

New Windsor program aims to make it easier to sponsor refugees

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DOUG SCHMIDT, WINDSOR STAR Updated: January 14, 2016



Syrian refugee Aya Alhajjeh, 6, holds a Canadian flag and flowers after arriving into Windsor International Airport with her family on Dec. 21, 2015. *JASON KRYK / WINDSOR STAR*

It will still cost about \$30,000 to privately sponsor a refugee family in Windsor, but a new group is forming to make the whole process a lot simpler.

It's one thing to financially commit to supporting someone fleeing faraway violence and war, persecution or starvation. But potential sponsors must also make a legal commitment and understand their responsibilities.

"People in Windsor and Essex County want to assist, but the sponsorship process can be difficult to navigate," said Chris Waters, acting dean of the University of Windsor's law faculty.

"Now, you'll have someone to help guide you through," said Anneke Smit, a Windsor law associate professor who will also chair a new Windsor chapter of the Refugee Sponsorship Support Program.

Windsor is the sixth Canadian city to host such a program, which facilitates training for lawyers and law students to provide free legal services to members of the public wishing to sponsor refugees.

"The legal community wanted to do something," Smit said of the current Canadian response to the Syrian refugee crisis, one she described as a global humanitarian emergency. Sponsorship costs are already high enough, she said, so that shaving hundreds or perhaps even thousands of dollars off the administrative process can help more of those in the community wanting to help.

The Windsor SSP will be launched at a public information session Jan. 21 at 6:30 p.m. The aim is to "increase the numbers of privately sponsored refugees in our area," said Kathleen Thomas, executive director of the Multicultural Council of Windsor and Essex County.



Kathleen Thomas, executive director of the Multicultural Council of Windsor and Essex County, is pictured in this file photo. *DAX MELMER / WINDSOR STAR*

The focus of the MCC's efforts is on government-assisted refugees (those funded by Ottawa over their first year in Canada), but its services, resources and programs are also there to assist refugees being privately sponsored.

"The big message here is, 'You're not alone,'" Smit said of would-be private sponsors who commit to supporting a refugee or refugee family for up to a year.

At next Thursday's meeting for anyone interested in private sponsorship, the MCC will speak about settlement supports in the community. Training will be provided by the national Refugee Sponsorship Training Program, which specializes in educating and supporting those engaged in private sponsorships, and experts will be available to answer questions.

The session runs from 6:30 to 9 p.m. in Room 2100 of the Faculty of Law building (corner of University and Sunset avenues).

Smit is expecting a big turnout of local lawyers and law students the following day for a training session on how to provide legal assistance to community members "navigating the sponsorship application process."

The Sponsorship Support Program is a national initiative backed by government, universities, business and other donors. About 1,000 lawyers and 150 law students have registered so far to donate their time and expertise, “with the ultimate goal of helping more Canadians help more refugees get to safety in Canada, faster.”

For more information,

visit the Windsor SSP website at <http://refugeessp.ca/about/windsor/> (<http://refugeessp.ca/about/windsor/>).

. Lawyers wanting to get involved can contact Anneke Smit at asmit@uwindsor.ca (<mailto:asmit@uwindsor.ca>)

or 519-563-7401.

Ottawa has committed to bringing 25,000 privately sponsored and government-assisted Syrian refugees to Canada by the end of February, as well as for another 10,000 government-assisted refugees fleeing Syria by the end of 2016. Between the beginning of November and Wednesday, Windsor had received 198 government-assisted and 36 privately sponsored Syrian refugees.

“We still don’t know how many are coming here — nothing’s been confirmed yet by either the federal government or the provincial government,” said Jelena Payne, the city’s community development and health commissioner. Meanwhile, more Syrian refugees are “trickling in almost every day,” she said.

Not knowing whether Windsor will end up getting several hundred or a thousand or more of Ottawa’s commitment might have been “frustrating” a month ago, but Payne said local settlement agencies are aware of how “fluid” the situation is and are now “mobilized and engaged.”

The city, which has its

own webpage dedicated to Syrian refugees
(<http://www.citywindsor.ca/residents/socialservices-/Social-Services-Overview/welcoming-refugees/Pages/default.aspx>)

, is still asking landlords and property owners with available units to call 311.

dschmidt@windsorstar.com (<mailto:dschmidt@windsorstar.com>)

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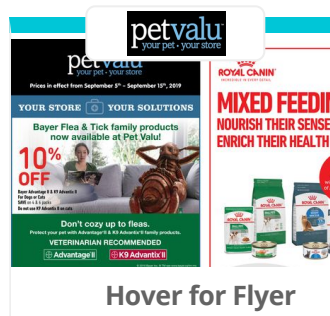
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