

The Honourable Andrew Scheer
Leader of the Opposition
House of Commons
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0A6

Via email: andrew.scheer@parl.gc.ca

June 24, 2019

Dear Andrew Scheer;

We are writing to ask your position on a critical issue in the province of Ontario: legal aid funding for refugees and immigrants. As you know, Ontario receives the vast majority of the country's refugees and immigrants, but has recently eliminated provincial funding for refugee and immigration legal services.

In its April 2019 budget, the Ontario government led by Premier Ford made deep cuts to Legal Aid Ontario. At the same time, the province entirely withdrew its funding to Legal Aid Ontario for refugee and immigration matters. Ontario Attorney General Caroline Mulroney wrote to her federal counterpart in late March, requesting that legal aid for refugee and immigration - historically a shared responsibility - be paid for entirely by the federal government.

Two full months have now passed since this was announced and implemented. During this time, legal aid for refugees and immigrants in Ontario has been decimated. Using the one-third of its budget for immigration and refugee services contributed by the federal government, Legal Aid Ontario is covering only a small fraction of the required services. And even on those limited services, legal aid is reaching capacity.

Both the provincial and federal governments acknowledge that legal aid for refugees is fundamental to ensuring that people are not deported to countries where they face persecution, torture or death. They acknowledge that legal aid is required to ensure the proper and efficient functioning of the federal tribunals, agencies and courts that handle refugee and immigration matters. The federal government recently made a historic investment of over one billion dollars to improve the efficiency of the refugee system - an investment that the current legal aid crisis jeopardizes.

Yet while the Prime Minister initially condemned the cuts as "wrong headed", no concrete steps have been taken by the federal government to resolve the problem - and the positions of the other federal party leaders remain unstated.

We are asking you: What is your position on the funding crisis? How would you address it if you were Prime Minister?

Canada's refugee and immigration system will face serious challenges of integrity and efficiency if the funding crisis is not resolved. Canada cannot be deporting marginalized people who have not had access to legal representation. Canadians need to know where you stand.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'MS', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Maureen Silcoff
Canadian Association of Refugee Lawyers (CARL)

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'LS', with a large, stylized flourish that loops back under the letters.

Leigh Salsberg
Refugee Lawyers Association of
Ontario, Access to Justice Committee