

New immigration program opens door to undocumented construction workers in GTA

By Nicholas Keung Immigration Reporter
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Ottawa has unveiled a new program that will offer both an immigration pathway for undocumented construction workers in Greater Toronto and help to address a labour shortage in the city.

The pilot has spots for 500 workers — plus their family members — and will open for application on September 3 through the Canadian Labour Congress, which will pre-screen and refer qualified candidates for final assessment by the immigration department.

“It’s a very small project for us but a very important project to initiate,” said Hassan Yussuff, president of the labour congress, who believes the number of non-status construction workers in

the country is in the thousands. “Some of these workers have been here for five years plus and their families have set down roots in this country. We need to find a way to resolve their status.”

According to the latest forecast by Build Force Canada, a national industry-led workforce management research group, Ontario needs an additional 26,100 construction workers in the next 10 years as 91,100 people currently working in the sector will reach retirement age.

“Toronto is very busy right now with all the condo, infrastructure and transit projects. It’s tough to build projects when you don’t have the labour. It causes delays and increases costs. That’s not going to be of benefit to anyone,” said Andrew Pariser, vice-president of RESCON, a leading association of residential builders in Ontario.

“The history of the construction industry is built on immigration from Italy, Portugal, Eastern Europe, Scotland and Ireland. They all find a home in construction. We reward workers with skills and performance, and not where they come from.”

The labour congress has been working with immigration officials for almost two years to iron out the details of the pilot unveiled Friday. Only undocumented construction workers who live in Toronto, Durham, Halton, Peel and York regions qualify.

To be eligible, an applicant must have:

- Entered legally initially as a temporary resident and lived in Canada for at least five years;
- Proof of paying Canadian income tax;
- Language ability for day-to-day conversation in English or French;
- A family member living in Canada who is a Canadian citizen or permanent resident, or a spouse or child in Canada;
- No previous offences that would make them inadmissible to Canada other than a breach of the immigration law for overstaying in the country.

The job categories that qualify for the program include: trades and skilled transport and equipment operators; maintenance and equipment operation trades; residential and commercial installers and servicers; heavy equipment operators (except crane); and construction trades helpers and labourers.

The labour congress’ Yussuff said applications will be processed on a first-come, first-serve basis and the first 500 qualified principal applicants will be provided a referral letter for the final assessment of the Immigration Department.

Immigration officials said many of the undocumented workers came to Canada with valid temporary resident status to fill labour shortages in the construction industry but have fallen out

of status due to the now rescinded “four-in-four-out” rules introduced by the former Conservative government. That policy, in place between 2011 and 2015, required temporary foreign workers to leave Canada after working here for four years and banned them from returning for four years, but many chose to stay illegally.

“Without valid immigration status, these workers and their families have lived in fear and been left feeling very vulnerable. The presence of out-of-status workers in a significant industry leads to depressed wages for Canadians and makes workers vulnerable to employer exploitation and abuse,” the Immigration Department said in a statement.

“This temporary initiative is a step forward to increase the protection of some of these construction workers and their families, while safeguarding Canada’s labour market and ensuring that Canada can retain the workers it needs to grow the economy and build communities.”

Yussuff said personal information submitted by applicants to the congress will be kept confidential and priorities are given to those with spouses and children in Canada. Application to the labour congress pre-screening and referral is free, but qualified applicants must still pay for all applicable permanent residence processing fees.