



Community and Private Sponsorship of Refugees in the USA: Rebirth of a Model

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Abstract

President Biden has expressed support for restoring US global leadership on refugee resettlement after the Trump administration nearly dismantled the refugee program. The US Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) is on the cusp of significant reform. By introducing community and private sponsorship as a key element of refugee policy, the program will increase capacity to resettle refugees while providing unique opportunities for direct public involvement in this process. This article traces the history of private sector involvement in the US refugee program and the re-emergence of community and private refugee sponsorship programs in recent years. We emphasize the significance of new efforts to promote “innovation” and private and civic engagement in US refugee resettlement. While the prospect of heightened public support for refugees is enhanced by this change, we also identify risks associated with this approach. As responsibility for welcoming refugees into US communities expands beyond the direct oversight of professional resettlement agencies to more diffuse (and often less experienced) community groups, it is incumbent to understand the potential consequences—positive and negative—of this policy shift.

Keywords Refugee policy · USA · Community sponsorship · Private sponsorship · Refugee resettlement

Introduction

Just weeks after entering office, President Joe Biden took two actions that signaled a repudiation of Trump administration policies related to refugees and immigrants and symbolized a new era in refugee policy. On February 4, 2021, Biden issued an

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executive order on “Rebuilding and Enhancing Programs to Resettle Refugees and Planning for the Impact of Climate Change on Migration” (White House, 2021b). This came two weeks after the president issued a “Proclamation Ending Discriminatory Bans to the United States,” revoking the so-called “Muslim ban” on immigration by individuals from several countries with Muslim majority populations, as well as a handful of other nations (White House, 2021a).¹

The plan to remake refugee resettlement demonstrated the administration’s aim to “build back better” a program severely undermined during Trump’s presidency.² The proclamation reasserted US leadership in global refugee resettlement while invoking America’s “long tradition” of resettling refugees. Biden also reclaimed the status of the US Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) as “a beacon of hope for persecuted people around the world” that “promotes stability in regions experiencing conflict,” even as it “facilitates international collaboration to address the global refugee crisis” (White House, 2021b). Though it received little attention, the order called for enhancing the longstanding approach to refugee resettlement as a public–private partnership. It underscored, for example, the importance of “private partners and American citizens in communities across the country” in resettling refugees, noting that such collaborations demonstrate “the generosity and core values of our Nation, while benefitting from the many contributions that refugees make to our country.”

The executive order mentioned in two critical places the function of community and private sponsorship of refugees, where ordinary citizens could play a key role in the resettlement process.³ Citing the need to “meet the challenges of restoring and expanding USRAP,” it states “the United States must innovate, including by effectively employing technology and capitalizing on community and private sponsorship of refugees, while continuing to partner with resettlement agencies for reception and placement” (White House, 2021b). The intent to initiate such “innovation” is underscored by a requirement that the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Health and Human

¹ The January 2021 proclamation revoked the following executive actions of the Trump administration: Executive Order 13,780 and Proclamations 9645, 9723, and 9983.

² Since passage of the 1980 Refugee Act, the USA has permanently resettled the most refugees in the world. Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, admissions dropped significantly for several years; during the Trump administration refugee resettlement nearly came to a halt.

³ Community sponsorship is defined by the Bureau of Population, Migration, and Refugees (PRM) as “pair[ing] refugees with groups of individuals (such as local clubs, businesses, university communities, faith groups, sports teams, book clubs) who commit to providing clearly defined financial and/or in-kind contributions and volunteer services to support their welcome and integration” (US Department of State, 2021). Community sponsorship may or may not entail direct collaboration with a refugee resettlement agency. PRM elaborates that “co-sponsorship” takes place when community groups reach a non-binding agreement with a resettlement agency “to provide, or ensure the provision of, reception and placement services to certain refugees sponsored by the agency” (US Department of State, 2021). Other recognized forms of community sponsorship by PRM include “allowing groups of individuals to provide clearly defined financial and/or in-kind contributions and volunteer services to the newly arriving refugees with whom they are paired.” Private sponsorship has yet to be clearly defined, but a recent report to Congress frames it generally as a program “whereby community members will take on the primary responsibility of welcoming and providing initial support to newly arrived refugees, helping facilitate their successful integration” (US Department of State, US Department of Homeland Security, and US Department of Health and Human Services, 2021).

