceptance is at the forefront of refugee's minds. Neina, a mother of four children from Iran, is still waiting for her hearing, and says, *“I hope that we are accepted as refugees at the hearing, so I can know that my family can stay in Canada and we can make our home here.”* It is extremely difficult for refugees to actively live, heal, and begin to feel at home in Canada when they do not know if they will be allowed to stay. Alesya, who is a Kurdish refugee from Georgia, waited for more than five years for acceptance, as her family was not accepted the first time by the Immigration and Refugee Board and her stress level during this time was unbearably high. She speaks about this experience, *“In my past, the biggest barrier was the fear of being deported from Canada, which would mean death. My husband, children, and me we all feared death. I had this fear for over five years.”*

Immigration Delays and Inaccessibility

During this time of waiting, there are often many difficulties that refugees face. Many of the refugees we interviewed had severe problems with the immigration department that caused their hearing date to be delayed. Celia, from Mexico, has been waiting for her family's hearing for over one and a half years, and the whole family has lived under the stress of refugee claimant status for too long. Through this time of waiting, there is no way to receive direct assistance or answers about the delay:

There are so many rules and details. The bureaucracy is a barrier for refugees

who don't have assistance. There is no one there at immigration to assist refugees, just to take their papers - the immigration officers don't have knowledge of the system...There's no welcoming place in immigration, no one who speaks their language. - Loly Rico, founder of FCJ Hamilton House

A huge obstacle is a lack of direct communication with Immigration. Even as a worker, I have to ask for information through the fax...Sometimes, the faxes are ignored. As a worker, I used to be able to get a reply within 48 hours. The time frame has really deteriorated. - Florence Gruer, Refugee Resettlement worker at the Salvation Army

The beginning was very bad. The worst days of my life. I had no papers, no work, no welfare, I was under the mercy of other people, like a slave. I blame immigration for these problems. They gave me no copies of my documents. - Brahim, Algeria

When there are mistakes and delays in the process, it is extremely difficult to work with the immigration system. The longer that one must wait for a decision, the more stress that each refugee and their family must endure. Arta, who came from Albania in March 1998 and is still waiting for a hearing date, illustrates the suffering that she endures because of the delay in receiving her papers,

I am not at home in Canada, not in Italy, not in Albania, not in any country. I feel like I am in the air. I think that to feel at home, is when you belong to this country. It is not just waiting for a paper, for a job. You feel like something is stopped. One paper that stops everything.

Inadequate Lawyers

Each refugee claimant needs to find a lawyer to represent him or her at the hearing. For refugees, the choice of one lawyer over another can mean the difference between life and death. The lawyer has responsibility for filling out the Personal Information Form, doing research, gathering evidence for the hearing, and representing their client. At present, legal aid only covers 12 hours of time, and that is an inadequate amount to fairly represent a refugee claim. Also, legal aid is not accessible for everyone; for example, Central Americans are often refused by legal aid, and these claimants must pay the entire fee from their pocket. To top off legal aid, many refugees pay a great deal of money from their pocket because they believe that they may then receive better legal counsel. During our Romero House feedback group, we discussed the prediction that legal aid for refugee claimants will be cut in Ontario during the next year. Many refugees spoke passionately about the need for legal aid assistance, and the impossibility of surviving financially without it. As Jaffet, from Eritrea asks, "*Is this a way for Ontario to keep out refugees?*"

One huge stress for many of the refugees interviewed was their experience of inadequate lawyers. Again, part of the problem is that refugees are coming to Canada and are extremely vulnerable, need to

find a lawyer immediately for their refugee case, and do not have adequate information about reputable lawyers in Toronto. Medhanit, who is from Eritrea, was rejected at her hearing, and was represented by a lawyer who fell asleep during the hearing.

My lawyer didn't know anything about Eritrea, he should have referred me to someone who did, he was not prepared, no information was submitted. He fell asleep at the hearing, and instead of addressing this, the panel closed the case and issued a deportation order.

Lack of preparation by lawyers can lengthen the delay for refugees, as Aziz, speaks, "My refugee hearing was rescheduled from October 96 to April 97, because my lawyer was not doing his job and I needed more documents. I survived, but it was long and hard." Arta, from Albania, spoke of her lawyer writing to legal aid saying their claim was not true, so they could not receive legal aid, and he charged more and she had to pay fees out of their own pockets. Lawyers have a lot of power, and refugees who are stuck with inadequate lawyers are often vulnerable to the situation, not knowing what to do.

Needing Proof

When fleeing persecution in their country, refugees often must leave quickly and secretly, and aren't able to prepare for what lies ahead in Canada. So when they prepare for their hearing in Canada, they are under a great deal of pressure to gather information for the hearing. Brahim, from Algeria, speaks about this stress,

I need one or two proofs. Many were taken by agents of the government...Without the proof, it will be very hard. I don't know how to make the judge believe me. If I knew that I was coming to Canada, I could've collected the information.

4. The Refugee Determination Hearing

The actual hearing date, and the experience of being interrogated without any support compounds a refugee's stress. Rosa is a refugee from Guatemala, who was rejected and deported from Canada in 1993, and reapplied for refugee status. She was only seventeen years old with a baby when she went to her first immigration hearing:

The first year was really hard because I went to the hearing alone, and I felt that immigration was against me. They interrogated me at the hearing and that was hard. And when I wasn't accepted the first time - that was really hard. - Rosa, Guatemala

Aziz, describes his frustration with the narrow interest of the Immigration and Refugee Board; "The IRB panel doesn't want to hear anything about feelings. They don't want to hear about threats on

your mother, your father, your family, but only you. To them, feelings are irrelevant."

5. Struggling towards Landed Status: Immigration Obstacles

Three documents should be enough - birth certificates should be valid. If my husband doesn't come, my children will be supported by the state. If he comes, then he will support us... They are physically destroying me, I am emotionally stressed... Before DNA testing, they said we do not believe that he is your husband. But as soon as we did the DNA test, they sent a second letter dated retroactively refusing my husband's landed application. - Medhanit, a mother of three children from Eritrea, who has been trying to sponsor her husband to come to Canada for over six years

A huge problem that affects many refugees, and that surfaced again and again in our interviews, is dealing with the immigration department in trying to achieve landed status. Without landed status, Convention Refugees do not have access to post-secondary education and certain training programs, cannot sponsor family members, cannot travel outside Canada and return, are barred from employment in certain sectors, have a social insurance number which begins with 9 denoting temporary and cannot participate in the political process. Therefore, obtaining landed status is an extremely important step for refugees to build a home in Canada. However, for many Convention Refugees, obtaining landed status proves to be extremely difficult.

Slow, Inefficient and Alienating Operations

Through our interviews, we found out that often, Immigration makes mistakes and because of these mistakes, delays sometimes last four or five years. Osman came to Canada from Eritrea in 1994 and is still waiting for landing status. To be eligible for landed status, he has been forced to do his medical chart three times because Immigration lost his forms. Neelan arrived in Canada from Sri Lanka, in 1996, and has been waiting for over 2 and a half years for landed status. He has filled out all of the forms, and he believes that he is waiting for a security clearance. But immigration has not explained the delay and Neelan has now been separated from his wife, children, brothers and sisters for over three years. He explains his suffering in waiting,

Now, for me, life is miserable... If immigration says no (to being landed), I say good-bye and go to my death in my country. I am not in my 20's or 30's. I am in my fifties. We do not live until we are 150. Everyone is suffering.

Since the interview, Neelan has been accepted as a Landed Immigrant and can now begin the process to sponsor his family to Canada.

The Immigration system renders refugees powerless, and they must continue to wait for a change in their situation. Neelan's frustration lies in receiving no answers from Immigration about his situation. He explains,

There is no access to meet Immigration (regarding landing papers). There should

be someone who can listen. The call centre: 973-4444 gives different answers. The offices are prohibited to the public unless you have an interview...I went to the St. Clair office, but all I could do was pick up forms. I asked them a question and they said, call 973-4444. It is a very bitter experience. I would like to live with my children and wife...It is heavy on my mind.

Florence Gruer, the refugee resettlement worker for the Salvation Army, struggles continuously for people waiting for Immigration to grant them landed status:

What happens is people have passed the security interview, but because of the time that has elapsed they have to do it again, 'regardless of whose fault'. People are waiting for 4 or 5 years or more for their landed (status). Recently, we sent an inquiry about a case which seemed that everything is in order and everything has been done. We received a fax saying that it was no fault of the individual but regardless of whose fault it is, it has to be done again. There is no flexibility there.

Not only does Immigration provide no room for questions to be asked, but also some immigration officials have been hostile towards refugees whom we interviewed, making them feel unwelcome in Canada. Jaffet and Saleh, two brothers from Eritrea, struggled to achieve landing status. Mary Jo Leddy, the director of Romero House, became politically involved with their struggle and they were eventually landed. They speak about the rudeness they experienced,

When we went to pick up our landed papers, the officials didn't look at us, they just spoke with Mary-Jo. When Mary-Jo wanted to talk to the supervisor, they made us stay in a separate room. The immigration officials were so rude to us, again and again, and in their eyes, we are nothing.

The Processing and Right of Landing Fees

How were we to pay for our landing fees? We wanted to go to school and learn and give to society, but we had to work as pizza drivers for two years to pay our landing fees. - Jaffet and Zawditu, brother and sister from Eritrea, who came to Canada in their early twenties without their parents

If the Convention Refugee's landing application moves through the system smoothly, there is still the Processing Fee and until recently the Right of Landing Fee that needs to be paid.

This Right of Landing Fee was introduced in the 1995 federal budget because there was a deficit, and the fee was used to offset the cost of settlement programs. It was referred to by refugee advocates as the "Head Tax", reminiscent of the fees put on Chinese immigrant families in the early 1900's. On February 28, 2000, Elinor Caplan eliminated the Right of Landing Fee for refugees. That is, any refugee who has not been landed before 4pm on February 28 will not have to pay this fee, of \$975 per adult including sponsored family members. This is extremely wonderful news for refugees and refugee

advocates who have been fighting for years to eliminate the Head Tax.

However, refugees still must pay the Processing Fee of \$500 with their Landed application, and this fee is problematic and unnecessary. The Processing Fee is a \$500 payment that needs to be made at the time of submitting the landing application. If the Processing Fee is not paid, then the Landing Application will not be assessed

Obviously, for refugees, fees are a huge barrier to becoming landed, and finding the money to pay these fees proves to be a struggle that makes refugees feel poor and unworthy and desperate. These refugees have just demonstrated to the satisfaction of the IRB that they had fled their country and never planned to come to Canada, and they're being charged to stay in Canada. There's little recognition of the difference between refugee and immigrants.

The loan program that was in place to pay for the Head Tax was useless to those refugees, like Esther, from Nigeria, deemed ineligible to receive the loan because the government didn't believe that they can pay back the loan:

Mary Jo gave us money from her own pocket for my landed fees. I did not have money to pay. I applied for a loan and they wrote back and said I was not eligible. How can I not be eligible? I am on welfare.

