

Community Sponsorship of Refugees

**Learnings from Innovation and Mobilization
in the HIAS Network, 2021–2024**



**Welcome the stranger.
Protect the refugee.**

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Executive Summary

Learning at an Inflection Point

From 2021 to 2024, HIAS and its partner agencies were at the forefront of a national effort to innovate how the United States welcomed refugees — by mobilizing local communities. This period followed the near-collapse of the U.S. refugee resettlement system under the first Trump administration, as resettlement actors made innovation a central strategy in rebuilding. The HIAS network tested and scaled multiple models of community sponsorship, including co-sponsorship, which matches refugee families with both professional caseworkers and trained volunteer groups. HIAS undertook a learning project to capture what this period of co-sponsorship taught us before an even more abrupt upheaval to resettlement in 2025.

As of this writing, resettlement has largely ceased, benefits long available to refugees are being rolled back, and some of the agencies and staff who carried out this work have been lost. Amid these shocks, this learning exercise took on new meaning. In addition to preserving critical knowledge, the exercise also presented an opportunity to explore a model for community mobilization and its potential applications in a changed world.

This report captures what HIAS learned from four years of fast-moving program delivery and experimentation, at a moment when creative solutions to support forcibly displaced immigrants are more needed than ever.

What We Did

This report is informed by insights from over 100 people closest to this work. HIAS held interviews and focus group discussions with 49 refugees, 33 volunteers, and 34 resettlement agency staff who participated in the co-sponsorship program across four sites, from Chicago to San Francisco's East Bay to New York City to Framingham, Massachusetts. We complemented these conversations with administrative data from the HIAS case management system and validated emerging findings with partner agency staff.

What We Learned

Refugees who experienced community sponsorship in the HIAS network recommend that it continue.

Newcomers described volunteers as accelerating the process of integrating into their new communities with confidence. Without volunteers, one said, “we would have struggled a lot more, and it would have taken us longer to adjust.” Many newcomers emphasized that volunteers' presence relieved the isolation that so often accompanies displacement. As one put it, “I didn't feel alone here.” Refugees who were interviewed consistently called for others to have access to community sponsorship in the future.

Volunteers make a difference through trusting relationships, not just tasks.

Looking beyond the government lens of “core” versus “non-core” services, volunteers' contributions fall into six roles: accompany, link, advocate, inform, advise, and fund or resource. A core insight: newcomers should set the pace of the relationship, so it never outstrips the trust that has been built.

There was no single model of co-sponsorship in the HIAS network.

Six percent of all refugee households resettled during these years were matched with co-sponsors; some locations had none, while others reached a third or more of resettled cases. Each configuration optimized for different results and scaled program requirements accordingly. Local programs varied match timing (pre- versus post-arrival), duration (three months to a year or more), and volunteer groups' financial commitments (from none to \$20,000 recommended).

The program's intensive, highly relational commitments run counter to national trends toward episodic volunteering.

Volunteer co-sponsors who took on leadership roles or repeated the experience with more than one family tended to be highly motivated, socially networked self-starters. Experienced volunteers described the work as a labor of love which many found “astonishingly rewarding” individually and enriching for groups' home institutions.



Staff of the resettlement agency Commonpoint reflect on the co-sponsorship program in a focus group. (Lindsay Kagalis/HIAS)

Co-sponsorship requires strong systems for coordination between newcomers, volunteers, and resettlement agency staff. Roles, responsibilities, and flows of information tended to require continual negotiation if not clarified early and often. Offboarding proved just as important as onboarding: clear transition pathways and deliberate decisions about extensions support families in achieving self-sufficiency and volunteer groups in preventing burnout.

Where to Go From Here

During this period, national goals remained broadly defined with local programs contextualized according to sites' varying needs and priorities. Any future co-sponsorship design should begin by articulating its "true North" in terms of desired impact, and building targeting, training, and measurement around it. Depending on its aims, a program could optimize for maximizing additionality (increasing the number of overall arrivals), mitigating risks for the most vulnerable cases, filling funding gaps, extending staff capacity, accelerating integration, mitigating psychosocial stress, or mobilizing a volunteer base. Each choice carries potential secondary benefits as well as tradeoffs which should be weighed carefully.

While the outlook for resettlement remains uncertain, leveraging the knowledge and relationships built through community sponsorship on behalf of forcibly displaced people need not wait. Conversations across sites point to a potential for movement-building on the

foundation of community sponsorship that has yet to be fully tapped. Experienced volunteers have hard-won expertise and demonstrated follow-through which could power direct service and advocacy alike.

Recommendations

- **Define and measure program results as part of a robust theory of change;** standard reporting from the 90-day post-arrival period is not sufficient on its own.
- **Standardize and document case selection criteria** so that outcomes for sponsored families can be compared with those of similar non-sponsored cases.
- **Prioritize coordination and volunteer management framework.** Ensure every site has a dedicated volunteer coordinator, strong orientation for volunteers to the role of case managers, and functional channels for case communication throughout the sponsorship period.
- **Emphasize peer learning and mentorship among volunteers.** Look for ways HIAS can provide structure and facilitation. Consider an advisory or consultative group of experienced volunteer leaders to leverage their expertise.
- **Explore ways to engage volunteer groups in support of additional populations** — refugees with continued support needs and immigrants with other statuses.



Alaa, a Syrian refugee who was matched with community sponsorship volunteers, shows drawings by her daughter in their Chicago home. (Lindsay Kagalis/HIAS)

Introduction

From 2021 to 2024, refugee resettlement actors in the United States worked to rebuild a system which had constricted to near-collapse under the first Trump administration—and made innovation a central strategy in this restoration. Several innovations focused on inviting actors outside the traditional landscape of UN and resettlement agencies to play a part. One initiative aimed to tackle backlogs in overseas processing of refugees by training NGOs to refer cases to the United States in addition to the predominant UNHCR referral channel. Other efforts focused on mobilizing volunteers from across the United States to help welcome refugees after they arrived to the country. This report explores how one such model of volunteer mobilization, community sponsorship in partnership with resettlement staff, unfolded within the HIAS network.

