

# “We Feel Like We’re Home”: The Resettlement and Integration of Syrian Refugees in Smaller and Rural Canadian Communities

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## **Abstract**

*Despite the media attention to Syrian refugee families being welcomed, finding work, and feeling at home in small towns across Canada, little is known about resettlement and integration in smaller and rural communities. Addressing this knowledge gap, this study visited four rural communities across four provinces in an effort to highlight the experiences of smaller and rural communities and the refugees living there. Based on interviews and conversations with rural refugee sponsors and community members, Syrian refugees, and service providers, the findings tell a story of refugees being welcomed into rural and smaller communities and of communities coming together to support the newcomers and find solutions to rural challenges. The article concludes that rural places can have a lot to offer refugees, some of whom settle permanently in these areas, and their experiences should be included as part of the larger narrative of refugee resettlement in Canada.*

## **Résumé**

*Malgré l'attention médiatique portée envers l'accueil, l'emploi et le sentiment de se sentir chez soi des familles de réfugiés Syriens dans de petites villes à travers le Canada, on sait peu de choses sur leur réinstallation et leur intégration dans les communautés rurales. Cette étude comble cette lacune en visitant quatre communautés rurales et les réfugiés qui y vivent. S'appuyant sur des entrevues et des conversations avec les parrains en région rurale et les membres de la communauté, les réfugiés syriens et les prestataires de services, les résultats racontent l'histoire de réfugiés ayant été accueillis dans des communautés rurales et de petite taille, et de communautés qui se sont rassemblées pour soutenir les nouveaux arrivants et trouver des solutions aux défis ruraux. L'article conclut que les régions rurales ont beaucoup à offrir aux réfugiés, dont certains s'y installent de façon permanente, et que leurs expériences devraient être incluses dans la narration plus large de la réinstallation des réfugiés au Canada.*

## Introduction

“We feel like we’re home,” is what Boushra Albik told the *Globe and Mail* in 2016 about her new home in Claresholm, a small town with a population of 3,758 in southern Alberta. Boushra, her husband, Ziad, and their young son, Elyas, are Syrian refugees who fled to Lebanon in 2015 and were privately sponsored into their new Canadian community by the Faith Community Baptist Church. The article goes on to say that Ziad is hoping to work as a barber in the small community, since the previous barber has retired, and members of the church are helping the family run errands, as there is no public transportation in the area. Boushra and Ziad also comment that they “feel loved” in the small community and miss their new home when they travel to Calgary to visit friends or run errands.<sup>1</sup> Across the country in Nova Scotia, Assam Hadhad, a successful chocolate maker from Damascus, Syria, and his family were settling into their new home in Antigonish, a small community of 5,000. They opened the now famous chocolate factory, Peace by Chocolate, in 2016 and are expanding their business and employing other Syrian refugees across the country. Tareq Hadhad told CBC that his family has been overwhelmed by the support of the small community, and that “without being in Antigonish, without being in this lovely community, really none of that could happen.”<sup>2</sup>

These are only two examples of Syrian refugees finding a new home in smaller and rural communities across Canada. Other media articles from numerous sources including the CBC, Global News, and the *Globe and Mail* speak of Syrian refugees settling in rural Canada and being welcomed into their new communities.<sup>3</sup> However, despite the media interest, very little is known about the processes of resettlement and integration outside of urban Canada. With funding from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), this study begins to address this knowledge gap and asks, What does refugee resettlement and integration look like in rural Canada? And, in the context of a global refugee crisis, are smaller and rural Canadian communities being under-utilized as sites for refugee resettlement?

This article makes a positive claim for the value of smaller communities and rural resettlement. My findings support the argument that many rural communities provide good integration opportunities for refugees, who are learning English, finding work, buying homes, and feeling welcomed in rural Canada. Before diving deeper into the challenges, innovations, and benefits of rural resettlement, the article will provide background on the resettlement system in Canada and a discussion of what is meant by the term *rural Canada*. Despite the challenges that refugees face in rural communities, including lack of public transportation

and access to specialized services, this is overwhelmingly a positive story, and the experiences of community members and refugees in rural areas must be included in the broader narrative of refugee resettlement in Canada.

