

Understanding the Experiences of African Asylum Seekers in Peel, York Region, and Toronto.

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United Way
Greater Toronto



CENTRE FOR
COMMUNITY
BASED RESEARCH



LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

It is with profound respect that United Way Greater Toronto acknowledges that we operate on the traditional territory and gathering place of many Indigenous nations including the Wendat, the Anishnaabeg and the Haudenosaune. Today, it is home to many urban Indigenous Peoples, including First Nations, Métis and Inuit Peoples.

We recognize that the Greater Toronto Area is covered by several treaties including Treaty 13 signed with the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation and the Williams Treaties signed by seven First Nations including the Chippewas of Beausoleil, Georgina Island and Rama, and the Mississaugas of Alderville, Curve Lake, Hiawatha and Scugog Island.

We recognize the rights of Indigenous communities and acknowledge the ancestral and unceded territories of the First Nations, Métis and Inuit Peoples across Turtle Island. We honour the teachings of Indigenous Peoples with respect to the land we each call home and our responsibilities to the land and one another. We are committed to improving our relations with Indigenous Peoples and acting on our responsibilities in Truth and Reconciliation and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

United Way Greater Toronto recognizes all Treaty peoples, including those who arrived as settlers, as migrants either in this generation or in generations past. We also acknowledge those who came here involuntarily, particularly those brought to these lands as a result of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and Slavery.

We must also acknowledge the deep-rooted inequities that persist today because of historical injustices. The legacy of colonization and slavery has left enduring impacts on Indigenous and African-descended communities, manifesting in disparities in economic opportunities, education, housing, health care, and systemic discrimination.

In recognizing this history and the current context, we pay tribute to the ancestors of African Origin and descent.

PARTNERS



As the largest non-government funder of community services in the GTA, United Way Greater Toronto reinforces a crucial community safety net to support people living in poverty. United Way’s network of agencies and initiatives in neighbourhoods across Peel, Toronto and York Region works to ensure that everyone has access to the programs and services they need to thrive. Mobilizing community support, United Way’s work is rooted in groundbreaking research, strategic leadership, local advocacy and cross-sectoral partnerships committed to building a more equitable region and lasting solutions to the GTA’s greatest challenges.

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CCBR is passionate about bringing people together to imagine and build innovative solutions to pressing societal issues. The Centre’s approach to research is community-driven, participatory, and action-oriented. It mobilizes people to participate in creating more responsive and supportive communities, especially for people with limited power and opportunity.

CCBR is a non-profit organization located on the University of Waterloo campus (in Conrad Grebel University College). We receive no core funding, relying on our entrepreneurial spirit in collaboration with our many partners.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Recommendations



BACKGROUND

In 2023, municipalities in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) saw a significant increase in refugee asylum seekers from African countries. An already stretched social services system and a crisis in the availability of shelter beds led many newly arrived refugees to sleep outdoors. Several high-profile cases involved the tragic deaths of individuals seeking access to shelter services.

As GTA residents saw this crisis unfold on daily newscasts, many raised concerns about the challenges asylum seekers faced in accessing shelter. In response, the City of Toronto Ombudsman's Office launched an investigation and concluded that the decision to restrict access to regular shelter beds was unfair, poorly planned and inconsistent with the City's commitments to transparency, accountability and the right to adequate housing (Ombudsman Toronto, 2024). In October 2023, the federal government committed to funding a reception centre for refugee asylum seekers in the Greater Toronto Area. On February 1, 2025, the Region of Peel launched a shelter and modified reception centre for asylum claimants, providing wraparound supports and services in collaboration with Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC). The shelter/reception centre has a capacity of 680 beds, designated for individual asylum claimants. The ongoing funding model for this initiative is evolving as various government levels clarify and affirm ongoing operational funding sources.

Many Black-led and faith-based groups sounded the alarm and stepped up to help. While federal, provincial, and municipal/regional governments struggled to meet urgent housing and social needs, these informal groups tried to connect with other service organizations to work together to create

a network of support. Newly arrived asylum seekers were therefore navigating a system of informal and formal services, provided by a myriad of community agencies, multiple levels of government, and health and education systems.

Anecdotal reports suggested that newly arrived asylum seekers were facing challenges in navigating this complex system of support. The most significant challenges were reported in the Regional Municipalities of Peel and York Region and in the City of Toronto. The municipal governments in these areas are responsible for emergency and shelter services and social assistance through Ontario Works.

This research study was therefore initiated by United Way Greater Toronto (United Way), in partnership with the City of Toronto, Region of Peel and The Regional Municipality of York to better understand how African refugee asylum seekers were connecting to and interacting with this system of support. The research was guided by an advisory committee of existing system players and led by a joint research team from the United Way and the Centre for Community Based Research (CCBR).

The first phase of the study developed a coordinated and comprehensive strategy to address the challenges African refugee asylum seekers faced in Peel, Toronto and York Region. In phase two, the various system, sector and philanthropic actors convened to explore service planning solutions to the challenges identified in phase one.

This report is written within a shifting policy context. Federally, the Government of Canada has recently announced changes to its immigration policy. The reduction in immigration targets and temporary

residents announced on October 24, 2024 has been matched with decreased funding to settlement programs, including for refugee newcomers (IRCC, 2024). These reductions have put the broader settlement sector in flux, likely impacting both refugee newcomers (including those from Africa) and the broader system of support.

At the municipal level, on December 17, 2024, the City of Toronto Council authorized the General Manager, Toronto Shelter and Support Services, to reimburse up to \$3,475,332 to churches and community organizations for their eligible expenses towards providing temporary shelter to refugee claimants incurred until December 31, 2023. The City's Shelter Safety Action Plan also includes

measures to address anti-Black racism in the homelessness sector. This includes implementing a Shelter Management Information System and an Anti-Black Racism Reporting Tool, pending a Privacy Impact Assessment and compliance with the Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (City of Toronto, 2024).

These recent policy shifts demonstrate the fluid and dynamic context in which this research has taken place. This context also includes other GTA residents who struggle with housing affordability and access to services.

A Note on Terms

The words "refugee claimant" and "asylum seeker" are often used interchangeably to refer to people who have fled their country due to persecution and intend to seek protection in Canada. The term "refugee claimant" is a designation meant to protect refugees' rights enshrined under Canadian and international law to housing, work and education while displaced. The UNHCR uses the term "asylum seekers" to include people whose request for refugee status has not yet been processed and people who intend to file but have not yet made their request (CCR 2024). Throughout this report, we use the term "refugee asylum seeker" or, more simply, "asylum seeker."

The phrase "support system" refers to the services and resources, and the interactions among them, designed to help asylum seekers throughout their claim process and with their settlement and integration into Canadian society. This system encompasses a range of sectors such as housing, legal assistance, healthcare, education, employment assistance and other social services providing information and settlement support, while promoting socio-cultural integration and a sense of belonging. The recommendations found in this report are intended to strengthen and improve this system of support to the benefit of African refugee asylum seekers in Peel, Toronto, and York Region.



