

Private refugee sponsorship: Lessons and questions from Canada, Uniting for Ukraine, and Afghan resettlement as Welcome Corps pilot program launches

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The United States has launched a pilot program for private sponsorship of refugees, a significant development in how the country welcomes displaced people through its refugee admissions. Private refugee sponsorship models already exist in other countries—and in recent months the United States has increasingly asked individuals and communities to help sponsor people displaced from nations in turmoil such as Afghanistan, Ukraine, Venezuela, and Haiti.

This report will analyze private refugee sponsorship in the U.S. context and make recommendations for its implementation within the United States. The new Welcome Corps program and any subsequent iteration of private sponsorship must draw substantive lessons from recent experiences in community sponsorship of Afghan and Ukrainian parolees, as well as the experiences of other national sponsorship programs in neighboring Canada and elsewhere. Private refugee sponsorship in the United States could serve as an effective complement to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program to help people displaced from their countries of origin and in need of protection under international humanitarian law. But it must have adequate guardrails to protect against exploitation and abuse, as well as appropriate support for sponsorship arrangements to succeed and effective support for refugees when sponsorship arrangements fall apart.

Principles of equity and inclusion must inform the selection of individuals who benefit from expanded pathways. Expanded complementary pathways must strengthen, not erode, the existing infrastructure and public-private partnerships underlying the established U.S. Refugee Admissions Program in support of American values and interests.

The basics of private refugee sponsorship

Private refugee sponsorship programs allow individuals, groups of individuals, or organizations to sponsor refugees with financial and other assistance when they arrive in their new country. Private sponsorship gives sponsors the ability to identify, select, and support the entry and stay of people in need of international protection.

The [United Nations Refugee Agency](#), or UNHCR, notes that private sponsorship differs from community sponsorship. Private sponsorship pathways allow sponsors to nominate individuals based on considerations such as their familial links, skills, or professional and educational background. This dynamic contrasts with refugee resettlement that is solely based on the risks and needs of refugees who are specifically identified by UNHCR. In community sponsorship, sponsoring individuals, organizations, and communities support the reception and integration of people that have already been accepted into their country through a UNHCR referral or another pathway. Thus, in community sponsorship, the role of the sponsor only begins after the arrival of the beneficiary in the country—whereas that relationship in private sponsorship begins before the newcomer's arrival.

With forced displacement at an all-time high, private refugee sponsorship is becoming an increasingly attractive option to help resettle some of the millions of people seeking refuge outside of their country of origin. Private refugee sponsorship is touted because it increases responsibility

sharing between national governments and civil society. Data also suggests that private sponsorship could enhance the integration of refugees compared to government-sponsored resettlement through formal and informal networks of support and advice in host communities. However, there is debate over the extent to which those integration outcomes differ because of pre-existing differences between distinct refugee populations.

Private, community sponsorship under the Biden administration

In the wake of displacement crises in Afghanistan and Ukraine, the Biden administration has frequently turned to parole mechanisms to admit tens of thousands of people fleeing instability and insecurity in those countries. These initiatives have, in turn, increasingly relied upon non-governmental sponsorship as they occurred outside of the traditional resettlement process through voluntary resettlement agencies, or RAs, under the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, or USRAP.

Shortly after tens of thousands of evacuated Afghans were granted humanitarian parole to arrive and remain in the United States, the Department of State [in October 2021](#) began working with Community Sponsorship Hub to establish the Sponsor Circle Program for Afghans. This program operates as an emergency private sponsorship-based initiative for direct support to arriving Afghans. Beth Frank, CSH's director of the Sponsor Circle program, notes it remains a relatively small program among recent Afghan newcomers.

Non-governmental sponsorship had an even larger role in the Uniting for Ukraine, or U4U, program [launched](#) in April 2022 after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. U4U [allows](#) Ukrainian nationals and their relatives to remain in the United States for two years under humanitarian parole. But they must have a U.S.-based supporter who agrees to provide financial and other support.

In October 2022, the Department of Homeland Security [announced](#) it would admit up to 24,000 qualifying Venezuelans into the United States on a parole basis. Venezuelans would only qualify if they had "a supporter in the United States who will provide financial and other support." DHS also indicated the Venezuelan parole program was specifically modeled after U4U, which required U.S.-based supporters to apply with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. In January 2023, a similar [parole process](#) was announced for qualifying Cubans, Haitians, and Nicaraguans with access to U.S.-based sponsors.

