OMRA 25 years
SHELTER CORPORATION
Newsletter
Fall 2026 | OMRAottawa.org

25th Anniversary AGM



Our AGM on June 15, 2026 was very well attended – so well attended that we had to put out many extra chairs! It was wonderful to see such a broad group of people come together: clients, volunteers, representatives from other agencies, and our grocery card supporters.

Carol did a wonderful job of keeping the meeting to under an hour and a half, leaving plenty of time both before and after the meeting to socialize, enjoy snacks, and catch up with one another. It was a wonderful combination of an important meeting and an opportunity to celebrate, learn more about OMRA, and reflect on the highlights of both 2025 and our 25 years of helping with housing.

One of the highlights of the afternoon was our guest speaker, **Marzia, a former OMRA client, who was interviewed alongside her tutor, Debbie Claydon.** Marzia shared her remarkable journey with OMRA, beginning when she had very little English and was struggling to find her way in a new country. Through the years, OMRA provided her with financial support, while volunteers provided mentoring, tutoring and encouragement.

Her journey took her from being someone who could hardly speak English to **graduating from Algonquin College**. Her story was a wonderful reminder that OMRA's work is about much more than providing help with rent. The combination of financial assistance, tutoring, mentoring and the ongoing support of volunteers can help newcomers gain the skills, confidence and independence to build a new life in Canada.



We said farewell to **Roya Shams** and **Omid Noori**, who both retired from the OMRA Board. We are grateful for their contribution. We were also delighted to welcome **Margaret Ford** to the Board. Margaret has been involved in refugee support for many years and is very interested in working with OMRA and our clients.

Amena Khavari, our Client Services Manager (CSM), also had an important milestone to share. Originally hired on contract, Amena is now an OMRA employee. She gave a moving talk about her own experience coming to Canada as a refugee and described her work with OMRA clients in employment, financial literacy, education and health.

Amena also spoke about how much it means to have so many wonderful volunteers available to work with our clients. She has been able to pair clients with volunteers who tutor them, meet with them each week, and provide friendship and encouragement.

These relationships are at the heart of what OMRA hopes to provide alongside our rent subsidies. **The financial assistance helps with housing, but the connections with volunteers help newcomers build the confidence, skills and community they need to move forward.**

Please also see the interview with **Paula Kingston** on page 4 for another perspective on the importance of volunteering with OMRA.

OMRA is a non-profit, volunteer-run charity helping resettled refugees in Ottawa manage rental costs since 2001. We are entirely funded through the generosity of our donors and supporters. To make a tax-receitable gift, check our website, OMRAottawa.org/get-involved/#tax_deductible, to see your options. CRA Charity No. 88342 9912 RR0001.

2026 Tamarack Race Weekend

Thank you to all who helped Team OMRA this year!

Team OMRA participated in the annual Tamarack Race Weekend on May 23-24, 2026. This event is an important activity for our fundraising efforts. And what a fun weekend it was (as the pictures show) with 17 fundraisers and 361 donations! We also smashed through our goal of $30,000 and raised almost $40,000.

One participant, Anne-Louise Parker, was not able to run in the actual race (she uses a walker). However, for 40 days prior to the race, she walked half a km a day for a total of 20 km. Anne-Louise was our best fundraiser – she raised over $8,000!



Photography by Noah Flumerfelt

Purdys CHOCOLATIER

Holiday Giving with Joy

Celebrate a sweet season and help OMRA!

Generous OMRA friends are once again heading up our **Purdys chocolate fundraiser** for OMRA. Please consider participating. It's easy and you get to enjoy delicious chocolate made with **100% sustainable cocoa,** sourced via collaboration with the **Cocoa Horizons Project**.

Here's how to participate:

Simply click or enter the link below (or scan the QR code) to get to the OMRA fundraiser page on the Purdys website, then follow the instructions on page.

https://rebrand.ly/2026OMRAShelter

Order by: November 16
Pick-up: December 5
in Old Ottawa South
(details will be in the above link)

Please email sportfamily11@gmail.com if you need more information

2026 OMRA Potluck Picnic

On a beautiful warm August afternoon, the OMRA team shared wonderful food and camaraderie in Brantwood Park next to the Rideau River. It was complete with canoe rides for all newcomers and most importantly, there was plenty of opportunity for newcomers and volunteers to chat and get to know one another.















1 on 1: A Volunteer's Story

Neha Naeem, an OMRA volunteer herself, interviews Paula Kingston about her experiences working with OMRA clients.

Paula found OMRA at a transitional time in her life. Recently retired as a lawyer, she was looking for a way to directly help others, from the ground up. Paula joined OMRA in 2022 as a language tutor.

"I have been on many boards, and while that work is essential, at this stage in my life I wanted to interact directly with newcomers."

OMRA's Maria Rigby knew exactly which families to connect Paula with. But Paula soon found that for many OMRA clients, language tutoring led to other support. Those she tutoring reached out with questions about accessing healthcare, finding jobs, and improving their resumes.

While focusing on its main mission to provide housing subsidies, OMRA helps others by providing language and other supports to help clients reach a stage where subsidies are no longer necessary. Within this overall mission, volunteers may respond flexibly to many diverse needs.

