

Trapped between hell and home

Quebec vowed to open its doors to 3,000 Haitian immigrants on humanitarian grounds. So why have fewer than 400 arrived?

BY KEVIN DOUGHERTY, THE GAZETTE JANUARY 8, 2011



The Petionville Golf Course in Port-au-Prince remains home to about 50,000 Haitians nearly a year after the earthquake. There was an astronomical increase in the number of immigrants from Haiti to Quebec last year, but few of them arrived as part of the province's humanitarian initiative.

Photograph by: PHIL CARPENTER, THE GAZETTE, The Gazette

After the 7.0-magnitude earthquake struck Haiti on Jan. 12, 2010, killing 250,000 people and leaving more than one million homeless, Quebec's then-immigration minister Yolande James announced the province would accept 3,000 Haitians who are not normally eligible to immigrate to Quebec as a "humanitarian measure."

In the end, 8,300 Haitians applied under the humanitarian program, created thanks to a bilateral immigration agreement with Ottawa. But by Oct. 6, only 18 of them had arrived in Quebec.

Kathleen Weil, named immigration minister in an August cabinet shuffle, said in an interview before Christmas the number of humanitarian arrivals had grown to 52. The latest figure is 389.

Days after the earthquake, Haitians with Canadian citizenship, holders of immigrant or visitors' visas living in Haiti and in some cases, but not all, their relatives were allowed to come to Quebec. The total number of Haitian immigrants to Quebec in 2010 was 3,310 -an increase of more than 80 per cent from 2009.

"It's not normal," said Marjorie Villefranche of the Maison d'Haiti community centre in Montreal, speaking about the disparity between the flow of Haitians on visitors' or regular immigrant visas and the trickle under the special humanitarian program.

Immigration applications generally take time and a lot of paperwork. Applicants must provide original documents, such as birth certificates and passports. But the earthquake destroyed homes and government offices, as well as lives.

"People can't find the original papers," Villefranche said. "That delays the process."

Villefranche said the Quebec and Canadian governments should have just let people enter under the humanitarian program.

"There would be 3,000 here already," she said in December.

Weil said that in granting Certificats de selection du Quebec, the first step in the immigration process, the province now recognizes the destruction in Haiti makes obtaining identification papers difficult.

Instead, Quebec will look at past immigrant applications from relatives, which include extended family members, as an element of proof. Family photos, showing the applicant with a relative, can also help establish identity.

A sworn declaration completes Quebec's alternate identification process, the minister explained.

Weil said she now has an agreement with Jason Kenney, her federal counterpart. Ottawa will use Quebec's process for confirming identity, rather than forcing Haitian humanitarian applicants through the whole process twice.

"Since then, the figures are moving," Weil said. "That is going to be enough for the federal government." (Under Quebec's agreement with Ottawa, the province sets its own criteria for admissions, and Ottawa has the final say on who gets to immigrate.)

Provincial immigration officials have issued 3,027 Certificats de selection du Quebec under the humanitarian program, Weil said. Those files have been transferred to the federal immigration department, which has issued only 464 immigrant visas. (Immigrants have three years to arrive in Quebec from the time they receive visas, Weil added.)

"From the moment (the earthquake) happened, it became a priority file for the government because of the presence of the Haitian community here in Montreal, the links that the community has with Haiti -the really heartfelt links," she said.

Martine Delva, who trained as a lawyer in Haiti but applied to immigrate as a skilled worker, doing office work, arrived in Quebec in April and was given permanent residence.

She first applied for immigration to Quebec in 2008 and was living in Montreal until December 2009, waiting for her permanent status.

Delva returned to Haiti, spending the holidays with her husband and son. They were in Port-au-Prince when the earthquake struck.

"After the earthquake, I tried with the embassy to see if at least my son, who is a minor ... could come with me."

Delva's husband and son could not get required papers, and her request was denied.

Returning to Montreal alone in April, Delva now is trying again to get her family into Canada.

"From here, I could make a request for the reunification of families," she explained.

She speaks to her son, now 7, every day by telephone and would like him to come to Montreal for schooling.

"It could take a year," Delva said, adding that she can travel back to Haiti and see her family but they cannot come here.

"He is in school, second grade," she said of her son. But in the wake of the chaotic presidential election in November, public services, including schools, were shut down.

Even the Canadian embassy in Port-au-Prince closed after the election. Getting a visa to travel to Canada -complicated enough in normal times -meant travelling first to Santo Domingo, the Dominican Republic capital.

Marie-Maude Prince lost her husband in the Jan. 12 earthquake, but she arrived in Montreal on Jan. 18 with her two Canadian-born daughters, age 3 and 12.

Prince has been travelling back and forth between Haiti and Montreal since 1998. She and her husband were on visitors' visas when their daughters were born here.

"I lost everything in the earthquake -my house, my car, my husband," she said in an interview.

After two days in a refuge, Prince went to the Canadian embassy in Port-au-Prince to apply for a work permit.

"They gave it to me," she said. Prince found a job starting March 1 and has been working ever since, while waiting for her permanent residence in Canada.

"I am waiting for the answer from the government," she said.

The humanitarian program was to

run from Feb. 17 to Dec. 31, but because the program was too popular, applications were stopped on July 21.

The standard immigration guidelines favour families with dependent children and grandparents, as well as skilled immigrants who can get visas as qualified workers. Quebec used its discretionary power

to tailor the humanitarian program to allow the sponsoring of "brothers, sisters and adult children over age 22" as well as their partners and dependent children.

Julie Lafortune, a Montreal spokesperson for the federal immigration department, said that by Nov. 27, "over 400" of those holding Certificats de selection du Quebec under the humanitarian program were being processed, explaining in an email that federal immigration officials can only consider the applications it has received.

"Applications must also be complete," she wrote. "The processing fee (\$250 for the first person in a family, \$100 for the others) must be included."

Haiti is the poorest country in the western hemisphere, with an average per capita income of \$659, according to the International Monetary Fund.

"Applicants must also appear for scheduled meetings and medical testing if requested," Lafortune added.

"Failure to meet all the requirements may delay applications."

Security checks are also made, to determine whether an applicant has a criminal record. But the lack of police records in Haiti makes this difficult.

Applicants must have a sponsor in Canada with an income of \$40,814 for a single person, or \$61,500 for a couple. For the humanitarian program, a co-sponsor who is not necessarily a relative can be added to meet the income threshold.

Writing to The Gazette in mid-December, Lafortune said her department "does not have any data for the time being on the number of Haitians who have settled in Quebec" as a result of the humanitarian program.

Still, the Oct. 6 figure of 18 immigrants arriving in Quebec under the humanitarian program, confirmed by Weil, was in a federal immigration department document provided to federal MPs and obtained by Benoit Charette, Parti Quebecois MNA for Deux Montagnes riding.

Charette, whose wife is Haitian and who has lived in Haiti, said he found it hard to believe the federal government would not know the number.

"If the figures were convincing, you can be sure they would be communicated with a big splash," he said.

Last month, Charette predicted the number of Haitians established as permanent Quebec residents under the program by the first anniversary of the earthquake would fall well short of the target set by former immigration minister James.

"Very, very far from 3,000," Charette said. "I applauded it when it was announced."

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