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AN IDEA WHOSE TIME HAS COME

Launching a Refugee Private Sponsorship Pilot in the U.S.

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Key Takeaways

- President Biden's February 4 executive order sets the stage for launching private refugee sponsorship programs in the U.S.
- Refugee sponsorship programs have seen success across the globe in improving refugee integration outcomes and directly engaging the American people in the resettlement process.
- Private sponsorship is a unique policy innovation to directly engage refugees with U.S. partners such as churches, charities, individual volunteers, universities, and foundations.
- Private sponsorship programs can be instrumental in getting the United States refugee resettlement system back on firm footing and should serve as a complement, not a replacement, to the existing resettlement infrastructure.
- Four key considerations policymakers should keep in mind when establishing a private sponsorship pilot initiative include a flexible and complementary approach, refugee and sponsor matching potential, cost requirements and guaranteed sponsor support, and balanced monitoring and evaluation requirements.

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Introduction

President Biden’s February 4th [executive order](#) to restore and expand the United States Refugee Admissions Program includes an innovative proposal the U.S. has turned to in the past to expand its capacity to leverage American generosity and extend humanitarian protection: private refugee sponsorship. Private sponsorship would allow refugees to resettle with support and funding from local community sponsors. As [long-time advocates](#) for private sponsorship programs, we are heartened to see the Biden administration include it as a complementary method to support the rebuilding of the U.S. refugee resettlement system.

At the end of 2020, refugee admissions were at record lows. Refugee resettlement infrastructure — domestically and internationally — was more damaged than any time since the modern system was created in 1980. The Biden administration has announced plans to increase refugee resettlement, and a private sponsorship program should serve as a vital component of the larger effort of getting the resettlement system back on firm footing.

The case for private sponsorship — that it would allow charitable Americans to pool resources and time to assist resettled refugees — is compelling. But many questions remain as to what a private refugee sponsorship program should look like in practice in 2021.

In thinking about launching a new private sponsorship program, the U.S. can learn from three distinct sources: first, the informal sponsorship systems that operate across the country already; second, the proliferation of formal sponsorship systems around the world in recent years; and third, the original U.S. private sponsorship program from decades ago. In this policy brief, we will sketch out what a sponsorship pilot program should look like and make a case for private refugee sponsorship to complement, not replace, the existing resettlement infrastructure.

The current role of community support and community sponsorship

At its core, the refugee resettlement program is already a public-private partnership. The State Department offers short-term support through the Reception & Placement (R&P) Program, while the Department of Health and Human Services provides longer-term support, both contracting with nine refugee resettlement agencies to support refugees in their transition to the United States. To administer the R&P Program, the State Department contracts with and funds nine nonprofit refugee resettlement agencies to provide R&P “core services” to admitted refugees. Typically, these R&P funds provide for 30 to 90 days of a refugee’s resettlement costs, but the exact length of coverage ultimately depends on the regional cost of living and the size of the refugee family.

While R&P funds help each refugee begin a new life in their new country, private funding sources are imperative to sustain a family and improve integration outcomes. Therefore, resettlement agencies use a blend of public and private funding sources and local volunteers to provide refugees with services. Some examples include local canned food drives, a church congregation welcoming a new family that practices the same faith, a school group holding a bake sale to raise money, and a family donating a car.

Refugees must overcome many challenges during their first years in the U.S., such as finding employment with a livable wage, navigating a new community, and improving English proficiency; volunteers are critical to their success. While the State Department oversees the resettlement of refugees and the resettlement agency helps with applications for public assistance and green cards, it’s the local community that provides the human face of resettlement: the helpful neighbor down the street who offers English tutoring lessons, the basketball coach that welcomes the newcomer onto the team, or the retired schoolteacher who donates a dozen books to a new family.

Resettlement agencies are pioneering innovative approaches to build on this community support by creating formal agreements — community or co-sponsorship programs — with partners including churches, charities, individual volunteers, universities, and foundations to more directly support particular refugee families in their transitions to the U.S.

