

NEWS RELEASE – Ministers agree that Immigration is key to Canada’s future

Victoria, January 22, 2004 -- Federal, provincial and territorial ministers responsible for immigration reaffirmed today the importance of attracting skilled and knowledgeable immigrants to address Canada’s demographic changes and labour market needs.

“Immigration is critical to building our economy and society,” said the Honourable Judy Sgro, Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, who chaired the meeting. “We need to ensure that newcomers have every chance to succeed, whether they come to Canada as skilled immigrants, to join family members, for business reasons, or as refugees fleeing persecution.”

Ministers will actively pursue solutions within their jurisdictions to ensure that the credentials of newcomers are recognized in Canada, and will step up efforts to engage employers, professional associations, and other licensing bodies. “There is a wealth of talent and experience in Canada that is under-employed,” said Minister Sgro. “While I am encouraged by the significant progress already made by provinces, this is a complex and important issue which requires an ongoing commitment among governments.”

In a presentation to Ministers, Statistics Canada’s chief statistician Ivan Fellegi outlined data that demonstrated the important role of immigration in addressing demographic and labour market challenges.

“We need to focus on the importance of ensuring that newcomers contribute fully to Canada's economy, find jobs that are better suited to their skills and qualifications, and have the opportunity to enhance their language abilities so they integrate more quickly into Canadian society,” said George Abbott, British Columbia Minister of Community, Aboriginal and Women’s Services, who welcomed his colleagues to British Columbia.

Although only 25 per cent of immigrants have settled outside Toronto, Vancouver and Montréal in recent years, many jurisdictions have made progress in encouraging immigrants to locate in other communities. Ministers shared a number of initiatives and strategies aimed at attracting and retaining immigrants, and agreed that solutions must be tailored to suit the different needs of all regions.

Since their inaugural meeting in 2002, there have been many initiatives undertaken that will help attract skilled immigrants and help them to better integrate into Canadian society and the labour market. These include measures to enhance language training, the expansion of Provincial Nominee Programs, and initiatives to attract and retain international students in Canada. Ministers also highlighted the importance of providing better labour market information to immigrants to improve outcomes for newcomers to Canada.

Ministers noted the positive multilateral and bilateral working relationships that exist among all jurisdictions, and agreed that the willingness of governments to seek flexible solutions based on the differing needs and priorities of jurisdictions has been vital to the progress since their inaugural meeting.

Ministers also discussed strategies to support Francophone immigration to minority official language communities through community-based initiatives that could involve multiple partners, including municipal, provincial and federal governments, as well as the business and voluntary sectors.

Ministers recognized the need for continued flexibility in Canada's immigration program so that it continues to meet the unique needs of each province and territory. They noted that the number of immigrants admitted under the Provincial Nominee Program (PNP) in 2003 is expected to double, from about 2,100 in 2002, as a result of the growing provincial and territorial involvement in the program. Ministers cited the PNP and Québec's selection program as examples of how immigration can be tailored to meet the specific social and economic needs of different jurisdictions.

Ministers also discussed the challenges facing refugees, highlighting the need to reduce lengthy processing times. They also reiterated the importance of focussing on those in genuine need of protection.

"We can't work in isolation," said Minister Sgro. "Each jurisdiction recognizes the need to broaden its partnerships and engage communities, employers, and occupational regulatory bodies to develop flexible approaches to address the many immigration challenges so that newcomers feel welcome and become productive members of the communities in which they settle," she said.

Ministers will meet again in New Brunswick in Fall 2004 to evaluate progress and pursue other initiatives to attract and integrate newcomers to Canada more effectively.