

December 4, 2019

The Honourable Marco E. L. Mendicino MP  
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Dear Minister Mendicino,

I am writing on behalf of Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) Canada to congratulate you on your party's victory in the federal election as well as on your recent cabinet appointment. I want to assure you of our prayers and extend our best wishes as you begin your new responsibilities as Canada's Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship.

MCC is entering our centennial year in 2020, marking 100 years of work as a worldwide ministry of Anabaptist churches, sharing God's love and compassion for all in the name of Christ by responding to basic human needs and working for peace and justice.

MCC currently supports programs in more than 50 countries, through the efforts of paid workers, volunteers and members of supporting churches. Our work is focused on international relief, development, and peacebuilding, and at many points our work touches those who have been forced to flee their homes. In addition, MCC—together with our five provincial counterparts—also works with local partners across Canada to help refugees resettle through the PSR and BVOR programs.

Our engagement with immigration in Canada goes back to our origins in the 1920s when Mennonites were involved in resettling about 20,000 of our co-religionists from Ukraine who were caught up in the conflict and violence in the Soviet Union at the time.

Our involvement took a new direction when we negotiated and signed the first Master Agreement (now called Sponsorship Agreement) with the Honourable Bud Cullen, Immigration Minister of the day, in 1979. In the following 22 months we resettled about 4,000 refugees from Southeast Asia. This involved an effort from more than half of our constituent churches as well as many other interested groups. Since 1979, we have been involved in resettling over 12,000 refugees in Canada.

As you take on a new mandate as Immigration Minister, we want to continue to work with the Government of Canada on refugee resettlement. We are eager to engage with you on how we can best work together to address forced displacement globally. What follows are a few ideas on where we think Canada's work with refugee resettlement can move in the next few years.

**Sponsorship Agreement Holder Association Council:** We are in full support of the Sponsorship Agreement Holder Association Council (SAH Council). Brian Dyck, our national Migration and Resettlement program coordinator, recently completed seven years as chair of the SAH Council and we currently have MCC staff sitting on the SAH Council.

A healthy working relationship between IRCC and SAHs is an important way to make sure that we have a successful PSR and BVOR programs. We hope that relationship and dialogue can extend to your office as well. We believe both the strength and the weakness of these programs is that we must work together. Regular conversations make sure that this remains a strength.

**Caps, processing times and moving forward:** The Privately Sponsored Refugee (PSR) program has grown enormously since 2015. One positive result is shorter application processing times. We understand that a balance between file intake and file processing is important to the government for logistical and financial reasons. It is also important for applicants and sponsors to see short processing times, so they do not need to put their lives on hold while they wait for a decision from the government. We can all agree with David Manicom, former AADM at IRCC, who during a SAH conference a few years ago called long processing times cruel.

It is important to make sure that the goal of 12 months processing time for PSRs is reached and maintained. It will always be a temptation for an Immigration Minister to gain public favour and allow more application submissions without a corresponding commitment to increased processing and landings. Such a promise is cheap and meaningless because it can lead to the cruelty of longer processing times. We urge you not to make such promises without a commitment to provide the necessary resources and landing spaces that realistically allow for more applications with the 12-month target.

At the same time, I am sure you realize that the desire for more sponsorships from diaspora communities and their allies is insatiable. Family reunification has become an important part of the PSR program that needs as much support as can be provided. We believe uniting families not only shows compassion but also contributes to positive settlement outcomes, is good for the communities that welcome resettled refugees, and of course provides more protection spaces for refugees.

**Monitoring and Program Assurance:** The increased number of PSR and Blended Visa Officer Referred (BVOR) arrivals have also put a strain on the refugee sponsorship programs and SAHs, including that of MCC. While we certainly support the monitoring of sponsorships by IRCC, it has been a challenge to many. Specifically, it is sometimes a challenge for groups that have a family connection or are part of the ethnic or religious community of the newcomers to demonstrate that they are living up to their commitments because they do not always record or monetize their support.

We urge you to continue to ensure that the PSR and BVOR Programs have integrity and protect newcomers from abuse and neglect, but at the same time allow for flexible approaches to settlement and newcomer integration. MCC staff have been a part of the Assurance Working Group of SAHs and IRCC staff, so we know this is challenging. We hope that you can support this continued dialogue so that we reach a process that IRCC and sponsors of good will can agree upon. The protection of newcomers is everyone's top priority.

**Blended Visa Office Referred Program (BVOR):** Despite a slow start, the BVOR program has proved to be an important tool for communities in Canada who want to be directly involved in refugee resettlement. MCC has worked hard to promote the program among our constituents, and we have consistently been the top sponsor of BVOR refugees. We have appreciated the support of IRCC staff in this along with the UNHCR, RSTP, and the Refugee Hub based at the University of Ottawa.

