



28 January 2014

The Honourable Deb Matthews, Ph.D.
Minister of Health and Long-Term Care for Ontario
10th Floor, Hepburn Block
80 Grosvenor Street
Toronto, Ontario M7A 2C4

Dear Minister,

I am writing on behalf of the Canadian Council for Refugees to thank you for your decision to provide health care coverage for refugees and refugee claimants affected by the cuts to the Interim Federal Health (IFH) program.

Our member organizations are acutely aware of the wide-ranging and devastating impacts of the cuts. It is not always understood that the cuts affect many categories of people, including thousands who meet the Convention Refugee definition. The following are some examples.

- Coverage of psychotherapy for survivors of torture has been eliminated, for all categories of refugees and refugee claimants alike.
- Privately sponsored refugees (with some exceptions) are no longer eligible for IFH, leaving the sponsors with potentially huge unanticipated bills for medications or a prosthesis.
- Refugees trying to make a claim are left without IFH coverage while they try to get together the voluminous paperwork now required by the federal government before a claim can be made.
- Hundreds of people from Designated Countries of Origin were recognized as refugees last year (over 500 just from January to September, nearly 10% of the total number accepted). During the claim process, these refugees are denied all but public health related coverage under IFH, even if they arrive bearing wounds from the persecution they suffered.

Furthermore, it is simplistic to suggest that those whose claims have been rejected are necessarily “undeserving”.

- Traffickers sometimes force their victims to make and then abandon refugee claims. If their victims then escape, they may well need medical attention, but IFH won’t cover them.

- Recently an Iranian couple were accepted as refugees, but their two-year old son was refused! He was not going to be deported back to Iran, but he was left without health care coverage, as a rejected refugee claimant.
- Refused claimants from certain countries benefit from a moratorium on removals because of the generalized insecurity in their country of origin: Canada acknowledges that it is not safe to send them back. Yet, they are left without health care coverage under IFH, potentially for years.

We commend you for deciding that Ontario should step in to fill the gap left by the federal government.

It is the smart decision. It does not make economic sense to leave illnesses and injuries untreated until they need to be addressed, at much higher cost, in the emergency room. It does not make sense to leave pregnant women without prenatal care, risking the health of themselves and their unborn children (who will be Canadian citizens). It does not make sense to deny basic care to people in their first weeks and months in Canada, compromising their long-term integration, at costs to society as a whole.

It is also the moral decision. When someone is diabetic and needs insulin, when someone is injured and needs treatment, that person is first and foremost a human being who deserves health care, not an immigration category.

Faced with a refugee claimant with cancer who was denied the treatment he needed because of the IFH cuts, Saskatchewan Premier Brad Wall described it as “just common sense” to give treatment. He said, “This is the kind of country we are. You cover it.”

As someone who came to Canada over 20 years ago with my family as refugees, I am conscious that it could have been me, or my child, who was denied health care at a time of need. It could have been any of the hundreds of thousands of Canadians who came as refugees. It could have been any of our colleagues, neighbours, classmates, who are today valuable members of our society, but who at one time had to depend on the goodwill of strangers as they fled persecution.

Holocaust survivor and Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel said, in reference to the federal government’s refugee health care cuts, “Today, as yesterday, a nation is judged by its attitude towards refugees.”

Thank you for your contribution towards making this a nation that treats refugees fairly.

Yours sincerely,



Loly Rico
President