Services must “deliver a plan to the President ... to enhance the capacity of USRAP to welcome refugees by expanding the use of community sponsorship and co-sponsorship models by refugee resettlement agencies, and by entering into new public–private partnerships” within 120 days. These provisions reflect the outcome of intensive advocacy by refugee resettlement agencies, religious institutions, and human rights groups to reestablish and expand the refugee resettlement program, predicated in part on private and community sponsorship models (Kerwin, 2018). As a result, the USRAP is at the cusp of a major transformation that could lead to increased refugee admissions and a significant role for local citizens in resettling refugees across the United States.

Despite refugee admissions coming to a near halt during fiscal year 2021, in late summer 2021, the withdrawal of US military forces and civilian workers from Afghanistan provoked questions of how to “ramp up” the resettlement infrastructure to protect Afghans who worked with the US government. In June 2021, the International Refugee Assistance Project, Niskanen Center and Amnesty International (2021) submitted a report to the State Department that called for the increased use of community sponsorship of refugees. “After four years of devastating retreat on refugee protection,” the report noted, “the United States’ commitment to not only restoring this critical life-line but also innovating the U.S. refugee program through community sponsorship is a promising roadmap for foundational change and hope” (2021, p. 1).

The groups framed an expanded community sponsorship program as a “transformative tool” to strengthen US refugee admissions and highlighted how it could “help revitalize the global system for humanitarian protection by showing how direct engagement”—by local citizens—“builds more resilient programs and communities” (2021, p. 1). They also emphasized how community sponsorship of refugees, including a new program on private sponsorship, would afford more public access and engagement with refugees. Private sponsorship, they argued, would strengthen the “public’s sense of ownership of refugee resettlement” and provide stronger forms of community engagement with “newcomers” than currently takes place with “traditional resettlement and co-sponsorship” (2020, p. 1).

In the following, we summarize the history of USRAP, followed by an analysis of community and private refugee sponsorship programs that emerged in the USA following the Syrian refugee crisis in 2014–2015. We stress the significance of recent developments to promote “innovation” and increased private and civic engagement in US refugee resettlement. While the prospects of strengthening public support for refugees are enhanced by this change, there are also risks associated with this model. As responsibility for welcoming refugees into US communities expands beyond the direct oversight of professional resettlement agencies to more diffuse (and often less experienced) community groups, it is incumbent to understand the potential consequences—positive and negative—of this policy shift.

Refugee Act of 1980

Legislation governing refugee admissions and resettlement in the USA was created in 1980 to standardize resettlement procedures in the wake of the US war in Vietnam (García, 2017). The Southeast Asian refugee crisis pushed President Jimmy

Carter and Congress to enact the 1980 Refugee Act, which led to the creation of the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) and the US Refugee Resettlement Program (US Office of Refugee Resettlement, [n.d.](#)). Until 1980, the federal government's role in refugee resettlement was ad hoc and relatively limited (Bier & La Corte, [2016](#); García, [2017](#)). The Refugee Act institutionalized the longstanding relationship between refugee resettlement agencies (voluntary organizations) and the federal government. For the first time, the government regularly provided funds to resettlement agencies for each refugee admitted to the USA and developed standards for oversight of the “reception and placement” processes for any organization involved in resettlement.⁴

Often overlooked, the law also eliminated provisions of the “public charge” doctrine, which had largely governed immigration access to the USA since the late nineteenth century (Bier & La Corte, [2016](#)). The initial “public charge” regulation was passed in 1882, banning entry to the USA of anyone “unable to take care of himself or herself without becoming a public charge” (An Act to Regulate Immigration, [1882](#)). Nearly a decade later, this guidance was expanded to include any “likely public charge” (An Act in Amendment to the Various Acts Relative to Immigration and the Importation of Aliens Under Contract or Agreement to Perform Labor, [1891](#)). Under the revised rule, any immigrant, including those who met the definition of refugee, who used public benefits within the first year of their arrival, could be deported. They also had to show that they would not displace any American worker, and as a result, prior to 1980, faith-based groups played a critical role as guarantors or “sponsors” of refugees (Bier & La Corte, [2016](#); Daval, [2021](#)).

The Refugee Act ([1980](#)) eliminated the public charge standard and provided immediate access to health and social welfare programs to newly admitted refugees. Yet, the law also stipulated that, as quickly as possible, refugees must become “self-sufficient,” securing work and meeting their families’ basic needs within a few months of arrival in the USA. Support from resettlement agencies and access to public benefits is intended to give refugees “a leg up on their journey to self-sufficiency, to stabilize the individual or family so that they can gain access to the labor market, and otherwise thrive” (Darrow, [2015](#), p. 92). Yet, as Darrow and other scholars conclude, “self-sufficiency” is an unrealistic standard given high costs of housing, a limited safety net, and other challenges refugees face in securing jobs that pay a living wage, especially in the first years of residing in the USA (Frazier & Van Riemsdijk, [2021](#); Gonzalez Benson, [2016](#)).

