

Access to Services in Waterloo Region Regardless of Immigration Status.

Question #1. What's the best starting point for referrals back to your institutions?

Answer: University of Waterloo: The University of Waterloo recommends that community partners refer students directly to the International Student Experience team. Their email address will be shared in the chat and included with the provided resources. The team is committed to connecting students with the appropriate resources and identifying their specific needs, which often extend beyond the initial concern. Starting in the upcoming fall term, the International Experience team will be based in a dedicated space within the Student Success Office, known as the International Experience Center. This new space aims to make it easier for students to find the support and resources they need. Regarding immigration issues, students can make same-day appointments via the university's portal. The necessary links and contact information for the immigration consulting team will also be provided.

Wilfrid Laurier University: At Wilfrid Laurier University, immigration advisors handle not only immigration-related matters but also provide comprehensive support across various aspects of student life. For Laurier students, it is recommended to connect with the International Student Support team. This team serves as a central hub, capable of addressing a wide range of needs or referring students to appropriate services. Contact information for all three institutions will be provided in the Q&A section and shared at the end of the discussion. For Laurier students, reaching out to the International Student Support team is the best approach to receive assistance or appropriate referrals.

Conestoga College: Conestoga College emphasizes that the most appropriate method for obtaining support is to connect with the International Support Services team, either through direct contact or via email. The relevant email addresses have already been added to the chat for easy reference.

Question #2. Can I request for link or contact number or email for immigration consultants at the institutions?

Answer:

- Laurier Students can always go to International Student Support - laurierinternational@wlu.ca
- Conestoga College students can be referred to internationaladvisors@conestogac.on.ca
- UWaterloo students can connect with International Student Experience team ise@uwaterloo.ca

Question #3. To all post secondary, is pregnancy cover?

Answer: With the University Health Insurance Plan (UHIP) there is some coverage listed for delivery room usage at a hospital, and as long as the student or their spouse is added as a dependant this should extend to them as well.

Question #4. On the topic of food security support, how is the stigma for using the free services is advocated for between international students and domestic students? Are the institutions spreading the awareness and advocate for the normality to use such free services?

Answer: The services offered are designed for every student, and since they pay fees, they have the right to access these services at any time. Importantly, these services are confidential. When a student submits a form, the process is handled discreetly, ensuring confidentiality. Students should feel secure in reaching out to an advisor, even if they need emergency financial assistance. The situation will be assessed, and the institution will work to address their needs.

At Wilfrid Laurier University, for example, one program that stands out is "Cooking 101," where students gather weekly to cook dishes from various parts of the world. This program not only helps students learn about cooking but also teaches them about food safety, saving money, and other valuable life skills. Students who participate regularly can even earn an air fryer.

Overall, institutions have put in place extensive programs to meet the diverse needs of the student community. Students are encouraged to reach out and utilize these services without hesitation.

Also, at the Mini Mart, students can shop as normal and when they pay, there are options for them to enter what they can pay. Nobody is the wiser who is using the services or to what degree.

Question #5. What happens to health insurance and other health services during summer vacations? Are the campus clinics still operational for students who are not currently attending classes, such as during summer breaks or other non-class semesters? Additionally, is their health insurance still valid during these periods between studies?

Answer: They'll continue to have access to that coverage as well as being able to access the health services that are available on campus. Policy year starts from September all the way to August. If the students start in September, the policy will run into August next year. If the students start in January, it will be from January to August. So they will have full access to the health insurance and health services on campus. It's the same policy for all the three institutions.

Question #6. How do you regulate the mental health supports available on your campuses to ensure they are culturally sensitive? I've heard mixed feedback about school counseling services, including concerns about a lack of cultural understanding. Do all staff members receive regular training? What steps can students take, or what actions will the school take, if students have a negative experience?