RESEARCH OVERVIEW

The purpose of this research study was to explore and understand the experiences of African refugee asylum seekers in Peel, Toronto, and York Region, to identify promising practices as well as existing gaps within support systems, and to inform efforts for meaningful improvement.

The study intended to answer four main questions:

- 1

What are the shared successes and the barriers and challenges faced by African refugee asylum seekers in Peel, Toronto and York Region?
- 2

What promising practices in support systems are enabling these successes?
- 3

Where are the persistent gaps in support systems in Peel, Toronto and York Region?
- 4

What strategic actions would improve support for African refugee asylum seekers in Peel, Toronto and York Region?

A community-based research approach was used in this study. This means that efforts were made for the research to be as community-driven, participatory and action-oriented as possible (Janzen & Ochocka, 2020). These principles were operationalized in four important ways.

1. **Advisory committee:** The committee was made up of people with a broad cross-section of perspectives and experiences on the topic of African refugee asylum seekers who helped guide the research process. The group met five times over seven months to give input into the research scope, methodology, analysis, community forum and recommendations.

2. **Diverse research team:** The research team consisted of a mix of professional community-based researchers and those with a deep understanding of service systems (including for refugee newcomers) in the Greater Toronto Area. This joint United Way and CCBR team was led by a researcher who had recently been an African refugee asylum seeker and included others with refugee/newcomer backgrounds and lived experience as Black People.
- 12 UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN ASYLUM SEEKERS
- RESEARCH OVERVIEW
3. **Community forum:** A forum was organized to bring together research participants, the advisory committee and research team in order to share and verify research results and to discuss suggestions for future action. 26 participants attended.

4. **Co-developed recommendations:** Study recommendations were developed collaboratively by the joint research team with input from the advisory committee and based on suggestions from both research and community forum participants (see last section of the report).

This research was conducted between June to December 2024. It was designed as a qualitative, exploratory study that involved three methods of data collection:

1. **Document review:** Relevant documents, including local government reports, minutes of City/Regional Council meetings and media reports, were reviewed to contextualize the research findings.

2. **Individual and group discussions:** A total of 29 African refugee asylum seekers and nine service providers were interviewed remotely or in-person via individual interviews or focus groups. A semi-structured discussion followed the study's main research questions. African asylum seekers were purposively sampled to include those who arrived in Canada in the past six months to three years, were 18 years or older, resided in Peel, Toronto, and York Region and reflected a diversity in gender (including those identifying as 2SLGBTQ+), region of origin, ability and family structure. Discussions were held in English and French. Service providers were those who currently support African asylum seekers and sampled for diverse representation in the service sector, types of experience and gender. Free, prior and informed consent was obtained in advance of the interviews, aided by the involvement of a researcher with lived experience (for asylum seeker discussions).

3. **Community forum:** A community forum was organized to validate the findings with community members and stakeholders and to prioritize future actions based on the findings. The two-hour in-person forum was held at the Bathurst-Finch Hub (North York, Ontario). It included two rounds of brief presentations by the research team, each followed by round table conversations. While the forum did function to verify research findings, the conversations also served as providing more in-depth data that is included in this report.

UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN ASYLUM SEEKERS 13

The qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis across all methods and according to the four main research questions. The advisory committee was engaged in reviewing and providing their input on the preliminary findings. Data was analyzed with consideration of anti-Black racism within broader social systems. Systemic racism is present in Canada's immigration system (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2022). It shapes the experiences of people of African descent at multiple levels, in a way that other groups may not face as acutely. The challenges to accessing housing, employment and social services can be compounded by racial bias and stereotypes that influence the decisions of service providers, landlords and policymakers. (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2023). By centering anti-Black racism, the research highlights the specific ways this form of racism operates within Canada's immigration framework. It goes beyond generalized discussions of discrimination to uncover how anti-Black racism uniquely marginalizes African asylum seekers. This approach ensures that their lived experiences are not overlooked or homogenized within broader immigrant narratives.

Finally, a word about what this research is not. The study was exploratory rather than confirmatory or comprehensive. It was not quantitative research aimed at generalizing the experiences of all African asylum seekers or mapping the entire system of support. Instead, the research intended to gain more in-depth insights of key issues for the sake of timely action. It did so by foregrounding the voices of African asylum seekers. While asylum seekers are not expected to have a full awareness of programming that exists, this research explores a deeper understanding of the experiences and barriers that they face even while building on the strengths of the current system of support.



RESEARCH FINDINGS

This section presents the research findings. In it, we summarize what we heard from our individual and group discussions and forum participants while commenting on how these on-the-ground perspectives connect to the broader context as found in the document review. The four sections of the findings are organized according to the study’s four main research questions under the headings:

- 1 Experiences faced by African asylum seekers,
- 2 Promising practices offered by service providers,
- 3 Existing gaps in the local systems of support, and
- 4 Suggestions for improving support

1 Experiences faced by African asylum seekers

The first main research question probed for both the negative and positive experiences faced by recent African asylum seekers in Peel, Toronto and York Region. The findings below are organized into two categories starting with significant challenges (as they dominated), followed by some positive experiences. Combined, these experiences shed light on the inadequacies of existing systems of support and underscore the need for a more cohesive and effective support network in assisting African asylum seekers.

SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES

Both African asylum seekers and service providers alike emphasized that recent African asylum seekers faced significant challenges during their settlement journey. The major challenges encountered are found below, listed in order of strength of opinion. Notice that some challenges are linked to broader issues in society (such as housing, employment, and mobility), while others are more uniquely specific to asylum seeker experiences (such as legal services and language).

Challenges of securing stable housing.

Access to stable and affordable housing was the major challenge noted across research participants. Many participants highlighted the high cost of living in Peel, Toronto, and York Region, which compounded their difficulties in securing affordable housing. Participants also spoke about the hardship of arriving in Canada only to discover that shelters were unavailable (due to capacity) or having to endure living in an overcrowded shelter with its lack of privacy. Finally, discrimination in accessing housing was also foregrounded as articulated by this service provider:

“When it comes to.... housing ... a lot of people will not accept asylum seekers or refugee claimants because they’re not trusting of them being able to pay them. (The agency) has had a lot of clients that have been discriminated against because of that.”
–Service provider

This participant further explained that some landlords outright refused to rent to asylum seekers who are not receiving Ontario Works and other landlords do not consider Ontario Works a reliable source of income.

An asylum seeker from Peel shared her personal experience of being denied housing due to her immigration status. She believed racism was a significant factor in the landlord’s rejection. In addition, a participant at the community forum explained that asylum seekers have been taken advantage of by landlords. One such example involved a renter who sublet a basement apartment to 16 African refugees at an exorbitant cost. These types of experiences are supported by reports from the Homeless Hub, which note that immigrants and refugees in Canada often face isolation, fear and anxiety — feelings which are

amplified for racialized individuals who experience discrimination (Springer, 2021). For Black refugees in Ontario, race and immigration status significantly impact housing quality. Economic challenges, cultural differences and discriminatory practices by landlords and agents contribute to segregation in urban housing. Many Black tenants report harassment or outright rejection during the rental process, often leaving them with poor housing options (Springer, 2021).

Challenges in securing employment.

