

Community Sponsorship as an Integration and Inclusion Accelerator

An Evaluation of the HIAS Sponsor Circle Program in Europe and the United States

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This report was produced by Pairity (www.pairity.ca), a Canadian-based organization that applies data and technology driven interventions to facilitate refugee resettlement and community sponsorship, and measure outcomes around integration and social cohesion.



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Executive Summary

This report offers a comparative evaluation of HIAS Welcome Circles in the United States and Europe. HIAS and HIAS Europe mobilized Welcome Circles as a flexible community sponsorship program for displaced Ukrainians. Findings in this report cover Welcome Circles from 2022-2023, including 438 volunteers and sponsors who HIAS recruited, trained, and supported to welcome 738 displaced Ukrainians across 12 European countries and 18 U.S. states. This significant international effort mobilized Jewish communities for crucial reception aid, and longer-term support for integration and inclusion.

Data is drawn from HIAS monitoring reports, and original surveys, interviews, and focus groups with HIAS staff, Ukrainian newcomers, and Welcome Circle sponsors and volunteers. The report offers lessons for community sponsorship programs to harness community demand for direct aid and wraparound support for displaced people. It offers insights for improving community responses to displacement crises, volunteer mobilization and training, and building community.

Flexible program design between Europe and the U.S., and between European states offered space to adapt to local reception conditions and different volunteer mobilization contexts. While in the U.S. Welcome Circles adapted existing community sponsorship programs to connect groups with a single household or individual, the pace and scope of mass arrivals in Europe called for a more flexible model where Welcome Circles provided more on-demand support for specific support tasks to multiple households.

Regardless of the context, Welcome Circles served as venues for building lasting relationships, with sponsors and newcomers staying in close contact long after formal sponsorship periods. Volunteers and newcomers reported very positive interpersonal relationships and program satisfaction. Newcomers particularly reported overwhelming program satisfaction around interpersonal relationships, interactions with, and support from Welcome Circles. While participants formed enduring social bonds, this finding also illustrates a need to rethink how community sponsorship programs manage expectations around the pace and scope of newcomer integration and inclusion.

Participants reported slightly higher self-sufficiency outcomes in the U.S. than Europe, potentially reflecting more holistic support through direct sponsorship. However, the varied contexts across Europe and often more robust social welfare states make direct comparisons challenging.

Long-term, affordable housing and jobs were among the most challenging aspects of integration and inclusion. However, these findings are influenced by structural barriers like endemic shortages in affordable housing; and employment challenges are near universal across comparable contexts.

Displaced Ukrainians in the U.S. and Europe were afforded temporary protection policies, which remain precarious. The report calls for coordinated transition from temporary protection, offering stability and clarity for sponsors and newcomers alike. Research found significant differences between aspirations, with many in Europe considering their displacement temporary, and those in the U.S. as permanent.

Welcome Circles offer lessons for scaling, sustainability, and diversification. Crucially, HIAS mobilized professional staff to support Welcome Circles, whose roles were dictated by reception and displacement contexts. Liaisons in the U.S. empowered Welcome Circles with support and robust training, drawing on grassroots mobilization and recent sponsorship experiences. European Coordinators largely implemented novel programing, directly engaged with newcomers, and organized volunteers for specific tasks. HIAS staff

experience with refugees or other vulnerable populations was integral to program success. This finding holds lessons in terms of funding and professionalizing support roles.

Future programming should encourage flexible leadership structures and task delegation, and emphasize diverse group composition. They should also consider formalized sponsor peer support venues, which are uniquely suited to sharing lessons on managing intra-group dynamics and facilitating transitions to self-sufficiency. Findings also suggest the need to learn from past sponsors and newcomers alike to keep momentum, support sponsorship re-enrolment, and broaden community engagement.

HIAS's success point to community sponsorship as a key tool for emergency contexts, since civil society can mobilize quickly and flexibly to rapidly-evolving emergencies. Welcome Circles and other community models offer a structure for everyday people to support refugees, and a crucial backstop in the context of often insufficient social welfare supports, high costs of living, and challenging labour markets – which can be barriers to self-sufficiency, inclusion, and long-term success.

Sponsorship programs are a key tool for reception and longer-term inclusion, regardless of policy changes, and can capitalize on lessons from Welcome Circles. However, policymakers should consider community sponsorship as one part of broader integration efforts, and use lessons for other populations in need of humanitarian protection.

Introduction

HIAS Welcome Circles mobilized Jewish communities throughout the United States (U.S.) and Europe to support people displaced from Ukraine as a result of the full-scale Russian invasion in February of 2022. This report evaluates HIAS’s adaptable and innovative community sponsorship programs amid different national and regional policy environments. It analyzes the impacts of Welcome Circle models on displaced Ukrainians’ reception, integration¹, and inclusion journeys, and the experiences of sponsors and volunteers. It offers insights into the successes of flexible program design and future crisis responses – including mobilizing and supporting community sponsors, staff professionalization, and bridging gaps between short-term protection pathways and medium to long-term integration policies.

This report covers HIAS Welcome Circles that were certified after June 1, 2022 and had their newcomers arrive by August 31, 2023, supporting a total of 783 displaced Ukrainians. HIAS’s long-term presence in Ukraine working with Jewish communities and refugees meant they were uniquely situated for an immediate response. Welcome Circles in the U.S. and Europe shared key characteristics: they mobilized communities over broad geographies, including 12 European countries and 18 U.S. states; funded professional staff to train and support Welcome Circle volunteers; and operated amid challenging reception contexts.

Notably, both operated within temporary protection policies, and illustrate that emergency responses – even when they offer relatively broad mobility, residency, and social welfare rights – fundamentally rely on civil society and particularly faith communities to welcome and support displaced people.

In the U.S., the Biden Administration’s United for Ukraine (U4U) policy meant displaced Ukrainians were eligible for travel authorization and residence rights for two years under humanitarian parole – provided they had U.S.-based sponsors committed to their financial support.² U.S. Welcome Circles thus supported Ukrainian individuals or households with whom they were connected in advance of arrival. They represented a classic sponsorship model, where a core group of sponsors directly supported an individual or household. They were developed through HIAS participation in the Sponsor Circle Program (SCP) as a Sponsor Circle Umbrella (SCU) organization.³

The nature of displacement in Europe, coupled with the European Union (EU’s) Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), meant Welcome Circles were largely mobilized to support Ukrainians who had recently or would soon arrive. Early European mobilization thus took on more of a crisis-response posture. As of June 2024, 91% of displaced Ukrainians remained in Europe. Social welfare and residency provisions in the TPD also meant European Welcome Circles did not require the same financial and legal commitments as in the

¹ “Integration” in academic and policy literature is generally defined as a dynamic two-way process between newcomers and receiving societies. More practically, the EU has its “Common Basic Principles for Immigrant Integration Policy in the EU” and formally adopted that type of definition in 2005, the UNHCR describes it that way in its Integration Handbook, and the integration metrics used in this research are selected to be comparable with the OECD’s Integration Indicators.

² Originally, Ukrainians arriving under U4U were not eligible for the same benefits and social welfare supports as other resettled refugees, though these were later extended. See Beers, D. J. (2023). Life in Limbo: Temporary protection for Ukrainians in the US. *Forced Migration Review*, Issue 72. <https://www.fmreview.org/ukraine/beers/>.

³ The SCP was launched in October 2021 as a community-led resettlement initiative to expand the United States’ capacity for welcoming and integrating Afghans through community sponsorship. Since its inception, SCP has expanded to support Americans welcoming newcomers arriving through United for Ukraine and Processes for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans. The SCP’s successful implementation relies on collaboration amongst various stakeholders. The Community Sponsorship Hub (CSH) provides oversight and coordination, SCUs recruit, manage and support sponsor groups and sponsors assist newcomers with core resettlement services.

U.S. HIAS funded a Coordinator at the country or city level, who would organize a looser coalition of volunteers who often supported multiple displaced households, providing specific, task-based support.

U4U and TPD were extended as the war in Ukraine wore on. The U.S. government extended protections for one year in early 2023, and in February 2024 announced case-by-case re-parole procedures. As of March 2024, more than 236,000 U4U cases were approved, with over 187,000 Ukrainians having arrived in the U.S.⁴ Likewise, the EU extended TPD for two years, and at the time of writing it was due to expire in March of 2026. Its fate thereafter remains uncertain should European states deem Ukraine safe for returns.⁵

Table 1: Displaced Ukrainians as of June 2024

	N	%
Europe	5,996,500	91%
United States	271,000	4%
Global	287,300	5%
Total	6,554,800	

Source: Ukrainian Refugees (2024, June 14) UNHCR, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>

Table 2: Welcome Circle Demographics and Context (Europe)

Location	Ukrainian Refugees (2023)	Ukrainian Refugees (2024)	Change from 2023-2024	% Change from 2023-2024	Ukrainian residents / diaspora (2021)	Active Volunteers	Total Volunteers	Beneficiary Households	Beneficiary Individuals	Beneficiary: Volunteer Ratio (Individuals per Total volunteer)	
Austria	<i>Not included in evaluation</i>										
Belgium	70,917	79,545	↑ 8,628	↑ 12%	5,673	5	20	15	36	1.8	
Czechia	504,352	346,830	↓ -157,522	↓ -31%	193,547	5	5	15	47	9.4	
Germany	1,056,628	1,169,630	↑ 113,002	↑ 11%	83,043	4	6	15	35	5.8	
Greece	22,704	30,320	↑ 7,616	↑ 34%	20,690	2	2	2	2	1	
Hungary	35,030	59,160	↑ 24,130	↑ 69%	63,175	10	20	11	28	1.4	
Ireland	80,540	107,090	↑ 26,550	↑ 33%	2,144	10	12	30	68	5.7	
Italy	173,213	170,580	↓ -2,633	↓ -2%	230,366	5	5	10	29	5.8	
Moldova	107,480	120,470	↑ 12,990	↑ 12%	-	3	3	102	256	85.3	
Poland (Krakow)	1,583,563	957,505	↓ -626,058	↓ -40%	651,221	22	27	13	27	1	
Poland (Warsaw)											
Portugal	54,242	61,180	↑ 6,938	↑ 13%	27,195	3	6	4	9	1.5	
Totals (Averages)	3,688,669	3,102,310	↓ -586,359	↑ 11%	1,277,054	79	123	229	580	11	

⁴ Montoya-Galvez, C. (2024, April 24). In 2 years since Russia’s invasion, a U.S. program has resettled 187,000 Ukrainians with little controversy. CBS News. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/ukrainian-refugees-us-uniting-for-ukraine-russia-invasion>

⁵ Individual Ukrainians might then choose between return or potentially applying for individual asylum in European states, or states could offer other forms of group protection or long-term residency rights. See Ciger, M. I. (2023). What Happens Next? Scenarios following the end of the temporary protection in the EU. MPC Blog, European University Institute <https://blogs.eui.eu/migrationpolicycentre/what-happens-next-scenarios-following-the-end-of-the-temporary-protection-in-the-eu/>.

Sources: Ukrainian Refugees (2024, June 14) UNHCR, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine> (Last updated 13 June 2024); Ukrainian diaspora (2021) Eurostat, Retrieved June 14, 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Ukrainian_citizens_in_the_EU

Table 3: Welcome Circle Demographics and (U.S.)