## Background

Refugees can be resettled into Canada through government assistance or the private sponsorship program. Through the Government Assisted Refugee (GAR) Program refugees are referred to Canada for resettlement by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and refugees receive support for one year from the government of Canada (or province of Quebec).<sup>4</sup> The majority of government-assisted refugees are resettled in urban centres across the country, such as Toronto, Vancouver, Ottawa, and Edmonton,<sup>5</sup> and are supported by service-provider organizations that are funded by Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC).

The government of Canada works with provinces and territories, service-provider organizations, and other partners and stakeholders to deliver services and provide resources to refugees. Services available through this network include, but are not limited to, language training, career supports, and help accessing support services such as child care and interpretation services.<sup>6</sup> A limited number of service-provider organizations have a signed agreement with the IRCC designating them as Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) centres.<sup>7</sup> Under RAP, the Canadian government or province of Quebec provides government-assisted refugees with essential services and income support.<sup>8</sup> RAP service-provider organizations exist throughout the country, with the majority, but not all, located in large cities.<sup>9</sup>

Private sponsorship across the country occurs through two streams of sponsorship. The first is strictly private sponsorship, in which sponsors can name the individual(s) they want to sponsor into their community or be matched with a refugee through an inventory of visa office-referred cases. In this stream, sponsors pay the full cost of resettlement, which is laid out by the government of Canada and includes a start-up allowance for refugees and monthly stipend based on family size. Sponsoring groups agree to provide the refugees with care, lodging, settlement assistance, and support for twelve months or until the refugee becomes self-sufficient.<sup>10</sup> The second stream is called the Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) Program. The government of Canada provides up to six months of RAP income support, and the sponsors provide another six months of financial support and up to a year of social and emotional support.<sup>11</sup> Refugees sponsored through the private sponsorship program can be resettled anywhere across Canada that a sponsorship group has formed, including in rural and smaller communities.

Much of the research that has been conducted on refugee resettlement and integration in Canada has neglected to study private sponsorship and the unique experiences of smaller communities and the refugees who settle there. In 2017 the Refugee Research Network and Centre for Refugee Studies at York University submitted a policy brief to the government of Canada on the state of private refugee sponsorship. The brief identified this rural knowledge gap and recognized the need for further research, stating that “it would also be productive to discover how PSRS [privately sponsored refugees] fare in cities compared to smaller centres or rural areas.”<sup>12</sup> In 2011 the Canadian Council for Refugees published a report entitled “Refugee Integration: Key Concerns and Areas for Further Research.” Regarding access to settlement services, private sponsors, academics, and settlement practitioners felt more research was needed on access to settlement services in different provincial jurisdictions, how experiences differ between smaller communities and larger cities, and if the centralization of settlement agencies and services in urban centres affects integration.<sup>13</sup>

What is understood as *rural* is a highly debated and contested topic. For many analysts and researchers, the term is a reflection of distance and population density, while for others it is a social construction that reflects a specific history, lifestyle, and local knowledge.<sup>14</sup> While the concept is fluid and changes, depending on the community and the context, “there is a general understanding that rural areas are places that generally have smaller populations, are distant from urban areas and have distinct identities and cultural ties.”<sup>15</sup> Rural Canada is extremely diverse, and the economic, social, cultural, ecological, physical, and linguistic characteristics of rural communities vary from province to province, and from community to community.<sup>16</sup> For example, rural economies can range from single-industry communities, such as those that depend solely on fishing or tourism, to mixed economies. While some rural areas may boast vibrant and growing economies, others lack job opportunities and have a high rate of unemployment.<sup>17</sup>

Rural communities in Canada today are facing numerous obstacles and many are struggling to survive. Globalization and the liberalization of markets have changed rural areas and placed added stressors on communities.<sup>18</sup> For example, as youth migrate to urban centres in search of jobs, rural populations decline and businesses and local services begin to disappear. This process is cyclical, as without local services it becomes very hard to keep and attract new residents, and the population continues to decline.<sup>19</sup> Challenges facing rural communities, including aging populations, lack of adequate infrastructure, and environmental concerns, are compounded by the global reality of climate change and international economic development.<sup>20</sup>

