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Realizing potential: Reflections on policy responses to displaced persons in Manitoba

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Introduction

Canada welcomes displaced persons from all over the world and has established itself as a well-known resettlement destination. Through its three main resettlement programs, the country gives permanent residency status to refugees arriving in the country each year. Through these Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) programs, refugees are eligible for various resettlement services, including transitional housing, financial support, language classes, employment readiness training, and healthcare. Over the years, policies and programs for displaced persons have been modified, and in three prominent cases, programs have been developed outside of or in addition to the established refugee resettlement approaches to respond to country-specific crises. Cohort-based strategies have been used in the case of Syrian refugees fleeing civil war in 2015–16, and in response to the needs of Afghans following the US withdrawal of forces and reestablishment of the Taliban. In response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the federal government also created the Canada-Ukraine Authorization for Emergency Travel (CUAET) program, creating a streamlined immigration pathway for newcomers seeking refuge from the conflict. Most recently, the government has launched a smaller-scale initiative prioritizing resettlement of Sudanese nationals and others impacted by the civil war and the massive internal displacement of over 10 million people (IRCC 2025a; UNHCR 2024a).

This study examines and compares the supports accessible to all refugees with those available under the special initiatives for displaced Syrians, Afghans, and Ukrainians, with a focus on the Manitoba context. This research has been substantially informed and based upon interviews with settlement service sector representatives in Manitoba, and a significant part of this report is dedicated to reviewing their assessment of the successes that have been achieved under the three cohort-based responses and their recommendations arising from these experiences.[1] The goal is to clearly articulate, through a case study of the Manitoba context, what has been demonstrated as possible in supporting the settlement and integration of refugees and other internationally displaced persons. The report also documents policy recommendations to support

improvements in settlement services for newcomers, arising from our focus group discussions with settlement sector representatives who reviewed our preliminary findings. This work is of particular importance given the recent reduction in federal immigration targets in response to rising housing costs and the Government of Manitoba's acknowledgment that this will negatively impact the province. We expect that this research will also be of interest to settlement stakeholders across Canada, who are looking to provide more responsive support and improve settlement services for displaced persons.

Successful integration involves meeting several interrelated needs, including income, housing, employment, language skills, education, social networks, and physical and mental health services. These are needs that are relevant to all newcomers, but refugees, given their selection based on humanitarian criteria, may face intensified challenges in all these areas (Yu, Ouellet, and Warmington 2007). High-quality studies aimed at isolating the impact of settlement support services have demonstrated meaningful outcomes for newcomers.[2] Government investments in benefits and settlement services for refugees also show a strong value-for-money case from a taxpayer perspective, with refugees contributing significantly to the economy and generating more tax revenue for governments than they cost in benefits and services.[3] Based on the experience in Manitoba with cohort-based support services for displaced persons, our policy recommendations highlight how settlement support enhancements can improve integration into the labour market and build on the positive contribution that refugees and other displaced persons make to Manitoba, including our economy and government finances.

This report is organized as follows: Section One provides background context on the refugee system in Canada and some demographic data on the composition of displaced persons who have immigrated to Canada and Manitoba. Section Two summarizes the benefits available to refugees more generally, as well as enhancements and innovations made in the three cohort-based approaches to servicing displaced Syrians, Afghans, and Ukrainians. Section 3 recaps the assessment of the incremental supports made available in Manitoba, based on our interviews with settlement services sector leaders. Section 4 concludes with policy recommendations. While our report primarily focuses on the resettled refugees and displaced persons arriving under the CUAET program, it also briefly addresses the circumstances of asylum seekers and other temporary residents, given the innovations demonstrated through the CUAET program using the temporary residency pathway to deliver a rapid response to the Ukraine crisis.

Background

Refugee system in Canada

The Canadian refugee system comprises two main components: the in-Canada asylum program and the refugee humanitarian resettlement program. The in-Canada asylum program provides refugee protection to people already in Canada or arriving at a Canadian port of entry. Refugees can apply for protection by making a refugee claim to the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRCC 2024b). The refugee humanitarian resettlement program helps refugees who are outside Canada who need protection from their countries of origin. The number of resettled refugees admitted is capped by the limits set in Canada's Immigration Levels Plan (IRCC 2023b). Refugees are referred to Canada by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), private sponsors, or a designated referral organization.[4]

Resettled refugees admitted are granted permanent residency status when they arrive in the country (IRCC 2019). This status allows them to work legally in the country and have access to settlement services,

healthcare and other government benefits such as social assistance, Manitoba's Rent Assist program, and federal and provincial child benefits. Asylum seekers or refugee claimants do not receive permanent residency upon arrival and have limited access to financial support and settlement services (Manitoba Immigration, n.d.).

Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) administers three main resettlement streams. Most resettled refugees arrive through the Private Sponsorship of Refugees program, which enables citizens, permanent residents, or private organizations to submit undertakings for refugees and take on responsibility for providing financial assistance and ensuring they receive the necessary support and services during their settlement process. There were, until recently, three different streams through which a refugee can be privately sponsored. Refugees can be sponsored by either a sponsorship agreement holder, a group of five Canadian citizens or permanent residents, or a community organization sponsor, although IRCC has recently suspended the latter two pathways (Purkey et al. 2025). These sponsoring groups must commit to and demonstrate the capacity to provide basic assistance to refugees for one year. Most of the remaining refugees arrive through the Government-Assisted Refugees Program. Refugees arriving in this program are eligible to receive support and services financed by the federal government to aid in their settling process. Service provider organizations registered and funded by the government provide these services to refugees in Canada. The third stream is the Blended Visa-Referred refugee program, which enables both private sponsors and the government to partner to provide the necessary financial assistance to refugees referred to Canada by the UNHCR.

Demographics of displaced persons

In 2024, the UNHCR estimated that there were 123 million forcibly displaced people globally, an increase of 39 million compared to 2021. Of these, 68 million are internally displaced, 38 million are refugees, and 8 million are asylum seekers (UNHCR 2024). Of the refugees under the UNHCR's mandate, 65 per cent originated from four countries: the Syrian Arab Republic, Venezuela, Ukraine, and Afghanistan (see Table 1). It has been estimated that out of the 123 million displaced people, 47 million are children with 2 million being born as refugees (UNHCR 2024a). As of 2023, fewer than five per cent of refugees identified as requiring resettlement have been resettled (UNHCR 2024b).

