

# Private Sponsorship Programs for Refugees and the Road Ahead for Welcome Corps

Explainer | October 2023

Private sponsorship programs are a promising avenue for refugee resettlement that can expand the capacity of the United States and other countries to welcome more refugees annually. These programs utilize private resources for refugee resettlement, allowing individuals and organizations to sponsor refugees and help them integrate into their new communities. Private sponsorship programs for refugees have been implemented in several countries around the world for decades. The first was introduced in Canada in 1978 and thereafter similar models were launched in Australia, Germany, New Zealand, Ireland, the United Kingdom, and the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Although the concept of private sponsorship is not new, it is making a comeback in the United States. At the beginning of 2023, the Biden administration launched Welcome Corps, the first private sponsorship

program for refugee resettlement that the country has implemented since the 1990s. Below is a brief explanation of private sponsorship, how it is different from traditional resettlement and other programs, and the road ahead for Welcome Corps.

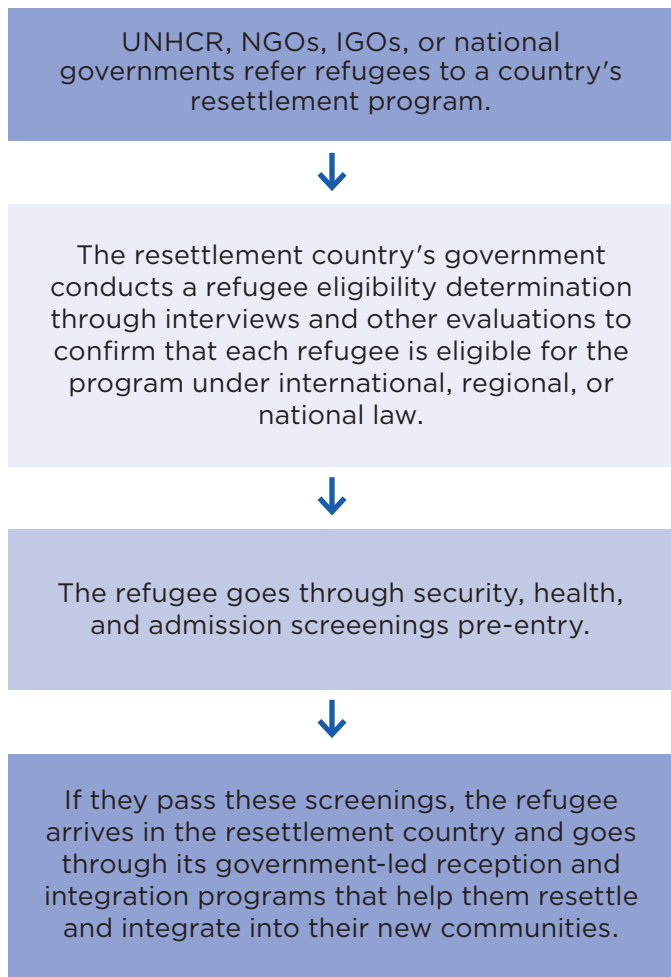
## Private sponsorship programs incorporate private actors and resources

Private sponsorship programs allow private actors (usually citizens, permanent residents, and organizations) to help refugees enter and integrate into their new country through its resettlement program.<sup>5</sup> Private actors can apply to be sponsors and refer refugees to a country's resettlement program at the beginning of the resettlement process and support them once they arrive. Private sponsorship expands upon traditional resettlement because private sponsors can recommend refugees for resettlement who may not have been referred otherwise. But refugees who were referred by the UNHCR, an intergovernmental (IGO) or non-governmental organization (NGO), or national governments can still be matched with private sponsors that provide resettlement and integration support after they arrive in the resettlement country. Refugees who receive support from private sponsors still go through security vetting, health screenings, and background checks conducted by the resettlement country government. But once they arrive, instead of going through traditional resettlement programs with resettlement support from the government and non-profit agencies, private sponsors usually take on this responsibility.<sup>6</sup>

