
VOLUNTEERS AND SPONSORS: A CATALYST FOR REFUGEE INTEGRATION?

By Susan Fratzke and Emma Dorst

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A Catalyst for Refugee Integration?

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Executive Summary

The rapid rise in the numbers of refugees and asylum seekers arriving in Europe and North America in 2015 and 2016 was met in many countries by an equally unprecedented outpouring of public support. Humanitarian assistance and social service agencies were at times overwhelmed with offers from members of the public wanting to volunteer or provide donations. This surge in community engagement has sparked a conversation on both continents about whether and how private citizens and community groups can be better engaged in supporting newcomers' settlement and integration.

While volunteers and sponsors cannot replace specialized social service agencies or well-resourced social assistance programs, they do offer unique resources that can be an invaluable complement to the services that professional agencies and case workers are able to provide. Volunteers typically carry out discrete tasks or functions (e.g., teaching English, preparing an apartment for new arrivals). In contrast, sponsors (generally, organizations or groups of individuals) take on responsibility for ensuring that newcomers achieve certain integration outcomes, such as acquiring stable housing or becoming self-sufficient.

Volunteer mentorship or sponsorship programs that directly match refugees with community members provide newcomers with dedicated points of contact who can answer their questions (What does my child's report card mean?) and provide individual assistance (a personal tour of the public transportation system or driving lessons) or tailored services (one-on-one language tutoring). These programs thus create a ratio of service providers to clients that even the most well-resourced professional agency would never be able to replicate.

When done well, sponsorship or volunteer mentorship relationships can provide companionship and emotional and social support.

Aside from their time and availability, volunteers and sponsors offer resources that may not be available to resettlement and integration agencies in house. For example, those who are familiar with particular employment sectors can help refugees tailor their resumes for specific jobs. Their social connections within the community may provide valuable sources of information about affordable housing or employment opportunities. Perhaps most importantly, when done well, sponsorship or volunteer mentorship relationships can provide companionship and emotional and social support that extend beyond the scope of professional service providers—and that isolated newcomers desperately need.

Yet, engaging volunteers or community sponsors is hardly a cost-free, or even a cost-saving, endeavor for most resettlement and integration agencies. Volunteers and sponsors require vetting, training, supervision, and ongoing support in order to be effective. The most effective programs employ a full-time volunteer or community engagement coordinator. Refugee sponsorship programs, such as those in Canada and the United Kingdom, often have dedicated bodies at the national level that provide training and oversight for sponsor groups. But many local refugee service agencies lack the expertise and financial and staff resources to provide the necessary support and guidance to volunteers and sponsors. Volunteer and sponsorship programs that do not have adequate support run the risk of backfiring and providing poor-quality services to refugees or, in the worst cases, actually doing harm.



Policymakers can step in to fill these gaps in three ways:

- **Create policy frameworks that allow agencies to engage volunteers or sponsors where they would add the most value.** This can be done by avoiding overly prescriptive or burdensome service requirements and giving agencies some flexibility to determine how best to provide services.
- **Designate funding for community engagement as part of the broader integration or resettlement strategy.** Funding a staff position to coordinate volunteers or sponsors is the single biggest obstacle many local agencies face to establishing an effective community engagement program. Providing dedicated financial resources for this purpose would both expand the reach of volunteer programs and improve their effectiveness. Private philanthropy can also play a role in providing supplemental funding for sponsor and volunteer support positions at the local level.
- **Provide or fund a set of learning resources for agencies seeking to engage community members in service provision.** Many agencies lack in-house knowledge of how to facilitate community engagement well. Off-the-shelf training materials, manuals, and forms would help fill this gap. Train-the-trainer programs and opportunities for volunteer support staff to exchange experiences and best practices would also help develop the capabilities of local agencies to effectively engage the resources of local communities.

Increased investment in community engagement would allow agencies to more effectively leverage the human, social, and financial capital of volunteers and sponsors who are eager to help welcome newcomers and contribute to their integration. By supporting community engagement, policymakers can increase refugees' access to individualized, ongoing support, which can contribute to improved integration outcomes.

I. Introduction

The rising number of displaced people around the world has increased pressures on receiving communities and service providers, many of which are struggling to meet the core needs of resettled refugees and recognized asylum seekers. At the same time, many communities are beginning to grapple with the long-term challenges of the integration process, paralleled by a rise in public skepticism about immigration (and about refugees and asylum seekers in particular).¹

Yet, even as publics question immigration and integration policies writ large, there are significant pockets of support at the local level. This report explores community engagement primarily in Europe and North America where, in many countries, offers of financial and volunteer support for refugees from private

¹ In Italy, for example, only 18 percent of people feel that immigration has a positive impact on their country, while 57 percent believe the overall impact of immigration has been negative. In Germany, despite a strong belief in the principle of asylum and a national obligation to accept refugees, only 23 percent of people believe that refugees will successfully integrate into German society, whereas 46 percent have no such confidence. See Tim Dixon et al., *Attitudes Towards National Identity, Immigration and Refugees in Italy* (N.p.: More in Common, 2018), 8, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a70a7c3010027736a22740f/t/5b5852700e2e72de2784d45d/1532514941303/Italy+EN+Final_Digital_2B.pdf; Marc Helbling et al., *Attitudes Towards National Identity, Immigration, and Refugees in Germany* (N.p.: More in Common, 2017), 7, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a70a7c3010027736a22740f/t/5aec61741ae6cff5ed8d8bb3/1525440898162/More+in+Common+Germany+Report+English.pdf>.



individuals and community groups have surged since 2015.² In theory, harnessing this groundswell of volunteer support could alleviate some of the pressures on overstretched providers. Private community members can offer a range of resources—including their time, unique skills and knowledge, and access to local social networks—that can complement and expand on the assistance offered by professional service providers.