Institutions have received feedback from students indicating that counseling services sometimes lack cultural nuances and understanding. As a result, there has been a conscious effort to improve hiring practices and counselor placement to better address these issues. If a student encounters a negative interaction or feels that cultural sensitivity is lacking, they are encouraged to report it to the institution.

Specifically, students should approach the international student support office to relay their experiences. This allows the institution to address the situation, potentially escalating concerns if they pertain to a particular counselor. The goal is to hire more staff with diverse lived experiences to ensure that they can address cultural issues effectively.

Students are urged to advocate for themselves by reporting any problems, as the institution can only take action if they are made aware of the issues. The university counseling units are working to align their counselors' backgrounds and experiences with those of the student population. The MATES program, which involves peer-to-peer support, also provides students with a relatable and accessible avenue for assistance.

At University of Waterloo, like other institutions, the importance of having a diverse staff that mirrors the student population is emphasized. There is a rigorous cultural sensitivity training program in place across all departments, including for security personnel and the student rights and responsibilities department. This ensures that all staff are equipped to handle complaints or accusations related to cultural insensitivity. Students are educated about the role of security and encouraged to trust and report issues without fear.

Moreover, Conestoga has a comprehensive system for addressing these concerns. Students can lodge complaints through various channels, including security and the care team. The international transition coordinators play a crucial role in establishing early connections with students through webinars and meetings, providing a safe space for them to express concerns. This intentional relationship-building helps students feel comfortable reporting any issues they might face, allowing the institution to address them promptly and effectively. At Conestoga, counsellors are in-house staff who participate in ongoing culture sensitivity training. They have Professional Development that offers valuable year-round trainings for all Conestoga staff on a wide variety of topics including SafeTalk, Mental Health First Aid, Intercultural Customer Service series, etc.

Question #7. In the event that the student is here with a partner who has a work permit, once the partner begins working and becomes OHIP eligible, how does this impact the student's upcoming/outstanding tuition fees?

University of Waterloo: If a student qualifies for OHIP they will need to provide their documentation from OHIP of coverage. Once they provide proof of coverage their UHIP fees will be prorated as of the date they show evidence of coverage.

Wilfried Laurier: Same as above however would like to add that there are deadlines to request exemption from UHIP and students should refer to the exemption fees website or connect with Service Laurier.

Conestoga College: International students can only opt out of the Conestoga International Health Insurance Plan (CIHIP) fee if they have a valid OHIP card. Their OHIP validity must cover their enrollment, which means the start of their OHIP coverage must be on or before the beginning of the student's intake term to ensure that the student is covered. The opt out will need to take place during the Change of Coverage Period.

Question #8. What would happen in an event where the non-student family member separate from the student due to domestic violence, are they eligible for services for the duration of the school term. thank you

Answer: University Of Waterloo: In the case of legal separation or divorce, the family member of the student will no longer be eligible for UHIP. UHIP is only available to students and their eligible dependents. The spouse/partner of the student would be responsible at looking for alternative health insurance.

Wilfried Laurier: Students will need to notify the university to remove the partner from their UHIP plan and the partner will have to find alternative coverage.

Conestoga College: Dependants must be enrolled for the same length of coverage as the student. In an event where the non-student family member separates from the student due to domestic violence, the student would be able to reach out to the plan administrator for a refund of the remaining term and the dependants will not be covered under the plan.

Question: Cost coverage for medications for students. The example given is medications required for mental health. Are these covered through the insurances that international students have?

At the University of Waterloo, international students have supplementary insurance through the WUSA (Waterloo Undergraduate Student Association) and GSA (Graduate Student Association) health plans, which include coverage for prescriptions. However, the specific coverage for each medication depends on the details of the insurance plan, and students need to complete a pre-determination with the insurance company to find out which medications are covered. Generally, prescription coverage is included, but for precise information, students should verify their coverage with the health insurance provider. This process is similar to the requirements for those with OHIP coverage. The same policy applied for students at other institutions as well.

