



202-1193 Kingsway, Vancouver, BC V5V 3C9
Tel: 604.873.8437 ▪ Toll free: 1.800.307.1212 ▪ Fax: 604.874.9898
info@firstcallbc.org ▪ www.firstcallbc.org

July 27, 2009

Name
Member of Parliament
House of Commons
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A6

Dear Name;

Re: Canada's Refugee Transportation Loan Program – Survey and Request for Assistance

We are writing to you as a province-wide, non-partisan coalition of organizations concerned about the health and well-being of BC's children and youth. For over a year First Call has been raising our concerns about Canada's policy of charging refugees interest-bearing loans for the costs of their transport to Canada.

We are asking you to let us know your position on this policy. We are also asking for your help in convincing the Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism and the Minister of Finance to make the necessary policy changes to allow the Government of Canada to absorb the cost of transportation for resettled refugees.

By way of background information, we have attached a copy of our most recent letter to Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism, the Honourable Jason Kenney, outlining our concerns about this policy and requesting the immediate elimination of the refugee debt burden created by the loan program, both past and future. Also attached is a backgrounder containing some additional facts on the costs involved in making this change.

Some of the key impacts this policy is having on refugee children and their families are:

- Teenagers struggle to keep up with their high school studies while working to contribute towards loan payments.
- Refugees postpone upgrading their skills and qualifications while working at low-end jobs to meet the monthly loan payments.
- Refugee youth sacrifice ambitions of pursuing higher education because they must work to pay off their debt.
- Parents working multiple jobs to meet loan payments are hardly at home and can't give their children the support they need.
- Refugee families making their loan payments may not have enough money for basic living costs, including food.
- Refugees struggling with the trauma of persecution and exile and the stresses of adapting to a new country are particularly vulnerable to feelings of acute anxiety over the huge debt burden.
- The risks of defaulting on the debt are long-term consequences such as lack of access to mortgages, educational loans and the possibility of sponsoring family members.

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Our survey consists of a single yes/no question:

Do you support the elimination of the requirement that refugees resettled in Canada pay back to the Government of Canada the costs of their transportation to Canada?

We would appreciate your response to this question by September 1, 2009. Please reply by e-mail to: info@firstcallbc.org, or in writing to: First Call, 202 – 1193 Kingsway, Vancouver, BC V5V 3C9.

A simple yes or no will suffice, but we would welcome any added commentary you may wish to include. We will be compiling the responses from all BC MPs and sharing them with our coalition partners and supporters.

If you are supportive of making this change in policy, we are also asking that you urgently take this matter up with Ministers Kenney and Flaherty. We would be happy to supply additional information or help to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you for your attention to our requests. We look forward to receiving your reply.

Sincerely,

Adrienne Montani
Provincial Coordinator

Encl: Letter to Minister J. Kenney
Backgrounder
List of First Call Partner Organizations