

## A Better Way: A New Model for Community Sponsorship of Refugees in Australia

The Australian community has repeatedly called for a chance to be more involved in bringing refugees to Australia. The Australian community is eager to open their homes, offer jobs and volunteer their time in order to help more people find safety in Australia. A new community sponsorship model is needed to enable people to come together to add to, not reduce, Australia's resettlement places.

Australia has a long tradition and creditable record of communities supporting refugees to settle, with previous refugee sponsorship models that have enabled refugees to come to Australia and that have engaged a diverse range of Australians in supporting their settlement.

Some models, such as the Community Refugee Settlement Scheme which started in 1979, engaged a combination of government and private funding and involved community groups (including faith communities) volunteering their time and resources to help new refugees settle. Other community responses, including in the context of refugees from the Balkans war in the 1990s, have demonstrated the Australian community's willingness to accept more refugees and to provide for their day to day needs in the early settlement phase.

Together, we believe there is potential for the Australian Government to adopt a fair, open and community led refugee sponsorship program that can enhance Australia's response to the global refugee situation by drawing on the most successful aspects of the Canadian private sponsorship experience.

### Our concerns with the current Community Support Program

The current Community Support Program (CSP) is a program that makes it possible for people and businesses in Australia to support a person in humanitarian need to come to Australia and assist them in their settlement journey. After several months of delay, the program looks likely to commence operation from March 2018 onwards.

There are a number of problems with this current model. Firstly, the program focuses on individuals or businesses being sponsors, rather than communities coming together to sponsor refugees. By focusing on individuals, there is a risk of relationship breakdown, financial pressure and exploitation. In addition, the settlement and integration benefits of broad community engagement with a newly arrived family may be lost.

Second, the costs associated with the scheme are prohibitively high. An estimation of the cost to an individual or business wishing to sponsor a family of five (comprising two adults along with three children under 'working age') would be up to \$100,000, including up to \$43,000 in income support for the sponsored family, depending on the extent to which they rely on social security in the first 12 months of arrival.

Third, the CSP currently gives priority to applicants who are: (i) considered 'job ready'; (ii) come, are from certain countries; and (iii) are willing to settle in regional areas of Australia. The 'job ready' requirement prioritises those with the highest education and skill levels, rather than those in most desperate and urgent need of resettlement. The country-of-origin requirements also may function so as to preclude those in most urgent need of resettlement.

Finally, the program currently sits within the Refugee and Humanitarian Program, which has a fixed annual visa quota. This means that sponsored refugees would take places out of the number of refugees that the government has already committed to resettle. In order to attract community members as sponsors, our community sponsorship program should be supplementary to the government's existing commitment, allowing the community to support additional refugees to settle in Australia and expand our national response, rather than privatising an existing government commitment.

## What lessons can Australia learn from Canada?

Australia has much to learn from Canada's experience over the past 40 years with its community sponsorship program.<sup>1</sup> In Canada, private sponsorship of refugees (PSR) has been part of the resettlement landscape since the Indochinese refugee crisis in the late 1970s and is estimated to have resettled more than 300,000 refugees since. Typically, this has occurred via religious, ethnic, community, or service organisations who are Sponsorship Agreement Holders (SAHs) or Groups of Five (five or more Canadian citizens or permanent residents). All sponsors agree to give "emotional and financial support to the refugee for the full sponsorship period" and raise the equivalent of one year of social security, which is held in a trust account and paid to the sponsored refugees to meet their settlement expenses. The required cash amount can be reduced by in-kind commitments of housing, clothing, furniture, household goods and food.

Canada's most effective and high-functioning Sponsorship Agreement Holders (SAHs) provide a good model for community sponsorship partnerships in Australia. These SAHs bring together:

- Trained and supported volunteers from the broader community
- Close connections with refugee communities
- Clear and effective settlement plans developed in partnership with local settlement agencies
- Partnerships with business to help refugees find employment
- Fundraising programs to gather the support required for their sponsorship work
- High standards of accountability, lodging high quality sponsorship applications with government and monitoring the work of partners and volunteers to ensure that sponsorship undertakings are met