In May 2022, the Department of State [announced](#) its Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, or PRM, would launch its private refugee sponsorship pilot program before the end of the calendar year. The pilot program was announced as part of PRM's efforts to expand domestic community sponsorship in refugee resettlement. In its [annual report](#) to Congress on refugee admissions in the 2023 fiscal year, the Department of State noted that the emergency responses for Afghan and Ukrainian resettlement would better inform the private sponsorship pilot. The program, called the Welcome Corps, [officially launched on January 19, 2023](#).

Successes and challenges in refugee sponsorship

Community sponsorship of Afghan and Ukrainian populations has yielded success stories. Beth Frank of CSH said that Sponsor Circles for Afghans "are pulling from a broader group to support newcomers," such as local immigrant or Muslim communities, by connecting them with the

resources they need after their arrival. Tens of thousands of Americans [applied](#) to be sponsors under U4U—and, in announcing its Venezuelan parole process, the Department of Homeland Security [touted](#) how U4U quickly paved the way for orderly Ukrainian arrivals while decreasing flows at the border.

While Frank said sponsorship breakdowns have not “been a significant issue” for the Sponsor Circles, both newcomers and sponsors must navigate some challenging dynamics. For example, Afghan newcomers and sponsors at times have disagreed over how much welcome money would go directly to families, Frank said. Navigating benefits have been the most common question for Sponsor Circles, although sponsors typically take relevant issues or questions to supporting umbrella organizations, Frank said.

USCRI staff and affiliates report that sponsor breakdowns have occurred between arriving Ukrainians and their sponsors. High housing costs and the uncertain duration of the war in Ukraine have combined to put a strain on sponsor-newcomer relationships. Refugees International [reports](#) that some exploitative sponsors made it past USCIS’s expedited approval process at the start of U4U—and that securing housing, health care, employment, and other benefits for U4U recipients has been a tall task for some sponsors without backgrounds in case management.

Disparities in sponsorship arrangements between nationalities have also prompted criticisms from an equity perspective. Fewer parole admissions were initially offered to Venezuelans than Ukrainians, while Afghans have faced more regulatory hurdles in accessing benefits than Ukrainians have. The processes to allow sponsorship for Venezuelans, Cubans, Haitians, and Nicaraguans were also announced in conjunction with the continued use of Title 42, which unjustly prevents asylum seekers from pursuing their asylum claims in the United States under domestic and international law.

Canadian private sponsorship

Canada maintains the world’s oldest and longest standing private refugee sponsorship program—one that UNHCR and other countries hold up as a model. Like the United States, Canada’s modern refugee system is rooted in the response to displacement after the Vietnam War, particularly societal and governmental efforts to aid “boat people” fleeing Southeast Asia. The Canadian government in 1979 [pledged](#) to support one refugee for every refugee that the Canadian public provided with private support. A majority of Southeast Asian refugees in Canada during this time period were sponsored by private groups.

[Canada operates](#) the Private Sponsorship of Refugees, or PSR, program for private groups to sponsor eligible refugees abroad. Private sponsors support refugees for a sponsorship period that typically lasts up to a year through help with start-up costs such as furniture and clothing and on-going costs like housing, food, and transportation. In private sponsorship, groups decide which refugees they want to sponsor and apply to the Canadian government for approval.

More than 100 organizations are recognized as sponsorship agreement holders, or SAHs, that have reached agreements with the Canadian government to help support refugees in the country. Smaller groups of Canadian citizens or permanent residents can also sponsor refugees in arrangements known as Groups of Five.

The PSR differs from the Government Assisted Refugee, or GAR, program, where UNHCR or a non-governmental organization identifies people for resettlement and the Canadian government provides post-arrival assistance. A third program called the Blended Visa-Office Referred or BVOR Program—only established in 2013—allows groups to select refugees to sponsor from a bank of profiles of refugees who have been identified by UNHCR and vetted by a visa office overseas.

Privately-sponsored refugees and government-assisted refugees gain the same legal status as permanent Canadian residents and face similar pre-migration circumstances—fleeing their home countries because of war, political persecution, or violence. However, privately-sponsored refugees [tend](#) to have a higher level of education than government-assisted refugees. Officials also recognize that other unmeasured differences may exist between the two groups of refugees such as exposure to violence and duration of displacement.

Lessons and questions from Canada

Canada now has decades of experience in private refugee sponsorship that can inform government and non-governmental stakeholders in other countries. Due to its geographic and cultural proximity to the United States, Canada represents an ideal model to evaluate how a private sponsorship program could operate successfully in the United States.

