

[Skip to main content](#)

Canada's private sponsorship of refugees: Potential lessons for Australia

Report from [Refugee Council of Australia](#)

Published on 24 Aug 2017 — [View Original:https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/publications/reports/canada-private-sponsorship/](https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/publications/reports/canada-private-sponsorship/)



© Mstyslav Chernov



DISCUSSION PAPER

Canada's Private Sponsorship of Refugees program: potential lessons for Australia

In June 2017, senior staff of Settlement Services International (SSI) and Refugee Council of Australia (RCA) were involved in meetings in Canada and Geneva to learn more the Canadian model of private sponsorship of refugees and its implications for Australia. SSI CEO Robert Howeshead and RCA CEO Paul Power participated in the Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement (ATCR) and UNHCR's Annual Consultations with NGOs in Geneva and then travelled to Canada to join APTO-Polity and Kaituma Group of 50 for 18 days of meetings and site visits in Vancouver, Toronto and Ottawa. Paul Power also visited Montreal, after presenting and participating in a two-day meeting of Canada's National Resettlement Council, the SSI and RCA delegates were involved in site visits or meetings with 18 NGOs and representatives of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. This discussion paper summarizes the delegates' key findings and paths forward, for further dialogue, clear of how the current Australian sponsorship model could be modified.

The role of private sponsorship in Canada's resettlement program

Private sponsorship is the resettlement of a refugee where financial costs and settlement support are provided by private groups or organizations. In Canada, private sponsorship of refugees (PSR) has been part of the resettlement landscape since the first private refugee visas in the late 1970s and is estimated to have resettled around 280,000 refugees since that time. Typically, this has occurred via religious, ethnic, community or service organizations who are Sponsoring Agreement Holders (SAHs) in Canada or those in most Canadian offices 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 settlement costs, which is used 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.

To resettle in Canada individuals must be referred by UNHCR, a designated referral organization, or a private sponsoring group. Government-assisted refugees (GARs) are Convention refugees referred by the UNHCR and receive immediate support services and income support from the federal government up to one year post arrival. Blanket Visa Offshore Resettled Refugees (BVRs), are Convention refugees referred by the UNHCR who are matched with private sponsors and receive a blend of government and private financial support. Privately Sponsored Refugees are Convention or country of origin class refugees who receive financial and other support from a private sponsor for one year post arrival.

Observations of program and lessons learned

- Effectiveness of resettlement is critical to address protection. While the program has its challenges, Canada's private sponsorship of refugees has been highly effective in improving the protection of refugees, providing a durable solution to the displacement of more than 280,000 people. This is a major effort that the total resettlement program (government and private) of any country outside of North America and Australia. It is a model of resettlement that the Canadian Government and provides a model which can be adapted in many other countries as part of global efforts to respond to the pressing need for more resettlement places.

August 2017

[Download PDF \(335.57 KB\)](#)

Introduction

In June 2017, senior staff of Settlement Services International (SSI) and Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) were involved in meetings in Canada and Geneva to learn more the Canadian model of private sponsorship of refugees and its implications for Australia. SSI CEO Violet Roumeliotis and RCOA CEO Paul Power participated in the Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement (ATCR) and UNHCR's Annual Consultations with NGOs in Geneva and then travelled to Canada to join Astrid Perry and Katrina Grech of SSI for 10 days of meetings and site visits in Vancouver, Toronto and Ottawa. Paul Power also visited Montreal. After presenting and participating in a two-day meeting of Canada's National Settlement Council, the SSI and RCOA delegates were involved in site visits or meetings with 18 NGOs and representatives of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. This discussion paper summarises the delegation's key findings and puts forward, for further dialogue, ideas of how the current Australian sponsorship model could be modified.

The role of private sponsorship in Canada's resettlement program

Private Sponsorship is the resettlement of a refugee where financial costs and settlement support are provided by private groups or organisations. 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 around 280,000 refugees since that time. 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.