Refugees are chosen for resettlement by the federal government in cooperation with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration. Prior to arrival in the USA, they are assigned

⁴ Congress provided federal funds to support the admission of 6500 Hungarian refugees in 1956; by 1958, 38,000 Hungarians had been admitted to the USA under humanitarian parole provisions. The Cuban Adjustment Act of 1966 also had provisions for federal funding for Cuban refugees, and additional funds were set aside for refugees from Southeast Asia during the Ford and Carter administrations (Congressional Research Service, [1980](#)).

to one of nine resettlement agencies,⁵ which work with a network of affiliate organizations at the local level to carry out the practical work of resettlement. The first three months after a refugee arrives is known as the “reception and placement” period, during which modest supports from the federal government and a resettlement agency are provided to ease transition to US society. The resettlement program’s success historically hinged on the efforts of these national resettlement organizations and their local affiliates, refugee-led community organizations, and volunteers to help refugees quickly transition to economic “self-sufficiency” (Gonzalez Benson, 2020). This work has often been facilitated by members of faith communities, including Christian, Jewish, and Muslim groups, and the major US resettlement agencies primarily represent faith-based organizations (Eby et al., 2011).

Community sponsorship, including new proposals for private sponsorship in the USA, is linked an earlier history of private sector mobilization on behalf of refugees. Faith-based and ethnic community organizations historically were the sponsors of refugees, though generally that label was not used prior to the post-World War II era and the adoption of the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees in 1951 (UN General Assembly, 1951). Bier and La Corte (2016) emphasize the inherently private and charitable nature of refugee resettlement prior to the 1980 Refugee Act, when “Americans routinely sponsored and funded the resettlement of displaced family members overseas” (p. 1). After World War II, private associations, and other religious and ethnic groups “were the primary sponsors for refugees, funding almost all refugee resettlement to the United States with private money.”

In the early 1980s, at the encouragement of James Purcell, Director of the Bureau of Refugee Programs, and Secretary of State George Schulz, President Ronald Reagan piloted a private sponsorship program for several thousand Vietnamese refugees (Bier & La Corte, 2016). In 1986, the administration launched the “Private Sector Initiative,” which created a “special quota for the admission of refugees who would be supported by private sector funding, in addition to those refugees supported by government funds” (Talla, 2016, p. 5). This short-lived effort provided an exemplar of private sponsorship that afforded capacity to resettle more refugees than would be admitted through the “traditional” federal partnership with resettlement organizations. Some 16,000 refugees were admitted through this initiative in five years.

President William Clinton allowed up to 3000 refugees to be admitted through private sponsorship in the first two years of his presidency. In 1996, however, the administration cut the program citing the burden of rapidly rising health care costs for private sponsorship groups (Bier & La Corte, 2016). Myers (1991), staff member for Senator Edward Kennedy, noted in 1991 that “voluntary agencies and other private sector organizations resettling refugees have grown reluctant to commit themselves to private sector resettlement initiatives because of the unpredictable and inflationary medical costs” (p. 149). Rather than provide refugees with health

⁵ These organizations are Church World Service, Episcopal Migration Ministries, Ethiopian Community Development Council, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, International Rescue Committee, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, and World Relief Corporation.

care under existing Medicaid programs to address this challenge, Clinton ended the program. It is worth noting that this took place in the context of divisive debates on “welfare reform” and “immigration reform,” which also likely influenced the decision to eliminate private sponsorship. As a result, for more than two decades, community and private sponsorship of refugees existed on a limited scale through the efforts of local organizations like Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services of Connecticut (IRIS).

Contextualizing the Re-emergence of Community Sponsorship Since 2015

In 2011, what began as peaceful protests against the Assad regime in Syria led to a complex civil war with significant global involvement (Rabinovitch & Valensi, 2021). By the end of 2014, more than 10 million Syrians were internally displaced or crossed borders into Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq (UN High Commissioner for Refugees, n.d.) and the international community characterized Syrian forced migration as one of the worst refugee crises in decades (Rountree & Tilli, 2019). Mass forced migration from the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and Southwest Asia prompted the United Nations to host a “Leaders’ Summit on Refugees” in September 2016. More than 50 countries and international organizations participated in the event; the summit’s outcome document, the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, became the precursor to two global compacts related to refugees and safe migration that would be finalized two years later. The involvement of private sector actors in these deliberations and their commitments of resources was notable. The New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants articulated that “a comprehensive refugee response should be developed and initiated by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, in close coordination with relevant States, including host countries, and involving other relevant United Nations entities, for each situation involving large movements of refugees” (United Nations, 2016, para. 69).