Location (18 States)	# Circles per state	Circles Surveyed	% Surveyed	Ukrainian residents / diaspora (2022)	Total Volunteers	Average WC Size (range 5 to 10)	Beneficiary Households	Beneficiary Individuals	Volunteer to Beneficiary Ratio* (Volunteers per Beneficiary)
CA	12	9	75%	134,999	88	7	14	44	2.8
CO	2	1	50%	21,517	10	5	3	12	1.3
CT	1	0	0%	23,856	7	7	3	10	2.3
FL	1	1	100%	75,460	6	6	2	5	2.5
MD	1	0	0%	25,799	6	6	1	2	3.0
MO	1	1	100%	12,910	5	5	1	2	2.5
NC	1	1	100%	24,698	5	5	1	3	1.7
NH	1	1	100%	3,363	5	5	1	2	2.5
NJ	4	4	100%	67,861	25	6	5	16	2.5
NY	13	11	85%	160,579	84	6	18	65	2.6
OR	2	1	50%	19,650	18	9	2	5	6.0
PA	1	0	0%	105,191	5	5	1	2	2.5
TX	1	0	0%	36,241	9	9	1	5	1.8
UT	1	0	0%	4,613	5	5	1	4	1.3
VA	2	1	50%	24,785	12	6	2	13	1.0
VT	1	1	100%	2,754	7	7	1	3	2.3
WA	1	1	100%	64,397	9	9	1	4	2.3
WI	1	0	0%	10,662	7	7	1	6	1.2
Total	47	33	70%	819,335	313	7	59	203	2

Note: some Welcome Circles hosted > 1 family (but not at a time) so calculations take this into consideration

Source: Ukrainian Population by State: U.S. Census Bureau. (2022) "People Reporting Ancestry." American Community Survey, ACS 1-Year Estimates Detailed Tables, Table B04006, 2022. Retrieved on November 1, 2023 from [https://data.census.gov/table/ACS1Y2022.B04006?g=010XX00US\\$0400000](https://data.census.gov/table/ACS1Y2022.B04006?g=010XX00US$0400000)

Methods and Data

Data for this report is derived from HIAS reports and monitoring data, external country and state-level data, and primary data collected by Pairity.⁶ We employed a multi-methods approach comprised of quantitative and qualitative data, and interpretive analysis given significant variation across countries and between Welcome Circle models. All research participants were provided with an informed consent document detailing research goals, rights to confidentiality, potential risks and discomforts, data storage and handling, and rights to withdraw. All data collection and storage comply with U.S. and EU data privacy and protection regulations.

Table 4: Data Collection Tools and Sample Sizes

Respondent Population		Data Collection Tool		
		Surveys	Interviews	Focus Groups
HIAS Europe	Welcome Circle	11 Coordinators	10 Coordinators	4 Volunteers (1 FG)
	Ukrainian Beneficiaries	133 Beneficiaries	–	6 Beneficiaries (3 FGs)
HIAS U.S.	Welcome Circle	33 Leads	20 Leads	4 Liaisons (1 FG)
	Ukrainian Beneficiaries	35 Beneficiaries	–	6 Beneficiaries (3 FGs)
HIAS Staff	HIAS EU + US Staff		–	6 Staff (1 FG)

Beneficiary Surveys (Europe and U.S.)

Beneficiary surveys provide key outcome data. 168 Ukrainian beneficiaries – 133 in Europe and 35 in the U.S. – responded to surveys. Surveys were offered in Ukrainian and Russian, and emailed directly to beneficiaries. Surveys collected data about household demographics, mobility decisions, quality and frequency of interactions with sponsors, and types of support. They also asked about achieving integration and self-sufficiency, sense of belonging, and plans for future mobility. Surveys included an option to participate in focus groups.

Beneficiary Focus Groups (Europe and U.S.)

We conducted three beneficiary focus groups in both Europe and the U.S. Focus Groups were conducted online, in Ukrainian. We used aggregate survey data to facilitate discussions around experiences, program objectives, and outcomes.

⁶ It should be noted that European Union agencies and national governments collect and report far more substantial data than the U.S., and thus contextual and comparative research cited in this report is far richer than in the U.S.

Welcome Circle Lead Volunteer (U.S.) & Welcome Circle Coordinator (Europe) Surveys

33 of 47 Welcome Circle Lead Volunteers in the U.S. completed surveys. They included questions around beneficiary demographics, volunteer recruitment and intragroup dynamics, relationships with beneficiaries, previous engagement with refugees, and a range of questions around facilitating integration and self-sufficiency.

All Welcome Circle Coordinators in Europe (11 of 11) completed surveys. We analyzed Coordinator surveys comparatively with U.S. Leads since they served similar coordination functions and because European Welcome Circles were often looser coalitions of volunteers recruited and managed by Coordinators.

Welcome Circle Volunteer Semi-Structured Interviews

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 U.S. Lead Volunteers and 10 Coordinators in Europe. Question banks were informed by survey responses and program objectives. Semi-structured formats provided a conversational environment where participants could reflect on personal experiences while also ensuring comparable data. In Europe, we opted for a single focus group with volunteers given significant differences between contexts and to generate comparative data.

HIAS Liaison Focus Group (U.S.)

In the U.S. HIAS paired each Welcome Circle with a designated staff point of contact to work with them through the duration of the program, from application to completion, and people referred to as HIAS Liaisons. We conducted one focus group with HIAS Liaisons in the U.S. after analyzing beneficiary and volunteer data. Our goal was to understand Liaison's professional backgrounds and experiences with community sponsorship, and to discuss preliminary research findings. The focus group offered an important venue for reflection among professionals with significant experience supporting refugee newcomer populations and mobilizing community support across the U.S.

HIAS Key Personnel Focus Group (Europe and U.S. combined)

We conducted a wide-ranging focus group with key HIAS staff as the final mode of primary data collection, emphasizing reflection on rationales and policy contexts for variation between Welcome Circle models, primary comparative data, and future program development, sustainability, volunteer mobilization, and policy recommendations.

Comparative Findings Overview

Variable Policy Contexts & Community Support Models

Welcome Circles in the U.S. and Europe operated within different policy and social environments and responded to different local contexts. The most significant and obvious difference is that travel authorization to the U.S. required financial sponsorship under the U4U program.⁷ In contrast, the EU's TPD meant

⁷ A relatively small but nonetheless significant 25,000 Ukrainians arrived at the U.S./Mexico border in the first two months of the war and were granted a one-year humanitarian parole.

Ukrainians could arrive autonomously with immediate residency, work, and social welfare rights in all EU member states, along with similar programs in the U.K. and other states on the continent.

Different experiences and precedents influenced program design. The U.S. model was adapted from community support programs for Afghan refugees under Operation Allies Welcome (OAW). U.S. Welcome Circles were similar to models in places like Canada. They developed a Welcome Plan with the support of HIAS staff and committed to hosting an individual or household for six months to provide immediate settlement supports and foster integration. Welcome Circles averaged seven members, with a ratio of two volunteers per beneficiary. Each designated a Lead volunteer for training, group coordination, and liaising with HIAS. HIAS recruited devoted Liaisons with experience in refugee resettlement and community support to guide sponsors.

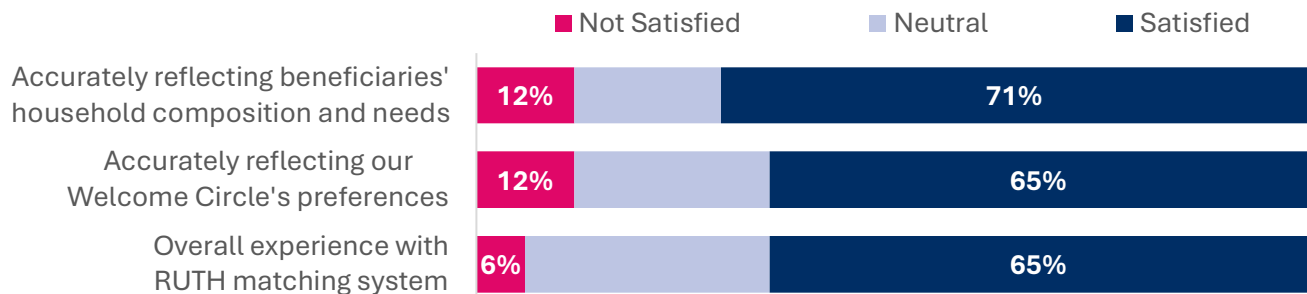
In Europe, the scale of displacement required an immediate crisis response. HIAS trained country-specific (city-specific in the case of Poland) Coordinators, who acted in a hybrid role straddling the functions of Leads and Liaisons, and recruited and trained community volunteers. Our research found considerable variation in volunteer to beneficiary ratios, scope of services, personal relationships, and Coordinators' knowledge about comparable programs.

Context-Dependent Sponsorship Models

Given that U4U required a U.S. sponsor, HIAS matched a significant subset of Ukrainian households with Welcome Circles who were motivated to help but did not have existing ties with Ukrainians.⁸ The RUTH (Refugees Uniting Through HIAS) matching system was a key and unique program feature. 52% of survey respondents were matched with RUTH.

Fig. 1: “RUTH” Matching System Satisfaction (U.S.)

*Q: Please indicate your satisfaction with the RUTH matching system.
(Responses from the 17 Leads that reported using RUTH)*



Among those matched by RUTH, the majority were satisfied with the overall experience (65%), and felt their match reflected volunteer (65%) and beneficiary (71%) preferences. However, several Leads suggested there could be better clarification and communication around matching processes and rationale, particularly

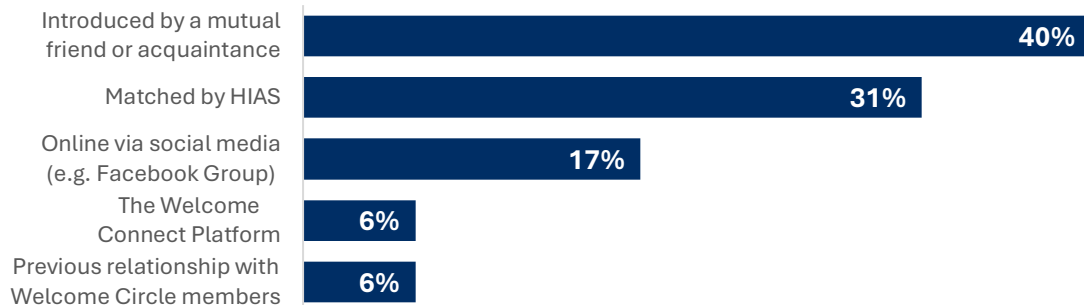
⁸ 98% of beneficiary survey respondents entered the U.S. through U4U. 69% had a HIAS visa sponsor, 29% through a different visa sponsor and later joined the Welcome Circle program, and 2% on other types of visas or entry.

when a match changed or was rejected. Most noted that improved communication regarding matching outcomes and next steps would improve future programming.

From beneficiaries' perspective, several reported being connected with Welcome Circles through mutual acquaintances (40%), which Leads noted as an advantage in terms of additional connections or beneficiary family members in the U.S. to support their settlement.

Fig. 2: Beneficiary Connection to Welcome Circles (U.S.)

Q: How did you connect with your HIAS Welcome Circle?