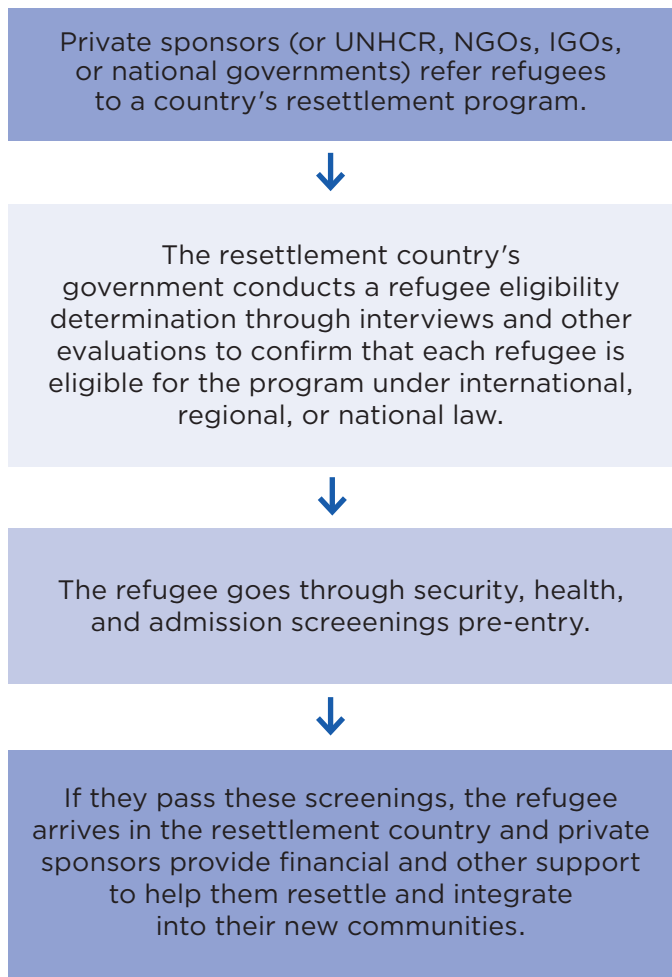
## Who is a refugee?

The U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) and UNHCR define a refugee as a person who is outside of their country of origin (or under certain circumstances within it)<sup>2</sup> and is unable or unwilling to return based on persecution they experienced or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.<sup>3</sup> Many countries have adopted this definition and utilize it for their refugee resettlement programs to determine who is eligible for them.<sup>4</sup>

## Traditional Resettlement Process



## Private Sponsorship Process



## Private sponsorship and traditional resettlement processes diverge when it comes to referrals and resettlement resources

Refugees who go through the private sponsorship process take many of the same steps as those who enter a country through the traditional resettlement process.<sup>7</sup> They also both come to their resettlement country through its refugee resettlement program. These programs diverge during the first and last steps of the processes highlighted above. They differ in how refugees are referred to a country's resettlement program and where the resources for refugee resettlement are coming from.

## Private sponsorship programs can expand a country's capacity to welcome more refugees annually

By the end of 2022, the world's refugee population reached 35.3 million people, yet only 114,300 refugees were resettled worldwide.<sup>8</sup> Many countries only implement traditional resettlement programs that have limited capacity and annual caps on the number of refugees that can be considered for resettlement, which are usually not met. Private sponsorship programs can help countries meet or raise this cap by utilizing private resources and actors to resettle more refugees.

These programs can supplement traditional resettlement programs by providing financial and other support outside of government funding. Refugee referrals from private actors also give people who may not have been referred through the UNHCR, NGOs, IOs, or governments access to national refugee resettlement programs.

## The benefits and drawbacks of private sponsorship programs

Private sponsorship programs for refugee resettlement have many benefits for a country’s citizens, population, communities, and economy. However, there are some drawbacks and potential vulnerabilities associated with these programs that should be acknowledged. Below is a list of some of the benefits and drawbacks of these programs.