Recognizing this pool of potential resources, interest has grown among both governments and local integration and resettlement agencies in finding ways to engage community members in supporting refugees' integration. Several European countries have committed to adopting a model pioneered in Canada—community sponsorship of refugees—that delegates responsibility for certain elements of refugees' settlement and integration to private individuals and community groups.³ Other countries have explored how to draw on volunteers for specific tasks, such as providing community orientations or conversational language practice.

*Using volunteers and sponsors to provide
integration support ... requires specialized knowledge
and dedicated financial and staff resources.*

Despite the growing interest in volunteering and sponsorship, integration and resettlement service providers have often struggled, particularly at the local level, to effectively utilize the resources that private citizens have to offer. Using volunteers and sponsors to provide integration support is often a complex and intensive undertaking that requires specialized knowledge and dedicated financial and staff resources that many local agencies and organizations lack. This report considers where community members can add the most value to integration efforts, assesses the barriers that community organizations and integration service providers face in engaging communities, and offers recommendations for how policymakers can facilitate the effective engagement of communities in integration.

II. The Added Value of Community Engagement

While high-quality and professional social services and well-funded social support networks remain critical to integration efforts, community members can be a valuable complement to professional case workers by providing a variety of important resources:

- **Human capital and human resources.** Private individuals may have specialized skills or knowledge (such as unique language skills or knowledge of local housing markets) that a service agency does not have in house. The additional time and one-on-one attention that volunteers and sponsors can devote to addressing the specific questions or concerns of refugees can also be of tremendous value, particularly at a time when case workers are

2 See, for example, European Web Site on Integration, “Comparative Analysis: Voluntary and Citizens’ Initiatives before and after 2015,” European Commission, November 2, 2016, <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/intdossier/comparative-analysis-voluntary-and-citizens-initiatives-before-and-after-2015>; Odette Yousef, “Refugee Resettlement Groups See Surge in Volunteers,” WBEZ News, December 2, 2016, www.wbez.org/shows/wbez-news/refugee-resettlement-groups-see-surge-in-volunteers/a2b6b0a3-1f7f-4735-a5a5-d1ea6c624a59.

3 As of July 2019, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom had launched or announced sponsorship programs.



overstretched. Volunteers can also provide important companionship and emotional support to refugees who lack friends and extended family in their new communities, a role that professionalized agencies are particularly ill-equipped to take on.

- **Social networks.** The unique personal, professional, and social networks that community members bring can be an incredibly valuable resource. Volunteers and sponsors' connections with local employers, for example, can be instrumental in helping refugees find their first job. Community members can also help refugees connect with local civic and social groups, helping to reduce isolation.
- **Physical and financial resources.** Finally, community members can be an important source of physical resources and capital to fill gaps for refugees during their first few weeks or months after arrival. Financial donations can help to cover rent or a deposit where affordable housing is scarce, for example. In some cases, larger donations, like vehicles or a spare apartment, may even be on offer.

Community engagement in refugee integration generally takes one of two forms: volunteering or sponsorship. However, it is useful to view these practices as points along a continuum—they do not preclude one another, nor are they the only avenues through which individuals or groups can support those resettled in their communities.

- **Volunteering.** Volunteering gives individuals responsibility for completing particular tasks that are usually clearly defined and occur at a predetermined time or within a set time frame. In the context of refugee resettlement and integration, this might include language tutoring, reviewing resumes, conducting mock interviews, or teaching someone to use public transportation. Volunteers may also serve as mentors, providing ongoing social, employment, or other form of support for a period of time.
- **Sponsorship.** Sponsorship can be understood as a level of commitment beyond volunteering that gives an individual or a group responsibility for outcomes. Sponsors must use their own knowledge, resources, and creativity to ensure that newcomers meet important initial integration goals, such as developing basic language proficiency, enrolling in school, or finding a job.

Regardless of the exact method of engagement, volunteers and sponsors can both be deployed in several different ways to support integration and resettlement efforts. The sections that follow look at five specific ways that community members can add value to integration.

A. **Providing Individualized Services**

Community members, whether serving as volunteers or as sponsors, can draw on their time, knowledge, and skills to provide refugees with support that is more tailored to their individual needs than what professional services are usually able to provide. Case workers in many refugee-receiving countries are overstretched, with caseloads that are too large to allow for individual follow-up. A study in Toronto, for example, found that the average caseload in the government-assisted refugee program is 70 families per case worker.⁴ Heavy caseloads may mean that case workers are harder to reach or do not have the time to answer non-urgent questions (e.g., Where can I buy halal meat? What does this note from my child's school mean?).

4 Together Project, "Matching Government-Assisted Refugee Newcomers" (brief, Together Project, Toronto, December 2016), https://togetherproject.ca/site/uploads/2018/03/Together_Project_Report_Matching_Government-Assisted_Refugee_Newcomers.pdf.