HIAS undertook an organizational learning project to reflect on this period before an even more abrupt upheaval to resettlement with the onset of the second Trump

administration in 2025. This report draws on interviews and focus group discussions with over 100 people involved in the community co-sponsorship program, of whom nearly half were refugees, and the rest volunteers and staff of HIAS's local partner agencies. As of this writing, resettlement has ceased for all populations with the exception of white South Africans despite urgent needs, benefits long available to refugees are being rolled back, and some of the agencies and staff who carried out this work have been lost. The question is no longer only how community sponsorship performed under favorable conditions, but what of it can be adapted and carried forward into a changed environment. How can the knowledge and relationships built over these years help respond to today's challenges?

These discussions underscore that community sponsorship did not play out as a single, uniform model across the national HIAS network. Rather, within the broad parameters of government policies and HIAS

“ The question is no longer only how community sponsorship performed under favorable conditions, but what of it can be adapted and carried forward into a changed environment. How can the knowledge and relationships built over these years help respond to today’s challenges?

training, local agencies mapped the resources of volunteers’ time, material contributions, and growing expertise onto their contexts in a variety of ways. Programs also evolved within this timeframe, in response both to shifting national guidance and local experience. As a result, stakeholders’ reflections shed light on a diversity of program models which optimized for different desired results and responded to challenges with a range of adaptations.

These experiences illuminate important design questions which any future program must address. Which outcomes should be prioritized, and what tradeoffs are presented by each choice? Should the North Star of community sponsorship be additionality —expanding agencies’ capacities to resettle a greater number of refugees? Alternatively, should the volunteer program focus on mitigating the risks faced by a smaller subset of particularly vulnerable cases? Is it most useful as a vehicle for private fundraising to fill critical gaps and reduce burden on overstretched staff, all with the aim of achieving a satisfactory level of core service quality? Or is it a way to enhance outcomes for refugees and raise the bar above the floor of mandated core services? If pursuing this latter aim, which specific outcomes are to be emphasized — financial stabilization, social integration, psychosocial wellness, or something else? To what extent should it be underscored as a means for invigorating local communities and institutions who do the welcoming — providing ways for Americans to engage in meaningful social action and strengthen relationships within their neighborhoods, congregations, and workplaces?

Reflections on community sponsorship in these years also speak to broader questions facing efforts to organize on behalf of refugee and immigration issues.

What can community sponsorship illuminate about the drivers of certain types of community mobilization — particularly, intensive and highly relational modes of volunteering? What impact does the experience have on volunteers’ own outlooks and actions beyond the program? What insights can we glean about the process of rebuilding and pivoting after prior setbacks?

Acknowledgements

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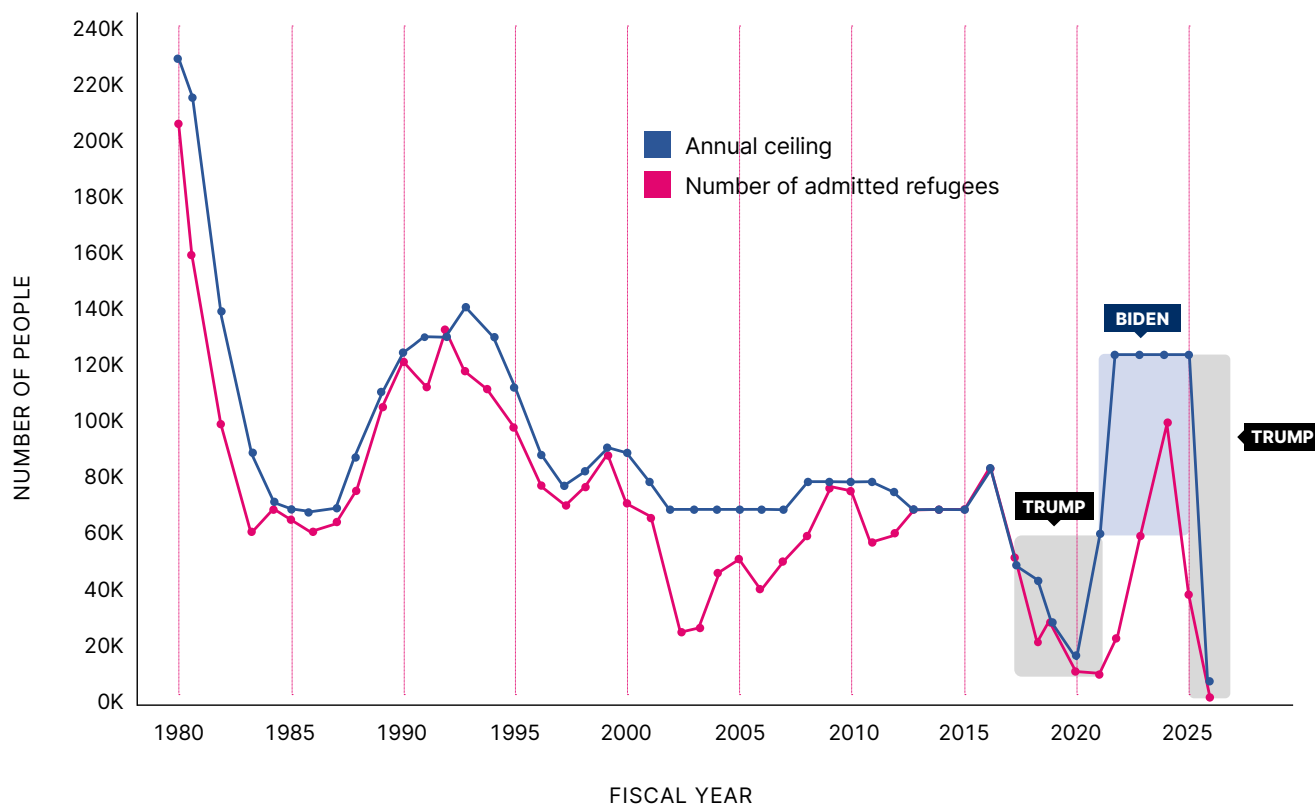
Finally, the team thanks Walder Foundation, whose support created the space to convene and reflect to drive the kind of learning needed to realize the full potential of this work.

Revival of US Community Sponsorship

For the past several decades, the “traditional model” of refugee resettlement in the United States has assigned non-governmental resettlement agencies to oversee the delivery of a set of mandated core services to newcomers. Each refugee household is assigned a professional caseworker who coordinates service delivery in the 90 days after their arrival. Versions of community sponsorship have existed alongside the traditional model, but the approach received a new level of focus and investment beginning in 2021.