Benefits	Drawbacks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• These programs take some of the financial and logistical burdens of refugee resettlement off the government and resettlement agencies and increase a country’s capacity to accept refugees. This may allow countries to supplement their resources and accept more refugees, to meet or to add to the refugee caps or quotas they set each year.</li> <li>• They allow private actors to refer refugees for resettlement that may not have been referred through the public resettlement process.</li> <li>• Refugees who come to a country through private resettlement can fill gaps and shortages in the labor force, promoting the country’s economic growth, just like those resettled through traditional resettlement programs.</li> <li>• They allow private citizens and residents to directly engage with refugees and help them integrate into their communities faster and more efficiently. This approach can lead to better social, economic, and educational outcomes for refugees. It can also make communities more accepting of newcomers and recognize the assets and skills they bring to local economies and communities.</li> <li>• These programs can create a stronger sense of community connections among volunteers. Groups that form through community or faith organizations have reported that private sponsorship programs helped them get to know people who were already in their community.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Governments may rely too heavily on these programs and draw back from their government-run refugee resettlement programs. This type of shift could lead to more privatization of refugee resettlement, thereby putting a larger burden on private actors to provide refugees with integration resources. It could also give too much power to private citizens and private sources of funds investing in this sector, relinquishing the important and unique role of government.</li> <li>• Private sponsorship programs are mainly available to refugees with pre-existing ties in the resettlement country who are referred to the program based on this connection. As a result, the program can be perceived as exclusionary.</li> <li>• The private sponsorship system is highly diffuse and includes thousands of sponsoring entities (as opposed to hundreds through traditional resettlement programs) and it is more difficult to ensure quality services are provided and safeguarding measures are adhered to.</li> <li>• Resources are sometimes not used as efficiently as they are through traditional resettlement. Private sponsor groups usually reach one family at a time, whereas resettlement agencies can assist multiple families at once.</li> </ul>

## **Welcome Corps, the only US private sponsorship program for refugees, was launched at the beginning of 2023**

Welcome Corps is a new private sponsorship program launched by the Biden administration at the beginning of 2023. It is the first private refugee resettlement program that the United States has implemented in over three decades. The last time a program like this was implemented was in the 1980s through the Private Sector Initiative that allocated a special quota for refugee admissions that was supported by private sector funding.<sup>9</sup> Approximately 16,000 refugees were admitted through this program within five years, but the program ended in 1996 because of the high and unpredictable financial requirements for and a complex process to become private sponsors.<sup>10</sup>

Welcome Corps will expand the US Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) by allowing private sponsors to refer refugees to the program and provide resources to support their resettlement in the United States. Private actors can apply to be sponsors and join Private Sponsor Groups (PSGs) that refer and support refugees as a group. PSGs provide financial, social, emotional, and other support for the refugees' resettlement needs such as housing, food, healthcare, securing benefits, employment, and education as they adjust and integrate into their resettlement country. PSGs take on these responsibilities with the help of Private Sponsorship Organizations (PSOs) like HIAS that provide guidance and insight. They can either identify a PSO that they would like to work with before they apply for Welcome Corps, or they will be assigned to one. PSOs do not need to be refugee resettlement agencies. Some PSOs are resettlement experts and others are new to the field and receive training. HIAS is co-chairing the PSO Council, an advisory council of the PSO network that serves as a peer-support structure to provide recommendations on topics of concern, address key challenges that impact the PSO experience, and inform ongoing program design.

The US Department of State (DOS) is rolling out the Welcome Corps program in two phases. During the first phase (which started in the beginning of 2023 and plans to continue indefinitely), private sponsors are

matched with refugees who have already been referred and approved for resettlement through the traditional resettlement process under USRAP.<sup>11</sup> For the second phase, private sponsors can identify and refer refugees to USRAP for resettlement and support those refugees when they arrive in the United States.<sup>12</sup> During the first year of this program, DOS endeavors to have 10,000 private sponsors participate in the program to resettle at least 5,000 refugees.<sup>13</sup>

## **DOS plans to use lessons learned from Sponsor Circle and humanitarian parole programs to enhance Welcome Corps**

HIAS and other community organizations are participating in Welcome Corps, providing their guidance and expertise partly based on their extensive experience over the past few years organizing circles through the Sponsor Circle Program (or as HIAS calls them, Welcome Circles).<sup>14</sup> Sponsor Circles are groups of private actors who provide financial, emotional, and resettlement support to newcomers in the United States.<sup>15</sup> Community organizations began implementing Sponsor Circles with DOS in 2021 to support newly arriving Afghans who were relocated through the Operation Allies Welcome (OAW) program.<sup>16</sup> The Sponsor Circle Program was then adapted to support Ukrainian beneficiaries through the Uniting for Ukraine program, and later other humanitarian parole pathways. Humanitarian parole is a type of complementary pathway, which is an alternative to a country's refugee resettlement program that allows people to enter a country and remain there legally.<sup>17</sup>

Sponsor Circles provide support to beneficiaries of humanitarian parole programs. These pathways can facilitate access to protection faster and serve as an alternative to refugee resettlement programs and asylum that usually involve years-long processing periods. The United States recently implemented several humanitarian parole programs with private sponsorship elements for people from specific countries, including Ukraine, Venezuela, Cuba, Haiti, and Nicaragua.<sup>18</sup> These programs allow certain nationals to enter and stay in the United States for up to two years if they have a private sponsor, but they do not include a pathway to permanent residence.