Volunteer mentors or sponsors, who are usually matched with only one refugee or family at a time, can provide the more in-depth and tailored support that case workers may not be able to supply. In Canada, for example, the private sponsorship program requires at least five sponsors per family, reversing the ratio. And unlike case workers, who may only be available during working hours, sponsors often view themselves as more similar to family or friends and are available to answer questions or provide guidance at any time. Sponsored refugees do appear to receive more support than those assisted by the government. An evaluation of the Syrian resettlement program in Canada found that sponsored refugees were more likely to report receiving assistance with things like finding a doctor or locating child care than government-assisted refugees. Sponsored refugees were also much more likely than government-assisted refugees to report that they knew how to do things like access community services and health care or enroll in school.⁵

Outside of sponsorship, mentoring programs that match refugees with a community member who has agreed to serve as a guide can play a similar role. In Charlottesville, Virginia, in the United States, the volunteer-run organization International Neighbors matches refugees with established residents who have similar backgrounds or interests.⁶ The local mentors meet with their refugee matches to answer questions (e.g., explaining a report card to parents).

Aside from being on call to answer questions—from the urgent to the mundane—volunteers and sponsors may also be able to provide more tailored services than professional case workers. Access to transportation, for example, is a critical need for many newcomers, particularly those settled in more remote areas without strong public transportation networks. International Neighbors in Charlottesville, for example, uses volunteers to provide free driving lessons for refugees in their community, in addition to its mentoring program. Volunteers and sponsors can also provide child care to families while adults are in language classes or searching for jobs.⁷

Community organizations also use volunteers to provide one-on-one tutoring for refugees who need extra support, or organize conversation circles or “language cafes.”

Another common role often taken on by volunteers and sponsors is that of language tutor. While mainstream integration programs may provide free language courses to newly arrived refugees, these courses may follow set curricula that can be too advanced (or too elementary) for certain refugee groups, for example, those illiterate in their native language or those who have mastered the basics and need to develop language skills specific to their profession. In the United Kingdom, the community sponsorship group CHARIS, for example, found that local English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes were too advanced for the families they had sponsored; the classes required a basic understanding of English, which the families did not have. By putting a call out for volunteers, CHARIS found three certified ESOL teachers within its network. These individuals prepared one-on-one lessons for individual family members, as well as a tailored course for the whole family.⁸ Community organizations also use volunteers

5 Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), *Rapid Impact Evaluation of the Syrian Refugee Initiative* (Ottawa: IRCC, 2016), 22, www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/reports-statistics/evaluations/rapid-impact-evaluation-syrian-refugee-initiative.html.

6 Elissa Nadworny, “90 Days to Start a New Life: For Refugees in the U.S., What Happens Next?” National Public Radio, March 9, 2018, www.npr.org/2018/03/09/577353905/90-days-to-start-a-new-life-for-refugees-in-the-u-s-what-happens-next.

7 Jodi Kantor and Catrin Einhorn, “Refugees Welcome,” *The New York Times*, June 30, 2016, www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/world/americas/canada-syrian-refugees.html.

8 UK Home Office, *Community Sponsorship Guide: A Step-by-Step Guide to Preparing Your Community Group to Welcome a Refugee Family* (London: UK Home Office, 2017), 10, www.socialfinance.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/community-sponsorship-miniguide.pdf.



to provide one-on-one tutoring for refugees who need extra support, or organize conversation circles or “language cafes” where refugees can practice conversational language skills with native speakers outside a classroom setting.

B. Building Social Connections

Volunteers and sponsors can also play an important role as companions, providing social and emotional support for newly arrived refugees who have no other connections in the community. Successful sponsorship arrangements, for example, are frequently quite intimate, and refugees and sponsors develop close personal relationships.⁹ Resettlement in the United States has occasionally included a “co-sponsorship” element, wherein refugees are matched with churches or community organizations that are responsible for various welcoming tasks such as finding housing, enrolling children in school, and supporting refugees with their job search. Resettlement agencies that have used a co-sponsorship model report, anecdotally, that the personal connections sponsors have with refugees are critical in reducing isolation and connecting them with the community, and that there is a clear difference in the experiences of sponsored vs. non-sponsored refugees.¹⁰ Similarly, a Syrian man resettled in New Zealand via the country’s sponsorship program noted that the activities he and his family shared with sponsors, such as playing squash and going for hikes, helped their relationship develop into a close friendship.¹¹ Outside of formal sponsorship arrangements, volunteers can also play a role in building social connections. In the United States, one resettlement agency recruits volunteer families to host refugees for dinners in their homes, and refugees are matched with families that have a similar composition (e.g., children of approximately the same age).¹²

Volunteers and sponsors can also help refugees develop wider social networks within their new communities. The Patenschaftsprogramm in Germany, which pairs asylum seekers whose claims have been recognized with community mentors, asks mentors who help their partners find and enroll in community organizations that match their interests, such as sports clubs or volunteering groups.¹³ Elsewhere, mentors and sponsors report taking on similar roles by, for example, helping refugee children in their partner families to enroll in sports clubs or youth programs.¹⁴

C. Supporting Access to Employment

Volunteers and sponsors can also provide valuable assistance to refugees in accessing the labor market, serving as career mentors or job search guides. An evaluation of the resettlement of Syrian refugees in Canada, for example, found that privately sponsored refugees were less likely than those resettled through government programs to report that “not knowing how to find a job in Canada” was a barrier to finding work.¹⁵ Programs sometimes use volunteers to provide detailed resume reviews or conduct mock

9 Kantor and Einhorn, “Refugees Welcome.”

10 Participant comments during Migration Policy Institute (MPI) roundtable, “Two-Generation/Whole Family Strategies for Refugee Resettlement,” Washington, DC, May 23–24, 2018.

