

New Brunswick multicultural council wants to change narrative on refugees

Myths, false information creating 'toxic narrative' about refugees, council says

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The New Brunswick Multicultural Council has launched a campaign to dispel "myths, misunderstanding and false information" about Syrian refugees.

In a statement issued on Thursday morning, the council says those myths are feeding "an increasingly toxic narrative" about the influx of refugees who are set to arrive in Canada by the end of

the year. The council has started a petition for people to show their support for these people.

"Syrians are just like you or me," managing director Alex LeBlanc said. "Once they learn they are coming to New Brunswick, they will go online and research our province. I think a lot of New Brunswickers would be embarrassed to know that the first impression they make on these refugees are the negative comment boards on news sites."

Earlier this week, several mayors and Saskatchewan Premier Brad Wall expressed concern with the end of 2015 timeline given by the newly elected federal Liberals to take in 25,000 refugees. In a letter sent to Trudeau and released publicly, Wall suggested the date-driven plan could "severely undermine the refugee screening process" and

suggested Trudeau suspend those plans until he re-evaluates the screening processes in place.

But Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has assured Canadians he will keep his promise, as the clock ticks closer to December. And New Brunswick, which hopes to settle at least 1,500 of the 25,000 Syrian refugees, has taken a similar stance as Trudeau.

"The support from the public is far away to the number of people who are disbelieving or feel there's a danger," Public Safety Minister Stephen Horsman said on Monday. "I don't believe that and I don't think our government believes that. We've been given an opportunity to help people and the rest of the world is doing the same."

Trudeau has also spoken out against "acts of hatred and racism" since the

Paris attacks, including a fire at a mosque in Peterborough, Ont., the smashing of windows at a Hindu temple in Kitchener, Ont., and the attack of a Muslim woman in Toronto. On Thursday, the Toronto Transit Commission said women wearing hijabs were accosted on a subway train.

"Canadians understand that religious groups around the world suffer persecution regularly at the hands of violent extremists," Trudeau said in a statement. "Our focus must be on stopping the people responsible for the terror and continuing to fight hate by embracing Canadian values."

Acts like the ones in Ontario perpetuate fear on both sides, LeBlanc said. People become afraid of refugees and

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because of the hostility, refugees could be afraid of coming to Canada.

Those who are suggesting people be afraid of refugees in light of the terror attacks in Paris are fear mongering, he added. The majority of the attackers were French and Belgian nationals, not refugees.

"We need to get past that and just start talking about the facts and focusing on the people who are going to start their new lives here and roll out the welcome mat."

The New Brunswick Multicultural Council's campaign is called Restore Hope, an English translation of the province's Latin motto, Spem Reduxit. It refers to the province's creation as a new beginning for United Empire Loyalists who fled the United States as refugees. An estimated 14,000 Loyalist refugees settled in what is now Saint John.

In comparison, the Syrian refugee crisis has seen millions of people displaced in refugee camps and scattered across Europe, more than the entire

population of Atlantic Canada, LeBlanc said.

On its petition, which has already generated more than 200 signatures, the council says that "fear and anger toward refugees and Muslims" only helps the objective of terrorists. While the country must be "forceful" in responding to the attacks in Paris, the council stressed the need to be sure we're targeting the right people – not Syrian refugees, who "were the first victims of this war and terror."

"It's more complex than the way people are looking at it," LeBlanc added. "Part of the solution is welcoming people and demonstrating compassion and providing opportunities for education, integration. These are the things that make a measurable difference."

The council is expected to play a big role in settling refugees in New Brunswick by co-ordinating the efforts of settlement agencies across the province. Assuming New Brunswick gets about 1,500 Syrian refugees in the next month and a half, it will be about four times the number of refugees the province typically settles in a full calendar year.



Alex LeBlanc, managing director of the New Brunswick Multicultural Council Inc. unveiled the organization's new logo this summer. The council is calling on New Brunswickers to show their support for Syrian refugees by signing a petition.

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