A clear lesson from Canada is that members of the broader community who are contributing to, and engaged in, community sponsorship programs want their efforts to add to the government's existing commitments to refugee resettlement. They do not want governments to use their goodwill as a means of saving money on pre-existing commitments and will be less likely to engage with the program if their efforts do not add to the national refugee response.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a full outline of what Australia can learn from the Canadian community sponsorship program see <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/publications/reports/canada-private-sponsorship/>

<sup>2</sup> See <http://ccrweb.ca/en/private-sponsorship-refugees>

## A Better Way: The Proposed Model

We have developed an alternative model for community refugee sponsorship, details of which are set out below, which draws upon the best aspects of the Canadian community sponsorship experience. Adoption of the below model could allow Australia to develop a world-renowned community sponsorship program at minimal cost to the tax-payer. In doing so, Australia could enhance its humanitarian response to forced migration significantly and in a way which would facilitate the efficient and deep integration of refugees into the Australian community. It would also provide an opportunity to leverage the compassion and generosity of Australians to meet Australia's international responsibilities to support refugees in need of protection.

**We urge policy makers to consult with interested community members and refugees in designing the more detailed features of Australia's community sponsorship program and would be happy to facilitate such an exchange.**

A better, fairer Community Sponsorship Program should focus on four key principles:

- the principle of additionality
- priority based on need, not skills, race or religion
- guaranteed access to settlement services (however funded)
- wide community engagement.

This model sets out a better way forward for the Australian Government to adopt to a Community Sponsorship Program that is truly community led.

### 1. 10,000 places in addition to the Refugee and Humanitarian Program

We propose that a community sponsorship program be developed outside of the Refugee and Humanitarian Program quota. Starting at 5,000 places, the program could grow over five years to offer 10,000 places per annum.

### 2. Who can be sponsored?

Community sponsorship should provide resettlement opportunities for those in most urgent need of resettlement as identified by UNHCR, as well as those seeking family reunion in Australia and those who Australian employers may wish to sponsor.

Sponsored refugees should be required to meet the eligibility criteria for one of the existing visa subclasses in the Refugee and Humanitarian Program. This would include those found to be refugees by UNHCR (the Refugee visa, subclass 200) or those who are otherwise subject to substantial discrimination amounting to a gross violation of their human rights in their home country (the Special Humanitarian Program, subclass 202).

Sponsored refugees should not be selected based on their employability, English language ability, religion, age or any other characteristic unrelated to their protection needs or the nature of their relationship with their proposed sponsor. Priority should be given to those identified by UNHCR as in most urgent need of resettlement. There should be no restrictions on where a refugee is from or is currently residing, provided they can demonstrate their ongoing need for protection.

### 3. Who can sponsor?

Those individuals wishing to sponsor refugees should do so as a collective volunteer group ('sponsor group') under the auspices of a registered non-profit organisation, (which would include incorporated community associations, local councils, religious organisations and other charities). Such registered non-profit organisations are referred to in this paper as 'Approved Community Organisations' or 'ACOs'. The term 'sponsor' is used in this paper to refer to the sponsor group working under the auspices of an ACO.

ACOs should be non-profit associations registered in an Australian state or territory. Together the ACOs and sponsor group must be able to demonstrate capacity to raise funds and support

settlement for the first year, and must undergo training on refugee settlement before being approved. This training could be provided by experienced settlement service providers.

In view of the potential for a high level of interest in a well-constructed community sponsorship model, the Australian Government should set high standards for organisations and individuals wishing to engage in community sponsorship of refugees. ACOs must be expected to meet clear benchmarks for financial accountability, screening and training of volunteers and staff, as well as integrity and support to the refugees they sponsor. This should be set out in a sponsorship agreement between the sponsors and the Government. A reputable organisation with experience in refugee settlement may be best placed to manage the training and oversight of ACOs and ensure the sponsorship agreement is met.

### ***What about individuals?***

Individuals are vital to a successful community sponsorship model. However, we believe that the responsibility of sponsoring refugees should not rest on a single individual alone. There is a risk that people may no longer be able to provide ongoing support, or that there may be a breakdown in the relationship between an individual sponsor and refugee. As such, individuals wishing to sponsor a refugee should do so under the auspices of an Approved Community Organisation, as a member of a larger sponsorship group involving other volunteers.