11 Amnesty International, *Community Sponsorship of Refugees: New Zealand’s Pilot Programme and Its Potential* (Auckland, New Zealand: Amnesty International, 2018), 13, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5adea6a089c1722c3aed0f82/t/5bf4a446898583726608f0cd/1542759605586/AI_Shadow_Report_Final_Final_Web_Spreads-ilovepdf-compressed.pdf

12 Participant comments during MPI roundtable, “Two-Generation/Whole Family Strategies for Refugee Resettlement.”

13 In 2016, the German federal government allocated 10 million euros for programming that links refugees with local mentors and host families. Funds go to support civic initiatives such as the Start with a Friend program, which connects refugees and community members in the interest of creating friendships and facilitating integration. See German Federal Government, “Paten für Flüchtlinge gesucht,” accessed January 19, 2016, www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/paten-fuer-fluechtlinge-gesucht-356766; Start with a Friend, “Aus Fremden können Freunde werden,” accessed January 18, 2019, www.start-with-a-friend.de/.

14 See, for example, Kantor and Einhorn, “Refugees Welcome.”

15 IRCC, *Rapid Impact Evaluation of the Syrian Refugee Initiative*.



interviews. Community members with specialized knowledge of a specific labor market sector may be able to provide targeted guidance to refugees seeking to find employment in that sector. NOVA Friends of Refugees, a volunteer-led community organization in Northern Virginia,¹⁶ holds an annual career fair for highly skilled refugees living in the Washington, DC, area, for example. The organization recruits volunteer mentors with career experience in engineering, information technology, international development, and health—sectors that have a high demand for workers in the region.

Volunteers and sponsors can also provide access to social networks, which are important in finding appropriate and stable jobs. A study by the German employment agency found that more refugees found their first jobs through social networks (42 percent) than the public employment agency (26 percent).¹⁷ Since the study was published, official integration agencies in Germany have been trying to figure out how to support the formation of social networks to help refugees find work. The Patenschaftsprogramm is one example of such an effort. The program asks mentors to help their partners identify and apply for job and training opportunities, alongside their role of providing social support and friendship. In the program's first year, about 30 percent of mentors reported placing their partners in work or training programs that would lead to a job.¹⁸

D. Overcoming Housing Barriers

Newly arrived refugees face numerous barriers that can prevent them from securing stable housing. Many refugee-receiving countries in Europe and North America are facing severe housing shortages, particularly within their public housing stocks and at the low-cost end of the housing market. In Canada, market inflation and a lack of new public housing development has led to a dearth of affordable rentals.¹⁹ And in Ireland, resettled refugees have often stayed in group reception centers for a year or more after arrival because no affordable housing was available.²⁰ Even if affordable housing is available, it may be located in areas without access to the services (e.g., language classes or specialized health-care facilities) or public transportation that new arrivals need to facilitate their integration.²¹ In addition to the scarcity of affordable housing, private landlords may be reluctant to rent to refugees who lack references or a credit history in the country or who are unable to pay a deposit with their lease.

Community members can help overcome these barriers by drawing on their social networks, knowledge of local housing markets, and personal financial resources or property. Private individuals and community groups can help address affordability issues by “topping up” social assistance benefits to cover rent payments. In the United Kingdom, for example, refugees are given a housing allowance, but sponsors sometimes provide additional support to cover the shortfall if they must rent at the market rate.²² In

16 Episcopal Migration Ministries, “NOVA Friends of Refugees,” accessed July 19, 2019, <https://episcopalmigrationministries.org/novafriendsofrefugees/>.

17 Janina Britzke and Jürgen Schupp, *SOEP Wave Report 2016* (Berlin: Deutsches Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung Berlin, 2016), 157, www.diw.de/documents/publikationen/73/diw_01.c.560446.de/wave_report_2016.pdf.

18 German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women, and Youth (BMFSFJ), *Wirkungsanalyse des Patenschaftsprogramms im Bundesprogramm “Menschen stärken Menschen”* (Berlin: BMFSFJ, 2017), www.bmfsfj.de/blob/117596/ed5f189dae3bf142645cb4b87db14f0e/wirkungsanalyse-des-patenschaftsprogramms-menschen-staerken-menschen-data.pdf.

19 Damaris Rose and Alexandra Charette, *Finding Housing for the Syrian Refugee Newcomers in Canadian Cities: Challenges, Initiatives and Policy Implications* (Montreal: Institut national de la recherche scientifique, 2017), 2, <http://espace.inrs.ca/6458/1/FindinghousingforSyrianrefugees-report.pdf>.

20 Sorcha Pollak, “Ballagherreen Refugees Complain of ‘Lies’ about Housing,” *The Irish Times*, October 1, 2018, www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/ballagherreen-refugees-complain-of-lies-about-housing-1.3646624.

21 See Damaris Rose, *Creating a Home in Canada: Refugee Housing Challenges and Potential Policy Solutions* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2019), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/canada-refugee-housing-challenges-policy-solutions.