Table 1: Countries by number of displaced persons

Originating country, 2024

Country	
Syria	6.3 million
Venezuela	6.2 million
Ukraine	6.1 million
Afghanistan	6.1 million
South Sudan	2.3 million
Sudan	1.8 million

Source: UNHCR (2024a) • Get the data • Created with Datawrapper

Canada is recognized as one of the top four countries of resettlement, leading all countries in 2018 (Radford and Connor 2019) and has continued to be the highest recipient in more recent years (International Organization for Migration 2024). The UNHCR defines resettlement as the transfer of refugees from a country of asylum to another state that has agreed to admit them and ultimately grant them permanent residence (UNHCR 2024a). From January 2015 to October 2024, Canada resettled 317,370 refugees, with 171,850 of these being privately sponsored refugees (IRCC, 2024d).[5] Table 2 outlines the refugee arrivals by country of origin, while Table 3 shows the distribution by province of settlement. Across all provinces, Ontario resettles the largest number of refugees, with Manitoba being fifth — see Table 4. On a per capita basis, however, Manitoba has the second highest number of resettled refugees.

Table 2: Refugees settled in Canada by country of origin

January 2015-October 2024

Country	
Syrian Arab Republic	101,690
Afghanistan	60,360
Eritrea	52,055
Iraq	23,965
Somalia	18,175
Congo	14,890
Ethiopia	9,935
South Sudan	4,335
Other countries	31,960
Total	**317,365**

Source: IRCC (2024d) • Get the data • Created with Datawrapper

Table 3: Top five provinces of refugee resettlement, Canada

January 2015-October 2024

Province	
Ontario	131,805
Alberta	63,040
Quebec	40,515
British Columbia	30,205

Manitoba	**18,565**

Source: IRCC (2024d) • Get the data • Created with Datawrapper

Table 4: Top five provinces by resettled refugees per 100,000 residents

January 2015-October 2024

Province	
Alberta	1,290
Manitoba	**1,242**
Saskatchewan	872
Newfoundland and Labrador	872
New Brunswick	838

Source: Author's calculations based on IRCC (2024d) and Statistics Canada (2024), using third-quarter population estimates for 2024 • Get the data • Created with Datawrapper

Note that the data discussed above for Canada and in Tables 2–4 do not include refugee claimants or Ukrainian displaced persons arriving as temporary residents under the CUAET program. Between March 17, 2022 and March 31, 2024, when the program ended, 298,128 arrived in Canada under CUAET (IRCC 2024a), a number comparable to the total number of refugees admitted to Canada between January 2015 and October 2024. Table 5 summarizes the data on the three main country-specific initiatives that are the focus of this report, highlighting the larger scale of the CUAET relative to Canada's Syrian and Afghanistan initiatives.

Table 5: Displaced persons settled in Canada under country-specific initiatives

Country	Years	Number of persons settled in Canada	Number settled, per 1,000 displaced persons from country of citizenship in 2024
Afghanistan	2021–24	55,195	9
Syria	2015–16	44,620	7
Ukraine (CUAET)	2022–24	298,128	49

Source: IRCC (2024a, 2024h, 2024i), UNHCR (2024a), and author calculations based on these sources • Get the data • Created with Datawrapper

Demographics of displaced persons settling in Manitoba

Manitoba is known as a leading settlement destination, with a well-established refugee resettlement sector (Garcea and Wilkinson 2017). Manitoba welcomed 18,565 refugees between January 2015–October 2024, making it second-highest in Canada on a per capita basis among provinces. Table 6 presents data on refugees resettled in Manitoba by country of citizenship from 2016–2021. Between August 2021 and October 2023, Manitoba welcomed an additional 795 refugees from Afghanistan under Canada's commitment and targeted initiatives in response to the US withdrawal from the country (IRCC 2024h). Based on this data, Manitoba resettled approximately two per cent of the 38,935 Afghan arrivals through these initiatives, approximately 1.5 percentage points below its population share. [6]

Manitoba proved to be a welcoming environment for Ukrainian displaced persons. As of April 2024, the province had accepted 27,699 displaced Ukrainians, representing 9.4 per cent of the Canadian total, according to Employment and Social Development Canada data (OUSH 2025). Manitoba had the highest number of Ukrainian displaced persons relative to its population. [7] Manitoba then, through the CUAET program, in two years, was able to settle more than three times the number of refugees resettled in the previous five years.

Comparing group-specific benefits and policies in Manitoba with typical settlement supports

Standard resettlement supports available to refugees

As part of the resettlement and integration process, resettled refugees are offered various support and services to help them settle (IRCC 2024j). Government-assisted refugees (GARs) under the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) are provided with financial support and essential services when they arrive in Canada. Loans from the federal government are available to cover transportation costs and initial settlement costs (IRCC 2018a). The federal government provides income support to GARs for up to one year (or less if they are stable enough to provide for themselves) through RAP. This is tied to the province's Employment and Income Assistance rates (RSTP 2024).

A number of services are provided to refugees in the first four to six weeks after arrival. GARs are usually provided with start-up costs and subsequent monthly income support to enable them to afford their necessities for the first year. During the first weeks of arrival, GARs are provided with temporary housing. This can be in the form of hotels or organizational buildings. In Manitoba, Accueil Francophone, Westman Immigrant Services and Regional Connections Immigrant Services are responsible for arriving GARs and to provide transitional housing for 21 days after the arrival of the refugees before they secure long-term housing. Manitoba added an additional Resettlement Assistance Program, the Portage Learning and Literacy Centre provider, in 2025, bringing the total number of RAP in the province to four. Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSRs) arriving to the province are dependent upon their sponsors to locate housing.