There were a number of employment challenges faced by African asylum seekers. Employment discrimination emerged as a prominent theme. An African asylum seeker in Toronto recounted a disheartening experience:

“I don’t want to mention the company but the interviewer outrightly told me that he cannot give any job to a Black [person] or to an African. They don’t trust us. I feel that there should be job placement programs for immigrants. It’s not easy.”
– African asylum seeker

Community forum participants echoed these concerns, noting that many asylum seekers arrive with significant qualifications but struggle to gain employment due to a lack of Canadian experience and challenges in transferring their credentials. These experiences align with broader trends of racial discrimination in employment, where racialized individuals face negative evaluations of their qualifications despite programs aimed at bridging these gaps (Gagnon & Ng, 2020). In addition, work permit restrictions further hinder opportunities. Asylum seekers are often barred from accessing vocational training for six months, leaving them unable to improve their employment prospects during this period.

Language barriers.

Both service providers and asylum seekers identified language barriers as one of the more significant challenges hindering the settlement process. These barriers add another layer of complexity to the numerous obstacles asylum seekers already face. Service providers expressed concern that many African asylum seeker clients struggle to understand how the system works, often due to a lack of accessible information in their native languages. This disconnect can delay access to essential resources such as housing, legal aid and healthcare.

Limited access to responsive legal support.

Participants identified three key issues with accessing legal services. First, is that many asylum seekers find it challenging to secure legal representation due to an insufficient number of available lawyers. Second, is the lack of responsiveness of lawyers who are overwhelmed by numerous client files, causing some to fail to provide timely and effective support. And third, there are communication barriers when lawyers do not speak the same language, which can lead to misunderstandings and jeopardize their cases.

Negative experiences with regional mobility.

Research participants noted challenges related to African asylum seekers moving from the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) to other regions in Ontario in search of more affordable housing. While this mobility helped some to secure more affordable housing, it was not without its own set of challenges.

A 2SLGBTQ+ participant described the hardships she faced when she moved with her three children from Toronto to Cornwall due to overcrowding in the shelter system. Initially optimistic about settling in a small, green city, she soon faced challenges when

IRCC abruptly closed the shelter she was staying in. She described this act as a “rude” eviction notice. She described her struggles finding stable housing and employment in Cornwall, compounded by a lack of relocation assistance from IRCC. Eventually, overwhelmed and unsupported, she moved back to Peel to stay with a friend, expressing frustration at the lack of help from government institutions such as Ontario Works and IRCC. As noted by a service provider participant working in one of the transfer regions, similar challenges have been reported by African asylum seekers moving to the Niagara region. They experienced both racism and a lack of job opportunities, which ultimately led many to return to the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). The participant highlighted that, in addition to limited job opportunities in these regions, asylum seekers faced significant challenges related to the legal process, as they needed to stay closer and work with their lawyers. Additionally, the lack of cultural communities in the transfer regions made it harder for African asylum seekers to integrate, which further exacerbated the difficulties they encountered.

SOME POSITIVE EXPERIENCES

Despite the dominance of challenges faced by African asylum seekers, some positive experiences were noted. Some asylum seekers considered their journey to Canada a success and appreciated the pockets of support that they received. These participants detailed where they received initial support, how they accessed information about available services and what proved most helpful as they navigated the support system. These positive experiences represent windows of hope for the broader system of support to build on.

Received helpful information from formal and informal networks.

Some participants highlighted receiving valuable information from both formal and informal networks. A service provider noted that some organizations have staff positioned at ports of entry to provide guidance. One participant explained:

“For us, we have workers at the port of entry. We work mainly with immigration services and the Region of Peel. They give a lot of our clients’ booklets about our services and explain the kinds of things we can help them with and in which cities they can find us.”
– Service provider

Participants also received information through informal channels such as friends, cultural communities, social media platforms (e.g., Facebook), word-of-mouth and information sessions offered by service provider organizations.

Received informal support from faith and cultural communities.

Many participants emphasized the vital role of faith and cultural communities in providing guidance and emotional support during their settlement journey. Faith communities often directed them to legal resources, food banks and counselling services. For instance, a participant from Peel stated:

“At church, they incorporate African-style worship services sometimes and create prayer circles specifically for immigrants and refugees. It comforted me amidst everything I was going through. I felt welcome.”
– African asylum seeker

Cultural events also played a key role in fostering a sense of belonging. Participants spoke of how attending cultural gatherings helped them celebrate traditions, meet people from similar backgrounds and learn new languages. For example, an asylum-seeking participant from Toronto relayed how her community was so supportive, saying:

“Community is where I found myself. I had supportive people always willing to listen. I was pregnant at the time when I came here, so I was able to access proper healthcare. But most importantly was that the environment and the community around me were able to accept me and support me. That was what I felt that made me feel so welcome.”
– African asylum seeker

Participants highlighted how cultural communities played a crucial role in fostering a sense of belonging, providing employment opportunities and shielding them from anti-Black racism. One asylum seeker participant shared how the Black community helped him find jobs, allowing him to avoid what he described as the “white man’s job”, meaning he was worried about working for a white employer and the potential racism associated with it. Regarding housing, a community forum participant indicated that Black landlords have been proven to be more helpful in renting to African asylum seekers. These communities acted as support networks, both in person and online. For instance, a participant from York Region noted that they connected via “online groups where I got to meet with people from my country online. Then we got to meet [in-person] and that was how they helped me because they had been here for a while. So, they were able to show me around and tell me what I need to know about the country.”

A 2SLGBTQ+ participant from Toronto described the support she received from cultural communities, emphasizing the role of WhatsApp groups in sharing job opportunities and offering emotional support: "... If you're going through a mental challenge or you're going through a hard time, they have people who you can talk with and express your feelings. I believe it's been much help."

Developed self-determination and resilience.

Some participants highlighted their own self-determination and resilience as critical strengths that helped them navigate the challenges of being asylum seekers. One participant from Peel shared that "self-determination, community, pastors and support groups," were key elements that sustained him. Similarly, a 2SLGBTQ+ participant reflected on her journey, stating:

"For me, I've built up a thick skin. The whole experience made me feel resilient. I cried about it then, but I can't cry about it now. But I think government institutions that deal with asylum seekers should learn to appreciate the fact that in addition to diplomatic challenges, we're looking for some place to call home."

– African asylum seeker

Received financial assistance from the government.

Government assistance was another positive experience expressed by asylum seeker participants. Financial assistance that was found to be particularly helpful included housing, financial aid, health services, job training and legal aid. A 2SLGBTQ+ participant highlighted housing support as the most valuable, while healthcare provided under the Interim Federal Health Program and Ontario Works was praised as well. One participant expressed gratitude for her husband's health insurance and access to a midwife. Another acknowledged access to dental care through Healthy Smiles, adding, "They just sent the Healthy Smiles direct to me ... being in a shelter, I was able to access that facility."

Had a positive experience with regional mobility.