22 MPI Europe and ICF, *Study on the Feasibility and Added Value of Sponsorship Schemes as a Possible Pathway to Safe Channels for Admission to the EU, Including Resettlement* (Brussels: European Commission, 2018), 54, 71, 73, 133, <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/1dbb0873-d349-11e8-9424-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-77978210>.



Canada, the Welcome Fund was established in 2015 to gather private finances to supplement the monthly government housing allowance provided to Syrian refugees.²³

Community members can also help identify alternative housing options via their knowledge of local housing markets or even offer their own housing assets for use by new arrivals. In Canada, settlement agencies use volunteers who are familiar with the local rental market to mentor refugees in their housing search.²⁴ The Irish “Pledge a Bed” campaign, run by the Irish Red Cross, found accommodation for 88 refugees between 2015 and 2017 in the form of donated and shared housing.²⁵ And in North America, the hospitality platform Airbnb has cooperated with the International Rescue Committee (a refugee resettlement agency) to launch the Open Homes initiative, which allows Airbnb hosts to offer free short-term housing to newly arrived refugees in the United States and Canada.²⁶ On a smaller scale, community members in Washington, DC, have created an online support network that maintains a list of available housing, including church parsonages, basement apartments, and more.²⁷ Sponsors can also help allay the concerns of landlords who may not otherwise be willing to rent to newly arrived refugee families by cosigning leases or providing references.²⁸

Community and private resources can also widen the geographic scope of where refugees are placed. Resettlement locations are often selected based on housing availability and access to services. These limitations create concentrations of resettled refugees in certain areas, which not only stresses the local housing market, but can also quickly overwhelm service providers. In Ireland’s new refugee sponsorship program, refugees who are matched with sponsors can be settled in smaller communities that have available housing but may not have the same wealth of services as bigger cities.²⁹ Sponsors agree to fill the service gap by taking on responsibilities such as basic language training. In the United States, resettlement policy requires that refugees who are joining family or have other established ties to a certain locality be resettled no more than 100 miles from (and within the same state as) the nearest resettlement agency office. Those without preexisting ties must be resettled in communities no more than 50 miles from the nearest local resettlement agency office, limiting the number of cities in which refugees could be placed.³⁰

E. Improving Perceptions of Refugees within the Settlement Community

Volunteering and sponsorship can be a transformative experience for community members, who often report that these experiences have given them a better appreciation of the reasons refugees have fled their countries and the challenges they face in integrating. But perhaps even more important than the direct effects on sponsors and refugees themselves are the effects on communities more broadly. Public opinion research by the UK organization More in Common suggests that people respond more favorably

23 CBC News, “Refugee Agencies Making Headway in Housing Syrians, but Thousands Still Need Homes,” CBC News, March 8, 2016, www.cbc.ca/news/canada/refugees-housing-moving-in-1.3476893; Manulife Financial Corporation, “Manulife and Community Foundations of Canada Establish Welcome Fund for Syrian Refugees,” CISION, December 10, 2015, www.newswire.ca/news-releases/manulife-and-community-foundations-of-canada-establish-welcome-fund-for-syrian-refugees-561463231.html.

24 Rose, *Creating a Home in Canada*.

25 Sorcha Pollak, “New Campaign Calls on Irish Households to Pledge a Bed to Syrian Refugee,” *The Irish Times*, May 14, 2018, www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/new-campaign-calls-on-irish-households-to-pledge-a-bed-to-syrian-refugee-1.3495120.

26 Airbnb, “Airbnb Pilots New Platform to Provide Housing for Refugees and Evacuees, Partners with International Rescue Committee” (news release, June 7, 2017), <https://press.airbnb.com/airbnb-pilots-new-platform-to-provide-housing-for-refugees-and-evacuees-partners-with-international-rescue-committee/>.

27 Author communication with community group members, May 18, 2018.

28 Rose and Charette, *Finding Housing for the Syrian Refugee Newcomers in Canadian Cities*.

29 MPI Europe and ICF, *Study on the Feasibility and Added Value of Sponsorship Schemes*.

30 Andorra Bruno, *Reception and Placement of Refugees in the United States* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2017), 3, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/homesec/R44878.pdf>.



to ideas presented by people with whom they identify.³¹ Volunteers, sponsors, and mentors who work with refugees are thus well positioned to be sources of information to friends and family about their own experiences with refugees and to advocate for more tolerant attitudes within their personal networks. In Canada, for example, officials and experts attribute the high level of support for Canada's resettlement program to the fact that a large proportion of Canadians have had a direct or indirect experience with refugee sponsorship: nearly one-third of Canadians have either sponsored refugees themselves or know someone who has.³²

Experts attribute the high level of support for Canada's resettlement program to the fact that a large proportion of Canadians have had a direct or indirect experience with refugee sponsorship.

Conversely, communities that do not feel engaged in refugee settlement decisions or integration may react negatively to the arrival of refugees in their midst. Examples of this type of backlash abound in the United States, where the resettlement program has been criticized for not doing enough to consult with and involve local communities in resettlement decisions and activities.³³ Involving community members as sponsors or volunteers may help to provide communities with greater ownership of the process. One resettlement agency in the United States that has increasingly shifted its operations to a sponsorship model reported that where it has used a sponsorship approach, communities have been much more open to receiving resettled refugees. One of their strongest programs, for example, is in Fayetteville, Arkansas, a town of 74,000 people in the deep south, which according to the resettlement agency has become extremely proud of their resettlement program.³⁴

III. Obstacles to Community Engagement and Opportunities for Investment

When done well, community engagement can have a transformative effect on integration outcomes. But service providers often struggle to figure out how to put the goodwill of community members to best use. Poorly executed engagement initiatives have the potential to hinder integration, create resentment among newcomers and community members, and damage public perceptions of refugee resettlement. Insufficient training or support for volunteers and sponsors can lead to gaps in service provision and, in extreme cases, re-traumatization of refugees.

