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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. Toronto, Vancouver, Hamilton, London, Guelph and Montreal have all passed motions to implement sanctuary policies.

Common Misconceptions About Sanctuary Cities

Ok, you’re convinced that such a policy is key to ensuring that we build an inclusive, healthy, and safe city for all but you don’t know what to respond to friends and colleagues who are resistant?

Here are some myth-busting arguments to help you get them on board:

Myth #1: Immigration is not a municipal concern

Reality: And that is why municipalities don’t have to enforce immigration law. It is not their role. For this reason, they can choose not to ask for information about immigration status and not share any such information unless directed by law. This is important because while immigration is regulated federally, municipalities can help protect migrants and their families, who are our neighbours in our cities. Ottawa has shown leadership in helping resettle refugees, and this is the logical next step to helping build a safe city for all. The wellbeing of all Ottawa residents, irrespective of immigration status, should be our concern.

Myth #2: Sanctuary cities are a safe haven for criminals, condoning 'illegal' behaviour

Reality: People often refer to undocumented individuals as “illegal”, or criminal. But these are often people who come to Canada with authorization/permission and may have lost this permission to stay temporarily or permanently for a variety of reasons. A sanctuary city policy ensures that a person whose visa has expired and who is waiting on a renewal, a refugee claimant who is waiting for a decision on their application or has been denied protection and decided to stay because they fear for their life, a worker who is in the process of switching visas, a foreign student who is waiting for their university registration to be finalized, etc. have access to municipal services. These individuals should have access to municipal services without the the fear that they may be discriminated against, detained or deported.



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Myth #3: Sanctuary cities are expensive and provide services to people who don't pay taxes.

Reality: People without status work, pay HST, property taxes (whether as owners or indirectly as tenants), and often have social insurance numbers. They contribute to the CPP and to EI, and have income taxes taken from their pay cheques. Despite paying taxes, they are often limited in the services they can access. By paying for services that they cannot access, migrants without status are in fact subsidising public programs. As taxpaying Ottawa residents, they should be able to access Community Health Centres, shelters for women fleeing violence, emergency services, children's programming and other city services regardless of their immigration status. Ensuring access without fear to such services is good for the whole community. It makes the community safer when everyone feels safe calling the police. Ensuring access to basic services for all is a good investment for the whole community.

Myth #4: Canada's immigration system is very generous and we can't afford to send a message that you don't need papers to access services

Reality: Canada hosts less than 1% of the world's refugees and ranks 41st on the numbers of refugees per capita, far behind countries such as Lebanon, Jordan, Chad, Kenya, or Sweden. Furthermore, more people come to Canada as temporary workers than as permanent residents. The entire system is one of growing temporariness where people are forced to live in precarious situations, often falling in and out of status. This trend is on the rise and it is important that cities make sure that no one falls through the cracks. One way to help individuals from falling through these cracks is to make Ottawa a Sanctuary City, ensuring that they can contact the police without fear if needed, can register their child for camp in the summer or use a shelter if fleeing domestic violence.

Myth #5: Ottawa has done enough – This campaign is not helpful

Reality: Ottawa has been a leader in refugee resettlement for decades. But there is always more that can be done. Becoming a sanctuary city is something we should consider not in spite of our city's efforts, but because of them. Ensuring access without fear is the logical next step in making Ottawa a welcoming city for all.



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