

**Recommendations for Private Sponsorship Design in an Expanded
Community Sponsorship System**

(June 10, 2021)

In the aftermath of World War II, the global community recognized its failure to protect victims of persecution and made a powerful commitment to protect the rights of refugees. As we mark the 70th anniversary of the Refugee Convention, the United States' renewed leadership on refugee protection is a welcome and necessary commitment to revitalizing the Refugee Convention's humanitarian spirit and sense of shared responsibility for supporting the rights, dignity, and security of all people.

After four years of devastating retreat on refugee protection, the United States' commitment to not only restoring this critical lifeline but also innovating the U.S. refugee program through community sponsorship is a promising roadmap for foundational change and hope.

Community sponsorship of refugees, inclusive of private sponsorship, offers communities, organizations, institutions, and companies the opportunity to directly engage in refugee resettlement. In particular, a private sponsorship program strengthens the public's sense of ownership of refugee resettlement, fostering even more direct relationships with their new neighbors and further deepening community member and newcomer engagement that already occurs through traditional resettlement and co-sponsorship.

Expanded community sponsorship is a transformative tool – one part of a larger vision for how the United States can build back better in U.S. refugee admissions. Leading by example, the United States can also help revitalize the global system for humanitarian protection by showing how direct engagement builds more resilient programs and communities.

President Biden's Executive Order 14013 ordered the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Health and Human Services to deliver a plan by June 4, 2021 on the expanded use of community sponsorship, including private sponsorship as well as existing co-sponsorship models.¹ As the the Departments of State (DOS) and Health and Human Services (HHS) consider design for this expansion, we make the following recommendations:

¹ Executive Order 14,013, "Rebuilding and Enhancing Programs To Resettle Refugees"

1. Key Definitions & Clear Timelines

The Bureau of Population, Migration, and Refugees (PRM) within DOS defines community sponsorship as “pair[ing] refugees with groups of individuals (such as local clubs, businesses, university communities, faith groups, sports teams, book clubs, etc.) who commit to providing clearly defined financial and/or in-kind contributions and volunteer services to support their welcome and integration.”² PRM defines co-sponsorship as a form of community sponsorship in which co-sponsors “are community groups which have accepted – in a (non-legally binding) written agreement with a resettlement agency – the responsibility to provide, or ensure the provision of, reception and placement services to certain refugees sponsored by the agency.”³

However, private sponsorship – a type of community sponsorship, but different from and usually involving a more robust sponsor commitment than co-sponsorship – has not yet been formally defined by the U.S. government. Additionally, clear timelines for both the design process and the ultimate rollout of private sponsorship have yet to be announced.

Recommendations:

To level-set for the design process and provide clarity in discussions of various forms of community sponsorship, PRM should define private sponsorship for the purposes of a future U.S. program.

Additionally, to create and sustain public interest, DOS and HHS should commit to clear timelines for both the design process and the ultimate rollout of private sponsorship. These timelines should include when agencies will make a more detailed public announcement of an expanded community sponsorship system, inclusive of a private sponsorship program.

and Planning for the Impact of Climate Change on Migration,” Feb. 4, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/02/04/executive-order-on-rebuilding-and-enhancing-programs-to-resettle-refugees-and-planning-for-the-impact-of-climate-change-on-migration/>.

² U.S. Department of State, “FY 2022 Notice of Funding Opportunity for Reception and Placement Program,” Apr. 19, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/fy-2022-notice-of-funding-opportunity-for-reception-and-placement-program/>.

³ *Id.*

2. Co-Design Based in Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity

Expanded community sponsorship, and a private sponsorship program in particular, should be created through co-design with a spectrum of stakeholders, including refugees themselves; resettlement agencies; thought leaders with expertise on forms of community sponsorship in the U.S. and globally; and entities likely to play a role in future community sponsorship, such as universities, faith institutions, and companies. A co-design process with active involvement of stakeholders will allow DOS and HHS to benefit from a wealth of information and expertise.

Reflecting the president's commitment to racial equity and inclusion, a co-design process should center refugees themselves, whose lived experiences are necessary to inform a program that succeeds at meeting refugees' needs and goals as they integrate into a new community.