One French-speaking asylum seeker shared his success after moving to Cornwall. He described how the move positively impacted his integration and ability to rebuild his life while waiting for his refugee claim to be heard. He quickly found employment, secured housing and integrated into the community. He credited his success to receiving accurate and helpful information from immigration services and support from cultural communities and friends. Reflecting on his journey, he emphasized the critical importance of having "good" and reliable information, stating that misinformation often leads to unnecessary struggles for asylum seekers.



2 Promising practices offered by service providers

This shorter section highlights promising practices offered by service providers that have contributed to the successful settlement of African asylum seekers in Peel, Toronto and York Region. Generally, these promising practices have been piecemeal, particularly in light of the large numbers of African asylum seekers arriving in Peel, Toronto, and York Region. Still, research participants (particularly service providers) were able to identify a number of promising practices. These could be adapted and scaled to benefit all African asylum seekers. We categorized these promising practices into two main groups of promising practices for all asylum seekers (and other newcomers) and promising practices specifically for African/Black asylum seekers.

PROMISING PRACTICES FOR ALL ASYLUM SEEKERS (AND OTHER NEWCOMERS)

Helpful support services.

Asylum seeker participants highlighted various support services that have been instrumental in their settlement journey. Employment-related initiatives, such as job fairs and career development programs, were particularly valued. One participant from Toronto praised these efforts, stating, “Support will include holding employment and career fairs ... We’ve had sessions on resumes and career improvement.” These services provided critical opportunities for skill-building and job placement, helping asylum seekers (or other newcomers) navigate the employment landscape in Canada.

Family-focused services also emerged as beneficial, especially for parents managing the dual challenges of settlement and childcare. Programs such as after-school homework clubs and holiday activities not only supported children’s education and engagement but also alleviated financial burdens. As one participant explained, “... the programming team helps the children... They have activities for them during summer and holidays ... That brings a bit more of a load off my back because if I had to pay for these activities, I wouldn’t be able to.”

In addition, participants identified other helpful practices that addressed specific community needs. These included youth programming in shelters, tailored support for vulnerable groups such as pregnant women and 2SLGBTQ+ individuals and providing on-site health professionals in shelters. Collectively, these services were recognized for their role in easing the settlement process and promoting well-being among asylum seekers.

Operating through an anti-oppressive and trauma-informed lens.

Service providers highlighted their efforts to create safe and supportive environments by applying anti-racist and trauma-informed approaches. A service provider explained: “We try and operate from an anti-homophobic, anti-racist, anti-oppressive lens. They’re fleeing their countries because of oppression, and we try and get them out of that mental state by creating a space where they feel safe.” Service providers also organized group sessions and peer-to-peer chats, allowing asylum seekers to open up about their experiences. This approach helps service providers understand the challenges their clients face — including the trauma and mental health issues (including the potential stigma around these issues) asylum seekers carry with them from experiences in their countries of origin — enabling them to offer tailored support.

Creating avenues for asylum seekers to stay connected to their cultural community.

Some service providers said that their organizations play a crucial role in helping asylum seekers stay connected to their cultural communities, particularly with people from their country of origin. These connections foster a sense of belonging and provide vital informal support, helping asylum seekers access resources and navigate their new environment. Participants emphasized the importance of these cultural networks.

Community organizations also play a significant role in connecting asylum seekers to essential resources. Another asylum seeker in Toronto highlighted the support she received from the African Canadian Social Development Council and how connecting with a resource centre in Toronto had been incredibly helpful. By creating or facilitating these connections, community organizations help asylum seekers feel welcomed and supported, making their transition smoother and fostering a sense of belonging in their new surroundings.

Tailoring support to specific needs.

Some service providers shared their efforts to address the specific needs of their asylum seeker clients. For example, one participant explained that their organization focused on building a sense of community for women that they support, given that many come from backgrounds where social isolation is uncommon. In addition, they help to address any cultural shock that the asylum seeker may be experiencing. This process helps to create a familiar and supportive environment where asylum seeker women can start identifying and naming the traumas they have faced. In her own words:

“We provide comprehensive wraparound support services, including addiction and mental health treatment, as well as culturally sensitive programming. Each woman receives an individualized case plan tailored to her needs, and we ensure she is matched with an appropriate caseworker who can provide effective support..”

– Service provider

Increasing municipal funding to address the refugee crisis.

Some participating service providers noted the allocation of additional funds from municipal governments to help address the immediate challenges faced by asylum seekers. For example, they highlighted the targeted funding support in Peel to address specific urgent needs to be encouraging and promising. In the words of one service provider:

“Peel Region is including some financial assistance for first and last month [rent] and deposit, even rental risk financial assistance. Things are getting better because now Peel Region has a crisis office for refugees. We know where to call when we have some refugee stuck at the airport or is homeless, and we can get support quickly. Or at least we have someone to talk to.”

– Service provider

Providing digital services.

Both asylum seekers and service providers highlighted the value of digital services in facilitating access to resources. A service provider explained:

“We provide digital and in-person services. We try to accommodate as much as possible the needs of the clients, and many of the clients have some mobility challenges.”

– Service provider

Asylum seekers generally agreed that online services are convenient and efficient. One participant shared:

"I find it's easier for me to check something online. Like I was looking at upgrading and doing a pre-university course, and I thought if I go all the way [there in person] and then I don't get someone to talk to me [I would have wasted my time]. I just checked for the contacts online and called to see if I am able to do it. I like doing things like that online first before going in person."

– African asylum seeker

PROMISING PRACTICES SPECIFICALLY FOR AFRICAN/BLACK ASYLUM SEEKERS

Recruiting staff with lived experiences as African asylum seekers.

Having staff who understand the experiences of African asylum seekers was described as a promising practice in some organizations. A service provider emphasized this point, stating that in her organization, "most of the staff, more than 50% are Black and they are from Africa, and most of them even came to Canada as asylum seekers, including myself. So, it's very easy when you are facing an African asylum seeker." Other participants shared that having staff with lived experience helps build more trust when working with clients. Clients feel understood and there is an added layer of hope for a successful settlement experience.

Involving Black-led community service organizations.

The environmental scan conducted during this research highlighted that Black-led organizations have played a key role in addressing the recent African asylum seeker crisis in Peel, Toronto and York Region. These organizations have been actively involved in various roundtable discussions, contributing valuable insights and expertise (City of Toronto, 2024). Media reports highlight that Black-led churches and organizations are shouldering much of the care for refugees (Fagan, 2024).

Some research participants echoed this assessment. Asylum seekers and service providers emphasized that involving Black organizations helps ensure the needs and voices of African asylum seekers are not overlooked. Participants also shared how Black-led organizations and faith communities responded to needs for things like temporary shelter and food security. Yet, despite identifying the significant contributions of Black-led organizations, these participants noted that there remains a pressing need to further increase their involvement and improve their capacity.



3 Existing gaps in the local systems of support

This section highlights gaps in the African asylum seeker support system, focusing on challenges at the local or direct service level, as well as broader systemic inequities that contribute to these issues. Combined, the gaps indicate that both targeted and systemic interventions are needed to create a support system that addresses immediate needs while tackling deep-seated inequities in society.

