



## PALLISER FURNITURE

# PALLISER FURNITURE'S EXPERIENCES WORKING WITH REFUGEES IN CANADA & MEXICO – A LEARNING JOURNEY

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In the past, migrants arrived in Mexico seeking economic opportunities or to be reunited with their family in the USA. In the last few years, however, an increasing number of people are fleeing Central America with the intention to remain in Mexico, seeking international protection as refugees. The number of asylum-seekers in Mexico in 2018 rose 103% in comparison to 2017, from 14,596 to 29,623 and the upward trend is likely to continue. The majority of asylum-seekers arrive to Mexico from Honduras, El Salvador and – to a lesser extent – Guatemala through the southern border, the most common reception point being Tapachula, Chiapas. Chiapas has the highest poverty rate in the country and less than 30% of jobs are in the formal sector.

In response to the increasing arrivals of migrants and refugees as well as the limited economic opportunities and security conditions in these southern border areas, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has implemented and is looking to scale

up a local integration program with private sector companies in Mexico. The program relocates asylum-seekers and refugees from southern Mexico to central and northern states, where there are greater opportunities for social and economic inclusion due to a booming industrial sector.

Palliser Furniture has participated in the local integration program as an employer. Through this experience, both Palliser and UNHCR have identified the need to better prepare potential candidates for work in Northern Mexico with training and orientation, based on business needs. Palliser's experiences in Canada, where it has a long and rich history of working with newcomers and immigrants. In 2019, UNHCR and Palliser are planning on expanding on their current collaboration, drawing on good experiences and practices from both organizations to develop a more efficient and effective program (both for asylum-seekers and refugees as well as for participating companies).

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The local integration programme has the objective of integrating people with international protection needs into formal employment as soon as possible, allowing them to participate in the local economy as workers, consumers, tax-payers and contributors to social security, while ensuring their access to decent work and a sustainable income. Since August 2016, UNHCR has relocated and supported over 1,926 asylum-seekers and refugees to Saltillo, Coahuila; Guadalajara, Jalisco; and Monterrey, Nuevo León through the local integration programme. 50% of the existing participants are from El Salvador, 36% from Honduras, 7% from Guatemala, 3% from Venezuela, with the balance from Colombia and Nicaragua.

The program also has the potential to provide benefits to the companies who employ refugees. There is a constant and growing demand for labour in these industrialized cities of Mexico, in addition to high turnover rates of local employees. Companies spend considerable time and resources hiring staff and training them for their jobs. This cost is increased with staff leave their jobs after a few weeks or months. Companies are looking for solutions and this challenge is recognized as a significant barrier to greater economic and social development that companies and state actors want to solve. An integrated and stable work force in the north would help companies meet their labor needs and a diversified and committed workforce of new arrivals will help the integration of these newcomers and the creation of stronger communities.

UNHCR has worked with 42 employers, from large, medium and small companies. Of the nearly 2,000 persons relocated to Saltillo, the largest employers are industrial manufactures facilities including MABE and Lennox. Palliser Furniture hopes to increase the number of refugees employed through the programme. Smaller numbers of participants work at Al Super supermarket a local hotel and by the end of 2018, four refugees had secured additional income through UBER.

UNHCR supports asylum-seekers and refugees with capacity-building, humanitarian assistance, psychosocial and legal support including for migratory documentation on the southern border, where potential participants of the local integration program are identified. Participants are supported with transportation via bus to Saltillo, Guadalajara and Monterrey (depending on their profile), where they are then provided temporary housing, a one-off cash grant for the first month's expenses, and orientation to help them settle in in their new city. During the first week in the program, UNHCR connects participants with education and employment opportunities. UNHCR then provides follow-up counseling and supporting through bimonthly household visits to participants over the course of one year. Eligible participants are also supported with family reunification and after two years of permanent residence in Mexico, naturalization. The local integration program has been a success due to the collaboration with state and municipal

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government, civil society partners, and the private sector.

