

Guidance for Private Sponsors Regarding COVID-19

Guidance specific to the Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) and Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) Refugee programs

Context

IRCC acknowledges that we are living in extraordinary times and the significant impact that the COVID-19 pandemic is having on the sponsorship community. Sponsors have an important role to play in ensuring that refugees continue to receive the standard levels of support while taking into account COVID-19 specific guidelines created by governments at all levels.

This document is intended to assist sponsors in understanding how cases in process are affected and, for refugees already in Canada, how sponsors can continue to fulfill their sponsorship role while also addressing the unique settlement needs of sponsored refugees during this difficult time. If sponsors have case specific questions that are not answered in this document they can contact:

- **Pre-arrival:** please contact the Resettlement Operations Centre in Ottawa (ROC-O) at IRCC.INROCO-CORORI.IRCC@cic.gc.ca
- **Post-arrival:** please contact the Resettlement Services Assurance Team (RSAT) at IRCC.PSRCaseReview-RevuedecasPSR.IRCC@cic.gc.ca

IRCC continues to hold regular calls with the Sponsorship Agreement Holder (SAH) Council and the Refugee Sponsorship Training Program (RSTP). Any further policy and program updates will be shared with all sponsors via the RSTP.

Providing support for refugees already in Canada

Resources

Sponsors are encouraged to visit:

- the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) [website](#) for the latest public health information
- the Refugee Sponsorship Training Program (RSTP) [website](#) for PSR-specific updates and resources
- Provincial and municipal websites to learn about guidance in your specific areas

COVID-19 information in multiple languages

The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) [website](#) has resources in multiple languages to help Canadians understand COVID-19. These resources, which include factsheets, videos, recordings and infographics, may be useful for the sponsored refugee. The languages available for each resource can be found under its description.

Communicating with refugees and providing support

Sponsors are expected to continue to provide refugees with support as set out in the Sponsorship Undertaking however IRCC recognizes that some activities may be delayed due to current COVID-19 related limitations.

For recently arrived refugees, sponsors are expected to, at minimum, provide basic orientation, making sure to include information on health, e.g. Interim Federal Health Program (IFHP), and local essential services, nearest grocery stores, etc., and current COVID-19 guidance as well as assistance in completing applications for provincial health care insurance, Social Insurance Number, and Canada Child Benefit (all of which can be done online or by phone).

As a result of COVID-19, some refugees may have additional needs and require further support, such as private transportation to urgent medical appointments, masks, cleaning supplies etc. Sponsors should continue to assess and address any urgent needs during this period.

While sponsors are not expected to have in-person interactions with newcomers, they should still be checking in using virtual technology e.g. FaceTime/WhatsApp video, text messages, phone calls, etc. with an interpreter as needed. These check-ins will help ensure that sponsored refugees have access to food and essentials and that they are aware of the health risks related to COVID-19 and what is expected of them during this time (e.g., physical distancing, COVID specific personal hygiene techniques, etc).

Settlement services

Service Provider Organizations

Most settlement services are operating at reduced capacity, with the focus being on critical settlement and resettlement services (primarily Resettlement Assistance Program and case management). Some organizations may be offering other limited services based on their capacity to do so. A list of all SPOs can be found on the IRCC website [here](#).

SettleNet.org

SettleNet.org is an online platform for Canada's immigrant and refugee serving sector where sector staff, leaders and those in related fields can learn, share, connect and collaborate. It contains information on a wide variety of settlement topics that sponsors may find useful. Sponsors who are interested in accessing SettleNet are invited to visit settle.net.org and register.

Post arrival case reviews

Sponsors are expected to provide refugees with the support as outlined in their Sponsorship Undertaking. The program requirements remain the same and sponsors are expected to continue providing financial and non-financial support. To ensure this is

the case, the Resettlement Services Assurance Team (RSAT) is continuing to conduct assurance activities to confirm newcomers are doing well and supported during this challenging time.

IRCC Officers will remain flexible and will continue to exercise discretion when working with sponsors in assessing sponsor efforts to provide the necessary supports. In doing so, it is important to note that IRCC will also take into account what supports were provided prior to the outbreak of COVID-19.

Officers reviewing cases will work with sponsors on a case by case basis. If sponsors have any questions, or are having difficulties providing adequate support for a case due to COVID-19, they are strongly encouraged to [reach out to the Resettlement Services Assurance Team \(RSAT\)](#) as early as possible for guidance and assistance. Early disclosure of a potential concern is in the best interests of sponsoring groups and will be considered as part of any assessment that IRCC undertakes in the case review process.

Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB)

During the COVID-19 pandemic sponsored refugees, as permanent residents, may be eligible for certain benefits such as Employment Insurance (EI) and the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB). IRCC strongly encourages sponsors to contact all newcomers that are still within their sponsorship period to determine if they have applied for any benefits, and for sponsors to determine whether any benefits received may impact the level of financial support required. You can review the eligibility for benefits programs here: <https://www.canada.ca/en/services/benefits/ei/cerb-application.html>.