Question #9. Share each of the different areas that each of you work in, wondering if you've seen a particular set of challenge that might relate to precarious status. So are there some people that have very particular challenges that are tied to very particular kinds of precarious status? And what challenges have you encountered in trying to address those?

Imtenan Abd-Al-Razik: Many international students in Canada are now finding it difficult to secure permanent residency due to changes in the Express Entry system. Despite tracking their points meticulously, many students discover too late that the pathway has become increasingly competitive, with smaller draw sizes and higher point thresholds. This issue is especially pressing for those from less prestigious educational backgrounds, who face additional challenges in securing jobs, further complicating their prospects for residency.

For instance, we had some Ukrainian clients who had lost their IDs. Without a Ukrainian passport, replacing these IDs is nearly impossible. Consequently, these individuals risk losing their status and find it very challenging to navigate the system. These are systemic challenges that are difficult to overcome.

Eduardo Huesca: Many migrant workers, particularly those in the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP), are hesitant to speak out about their living or working conditions. They fear that raising concerns might lead to deportation, being sent home prematurely, or not being invited back for the next season. This fear significantly limits efforts to address workplace health and safety. Although some workers do stand up, the underlying fear of repercussions due to their precarious status remains a major barrier.

Paula Ballak: There are a few communities that frequently migrate between Canada and Latin America. Their health care coverage often lapses because they haven't been in Canada for the required period. By the time they are eligible to regain their health insurance, they may have already returned to their home countries. This issue highlights the importance of the Community Health Centre (CHC) model, which doesn't bill OHIP. The CHCs provide services without requiring health insurance or any form of remuneration for healthcare or allied healthcare. The goal is to reassure everyone that regardless of their situation, CHCs respect and care for all individuals, offering services free of charge.

Question #10: What solutions have you found effective for addressing some of the specific challenges or widespread issues encountered in your organizations?

Anna Luz: Anna Luz highlighted that the solutions depend on the nature of the challenges. For instance, they have dealt with issues such as people from Ukraine who are unable to renew their documents, like passports. This issue is systematic and requires addressing at a higher level. To resolve it, they have considered engaging with the federal government to discuss how to amend such policies, as without a valid passport, individuals cannot maintain their status and subsequently lose eligibility for services they once had access to, such as when they arrived as temporary workers. This situation highlights the need for systemic change and engagement with members of parliament to advocate for policy modifications.

In their office, they have also seen an increase in individuals coming in with open work permits—often partners of temporary workers or students—seeking employment support. Although they don't directly provide employment services, they have created an email list to direct these individuals to relevant resources. Many newcomers face a situation where, despite being told they

are eligible for services, they find upon arrival that they are not. They have therefore focused on referring these individuals to appropriate services and providing informational sessions to help them navigate available resources.

Question #11. Can you all comment on effective solutions or strategies for addressing similar challenges, whether locally or by connecting with organizations outside the region.

Sunanda Sachdev: mentioned issues with Service Ontario regarding the issuance of OHIP cards. Conestoga College students who applied for OHIP cards at a Service Ontario location on Duke Street were often denied, while those who went to the Stratford location received their cards. This inconsistency in service delivery highlights the need for standardized communication across Service Ontario locations. She emphasized the importance of clear, uniform eligibility criteria for services, as it is challenging for clients to navigate which centers are supportive and which are not. To address this, they encourage clients to seek services in rural areas like Wellington and Wellesley, where they can obtain non-OHIP coverage.

Paula Ballak: commented on the inconsistency in responses depending on the service location, which is disheartening. She works with two Ukrainian guest houses in the area and noted that different sites often provide conflicting information. Despite this, they strive to do their best to help individuals, understanding the frustration of those in desperate need of progress. She welcomed continued referrals to their services and expressed a commitment to supporting people as best as possible.

