



Syrian refugees in Canada facing obstacles to integration: Senate committee

By Josh Dehaas
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A Senate committee is warning that Syrian refugees are not being integrated into society quickly enough, in part due to inadequate access to English and French classes, a lack of mental health services and delays getting child benefit cheques.

The Senate Committee on Human Rights is scheduled to report on integration in the fall, but released interim recommendations Monday due to the “urgency of the situation.” The senators have recommended:

increasing funding for language-training programs that would be made available to refugees upon their arrival, and possibly for child care during the classes;

speeding up disbursement of child tax benefits;

replacing immigration loans for transportation and other expenses with grants or at least interest-free loans;

working with the provinces to draft a comprehensive plan to address the mental health needs of refugees;

reducing anxiety by equalizing processing times for government-assisted and privately-sponsored refugees;

and working with provinces and settlement organizations to ensure adequate programming for young people.

Conservative Sen. Salma Atallahjan, deputy chair of the committee, said that refugees told the committee they were forced to rely on food banks until Canada Child Benefit cheques started flowing up to three months after they applied.

The new Canada Child Benefit pays up to \$533 per month for each child under the age of six and up to \$450 per month for each child aged six to 17.

Ataullahjan said that refugees are waiting too long for English classes, sometimes can't attend because they can't find child care, and also worry about paying back transportation loans.

"One gentleman was really distraught because he wasn't working and he had gotten a final invoice," she said. "He said give me a job -- give me anything."

"One underlying theme" in testimony from refugees, according to Ataullahjan, was "we don't want to be a burden to Canada, we want to give back to this country that has given us so much."

Wendy Cukier, who leads the Ryerson University Lifeline Syria Challenge, told CTV News Channel that forgiving the travel loans is high on the list of priorities.

She also said refugee families need better access to child care and "travel support" so that parents can attend English-language classes.

Dr. Meb Rashid, medical director of refugee-focused Crossroads Clinic in Toronto, told the committee that refugees are not getting enough access to therapy for post-traumatic stress disorder.

But he said that other aspects of integration – including English classes -- also matter for mental health.

"I've seen people go through therapy, and what really helps is them getting a job," Rashid said. "Those issues really intersect, fundamentally, with people's mental health."