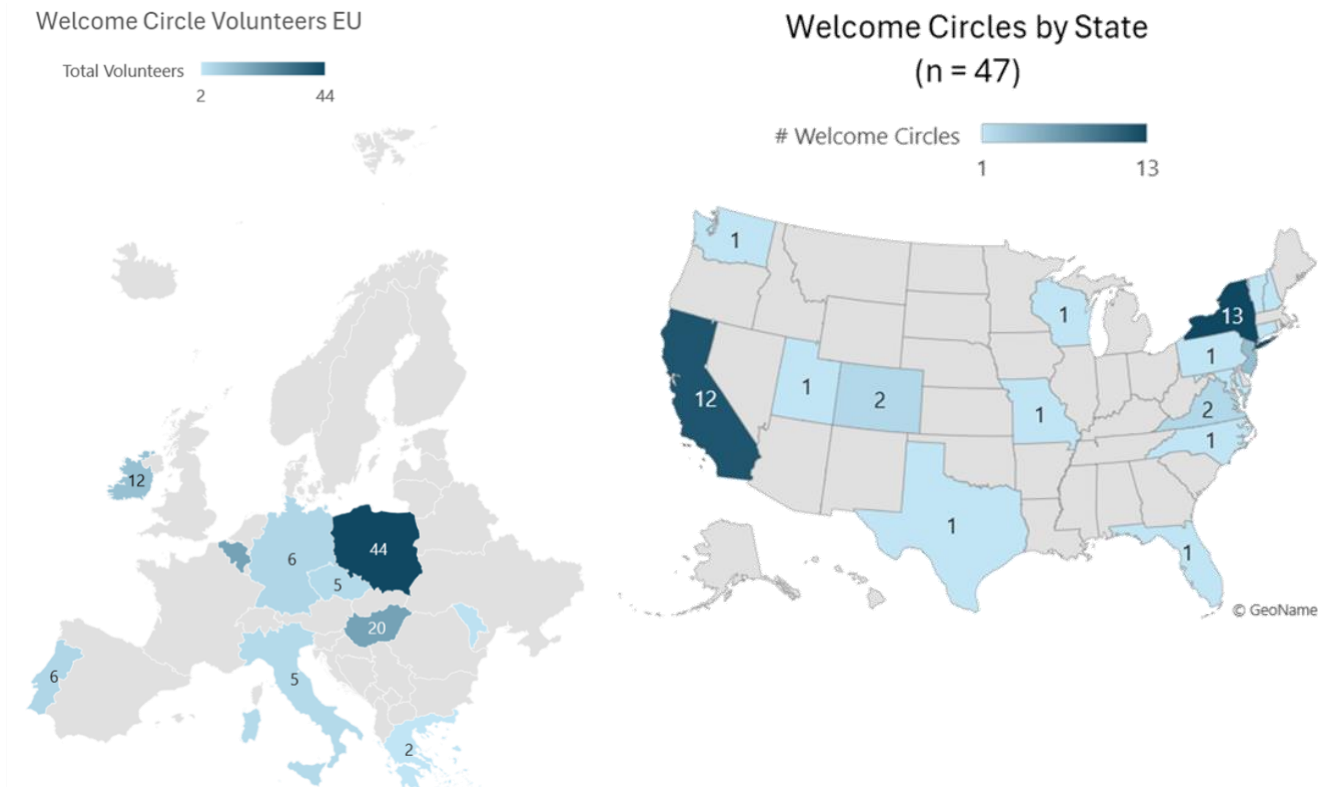


While European Welcome Circles were originally conceived to relocate Ukrainians from states of first reception throughout Europe and match them with sponsors, the immense scale and pace of displacement meant the majority arrived “spontaneously,” and many of those in Czechia, Moldova, and Poland elected to remain. HIAS pivoted to include integration supports in states of first reception, and Welcome Circles in more distant countries supported households arriving with relatively short notice.

Geographic Distributions & Volunteer Mobilization and Support

Welcome Circles were broadly distributed across the U.S. and Europe, though were often concentrated in areas where HIAS had mobilized for Afghans or where Jewish communities had experience with previous displaced populations. Welcome Circles were mobilized across 18 states. California and New York accounted for 53% of all circles, hosting 54% of newcomers. In Europe, the most significant mobilization was in Poland (36% of volunteers) – though Moldova received the largest number of displaced Ukrainians, with the fewest volunteers.

Fig. 3: Welcome Circle Volunteers by Country (Europe) & Welcome Circles by State (U.S.)



In the U.S., the most common volunteer motivations were humanitarian (94%), followed by faith-based (48%), and personal experience with immigration or displacement (42%). Those who took leadership roles were mostly motivated community members (33%), followed by grassroots (27%), and established community leaders (24%). Many were in areas where HIAS invested considerable resources in community education and advocacy, and mobilization successes can be attributable to those efforts.

U.S. volunteers reported previous experience with refugees, with 30% having recently supported Afghans, and 21% with other undocumented / unauthorized populations and / or other refugees, and some with other major refugee populations including Iraqis and people from Latin America and the Caribbean.

Europe saw some similar trends in terms of motivations, mobilization, and experience. Coordinators had worked with major refugee populations in Europe, including resettled refugees, asylum seekers arriving at the EU’s external borders, and Syrians in 2015-16.

Coordinators and volunteers in Central and Eastern Europe likewise had experience with historical refugee populations including those from the Soviet Union or the former Yugoslavia. 91% of volunteers and Coordinators had experience with other vulnerable groups including people with disabilities, unhoused people, or survivors of domestic violence.

“[In terms of] community engagement in the U.S., this [outpouring of support from the Jewish community] was kind of the moment we’d been waiting for. We were tethered to our phones and Zoom, and the Jewish community was ready. We’d been priming the Jewish community in the United States to take on this kind of role for a very long time.”

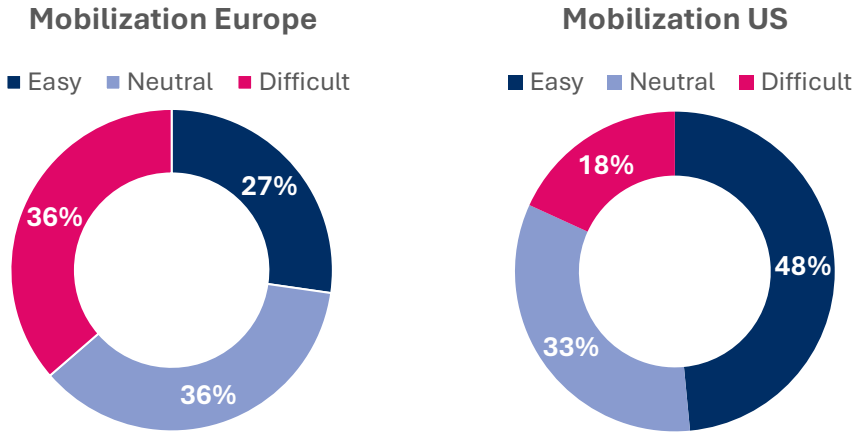
– HIAS Senior Staff

“We were inundated with requests for community support [...] in the context of five million people crossing the border in the very first week. We were on calls with the Jewish communities, and it was things like ‘We’re in Moldova, and we have a school full of mattresses, and people are sleeping on the floor.’ So it was very ad hoc humanitarian action, and I think they were often approaching us because they were looking for a more structured way of channeling their support.”

– HIAS Europe Mobilization Staff

Fig. 4: Welcome Circle Volunteer Recruitment

Q: How difficult was it to mobilize volunteers in your circle?



Research found different degrees of ease for recruiting volunteers. 48% of U.S. volunteers ranked mobilization as easy, and only 18% reported it as difficult. In contrast, only 27% of European Coordinators found mobilization easy, and double that of the U.S. (36%) found mobilization difficult. Interviews ascribed these differences to recent experience with Afghan refugees and familiarity with community sponsorship, whereas in Europe community sponsorship was more novel and the scale of arrivals meant focusing on reception while simultaneously recruiting and managing volunteers, and adapting programs for different countries.

These differences underscore the positive trend that locations with previous experience were able to mobilize from among recent volunteers and broader communities. HIAS harnessed existing momentum to scale community sponsorship, and successfully developed new networks to respond to mass arrivals.

Beneficiary Integration, Inclusion, and Self-Sufficiency

Regardless of the context or program design, community sponsorship programs assist with initial settlement tasks and provide social capital to improve newcomer integration. HIAS staff described Welcome Circles as offering a “soft landing,” but that longer term processes for achieving self-sufficiency and integration were often not a realistic goal within the official 6-month sponsorship period in the U.S. Other community sponsorship models in the U.S., for example the Welcome Corps, limit sponsorship to three months. In contrast in Canada, official sponsorship is one year, and European community sponsorship programs often define support for up to 1.5 years. Findings from this research suggest relationships persist long beyond official sponsorship periods, pointing to the need to reconsider official sponsorship periods when designing programming.

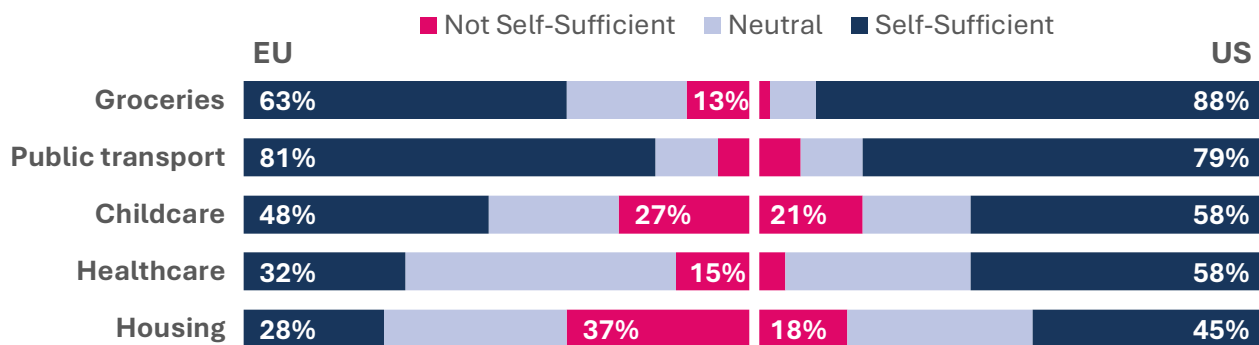
“Even though some beneficiaries spoke English and obtained work quickly, and thus became 'self-sufficient,' this is not necessarily fitting with the spirit of the program. I think that is this ideal goal, but I think that six months it's not enough. It could be [enough time] with those people who don't need much help [because of languages and skills]. But in my opinion, it's not the idea of [the program]. Obtaining quick work isn't necessarily a metric of self-sufficiency.”

– Welcome Circle Coordinator, Woman, Ireland, Europe

Beneficiaries reflected on a range of self-sufficiency metrics to meet essential needs in a sustainable manner and with dignity. Most felt self-sufficient in terms of basic needs like adequate transport and affordable food, and some found affordable childcare. Access to healthcare varied, and some Welcome Circles continued to support beneficiaries up to a year after arrival. Access to *suitable* housing was the greatest challenge, and Coordinators and Leads noted that many Welcome Circles were still subsidizing housing up to a year later.

Fig. 5: Beneficiary Self-Reported Self-Sufficiency (Europe vs U.S.)

Q: “Self Sufficiency” is metric of integration that means the ability to meet your essential needs in a sustainable manner and with dignity, and where you no longer rely on the support of your Welcome Circle. How would you rate your level of self-sufficiency in your new community?

