

Welcome Circles in Europe for People Fleeing Ukraine

Key Outcomes and Best Practices

Fact Sheet | Oct 2023

Introduction

In response to mass displacement from Ukraine, in May 2022 HIAS Europe launched the *Welcome Circles* program to enable the community-based reception and integration of people displaced from Ukraine in 12 countries across Europe.

HIAS Welcome Circles are groups of volunteers that assist newcomers in accessing housing, education, language classes, work, social services, and other needs. Volunteers are supported by professional integration coordinators in each community, and HIAS completes vetting and background checks of volunteers.

The HIAS Europe Welcome Circles program was modeled on the Sponsor Circle program that was first piloted with Afghans arriving in the United States

in 2021.¹ The US program was later expanded in 2022 to resettle Ukrainians and other newcomers. Currently, HIAS Welcome Circles provide integration support to Ukrainians throughout Europe. After the outbreak of war in Ukraine, Jewish communities in Eastern Europe started helping Ukrainians relocate from frontline countries near Ukraine to receiving countries throughout Europe. The HIAS Europe relocation program was then mobilized to support these communities by connecting Ukrainians with HIAS Welcome Circles in more distant receiving countries. Many Ukrainians also decided to remain in countries of first arrival including Poland, Moldova, and the Czech Republic where the program provides support.

Welcome Circles by the numbers



16 Circles in 12 Countries across Europe.

488 Individuals relocated from Poland and Moldova as of Sep 2023.

797

Beneficiaries supported by the circles in Europe.



■ Countries with HIAS Welcome Circles

The Impact of HIAS Welcome Circles in Europe

In 2023, **Pairity**, a research organization that uses data-driven approaches to measure resettlement and community sponsorship outcomes, conducted an interim evaluation of HIAS Welcome Circles in Europe. Key findings of the evaluation – derived from surveys and semi-structured interviews with beneficiaries, volunteers, and coordinators and reports of professional integration coordinators² – are listed below.³

The findings shed light on the successes and challenges of these circles so far and how they can improve. Pairity found that Ukrainians experienced positive

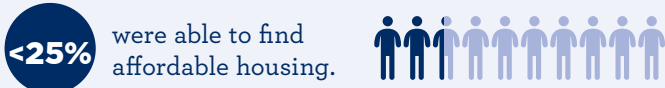
integration outcomes overall and achieved partial self-sufficiency with support from HIAS Welcome Circles. Coordinators and volunteers found that adaptability, efforts to incorporate the perspectives of people with lived experience of displacement, and localized approaches have been effective in promoting integration. Nonetheless, challenges were identified, including the short (six-month) timeframe for self-sufficiency, difficulty retaining volunteers, and challenges with long-term planning due to the uncertain nature of the war.

Integration outcomes

Welcome Circles facilitated integration by fostering connections with the broader community and helping Ukrainians to meet some of their basic needs.



Beneficiaries reported that they were able to reach self-sufficiency in some instances and access some basic needs on their own where they no longer needed to rely on Welcome Circles.



Community engagement and social cohesion

Welcome Circles helped foster connections among beneficiaries, service providers, and community organizations.



Dignity and support

The vast majority of beneficiaries were satisfied with Welcome Circle support.



Coordinator and volunteer perspectives

Coordinators and volunteers took an adaptive approach, taking on flexible and less conventional roles depending on their context. Professional integration coordinators support volunteers and manage the circle by taking on tasks such as providing workplans and coordinating group communication. Breaking from typical community sponsorship models, coordinators took on a significant amount of direct work with beneficiaries, who outnumbered the volunteers in some cases. Volunteer circles also simultaneously supported several households, rather than supporting just one (a model that HIAS typically applies in the United States).

Funding and support were perceived as flexible and responsive to community needs. Coordinators appreciated funding and support to develop flexible, community-driven programming and promote volunteer mobilization. Coordinators particularly found HIAS trainings (for instance, on Temporary Protection and strategies for volunteer coordination) helpful. Circles also fostered broader solidarity networks. A majority (74%) of coordinators connected with other community groups and organizations to better support beneficiaries.