Of note, the Declaration emphasized the role of the private sector and civil society, stating that any refugee crisis “should involve a multi-stakeholder approach.” These stakeholders included “national and local authorities, international organizations, international financial institutions, civil society partners (including faith-based organizations, diaspora organizations and academia), the private sector, the media and refugees themselves” (United Nations, 2016, para. 69). Elsewhere, the Declaration concluded that “private sector investment in support of refugee communities and host countries will be of critical importance over the coming years” (para. 86). Two years later, when the Global Compact on Refugees was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, private sector actors were cited as critical for increasing “durable solutions” for refugees through permanent resettlement (United Nations, 2018).

Support of private- or community-based efforts for refugees also rose from increased recognition of the limits of the existing global refugee resettlement regime. Citing growing numbers of refugees and displaced persons worldwide, in

2014, the United Nations urged wealthy European countries and the USA to assume more responsibility for resettling refugees. At that time, the UNHCR also called on the private sector to innovate and increase its support for refugees.

While Canada is the most visible example of community sponsorship of refugees, several other countries in Europe and Australia have established private or community sponsorship efforts (D'Avino, 2022; Hirsch et al., 2019; Hyndman et al., 2021; Tan, 2021). With the exception of Canada, which has the largest and oldest private sponsorship program (Lenard, 2016), most countries established these efforts less than a decade ago amidst extensive migration of Syrian refugees to Europe.

The Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program, is a forty-year-old Canadian initiative that allows a sponsorship group to identify and sponsor refugees if they provide financial and other supports for at least one year in conjunction with local service providers (Labman, 2016; Labman & Cameron, 2020; Reynolds & Clark-Kazak, 2019). Sponsorship groups can be community-based organizations, a group of at least five citizens or permanent residents working together, or a “constituent group, working with a sponsorship agreement holder” (Reynolds & Clark-Kazak, 2019, p. 3). A more recent public–private sponsorship effort, the Blended Visa Office-Referred Program, involves cost-sharing between sponsorship groups and the Canadian government with refugees referred by UNHCR.

The growth of other community sponsorship models in the UK, Australia, Germany, Spain, and Italy represents a way to build public support for refugees and offers a potential means to increase the number of refugees resettled (Pohlmann & Schwiertz, 2020; Tan, 2021). Most of these programs have several similar elements: shared responsibility (public and private) for financial and other supports; “controlled arrival” of refugees to asylum countries; serve as a compliment to existing state-sponsored refugee resettlement; and “ultimate responsibility” for refugees “remains with the state” (Tan, 2021, p. 3).

It is in this context of a growing global migration “crisis” that voluntary agencies and groups in several US states began to explore or implement community sponsorship programs for refugees. Meanwhile, as presidential candidate Donald Trump vilified refugees and immigrants, several prominent US organizations including Human Rights First, the Cato Institute, the Niskanen Center, and the International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP) advocated for the private sponsorship of refugees in the USA.

In 2016, the Urban Justice Center, IRAP, and Human Rights First authored a report which found that the number of refugees annually recommended by UNCHR for resettlement far exceeded the number of actual refugee admissions. Private sponsorship of refugees, they suggested, “could supplement public funding and expand resettlement opportunities through USRAP,” citing successful examples of such efforts in Canada, Germany, and Italy (Urban Justice Center et al., 2016, p. 4). They also underscored the importance of maintaining the principle of “additionality”—that any refugees admitted to the USA under private sponsorship would “be in addition to refugees who are resettled using government funds rather than replacing government support” (p. 2). To foster this “additionality,” private sponsors would assume all the financial obligations and responsibilities for resettling refugees traditionally carried out by resettlement

organizations and the federal government. They would thus be responsible for supporting refugee families or individuals for one year, covering both their pre-arrival costs and financial or in-kind support. After the first year, eligible refugees could apply for means-tested public aid and food assistance programs. Drawing upon the Canadian model, private groups or family members seeking to sponsor a refugee could be “matched” with a refugee who was “pre-selected by the U.S. government or resettlement agency,” or they could “name” a refugee relative or non-relative overseas and apply on their behalf (Urban Justice Center et al., 2016, 2–3).