GAPS IN THE LOCAL SYSTEM

Research participants named a number of gaps in how the local system of support functions for African asylum seekers in Peel, Toronto and York Region. These gaps occur within local service delivery and highlight how organizations and institutions are not adequately equipped to meet the specific needs of asylum seekers. Five main gaps were identified.

Limited culturally sensitive and trauma-informed services.

A significant gap in supporting African asylum seekers is the limited availability of culturally sensitive services and the inadequate preparedness of service providers. In all group discussions, both asylum seekers and service providers frequently emphasized the need for specialized training to enable service providers to deliver culturally appropriate support.

Additionally, service providers pointed out that many asylum seekers arrive in Canada traumatized or living with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), underscoring the need for trauma-informed services tailored to their unique experiences. An asylum seeker from Toronto emphasized the need for programs focused

on stress management, including support groups for those dealing with such challenges. Participants also expressed concern over the lack of information on the psychosocial impacts and different types of trauma, such as childhood trauma, discrimination trauma or trauma related to being a 2SLGBTQ+ person in hiding.

A service provider participant discussed how the system retraumatizes African asylum seekers, noting that while they arrive with hopes of freedom, they face a system that disadvantages them:

“The way the system retraumatizes the refugee claimants that come into this country ... It’s one thing to be a refugee, but the worst of all is to be a refugee of African descent. It puts you at a major disadvantage because you’re coming from an oppressive society. And then you’re coming to a society where you have this dream of freedom — freedom of speech, freedom of art, where you can openly be yourself — and then you’re faced with a system that is designed to be at a disadvantage to you. And then you get retraumatized, and you’re silenced. I don’t want to ask, because they feel I’m asking for too much.”

– Service provider

The participant continued:
“Some of [the African asylum seekers] were trained to keep quiet and just follow others. Now they come into a system where they’re able to actually speak. But when they speak, they are labeled. So, because they don’t want to be labeled, they become silent, and they begin to bottle up these things inside of them. And this is where we talk about cultural sensitivity.”

– Service provider

Inconsistent information and gaps in collaboration.

Participants identified inconsistent and conflicting information about available services as a significant issue in the support system. An asylum-seeking participant highlighted that misinformation is widespread, with institutions often providing contradictory answers leading to frustration and a sense of inadequacy. They suggested, “If I ask a question, the answer should be the same everywhere. If it differs, there should be a clear explanation.”

A service provider emphasized that asylum seekers and other newcomers frequently receive inaccurate or outdated information. They underscored the need for delivering consistent and relevant information, stressing that their goal is to empower asylum seekers with accurate knowledge at every stage of their settlement journey. This concern was echoed at the community forum, where participants highlighted that asylum seekers are uncertain about when and how to make a claim. In discussions, participants suggested that improved support could include initiatives such as group sessions and one-on-one guidance to help asylum seekers access resources, establish meaningful connections and navigate their new environment with confidence and ease.

Collaboration among support services also presented mixed experiences. Some asylum seekers encountered challenges due to poor communication and lack of coordination between services, which hindered their access to resources. An asylum seeker participant described her challenges, “the major gaps are in communication — there is no collaboration across services.” However, asylum seekers described positive experiences where coordination was effective, though they acknowledged these cases might not reflect everyone else’s experience.

GAPS ARE EMBEDDED IN A BROADER SYSTEM

Some research participants pointed out that the local gaps identified above are embedded within broader systemic structures. While the perspectives represented below are of individual participants, they align with findings of other reports highlighting that anti-Black racism has historical and institutional roots. For example, the Ontario Federation of Labour (2023) highlighted how discriminatory immigration strategies and the lack of targeted action for Black refugees and immigrants contribute to ongoing marginalization. Addressing these local gaps, therefore, requires action not only at the local level but also at a broader structural level.

Ongoing crisis of affordable housing.

Housing was the most frequently cited area of concern. African asylum seekers emphasized the scarcity of affordable housing and the need for better housing options so that people can be living in safe and stable conditions. A participant from Toronto expressed, “There’s a housing issue in Toronto, there should be a shelter system that helps people move to transitional housing and to move to something more permanent. So, they should work on the rental market to make it a little cheaper and more affordable for everyone.” This participant also raised concerns about the lack of privacy for herself and her family while staying in shelters.

African asylum seekers in other regions echoed the gap in affordable housing. A participant from Peel remarked:

“I think housing insecurity is a major gap in the asylum support system. Emergency shelters are overcrowded and affordable housing options are

extremely limited. As a result, we sometimes spend long periods in temporary shelters that are not conducive to healing or developing a stable life. We are also victims of discrimination in the housing market, which makes it difficult to obtain safe, stable housing, even if we are sometimes entitled to it.”

– African asylum seeker

Literature also acknowledges the challenges for Black refugees and newcomers to obtain affordable housing. They often experience systemic discrimination in the rental market and have to resort to poor living conditions. It hinders their stability and recovery, and perpetuates cycles of poverty and exclusion (Springer, 2021). This issue highlights broader systemic inequities that increase the challenges African refugees encounter in local support systems.

Anti-Black racism.

African asylum seekers and service providers alike shared their perspectives on discrimination against Black individuals. They explained how anti-Black racism creates obstacles to accessing fair and equitable support. These barriers exist across multiple sectors, such as housing, healthcare and employment. Participants emphasized that the broader system is not structured to meet the needs of racialized communities. This creates a significant gap in equitable and culturally appropriate support, leaving African asylum seekers underserved in formal settlement organizations. A service provider described anti-Black racism as a pervasive form of oppression experienced by African asylum seekers, saying:

“There are a wide range of challenges that [African asylum seekers] experience, but ... most of it would be grounded in anti-Black racism ... It’s subtle. It’s microscopic. But it’s there ... Whether it’s through the language barrier ... [or] cultural differences, there’s nobody that takes the time to explain to

them. Outside of a Black service provider, [there’s nobody] who has that insight into what their experience is like, and [who] can empathize with it. It’s very difficult to offer support from that perspective, to really be able to relate to the client. So, the major oppression that they face is because of their skin.”

– Service provider

Discussing the racism issue with a group of Franco-phone asylum seekers, a participant quickly reacted. “Racism — we find it all the time in the places where we live, whether it’s in the workplace or on the bus. It may exist to different degrees, but it still exists. It exists here in Canada.”

Stressing that racism is structural and embedded in everyday life, a service provider participant mentioned, “I think the extent to which racism affects refugees and asylum seekers is so structural.” The participant provided examples, such as how a person’s name on a resume can impact their chances of being called back for a job or being automatically disadvantaged on the basis of their name. Agreeing with the previous participant, another service provider emphasized that racism affects all Black individuals, regardless of their status, and warned that it remains a systemic issue that cannot be effectively addressed without government intervention. The participant stated:

“We can talk. We can do things. But until the government deals with this matter, nothing is going to change ... The problem here is that there is systemic racism. And until this topic comes to the table, and society itself comes to discuss it, nothing is going to be changed. Yeah, they can put money into it, but it will never change ... the concept they have about African descendants.”

– Service provider

While the participant calls for government action, they also indicate that it needs to be coupled with societal knowledge of systemic racism. Funding alone is insufficient to address a deep-rooted issue.

Inequitable immigration systems.