Through various service providers and sponsors, both GARs and PSRs receive access to federal and provincial settlement programs and services (IRCC 2024b). [8] Refugees receive a basic orientation to the country during the first weeks of arrival and have access to language training in English and French. Refugees are eligible for the Interim Federal Health program and are provided with temporary physical and mental health care coverage for basic supplemental and prescription drug coverage until they are registered

for provincial health coverage after three months of residence (IRCC 2019).[9] Service provider organizations provide employment services to support the labour market integration of these refugees. These employment services are to help them gain the necessary Canadian job market skills. They usually include resume writing services, forums on the Canadian job market, and how to search for a job. Both privately sponsored refugees and GARs are also eligible for government benefits available to permanent residents, including the Canada Child Benefit (Canada Revenue Agency 2022) and the Manitoba Rent Assist program (Manitoba 2024a, 34–35).[10]

Supports made available to Syrian refugees

The Syrian crisis, which began in 2011, led many people to flee to neighbouring countries for protection. The initial civil war was then exacerbated by devastating earthquakes in 2023. By 2024, 6.3 million people had been displaced into other countries, while another 7.4 million remained internally displaced (UNHCR 2024a). In 2015, Canada responded to the civil war escalation with a targeted initiative to resettle over 25,000 refugees within five months (IRCC 2017). This targeted program arose out of a Liberal election commitment in response to a more modest initiative of the governing Conservatives, whose commitment aimed to prioritize specific groups (Silvius et al. 2017). By the end of 2016, 44,620 Syrian refugees had been resettled, including 21,745 GARs, 18,930 PSRs, and 3,945 Blended Visa Office-Referred refugees (IRCC 2024i).

The Syrian crisis was unique in the scale of the response, the collaborative effort between the federal and provincial government, and the large role provided by private citizens towards the resettlement of government-sponsored refugees (IRCC 2024e; Silvius et al. 2017). Syrian refugees were resettled under the three main resettlement programs in Canada and were eligible for resettlement services and income support as outlined in Section 2.1. In addition to the standard programs and services available, there were several special provisions for Syrian refugees resettled under Canada's 25,000 commitment and through the Manitoba government.

The federal government allocated an additional $760 million over four years to support the processing and transportation of Syrian refugees, and increased settlement support funding by $257 million over five years (Office of the Auditor General of Canada 2017). In addition to scaling up internal resources, staffing, funding and coordination support was provided by the federal government to match Syrian refugees with private sponsors, and funding was provided to municipalities that generally did not resettle refugees to develop settlement plans (Silvius et al. 2017). Transportation loans were waived by the government for Syrian refugees arriving from Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, but only for those who arrived between November 4th 2015, the date the Liberals assumed power, and February 29th, 2016 (Munson and Ataullahjan 2016). The Liberal government's promise to resettle a large number led to the chartering of flights to carry Syrian refugees from their various locations to Canada (Garcea & Kikulwe, 2019), with a total of 99 flights chartered (IRCC 2024c). Reception facilities were established at each point of entry (IRCC, 2018b).

As part of the resettlement process in Manitoba, Welcome Place opened two additional housing locations to meet the influx of Syrian refugees, diverting refugees from hotels (Silvius et al., 2017, 2019a). The provincial government played a role in helping secure the units in partnership with private landlords and the repurposing of public housing units (Manitoba 2016). Four hundred rent subsidies were made available to cover the gap between GAR housing benefits and market rental rates through Manitoba's rent supplement program (Manitoba 2016). This facilitated additional options for transitional housing service providers to place Syrian refugees in long-term housing. The province also provided $1.6 million for refugee settlement in 2016, primarily towards school supports, with a focus on supporting Syrian newcomers (Manitoba 2016). The broad

provincial support was matched by the extensive efforts of settlement service agencies. As summarized by one interview participant: “All of us put an incredible amount of time on various tables… We had special tables around child and youth activities and supports, and what we could enhance, where we could build inclusion to existing activities” (007). Organizations working in smaller communities also highlighted that coordinating roundtables were organized at the community level and were also highly effective. These community-level initiatives also benefited from community workshops hosted based on the “Bread and Borders” resource developed by the *Refugee Public Awareness Coalition* (Refugee Public Awareness Coalition 2017). As one participant informed us, “we had great turnout for some of those sessions, 80 people coming to workshops in small towns and really interested in the discussion” (008).

There was also atypically high levels of private financial support for Syrian refugee resettlement in Canada, with companies such as Manulife Financial, Canadian National Railway, and IKEA contributing large sums of money, as well as broader private fundraising that was then channelled to settlement service agencies (Silvius et al. 2017). Individual private landlords also worked with service-providing organizations to cut rental expenses for up to a year (Bucklaschuk and Silvius 2017; Silvius et al. 2017). A hub was created for Syrian refugees to provide centralized access to donated items, including home furnishings, clothing, and winter wear, at the Canadian Muslim Women’s Institute (Participant 005).

Supports made available to Afghan refugees

Afghanistan has long been destabilised by conflict and military intervention by foreign powers but has most recently been dealing with a continuing humanitarian crisis related to the US military intervention in the 2000s to displace the governing Taliban in response to the September 11th terrorist attacks by Al Qaeda and the return of government control to the Taliban when US forces withdrew in 2021 (Montalvo and Batalova 2024). As of 2024, 6.1 million refugees were under the UNHCR’s mandate, and an additional 3.2 million people were internally displaced in Afghanistan (UNHCR, 2024a). The Canadian government was deeply involved in Afghanistan, initially as part of the US-led NATO intervention in 2001, later assuming a combat lead role in Kandahar in 2005, then shifting to a training mission until 2014. Canada’s extensive reliance on Afghan interpreters, locally engaged staff, and civil-society partners through this involvement implied an ethical obligation that became central to policy debates on how to respond to the US withdrawal and return to power of the Taliban (Special Committee on Afghanistan 2022).

In July 2021, the government of Canada pledged to welcome Afghan nationals in need of emigration, creating a Special Immigration Measures program aimed at Afghans who were employed at the Embassy of Canada in Afghanistan or persons who were at risk because of their work for Canada (IRCC 2021b). Unlike the Syrian initiative, which aimed to resettle UNHCR refugees from camps in other countries, the Afghan initiative sought to evacuate individuals directly from Afghanistan (Khan 2022). Global Affairs Canada and the Department of National Defence referred applicants to IRCC for processing, with applicants being “treated like government-assisted refugees” (Special Committee on Afghanistan, 2022, p. 52). In August 2021, the government pledged a Humanitarian program for Afghan nationals in need of resettlement for 20,000 vulnerable Afghans, including female leaders, journalists, rights defenders, and LGBTQ individuals, into Canada (IRCC 2021a). In total, between August 2021 and November 2024, 55,195 Afghans arrived in Canada through special initiatives, including 15,505 through the Special Immigration Measures Program for Afghans who assisted the Government of Canada, 23,940 through the humanitarian program composed of GAR and PSR resettlement, and 4,130 through a program granting permanent residency to relatives of former interpreters (IRCC 2024h).

