

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

We Need Action Now - A Call from African, Refugee and Civil Society Groups

TORONTO, July 14, 2023 – African groups, groups working with refugees, people experiencing homelessness and providing healthcare, and other civil society groups are calling on all levels of government to urgently provide emergency shelter and housing supports to address the crisis refugee claimants are facing in Toronto.

A significant proportion of refugee claimants in Toronto who are unhoused and without any shelter or community services or support are of African origin. African groups and civil society organizations are deeply concerned that there appears to be a lack of action to address the shelter and housing crisis faced by African and racialized refugee claimants. There are approximately 30 or more African people at any given time sleeping on cardboard outside 129 Peter Street, the City of Toronto Referral and Assessment Center in downtown Toronto.

Refugee claimants are typically expected to contact Central Intake at the City of Toronto to access emergency shelter and services. However, current claimants are turned away without any shelter, referrals to other appropriate options or services leaving them virtually stranded on the streets.

Unhoused people on the street face sexual exploitation and high levels of violence, as well as inadequate food and healthcare. As new arrivals in Canada, refugee claimants' unfamiliarity with Toronto has left them more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

In response to the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, all orders of government acted quickly to support displaced people. This included providing shelter, housing, and services. Civil society organizations call on governments to show the same compassion to refugees from other parts of the world.

“Weekly virtual meetings are held to encourage community members to open their homes to displaced refugees, in a commendable display of the spirit of Ubuntu – an African philosophy emphasizing humanity towards others. Despite the challenges, such as hosts' ability to adequately feed guests and compliance with city housing policies, these organizations have persisted in their mission.” – Rev. Eddy Jumba, Dominion Church International.

“An overwhelming proportion of those left out on the street are African refugee claimants. There is a strong community of African, Black, and Caribbean led organizations who are providing direct and culturally appropriate shelter, housing and support services for refugee claimants, in large part without funding. These organizations have been historically unfunded or underfunded to provide these services and they simply cannot do it alone. It is time that governments step up to invest in our communities and address the disproportionate disadvantages they face.” - ammanuel melles, Executive Director, Network for the Advancement of Black Communities.

“In our more than 30 years of working with refugee claimants we have never seen this level of shelter need, or homelessness. It is a crisis. Toronto urgently needs a reception centre where refugee claimants can feel safe, that will receive them, and provide shelter, services and information.” - Loly Rico, Executive Director, FCJ Refugee Centre.

In response to this crisis, African groups, refugee serving agencies, organizations working with people experiencing homelessness, healthcare providers, and other civil society groups urgently call on all orders of government to:

- Urgently establish reception centers to immediately shelter and support refugee claimants.
- The federal government in particular to ensure that refugee claimants have dedicated shelter space that includes the unique supports they need including legal services, healthcare and appropriate wraparound assistance including immediate emergency street outreach and mobile resources.
- The federal government must also take the lead in funding shelter spaces, personnel and support services;
- All governments must identify and immediately support Black-led and Black-serving agencies to remedy historical underfunding or no funding, and build community capacity to provide culturally appropriate wraparound services for refugee claimants.

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Community groups:

African Centre for Refugees in Ontario-Canada
All Saints Toronto
Center for Refugee Children
Christie Refugee Welcome Centre
CP Planning
FCJ Refugee Centre
Margaret's Housing and Community Support Services
Matthew House
Network for the Advancement of Black Communities
New Nakfa
Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants
Romero House
Rwandan Canadian Healing Centre (RCHC)
Sistering
Sojourn House
St. Michael's Hospital

Street Haven
The Peoples Church
The Toronto Drop-in Network
Workers Action Centre