



Lenten: Preparing for Easter Joy



The season of Lent calls us to embark on a 40-day journey of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, echoing the time Jesus spent in the desert as He readied Himself for His ministry. It is an opportunity to pause in reflection, turn from sin through repentance, and revive our commitment to faith—growing nearer to Christ by deepening our prayer life, practicing self-discipline through fasting, and extending His compassion through generous almsgiving. As we make our way toward the glory of Easter, may this holy time reshape our hearts and guide us to the profound joy of His resurrection. May you experience a blessed and grace-filled Lent.

His Eminence Frank Cardinal Leo, Metropolitan Archbishop of Toronto’s has prepared a Lenten Message. To read it please click [here](#).

Important Change to the IFHP

Starting May 1, 2026, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) will introduce co-payments for certain benefits under the Interim Federal Health Program (IFHP).

A co-payment (or “co-pay”) means that IFHP beneficiaries (newcomers) will pay part of the cost for some supplemental health services and products, while the Government of Canada pays the rest.

How does this affect cosponsors?

Cosponsors are responsible for financial and settlement support for newcomers

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Important: RAP Rate Increase

Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) recently announced a substantial increase to minimum financial support requirements as outlined in the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP). Both Monthly RAP Rates and Start-Up Costs have increased significantly. These changes, which come into effect on January 26, 2026, are intended to better align with provincial social assistance rates and reflect the real cost of living across Canada. Unfortunately, the magnitude of this increase far exceeds normal inflation and the premium we routinely build into our cost tables.

Regrettably, this change, which is entirely outside of our control, must be implemented in order for us to meet our obligations to our sponsored refugees, as outlined by IRCC.

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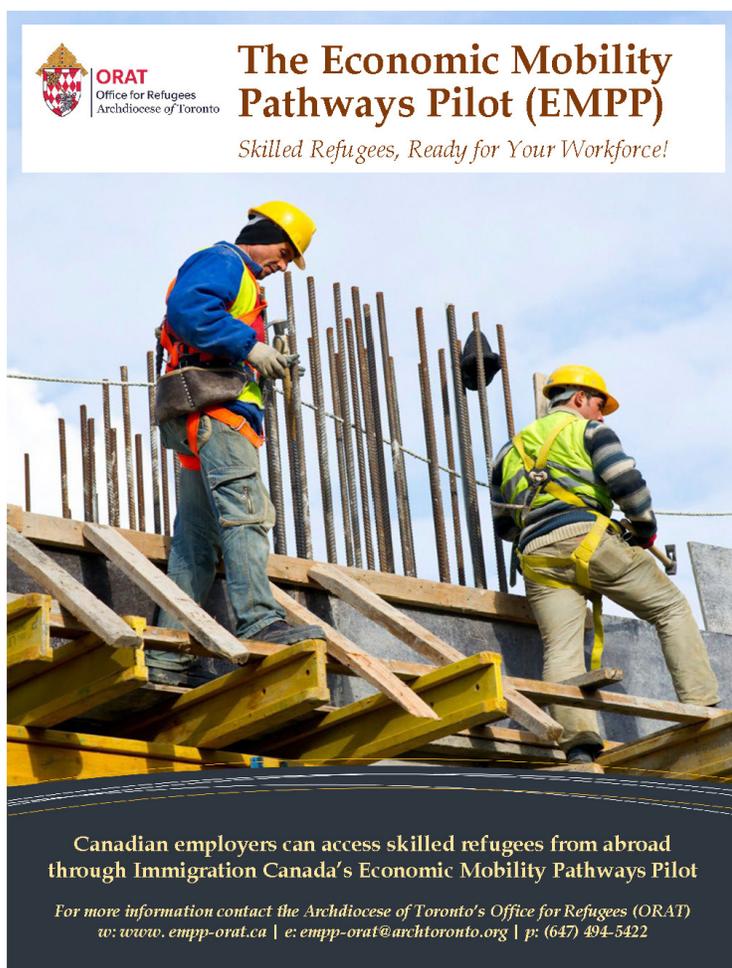
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EMPP: From Temporary to Permanent

On January 20, 2026, ORAT, as one of the Trusted Partners of IRCC, participated in an online meeting regarding the Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot (EMPP). During the session, it was confirmed that the pilot has concluded, and there are no plans to extend the related public policy. IRCC is now working toward establishing a permanent program. Specific details of this new program will be shared as they become available.