Aside from the risk associated with reliance on individual sponsors, we believe that a successful community sponsorship model should involve the wider community in the settlement process. The previous model of private sponsorship in Australia has turned into a de-facto family reunion program, placing significant pressure on family members (many new refugees themselves) to raise the substantial funds and provide support on arrival. While family reunion for refugee families is an urgent issue that must be addressed, a community sponsorship program should not be primarily about families simply sponsoring other family members without broader community involvement. A program that only engages family members as sponsors misses many of the potential benefits associated with broad-based community engagement in the sponsorship.

Former refugees wishing to bring their family members to Australia should do so under the auspices of an ACO with other volunteers from the broader community involved in the sponsor group. By linking individuals wishing to be united with their family with community groups wishing to sponsor refugees, family members do not have to bear the substantial financial burden of the current model, and can receive additional support to help their family members settle. Under this model, former refugees in Australia can also help identify those in need of resettlement, supporting the community sponsors to connect with refugees overseas.

### ***What about businesses?***

Businesses also play a vital role in the sponsorship and settlement process. However, we believe that businesses are not well placed to provide ongoing settlement support and assistance for sponsored refugees. Where businesses can provide financial support and employment opportunities, they should partner with an ACO and a broader group of volunteers (which may include the employees of the business) to undertake the sponsorship, to ensure that the sponsored individual/family receives the full range of settlement support they need, not just employment.

Businesses offering employment to sponsored refugees should be able to offer this employment as an offset to the costs which the sponsor is expected to raise. Under this model, if a business employs a refugee, the sponsor does not have to raise funds to cover the costs of Centrelink for the period in which the person is likely to be employed. However, if a person does not continue employment and requires Centrelink, the cost of this should be covered by the sponsor. Where a business offers employment to sponsored refugees, the refugee employee should be guaranteed the same wages, conditions and rights as other employees in Australia.

Businesses may also wish to donate funds to help cover the costs of other sponsors – this should be permitted and encouraged.

#### 4. Who pays for what and how much should it cost?

The concept of community sponsorship involves the sponsoring community organisation covering the cost associated with a refugee's initial stages of settlement, as well as airfares and medical checks prior to departure. Sponsors should be expected to raise funds to cover the costs for refugees for the first year of living in Australia. This should include costs for food and living expenses, rent and initial costs to make a new home in Australia. However, there should be no visa application charges or processing fees raised by the government.

Our proposed model would reduce the cost of sponsoring a family of five from up to \$100,000 (under the CSP) to between \$20,000 and \$50,000, depending on the extent to which income support is required in the first year after arrival. The cost of sponsoring an individual would be between \$7,000 and \$20,000, depending on the period of income support required. Some of these costs could be offset if sponsors are able to provide in-kind support (such as free accommodation or furniture).

##### ***Pre-arrival costs***

Sponsors should be expected to cover the costs of airfares and medical checks required before arriving in Australia. This will vary depending on where the person is located and the cost of certain medical checks. On average, this will likely cost around \$2,000 per person.

##### ***On-arrival support***

Once the sponsored individual/family arrives, the sponsors should be expected to provide initial short-term accommodation, furniture, appliances and basic essentials. This is likely to cost around \$5,000 for one family. Where sponsors are able to provide these items in-kind, this can offset the amount they are expected to raise for on-arrival support.

##### ***Income support***

Sponsored refugees should have access to Centrelink income support, including rent assistance, on par with other permanent migrants and refugees. Centrelink payments should be paid by the government through the usual Centrelink procedures.

However, the sponsor should be expected to raise funds to cover the amount of income support used by the refugee for the first 12 months. This money should be held in trust by the ACO, with the Federal Government entitled to bill the ACO to recover these costs at the end of the sponsorship period (ie 12 months after the sponsored person/family arrives in Australia).

This will ensure that sponsored refugees have reliable access to income support through a pre-existing and regulated national mechanism. It will also reduce the administrative burden on organisations and will help to prevent cases of exploitation or fraud.