Despite its promise, there is a potential risk that private sponsorship will allow governments to curtail or withdraw responsibility for refugee resettlement. The Australian Community Support Program (CSP) established in late 2017 provides a cautionary example. Hirsch et al. (2019) point out that the CSP introduced “problematic policies,” including “a lack of additionality; prohibitively high visa application charges and processing fees; discriminatory selection criteria; and a lack of community engagement in the design and participation of the program” (p. 110). In their assessment, the program “represents a market-driven outsourcing and privatization of the existing refugee program” (p. 110).

Even in the Canadian model, where private sponsorship adheres to the concept of additionality, signs of a shift of responsibility were evident in the past decade. Labman (2016) notes that in 2010, when Canada announced it would accept up to 2500 more refugees annually, 500 of these refugees would be government-sponsored and 2000 would be open for private sponsorship. And, while the promise to increase resettlement to Canada by 20% never materialized, the approach signaled the government’s growing reliance on private sponsors. Similarly, D’Avino (2022) and Tan (2021) cite the impulse to reduce government responsibility for refugees in Europe, including Ireland, Italy, Germany, Spain, and the UK. D’Avino (2022) highlights the growing privatization of resettlement as aligned with a neo-liberal state model, noting the “transfer of responsibilities to civil society and the employment of NGOs and community groups for the provision of refugee services” as central to the logic of the neo-liberal state (p. 332).

The desire to increase resettlement in the USA through civil society engagement was evident throughout the past decade. But it was in a moment of domestic policy crisis under President Trump that advocates began mobilizing to “save” the resettlement program. Changes to the refugee program by the Trump administration reduced annual US refugee admissions to their lowest levels since the creation of the 1980 Refugee Act and effectively barred refugees from several (Muslim majority) countries (Mathema & Carratala, 2020). But these policy shifts also had a notable unintended consequence: new forms of political engagement and organizing on behalf of refugees emerged in and between local communities in response (Libal et al., 2022). Amidst a growing global migration crisis, community sponsorship of refugees—a largely volunteer effort—emerged in dozens of US communities, reflecting a renewed form of civic engagement and a repudiation of the politics of fear.

Community (Co-)Sponsorship: Adaptation of an Older US Model

By 2015, one Connecticut-based refugee resettlement group, Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Services (IRIS), had emerged as a national innovator in community “co-sponsorship” of refugees. IRIS had previously worked with several local community sponsorship groups that took responsibility for resettling refugee families, but international and national events would soon create momentum for an expansion of this model. Media interest in large numbers of Syrians fleeing the country’s civil war and Trump’s explicit anti-immigrant/anti-Muslim campaign rhetoric led to rising global support for refugees. In the USA, this intensified in a nationwide backlash to Trump’s “Muslim travel ban” and cuts to refugee admissions he announced just days after taking office in January 2017. As occurred elsewhere, thousands of people in Connecticut publicly protested these policies and called on the US government to welcome Syrians fleeing war and persecution.

IRIS was quickly inundated with interest in sponsoring refugee families from local communities and Christian, Jewish, and Muslim faith-based institutions across the state. The organization announced that interested groups, most which newly formed for this purpose, could apply and demonstrate their capacity to resettle a refugee family. To gain support from IRIS, community groups needed to assume the costs of resettling refugee families for at least one year. IRIS also required these groups to help refugees find housing and employment and connect them to local schools, social services, English language courses, and transportation to facilitate refugees’ “self-sufficiency” (IRIS, 2021).

The co-sponsorship model is predicated on directly connecting refugees and community members, which is vital when refugees are resettled without family ties or within diaspora communities (Harding & Libal, 2020; Libal et al., 2019). Volunteers, who are often tied to local groups, promote interaction between refugees and community institutions and link refugees to relevant services. Initial research from Connecticut finds that community members effectively support refugees in the face of challenges related to housing, schooling, employment, and ongoing access to social benefits and health care:

By developing diffuse nodes of community support, local volunteers promote community integration and self-sufficiency among refugees, helping them generate social capital in their new environment...In this sense, the social networks that refugees typically form in host countries – networks that are essential to their ability to thrive – depend more heavily on the support of co-sponsorship volunteers than typically occurs in resettlement... (Harding & Libal, 2020, p. 254)

Other positive effects of this community sponsorship model illustrate its potential (Labman & Cameron, 2020). During its initial implementation—prior to restrictions on refugee admissions imposed by Trump—co-sponsorship led to a significant increase in community capacity to support refugees resettled in Connecticut. Those resettled through co-sponsorship found jobs and demonstrated

other forms of successful integration faster than refugees resettled directly by IRIS. Community co-sponsorship also appears effective “as a means to address stereotypes and any opposition toward newly relocated refugee families” (Harding & Libal, 2020, p. 254). In states where relatively few refugee families have previously been resettled, this is critical to address limited ethnic, racial, and religious diversity and promote community inclusion of newly arrived refugees (Besteman, 2016). In addition, the involvement of hundreds of people in in these local efforts helped raise visibility and support for refugees across the state.