In anticipation of the new program, ORAT is planning to launch an overseas referral initiative aimed at creating a database of eligible candidates. Once the program is officially launched, ORAT will be in a position to actively reach out to employers to match their economic needs with qualified refugees, facilitating meaningful employment opportunities and supporting economic integration.

We look forward to providing more updates as this exciting development unfolds.



 **The Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot (EMPP)**
Skilled Refugees, Ready for Your Workforce!

Canadian employers can access skilled refugees from abroad through Immigration Canada's Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot

For more information contact the Archdiocese of Toronto's Office for Refugees (ORAT)
w: www.empp-orat.ca | e: empp-orat@archtoronto.org | p: (647) 494-5422

Important Change to the IFHP

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during their one-year resettlement period. This means **the co-pay will be the responsibility of the cosponsor.**

This change will apply to cosponsors whose cases have arrived and whose settlement period extends beyond May 1, 2026. It will also apply to all cosponsors whose sponsored refugee has yet to arrive. Cases whose resettlement period ends before May 1, 2026, will not be affected.

What is changing?

- Prescription medications: Beneficiaries will pay \$4 per eligible prescription, whether new or a refill.
- Other supplemental health benefits: Beneficiaries will pay 30% of the cost of eligible services and products.

These co-payments apply only to services and products received on or after 12:01 a.m. (local time) on May 1, 2026. Services received before that time will not require a co-payment.

What is NOT changing?

- Basic health services, such as doctor visits and hospital care, will continue to be fully covered at no cost.
- Pre-departure medical services and immigration medical exams will also remain fully covered at no cost.

What do cosponsors need to do when the newcomer uses IFHP?

- Cosponsors **must retain all receipts** and documentation for any payments or purchases made by or on behalf of the sponsored newcomer (beneficiary). This includes receipts for items purchased directly, as well as records of traceable payments (e.g., e-transfers, cheques, or bank statements) for cash or other support provided.
- Should IRCC select the case for review, they will request proof of the financial support provided. Failure to provide adequate documentation (such as receipts or other verifiable records) for amounts claimed as support may result in IRCC determining that the support obligation was not met. In such cases, the cosponsor(s) could be required to reimburse the newcomer for the undocumented amounts.

For More information click [here](#).

Important: RAP Rate Increase

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We recognize that this will deeply affect our cosponsors, many of whom are recent immigrants themselves. We share their disappointment and understand how difficult this will be for many.

What This Means for Our Cosponsors

In addition to publishing our updated 2026 Sponsorship Cost Table — which now reflects the new IRCC RAP rates plus a 10% contingency premium to help protect against future increases — we are taking the following proactive steps to ensure every sponsored family has sufficient funds upon arrival:

- **Submitted Cases (But not Arrived):** We are reviewing all in-process and not-yet-arrived cases and are contacting cosponsors to request the additional deposit required under the new rates.
- **Arrived Cases (Within Settlement Period):** We are reviewing all currently arrived cases still within the 12-month sponsorship period and requesting top-ups where a funding gap now exists.
- **Cases Pending Submission:** We are requiring the full updated amount (new RAP + 10% contingency) for every new submission moving forward.

Updated Resources

To support sponsors and ensure clarity, we have updated the following tools on our website to reflect the new RAP amounts:

- The [Sponsorship Cost Table](#) provides the cost of sponsorship by family size. This is a projected cost.
- The [Sponsorship Cost Calculator](#) allows accurate calculation of cost of sponsorship based on family composition. This is a projected cost.
- The [RAP Calculator and Budget Workbook](#) provides an accurate picture current RAP Rates for arrived refugees.

These measures, while difficult, are necessary to remain in full compliance with our legal obligations to the refugees and to IRCC and help ensure that arriving refugees have the financial support they need to settle. If you have questions about how these changes may impact your case, our office is here to help.