It is important to note that if sponsored refugees are issued benefits but are later found to be ineligible, repayment of those benefits will be required by the sponsored refugee. Sponsors should provide information and support to newcomers so they only apply for benefits for which they are eligible and not receive benefits that they will be required to repay at a later date. In addition, CERB benefits are taxable and sponsors should encourage newcomers, who were in fact eligible, to understand that they will be required to pay taxes on this money next year.

EI and CERB are considered to be earned income and subject to the same 50% earnings deduction rule as employment income. Information on this can be found in Q23 & Q24 of the [Post-arrival Financial Support FAQs for PSRs](#). Sponsored refugees should not qualify for social assistance as they should be receiving financial support from their sponsors unless a sponsorship breakdown has been declared.

Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) Reductions to Financial Support

Sponsors can choose to reduce support when sponsored persons receive the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) in accordance with the 50% earnings deduction

rule. Sponsors should keep records to be able to show that reductions to monthly financial support are made because sponsored person(s) are receiving CERB and were done in line with program requirements.

Reduction Guidelines

If reductions are made based on CERB earnings, sponsors need to be able to demonstrate that they shared with the sponsored person information on program eligibility including the fact that anyone who applies for, but is ultimately deemed ineligible, may be required to repay CERB earnings at a later date

This information should be documented (e.g., by email, SMS, etc.), even where sponsors provide this information verbally. If sponsors are unable to document this in writing due to case-specific challenges, literacy, no email, etc., they are encouraged to [contact the Resettlement Services Assurance Team \(RSAT\)](#) for support.

Sponsors are encouraged to use the template posted by RSTP in [English](#) and [French](#) as evidence that they have discussed CERB with the sponsored person or document it themselves.

Provided that the sponsor made deductions in line with program requirements and informed the sponsored person about CERB as per these guidelines, the sponsor will not be held responsible for paying back income support withheld during the sponsorship period due to CERB income even if the sponsored person is later found to have been ineligible to have received such benefits. .

If IRCC receives a credible report that a sponsor may have intentionally directed a sponsored person to incorrectly apply for CERB or did not share information with them about program eligibility requirements, the sponsor may be required to repay any withheld income support even after the end of the sponsorship period or the sponsor may be found in default as per R153(4)(b).

NOTE: Sponsors are not to assess the eligibility of sponsored persons to apply and receive CERB. All questions about eligibility criteria must be directed to CRA or Service Canada. If sponsors are concerned about a sponsored person's eligibility to receive CERB, please document those concerns and communicate them with the sponsored person and IRCC.

Immigration Loans Program

IRCC is suspending its immigrant loan collection activities for a period of 6 months, until September 2020, and as of May 2020 monthly statements have been suspended until October 2020. Credit cards, pre-authorized debit, and postdated cheque payments are not automatically suspended. Clients who have questions about their loan, want to suspend pre-authorized payments, or who want to make alternative arrangements for

payments during this period, can contact IRCC at [1-800-667-7301](tel:1-800-667-7301) or at collection@cic.gc.ca.

This information is also available on the IRCC website:

<https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/coronavirus-covid19/refugees.html#loans>.

Interim Federal Health Program

At this time, Interim Federal Health Program (IFHP) coverage remains the same, however, there may be changes in the way in which services are delivered. This may include tele-services or having virtual appointments. Any future changes made to the Program due to COVID-19, will be shared with Medavie BlueCross, and communicated on their website and through the [Contact Centre](#).

For any IFHP related questions related to COVID-19, please email IRCC.PSRCaseReview-RevuedecasPSR.IRCC@cic.gc.ca.

What you need to know to prepare for a refugee's arrival in Canada

Health Screenings and Additional Requirements

All air travellers, including refugees, must pass a health screening (where available) before boarding their flights to Canada. Additionally, all travellers arriving in Canada must undergo another health screening at the port of entry. Anyone who shows symptoms of COVID-19 will not be allowed to enter Canada by air. Travellers with these symptoms and who are not subject to the travel restrictions may still enter Canada by land, rail or sea.

Public health authorities require that all individuals entering Canada have a plan to [quarantine for 14 days](#). This is mandatory, even if they have no symptoms.

Sponsors must ensure that accommodations provided to refugees are in line with public health guidelines and that these accommodation arrangements are communicated to the refugee(s) before their travel to Canada as they will be requested at the Port of Entry (POE). IRCC will continue to work with partners, including the SAH Council, to develop a plan in this regard. Further instructions will be provided to sponsors once available, and once travel resumes again.

For more information, please consult the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) guidelines on travel COVID-19 [here](#).

COVID-19 impacts on resettlement operations and services

Travel Restrictions

As a result of the temporary travel restrictions, IRCC and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) have cancelled all refugee arrivals until further notice.

While permanent residence applicants, including refugees, whose applications were approved on or before March 18, 2020 may be exempt from these travel restrictions, conditions to facilitate departure vary by country and departures may not be possible due to various factors including, but not limited to, domestic travel restrictions, airport closures and flight availability in some countries.

Information on when travel to Canada may resume is not currently available. IRCC will contact sponsors and refugees with further information once travel arrangements can be made.