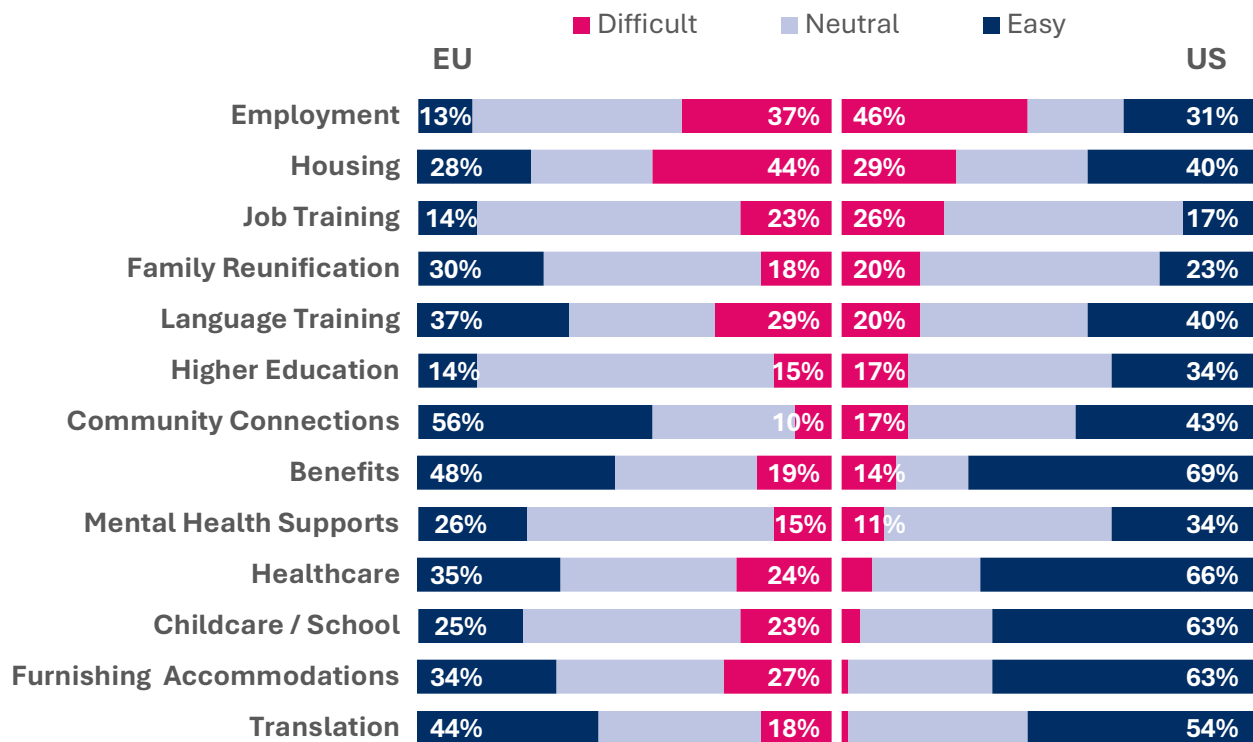


Self-sufficiency metrics were on average higher in the U.S. than Europe, potentially reflecting more personalized and holistic support through direct sponsorship. However, the range of supports across different European countries and often more robust social welfare states renders direct comparisons challenging.

Research also asked about longer-term integration tasks like finding work, learning languages, and finding *permanent* housing. Unsurprisingly, housing and employment were among the most difficult to achieve. However, these findings are influenced by structural barriers to integration and inclusion given endemic shortages in affordable housing, and employment challenges are near universal across all comparable contexts.

Fig. 6. Beneficiary Ease of Integration

Q. Which integration areas have been the easiest/hardest to accomplish?



Leads noted that relatively quick employment was most frequent when occupations did not require professional licenses (e.g., cooks, photographers, freelance designers). Beneficiaries credited Welcome Circle support for relative ease in several important, particularly accessing social benefits and health services. Notably, while newcomers ranked some of these tasks as relatively easy, volunteers reported them as significantly more challenging to support. We attribute this discrepancy to Welcome Circles taking on tasks and thus easing the way for newcomers.

We analyzed U.S. data to explore differences between integration outcomes and costs of living at the state level. The majority of beneficiaries were located in states with high cost of living given that 54% were sponsored in California and New York – two states in the top five.⁹

Generalized findings on economic wellbeing in Europe are likewise complicated given differences across GDP/capita, costs of living, financial assistance and social welfare benefits, and labour markets. Poverty and unemployment are particularly acute in states of first reception. For example, a February 2023 report from the Norwegian Refugee Council found that 68% of Ukrainians in Poland, Romania, and Moldova risked falling into poverty as a result of cuts to social assistance.¹⁰ More recent EU data show that in Moldova, 71% of a sample of Ukrainians relied on humanitarian aid for primary income, and 37% could not meet basic needs. In Poland, 41% reported insufficient income for household needs, and of the 58% who reported subsisting on income from work, 80% said it only met basic needs. Likewise, 41% in Poland and 38% in Moldova reported a desire to return to Ukraine before the cessation of hostilities because of issues around housing.¹¹ Ukrainians around Europe also noted loneliness and social isolation, which community sponsorship initiatives are particularly suited to address and which were far less prevalent among Welcome Circle beneficiaries.¹²

These trends contributed to significant mobility over the period of research. As described in Table 2, countries with active Welcome Circles saw a sharp decline in Ukrainians from 2023 to 2024. Poland saw the most drastic change, with just under 630,000 Ukrainians leaving the country from the end of 2023 to June 2024 – a decline of 40%. Czechia likewise saw a significant decline of just over 165,00, or 31%.

Social assistance impacted Welcome Circles both in Europe and the U.S. Focus groups with beneficiaries revealed how initial reception conditions in Europe and subsequent cuts to benefits prompted a desire to look further abroad. For example, they described residing in asylum dormitories and a lack of permanence motivating their desire to explore options in the U.S., describing sponsorship as a “chance at a different life.” The upshot for this evaluation is that Welcome Circles offered a global alternative, and a tangible model for responsibility sharing for refugees throughout Europe.

⁹ World Population Review (2024). Cost of Living Index by State 2024. Retrieved July 5 2024, from <https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/cost-of-living-index-by-state>

¹⁰ NRC. (2023, Feb 21). Hidden Hardship: 1 Year Living in Forced Displacement for Refugees from Ukraine. *Norwegian Refugee Council* <https://www.nrc.no/resources/reports/hidden-hardship/>

¹¹ Eurostat (2024). Temporary protection for persons fleeing Ukraine - monthly statistics. *European Commission*. Retrieved June 14, 2024, from https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Temporary_protection_for_persons_fleeing_Ukraine_-_monthly_statistics

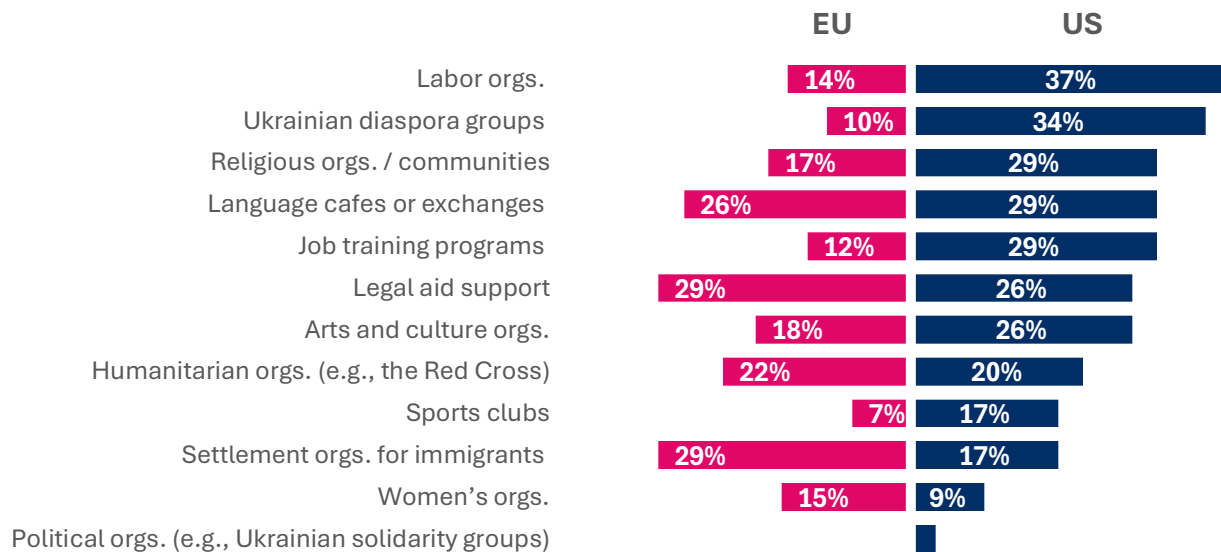
¹² EUFRA. (2023, Feb 28). Fleeing Ukraine: Displaced People’s Experiences in the EU. *European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights* <http://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2023/ukraine-survey#publication-tab-1>

The Importance of Community Mobilization & Recruitment

In both Europe and the U.S., support structures extended to congregations and community networks, far beyond those who were formally part of Welcome Circles.

Fig. 7: Beneficiary Connections to Organizations (Europe vs U.S.)

Q: What types of organizations has the Welcome Circle connected you to (select all that apply)



Ukrainians reported Welcome Circles facilitated connections to a broad range of necessary services – which were a focus of HIAS’s volunteer training. 67% of beneficiaries in Europe and 80% in the U.S. reported Welcome Circles connected them with external organizations. Beneficiaries in Europe cited connections to legal aid, settlement, and language exchanges, while those in the U.S. noted connections to labor organizations, job training, and cultural groups. These differences can be ascribed to program structures, since European Welcome Circles often facilitated connections to settlement support, while U.S. circles provided it directly.

“There is a tradition here, and [sponsors] all go to the same synagogue. That is, when they solve our problems, from beginning to end [the Welcome Circle] has a team. They write questions and every family or every person from this synagogue [...] help with different tasks. For example, who is responsible for work, children’s education, or paying for courses? The tasks are distributed so quickly, and I knew who was responsible for what issue, so I can write to each asking for help. I cannot imagine my situation without these people.”

– Welcome Circle Coordinator, Woman, Ireland, Europe

Surveys and interviews with European Coordinators found early recruitment challenges were largely owing to relatively small Jewish communities. In some countries, mobilization was complicated by their geographic

dispersal. However, cities with active Jewish communities, student networks, and congregations mobilized and consistently engaged volunteers.