In group conversations, including the community forum, some participants discussed the inequitable reception of African refugees. Participants shared that there seemed to be an unwillingness from decision makers to be more proactive for this group of refugees compared to their white counterparts. Highlighting these inequities, a service provider originally from Africa compared the support extended to Ukrainian refugees with the treatment of refugees from war-torn African countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Sudan. The participant stated:

“I like to do comparisons, and when I look at the Ukrainian portfolio ... I see a specific pathway created just for Ukrainians. To me, that feels like discrimination at its finest. That’s just my opinion, but it’s hard not to see it ... I often say it’s discrimination at its best, especially against Black people and other dark-skinned individuals.”

– Service provider

Long processing times for refugee status approval further exacerbate inequities, delaying financial stability and access to critical benefits. As one African asylum seeker explained:

“It’s just always a long process when it comes to getting those benefits ... You have to wait for a response which means it’s more like a long time waiting. Whatever benefits that ... the federal government is laying down for asylum seekers, they should probably make it faster. ... because most people are not financially stable and they do not even have a place to stay.”

– African asylum seeker

African asylum seekers expressed concerns about the requirement to obtain the “brown paper” (Refugee Protection Claimant document) before accessing essential services. Community forum discussions highlighted that some groups are granted quicker access to essential services than others, reflecting systemic inequities. Without this document, they are excluded from vital resources like healthcare during the critical early stages of settlement and exacerbate stress.

4 Suggestions for improving support

Participants in this research offered many suggestions about how to better support African asylum seekers in achieving their goals. In fact, suggestions for improving support were what research participants talked about the most. The suggestions emphasize the need for both individual and systemic interventions to support African asylum seekers. They also highlight the importance of both immediate improvements and long-term structural changes to foster an inclusive and equitable environment. The suggestions below from research participants are categorized into two main areas: suggestions to overcome individual challenges and suggestions to address systemic challenges.

SUGGESTIONS TO OVERCOME INDIVIDUAL CHALLENGES

This section provides suggestions from research participants about how to better support individual African asylum seekers, emphasizing actionable steps to address their unique challenges. These suggestions underscore the need for tailored interventions that address the gaps mentioned above while building on existing promising practices.

Increasing networking opportunities for African asylum seekers.

Participants highlighted the importance of expanding community events that provide African asylum seekers with opportunities to connect with each other and with service providers. African asylum seekers can offer each other mutual support and receive valuable information about available support from service providers. Such initiatives could include mentorship programs. One service provider participant had this

to say about creating more networking opportunities for asylum seekers:

“I know that there’s a lot of solutions that we could think of, but one thing for me, I think, would be community events or the ability to network ... being able to meet up with each other or meet people who have been in their positions ... One of the best ways, in my opinion, is being able to talk to and hearing from the people who are trying to help. And then also them hearing us and what we’re trying to do...”

– Service provider

An asylum seeker participant from York Region emphasized that establishing a safe space for individuals to network and share their thoughts, opinions and experiences would greatly support their settlement and integration process. As pointed out in the discussions, increasing networking opportunities would be vital for fostering connection, support and socio-cultural integration of African asylum seekers.

Creating a centre or centralized hub for African asylum seekers.

Participants emphasized the need for a centralized hub in the GTA where African asylum seekers can access support services, reliable resources and information, while also ensuring their voices are heard. One asylum seeker emphasized the importance of designing such spaces to allow individuals to provide feedback on services being offered. Some participants noted that the group discussions in this research provided a valuable opportunity to voice their concerns and reflected this desire for such a forum where they could regularly discuss the issues that affect them. Commenting on the effectiveness of group discussions, an asylum-seeking participant

said, “I feel like it’s a hub, where people can share their fears and learn about their difficulties.”

Reiterating the need for a centralized hub, another asylum seeker participant argued that the creation of a platform — such as a dedicated website — would also provide asylum seekers with resources to find jobs and achieve financial stability.

Improving accessibility to resources and leveraging digital services.

Participants emphasized the need for accessible resources and digital services to help asylum seekers navigate the support system more effectively. Providing written guides that outline the necessary steps at each stage of the asylum-seeking process was suggested to address misinformation and improve understanding. An asylum seeker participant highlighted that such guides would significantly enhance the support system.

Digital services were also noted as a valuable tool for making support easier, faster and more cost-effective to access. Participants pointed out that online platforms can help reduce the risk of encountering anti-Black racism during in-person interactions with service providers. One asylum seeker shared his perspective:

“Staying in the comfort of your home and accessing different information online, trying to find an online portal or website that can suit whatever support that you are trying to assess — digital support is going to be really helpful and will reduce the rates of discrimination when it comes to skin colour. It would be really helpful and speed up a lot of processes.”

– African asylum seeker

However, awareness and usability of existing digital services remain a challenge too. As one service provider noted:

“Most people don’t actually know about most of these digital services. So what the government might want to do is actually create public awareness of certain services — the digital support services — and also make it user friendly, easy to access and maneuver.”

– Service provider

SUGGESTIONS TO ADDRESS SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES

The suggestions here address the systemic barriers and the need for comprehensive reforms to improve support systems for African asylum seekers. Research participants consistently called for culturally responsive services, streamlined processes and stronger advocacy efforts to address systemic inequities, particularly anti-Black racism. The suggestions below emphasize the importance of collaboration between asylum seekers, service providers, community leaders and policymakers to design and implement effective solutions.

Promoting culturally responsive support programs.

The need to create culturally responsive services emerged as a key theme in discussions. Participants emphasized the importance of tailoring support to meet the unique needs of African asylum seekers. One asylum seeker suggested that increasing the number of frontline staff who are culturally knowledgeable would be beneficial. She stated: *“I feel there should be increased access to dedicated case managers who are culturally knowledgeable and able to work closely with African asylum seekers to address their individual needs.”*

Stressing the necessity of increasing the involvement of African asylum seekers in planning as a strategy to make the service culturally appropriate, another service provider participant stated:

“I believe that getting [asylum seekers] involved in the planning has really helped us design culturally sensitive programming, because we might think that we understand what they need ... [but] how can we tweak the programming in such a way that it benefits the refugee women that we serve? Getting them to teach us what their culture is, what has been their experience, what they have regarding the job that they’ve done, regarding the community they grew up in. Some of them are very open to educating us so that we are better equipped in providing that robustly designed program.”

– Service provider

Providing consistent, clear and detailed information.

Information-related concerns and how to address them were repeatedly mentioned in the research discussions. For example, one Francophone asylum seeker participant argued that asylum seekers should receive clear, relevant and detailed information about the asylum application process and the necessary steps involved. This participant stated: “If they may give you all the information you need about what to do at the airport and about all steps you need to take, it’ll be a lot easier, it will help a lot.” Another asylum seeker highlighted the need for clear information throughout the asylum-seeking process. She stated:

“There should be more ... awareness for asylum seekers, helping them understand the process clearly. Accessing support should not be overly complicated — the process should be straightforward, with clear requirements. It would be helpful if they could be informed about these steps in advance.”

– African asylum seeker

Doing more advocacy work for improving the support system.

