

## Policy Foundations for Community Sponsorship of Refugees

Governments and societies around the world are under sustained and increasing pressure to address one of the greatest challenges of our times: providing protection and assistance to the rising number of people displaced across the globe. More than 65 million people are now forcibly displaced – including more than 22 million refugees.

The number of resettlement places available for refugees around the world is grossly inadequate to respond to the need. In 2017 the UNHCR forecasted that only 93,200 places would be available in resettlement countries that year, less than 0.5% of all refugees globally, and only 8% of the refugees identified by UNHCR as in greatest need of resettlement. As a result, the responsibility for the vast majority of the world's refugees is currently borne by less wealthy nations of the world - typically those most proximate to refugee-producing countries.

United Nations declarations and expert bodies are calling for greater responsibility sharing – which means rich countries doing more in responding to the challenge of forced migration as well as encouraging the engagement of new stakeholders, including private individuals and organisations. At the same time, we know from experience that many Australians are willing and wanting to offer their own time, money and other resources to help refugees find safety and successfully integrate in Australia.

In this context we support the efforts made by successive Australian governments in exploring community refugee sponsorship models. This has included the previous Community Proposal Pilot (CPP) and its successor, the Community Support Program (CSP). However, the new CSP model has a number of features which inhibit its potential to deliver significant benefits to refugees in need of resettlement and the Australian community.

### Our concerns about the CSP

- **Places in the CSP come from the humanitarian intake quota.** Potential sponsors would like to expand Australia's national response, not privatise it.
- **Costs are prohibitively high.** For a family of five (2 adults and 3 dependent children), the total cost will be up to \$100,000, with visa fees alone set at approximately \$30,000. The cost of sponsoring an individual refugee would be up to \$48,000. While many refugee families in Australia will do whatever they can to raise these funds to sponsor family members, broader community sponsors will be looking for 'value for money' in investing in humanitarian outcomes and will be deterred by these costs.
- **The CSP's criteria** (requiring refugees to have secured employment or be 'job ready' for employment in Australia) will exclude many refugees in most urgent need of resettlement
- **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.

**With these concerns in mind, the Community Refugee Sponsorship Initiative has developed an alternative vision for community refugee sponsorship in Australia (see following page).**

## A better model for Community Sponsorship in Australia

We have developed an alternative model which draws on lessons learned from Canada's successful community sponsorship scheme, adapted for the Australian context. The Canadian community sponsorship system has evolved over more than 40 years, and resulted in the resettlement of more than 300,000 people. Key features of our proposed model are as follows:

- **Size of program:** The initial program size should be 5,000 places per annum, growing to 10,000 places per annum over the next five years. These places should be additional to those provided by Australia's humanitarian migration quota.
- **Eligible refugees:** These should include 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. Priority should be given to UNHCR-referred candidates and employability should not be part of the eligibility criteria.
- **Eligible sponsors:** Those individuals wishing to sponsor refugees should do so as a collective 'sponsor group' under the auspices of a registered non-profit organisations, including incorporated community associations, local councils, religious organisations and other charities ('Approved Community Organisations' or 'ACOs'). ACOs should be able to demonstrate that each sponsorship group will be capable of providing settlement support to the sponsored refugee(s) for 12 months.
- **Cost of sponsorship:** 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. Sponsor groups under the auspices of an ACO 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. To ensure people do not experience hardship, sponsored refugees should have access to Centrelink (including rent assistance). However, the cost of Centrelink for one year should be covered by the sponsors. **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.<sup>1</sup> Some of these costs could be offset if sponsors are able to provide in-kind support (such as free accommodation or furniture).
- **Access to public services:** Sponsors should be responsible for providing settlement support for the first year of settlement. However, sponsored refugees should have access to all other social services, Medicare, English language tuition and education, 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.

Adoption of the above fundamental principles 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.**

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

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<sup>1</sup> These costs include airfares, medical checks and initial financial support on arrival, plus income support (based on Centrelink entitlements) to the extent required.