The story of Fadumo, who came to Canada from Somalia, is telling. Fadumo was accepted as a Convention Refugee in 1997 and given 3 months to pay \$3500 worth of fees for her Landing Status. She tried to save money and to get a loan, but she was not eligible because she wasn't working. By December of that year, her situation became so desperate that she left her house and went into a shelter. By doing this, she was able to cash in her welfare cheque and give all of it to immigration. In the information on the "Right of Landing Fee", published by Citizenship and Immigration Canada, the \$975 Head Tax is described as "partial compensation for the privileges and benefits which permanent resident status confers." Paying this tax has meant, for Fadumo, being homeless, suffering the consequent humiliation and frustration, and feeling the guilt of putting her sons through this experience.

Family Reunification?

For many refugees who arrive in Canada alone or with only part of their immediate family, being granted landing status means being reunited with their family. Family members are often in dangerous situations in their country, and refugees in Canada cannot feel at home in Toronto until reunited with their family. Many refugees spoke about their hopes to be reunited with their family. Ruth came to Canada from Eritrea in early twenties and has lived in Toronto for the past two and a half years without her parents, brothers or sisters. Arthur came to Canada in December 1997 from Albania and has been separated from his wife and son for the last two years:

Why are people separated? It's been one year since I was accepted at my hearing. Why does it take so long for my family to be able to come?... 90% of feeling at

home here is my family coming.

Zawditu, from Eritrea, says, "We hope that we can bring our mom to Canada, but our paperwork isn't finished yet, but that will help us feel at home". Brahim, from Algeria, worries about his wife and two children and hopes for the day when he can sponsor them to be reunited with him in Canada. His wife and children are in hiding and are constantly moving. Brahim is fearful that the police will kidnap his children to further punish him.

6. The Constant Struggle: Ongoing Obstacles that Refugees Face

Searching for Housing

Finding affordable housing proves to be a huge problem in Toronto. According to a report released by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp., Toronto apartment hunters face the highest rent and the second-lowest vacancy rate, of 0.9% in the country. And rents are rising. In one month, rent for a one-bedroom apartment excluding utilities - which can cost up to \$150 per month - increased from \$729 per month to \$770. In one month, two-bedroom apartments rose from \$881 to \$916.¹⁰ Without rent control, Toronto rents are skyrocketing and people cannot find space with the money that they receive from welfare. At present, there are 55,491 people on Toronto's waiting list for social housing, and on average one waits for seven years for a subsidised dwelling.¹¹ With the clear need for social housing in Toronto, the Provincial government recently decided to sell off 5,800 homes used as public housing for low-income families.¹²

On welfare, a single person is allocated \$325.00 per month for housing, and a room in Toronto often costs more than \$400. The maximum amount for shelter allowance is \$673, which means that even a woman with eight children must live in a one-bedroom apartment. Also, landlords require first and last month's rent to secure an apartment, and for refugees, whose only income is welfare, this proves to be extremely difficult, if not impossible. Because refugees are so desperate to find permanent housing in Toronto, they are vulnerable to scams. Brahim, from Algeria, paid \$175 to a private apartment-finding agency that promised to find him housing - they didn't follow through, and he lost this money.

Even if one can manage to pay the rent, many refugees are discriminated against because they are on welfare. Many of the refugees interviewed spoke about their interactions with landlords who consider people on welfare to be lazy. Maria, from Peru, comments on the renting difficulties she has faced,

Canada is famous for kindness, but when I was looking for a house, people kept

¹⁰ Ann Perry, "Toronto apartment hunters face country's 2nd-lowest vacancy rate", The Toronto Star, November 26, 1999.

¹¹ Richard Brennan, "Tory Sell-off of public housing stirs furor", The Toronto Star, January 16, 2000.

¹² Brennan.

asking if I work. I say that I am looking for work and they say this isn't a place for you, only a place for people who work.

Afonso, from Angola, did not live at Romero House (because there was no space) but a volunteer from Romero House did help him and his wife to find housing so that they could leave the shelter situation. Afonso speaks about the difference between looking for housing on his own, and with a Canadian volunteer,

If I go by myself, they ask first, "working or dependent on government?" They will not accept us if we say dependent. Second question is "can you pay now?" They just rent to someone else.

Many refugees spoke of their experiences facing racism when they searched for housing. Landlords have the right to rent to whomever they choose, and many refugees were turned away because they are black or because they speak English with an accent. Esther, from Nigeria, spoke about her experiences of a Romero House volunteer calling to see places for rent, but when she went, the landlord would always say that the apartment was not available. Medhanit, from Eritrea, also spoke about the blatant racism, *"I could not find housing because of discrimination - because I have kids and because of my skin colour. They tell me, one was 'just rented now' when they see me"*. Romero House volunteers have witnessed blatant racism from landlords; for example, one landlord phoned Romero House in search of a potential tenant, he asked for anyone who was not black and had no kids! The absence of available low-cost government controlled housing for refugees puts all of the advantages on the side of the landowner, and often, they abuse this power.

Searching For Work

Many of the refugees who were interviewed discussed the barriers they face in finding work in this city. Refugee claimants are not allowed to work without a work permit, and often after doing the paper work, they wait many months before their work permit is accepted. For refugee claimants, they are forced to survive under the welfare system, and are seen as lazy. Many refugees who we interviewed spoke about their experience of being on welfare, and being seen as taking from the system, and being seen as someone with no abilities or skills. Gerry, who works at Brottier House, speaks,

They find it difficult to understand why they are considered second hand citizens who don't want to work, when they're not allowed to work (in the first few months in Canada) even though they are skilled and want to work. For refugee claimants, welfare isn't because they've lost work - they don't even get a chance to work.

These barriers have driven some people to work illegally, being paid less than minimum wage under the table, with no rights or protection.

When refugees are allowed to legally work, the barriers they face are huge. Through our interviews, refugees defined the greatest barriers to finding work as being: language difficulties, not having

connections with people in the work force, racism, not having their foreign credentials acknowledged, holding a temporary social insurance card and having no Canadian work experience. Neelan, from Sri Lanka, took a co-op class in Toronto where most people found work, but his internship was with the Ministry of Education, and they were cutting jobs, so he could not find work there. He has sent out 150 resumes with no success. Haileab, from Eritrea, has now been looking for work for two years, and spoke to us about her frustrations. She speaks English very well, and has obtained a master's degree from India, and yet she says,

to break the ice in Canada and get into the system is very difficult. I felt so desperate I considered paying money to an agency to get me a job. There are lots of classes but we need one step more, links to employers.

When someone does find work, most often, this work is part time or contract, with no benefits, no protection, and no room for promotion. Maria, from Peru, is a Convention Refugee who is waiting for landed status. She sees the number nine on her social insurance card, which means temporary status, as a symbol that illustrates that she is not yet at home in Canada and is not seen as someone who wants to make a permanent home here. She speaks, "*When I go looking for a job, people ask for my social insurance card, and when they see the number nine, they say come back when you have the right number to work*". Maria is a trained nurse from Peru and has volunteer experience in a Toronto hospital, and yet her paid work is cleaning for minimum wage. This job is neither satisfying for her sense of self worth, and leaves her struggling to feed her two children and hold down the rent with these wages. Massud has hopes of starting his own small business, like he did in Iran, but he needs someone to believe in his dreams and loan him the money before he can work. He has lived in Canada, now, for two and a half years, and still relies on welfare.

Learning the English Language

Most of the refugees interviewed came to Canada with little or no knowledge of the English language. Therefore, a huge part of their experience in Canada is struggling through English language classes in order to function and feel at home in Toronto. When asked about the barriers that prevent refugees from feeling at home in Canada, many of the refugees we interviewed immediately stated that language was the greatest barrier for them. Without proficiency in the English language, it is extremely difficult for refugees to function in Canadian society, in the basic ways of shopping for food, using the TTC system and meeting people at the community center. Norbert, a former Romero House volunteer, speaks about the language barrier,

Majid (an Iranian refugee) spent two hours on the subway just going up and down and trying to find where he lived. It's humiliating for an adult who feels he can't do anything, to not be able to communicate with the world that is something we take for granted.

Gerry, who works at Brottier House, gives another example of the importance of language skills,

Language is a barrier, because sometimes people don't understand the rules of renting a place, and may get evicted because they can't understand the rules. Or sometimes notices are posted in the building for people to come together, and they can't be involved in that process because they can't read the sign.

Without the ability to speak and read English, refugees cannot read the immigration information, and may fill out their forms incorrectly. This could cause years of backlog and waiting in the immigration system. The knowledge of English greatly affects job possibilities, in a predominantly English speaking job market. This language struggle is not one that is resolved quickly. Refugees spend years studying and practicing the English language. Not only are language skills important for job opportunities, but knowledge of the English language helps one to feel safe in their neighborhood. Pucha, who came to Toronto from Angola, says, *"I'm scared of violence in Toronto. I don't go outside at night, I feel very afraid. I don't speak English very well, so I couldn't ask for help if I was in danger"*.

Therefore, English classes are essential and extremely valuable for refugee claimants and Convention Refugees to feel more at home in Canada. In these classes, refugees could potentially learn the skills that they need, but as Loly from Hamilton House states,

English classes aren't geared for refugee claimants - they don't give important English knowledge about how to use the subway or find housing, or how to use the banks. That is the English that refugees need, not English for rich tourists about the CN Tower.

Refugees need to learn the skills that are needed to find work in Toronto, how to fill out a resume, how to speak in a job interview, and these skills could be incorporated within ESL classes.

Although English classes are extremely important for refugees to feel at home in Canada, many refugee women are denied the opportunity to go to English classes because childcare is not available to them. Celia, who came to Canada from Mexico, cannot attend English class because her four-year-old daughter only goes to junior kindergarten for the morning, so she spends her days trying to learn English from the books in the library. Not only does this affect her English language skills, but also, without the class, she does not have access to meeting new people in the city, and building friendships. Celia speaks,

There needs to be English with daycare. I need to know English to work for communication, I am afraid to go outside because I can't speak English, I am afraid that someone will ask me questions.

Culture Shock

One theme that came up throughout our interviews and is connected to many of the other themes discussed in this paper, is the experience of culture shock for refugees who have left their home and are struggling to adapt to Canadian society. Norbert, a former Romero House volunteer, sees culture shock

as a huge barrier to resettlement:

It's hard for refugees to find the food they are used to, they don't feel at home, they feel shut out from Canadian society and go more and more within themselves trying to keep their culture and language.

Refugees adjust to Canadian society at different times and this can be very difficult for family dynamics. As Norbert explains,

I knew a family from Burundi - the parents developed problems, she was experiencing women's freedom in Canada, and the man felt he was losing his wife, and marriage problems shook up the family.

Karen, a former Romero House volunteer, also speaks of how the differing degrees of adjusting to a new culture can affect a family,

A woman's children came to Canada when they were young and they now consider English their native tongue, and I remember she once told me, 'Karen, I want to be able to comfort my son in Tigrina but he doesn't know Tigrina (the Eritrean language).'