Service providers and community organizations tend to encounter three primary obstacles to effective community engagement: understanding how to properly utilize volunteers and sponsors, knowing how to support them, and having the resources to do so.

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- 31 Daniel Yudkin, *The Psychology of Authoritarian Populism—A Bird's Eye View* (N.p.: More in Common, 2018), https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a70a7c3010027736a22740f/t/5b2a5706575d1f5530732b9d/1529501451397/Yudkin%2C+Daniel.+%282018%29.+The+Psychology+of+Authoritarian+Populism%2C+A+Bird%27s+Eye+View_June2018.pdf.
- 32 Michael Adams, "Canada in 2018 Is a Country of Global Citizens," *The Globe and Mail*, April 16, 2018, www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-canada-in-2018-is-a-country-of-global-citizens/.
- 33 U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Refugee Resettlement: Greater Consultation with Community Stakeholders Could Strengthen Program* (Washington, DC: GAO, 2012), www.gao.gov/products/GAO-12-729.
- 34 Kate Frentzel, "Practicing Faith through Advocacy," *Luther Magazine*, May 17, 2019, www.luther.edu/magazine/?story_id=833408&issue_id=833365.



A. *Knowing How to Use Volunteers and Sponsors Effectively*

Putting volunteers and sponsors to effective use is not intuitive. Service providers and community organizations must have a sense of both their own needs and which of these gaps could be filled by nonstaff members, as well as a familiarity with the resources and capabilities of the community and willing volunteers. Some tasks are uniquely well suited to volunteers, while others may be more appropriate for experienced professionals (e.g., completing complicated benefits paperwork that requires access to sensitive personal information). But this delineation may not always be obvious at the outset. Turning some level of responsibility over to nonstaff members will also entail a certain level of risk, and this can be daunting for organizations used to having complete control over their work with clients.

Determining how best to incorporate interested community members into an integration or resettlement program is particularly challenging for programs that have little history of community involvement. In many countries, integration and settlement support is institutionalized and provided by government agencies or contractors who have little experience with community engagement or volunteer coordination. Even in countries with a strong voluntary sector or history of drawing on civil society to provide social support, this knowledge may not extend to the refugee settlement and integration sector. The United States, for example, drew heavily on sponsors, volunteers, and community organizations to provide resettlement services prior to the 1990s; more recently, however, resettlement service provision has been largely shifted to professional staff in resettlement agencies, in part due to the introduction of stricter and more complex service delivery regulations.³⁵ As a result, institutional knowledge within these agencies about how to successfully manage co-sponsorship arrangements with local congregations or community groups has faded.³⁶ Even in Canada, where sponsorship is relatively commonplace, settlement agencies that work with government-assisted refugees have struggled to figure out how to use volunteers to support their clients.

Some tasks are uniquely well suited to volunteers, while others may be more appropriate for experienced professionals.

In some cases, tensions have arisen between volunteer initiatives hoping to provide direct support and settlement agencies. While volunteers perceive service providers to be acting as “gatekeepers,” preventing interaction with new arrivals, resettlement agencies report being reluctant to use volunteers because they are concerned that volunteers do not fully comprehend the vulnerabilities of new arrivals.³⁷

B. *Knowing How to Support Volunteers and Sponsors*

Volunteers and sponsors are not free labor. Rather, to be effective, community members require vetting, training, and ongoing guidance and support (see Box 1). The complex needs of refugees can easily overwhelm untrained volunteers or those unsure of where to turn for assistance.³⁸ Lack of training and insufficient

35 The United States moved away from sponsorship- and community-supported resettlement in the 1990s in favor of a more professional model due to concerns over uneven standards of care for refugees. The Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) introduced more extensive standards of care for resettlement agencies and, as a result, the program shifted from operating through local churches to subcontracting professional case workers at social service agencies. For more information on historical shifts in refugee sponsorship legislation, see the Niskanen Center's review, arguing for increased private-sector involvement in refugee resettlement. See David Bier and Matthew La Corte, *Private Refugee Resettlement in U.S. History* (Washington, DC: Niskanen Center, 2016), www.niskanencenter.org/wp-content/uploads/old_uploads/2016/04/PrivateRefugeeHistory.pdf.

36 Participant comments during MPI roundtable, “Two-Generation/Whole Family Strategies for Refugee Resettlement.”

37 Craig Damian Smith, Tea Hadžiristić, and Lina Alipour, *Filling the Gap: Volunteer & Settlement Sector Interactions In Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis* (Toronto: Together Project, 2017), 57, https://togetherproject.ca/site/uploads/2018/03/Together_Project_Report_Filling_the_Gap.pdf.