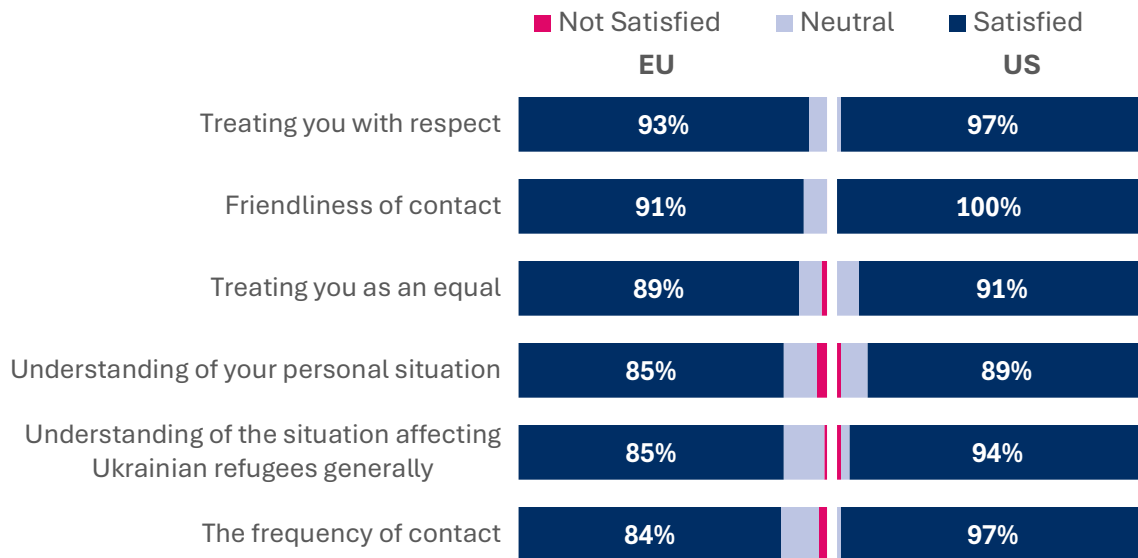
Ukrainians’ identity did not play a significant role in deterring volunteer engagement with non-Jewish refugees in the majority of contexts. For example, older volunteers in Eastern Europe with lived experience of the Holocaust and anti-Semitism originally preferred to work with Jewish Ukrainians, and in other locations the preference was influenced by external funding dedicated to Jewish refugees. However, Coordinators noted most volunteers were motivated by humanitarian principles, and conversations changed opinions about supporting non-Jewish Ukrainians.

Welcome Circle & Beneficiary Dynamics

Volunteers reported very positive interpersonal relationships and program satisfaction. Beneficiaries likewise reported overwhelming program satisfaction around interpersonal relationships, interactions with, and support from Welcome Circles. 100% in the U.S. and 91% in Europe were satisfied with friendliness of contact with; 97% and 93% reported respectful treatment; and 94% and 85% were satisfied with Welcome Circle’s understanding of Ukrainians’ situation in general. These minor differences may be largely attributable to program design and type of relationships between sponsors and newcomers.

Fig. 8: Beneficiary Satisfaction with Welcome Circle Support

Q. Thinking about your contact with the Welcome Circle, how satisfied are you with...

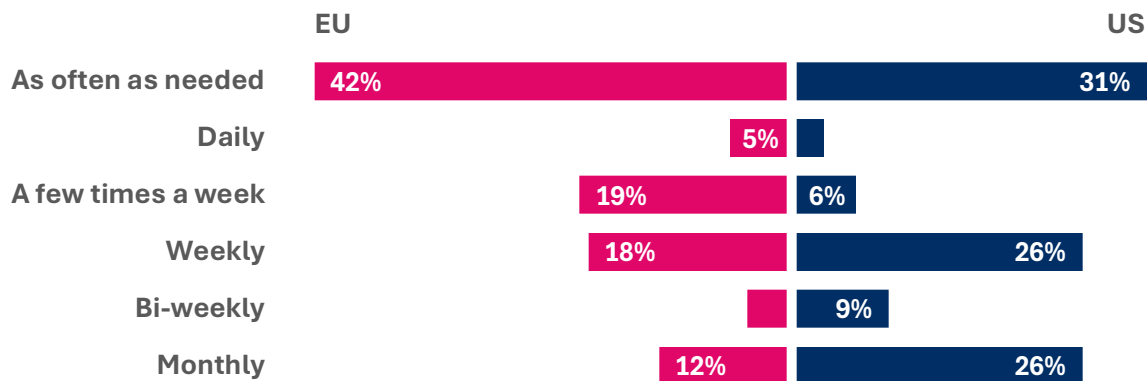


However, results were mixed across countries in terms of whether or not beneficiaries felt they received adequate support for integration, though this finding was significantly influenced by the scope of government services and cash assistance in local contexts.¹³

¹³ For example, the Czech government offered a 400 Euro subsidy, which was subsequently increased to 800 Euros, while in Poland, special government cash assistance and subsidies for Ukrainians has been cut to one-time payments of a rather small 300 Zloty (€63), as well as cessation of free public transit. Cash assistance for Poles welcoming Ukrainians into their homes was ended in late 2022.

Fig. 9: Beneficiary Frequency of Contact with Welcome Circle

Q. How long have you been / were you connected with your Welcome Circle?



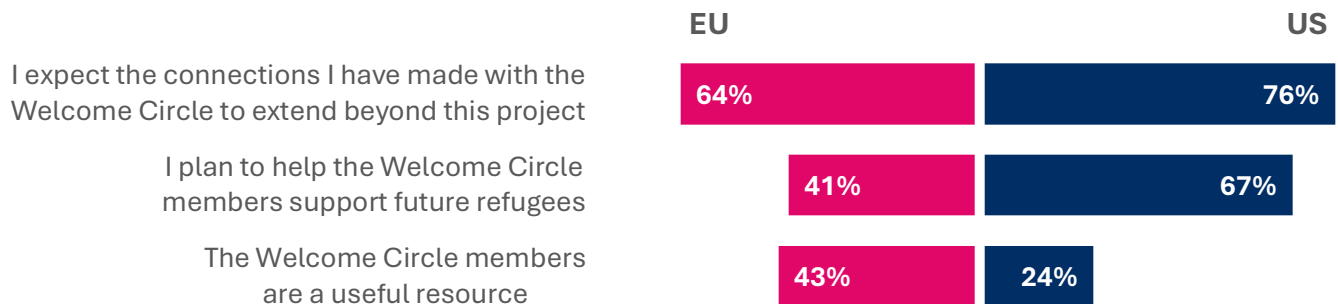
“I’m not used to being helped, and when you’re in a situation where you don’t know where to go, where you are, you don’t understand the language, you need help. I felt like this project gave me confidence and a feeling that I am safe in all senses of this word.”

– Ukrainian beneficiary, Woman, (Mother with children, age not provided) Germany, Europe

Fig. 10: Beneficiary Maintaining Connection to Welcome Circle

Q: Do you plan to remain in contact with your Welcome Circle after the project is finished?

If yes, why? (Select all that apply)



Relationships in the U.S. largely surpassed official sponsorship timelines. 80% of beneficiaries were still in contact with sponsors at the time of surveys. Of those who were no longer in contact, no one cited negative interactions, but instead circumstances like moving to another state. Of the 94% who answered the question, 76% in the U.S. and 64% in Europe planned to remain in contact with their Welcome Circle, citing social connection and relationships, rather than in-kind support or financial dependence. Significantly for the interest of scaling and program longevity, 67% of beneficiaries in the U.S. and 41% in Europe noted they would assist Welcome Circles in supporting future refugee newcomers.

“Even though six months have already passed, [and] we have been here for eight months now, we are constantly in touch [with the Welcome Circle]. They still support us [...] they invite us to [their homes] constantly. They have become our second parents.”

– Ukrainian beneficiary, Man, 39, California, U.S.

Despite these largely positive results, some Welcome Circles noted different expectations from beneficiaries, which tended to involve the extent of financial and housing support, transitions to self-sufficiency, and striking a balance between support and fostering dependency. They described financial conversations as uncomfortable, and suggested additional reminders of available HIAS training materials, support around financial management, and pre-arrival information for beneficiaries regarding sponsors’ financial commitments. Likewise, some Leads and Coordinators noted a need to temper volunteers’ expectations around the scope and pace of beneficiary integration and inclusion.

“There was a lack of understanding of exactly our role [in terms of financial support]. I don't think [the Ukrainian family] fully understood all the roles and responsibilities of the Welcome Circle.”

– Welcome Circle Lead Volunteer, U.S. [Participant #19: Woman, New Jersey]

“I was trying to hold the group's expectations together while helping to meet the newcomers’ expectations [...] I tried to teach and guide folks to just recognizing that this journey of generosity may not go the way that we expected.”

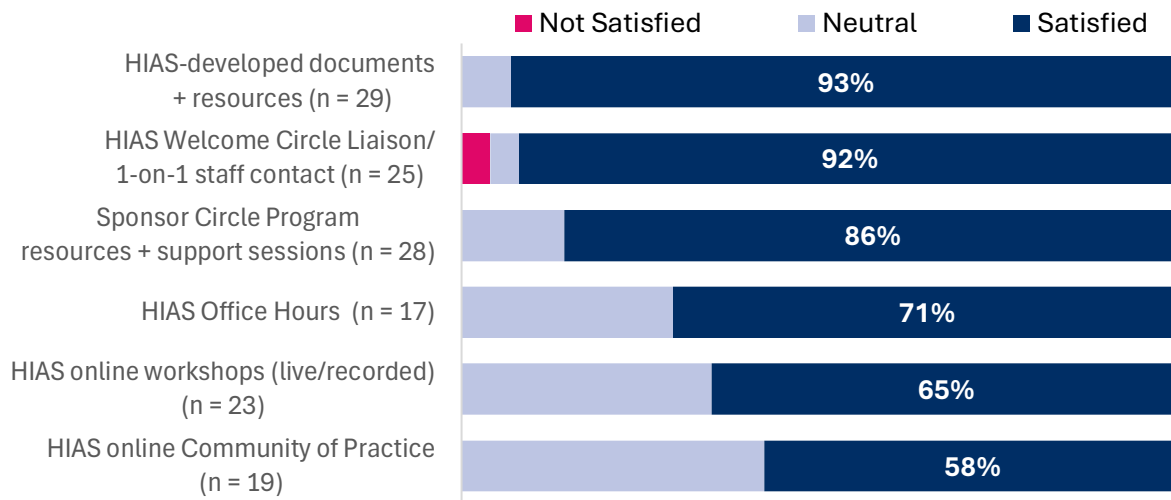
– Welcome Circle Lead Volunteer, U.S. [Participant #20: Man, California]

Welcome Circle Capacity & Training

Research also investigated HIAS support and training for Welcome Circles, particularly given different models and contexts. The central finding is that volunteers benefited significantly from pre-arrival planning and consistent contact with HIAS staff.

Fig. 11: Welcome Circle Satisfaction with HIAS Support (U.S.)

*Q: Please indicate your satisfaction with the guidance/training.
(Reported as relative percentages of those who reported using the resource)*



Liaisons and Coordinators had broad experience with refugees or other vulnerable populations, which was integral to ensuring safeguarding practices, pre-arrival planning, meeting program requirements, and navigating immigration bureaucracies. U.S. Liaisons were universally noted as a core reason for confidence and success, with sponsors repeatedly emphasizing open communication and frequent contact as an outstanding part of their experience.

The Role of HIAS U.S. Liaisons

HIAS' model for supporting Welcome Circles included personal guidance as one of its main pillars – referred to as HIAS Liaisons. Every Welcome Circle was asked to identify a Lead, who was given a designated point of contact on the HIAS team with whom they were paired for the duration of the program – from application prep to completion of the sponsorship period. HIAS Liaison, had regular structured check-ins with groups, but were also available by phone or email to provide Welcome Circles with resources, guidance, and troubleshooting support to address challenges in real time.

Staff professionalization and dedicated support roles offer a key insight for comparative analysis. Coordinators with direct experience with refugees were better able to train and support volunteers and help

them manage relationships. Those with less experience more often described coordination challenges and taking on direct support tasks rather than delegating.