Within weeks of taking office, President Biden issued an executive order laying out a vision for rebuilding the resettlement program from its state of retrenchment at the close of the first Trump administration. Community mobilization featured as a key strategy, with the executive order stating, “To meet the challenges of restoring and expanding USRAP, the United States must innovate, including by effectively employing technology and capitalizing on community and private sponsorship of refugees, while continuing to partner with resettlement

US Refugee Resettlement Ceilings and Actual Admissions, FY1980–2026*



* Refers to the first five months of fiscal year (FY) 2026: October 1, 2025 – February 28, 2026.

Source: Migration Policy Institute

agencies for reception and placement.” Additionality was highlighted as a central goal—the idea that by engaging volunteers, the United States would be able to welcome more refugees than through traditional agency models alone.

The need for greater capacity intensified in the face of new displacement crises: the fall of Kabul in August 2021 and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022. With need acute and public interest strong, the State Department partnered with the Community Sponsorship Hub and a network of nonprofit partners—HIAS included—to catalyze private sponsorship groups which put implementation more fully in the hands of volunteers. Meanwhile, resettlement agencies received guidance from the State Department on the hybrid model of co-sponsorship in which families would receive support both from professional caseworkers and from volunteer groups.

This government guidance focused heavily on certain aspects of program design and implementation.

Cooperative agreements between the State Department and resettlement agencies drew distinctions between volunteer groups providing a “majority” of government-mandated “core services” and those providing supplemental services outside the parameters of those deemed “core.” Program regulations required volunteer groups engaged in core services to sign (non-legally binding) written agreements with local resettlement agencies. Uncertainty around these distinctions led to challenges in both recruitment and monitoring, as some volunteer groups were reticent to sign agreements, particularly for first-time commitments, and groups which began with supplemental support took on responsibilities in the realm of core services.

On other points, government program guidelines were silent. For example, no requirements were set for selection criteria for which refugee cases should be prioritized for matching; financial or material commitments expected from volunteer groups; program duration; and coordination structures between resettlement agency staff and volunteers, beyond the basic supervisory nature of the relationship. HIAS broadly passed on this room for choice to implementing partner agencies, and as a result, local programs varied across all these aspects.

Each agency took a different approach to selecting families for co-sponsorship matches. Matches made prior

to families’ arrival to the United States relied on the data available in case files, such as household size and composition, documentation of severe medical conditions, and recorded language and educational backgrounds. Some agencies prioritized large families and those with known medical needs. However, pre-arrival data could be incomplete or not line up with assessments made by agencies upon arrival. JFCS East Bay chose to match all families post-arrival, with a requirement for at least one member of the household to speak English to facilitate communication with volunteers. Other sites matched families post-arrival when volunteer teams were not available earlier, or when they assessed families to need additional support adjusting.

Defining Terms

In the United States, **community sponsorship** is a broad term that refers to both private sponsorship and co-sponsorship models of refugee resettlement.

- In **private sponsorship**, volunteer groups play the role of caseworkers, with remote technical assistance and oversight from an agency.
- In **co-sponsorship**, volunteer groups support refugees who have a professional case manager from a local refugee service provider.

Local programs also varied the responsibilities assigned to volunteers, expected (or encouraged) financial commitments, and sponsorship durations, with these program aspects tending to scale in tandem. At the intensive end of the spectrum, formal match periods were up to a year long, with volunteers providing significant financial resources and core services which could include greeting refugees at the airport; providing initial housing and basic furnishings; facilitating school registration for children, initial medical screenings, Social Security application, and benefits enrollment; assistance with English language learning; and/or assistance with employment services. At the other end of the spectrum, the role of volunteers was explicitly limited to tasks outside the realm of core services with a time limit of three months and no financial contributions. Beyond the initial

Local Co-Sponsorship Models at a Glance

Location/Agency	Time commitment	Financial commitment	Timing of match
Concord, CA JFCS East Bay	3 months; 1 month extension possible	None	Post-arrival only
Chicago, IL JCFS Chicago	6 months	\$10K recommended to pooled fund	Pre-arrival preferred; post-arrival when volunteers not available
New York, NY Commonpoint	6–12 months; no hard stop	\$15K minimum per case	Typically pre-arrival; post arrival for specific cases
Framingham, MA JFS Metrowest	12 months; no hard stop	\$20K recommended	Pre-arrival preferred; post-arrival when volunteers not available

As of data collection in 2025

match period, approaches varied to formal extensions and offboarding or transition from a formal relationship to informal ties. Volunteers' roles are explored further in a later section.

Between Fiscal Year 2021 and Fiscal Year 2024, co-sponsorship served a small minority of cases on a national level, with significant variation across locations. According to administrative data, **six percent of all refugee households resettled by the HIAS network during these years were matched with co-sponsors; some locations had no co-sponsorship, and in other locations co-sponsorship reached a third or more of resettled cases.** The administrative record likely

undercounts the full reach of co-sponsorship as program staff noted under-reporting of sponsorship matches in the database used to manage resettlement cases, and spot checks revealed some verified sponsored cases not recorded as such. Among co-sponsored cases, the five top countries of origin match those of the overall HIAS Reception and Placement program during this time period: Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Syria, Venezuela, and Burma.¹ The average household size for co-sponsored cases was four people, slightly larger than the average of three people in non-sponsored cases.

¹ Note: Volunteer support to Ukrainians mostly took place through private sponsorship initiatives around the humanitarian parole program United for Ukraine.



Newcomers resettled in New York City reflect on their experiences with community sponsorship volunteers in a focus group. (Lindsay Kagalis/HIAS)

Methodology

The report explores the period from Fiscal Year 2022 (October 1 2021) through the end of Fiscal Year 2024 (September 30 2024). Interviews and focus group discussions were conducted between January and August 2025 with 49 refugees resettled through USRAP and matched with co-sponsors during the years under review; 33 volunteers, including a mix of group leaders and those not in leadership roles; and 34 resettlement agency staff including resettlement directors, case managers, and employment coordinators. Four sites were visited: Concord, California, in San Francisco's East Bay; New York City; Chicago, Illinois; and Framingham, Massachusetts. Sites were selected for their level of activity in the HIAS co-sponsorship program.² Administrative data from the IRIS case management database were also reviewed, and a reflection session with partner agency staff served to validate emerging findings.