One such group, Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services, or IRIS located in Connecticut, relies heavily on nongovernmental funding to provide refugee services. Enhancing community support through programs like the IRIS model create a way to funnel new resources into the resettlement system, which in turn can provide more and improved services to refugees.

If the standard resettlement model is a public-private partnership, community sponsorship programs are an enhanced public-private partnership that seeks to scale up involvement by private actors to complement the existing resettlement structure. However, the refugees who benefit from these programs are currently counted toward the annual cap on refugee admissions.

International private sponsorship

For years, there has been growing momentum in the U.S. and abroad for formalizing community support in the form of private sponsorship programs. Abroad, private sponsorship programs developed largely due to expansive commitments by both corporations and private citizens to address

the growing refugee crisis in Syria. While there is some variation among programs, they all leverage private support for refugees to bolster government-funded programs.

Private sponsorship programs in Canada, Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and Argentina demonstrate the various ways that governments can partner with communities to support refugees. These programs build stronger relationships between refugees and communities and improve refugee acculturation outcomes. Sponsorship programs allow the private sector to get more involved in providing services and assistance to refugees in three key ways:

1. Sponsorship programs provide more financial support for refugees.

Refugees receive more financial assistance when supported by a sponsorship model. Community groups in such arrangements provide comprehensive resettlement support, providing housing, groceries, case management, ESL tutoring, and employment search assistance.

The partnership between refugees and sponsors allows for continued financial support but also continued social engagement, even friendship. After the formal partnership period is finished, community sponsorship teams often partner informally with refugee families, continuing genuine friendships. Refugee clients are more likely to have people other than their caseworker whom they can ask questions about their community. This facilitates faster community orientation and building of social networks, leading to improved long-term refugee acculturation outcomes.

2. Sponsorship programs improve refugee employment outcomes.

Canada's private sponsorship program, the oldest and largest in the world, has resettled nearly 300,000 refugees since its establishment in 1979. By connecting refugees with an established community, Canada's private sponsorship programs improve employment outcomes for refugees.

Program evaluations of Canada's private sponsorship program demonstrate that privately sponsored refugees achieve faster and higher-paying employment than government-sponsored refugees: 70 percent of privately sponsored refugees achieve employment within one year of arrival, compared with 40 percent of government-sponsored refugees. While this difference is often attributed to the higher education and language qualifications of privately sponsored refugees, a 2020 evaluation found that even when controlling for these differences, private sponsorship programs consistently improve employment outcomes.

We witness this same trend in the U.S.: cultivating social networks for refugees increases their potential to connect with employment opportunities. While refugee resettlement agencies assist refugees in their employment search, community sponsorship programs expand these job-search networks. As community sponsorship programs attract volunteers from diverse professional backgrounds, refugees are likely to have a broader career network and are more likely to be connected to higher-paying jobs. This has compounding positive effects for newly arrived refugees, providing a higher possibility of achieving financial stability, improving language skills, and accessing a broader social network.

3. Sponsorship programs increase civic engagement and advocacy.

Not only do refugee sponsorship programs generate additional resources to support refugees, they also help grow involvement in volunteer-based organizations and facilitate community connect-edness. Sponsorship programs mobilize volunteers to help refugees, and most cite the resulting community engagement around refugee resettlement issues as a key benefit.

For example, Canada's private sponsorship programs show that they engage diverse community organizations, while the U.K.'s piloted programs engage first-time volunteers in the refugee space. Even though New Zealand's pilot private sponsorship program is in its infancy, both community organizations and sponsored refugees found that the program mobilized volunteers who had never previously assisted refugees, generated new interest, and engaged the community.

This level of community engagement also has cascading, positive secondary effects. Community engagement educates the public on refugee resettlement and the challenges facing immigrant communities. Volunteers are often the most significant financial donors to an organization and the largest social media sharers to advocate for refugee resettlement. Not only do community sponsorship teams support refugees, they also strengthen the organizations they work through by expanding their volunteer base.

Avoiding the pitfalls of the PSI

In 1983, Jim Purcell, the then-director of the Bureau for Refugee Programs at the U.S. Department of State, was on the search for new approaches to resettle refugees. After failing to obtain congressional funding to expand the refugee admissions program, Purcell wanted to experiment with a new proposal: private refugee sponsorship that would allow Americans to participate directly in the resettling of refugees.