National Diffusion of the Community Sponsorship Model

Community-based initiatives to support refugee resettlement, such as those by IRIS, began to grow during the Trump administration on an ad hoc, local basis. In late 2019, Open Society Foundations, the Shapiro Foundation, and philanthropists G. Barrie Landry and Laurie T. Franz established the Catalyst Fund “to help organizations across the United States develop, implement, and enhance community sponsorship programs” (Community Sponsorship Hub, n.d.). The Fund initiated a first call for proposals from resettlement organizations and community groups in fall 2020. Additional donors and organizations have since joined the effort, and there is considerable cross-fertilization between the Community Sponsorship Hub and another recent private initiative, Welcome.US. The latter focuses on Afghan evacuees to the USA since the US military withdrawal in late summer 2021.

To date, the Catalyst Fund has issued three rounds of grants. By the end of 2021, grantees include 34 local-level organizations and five national resettlement agencies supporting co-sponsorship programs through their local affiliates (Community Sponsorship Hub, n.d.). Of the 34 local groups, about two-thirds are in the Northeast and Midwest, while roughly one-third are in the South, Southwest, and Western United States. We briefly outline the work of several of these organizations to illustrate the diversity of approaches to community sponsorship of refugees supported by this national initiative.

New Roots Fund in Seattle, Washington, received support in the first round of Catalyst Funding and has partnered with the Episcopal Dioceses of Olympia’s Refugee Resettlement Office to implement a co-sponsorship program with a focus on entrepreneurship. According to the project summary provided to the Catalyst Fund, the New Roots Fund plans to use their “extensive contacts to identify [community] sponsors within the business and banking communities” to directly support refugees with backgrounds in entrepreneurship (Community Sponsorship Catalyst Fund, 2021, para. 1). This focus on the role of the business sector reflects global and domestic trends to expand parties engaged in refugee resettlement, which gained momentum following the New York Summit in 2016 (Fratzke et al., 2021; International Finance Corporation, 2019; Soros, 2016).

Pittsburgh-based Hello Neighbor is using second round Catalyst funding to resettle refugees after their arrival, with community sponsorship as their core model. Hello Neighbor announced in October of 2021 receipt of a federal

contract for direct resettlement, with a first-year goal of resettling 100 refugees, 50 Special Immigrant Visa Holders, and 100 Afghan Humanitarian Parolees (Hello Neighbor, 2021b). Community sponsors are responsible for a wide array of resettlement activities, ranging “from airport pick ups to housing support, transportation, first day of school support, attending parent-teacher conferences, and community introductions to libraries, playgrounds, and other third spaces” (Hello Neighbor, 2021c; Community Sponsorship section, para 2). This approach builds on their earlier work, which started in 2017, of providing “mentorship” to refugees who have been in the USA for more than 90 days. Mentors are paired with refugee families and must commit to at least ten hours of support per month for six months (Hello Neighbor, 2021a).

While faith-based organization Home for Refugees, a first-round grantee, is based in Los Angeles, California, they resettle refugees across the USA with a community sponsorship model. Community groups (faith-based and non-faith-based), called “Home Teams,” are tasked with working alongside a case worker to meet basic needs of refugees, including “job coaching, health advocacy, financial coaching, practicing conversational English, child education advocacy” (Home for Refugees, n.d.b, p. 3). Home teams are also expected to raise \$10,000 per family, with half covering the costs of training and ongoing support from Home for Refugees and the other half used “for the family’s Relief Fund” (Home for Refugees, n.d.a). Support to refugees is provided during their first year of resettlement. Home Teams also help refugees access public benefits and furnish their home (Home for Refugees, n.d.c).

The Hello Neighbor Network is a national “coalition of grassroots organizations working in post-refugee and immigrant resettlement” (Hello Neighbor Network, 2021, para 1). The 25-member organizations are mostly located in the eastern USA. The coalition aims to serve as a peer network for its members, offering education and resources to assist groups working in resettlement. The network, in partnership with the Schultz Family Foundation, Stand Together Foundation, and the Starbucks Foundation, recently announced a \$1 million fund to help resettlement organizations “increase their capacity to serve individuals and families who have fled Afghanistan” (Vinciguerra, 2021, para. 1). Grantees must provide “volunteer-led” services to Afghan refugees, signaling an interest in a community sponsorship model. Such philanthropy to community groups represents a new approach to resettlement, reflecting an enhanced role for corporate actors in funding local implementation of the resettlement program.