EDUCATION CORNER

Syria Country Report (Post-Assad)

Nestled along the Mediterranean Sea in the heart of the Middle East, **Syria is undergoing a fragile transition** following the **collapse of Bashar al-Assad's** regime, which ruled the country for decades and presided over a civil war that erupted



in 2011. The fall of Assad has created both **hope and deep uncertainty**, as Syrians attempt to rebuild a nation devastated by years of conflict, displacement, economic collapse, and sectarian violence.

Syria's Geo-history: The historical tapestry of Syria unraveled after the Great War (1914–1918) when Ottoman forces withdrew, marking the end of centuries-long occupation. Subsequently, French forces assumed control, establishing a colonial government. In 1946, Syria gained autonomy, yet the nation remained ensnared in political instability, corruption, and military coups.

The Arab Spring, a wave of pro-democracy uprisings, swept through the Middle East, inspiring hope for a better life. While leaders in other regions relinquished power, the Syrian government under President Bashar al-Assad resisted, sparking a brutal crackdown on dissent and triggering a protracted civil war.

Following Assad's fall, Syria has entered a new phase, characterized by the dismantling of former security structures and the emergence of competing political and military actors attempting to shape the country's future. The post-Assad period has brought new political openings but also heightened risk of fragmentation and renewed violence.

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Syria Country Report (Post-Assad)

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Current Political and Security Situation

Since the fall of Assad, Syria has experienced **rapid political changes**, including:

- **Collapse of central government authority** in several regions.
- **Power struggles among armed factions** and local governance bodies.
- Increased calls for a **transitional government** and international mediation.
- Heightened concern regarding **revenge attacks**, local instability, and security vacuums.
- Continued foreign influence and involvement, complicating stabilization efforts

The transitional government is led by interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa (previously known as Abu Mohammad al-Jolani), who heads the former rebel group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). Al-Sharaa has a controversial past: he fought with al-Qaeda affiliates in Iraq (including early links to what became ISIS under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi), later founded the al-Nusra Front (al-Qaeda's Syrian branch), but broke ties with al-Qaeda around 2016 and positioned HTS against ISIS during the civil war. The United States once placed a \$10 million bounty on his head as a designated terrorist, though this was rescinded in late 2024 amid diplomatic engagements and his efforts to project moderation. Despite these shifts, his jihadist history continues to fuel skepticism about long-term stability and governance inclusivity.

Although some areas have seen reduced fighting, many parts of the country remain volatile, with communities facing insecurity due to armed group,

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Syria Country Report (Post-Assad)

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weakened law enforcement, and the absence of functioning national institutions.

Religious Affiliation: The majority (87%) of Syria's population adheres to Islam. Christians, constituting approximately 10% of the pre-war population, encompass various denominations such as Greek Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, and Catholic.

In the aftermath of Assad's fall, **religious minorities remain extremely vulnerable**, particularly Christians, Druze, Alawites, and Yazidis. In many areas, minorities fear:

- Targeted violence or retaliation.
- Forced displacement and confiscation of property.
- Lack of protection due to weak transitional governance.
- Increased pressure from extremist factions in unstable regions.

Al-Sharaa's past affiliations and behavior—rooted in jihadist networks that once included ties to al-Qaeda in Iraq (ISIS's precursor)—have significantly heightened concerns among religious minorities, who worry about potential sectarian biases or inadequate safeguards despite his public assurances of protection and pluralism. Regrettably, the Christian minority has endured widespread discrimination and persecution,

exacerbated during the civil war with the destruction of properties and religious sites, forced conversions, and loss of lives. This remains a significant concern in the current



post-Assad landscape.

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My name is Rowena, a Christian woman from Lahore, Pakistan, and a mother of two children. My life as a refugee has been shaped by loss, courage, and an unbreakable commitment to protect my children.



I raised my children as a single mother with great difficulty. In 2007, I remarried. My marriage was to a faithful Christian man, and my hope was that this would give my children stability and a father's care. For a time, life was peaceful until it was shattered by religious persecution. In 2014, my husband's acquaintances began harassing me, pressuring me to convert to Islam and threatening my family. When I refused, the threats escalated into brutal violence. My husband and I were beaten in our own home. The police refused to help us because we were Christians. Our neighbors were too afraid to stand as witnesses. We were completely abandoned.