Refugees are trying to resettle in a place where they never thought they would be, separated from their culture and family.

Many of the refugees interviewed spoke about their need to connect with their culture in Toronto, and the strength that they receive from cultural connections. Often, refugee survival depends on others from their culture helping out with food and hospitality. When faced with impending homelessness for herself and three children, Esther spoke about going through the phone book looking for Nigerian last names so she could call someone for financial help. Similarly, Arta was completely broke when she first came to Canada from Albania, and she speaks of how other Albanians helped her to survive those first few weeks:

The Greek people who we rented from knew Albanians like us. They phoned us and the woman said, "Call me if you need anything." The first thing I said was "I don't know who you are and I hope one day I can give you something back, but right now we need \$50 for food." She came that same day with three bags of food: milk, cheese, meat and cereals.

Other refugees also spoke of their feeling of home and welcome when they met someone from their country. Elsa, from Columbia, spoke with tears in her eyes about the importance of cultural friendships,

I have friends now in Canada who are also from Columbia and Chile, and our friendship is formed out of solidarity. My friend said that she came as a refugee

20 years ago, and she will help us because she knows what it's like to be a refugee.

Although finding others from one's culture in Toronto is empowering for many, often there is great division in ethnic communities. This is often because of the complicated politics that have caused people to flee their country. Another refugee from their country may be affiliated with the other side of the conflict. Esther is one example of a refugee who is working to strengthen the Nigerian community in Toronto so that they can help each other in times of crisis. Esther put together a Nigerian pageant to bring the Nigerian community together in an act of hope. She speaks about her motivation:

There are many Nigerians here. But they are not united at all. I think it is poverty that is causing it...There is nothing wrong with inviting someone to stay with me. But you hardly see people do that. Because the community is divided...so I put together this pageant because I felt that it is time for all of us (Nigerians) to come together and get to know one another.

The event was a success - The Commission of Nigeria in Ottawa attended and sponsors were found for all the girls.

Canadian Racism

Canada doesn't have war, but it has a problem with racism. I live in a Portuguese area, and I went to the store and these people were looking at me and talking racist in Portuguese, thinking that I didn't know Portuguese. I felt so bad, because I'm black. In Angola, most people are black, but here, I'm looked at because of my skin colour. - Pucha, a 19 year old mother from Angola

Many of the refugees we interviewed spoke about their experiences of racism in Toronto that made them feel unwelcome in this country. The experience of racism is not limited to the housing search process already discussed. Saleh, from Eritrea, spoke up in the feedback group about how it is extremely difficult for him to get a taxicab, because he is a tall, black man, and taxi drivers are afraid that he will pull a knife and rob them. Maria, from Peru, speaks about an experience where she faced racism on the TTC,

One day the bus driver asked me about my ID and wanted Canadian ID and he said, "Get off the bus!" and I felt so sad because he didn't respect me. Maybe I made a mistake, but he could be compassionate also.

Anti-Refugee Sentiment

Sometimes Canadians think that refugees come to steal their money and jobs, and they are always judging the newcomer. There needs to be more education...Many people who come over as refugees have so much talent and they so much to give

to society. But they just need help for the first few years, to get back on their feet, and then they can give to society. - Zawditu, Eritrea

Refugees know that they are portrayed in a racist light through the media as criminals, and this public attitude makes it so difficult for refugees to settle in Canada. In mainstream newspapers, refugees are often only perceived in a negative light and refugee success stories are hardly ever mentioned. A few examples come to mind: in October, 1999, Mayor Mel Lastman commented about refugees, "Take them elsewhere. They have to start taking them to other places in Canada because they can't destroy Toronto."¹³ Then we have the many articles written about Russian and Asian gangs, who claim refugee status, and the many Honduras refugees selling drugs in Vancouver.¹⁴ Diane Francis writes an article in The National Post, urging readers to believe that all refugees come to Canada to scam the system. She writes

So say the "R" word and you're in with all the goodies that Canadians enjoy. Once in, they use our tax dollars to hire Legal Aid lawyers to wear out the system, but never their stay.

*The wholesale defrauding of our refugee system represents an unnecessary expenditure of \$1.25-billion per year. Add to that the cost of crimes committed against Canadians and our companies plus the injuries or deaths caused against Canadians and the tab is exponential and unlimited.*¹⁵

Refugees know that they are portrayed in a racist light through the media as criminals, and this public attitude makes it so difficult for refugees to settle in Canada. Without prompting, many interviewees define themselves to be a good, well-intentioned person. This phenomenon speaks to their overwhelming experience of being scapegoats in the media and in society at large.

Mental and Emotional Health Problems

The impact of mental and emotional health on the experience of home and homelessness of refugees is staggering and complex, and a complete evaluation of this is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the interviews reveal how critical it is to acknowledge the devastating impact that mental and emotional health problems have on refugees trying to resettle in Canada.

As discussed before, refugees have come to Canada to find refuge and they often need space to heal. Many refugees speak about their feelings of guilt for leaving their family. The pain felt when they are notified of their family and friends suffering back home or the media reports of worsening country conditions compounds this guilt. Many work hard to provide refuge for family through sponsorship, and this alleviates some guilt. However, the narrow definition of who one can sponsor makes it difficult to

¹³ The Toronto Star, October 14, 1999

¹⁴ Cal Millar, "Russian and Asian Gangs", The Toronto Star, October 7, 1999

Mark Stevenson, "Hondurans Selling Drugs in Vancouver", The National Post, Thursday, February 10, 2000

¹⁵ Diane Francis, "Refugee System has spun out of control", The National Post, Saturday, January 8, 2000.

provide refuge for their family. They are left with the knowledge that people are suffering and they are rendered helpless.

Many refugees have survived unbelievable trauma, and are survivors of torture and sexual assault. When they come to Canada, some refugees need professional counseling to cope and eventually to heal. Brahim, who was tortured in Algeria with electric shocks, speaks of his deep fear when he must interact with any person in a position of authority,

Right now, when I see police or authorities, I feel scared because of the torture done to me...I am afraid of uniforms, my heart beats very quickly, I turn white like a sheet...in government offices, even at the Ministry of Transportation, I get scared.

Jacques, who is a torture survivor from the Congo, stresses the importance of assuring refugees that it will not happen again, "*Sometimes, I sleep with the light on because in the dark, I relive these problems again*". The weight of past trauma and torture, survivor guilt, and the stress of persecution, flight and exile, is carried by refugees in Canada, who are forced to relive these times through nightmares. Three people interviewed are clinically depressed and have made suicide attempts. One individual made a suicide attempt, and was stitched up and sent back home from the hospital, without any psychiatric assessment or support. Another was unable to buy the expensive medication because winter clothes were needed, and ended up in a psychiatric ward for a month.

Three individuals interviewed could be described as "chronically homeless" in Toronto, moving from place to place in Toronto. Massud, from Iran, has moved three times since he left Romero House, and he says, "*I move all the time, it is just normal for me.*" Majid, from Iran, was tortured during his years in prison, and suffers brain damage. Similarly, he moves from place to place in Toronto, and will probably always be in need of a supportive community. Poverty and mental illness contribute to his insecurity, "*I live day to day. Some people have a plan. For me it is difficult, because tomorrow I don't know what will happen.*" Houcine, from Morocco, has lived in over 12 places since he came to Canada in 1994, and at the time of our interview with him, he was living at the Salvation Army Emergency Shelter. He suffers from paranoia, and his comments during his interview illustrate his fear, "*You look like an immigration officer...how many questions do you have left?...sometimes I can't smile because I don't feel well, I'm not going to change*". These three individuals are survivors of torture and persecution, and continually walk the fine line between being housed and living on the streets. If they are to be at "home" in Canada, they are in need of more professional psychological supports than what is available in this province.

Experiences of Home in Toronto: the Practice of Romero House

It is clear from the previous two sections that at the same time as a refugee's sense of self is fragile, there are urgent demands required for survival: shelter, food, immigration documents to be completed upon arrival. A transitional space which can assist with these urgent demands within an environment which nurtures this fragile self is necessary. This section will describe the practice of Romero House in providing this space.

When you come to Canada as a refugee, a house won't help you very much because you need help in adjusting to the culture and the language, but Romero House was a home, it provided a warm environment for us. Refugees need personal support, people to talk to, a community. - Jaffet, Eritrea

Romero House seeks to provide a place where refugees can find a sense of home, and for some, like Jaffet, it is successful. When asked to identify experiences which helped them feel at home, the vast majority (41 of 49) named experiences at Romero House. For some, life at Romero House was not only their primary experience of home in Canada, but also a significant experience of home over the course of their entire life.

What is it that creates this sense of home? What are the strengths of Romero House? What values or characteristics should volunteers have? The responses to these questions painted a multi-faceted holistic practice of Romero House founded in relationships rather than specific functional assistance.

Accompaniment - the fundamental best practice

Accompaniment is making the choice to be present to the person with your whole self. It's a commitment. It's a risk. It's a vulnerability. It's a way of saying, I will be here tomorrow. - Jack, Board Member

The fundamental best practice of Romero House is the living out of a community based vision of accompaniment - living together as good neighbours. The practice of Romero House is unique in that volunteers and refugees welcome newly arrived refugees into their home and desire above all else to be good neighbours to each other. The philosophy of being good neighbours acknowledges each person as a whole person who can then develop whole relationships. Pucha, a woman from Angola comments,

.. refugees will feel at home if they feel loved as a person. You have to see them, not as a refugee, but as a person. You have to treat them as an equal. This is not very difficult - they can give their ideas too.

The core practice of accompaniment is inspired by the faith based Central American practice of *acompañamiento* meaning "stand by the people". This term is apparently derived from Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero who publicly stated one of the church's roles was to "accompany the

people" (final pastoral letter, August 1979).¹⁶ Specifically, Romero understood pastoral work of accompanying to be the "personal evangelization of those Christian individuals or groups who have taken on a concrete political option" in response to the demand of their conscience. A Salvadoran sister, 'Juanita' cited in Berryman, describes her commitment, "The Church refuses to accept the oppression of the poor and even though we have few resources to give to the poor, we can offer ourselves. And so we must be with the poor, in their communities and sharing the dangers with them" (Berryman, 177). For some, like Romero, their prophetic commitment led to their death. In the 1980's, *Acompañamiento* was used regularly by Catholic priests and sisters to refer to their holistic pastoral approach. Often, *acompañamiento* was literal, i.e. lay volunteers would be with individuals threatened by death squads. *Acompañamiento* describes the position that comes from outside a community: priests, sisters, or middle class lay people who voluntarily cast their lot with the poor.

