

Gretna Reception Centre at 599 Berlin Avenue - Questions and Answers



Who is an asylum seeker?

An asylum seeker, or refugee claimant, is a person who, from fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, social group, or political opinion, has crossed an international border into a country in which they hope to be granted refugee status. The asylum seekers who have been crossing into Canada are young and old, single men and women, families, single parents and elders who come originally from many different countries.

Isn't it illegal for asylum seekers to cross the border in this manner?

As a signatory to the United Nations Refugee Convention, Canada is committed to providing protection for refugees. Under Canadian law, individuals have a legal right to seek asylum without penalty applied to illegal entry and to fair and timely review of their case and adequate supports until a decision is made. Those crossing the border irregularly are intercepted by the RCMP and taken to Canada Border Services Agency at the Port of Entry for examination and screening.

What is Manitoba Housing's plan for 599 Berlin?

The vacant building will be utilized as a reception centre for asylum seekers. Provincial staff members will provide short-term shelter, assist with completion of initial documentation, and triage individuals and families proceeding through the refugee claimant process into Winnipeg. We expect that up to 60 people could be housed at 599 Berlin, although we will carefully monitor numbers to ensure we are not overwhelming the building infrastructure, the capacity of our social services staff, or the community-at-large.

Are any Manitoba Housing tenants or seniors being moved out because of this project?

No. This building has not been used as seniors housing for several years. It was most recently used as employee housing for a local employer who had hired a number of immigrants. In all areas, the provincial response to the growing number of asylum seekers is based on ensuring that they are treated no differently than any Manitoban in need of social services, and that no Manitobans are displaced as a result of meeting the needs of an asylum seeker.

Will the site be supervised?

Yes, the site will be supervised at all times. Provincial staff will be on site during the day and contract security will be in the building overnight.

How long will an asylum seeker stay in Gretna?

The vast majority of individuals and families will be moved along to Winnipeg within 2 to 5 days. There is a requirement that all asylum seekers present to federal staff located in Winnipeg within 3 working days.

Are the asylum seekers a security risk to the Gretna community?

The processes put in place by Canada Border Services Agency are rigorous. The screening at the border is extensive, and individuals whose identities can't be established, or who have a history of violence, are detained at the border. In the experience of the settlement service providers, there has been no reason to believe asylum seekers are a specific risk to the community. The individuals and families who come to make a refugee claim do so in order to make a better life for themselves, and are not coming to cause trouble. They are seeking safety and security in Canada.

How will they be fed?

Manitoba Housing is working with local restaurants and other local food service providers to plan for meals.

What will these individuals be doing while staying at the Reception Centre?

While in Gretna, provincial staff will work in partnership with the Canadian Border Services Agency to fill out the required paperwork in preparation for their next steps. Those individuals who are staying in Manitoba and requiring financial assistance will also have an initial assessment completed. The time in Gretna is also an opportunity for provincial staff to assess their long-term housing and support needs. It is our hope that by completing the paperwork and the assessment in Gretna, individuals and families will be better positioned to transition quickly from temporary housing and into permanent housing in Winnipeg, or wherever they may choose to live in Manitoba.

How will this affect me and my family on a daily basis?

Other than seeing new people within the community (walking, shopping, dining etc.), it is not expected that you will be impacted personally. That being said, the Reception Centre staff will be available to answer any questions that arise. Residents of Gretna are encouraged to stop in and say hello. Our hope is that open communication and information sharing will alleviate fears held by both community members and the asylum seekers.

Will there be a benefit to the community?

Every reasonable effort will be made to purchase goods and services at a local level. This could include retail and grocery stores, restaurants, motels etc. The initiative will also provide some employment opportunities in the community.

When will this happen?

Provincial staff members are scheduled to begin preparation (set up rooms) immediately. They expect to be ready to receive asylum seekers beginning in May. The expectation is that there will be a gradual "ramp up" of individuals staying on site, the full capacity of the building will not be occupied all at once.

Why was the community not informed sooner?

Although there have been Provincial staff on site and preliminary discussions regarding the suitability of the building held, the decision to move forward was just recently made. Sharing information with the community was identified as a high priority, and a meeting was scheduled as quickly as possible.

Will community services (RCMP/Fire/Emergency/health care) be further stressed because of this?

To date, the vast majority of asylum seekers have arrived healthy, and we have not required police or other emergency service providers to be involved with any regularity. The RCMP and the Southern Health Authority have been made aware of our plans and have not expressed any concerns with the operation.

How long will the Reception Centre be open?

The Province recognizes that maintaining a reception centre in Gretna is not a long-term sustainable strategy. It is our hope that by opening up the facility in Gretna, and staffing it with provincial staff, we will be able to gather better data, and improve the predictability of the flow of asylum seekers into Winnipeg. This will help us determine our long-term plan.