

# Report

# HIAS US Welcome Circles for Ukraine

April, 2024

This report was commissioned by HIAS and executed by Pairity ([www.pairity.ca](http://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 provides an evaluation of the HIAS US Welcome Circle program for Ukrainians in which groups of sponsors hosted displaced Ukrainians for the period of six months. The report's goal is to understand program results, highlight opportunities for improved program delivery, and explore how lessons from Welcome Circles might inform other community sponsorship programs. Findings are drawn from a multi-methods analysis using HIAS program documents, third-party sources, and primary data from surveys and interviews with Welcome Circle Lead volunteers and Ukrainian beneficiaries.

The HIAS Welcome Circle program had a strong foundation, as it was developed and adapted through HIAS' participation in the Sponsor Circle Program. The Sponsor Circle Program was launched in October 2021 by the Community Sponsorship Hub and U.S. Department of State and implemented by a consortium of partners. This foundation enabled HIAS to implement a rapid response to the Ukrainian emergency as a well-organized, well-structured community sponsorship program.

**Strength of Program Design & Experience:** One of the clearest findings from volunteers is that program design and structure facilitated organized community sponsorship, even for those with little experience supporting refugees. HIAS successfully fostered volunteers' strong humanitarian motivations to support refugee households, and channeled it into developing well-trained, supportive sponsor groups. Above all, volunteers unanimously reported that training and one-to-one support provided by HIAS Liaisons was integral to fostering confidence and success.

**Community Connections & Social Cohesion:** Welcome Circles were particularly focused on creating social connections with beneficiaries by offering social support and ensuring beneficiaries were part of the community. Reciprocally, beneficiaries reported a strong sense of community belonging and desire to stay connected beyond the formal sponsorship period.

**Key Challenges:** As is common in other sponsorship programs, the most challenging tasks to achieving integration and self-sufficiency was finding suitable housing and employment. These challenges were further compounded by lack of affordability in Welcome Circle locations and the inability for "survival jobs" to achieve self-sufficiency, particularly within a six-month period.

**Insights for Future Programming:** Future program design and funding should include resources for dedicated support staff, explore ways to systematically leverage sponsors' peer support, and expand volunteer training via structured program feedback. Future programming should also consider local affordability, potentially through targeted sponsor recruitment and financial support to account for cost of living. HIAS and other community sponsorship models can mobilize experienced volunteers to form new sponsorship groups for refugee populations from around the world. Finally, Welcome Circle experiences offer data that integration and social cohesion are long-term tasks and relatively short formal sponsorship periods are generally followed by additional months of support and enduring relationships.

## Introduction & Context

### About US Welcome Circles

HIAS' Welcome Circle program seeks to mobilize groups around the US to provide community sponsorship for Ukrainians displaced as a result of the February 2022 Russian invasion. The Welcome Circles this report refers to were Circles that were certified after June 1, 2022 and had their newcomers arrive by August 31, 2023. This includes 47 Welcome Circles with 59 Ukrainian households across 18 states, which supported over 200 individuals.

The Welcome Circle model was developed through HIAS’ participation in the Sponsor Circle Program (SCP) as a Sponsor Circle Umbrella (SCU) organization. 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.

Through this model, Welcome Circles were typically comprised of five to eight volunteers who first developed a Welcome Plan with the support of HIAS staff. Welcome Circle members committed to hosting a beneficiary individual or household for six months with the goal of facilitating immediate settlement support and aiding in their integration journey. As described in Table 1 below, typical Welcome Circles averaged seven members, with a ratio of two volunteers per beneficiary. Each Welcome Circle designated a Lead Volunteer (referred to as the “Lead” in this report) for coordination and liaising with HIAS. While Welcome Circles were mobilized across 18 states, California and New York accounted for 53% of all circles and hosted more than half of all beneficiaries and households.

Welcome Circles are an example of a broader trend toward community sponsorship for refugees in the US. They were developed amid national private sponsorship initiatives as an emergency response to welcome Afghan and Ukrainian refugees through the Sponsor Circles Program. The success of these initiatives led to an expansion, which included other countries of origin. The Sponsor Circle Program and consortium members, including HIAS’ Welcome Circle Program, informed the Welcome Corps initiative, which became the first large-scale private refugee sponsorship program in the US.

The US response to Ukrainians mirrored similar global programs, which further solidifies the success of sponsor programs. Under the Uniting for Ukraine (U4U) policy, Ukrainians who were displaced as a result of the Russian invasion were eligible for travel authorization and the right to reside in the US for two years under humanitarian parole provided that they had US-based sponsors who committed to providing financial support. As of November 2023, 211,722 Ukrainians had been given travel authorization and 168,312 had been paroled in the US.

The overarching goal of this report is to understand program results, highlight opportunities for improved program delivery, and explore how lessons from Welcome Circles might inform other community sponsorship programs. Research questions and design were developed collaboratively with HIAS staff in order to capture the experiences of volunteers, beneficiaries, and engaged staff. The data collection for the US context in this report mirrored a separate evaluation of HIAS Europe’s Welcome Circles. While this report focuses on the US context, a final report to be published in the Summer of 2024 compares results between the U.S. and Europe to understand the relative strengths of each program, primarily by exploring the differences in populations, mobility patterns, social welfare benefits, and protection policy frameworks.

**Table 1: Welcome Circle Demographics and Context**

Location (States)	# Circles per state	Circles Surveyed	% Surveyed	Ukrainian diaspora (2022)	# 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%	24,69	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%	2,754	12	6	2	13	1.0
VT	1	1	100%	24,785	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
<i>Total</i> 18	47	33		819,335	313		59	203	
<i>Average</i>			70%			7			2

Sources: Ukrainian Population by State: U.S. Census Bureau. "[People Reporting Ancestry](#)." American Community Survey, ACS 1-Year Estimates Detailed Tables, Table B04006, 2022. Accessed on November 1, 2023.

\*Welcome Circle

## Methods & Data

Data for this report was derived from HIAS US’s Welcome Circle reports and documents as well as third-party sources including the first of two phases of primary data collection conducted by Pairity. We employed a multi-methods approach to collect quantitative and qualitative data and employed interpretive analysis given the relatively small population size. Phase 2 data included focus groups with Ukrainian beneficiaries and HIAS Liaisons and staff members.

**Table 2: Phase 1 Data Collection (included in this report)**

Collection Tool	Respondent Population	Sample Size
Online Surveys	Welcome Circle Leads	33 (out of 47)
Online Surveys	Ukrainian Beneficiaries	35 (out of 59)
Semi-Structured Interviews	Welcome Circle Leads	20

### Welcome Circle Lead Surveys

Welcome Circle Lead surveys were delivered online. Information was collected pertaining to volunteers’ experiences as well as beneficiary integration and self-sufficiency. This survey also collected data on beneficiary demographics, volunteer recruitment and experiences, relationships with beneficiaries, and previous engagement with refugees and other vulnerable populations.

### Ukrainian Beneficiary Surveys

Beneficiary surveys were available in Ukrainian and Russian, and emailed directly to Ukrainian beneficiaries. Surveys collected data about household demographics, mobility decisions and modes of arrival in the US, quality

and frequency of interactions with volunteers, and types of support provided. Data was also collected to understand the relative difficulty of achieving integration and self-sufficiency metrics, understand the sense of belonging and social cohesion, as well as current plans for staying in situ or future mobility. Surveys included an option to volunteer for subsequent focus groups.

## Welcome Circle Leads Semi-Structured Interviews

Welcome Circle Lead surveys and program evaluation criteria informed a question bank for semi-structured interviews. Interviews lasted an average of 30 minutes and were conducted over Zoom. Semi-structured interviews offer a conversational environment where participants can offer individual responses while also ensuring comparable qualitative data. The question bank was subtended by specific data points and lines of discussion depending on survey responses and the unique contexts of each participating Welcome Circle.

### Semi-Structured Interview Discussion Categories

- Volunteer Leads' background and motivations for taking on the role
- Interactions with and support from HIAS
- Volunteer mobilization and Welcome Circle organizational structure
- Volunteer / beneficiary relationships
- Integration challenges and successes
- Opportunities and suggestions for scaling and program development

All research participants were provided with an informed consent document detailing the purposes of the research, rights to confidentiality, potential risks and discomforts, data storage and handling, and rights to withdraw from the research. All data collection and storage comply with US data privacy protection regulations.

## Findings Overview

### Development and Implementation of the Welcome Circle Model

  
"This was a congregation-wide effort. And it was, I think, a really great experience for the congregation."  
– Participant #14

**Finding 1: Welcome Circles are a community-wide effort.** Research found that Welcome Circle application requirements and the set-up of the circles themselves ensured that nearly all circles followed a typical sponsorship model of five to ten core members, though most circles (76%) had additional support from their wider community or congregation.