This methodology has several limitations. All sites visited are in high cost-of-living areas, which may shape

how findings translate to other contexts. In addition, high levels of staff turnover occurred during the project period both at HIAS and at partner agencies as a result of federal policies changes and funding to resettlement organizations, reducing access to some institutional memory. In light of this attrition, documentation is arguably all the more vital to preserve knowledge. The interview sample also reflects who remained reachable and willing to participate. The refugees who spoke with the team had, for the most part, completed the full match period and stayed in contact with their agencies, and the volunteers interviewed represented a committed core with years of experience; families whose matches ended early or unhappily, and volunteers who stepped away, are underrepresented. The accounts that follow should be read with that selection in mind. Where the data allow, the report notes points on which experiences diverged.

² As part of this project, a 2025 report focuses on Chicago specifically: [Community Sponsorship of Refugees in Chicagoland](#).

What Does Community Sponsorship Mean for Newcomers?

With that context and those caveats in mind, the report turns first to the people the program exists to serve. **Interviews and focus group discussions with 49 refugees who had participated in the community sponsorship program converged on one point: without exception, these newcomers called for the program to continue.** They described it as highly relevant to the needs of newly arrived families, and believed their own resettlement experiences would have suffered in its absence. Aware of the pressures on the resettlement system in 2025, several refugees interviewed appealed directly to volunteers and agencies. As one newcomer put it: “Don’t let this work die.”

When asked how the program affected refugees, many newcomers and agency staff emphasized similar themes. Material support, where present, helped families bridge critical gaps in their first months. This was particularly vital in areas where low-income families face extreme housing cost burdens. More broadly, the presence of volunteers added more human elements to the highly bureaucratic process of resettlement which newcomers found made it easier to see the path they were walking, and to manage the journey. Newcomers described the reassurance of feeling volunteers could be their extended “eyes” — people who understand their new environment and can help families make sense of it with their best interests in mind.

Mary, resettled from Colombia, shares the impact of having volunteers welcome her and her family to Chicago.
(Lindsay Kagalis/HIAS)





“ Families really, really benefit with a sense of belonging and not feeling isolated.

— Case manager and formerly resettled refugee

Two boys resettled with their parents in Chicago talk about what they're learning in school. (Lindsay Kagalis/HIAS)

In the short term, newcomers described volunteers as helping them get their bearings, both in terms of knowledge and in terms of confidence. Some newcomers believed they would have had worse employment outcomes without volunteer support—e.g. defaulting to gig work, not working in their chosen field, having dangerous working conditions or punishingly long commutes. Several said that the support accelerated their stability. “We would have struggled a lot more,” one newcomer said, “and it would have taken us longer to adjust, a much longer time.” Some staff shared a similar assessment. “When you compare families with volunteers and families without volunteers,” a case manager said, “you feel that families who get volunteers here know the city, the rules, the system faster.”

Specific impacts were mentioned, including greater mobility for women expressing safety concerns. One newcomer said that after arriving, “my wife was very scared to go outside. Volunteers helped her a lot.” Another said volunteers were particularly helpful in assuaging anxiety about how she would be perceived wearing the hijab. “The volunteer said, ‘Don’t worry about anything. It’s your right. It’s your thing.’ They were kind enough to give us that courage to move around.”

Newcomers and staff alike also emphasized emotional benefits. “The act of resettling is traumatic in itself,”

one staff member emphasized. “And with community sponsorship, it relieves a lot of that stress for people.” Refugees described feeling that people in their new communities welcomed them and cared about their welfare. “Knowing there was somebody on the other side expecting me kind of kept me going,” a single refugee who was matched pre-arrival recalled.

Upon arrival, the more social nature of interactions with volunteers can relieve isolation many refugees experience. One case manager who first arrived to the country as a refugee herself said, “When a client only has the case manager or agency, there’s a set of rules, there are boundaries, so no matter how hard we try, there’s a disconnect in a way; they don’t feel like we’re a family. They will tell us, ‘I don’t have anyone to visit on the weekends. We go nowhere.’ You know, their kids don’t get invited to birthday parties...When you team them up with a volunteer, they start forming a sense of friendship, a belonging when they’re totally displaced from their country. Families really, really benefit with a sense of belonging and not feeling isolated.”

In addition to the stressors of resettlement, several newcomers shared that they were most affected by volunteers’ support for them in moments of personal crisis after arriving, including illnesses or deaths in the family.

“I didn’t feel alone here.”

One refugee spoke about how volunteers helped him navigate the early months as head of household for a family of seven with two complex medical cases. “I didn’t have big expectations,” he said, but the volunteers helped with medical appointments, accompanied him through the process of getting his driver’s license, and spent time with one adult family member with cerebral palsy on outings to local parks. Ultimately, he found in them emotional support he “could not have imagined.” He said, “After we came to the United States, my mom was diagnosed with cancer. My mom had surgery at a hospital 50 miles away from my home. I was alone there with my mom for the surgery. One of the volunteers mentioned that she would come and be with me for the surgery. I didn’t expect her to—I told her, it’s a long drive. But she came. She was with me in the hospital for six to seven hours. **It gave me a lot of emotional support. I didn’t feel alone here. I didn’t feel I am in a foreign country. I felt I am in my own country, that I have someone with me.**”

— Refugee resettled from Afghanistan

Newcomers also expressed appreciation for diversity, pluralism, and volunteerism as values they came to associate with American culture. This experience “got us excited about integrating” said one newcomer. Several said they want to volunteer themselves in the future. One said, “I learned from them that we have to be nice with humankind. We have to be kind with humankind without considering race, gender, thoughts, and religions. So this is the most important thing that I learned from them. And to be honest, in the future, I will help those people who are in real need as we were.”

It should be noted that not all matches resulted in strong rapport. While newcomers interviewed said they felt their privacy and boundaries were respected by volunteers, staff recalled cases when families decided they were not comfortable with the level of involvement volunteers wished to have—for example, attending an appointment uninvited, or pushing for an unwelcome role in managing the family’s finances. In a small number of cases, families withdrew from the match. Input from interviewees suggests that some of these mismatches boil down in part to volunteer training on boundaries and in part to individual expectations and styles. It also appears that rapport could be hurt in some cases by confusion around the role of volunteers versus agency staff, which will be covered in another section.