When refugees settle into rural communities they face challenges that are characteristic of living in a rural community. Population decline in rural areas means fewer local services that many refugees need, including medical, education, and translation services. A lack of infrastructure and dispersed population results in no public transportation, which can be crucial for newcomers who may not have a driver’s licence or access to a vehicle. The Rural Development Institute (RDI) found that refugees face these and other challenges when settling into rural communities. During a case study of five rural Manitoba communities where refugees had been resettled, the RDI spoke with refugee sponsorship groups and service-provider organizations. From these interviews the RDI found that rural resettlement challenges included “difficulty finding work, followed by affordable housing, volunteer fatigue, availability of food that meets newcomers’ religious needs (e.g., halal meat) and access to post-secondary education. Overall, though participants indicated that there are strong supports, some of the challenges of settlement are simply inherent with living in a rural area (e.g., lack of public transportation, meeting specific food requirements, limited access to higher education).”<sup>21</sup> The Federation of Canadian Municipalities also recognizes the hurdles that newcomers face in rural Canada, including a lack of multilingual health-care professionals, rental housing, and advanced language training.<sup>22</sup>

While these challenges present barriers for refugees in rural areas, rural citizens work to address and overcome adversity through the strength of community networks and social connections. When conducting their study in rural Manitoba, the RDI heard from rural service providers and refugee sponsorship groups spoke not only of the challenges of rural resettlement, but also about the strong volunteer and community networks that mobilized to support the refugees in their communities.<sup>23</sup> In her book Stacey Wilson-Forsberg discusses the informal community networks involved in the integration of immigrant adolescents in a small city and rural town in New Brunswick. She states that the purpose of her book is “to examine how engaged citizens in New Brunswick set in motion social capital and social networks to create the necessary conditions to support an important aspect of the adaption and integration of immigrant adolescents: sense of belonging.”<sup>24</sup>

Rural communities can utilize social capital and community networks to address adversity and create sustainable, welcoming communities, and refugee newcomers can be a part of this process. Because of smaller populations and distance from urban areas, small communities generally have enhanced social capital, understood as the “relationships between people characterized by trust and norms of reciprocity that can be used to achieve individual and collective

goals,” when compared to metropolitan areas.<sup>25</sup> Building social capital is an important way that smaller communities can improve their resilience in the face of increasing challenges and stressors. When a community increases its connections and interactions with diverse groups on a local, national and global scale, it builds “enduring social capital” through strengthened relationships and knowledge sharing and increases “community initiative, responsibility, and adaptability,” which is needed to ensure sustainable communities.<sup>26</sup> Diversity is thus an asset to smaller communities, as newcomers bring new resources, skills, and innovative ideas into the community.<sup>27</sup>

The presence of social capital and social support networks in a community are also an important resource for resettled refugees. Social ties and support networks are vital to successful resettlement, as refugees use these ties as “mechanisms for support and integration.”<sup>28</sup> Social connections, within and outside the newcomers’ ethnic groups, are central to refugee integration and are important for refugees’ emotional support, confidence, language skills, and sense of safety and security.<sup>29</sup> In addition, resettled refugees can have a lot to offer smaller communities looking to build social capital, as “refugees are for the most part resilient and resourceful, and often come from societies that place a higher value on interpersonal relationships than most Western societies, making them quite adept at developing effective social networks.”<sup>30</sup>

### **Research Design**

In an effort to further understand these informal social and community processes of resettlement and integration in rural Canada, I embedded myself in four communities across four provinces. I chose these communities because they illustrate the diverse nature of rural Canada and have varying population sizes, economies, and geographies. Despite their differences, all the communities face similar rural challenges, as they are not metropolitan centres and each struggles with a lack of public transportation and other available services, as discussed previously. Prior to my fieldwork visits, I spoke with refugee sponsors over the phone and via email. I made preliminary, short visits to three of the four communities, before returning and immersing myself in each community for about a week in May and June 2017. While in each community, I interacted with community members and refugees at informal social events and conducted semi-structured interviews. I attended community functions, met diverse sets of community members, and visited with refugee families and sponsors multiple times. I conducted formal interviews with ten Syrian refugees and forty-five private sponsors, community members, service providers, and/or resettlement experts, but also met and spoke informally with other refugees and community members in the areas during my

visits. Many of the individuals with whom I spoke had multiple roles in their community. For example, one individual could be both a private sponsor and a local service provider, and thus the roles and responsibilities of those involved in the sponsorship process were not often clearly defined.

