



Community  
Refugee  
Sponsorship  
Initiative

COMMUNITY REFUGEE SPONSORSHIP:  
A SOLUTION FOR REGIONAL MIGRATION

Submission to Joint Standing Committee on Migration inquiry into  
migration in regional Australia

Contact:  
Lisa Button  
Executive Director  
Community Refugee Sponsorship Initiative  
Tel: 0450578664  
Email: [lisa.button@crsi.org.au](mailto:lisa.button@crsi.org.au)  
Website: [www.ausrefugeesponsorship.com.au](http://www.ausrefugeesponsorship.com.au)

## Executive Summary

Community sponsorship offers a tried and tested method for supporting the successful and sustainable settlement of humanitarian migrants in regional communities, including in locations that do not currently support government-funded migrant services. Ordinary Australians and community groups in many regional communities are willing to invest their time and money to sponsor refugees into their communities, with many local governments also supportive of this approach. The Australian government could unlock a range of benefits for Australian communities, businesses and refugees by introducing a new community sponsorship scheme, starting in a number of select regional locations.

Humanitarian migrants typically arrive in Australia highly motivated to build successful new lives for themselves and their families and eager to make positive contributions to their new communities and have done so over many decades.

Increasing the number of humanitarian migrants who settle in regional Australian communities should be an important pillar of any comprehensive policy framework for increasing migration to regional Australia. Humanitarian migrants can expand the permanent local labour market, offset the effects of aging/declining regional populations and expand the consumer base for locally produced goods and services. Humanitarian migrants and their families also contribute to the resilience, adaptability and vibrancy of Australia's regional communities.<sup>1</sup>

**It is essential, however, to the successful and sustainable settlement of humanitarian migrants in Australia's regional towns and cities that new migrants feel a deep and genuine sense of welcome and belonging.<sup>2</sup> While housing, healthcare, education and jobs are all needed, genuine community welcome and support is the social 'glue' needed to make regional migration work and 'stick'.**

Community sponsorship of refugees provides a framework for deeply empowering ordinary people in the act of welcoming refugees into their communities and bearing primary responsibility for supporting those new arrivals during the early phases of settlement (typically the first 12 months). It is a practice that has been successfully tried and tested in Canada for over 40 years and is now being replicated in many other countries, including the United Kingdom where the conservative government recently extended and expanded the successful program that it introduced in 2015. It is an approach that often attracts support from parliamentarians across the political spectrum.<sup>3</sup>

Sponsors must go to considerable lengths to prove that they can provide financial and practical support to new arrivals in a safe, reliable and responsible manner, with professional settlement agencies providing training and support to sponsor groups. Going through this process means that by the time sponsored refugees arrive in their new communities, sponsors are deeply invested in the act of sponsoring and are accordingly highly motivated champions, supporters and mentors for refugees in their community.

Sponsorship is one of the most individualised and locally-driven approaches to settlement. The support provided by community sponsors is intensive, holistic and naturally adapts to the needs of the individual/family group as well as the features of the local community. As a support structure, a sponsorship group is also very robust, leveraging the capacities of a diverse group of highly invested and committed volunteers rather than just those of a single individual, business or entity. In addition, sponsorship offers benefits to the sponsors themselves and their communities including new connections, increased community capacity, cohesion, purpose and pride.

---

<sup>1</sup> For a recent analysis of the social and economic contribution of humanitarian migrants, see Deloitte Access Economics and Oxfam's recent report: *Economic and Social Impact of Increasing Australia's Humanitarian Intake* (August 2019)

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Piper, *Refugee Settlement in Regional Areas. Evidence-based good practice* (October 2017) p 9.

<sup>3</sup> See The Guardian, *Two Coalition MPs join Tim Watts in call for more private sponsorship of refugees* (23 May 2017) <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/may/23/two-coalition-mps-join-tim-watts-in-call-for-more-private-sponsorship-of-refugees>