Humanitarian parole programs also do not have clearly defined responsibilities or monitoring, which is a gap that the Sponsor Circle Program fills by providing structure, training, reporting, and oversight for sponsors. *Sponsor Circles and humanitarian parole are short-term responses that serve as supplements to – not replacements for – refugee resettlement.*

Although the humanitarian parole programs that Sponsor Circles work with have similar aspects to Welcome Corps, it is important to note the fundamental differences among these programs. Humanitarian parole programs typically provide short-term protection for displaced people but without a pathway to permanent residency or citizenship. They provide temporary solutions for people in need of humanitarian protection including pathways to enter safe third countries. Welcome Corps, however, is a more permanent solution in comparison. Welcome Corps private sponsor groups provide support similar to what Sponsor Circles provide as private actors, but since Welcome Corps is part of USRAP, it provides refugee status to its beneficiaries that can lead to permanent residency and citizenship. Moreover, DOS has incorporated lessons learned over the past few years through the Sponsor Circle Program in its implementation of Welcome Corps.

## **Organizations like HIAS conduct evaluations of Sponsor Circles to improve upon private sponsorship models**

Several organizations that were some of the first to implement Sponsor Circle programs, including HIAS<sup>19</sup> and Community Sponsorship Hub<sup>20</sup>, have conducted evaluations of these programs over the last few years. These evaluations highlight the outcomes and best practices for private and community sponsorship programs that they've observed since 2021. They found that:

- These U.S. programs effectively met the immediate needs of Afghan beneficiaries within 90 days including housing, employment, food, healthcare, education, and legal assistance.
- Welcome Corps requires sponsors to provide financial support of at least \$2,425 per individual refugee (for three months) and they can fundraise to reach this

minimum.<sup>21</sup> HIAS found that in most cases more time (six months) and therefore more funding is needed per individual refugee to cover basic costs such as housing and food. Circles also found that their overall fundraising goals (typically \$20,000 per Sponsor Circle) were successful and most exceeded their goals through support from their communities and congregations.

- Providing agency and choice to affected populations receiving help from Sponsor Circles leads to better resettlement outcomes. HIAS experienced positive outcomes with the launch of its new technology called RUTH (Refugees Uniting Through HIAS), a platform that helps match forcibly displaced people with HIAS Welcome Circles in the United States.
- Coordinators and beneficiaries of HIAS Welcome Circles in the United States found seeking employment and finding suitable housing as some of the most challenging tasks.
- Organizations that participate in the Sponsor Circle program should provide circles with state-specific resources on applying for benefits, as participants reported that navigation of these resources was time consuming.
- Community organizations, like HIAS, should train members of Sponsor Circles on both cultural literacy and cultural humility to support beneficiaries' agency and respect their culture and values.
- Most sponsors and beneficiaries believe that their relationships strengthened, and beneficiaries made meaningful connections with their communities in the United States.

## **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

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3. Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, G.A. Res. 429(V) (July 28, 1951). See *also* Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, G.A. Res. 2198 (XXI) (Jan. 31, 1967).
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6. See Welcome Corps. 2023. “About.” <https://welcomecorps.org/about/>.
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11. DOS. 2023. “Launch of Welcome Corps – Private Sponsorship of Refugees.” Fact Sheet. January 19. <https://www.state.gov/launch-of-the-welcome-corps-private-sponsorship-of-refugees-2/>. For more information on traditional resettlement programs in the United States see HIAS Center for Refugee Policy. 2023. “U.S. Refugee Admissions Program.” Explainer. <https://hias.org/publications/u-s-refugee-admissions-program/>.
12. *Id.*
13. *Id.*
14. *Id.*

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