In all four communities, most of the individuals involved in the sponsorship group, as well as in other volunteer roles, were women. Thus, the majority of the individuals whom I spoke with were women, and groups stated that the majority of volunteers and people who had day-to-day contact with the refugee families were women. Each group also expressed a concern that the male refugees may not be getting as much male support or making as many male friendships as the women because of the lack of men involved in the process.

Of the sponsored refugee families that I visited, one is a government-sponsored family that moved out of the city, three are privately sponsored families, and two are Blended Visa Office–Referred families. The refugees had been in Canada for differing time periods. Three of the families arrived in Canada in the winter of 2016, and the other three families arrived in the fall of 2016.

- Community A is a community of 8,000 people in southwestern Ontario that is about 150 kilometres from the nearest metropolitan centre. This refugee sponsorship group sponsored a Syrian family. I spent seven days visiting in this community.
- Community B is a rural region in Nova Scotia. Here I visited three Syrian refugee families in two neighbouring communities who were sponsored by a coalition of individuals living in the area. Two of the Syrian families live in a community of 3,000 people that is about twenty kilometres from the nearest metropolitan centre, and the other Syrian family lives in another community of 500 people that is about fifty kilometres from the nearest urban centre. I spent eight days in this rural area.
- Community C has a population of 800 and is in southern Alberta. It is about 100 kilometres from the nearest urban centre. One intergenerational Syrian family was sponsored into this community, where I spent five days.
- Community D is a community in central Saskatchewan of 6,000 people that is about 110 kilometres from the nearest urban centre. One Syrian family was sponsored here. I spent six days in this community.

### **Research Findings**

The collected data were analyzed in accordance with the research questions guiding the study. I identified common themes across the four communities and compared the similarities and differences between the experiences of

participants. Thus the findings below are organized into three common themes that each community experienced and had to address. The first theme is how communities dealt with and understood the common assumption that rural Canada is unwelcoming and intolerant towards immigrant or refugee newcomers; the second involves communities addressing and finding solutions to rural challenges; and the last theme looks at how communities and refugees utilized and enhanced their social capital through the resettlement and integration process. While the four communities faced many of the same resettlement challenges and opportunities, some findings were unique to each community, and I have disaggregated some of these examples within my discussion of the three themes.

### *Common Assumptions of Prejudice and Intolerance in Rural Canada*

The assumptions made about rural communities manifest in how smaller communities perceive themselves and the actions that the four communities took to welcome the refugee newcomers. Rural communities are often viewed as being “more white and less tolerant,”<sup>31</sup> and in all four communities each sponsorship group expressed initial concerns about prejudicial or unwelcoming attitudes towards refugee newcomers within their communities. They were all aware that their communities were largely white, Christian communities and that people in their community may not have had a lot of experience with other ethnicities or religions. With this in mind, every group took steps to inform and involve the wider community in the private sponsorship process through some or all of the following activities: community meetings, community fundraising, presentations to the town council, community-wide requests for volunteers and donations, etc. Throughout this process, the sponsors and other involved community members stated that intolerant or unwelcoming attitudes were not overt in their communities and overall the communities were very supportive. One sponsor stated, “The whole response was a lot more positive at least than I specifically thought it would be, and I think we as a group were really pumped by how excited the whole community seemed to be ... and overall people were really just excited to help.” Another sponsor stated, “People were asking us regularly when they were going to get here,” and another, “The response of the community was overwhelming.” One refugee commented that the people were very nice in his community and “everybody in the community wants to help.”

The unwelcoming attitudes that were mentioned by sponsors or community members included negative Facebook rhetoric about immigration or refugees in general, and personal conversations with people who were opposed to the sponsorship or had concerns about the process. One

sponsorship member stated, “I haven’t noticed it a whole lot, but I do know it’s there. Sometimes it’s just ignorance. People don’t understand ... people are afraid of what they don’t know.” Another community member said, “Once they saw the family and got to know them, and their kids are in our schools ... most people feel like it’s quite silly now to be afraid or anything like that.”