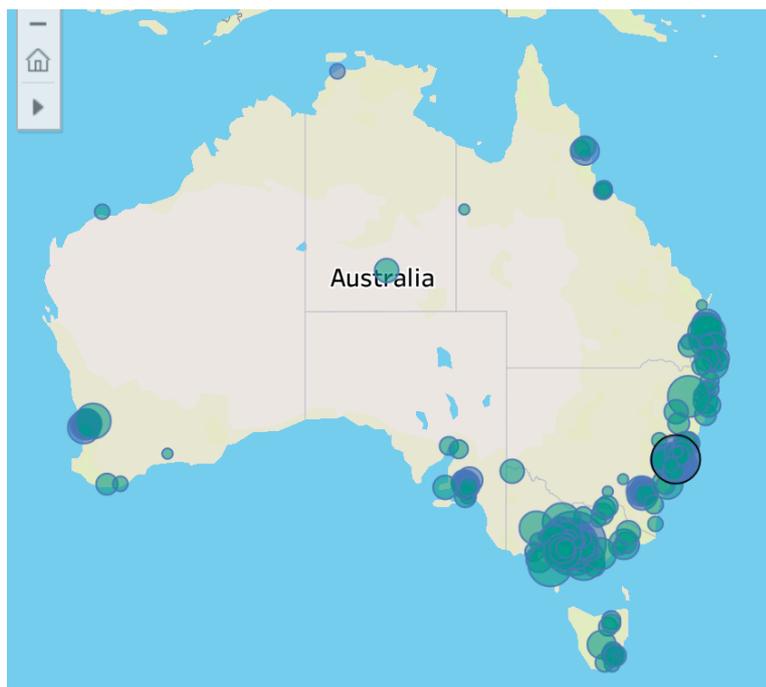
Of particular relevance to this enquiry, the Canadian and United Kingdom schemes demonstrate the success of sponsorship as a framework for:

- **Diversifying the range of locations in which refugees can successfully settle:** In recent years, refugees have settled in over 400 communities around Canada (including many small and remote regional locations), with only around 30 of these locations large enough to support government-funded settlement services. Sponsorship has also taken root in regional parts of the United Kingdom.
- **Supporting the successful social and economic participation of refugees:** Sponsors help refugees in a myriad of ways including finding local work, improving their English proficiency, providing transport and help getting a drivers licence, attending medical appointments and becoming involved in community life more generally.

Community sponsorship is different from employer-based sponsorship in that the offer of a job is not a prerequisite.<sup>4</sup> However, regional businesses and their staff can still play an important role as members of a local community. Local businesses that become involved in sponsoring may also wish to offer employment to those who they sponsor once they're in the country. This has been the experience of Danby, a refrigeration and appliance company in the regional town of Guelph Canada, whose CEO has sponsored dozens of families into the community (more than 200 refugees) with the support of Danby staff and other members of the local community.

### People, community groups and local governments from all over Australia want to be involved

The below image is taken from an [interactive map](#) available on our website which shows specific pledges of support from potential sponsors all around Australia. This data, collected with little effort over a short period of time, represents only a small portion of the level of interest that we know exists in Australian communities.



In addition to these pledges of support, more than 30 local governments around Australia have passed motions supporting the introduction of a fair and accessible community sponsorship scheme, including many in regional Australia.<sup>5</sup> More than 26,000 individuals have indicated their desire to see Australia adopt a new community sponsorship scheme along with sporting clubs, schools and other community groups.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Refer to the submission made by Talent Beyond Boundaries, which CRSI endorses.

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.amnesty.org.au/community-sponsorship-support/>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. This work has been done under the 'My New Neighbour' campaign led by CRSI-member, Amnesty International Australia.

## Recommendations

The Community Refugee Sponsorship Initiative (CRSI) recommends that the Australian government introduce a new community sponsorship scheme to encourage and enable ordinary Australians to sponsor humanitarian migrants into their communities. As a first step towards a national program, such a scheme could be launched in a number of select regional locations, with the following program design features:

