

Halton welcoming 50 Syrian refugee families by end of April: HMC

By Julia Le
Metroland Media Group

Halton can expect to welcome 50 Syrian refugee families by the end of April.

Kim Jenkinson, executive director of Halton Multicultural Council (HMC) told the *Oakville Beaver* last week with the first wave of 14 families already settling into Halton and the surrounding GTA area, the community is ready to support the next wave of Syrian refugees on a path to a better life.

Syrian refugee fund: It also started a Syrian refugee fund that has already raised \$25,000 to help fill in the gaps where a family may need support with housing or other living expenses, or if a sponsorship agreement breaks down.

As well, HMC settlement workers have been meeting families at the airport as they arrive in Canada. Volunteer interpreters, who have gone through police background checks, are being recruited to help act as translators between a sponsoring group and a family.

Next week, HMC is offering cultur-

al sensitivity training, and registration is already full as people want to learn more about how they should interact with Syrian refugees without being offensive or ignorant.

Jenkinson added it's working on a partnership with the Canadian Mental Health Association to connect the Arabic community and break down any stigmas that surround mental health issues.

HMC is connecting Syrian refugees with community groups like the Dar Foundation, an Islamic non-profit organization that services the Muslim and Arabic communities.

Affordable housing a huge challenge: The most daunting is finding affordable housing for the families being sponsored by Halton groups.

In Halton, renters may experience difficulty finding suitable rental housing with overall vacancy rates at 1.6 per cent, according to Halton Region's 2014 State of Housing Report.

That, while, according to the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), a vacancy rate of at least three per cent is considered necessary

for adequate competition and housing options.

Too, monthly rent in Halton ranges from \$891 for a bachelor unit to about \$1,432 for a three-bedroom unit.

However if you look at the vacancy rates by unit size in the Halton Region report, a three bedroom unit has a vacancy rate of only 0.5 per cent.

Families are large: Jenkinson said sponsorship groups are experiencing difficulty when trying to find appropriate accommodations for the refugees.

"Some of the families are very large so when you're trying to house a family of eight or nine people, we're probably not talking about a three-bedroom apartment anymore — so that's a challenge...especially when housing is short...to find those spaces for larger families."

Such was the case for the Al-Balkhi family whose members arrived in Oakville Dec. 20.

Its sponsoring group, Abraham's Children Together (ACT), comprised of the interfaith community across Oakville and Mississauga, worked feverishly to find the family of seven a



Kim Jenkinson, executive director of Halton Multicultural Council, says 14 Syrian families have settled in, so the region is ready for more. Submitted Photo

home to call its own while its members were temporarily housed with Maplegrove Church members Carlos and Katy Joaquim for two weeks.

Oakville resident Sandra Onufryk, one of the Maple Grove Church members who have been spearheading the sponsorship project, told the *Oakville Beaver* Wednesday (Jan. 21) she made at least 15 calls while two other group members also helped look for ac-

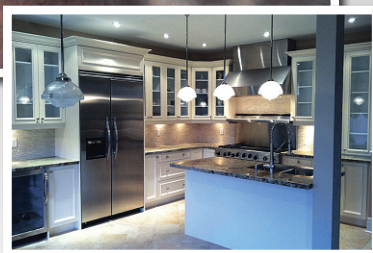
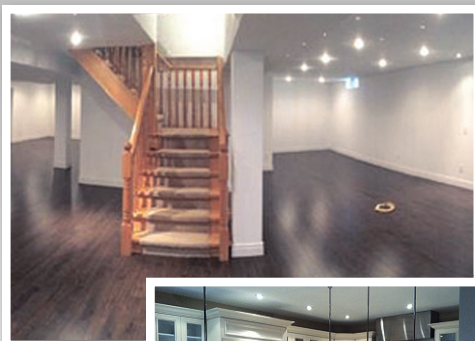
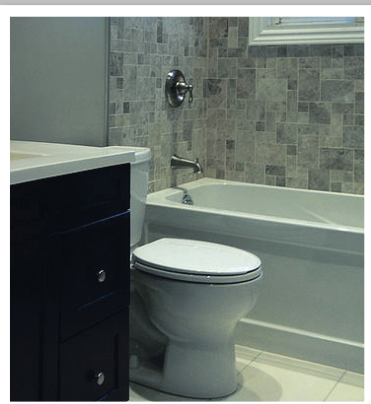
commodations for the family in and around Oakville.

Despite the challenges, Onufryk said the Oakville community has proven to have a big heart.

"I cannot express how generous the community of Oakville has been for this family," she said. "We've had incredible support for this family, both in terms of volunteers and financial donations."

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