However, there is religious bias in these communities, even if it wasn’t overt. In at least three of the four communities, the subject of religion and how well some community members think the refugee family “fits” into the community came up during my fieldwork. For example, in one community a few sponsors reflected that some community members seemed more willing to embrace a refugee family because they were Christian. In one community discussions around the ability of a Christian family to “fit in” faster, and integrate more easily into the rural community than a Muslim family was a dividing point between some sponsorship members. This community ended up specifically choosing to sponsor a Christian family because they thought they would “fit in” better than a Muslim family.

Everyone said that since the refugees have arrived in their communities they have not heard any intolerant or negative comments directed at the families in person or otherwise. When asked, none of the refugees said they had experienced unwelcoming attitudes when out in the community. However, some refugees may have been reluctant to disclose anything negative about their communities.

### *Addressing Rural Challenges through Community Connections and Networks*

When speaking with refugees and private sponsorship groups, the most pervasive and articulated challenges for refugee families centred upon acclimatizing to new social and cultural norms and dealing with a lack of available services. The most commonly mentioned challenge, other than the language barrier, was access to transportation. A vehicle of one’s own is the only constant mode of transport in the four rural communities I visited. Thus, transporting refugee families to the grocery store, or appointments in the city, involved a lot of volunteer driving. If the refugee family was large, transportation involved multiple volunteer drivers at one time or the need to rent a bus. Because rural communities are small, some of the families could walk to services in town. However, walking was not always an option, as some families lived a considerable distance from services, and the cold and snow didn’t encourage walking long distances. To overcome this challenge, groups worked hard to get the adults their driver’s licence. This process could involve paying for a driving test or extra lessons, helping to look for an inexpensive vehicle, and/or helping to pay for a vehicle.

Another common challenge mentioned by all sponsorship groups was the lack of an Arab and/or Muslim community in the rural area. This lack of Arab community meant that most families must drive to the city to access the mosque and obtain ethnic foods, including halal meats, and Arabic translators are often hard to find. Some families also must travel to the city to buy cultural-specific attire and other items of clothing. Sponsorship groups and communities worked to address this lack of community by driving families to the city for mosque or other cultural events, connecting them to other Arab or Muslim people in surrounding rural areas, using personal networks to find translators who were willing to drive or translate over the phone, and asking the local grocery to bring in specific foods.

Another challenge was a lack of newcomer services in rural areas. The availability of local services depended largely on the province and the size of the community. In the absence of formal newcomer service centres, rural sponsors and community members spent hours trying to find and access services for their newcomers. Even when sponsorship groups had members who were trained professionals, such as social workers, people working within the immigration system, English teachers, and doctors, figuring out how to navigate services was difficult for many. The system is complex, and service providers don't necessarily know of the sponsorship program or the benefits, such as the interim federal health plan, that refugees have access to. One sponsor commented, "As much as you know about it [service provisions and programs] you still don't know, because service providers themselves don't necessarily know about it."

For housing, only one group in Community D was able to access government subsidized housing, while the others found private rental homes or townhouses in the community. Every group was able to find a physician in the area who could see the refugee family (and in some cases they were able to find Arabic-speaking physicians). However, finding and accessing affordable dental care was a challenge for every group, and every refugee family needed extensive dental care. To deal with the costs, some groups were able to find dentists in the area who would do some work pro bono.

At least two groups explored professional counselling options for their families. However, the services available were offered in English only and not necessarily accessible. In one case, a sponsorship group considered driving the refugees into the city to access services but couldn't find an appropriate service there either. In most cases the sponsorship groups addressed mental health concerns more informally. For example, when one group became aware that a young refugee woman appeared to be very lonely and isolated within her home during the winter months, the group made an effort to stop by the home more often and take the woman

out for coffee or other activities. Another group mentioned that some mental health concerns remedied themselves once the refugee family was able to purchase a vehicle and gain some independence.

Each group also accessed English-language services differently. In some cases, access to English classes was limited, and sponsorship groups informally organized volunteers who were often retired teachers who would go into the family's home during the week to teach English. For formal instruction, Community C accessed a non-profit service in their community and also drove one young adult to a government-funded class in the city, while Community A accessed a unique volunteer-run service in a neighbouring community. Community B found a university scholarship program for one refugee, and Community D accessed classes offered through their local college. Three groups had to organize volunteers to drive refugees to language classes in neighbouring communities weekly or daily. While this commitment decreases somewhat after the family has acquired a vehicle and driving licences, it doesn't necessarily disappear, as the vehicle may be needed by one family member for work, and the others had to continue to rely on volunteers to attend classes.