“When I speak to other Coordinators, I realize that our Welcome Circle is very different, because it's very organic. Everything started right at the beginning of the war. When refugees started to arrive, we had a community, a very beautiful community of Jewish people that wanted to help. And so, this Welcome Circle kind of came to be different types of people with different types of help that they could bring. They just started helping. And so that's how our Welcome Circle started growing and just flourishing.”

– Welcome Circle Coordinator, Woman, Belgium, Europe

European Coordinators emphasized that funding and support to design flexible models around community capacity and volunteer mobilization. They also noted programming and support continued to develop organically depending on local needs and community involvement.

“In my case, my initial reaction was [the application process] was far beyond our capability. I was proven wrong happily. I think I'd be a good person to speak to for people who have the desire [to become a Welcome Circle] but lack the confidence.”

– Welcome Circle Lead, U.S. [Participant #12: Man, Florida]

“I recommend [connecting with other welcome circles] to others, for sure, because not only did you get to talk to different people from HIAS who had years of experience resettling people, and invaluable suggestions and expertise that come from the long view, [but] you also got to check in with other Welcome Circles [...] I thought it was wonderful. I mean, every time I had a question in one of those Zoom sessions someone from HIAS always had a super insightful answer with good advice about how to communicate effectively [with] newcomers.”

– Welcome Circle Lead, U.S. [Participant #9: Woman, Missouri]

Peer support from experienced Welcome Circle members in the U.S. and between Coordinators in Europe played a significant role in completing pre-arrival and onboarding tasks, navigating relationships, and comparing between contexts. U.S. Welcome Circles were eager to share experiences with newer groups. For instance, some with related beneficiaries (e.g., a cousin in another community) connected to share best practices. Others noted that faith-leaders made connections to nearby communities seeking to start new Welcome Circles. A few Leads noted interest in venues to share knowledge with prospective or new sponsors via peer-support.

“I just want to say that our Liaison was spectacular. She wound up giving me her [personal phone number] so that I was able to text with her; she went above and beyond. She would have Zoom meetings with me to find out how things were going once the [Ukrainian] family was here. She was extraordinary.”

– Welcome Circle Lead, U.S. [Participant #7: Woman, Oregon]

“I have all good things to say about HIAS, because they provided us more material than we could possibly read or want to read. My Liaison was wonderful. Every time I texted her, she texted me back like within seconds, and she was very patient with me. Probably all the information to all the questions I asked her were actually on the [shared] drive, and I could have read it. But she just told me [the answers] when I asked.”

– Welcome Circle Lead, U.S. [Participant #9: Woman, Missouri]

“In terms of advice] I would say, feel free to lean on your umbrella agency [HIAS]. Because any question we have, anytime, we've gone either to immigration lawyers, to the open office hours, or anything like that. Anytime we have personally talked to our Liaison, it's been great. They're so open to answer any question and to help us. I would say, that's really important. You lean on your umbrella agency. They're your best friends in this process. They've gone through this with other circles, and they have a lot of experience. So that's been a real plus for us having those people we can go to. So that I think that's the most important thing that I would say.”

– Welcome Circle Lead, U.S. [Participant #15: Woman, Virginia]

“ I'll say that documentation HIAS provides –the handouts and the things that are available on the online are outstanding– they're really good. But putting those things into practice – It's one thing to read the manual. It's another thing to actually put the machinery together [...] We could not have done this without (1) the written material and certainly (2) the Liaisons. We could not have done it at all, because we are amateurs.”

– Welcome Circle Lead, U.S. [Participant #6: Man, California]

Several Leads implemented co-leadership models for managing Circles. Leads proposed this as a best practice in order to avoid burnout, particularly when dealing with arrival tasks and managing intra-group dynamics. Welcome Circle demographics played a significant role, since many with co-leads noted at least one did not work full time, and across all Welcome Circles 94% had at least one retiree. Retired sponsors allowed for better task distribution between those with more flexibility and those working full time or engaged in childcare.

“[Some sponsors] expressed frustration [at the comprehensiveness of Welcome Plans], and we would remind them of all of the resources and supports that we offer. They trudged through the Welcome Plan and put their plans together for [accessing] benefits and domestic medical screenings. And then, upon reflection, [sponsors] are coming back and saying, ‘I’m so glad that they did this Welcome Plan because it gave me the chance to do some planning beforehand.’ That ended up being really critical, because there was structure for people to know what they’re getting into beforehand, and so they could be in a position to troubleshoot.”

– HIAS U.S. Senior Staff

“And while [The Welcome Plan] was very overwhelming, once we jumped in and got things delegated, the people who worked on it did a great job each on their pieces. It really works because we had all the research done when the family came over in February. We knew who we had to speak to about benefits. We knew how to go about assessing their skills for employment. We had it written down. The Welcome Plan was a huge success. I would say that was really the best guidance that we had from HIAS was to do that Welcome Plan.”

– Welcome Circle Lead, U.S. [Participant #5: Woman, New Jersey]

In-depth interviews and focus groups with Leads, Coordinators, and volunteers offered detailed conversations on the barriers to and conditions for re-enrolling. While the majority noted interest in continuing with future sponsorship or advocacy work, they needed time to rest and reflect on their experiences.

While European Coordinators noted greater challenges in maintaining volunteer engagement, generalist volunteers were crucial for early tasks including registering for social benefits, identity documents, and school enrolment, and later integration stages including seeking employment, funding housing, or accessing healthcare. Some reported over-reliance and instances of volunteer burnout – which has been noted in various contexts.¹⁴ However, they stressed broad positive feedback in terms of community building – which supports the lasting benefits of community sponsors in other contexts.¹⁵

¹⁴ Lusk, M. & Terrazas, S. (2021). Ameliorating Stress and Burnout among Professionals who work with Migrants and Refugees. *Journal of Human Services: Training, Research, and Practice*. 7(2): <https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/jhstrp/vol7/iss2/3/>

¹⁵ Phillimore, J. et al. (2022). ‘I Have Felt so Much Joy’: The Role of Emotions in Community Sponsorship of Refugees. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*. 33:386-396 <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11266-021-00349-3>; Macklin, A. et al. (2018). A Preliminary Investigation into Private Refugee Sponsors. *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 50(2): 35-57 www.yorku.ca/laps/soci/publication/a-preliminary-investigation-into-private-refugee-sponsors/

“[Online resources] depended on the on the composition of the Welcome Circle. If there were certain members who, had a very good familiarity and comfort level using different online portals and technologies, then their access to resources seemed higher. I would set up individual Google folders for each of my circles as time went on that’s a practice I started and some of the members didn’t know how to access it at all and had to rely on other members, and some used it religiously. The age composition essentially determined how different people used all the [volunteer] resources.”

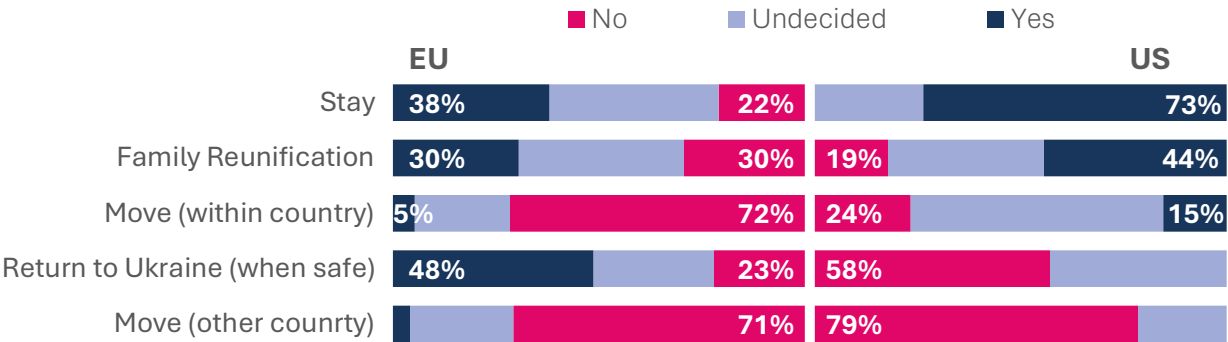
– Welcome Circle Liaison, Woman, California U.S

Permanent vs Temporary Mobility Plans

Research found significant differences between future plans and aspirations, with many in Europe considering their move as temporary, and those in the U.S. as permanent. 73% in the U.S. planned to remain, and none reported concrete plans to return to Ukraine. In contrast, only 38% in Europe reported plans to stay in current locations, and 48% noted plans to return to Ukraine when it was safe to do so. Understood in this light, the different program models – while not originally designed to do so – chanced upon a degree of alignment with beneficiaries’ own sense of permanence. Moreover, one reason that some decided to stay in Europe may have been the proximity to Ukraine and relative ease of returning when it was safe to do so.

Fig. 12: Beneficiary Self-Reported Mobility Plans

Q: Displaced people and refugees make different choices about their future plans for mobility. At the current moment, how likely are you to...



“You can find a state with a very different housing price range. But I have a large telegram channel from which I follow a lot of people all over America [...] how much they earn, and how much their living cost. And from there, I see that the rent is the same [...] In one state you can earn a very large amount of money, but you will also pay a lot there for rent.”

– Ukrainian beneficiary, Man, 40, California, U.S.

“We do not consider a return to Ukraine for now, although we are thinking about the relocation within the country.”

– Ukrainian beneficiary, Woman, 36, Virginia, U.S.

Coordinators in Europe noted uncertain outcomes of the war in Ukraine resulted in psychological reluctance to commit to long-term settlement, which comports with broader trends. A 2023, 10-country survey of 14,500 Ukrainians found that while one third felt they were part of host countries’ communities, an additional third wanted to return home.¹⁶ Our analysis found relatively similar opinions 14 months after the Russian invasion. However, interviews revealed changing attitudes towards remaining as the war persisted.

“In general, I feel very comfortable. I feel at home in Ireland [...] I sometimes think about returning or moving [given the] difficult housing situation. The place where I am now is a very difficult atmosphere psychologically, so sometimes I want to go back home. And in principle, if I had different living conditions, maybe I would not think about [returning]. I cannot say.”

– Ukrainian beneficiary, Woman, 36, Ireland, Europe

“I chose to return to Ukraine a long time ago, and when it is safe to do so, I will come back but my children want to stay here, they like it here, and they want to build their future here.”

– Ukrainian beneficiary, Woman (Mother with children, age not provided), Germany, Europe

A larger proportion of beneficiaries in the U.S. planned to, or were undecided about, whether they would bring family members or move within the U.S. – mostly citing cost of living and employment prospects. As described above, many Welcome Circles were in high cost of living areas. For context, 17-20% of resettled refugees from 2000-2014 moved between U.S. states within the first year.¹⁷ Interstate mobility is largely determined by economic opportunity and diaspora communities, and refugees thus move for the same reasons as other immigrants.