Of the nine national resettlement organizations who work in partnership with the federal government to resettle refugees in the USA, all implement a model of community sponsorship either at the national level or through select local offices. Five of these organizations have received support from the Catalyst Fund to implement community sponsorship programs (Community Sponsorship Hub, n.d.). In an announcement on its website, for example, the Ethiopian Community Development Council (2021) announced that the Catalyst Fund grant has helped to launch a community sponsorship pilot program at some of its local offices.

Operation Allies Welcome, Uniting for Ukraine, and the Re-emergence of Private Sponsorship

Since the Biden administration took office, two geopolitical crises have created conditions to accelerate private sponsorship in the USA. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan in summer 2021 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 have precipitated efforts to support Afghans and Ukrainians through private sponsorship. However, it is unclear if each group will be accorded official refugee status with the corresponding rights that entails. On August 29, 2021, President Biden charged the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) with coordinating efforts to support Afghans evacuated during the late stages of US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Named Operation Allies Welcome, the effort entails extensive collaboration between DHS, the State Department, and Department of Health and Human Services, as well as resettlement organizations and private sector actors. Since it began, the project has served to deepen and expand the “public–private partnership” to resettle refugees. It has also presented an opportunity for the State Department and Office of Refugee Resettlement in the Department of Health and Human Services to create a new private sponsorship initiative. Refugee advocates expect that in 2022, this pilot private sponsorship program with Afghan evacuees will be expanded to include refugees from other countries. They regard such a program as vital in the face of a weakened ecosystem for refugee resettlement following changes made by the Trump administration (Nawyn, 2019). In their report to Congress on “Proposed Refugee Admissions for the Fiscal Year 2022,” the US Departments of State, Homeland Security, and Health and Human Services (2022) underscored the important role for such private initiatives.

The evacuation and temporary housing of more than 50,000 Afghans with “humanitarian parole” status pushed the federal government to expand who can sponsor and support resettlement beyond the traditional voluntary resettlement actors. In late summer 2021, the State Department, in collaboration with private, philanthropic actors, launched the Sponsor Circle Program for private sponsorship of Afghan evacuees. A project of Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, Inc., the Community Sponsorship Hub, seeks to engage private sector support, including community groups, businesses, and non-governmental organizations. According to Secretary of State Antony Blinken (2021), the Sponsor Circle Program for Afghans “showcases the powerful role that individuals can play in coming together to welcome and integrate Afghans into American society, reflecting our spirit of goodwill and generosity.” It also departs from recent community sponsorship efforts, where resettlement agencies and their local affiliates coordinated refugee resettlement with local volunteer groups.

The Sponsor Circles program is modeled in part on the Canadian “Group of Five” program (Bond & Kwadrans, 2019; Labman, 2016; Van Haren, 2021) and based on recommendations from US advocacy groups (International Refugee Assistance Project, Niskanen Center, & Amnesty International, 2021). The Sponsor Circle approach allows as few as five individuals eighteen years and older to create a “certified sponsor circle” responsible for resettling an Afghan evacuee

individual or family. Prerequisites to participate include raising \$2,275 for each Afghan family or individual and committing to “finding initial housing, stocking the pantry, connecting children to school, providing initial income support, and helping adults to find employment” (Sponsor Circles, [n.d.a](#)). Sponsor Circles commit to a minimum of 90 days of support, though they are encouraged to work with the family that they are assigned for a year or more. At this time, unlike Canada’s program, the Sponsor Circles for Afghans program does not allow groups to “name” Afghans who are eligible for resettlement to be admitted to the USA.⁶ While Afghan evacuees have been accorded the same resources as those resettled through the refugee and Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) programs (Afghanistan Supplemental Appropriations Act, [2022](#)), in many instances, Sponsor Circles must find legal aid resources for Afghans so that they can apply for SIV or asylum status.⁷ The costs of such legal aid is not part of the \$2275 that Sponsor Circles raise on behalf of the Afghan family they are sponsoring.

The larger implications of these changes are unclear, as the program is less than a year old. The philanthropic actors responsible for creating the program are implementing a modified version of private refugee sponsorship, alongside community sponsorship models, such as those used by IRIS in Connecticut. It is significant that the Community Sponsor Circles provides a testing ground for scaling up community and private sponsorship in the future. Yet, this specific program for Afghans may also command private sector resources due to the sense of responsibility many Americans feel toward Afghans.

