

Quebec suspends faith-based refugee resettlement program

Banned by the Quebec government, churches and faith communities who sponsor refugees want to face their accusers and get some sort of explanation for Quebec's sudden one-year suspension of refugee sponsorship.

"We find it unacceptable that institutional sponsorship promoting the settlement of refugees in Quebec has been suspended in general," Canadian Religious Conference executive director Rev. Alain Ambeault told Canadian Catholic News in an e-mail.

At the end of October, Quebec's government, which runs its own separate immigration and refugee system under an agreement with Ottawa, suddenly suspended all the agencies that normally manage the bulk of refugee resettlement cases. Until November 2021 only independent groups of two to five individuals may submit applications to sponsor refugees. Under the small group sponsorships, successful applications are chosen by lottery.

In a posting to the provincial government's gazette, the government says it has "serious concerns about the integrity of certain practices of legal persons within the framework" of the refugee sponsorship program.

"Investigations are ongoing and we will not be commenting further to avoid harming their progress," an immigration ministry spokesperson told CBC.

"If you accuse us, tell us what we are doing (wrong)," said Alessandra Santopadre, who runs the refugee resettlement program in the Archdiocese of Montreal. "They always said, 'We are looking for, we are still collecting, the proof.' "

Rumours have floated about in Quebec refugee circles about personnel in some agencies pocketing money from refugees to move their cases through the system. But Santopadre objects to being tarred with the brush of a vague, general accusation.

"Why did you accuse everybody?" she asked. "If you have found someone who is corrupted, OK. Try to figure it out with those organizations – but not everybody. We are not corrupted. The diocese is not corrupted."

"Obviously there is something to that (allegations of corruption). But to do a blanket accusation of everybody, to suspend everybody because of maybe a few, something is just not right with that," said Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) director for Canada Norbert Piché.

Prior to the current government, the JRS was bringing in as many as 200 refugee families a year. The new government of Premier François Legault and the Coalition Avenir Québec immediately moved to limit immigration in 2018, cutting the quota for sponsoring agencies to a flat 30 per agency between September 2018 and February 2019, then another 30 between January and June of 2020.

Immigration numbers for Quebec are down dramatically, from 25,500 in the first eight months of 2019 to 18,155 in the same period this year. Pre-COVID, the goal was for Quebec to take in 30,500 in 2020. Quebec's government says it now plans to increase its immigration numbers as high as 47,500 in 2021, to make up for the 2020 shortfall.

The TCRI (Table de concertation des organismes au service des personnes réfugiées et immigrantes), which represents the refugee sponsoring agencies, issued an open letter in November expressing frustration over the Minister of Immigration's refusal to meet with the organizations that help refugees with housing, language education, job searches and more.

"The MIFI (Quebec's immigration department) has introduced a spirit of suspicion in place of the spirit of collaboration," said the Nov. 3 letter.

"The punishment imposed by the MIFI is not only unjust and arbitrary, it is also a blow to humanitarian immigration as a whole," the letter said.

Piché believes the Legault government is uninterested in what the churches are doing with refugees and politically aligned with anti-immigrant sentiment in small-town and rural Quebec.

"It just seems like they're not very much in tune with the faith communities here," he said. available.