"I would not want to be a tutor and just say things like, 'Okay, now look at pages 14 and 15.' While that is often required, those who come to us require deeper understanding and support."

I was struck by Paula's observation that much of our volunteering is really about advocacy.

She told me about providing English tutoring to a young woman who had enrolled in an adult education school. However, she could not get into the school located two blocks from her home. Instead, the only school that would accept her was so far away that she had to spend hours on the bus each day.

"One day, Maria went into the nearby school with my client to speak with the administrators and ask what was going on, because the policy made no sense for her situation. As a result, the client was moved to the nearby school. As volunteers, a large part of our role is advocating for people who do not yet have the language skills, cultural knowledge, or networks needed to advocate for themselves. OMRA is unique because we assist in providing that support."

> "Seeing people reach their goals makes it all worth it"

I asked Paula about lessons she had learned through her experience with OMRA. Having worked in the legal system, she was familiar with navigating complex institutions. However, she explained that understanding services for newcomers was a completely different challenge – I had to second that.

"They are extremely complicated even for me, so imagine how hard it is for someone who does not speak English."

Paula shared a story that stayed with her about how OMRA supported a client who had the rug pulled out from under her feet because of an honest mistake.

"One of our clients incorrectly entered her birthday when filling out a government document. As a result, the provincial government removed her access to social supports such as OHIP and Ontario Works.
She had a family, a child, and another one on the way. Luckily, OMRA was there to help her sort it all out."

Hearing this, I could not be more grateful for OMRA. By being a nimble organization with dedicated volunteers and board members, OMRA tackles issues that single people and families face head-on. OMRA has helped many people keep their heads above water during difficult times.

OMRA volunteers often experience the ups and downs facing newcomers. Hope is essential for both clients and volunteers.

"One of my happiest moments was with one of my clients, a young woman with a great deal of trauma in her background – who came here completely on her own – worked tirelessly to improve her language skills. She worked so hard for that. Watching her pass all of her tests and become a Canadian citizen was incredibly rewarding. Seeing people reach their goals makes it all worth it."

I was moved. As volunteers, we are often among the first people clients reach out to for help. We see both the highs and lows of their journeys. We understand how daunting the challenges can be and choose to support them through it. Seeing light at the end of the tunnel for the people OMRA serves truly makes it all worthwhile.

To close this lively and thoughtful interview, I asked Paula what she would say to people who want to support OMRA and the vital work it does.

"Support OMRA. Donate if you can. Get to know new people in your neighbourhood and make an effort to be welcoming. Small acts of kindness can make a big difference."

Updates to the OMRA Board

New member to the OMRA board



At the OMRA AGM on June 15, 2026, **Margaret Ford** was confirmed as the newest director on the OMRA board.

Margaret is a retired federal public service manager. She spent over 15 years in Canada's foreign service with postings in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, Canada's Permanent Mission to the United Nations in New York, and at the Commonwealth Secretariat in London, before serving in 3 other government departments (National Transportation Agency, Department of the Solicitor General, and CIDA.)

She has considerable experience in economic and development policy, the negotiation and delivery of development projects, and in financial and human resource management. She has helped sponsor and assist a number of refugees over the last several years.

We are pleased to have Margaret on the OMRA team!

OMRA is looking for a new president in 2027

As was announced at the AGM, Maria Rigby will be stepping down as president in 2027. Maria has been working this year as OMRA's co-president, along with long-time board member Carol Buckley. Carol has offered to be co-president in 2027 to assist with on-boarding a new President.

As followers of OMRA will know, the Board role is an active, hands-on commitment. **If you are looking for a rewarding volunteer opportunity, or know someone who is, this is a role where you will have real opportunities to make a difference in newcomers' lives** and enjoy working with like-minded members of the community!

Ten Thousand Villages Tea Room

The Ten Thousand Villages Sale is returning to the Ottawa Mennonite Church (1830 Kilborn Avenue) on **Friday, November 13 and Saturday, November 14, 2026!** The sale runs from 3:00 PM until 8:00 PM on Friday and 10:00 AM until 4:00 PM on Saturday. There will also be a tea room on Saturday serving delicious borscht and baked goods.



Start your Christmas shopping early and come and buy fair-trade crafts from around the world. The sale will also feature hand-knotted rugs from Pakistan. The sale is supported by the Ten Thousand Villages store in Cobourg, Ontario. Proceeds will go to OMRA.

OMRA Grocery Card Program

As we all know, housing rents and rising food costs are creating challenging times for everyone, and especially newcomers. Government support has not increased, and many of OMRA clients are struggling to put food on the table.

OMRA supports between 20 and 30 households per year, our card program provides much of the money needed to provide subsidies. **So, the more people who buy grocery cards, the more money we have to provide much needed rent subsidies!**

How it works: a participant buys a grocery card and gets the full value of that card. **The stores then give us 5% on the total purchases**. Once a month, participants decide how many grocery cards they would like to purchase, etransfer the funds to OMRA, and then pick up the cards from an OMRA distributor. Voila! OMRA can provide more and higher rent subsidies.

OMRA greatly appreciates the support through our grocery card program or by your donations!

To sign up for our grocery card program just go to our website: omraottawa.org/get-involved