

Ford U-turns on plan to take over jurisdiction on issuing work permits to asylum seekers



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 Doug Ford speaks with reporters at Queen's Park July 28. | Steve Cornwell/The Trillium

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Ontario will not be wading into federal jurisdiction to issue work permits to asylum seekers after all.

Premier Doug Ford had publicly announced at a meeting of the country's premiers held in Huntsville, Ont., last week that the province would begin issuing work permits for asylum seekers because the federal government was moving too slowly.

"I'm not waiting any longer," he said at the time. "We're issuing work permits in Ontario for these folks to give back and contribute to society."

However, the premier said Monday he won't be moving forward with that.

The premier didn't give any reasons for his reversal, but it came after the federal government challenged his claim that it takes asylum seekers "over two years" to get a work permit.

"They're just sucking off the system non-stop — not their fault — the fault falls under immigration that it takes over two years to get a work permit," Ford said last week.

The federal government challenged Ford's timeline, [telling the media](#) that work permits are issued on average in 45 days. However, the feds' timeline only begins when refugee claimants have submitted a claim for refugee protection online, and they must undergo a medical examination before it can be completed.

Asked about his two-year figure Monday, Ford said he'd got it from people he'd met in his riding of Etobicoke North.

"Well, you know, I just go out there and I'm hearing it on the street, go up Airport Road, pull over the Tim Hortons by the Congress Centre, start talking to people, ask them how long they've been there, ask them if they want to work," he said.

"All I know is, on Airport Road in my area, there's people who have been sitting there for two years," he said.

Ford also said that the asylum seekers in his riding are working illegally while waiting for their permits to be approved.

"We're paying them to sit around, which is crazy, but then they're out there standing on certain corners within the city, and contractors will come by, pick them up, and they're paying cash  the table, so we're losing a tax base on that," he added.

Ford's plan to issue work permits provincially was included in the formal communique issued by the country's premiers at the end of the Council of the Federation meeting last week. At the time, Ford thanked Alberta Premier Danielle Smith for giving him the idea to assert jurisdiction over the matter based on Section 95 of the Constitution, which states that the federal and provincial governments have concurrent jurisdiction over immigration.

Corporate immigration lawyer Rick Lamanna, a partner at Fragomen and board member at the Canadian Immigration Lawyers Association, said he believes Ford's work permit announcement was likely a negotiating tactic, and it may have worked.

The federal government is currently consulting on its plan for immigration levels, and the premiers have been advocating to have more spots in their provincial nominee programs to satisfy employers in their provinces, he said. Lamanna said he wouldn't be surprised if the announcement put pressure on the federal government for a commitment on that, and to speed up the processing of work permits for asylum seekers.

"The speed of the U-turn is telling," he said.

Lamanna also said that it wouldn't have been simple for the province to follow through on issuing work permits, and there would likely be logistical challenges when it comes to tracking the permits and their expiration and co-ordinating with the federal government.

Ford and Labour Minister David Piccini also took the opportunity to press the federal government for more funding for immigration support services.

In a statement, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) said the federal government will "continue to work collaboratively with provinces and territories to achieve our shared economic immigration objectives."

"As the department looks towards the 2026-2028 Levels Plan and 2026 allocation decision-making, IRCC will engage all provincial/territorial partners and ensure that their perspectives are taken into account," it said. "Therefore, we are not able (to) speculate about future agreements."