He recognized that some constituencies in the U.S. were eager to help bring their countrymen here, especially those who needed assistance fleeing the Soviet and Cuban communist regimes. With the support of Secretary of State George Shultz, President Reagan approved the Private Sector Initiative (PSI), which allowed Americans to sponsor refugees independently. Over nearly a decade starting in 1986, more than 16,000 refugees were resettled through the program, which tapped into the philanthropic and charitable interest of America's congregations, civil society groups, and constituent-specific institutions.

The PSI had issues that made it unworkable, so much so that the program was allowed to expire in 1995. But much has changed since Purcell first considered leveraging American compassion and charity to complement the resettlement system, and we should learn two specific lessons from the original PSI when envisioning a new refugee sponsorship program.

First, during the PSI, privately sponsored refugees did not qualify for publicly funded medical, food, or cash assistance benefits for two years after their arrival or until they received permanent residency, whichever occurred first. While private communities may be able to meet many needs of newly arrived refugees, refugees should be permitted to access public benefits and subsidized health insurance when they enter the country, and their participation shouldn't penalize their

ability to receive legal permanent resident status.

Second, during the PSI, 84 percent of refugees in small communities were employed within a year after arrival. As long as a sponsored refugee was not employed, sponsors were required to support them, even if they had not been offered or accepted a job. For refugees who wanted to pursue educational opportunities or employment related to their qualifications, sponsors were required to continue financial support. This feature of the PSI led to ballooning costs for sponsoring entities and deterred participation.

To address this in a new sponsorship initiative, rather than requiring a self-sufficiency benchmark, one recommendation would be to set a designated time frame of one year of support by sponsors for refugees. Refugees who require additional support beyond this period could be referred to the employment and support services available to them through refugee resettlement agencies, which are currently available for up to five years after arrival.

Moving forward: A national strategy for sponsorship success

While community sponsorship programs are already operating successfully across the U.S., there is no national strategy to scale up these programs across the nine refugee resettlement agencies. The Biden executive order should provide the formal federal commitment to scale such programs in order to capture the potential benefits to both refugees and local communities. Moreover, considering the annual cap on refugee resettlement, the U.S. essentially puts a ceiling on American charity. Under the current system, no surge in volunteers, no fundraising campaign, no single check from a philanthropist can increase the cap set by the president. Looking forward, we envision a complementary private refugee-sponsorship pilot that engages an enthusiastic volunteer community.

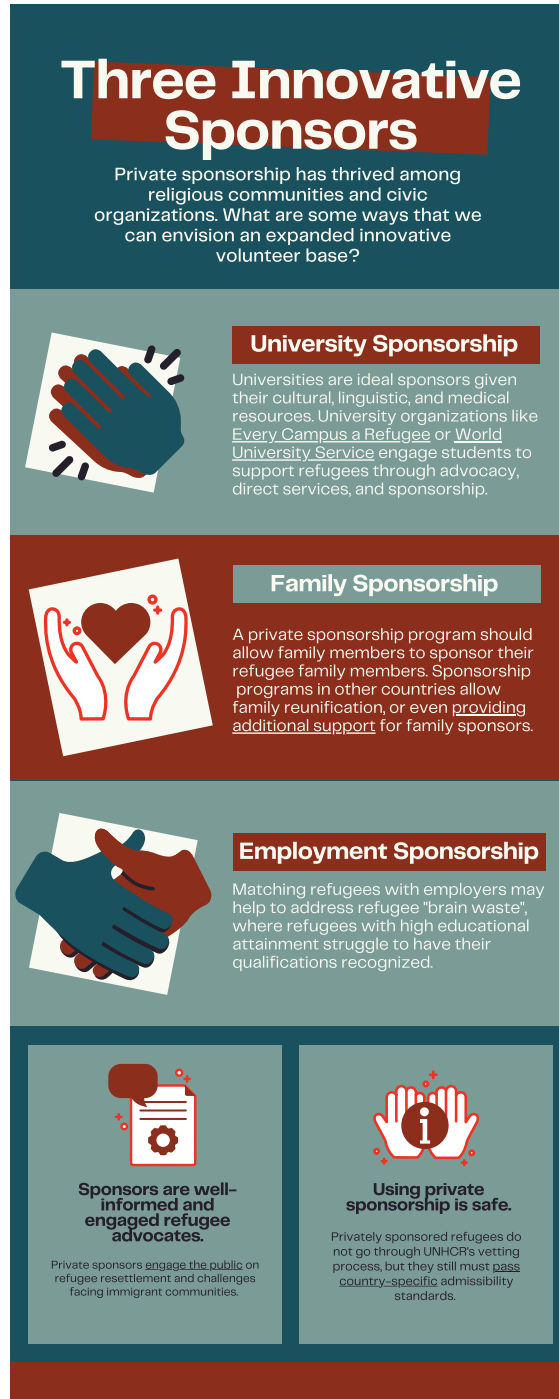
Here are four key considerations policymakers should keep in mind when establishing a private sponsorship pilot initiative:

