

Mennonite Coalition for Refugee Support

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Bill C-4: Punishing families fleeing persecution

Kitchener, ON – As the fall session of Parliament resumes, The Mennonite Coalition for Refugee Support (MCRS) has expressed grave reservations about the proposed Bill C-4, known as the "Preventing Human Smugglers from Abusing Canada's Immigration System Act". The bill is being presented as targeting smugglers, yet it is the families fleeing persecution that will be punished if the bill is passed into law.

Bill C-4 gives the Minister of Public Safety the power to designate any group of two or more refugee claimants as an "irregular arrival". Once designated, everyone in the group would face mandatory imprisonment for at least a year with no review of whether the detention is justified. Children and the elderly would also be jailed. Even if found to be legitimately in need of protection and accepted by Canada as refugees, people in a designated group would not be allowed to apply for permanent residence for five years. As a consequence, they would be barred from traveling outside of Canada for any reason during that time. They would also be prevented from sponsoring family members to come to Canada. As a result, young children may be separated from their parents for many years.

The Kitchener-Waterloo community has a proud history of welcoming refugees and newcomers. From Mennonite refugees fleeing persecution in the 1920s to the many refugees and newcomers from around the world who have more recently chosen to live here, the community has been a place of refuge and welcome.

"Bill C-4 is a big step backwards for this community, and this country," said MCRS Executive Director Eunice Valenzuela. "Putting innocent refugee claimants in jail not only adds to the trauma that they have experienced, it also threatens the freedoms and human rights that are enshrined in Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms."

There are no illegal or queue-jumping refugees, only people who find themselves in desperate situations needing help. According to the international Convention on the Status of Refugees – of which Canada is a signatory – refugees should not be penalized for entering a country without authorization. The Convention recognizes that for those fleeing persecution, there is no queue.

First introduced as Bill C-49 during the fall of 2010, the proposed legislation was condemned by all opposition parties and by human rights and refugee advocates including MCRS, the Canadian Council for Refugees and the Canadian Civil Liberties Association. Despite the many objections raised against the bill in its first form, it has been reintroduced with few changes.

MCRS has been the primary organization supporting refugee claimants in Waterloo Region for 25 years. Each year, over 400 families fleeing persecution receive guidance and support through its programs. Its mandate is to help refugee claimants navigate the complexities of the refugee claim process, to assist refugee claimants with settlement and social support needs, and to build a community of mutual support.

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For further information on Bill C-4, visit <http://www.mcrs.ca/getinvolved/advocate>

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