Imtenan Abd El-Razik: echoed Sunanda's observations about the challenges at Service Ontario and Service Canada locations, where staff often insist that the only acceptable proof of permanent residence (PR) is a PR card. This misinformation can cause significant problems for clients, especially those without enough residency days or those with pending legal issues, leading to unnecessary complications. To mitigate this, they provide clients with letters stating that a Confirmation of Permanent Residence (COPR) is also valid proof of status, hoping to educate the service providers and prevent clients from undergoing unnecessary procedures.

Anna Luz: added that there is a need for education within social services and other organizations. For instance, some social services previously required a PR card for identification, despite immigration guidelines indicating that a PR card is not mandatory and a landing paper is sufficient proof of status. They took steps to educate these services, resulting in changes where social services now accept landing papers. She emphasized the importance of addressing these issues in forums and advocating for changes at the federal level. This includes lobbying for better understanding and implementation of immigration guidelines among service providers, ensuring that people are not disadvantaged by inconsistent or incorrect requirements.

Question #12. What should someone do if their passport has expired and they have lost their immigration status? Are they eligible for a temporary permit, for example? Similarly, if individuals have lost their status, where is the best place to seek services in the region?

Imtenan Abd-El-Razik: Imtenan Abd-Al-Razik noted that the answer to the second question is complex because it depends on the individual's previous status and the available options. They advised that such cases should be referred to immigration consultants at universities or other relevant resources, as the appropriate action will vary based on the person's immigration history.

Regarding the more specific scenario of an expired passport and lost status, they shared an example of a student from India who faced this issue. The student's passport expired, leading to the loss of their status in Canada. The student could not leave the country to renew their passport because obtaining a new Indian passport required proof of Canadian status, which in turn required a valid Indian passport.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, when processing times were significantly delayed, they managed to successfully navigate this issue. They demonstrated to immigration authorities that the student had made every effort to resolve the situation but was caught in an impossible loop. They applied for a temporary resident permit, which allowed the student to then renew their passport. Although the process was lengthy and complicated, they successfully proved the necessity of the temporary permit, highlighting that such an approach has worked in the past when a clear need was established.

For those who have lost their status, Imtenan emphasized the importance of consulting with immigration experts or university immigration consultants to explore available options and navigate the process effectively.

Question #13. What legal services and resources are available for people living in the townships, and can you address this as a starting point?

Imtenan Abd-El-Razik: explained that legal clinics have some discretion to provide services to individuals outside their designated catchment areas. Typically, if a person lives in an area that does not have a clinic offering immigration services or if the local clinic is unable to assist, another clinic can step in to help. However, this process is not as straightforward as it would be for individuals living in areas like Kitchener, Waterloo, or Cambridge. Such cases require additional background authorizations.

Imtenan emphasized that people from the townships are encouraged to contact them for assistance. Additionally, they mentioned that providing summary advice is generally straightforward and can be offered regardless of a person's specific location or income level. Even if individuals are slightly above the income threshold or not exactly within the service area, they can still receive summary advice. The more complex aspect of representation may require extra permissions, but initial consultations and advice are readily available.

Imtenan encouraged anyone in need to feel free to call, as the clinics are willing to assist with initial advice and explore ways to provide further support, ensuring that people in the townships have access to necessary legal services and resources.

Question #14: How can a refugee change their lawyer if Legal Aid has informed them that the lawyer is not submitting the required consent?

Imtenan Abd-El-Razik: provided an overview of the process for changing a lawyer when dealing with Legal Aid. Legal Aid Ontario, being a government-funded organization, generally does not allow the change of a lawyer without a valid reason. This policy exists to prevent the unnecessary expenditure of funds on the same case multiple times.

However, if a refugee has a Legal Aid certificate and can demonstrate that there is a significant issue with their current lawyer, they may be able to request a change. Valid reasons for requesting a change include the lawyer not fulfilling their obligations, a serious conflict between the client and the lawyer, or any other significant problem that hinders the professional relationship. If such issues can be clearly demonstrated, Legal Aid may issue a second certificate to facilitate the change of lawyer.