At the same time, we are concerned about the sustainability of this program if financial incentives are not provided. The support provided through the Refugee Hub and Lifeline Syria have encouraged groups to get involved who were concerned about the financial commitment. If some sort of incentive does not continue, it is unlikely that the program can go forward without adjustment. The program has been in existence for seven years and has seen enormous fluctuation in numbers, types of groups involved, and incentives. It is appropriate to take a detailed look at the program. We need to pick out what is important about the program and nurture it.

At MCC, we appreciate two important aspects of the BVOR program. First, the way the program provides additional resettlement spaces for UNHCR referred refugees is key. The presence of an agency with a degree of impartiality, like the UNHCR, involved in selection ensures that Canada supports a strategic use of resettlement. Through BVOR, we demonstrate what the UNCHR calls responsibility sharing with host states. The program provides benefits for refugees who do not get the opportunity for resettlement. The fact that BVOR resettlement is in addition to Canada's commitment to the UNHCR to resettle refugees, is an important factor as we talk to some potential CGs. It is important not to lessen our shared commitment as Canadians to the UNHCR through our involvement in refugee resettlement.

Secondly, we appreciate the community engagement the BVOR program promotes. Many groups that take on resettlement through the BVOR program are often new to sponsorship. Their involvement can open their eyes to a whole new world of the struggles that refugees face and the challenges of resettlement in Canada. We hope that this experience does not just provide a protection space for refugees but also builds support for newcomers to Canada and healthy communities ready to integrate newcomers. This strengthens Canada as a whole.

For the BVOR program to work, it needs to be both meaningful and manageable for sponsors. We welcome the opportunity to continue to meet these goals of providing more resettlement spaces for UNHCR referred refugees and engage communities across Canada directly in the process. We are ready for continued conversation about what that would look like going forward.

**Program Evaluation:** The BVOR program does not function in a vacuum. It would be wise to also look at how PSR, Government Assisted Refugees (GAR) and Joint Assistance Sponsorship (JAS) fit together with the BVOR program through a review of the entire refugee resettlement regime in Canada. A [review like this](#) was conducted by your department in 2014, but the context of refugee resettlement has changed significantly after Operation Syrian Resettlement (OSR). It is time to look at how all the different resettlement components work together. This will ensure that we achieve the best settlement outcomes in all streams and can make the most of our contribution to the world-wide displacement crisis.

Another factor that must be examined is the balance between the landing targets for the various programs. As we look at the national immigration plan your government has set for the next three years, the balance between GARs and the sponsored categories has seen a change. Since the early 1990s when PSRs became part of the annual immigration plan, GARs have almost always been higher than PSRs. This has shifted since 2016. While this change was partly explained as a way to deal with the huge inventory of PSR files, it appears the pattern is projected to persist beyond when we expect the 12-month processing of PSRs to be reached. This suggests a shift in philosophy about who takes responsibility for selection and integration of refugee newcomers in Canada. It is important to examine this change and consider what it means for the future of Canada's role in refugee resettlement especially as it pertains to shared goals with the UNHCR.

**Global Engagement on Refugee Resettlement:** The refugee resettlement programs in Canada have been held up as an example globally. We have appreciated the commitment to work with other states and NGOs around the world in promoting more and better refugee resettlement through the Global Refugee

Sponsorship Initiative (GRSI). MCC staff have been honoured to be a part of those efforts and we want to continue to be available as much as time allows to support the expansion of refugee resettlement globally.

Canada has the potential to do more. As the current chair of the Annual Tripartite Consultation on Resettlement (ATCR), the government of Canada, along with the Canadian Council of Refugees as the NGO partner, can work together with the UNHCR to expand the number of refugees able to access durable solutions. We can work to try to fill the gaps left by other states, most notably the United States with their reduction in resettlement commitments. The Global Compact on Refugees and the Global Compact on Migration are important steps in the right direction, but without a commitment to implementation from states and other actors, they cannot reach their potential. We are in a global crisis of forced displacement. It will take decisive action by a coalition of states, along with other actors, to make a difference for refugees and displaced peoples, for the host countries that border conflict zones, and for the countries where refugees come from originally.

**Root Causes of Conflict:** Finally, all we do for refugees will not make a difference unless we identify and respond to the root causes of forced displacement. While this is perhaps beyond the mandate of your department, we at MCC believe that it is important to address the root causes of displacement through development, diplomacy, and peacebuilding.

Five years ago, when the UNHCR presented their Global Trends document for 2014, Antonio Guterres, UN High Commissioner for refugees at the time, said, “The solution is political. There is only one way to stop displacement. [It is] to stop conflict and it is to find peace, and that capacity is lacking in today’s world.”

That is still true today. We believe that Canada should devote efforts to resolve conflicts and help states rebuild in ways that incorporate those who have been displaced.

As people of faith, we believe that the solution is also spiritual. That is why we continue to pray for meaningful and lasting peace for the 80 million or so people who have been forced to flee their homes.

Sincerely,



Rick Cober Bauman  
Executive Director,  
MCC Canada

CC:

Peter Kent, Conservative Party of Canada  
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