**Finding 2: Welcome Circles Encourage Community Members to be Leaders.**

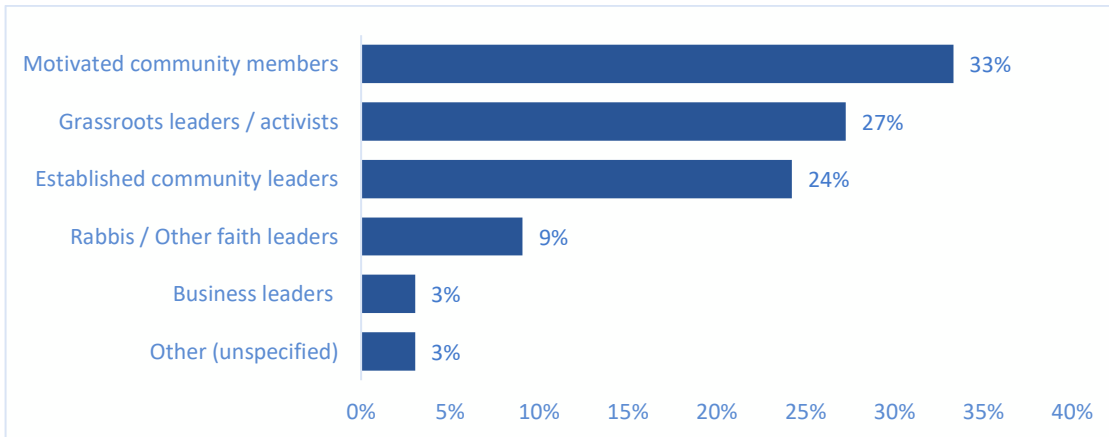
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*"[Individuals who took leadership roles were] congregants with strong connections in the community who could open doors to opportunities that might otherwise not be possible. Also, people who could offer specific skills and knowledge to help settle our Newcomers."* – Participant #5

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### Fig. 1. Welcome Circle Leadership Roles

Q: Which type of individuals best describe the people who took leadership roles in your Welcome Circle?



### Finding 3: Welcome Circles are mostly motivated by humanitarian crisis, followed by their religious beliefs.

The most common motivations for forming Welcome Circles were humanitarian (94%), followed by religious or faith-based (48%), and personal experience with immigration or displacement (42%). Those who took leadership roles were mostly motivated community members (33%), followed by already-active grass-roots leaders (27%), and established community leaders (24%). Thus, membership and leadership of Welcome Circles were mostly motivated individuals and communities with a desire to aid people displaced by a specific crisis. However, many of the Circles formed in areas where HIAS invested considerable resources in community education and grassroots advocacy. Due to this investment, long-term advocacy and relationship building was made possible. The topic is explored in-depth in the final comparative report mentioned above.

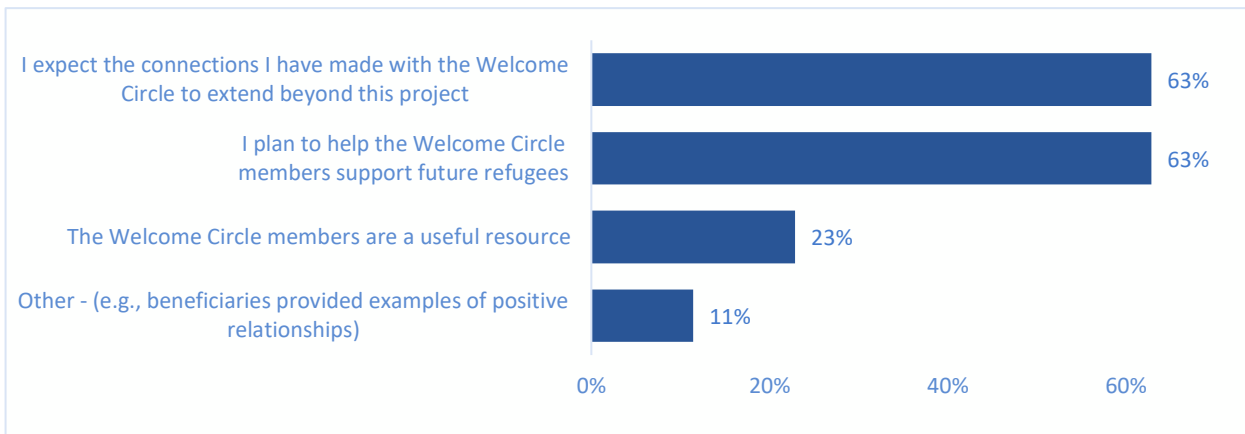
The strong humanitarian motivation was further demonstrated by the high frequency of interaction between volunteers and beneficiaries within their first 30 days of arrival with all Circles reporting interactions at least a few times a week. Most volunteers connected with newcomers daily (55%). The rest reported interacting a few times a week (39%) or as often as needed (6%). Importantly, both volunteers and beneficiaries reported that they kept in contact far beyond the intended six-month program duration.

**Finding 4: Welcome Circles create long-term, positive relationships.** 80% of beneficiaries reported that they were still in contact with sponsors after the official end of the program. Of those who were no longer in contact, none cited negative interactions as the reason, but circumstances like moving to another state. From the beneficiaries’ perspective, most reported that volunteers supported them either as often as needed (31%), a few times a week (26%), or weekly (26%).

Beneficiaries were also provided with very positive experiences in terms of relationships with Welcome Circle members. For example, all respondents who answered the question (94% of survey respondents) planned to remain in contact with their Welcome Circle after the program ended. Beneficiaries commented on the value of the social connection and relationships.

### Fig. 2: 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)



**Finding 5: The Welcome Circle structure and the development of a Welcome Plan is important for both clarity for circle participants and successful outcomes for beneficiaries.** Welcome Circle participants described the standardized framework for sponsorship as clearly structured with well-defined requirements and ample documentation and resources available. A standardized Welcome Plan and application process provided the necessary structure for Welcome Circles to recruit and mobilize volunteers from their communities despite some preliminary challenges. For example, while some Leads described the application process and Welcome Plans as “overwhelming” – particularly completing it without foreknowledge of what type of household they would be welcoming – most agreed that it was a helpful resource to understand responsibilities and as a tool for later reference when completing necessary tasks. One noted that reviewing an approved Welcome Plan removed guesswork and reduced the burden of uncertainty.

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*“Probably the most helpful aspect [of the application] was a requirement to do a Welcome Plan.” Participant #5*

*“[HIAS provided] help in getting [it] together [...] it was really pretty clear about what we needed to include. Also, there was a timeline which was really helpful to us – we need to do this before we could do that [...] That was very helpful to us.” – Participant #15*

*“I would have liked a bit more on-the-ground help in terms of filling out all the various parts of the application. The best thing that happened was HIAS shared another Welcome Circle’s [approved] application. So, we were able to look at that in terms of how to go about organizing our own application.” – Participant #7*

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**Finding 6: RUTH provided satisfactory matches, but communication on match reasoning is desired.** Given that the U4U policy required a US sponsor, HIAS matched a significant subset of Ukrainian households with Welcome Circles who were motivated to help but did not have existing ties with one another<sup>1</sup>. The RUTH (Refugees Uniting Through HIAS) matching system was a key and unique program feature. 52% of survey respondents were

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<sup>1</sup> 98% of beneficiary survey respondents entered the US 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.



matched with RUTH though it and the matching platform were often described by participants as somewhat puzzling in terms of why certain matches were offered.

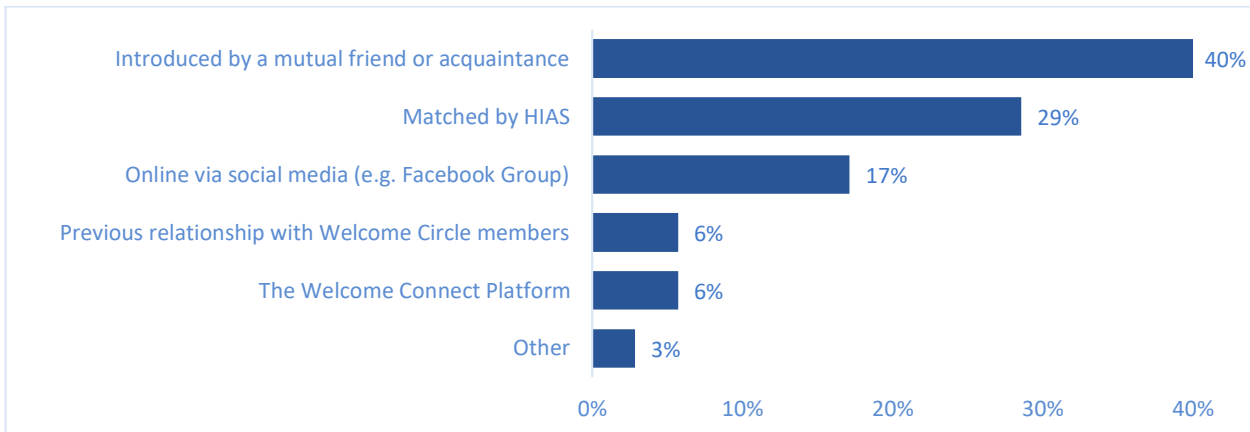
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*“I didn't know how the matching algorithm worked, but I didn't really care either, [we were flexible] we were going to try to help someone.” – Participant #9*

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**Fig. 3 Beneficiary Connection to Welcome Circle**

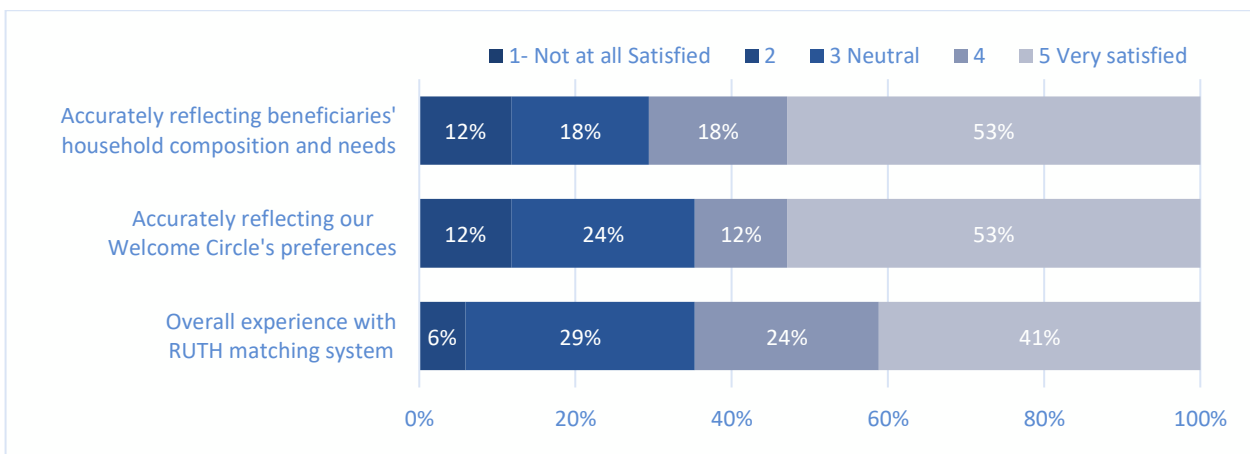
Q: How did you connect with your HIAS Welcome Circle?