Similar to the Syrian case, multiple chartered flights were made available to facilitate resettlement (IRCC 2023a; 2022b). Service providers we interviewed noted that some unique supports were made available to Afghan refugees in Manitoba, including the provision of electronic devices, allowing them to communicate with family and attend language classes online in the COVID-19 pandemic context, where in-person contact was disrupted, and some discretion with respect to settlement location within Canada (005).

Supports made available to Ukrainian displaced persons

The Ukraine crisis stemming from the Russian invasion in February of 2022 led to the rapid displacement of the population and further destabilization in a country that has been undergoing civil conflict since 2014. By 2024, Ukraine had joined countries facing the most pressing refugee crises, such as Syria and Afghanistan, with displaced populations of over 6 million people (UNHCR 2024a). Canada and Manitoba have a long-standing history of welcoming Ukrainians into the country, and with a large and well-established diaspora community, responded rapidly with a uniquely robust response to facilitate the migration of displaced Ukrainians to Canada. This included a unique new temporary residence program, dedicated financial supports, and a Manitoba reception service centre, all specifically for Ukrainian newcomers.

In tacit recognition that existing programs would take too long to bring people to safety, IRCC created the Canada-Ukraine Authorization for Emergency Travel (CUAET) for Ukrainians and their families, a temporary residence program to enable displaced persons to work and study legally in the country. Normally, when an individual is granted a visitor's visa in Canada, the stay in the country is limited to 6 months, but under the CUAET program, displaced persons could stay for up to 3 years with a visitor's visa and could choose between a work permit, a study permit or a visitor permit (IRCC 2022a). Fees for the visa were waived, along with the option to apply at no cost for an open work permit with the visa application, with a 14-day processing time for most cases. Other fees were waived, including for biometric collection, visa extensions, study permits and renewals. The CUAET program also waived COVID-19 vaccination requirements, and participants were exempt from the requirement for an overseas medical examination, with exams having to take place after arrival in Canada. Unlike conventional refugee policy, the CUAET program was not capped with respect to the number of people admitted, with the possibility of extending. Those immigrating through the CUAET program also did not need to demonstrate residency in Ukraine at the time the conflict began, nor did they have to promise to leave the country at the end of their visa.

As temporary residents, CUAET applicants would normally not have had access to the financial assistance and settlement supports available to refugees because they arrived in a temporary migrant stream. Instead, the federal government created a specific program to provide Ukrainian families with $ 3,000 per adult and $ 1,500 per child as one-time income support to help them settle in Canada (IRCC, 2024f). Although initially ineligible, Ukrainian newcomers arriving under CUAET were temporarily granted access to federally funded settlement supports at no cost until March 2025 (IRCC 2024g), including access to two weeks of emergency temporary hotel accommodations (IRCC 2023c). As part of the policy response for Ukrainians, the government created job boards where various employers can post jobs specifically for Ukrainian displaced persons to find jobs. Three planes were chartered to facilitate the arrival of Ukrainians to Canada, and the government also partnered in a Ukraine2Canada Travel Fund that supported over 5000 migrants (IRCC 2025b; Miles4Migrants 2025). The government also established the Canadian Industry for Ukraine Donation Portal, a website for businesses to donate needed goods and services and connect them with agencies delivering support (IRCC 2023c). The National Operation for Ukrainian Safe Haven was also funded by IRCC and was a coordinating and information-sharing entity to support Ukrainian newcomers, including federal

government departments, provincial government representatives, settlement sector and emergency service organizations, and other community organizations (OUSH, n.d.-a).

With respect to provincial government support, a reception centre specifically for Ukrainian newcomers was set up in a hotel near the airport with access to various settlement and government services, with an information booth located inside the airport. This reception centre was unique in that it was run by the provincial government, and with respect to the level of service it provided, including support with accommodations, accessing health services, settlement services, housing support, trauma counselling, and driver's licensing services (Hoye 2022). Notably, newcomers were also able to get a Manitoba Health card and Social Insurance Number assigned onsite (Ukrainian Refugee Task Force 2023), which is an option not available to refugees. The NEEDS Centre also supported children and youth onsite, offering school readiness classes at the reception hotels (001). One participant highlighted that while the reception centre "was sometimes described as a Manitoba resource", in practice, "it was primarily used by Ukrainians arriving in Winnipeg.... In our rural service areas, nearly all [Ukrainian arrivals] travelled straight from the Winnipeg airport to their rural community of destination, without a stop at the hub. This was typical for rural arrivals" (004).

The provincial government also established a Ukrainian Refugee Task Force and prepared a guide specifically for Ukrainians (Ukrainian Refugee Task Force 2023). Rural immigration partnerships aimed at integrating Ukrainian newcomers were also supported (OUSH, n.d.-b; Manitoba 2023). As temporary residents, CUAET arrivals were unable to access provincial financial supports, such as Manitoba's Employment and Income Assistance (EIA) or Rent Assist. The provincial government, however, created the Temporary Assistance Program, a program mirroring EIA benefits, specifically for Ukrainians (Manitoba 2022; 2023a), and in April of 2023 allowed CUAET visa holders to apply directly to the EIA program (MANSO 2024). New Journey Housing partnered with the Manitoba Government, operated out of the reception centre, to connect Ukrainian displaced persons to housing options, with the Manitoba government funding three new Ukrainian-speaking staff at the organization (OUSH, n.d.-b). New Journey Housing solicited offers from landlords for discounted rents, provided workshops on how to navigate the rental market and operated a volunteer driver program to help newcomers make connections and view apartments (OUSH, n.d.-b). Manitoba Public Insurance also undertook an assessment process resulting in Ukraine being the first Eastern European country with driver's licences being exchangeable for a Manitoba driver's licence (MPI 2022, 2024).

