

Right Honourable Justin Trudeau, Prime Minister of Canada
Honourable Premier Doug Ford
His Worship John Tory, Mayor City of Toronto
Members of Ontario Municipal Councils

March 25, 2020

Open Letter - We Cannot Leave Anyone Behind

We write this Open Letter in Solidarity with Migrant Workers, Non-Status individuals and their families as community workers, organizers, volunteers, teachers, students and residents of Ontario, Canada.

We are writing to ask urgently that the governments of Canada and Ontario as well as the local municipal councils include all people with precarious immigration status in all emergency benefits and measures for housing, health services, education, employment and income support during the present health crisis.

For decades, temporary and migrant workers have supported our livelihoods in crucial ways, like caring for our loved ones or picking the fruits and vegetables that feed our communities. At any given time, those with precarious immigration status, international students and non-status individuals face multiple challenges in accessing income supports, and social and essential services such as:

- Housing or subsidized housing
- Education
- Employment and employment support
- Health support services

This leaves these groups (migrant workers, international students, non-status workers, refugee claimants and rejected refugee claimants), who are already working in minimum-wage positions in even more precarious situations.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, they were often living in vulnerability – concerned about basic necessities like rent and food, while at the same time grappling with significant impacts on their health and wellbeing as they navigate an uncertain pathway to permanent residence.

Now, in light of COVID-19, the situation for these communities is increasingly unbearable.

We cannot leave anyone behind.

These specific communities should be acknowledged and included in current discussions and solutions related to employment, financial and wellbeing/health support programs as we face this challenge across our country, our province and in our local municipalities.

The challenge.

There has been significant response to support Canadians. The Canadian Government's *Economic Response Plan* was implemented to support workers and businesses facing unprecedented challenges – including those not eligible for the Employment Insurance (EI) program and those without paid sick leave.

While we applaud these supports, there are glaring gaps. People who fall between the cracks are some of our most vulnerable community members.

Many marginalized and oppressed people who walk through the doors at Refugee and Migrant support centres across the province and the country, find themselves in need of support.

Most migrant workers, refugees (claimants and rejected claimants) and non-status individuals are ineligible to apply for current supports. They do not qualify for EI and Canadian Revenue Agency managed programs. Often, they are paid at minimum wage, some even below. International students are already restricted on the number of hours they can work per week, limiting their access to EI.

Thus these communities are already excluded. In light of current public health concerns, such exclusion runs deeper - and their needs are greater than ever.

- Imagine not having enough money to cover rent and put food on your family's table at the end of the month.
- Imagine having to rely on a shelter system that is already over capacity, where finding space is extremely difficult.
- Imagine not having enough money to cover prescriptions, even for prescriptions unrelated to COVID-19.
- Imagine that you suffer from existing health issues that now leave you with increased vulnerability.

These are some of the experiences of many of the individuals and families we support. For the most part, we are not seeing these concerns addressed by government responses to COVID-19.

Inaction by any level of government can compromise public health, not only for the aforementioned communities but for ALL of us.

This is a HEALTH for HUMANITY concern.

The opportunity.

We appreciate the Ontario government announcement that it will provide COVID-19 assessment and treatment to uninsured people in the province and waiving the three month waiting period.

We are appreciative of the moves to ensure access to healthcare regardless of OHIP and immigration status. We want to reiterate the importance of implementation and ensuring this directive is actioned on the ground.

Health is a human right. Any individual in need of medical attention should seek and receive the support they need, especially during a pandemic.

Additionally, migrant workers, international students, non-status workers, refugee claimant and rejected refugee claimant must have access to benefits such as sick leave.

Without paid sick days, many go to work – even when sick - because they cannot afford to take the day off. Again, this increases the risk to all of us. For many of these workers, a work from home option is not available. So they are finding themselves forced to work - or in some cases have been laid off - while others have not been paid appropriately for this month.

This leaves many with limited choices and often choices that put them at risk physically or financially (often both).

A lack of much needed supports is compounding factors that further drive these communities into a deeper state of insecurity.

For those who are not eligible for the various emergency benefits announced by the Federal Government, we urge the Ontario government, to implement an **emergency Ontario Works for All three month program**.

We recommend this emergency program consist of:

- a) Benefits for three months;
- b) The same application process (either by phone or online) for residents and others in need that qualify for Ontario Works;
- c) The access to benefits for emergency applicants at the same rate any other Ontario Works recipient.

In unique times like this, Canadians must come together and not leave anyone behind.

Walking together with uprooted people and in solidarity:

Adam House, Toronto
Angela Rose house, Windsor
Becoming Neighbours
Carty House, Ottawa
Casa El Norte, Fort Erie
Casa Maria Refugee Homes, Peterborough
Chez Marie, St Catharines
Chinese & Southeast Asian Legal Clinic, Toronto
Christie Refugee Welcome Centre, Toronto
Colour of Poverty Colour of Change
COSTI / Immigrant Services, Toronto
Diocese of London Refugee Ministries, Windsor
FCJ Refugee Centre, Toronto
Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary,
(Loretto Sisters)
Kitchener-Waterloo Multicultural Centre
Matthew House Ottawa
Matthew house, Toronto

Matthew House Windsor
Micah House, Hamilton
Migrant Workers Alliance for Change (MWAC)
OCASI
OHIP For All
Office for Systemic Justice - Federation of
Peace Bridge Newcomers Centre, Fort Erie
Quaker Committee for Refugees, Toronto
Romero House, Toronto
SALCO
Sisters of St. Joseph in Canada
Sisters, Faithful Companions of Jesus
Sojourn house, Toronto
The 519, Toronto
The Centre Oblat- A Voice for Justice
The Peoples House, Toronto
Unison Health and Community Services