To resettle in Canada individuals must be referred by UNHCR, a designated referral organisation, or a private sponsorship group. Government-Assisted Refugees (GARs) are Convention refugees referred by the UNHCR and receive immediate support services and income support from the federal government up to one year post arrival. Blended Visa Office-Referrred Refugees (BVORs) are Convention refugees referred by the UNHCR who are matched with private sponsors and receive a blend of government and private financial support. Privately Sponsored Refugees are Convention or country of asylum class refugees who receive financial and other support from a private sponsor for one year after arrival.

Observations of program and lessons learned

- Effectiveness of sponsorship in refugee protection: While the program has its challenges, Canada's private sponsorship of refugees has been highly effective in improving the protection of refugees, providing a durable solution to the displacement of more than 280,000 people. This is a larger effort than the total resettlement program (government and private) of any country outside of North America and Australia. It is achieved at minimal cost to the Canadian Government and provides a model which can be adapted in many other countries as part of global efforts to respond to the pressing need for more resettlement places.
- Program's role in building social cohesion: Many people involved in the sponsorship program speak enthusiastically about how it benefits Canadian society by bringing people together to work on a common cause. Because members of the broader community can readily participate, the sponsorship program, in the words of Gregory Maniatis of the Open Society Foundations in his ATCR presentation in Geneva, "reanimates life at the community level, addressing one of the problems we have today, which is the breakdown of community and the sense of individual loneliness". Mr Maniatis spoke about how volunteers involved in refugee sponsorship are prompted to seek out the support and skills of others in the community, how alliances are built between faith-based and secular organisations and partnerships between local communities and government. An Ottawa organisation quoted a local volunteer's reflection on being part of a sponsorship group: "I have met the most wonderful Syrians and I have met the most wonderful Canadians as well."

- Differences between government-assisted and privately-sponsored refugees: While some people we met spoke enthusiastically about the better employment and social outcomes achieved by privately sponsored refugees over government-assisted refugees, others pointed to the differences in the two programs. The government program generally focuses on refugees referred by UNHCR because of their vulnerability while those who are privately sponsored already have relatives in Canada or have the social capital to be able to know about and navigate the system to find a Canadian sponsor. Government reports show that privately sponsored refugees are [much more likely than government-assisted refugees to arrive in Canada with more education and better English or French and are more likely to be single adults than in family groups](#). The differences in employment and income between privately sponsored and government assisted refugees are significant in the early years in Canada but, over 10 years, as outcomes for all refugees improve, this gap becomes much smaller.
- Selection of refugees for sponsorship: Private sponsors' role in selecting refugees for resettlement favours those with relatives and connections in Canada and limits opportunities for the resettlement of the most vulnerable refugees nominated by UNHCR as being in need of resettlement. The opportunity for Canada's refugee community members to reunite with members of their extended families is a significant driver of interest in private sponsorship. However, private sponsors are also involved in making their own selection of which refugees to resettle, beyond requests from families in Canada. Some sponsors spoke of being inundated with heart-rending appeals for resettlement. Others observed that this is inappropriate when [UNHCR is much better placed to do this and is trying to find resettlement places for 1.2 million refugees in priority need of resettlement in 2018](#). The Canadian system does allow for UNHCR-identified refugees to be sponsored to Canada through the [Visa Office-Referred program](#) but numbers resettled through this process remain small.
- Motivations for sponsors: In his presentation to the ATCR, Brian Dyck of Canada's Sponsorship Agreement Holders Association spoke of several key motivations for sponsors. These include: connections with family members and friends in need of resettlement; affinity with groups such as LGBTI refugees; commitment to volunteering; people resettled as refugees in the past paying it forward to the current generation of refugees; faith motivation; and a sense among many Canadians that sponsoring refugees had become an important part of the national identity.
- Engagement of business: Organisations reported that business interest in supporting and employing Syrian refugees was high in 2015 when publicity about refugee needs was at its height. This resulted in some increased support but fewer results than expected, "because people have businesses to run", as one NGO leader observed. A businessman and philanthropist in Guelph, Ontario, Jim Estill, has received publicity for his outstanding efforts to give \$1.5 million in financial support for the sponsorship of 58 Syrian refugee families. He has worked with Muslim Society of Guelph, which has created the infrastructure, recruited and coordinated volunteers and submitted applications through a partnership with a sponsorship agreement holder, the Islamic Foundation of Toronto. While Mr Estill's example is rare, his approach shows the benefits of business working with community organisations. As Professor Audrey Macklin of the University of Toronto observed, much of the unseen work of private sponsorship is done by volunteers (often retirees) who have the time to show newcomers how to use local public transport, help to book children into school and explain the complications of banking and government systems. "Sponsorship of refugees is often about very inter-personal work. That's not what corporations do." However, Professor Macklin sees great scope for business engagement in employment strategies, particularly sectors such as banking and construction.
- Links with settlement services: Private sponsors are required to develop settlement plans for the refugees they resettle. These should include making connections with government-funded settlement services. However, government officials noted that many family members involved in the sponsorship process and inexperienced Groups of 5 did not introduce newcomers to these services in the early months in Canada, when the services were most needed. A number of settlement service leaders reported that their agencies too often were first contacted to help refugee families when needs became critical or the relationship with the sponsor fell apart.