1. **Criteria for refugee/family:** Any person meeting the eligibility criteria under the existing Refugee and Humanitarian Program should be eligible for sponsorship.<sup>7</sup> There should be no criteria relating to skills, language or country-of-origin as such criteria can exclude those in most urgent need of resettlement.
2. **Sponsor criteria:** Sponsor groups would need to be comprised of at least five members of a local community and who can demonstrate their ability to provide practical and financial support to those whom they sponsor. The sponsor group must include individuals who are not related to the refugee(s) in order to ensure broad community engagement in the sponsorship. The sponsor group could include owners or staff of a local business, and perhaps even an offer of employment, though employment should not be a prerequisite for sponsorship.
3. **Role of intermediaries and professional settlement services:** There would be no professional intermediary organisation arranging the sponsorship<sup>8</sup> but sponsor groups would need to have a relationship with a registered community association or other local not-for-profit entity, which would effectively underwrite the obligations of the sponsor group. Sponsor groups would also need to be trained by a settlement agency and have the support of such an agency should they encounter difficulties and require advice.
4. **Visa fees:** Neither refugees nor sponsors would be required to pay any significant visa application fees.
5. **Cost of sponsorship:** Sponsors would pay for the sponsored family's migration expenses and their basic needs in their first 12 months in Australia (including income support, to the extent required).
6. **Supplementary role of sponsorship:** Community sponsorship would supplement rather than supplant government-funded resettlement, in light of the significant investment being made by private sponsors. A successful initial program implementing these design features in select regional communities could be established by making available as few as 100-200 additional humanitarian visas, depending on the number of initial sites.

It would also be possible to construct pilot schemes to test and demonstrate a selection of the above design features. However, these elements are all mutually supportive and reinforcing and as such we believe that the program incorporating all of the above design features will be most successful, and deliver the widest range of benefits to Australian communities, sponsored refugees and sponsors.

More details on our proposed model of sponsorship can be found in the Appendix and in our position paper [A New Model for Community Refugee Sponsorship in Australia](#). We would be happy to discuss with the Committee the details of how this model could be implemented in regional Australia.

---

<sup>7</sup> For a regional sponsorship scheme, we suggest that the focus be on sponsoring refugees referred to Australia by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (visa subclass 200) and other 'un-linked' refugees rather than those who have strong family links in Australia.

<sup>8</sup> Our proposed model does not feature an 'Approved Proposing Organisation' (as featured in the government's Community Support Program), as this model adds unnecessarily to the cost of sponsorship and may disempower community volunteers.

## Introduction

The Community Refugee Sponsorship Initiative (CRSI) aims to secure the adoption and successful implementation of a new community refugee sponsorship program in Australia with the support of its members and affiliates and funding from the Sidney Myer Fund along with Open Society Foundation and other philanthropic donors.<sup>9</sup>

Community sponsorship of refugees would tap into the capacity and generosity of ordinary Australians and allow them to play a central role in the settlement journey of a refugee family. Community sponsorship can support the achievement of a range of government priorities including increasing regional settlement, ensuring successful economic and social inclusion of refugees and diversifying the makeup of the Refugee and Humanitarian Program. For communities, the benefits of engaging in sponsorship are multi-faceted – the act of sponsorship can develop community capacity, cohesion, purpose and pride and sponsorship can boost local population and labour pool in an integrated and sustainable way.

The term ‘community refugee sponsorship’ or ‘community sponsorship’ refers to an arrangement whereby ordinary individuals and community groups join together to financially sponsor the permanent migration of a refugee or refugee family from overseas into their local community and then provide them with practical and holistic support during their first year in the country. That means helping refugees with things like finding and setting up a home, enrolling children in school, opening bank accounts, accessing medical treatment, gaining a driver’s license, learning English, securing qualifications and finding work or starting a business. Sponsorship often evolves into long-lasting friendships, with sponsors providing emotional support as well.

This practice was first developed in Canada where community members have sponsored and welcomed more than 300,000 refugees since the late 1970s in addition to those entering under the government-funded resettlement program. The practice is now spreading around the world with countries including the United Kingdom, Ireland, Germany, New Zealand and Argentina now implementing permanent or pilot community sponsorship schemes inspired by the successful Canadian example.

## The Benefits of Community Refugee Sponsorship

There are many benefits of sponsorship for new refugees, the communities that welcome them, and the broader Australian and international community. Importantly, community sponsorship can help achieve the government’s current priority of increasing and supporting the migration of humanitarian migrants to rural and regional Australia.

