



Support Swells for U.S. to Expand Opportunities for Community Sponsorship of Refugees

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The Trump administration presided over the most extensive cuts to refugee resettlement in the history of the modern resettlement program. President-elect Biden has promised to increase refugee admissions when he enters office in January. His nominees for key Cabinet positions, such as Secretary of State and Secretary of Homeland Security, have been vocal in recognizing the importance of refugee resettlement.

But beyond a higher refugee ceiling, the new administration should also pursue a range of innovative policy solutions in the arena of refugee resettlement and protection. One policy approach currently seeing a groundswell of support is expanding opportunities for community sponsorship of refugees. The concept is simple: community sponsors partner with local resettlement agencies and help carry out resettlement responsibilities, assisting with everything from securing employment to teaching English, from enrolling children in school to explaining the traditions around holidays like the Fourth of July.

There is widespread support for refugee sponsorship, and there are growing calls for the incoming Biden administration to include refugee sponsorship as a core element of its restoration of America's refugee resettlement system.

On World Refugee Day in June, **President-elect Biden** recognized the importance of community sponsorship programs, declaring, "I will pursue policies that increase opportunities for faith and local communities to sponsor refugee resettlement."

Many U.S. allies have long **recognized** refugee sponsorship systems as innovative policy options to harness volunteer power. In the last few years, countries including Australia, Argentina, New Zealand, Spain, Germany, Ireland, and the U.K. **pursued** various sponsorship models to complement their resettlement systems. Canada has relied on community sponsorship programs for decades and resettled hundreds of thousands of refugees sponsored by Canadians.

Groups within the United States representing diverse political viewpoints — conservatives, libertarians, progressives, and moderates — support the improvements President elect-Biden has suggested. Institutions ranging from think tanks to university-based research centers, from refugee service providers to advocacy organizations, have all called for expanding refugee sponsorship opportunities for Americans.

In September, our **Niskanen Center colleagues Larry Yungk and Idean Salehyan** wrote:

Other community actors, in addition to traditional refugee agencies, could also play a constructive role by sponsoring refugee resettlement to their communities. In other countries, such as Canada, local organizations, religious congregations, groups of individuals, and universities can sponsor refugees. These long-standing, successful options

provide practical ways to channel local interest and resources to resettle more refugees than could be done via the governmental program alone. These alternatives also foster **stronger community awareness** of refugees, and the participatory nature of these programs creates a shared responsibility in making resettlement successful.

In October, Silva Mathema and Sofia Carratala of the **Center for American Progress** wrote,

Many experts suggested that some form of a strong community sponsorship program with proper oversight has the potential to expedite integration of refugees, raise public awareness, and help expand the program. Community co-sponsorship or private sponsorship allows a private individual, congregations, and other community groups to get involved in refugee resettlement and take responsibility for outcomes such as making sure the refugees learn skills to integrate into the community, including develop language skills, or find employment. The (U.S.) should explore ways to build this additional avenue for resettlement to complement the current federal model.

Earlier this year, Amnesty International USA National Director of Advocacy and Government Affairs, **Joanne Lin**, made identifying and welcoming refugees and asylum-seekers a top priority for her organization, focusing on “refugee resettlement and community sponsorship for refugees and helping those seeking safety establish new homes.”

In November, the **Cato Institute’s David Bier** wrote, “Congress should allow individuals and nonprofits to sponsor refugees.”

During an October Niskanen Center **briefing**, the Heritage Foundation’s Olivia Enos **explained**:

One of the solutions that we offered was [...] private resettlement. [...] What better way to do that than to have individuals or communities or institutions coming together and privately offering resettlement options [...] that really involves community engagement. Because I think at root, for a resettlement program to be successful, there has to be buy-in from the American people and a commitment to be a good and a loving neighbor to the new refugees and those who are being resettled from within our own communities.

In November, the National Conference on Citizenship and the Penn Biden Center for Diplomacy and Global Engagement **wrote** in a joint report:

USRAP has been so thoroughly weakened that incremental changes to ramp up admissions in the near-term will not be enough to ensure its long-term health and durability. Considerable innovation is required to reimagine the domestic resettlement system as a world-class model of successful refugee integration, including reorienting resettlement around long-term social and economic outcomes and launching a national private sponsorship program to expand community involvement. This work should be grounded in a durable base of bipartisan support that strengthens the program’s resilience through new partnerships and effective communications at the local, state, and national level.

In November, the **International Refugee Assistance Project** identified ways the incoming administration could expand and pilot new programs to bring displaced people to safety:

By harnessing the interest and resources of private actors around the country, the United States can increase the number of refugees resettled annually as well as the resources available for resettlement. Private sponsorship would allow U.S. residents to engage more

directly with refugees, improving integration outcomes and building a constituency of Americans personally invested in maintaining the American tradition of welcoming refugees and other immigrants. This community of supporters can serve as an important bulwark against efforts to restrict refugee resettlement.

Experts agree that refugee sponsorship has the potential to transform the U.S. resettlement system. Not only can it unlock new capacity for the U.S. to resettle more refugees, but more importantly, it better informs the American people on refugees and their resettlement process and experience (more information about sponsorship opportunities can be found on the Refugee Council USA [website](#)). The Biden administration can support and enhance refugee sponsorship opportunities and expand sponsorship to include other vulnerable populations such as asylum seekers or Special Immigrant Visa holders.

Another sponsorship proposal goes one step further by building on community sponsorship. Private sponsorship allows for groups of Americans—churches, civic organizations, universities—to come together to resettle a refugee family and serve as the primary sponsor. Many of the institutions quoted above express support for private sponsorship.

Community sponsorship programs exist already in the U.S., and scaling them will enhance the refugee admissions system. But private refugee sponsorship does not currently exist in the U.S. Such a program would need to be launched by the Biden administration and then studied and improved over time as best practices develop and emerge.

The new administration should consider launching a private refugee sponsorship pilot program early in 2021. In fact, in 2016, Assistant Secretary of State Anne Richard **announced a new private refugee sponsorship** pilot program. These plans were derailed when the Trump administration came into office a few months later. The president-elect should take this opportunity to craft a private sponsorship pilot and directly harness American philanthropy.

The American people want a more central role in refugee resettlement. Public policy experts from across the political divide see the benefit of expanding community sponsorship opportunities. Expanding refugee sponsorship opportunities leverages both these interests and meets the needs of refugees. The Biden administration should seriously consider the case for expanding private sector engagement—community sponsorship and private sponsorship—in the refugee resettlement system, both for the betterment of refugee integration and for fulfilling the desires of scores of Americans looking to assist their newest American neighbors.