Broadly, interviewed newcomers report satisfaction with the program and a sense that they were better off for it. Multiple newcomers compared their experience to friends or relatives who were resettled without volunteer support, and concluded they had benefited from this addition. This qualitative feedback is strong and persistent across all locations. However, tracking outcomes systematically would require grappling with the limitations of existing data systems for initial resettlement. Administrative data on initial resettlement focus on task completion within the 90-day window, as well as a limited set of outcomes, including whether refugees were employed and whether income exceeds expenses. For the period studied, comparisons between cases with and without community sponsorship are difficult even on these narrow datapoints. As described earlier, families’ selection for community sponsorship was not random, and did not follow standard criteria which could be used to identify non-sponsored cases to which they could be reasonably compared.

Feedback from interviews suggests that to capture the outcomes of the program, a monitoring system would ideally address newcomers’ subjective senses of confidence, agency, well-being, and perceptions of belonging. These changes could also be traced over a longer-term horizon, with an eye to assessing integration and thriving.

Volunteers' Roles

To view the role of volunteers through the lens of core versus non-core services is to take the standpoint of a government program regulated for standardization and compliance. Interviews with newcomers, volunteers, and staff offer another lens: the roles volunteers fulfilled in newcomers' lives. These functions can be sorted into the following categories: accompany, link, advocate, inform, advise, and fund or resource. All of these roles are inherently relational. What combination of functions volunteers played—and with what intensity—depended on local agency policies, newcomers' preferences, and volunteers' resources.

Accompany

The most common role volunteers played across all sites was accompaniment. Compared to resettlement staff, volunteers have disproportionately more time to dedicate to interacting with newcomers, and more discretion about how to use their time, while caseworkers must follow prescribed processes to complete core services. A staff member said, "I think volunteers have the luxury of fully focusing on services to clients and really just being present with a client and trying to facilitate their goals. And [staff] unfortunately, are beholden to federal reporting requirements that are maintained across all of the programs. So that's just an unfortunate reality of how the system is set up, that a case manager sometimes is spending who knows what proportion of their time on case notes and documents and donation values, and not as much time as we would love to spend with a client."

Volunteers provided rides to and from the maze of appointments new arrivals must navigate with medical providers, government offices, or job interviews. Volunteers also provided accompaniment to help orient refugees to their new surroundings, opening bank accounts, practicing commutes on public transportation, making introductory visits to the public library, or touring local parks.

In some cases, accompaniment extended from the physical to the emotional. Several newcomers across locations spoke of inviting volunteers to support them

through life cycle events, including births, weddings, medical events, and deaths of close relatives. One male newcomer said, "For me, the best part was emotional support, beyond the other things that they did for us, like materials and transportation, all those things that [other newcomers] mentioned...I cannot share my problems with my parents back in my country because my parents have some health issues and I cannot share all the situations of my life which is going on here. They are not even aware that my son has a disease and he's taking blood transfusions month by month. So I can share all of my emotions with [the volunteers], and so can my wife."

“ A core insight may be that newcomers should set the pace of the relationship with volunteers, so it doesn't outstrip the level of trust which has been built.

Whether accompaniment is welcome, however, depends on boundaries as described in the earlier section on how newcomers viewed the program. A core insight may be that newcomers should set the pace of the relationship with volunteers, so it doesn't outstrip the level of trust which has been built.

Link

Volunteers acted as connectors to link newcomers to resources and make introductions. This bridging support was especially notable in the area of employment. Volunteers leveraged their social capital and networks to help newcomers secure initial employment or in some cases to find a more favorable job in terms of pay, working conditions, or commute length. At times, it was the host institution of the volunteer group which provided relevant contacts, underscoring how institutional sponsorship for volunteer groups offers an additional layer of social capital which can be mobilized on behalf of



newcomers. Other examples of linking included helping newcomers find healthcare providers or conveniently located low or no-cost English language classes.

Linking newcomers to other members of their linguistic, cultural, or religious communities was less commonly mentioned. Some newcomers said volunteers connected them to local mosques or churches. In a few cases, groups which had worked with more than one family from the same country put the families in touch with each other—although agency policies on this varied.

Advocate

Another role volunteers played was to advocate for newcomers in order to remove barriers, mitigate challenges, or assist in negotiations. Examples given in interviews included securing placement for children in summer camps or afterschool programs with fee waivers or deadline extensions. Another was negotiation with utility companies—with gas and electricity fee structures being a common shock for many newly arrived refugees. One newcomer interviewed spoke about the multiple steps volunteers helped him navigate to address his utility bill. “The first month I actually received a gas and electric bill for over \$2,000. And the volunteers went with me to the [utility company] office. All the offices were closed, Finally, we contacted [the company] via phone, and they found a representative, and we discussed that. [The volunteer] introduced me as a low-income person, so finally I got the monthly

discount, like 30% or 35%. I renewed that by myself this year.”

Agency staff noted that while advocacy can be a valuable support, when it tips into volunteers solving problems for newcomers rather than playing a supporting role as newcomers tackle the problem, this can delay learning and confidence. The co-sponsorship model in which families are paired with both volunteers and case managers can present risks of triangulation, one resettlement director reflected. At times she said “it’s just the case manager and the volunteers talking about decisions about the clients, which I don’t like. The clients need to be actively coming and problem solving with us. Oftentimes, they just bring the problem to us, the clients, and don’t really problem solve. So when I’m part of those meetings, sometimes I just bounce it back to them. Like, ‘what would you do? What do you think your solutions are?’ But volunteers, I think they just take that on and they just come up with a solution. And they’re good solutions. It’s not that they’re not. It’s just the family is not going through the process of coming up with that on their own.”

Striking this balance requires careful orientation and training, a topic covered in a later section. One volunteer recalled, “One thing that [the volunteer coordinator] said to me really stuck and I think helped me. She said, remember, you’re not there to save them. You’re there to help them become more independent.”

Inform and/or Advise

Compared to both volunteers and staff, newcomers have disproportionately less information about the new context in which they find themselves. Volunteers helped fill this gap through informal, everyday cultural orientation: how to use bank cards, how to recognize common scams, and where to find culturally appropriate food or good deals.

Some newcomers want only information, while others welcome advice as well. The line between informing and advising can be a fine one, but interviewees emphasized this is a distinction which must be handled with care. One newcomer said, “It’s good to listen to advice, whether you take it or leave it. But regardless of whether you take it or leave it... personally, I really appreciate receiving advice.” Another said, “I think their role is not counseling. Their role is to introduce the systems, introduce the behaviors, introduce all of things for us. It’s just not advice, not counseling.”