¹⁶ EUFRA. (2023, Feb 28). Fleeing Ukraine: Displaced People’s Experiences in the EU. *European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights* <http://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2023/ukraine-survey#publication-tab-1>

¹⁷ Mossaad, N. et al. (2020). In Search of Opportunity: Internal migration of refugees in the United States. *Scientific Advances* 6(32). <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.abb0295>

Successes & Best Practices

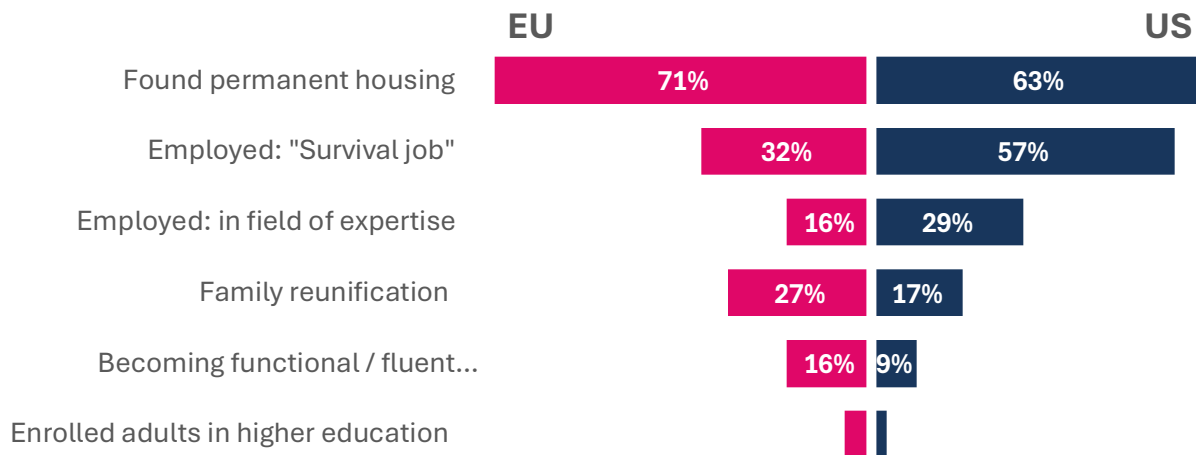
Community Sponsorship as an Integration and Inclusion Accelerator

This evaluation illustrates that HIAS Welcome Circles provided crucial pathways for improved settlement outcomes, and provided crucial connections to secondary and potentially tertiary social and community resources – which are a key driver of integration and inclusion.

As described in Fig. 13., most beneficiaries found independent housing, and a large majority in the U.S. found either “survival” jobs or jobs in their fields of training. Interviews suggested the sustained sponsorship and connections through congregations and broader communities meant better access to potential jobs. Differences in outcomes can also be attributed to the fact that a large majority in Europe were located in countries with high concentrations of Ukrainian refugees, tighter overall job markets, and languages which presented a more substantial barrier than in the U.S.

Fig. 13: Beneficiary Integration Metrics

Q. Have you or your household achieved any of the following? (Select all that apply)



The situation of Ukrainian refugees is potentially unique among asylum seekers and refugees in Europe insofar as many can maintain remote employment in Ukraine, allowing for financial self-sufficiency but potentially delaying local employment. At the same time, OECD research suggests that Ukrainian refugees might have better work success than other refugees in Europe given education levels and cultural and geographical proximity to Europe.¹⁸ Before the onset of the war, Ukrainians represented the third-largest cohort of foreign nationals in Europe, suggesting familiarity with labour markets and a larger and more established diaspora.¹⁹ In 2022 the European Central Bank predicted that 25-55% of Ukrainian refugees

¹⁸ OECD. (2022). The Potential Contribution of Ukrainian Refugees to the Labour Force in European Host Countries. *OECD Policy Responses on the Impacts of the War in Ukraine*. OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/e88a6a55-en>.

¹⁹ Eurostat. (2022). *Residence Permits – statistics on stock of valid permits at the end of the year*. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Residence_permits_-_statistics_on_stock_of_valid_permits_at_the_end_of_the_year&oldid=546073#Non-EU_citizens_with_a_valid_residence_permit

would participate in the Euro area labour market.²⁰ It is also the case that a large proportion of Welcome Circle beneficiaries are either retired or left Ukraine because of disabilities or other vulnerabilities, meaning less suitability to find jobs. From an anecdotal perspective, therefore, HIAS Welcome Circle beneficiaries in Europe were likely equal to or slightly above average employment for refugees.

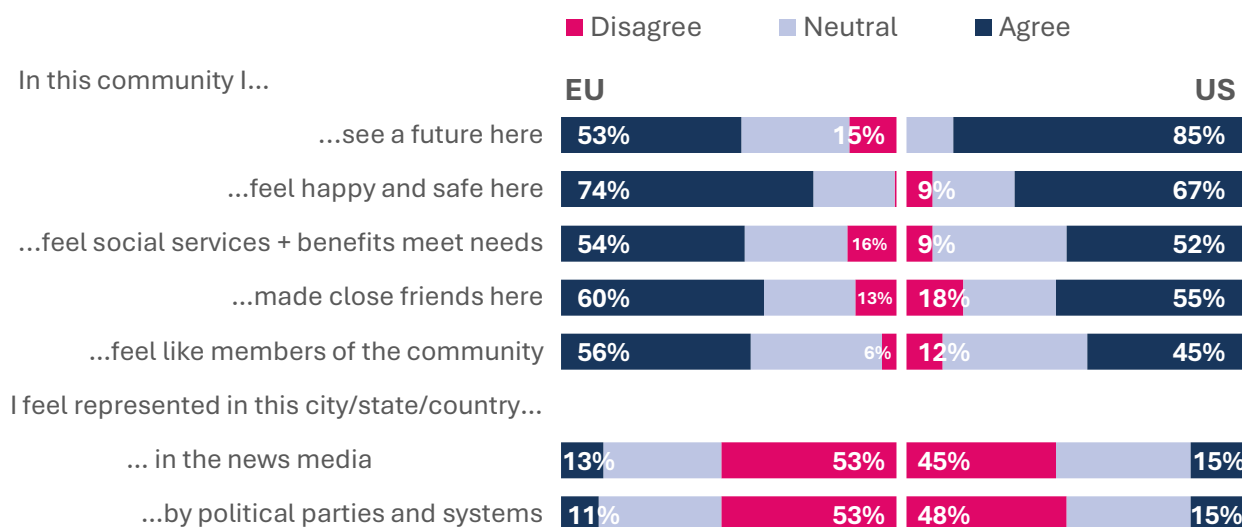
“Our communities and the folks we’re recruiting and mobilizing understand that this is a long game for many different populations, and because we educate around the rise in global displacement that they understand the need big picture. We’re creating waves of volunteers; as people have to tap out because they’re fatigued or exhausted financially with their own resources, there are new waves [of sponsors] coming in. We’re building something we’re proud of.”

– HIAS U.S. Senior Staff

Surveys also captured social integration metrics. Beyond work, beneficiaries noted significant ease in terms of making broader social connections, facilitated by Welcome Circles. Jewish Ukrainians and volunteers mentioning celebrating High Holidays and life events with Jewish community. As with other integration and inclusion metrics, those in the U.S. reported a greater sense of belonging and social connections, but an almost equal percentage reported feeling safe and happy.

Fig. 14: Beneficiary Sense of Belonging

Q: We would also like to understand how you feel about your sense of belonging in the city or country where you are currently located. Please tell us the extent to which you agree with the following statements.



Surveys and interviews also explored social integration attitudes. More beneficiaries in the U.S. were oriented towards adapting to local customs and norms (88%) than following the events in Ukraine (74%) or

²⁰ Botelho, V. (2022). The Impact of the Influx of Ukrainian Refugees on the Euro Area Labour Force. *European Central Bank ECB Economic Bulletin*, Issue 4. https://www.ecb.europa.eu/pub/economic-bulletin/focus/2022/html/ecb.ebbox202204_03~c9ddc08308.en.html

maintaining the Ukrainian customs (68%). Attitudes contrasted slightly with Europe, where 77% agreed on the importance of adopting local customs and ways of life, and a larger proportion (88%) signaled the importance of following the news and media in Ukraine – which comports with beneficiaries’ desire to return.

Flexible but Clearly-Defined Program Design

One of the clearest findings from surveys and conversations with volunteers is that program design and structure facilitated organized community sponsorship, even for those with little experience. Flexible program design throughout Europe offered opportunities to support far more displaced Ukrainians, to tailor supports for particular needs, and to react to changes in local social welfare supports.

On the other hand, U.S. Welcome Circles adapted and expanded on recent sponsorship experiences for a more clearly articulated model. The structure of a small group of key volunteers was well suited for developing community connections, while broader community support ensured volunteers were not overwhelmed with tasks, particularly around immediate settlement tasks. Venues for learning from established Welcome Circles were a notable program strength, particularly guiding novice volunteers. Above all, one-on-one support from Liaisons and general oversight from Coordinators was integral to confidence and success.

“We were lucky that we were tied into a network of extended friends in our communities who could also help out functionally. We had the heads of committees through the Welcome Circle ... those were the people that were doing the [main] work.

Then we reached out to a greater community for collecting or dropping off items, but not really doing the family interaction or filling in paperwork. I think it really has to be made clear [that early settlement] is quite an intensive period, and eight people would be more ideal than six [as key Welcome Circle members], because it allows other people to support [when other members aren’t available] and life events happen.”

– Welcome Circle Lead, U.S. [Participant #4: Woman, New York]

European Coordinators also took pains to note their appreciation for funding and support to develop flexible models around available community capacity and volunteer mobilization. They noted the capacity to recruit specialist volunteers who could participate on an *ad hoc* basis as required. They also noted that a year after the beginning of the war programs were still developing organically to local needs and community involvement.

“From where people stand on an advocacy perspective on a personal values perspective, Welcome Circles have deepened interest in refugee issues and working across different populations, not only with Ukrainians. But that’s dependent on funding – whether that’s from the European Commission or other sources. So the question of sustainability is always relevant. There’s genuine long-term, sustainable interest from communities as long as we can pair that with resources.”

– HIAS Europe Senior Staff

Welcome Circles in Europe were prepared to receive those who made the decision to move on from states of first reception, signalling potential modality for responsibility-sharing between EU states and how community sponsorship models can serve as integral venues for enacting solidarity.

“When it was no longer possible to stay [in Poland] because the state program that provided housing for Ukrainian refugees was ending, I decided to go to Ireland. At that time Ireland had the best support for Ukrainian refugees, such as social housing, and there was also some support with education for children, including some financial support. I knew for sure that we will have a place to stay there, and we will not end up on the street, and in Poland there was such a perspective.”

– Ukrainian beneficiary, Woman, 36, Ireland, Europe

Flexibility also mattered given differences in mobility plans. In the U.S., closer relationships between Welcome Circles and beneficiaries comported with the overwhelming desire to remain long-term. In Europe, most saw their displacement as temporary. And while this does not mean that European Welcome Circles ignored outcomes like good jobs or stable housing, fostering independence while awaiting safe return took precedence over long-term integration.

Investments in Professional Support Personnel

Surveys and conversations with sponsors, volunteers, and Coordinators confirmed professional support from HIAS was integral to overall program success, but also pre-arrival preparedness, day-to-day relationship navigation, understanding community sponsorship in settlement and integration, managing volunteer / beneficiary relationships, and navigating immigration bureaucracies.

“Just to get answers on why applications are taking so long, or be approved and then travel authorizations would be delayed [...] People are coming at us with all these questions and frustrations [...] it was a really hard position to be in because I'm a problem solver and I'm here to help people and I wasn't able to help them in this situation. [...] It's really hard to work with volunteers and ask them to do a certain amount of fundraising ahead of time and to have a plan and just be waiting and waiting and waiting.”

– Welcome Circle Liaison, Woman, Colorado, U.S.