Rainbow Railroad, an organization that offers a sponsorship program in Canada to LGBT refugees, is a powerful example of how private entities can name and resettle specific populations in need of protection. Resettlement teams of five to seven individuals are the main providers of support through a program to resettle LGBT individuals in the Toronto area, said Rainbow Railroad's Paige MacLean. MacLean said setting expectations for both newcomers and sponsors is one of the biggest challenges that sponsorships face. An extensive settlement team handbook provides direction on establishing sponsorship teams, managing sponsorship periods, and preparing for 'Month 13'—a reference to the end of Canada's one-year sponsorship period.

A pilot study [in Ontario](#) identified a number of pre- and post-arrival challenges with the private refugee sponsorship program. Participants told researchers there was a frustrating lack of communication received from the government around the status of applications and the notification of arrivals. Relations between newcomers and their sponsors could also be strained without the clear communication of expectations for one another. Logistical challenges such as seeking employment opportunities, overcoming language barriers, and managing budgeting were also difficult.

Amid the emergency operation to resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees in a matter of months in 2015, Canada's system became strained, particularly in terms of meeting demands for clean, safe, and affordable housing. According to [a Migration Policy Institute report](#), Syrian refugees and their case managers and sponsors struggled to find affordable housing that accommodated large family units and were accessible to transportation, health care opportunities, and diaspora communities. Other experts [have argued](#) private sponsorship in Canada turns public policy challenges such as housing affordability into private logistical problems for sponsors to tackle, essentially ceding the government's responsibilities for resettlement to private entities.

Policy recommendations and considerations

Private refugee sponsorship has promise in helping some of the millions of people displaced around the world relocate in safety and dignity. Government-sponsored initiatives to resettle refugees have become strained and face daunting systemic questions about lasting protections from the effects of climate change and protracted conflicts. Furthermore, government-led resettlement is vulnerable to political headwinds by changes in leadership that may cater to anti-immigrant or anti-refugee sentiments.

But it is important that expansions in private refugee sponsorship are taken in conjunction with the restoration and expansion of the standing capacity of existing pathways, such as USRAP. USRAP must remain the backbone of the U.S. government's response and be the first model to build capacity and meet growing needs year to year. U.S. refugee policy must be able to continue to serve some of the most vulnerable people on the planet as the nation welcomes in more refugees through private sponsorship, who tend to be more educated than refugees assisted in government-run resettlement.

Identification procedures informed by equity, protection needs

As proponents [note](#), private sponsorship could help reach individuals such as non-nuclear family members of refugees who cannot receive Priority Three status—which provides USRAP access for purposes of reunification with family members already in the United States who entered as refugees or were granted asylum. Refugees seeking to resettle in the United States will have different needs—and it is important for the new system embedding private sponsorship within USRAP to have processes that recognize those needs. Some refugees may need more specialized, trauma-informed case management that are more appropriate for a traditional arrangement with a resettlement agency.

Naming is a critical part of the Canadian model of private sponsorship, said Shauna Labman, a legal scholar at the University of Winnipeg who focuses on refugee law, resettlement, and private refugee sponsorship. At the same time, “there is an aspect of privilege... to having your name known to Canadians ready to sponsor you,” she noted. Indeed, in Canada, there have been [recurring tensions](#) “between selection criteria based on family reunification versus protection and vulnerability” and how different refugee populations benefit from these distinct pathways.

PRM must keep this dynamic in mind as it refines and tracks how different refugees with different needs are able to access protection under the USRAP and the Welcome Corps. PRM must carefully lay out and refine how the government and its consortium partners will evaluate which cases are best suited for private sponsorship and which will remain in the main USRAP pipeline, particularly in the lead up to Welcome Corps' second phase with sponsors naming refugees.

As suggested by the Canadian model, a private sponsorship program raises questions about equitable access to protections, as wealthier, more educated, and well-connected refugees are “chosen” by sponsors to receive resettlement. To address this dynamic, the U.S. government must maintain and bolster the traditional resettlement program to ensure the most vulnerable refugees have an opportunity to rebuild their lives in the United States.

Strong marketing, communication during rollout

Due to this administration's extensive use of parole, it has been difficult at times for the broader public to understand the differences between individuals relocating to the United States under traditional pathways like the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program or those served by emergency programs, such as Uniting for Ukraine or humanitarian parole after the non-combatant evacuation operation in Afghanistan.

