



TO: Chair and Members of the Board of Health

FROM: Christopher Mackie, Medical Officer of Health

DATE: 2016 April 21

SYRIAN NEWCOMER ACTIVITY SUMMARY

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- 1. Report No. 025-16 re: Syrian Newcomer Activity Summary be received for information; and further*
- 2. All volunteer Arabic speaking interpreters who assisted in the successful immunization of government assisted Syrian newcomers to the City of London be sent a letter of commendation from the Board in recognition of their significant contribution to this initiative.*

Key Points

- 559 of 915 (61.1%) Syrian newcomers were immunized for common communicable diseases, resulting in their protection and a reduced risk of the spread of these diseases in interim lodging sites and in the community.
- The volunteer Arabic speaking interpreters provided an invaluable service to the Middlesex-London Health Unit in assisting with the provision of the immunization clinics.
- Other public health services have been provided and steps are being taken to ensure the ongoing provision of appropriate services to Syrian newcomers in our community.

Background

Syrian newcomers began arriving in London in December 2015 as a part of Canada's commitment to receive 25,000 Syrian refugees by March 1, 2016. Under the coordination of the Southwest Local Health Integration Network and the guidance of the *Ontario Health System Action Plan: Syrian Refugees* ([Appendix A](#)), the Middlesex-London Health Unit (MLHU) partnered with other local and provincial agencies to form the Middlesex-London Health Care Planning Group for Syrian Refugees to prepare for their arrival.

Plans included the provision of temporary housing arranged by Cross Cultural Learner Centre (CCLC), London's federally-funded Resettlement Assistance Program site, which included interim lodging sites at local hotels while arrangements were being made for permanent family accommodations. In addition, the London Intercommunity Health Centre (LIHC) prepared to provide acute health care needs for the newcomers while families awaited connection with primary health care providers.

In mid-January, LIHC contacted MLHU with concerns about a potential outbreak of respiratory disease among the government assisted newcomers at interim lodging sites in London, and their capacity to handle the implications of such an outbreak. In fact there was no outbreak, however, there were concerns that newcomers were not being resettled into the community or being connected with primary health care providers as quickly as anticipated. As a result, large numbers of newcomers, many of whom were inadequately immunized for common communicable diseases, remained in relatively crowded living conditions for an extended period of time. The risk of the spread of communicable disease at the interim lodging sites was deemed unacceptably high and therefore the decision was made to begin offering these newcomers vaccinations that were felt to be the highest priority for those living in group settings.

Immunization

From January to March 2016, staff of the MLHU, CCLC and LIHC collaborated successfully in a short period of time to immunize almost all Syrian newcomers who remained in interim lodging sites at the time. Arrangements were made quickly to present vaccine information sessions at the interim lodging sites; set up and staff vaccination clinics; provide transportation to and from the clinics; and to obtain the services of Arabic speaking, foreign trained physicians as volunteers to assist in all of these activities. The contribution of these interpreters cannot be overstated – they voluntarily gave a great deal of their own time and without them, the success of this large scale immunization initiative would have been difficult to achieve. Between January 25 and March 10, MLHU staff organized ten immunization clinics and immunized 559 Syrian newcomers, which represented 61.1% of the 915 government assisted newcomers who arrived in London between December 20, 2015 and March 6, 2016. There were 1,412 vaccine doses administered, providing protection against the following diseases: diphtheria, *Haemophilus influenzae* type b (Hib), influenza, invasive meningococcal disease, measles, mumps, pertussis (whooping cough), polio, rubella, tetanus, and varicella (chickenpox).

Other Public Health Services

Other public health services have been provided to support Syrian newcomers. MLHU's Health Care Provider Outreach staff assisted the Cross Cultural Learner Centre and London Intercommunity Health Centre in garnering support from and expediting linkages between primary health care providers. They are working collaboratively to develop resources to support health care providers in their work with Syrian newcomers. MLHU consulted with hotel management at interim lodging sites regarding on-site tobacco use, provided tobacco education for newcomers, and completed regular site inspections. Several sessions, with a focus on preconception and prenatal information and support, were provided to women who were pregnant and/or planning a pregnancy. Two dental screening sessions were provided; out of the 81 children screened, 43 were referred for urgent dental care in the Emergency and Essential Services Stream of Healthy Smiles Ontario (HSO) program, and those not considered as urgent were enrolled in the core HSO program for preventative and treatment services. CCLC provided education sessions to MLHU staff regarding cultural competence, with approximately 100 staff attending.

Next Steps

In anticipation of the arrival of approximately 4,400 additional Syrian newcomers to Ontario over the remainder of 2016, an internal working group has been established to explore what additional public health needs exist for Syrian newcomers and how those services and supports can best be provided. Internal coordination and external collaboration are both considered key in this process. MLHU and CCLC are planning for more, although less frequent, immunization clinics over the next several months. MLHU will participate in discussions with a group of community partners about developing a coordinated approach for ongoing parenting support. It is expected that the enhanced system of support put in place for Syrian newcomers will extend to the work MLHU engages in with all immigrants and refugees in London and Middlesex County.

This report was prepared with contributions from several staff involved in this initiative.



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This report addresses the following requirement(s) of the Ontario Public Health Standards (2008):
Emergency Preparedness Program Standard; Infectious Diseases Program Standards – Vaccine Preventable Diseases;