- **Accountability of volunteer groups:** Because regulation is relatively limited, the Canadian private sponsorship system relies heavily on sponsorship groups for its effectiveness and integrity. The 108 organisations which have been registered as Sponsorship Agreement Holders (SAHs) have previously demonstrated they have the financial resources, the planning and the commitment to coordinate sponsorships. As SAHs oversee the work of constituent groups which work with them, the SAHs take responsibility for ensuring these groups meet the requirements for finances, settlement plans and criminal record checks for volunteers. The challenge of working with Groups of 5 is greater, as the system allows for any five permanent residents to come together to submit a one-off application to sponsor. While each group must meet preconditions for finances, settlement plans and criminal record checks, the disparate nature of these groups makes monitoring of their activities difficult. The Canadian Government funds a small secretariat and annual conference for the SAH Association, as a forum for dialogue with the SAHs. Funding has increased for the Refugee Sponsorship Training Program (coordinated by Catholic Crosscultural Services in Toronto), enabling the program to expand from four staff to a network of trainers in seven cities.
- **Managing expectations:** Three of the greatest challenges in managing effective sponsorships are maintaining good relationships between the sponsor and refugee, managing the expectations of all concerned and maintaining effective communication. Many new sponsors are unaware of some of the challenges of supporting newly arrived refugees and some have difficulty appreciating the refugee family's need for autonomy. Some sponsors may overtly or subconsciously project an expectation of gratitude which leaves refugees feeling beholden to their sponsors. Refugees can have high expectations about their employability, rights, entitlements, housing, location or quality of life in Canada which, when not met, may result in confusion, resentment, anger and, ultimately, a breakdown in the relationship with the sponsor. Managing expectations through regular and effective communication is a central message emphasised in training offered to sponsors.
- **Addressing risk of exploitation:** While most of the relationships between sponsors and refugees are supportive and constructive, some leaders in the sponsorship movement spoke about the risk of refugees being exploited by some people involved in sponsorship. These risks include pressure on refugees to repay their sponsors (something specifically banned by government) or being obligated to work against their wishes for a particular employer.
- **Different level of support for privately sponsored refugees:** One of the international criticisms of the Canadian private sponsorship program is that it does not guarantee the same level of monetary support available to other refugees. In their first year in Canada, government-assisted refugees receive monthly income support, if they require it, through the federal government's Resettlement Assistance Program. Private sponsors are expected to provide a similar level of support but can give part of this assistance in kind, reducing privately sponsored refugees' capacity to allocate their income as they see fit. In the second year in Canada, refugees in both categories become eligible, like other Canadians, for income support managed by provincial governments. Income support from the federal government and private sponsors ceases.
- **Overwhelming demand for program:** Even with the significant expansion of the PSR program in 2016, when it peaked at 17,600 places, demand is always far greater than the number of available spaces. The quota for 2017 is 16,000 places and many SAHs are frustrated by the restricted numbers of places allocated to them.

