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CANADA

Canada's record-setting invitation to immigrants after COVID shortfall an 'absolute shock'

By **Nicholas Keung** Immigration Reporter

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If you're an immigrant living in Canada and looking for permanent residency, this might be your lucky year.

Canada has set a record for the number of skilled migrants invited to apply for permanent residence on a single day, as the government scrambles to make up for an immigration shortage caused by COVID-19 and the resulting travel restrictions.

On Saturday, Feb. 13, the immigration department held its latest draw from a pool of candidates and issued 27,332 invitations — five times more than its previous high of 5,000 people — to hopeful candidates already living in the country.

The news caught immigration experts and applicants by surprise and created a buzz on social media, with pundits tagging it #SaturdaySurprise from Canada.

"It was an absolute shock to everyone. We all thought there was a glitch on our screens and the numbers were incorrect," said Kareem El-Assal, managing editor of immigration news site CIC News and policy director at CanadaVisa.com.

The plan is not without its critics, however, who say the strategy could open up the program to people with limited qualifications who would have been out of luck had it not been for Ottawa's attempt to meet its immigration targets in the middle of a pandemic.

Applying for permanent residency is usually a long and competitive process.

Skilled immigrants who are interested must create a profile in a government management system called Express Entry, where they score points for things such as age, language skills, educational attainments and work experience.

The highest rankings are then invited via routine draws to apply for immigration. While an individual typically needs a minimum score of 400 points or above to make the cutoff, the lowest-ranked person invited in the latest round only had a score of 75. (The immigration department posts the results of each draw on its website.)

This latest draw applies to people in what's called Canadian Experience Class, meaning they've worked in the country.

The instance of requirement loosening means some applicants, with scores too low to normally be considered, are now being encouraged to create a profile and try their luck, experts say.

"Between now and the next draw, you are going to have more Canadian Experience Class candidates entering the pool," said El-Assal.

"If I'm in Canada right now and I meet the minimum requirements, I will be rushing to submit my profile ASAP because there's a very good chance that I will be invited."

Given the challenges presented by the travel restrictions and reduced processing capacity, El-Assal expects the immigration department will continue to prioritize immigration candidates from within Canada before it looks further abroad.

Canada had set to bring in 340,000 new permanent residents in 2020, but ultimately only 180,000 landed here, the lowest annual immigration intake since 1998, according to El-Assal.

This year, Immigration Minister Marco Mendicino planned to bump up immigration levels to 401,000 in order to make immigration part of Canada's economic recovery post-COVID-19.

But as the pandemic continues, international travel remains slow, and immigration with it.

"They've got these massive (immigration) levels that they have to hit and they took a real beating last year. They thought the border would be more open now but they are not. They're scrambling to find a way to meet those targets," said Alberta-based immigration lawyer Mark Holthe, chair of the Canadian Bar Association's immigration section.

"This was a really wonderful development. So many people have invested so much time and effort in getting here in the first place, whether it's the hundreds of thousands of dollars that (foreign) students have paid and worked here. They're paying taxes. They're contributing. It's not like they're on handouts."

In a news release, the immigration department said 90 per cent of the 27,332 people invited in this round are already living in Canada, with at least one year of Canadian work experience.

"This means they're unaffected by current travel restrictions and won't face the same barriers as overseas applicants when gathering the required documentation and undergoing criminality and medical screening," it said.

"Those invited to apply who are not currently living in Canada will be able to travel once restrictions are lifted."

However, Toronto immigration lawyer Sergio Karas said trying to meet the immigration target by lowering the bar is a "terrible" way to make policies.

The latest draw unfairly rewards the low scorers, who "took a flyer" and entered the pool, he said, even if they have poor qualifications, poor language skills and poor job prospects while qualified applicants who are still collecting documentation and not yet in the system lose out.

"The draw transforms a well-structured and predictable system into a lottery ticket," said Karas. "It makes the system look worthless and game-able."

Since immigration employees are still working from home, he questioned whether the department has the processing capacity for the flood of applications coming from this draw without compromising the processing time or quality of decisions.

Independent immigration policy analyst Richard Kurland said the system is nimble and flexible as it's supposed to in adapting to the challenging environment under the pandemic.

"Due to COVID, fewer people registered in the system, resulting in a lower pass mark," he said. "Now, the publicity (of this news) will flood the system with new candidates. You'll likely see a lot more people registering just in case immigration lightning strikes twice, increasing the pass mark again."



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