1. A new category, flexible and complementary to the current program.

The president should create a new category for privately sponsored refugees that honors the fundamental principle that private sponsorship will not replace any government effort toward resettlement — a principle that will require ongoing reassertion to ensure that private sponsorship continues to be a means to increase overall resettlement. Carefully structuring the program can achieve this.

Historically, refugee admissions were broken down by regional category. The Trump administration changed the regional categories to reflect new priorities: refugees from the Northern Triangle countries; Iraqis affiliated with the U.S. military; those suffering religious persecution; and others. The Biden administration is changing policy back towards geographic priorities, but should also set a new category for privately-sponsored refugees at 10 percent of the cap for government-sponsored refugees. For example, if the government's resettlement ceiling were 125,000 refugees, then the community-sponsored ceiling would be 12,500 refugees.

FIGURE 1:
Who Can Sponsor Refugees?



2. Family reunification and matching potential

International sponsorship programs have matching processes to ensure that sponsor capabilities and refugee priorities are aligned. Australia's [Global Special Humanitarian visa program](#), for example, allows family members to sponsor related refugees and provides additional support for such cases.

Matching helps to balance goals of prioritizing vulnerable refugees and sponsors who may be able to support them best. This practice aligns with a [growing movement](#) for increasing refugees' autonomy and decision-making power over their own resettlement.

3. Addressing cost and guaranteeing sponsor support

The pilot must establish funding structures that guarantee refugees basic support and minimize the financial impact on current resettlement systems. Private sponsors should be required to provide set financial contributions in the form of cash or in-kind donations. While the current R&P program contributes a fixed per capita grant of \$2,275, to be split between the refugee client and the resettlement agency administering services, private sponsorship programs may require higher financial commitments.

As previously stated, even through the government R&P program, private support is absolutely necessary to help support refugees. Resettlement agencies pick up the tab for the vast majority of initial refugee resettlement costs through private support, so support through a private sponsorship program would need to be set higher.

Costs through international private sponsors are typically much higher, ranging from [\\$13,845](#) annually in Canada's program, to almost [\\$100,000](#) in Australia's Community Support Program (both for a family of four). Ensuring that privately sponsored refugees will be able to access publicly available benefits like health insurance will help to reduce costs for sponsors. In envisioning a U.S. private sponsorship pilot, we should require that [sponsors contribute R&P-level funds](#), or the base \$2,275, but make them show proof that they have available at least double that amount.

4. Balanced monitoring and evaluation requirements

The pilot must establish oversight and evaluation requirements for sponsors and refugees. These requirements can be developed in consultation with the State Department to ensure that refugees receive necessary support but that administration of the program does not become overly burdensome.

Conclusion

Americans should not be limited in their charitable potential but rather supported in their willingness to solve a worldwide refugee crisis. It's time the U.S. launched a private sponsorship pilot program above the annual refugee resettlement cap, with the purposes of information collection, data sharing, and the learning of best practices. The U.S. has led the world in refugee resettlement for decades. Once again, it's time for the U.S. to show the international community what refugee protection could and should look like.