A robust messaging strategy should be deployed to teach communities which refugees and individuals are best served by different pathways. Elizabeth Foydel, the private refugee sponsorship program director at the International Refugee Assistance Project, said that clear descriptions of private sponsorship, community sponsorship, and traditional resettlement must be broadcasted on the front end of scaled up private refugee sponsorship. "We want to have a coherent sense of the system and a clear way we talk about these different channels," Foydel said. "[Private refugee sponsorship] should be a tremendous value add for our humanitarian immigration, but it's probably not the right route for everybody."

Furthermore, stakeholders such as PRM and the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) must be proactive on public education about access to government-based benefits—as resettlement agencies, private sponsors, and resettled individuals in varying programs navigate this new, dynamic operating environment.

Targeted geographic, organizational outreach

After the Welcome Corps' January 19 launch, recruitment of sponsors can and should be targeted toward new communities and localities that do not traditionally serve refugees. "You want this program to really tap into not just communities that already receive refugees, but maybe communities that don't traditionally have as much involvement," Foydel said.

Upfront communication about the commitments involved in being a private sponsor can also be key in the prevention of later sponsorship breakdowns. Some organizations or individuals may not be ready for the level of financial and time commitment that private sponsorship takes. A successful external messaging campaign will guide organizations and individuals more suited for community sponsorship to those programs and pathways instead of the more demanding expectations of a private sponsorship arrangement.

Holistic sponsor training and vetting

Applying to become a sponsor for Ukrainian and Venezuelan nationals through recent emergency parole programs revolved largely around a Form I-134 Declaration of Financial Support gathering employment and asset information from supporters. A higher level of scrutiny toward financial vetting ought to be in place ahead of a complete private sponsorship program rollout, particularly with the ongoing high costs of housing, transportation, food, and other essential goods and services.

With an established private sponsorship program, mandatory training for private sponsors should engrain an awareness and sensitivity to the power dynamics at play between sponsors and sponsored refugees and how to manage those dynamics professionally and appropriately. Privately sponsored refugees must also be adequately informed about the sponsorship arrangements they

are about to enter. They should be informed on their rights as privately sponsored refugees as well as resources that empower these individuals to advocate for themselves.

Robust mechanisms to prevent, respond to sponsorship breakdowns

Sponsorship breakdowns represent a threat to the successful integration of newcomers after their arrival in the United States. Federal officials must consider the potential value of impartial mediators between sponsors and sponsored refugees during disputes—with [Canada's Resettlement Services Assurance Team](#) as a potential model. These entities must respond promptly to requests for mediation to prevent disputes from festering into irreconcilable sponsorship breakdowns. Preventing breakdowns within sponsorship groups—over, for example, different visions for how involved or proactive a team should be with newcomers—should also be a priority, Labman noted. The consortium should also monitor how frequently privately-sponsored refugees move elsewhere within the United States—so-called “secondary migration” that already occurs with Afghan, Ukrainian, and other newcomers—and how those trends impact refugee integration.

Foydel of IRAP said that implementing partners need to be proactive in establishing a ‘Plan B’ or even a ‘Plan C’ for sponsored refugees to turn to in case of sponsorship breakdowns. These mechanisms must be designed to intervene on a rapid basis since sponsorship breakdowns could immediately imperil a sponsored family's housing arrangement or access to other critical services.

Conclusion

Private refugee sponsorship in the United States could provide a complementary protection pathway to people seeking safety and security they cannot find in their countries of origin. But the program must be rolled out in a way that effectively and ethically prevents sponsorship breakdowns, attracts a wide and diverse sponsorship base, guards against exploitation and abuse, and sets expectations for newcomers and sponsors alike. Independent monitoring and evaluation using valid and reliable outcome measures will be essential to identifying the strengths, weaknesses, challenges, and successes of private sponsorship from a holistic perspective.

Refugee populations with connections to the United States will be able to benefit from being ‘named’ by U.S.-based sponsors. Refugees with UNHCR referrals in the traditional resettlement pipeline will continue to need protection and timely access to post-arrival resettlement services under USRAP, which has resettled roughly 3.5 million refugees in the United States over its history. “The United States must continue to do right by the most vulnerable refugees through a modernized USRAP system that strengthens America's standing as a champion in refugee resettlement and protection. In this context, private refugee sponsorship in the United States through the Welcome Corps can truly be a complementary pathway that meets the principle of additionality,” said Eskinder Negash, President and CEO of USCRI.

Taking lessons from Canada's longstanding model and the emergency responses for Afghanistan and Ukraine, the private refugee sponsorship program's design, governance, and transparency will be essential parts of its success in the broader U.S. refugee admissions landscape amid record-breaking displacement across the world.