“[Welcome Circle program guidelines and resources] definitely set me up for a more professionalized way to do this work. It was unlike anything we've ever done and it put us in a in a sphere of expertise which was amazing, because I was learning about [policy contexts and service navigation] I never knew. [For example, I could] explain benefits in a way that I never could before. [The program] professionalized everything about this work.”

– Welcome Circle Liaison, Woman, New York, U.S.

Coordinators offered suggestions for workshops to interact on solutions to specific challenges. They also suggested that regionalization for exchanging best practices would play an important role – for example, states of first reception with weaker social welfare systems and fewer benefits might require localized best practices since these were not always comparable to situations in Belgium or Ireland.

“The [in person training] was really nice. We learned about how to deal with our own emotions, which was very helpful for me because I think that when you're [in this role], you have to be sensitive, which is a good thing, and also can be a really bad thing, because you get burnt out really easily.

Just knowing that you have a community of other coordinators from all over Europe that are living the same thing [...] it was just a very rich experience to just to be able to exchange with people. I actually went back, and I phoned all of the refugees I knew, and I organized meetings with them, and it just gave me a new wave of motivation.”

– Welcome Circle Coordinator, Woman, Belgium, Europe

Coordinators noted HIAS trainings on TPD practicalities and strategies for maintaining volunteer engagement were helpful for recognizing that many day-to-day challenges were shared across contexts. 74% of Coordinators had made connections with other community groups and organizations to better support beneficiaries, illustrating a growing network of solidarity directly attributable to the Welcome Circle model and HIAS investments.

Insights for Sustainability & Scaling

Cost of Living and Diversifying Sponsorship Locations

- While no doubt challenging since community sponsorship programs rely on volunteer mobilization, this evaluation finds that cost of living, housing availability, and labour markets can pose significant barriers to self-sufficiency and ultimately to integration, inclusion, and long-term success.
- In both European and U.S. contexts, the need to diversify sponsor locations is something of a Catch-22 given that HIAS mobilized Welcome Circles in locations where they already had a strong presence, which turned out to be places with short housing supply and high costs of living.

Future mobilization might consider diversifying sponsorship locations, potentially destining newcomers with lower social capital including professional experience, language capacities, or other barriers to destinations with complementary labour markets and lower costs of living.

Investing in Staff Professionalization

- Welcome Circles achieved greater success when supported by HIAS staff with experience with refugee newcomers, other vulnerable populations, community organizing, and mobilizing volunteers.
- Analysis suggests relationships between levels of staff professionalization and newcomer settlement and integration outcomes.

Future program design and funding should include resources for experienced and dedicated support staff. However, the labor-intensive process of what often amounted to on-call case management should be balanced with considerations for scaling program delivery.

Volunteer Training and Expectation Setting

- Findings comport with broader research that robust volunteer training and expectation-setting improves program satisfaction and interpersonal relationships between sponsors and refugees.²¹
- HIAS staff emphasized the need for expectation management around financial dependence and other potentially sensitive topics, but also noted that relationships persisting beyond the formal sponsorship period were based on close personal ties rather than dependence on financial or in-kind support.
- European Coordinators reported the need for more detailed and consistent volunteer training. Welcome Circles throughout the U.S. and Europe noted the need for clearly-defined sponsorship and volunteering periods, and for extending volunteer training to all Welcome Circle members to access available training resources.

Future programming should establish clearly-defined engagement periods, though set expectations around realistic objectives for the pace integration and likelihood of relationships persisting beyond formal sponsorship periods. Programming should consider universal training on volunteer / beneficiary relationships and psychosocial support for supporting people with trauma to mitigate volunteer burnout.

Sponsor Group Compositions & Peer Support

- Sponsors, volunteers, and HIAS staff all noted the potential for volunteer burnout when one member was tasked with training, coordination, and oversight, and sponsors and volunteers noted success when group leadership functions were shared and tasks delegated.
- Welcome Circles were nearly unanimous on the importance of broader community engagement, where support roles did not require full-time sponsorship or developing close relationships. Sponsors emphasized the advantages of mixed group demographics. Groups comprising people in full-time work and retirees reported shared tasks and wraparound support.
- Sponsors highlighted the value of peer support informally or through more structured feedback, though were less enthusiastic about online communities of practice.

Future programming should allow for flexible leadership structures and delegation, and emphasize diverse group composition. They should also consider formal peer support and learning venues, which are uniquely suited to sharing lessons on managing intra-group dynamics and transitioning to self-sufficiency. Peer support should also include insights from beneficiaries around transition plans and establishing non-hierarchical support relationships. However, peer support networks require oversight and moderation, potentially increasing organizational demands.

Sponsor Engagement and Retention

- Welcome Circles confirmed interest in remaining engaged in sponsorship initiatives broadly, though noted a degree of fatigue and the need for rest and reflection after initial experiences.
- Desire to remain engaged in sponsorship extended to beneficiaries, several of whom had begun to support new Welcome Circles or were offering peer support across both the U.S. and Europe.

²¹ See Zanzuchi, M. B., (2024). Supporting Self-Sufficiency: Considerations for Refugees' Transitions out of Sponsorship and Complementary Pathway Programmes. *Policy Brief* MPI Europe. www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/comet-mpie-transition-strategies-2024_final.pdf

- Welcome Circle Leads noted missed opportunities in terms of end-of-program debriefings with sponsors, and thus tracking the likelihood of re-enrolment in Welcome Circles or other community sponsorship programs.

Subsequent programming and other community sponsorship initiatives should provide opportunities for highlighting volunteers' contributions, and make efforts for volunteer appreciation. Organizations should consider devoted resources for outreach with previous volunteers, with an emphasis on understanding opportunities and barriers for re-enrolment.

Embedded Monitoring and Evaluation Frameworks

- What we measure and how we measure it significantly affects understanding and improving community sponsorship programs. Yet the pace and scope of emergency responses can often mean that Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) activities are only considered near the end of programming and funding cycles.
- Integration, inclusion, self-sufficiency, and satisfaction outcomes are best analyzed in relation to baseline data, particularly related to sponsor and beneficiary characteristics, needs, and preferences.

Community sponsorship programs should embed MEL frameworks into initial design and theories of change for robust outcome evaluations. Volunteer experiences should be given equal weight in MEL frameworks to those of refugee newcomers since successful programming ultimately depends on mobilization, which are influenced by volunteers' likelihood to re-enroll or recommend sponsorship to their networks.

Considerations for Policy & Advocacy

Volunteer Mobilization Momentum Beyond High-Profile Emergencies

- Successful community sponsorship programs depend on mobilization and recruitment countries – particularly where they are not yet an established part of humanitarian immigration streams. Cyclical community interest depends on media attention and political mobilization. The outpouring of support for Ukrainians mirrors past global mobilization, for example with Syrian refugees in 2016, and some growing support in the U.S. for refugees from Latin America and the Caribbean.
- It remains a major challenge to mobilize new volunteers for long-term refugee populations or those from emergencies with less media and political attention. HIAS Welcome Circles are an opportunity to turn volunteer momentum toward other refugee populations, potentially bolstering longer-term social processes to normalize community sponsorship.
- HIAS's successful program implementation points to community sponsorship as a key tool for emergency contexts more broadly, because civil society can mobilize quickly and more flexibly in rapidly-evolving emergency contexts.
- The majority of Welcome Circle volunteers, Liaisons, and Coordinators had experience welcoming and supporting recent and historical displaced populations. This finding shows potential to mobilize beyond high-profile emergencies, and to retain volunteers for future community sponsorship. One key aspect of harnessing momentum lies in robust volunteer training and expectation management to learn from positive sponsorship experiences.

Innovative Matching and Placement

- Some U.S. Welcome Circles were matched using the RUTH algorithm, which linked sponsors with beneficiaries based on beneficiary preferences and Welcome Circles' support capacity. However, Welcome Circle matching and matching in broader community sponsorship models rarely consider local labour markets, housing, or services.
- Research for this report illustrated significant structural barriers around costs of living and employment opportunities. Research for this report illustrated significant structural barriers around costs of living and employment opportunities. Cost of living often meant support for rent and transportation extended beyond the sponsorship period, and suggested cost of living might inform matching and placement.
- While matching and placement is inherently limited by sponsor locations, future programming might consider more calculated placement from among sponsor group localities. For example, individuals with lower language skills or formal training might fare better in locations with complementary labour markets or lower costs. In turn, more sophisticated matching and placement might improve beneficiary satisfaction and sponsor experiences.
- Community sponsorship programs should consider the preferences of both sponsors and beneficiaries, which would help to match expectations and prevent sponsorship breakdown or difficult relationships within sponsor groups.

Beyond Temporary Protection

- Displaced Ukrainians' future in the U.S. and Europe remains unclear, not only given the uncertain outcome of the war, but also the temporary nature of protection schemes and significant cuts to social assistance in several European states.
- Humanitarian parole in the U.S. is inherently precarious since it defers decisions on immigration status and is open to politicization. Likewise, and despite its extensions, TPD is precarious, which can lead to protracted temporariness and the emotional and practical challenges that come with precarity.²² A coordinated transition from temporary protection would offer more stability and clarity for those engaged in community sponsorship.
- HIAS Welcome Circles and other community support models offered a venue for everyday people to mobilize and support displaced Ukrainians, and a crucial backstop in the context of insufficient social welfare supports. New forms of sponsorship might prove a key tool for longer-term integration regardless of policy changes and could capitalize on lessons learned from Welcome Circles. However, policymakers should consider community sponsorship as one part of integration efforts, and use lessons for other groups in need of humanitarian protection.

From Protection Pathways to Integration and Inclusion Journeys

- Community sponsorship programs require more sustained attention to transitions from sponsorship to self-sufficiency. To date, programming and training focus on the immediate arrival period and

²² See Wagner, M. (2024, March 4). Extending Temporary Protection: It seems viable, but is it? *ICMPD*
<https://www.icmpd.org/blog/2024/extending-temporary-protection-it-seems-most-viable-but-is-it>

access to services and benefits, with less attention paid to preparing participants for what comes next.²³

- Protection pathways in general are the first phase of integration and inclusion journeys and cannot be seen as a replacement for long-term state support, particularly for programs with relatively short sponsorship periods. Protection pathways will see greater returns when complemented by benefits or programming for employment, upskilling, language training, and other key determinants of integration.
- Relationships between sponsors and newcomers persist and deepen after formal sponsorship periods end – which often indicate the need for continued assistance. Community sponsorship programs should consider evidence-based sponsorship periods, drawing on lessons from Welcome Circles and other more established sponsorship programs.
- Finally, displaced Ukrainians should be understood as a relatively unique population among those in global resettlement queues or autonomously seeking protection. The majority supported by Welcome Circles transitioned directly from pre-war lives, without the typical period of displacement in host countries which often mean significant gaps in work, education, and social engagement. This trend is even more pronounced in resettlement programs that prioritize vulnerable refugees – including single mothers, older individuals, significant medical conditions, or other factors that may hinder integration. New protection pathways should thus include clear and discreet policy coordination with long-term integration support.

²³ For a detailed comparative analysis see Zanzuchi, M. B., (2024). Supporting Self-Sufficiency: Considerations for Refugees' Transitions out of Sponsorship and Complementary Pathway Programmes. *Policy Brief MPI Europe*. www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/comet-mpie-transition-strategies-2024_final.pdf