Among those matched by RUTH, the majority felt satisfied with the overall experience (65%) and felt that their match reflected volunteer (65%) and beneficiary preferences (71%). While participants were generally satisfied with matches, several Lead Volunteers interviewed suggested that there could be better clarification and communication around process and match rationale, particularly when a match changed or was rejected. A few participants explained that they had an initial match and some even met beneficiaries over Zoom, but their match was changed without clear communication or rationale. Most noted that improved communication regarding matching outcomes and next steps would be beneficial for future programming.

**Fig. 4: RUTH Matching System**

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

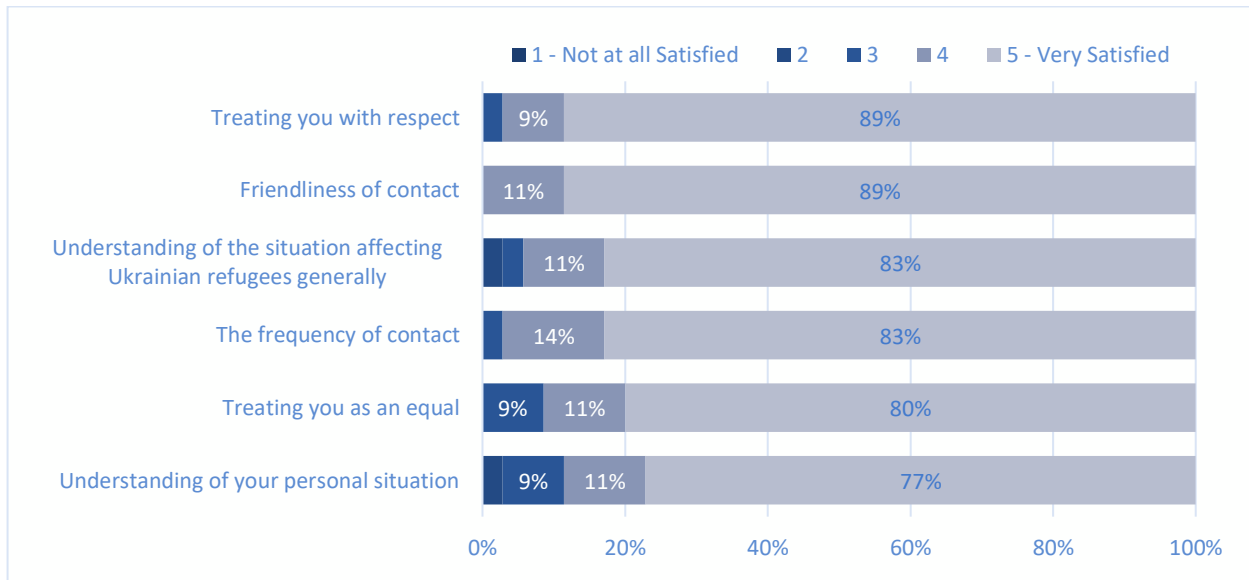


From the beneficiaries’ perspective, several respondents reported being connected with Welcome Circles through mutual acquaintances (40%), which Lead Volunteers noted as an advantage in terms of having additional connections or beneficiary family members in the US to support beneficiaries’ integration.

**Finding 7: Beneficiaries were overwhelmingly satisfied with their experiences.** Beneficiaries reported an overwhelming program satisfaction in terms of interactions with and support from Welcome Circles. For example, 100% were satisfied with friendliness of contact with Welcome Circles; 98% reported satisfaction with being treated with respect; and 94% were satisfied with Welcome Circle’s understanding of Ukrainians’ situation in general.

**Fig. 5: Beneficiary Satisfaction with Welcome Circle Support**

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



While beneficiary focus group data are analyzed in the final comparative report, it is worth noting here that some went out of their way to acknowledge their appreciation for Welcome Circle volunteers by leaving additional comments in the survey.

**Beneficiary Survey Open Responses**

*“I will try to continue communication, because I am grateful to them for their support.”*

*“They are very nice people; they are like relatives.”*

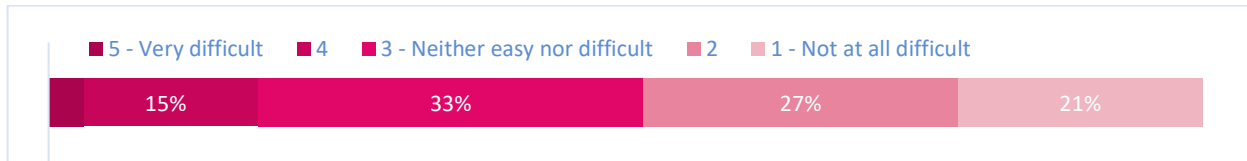
*“These are very good people who have helped us a lot and are now advising us on any issues and we are interested in keeping in touch with them.”*

**Welcome Circle Support & Capacity**

**Finding 8: Volunteer recruitment was relatively simple.** Motivations for establishing Welcome Circles varied and mobilization was largely organic. Most Lead Volunteers described their involvement via one of three pathways: (1) an initial motivation to support Ukrainians then discovering the Welcome Circle program as means of direct aid; (2) congregation leaders mobilizing members to form a Welcome Circle; or (3) previous experience with community sponsorship models. As such, a significant majority of Welcome Circle Leads reported volunteer recruitment as either not difficult (48%) or neutral (33%).

### Fig. 6: Welcome Circle Volunteer Recruitment

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



Welcome Circles had the significant benefit of broad previous experience. 45% had worked with other vulnerable populations, which Leads mentioned as integral to ensuring safeguarding practices. The majority (64%) of volunteers had previous experience working with displaced populations with most having supported Afghan refugees through other community sponsorship models including the Sponsor Circle Program for Afghans or community co-sponsorship programs in partnership with their local Resettlement Agencies. Lead Volunteers mentioned that previous experience supporting refugees was extremely helpful in terms of navigating program requirements, integration tasks, and immigration bureaucracy.

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*"[Our] Welcome Circle [was] comprised of a subset of members who had successfully resettled an Afghan family of five. The experience of the group made things very smooth. We were ready right away with ESL classes, housing, [and] benefits." – Participant #9*

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**Finding 9: Peer support was significant to the success of the Welcome Circle model.** Peer support played a significant role in terms of completing pre-arrival and onboarding tasks, and in navigating relationships with beneficiaries. Established Welcome Circles were willing and eager to share their experience with newer groups. For instance, some Circles with related beneficiaries (e.g., a cousin in another community) connected to share best practices. Others noted that faith-leaders in their community made connections to nearby communities seeking advice on starting a new Welcome Circle. A few Lead Volunteers noted their interest in being able to pass along what they had learned via peer-support or mentorship, particularly to prospective members seeking information about the program or developing their Welcome Plan.

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*"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." – Participant #12*

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Many Leads who had less experience appreciated the benefits of learning from other circles' experience.

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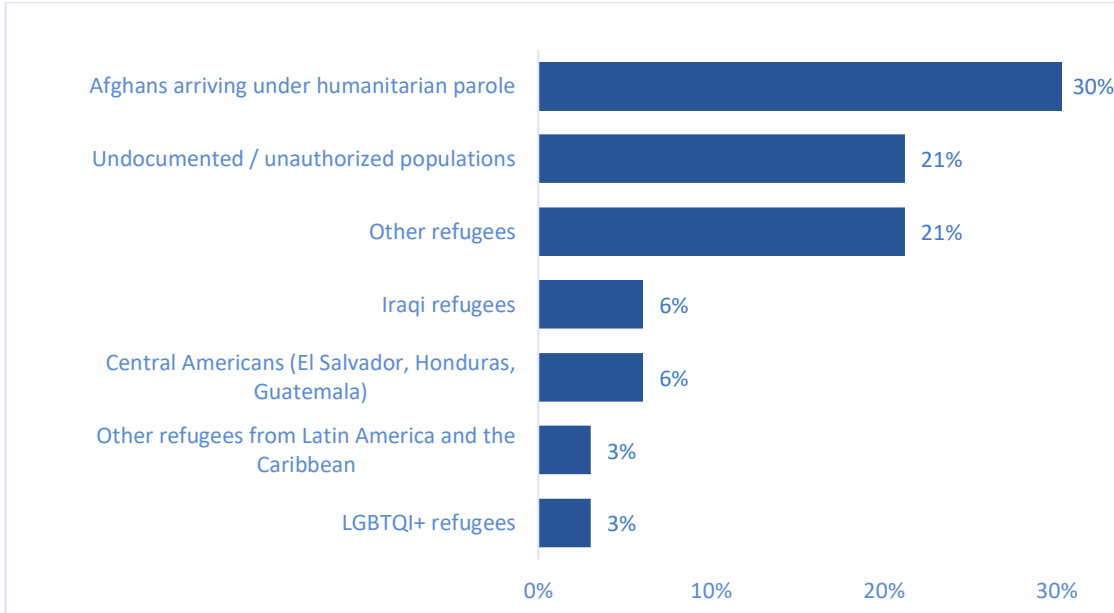
*"I recommend [connecting with other welcome circles] to others, for sure, because not only did you get to talk to different people from HIAS who had years of experience resettling people, and invaluable suggestions and expertise that come from the long view [but] you also got to check in with other 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."*  
– Participant #9

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Finding 10: Most Welcome Circle members had previous experience supporting Afghans in the past.