Participants noted that advocacy was not limited to the provision of information. To drive meaningful change, some participants recommended intensifying advocacy efforts more broadly for improving the support system for asylum seekers.

A service provider participant suggested: *“Reaching out to high level structures to do more advocacy work as we took almost two hours talking about the problems that are affecting the Black community, those who are looking for asylum or refugee status. ... Can we get those people who are in higher level of politics and hold them accountable in a certain way? They’re there to represent us too. Let’s bring them to the table and discuss with all of us the issues that are affecting our community. Yes, I myself am going to continue to advocate... to educate... to support.”*

– Service provider

One asylum seeker suggested the creation of advocacy groups led by asylum seekers themselves to represent their community effectively. She explained that the groups could be invited to meetings or workshops to speak about the challenges they face. The participant argued that having asylum seeker advocates would strengthen the support system because it allows service providers to hear directly from them about the difficulties they face. This idea is similar to the model of The Migrant Workers Alliance for Change. This membership model brings together migrant workers, regardless of immigration status, to advocate for themselves (Migrant Workers Alliance for Change, 2024).

Improving mental health services for African asylum seekers.

The traumatic backgrounds of many asylum seekers and the need to address them were among the concerns raised by research participants. They emphasized the importance of providing improved culturally appropriate mental health services to effectively support asylum seekers in coping with trauma and stress. Recognizing the fragile emotional state of asylum seekers, a service provider participant underscored the importance of delivering mental health care through an anti-homophobic, anti-racist and anti-oppressive lens, particularly for 2SLGBTQ+ asylum seekers. The participant highlighted that the goal for enhancing mental health support services should include creating safe spaces for healing and support, especially in addressing trauma stemming from their home countries.

Training service providers to strengthen efforts to address anti-Black racism.

Throughout the research discussions, racism was identified as a significant challenge that undermines effective support for African asylum seekers. Therefore, participants recommended providing anti-racism and anti-oppressive training for all frontline service providers. In the words of one service provider:

“Basic training on anti-oppressive frameworks [is needed] — anti-Black racism framework. Just make it mandatory that every single employee goes through that type of training. If you’re going to be a frontline service provider, if you’re going to be somebody who will be dealing with refugee claimants or asylum seekers, then you are required to go through this type of training.”

– Service provider

A similar suggestion was made by an asylum seeker, saying: “I feel they should implement a mandatory anti-discrimination training for staff in shelters, healthcare services, employment agencies and even all the institutions that interact with asylum seekers.”

Increasing involvement of Black-led organizations in the support system.

The meaningful involvement of Black-led organizations that primarily serve the Black community was emphasized as crucial in participant discussions. Strengthening their participation in decision-making and program development was seen to enhance the effectiveness of support systems, ensuring they are culturally and racially responsive and better equipped to meet the needs of African asylum seekers. Participants highlighted the importance of ensuring that this participation is sustained throughout all phases, from program planning to implementation. A service provider made the point in this way:

“We should involve major stakeholders [such as Black-serving organizations] that really matter at that table to design the program. We should be involving frontliners who maybe have the experience of working with these clients ... then we are aiming for success. But when a program is created and we are just asked to implement those programs without our inputs [from Black-serving organizations], the sustainability of that program is already wobbling from the beginning.”

– Service provider

Increasing government funding for safer and adequate accommodations.

Another key theme that emerged from the conversations was the need for affordable, safer and adequate accommodation. Participants suggested that different levels of government can play a crucial role in addressing the housing needs of African asylum seekers, including allocating funding to subsidize rents. For example, an asylum seeker highlighted the need for increased housing assistance and stated: “I feel there should be increased investments in affordable housing projects. Maybe the government should provide ... rental subsidies and prioritize asylum seekers in housing programs.”

Expediting the asylum-seeking process and reforming policies to address biases.

Research participants emphasized the need for faster administrative procedures and addressing biases in the claim process. One participant stressed the importance of efficiency: “If this administrative procedure can be completed as quickly as possible, I don’t think many asylum claimants and refugees will suffer in Canada.” Another asylum seeker underlined the urgency for change in this topic, stating: “I personally think that it rests on the shoulders of policy reforms. If they are able to reform policies that are actually addressing this and systemic barriers and biases in the asylum process, we would actually make headway.” Another asylum seeker elaborated on the scope of necessary reforms, advocating for a more inclusive and respectful system:

“The government can advocate for the rights and dignity of asylum seekers, try to promote a culture of inclusivity and respect ... and give them certain rights just to make them feel accepted and welcome... and also try to develop programs that would promote our community engagement, like creating better communication paths between asylum seekers and the social or service providers. There should be communication, no communication barriers and there should be easy access to information when it’s being requested.”

– Asylum seeker



RECOMMENDATIONS AT A GLANCE

Based on input from study participants and broader policy analysis, this section outlines recommended actions to improve support services for African asylum seekers. These recommendations are grounded in discussions with service providers and asylum seeker research participants, as well as conversations from both the community forum and the project’s advisory committee. They are organized into three categories of **1) programs and services**, **2) investments** and **3) policy**. These categories are roughly ordered on a continuum of vulnerability to stability — of responses that address asylum seekers’ immediate vulnerability to longer-term solutions that provide stability to asylum seekers on their settlement and integration journey.

29 RECOMMENDATIONS ORGANIZED UNDER 3 CATEGORIES



1

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

1.1 Amplifying African asylum seeker's voices when developing practical solutions.

African asylum seekers are not just recipients of services but should be active participants in shaping the solutions and programs that affect them. Their insights, challenges and aspirations should be considered in the decision-making process. By giving them a platform to express their experiences and exercise their leadership skills, their needs and concerns can be better understood and addressed. To amplify their voices, we need to continue to strengthen efforts to:

- Build on and deepen existing engagement with African asylum seekers to better understand their lived experiences and their unique needs so that programming in settlement organizations can be more responsive. This can include involving African asylum seekers in municipal roundtable discussions designed to address the African asylum seekers crisis in the GTA.
- Recruit and engage service providers with lived experience as African asylum seekers or members of the African diaspora.
- Promote the value and contributions of African asylum seekers within local support systems by challenging stereotypes and promoting inclusive support systems. This can be achieved through public awareness campaigns that highlight the skills, talents and cultural perspectives African asylum seekers bring to their communities.

1.2 Building networks for African asylum seekers, including for employment.

African asylum seekers often face social isolation and limited access to professional and community networks, which are essential for successful integration. Without these connections, many struggle to secure employment, navigate services or establish a sense of belonging in the Greater Toronto Area. Building these networks early can help asylum seekers connect with mentors, peers and opportunities that will lead to their long-term stability. To achieve this, we must continue and reinforce efforts to:

- Expand community events and gatherings (e.g., cultural events, networking meetups and social online or in-person gatherings) to help individuals from similar cultural backgrounds connect, build meaningful relationships and reduce feelings of isolation.
- Connect current African asylum seekers with Black professionals who have successfully navigated the asylum process and can provide guidance on career development and navigating the job market in the GTA. This can be achieved through peer conversational circles or storytelling sessions (physical or virtual).
- Expand partnerships among African faith communities, cultural organizations, local businesses and community leaders to foster social and professional connections for African asylum seekers.