Both the federal and provincial governments were involved in supporting employment programming for the arrivals from Ukraine provided through various organizations including Manitoba Start, the Immigrant Centre, Opportunities for Employment, Regional Connections Immigrant Services, the Success Skills Centre, the Manitoba Interfaith Immigration Council, and the Ukrainian Canadian Congress (UCC)—Manitoba Provincial Council (OUSH, n.d.-b; Manitoba 2023). Most of these organizations provided services in Ukrainian or offered interpretation. For example, Opportunities for Employment used existing Ukrainian-speaking staff and translated its Canadian Workplace Culture training while identifying employers willing to hire Ukrainian newcomers and those with Ukrainian-speaking staff (OUSH, n.d.-b).

UCC Manitoba provided a wide range of settlement services for Ukrainians arriving in Manitoba and was the central community organization soliciting and channeling unprecedented private fundraising support, supporting 15,000 individuals to access services. As part of this initiative, the UCC (OUSH, n.d.-b):

> launched the "Welcome Desk" at the [Winnipeg] airport; opened a UCC MPC information desk managed by volunteers at the Provincial Hub; opened a donation centre; launched fundraising efforts; launched a mentor program; launched a mattress program; provided a shuttle service

from hotels to the donation centre; leveraged a jobs connection portal in partnership with Economic Development Winnipeg and Manitoba/Winnipeg Chambers of Commerce; launched a talent search, job matching and resume writing service; managed corporate sponsor relationships; collaborated with Sleep in Heavenly Peace; opened a food bank; operated a children's day camp; supported medical and dental assistance; offered Employment Preparedness (CPR, NCI [National Certification Institute (employment preparedness training)] and Food Handlers); organized a Children's Christmas Party Partnership with the Christmas Cheer Board; forged a partnership with the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority on a foreign medical personnel program; established a partnership with the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority to fill hundreds of vacancies in local hospitals and facilities; offered tax return preparedness.

Interview participants noted that much of the UCC support was time-limited, and with CUEAT ending, a select few remained as of 2025, focused more on community integration and social support, while most of the formal settlement sector organizations still have Ukrainian-speaking staff and with Ukrainians making up a large proportion of sector clients (003).

Assessment of supports by representatives of local newcomer serving organizations

In this section, we review the results of our interviews with representatives of local newcomer service organizations. Our interviews focused on the services available for displaced persons in Manitoba, both in general and specifically through the three cohort-focused program and policy responses reviewed above.

Assessment of general supports for refugees

Overall, there was consensus that the settlement resources provided more generally were too low to adequately meet the needs of refugees and support their successful integration, regardless of the country of origin or program of arrival. Several participants noted that the financial support provided to GARs was below the actual cost of living, forcing some refugees to struggle in meeting basic needs (Participants 001, 002, 003, 005, 009), and that this was made more acute when transportation loans had to be repaid (001). One participant noted that supports in Manitoba lagged behind some other provinces (002). This lack of ability to meet basic needs put additional pressure on settlement services providers who already faced challenges keeping up with the level of demand for services and meeting objectives within the time periods set out by the federal government (005).

Related to low incomes, challenges with unsafe and costly housing were repeatedly referenced as a major challenge that refugees faced (002, 003, 005, 007). One participant noted that the 2-week transitional period for temporary housing is not sufficient for settlement organizations to find and move new arrivals into permanent housing (005), and that this time constraint sometimes resulted in people moving into inappropriate housing. They also noted that this issue has been exacerbated by landlords and homeowners refusing to give refugees homes because they do not have guarantors or sufficient supporting documents to prove they are residents of Manitoba. The larger size of newcomer families and the lack of larger apartment units on the market were also noted as challenges (002).

When asked specifically about success in the labour market, language skill was noted as the greatest barrier by several participants (002, 002, 007). Many refugees arrive in Canada without any knowledge of the two

official languages. Delays in language assessment were noted as a bottleneck in the system (005). One participant highlighted how low-incomes lead refugees to skip language classes to look for jobs, suggesting that better income support should be paired with incentivized language supports to achieve better, longer-term labour market outcomes (007). In addition to language, acculturation issues need to be addressed to help refugees integrate into the workforce (008). Some participants suggested that there should also be more employment programs specifically for refugees (002), accompanied by adequate income support (007). One participant noted that most employment programming is aimed at putting people into any job as quickly as possible, but refugees often arrive with higher-than-average levels of education and skills. This participant suggested that taking the time to prepare and match refugees to jobs in their field would be beneficial to both refugees and society more broadly (008). Credential recognition was also flagged as a persistent barrier (007, 008), as well as the need for education and awareness efforts with employers regarding "embracing newcomers," given their presence in our communities (005).

Delays or limited access to other services were noted as barriers to integration more generally, but also had labour market implications. A lack of access to mental health supports, particularly given the trauma experienced by many refugees, was noted by several participants (004, 007, 008). As summarized by one participant: "mental health is really complex… there's limited resources available that might be culturally appropriate or have an ability to support newcomers in a way that is safe, and potential resources that are available are either limited, at capacity or have wait lists" (005). The fact that mental health is classified as a support service as opposed to a direct service by IRCC was noted as contributing to this problem (004). Delays in receiving access to healthcare more broadly were also highlighted as a significant barrier (002, 005, 007). Additional challenges noted include access to healthcare more generally (003) and inadequate and uncertain funding for settlement service providers (006, 007).

Assessment of supports made available to Syrian refugees

Several participants noted the helpful supplemental supports and initiatives that were mobilized in response to the arrivals of Syrian newcomers in 2015–2016. At the federal level, the chartered flights and waiving of transportation loans were noted as helpful in reducing financial strain for newcomers who already had to make ends meet on a low income (001, 002, 005, 007, 008).

Specific provincial initiatives were lauded, including housing supports (the rent supplements, engagement with private landlords, and the provision of additional transitional housing units) (001, 003), and provincial support for settlement services, including funding for school programming (009). The support for mental health was noted as an important innovation ("we had never offered psychosocial support like a service that we offered"), with supports offered upon arrival but also built into ongoing programming including through in-school social workers (009). Participants also noted the overall collaborative approach and in particular the involvement of the provincial government as helpful in supporting a robust response. As one participant noted "that was the first time that I saw a provincial government wholly dedicate resources to refugees, from reception, to housing, to service supports, settlement services in schools" (002). This was matched by extensive participation in government working "tables" that served as coordination hubs (007).

