

LOCAL

Call for all hands on deck to address surge of migrants

By: Scott Emmerson

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Phil Hossack / Winnipeg Free Press files

Abdikheir Ahmed

With the recent spike in the number of asylum seekers crossing the U.S. border into Manitoba, Immigration Partnership Winnipeg is calling for help to ensure refugee claimants get the support they need.

Representatives from a range of groups have been invited to meet today to help draft a comprehensive plan on how best to respond to the influx of migrants.

The groups include Canada Border Services Agency, RCMP, federal immigration officials, Manitoba government, City of Winnipeg, Winnipeg Regional Health Authority and Muslim and Christian faith organizations.

Due to time constraints, organizers said, the meeting isn't public.

Hundreds of people have illegally crossed into Canada from the United States in recent months, with more than 100 making the trek across the unmanned border near the town of Emerson.

"What if 500 people showed up, what do we have in place? What if 100 people show up in one day, what do we have in place?" Abdikheir Ahmed, director of Immigration Partnership Winnipeg, said Wednesday. "We have few resources, supports in place, haphazardly here and there.

"The first thing is to put everybody on the same page about this issue. To talk about a preliminary, co-ordinated structure: how best (can we) provide support to these people?"

The most critical needs, Ahmed said, are housing, transportation from the border, food and help with casework in terms of processing migrants' claims to Canada's immigration department.

"It may not be easy to come to a consensus, but first is to provide information, then to talk about the most critical things: who can provide what and how do we do it?"

Immigration Partnership Winnipeg is a non-governmental organization seeking to create a welcoming environment for newcomers.

On Monday, it put out a call on its Facebook page asking for donations of supplies, including winter clothes, to be used at the border.

While the number of people who may yet make the sometimes perilous trek into Manitoba is unknown, Ahmed said, "one thing we anticipate: if there are 20 people showing up at -20 C, then you have to expect more people when the weather is better."

"Things that we hear from the other side of the border is lots of people are scared and they want to get to a place where they are safe," Ahmed said, addressing the mood that is fuelling the recent surge in border-jumpers who originally left strife-torn nations such as Somalia. "Because of the language that is coming from the American administration, they are worried about being deported back home where they may be persecuted."

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