**Fig. 7: Welcome Circle Experience in Past Emergencies**

Q: Did members of your Welcome Circle have previous experience directly supporting refugees in past emergencies? (Select all that apply)



**The Role of HIAS 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 Volunteer 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 Liaisons had regular structured check-ins with groups and were also available by phone or email to provide Welcome Circles with resources, guidance, and troubleshooting support to address challenges in real time.

**Finding 11: One-on-one support from HIAS is essential.** Welcome Circle Leads cited HIAS Liaisons as the most useful support resource and an indispensable part of the program. 92% of Leads who reported engaging with Liaisons were satisfied with their support and advice. Across most interviews, Leads specifically mentioned that HIAS Liaisons were essential in clarifying program requirements from initial application stages, to dealing with challenging Welcome Circle members, to interacting with beneficiaries. The availability of a trusted expert gave many Leads the confidence to manage their Welcome Circle, knowing that support was just a text or phone call away. Many took pains to note that Liaisons were readily available, offering patient and supportive guidance.

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*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.” – Participant #7*

*“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*

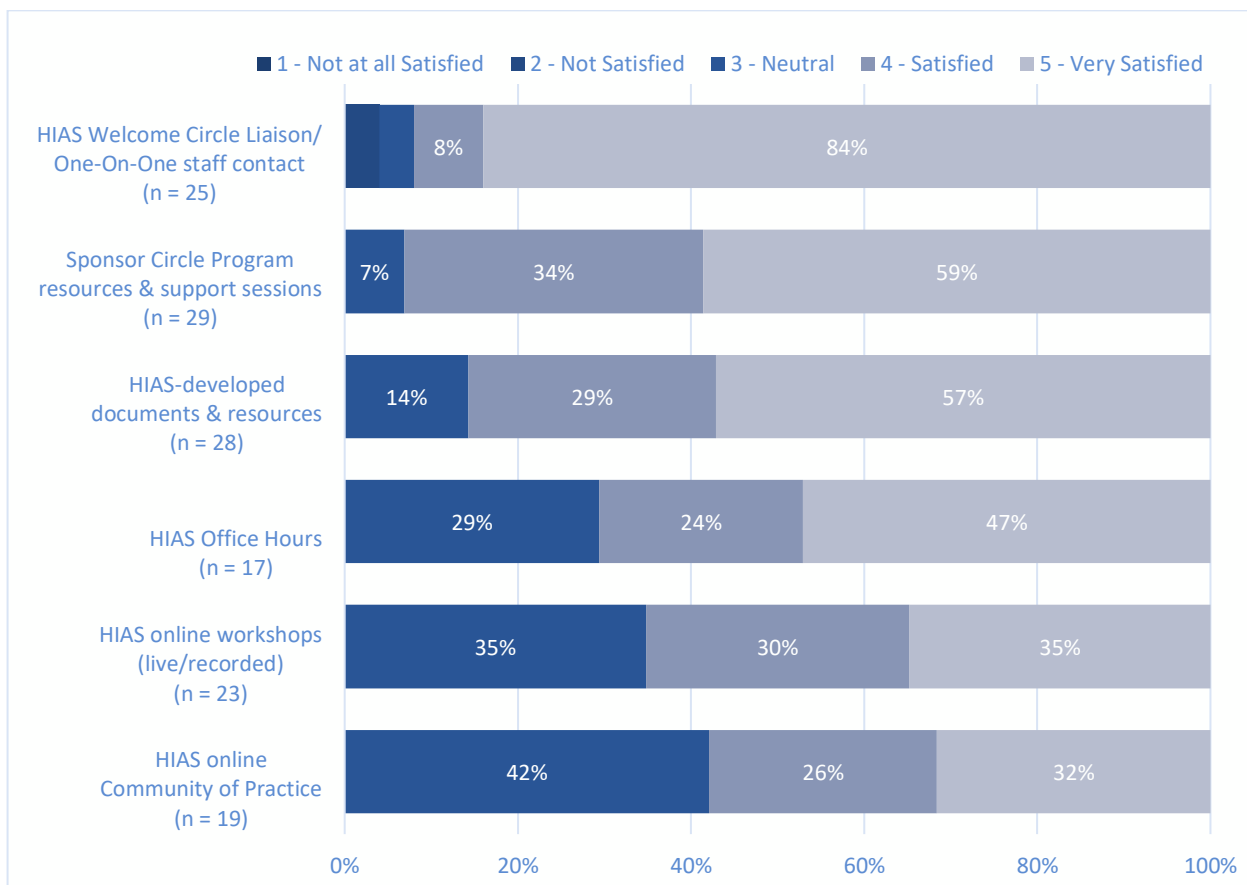
*information to all the questions I asked her were actually on the [shared] drive, and I could have read it. But she just told me [the answers] when I asked.” – Participant #9*

*“[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.” – Participant #15*

*“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.” – Participant #6*

**Fig. 8: Welcome Circle Satisfaction with HIAS Support**

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



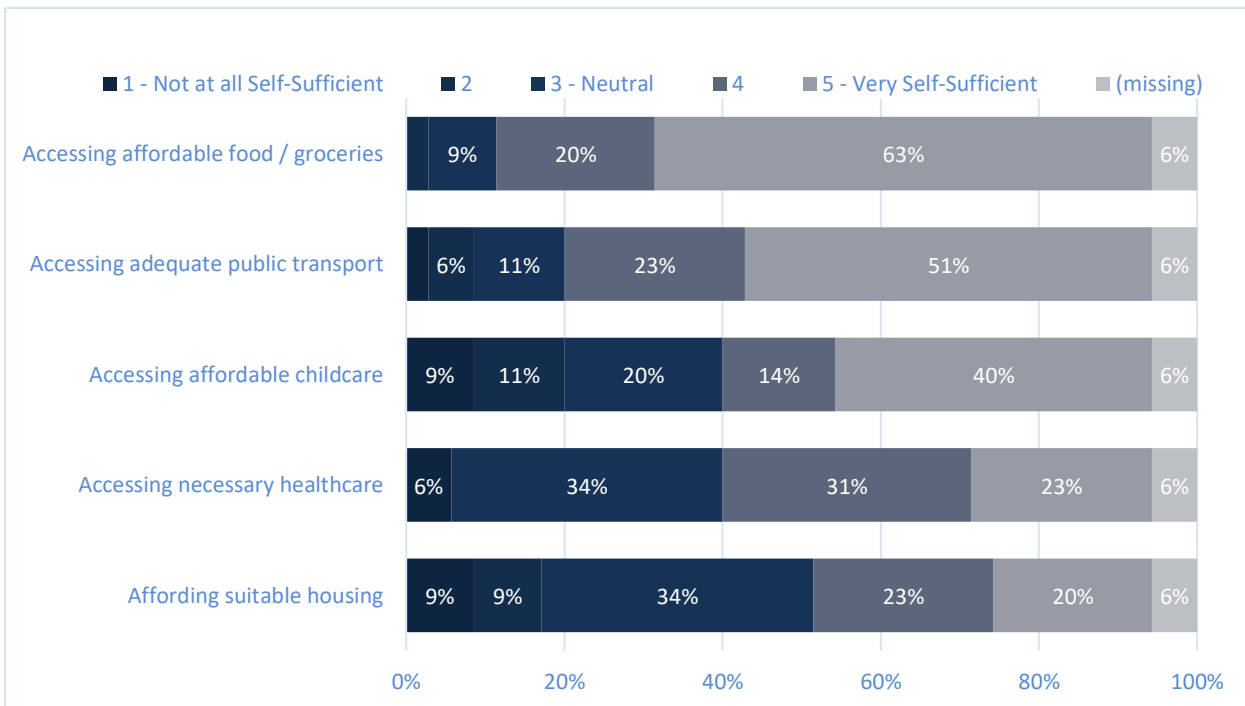
## Integration Metrics & Beneficiary Self-Sufficiency

**Finding 12: Most beneficiaries felt self-sufficient with most categories at the end of services with the exception of housing affordability.** Beneficiary surveys gathered data on a range of integration and self-sufficiency metrics, which was defined as the ability to meet essential needs in a sustainably and dignified manner, independent of Welcome Circles.

Most beneficiaries felt self-sufficient in terms of accessing basic needs including affordable food (83%), and access to transportation (74%). A lower but significant number found self-sufficiency in affordable childcare (54%) and necessary healthcare (54%). The greatest challenge to self-sufficiency was accessing affordable housing. Welcome Circle Leads also reported housing as one of the most difficult tasks to support, with many Lead Volunteers noting that they helped beneficiaries with rent support as needed for at least a year due to affordable housing shortages.