38 Behnam Behnia, “An Exploratory Study of Befriending Programs with Refugees,” *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 5, no. 3 (2008): 1–19.



oversight can also lead to refugees receiving inaccurate information or the development of inappropriate power dynamics between refugees and sponsors.³⁹ A support organization in Amsterdam found that they needed to be explicit with volunteers about how to answer refugees' questions on legal matters to avoid refugees being given bad advice.⁴⁰ In Canada, a study of volunteer engagement across Ontario encountered instances of paternalism toward refugees, ranging from "general cultural superiority around norms of social behavior," to control of bank accounts and social interactions, and interference in matters such as child care and education.⁴¹ Allowing sponsors and volunteers to work directly with resettled individuals without proper training can thus risk hindering the integration process, creating confusion, or exacerbating trauma.⁴²

Box 1. Principles of Good Volunteer Management

Providing support to newly arrived refugees comes with a unique set of challenges. These include navigating cultural differences and responding to the complex needs of individuals suffering from trauma and mental health issues. Successful community engagement therefore requires certain guidelines to ensure that the needs of both refugees and those striving to support them are being met. Key recommendations include the following:

1. **Select volunteers and sponsors carefully and set clear expectations.** Vetting volunteers and setting clear and realistic expectations around their responsibilities and level of commitment is critical. The integration process can be hindered by high turnover or unfulfilled commitments. Further screening to determine whether a volunteer's skills, experience, and social networks match refugees' needs and interests can enhance the experience. Volunteers are most effective in positions that they find personally rewarding and are well equipped to fill. Because the safety of vulnerable individuals and families is paramount, would-be volunteers and sponsors who will work directly with refugees should be subject to criminal history checks.
2. **Provide in-depth orientation and training.** Proper preparation and skill development are paramount for volunteers and sponsors working with refugees. Training should include information on refugees' backgrounds and experiences, and education about how to deal with cultural differences, trauma and its after-effects, crisis and conflict management, and communication with those with limited language skills. Training should also cover any special skills necessary, such as language tutoring, and self-care techniques including how to set appropriate boundaries and access support resources.
3. **Maintain open channels for communication and feedback.** Both volunteers/sponsors and the refugees they support need to understand what their options are should things go wrong. It is crucial that refugees have a direct point of contact within the managing agency so that rapid intervention can take place if the relationship with a sponsor/mentor become coercive or exploitative. Agencies should make sure that volunteers also have specific points of contact with whom they can share any concerns that arise. It is good practice to convene or facilitate forums that provide a safe space for community members involved in refugee resettlement to share their experiences and express frustration, discuss challenges, and seek advice.

39 Cheryl Lange, Zahra Kamalkhani, and Loretta Baldassar, "Afghan Hazara Refugees in Australia: Constructing Australian Citizens," *Social Identities* 13, no. 1 (2007): 31–50.

40 Kees Boersma et al., "A Port in a Storm: Spontaneous Volunteering and Grassroots Movements in Amsterdam: A Resilient Approach to the (European) Refugee Crisis," *Social Policy & Administration* (March 2018): 9.

41 Smith, Hadžiristić, and Alipour, *Filling the Gap*.

42 Participant comments during MPI roundtable, "Two-Generation/Whole Family Strategies for Refugee Resettlement." One participant noted that volunteers needed to be treated like employees, interviewed, trained, and sometimes fired. See also Boersma et al., "A Port in a Storm."



Insufficient training and support can also damage volunteers' and refugees' perceptions of one another. Volunteers who have not received any training on cultural differences or the refugee experience may perceive refugees as "ungrateful," "lazy," or conforming to some other stereotype.⁴³ Conversely, refugees may not trust the abilities or knowledge of an untrained volunteer and may avoid interaction, exacerbating the risk of social isolation. Volunteers who feel unsupported by the resettlement system or coordinating agency may abandon their commitment if they feel that they are not able to be helpful or if their contributions are not being recognized.⁴⁴

Yet integration and resettlement agencies are not always equipped to provide such assistance. Staff often lack an understanding of the knowledge gaps volunteers face or a full appreciation of the emotional stress that volunteers can experience. At a more fundamental level, agencies may not always recognize volunteers' need for training, support, or appreciation, as volunteers are not themselves staff members. Even where agencies are aware of these gaps, they may not know how to fill them or have the time or staff capacity to design a training program or be on call to answer volunteers' questions.

C. *Having the Resources to Provide the Necessary Support*

While there are clear benefits to effective community engagement, training volunteers and providing ongoing support is generally a time- and resource-intensive endeavor.⁴⁵ Successful volunteer programs often employ dedicated staff (e.g., a volunteer or community engagement coordinator) to manage training and serve as a point of contact for community members. To support sponsors, refugee sponsorship programs have sometimes created a dedicated agency that vets sponsors, develops and delivers training, oversees sponsor relationships, and is available to answer questions. In the United Kingdom, the RESET network, a nongovernmental organization platform, fills this role.⁴⁶ In Portugal, the office of the High Commissioner for Migration prepares and delivers a training program for sponsors, and also operates a 24-hour hotline for sponsors and refugees to call with questions or concerns.⁴⁷

But volunteer coordinators, training platforms, and hotlines all require funding and staff time to operate. These resources are often lacking, particularly at the local level. Where extensive volunteer or sponsor support structures exist, they have often been financially supported by the national government. The RESET network in the United Kingdom, for example, was established with a £1 million investment by the British government.⁴⁸ But investing in volunteers is not a central piece of integration policy in many countries. In the United States, there is no federal funding for resettlement agencies to undertake such activities; as a result, agencies often do not have full-time or trained volunteer and community engagement coordinators.⁴⁹ In some cases, regional governments or private donors have stepped in to fill this gap. State officials in Utah and Colorado have supported resettlement agencies in their regions to create volunteer platforms that offer online training resources and links to service opportunities.⁵⁰ Elsewhere, local resettlement agencies have turned to private donors to fund their volunteer or sponsorship efforts. Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services (IRIS) in Connecticut uses private donations, collected through

43 Behnia, "An Exploratory Study of Befriending Programs with Refugees."

44 Behnia, "An Exploratory Study of Befriending Programs with Refugees."

45 Participant comments during MPI roundtable, "Two-Generation/Whole Family Strategies for Refugee Resettlement"; Behnia, "An Exploratory Study of Befriending Programs with Refugees."

