
August 14, 2015

Where is the place of Filipino migrants in the DFA priorities?

Budget for Consular Office for Filipinos in Alberta, NOW!

It has now been two years since Migrante Alberta spearheaded the campaign to open a consular office for Filipinos in Alberta, Canada. Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) officials have made statements of their intent to include the budget for its creation since 2014.

Following Philippine President Benigno Aquino's Philippine State of the Nation Address (SoNA) this July, the House of Congress will tackle budget approval as its first agenda since it opened this August.

In the 2016 National Expenditures Program (Vol II), having a consulate in Alberta is not part of the budget (<http://www.dbm.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/NEP2016/NEP-VOLUME%20II.pdf>). Filipinos in Alberta ask: Where is the place of the more than 100,000 Filipinos in Alberta in the DFA priorities?

The road to pave the way for the department to respond was not easy for concerned Filipinos living in the province.

Migrante Alberta kicked off the campaign through a petition at the group's formal launch in August 2013. A coalition to open a consular office was formed after successful community fora in Edmonton and Calgary in the fall of 2013. Since August 2013, the coalition was able to collect and send about 7,000 signatures to DFA.

In June 2014, coalition members and individual supporters mailed campaign postcards to DFA's office in Manila. In the following month, the coalition sent a hundred of letters to the 35 members of the Congressional Committee on Overseas Workers Affairs, 49 members of the Congressional Committee on Foreign Affairs and three (3) senators sympathetic to the group's campaign. The campaign was closely coordinated with the international alliance Migrante International and Migrante Sectoral Party based in the Philippines.

Migrante Alberta also maximized social networking by initiating the "Selfie Project" in February 2014. Supporters post their selfies with their personal signage calling to open a consular office in Alberta on the Consular Campaign Facebook Page or through an email to migrantealberta@gmail.com.

Thus, in February 2014, Raul Hernandez, Foreign Affairs spokesman, was quoted in a news report saying that the recommendation had already been received and "submitted for consideration in the 2015 budget."

In September 8, 2014, the DFA sent a letter to the office of Senator Grace Poe saying that opening a permanent service missions in Calgary and Winnipeg will be considered for 2016. This letter was forwarded to Migrante on September 14th (document attached).

Similarly, on October 7th, the DFA positively responded to the House Bill No. 4971 otherwise known as *"An Act Creating a Full Consular Office in Alberta, Canada and Providing For Funds Therefore"* introduced by Hon Luzviminda Ilagan and Hon. Emmi De Jesus (document attached).

The DFA through its Legislative Liaison Unit, acknowledged that opening a full-time Consulate General in Calgary will benefit the Filipinos in the area. It said, "the Department sees the merit of opening a full-time Consulate General in Calgary given the number of Filipinos in the area as well as its physical distance from Vancouver, Canada" and "shall be considered in 2016 after a universal review of our network of Foreign Service Posts during the DFA Strategic Plan Review in 2015."

Currently, Alberta is under the jurisdiction of the Philippine consulate in Vancouver, which also covers British Columbia, Yukon and Northwest Territories. The consulate serves an estimated 200,000 to 250,000 Filipinos. Alberta alone is home to over 100,000 Filipinos, including permanent residents and temporary foreign workers.

It is crucial that a consular office is opened in Alberta given the challenges that temporary foreign workers are facing following the implementation of the changes in the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) in June 2014. The changes spelled out more stringent rules surrounding TFW hiring, increased fees and shorter stay in Canada. Also in April this year, the four-year moratorium for TFWs has caused massive deportations, even forcing others to become undocumented in order to remain here.

And even on the day-to-day woes, the presence of a permanent office and regular hours of operations would save the TFWs and immigrants time, money and effort to deal with their issues.

Recently, huge salaries and bonuses of DFA top diplomats have alarmed not only Philippine officials but common people as well. It sounds ironic that DFA diplomats are among the top highest paid or compensated amid the agency's apparent feeble assistance to distressed Filipinos abroad.

The DFA is guided by the Three Pillars of Philippine Foreign Policy, namely the preservation and enhancement of national security, the promotion and attainment of economic security and the protection of the rights and the promotion of the welfare and interest of all Filipinos overseas.

Where are the Filipinos in Alberta in this priority list?

Now more than ever is the time that the DFA heed the call of the people -- open a consular office in Alberta, Canada now!

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