Several newcomers gave examples of advice from volunteers which was welcome and helpful. These examples included how to approach the job-seeking process in the United States or legal norms a family may need to consider in terms of power of attorney for managing a member’s healthcare. When trust had been established, refugees sometimes continued to seek volunteers’ advice after the formal sponsorship period had ended—for instance when considering neighborhoods for their next apartment. Certain topics were described in interviews as more sensitive, including those related to parenting choices or financial decisions.

“ The line between informing and advising can be a fine one, but interviewees emphasized this is a distinction which must be handled with care.

There is a risk that newcomers may fear negative consequences should they not follow a volunteer’s advice. One staff member gave an example: “The volunteer wanted to sign the kids up for an afterschool program.

And the parents were like, okay, let’s sign them up. But it was not what they wanted. The volunteer kept pushing it. When I went to visit the family last week, when we talked about it, the mom was so quiet. And then when I said the words—‘At the end of the day, the volunteers are here to support you, but the choice is yours. You can just simply say no.’—that’s when I saw huge relief on her face.”

Socioeconomic divides can compound the power differential, something a newcomer described as adding unspoken pressure to advice from volunteers. “If I go to a volunteer’s house [and] the house is so nice, they have good cars, and they have plans for vacations and everything...there might be a feeling of a kind of superiority and inferiority. Then the next time he or she tells me something, I accept it as a directive.”

Resource

The final role volunteers can play is to provide funds or material resources. This role varies significantly across the sites. JFCS East Bay explicitly prohibited financial contributions by volunteers in the latest version of their program, having assessed the flow of money to exacerbate dynamics of “saviourism” in an earlier iteration. In New York City, fundraising is a mandatory precondition for Commonpoint volunteers, as the program is designed to help offset the high cost of living and particularly housing costs. This is a pattern which holds up across all refugee resettlement cases the agency accepts; if not matched to a volunteer group, cases must generally have a local contact (or “U.S. tie”) capable of providing similar assistance. Chicago and Framingham sites fall in the middle, having launched programs with fundraising requirements they have relaxed over time. At the Chicago site, funds raised by co-sponsor groups are channeled through a central pooled fund rather than passing directly from volunteers to families, adding a layer of distance.

The use of funds also varies, from paying for much of a family’s basic expenses—including rent—for an initial period to temporary supplemental support when families faced delays in receiving benefits such as SNAP to ancillary fees such as driving lessons or summer camp fees. In-kind donations commonly related to home goods, such as televisions or a washer/dryer.



Khatereh, a refugee from Afghanistan who was matched with community volunteers, in the California cafe she runs with her family. (Margo Balboni/HIAS)

Material offerings can be a trust-builder, when the value is immediate and concrete—e.g. groceries or core items for the house. However, some donations are less than straightforward. In particular, some volunteer leaders said they had seen car donations lead to issues if not accompanied with orientation to how car insurance requirements, traffic laws, and parking tickets work in that city and state, and agreement on whether volunteers will pay for such costs related to the car.

Where present beyond token amounts, money can become a salient frame through which the community sponsorship dynamic is viewed by both parties. Interviews highlighted that there can be confusion about the funds, particularly when volunteers are the ones managing funds directly to donate to families; one family expressed in an interview that they thought the volunteers were inviting the family to dine out for meals with using the family's public benefits cards. Where

“ Where present beyond token amounts, money can become a salient frame through which the community sponsorship dynamic is viewed by both parties.

volunteers are directly involved in covering housing costs, this can be a flash point given the high stakes and many barriers to affordable decent housing. At the time of writing, there have been widespread rollbacks in benefits previously available to refugees, including SNAP. Should these rollbacks persist, the need for financial support to meet basic needs may become overriding.

A Model of Community Mobilization

Without volunteers, there is no community sponsorship. Understanding volunteer experiences is critical to making community sponsorship sustainable and scalable.

Recruitment

After a surge in volunteering interest when the community sponsorship program first reopened, demand for volunteers came at times to outpace supply. Some volunteer groups did not repeat the experience after an initial match, and some groups saw internal attrition requiring leads to assemble new teams. The individuals interviewed in 2025 represented a bedrock volunteer base who have many combined years of experience working with multiple refugee cases—as many as eight families in the case of some volunteers. Interviews with this core cadre show similarities in motivators, skills, and preferred modes of collaborating.

“Without volunteers, there is no community sponsorship. Understanding volunteer experiences is critical to making community sponsorship sustainable and scalable.”

Dedicated community sponsors are not typical volunteers. In important ways, the program design runs counter to broader trends in the United States around volunteerism, which have seen an increased demand for flexible, short-term, or episodic volunteer opportunities. This contrasts markedly with the intensive nature of community sponsorship, even for those not in lead roles. As one volunteer put it: “It’s not just the time commitment. You’re committing to have a role in people’s lives.” In addition to being highly relational, accompanying refugees through resettlement is also often highly bureaucratic.

The volunteers who successfully navigated this work tended to be highly motivated, socially-networked self-starters. Many group leads and repeat volunteers were deeply engaged members of their communities, often within religious institutions or civic associations which they drew on for volunteers. The most common demographic profiles are people retired from professional jobs within the past five to ten years, with interviewees noting that the time commitments had limited recruitment and retention for volunteers of working age and/or raising small children. Women are represented in greater proportion than men.

“Dedicated community sponsors are not typical volunteers.”

In interviews, they expressed a bias towards action, preferring hands-on application of their values to other paths like philanthropic giving alone. Some identified these values as faith-based and others as secular. A subset of volunteers said they were motivated by their identities as the children or grandchildren of immigrants. A further subset were immigrants themselves, including at least one person who received asylum through the support of HIAS decades earlier. These motivators align with findings of data collected on private sponsorship volunteers through More in Common and Community Sponsorship Hub.

At each site, there was a cadre of volunteers who had been engaging in some version of community sponsorship since the 2010s, partnering with various institutions to do so. For others, media coverage of the evacuation of Kabul or invasion of Ukraine had been a catalyst to organize. A few had gotten involved after learning of the opportunity through HIAS or a local partner agency. **For most lead volunteers at least, recruitment appeared to be largely a matter of agencies capturing interest rather than generating it.** Lead volunteers themselves



“ To better support volunteers, interviewees suggested a greater emphasis on concrete task aids designed for real-time use and creating more opportunities for peer-to-peer learning.