<p><b>Sponsored refugees</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opportunity to build a new life in safety</li> <li>• Holistic, intensive and personalised support to successfully settle, find employment, learn English etc</li> </ul>	<p><b>Local communities and residents</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develops community capacities and pride</li> <li>• An antidote to disengagement and loneliness</li> <li>• Increased population/ rejuvenation of shrinking/aging towns and regional/remote locations</li> </ul>
<p><b>Local sponsors</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Satisfaction of helping others in need</li> <li>• Developing new local connections and friendships</li> </ul>	<p><b>Local businesses/industry in regional locations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New pool of reliable local labour</li> <li>• Enlarged local customer base</li> </ul>
<p><b>Other newly arrived refugees and migrants in the local community</b></p> <p>Benefits of greater mutual understanding and increased engagement between general community and new migrants, triggered by sponsorship</p>	<p><b>Australia foreign policy and the international community</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Australia’s ability to do more to respond to global need at minimal additional cost to the taxpayer</li> <li>• Associated benefits for Australia’s international goodwill and leverage in regional/international migration issues</li> </ul>

<sup>9</sup> CRSI’s members are Save the Children Australia, the Refugee Council of Australia, Amnesty International Australia and Welcoming Cities. Affiliates include the Australian Churches Refugee Council (part of the National Council of Churches in Australia) and Rural Australians for Refugees.

## Community sponsorship can encourage refugees to settle in regional areas

Community sponsorship can increase the diversity of settlement locations across Australia. Community sponsorship can assist refugees to settle in regional areas because it enables refugees to be settled successfully without the need for formal settlement services to be on the ground in each settlement location. While refugees arriving under the traditional government-funded humanitarian program rely primarily on the assistance of professional settlement services in the location where they are settled, sponsored refugees are assisted by a dedicated local group of volunteers who have been appropriately trained and vetted.

In Canada, while there are only 34 cities that support government settlement services,<sup>10</sup> community sponsorship has supported refugees to resettle in over 400 locations across Canada. In the United Kingdom sponsor groups from regional locations such as Devon and Wales (to name just a few) have also begun welcoming new refugees to their communities.

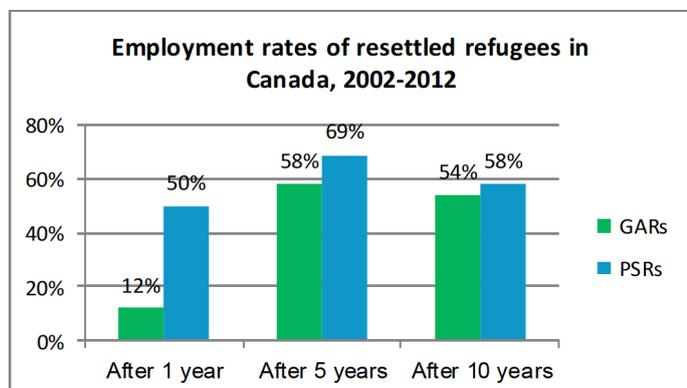
## Committed community members can help refugees access employment and start businesses

Finding work in regional Australia without the support of an existing social network can be extremely challenging.

*Most of the jobs in regional areas are dependent on connections, especially hidden jobs which are only known to internal workers and friends of workers or employers. Therefore, settlement service providers may be unaware of all employment opportunities, especially in smaller rural communities.<sup>11</sup>*

Community sponsorship is an effective way to help refugees find employment quickly in their local communities. Sponsorship allows new arrivals to tap into the extensive social and professional networks of their sponsors, as well as learn from their sponsors about local employment conditions, expectations and opportunities. As community sponsors would need to form a group of at least five people, there is a much wider network of support than if someone was simply supported by their family members and/or a single government-funded caseworker.

Research from Canada suggests that refugees who have been sponsored by community members enter the labour force more quickly than government assisted refugees, and have higher earnings.<sup>1</sup> Between 2002 and 2012, 50% of Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSRs) found employment within their first year of arrival, compared to 12% for Government Assisted Refugees (GARs).<sup>1</sup> While there may be some demographic factors at play here, it seems self-evident that refugees who are supported by a number of individuals within their community are more likely to be able to tap into existing social and professional networks through which employment is so often found.



Source: IRCC (2016). Evaluation of the Resettlement Programs.

