

May 31, 2004

Stephen Harper, MP
Leader of the Conservative Party of Canada
1041 Canyon Meadows Drive S.W.
Calgary, AB T2W 5V3

Dear Mr. Harper:

AN OPEN LETTER

Canada loses over \$4 billion dollars annually through the un-/under-employment of internationally trained workers immigrating to Canada. Canadian employers estimate that over 300,000 jobs go unfilled for lack of skilled workers. Canada's ability to compete effectively in the global marketplace is eroding due to our failure to fully employ skilled immigrant workers while our competitors do. As Leader of the Conservative Party of Canada, we urge you to take a public leadership stance on government actions to resolve these contradictions.

We are a group of 27 organizations from cities across Canada who met on May 21 of this year to discuss the crisis in employment for internationally trained professionals and other immigrants. Collectively, we serve thousands of newcomers annually who have been brought to Canada for their skills and experience, but find only barriers to suitable employment. Canada cannot afford to waste these national assets if we are to remain globally competitive, make advances on establishing a knowledge-based economy and replace skilled workers as they retire.

At the same time, we have a crisis in the community sector that serves immigrants. Over the past several decades, the Federal government had invested heavily in a community infrastructure that delivers employment preparation, settlement and language services and skills training. Often the first contact for newcomers, we are the most frequently used gateway into Canadian society. This system is being eroded by a new focus on cost accounting over service delivery, agreements that fail to compensate for the full cost of delivering programs and the failure to recognize the value of integrated community services. Just when newcomer workers are a most needed brain gain for Canada, the community supports they rely on are being drained away.

We are asking you and your Party to take a leadership position in championing a number of changes that will support Canada's social and economic development by fully integrating its newest members. Some needed changes include:

1. Stake out a mandate for the Government of Canada and its relevant ministries that will:

- Create a Human Resources Investment program with stable and adequate long term funding for newcomers, as already established for youth, people with disabilities and older workers

- Make skill upgrading and retraining for the new labour market more universal
- Extend other labour market support programs to underemployed workers to facilitate labour market re-entry and address immigrant access issues.

2. Accelerate labour market discussions with the Provinces that will:

- Lead to a streamlined, efficient and transparent credentials assessment and accreditation process for regulated trades and professions that recognizes legitimate newcomer assets
- Integrate settlement, language and employment preparation programs into a systemic response to labour market gaps and skill shortages
- Establish immigration-to-work programs that address Canadian employers' risk aversion for workers with no Canadian experience
- Encourage newcomer employment further through pan-Canadian marketing strategies and employer subsidy programs.

3. Recognize the expertise of organizations already working with Canada's newest workers by:

- Valuing formally the integrated service capacity developed by the community-based sector and directly involving groups in policy development and program design and implementation
- Engaging newcomers themselves in collaborative efforts with the provinces to reform occupational regulatory bodies
- Providing adequate, secure and equitable service contracts to community organizations that focus on quality standards and outcomes, as opposed to largely cost-focused partial-contribution agreements.

We believe that the upcoming election is the right time to declare where Canada's interests and priorities lie. If we are to achieve our social and employment goals for all Canadians, completing the process of integrating immigrant workers by fully using their talents and energy must be a next step. We in the community sector are partners in this endeavor. Our broad range of services, our ability to lever additional resources and our entrepreneurial orientation and cost-effectiveness contribute to this goal.

We look forward to hearing you publicly state what your Party's priorities are in the coming campaign. We will ourselves seek to raise questions on these issues at all-candidates meetings.

Sincerely,

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 On behalf of the Newcomer Labour Market Partnership

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