Another notable finding from the Syrian response was how many services were expanded within the existing framework of settlement supports, allowing services to be provided in an equitable manner. As summarized by one participant: "the support that the government gave was not specific to Syrians but because the Syrians were coming… any other refugee that arrived with the Syrians got the same support with the Syrians" (004). For example, one participant noted that the increased support was used to expand settlement

programming including English classes and a childcare program which anyone qualifying for settlement services could access (004). Provincial support for settlement agencies and in-school supports for example also allowed for flexible implementation. Two noted exceptions to this were the forgiveness of transportation loans and the Manitoba rent supplements, which participants noted was not inclusive of other refugees (001, 002, 003, 005).

For some participants, the successful changes and new practices implemented in response to the Syrian arrivals were the first exposure to the idea that "you can change the system" after years of being told that the system could not be changed (009). Another participant, however, highlighted that this success was dependent on the surge in public sympathy around the Syrian cause, and that this created inequities: "they're going to work on and put resources and change policies and so on in response to public... opinion and desires. It does not come across to us in the sector as equitable" (007). Once public focus shifted elsewhere, the service improvements, support, and relationships with the government started to backtrack, with provincial government involvement in housing being cited as an example (002).

Assessment of supports made available to Afghan refugees

Given the relatively small number of Afghan refugees that settled in Manitoba, there was not much input from local service providers we interviewed regarding innovations or new services developed specifically for the federal Afghan initiative. Participants, for the most part, did not have knowledge of programs specifically with respect to the Afghan response once in Canada, and those that did noted an absence of Manitoba government support and a lack of willingness to repeat the type of coordinated support around housing that was provided under the Syrian initiative. One participant did note that the communications devices provided were a helpful innovation, allowing, for example, children to participate in homework clubs (005), but that efforts to see this service continue and be expanded to other refugee groups were unsuccessful.

Assessment of supports made available to Ukrainian displaced persons

> The supports... provided to Ukrainians is superb. It's an amazing concept... from labour market to settlement services to reception and housing. It is a model for what should be done for refugees. (002)

> I personally believe it's a best practices model, you know, to have as many services as possible easily accessible. It's quite amazing and quite comprehensive, and it's really facilitated rapid movement of people from really desperate situations to Canada, and I would say, that's a very positive thing. It demonstrates best practices in many areas. (007)

The local response to the displaced Ukrainian population was a key source of ideas for enhancing and streamlining services for all newcomers. The reception centre model with temporary housing, paired with on-site essential government services, was lauded (002, 007). Several specific services offered at the reception centre were identified as best practices that should be replicated for others. The ability to receive a health card onsite and upon landing addressed a longstanding issue with respect to newcomers facing months of delays in getting access to provincial health services and provided access to those on student and visitor visas would not normally have access (001, 002, 003, 008, 009). Access to federal Social Insurance Numbers onsite and shortly after arrival played a similar role in expediting access to employment and other benefits. Other noted innovations included the school readiness classes (001), translated materials/documents (007),

proactive childcare support (005), and landlords willing to waive guarantor and co-signer requirements (001). The UCC/UNF donation centre, helping with household items, especially the focus on winter clothing (005), and the lead that the government played in connecting Ukrainians to employment (002) were also noted as successful and important services that refugees could also benefit from. The federal changes, including expedited visa issuance, free chartered flights, the waiving of fees and pre-arrival health requirement exemptions, were also noted as the types of policy changes that the settlement sector has been lobbying for, for refugees (006). The driver's licence exchange process implemented by Manitoba Public Insurance was also noted as a best practice, which facilitated settlement outside of Winnipeg in communities that are very difficult to live in without owning a vehicle and being able to drive (006).

Not all participants were universally positive about the changes made in response to the Ukraine crisis. Some concerns were raised about how creating a separate new immigration stream for Ukrainians resulted in duplications, inefficiencies and inequalities. As one participant summarized:

> we already have the system in place to support newcomers, and us having to recreate it on such a quick timeline doesn't seem like a good way to do things… We already know how to do it, and we had it in place (001).

In one case, a settlement service provider providing support to all newcomers was approached by a funder to deliver programming, but when they advocated for an integrated program that made sense operationally, the funder went elsewhere to an organization that would provide service only to Ukrainians (002). The participant noted that the result was a delay of nearly a year while the new program was set up, while they could have expanded existing programming in a much shorter period.

While granting temporary resident status facilitated rapid immigration, it also contributed to these inefficiencies, duplication and inequalities, as the Ukrainian newcomers were not initially allowed to access federally funded settlement services. The temporary resident status also generated uncertainty and insecurity, as emphasized by one participant:

> We don't know if they can become permanent residents, because that pathway, not everyone's going to get approved, they're not going to have all the right points in order to become permanent residents…. To have these hundreds of families and people living in this state of limbo doesn't seem like a good move to me…. If you're going to welcome them, welcome them here; don't say 'okay, come for a bit, but then you're probably going to have to go' (001).

Some noted how Ukrainians were disadvantaged due to their temporary resident status, unable to access the Canada Child Benefit (until after 18 months) and Manitoba's Rent Assist program (001).

Analogous to the equity issues faced when Syrians were exempted from transportation loans, concerns were raised with respect to differential treatment compared to others fleeing conflict zones as refugees. As one participant shared:

> It's been quite inequitable in terms of the approach with Ukrainians…. You can see how everyone else is waiting. Family sponsorship is delayed, income support is delayed, getting any of the paperwork that you need to settle and integrate into Canada is delayed for all other groups, and with Ukrainians it is all being expedited…. The critique is that we as a sector would like to see some of those best practices examined and potentially applied across the board or examined in

> light of other communities who face similar situations, exactly the same situations and the same level of need and desperation (007).

Similarly, another participant noted:

> There are other refugee pockets who again are waiting and have waited a long time to be able to come. Why are we not increasing those numbers like we are with Ukrainian refugees.... is it because they're coming from... a white European background versus coming from Africa or coming as a Muslim? Why is it that we're bringing so many Ukrainians versus other refugees around the world (005)?

