



Refugees file into the lounge at the Fredericton International Airport the weekend before Christmas. The family of seven is now settled in their Fredericton apartment. PHOTO: RAY BOURGEOIS/THE DAILY GLEANER

# Refugees embracing a new home

Since December, 152 government-sponsored Syrian refugees have arrived in New Brunswick

**KARISSA DONKIN**  
LEGISLATURE BUREAU

**FREDERICTON** • By the end of the week, 152 government-sponsored Syrian refugees will have arrived on New Brunswick soil, beginning a new life away from war.

They've settled mostly in Fredericton and Saint John, with some in Moncton and small towns across the province. They arrive on government-chartered flights after long journeys from refugee camps in Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan.

That figure – which doesn't include privately-sponsored families assisted by groups like churches – will continue to grow over the next weeks and months. New families will be welcomed nearly every day, stopping first in Toronto or Montreal for screening, processing and to pick up warm winter clothes.

New Brunswick has committed to re-settling as many as 1,500 people. Nationally, the federal government says they will settle 25,000 Syrian refugees by Feb. 29, 2016, a date the Liberals set after admitting they wouldn't make the original deadline of Jan. 1.

As of Tuesday, the federal government says 6,720 refugees have arrived in Canada, while 5,773 applications have been finalized.

When the first family of Syrian refugees arrived in Saint John a few days before Christmas, Shilo Boucher was worried about how they might feel about their new surroundings. Would they be frightened? Overwhelmed?

Instead, she was greeted with big smiles from two children and their

parents when they arrived at the Saint John Airport, thankful for a new beginning.

"They really understand how hard our community is working to make sure they're looked after," Boucher, president and CEO of the YMCA of Greater Saint John, said in an interview.

Since then, the Saint John Y has been scrambling to make sure families have everything they need. Welcome teams have been set up to greet families at the airport, translate from Arabic and help them adjust, while volunteer health professionals offer checkups. Some volunteers have offered to watch children while their parents go to endless appointments.

Since that December day at the Saint John Airport, 57 refugees have been re-settled in Saint John, along with eight in nearby Hampton and six in Quispamsis.

Many are living at a hotel until the Y can find housing for families, which range in size from four people to nine. Even though Saint John has a high rental vacancy rate, finding housing isn't easy. It needs to be affordable and it must be close to transit, so the newcomers can make it to the Y for language classes.

When they arrive in Canada, Boucher has heard many families gush about the cold Canadian winter. A pain to most Canadians, it's a marvel to these families, many who lived in camps under dry desert conditions that can be hard on your respiratory system, Boucher said. In their first days in Canada, volunteers have already taken groups of families sliding in the snow.

"They're just thankful to be here and they feel safe," she said.

As the months go on, the province's settlement agencies will shift their focus from welcoming refugees to convincing them to stay. That will take work from all parts of the community, New Brunswick

Multicultural Council managing director Alex LeBlanc said.

"Integration and retention will require effort and goodwill from all sectors, the community and employers. Based on what I've seen so far, I think New Brunswick can be a leader in the country on this."

One message LeBlanc has heard from many of the settlement workers who deal directly with families is that people are coming to New Brunswick eager to get settled and go straight into the workforce.

Many have been away from the workforce and routines for an extended period, leaving their homes and jobs behind to flee war. Getting back to work, LeBlanc said, is a way for them to re-establish that sense of independence.

He believes New Brunswick will be supportive because it's a way to restore hope for families whose lives have been shattered by war, but also for New Brunswick's declining population.

"Ultimately, our population drives our economy and funds the supports and services we all rely on," he said. "Because of retirements over the next 10 years, our workforce is projected to have a shortage of over 40,000 workers. We will need New Brunswickers and new Canadians to grow our economy."

## By the numbers

A total of 152 government-assisted Syrian refugees will have arrived in New Brunswick by the end of the week. Here's where they will live:

- Saint John: 57
- Fredericton: 40
- Moncton: 25
- St. Andrews: 9
- Hampton: 8
- New Maryland: 7
- Quispamsis: 6