

Calgary agencies struggle to serve immigrants' needs

Federal funds fail to follow newcomers

EVA FERGUSON
CALGARY HERALD

Calgary agencies are being deluged with immigrants from other Canadian centres, but they're struggling to serve newcomers' needs under a federal funding formula that ties financial support to original ports of landing, according to a report issued by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities.

The report stresses the importance of encouraging immigration into Canada to drive the economy, particularly during the growing financial crisis.

But that same downturn will force immigrants to become more mobile and face new social and economic challenges, the report says, searching for jobs and social support be-

yond their original points of entry, meaning secondary cities like Calgary need to find the additional funding they deserve.

Fariborz Birjandian, executive director with the Calgary Catholic Immigration Society, said secondary immigrants are a growing group that agencies have been struggling with for several years.

"We have huge challenges around that, Birjandian said. "Many immigrants will choose to first come to Canada through Vancouver, Toronto or Montreal, because those are the cities they know. But after a year or less, they realize that the jobs are in Calgary. So they come here. But the funding doesn't follow them."

Colombian immigrant Rafael Cuartas is a perfect example. After landing in Montreal earlier this year, it took him only a few weeks to realize job opportunities are better in Calgary for his skills as a computer engineer.

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Leah Hennel, Calgary Herald

Rafael Cuartas and his wife, Eliana, landed in Montreal earlier this year from Colombia, but moved to Calgary because of the job opportunities.

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IMMIGRANTS

"It's hard right now for work. But there are still so many more jobs here in Calgary," Cuartes said.

Montreal was his original point of entry, only because Canada Immigration accepted him there more quickly.

As he looks for work this spring, Cuartes and his wife will receive language training at a Calgary agency.

Birjandian estimates that out of the 15,000 immigrants Calgary received in the past three years, more than 3,000 were secondary migrants, or "transfers" from other centres.

As well, he added, Calgary has seen a doubling in immigration over the past 10 years, and a 150 per cent increase in transfers.

Federal funding, however, is a per capita formula based on the number of immigrants landing in a particular centre, simply because there is no way of tracking immigrants as they move from province to province.

Jason Kenney, federal minister of citizenship, immigration and multiculturalism, admitted Thursday that Calgary is challenged because tracking immigrants who move is difficult.

"This is a challenge we are very aware of and we're looking at ways to be more sensitive to that."

Kenney explained that although the Tories have tripled funding to settlement programs since becoming government, they are still looking at ways to allow funding to follow immigrants as they move to other cities.

A pilot project is being looked at, he said, in which immigrants who get language training for instance, would receive a certificate with the number of hours they are to receive. If they move before the program is complete, they would take that certificate with them so the second city would be reimbursed by the first city for the remaining number of hours of training left.

Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart said as more secondary immigrants continue to flow into Calgary, more pressure is being put on municipalities that help to fund some programs, particularly language and job skills supports.

"We as a city are receiving a significant amount of immigrants, the numbers were compounded by the boom.

"But even as we shoulder the recession, Calgary is still viewed as being able to best handle those challenges, and offer the most jobs."

Colley-Urquhart said she'd be willing to put together a motion encouraging better communication on immigrant funding between all levels of government in hopes of wiping away a funding formula that doesn't follow immigrants to their second or third cities.

"We have a formula that's not working, and it's stressing social agencies to the limit."

Ald. Joe Ceci, who brought a motion to federation earlier this month asking for a review of the funding formula, said the federal government needs to ask local agencies to record the number of secondary migrants they receive so they can adjust fund-