The following comment sums up the sentiment shared by some interviewees, with respect to mixed feelings regarding the high levels of support mobilized so quickly in the Ukrainian case:

> It's great to see the up swelling of support, both public support and then governmental support, but it's not consistent. What we feel in terms of the Ukrainian responses, it feels like it's race-based as well.... I think over the years we've gotten more out-loud about how anti-racism has to be a part of creating a welcoming host. But I do think that is something that we need to work on as a sector and as a society (007).

The issue of equity was noted to be even more stark when comparing CUAET arrivals with other temporary residents, such as international students, seasonal agricultural workers, and other temporary foreign workers, who are not eligible for comprehensive federally funded settlement services, may face limited or delayed access to provincial healthcare, housing or income support (003, 006). The ability to obtain a health card onsite at the reception centre and on the same day, while other displaced individuals remained ineligible or had to wait for months, was clearly noted as the most significant disparity in the treatment of displaced people (006). There was hope expressed that the experience with the Ukrainian crisis would lead to change:

> People have been asking for that for decades, to facilitate temporary residents having the same access to services as permanent residents. That to me is this is an opportunity because they've opened the door now.... Ukrainians are getting a lot of those things, so why not extend it to all temporary residents. (003)

Overall, the efficient review, processing, and acceptance of applications for CUAET visa holders was recognized as a success story that should be replicated as a best practice to support forcibly displaced people worldwide, demonstrating how proactive policies can provide meaningful support in times of crisis.

Conclusion and recommendations

Manitoba has long been a welcoming province for newcomers with a robust settlement sector. Based on these supports and successful integration, refugees and other displaced persons provide a net benefit to the economy and government finances, and settlement supports provide value for money to taxpayers by facilitating their integration into local labour markets and communities. With reduced federal immigration targets and the province's reliance on newcomers to meet labour market needs, ensuring successful integration can help both Manitoba and newcomers realize the full potential that Canadian residency offers. Improving settlement support is then an important goal.

This study broadly identified the settlement supports and programs available to displaced persons in Manitoba, as well as the additional supports and innovations developed specifically for Syrian refugees, Afghan refugees and Ukrainian displaced persons. From a review of these experiences, several recommendations emerge for improving settlement options and streamlining and facilitating integration by replicating strategies implemented for country-specific groups of newcomers and for displaced persons more generally. The following policy recommendations provide a framework for policymakers to enhance future immigration responses for displaced populations. Below, we document the consensus recommendations that arose based on discussions that took place with the research participants in a focus group discussion facilitated by the author. These recommendations prioritize efficiency, equity and long-term integration while ensuring Manitoba and Canada remain a global leader in humanitarian migration. These include recommendations both at the federal and Manitoba government levels. Most of the recommendations focus more narrowly on the specific topic of reforming settlement supports, based on what has already been demonstrated as possible in supporting the settlement and integration of displaced persons. Participants, however, also felt it important to address related structural concerns involving Canada's immigration system more broadly.

Overall, participants emphasized the importance of an equitable immigration framework for responding to emergencies and supported the criteria put forward by the Canadian Council for Refugees (2023): "be transparent; respect equity in responses; avoiding negative impacts on other refugees (through respecting the principle of additionality—both of numbers and of resources); [and] provide resettlement primarily through the Government Assisted Refugee Program (because private sponsors should not bear the main responsibility for emergency responses, and it is important to avoid an impact on other privately sponsored refugees)".

Federal government

1. Based on the lessons learned and evaluation of the noted initiatives, establish rapid-response immigration pathways, including: (a) creating dedicated emergency visa programs modeled after the Canadian Ukrainian Authorization for Emergency Travel (CUAET) program for displaced populations from conflict zones, ensuring expedited processing, (b) biometric assessment upon arrival or alternative screening methods in emergency situations to speed up application processing, and (c) built-in pathways to permanent residency. Echoing calls from the Canadian Council for Refugees (2023) "the rapid response framework should be based on objective criteria driven by the need for the protection of displaced peoples, rather than wide media coverage or organized political pressure," and should be based on the principle of additionality, not at the expense of other displaced persons seeking settlement.

2. Safe and Cost-Free Travel: Use government-funded charter flights to transport displaced persons safely and remove the requirement to repay travel costs under Immigration and Refugees and Citizenship Canada's (IRCC's) Immigration Loan Program to reduce the heavy financial burden they place on refugees and other displaced persons. The use of chartered flights can help facilitate integrated models called for under Recommendation 1.

3. Establish a National Rapid Response Immigration Task Force: Create a rapid-response immigration task force within IRCC to ensure swift policy implementation during humanitarian crises, while enhancing federal, provincial and municipal coordination to facilitate a seamless transition from emergency support to long-term integration.

4. Position Canada as a global leader in humanitarian migration: Based on the Canadian experience and innovations to date, advocate for international agreements on emergency migration pathways, positioning Canada as a model for crisis-responsive immigration policy. This should include strengthening partnerships with United Nations (UN) agencies and NGOs to coordinate global responses and share best practices in humanitarian migration, including the UN Global Compact on Refugees.

5. Reverse the recent cuts to targeted resettlement in Canada's Immigration Levels Plan, while ensuring timely and equitable processing of immigration applications for Government Assisted Refugees (GARs) and Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSRs), in line with the Canadian Council for Refugees' (2024) call to "bring a minimum of 20,000 GARs, and through a one-time increase address the backlog of privately sponsored refugees awaiting resettlement and end the separation of the huge numbers of children and spouses overseas of people who have been granted protection in Canada".

6. Extend access to IRCC-funded settlement services, ensuring newcomers receive settlement services regardless of their immigration status: Under the CUAET initiative, Ukrainian displaced persons on temporary visas were given access to federally funded settlement services. This access, with appropriate funding support, should be continued and extended to other temporary residents regardless of country of origin.

7. To facilitate the above recommendations, the Federal government should reverse the recent and ongoing cuts to the IRCC public service complement (Cimellaro 2025).

Federal and Manitoba governments

8. Provide settlement-related social services in a non-discriminatory, inclusive manner: More generally, an important lesson from the cohort-based approaches was that provision of social services, such as access to health care, mental health services, income support, and housing to specific groups based on country of origin, can lead to an inefficient allocation of resources and resentment. Given the existing structure to provide equitable and fair settlement and integration programs and services based on the expertise of the non-profit sector, these social services should be provided in a non-discriminatory manner. While this can be challenging to enforce with private/voluntary sector initiatives, governments should avoid funding or incentivizing exclusionary supports.