Some Ukrainian beneficiaries became volunteers providing support based on their lived experience. In several countries, Ukrainians who had benefited from the program started participating as volunteers and mentors to newly arriving beneficiaries. This shows a circle of support where people who were now sufficiently integrated through the Welcome Circles program were able to offer their support and invaluable perspective to help new beneficiaries.

Volunteer retention remains a challenge. Coordinators indicated that it was easy to recruit volunteers but challenging to maintain their engagement over time. Some also reported instances of over-reliance on certain volunteers, leading to burnout in some cases.⁴

Lessons learned and recommendations

- **Extending the timeframe of the program.** Coordinators in Northern, Southern, and Eastern Europe indicated that six months may not be a realistic timeframe to expect beneficiaries to be fully self-sufficient.⁵ On a case-by-case basis, support may need to be extended from six months to 10-12 months. More detailed and consistent training for volunteers, and clearly defined volunteering periods, are also needed to help mitigate the risk of volunteer burnout.
- **Context specific resources.** Each circle developed distinct, localized approaches based on available resources and levels of community engagement. Context-specific resources that are aimed at longer term integration should be provided to support local communities as they adapt to structural challenges (e.g., local housing and labor markets).⁶ This localized support would complement standardized guidance on private hosting and/or community sponsorship across Europe.
- **Comparative examples of models and best practices in other countries** were of interest to local staff and volunteers. Several coordinators suggested that to improve the program, more opportunities for interactions with colleagues in different countries and professional development would be helpful. Opportunities for transnational learning and collaboration should be developed, with the aim to promote knowledge transfer.
- **Scaling up funding and support to meet the pace of arrivals in frontline countries.** Due to the scale of displacement of Ukrainians,⁷ the pace of arrivals in frontline countries and the short lead time on relocations was a source of stress and strain on volunteer resources. In anticipation of future arrivals, funding and support for increased and streamlined relocation from countries of first arrival should be scaled up.

- **A Europe-wide data portal to show available capacity.** Frontline countries noted the need for a more streamlined Europe-wide data portal that would provide an overview of which Welcome Circles have available capacity. This would improve upon data portals that already exist and make the process of relocating Ukrainians from frontline countries to other receiving countries more efficient.
- **Uncertainty regarding the war in Ukraine makes mid-to-long-term planning a challenge.** Coordinators observed that some beneficiaries were hesitant to embark on longer-term integration efforts. However, most indicated that they were more likely than not to remain in their current host country than to return home. As the program was launched as an emergency response initiative, coordinators

must now be supported in their transition towards longer-term integration objectives. Going forward, such projects must orient Ukrainians towards durable solutions, while acknowledging the uncertainty regarding eventual returns.

About the Center

The HIAS Center for Refugee Policy seeks to advance the rights of refugees and displaced people across the globe by publishing research and policy analysis, generating new policy-relevant ideas, and bringing new voices to the public conversation. The Center leverages HIAS’ global presence and over a century of experience to provide practical responses and policy solutions to the most pressing challenges concerning displaced populations.

Endnotes

1. DOS (U.S. Department of State). 2021. “Launch of the Sponsor Circle Program for Afghans.” Press Statement. October 25. <https://www.state.gov/launch-of-the-sponsor-circle-program-for-afghans/>.
2. Online surveys were received from 133 Ukrainian beneficiaries and 11 coordinators and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 coordinators.
3. Pairity. 2023. “Updated Interim Report HIAS Europe Welcome Circles for Ukraine.” August 30. (Unpublished internal report).
4. See Temporary Protection Directive. Council Directive 2001/55/EC, 2001, O.J. (L 212). <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32001L0055&qid=1648223587338>.
5. A recent study found that some of the key elements that predict whether volunteers will remain active in community sponsorship programs like Welcome Circles include the groups dynamic (i.e. tension among members or whether some leave the group), how prepared volunteers feel, and whether they receive support with difficult tasks. Belén Zanzuchi, María, Nadja Dumann, Florian Tissot, and Admir Skodo. 2023. *Attracting, Retaining, and Diversifying Sponsors for Refugees in Community Sponsorship Programmes*. Brussels: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) Europe.
6. HIAS. 2023. “Welcome Circle 6 Month Report Compilation Review: Round 1 – May 2022 – May 2023.” (Unpublished internal report).
7. *Id.*