Confronted simultaneously with structural injustice and the urgent survival needs of refugees, the praxis of accompaniment at Romero House is fundamentally a faith response with political implications. The life and work of Romero House is an expression of a voluntary commitment rooted in faith. The director, volunteers, and board members do not receive a salary for their work:

Everyone is there because they believe in the community, not for any worldly recompense. I believe that's at the heart of it. When you're not paid at the market level, then you have to regenerate your motive for your work - your work is deeper than money. - Jack, Board Member

At the volunteer commissioning, volunteers promise to love their neighbour as themselves, to live simply, to share their life in community, and to be faithful to prayer. While volunteers live in Christian community, reading scripture and putting their tradition of faith in action, Romero House accompanies refugees of all faiths.

The following practices are key expressions of this commitment to accompaniment:

- genuine welcome
- refugees and volunteers (full time staff) living together
- volunteers listen with compassion and act in response to any problem
- supportive relationship continues after a refugee moves out of Romero House
- the active community life, made up of board members, volunteers and refugees.

Being accompanied in a caring and welcoming manner is important to those interviewed. Haileab, from Eritrea no longer felt "*untouchable*" after arriving at Romero House. After experiences of interrogation and suspicion in both their home country and in Canada, several interviewees were surprised by this new way of relating and appreciated it:

¹⁶ Phillip Berryman dedicates an entire chapter to this practice in his book Stubborn Hope: Religion, Politics, and Revolution in Central America, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994.

Nobody knows us but they welcome us.... I've never seen this. - Asha, Kazakhstan

They did not ask questions about sex, color, political, religion or social. The only thing important is that you need help. - Carlos, Colombia

The three houses which make up Romero House are located in a predominantly white middle class neighbourhood in Toronto. In these houses, volunteers and refugees live together and build relationships of trust and solidarity. Khalaf, a man from Egypt, describes the impact of this,

Maybe I'm bad or she's bad, you (the volunteer) always see us as good, and trust us. You don't know me and you open your house, your heart ... At Romero House, I have learned to trust people again.

Lila, from Ethiopia, feels that the volunteers, "*are there when we need them*". The live-in volunteers also demonstrate a commitment to being attentive and present all the time. Returning home in the evening, after spending a day in the Romero House office located in the basement of one of the houses, it is common to spend time chatting about one's day, assisting someone with homework or explaining a piece of mail, and reminding residents about important appointments. Volunteers are also there in times of crisis which may include accompanying a sick child to emergency, responding to suicide attempts, or mediating conflicts. "*According to my experience,*" Houcine, a man from Morocco, states, "*they (volunteers) share life with people.*"

Romero House makes a commitment to each refugee to listen and respond first with compassion and then with information, intervention or a referral. Having a compassionate person to listen to their experience can provide security, as Alesya, from Georgia, illustrates "*When I met Mary Jo and I could tell her my whole story and she would understand me and at that moment, I felt that I will be protected,... that I am in good hands*". With limited space, Romero House cannot meet the demand for transitional housing. However, Romero House still makes a commitment to these individuals and helps them as they can. Esther, from Nigeria, recalls her first experience after making contact with Romero House, "*There was no space but Norbert said he would do whatever he can. That gave me hope. He stayed in touch with my family and several weeks later, we moved into Romero House*". Six months after arriving in Toronto, Brahim, from Algeria, still hadn't received his eligibility document from immigration and he was desperate for assistance. Without this document, he was not eligible for welfare and he could not work. The distant family friends who took him in initially were demanding him to move out. Unfortunately, Romero House was unable to provide housing, but recognizing his desperation, a volunteer, in the words of Brahim, "*pushed immigration to move and got my papers*". This involved several visits to different immigration offices and persistent phone calls to Immigration officials.

This commitment to accompaniment continues after residents move out of Romero House, ensuring that refugees won't slip through the cracks. This commitment creates experiences of feeling a part of a family or a community which refugees can depend on even after moving out:

Every time I have a problem, I come here. This is my family. - Majid, Iran

Romero House is always around to help, like a family. When something happens, I can come here and expect to get help. - Arthur, Albania

This sentiment was echoed by many of the refugees interviewed. Interviewees value being a part of this caring community;

The most important thing is that Romero House cares for all the people, not just the new people, for example, Sam who has been around a long time but still needs support. - Maria from Peru.

Esther, from Nigeria's use of "*Mary Jo for a reference and next of kin*" illustrates the security that "*knowing Romero House will be there tomorrow*" provides.

This model of accompaniment encourages and provides opportunities for all members of the Romero House Community to accompany each other (e.g. refugee-refugee, refugee-volunteer, refugee-board, volunteer-board, board-board, volunteer-volunteer). Arta, from Albania, compares the accompaniment of Romero House to the love of a mother where you do not have to "*care about your life alone*". For some refugees, the volunteers may be the only Canadians who are with them, not for money, but because they want to be with them. Refugees depend on the volunteers when they first arrive, but soon contribute to the life of the community. Pandeli's, from Albania, justification of his priority to find housing nearby because "*Maybe I will need help or Romero House will need my help,*" typifies the mutuality refugees desire. Asha, from Kazakhstan, feels similarly, "*I am sure that these are people I can trust and they can help anytime, anywhere, and I am ready to help them.*"

Refugees accompany each other and provide security:

At first, Romero House was strange, but when we started to communicate, we realized that we share the same situation as the others as refugees, so we feel like we are one together and we feel safe. - Tenzin, woman from Tibet

At Romero House, you don't have to feel scared. It is good. At home, you do not have to protect yourself. You feel like behind the door is a friend. You can talk to them. They don't have to do big things for you, to talk, to have good times. You feel better when you can help someone. - Arta, Albania

Chronically homeless and battling physical and mental illnesses, Majid, from Iran, might be considered one of the most needy in the Romero Community, yet his perspective is as one of the veteran members of the community who has accompanied the volunteers, "*I have seen many different volunteers.... I watch them change over one year. This is difficult work.*"

Most importantly, this spirit of Romero House rooted in accompaniment provides a sense of security

and protection that refugees seek. Alesya summarizes this best, "*Cause you really feel here, from the first day, that you are part of the family. This is so important. Refugees know that when they come to Romero House they will be safe*". Medhanit, a woman whose appeal of an Immigration and Refugee Board decision was successful knows from experience that "*the support of Romero House will save you even if Immigration comes with a deportation order in a brown envelope*". Refugees also draw a sense of hope and strength from their experience in the Romero House community. With the support of the community, Medhanit feels "*strong, like no one can push you.*"

The holistic services and programs provided at Romero House are a direct product of the current needs and anticipated needs of residents. Through living together in the same house, volunteers can anticipate needs. This reduces the number of times that the refugee has to ask for help. In this way, these services and programs can be seen as a neighbour to neighbour act and not as a service provider to client act. In the words of Neelan, a man from Sri Lanka, "*Romero House treated any problem anyone had as Romero House problems*". Pandeli, a man from Albania, compares this to his experience of other organizations, "*Many organizations I know only help in one way. They say, 'Not my business' or I have no idea.*" His wife, Renata, emphasizes, "*People who come here find everything*".

Services of Romero House

The following are services of Romero House which impact positively on their resettlement and integration based on the experience of refugees and staff at Romero House.

Arrival - Welcome

We realized, through the interviews, that the experiences of refugees during the first few hours and days greatly impacts on their sense of home in Canada. The welcome experienced by claimants arriving at Romero House is critical. A significant number of refugees identified experiences in their first few hours at Romero House when asked to identify experiences which helped them to feel at home in Canada.

1. Reception

When I came to Toronto on the bus, I didn't know anyone here and I felt in shock. But the two people who met me, the volunteers, were so friendly and it made me feel more comfortable. ... On the first day, the volunteers took us shopping for food, and I felt safe. I was not afraid of being hungry. I had no money, but the volunteers helped us. - Larisa, Kazakhstan

Many of the refugee claimants who live at Romero House are referred by Casa El Norte, an emergency shelter in Ft. Erie. These claimants are met at the bus station by volunteers in the Romero Van.

Other claimants come to Romero House through referrals by Toronto shelters, and some by showing up at the door. Listen to Jacques, from Congo, relate his welcome at Romero House,

I met Mary Jo at the office. She tried to understand me. It was a surprise. She was very compassionate to my situation. We went to pick up my stuff. I can't forget that. Thank you.

2. Provisions and Assistance-

The house was already furnished and was filled with food when I came. - Lila, Ethiopia

Upon arrival, the claimants' immediate needs (shelter, food) are met with the assistance of the volunteer and an interpreter. Often, the interpreter is an alumnus of Romero House. The new arrivals are given money for food and a volunteer accompanies them to the local grocery store. Living in the same house as the new arrivals, the volunteer is eager to ease their adjustment. Arta, from Albania describes the importance of help from morning to evening,

When I met Tonie, Paola, Janice,(volunteers) it was perfect timing. I was going from this place where I was three months alone to Paola every day asking, "Do you need anything?"

Romero House consists of rent-g geared to income units subsidized by the Ministry of Housing. Each family has their own unit accessed by a common entrance. Each house also has a common living room to encourage community building. This room is available to all the residents and is the site of gatherings like house meetings and parties.

Until the claimants are eligible for welfare, their expenses (rent, food, health needs) are covered by a grant from the Homelessness Initiatives Fund from the City of Toronto. For inland claimants, this period of time can last for more than six months.

3. Welcoming -

In the house where the volunteer lives, he/she plays the role of building community and accompanying their housemates as house coordinator. Upon arrival, the house coordinator introduces the new resident(s) to others in the house and to others in the community of same language. The customary welcome party is also a benchmark for some, like Saleh, a man from Eritrea in beginning to feel at home,

On the first day, Mary Jo welcomed us and lots of the other refugees came and they welcomed us. And we felt at home, not living with strangers, but with people who cared about us unlike the shelter where, we were just a bunch of people put together, and we felt like we were in jail, very afraid.

Services related to Refugee Determination Process

1. Information

When I came, I was new to the country. I didn't know left from right. Romero House gave me direction in many ways, like (with) my papers. - Ruth, Eritrea

Specializing in assisting refugee claimants, Romero House guides newly arrived refugee claimants through the necessary steps. As rules often change, volunteers work hard to stay informed about current procedures and policies. Ignorance of the refugee determination process can add to the stress. Medhanit from Eritrea, passionately observes that "*Refugees do not know their rights.*" As they walk through it together, volunteers explain the process to claimants to help ease this stress and provide an approximate timeline of the stages of the process. Volunteers also outline the possible courses of action if they are refused since this is often one of their biggest fears.

2. Appointments

Volunteers ensure that a refugee claim has been filed. Living at Romero House, residents benefit from having an address to which Immigration can send the critical documents. Once eligibility documents arrive, volunteers arrange and accompany refugees to appointments to apply for welfare, legal aid and English classes. These institutions do not provide interpreters, so Romero House draws on the language skills of current residents and alumni to interpret at these appointments. Volunteers also orient new residents to the schools, local community health clinic, and the neighbourhood.