### Fig. 9: Beneficiary Self-Reported Self-Sufficiency

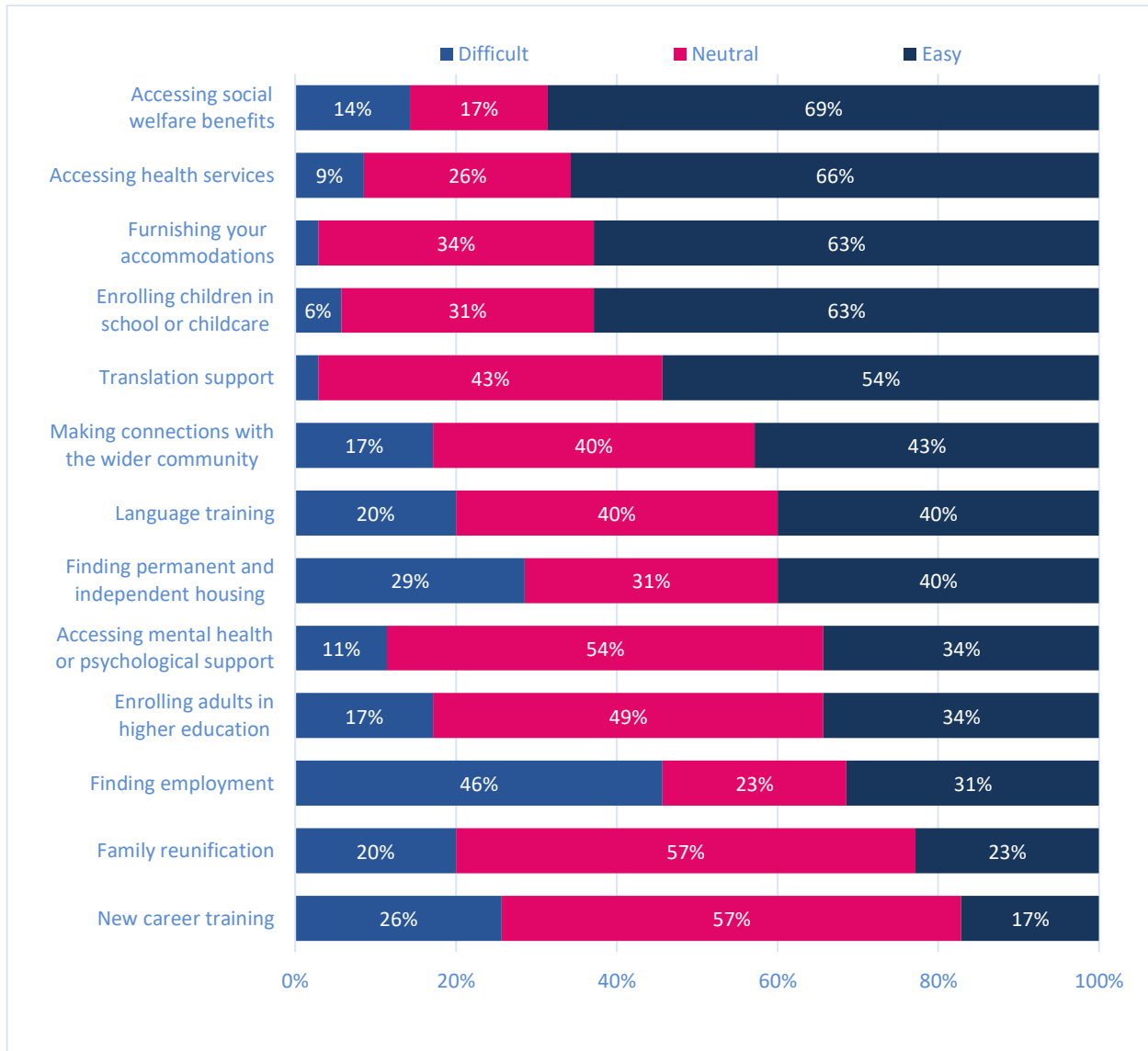
Q: "Self Sufficiency" is a metric of integration that means the ability to meet your essential needs in a sustainable manner and with dignity, and where you no longer rely on the support of your Welcome Circle. How would you rate your level of self-sufficiency in your new community?



**Finding 13: Employment is the most difficult to achieve.** In terms of integration tasks, beneficiaries ranked finding employment -- one of the most important tasks for self-sufficiency -- the most difficult to achieve. This data was echoed by Welcome Circle Leads. This is not a surprising finding given that employment can be a major challenge for newcomers in any context. Lead Volunteers who mentioned relatively quick and successful employment for beneficiaries noted that it was achieved when occupations did not require professional licenses (e.g., chef, photographer, freelance designer). On the positive side, beneficiaries noted relative ease in several important areas when supported by Welcome Circles, particularly accessing social welfare benefits and health services. Notably, while beneficiaries ranked some of these tasks as relatively easy, Welcome Circle volunteers reported these tasks as significantly more challenging to support. This discrepancy in self-reporting can be attributed to Welcome Circle efforts easing the way for beneficiaries.

### Fig. 10: Beneficiary Ease of Integration

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

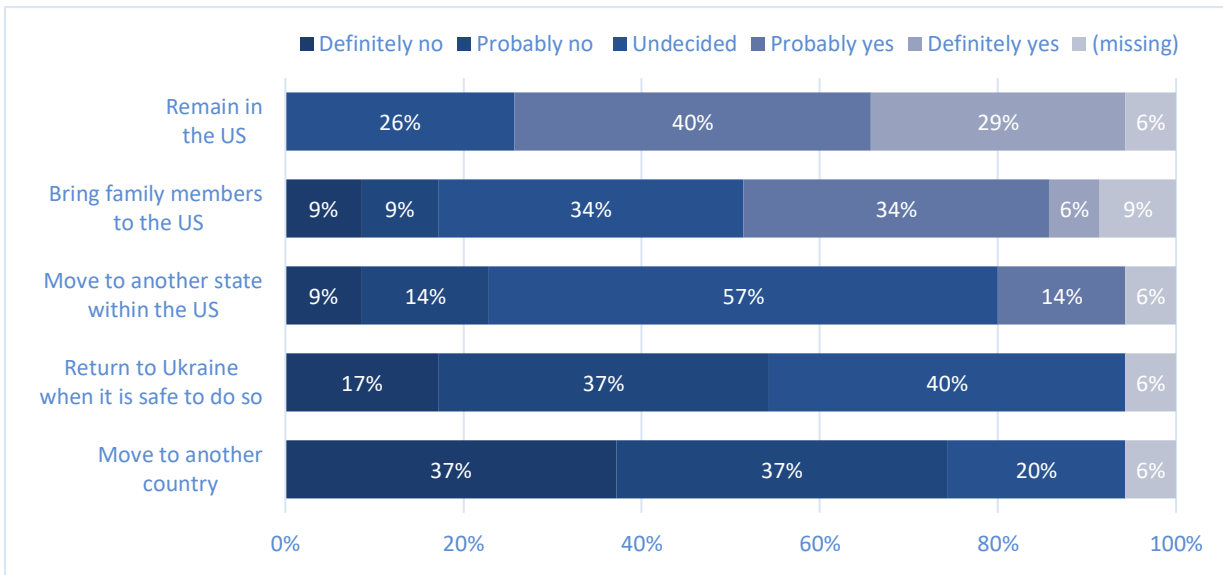


### More Stability than Mobility

**Finding 14: Beneficiaries plan to stay in the US.** Regardless of the uncertain outcomes of the war in Ukraine, beneficiaries were relatively certain of their plans to remain in the US. Specifically, 74% were certain they would not move to another country, and 69% reported they would most likely remain in the US. None of the beneficiaries reported definite plans to move to another country or return to Ukraine.

### Fig. 11: Beneficiary Mobility Plans

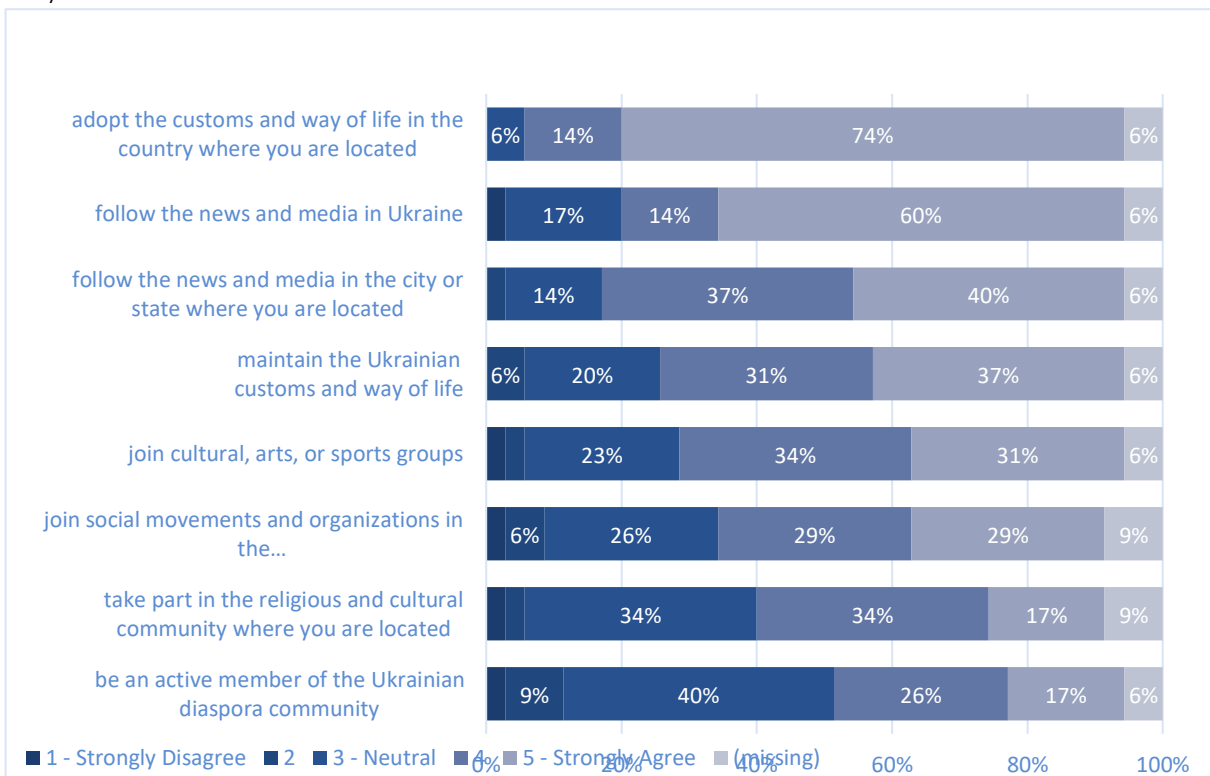
Q: Displaced people and refugees make different choices about their future mobility plans. At the current moment, how likely are you to...



