

Council updated on Peel addressing refugees from Syria

By Bill Rea

Syrian refugees are coming, and Peel Region is working to make sure they can be accommodated.

Regional councillors recently received an update on the situation from acting Commissioner of Human Services Gayle Bursey. She observed that the federal government is confident it will reach its target of having 25,000 refugees in Canada by the end of February. So far, more than 13,000 have arrived, and about 5,700 refugee applications have been finalized, meaning these people should be arriving shortly. As well, she said a little more than 15,000 applications are currently being processed.

Most of the refugees in Ontario are going toward Toronto.

Bursey said government-sponsored refugees are being welcomed through six Refugee Assistance Program (RAP) communities, with the closest one being in Toronto.

She also said that since Dec. 10, 50 refugees have arrived in Peel.

‘The Peel community response to this humanitarian crisis has been remarkable,’ she declared.

Bursey said Peel has an action plan to deal with these newcomers, consisting of five areas.

The first is emergency escalation, which saw the Region quickly activate a regional emergency operations centre. That allowed for the swift mobilization of resources from the human services, corporate services and public health departments, as well as Peel Regional Paramedics, who have been at the airport for each flight carrying refugees. She said 22 of the people arriving were taken to hospital.

Bursey said they have been able to scale back the emergency response as the involved departments have been able to absorb the influx. She also pointed out the federal government is looking to bring in 50,000 more refugees by the end of the year, so they are ready to scale it back up again if necessary.

The Region had a list of sites prepared for interim lodging of these people, but the government already has places lined up. She said the sites the Region was looking at can still be made available if needed.

The action plan also called for coordinating settlement agencies within the region. So far, they have provided funding to specific agencies to hire two mental health staff people to work exclusively with the refugees. As well, funding has been provided to the United Way of Peel to support the collection of donations. They have been working with agencies to make sure the newcomers have been provided with grocery vouchers, clothing, furniture, etc. The Region also helped the Peel Newcomer Strategy Group host an event for community partners to swap information on how to support these people.

In addition, the action plan has worked to facilitate donations to appropriate agencies, and Bursey was impressed with the generosity of people in the community with their donations of gently-used clothes, household items and furniture.

The action plan also calls for managing resources as the federal plan evolves, which has required adjustments as new challenges develop.

The pace at which refugees have been coming in has created challenges. Bursey said there have been calls from settlement agencies in Toronto, Ottawa and Vancouver to slow things down.

Finding suitable housing has been another challenge. Bursey said the refugees are being given allowances to cover housing costs, but there is a problem finding units big enough to house entire families; half of which have at least four children. One complication she pointed to is these units have to provide easy access to public transportation. She said there will be a report on affordable transportation issues going to council later this month.