The program is also made possible by the favorable legal framework in Mexico for asylum-seekers and refugees. People recognized as refugees by the Mexican Government have the right to permanent residency, which ensures their economic, social and legal rights in Mexico including the right to work. However, before being recognized as refugees, there are some important challenges for asylum-seekers during the asylum procedure. Asylum-seekers can apply for a Visitor's Card for Humanitarian Reasons, which grants the right to engage in remunerated activities (without this card, they do not automatically have the recognized right to work). By law, they must remain in the state where they applied for asylum until the procedure is completed (in practice, this may take around four months). Due to this context, when the local integration program began in 2016, UNHCR focused on supporting asylum-seekers in Chiapas through humanitarian assistance and other support, and relocating recognized refugees once they completed the asylum procedure. However, over time (and particularly in response to the caravans that have been arriving since 2018), there has been increasing cooperation with the government to ensure access to documentation and freedom of movement to the population. UNHCR is now relocating asylum-seekers with Visitor's Cards for Humanitarian Reasons, which will speed up their local integration process while they continue their asylum process in Saltillo, Guadalajara and Monterrey. This

is of great impact to the population, who previously would have had much more time out of the workforce and therefore a more difficult time integrating once recognized as refugees.

In terms of challenges, corporate partners have identified that staff retention is a problem, with both Mexican nationals and relocated asylum-seekers frequently changing jobs. UNCHR has been evaluating the conditions and reasons for turnover within the asylum-seeker and refugee population, as successful integration implies that relocated people have the skills to succeed in their work. Most Central Americans have not worked in a formal wage-earning job, in particularly in the industrial sector where there are strict working hours and expectations. Psychosocial support as well as child care options, transportation, meals, and other benefits can contribute to retention of participants.

Since 2016, UNHCR has relocated nearly 2,000 asylum-seekers and refugees to Saltillo, Guadalajara and Monterrey (38 in 2016; 114 in 2017; 516 in 2018; and 1,258 in 2019). UNHCR plans to continue expanding the program, with a target of 3,700 people relocated in 2019. Based on UNHCR monitoring, 86% of those relocated remain in Saltillo. Another 10% have moved to another city in Mexico (where they have family members or have found other labour opportunities), and 4% have presumably left the country (several with family ties in the United States). After one year in the program, almost 60% of the refugees have graduated out of poverty (earning

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an income above the national poverty line). All working-age adults have been linked with job opportunities, 91% of working adults have social security, and all school-aged children have been enrolled in school. Three refugees have been supported with University-level education. Four participating families will qualify in 2019 for a government-subsidized housing credit scheme and are planning to become home-owners. Impact is measured through a questionnaire that is applied during bimonthly household visits.

The goal is also to replicate the model in other spaces and to improve the population's integration into the local workforces. The sustainability of the program depends on the involvement of new actors, including the private sector to improve the employability and retention of participants. The training and orientation program that UNHCR and Palliser are planning to implement needs to be further defined and developed in order to help asylum-seekers and refugees adapt to industrialized work. This training needs to take into consideration the trauma and stress that asylum-seekers and refugees have experienced and continue to suffer. The program also needs to address work in factories, with structured hours and repetitive tasks; the working culture and environment; and the benefits of formal employment. Post-relocation, UNHCR and Palliser will work together to evaluate the current system of post-placement monitoring, follow-up support, mentorship and benefits provided by employers to ensure that the relocated

population flourish in their new environment. Increased involvement of employers such as Palliser is essential to ensure that the model works for the private sector, providing a benefit to the participating companies and the local economy.

In the long-term, ongoing collaboration with the government will also be essential to ensure sustainability and scale of the program. Increased participation of the Mexican Refugee Commission (COMAR) and the Ministry of Employment (specifically the National Employment Service) could help transform the program into a public policy that benefits refugees, migrants and the local population alike through job matching and relocation programmes nation-wide.

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