Additionally, a co-design process should benefit from the range of other diverse stakeholders with experience in community sponsorship. Although a private sponsorship program has not existed in the United States since the 1980s, various forms of community sponsorship, including co-sponsorship, exist throughout the country. Participants in existing community sponsorship forms have practical experience to share and build upon – as do those with knowledge of community sponsorship programs that exist in other countries, including Canada. Entities likely to serve as sponsors will also have unique insight into the resources and experience they can provide a newly-arrived refugee.

Recommendation:

DOS and HHS should actively engage in a co-design process with a spectrum of stakeholders, centering resettled refugees, to create an inclusive and equitable process and a responsive and resilient program. They should also ensure there are transparent lines of communication with stakeholders.

3. An Iterative Program with a Strong Monitoring & Evaluation Component

A U.S. private sponsorship program should be iterative, allowing the program to evolve and refine in successive iterations as the United States also rebuilds infrastructure for its U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). The program can build on traditional refugee resettlement and co-sponsorship opportunities while innovating different design options and assessing how they safeguard the well-being of, improve the experience of, and built better outcomes for, both refugees and the communities resettling refugees. A strong monitoring and evaluation component from the program's outset will facilitate this feedback and evolution as the program is brought to scale in future fiscal years.

As with the co-design process, program iterations should center the refugee as a key stakeholder in their own resettlement process and integration plan. Equity, inclusion, and diversity should be guiding principles in each iteration to ensure meaningful and effective participation of impacted communities and other stakeholders.

Recommendation:

DOS and HHS should build an iterative private sponsorship program from a monitoring and evaluation foundation to ensure the well-being and success of refugees and communities, as well as inform future iterations of program design.

4. Resettlement and Resources *Additional to Existing USRAP*

Private sponsorship should be used to increase the number of refugees resettled in the United States annually, with an additional number of refugees resettled via private sponsorship above and beyond the number to be resettled each year through traditional USRAP and co-sponsorship. This preserves the U.S. humanitarian commitment to resettle refugees through a government-led resettlement program and acknowledges the critical work resettlement agencies already do, while utilizing private resources and capacity to expand pathways to safety for refugees.

Recommendation:

DOS and HHS should work with the White House to designate an additional number of resettlement places each fiscal year for refugees who are privately sponsored, clearly separate from and on top of the number who will be resettled through traditional USRAP and co-sponsorship in each respective year. This number should be publicly announced to attract sponsor interest and make clear the additive value of private sponsorship.

5. Opportunities to “Name” Refugees for Sponsorship

Refugees are primarily referred for traditional resettlement through USRAP by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), embassies, or family members. For private sponsorship, another option is an open “naming,” or nomination, of refugees by sponsors.

Open naming would incentivize potential sponsors, maximize alignment of interest and expertise, and allow the program to reach refugees who might not be encompassed by USRAP currently (e.g., expanded family reunification for non-nuclear family members not currently eligible to access USRAP through the Priority Three category; refugees from emergent humanitarian crises abroad; LGBTQ+ refugees or survivors of sexual and gender-based violence who fear approaching governmental or government-affiliated institutions where they currently live, but have U.S. contacts or are willing to approach NGOs; and people determined to be refugees due to, in part, to climate-change impacts). All refugees would meet the U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act refugee definition, and undergo the same vetting processes as other refugees entering the United States.

Recommendation:

DOS and HHS should consider a mechanism for open “naming” of refugees by sponsors, either in the initial iteration of the program or in future iterations as the program expands. At the same time, the program should also begin with and retain a mechanism for “matching” all other refugees referred by UNHCR, embassies or consulates, and NGOs to sponsors in the United States. This will allow groups outside of traditional resettlement areas, and/or connection to refugees overseas, the opportunity to welcome.

6. A Broad Range of Potential Private Sponsors

With appropriate infrastructure for application processing, as well as training and oversight, many types of groups or entities could serve as private sponsors. Universities eager to sponsor students, “rainbow” groups like those in Canada formed to sponsor and meet the unique needs of LGBTQ+ refugees, businesses, and groups modeled after the Canadian program’s “Group of 5” would greatly enhance sponsorship opportunities and have capacity to more independently undertake sponsorships. A wider range of potential private sponsors would broaden the actors involved in resettlement, fostering a deeper sense of community ownership in the program and allowing resettlement to occur or expand in more communities geographically.

Recommendation:

DOS and HHS should keep open the possibility of a broad range of groups and entities to serve as sponsors. Even when operating more independently, private sponsors should still be obligated to meet certain requirements, including demonstration of capacity to welcome and facilitate integration, and pre-arrival training.