

## Ottawa ends program reuniting Syrian refugees with relatives in Canada



Syrian refugees receive winter clothing as they arrive at the Pearson Toronto International Airport, December 18, 2015.

MARK BLINCH/REUTERS

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 43 COMMENTS



The federal government has quietly cancelled a program that matched private Canadian sponsors with Syrian refugees abroad who have relatives in Canada because of low sponsor turnout.

The Syrian Family Links Initiative was discontinued on Dec. 31. While families in Canada had registered more than 8,000 people for the program, only 36 private sponsors applied, for a total of 127 refugees.

"Given the ongoing crisis in Syria, the response by Syrian families in Canada to Family Links has been overwhelming, with 8,025 Syrian refugee family members being registered for sponsorship. Unfortunately, the number of refugees registered far exceeded the number of sponsors available," read Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada's website.

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"As a result, the Syrian Family Links Initiative will be discontinued on December 31, 2016, due to the low turn-out of sponsors."

The immigration department said many private sponsors already knew Syrian refugees in Canada with displaced family members overseas, and therefore few of them used Family Links. However, some people involved in refugee sponsorship said the program was not promoted enough.

The government does not track how many Syrian refugees sponsored through Family Links have arrived in Canada. Nearly 40,000 Syrian refugees had landed in Canada as of Jan. 2 – 21,751 government assisted, 13,997 privately sponsored and 3,923 through a blended program of private and government sponsorship.

The Family Links project was launched in January, 2016, in an effort to reunite Syrian refugees in Canada with family members displaced by the civil war overseas. The federal government partnered with Catholic Crosscultural Services (CCS), which put Canadian sponsors in contact with Syrian refugees in Canada. The sponsors and family members then agreed to sponsorship terms, with the private sponsor usually providing 12 months of resettlement support.

In May, 2016, the government told the CCS to stop accepting new registrations from Syrians in Canada because the program had significantly more refugees than sponsors. The CCS turned its efforts to matching more sponsors with refugees.

The low sponsor numbers for Family Links is in stark contrast to the overwhelming interest from private sponsors in Canada, who have expressed frustration with the lengthy waits for the arrival of the Syrian families they sponsored. Former immigration minister John McCallum, who recently announced he is leaving politics to become Canada's ambassador to China, repeatedly acknowledged this problem.

"I'm probably the only immigration minister in the world whose major challenge is not being able to deliver enough refugees quickly enough to satisfy the amazing generosity of Canadian households and Canadian families who want to sponsor them. This is a good problem to have," Mr. McCallum said in the House of Commons last May.

Becky Puterbough is part of a sponsorship group in Merritt, B.C., that used Family Links to connect with a Syrian family of four in Jordan. The refugees, who have relatives in Kelowna, have not yet arrived. She said her group found the initiative very easy to use, and she wonders why the federal government did not do a better job of advertising it to other eager private sponsors.

"It's disappointing, because we've met the family from Kelowna and the happiness that they felt, just the joy of knowing that they were going to bring their family here," Ms. Puterbough said. "It really made us feel how worthwhile the whole sponsorship program is."

Former Toronto mayor John Sewell, who is highly involved in Toronto's refugee sponsorship community, said he has never heard of Family Links, which he found disappointing given the number sponsorship groups wanting to resettle a Syrian family.

CCS executive director Carolyn Davis defended the organization's efforts to promote Family Links.

"We reached out to community groups," she said. "We reached out to groups of five. We reached out to all the sponsorship agreement holders. There were e-mails that went out to ... groups that organized themselves in various municipalities around meeting the needs of Syrian refugees to see if they knew of any sponsors. We reached out to just about everybody that we could find."

**PLAY VIDEO**

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In his first address to the United Nations, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau talked about refugees and the politics of inclusion

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