Residents benefit from the relationships between Romero House and local service providers. Four Villages Community Health Clinic is located near to Romero House and provides health service free of charge. This is particularly important to those refugees who are inland claimants and are not yet covered by the Interim Federal Health Plan. These daily interactions with refugees and communication with Romero House has led to the needs of refugees being addressed in the operation of the Health Clinic. Usually about a quarter to a half of the participants in a local English as a Second Language class run through the Toronto District School Board are Romero House residents, and the ESL teacher has participated in Romero House community events. Also, there is an arts program particularly for refugees and their friends held at a local church in which some residents participate. These networks make it easy for newly arrived refugee claimants at Romero House to get connected to these service providers, and it provides a second place for these service providers to leave messages for residents (the office) if they are unable to reach them at their home.

3. English Language Learning

While many languages are spoken in the Romero House community, the language of common life is

English. Volunteers combine teaching English through conversation classes and individual tutoring with creating a safe environment to practice. Maria, from Peru, describes this atmosphere, *"Nobody laughs at us when we can't speak English - I have had other people laugh at me and call me stupid Spanish and I need to feel safe when I speak broken English."*

Tutoring is specifically arranged for those refugees who are unable to attend E.S.L. classes, primarily women with children who do not have access to child care. These women articulated a special attachment to their tutor.

The Refugee Determination Hearing

1. Preparation

Within a month of receiving their eligibility document, each refugee claimant has to find a lawyer who will represent them at the Refugee Determination Hearing. Romero House is able to direct claimants to lawyers who specialize in the appropriate country and who have demonstrated their competency. Decisions are ultimately made by the claimants themselves who sometimes decide to depend on another source. Regardless, staff offer to assist the lawyer in doing research and collecting documentation, since preparing a case usually requires much more time than the lawyer can bill legal aid for.

Often, refugees benefit from access to international connections through Romero House. For example, an expert on African politics happens to live across the street from one of the houses and has been helpful in retrieving important documentation for residents. Residents at Romero House are encouraged to use the office phone/fax/email to make contact with those in home country who can assist in collecting important documentation. Without this assistance, genuine refugees may be refused by the Immigration and Refugee Board because they do not have the resources to be able to prepare properly.

2. Accompaniment at the Hearing

Romero House staff accompany refugee claimants to their hearings. Interviewees commented that this provides moral support, *"When we went to the hearing, we were so stressed out, but we had much support from Romero House. All of our community came, and gave us strength."* (Jaffet, Eritrea) and it also increases the chances of a fair procedure since *"Other people are watching"* (Medhanit, Eritrea). Medhanit only found out about Romero House after she experienced the hard way what happens when nobody is watching. Her claim was refused despite the fact that her lawyer fell asleep in her hearing.

3. Positive Determinations

About 90% of all refugee claimants who have stayed at Romero House from their arrival to their hearing have received positive refugee determination decisions. This is significantly higher than the current national average of positive determination decisions of 44% as reported by the Country Report of the Immigration and Refugee Board. Refugees at Romero House have the advantages of guidance through

all the steps, referrals to reputable lawyers, case preparation assistance by volunteers, and accompaniment to the hearing. The experience of being granted protection by Canada after fleeing persecution and living with uncertainty can be one of relief and recognition.

After a Successful Hearing: Applying for Permanent Residence Status

For those receiving a positive decision, Romero House assists them in applying for permanent residence status and pays the processing fees with donated funds (\$500 per adult). Ready to begin their new life in Canada, the next step, is to move out of Romero House.

Securing Permanent Housing Services

The following services are provided to assist with the Housing Search:

1. Assistance locating possible apartments through listings and referrals from former residents
2. Accompaniment and Transportation to view apartments
3. Short term loan for first and last month's rent, in order to secure an apartment
4. Liaison with welfare to ensure the granting of Community Start up Benefits and shelter fund where eligible
5. Transportation to the furniture bank where free used furniture is available
6. Transportation to move
7. Follow-Up contact to provide assistance which may prevent eviction

The practices of using local ethnic newspapers and encouraging former residents to contact us when they see apartments advertised in their neighbourhoods have been helpful.

The availability of volunteers to accompany potential tenants to meet with landlords is a strength of Romero House. One gentleman, Afonso, from Angola, found an apartment but had no deposit and the landlord didn't seem to eager to rent to him. He dropped by Romero House, and a volunteer was able to accompany him to meet with the landlord immediately. The landlord accepted a cheque from Romero House to secure the apartment.

The short term loan for first and last month's rent has been available for the past year. It has been very successful, as more than 90% of those who were loaned this money, paid it back within a month.

After a negative decision:

For those receiving a negative decision, Romero House assists the refugee in making an informed decision about how to proceed and continues to accompany them through this difficult time. If refugees come to Canada through the United States, then they will be deported to the U.S, otherwise they will be deported to their own country. If he/she came to Canada through the U.S. and decides to leave the country for three months and then return and file a new claim, Romero House arranges shelter in the U.S. and accompanies him/her to the border,

When I had to leave the country, Romero House drove me to Buffalo, and drove to bring me back after three months. I was so depressed during that time, but they helped me through it. - Rosa, Guatemala

If he/she decides to file an appeal (H and C, PDRRC, ...), Romero House will help them do this with assistance from Vigil and Amnesty International where appropriate. Romero House is a founding member of a broader coalition called the Southern Ontario Sanctuary Coalition whose members may be able to provide information and further support to assist a refugee facing a deportation order. Sometimes, stays of deportations are requested and granted to buy some time. While to others, Romero House bids farewell as people depart, once again becoming homeless on the world scene.

Advocacy

1. Individual Situations

Romero House intervenes and advocates when a refugee faces an unusual delay, misinformation, or a crisis situation. For example, one woman arrived at Romero House eight months pregnant. The average length for her to receive her eligibility document which would give her critical health services is one month. After several phone calls and descriptions of the dire need for an expedited eligibility document, she received it in less than a week.

Several of those interviewed first got to know Romero House at this advocacy level after their claim was denied and were facing deportation. Their individual stories typify what happens to refugees who do not have the support of practices like Romero and are vulnerable to poor lawyers, misinformation, or inaccurate Personal Information Forms. This advocacy work is critical:

I feel most at home in Canada, because my past was horrible, always persecution and discrimination and always fear... If not for the advocacy of Romero House after my claim was denied, I would still be searching for home. - Alesya, Georgia

This is labour intensive work. It took years of persistent advocacy, continually contacting M.P.'s and the Minister of Immigration to finally get landed papers for two Eritrean men, Saleh and Jaffet because of a dispute over validity of documents. Their sister, Zawditu was granted this status without any difficulty with the same documents two years earlier: *"When we had huge immigration problems and couldn't get landed - Mary Jo still struggled with us and without her, Immigration would not listen."* (Jaffet, Eritrea).

Romero House is known for its loyalty and tireless advocacy, *"When a judge rules a deportation order, the lawyers say "Okay. Goodbye." Mary Jo will fight till it's changed."* (Medhanit, Eritrea). In her particular situation, a board member and director, spent two solid weeks listening to tapes, transcribing, seeking affidavits and preparing for the stay of deportation hearing to the Federal Court.

Romero House has demonstrated its willingness to go to the source and challenge unfair practices. This advocacy also exposes the injustice and inconsistencies of immigration practices. For example, last

spring, Romero House supported two Turkish Kurds to bring a formal

complaint about CSIS to its watchdog SIRC after facing the Interrogation practices of CSIS which call upon refugees to inform on others in order to get landed status. A report from SIRC is expected to be released this spring.

2. Member of Organizations

Romero House also networks locally and nationally with other refugee organizations so that lobbying for systemic change can happen: Canadian Council for Refugees (CCR), Coalition for Shelter Providers for Refugee Claimants, City of Toronto Refugee Housing Task Group, and Southern Ontario Sanctuary Coalition. Most recently, Romero House has regular contact with the local Federal Member of Parliament. This lobbying is appreciated by the interviewees, *"The volunteers have will - they raise their voices, fighting for a better refugee process, and that is very good."* (Saleh, Eritrea)

Psychological support

Romero House does provide a supportive environment and makes referrals to organizations like the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture. It does not provide any professional services to address psychological trauma.

Community Life

While the specific services provided by Romero House are extremely helpful to refugees in Toronto, the sense of home that Romero House provides for many is fostered through the day-to-day community life. People who call Romero House their community include: current and former residents, refugees who did not live at Romero House but have sought advocacy help, the director (Mary Jo), board members, and current and former volunteers. Initiatives endeavour to develop and strengthen relationships and to develop a community where people can support each other and celebrate together. Celebration is a necessary to providing a sense of home because in celebration, we are not just volunteers and refugees in narrow functional roles, but we are people gathered together in joy. Refugees constantly face bad news and daily stresses; therefore celebrating the good news is necessary in bringing hope to the community.

Communication and Community while living at Romero House

You can't do anything without communication; there is nothing if there is no communication with people under the same roof. - Afonso, Angola

With house meetings and shared celebrations, a sense of community is nurtured among those claimants living at Romero House at any one time. Strong relationships develop which continue after the group disbands and moves out. Mansur, from Yemen, describes this bond:

Life put us under one roof. When we were all there, we lived like one family. We shared the kitchen, the house. You feel close, a very positive emotion. It is part of your life. One year together is time.

Opportunities to Participate

Membership in the large Romero House community provides opportunities to participate in a variety of ways.

1. Attending celebrations, camp and other events

Refugees are invited to events while living at Romero House and after. These include annual Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners and a week-long summer camp, as well as potlucks, Women's Group and parties throughout the year to celebrate a positive refugee determination decision or landed status or citizenship. Haileab, from Eritrea, describes the significance of these invitations, "*Sometimes we do not have friends, but there is a community that thinks of us and shares together*". The gatherings are always potluck. Several commented that sharing food together made them feel at home. Fawzia, from Eritrea, "*Women's group was so important to me! Getting together with all of the women and drinking tea felt like my home.*"

Each summer, refugees, board members and volunteers spend one week at Romero Camp up north of Espanola. During the day, volunteers co-ordinate activities for the youth and adults have opportunities to rest, swim, canoe, or hike, in the outdoors. Lila from Ethiopia recalls, "*Camp helped me to relax. I learned canoeing, swimming and fishing*". People take turns preparing meals and cleaning up after. In the evening, adults can attend Club Romero where they can play cards, dance and chat with friends. Several of the Board Members juggle family and work commitment, so that they are able to plan and co-ordinate camp each year.

Camp, parties and events bring people together who are at different stages of the resettlement process. It can be comforting for newly arrived claimants to meet Romero House alumni who have been where they are and have survived. For example, a woman from Tibet arrived at Romero House eager to bring her husband and son who were in India. She became very upset and anxious when it was explained to her by a volunteer that it would probably take at least two years to be able to sponsor her family. This anxiety filled the house with uneasiness. When it was almost unbearable, she was invited to a big gathering of the Romero community to celebrate two refugee acceptances and the granting of landed immigrant status after persistent advocacy. Meeting others who had waited so long served to lessen her anxiety.