More recent research shows that community sponsored refugees have a significant employment advantage that last for up to 15 years after arrival, in comparison to other refugees.<sup>12</sup> This study concluded that 'PSRs

<sup>10</sup> See <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/help-within-canada/government-assisted-refugee-program/providers.html#tbl>

<sup>11</sup> Regional Australia Institute, *Steps to Settlement Success: A Toolkit for Rural and Regional Communities* (2011), p 18

<sup>12</sup> Lisa Kaida, Feng Hou, and Max Stick, 'The long-term economic integration of resettled refugees in Canada: a comparison of Privately Sponsored Refugees and Government-Assisted Refugees' (2019) 0 *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 1.

are more likely to be employed and earn more than their GAR counterparts',<sup>13</sup> with the current private sponsorship programme in Canada facilitating both the 'short- and long-term economic integration of refugees'.<sup>14</sup>

Australian data suggests that refugees are also more likely to start their own businesses than other migrants or the average member of the Australian population.<sup>15</sup> It stands to reason that those refugees who have strong community support of the sort provided by community sponsors are more likely to be successful in their entrepreneurial pursuits than those who do not enjoy such close links. Sponsors can provide local insights and commercial know-how, link refugees with their own business networks, provide start-up capital and, depending on the business, act as initial customers.

### Community sponsorship helps refugees learn English quickly and participate in community life

Informal opportunities for non-English speaking migrants to practice English is an extremely important part of developing English language proficiency and professional language services can struggle to provide such opportunities in authentic and accessible day-to-day settings. Community sponsorship can have a positive impact on the development of proficiency in English, supplementing formal English language education programs. Sponsors typically interact with the refugees whom they sponsor several times a week in connection with all manner of issues. These interactions, during which interpreters are often not present, become informal learning opportunities. One study in Canada found that 'PSRs are acquiring official language skills quickly through interactions with their sponsors during the initial settlement period, thus overcoming the language barrier'.<sup>16</sup>

Social integration outcomes for community sponsored refugees in Canada have also tended to be better than government assisted refugees. Canadian research suggests that sponsored refugees are more likely to successfully integrate into the community.<sup>17</sup> Community sponsorship has also been found to be a predictor of successful integration.<sup>18</sup> Community sponsored refugees are more likely to rate themselves as more satisfied at two years (77 percent) than Government assisted refugees (69 percent).<sup>19</sup>

Sponsored refugees may also get more help to expand their social networks and improve social capital. As sponsors provide comprehensive wrap around support, this may assist new arrivals to better integrate into the community.

### Doesn't Australia already have a community sponsorship scheme?

Australia currently has a small private sponsorship scheme, the 'Community Support Program' or 'CSP', which enables private individuals to sponsor 1,000 refugees per year. Despite its promising name, there is an emerging recognition that this program does not deliver the wide range of benefits that could be achieved through community sponsorship.

Sponsoring under the CSP is extremely expensive featuring substantial visa fees and intermediary fees, in addition to the costs of supporting refugees themselves.<sup>20</sup> The CSP also engages selective criteria over-and-above the 'refugee' definition, that excludes many refugees most in need of resettlement (as identified by UNHCR).

---

<sup>13</sup> Lisa Kaida, Feng Hou, and Max Stick, 'The long-term economic integration of resettled refugees in Canada: a comparison of Privately Sponsored Refugees and Government-Assisted Refugees' (2019) 0 *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 1, 16.

<sup>14</sup> Lisa Kaida, Feng Hou, and Max Stick, 'The long-term economic integration of resettled refugees in Canada: a comparison of Privately Sponsored Refugees and Government-Assisted Refugees' (2019) 0 *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 1, 18.

<sup>15</sup> Centre for Policy Development, *Seven Steps to Success: Enabling Refugee Entrepreneurs to Flourish* (2019)

<sup>16</sup> Lisa Kaida, Feng Hou, and Max Stick, 'The long-term economic integration of resettled refugees in Canada: a comparison of Privately Sponsored Refugees and Government-Assisted Refugees' (2019) 0 *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 1, 17.

<sup>17</sup> Jennifer Hyndman, William Payne, and Shauna Jimenez, 'The State of Private Refugee Sponsorship in Canada: Trends, Issues, and Impacts' [2016] 21, 15.

<sup>18</sup> Morton Beiser, 'Sponsorship and resettlement success' (2003) 4 *Journal of International Migration and Integration / Revue de l'integration et de La Migration Internationale* 203, 203–215.

<sup>19</sup> Jennifer Hyndman, 'Research Summary on Resettled Refugee Integration in Canada' 57, 22.