Many of the refugees said that they liked the mix of formal and informal English instruction. During our conversations, many spoke of Syrian friends or acquaintances who lived in big cities who were not learning English as fast as they were. Some said that their friends didn't need to learn English because they lived in an Arabic-speaking community, or that they had trouble accessing language services because of long wait lists. The refugees I spoke with were eager to learn English, and one refugee stated that "language was the biggest barrier" when they first arrived.

#### *Utilizing and Enhancing Social Capital*

Across all the communities I visited, community members and refugees were quick to point to the positive attributes of rural places, which were often linked to the enhanced social capital in rural areas. Many comments were made to this effect including, "In a smaller community you can get to know people a lot easier," "We're a very close, very supportive community," and "It's a really helpful community here." Refugees commented that their communities were welcoming, and one said, "It's a special area." Everyone pointed to the close sense of community, where everyone knows everyone, in rural areas as a benefit to refugee resettlement. Each sponsorship group included individuals from different parts of the community who often held many different roles and had access to different resources and parts of the community. For example, one sponsor commented, "It feels especially, in a community this size, like a very arbitrary, made up division,

especially if you look at me, I am both a [sponsorship] member and an employee of the --- so when am I volunteering and when am I working? I don't even know, so it kind of feels silly sometimes to enforce a division that's really not there.... It's a small community, and everyone overlaps in their various roles." Thus, even if the sponsorship group didn't have a specific connection, someone within the group would know someone who could help in a specific area.

For example, personal connections were often used to help the refugees access employment opportunities. Because everyone knows who the refugees are, many of the refugees were offered jobs by local business owners. Older youth and adults were offered part-time jobs from local businesses, including restaurants, industrial plants, and grocery stores. Further, through the communities' social connections, some refugees also found jobs within their trained professions.

When I spoke to the refugees specifically about what they liked about the communities in which they are living, they spoke about similar things. Many of them stated that they liked that their community is quiet, the people are friendly and everyone knows them and says "Hi," it is safe and their children can go outside, everything is close by, they are close to their sponsors (the people who care about them and help them), and they can live in a house and have a garden. Some said that they liked going to the city for shopping, but they really liked coming back "home" afterward. Everyone spoke about the warm welcome they received when they first arrived and at community events, such as church potlucks or concerts. Others spoke of their ability to access certain services close to home.

Other commonly identified benefits of rural communities, by both sponsors and refugees, included the fact that everyone in the community embraced the families and is invested in their success (because the whole community worked together to bring them here), the community is safe, there is no traffic, the cost of living is lower in comparison to urban centres, large families can afford appropriate housing, the available services are close by and everything is easy to get to, and the refugees learn English faster, because there are few, if any, other Arabic-speaking individuals. Some sponsorship members also mentioned that retired people and seniors are a rich resource in rural communities, as they have a lot of time to volunteer and spend time with the newcomers.

Community members and sponsors also recognized the social capital that the newcomers brought to, and fostered within, their communities. Many commented that the refugee family brought diversity into their community and exposed the community to a new culture. Individuals also mentioned that it was great to have the community work together and rally around a common goal. One sponsor said that the sponsorship had "pulled people together for different

events that might not [otherwise] come together." Refugee sponsorship also offered the community an opportunity to be part of something bigger and do something concrete in response to an international crisis. When speaking about private sponsorship one sponsor said, "It's like the intersection of local community building and international relief work, and it's so rare that you actually have those two things come together in one."

The community bonds and connections present in these communities influenced the decisions of refugee families to stay in their new communities. Many of the private sponsors and service providers I spoke with assumed that the refugees would want to move to a city once their year of sponsorship was over in order to be closer to an Arabic-speaking community, a broader range of newcomer services, and other ethnic and cultural services. However, while this is true for some, many of the refugees I spoke with have decided to stay and make a home for themselves and their families in their small community. The decision of families to stay surprised many community members. One service provider commented, "I don't think anybody expected them to want to stay here."