Soon after, my son was followed and threatened, and my daughter narrowly escaped an attempted abduction outside her school. Fearing for our children's lives, we fled our home and went into hiding. Church leaders warned us that in Pakistan, we would never be safe. With no other option, we sent our children to Thailand in search of safety as asylum seekers. I joined them later, while my husband remained behind due to lack of funds. I never saw my husband again.

In Thailand, we lived as refugees without legal protection, under constant fear of arrest.

My children's education stopped. Our refugee claim through UNHCR was rejected despite years of waiting and appeals. We survived only through faith, church support, and my son's courage as the sole provider.

In Bangkok, Thailand, fear follows refugees every single day. Police and immigration raids tear families apart without warning.

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Syria Country Report (Post-Assad)

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As ORAT undertook registration of 2026 cases, we experienced a huge surge in demand from Syrian Christians—a clear sign that many religious minorities no longer feel there is any viable future under the current administration, driving continued emigration and resettlement requests.

Humanitarian and Economic Conditions: The fall of Assad has not immediately improved humanitarian conditions. Syria continues to face:

- Severe shortages of food, fuel, and medicine.
- Collapse of infrastructure and public services.
- High unemployment and poverty.
- Disrupted education and healthcare systems.
- Continued internal displacement and unstable returns

While some international actors have expressed willingness to support reconstruction, progress remains limited due to **political uncertainty, security risks, and the absence of unified governance.**

Refugee Outflow and Displacement

ORAT has played a pivotal role in sponsoring over **1,100 Syrian families (2,543 individuals)** and successfully welcomed and settled more than **700 Syrian families (1,649 individuals).**

Despite the fall of Assad, **large-scale return of refugees has not occurred**, as many Syrians remain hesitant to return due to:

- Lack of security guarantees.
- Destroyed homes and communities.
- Fear of persecution by local factions.
- Uncertainty regarding land ownership and documentation.
- Limited economic opportunity.

Worldwide, **millions of displaced Syrians remain in neighboring countries and beyond**, with many still living in precarious legal and financial conditions.

Outlook: The Syrian narrative is one of resilience, marked by historical complexities and contemporary challenges. The fall of Assad represents a major turning point, but the country remains in a fragile transition period where peace is not yet assured.

Syria's future depends heavily on whether a stable political settlement can be reached, whether minority communities will be protected, and whether humanitarian and reconstruction assistance can be delivered effectively.

ORAT's Support: **ORAT remains committed** to supporting Syrians affected by conflict and displacement, providing hope and stability for families seeking safety and rebuilding their lives.

Rowena's Journey of Faith & Courage

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Mothers are arrested and taken away, while their children are left behind crying, helpless, and alone. Those detained are thrown into the Immigration Detention Centre (IDC), a place overcrowded beyond human limits. There is no space to sit, no room to breathe, and sickness spreads quickly among exhausted bodies. Hunger, illness, and despair fill the air.

Living as a refugee in Thailand is a silent suffering. We lock ourselves inside rooms, afraid to step outside, afraid of arrest, and afraid of disappearing. Survival is not living; it is enduring each day with fear in our hearts and prayers on our lips.

After many years of suffering, hope finally arrived. In September 2022, through Canada's Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program, the Archdiocese of Toronto's Office for Refugees (ORAT), along with compassionate parishioners welcomed us to our new country and home, Canada. We were resettled in Canada and for the first time in many years, my children and I could breathe freely.

This is not just a story of persecution it is a story of a mother who refused to surrender her children to fear. I lost my home, my husband, and my past, but I did not lose my faith.

Today, I stand grateful, resilient, and determined to rebuild a future where my children can live with dignity, safety, and hope. Thanks to the generosity of the Archdiocese of Toronto's Office for Refugees (ORAT) and our parish community in Bolton, who welcomed us into their community.



PRAY



FAST



GIVE

Supporting ORAT

Our work is supported by the generosity of the Archdiocese of Toronto, ShareLife, various collaborating organizations and the faithful. If you would like to donate to support the work of this office, please click the donate button.



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