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Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership Submission to Ontario's 2026 Pre-Budget Consultation

Waterloo Region is an economically significant community in Canada, and has had one of the highest rates of immigration in Canada in recent years. Encompassing the cities of Kitchener, Waterloo, Cambridge and the townships of North Dumfries, Wilmot, Woolwich, and Wellesley, it has a long history of immigration, with diverse communities contributing to its cultural fabric. In recent years, a large number of permanent and temporary immigrants have settled in the area, drawn by three post-secondary institutions, a strong local economy, and a thriving tech sector. With recent federal reductions to annual immigration levels, permanent migration to Waterloo Region remain high while temporary migration numbers have come down locally.

Immigration is transforming our region demographically, and it is essential to sustaining our economic growth. Almost all labour force growth is now driven by immigration. Newcomers are revitalizing neighbourhoods, strengthening local businesses, and enriching our community through their contributions to arts, culture, civic life, and philanthropy.

For almost 20 years, the Immigration Partnership has been an essential regional economic initiative involving over 70 immigrant and community service, government, post-secondary, business and ethno-cultural organizations working together to ensure Waterloo Region is an inclusive community where immigrants thrive and contribute to shared prosperity and growth.

Challenges are inherent in migrating to a new country, and it is essential we work together to help new immigrants overcome their challenges as quickly as possible so they can contribute to shared prosperity and growth. The top challenges of newcomers in Waterloo Region include: 1. Cost of living; 2. Finding affordable housing; 3. Finding work; 3. Finding health care; and 5. Making friends and social connections. As immigration continues, proactive investment in essential community infrastructure like housing, health care and more is needed to ensure that newcomer and other residents are able to live a good life.

Our [2025-2028 Strategy for Building Community through Immigration](#) sets out key

community strategies for change to improve immigration experiences and outcomes.

To address community priorities and maximize the community benefits of immigration, our community requires the following investments in the 2026 provincial budget:

1. Through provincial and federal collaboration, a stable, sustainable immigration system which is achievable through a 30-year levels plan aligned to infrastructure and labour force plans. This timeline matches municipal planning timelines and will allow municipalities to plan effectively and develop needed infrastructure at pace with expected growth.
2. An annual investment of \$250,000 to the Regional Municipality of Waterloo for our Immigration Partnership to sustain cross sector regional efforts to support immigration following a 30% federal funding reduction for the 2025-2028 period. This change poses immediate risk to our region's ability to attract, retain, and support the immigrants shaping our collective future as we grow to 1 million residents.
3. A 100% increase in provincial settlement funding and significant investment in English as a Second Language programming in Waterloo Region at training levels 5-8 following their defunding by the federal government. Language is one of the biggest barriers cited by regional employers to hiring immigrants. Without this critical investment, some immigrants will not be able to meet workplace language requirements and participate in the labour market.
4. Targeted investment through the Skills Development Fund or other funding mechanisms to sustain successful regional employment and skills development programs for immigrants that ease transition to skills-aligned roles or upskill for new careers, including: an additional \$150,000 annually in the Workplace Immigrant Network and Global Skills Conference, and \$250,000 annually for the Waterloo Region Immigrant Work Experience Program.
5. Significant investment in affordable and lower income housing, transitional housing, community housing, housing subsidies and the associated infrastructure.
6. Significant investment in health care infrastructure, services and personnel, including:
 - a. National mobility of internationally trained health (and other regulated) professionals approved for practice in other provinces and expedited credentialing in Ontario;

- b. Funded medical interpretation via the Ontario Health Insurance Plan or \$400,000 in earmarked funds via Ontario Health for language interpretation in medical settings in Waterloo Region;
 - c. Continued investment in dedicated two regional refugee health clinics; and
 - d. Incentives for all family physicians to take on refugee and other newcomer patients.
- 7. Sustainable investment in Ontario's public post secondary system as a primary driver of immigrant attraction and local economic development.
 - 8. Investment in local anti-hate and inclusion programs to counter the impact of growing anti-immigrant sentiment on newcomers, industry and community economic development.

On behalf of the Immigration Partnership:

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