

## 2020 Pre-Budget Submission by OCASI – Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants to Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs

January 24, 2020

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

OCASI – Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants is the umbrella organization for immigrant and refugee serving agencies in Ontario and the collective voice for the sector. OCASI was established in 1978, and has now grown to 239 member agencies located in communities across Ontario.

OCASI works towards equality, access and full participation for immigrants and refugees in every aspect of Canadian life. As an umbrella organization, OCASI carries out its mission in large part by building and strengthening the capacity of our member agencies to deliver good programs and services.

### 2. CONTEXT

Immigration to Ontario is once again on the rise, reversing the trend of the previous decade. In 2019 Ontario received over 40 percent of all immigrants to Canada. According to the 2016 Census, almost 30 per cent of Ontario's population was comprised of immigrants. While Ontario receives the highest number of all migrant workers, international students and refugee claimants, they form only a fraction of Ontario's population.

#### Employment

The face of immigration to Canada has changed significantly over the last several decades. The majority of immigrants are now people of colour. Similar to other people of colour in Canada, immigrants are over-represented among those who are low-income, and those working in low- paying, precarious, and low-status jobs, in which their rights as workers are not fully protected.

On average immigrants have much higher educational and professional attainment compared to Canadian-born residents. The 2016 Census found that 41% of chronically poor (living below LICO for 5 consecutive years) immigrants have degrees. But immigrants are under-represented in professional positions and their experience, skills and credentials are often not recognized in Canada. This is a tremendous loss for immigrants personally, as well as significant loss for Ontario.

## Poverty

Child poverty rates are higher for children of colour, Indigenous children and children of immigrants. Child poverty rates in Canada are 13% for White non-immigrant children, but are 32% for children of immigrants; and 25% for children of colour on average. Immigrant children of colour are over-represented among children living in poverty. Recent (arrived between 2011-2016) immigrants had a low income rate of 31.4%, which was more than twice the rate of 12.5% for non-immigrants. Racialized immigrants are most likely to experience the highest low-income rates. Recent immigrant women face a 59% income gap compared to non-immigrant men. The income gap is likely the highest for racialized recent immigrant women.

Immigrants, and particularly immigrants of colour, are over-represented among those who face food insecurity, live in precarious or substandard housing (80 percent are in rental housing) and more likely to spend substantial proportion of their income on housing.

### 3. PRIORITIES

Our submission is focused on the following priorities that have a significant impact on immigrants and refugees, and their opportunities to build strong and healthy families and communities and participate fully in the economy and society.

#### a. Newcomer settlement Program and Language Training

We commend the government for recognizing the importance of immigrant settlement services in Ontario and continuing to fund such services through the Newcomer Settlement Program (NSP) administered by the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services.

Immigrants and refugees make significant economic, social and cultural contributions and help to build and sustain stable communities. The Newcomer Settlement Program funds services that help newcomers to become established more quickly. English and French language training programs, funded in collaboration with the federal government, are an important resource for newcomers to build language capacity and participate fully in society. Delivered by community-based organizations, the services are cost effective and deliver good return on investment.

The NSP and language training programs will be particularly important and needed next year as Ontario begins to roll out the rural and northern immigration pilot program, as well as expansion of the Ontario Immigrant Nominee Program.

**Recommendation 1: Sustain investment in the Newcomer Settlement Program and language training programs.**

## b. Employment supports

The Ontario government is putting in place a new system for employment support. We see this as an opportunity to co-create a new way of service delivery, and one that is more flexible, to benefit all Ontarians.

The transformation so far, and cuts to employment funding have however negatively affected many of the programs provided by community-based organizations, including programs for immigrants. Employment supports are critical to ensuring immigrants can become employed in their field, and at a level that is consistent with the experience and skills they bring. Over the years, community-based organizations have built a solid base of expertise in supporting immigrants and other disadvantaged groups to become employed and find good jobs.

Access to affordable, safe and appropriate childcare is an essential support for women who want to enter the labour market, follow education or training, or want to start their own business. These supports are critically needed for women who are pursuing a path out of poverty. Childcare workers themselves are over-represented in the working poor and must be paid appropriately.

**Recommendation 2: Ensure that immigrants, and community-based organizations delivering employment services are not left out in the transformation of Employment Ontario.**

**Recommendation 3: Reverse the childcare funding cut and invest in an Ontario childcare strategy.**

**Recommendation 4: Immediately increase the minimum wage to \$15 per hour.**

## c. Access to justice

Access to justice is a fundamental right for all residents, and should not be limited on any basis including poverty. We are encouraged that the funding cuts to community legal clinics announced last year will not be implemented. Meanwhile, there have been significant funding cuts to Legal Aid Ontario overall, and a complete withdrawal of funding of refugee and immigration law services.

As a result more people will be representing themselves in the justice system, particularly people who can no longer access legal aid and cannot afford to pay a lawyer. People of colour and immigrants and refugees of colour are over-represented among the working poor and people who are low-income, and are more likely to be denied access to justice.

Women in particular including women facing violence, are likely to be most impacted, especially women of colour and refugee and immigrant women – who in addition to facing poverty in high numbers are likely to face other systemic barriers. In its study on Access to Justice in 2016, The Canadian Bar Association reported that every \$1 spent on legal aid saves \$6 to the justice

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system.<sup>1</sup> “Access to legal assistance is the single right that makes every other right viable”.<sup>2</sup> Legal Aid in Ontario is the fundamental framework that ensures access to justice for the most vulnerable Ontarians.

Recommendation 5: Reverse the cuts to Legal Aid Ontario and restore funding for refugee and immigration law services.

#### d. Racialization of poverty

People of colour in Ontario, including immigrants and refugees continue to experience disproportionately high levels of poverty and other disproportionate disadvantage and systemic discrimination. These factors must be explicitly included in all poverty reduction measures in policy and the budget – including taxation benefits, housing, childcare, employment supports and more. The Anti-Racism Directorate began the work of better understanding these factors, including through the collection of disaggregated data across provincial Ministries and public institutions. That work should be appropriately resourced to continue, so that the Ontario government’s fiscal and policy decisions can be informed by sound and representative data and equitably serve all Ontarians.

Recommendation: Appropriately resource the Anti-Racism Directorate to provide for the collection and analysis of disaggregated data across all provincial Ministries and public institutions – including the Ministry of Health.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

We ask the Committee to consider the real impact of the Ontario Budget 2020-21 on low-income communities, newcomer and racialized communities, and recommend restoring funding and services that affect those in most need.

We thank the Committee for the opportunity to provide these submissions.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cba.org/CMSPages/GetFile.aspx?guid=8b0c4d64-cb3f-460f-9733-1aaff164ef6a>

<sup>2</sup> Professor Hazel Glen, University of London College, 2018