**Finding 15: Beneficiaries in the US are keener to adapt to US customs as opposed to those resettled in the EU.** In terms of social integration, most beneficiaries remained more oriented toward adapting to the customs of the US (88%) than following the events in Ukraine (74%) or maintaining the Ukrainian customs (68%). This contrasts with the findings in the EU, where most focus was on events in Ukraine owing largely to beneficiaries’ desire to eventually return to Ukraine. Such dynamics were addressed in focus groups with beneficiaries, which are covered in a comparative perspective in the final comparative report.

### Fig. 12: Beneficiary Attitudes Toward Social Integration

Q: We would like to understand your attitudes toward cultural integration. On a scale of 1-5, how important is it for you to:





# Successes & Best Practices

## Strength of Program Design & Experience

### Success 1: The Welcome Circle structure works - including the small size and the one-on-one support from HIAS.

One of the clearest findings from Welcome Circle volunteers is that program design and structure facilitated organized community sponsorship, even for those with little experience supporting refugees. The Welcome Circle structure of a small group of key volunteers was well suited for developing community connections and building relationships, while extended support from congregations and wider communities ensured that Welcome Circles were not overwhelmed with tasks, particularly in the demands of the first 30 days. Venues for learning from established Welcome Circles was a particular program strength, specifically guiding newer Welcome Circles. Above all, Lead Volunteers were very clear that one-on-one support provided by Liaisons was integral to their confidence and success.

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*“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.” – Participant #4*

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## Community Connections & Social Cohesion

**Success 2: Welcome Circles create lasting social connections and a sense of community belonging.** Welcome Circles were particularly focused on creating social connections between members and beneficiaries, offering social support, and helping beneficiaries feel like part of the community. These community connections and relationships were borne out in terms of beneficiaries' potential mobility plans given that most wanted to stay in the US and could envision staying longer-term. Survey data will be more fully fleshed out in beneficiary focus groups.

Beneficiaries also reported a strong sense of community belonging: 87% could see a future for themselves in their community; 63% felt safe and happy; and 52% had made close friends. These findings reflect Lead Volunteer comments about being supported by at least one congregation, and always being able to reach out to broader community networks for support. Community members were mostly focused on one-off tasks, which left core Welcome Circle members the capacity to focus on developing relationships and supporting beneficiaries beyond transactional needs.

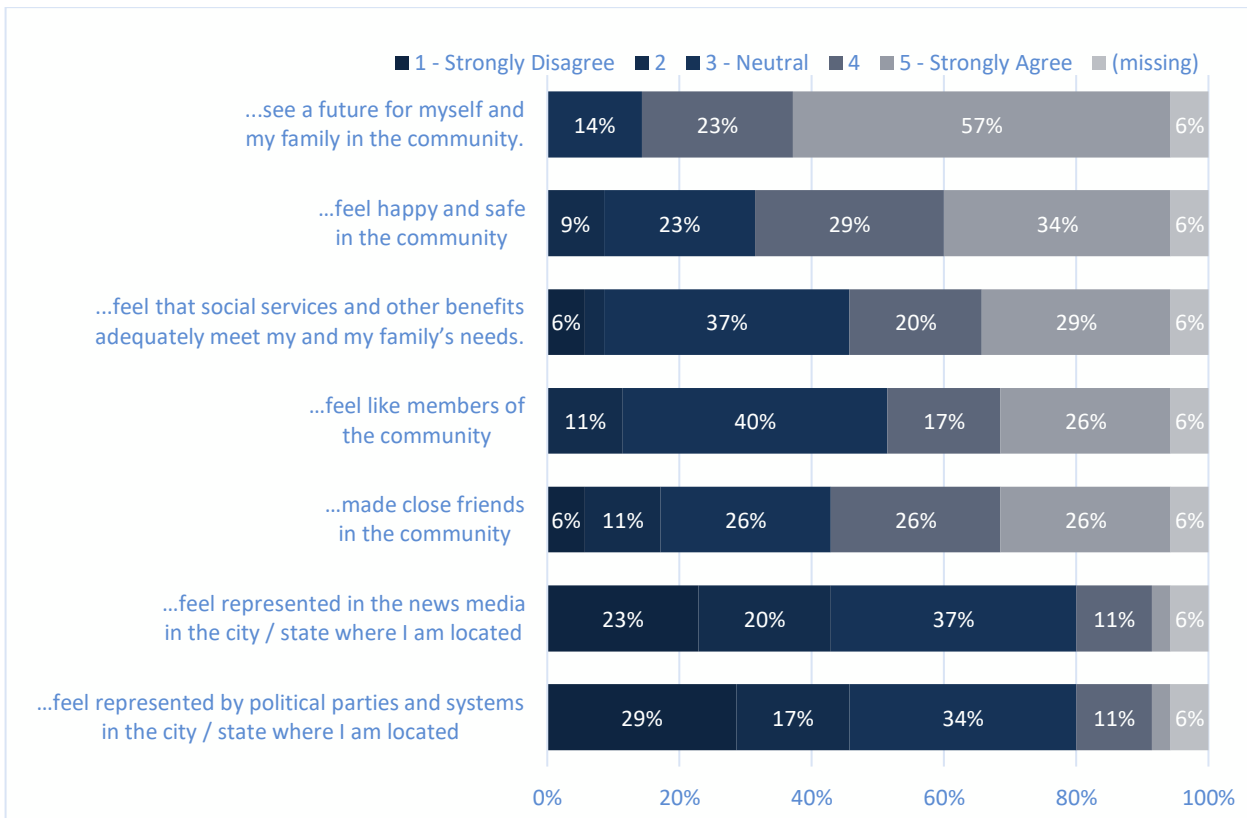


[Our wider community has] been extremely warm and welcoming. And it's been a really lovely relationship and experience. I'm sure that will continue after the financial support ends. Because we've developed relationships with [the beneficiaries]. We've had social gatherings with them, you know, [like] barbecue and brunch at Temple. We're thinking about having a Hanukkah party because really, we have an extraordinary situation, they are really such lovely people. So appreciative of all that we do they're always saying thank you and that they're working really hard to become self-sufficient." – Participant #13

“Our synagogue is totally committed to welcoming refugees. When the couple were starting their second round of ESL classes, one of our group thought the driving would be too much for our Circle to absorb, so we asked for help in the synagogue newsletter and created a sign-up...The volunteers were by and large retirees with great connections - either in the job world or had kids that were the same age that provided new socializing outlets. The couple found it beneficial to get to know the drivers and practice English and find out more about living in [our city]. They may have gotten a job or informational interview out of it as well. Two of the Bar Mitzvah kids (my son included) asked for donations for the refugee resettlement group as part of their Bar Mitzvah project. There were a lot of small donations, but there were a few large donations that finally put us in solid financial footing. From our newsletter ask, a family donated a van!” – Participant #9

### Fig. 13: 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. On a scale of 1-5, please tell us the extent to which you agree with the following statements: I /my family...



## Key Challenges

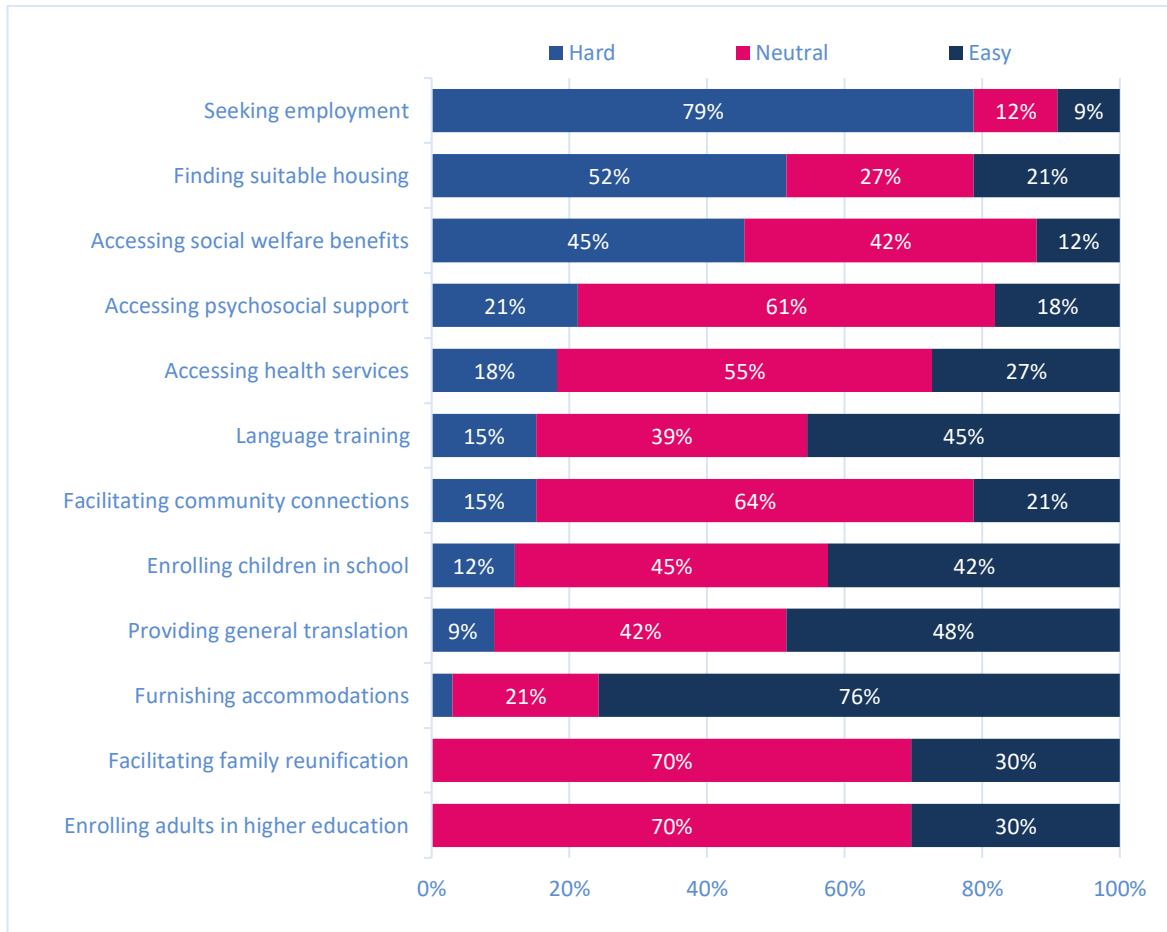
### Barriers to Integration

**Challenge 1: Affordable housing and employment remained the most challenging to obtain.** Lead Volunteers and beneficiaries ranked finding suitable housing and employment as the most challenging integration and self-sufficiency tasks. The majority of Lead Volunteers (79%) reported employment as the most challenging task to support. A few noted specific challenges in dealing with immigration bureaucracy and convoluted application processes which sometimes contributed to delayed documentation and, in some cases, delays in looking for work.