46 See, "RESET: Communities and Refugees," accessed February 1, 2019, www.resetuk.org/.

47 Interview with Pedro Calado, the High Commissioner for Migration, Portugal, March 28, 2018, to inform MPI Europe and ICF, *Study on the Feasibility and Added Value of Sponsorship Schemes*.

48 UK Home Office, "Home Office Awards £1 Million to Help Communities Support Refugees" (news release, June 18, 2018), www.gov.uk/government/news/home-office-awards-1-million-to-help-communities-support-refugees.

49 Participant comments during MPI roundtable, "Two-Generation/Whole Family Strategies for Refugee Resettlement."

50 Colorado Refugee Connect, "About Us," accessed July 7, 2019, www.corefugeeconnect.org/about-us/; Utah Refugee Connection, "Homepage," accessed July 7, 2019, <https://serverrefugees.org/>.



private fund-raising efforts or fees paid by sponsors, to employ a full-time community engagement and volunteer coordinator and deliver its sponsor training program.⁵¹

While engaging volunteers or sponsors does have clear costs, it is worth noting that programs that have been able to invest in community engagement have found it to be well worth the effort. A representative from one resettlement organization in the United Kingdom reported that, in his view, all resettled refugees should be assigned sponsors: in their experience, sponsored refugees have found it much easier to settle into their new communities than those supported through service agencies alone.⁵²

IV. Recommendations for Policymakers

There is an emerging consensus that engagement through sponsorship and volunteering is a useful tool for building resilient communities that can meet immigration and integration challenges. Volunteers and sponsors can complement professional service providers by providing highly individualized assistance to meet refugees' needs, such as driving lessons or individual language tutoring, social and emotional support, or assistance in connecting with job opportunities and overcoming barriers to housing. Through volunteering and sponsorship initiatives, communities may also feel more involved in integration and resettlement, helping to prevent hostility in the future. But using volunteers and sponsors to facilitate refugee resettlement is not a cost-free or even necessarily a cost-saving endeavor; it requires targeted investment and sustained support. On their own, local agencies can struggle to make effective use of the resources that private community members can offer because they lack an understanding of how best to employ community members or the knowledge and resources to appropriately train and support them.

Using volunteers and sponsors to facilitate refugee resettlement is not a cost-free or even necessarily a cost-saving endeavor; it requires targeted investment and sustained support.

Policymakers interested in drawing communities more effectively into the integration process can support volunteering and sponsorship initiatives in several ways:

- **Enact policies supportive of volunteer engagement or sponsorship.** Policy contexts in many refugee-receiving countries inhibit community engagement by placing restrictions on the types of organizations that can provide direct support or creating overly burdensome reporting requirements. Strict service provision and settlement guidelines, such as those in the United States, that limit both the number of service providers and the resources available to them to manage volunteers can hinder the flexibility and creativity of the resettlement sector.
- **Provide community engagement and volunteer support infrastructure.** A lack of funding for staff to devote time to managing and overseeing volunteers or sponsors is a major obstacle to effective community engagement in many contexts. Without proper training and oversight, volunteers and sponsors can do more harm than good by, for example, providing inaccurate

51 Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services, "Information for Co-Sponsors," accessed January 17, 2019, www.irisct.org/information-for-co-sponsors/.

52 Phone interview with Caritas UK, conducted in April 2018 to inform MPI Europe and ICF, *Study on the Feasibility and Added Value of Sponsorship Schemes*.



information to refugees. Dedicated funding for staffing coordinator positions and developing and delivering training programs, either from government appropriations or private investments, would strengthen organizational capacities to expand volunteer programs and provide more comprehensive support to sponsors and mentors.

- ***Build knowledge and capacity for community engagement.*** Particularly at the local level, many service providers face significant knowledge gaps on how to use or train volunteers and sponsors. Having access to (and knowing where to find) freely available toolkits, intake forms or volunteer management guidelines, or training programs that can be used off the shelf would help to fill some of these gaps. Train-the-trainer programs to develop the knowledge and capabilities of local volunteer coordinators, or platforms for volunteer management professionals to convene and exchange experiences, would also be of value. In some countries, integration agencies may be well placed to provide these tools directly, as has been done in Portugal. In other cases, it may be more effective for the state to fund nonprofit organizations or a platform to take on this role, as in the United Kingdom.

By recognizing and supporting the added value of community engagement in the integration of refugees, policymakers can help ensure that newcomers receive the individualized support they need to enter the work force and create social networks. Investing in the ability of integration service providers to identify, train, manage, and support volunteers and sponsors can enable a community to leverage its human and financial resources to achieve positive integration outcomes that benefit governments, communities, and newcomers alike.



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