Other Travel Arrangements

Refugees already in possession of valid permanent resident visas and their Confirmation of Permanent Residence (COPR) document, intending to book their own travel to Canada may proceed to do so. However, **IRCC recommends that sponsored refugees do not book their own travel at this time even if they are able to find available travel options to Canada.** As operations remain either suspended or at reduced capacity, neither IRCC nor the IOM can provide any assistance to refugees who choose to make their own travel arrangements before or during their travel.

Exit Permits

During this temporary hold, it is inevitable that some documents may expire, including exit permits issued by certain countries to refugees. Please note that refugees are not normally required to apply for an extension of their exit permits until a new travel date is known. In the meantime, applicants should ensure they comply with local regulations. In some countries, the relevant offices responsible for exit permit issuance are also affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and may be operating at a reduced capacity, while some may be temporarily closed.

When travel to Canada resumes, applications for new exit permits, or their renewal, may be facilitated, subject to other measures implemented by the respective government authorities in your host country.

IOM and IRCC Offices Outside Canada

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, several Canadian embassies and consulates and IOM offices abroad have either reduced their operations or closed their offices temporarily. Sponsors should limit their communications to these offices during this time.

When travel to Canada resumes, applications for new exit permits, or their renewal, may be facilitated, subject to other measures implemented by the respective government authorities in the host country.

Application Intake and Processing

The Resettlement Operations Centre – Ottawa (ROC-O) continues to create sponsorship applications received by e-mail. Due to the current disruptions to normal operations, applications received by mail are being stored securely by IRCC and will be created in the electronic system only once IRCC capacity returns to normal. Applications will be created based on the date on which the application was received by IRCC and will be processed accordingly.

If a sponsor has already submitted an application by mail, they should not resubmit the same application by email as this will create additional work and add to our processing times.

IRCC continues to review applications and render sponsorship eligibility decisions. Sponsors will be notified such decisions and eligible applications will be transferred to the appropriate migration office abroad.

Supporting Documents

IRCC recognizes that in light of the COVID-19 situation, there may be limitations to obtaining the required documents and information needed to submit a sponsorship application. However, specific documents are required in order to process the application and incomplete applications will be returned.

At this time, the Resettlement Operations Centre – Ottawa (ROC-O) will not consider exceptions from the requirements to submit specific documents and information as they are needed to process and subsequently render a decision on the application.

Submitting a complete application will ensure that processing times are kept to a minimum. If you are unable to submit a complete application, we recommend you keep your application and only submit it once you have obtained the necessary documents to avoid it being returned.

Application Processing Outside Canada

Migration offices currently have differing levels of capacity to process immigration applications, including PSR applications. Interviews are not taking place at this time to ensure the safety and wellbeing of applicants and staff. Applicants will be invited for their interview once it is possible to do so.

Migration offices with the capacity to process refugee applications will continue to do so up to finalization and once travel is possible, the application will be finalized. Sponsors and sponsored refugees may continue to receive requests for documents or information; however, the period during which you must respond to these requests has now been extended to ninety (90) days instead of the usual thirty (30) days. This additional time is given to everyone due to the COVID-19 situation and to avoid the need for extensions.

One-Year Window (OYW) of Opportunity Provision

To ensure that family members of resettled refugees who are eligible under the One-Year Window (OYW) of Opportunity provision are able to meet the requirement to submit their applications within the year following the arrival of their family in Canada, the Resettlement Operations Centre – Ottawa (ROC-O) will accept OYW applications received by e-mail even if some required documents or information are missing at the time of submission. A letter will be sent requesting the missing documents and the application will only be processed once those documents are received.

Processing Times

Due to the current disruption to normal operations, there may be delays in the processing of applications, regardless of type/category. Specific information on processing times is currently unavailable due to the quickly evolving nature of the COVID-19 pandemic. IRCC will contact sponsors and refugees once further information related to their application(s) is available.

Impact on specific resettlement programs

Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) Program

In light of the current disruptions to normal operations, any further cases for consideration under the Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) Program will not be posted until further notice.

Cases for potential matching that were previously on the Refugee Sponsorship Training Program (RSTP) database have already been removed.

The pause on the BVOR Program will not affect cases that had already been matched, and for which the sponsorship had already been approved by the Resettlement Operations Centre – Ottawa (ROC-O). However, information on when those cases might arrive in Canada is not currently available due to the travel restriction measures currently in place.

Sponsors will receive a notification from IRCC by e-mail once the refugee they are sponsoring is ready to travel and to advise on any additional requirements due to COVID-19.

Joint Assistance Sponsorship (JAS) Program

Interested groups may still sponsor refugees through the JAS Program. Profiles that are available for this type of sponsorship remain available on the Refugee Sponsorship Training Program (RSTP) matching database.

However, due to the current travel restrictions in light of COVID-19, the arrival of refugees sponsored from outside Canada, including JAS cases, will be delayed until further notice.

This delay does not affect refugees who are already residing in Canada and are available for potential JAS sponsorship.