Beneficiaries noted challenges around employment. While many reported finding survival jobs (57%), fewer were able to find employment that suited their field of experience (29%). Leads noted that many of the survival jobs did not pay well enough for beneficiaries to be financially self-sufficient, particularly not within the six-month period of support.

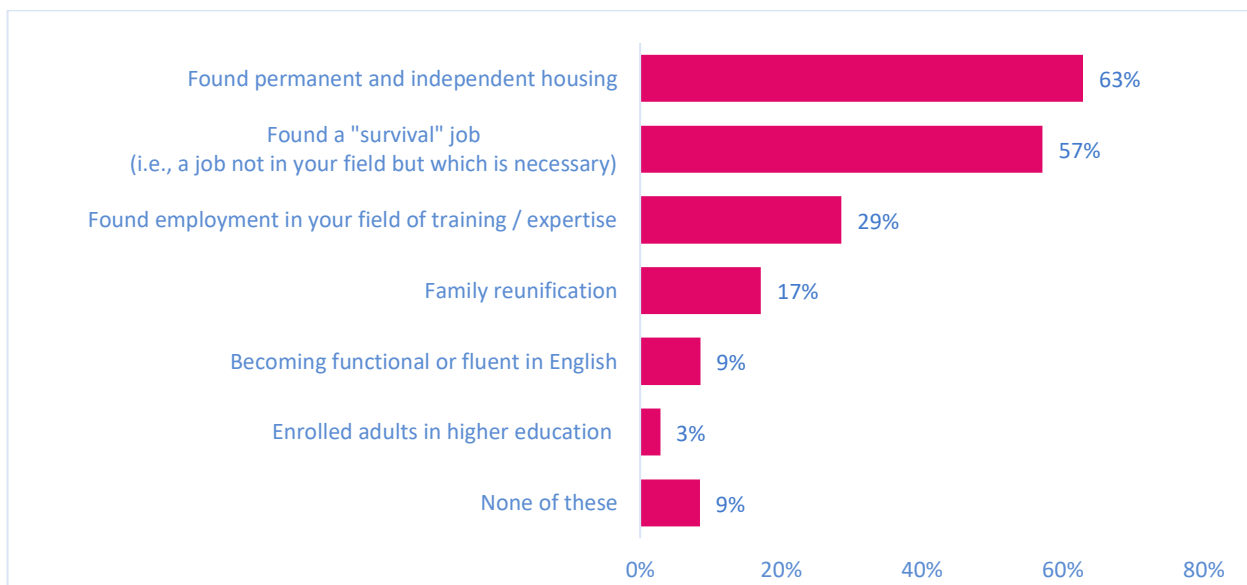
**Fig. 14: Welcome Circle Ease of Integration Support**

Q: Which integration areas have been the easiest/hardest to support?



**Fig. 15: Beneficiary Integration Metrics**

Q: This list represents some of the most essential metrics of integration. Have you or your household achieved any of the following? (Select all that apply)



**A note on transportation:** Transportation was a unique challenge in that many Welcome Circle locations had limited access to public transit. Welcome Circles described the intensive scheduling involved when needing to drive beneficiaries to nearly all required tasks like appointments, groceries, and language courses. The initial focus of many Welcome Circles was to support beneficiaries in obtaining a driver's license and purchasing a car to facilitate self-sufficiency. Those able to help beneficiaries gain access to a car noted the immediate independence and relief from volunteer burnout, and beneficiaries were equally thankful.

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*"We are INSTANTLY grateful to the whole team for [helping us gain access to a car]! It helped our family a lot in free movement and additional income for our family!" – Beneficiary Survey response*

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Beneficiaries noted challenges around employment. While many reported finding survival jobs (57%), fewer were able to find employment that suited their field of experience (29%). Leads noted that many of the survival jobs did not pay well enough for beneficiaries to be financially self-sufficient, particularly not within the six-month period of support.

## **Timeline of Welcome Circles**

**Challenge 2: A six-month timeline did not seem adequate to Welcome Circle Volunteers as more time is needed to find employment.** Indeed, several Welcome Circle Lead Volunteers interviewed suggested that six months was not long enough for beneficiaries to become self-sufficient and most provided financial and other support for at least one year. Leads suggested that the program should consider general trends around affordability and challenges to well-paying employment when structuring the program and potentially when deciding on matches.

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*"The advice [to new Welcome Circles] is to be prepared for at least a full year of continuous support. Because we are not social workers, you know, we're not familiar with all of the bureaucratic things that we will need to do. So, just to be persistent, look at every avenue of potential financial support, etc." – Participant #3*

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**Challenge 3: High cost of living also extends the timeline needs.** Other Lead Volunteers mentioned the challenge of affordability in general, regardless of timelines, remarking that those communities that can easily raise funds are often located in wealthy or expensive places to live. In particularly expensive states and cities, Lead Volunteers noted the challenge of being able to find suitable housing given beneficiaries' limited incomes and were concerned that after their support ended beneficiaries would no longer be able to afford to remain.

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*I sort of question the model of finding a community that has enough money or can raise enough money to bring someone here, but then they're in a very expensive community [like] New Jersey or the New York area or California. [Our Liaison] says it hasn't really been a problem for people to remain where they want, or sometimes they move. But when you're looking at apartments and all we can find are the things that are super expensive and are going to take half their income or more - it's a little daunting. We found a place that has a great location and good school system, but it's a very small two bedroom. It's a lot nicer than what we could have found them in cheaper towns, where I wouldn't have necessarily even felt*

*comfortable having them...I wonder if that has been an issue that other people had brought up." – Participant #19*

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*Interesting solution:* One Lead suggested a unique approach as a solution to small towns that want to support beneficiaries but lack infrastructure and jobs for long-term integration: this circle implemented their support as temporary relocation, they supported beneficiaries to get their paperwork in order, acclimatize to life in the US, and then supported their transition out of the community to a larger city when beneficiaries were ready.

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*difficult to find housing, and it's difficult to find work here, but it's a really great place to plan your next move." – Participant #2*

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While the aim of the Welcome Circle program is social integration in the community in which they are received, alternatives could be explored and adapted if the reality of affordability and limited employment opportunities persists.

## **Volunteer Well-being and Expectation Management**

**Challenge 4: Support expectations and boundaries need to be more clearly defined and communicated between volunteers and beneficiaries.** While not the norm, a few Lead Volunteers mentioned challenges with sponsorship breakdown including disagreements or misunderstandings between volunteers and beneficiaries, particularly regarding support expectations. Compared to Europe, there were more cases of sponsorship breakdown, including paternalistic views toward beneficiaries by volunteers with limited experience. Some of this paternalism stemmed from situations where newcomers were dependent on housing connected to volunteers (e.g., living in an in-law suite of a volunteer's house), and were thus limited in terms of autonomy. Other negative situations mentioned in Lead Volunteer interviews revolved around volunteers feeling that beneficiaries were not integrating quickly enough. However, in each of the various situations mentioned, Lead Volunteers reported that support from HIAS Liaisons was crucial in terms of providing clear advice on addressing intergroup relations and how to address interactions with beneficiaries. Lead Volunteers noted that while there were many beneficial and mandatory trainings that they received as Leads, they suggested that all volunteers need to understand that Welcome Circles were there to offer 'support' rather than 'adoption' of beneficiaries.

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*"With this one individual it became a little too friendly. It started crossing the boundaries between support for this family, and adopting the family... I think we had the resources to look at [this issue], and we certainly knew that we could have reached out to HIAS if we felt we needed to. I think that was the important thing is that the resource was always there."– Participant #14*

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**Potential Solution:** Lead Volunteers advised that challenges around sponsorship breakdown could be mitigated by additional mandatory training not just for Leads, but mandatory for all volunteers around expectation management, especially those hosting beneficiaries. More frequent check-ins by HIAS staff with beneficiaries and being involved in Welcome Circle meetings could also be helpful.

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*"I think the training shouldn't be mandated just for the leader. I think everyone in a Welcome Circle should go through those trainings [...] especially the safeguard training. I think people should hear that information firsthand. If they can't commit to training and the workload that involves, then honestly they're not really buying into the commitment they need to do for the Welcome Circle." – Participant #4*

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**Challenge 5: A need to manage burnout for volunteers with clearer guidance from HIAS around expectations.**

Volunteer well-being was a significant issue for some Welcome Circles, with Lead Volunteers reporting that by the end of the program many volunteers felt burnt out. While many Leads had previous experience with sponsorship and were able to rely on the community for support, sponsorship was still a very significant commitment. When asked if their Circle would be interested in supporting additional beneficiaries in the future, most reported needing a cooling-off period to refresh and recover before they would consider hosting again.