Staff of the resettlement agency JCFS Chicago reflect on the co-sponsorship program in a focus group.
(Lindsay Kagalis/HIAS)

act as recruiters within their communities, with experienced ones developing a sense for how to match people to tasks and turn away potential volunteers who do not demonstrate the needed level of follow-through; or, in the words of one leader, “the people who want to want to help, but don’t actually want to help.”

Training

HIAS and local agencies provided training to volunteers. Some sites had developed full handbooks, while others had diffused materials and presentations. In general, volunteers interviewed felt that this training provided strong framing to conceptualize the resettlement journey and the role of sponsors. To better support volunteers, interviewees suggested a greater emphasis on concrete task aids designed for real-time use and creating more opportunities for peer-to-peer learning.

Volunteers gave positive feedback on the orientation HIAS and agencies provided to frame the community sponsorship dynamic. Units on trauma-informed communication, cultural humility, and a strengths-based approach to supporting families to exercise their agency were frequently mentioned. While orientation materials also referenced task-based information, volunteers found that it wasn’t always in a format which felt accessible at the moments they needed to put it into action. Reflecting on housing training, one volunteer said, “It was so abstract I couldn’t actually take it in. So I look back [at the training] and I went, oh, that was available to me. It didn’t register until you’re in it.”

In terms of practical tools, volunteers voiced a need for checklists or needs screening tools which can be used while meeting with newcomers or preparing for tasks. One volunteer explained, “Your health care team should have an intake form and this is what they need to figure out: Has this family ever had dental care? Have the kids ever seen pediatricians? I didn’t need someone to tell me how to make a dentist appointment; I know how to make a dentist appointment. But I need something to remind me when to do this.” In some cases, volunteers took the initiative to develop these for their groups. Some felt that training schedules should include opportunities to refresh to reflect the fact that experienced groups may include new individual volunteers, or volunteers engaging in a new aspect of the work.

Many volunteers interviewed wanted more opportunities to exchange knowledge with volunteers in other groups, both to draw on support and to pass on the expertise they had developed over time. As one volunteer said, “You need to have more established volunteers who are comfortable serving as mentors. Then you don’t feel you are in a bubble...Even more so than the case managers, working with veteran volunteers was helpful.”

Volunteer-Staff Coordination

Co-sponsorship weaves a new tier of actors into a complex process of resettlement. Clarity of roles and flows of communication between volunteers and staff have emerged as the key hinges on which this collaboration turns.

“ Co-sponsorship weaves a new tier of actors into a complex process of resettlement. Clarity of roles and flows of communication between volunteers and staff have emerged as the key hinges on which this collaboration turns.

While sites more commonly put volunteers in direct contact with case managers in earlier iterations of community sponsorship, many adjusted after finding that the volume of communication often led to challenges for case managers balancing their broader caseloads, which include both sponsored and non-sponsored cases. Newer models typically include a dedicated volunteer coordinator who is the primary contact, and varying access to case management teams. This coordination question carries an equity dimension. Because matched families often have volunteers advocating on their behalf, there is a risk that staff attention tilts toward them and away from families without volunteers. If non-sponsored families effectively receive less from overstretched case managers as a result, that would be a harmful spillover of the program onto the wider refugee population—and a reason to weigh how staff time is allocated across both groups, not only how volunteers and staff divide the work on a given case.

If roles and responsibilities are not strictly delineated, they tended to require continual negotiation. This includes an understanding both of what the volunteer role is, but also what a caseworker does—which may be less clear to volunteers who have reduced contact with case managers in the newer coordinator models. One volunteer reflected, “One of the challenges with the model is that those of us able to volunteer our time come from affluent communities, and are used to a certain service level, and then place those expectations on case managers making \$35,000 a year.” What volunteers may find frustrating is “the reality of social services in the United States.”

Some volunteers expressed frustration with what they describe as one-way information flows, where they report to staff but have limited visibility in processes and tasks on the staff side. In an ideal setup, one said,

“there would be as much accountability to us as our accountability to them.” **Solutions suggested include stronger orientation to the role of the case manager, delineation of roles and responsibilities, and regularly scheduled check-in meetings throughout the match period.**

Offboarding and Transition

The wind-down of a community sponsorship match is an area where more complete and consistent guidance may benefit families and volunteers alike. Sites varied in how they handled extensions, offboarding, and transition of the formal sponsorship relationship to informal ties which parties may choose to continue. What stood out strongly was the importance of a clear

“ The offboarding training is just as important as the onboarding training.

—Volunteer

pathway to transition from the start of a match. This includes orienting families to the time-bound nature of the support, and training volunteers on how to manage the trajectory of their support with a shared understanding of this transition in mind. As one volunteer put it, “The offboarding training is just as important as the onboarding training.”

Some good practices included setting check-ins with families at regular intervals to re-ground the group in the timeline for transition. A volunteer reflected,

“The challenge is how do you keep repeating this is the expectation because they arrive and it’s overwhelming.



Community sponsorship volunteers share their experiences in a New York focus group. (Lindsay Kagalis/HIAS)

There are so many layers. There's so many faces. There's so many things that [newcomers] have to comprehend. Even who [the volunteers] are and why we're here and who is who to reach out to. What we've learned is this: the idea that for the first three months, this is what we're going to focus on. Here's a checklist for three months. And then this is what we're doing for the next six months...The whole idea is not to make it a cliff."

In addition, volunteers envisioned ideal approaches to transition planning including formal stock-taking of needs for extensions on the one hand, and celebrations of the distance traveled on the other. "What does it mean to have a celebratory final dinner together? What does it mean to look back and check milestones? What if there's an exception? What if someone stumbles or there's an illness or they lose a job? Can we adjust that? We haven't discussed any of that."

Interviewees emphasized that extensions of formal support, when needed, should be clearly decided upon and revisited. Many groups remain in touch as friends or caring neighbors. However, cases where there was a relationship of dependency after four or five years were seen as unsuccessful in terms of helping the family achieve self-sufficiency and in terms of the volunteer group's ability to support additional families. Uncertainty around how to approach exits "contributed to fatigue in an intense way" some said, and must be viewed also in the context of the sustainability of volunteer groups. In a scenario where resources for immigrants are more restricted, this could present added challenges.

