



Submission to the
Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

Submitted by
COSTI Immigrant Services

Toronto

April 13, 2005

Thank you for this opportunity to speak to you briefly about some of our thoughts on the issues before you regarding citizenship and immigration. We have been guided in preparing our comments by the issues identified in the Report of the Standing Committee dated November 2004 and by the specific questions in the Committee's invitation for these hearings. We have selected a number of issues to address here; namely labour market integration of newcomers and citizenship issues. We rely on our colleagues representing the broader sector of which we are a part to address some of the other pressing issues:

Let me start by introducing the agency I represent. COSTI Immigrant Services is one of Canada's oldest and largest community-based agencies with a specific mandate to serve immigrants. Started in the post war era to assist Italian immigrants settling in Toronto, COSTI today serves more than 45,000 individuals per year from all areas of the world. We have a staff of 200 who speak a combined total of 60 different languages. Our services have evolved over the years to address the changing needs of the various waves of immigrants and refugees coming to Canada. Our services include settlement counseling, English language training, employment support programs, vocational rehabilitation programs, seniors programs, women's programs, a problem gambling program and family violence prevention education program, a housing program and a reception centre for government assisted refugees.

Over the 50 plus years that COSTI has worked with newcomers, we have beared witness to the changes in the experiences of newcomers and in the issues they face as they try to make the life in Canada that they expected when they made the decision to emigrate.

Canada's inability to adequately address the labour market integration of Canada's new skilled workers is an issue which has deservedly received the attention of many stakeholders including the provincial and federal government, employers, the media and others. We are encouraged by this interest and the genuine desire to fix the problem. Many current initiatives involving professional regulatory bodies, bridging programs and the like are beginning to have a modest impact, however we have created a situation of quite huge proportion and we share the concern that Canada's ability to attract and keep skilled immigrants has been compromised.

We do not see the current immigration policy as problematic per se and believe that the point system is generally an effective one. We see the problem in the lack of coordination between federal Ministries (primarily Citizenship and Immigration and Human Resources and Skills Development) and between federal and provincial ministries to provide a co-ordinated, informed and pro-active national strategy that includes a continuum of information and supports.

We also believe strongly that the continuum starts prior to arrival. From the time of approval to the time of arrival in Canada, precious time is lost during which individuals could begin their credentials assessment, job search and other information gathering and supports so that they “hit the ground running” in Canada.

This level of information and preparedness for the labour market realities newcomers will face in Canada will result in a smoother transition and, more importantly, will assist newcomers to set their own realistic expectations and plans. We also recommend that attention be paid to supporting newcomers who are not part of the 40% who are deemed “professional”. The majority of newcomers will not work in regulated fields and many, including family sponsored class, are seeking employment in semi-skilled and more general positions and they are experiencing the same types of barriers such as lack of Canadian experience, etc. So the strategies need to have a broad scope.

We wish to comment briefly on a number of specific issues related to citizenship that were noted in this Committee’s November 2004 Report:

Residency Requirement for Granting Citizenship

We support the proposed definition of “residency” as physically present for 3 years within a 6-year time frame. We also support the recognition of the residency period of refugee claimants prior to receiving permanent residence status.

Knowledge Requirement

We support the concept of inclusion in the Act that specific groups be exempt from the requirement including people over 60 years of age and those with learning disabilities. Accommodation should be made for those with low literacy levels. These should not be barriers to acquiring citizenship.

Prohibitions

We support the Committee’s recommendation that a process be set in place to ascertain whether criminal charges/offences outside of Canada are the result of a political or unjust process.

Fee

It is our experience that the \$200 fee per person for Citizenship can be problematic, particularly in light of the high levels of under-employment experienced by newcomers in their first 3-5 years in Canada.

Oath

We believe that reference to “Her Majesty the Queen” should be removed from the oath and replaced with reference to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. This more appropriately reflects the foundation upon which Canadian citizenship and values are based.

We would be remiss if we did not take this opportunity to comment on the issue of funding for settlement services in Ontario. As a long-time delivery agent of these services under funding from the federal government we can tell you that the funding allocation for Ontario is simply inadequate to meet the need and that the various funding formulae are placing extreme hardship on the agencies providing services. No increase since 1996, funding caps and other restrictions in place a problematic for us and others in the sector and we urge you to address this issue as an integral part of the way Canada supports newcomers.

Thank you very much for this opportunity.

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