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*"[We'd be willing to help again] possibly in the future, after we stop and breathe for a while and do it again. But you know we were able to do this, which surprised me. But it was a heavy lift for us, and so I don't know if [all volunteers] would be ready to do it again. But possibly." – Participant #12*

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Many Leads noted that volunteers would benefit from a clearer understanding around time commitments and the intensive support demands, particularly in early settlement phases. The most consistent suggestions for improvement revolved around clearer guidance from HIAS around expectations and tasks or connections to other Welcome Circles to better prepare volunteers for the realities of their commitment.

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*"Functionally, it's a large workload almost daily and supporting and initially, the initial driving and other things like that ... I think [HIAS] does a really good job of saying the roles of what the Welcome Circle members are, I think, to be honest, if [HIAS] can include – certainly for the first three months, and then three months to six – a range of what that might mean, in time commitment. I think that would be helpful. I don't want it to dissuade people, but I want people to realize what the work— and the quality of work — needs to be [in order to be] involved, too. You can't do it half-assed." – Participant #4*

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**Potential Solution:** Employ the co-leadership model. Several Lead Volunteers described how their Welcome Circle implemented co-leadership models using two people to manage the circle rather than one. Leads proposed this as a best practice to split tasks and avoid burnout, particularly upon initial arrival. They also noted that co-leadership helped with sharing and delegating responsibilities and in managing intra-group dynamics and expectation management. Welcome Circle demographics seem to have played a significant role in this model, since many circles with co-leads noted that at least one did not work full time, and across all circles 94% had at least one retiree involved.



***“Make sure that the people who are offering to sponsor have ample financial resources, not the minimum because unexpected things happen. And also, ample time. I was spending like 20 hours a week on this for months. So really, you can't do it if you're employed full time. I was on leave, and I had enough time to do this, but in general it's a lot of money and a lot of time.” – Participant #8***

***“Maybe some Circles have more people who are just retired or not actually working and just balancing family but everyone in our group was either major caretakers for elderly family members or balancing part-time or full-time work. I think it should definitely be emphasized that a key Welcome Circle member cannot be someone who's working full-time and not available to juggle their work and go over to the family, or that is just willing to do weekends. – Participant #4***

***“I was very happy to have a Co-Lead. I thought the arrangement worked out great. [My co-lead] kept us on track with the administration and organizing and then I had more of the definite relationships with board members and others in the community with regard to fundraising and everything, so the combination worked great. We had excellent complementary [skillsets] to bring to the process.” – Participant #14***

## **Communication Challenges**

**Challenge 6: Pre-arrival communication with beneficiaries:** Welcome Circles felt pre-arrival communication with beneficiaries could be improved as many had the impression that they were not briefed on what to expect when arriving in the US. Lead Volunteers suggested additional standardization around pre-departure information and additional clarification with beneficiaries in terms of preparation for both the program and life in the US.

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*“[We struggled with communication around] what it is we expect of them. It's not even that they need to be supporting themselves in six months or a year. It's that they need to be trying. I think something that we underestimated was how little gets communicated in the first meeting or the first two meetings, because they're just so overwhelmed. I would say, take that slow. And really, obviously, you have a translator there, but make sure that they repeat to you that would really, be a helpful thing. Have them repeat in their own words what it is your expectations are, and what HIAS' expectations are so that it's really understood, because, you know, he sort of says, 'Oh, I didn't know.' We had the conversation multiple times, but it's hard to know whether it's him or whether it's really a misunderstanding. And we're going to give him the benefit of the doubt. But we've got to figure it out.” – Participant*

*#11*

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One Welcome Circle noted that beneficiaries were not prepared for the reality of the US in terms of crime, poverty, and lack of affordable housing or well-paying jobs, and because of this decided to return to Europe. From this experience, they suggested that beneficiaries may need to be better prepared to know the realities of what to expect in some areas of the US.

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*"It was also sad for us that they came here, and they thought that [our cities] were really scary... the fact that people, would come from a war zone and then think that America was not a safe place to live obviously made us feel really bad about America and about this situation. I don't think that this is properly covered [by HIAS], but it is shocking for people to come to a US city where there's homelessness and guns, and violent crime. I think that it is worth explaining, if [HIAS] is not explaining to newcomers, that some of the things about America are scary, and especially if you're traumatized by war, this might not be the best place to come for certain people. And [some big cities] are challenging in lots of ways, also because it's housing is expensive."— Participant #20*

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**Challenge 7: Communication about finances:** Many Lead Volunteers noted challenges communicating with beneficiaries about finances describing conversations around money as uncomfortable and lacking context based on clear program guidelines. They suggested the program could benefit from additional reminders of the available training or support regarding standardization of financial management, pre-arrival information for beneficiaries around Welcome Circles' financial commitments, and how best to discuss finances with beneficiaries. Lead Volunteers noted that it was challenging to strike a balance between support and fostering dependency when distributing finances.

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*"I would lay out whatever the group's plan for the money is. I think people need multiple conversations, especially when English isn't a first language. One conversation is not enough, and maybe an email and a couple of conversations just to make sure that the information is getting across. With money expectations, I think that's a conversation that should be had multiple times. For example, our group knew we really wanted to pay their rent for a year, but we wanted to wean them off, to give them money to pay their utilities by themselves so that they could build a credit score. But we didn't communicate that effectively or early enough [which caused some confusion]." — Participant #9*

*"Finances, that was the hardest part, I think. Talking about money is always hard, but that was really hard. Just trying to figure out. For example, when they arrived, I think they came with some cash and so they were buying things, and so the people who were hosting them in a house on their property were kind of like, wait, do they have money [or not]? At some point [their funds] run out. But when will that be? [Finances] would be one area where I feel [HIAS] could probably provide more training [and guidance]."— Participant #18*

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# Insights for Program Improvement and Lessons for other Community Sponsorship Models

Overall, Welcome Circle volunteers and Ukrainian beneficiaries reported high degrees of program satisfaction, strong interpersonal relationships, and positive steps toward self-sufficiency.

The following recommendations and insights are for program improvement and to provide some universal lessons for the growing number of community sponsorship programs in the US and globally.

## Funding for Full-Time Liaisons and Venues for Welcome Circle Peer Support

- Nearly all Leads interviewed noted that HIAS Liaison support was integral to success, particularly in navigating challenging volunteer / beneficiary relationships and potential sponsorship breakdown, but also in terms of navigating immigration bureaucracy.
- Future program design and funding should include resources for dedicated support staff.
- The labor-intensive process of case management will need to be balanced with efforts to scale program delivery.
- Programs should consider systematically leveraging the experiences and peer support of experienced sponsors. Examples may include pairing prospective sponsors with a peer mentor or mentors. Peer mentorship would also have the added benefit of gathering positive experiences and stories to build recruitment momentum.

## Expectation-Setting on Time Commitments for Settlement and Self-Sufficiency

- Welcome Circle Leads consistently reflected on realistic timeframes for achieving self-sufficiency beyond six months. These reflections are borne out in self-reported metrics from beneficiaries.
- Welcome Circle support and relationships often continued beyond six months, though without extended program support of the program.
- Training and communication should differentiate between the time-intensive aspects of the first weeks and months after settlement and longer-term integration goals.
- HIAS and other sponsor programs should develop messaging and mitigation plans for advising sponsors on post-program relationships.
- HIAS and other community sponsorship programs should consider messaging and training sponsors around a realistic and data-informed timeframe to ensure that sponsors set realistic expectations of their impacts on integration outcomes.
- Offering data-informed expectation outcomes will help alleviate the risk of volunteer burnout.
- HIAS and other sponsorship programs should consider co-leadership models within sponsor groups. They should also account for key members' availability (e.g., a mix of full-time employed and others with more available time). Larger and more varied groups will also mitigate volunteer drop-off (e.g., emergencies or vacations).

## **Expanded Volunteer Training**

- Lead Volunteers suggested mandatory volunteer training for all Welcome Circle members as a solution to prevent sponsorship breakdown and/or paternalism, and to reduce the workload on Liaisons.
- Training should include expectation management, safeguarding, and the role of Welcome Circles in fostering self-reliance.
- HIAS and other sponsorship programs should implement systematized and confidential touchpoints with beneficiaries to collect data on experiences and relationships for early interventions to mitigate paternalism or sponsorship breakdown.

## **Financial Support to Match Cost of Living**

- Selecting destinations through targeted sponsor recruitment should consider the cost of living in settlement areas.
- Financial support accounting for the cost of living should be considered for future program development.
- Lead Volunteers suggested that HIAS offer more flexibility (e.g., Welcome Circles as temporary location to achieve early settlement benchmarks and subsequent planned relocation) or more location-specific protocols for extended support for up to one year.
- Further research may be required to focus on those sponsors who de facto continued sponsorship beyond six months.

## **More Detailed Matching Criteria and Communication**

- While overall most Lead Volunteers were satisfied with HIAS matches, any negative reflections were tempered by a strong humanitarian commitment to aiding Ukrainian refugees.
- Programs should consider clear communication with sponsors about matching procedures and rationales including explaining how RUTH functions.

## **Systematized Efforts at Re-Enrollment and Recruitment**

- Welcome Circle Leads noted an absence of efforts at end-of-program debriefings and thus potential missed opportunities at understanding the likelihood of re-enrollment in Welcome Circles or other community sponsorship programs.
- HIAS should consider devoted resources for direct outreach with previous volunteers to understand opportunities and barriers for re-enrollment.

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