2. Welcoming and serving newly arrived refugees

Refugees share their talents in a variety of critical ways in serving the community:

*I try to help out by translating and sharing my skills. - Lidiya, Russia
accountant and cultural interpreter*

I want to encourage the other refugees to hold on and to be strong. - Semira, Eritrea

Others who have made their way into the work world try to assist other refugees find employment. Osman was able to connect refugees from Romero House with jobs at his work.

3. Working for justice in Canada:

Through Romero House, refugees can contribute to a study, be invited to vigils, write articles for the Romero House newsletter, and be interviewed by local media. Some, like Neelan, are eager to channel their frustration with bureaucracy by trying to improve it for others, *"Call me anytime, if we can go and talk to immigration about this. We have a responsibility to future generations."*

4. Participation in an ongoing community of memory

For many, it is difficult to think about the future, let alone plan for it. For some, like Afonso from Angola, it is the limbo of waiting for immigration decisions holding him back:

I cannot take long steps. I am not allowed to think into tomorrow as I should. If I am not accepted, I will be sent back. If I am accepted, I can begin to think deeply into tomorrow.

While in this limbo, Romero House plays the role of *"People who will keep you and give you hope for tomorrow"* to refugees, like Esther from Nigeria.

Belonging to Romero Community means contributing to a shared history and future. Rosa, from Guatemala, reminds us of the children who call Romero their community/family, *"It's so nice to see the kids growing up over the years"*, and Esther, reminds us of the holiday Romero traditions, *"Every Christmas, we all go to eat and dance and have a celebration. It is the only place I have gone for Christmas. It is something you cannot turn your back on."*

Supportive, caring place to share sorrows

The refugee experience is marked with deep sorrow and pain. Many have found care and support in the Romero House community, from both fellow refugees and more settled Canadians. While each person's story is unique, the common experience of being refugees binds many together. Haileab, from Eritrea, concurs *"They (other refugees) know a part of me that volunteers cannot understand"*. Rosa, a Guatemalan woman who has endured rejection and deportation, describes the value of this support, *"During the hardest times when I was sad and depressed, I felt at home because I felt I had a family at Romero House."* Maria, from Peru and mother of 2 teenage girls, observed this community of care at camp, *"At camp, I felt like everyone was caring for each other, like a big family, like brother and sister. Nobody cared about languages or countries, they just cared for*

each other."

A Transformative Practice

Volunteer Program

The volunteer program is intentionally designed to be a transformative experience for the volunteers. Daily work is supplemented with weekly reflection and seasonal retreats where volunteers are encouraged to reflect on the impact of their experiences at Romero House on their worldview and their Christian faith. This transformative impact of the Romero House volunteer experience is the focus of Kathleen McAlpin's Doctor of Ministry thesis, Ongoing Conversion in Ministry: Movement from critiquing issues about refugees to compassionate love of neighbour.¹⁷

For some volunteers,

It is the first time they are given real responsibility. Romero House provides a place for them to grow and learn from people from all over the world, and to live in a faith community. Because the volunteers are given real responsibility, they respond with huge caring and willingness to fully give of themselves at Romero House. - Mary Jo Leddy

The intense experience of living and working at Romero House influences volunteers for the rest of their lives.

Refugees develop relationships across boundaries of race, culture, language, etc

The experience of belonging to a relatively peaceful multi-faith, multi-lingual, and multi-racial community is a source of hope and learning. Since refugees arrive in Toronto on both sides of conflicts in their home country, it is common for there to be division between compatriots in Toronto. Esther, from Nigeria, describes how living at Romero House has defined her response to this division,

The Nigerian community in Toronto is divided...I really think it would be positive for all of us to come together and get to know each other. All these things are from the fact that I have lived in a place like Romero House and know how important it is for people to be together, for people to support one another, and for people to help one another.

¹⁷Kathleen McAlpin, RSM, Ongoing Conversion in Ministry: Movement from critiquing issues about refugees to compassionate love of neighbour, Regis College, 1997.

Esther is part of a committee that organizes events to bring Nigerians together.

Through living in the same household as a Tibetan family, Celia, from predominantly Christian Mexico, gained a greater understanding of Buddhism,

I used to wonder why people do what they do. When a person prays like this on the subway, I used to wonder why. But when I pray the rosary. It is the same. When I pray, it is good. When they pray, it is good too. They respect me. My daughter said, "Mommy, Buddha is the same as Jesus Christ?" uh. oh. because Shara, (neighbour downstairs), is praying to Buddha. "No", I said, "it is another religion. But they are not bad, they are good people." I can say this now because I live with Shara in my house.

Esther, from Nigeria experienced a new interaction with whites,

Volunteers come in and sit with you. That was actually the reason I felt at home. There are actually people like this in this part of the world and they are white.. in great contrast to the whites who closed the door on me when I went to look for apartments.

Arta, from Albania referred to her learnings,

You learn about other cultures in many ways. You meet someone you don't know and you have conversations. We know very little about other cultures. You are not going to ask in an Indian store or watch the History channel, but if you know the people, then you know how they cook. Like, I know how Fawzia (Eritrean) cooks, and now I know how the whole country cooks. You hear people say, "in my country, we did this, etc." That's good.

Outreach to neighbourhood and larger society: Breaking down stereotypes through relationships and information

1. Public Education

Through lectures and her writing, particularly At a Border called Hope: Where refugees are neighbours, the director, Mary Jo Leddy, reaches many people. Her book puts a human face on refugees in Canada and puts into perspective the true meaning of social action (*The Edmonton Journal*). Volunteers do presentations at high schools and community organizations about Romero House using a slide show and stories from Mary Jo's book to develop more awareness of the strife refugees are fleeing from and their experiences here in Canada. Also, Romero House provides week long immersion experiences for university students.

2. Neighbourhood

The location of Romero House in a middle class neighbourhood was intentional. Mary Jo, the director explains,

Initially, we thought about different areas for Romero House in Toronto, but we didn't want to live in a ghetto area, where refugees won't feel safe, and where they will be further stigmatized. But what is important is that the refugees can integrate into a mainstream neighbourhood, where they can meet people who have connections, and not be ghettoized.

For the first several years, there was resistance to Romero House in the neighbourhood. Now, after eight years, the refugees experience a welcome and are benefiting from the connections.

Refugees can tap into the social networks of staff, board and neighbours that include: connections with universities, religious groups, hospitals, realtors, lawyers, teachers, and media. These connections can lead to jobs, a sense of belonging in the neighbourhood, individual and advocacy support, and most important to this topic: the breaking down of stereotypes.

Mary Jo, the director, provides an example,

Pandeli's family had their party after they were accepted. The neighbours came over to celebrate, and the neighbours' daughter, who is ten years old said to me, "I was so happy they got accepted, because they are wonderful people." She won't grow up to believe that refugees should be feared or locked away or sent back.

Organizational flexibility and responsiveness fed by a shared vision.

The fundamental practice of accompaniment fosters a flexibility and attentiveness that encourages growth and change in directions that are creative, pertinent and in the best interest of the refugees. If a particular service is no longer needed, it is likely to be dropped more readily than it would be in organizations that define themselves as service providers. Jennifer, a former volunteer, recalls "*When I came here there was no list of things I had to do, but instead I first had to find out what the people are like who are living here and then do whatever work I could do.*"

This organizational structure also attracts people who are genuinely interested in developing relationships of solidarity and care. This intention is crucial according to those we interviewed. When asked to identify values and characteristics that a volunteer should have, refugees stressed the primary importance of having compassion, having a good heart, and being egalitarian, dedicated and accepting. The importance of these caring volunteers to also be informed, be fast learners and be persistent in their advocacy was also articulated.

Board Member, Winki, has seen the impact of the volunteer program,

With the volunteers it is advocacy from a personal level. Refugees are not just a name, but a person and thus, the commitment goes very deep. Volunteers bring energy....Things would change with a permanent staff. It would become more bureaucratic and staff would get stuck in their roles.

Life of a community like Romero House is dynamic, not static. It is shaped by the generosity and needs of staff and refugees and by external policies and public attitude.

Limitations

The poverty of Romero House is both an obstacle and an asset. It is difficult to work with little funds. The volunteer turn over is quick and we need more money for housing and to pay people's immigration fees. But I also think that poverty is important, because we are almost in the same situation as the refugees financially. ... I'm not sure what it would be like if we had financial security - I think that it would profoundly change the attitude here. - Mary Jo, Director

Not being able to meet the demand for shelter was a shared frustration among all the staff we interviewed at Romero House and other refugee organizations. Every day, Romero House has to turn people away who are seeking shelter, *"We can care a great deal for the people at Romero House, but it serves so few people"* (Devon, volunteer).

The life and work of Romero House is very labour intensive and staffing is dependent on the generosity of full time volunteers. Over the past two years, there have been as many as eight volunteers and as few as four volunteers at any one time. Volunteers have concerns that being understaffed can lead to mistakes and to some things never getting done.

Year to year, one cannot guarantee a certain number of volunteers, and it is even more difficult to ensure a gender balance, racial diversity or diversity of gifts. Gender roles and communication between men and women are culturally constructed and both the volunteers and refugees bring these constructions to their interactions at Romero House. Sometimes, actions taken by female volunteers towards male refugees in the spirit of good neighbours are culturally interpreted as expressions of romantic interest. Also, women who have been sexually assaulted may feel more comfortable with a female house co-ordinator and men from countries where women are seldom authority figures may feel more comfortable with a male house co-ordinator. With a balance of male and female volunteers, Romero House can provide a more comfortable home. Having a group of volunteers who are of different races, cultures and languages would have a favourable impact on volunteer-refugee relations, *"People who work with refugees are better to be from different races, different cultures, and different languages, not just white and English speaking. You feel more safe, more comfortable."* (Massud, Iran) While

cognisant of the importance of gender balance and racial diversity, Romero House is limited in ensuring a specific staff make-up since it relies on the generosity of volunteers to come forward.

Turnover of staff can also mean a loss of critical information and a continual need for training. From day one, volunteers live with individuals who have suffered severe trauma. Being untrained in these circumstances can be dangerous.

Daily work with refugees give volunteers lots of reason to work for systemic change, but due to day to day survival needs of the refugees this gets put to the back burner sometimes.

The community model of Romero House faces specific challenges. At the same time as

volunteers develop relationships of mutuality and equality with refugees living at Romero House, they must exercise an authority role when the safety of fellow volunteers and refugees is threatened. Some refugees become very attached to Romero House and find it very difficult emotionally and practically to move out of Romero House after they have received their convention refugee status. In these situations, volunteers are called upon to be firm with refugees in move out plans.

While Romero House tries to be an inclusive community, some people have felt excluded through experiences of feeling misunderstood, being "pushed out", and being single in a community dominated by families. Refugees who wish to continue participating in the Romero House community after they move out complain of not having enough time. They are very busy working and going to school in their effort to survive and hopefully catch up with the rest of society and often live far away from Romero House.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Our Proposed Model of Support

Our recommendations for preventing homelessness in Toronto arise primarily out of our conversations with the people who are a part of the Romero House community: the director of Romero House, the Board of Directors, former volunteers, and refugees. Romero House is one example of a community that works towards providing a sense of home for refugee claimants. This practice of transitional housing which nurtures a sense of home is applicable not only to refugee claimants, but also to others who are at risk of homelessness.