Principles for an Australian program

Adapting Australia's Community Support Program to a new partnership model

With the high level of interest in supporting refugee resettlement in Australia, there is an opportunity to build a model of private sponsorship which draws on the best of what is available in Canada. This can be done through a series of modifications to the Community Support Program.

1. Approved Proposing Organisations (APOs) as coordinators of community partnerships: Canada's most effective and high-functioning Sponsorship Agreement Holders (SAHs) provide a good model for private 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. The Australian APO model should be changed from a fee-charging organisation to one which raises its own support and is able to draw together a partnership which includes the elements listed above. Organisations suitable to be APOs could include faith-based organisations, settlement agencies, neighbourhood centres, charities, refugee community organisations and service clubs.
2. Removing Visa Application Charges and APO fees: To ensure equity for different categories of refugees, Australia's national social security system is the best method of providing income support for privately sponsored refugees. Requiring an assurance of support for social security benefits in the first year is a reasonable measure but also levying large visa application charges is not reasonable. These charges should be removed from the CSP. In addition, APO's costs should be covered by public fundraising or philanthropy rather than through the levying of large fees on families or local sponsoring groups. The costs covered by sponsors should focus primarily on travel costs and an assurance of support for social security benefits.
3. Making private sponsorship additional to the existing Refugee and Humanitarian Program: As noted earlier, private sponsors are motivated by a wish to increase the level of support offered to refugees, not by a wish to help the Australian Government save money on its existing commitments. The Community Support Program must be additional to the government's current Refugee and Humanitarian Program and the planned expansion to 18,750 places in 2018-19. The Government would then be well placed to challenge the Australian community to work together to expand the nation's commitment to the resettlement of refugees.
4. Encouraging sponsors to consider UNHCR resettlement referrals: An expanded Australian private sponsorship program should provide opportunities for refugee families to reunite and also create opportunities for the business and philanthropic sectors to work in partnership with local communities. However, it should also ensure that the most vulnerable refugees identified by UNHCR as being in need of resettlement are not forgotten. Ideally, refugees referred by UNHCR should make up half of the private sponsorship program. For each refugee household proposed for resettlement by an APO, the APO could be asked to sponsor a refugee family recommended for resettlement by UNHCR. This arrangement could be managed by the Department of Immigration and Border Protection in a similar manner to the Visa Office-Referred refugee program administered by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada.
5. Creating opportunities for community involvement: In the old Community Proposal Pilot and the new Community Support Program, the focus is mostly on engaging families of refugees and the business community. Members of the broader Australian community are effectively excluded from the current Australian models of private sponsorship – and yet it is the broader community connections which have been at the heart of the success of Canada's private sponsorship movement. The Australian Government's 2015 announcement of 12,000 additional places for Syrian and Iraqi refugees unleashed offers of support from people all over Australia. Few of those who offered assistance then have since had the opportunity to get involved in refugee resettlement. A revised Australian private sponsorship model should recognise the great potential of a broad-based private sponsorship program – for mobilising resources to support refugees and for enhancing social cohesion.