Of the refugee families with whom I spoke, some have bought homes in their new communities, while others are renting. One family in Community A bought a house in their new community just after their year of sponsorship ended. They commented that Community A is "home" and they don't want to leave. They said that the people are friendly, and everyone knows who they are, because they are the only Syrian refugee family, which makes them feel special. Another family, living in Community B, who have now finished their one year of support, are renting a house in the centre of their small community. While they did live in an urban centre in Canada for a brief period, they didn't like living in an apartment and say that they are much happier with their house and large yard. They like having the ability to garden, they would miss their friends and sponsors if they moved, and the children do not want to leave the small community school. The family in Community D have also chosen to remain in their community.

Another family in Community C stated that they can't imagine moving to a bigger centre and they have also bought a house in their community. They feel safe where they are and like the quiet. They go shopping in the city and always like coming back "home." Earlier this year, the family welcomed some of their other family members into the community, who were also sponsored by the same group. In this instance, family reunification, or the "echo effect," is bringing another Syrian family to this small community. However, two families from Community B moved to the nearest urban centre, with the support and help of their sponsorship group. They are both young families and are moving in order to be

closer to the university, more job opportunities, and a larger Arab community.

### **Conclusion**

Despite the very real challenges in rural places, communities are finding unique solutions, and many refugees have decided to stay and rebuild their lives there. Refugees are finding quality jobs, accessing service, and buying homes in rural Canada, while small centres are becoming more diverse and welcoming new members into the area. While I am confident in the identified findings of this project, it is important to note the limitations of this study, as it was not a longitudinal research project and consisted of a small sample size. This is an initial look into rural resettlement and my findings are not meant to be generalizable or conclusive. Much more research is needed on this topic in order to expand our understanding of rural resettlement and integration. In this conclusion, I will expand on this story of rural resettlement through a discussion of community-led solutions to rural challenges, economic opportunities for newcomers, and recommendations for policy change.

Rural challenges, such as a lack of newcomer services, have led communities to develop their own creative solutions. Despite the fact that refugees can be resettled anywhere in Canada through the private sponsorship program, the current system does not offer expanded services outside of urban centres. For example, the growing number of sponsored Syrian refugees in one region in southwestern Ontario resulted in the community-led creation of an English-language school, which is accessed by the refugee family from Community A. The school began when an Arabic-speaking couple with backgrounds in non-governmental organizations in the Middle East, and one with official English as a Second Language (ESL) training, started teaching two refugees who were sponsored through their church in 2015. In a few months, they went from teaching four to thirty students in January 2016, as more and more private sponsorship groups requested to access this unique program. The school now runs five days a week in a church basement. Most of the students are refugees, but some immigrants and other newcomers are also accessing the centre. Over forty volunteers help run the program. There are students who are just learning to read and write, and others who are university graduates. While transportation has been the biggest challenge for refugees to access the school, sponsors either drive their students or helped the refugees with vehicle costs. The refugees not only learn English, they are also able to meet with other refugees and integrate into the community and meet new people.

Another example comes from Camrose, Alberta, a city of 18,000 where three churches came together to open the

Camrose Refugee Centre in November 2017. While churches in the area have been sponsoring refugees for decades, this is the first unified effort to help newcomers in the community. Community members saw a need for a service to help newcomers and they worked together to find a solution. The centre, which is mostly run by volunteers, assists churches and organizations sponsoring refugees and helps newcomers adjust to life in Canada and meet other newcomers in the area. Erhard Pinno, chairman of the Refugee Centre, commented, "I consider it a very historic day in the life of this community. It's another important step, I think in terms of being a real welcoming community ... letting refugees from all over the world know we are here to help you as much as we can."<sup>32</sup>

These creative solutions are just some examples of how rural communities use their social capital to address rural challenges. When private sponsors were concerned that their community may not be welcoming to newcomers, they held community meetings, sat in local grocery stores, and spoke with local community organizations. In the absence of public transportation, private sponsors rallied community members and organized carpooling. Without formal language classes, community members with a background in education volunteered their time and organized classes. Despite the challenges, rural communities lean on their social connections and use community networks to find solutions. This social capital is strengthened by diversity and is an important asset in rural communities that often lack the more formal, government-funded newcomer services that exist in urban places.

