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Canadian Politics

Canada pausing intake of highly skilled immigrant workers amid heavy backlog

Despite a labour shortage in parts of the country, the federal government is pausing new invitations because it doesn't have the ability to process them

Ryan Tumilty
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Canada's express entry pool, which includes skilled workers, skilled trades and people with experience living in Canada, comprises more than 207,000 people, shows a memo obtained by the National Post. PHOTO BY POSTMEDIA FILES

OTTAWA — Canada's immigration system for high-skilled workers is severely backlogged and even amidst a labour shortage, the government is pausing new invitations because the department simply can't process them quickly enough, according to a briefing document.

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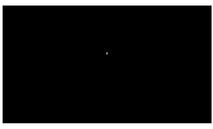
Immigration lawyer Steven Meurrens obtained the document through access to information and provided it to the National Post. In the memo, department officials outline that "an estimated 76,000* applicants are in the inventory for federal high-skilled worker applications, which is more than what the government needs to meet targets all the way out to 2025.



The same memo says the express entry pool, which includes skilled workers, skilled trades and people with experience living in Canada, has more than 207,000 people in it.

Canada's immigration plan has a variety of different classes, including skilled workers, provincial nominees, family reunification and refugees. The government has continued to process applicants nominated by the provinces, but other economic immigrants have been stalled since last fall.

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People applying through the high skilled worker and trades program submit a variety of documents including a language test and then wait for an invitation to finish their application before it is processed.

With travel bans in place, high-skilled worker applications from overseas have been on pause since September 2021. Last year, the government still managed to hit its record-high immigration targets, but did so mostly by inviting people already in Canada on temporary permits or as students to become permanent residents through a new temporary resident to permanent resident program (TR2PR).

The government's current immigration plan forecasts bringing in 110,500 skilled workers next year, but the department says in a memo that could have to be cut by as much as half, because the department has so much other work.

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"These reductions are due to admissions space required to accommodate the TR2PR stream and the resettlement of Afghan nationals to Canada," reads the memo.

The Liberals initially pledged to bring 20,000 Afghans to Canada, but during the fall campaign doubled the pledge to 40,000. As of the most recent update 7,000 of them have arrived in Canada.

A new departmental immigration plan will be tabled in Parliament when the House of Commons resumes in February.

The department aims for a six-month processing time for federal skilled workers (FSW), but in the memo they warned that could rise dramatically.

"Processing times are currently at 20.4 months (over three times higher than the service standard) and are expected to continue to grow as older inventory is processed. The FSW processing time is expected to rise to 56 months

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Immigration Minister Sean Fraser was not available for an interview, but Rémi Larivière, a spokeswoman for the department, said the government will still bring in highly skilled workers, because so many are already in the queue.

"The already existing robust inventory of skilled candidates to process means that there won't be a reduction in 2022 of the number of new skilled permanent residents arriving in Canada to work and settle," she said in an email. "This pause is temporary; invitations to apply under the FHS streams will resume once the processing inventory is reduced enough to create space for new intake."

Larivière said the fall fiscal update included measures to help reduce the backlog.

"The Government of Canada has proposed to provide $85 million in 2022-23 so processing times in key areas affected by the pandemic."

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Conservative MP Jasraj Singh Hallan, the party's immigration critic, said the delays are unacceptable.

"The massive backlog the Liberal government has created at Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada is not only hurting hard-working newcomers, families, immigrants and business owners, it also threatens billions of dollars of much-needed economic growth in Canada," he said in a statement.

He said employers need workers and the government has to act quickly.

"Immigrants and Canadian employers cannot wait three years to have Federal Skilled Worker applications processed. It's time for the Liberals to announce a precise date for when the pause on processing federal skilled worker invitations

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A Business Development Bank of Canada study from last fall found 55 per cent of Canadian businesses were dealing with labour shortages. They found that number was as high as 80 per cent in hospitality type businesses.

Potential immigrants to Canada are scored based on their level of education, language proficiency and other measures under the government's Comprehensive Ranking System. The memo outlines that with the current state of applications someone would need a score over 500.

Betsy Kane, an Ottawa Immigration lawyer, said that is a very high score.

"What that's going to mean is basically a young couple with very high education for both applicant and the person concerned, potentially only with executive-type job offers," she said. "What it's telling you is that only basically power couples are going to be who's going to benefit from the 500-plus scores."

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Kane said with this backlog there are also going to be a lot of people on work or study permits who will need extensions because their application hasn't been processed.

The federal Liberals have set targets to bring in more than 400,000 immigrants a year. Kane said they need more than lofty goals.

"The department has the capacity to do it. It just needs tools."

She said that should include getting people back into the office to process applications, many of which come in on paper.

"This department is an essential service just like Canada Revenue Agency and just like the Canada Border Services Agency," she said. "These guys should be back in the office."

start focusing more on what Canada's employers need.

"I don't think it's a matter of adding personnel. I think it's a matter of realigning priorities, and reassigning personnel to process the type of applications that the Canadian economy requires," he said. "Employers are desperate for skilled trades for people who are highly skilled typically in the construction industry."

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Not surprising that there is a backlog with the ideology of government who year. The trade person shortage is due to the crazy mantra in the last 20 years to promote university study instead of trying also to encourage young people to also consider work as an electrician, plumber, carpenter or welder. All these jobs are often more well paid than someone with a university diploma in some specific branches. 50 to 60 years ago there were for student with some difficult the trade school with the advices of orientation counsellor. Then suddenly the craziness that everyone should have a university diploma came

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