Legal Aid Ontario has a specific set of criteria for evaluating requests to change a lawyer, which can be found on their website. By searching for "change of solicitor Legal Aid Ontario," individuals can access detailed information on these criteria. The criteria include factors such as the duration of the case, the complexity of the case, the amount of money already spent, and the stage of the case.

Imtenan emphasized that while changing a lawyer under Legal Aid is possible, it is not a straightforward process and should not be viewed as simple. Each case is considered based on its unique facts and circumstances.

Question #15. Are clients with no status eligible for a shelter stay in the Waterloo Region? Additionally, are there plans to increase the amount of social assistance offered locally? Is it clear that the solution to ending homelessness is tied to the construction of housing, or is constructing housing the only solution?

Chris McEvoy: addressed the concerns by stating that there are numerous requests and inquiries related to services for non-status residents, including refugee claimants, individuals on visitor visas, work visas, visitor permits, and student visas. For short-term stays, individuals in immediate need of emergency shelter can indeed access such services in the Waterloo Region, regardless of their status. Emergency shelters are expected to be available to all residents throughout the region, irrespective of their immigration status.

Chris highlighted that emergency shelter should be seen as the last resort. If individuals have alternative accommodations, such as staying with friends or family or traveling to another community where they have a social support network, they should use these options before seeking emergency shelter. Despite this, there are currently numerous refugee claimants and individuals on student or visitor visas residing in emergency shelters across the region. For

example, out of approximately 32-34 families experiencing homelessness in Waterloo Region, supported by the YW and the Starling family and transitions team, around half are refugee claimants or families on visitor or student visas. Thus, access to emergency shelters is granted regardless of status, although individuals are encouraged to utilize other resources when available.

In terms of addressing and ending chronic homelessness in the Waterloo Region, Chris discussed the strategic plan aimed at reducing and eliminating chronic homelessness by 2030. An extensive report, comprising over 100 pages, was presented to the community and council in April, outlining the necessary strategies and actions to achieve this goal. An investment plan is currently in the works and will be presented to the community and council in the fall as part of the 2025 budget process.

Chris emphasized that the issue of homelessness and chronic homelessness is complex, and therefore, the solutions must be multifaceted. While the private market has a role to play in providing affordable housing and addressing chronic homelessness, it cannot be solely relied upon. The private market's challenges, such as low vacancy rates, high rental costs, and stagnant social assistance rates, mean that it cannot fully address the homelessness issue. Therefore, a comprehensive approach is required, which includes the construction of permanent, affordable, and supportive housing by non-profit organizations, co-ops, regional bodies, and lower-tier municipalities. An all-community approach is essential to achieve the goal of eliminating chronic homelessness by 2030.

Chris offered to share contact information for further discussions about the strategies and actions being undertaken to reach the 2030 goal, ensuring that all concerns are addressed comprehensively.

Question# 16. At shelter we have received mixed messages around status and ability to access a shelter bed. If I am understanding things correctly, a person's immigration status does not impact their ability to access shelter?

Answer: Shelter is a last resort - if someone has another place/option to stay (staying with a friend/family member, couch surfing) they should access those options before accessing emergency shelter.

Residency status is not an eligibility requirement for accessing shelter; there are refugee claimants, people on student visas, and people on visitor visa who sometimes access emergency shelter.

Question#17. About the eligibility for the eviction program, how the client can access to the program if they have a zero-income due to loss job, is working in the process for being accepted by Ontario Works and in the process for looking for a job, I hear some clients must be increase her income before can access to the eviction program. Thank you.

Answer: Source of and amount of income is an eligibility requirement for the rent bank - to ensure that only those living with low income access the service. If a household does not have any income/insufficient income to sustain their current housing/apartment, they may not be eligible

for the rent bank. The household must have enough ongoing income to afford the housing/unit - the rent bank/fund is an option for one-time payments (not ongoing rent assistance).