The following is an overview of the likely costs of Centrelink benefits for individuals and family groups:

- An individual:
  - Newstart allowance – \$538.80 fortnightly
  - Rent assistance – \$134.80 fortnightly
  - Total: \$673.60 fortnightly (\$17,513.60 per year)
  
- A family of five (two adults and three children):
  - Newstart Allowance – \$486.50 per partner fortnightly
  - Parenting payment – \$486.50 fortnightly for principal carer
  - Rent assistance – \$178.78 fortnight

- Total: \$1,638.28 fortnightly (\$42,595.28 per year)
- A single mother with two children:
  - Newstart Allowance – \$582.80 fortnightly
  - Parenting Payment – \$752.60 fortnightly
  - Rent assistance – \$158.34 fortnightly
  - Total: \$1,493.74 fortnightly (\$38,837.24 per year)

Where refugees do not require all the funds held on trust (for example, if they are able to find full-time employment within the first year), any un-used remaining funds can be used by the sponsor group or Approved Community Organisation to sponsor other refugees or repaid to the sponsor group in proportion to their original contributions. This creates an incentive for sponsor groups to develop independence building activities for greater utility in their sponsorship funding.

### ***Accommodation***

Sponsors should provide initial short-term accommodation and help refugees find long-term accommodation, preferably on arrival. At the very least, sponsors should cover the cost of Centrelink rent assistance (outlined above). However, if the sponsor is able to provide suitable free accommodation acceptable to the sponsored individual/family, the sponsor should not be required to raise funds to cover Centrelink rent assistance payments.

### ***Other social security supports***

Sponsored refugees should have access to Medicare, the National Disability Insurance Scheme, primary and secondary education, the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP), Commonwealth Supported university places and the Higher Education Loan Program, on par with other resettled refugees through the Refugee and Humanitarian Program. These costs should be borne by the Australian Government.

After one year of settlement, sponsored refugees should continue to receive social security support from the government, on par with refugees resettled through the Refugee and Humanitarian Program.

## **5. Settlement support**

Sponsors should be responsible for providing settlement support during the first year of arrival. This should include, at least, support on par with the services provided by settlement service providers for other resettled refugees, such as the Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP). This includes meeting families at the airport, providing short term accommodation and support to find long term accommodation, orientation support, enrolling in school and the AMEP program and eventually finding employment.

It is anticipated that sponsor groups will provide this support themselves through their own members and other community volunteers. It is expected that sponsor groups and Approved Community Organisations will have a wealth of social networks which they are able to draw upon to support sponsored refugees in settlement. As discussed above, ACOs will be required to undergo training on refugee settlement before becoming an approved to act in this capacity. This can be provided by an experience settlement service provider.

Sponsored refugees should also have access to the Translating and Interpreting Service and specialised torture and trauma counselling where needed, on par with other resettled refugees. This should be funded by the Australian Government.

After one year of settlement, sponsored refugees should be eligible to receive additional settlement support through the Settlement Grants program and other services, on par with refugees resettled through the Refugee and Humanitarian Program.

## 6. Case study example

A local incorporated community association is interested in sponsoring a refugee family. Members of the community association have little previous experience in providing settlement support, so they undergo training with an experienced settlement organisation. They apply to become an Approved Community Organisation and undergo vetting and approval. They contact the UNHCR, or an intermediary organisation, to identify a refugee family in need of resettlement whom they might sponsor – a mother with three school-aged children.

Volunteer members of the community association raises funds to sponsor this family. They need to raise \$45,750,<sup>3</sup> enough to cover the costs of the first year of Centrelink, as well as flights, medical assessments and initial needs upon arrival. The community association holds this money in trust for the first year.

The community association seeks donations of furniture and appliances for the family. A member of the association offers free accommodation in the local community area for the first year, meaning that the association does not need to cover the cost of Centrelink rent assistance. Six members of the community association also volunteer to provide various forms of settlement support for the first year, forming a volunteer group which is overseen by the association.

The local community association applies to sponsor the family, completing the required application forms. The application is assessed, and the family is approved for a refugee visa. The association helps arrange airfares and the required medical checks.

Volunteers meet the family at the airport, help them with initial needs, enrol children in school, find a family doctor, set up bank accounts and utilities, apply for Centrelink assistance (if required), help them find permanent accommodation and undertake other initial administrative/orientation tasks. They meet regularly to check how the family is settling and to offer any ongoing support they may need.

After one year, the association is billed by the Federal Government for the family's Centrelink costs, as well as assessed on whether the family has been well supported in their first year.

For more information visit [www.ausrefugeesponsorship.com.au](http://www.ausrefugeesponsorship.com.au)

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<sup>3</sup> Centrelink (not including rent assistance): \$34,720.4 for first year. Flights and medical checks: \$6,000. Other initial needs: \$5,000.