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What is the Ottawa Sanctuary City Network?

The Ottawa Sanctuary City Network is a coalition of social service providers, lawyers, advocates, migrants, researchers, and activists who are committed to making Ottawa a more inclusive and safe city for all residents. Our current campaign focuses on efforts to make Ottawa a city where all people, regardless of immigration status, are able to access municipal services without fear of discrimination, detention or deportation.

What is a Sanctuary City?

The term refers to cities that have adopted policies to ensure that all residents, regardless of immigration status, have access to municipal services. To ensure that people can access services without fear, these policies must provide guarantees to residents that service providers will refrain from collecting information about immigration status. These policies must also prevent service providers from sharing any such information with other levels of government, in particular with immigration enforcement, unless required to do so by law. For this reason, in Canada these policies are sometimes referred to as “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” or “Access Without Fear” policies.

Over 35 cities in the United States have sanctuary policies in place. In Canada, the cities of Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, Hamilton, London and Guelph have all passed motions to implement sanctuary policies. In the face of Trump’s immigration bans, and rising anti-Muslim politics in the US, many cities and university campuses in the United States have reaffirmed or re-introduced sanctuary policies.

Why Make Ottawa a Sanctuary City?

Migrant and racialized communities in Canada are experiencing increased insecurity and violence as a result of the rise in anti-immigrant sentiment and Islamophobia. By officially declaring itself a sanctuary city, Ottawa has the opportunity to turn its commitment to inclusion into further concrete action that will make the city safer and more welcoming for all.

Successive federal governments have made immigration policies more restrictive, leading to an increase in precarious immigration status for many.

Migrants with precarious immigration status will not access recreation programs, libraries, public health services, shelters, food banks, and even public transit if they fear that doing so will put their ability to stay in their communities in jeopardy. The exclusion this produces is unjust. While not having jurisdiction over immigration, cities can act to minimize exclusion and ensure that all residents have access the city services they are entitled to. By declaring that city services will be made available to all, regardless of immigration status, and by making sure that agencies that receive city funding respect these guidelines, we can make Ottawa healthier, safer, and more welcoming. Ottawa has shown its commitment to facilitating refugee resettlement - a sanctuary city policy would build on this work by ensuring that all residents have access to services.



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A sanctuary city is a happier city

If parents are afraid to access public transit, city parks, libraries and recreation services such as sports, clubs, camps, arts, and cultural programs, children are denied the ability to fully participate in city life. Access to services is central to inclusion, health and happiness for families.

A sanctuary city helps women and children live free of violence

Women in abusive relationships are less likely to report abuse or access support and shelter services if they fear that doing so would put their family's immigration status at risk. Services for women who have experienced violence can only fully protect survivors if information about immigration status remains confidential. A sanctuary policy helps women and children build lives free of violence.

A sanctuary city is a healthier city

When some people in our community are afraid to access the public health services they are entitled to, this puts the rest of the city at risk. Children may not receive their vaccinations, and contagious diseases may not be identified and treated. This impacts their well-being and is also a public health issue.

A sanctuary city is a safer city

Refugees, new immigrants, temporary foreign workers, or people who are without status are often afraid to contact police if they are the victim of or witness to a crime. Ensuring that Ottawa police will not inquire or share information about immigration status, unless required to do so by law, is key to improving safety. Many police forces in the U.S. consider such policies a part of their community policing initiatives.