6. Principle of additionality: A clear lesson from Canada is that people contributing to, and engaged in, private sponsorship 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 commitments already made. When the Gillard Government first proposed a private sponsorship pilot program, it was in the context of the government suggesting it wanted to explore ways of resettling more refugees without increasing the government's financial commitment. Unfortunately, the Community Proposal Pilot between 2012 and 2017 and the new Community Support Program have never been additional to the government's Refugee and Humanitarian Program commitment. It is unlikely that a broad-based private sponsorship program will develop in Australia if it is part of the government's current commitment of a program of 16,250 in 2017-18 and 18,750 places from 2018-19. Australians will be motivated to donate money and time if they see their efforts contributing to an increase in the number of refugees being resettled.
7. Diversity and equity in selection of refugees: Perhaps the most disappointing aspect of Canada's private sponsorship program is that it offers so few opportunities for the most vulnerable refugees to be resettled. The program is heavily weighted towards people with existing links in Canada. The Visa Office-Referred (VOR) refugee program (with full sponsorship costs covered by the SAH or Group of 5) and the Blended VOR program (with costs shared by the sponsors and the Canadian Government) provide a means for the resettlement of some refugees identified by UNHCR as being in priority need of resettlement. These programs have resulted in small numbers of referrals to date but need to be developed further if private sponsorship is going to assist UNHCR with finding solutions for the 1.2 million refugees it assesses as being in need of resettlement now. The reunion of extended refugee families will continue to remain a priority and motivator for Australians wanting to get involved in private sponsorship. However, Australia's private sponsorship program should also create opportunities for many refugees – perhaps half of the private sponsorship program – to be resettled through a process of referral from UNHCR.
8. Partnership between communities, services and business: The ideal model in Canada is of the high-functioning Sponsorship Agreement Holder which brings together recruited and trained volunteers through local groups, good links with employers and the business community, strong connections with settlement services and an effective fundraising strategy (preferably through a charity able to offer tax-deductibility for donations). This form of partnership should form the model for the Approved Proposing Organisations (or their equivalent) in an Australian private sponsorship program – a partnership of community-based volunteers, employers and settlement services, supported by a strong focus on training and support, screening of volunteers and a fundraising strategy, all with close connections with local and state government and civil society.
9. Setting high standards of accountability: In view of the potential for a high level of interest in a well-constructed private sponsorship model, the Australian Government should set high standards for organisations and individuals wanting to engage in private sponsorship of refugees. The organisations which coordinate sponsorship partnerships must be expected to meet clear benchmarks for financial accountability, screening and training of volunteers and staff, integrity and support to the refugees they sponsor. A poorly constructed and poorly regulated private sponsorship system could see refugees being left without adequate support and being financially manipulated by unscrupulous agents charging undisclosed fees and pushing them into exploitative jobs.
10. Developing an appropriate cost structure: A clear difference between the Canadian private sponsorship program and the Australian Community Support Program is the very high cost of participating in the Australian program. The Canadian program is focused on asking sponsors to cover the genuine costs of supporting refugees for the first year. It is around one-third of the cost of the Australian program.⁵ The Australian Government cannot reasonably require high visa application charges while also insisting on an assurance of support for social security benefits.

Primary country

[Australia](#)

Other countries

- [Canada](#)
- **Content format:**
 - [Analysis](#)
- **Language:**
 - [English](#)
- **Theme:**
 - [Protection and Human Rights](#)
- **Vulnerable groups:**
 - [Refugees](#)

Related content

- AUSTRALIA
Australian Red Cross: [Bringing family together after the horrors of war](#) 11 Sep 2019
- AUSTRALIA
HRW: [Australia: Retain Emergency Medical Care for Refugees](#) 22 Aug 2019
- AUSTRALIA
ABC: [Australians raise \\$100k to resettle Manus Island and Nauru refugees in Canada](#) 14 Aug 2019
- AUSTRALIA
ABC: [Australian Human Rights Commission calls for action over 30,000 asylum seekers living in 'limbo'](#) 17 Jul 2019
- AUSTRALIA
RCOA: [An analysis of UNHCR's 2018 Global Refugee Statistics: How generous is Australia's Refugee Program compared to other countries?](#) 10 Jul 2019