Question #18. Can you talk more about the waitlist lengths for housing?

Answer: The waitlist length for affordable housing varies by household size and number of bedrooms of the unit. Most households wait a number of years to access affordable housing through the Community Housing Access Centre. The waiting time on the affordable housing waitlist can be upwards of 5-8 years. More information can be found here: <https://www.regionofwaterloo.ca/en/living-here/find-affordable-housing.aspx>

Question #19: How can a client access the program if they have zero income due to job loss and are in the process of being accepted to Ontario Works?

Chris McEvoy: addressed this query by explaining that for a household to be eligible for the rent bank, there must be a source of income. The rent bank is designed to assist those with low incomes, ensuring that the services are accessible to those in financial need. If a household has no income or insufficient income to maintain their current housing or apartment, they may not qualify for assistance from the rent bank. This is because eligibility for the rent bank requires that the household has a sustainable ongoing income to afford their housing costs.

Chris emphasized that the rent bank is intended for one-time payments to help with immediate housing needs, rather than providing ongoing financial assistance. Therefore, if a household cannot demonstrate an ability to sustain their housing costs in the long term, they may not be eligible for rent bank support.

To assist those with no or insufficient income, it is important for the client to first complete the application process for Ontario Works or other available social assistance programs, which can provide ongoing financial support. Once they have secured an income source, they may then be eligible for programs like the rent bank if they face a one-time financial crisis related to their housing.

Chris added that the team is happy to provide additional resources and support to ensure that all inquiries are addressed comprehensively. They will also review any additional questions that may have been missed during the discussion to ensure that everyone has access to the necessary information and support services.

Question #20. Information on food banks in the area and barriers to transportation for temporary migrants.

Chris McEvoy: highlighted that while the public transportation system is not ideal for everyone, Grand River Transit (GRT) offers an Affordable Transit Program. This program provides a 47-48% discount on monthly passes and two-ride tickets for households with low income. He encouraged

those facing transportation barriers to explore this program as a potential resource to alleviate some of their travel challenges.

Food Assistance Program: Chris also elaborated on the food assistance available in the region. The Food Assistance Network, supported by the Food Bank of Waterloo Region, plays a crucial role in food distribution. While the Food Bank itself does not directly distribute food, it supports a coalition of partners who operate various food assistance programs. These include food delivery services like Tiny Home Takeout and food hamper programs run through community outreach initiatives. These services supply food to organizations such as the Cambridge Self Help Food Bank and support rural communities. McEvoy suggested that individuals and partners looking for food resources should connect with the Food Assistance Network and their associated programs. He expressed his willingness to share more detailed information offline with interested parties.

Sunanda Sachdev: mentioned that community outreach workers can sometimes provide vouchers to help cover transportation costs, offering an additional layer of support for those in need of travel assistance.

Question #21: One last word on what they think can be done to address gaps in support folks with precarious status in the region, and what we can do to enhance access to services for all.

Ana Luz: emphasized the importance of panels like these for learning from each other and understanding the available services. She highlighted the need to take actionable steps after identifying challenges, focusing on collaborative solutions.

Sunanda Sachdev: advocated for collective, focused, and targeted advocacy as crucial for achieving desired outcomes in enhancing support for individuals with precarious status.

Imtenan Abd-El-Razik: expressed frustration with bureaucratic immigration processes, suggesting that the current wait times and procedures are excessively burdensome. She called for changes to streamline and humanize the immigration system.

Paula Ballak: underscored the importance of community-focused collaboration and networking, especially in addressing challenges like transportation barriers that affect access to services across different regions. She highlighted initiatives like GRT's affordable transit program as examples of practical solutions that can bridge these gaps.

Eduardo Huesca: emphasized the need for consistent outreach to isolated migrant communities to better understand their priorities and needs. He discussed the importance of data collection to inform advocacy efforts, citing an example of gathering formal data on pesticide safety concerns among agricultural workers.