Our report, “Search For Home”, illustrates that accurate information, orientation, shelter and community support are required in order for refugee claimants to prepare for their refugee hearing. Once they are accepted at their hearing, they also need support and advocacy to overcome the barriers to receiving landed status, find permanent housing and work, and heal from past traumas. Therefore, arising out of these important needs, we propose a model of support that hinges on six programs, working together as a web of refugee support in Toronto. While the development of one of these programs will help to remove the fundamental obstacles that put refugees at risk of homelessness in Toronto, ideally, all six of these programs will be funded and operative soon.

These six programs are named:

- 1) ARRIVE RIGHT port of entry information centres
- 2) Refugee Claimant Transitional Housing
- 3) Accompaniment: Faith-based refugee support
- 4) Downtown Refugee Resource Centre
- 5) Ongoing Education of Service Providers
- 6) "Networking to Work" Employment Assistance

This model of support, if funded, will enable refugees to receive accurate information when they first arrive in Canada and throughout the entire refugee process until they have received landed status, and this model will also provide long-term community orientation, support and opportunity.

Recommendation #1
ARRIVE RIGHT Port of Entry Information Centres

The ARRIVE RIGHT Port of Entry Information Centres will provide essential information to refugee claimants when they make a refugee claim at all of the ports of entry: at US/Canada border crossings and at Pearson International airport. At present, shelter staff in the Niagara Region is already doing some of this work, informally. Funding needs to go towards developing accurate, up-to-date materials for refugees, translated into the languages predominantly spoken by refugees coming to Canada. Funding also needs to be provided for staffing the ARRIVE RIGHT Information Centres.

Through our interviews and in feedback discussion groups, many people agreed that an ARRIVE RIGHT program is essential for providing accurate information to refugee claimants. However, although many refugee advocates are discussing this vision, there is a lack of co-ordination of these individuals. We propose that funding be provided for a staff co-ordinator to bring refugee advocates together and develop a thorough proposal for this project. It is our vision that the ARRIVE RIGHT Port of Entry Information Centre be developed and staffed by the NGO community of refugee advocates (including refugees), who are working on funding proposals for this project. However, for the ARRIVE RIGHT Centre to be successful, there must be ongoing and positive dialogue between the NGO community and CIC, and specifically between the ARRIVE RIGHT staff and the Port-of-Entry CIC officers.

At an ARRIVE RIGHT Information Centre, staff will meet with refugees who have arrived in Canada and will try to find out the specific needs of each person. If the refugee doesn't have shelter for the night, staff will phone to the different shelters and if full, to the community/faith-groups of Toronto, and will find a place for them to sleep. An orientation package, in many different languages, will be provided to each refugee. This package will provide crucial information and orientation regarding the refugee process, such as:

- the refugee process in Ontario, the phone number of the Immigration and Refugee Board to call for address changes
- a list of the shelters in Toronto and their phone numbers
- how to access legal aid services and social services
- how to find housing in Toronto (such as searching through ethnic newspapers)
- one's right to good legal counsel and how to complain to the complaints board of the Law Society of Upper Canada
- a list of refugee lawyers in Toronto who have proven themselves to be legitimate
- who to avoid: "scoopers", immigration consultants and private housing services
- a complete, accurate, and up-to-date list of every NGO in Toronto that works with refugee claimants and how they can help, including the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture's phone number, address, and services.

Recommendation #2
Refugee Claimant Transitional Housing

At present, most refugee claimants who do not have family or friends in Toronto, are forced to stay in General Emergency Shelters, such as the Salvation Army, Scott Mission, and Nellie's Shelter for women, when they arrive in Canada. Refugee claimants have specific, immediate needs that cannot be addressed in the Emergency Shelter System: they need refugee information, help in translation and filling out immigration forms, support and safety. Therefore, funding needs to be made available for the operation of more refugee claimant specific houses which offer community support, accurate information and a sense of home, like Romero House, Brottier House, Matthew House and Hamilton House.

This is not a new idea. We support the recommendation of the Golden Report, for the city of Toronto to fund another refugee specific shelter, in addition to Sojourn House. HEART (Homes for the Emergency Accommodation of Refugees in Toronto) recently put in a proposal to the City of Toronto, entitled "Homeless Refugees in Toronto: A Grassroots Solution with `Heart'", proposing funding for "family-like" refugee claimant transitional housing, instead of funding a large refugee hostel. The proposal illustrates that if the city funds family-like housing for refugee claimants instead of putting refugee claimants in emergency shelters, they will save at least \$250,000 per year, and refugees would be much better served. For more information, contact Anne Woolger at (416) 250-0126. We recommend that the City of Toronto fund this proposal!

It is essential that these houses be in neighbourhoods, and not ghettos of poverty and violence. If refugees live in a neighbourhood, staff and volunteers can develop relationships between the neighbours and refugees living in the house. At Romero House, we have seen that these relationships are extremely important, for a number of reasons:

- 1) neighbours help to express a deep welcome for newly arrived refugees
- 2) neighbours and their children build real relationships with refugees, and know them as people and friends, not as criminals or statistics. These Canadian neighbours educate others.
- 3) by developing networks with employed individuals with personal and professional connections, neighbours can help to break into the job market.
- 4) neighbours will advocate of behalf of refugees when they know and understand the personal suffering that refugees undergo when they get stuck in the immigration system. For example, neighbours of Romero House, who had personal connections to an alternative school, saw that one child wasn't going to school because his parents didn't have papers yet, and she was able to enrol the child into the alternative school.

Funding should also be provided for these houses to host community events, such as acceptance parties, holiday dinners, talent shows, and outings, such as camp, spring hiking and winter skating events. These community events provide an opportunity for refugees who have moved out of the houses to continue to actively participate and meet newly arrived refugees. Through these events, refugees can continue to feel that this community is their "home", even when they have moved out and found more permanent housing. Funding should also be provided for child-care during events, such as Women's Group, so that single refugee mothers are provided an important opportunity to meet other adults and

participate actively in the community.

Recommendation #3

"Welcome the Stranger": Faith-based Refugee Support

Romero House volunteers work from a faith-based commitment to live simply and peacefully, welcoming the stranger into one's home, being a good neighbour, speaking out against injustice and working towards social justice for all people. Through the volunteer program at Romero House, young and old Christian people are given a chance to put their faith into simple, day-to-day action, such as teaching English, playing with the children, taking the time to talk with those who feel alone, and organising celebrations. Through this faith-based commitment, Romero House is infused with the spirit of accompaniment, and volunteers express a deep welcome, compassion and respect for human rights when interacting with the refugees who live as their neighbours.

There is a great deal of this faith-based energy in the city of Toronto that has moved people into action. One can see the committed neighbourliness of churches and synagogues in the "Out of the Cold" program in Toronto, who open their doors and provide a warm place to sleep for the homeless in the winter months. Also, at present, many religious communities are involved in helping refugees, through sponsorship and advocacy. One can see the joyous energy and celebration when a community has successfully sponsored a refugee to live in Canada. We believe that this energy and spirit of accompaniment found in many of the churches, synagogues and mosques of Toronto, could be channeled towards community building and real relationships of solidarity with newly arrived refugee claimants.

The central idea behind the "Welcome the Stranger" program, is to encourage and support faith communities to welcome and befriend refugee claimants who live in their neighbourhood. We propose that funding is providing for a full-time staff position to develop and provide continual support to a faith-based program, entitled, "Welcome the Stranger". The staff person's job would be to recruit and screen people and develop committees in the different faith communities, train the groups and develop a leader/contact person for each group. This person would publish an ongoing list of the communities involved in the "Welcome the Stranger" program, with the contact person's name and number and the location of the community in Toronto. This list would be available to refugee claimants at the ARRIVE RIGHT information centres and at the Downtown Refugee Resource Centre. Refugee claimants are encouraged to phone the contact person of the faith-community in their neighbourhood, so that they can meet these people who will provide ongoing support. This committee will begin to form a relationship of friendship and solidarity with the refugee family and will help provide ongoing resettlement support to the family.

There are a number of ways that the committee can help a refugee and their family in Toronto. Some ideas of support include:

- 1) Billeting - Welcoming refugees into their homes until they can find more permanent housing.
- 2) Providing food, clothing and other necessities. This is especially important if the refugee claimant has made an inland claim and must wait months before they are eligible to receive welfare.
- 3) Help to pay for their processing fee to become landed

- 4) Provide childcare when needed. This is especially important for single mothers who cannot attend ESL classes without childcare
- 5) Providing potential job contacts - helping the refugee to meet people in the faith community who may be able to hire them in the future.
- 6) Helping to find permanent housing, e.g.. accompanying the refugee to speak with landlords about renting a home.
- 7) Help to pay for medication that is not covered by IFHP or Welfare.
- 8) Providing necessary companionship, e.g. going out for coffee.

We know that trauma will be revealed through conversation. We advise that these committees refer refugees who need psychological help to places such as CCVT, we know that trauma will be revealed through conversation. Also, the committees need adequate training in crisis intervention, counseling skills and assisting refugees in healing from trauma. The "Welcome the Stranger" committee would not get involved in the legal or immigration matters of the refugee, but may accompany them to the Downtown Refugee Resource Centre where they can receive up-to-date information and trained help.

Recommendation #4
A Downtown Refugee Resource Centre

There needs to be funding for a Downtown Refugee Resource Centre, staffed by refugee advocates who are able to assist refugees in preparation for their case, fill out documents, or find out answers if their refugee or landed immigration file has been "lost" in the system. The staff will also help to find shelter for refugees, and when needed, will contact social services. These refugee advocates can also assist refugee claimants in finding a good lawyer, and will make complaints to the Law Society of Upper Canada when a refugee has been mistreated.

Again, this recommendation is not new. Sojourn House has recently began the New Canadians Housing Access Project with two housing workers, funded through the Homelessness Initiatives Fund, and they are hopeful that this initiative is one step towards a Refugee Resource Centre in the future. We support this vision, and it is clear that the foundation is here, but funding is needed. For more information, contact Debbie Hill-Corrigan at (416) 864-0515. In addition, S. Gopikrishna of the South Asian Family Support Services proposes to develop a webpage that would provide up-to-date crucial information to refugee claimants in their native language, and this would be an important asset to the Downtown Refugee Resource Centre. For more information, contact S. Gopikrishna at (416) 431-4847.