In April 2022, in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and subsequent humanitarian crisis, the Biden Administration established new efforts to resettle—on a temporary basis—up to 100,000 refugees in the USA. The Temporary Protected Status (TPS) Program for Ukrainian refugees allows Ukrainian nationals who have continuously resided in the USA since April 11 to register for TPS status for up to 18 months. The program will remain in effect through October 19, 2023 (US Department of Homeland Security, US Citizenship and Immigration Services, [2022](#)). The administration also created a program, Uniting for Ukraine, that allows a US sponsor to resettle Ukrainian refugees for stays of up to two years under humanitarian parole. This designation allows Ukrainian migrants to request authorization to work during their stay. Sponsors must demonstrate financial capacity to support Ukrainians and can be refugee resettlement groups, other non-profit organizations, or most people legally residing in the USA (Cameron, [2022](#)). Parallel to the Sponsor Circle Program for Afghans, private groups can propose to sponsor Ukrainian individuals or families through a matching program (Sponsor Circles, [n.d.b](#); Ukraine.Welcome.US, [n.d.](#)).

⁶ The program that has been set up for Ukrainians under “Uniting for Ukraine,” will allow a form of “naming” because it is based on individual applications for humanitarian parole on behalf of Ukrainians, rather than mass evacuation, which was the case for most Afghans. The proposed future private sponsorship program is slated to include a “naming” option, but this will likely take time to establish.

⁷ The temporary status that recent Afghan evacuees hold as “parolees” could be revoked in future and does not lead automatically to permanent residence.

The Future of the Refugee Program

Expanding community and private sponsorship initiatives promises to substantively reshape how refugees are resettled in the USA. As a greater number of individuals and communities take responsibility for sponsoring refugee families, a more expansive and sustainable resettlement program may emerge. Already, the strong civil society response to support Afghan evacuees has elevated the visibility of US refugee policy. Elizabeth Foydel of the International Refugee Assistance Project noted the critical role of diverse civil society actors to “welcome Afghans into their communities” and, particularly, the role of Sponsor Circles as “a new tool to support Afghans as they rebuild their lives in the United States” (International Refugee Assistance Project, 2021). In light of polarized US immigration policies, community and private sponsorship of refugees can facilitate greater public awareness of and support for refugee resettlement (Harding & Libal, 2020; Libal et al., 2022). Advocates suggest that sponsorship creates an unparalleled opportunity for Americans to become “ambassadors for the resettlement system” (La Corte, 2021), thus offering the potential of broader and more durable public support for refugees.

For an expanded resettlement program to flourish, however, a long-term public commitment to community and private sponsorship is essential. Traditional resettlement organizations are key actors in the resettlement system and must be supported through federal funding and be empowered to play a significant role in these innovative efforts. New non-profits, such as the Community Sponsorship Hub, will require added supports and oversight as well. These entities will play a vital role in facilitating community and private sponsorship work, particularly in communities with limited organizational capacity and experience resettling refugees.

Professional resettlement organizations are well positioned to support volunteers and community groups. To do so, however, these organizations must have adequate resources from the federal government and private sector to carry out this role. In addition, resettlement organizations and the Community Sponsorship Hub must also have the capacity to address challenges that will arise for volunteer groups and refugees. Without adequate training and ongoing support from resettlement agencies and caseworkers, community volunteers may experience “burn out” from these various responsibilities (Libal & Harding, 2021). Many community sponsors may have limited capacity or skills to navigate the social welfare system, access health care services, or secure affordable housing for refugees. And, while more refugees may be resettled than in the traditional approach, shifting responsibility for resettlement to community groups not tied to a resettlement organization raises questions of accountability, transparency, and equity in services and support.

One way to help ensure sufficient resources for private and community sponsorship to succeed is by institutionalizing this approach as a compliment to the existing resettlement program. Moreover, support for such a plan would signal that the USA has reclaimed its role as a global leader in defense of persecuted and displaced

populations. As importantly, advocates, policy makers, volunteers, and refugees themselves must continue to highlight the importance of the US refugee resettlement program. Community and private sponsorship aims to enhance the capacity to admit more refugees to the USA than in past—to develop what UNHCR has called “complementary pathways” to create lasting solutions for millions of refugees who wait in limbo in camps and urban settings globally. It is not a rationale to cut traditional programs and shift responsibility for resettlement to the private sector. Rather, such efforts can serve complimentary functions and ultimately strengthen US refugee policy.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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