<sup>20</sup> Sponsoring a family of five could cost as much as \$108,000 including visa fees of around \$30,000 and intermediary fees charged by 'Approved Proposing Organisations' of up to \$20,000. The community sponsorship schemes that operate in Canada and the United Kingdom do not feature any substantial visa or intermediary fees.

The design of the program neither requires nor actively encourages the involvement of the broader Australian community in sponsoring refugees, with the result that it currently functions for the large part as an expensive family reunion program. While CRSI is very mindful of the need for avenues for family reunion for humanitarian migrants, the CSP has the unintended consequence of placing significant financial strain on recently arrived refugees who will typically do anything within their power to bring family members to safety in Australia, often at the expense of their own ability to successfully rebuild their lives in Australia. Ideally, Australia would have a community sponsorship scheme that could support the reunion of refugee families by engaging unrelated members of the Australian community in sponsor groups (in addition to family members living in Australia), as well as allow the sponsorship of refugees who have no family links in Australia (ie those referred by UNHCR).

Finally, the 1,000 visas available under the CSP are taken out of the visa quota made available under general humanitarian migration program, which has historically been funded solely by the government rather than private sponsors.

As a consequence of these features, many Australians and community groups who would otherwise like to be involved in refugee sponsorship are not motivated to engage with the CSP - at its essence, they do not see the scheme as providing 'value for money' in terms of their desire to use their time and resources to expand or improve refugee protection in Australia.

## A new model for community refugee sponsorship in Australia

A comprehensive new model for community refugee sponsorship in Australia is described in CRSI's May 2019 position paper: [A New Model for Community Refugee Sponsorship in Australia](#). A copy of this paper is attached to this submission.

Community members who would like to sponsor a refugee or refugee family would need to form a group of at least five people under the auspice of an approved and registered non-profit 'Supporting Community Organisation'. The group must raise enough funds to provide for the basic needs of the sponsored refugee(s) during their first year in Australia (including income support, if needed) while also helping the new arrivals settle in their local community. Professional settlement organisations would play a role in training and supporting sponsor groups, utilising training guides and resources developed at a national level. This model eliminates expensive visa and intermediary fees, making sponsorship more attractive and accessible to would-be sponsors from the Australian community.

CRSI believes that the Australian community has the capacity and generosity to support the sponsorship of up to 10,000 refugees per year, in addition to the long-standing government-funded humanitarian migration intake.<sup>21</sup> It will take time to scale up sponsorship as a practice around Australia to this level, but we estimate that success at this scale would see ordinary people from around the country investing an additional \$80 million per year in refugee protection and support and 1.3 million hours of free and holistic mentoring per year by community members.<sup>22</sup>

## About CRSI and its aims

CRSI was established as an independent civil society initiative in April 2018 to pursue a shared mission of expanding refugee protection and 'welcome' in Australia through community sponsorship, inspired and informed by the Canadian example and global-best practice.<sup>23</sup> CRSI's work is funded primarily by the Sidney Myer Fund, along with Open Society Foundations and other philanthropic donors.

CRSI aims to demonstrate that community refugee sponsorship is a viable and transformative way to harness the resources of ordinary Australians to support successful refugee settlement, secure the necessary policy settings to enable the establishment of such a scheme and ultimately see community refugee sponsorship successfully implemented as a common practice in communities around Australia.

CRSI is engaging Australian policy makers and communities and international experts in positive and constructive conversations to encourage the implementation of a community sponsorship scheme that:

- Fosters connectedness, cohesion and community revitalisation in Australian communities, including in regional Australia

---

<sup>21</sup> 18,750 places for 2019/20

<sup>22</sup> These projections are based on the estimated cost and time involved in sponsoring 10,000 refugees comprising families of 5 people.

<sup>23</sup> See further information on our website at [www.ausrefugeesponsorship.com.au](http://www.ausrefugeesponsorship.com.au)



- Enables diaspora communities to sponsor refugee family members, with deep practical mentoring and support from the broader local community
- Prioritises those refugees in most urgent need of resettlement
- Expands the number of refugees who can rebuild their lives in Australia each year in addition to the government-funded program

CRSI works closely with the Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative (a Canadian Government and UNHCR-backed initiative) and international colleagues from Canada, the United Kingdom and other countries to ensure that Australia's future community scheme is informed by global best-practice.

Appendix: Overview of Sponsorship Model Proposed by CRSI