9. Increase affordable housing options and provide improved housing supports for displaced persons, including rent subsidies for apartments for medium-term transitional housing, and permanent social housing units, as called for by the Right to Housing Coalition (Right to Housing Coalition 2024), through partnerships between the federal government, provinces, municipalities and private organizations.

10. Fund and partner in providing integrated reception services with streamlined and timely access to government identification, including Social Insurance Numbers and Manitoba Health cards, upon arrival: For CUAET arrivals, health cards and SINs were provided onsite at the reception centre and part of a unique integrated model, where other refugee groups faced long delays, specifically in accessing health cards. Providing this identification and health access as part of a streamlined reception process would help displaced persons become established more quickly, access needed services and be better positioned to seek employment sooner.

11. Launch public awareness campaigns that articulate the contributions refugees and refugee claimants make to the economy and community, aiming to counter misinformation, targeted attacks, and negative

stereotypes about refugees, particularly refugee claimants, while addressing common myths and misconceptions. Such campaigns could build on the United Nations Refugee Agency publications such as Refugees in Canada (UNHCR, 2020) and the Bread and Borders toolkit (Refugee Public Awareness Coalition, 2017) to support community-level initiatives working on building greater understanding around refugee issues.

Manitoba government

12. Higher income supports more in line with the cost of living: Since income support for GARs is tied to provincial Employment Income Assistance rates, low provincial EIA rates indirectly lead to inadequate support for refugee households and should be raised to account for the rising cost of living, as well as for the differing costs faced in different communities for necessities such as transportation. The provincial government could also help address cost-of-living challenges by supporting municipal governments to provide targeted services for displaced persons that were introduced under cohort-based strategies, including low-income bus passes and temporary recreation passes.

13. Additional government funding for delivery and assessment of not-for-profit coordination of private sector support and resources for displaced persons, including:

- the waiving of guarantor and co-signer requirements from private landlords,
- donation centres for household items and clothing (especially winter wear), and
- employment opportunities, including language-matching opportunities with existing employees.

Both the Syrian and Ukrainian responses saw large-scale private sector responses mobilized around housing, material needs and jobs that required coordination by non-profit organizations. Participants noted these efforts were successful and should be supported going forward. Further research and documentation of these efforts, for example, on the impact of waiving of guarantor and co-signer requirements, is merited to document and verify that these exceptions were successful.

14. Additional support for school readiness programming for school-aged children upon arrival and ongoing in- and after-school support specifically aimed at integration of displaced persons: Past research has demonstrated the importance and provided recommendations to the government on supporting and expanding school supports for newcomer youth (Browning et al. 2023; Jowett et al. 2020, Shizha and Makwarimba 2024). Further investment is required, building on programs such as the Settlement Workers in Schools program and after-school homework programs offered by organizations, including Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba and Peaceful Village, to support child and youth access and successful transitioning into Manitoba schools with longer-term integration supports. Specifically, enhanced supports are needed for high-need students facing multiple barriers, and transition supports are required for older youth transitioning from high school to navigate alternative pathways. These targeted investments would build on the progress made in recent years and ensure that newcomer children and youth receive the comprehensive, long-term supports necessary for successful integration and future success.

15. Sustained, adequate funding to support access to culturally informed mental health services. As highlighted in the Virgo (2018) report, refugees face PTSD, depression and anxiety disorder at rates “significantly higher than suggested by general population data” (p.31) and “are less likely to engage with more institutional-based services” (p. 117). The report emphasized the “need for access to services that are

sensitive to and delivered by service providers familiar with their cultural backgrounds" (p.218) and recommended "to enhance and accelerate community-based [mental health] services and supports for newcomers and refugees, with a focus on trauma-focused interventions delivered through appropriate community-based organizations" (p.226).

16. Strengthen and adequately resource Manitoba Labour and Immigration (MLI): After years of austerity (Zell, 2024), the capacity of MLI to fulfill its mandate effectively has been reduced, and it remains critically underfunded, limiting the department's ability to execute initiatives that support Manitoba's broader immigration and economic development goals. Recent reductions in Provincial Nominee Program allocations will further strain the ministry's resources. This decline in funding jeopardizes essential services and programs, including credential recognition and facilitating private sector partnerships to support immigrant employment. Given the significant economic and social contributions of immigration, the province should reassess and reinforce its investment in MLI to ensure Manitoba can fully leverage the benefits of immigration.

17. Additional support and policy change to streamline assessment and broaden access to language classes, with sufficient income and child-minding supports to enable completion of stage 2 language classes, for both employment and naturalization purposes.

18. Additional employment-focussed training specifically for displaced persons tied to existing labour market opportunities, with efforts to connect newcomers sooner upon arrival in the first year, while still accessing income supports; and ensuring robust bridging programs are in place to support credential recognition and transition into occupations and professions that displaced persons practiced previously. This should include the establishment of an interdepartmental committee that includes representatives from the Departments of Business, Mining, Trade and Job Creation, Advanced Education and Training, Families, as well as the Fair Registration Practices Office, the community sector, and ethno-cultural leaders.

There is a strong humanitarian rationale to support better assistance to displaced persons and other newcomer populations, but there is also a strong public policy rationale based on benefits to the province and Canada more broadly for proceeding with the above recommendations. The flip side to the high social payoff of quality settlement services is the large cost that communities pay when the government under-invests in the newcomer population who, with some additional support, can succeed in education and employment. Manitoba businesses continue to rank access to labour as a major barrier to growth (Manitoba Chambers of Commerce 2024). With reduced immigration targets at the federal level, it is more crucial than ever that provinces ensure refugees and newcomers to the province succeed in acquiring the skills and services they need to integrate successfully. To not do so would be a lost opportunity for all to benefit.

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Abbreviations

GAR: Government-Assisted Refugee

PSR: Privately Sponsored Refugee

IRCC: Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada

UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

CUAET: Canada-Ukraine Authorization for Emergency Travel

EIA: Employment and Income Assistance (Manitoba)

RAP: Resettlement Assistance Program

MLI: Manitoba Labour and Immigration

UCC MPC: Ukrainian Canadian Congress–Manitoba Provincial Council

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