1.3 Strengthen partnerships and collaborations among African asylum seeker’s support services

Improving support for African asylum seekers requires stronger partnerships and collaborations among service providers providing formal services, informal community spaces and supports (such as places of worship, community centres, peer networks), and municipal resources. Better coordination would ensure African asylum seekers receive consistent and practical support throughout their settlement journey, addressing challenges caused by the current fragmented support system. To achieve this, the following actions should be continued:

- Strengthen partnerships in and expand efforts for providing Canadian orientation to African asylum seekers with accurate, comprehensive information about life in Canada and the asylum-seeking process. This can be done via collaboration among formal services and informal supports with African community organizations (e.g., the African Community Centre of Peel) in offering cultural orientation to asylum seekers.
- Establish a centralized resource hub for African asylum seekers, aligned with 211 Central (211central.ca), serving as a directory for accessing information and resources. The hub could also offer wraparound support services (through a one-stop-shop model, offering a range of services in a single physical location or online platform).
- Increase partnerships to offer training for service providers on cultural sensitivity and trauma-informed care tailored to African asylum seekers’ needs. This can be done by service providing organizations partnering with Black-led and Black-serving organizations offering workshops on understanding the cultural nuances and experiences of African communities.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INVESTMENTS

2.1 Increase Black community capacity and equip service providers to combat anti-Black racism and systemic barriers.

Increasing the capacity of the Black community and equipping service providers with tools to combat anti-Black racism and systemic barriers is essential for creating a supportive, trauma informed environment for African asylum seekers. Investments in this area will facilitate services to be more accessible, effective and culturally responsive leading to better outcomes for African asylum seekers. To achieve this, the following actions should be strengthened or continued:

- Further resource the development of Black-led and Black-serving organizations to guide this investment process.
- Fund demand-driven employment services with a focus on Black-led businesses with particular skill sets and with eligibility criteria open to African asylum seekers.
- Establish regular forums or working groups to strengthen local partnerships that bring together formal service providers, municipal representatives and Black community leaders (including faith and cultural leaders) to clarify roles and responsibilities, identify shared goals, promote resource sharing, build capacity and enhance logistical support.

2.2 Address immediate housing needs of African asylum seekers.

The data was clear that housing was the most pressing need facing African asylum seekers — something they share with other low-income residents in the GTA. Yet, as with other Black people in Canada, African asylum seekers face significant housing challenges due to economic barriers, cultural differences and discrimination by property owners and agents. These factors limit affordable housing options and force many into precarious living conditions. While there is emergency temporary housing, it is often overcrowded, and not conducive to their healing or development of a stable life. It is a foundation for all to have stable housing and this is no different for African asylum seekers. To achieve this, efforts underway must continue:

- Fund the training of staff in emergency shelters and temporary housing on cultural competence and trauma-informed care to better support African asylum seekers. Existing organizations such as the African Community Centre of Peel and the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture could support cultural competence training, while the Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion and the Crisis & Trauma ResourcesInstitute could contribute to trauma-informed care.
- Establish targeted housing assistance programs that provide direct financial support to African asylum seekers, addressing the systemic barriers and anti-Black racism they face in accessing housing.
- Resource and expand the current collaborative work between the City of Toronto and organizations to establish shelters for African asylum seekers that are led, managed and operated by Black-led organizations to ensure culturally appropriate support and care.
- Improve collaboration among service providers and local rent banks or establish a dedicated rent bank stream.
- Invest in improving communication between municipal governments and direct formal and informal service provider organizations supporting African asylum seekers by enhancing information sharing, coordination and collaborative planning. This will better align resources and services, ensuring more effective and responsive support systems.
- Provide housing stabilization and eviction prevention supports and strengthen tenant protections to help renters access and maintain affordable and secure homes.
- Establish housing stabilization mechanisms, enforce eviction prevention supports and strengthen tenant protections across all levels of government to ensure property owners and African asylum seekers access and maintain secure, affordable housing.

2.3 Expand and increase funding to grassroots and larger community service organizations.

Most of the above recommendations will require additional resources. The recommendations below acknowledge that all levels of government and the philanthropic sector have a role to play in expanding the system of support for African asylum seekers.

- Create a dedicated funding stream (e.g., funded by IRCC or community foundations) to enhance the support system for African asylum seekers for services that are most needed.
- Provide mandatory and comprehensive training on anti-Black racism, cultural competence and trauma-informed care to all frontline service providers and staff (e.g., understanding the cultural and language nuances that impact how African refugees engage with support).
- Advocate for increased federal and provincial funding or incentives (e.g., tax breaks, grants or subsidies) for private developers, to encourage the creation of accessible and affordable transitional or long-term housing options.
- Increase provincial funding for housing assistance programs specifically designed for asylum seekers and refugees. Increasing provincial funding could also be achieved by introducing rent subsidy vouchers that provide African asylum seekers with direct financial support to cover market-rate housing costs.
- Advocate for expanded funding for language training tailored to African asylum seekers.
- Provide and promote digital services more broadly to improve access to support services for African asylum seekers (e.g., offer digital services in several languages commonly spoken by African asylum seekers; provide training and support to help African asylum seekers navigate and use digital tools and resources effectively).

3 RECOMMENDATIONS ON POLICY

3.1 Intensify advocacy and work towards relevant policy changes and practice.

As highlighted in this report, the gaps in local support systems for African asylum seekers are deeply rooted in broader systemic inequities and barriers. To effectively support African asylum seekers, it is crucial to address the systemic barriers they face in key areas such as housing, employment and the asylum process. This can be achieved through targeted advocacy and policy changes that remove discriminatory practices and streamline asylum processes, ensuring that African asylum seekers have equal opportunities for stability and integration into Canadian society.

- Advocate for policy changes and legislative reforms to dismantle anti-Black racism and address systemic barriers faced by African asylum seekers in housing, while promoting the effective implementation of Canada's Anti-Racism Strategy 2024–2028 (which prioritizes equity in immigration, health and housing). This should include mandatory anti-Black racism training for property owners and managers, prohibiting discrimination in housing access and ensuring strong prevention and enforcement mechanisms.
- Advocate for the federal government to expedite the asylum process for African asylum seekers by establishing a fast-track system for those from vulnerable regions or communities, similar to policies already implemented for other specific refugee groups (e.g., Ukrainians).
- Establish accountability mechanisms, complaint procedures and formal evaluation that allow African asylum seekers to report cases of discrimination, microaggressions or inadequate service provision. These mechanisms should be reinforced by IRCC and the provincial government to facilitate regular engagement with African asylum seekers, ensuring their voices are heard and their insights contribute to the continuous improvement of services.
- Advocate for policy changes to remove systemic barriers to employment for African asylum seekers, such as biases against foreign credentials and experience, and establish programs to monitor and address hiring discrimination, ensuring compliance with equitable hiring practices. These actions should include promoting mandatory anti-racism and bias training for employers, ensure workplaces are welcoming for African asylum seekers, and strengthen the implementation of existing employment policies.



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