Impact on Volunteers

Volunteers at all sites said that they derive deep satisfaction from the work. As one volunteer said, "We find it to be astonishingly rewarding work... just astonishingly rewarding in the sense that I feel like I get more out of this than the family does." A number of volunteers found the work affirmed the same values which motivated them to participate. ("Every time I get thanked by congregants, I thank them for helping me feel I am living Torah.")

“ Every time I get thanked by congregants, I thank them for helping me feel I am living Torah.

—Volunteer

Several volunteers also highlighted that the experience has been enriching for the institutions and communities that produce volunteer groups. "We've built a whole community of volunteers, so it's been good for our community as well." Another affirmed, "Connection is what this is all about. And that's what we are lacking I think in our society. What an amazing way to have meaningful connection with other human beings." Such feedback reflects the deep well of motivation which draws people to this work. Interviews with experienced volunteers suggest that if conditions are in place for community sponsorship to be sustainable for them, there are people willing to make this work a part of their individual and group lives over a long period of time.

Refining the Theory of Change

In this period of experimentation, goals at the national level remained broadly defined while local programs optimized for different desired results in practice. Any future design would benefit from a clear articulation of the “true North” for the program, with a theory of change for how it works to realize this goal. Many program design and management decisions flow from the definition of goals, including targeting, training, and measurement. While not historically required by federal funders of resettlement, a more developed theory of change for the program would not only help teams manage the program with a clearer set of parameters, but also ensure that success can be recognized.

Depending on its aims, a program could optimize for:

- Maximizing additionality
- Mitigating risks for the most vulnerable cases
- Filling funding gaps
- Extending capacity/reducing burden of professional staff
- Accelerating integration, defined in terms of specific outcomes
- Mitigating psychosocial stress of migration
- Mobilizing volunteer base as doers, donors, and advocates

Each design choice carries tradeoffs and implications for program management. Maximizing for additionality would likely require higher repeat volunteering rates than seen previously, and possibly shorter match periods to achieve this. Some aspects of selection may need to happen pre-arrival with the tradeoff that matches rely on assumptions drawn from case files rather than a fuller picture of the family.

In turn, optimizing for serving the most vulnerable cases may require post-arrival matching for full/accurate assessment of vulnerability. This approach could mitigate strain on case management staff and help offset rollbacks in other supports, benefits, and services for vulnerable populations. It may also raise the potential for volunteer burnout in tougher cases. Setting parameters and support for offboarding would be even more essential.

If seeking to fill funding gaps as a priority, volunteer groups must be selected based on ability to donate/fundraise. This could come at the expense of the volunteer base's diversity. It would also pose a critical design decision as to how funds are disbursed: pooled or case-by-case, by volunteers directly or via affiliate.

Whichever outcomes are prioritized, there is a need to develop a transparent approach to case selection and to align monitoring systems to the theory of change.

Where to Go From Here

Conversations across sites point to a potential for movement-building on the foundation of community sponsorship which has yet to be fully tapped. Volunteers like the ones interviewed have expertise, institutional or community backing, and an enduring dedication to serving forcibly displaced communities. This represents durable civic capacity which is transferable beyond the context of past models with the right stewardship.

A staff member described the expertise now embedded in volunteer communities: “We have groups across the country that are resettlement experts at this point. These are groups that have been trained, gone through the experience of, over and over and over again, how to support newcomers in the state and how to support them to self-sufficiency and becoming members of the community and that is huge, especially if resettlement agencies are no longer in existence. There are volunteer groups and communities that know how to do this.”

While refugee resettlement remains in upheaval, the skills volunteer groups have built could be put to work to serve refugees with continued support needs or forcibly displaced immigrants with other statuses.

One staff member situated this potential in the present moment: “At a political moment like this one, at one point, mutual aid is all we have. For an agency like ours, we have both the privilege and the misfortune that we’re beholden to the federal government. The money that we get, the reporting, and the compliance and everything that we have to do is already dictated to us...But from a grassroots effort, [volunteers] can do this for asylum seekers, they can do this for anyone living in real fear of this administration, because they are able to move how they need to move and in a way we don’t get to.”

Some volunteers have already taken initiative in this area, with volunteers describing pilots to support asylum seekers. While a pivot carries an inevitable learning curve, the volunteers said much knowledge was transferrable, “We would never have known to do any of this or been able to do this had we not started as sponsors. And that’s important to us as a community.”

In addition to direct service work, there is strong potential to engage community sponsors in advocacy efforts on behalf of refugees and other immigrants. Traditionally, volunteers go through intensive

A newcomer at JFS of Metrowest offices in Framingham, Massachusetts. (Lindsay Kagalis/HIAS)



“Volunteers like the ones interviewed have expertise, institutional or community backing, and an enduring dedication to serving forcibly displaced communities. This represents durable civic capacity which is transferable beyond the context of past models with the right stewardship.”

experiential learning about immigrant experiences in the United States—but as a heavily operational program, community sponsorship trainings dedicated less time to background on policies and systems which are often the targets of advocacy work. [Research by More in Common](#) on community sponsorship nationwide indicated that many volunteers show interest in advocacy and civic engagement following the experience.

Finally, while seemingly less urgent there is a critical need to retain knowledge generated by and with community sponsorship groups. If past is prologue, losing

it will slow any future effort to rebuild and squander hard-won lessons. As one longtime volunteer said, “We saw what happened after Kabul when we needed to reinvent the wheel.”

Resettlement agencies and other stakeholders in the immigration space could play an important role both as sources of expertise on serving other immigrant populations and on advocacy strategies, and as conveners and enablers of the peer-to-peer engagement which volunteers desire.

Recommendations

- **Define and measure program results as part of a robust theory of change;** standard reporting from the 90-day post-arrival period is not sufficient on its own.
- **Standardize and document case selection criteria** so that outcomes for sponsored families can be compared with those of similar non-sponsored cases.
- **Prioritize coordination and volunteer management framework.** Ensure every site has a dedicated volunteer coordinator, strong orientation for volunteers to the role of case managers, and functional channels for case communication throughout the sponsorship period.
- **Emphasize peer learning and mentorship among volunteers.** Look for ways HIAS can provide structure and facilitation. Consider an advisory or consultative group of experienced volunteer leaders to leverage their expertise.
- **Explore ways to engage volunteer groups in support of additional populations—**refugees with continued support needs and immigrants with other statuses.

Front cover: Aria, a refugee resettled in New York City, chats with Maya, a volunteer who helped welcome him. (Lindsay Kagalis/HIAS)



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