

Refugees flee conflict only to find dream destination locked down

They've come from all four corners of the globe, many of them fleeing war, torture and poverty.

They're refugees and immigrants from countries where they've experienced extreme trauma, only to come to a country in lockdown over the COVID-19 virus.

Like many Canadians, newcomers have questions about living through the pandemic – food, health care, school for their kids – but in addition they face the challenge of trying to find community as strangers in a strange land. But they are uniquely suited to tackle it because of the lives they've left behind.

“It can be very, very difficult,” said Kathryn Friesen, director of immigration and settlement services for Catholic Social Services. “We know that newcomers already suffer from feelings of isolation and loneliness at the best of times. So, basically all of Canada is suffering from isolation and loneliness, and that's just an exacerbation of the already existing need for newcomers.”



Kathryn Friesen

Nevertheless, many of the newcomers have seen and lived through a lot worse.

“They're all unique when they come. But one thing they all have is this resiliency that is incredible,” said Laura Velazquez, a program coordinator with CSS.

"I think they have those life skills to deal with all of this. Their lives have taught them how to deal with the uncertainty a little bit better ... If you can overcome that, I'm pretty sure you can overcome other things."

CSS Immigration and Settlement Services normally helps integrate between 10,000 and 14,000 newcomers every year. That stopped in mid-March when the Canadian border was closed, leaving many on a waiting list with no certain end. The last families arrived in Edmonton on March 13 from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Cameroon and Syria.

Although they can't speak about specific cases, CSS counsellors say newcomers are adapting to life in their new home, even amid COVID-19.

"Their biggest fear is like yours and mine and every other person in the world right now," Velazquez said. "With everything changing daily, or almost daily, they are just questioning, 'What is going to happen next? What do I do next? How long do I have to stay home for? When can I start English school?'"

"Those are the most common questions that we get."

Immigration and Settlement Services provides language assessment and orientation from opening a bank account to using public transit. While some services can't be provided because of social distancing, CSS counsellors check in daily with each family, and organize online conversation circles and group chats.

Most of the staff are able to work from home. In-person visits continue only in the cases of the most vulnerable clients to ensure they have enough food, medication and other essential needs. Some need an explanation of the COVID-19 pandemic and how they need to take public health precautions.

The biggest challenge is isolation, which may slow their integration into life in Edmonton.

"A lot of newcomers don't have a community established here, so they don't have people they can readily reach out to, to access those services," Friesen said. "If people aren't able to do that, we put the supports in place to ensure they are able to do it. We want to make sure there is no reason for them to break a self-isolation protocol or quarantine."

"The schools are closed. So, any experiential knowledge that usually is the best of learning is not happening right now. So it's all more about 'How can we keep our heads above water?' and making sure people have food, do some English practice. It's not the full suite of services that we would normally be able to provide. People are generally understanding of that. These are exceptional times."

"If you are starting over and you have no social network, no people that you can rely on if you run out of food or you don't know where to go to get food,

you don't have anybody to call other than CSS – I think that adds on pressure to clients," Velazquez said.

"It will slow down the process for them. They're not starting English school, so they're not starting their journey to learn English. At the same time, they're not meeting other people from their culture, because they're not able to go to Mass or the mosque."

Additionally, some families may need time and effort to adjust to self-isolation. Counsellors work to help families set up a schedule, create safe spaces, and prevent any family crises.

"It can also be very difficult for families to all of a sudden go from everyone being in school, having their own lives, now everyone is together all the time. And there's no separation and no time apart. That can be really stressful on families," Friesen said. "The need is very great right now, for sure."

Still, in spite of the challenges, Velazquez said newcomers who have struggled to come to Canada have learned to adapt to almost any situation.

"They just make the best of the situation and they're so happy to be here in Canada, because that's what they've been longing for, for so long. This has been their dream for so long."