In order for the downtown refugee resource centre to work successfully, funding must be provided for:

- 1) enough staff to be able to assist all refugees who walk in to the centre
- 2) a staff position of a volunteer coordinator, who will train volunteers to assist refugees, in doing research for their refugee cases, and filling out immigration forms accurately
- 3) paid positions of interpreters, who would work on an on-call system, when help is needed.
- 4) free access for refugees to phone, fax, and email, to prepare for their cases, by getting documentation
- 5) a webpage and written materials that provide up-to-date crucial information to refugee claimants in their native language

The Downtown Refugee Resource Centre, if funded, is extremely important for many reasons:

- 1) Refugees will be able to find accurate and honest support. It will be less likely that they will pay to use Immigration Consultants, or depend on misinformed social networks for information.
- 2) Legal aid does not pay for the amount of time needed to do adequate research and preparation for a refugee case. In Ontario, there is also a prediction that legal aid will be cut for refugee claimants, which means that refugees will need support. Therefore, the Centre is essential for refugee claimants to be represented fairly at their hearing.
- 3) A central place for refugees would provide a space for isolated refugees to build social networks
- 4) Staff in other agencies who do not specialise in refugee specific issues can confidently refer refugees to this centre.

Recommendation #5
Ongoing Education of Service Providers

Receiving no information or funding at the Port of Entry, refugee claimants depend on people they meet to direct them to someone who can assist them. By taxi drivers, passerbys, etc, they may be referred to community organisations like ESL classes, community health centres, schools, shelters, social services, police stations, local city councilors, MP's, etc. Individuals who staff these organisations need to be informed re: the distinction between refugees and immigrants, the basic refugee process and also refugee specific services available. In this way, they can do a minimal assessment and refer the individual to the most appropriate place. Staff should be educated so they can be pro-active, to ensure that refugees are informed and on track.

Therefore, funding needs to be provided to educate service providers who work in the non-refugee specific shelters, community health centres and social services to be able to assist refugees. Education can be done through workshops and a provision of educational materials.

Recommendation #6
Employment Assistance- “Networking to Work”

Since most of the available jobs are not advertised publicly but rather through word of mouth, networking is key to securing employment. In this regard, refugees are at a distinct disadvantage which the standard employment program curriculum of cover letters, resume writing and interview skills do not address. For many, being unemployed is an obstacle to participating in society and feeling at home.

As relationships develop between refugees and settled Canadians in the Romero House community, more and more refugees at Romero House are finding work through these relationships. This experience exemplifies the importance of facilitating the development of social networks of refugees to include employed settled Canadians.

The employment assistance program “Networking to Work” for refugees will be linked to the refugee claimant transitional housing and the “Welcome the Stranger” programs. “Networking to work” will assist refugees in breaking into the job market in Canada. Through participation in this program, refugees will identify potential employment opportunities, link with settled Canadians in their field and be accompanied through the process of securing and maintaining employment. Often securing and maintaining employment depend on more than just one’s skill, but also on variables like child care, immigration difficulties, unstable housing, mental health etc. Hence, a holistic approach is needed and will be supported by links with the refugee resource centre and other community services.

A database will be developed which contains the specializations of settled Canadians who have come to know refugees through the other initiatives. For those who have credentials and appropriate skills, this relationship may lead to a better understanding of the Canadian context, possibly a letter of recommendation and contacts, and ultimately a position in their desired field. For others who may not be able to find employment in their field, relationships with peers in their field will sustain a part of them which may not be fulfilled otherwise.

Seeking work involves rejection which is difficult for anyone, but can be particularly difficult for refugees who likely have few social supports to cushion the rejection and to whom each rejection may reinforce their feeling of being excluded. The spirit of community and mutual support among the participants developed in the transitional housing and the “Welcome the Stranger” programs will be reinforced and drawn upon to encourage participants to continue on the road to employment. As the program develops, former participants will be invited to participate as mentors. Coming together, refugees may develop collective actions, e.g. small businesses, co-ops, advocacy groups, social groups, etc. In the spirit of accompaniment, the program will be continually shaped by the relationships, the experiences and the vision of all those involved.

B. Specific Recommendations to Government

We call on:

The Federal Government of Canada to:

1. Fund Arrive Right information centres for refugee claimants at all Ports of Entry.
2. Remove the Processing fee for the Application for Landing Status.
3. Reduce the processing time of inland claims and provide financial assistance and health care to those who are waiting and are not eligible for government support or for a work permit.
4. Develop a grievance procedure within CIC where refugees can lodge complaints and CIC can be held accountable for its actions.

The Provincial Government of Ontario to:

1. Fund non-profit refugee specific transitional housing
2. Continue to fund legal aid for refugee claimants
3. Increase the shelter allowance to levels of market rent and appropriate for family size
4. Reinstate Rent Control legislation
5. Develop regulation and certification procedures for Immigration Consultants

The Municipal Governments of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) to:

1. Fund a refugee resource centre in the downtown core with current multilingual information and staffed by knowledgeable settlement and housing workers.
2. Fund HEART proposal for creation of more home-like refugee specific shelters
3. Fund interpreters who can serve refugees at welfare, legal aid, and medical appointments.
4. Fund daycare at ESL classes for refugee claimants in the GTA
5. Fund professional mental health services geared to refugees to cope with struggles and heal from trauma.
6. Include community based accompaniment initiatives which seek to develop relationships of solidarity and support between settled Canadians and marginalized individuals in proposal call for access to Homelessness Initiatives Funds.

Appendices

Appendix 1 - Refugee Interviewees

Stage of Settlement for Refugees Interviewed

Immigration Status at time of interviews*	Number	Percentage
Stage 1 – Refugee Claimant	17	35%
Stage 2 – Convention Refugee	14	28%
Stage 3 – Landed Immigrant	16	33%
Stage 4 – Citizenship	1	2%
Other**	1	2%

* The initial immigration status in Canada of 97% of the sample was “refugee claimant” (stage 1)

** Seeking landed immigration status based on marriage to national, previous refugee claims and appeals were unsuccessful

Length of time in Canada (at the time of interview)

Length of time in Canada	Number	Percentage
0 - 6 months	8	16%
6 - 12 months	8	16%
12 – 18 months	8	16%
18 – 24 months	3	6%
24 – 30 months	3	6%
30 – 36 months	3	6%
36 – 42 months	2	4%
42 – 48 months	2	4%
48 – 54 months	4	8%
54 – 60 months	1	2%
more than 60 months (5 years)	7	14%

Nationality

Eritrean	8
Iranian	5
Albanian	4
Tibetan	4
Sri Lankan	3
Angolan	3
Colombian	2
Algerian	2
Mexican	2
Kazakhstan	2
Georgian/Kurdish	1
Russian	1
Nigerian	1
Yemeni	1
Ethiopian	2
Congolese	1
Egyptian	1
Peruvian	1
Guatemalan	1
Rwandan	1
Burundi	1
Moroccan	1

Gender

Male	22	45%
Female	27	55%

Appendix 2 - Interviews with Refugees

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me. We are interviewing 50 people who have lived at Romero House. We want to hear what you have experienced and what you would recommend for Canada and Canadians to assist refugees. We will ask about 10 questions. With each question, please answer honestly. If you need more time, or paper or pen, or don't feel comfortable answering just let us know. It is our hope that your experiences and wisdom will help improve the situation for refugees arriving in Canada.

Name _____ Age _____

When did you live at Romero House and for how long? _____

Where have you lived (birth - present) and why did you move?

What is the difference between a house and a home for you?

What have you felt most at home? What makes you feel at home?

Where did you feel most homeless? Why?

Since your arrival in Canada as a refugee, share one or two experiences which have helped you feel more at home here?

What experience would help you feel more at home here?

What prevents you from feeling at home and why?

Identify what you think are five main strengths of Romero House and give an example of each.

Now that you have moved out of Romero House, what is your involvement with people you met through Romero House? Why?

If you were going to design an organization dedicated to assisting refugees, what would be important to include and why?

What values or characteristics should those that work in organizations interacting with refugees have?

As you know, information from interviews will be used to make recommendations to NGO organizations, Social Services, Legal Services, Government, etc. Do you have other concerns that you haven't mentioned yet.

Appendix 3 - Interviews with Staff and Volunteers who work with Refugees

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me. We are interviewing 15 people who have volunteered their time working with refugees at Romero House, either as a live-in, full-time volunteer, or as a board member. We want to hear what you have experienced and what you would recommend for Canada and Canadians to assist refugees. With each question, please take your time and answer honestly. It is our hope that your experiences and wisdom will help improve the situation for refugees arriving in Canada.

Name _____ Organization _____

What are the strengths of Romero House/your organization, in serving refugees? Give specific examples.

In your opinion, what makes resettlement difficult for refugees?

What are the obstacles for Romero House/your organization in resolving these difficulties?

What strategic interventions are important to preventing homelessness in the refugee community?

If you were going to design an organization dedicated to assisting refugees, what would be important and why?

What values or characteristics should those that work in organizations interacting with refugees have?

As you know, information from interviews will be used to make recommendations to NGO organizations, Social Services, Legal Services, Government, etc. Do you have other concerns that you haven't mentioned yet.

Appendix 4 - The Process of Refugee Claimant to Citizen Status

Attaining Status can be divided into 5 stages

- < Arrival
- < Refugee Claimant
- < Convention Refugee
- < Landed Immigrant
- < Citizen

Arrival

A refugee claim can be made at a Canadian border, or airport, or from within Canada. If upon arrival, individuals inform an immigration officer that they want to make a refugee claim at the port of entry their claim is considered a Port of Entry claim. If refugees do not claim status upon entry and instead notify immigration and make a refugee claim after entering Canada, then their claim is considered an Inland claim.

Refugee Claimant

After making a claim and being interviewed, Eligibility document - IMM1442 are sent to the claimant which serves as official proof of their refugee claimant status.

After receiving the eligibility document, refugees must submit a completed Personal Information Form (PIF) with the assistance of a lawyer within 28 days to the Immigration and Refugee Board. This submission serves as the basis for their claim.

Convention Refugee

A hearing is then held before the Convention Refugee Determination Division [CRDD] of the Immigration and Refugee Board [IRB] to assess the claim and to determine if the claimant is a convention refugee.

In the case of a negative decision, each refugee claimant is allowed to apply for a judicial review. The Federal Court only deals with endeavours in the law or procedure-habeas information. Therefore, if the Federal Court officials deem the application credible, the Leave to Appeal is granted. A hearing ensues to determine if due-process was hindered in the initial hearing. If it is decided through the Federal Court that the process was flawed, another hearing is granted with the Convention Refugee Determination Division. A refused claimant can also make a submission to the Post-Determination Refugee Claimants in Canada Review (PDRCC) unit of Immigration. The claimant must show an objectively identifiable risk to their safety. The third option for refused refugee claimants is applying for landing status in Canada on humanitarian and compassionate grounds.

Landed Immigrant

If Convention Refugee status is granted, the individual has six months to apply for permanent resident/landed immigrant status. Applicants are required to pay a processing fee of \$500/adult and \$100/child. Those applying before February 28, 2000 also had to pay a Right of Landing Fee of \$975/adult before receiving their landed status. This process usually takes 10-18 months but can take years.

Citizenship

After living in Canada as a permanent resident for three years, landed immigrants are eligible to apply for Canadian citizenship.