Social connections in rural communities offer some refugees the chance to find and keep good employment, and rural Canada can be a place of economic opportunity. For example, in Community C a Syrian man found a job working in a tire shop, which made use of his extensive experience. A man in Community B found a job as a pastry chef in his rural community, while another family started catering in Community A. Michael J. Molloy (a former civil servant who worked on the refugee provisions of the 1976 immigration act and helped coordinate resettlement of Indochinese refugees into Canada from 1979 to 1980) stated that knowledge of previous employment could be used before placing some refugees in rural communities. Matching some rural communities with refugees could help bring new people and services into their communities, and refugees with relevant skills could find good employment, affordable housing, and available services.

The relative affordability of housing in smaller communities can benefit refugees and their families, as refugees who resettle in large metropolitan Canadian cities, such as Vancouver, often struggle to find an inexpensive and appropriate

place to live.<sup>33</sup> A report from the Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights contends that Syrian refugees have had difficulties finding affordable housing in Canada's major urban centres: "Many GARS [government-assisted refugees] who arrived between 4 November 2015 and 29 February 2016, for instance, were accommodated in hotels for longer periods than usual because they had difficulty finding housing. For some, the arrangement lasted months. During this time, families were confined to small hotel rooms designed for short stays."<sup>34</sup> Smaller communities with low-cost housing options could be utilized by the government to house newly arrived refugees so that families avoid living in hotel rooms for long periods of time. Finding long-term, appropriate housing for large families in Vancouver and Toronto is difficult and costly, and smaller and rural communities could be used to find sustainable housing options for refugees. As stated earlier, some of the families that I spoke with have been able to purchase homes in their new communities, but that would have proven more difficult if they lived in a large urban centre.

Moving forward, it is crucial that we share the positive stories coming out of rural Canada and begin to utilize smaller and rural communities more effectively for refugee resettlement. Refugees can benefit from the social capital, economic opportunities, and affordable housing options that rural communities can offer. In some cases, refugees can readily access services in rural communities that have become stretched in the cities. Because multiple levels of government are involved in newcomer services, select rural communities have government services in their communities. Community D in Saskatchewan has access to formal English-language courses through their local college, available public housing, and an immigrant services centre. One sponsor from the community in Saskatchewan stated, "We have so many services here, we have housing here, why aren't they settling some of these people here? If they can help us with the money part ... we could probably bring a whole community in if we could afford to find a benefactor who could pay for it, the housing is sitting here, the services are here." In an effort to further consider rural communities for resettlement, the government could expand the RAP to include more rural and smaller communities. If a community has services for resettlement and integration, it is worth examining ways in which they can be used more effectively.

This point has been made by others in small communities seeking to help refugees. Joseph McMorrow and Catherine Caufield wrote about the benefits of rural resettlement: "Why did large numbers of government sponsored Canadian Syrian refugees recently spend weeks isolated in urban hotels awaiting a permanent residence when there were small towns in Canada lining up asking to be allowed

to provide them with a welcome, a residence and friendly personal support?"<sup>35</sup> Despite the extensive experience that smaller communities have had with refugee resettlement, and the success of these communities to support newcomers, despite a lack of formal services, the IRCC continues to concentrate resettlement services in urban centres. McMorrow and Caufield saw this first hand in Camrose: "The Camrose Refugee Coordinating Committee recently asked that Camrose be named as a welcoming community for government-sponsored Syrian refugees. This offer included the complete provision of initial housing and meals. No formal reply was ever received because Camrose could not meet the settlement criteria—criteria that suspiciously look as though they were created to ensure that smaller communities would not be considered."<sup>36</sup>

The evidence and information above tells a positive story of rural refugee resettlement. Even though this is a small research study and much more research is needed on the benefits and challenges of rural resettlement, these stories give us a place to start. Many rural and smaller communities are working to create welcoming spaces for refugees, many of whom have decided to build a new life in rural Canada. These stories need to become part of the resettlement narrative in Canada, and communities with positive resettlement stories need to be considered by the government as potential destinations for refugees. As more and more people become displaced around the globe, rural resettlement is an opportunity that we can't afford to ignore.

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