

Factsheet

COMPLEMENTARY REFUGEE PATHWAYS: PRIVATE AND COMMUNITY REFUGEE SPONSORSHIP

Last update: June 2020

Governments are generally responsible for managing refugee resettlement but in some countries, including Australia, ordinary citizens can sponsor people who need protection. The rules and goals of these programs vary, determining their success.

What is private and community refugee sponsorship?

Community refugee sponsorship – also known to as private refugee sponsorship – refers to programs under which individuals, community, faith-based groups, families or businesses take the lead in the welcoming and integrating resettled refugees into a new country.

Community sponsorship programs [can](#) support existing government resettlement programs, or be an additional, complementary pathway to protection.

Community sponsorship is best known in the context of Canada, where citizens have facilitated the resettlement of [over 327,000 refugees](#) since 1978. As part of the 2018 [Global Compact on Refugees](#), states committed to considering establishing or expanding community sponsorship programs to provide greater access to durable solutions for refugees. Since 2016, at [least ten countries](#) have launched or piloted community sponsorship programs, including Argentina, Ireland, Germany, New Zealand and the United Kingdom.

Does Australia have a refugee sponsorship program?

Yes. Refugee sponsorship has a long history in Australia dating back to the [Community Refugee Settlement Scheme](#) (CRSS) that ran from 1978-1997. The CRSS was designed initially to support Australia's settlement of Indochinese refugees, but was expanded to help successfully resettle and integrate over 30,000 refugees from around the globe into the Australian community.

Australia's latest iteration of refugee sponsorship, the [Community Support Programme \(CSP\)](#), was introduced on 1 July 2017. The CSP allows individuals, community groups and businesses to sponsor eligible [humanitarian entrants](#) to resettle in Australia.

To be eligible for resettlement under the CSP, a person must first meet the criteria for a [Global Special Humanitarian Visa](#): to be outside Australia when applying and subject to substantial discrimination in their home country. [Further](#), CSP applicants must be between

18 and 50 years old, with adequate English language skills and either a job offer or skills that would enable them to find work quickly. Those willing to live in regional areas receive priority.

Sponsors cannot make applications directly; instead they must work with an [Approved Proposing Organisations](#) (APOs), which are generally experienced service providers appointed by the government. APOs work with sponsors to screen eligible applicants, lodge applications and ensure that settlement services are provided upon arrival. APOs also help to link individuals with reputable employment and community support.

Under [Australia's refugee policy](#), the CSP sits within Australia's broader Humanitarian Program. The CSP is limited to [1,000 sponsorship places per year](#), and these are deducted from the total quota allocated for refugees in the Humanitarian Program, which for 2018-19 is capped at 18,750 people.

What are the benefits and challenges of community refugee sponsorship?

Across the world, governments [have embraced the potential benefits](#) of community refugee sponsorship to improve social cohesion in communities, helping to create strong bonds between refugees and sponsors and to foster positive attitudes towards asylum seekers and refugees. Community programs may also generate [greater long-term integration outcomes](#) for refugees, as they receive social and financial support from established members of the community.

However, the nature of community refugee sponsorship can [favour refugees](#) who already have family living in the sponsor's country and who have the resources to navigate the system and find an overseas sponsor. This can lead to private sponsorship becoming a [de facto family reunification](#) program, to the detriment of highly vulnerable refugees without a family sponsor, but whose protection needs are just as great. Similarly, where governments place additional criteria for private sponsorship that are focused on integration capacity rather than protection needs, there is a risk that the most vulnerable of refugees are excluded. Community sponsorship programs — whether as a tool to support resettlement or as a [complementary pathway](#) — should take into account refugees' protection needs.

How could Australia's existing program be improved?

Under the CSP, sponsors are responsible for paying for visa applications, air fares, medical screening and resettlement costs for the first year, as well as [administration fees to the APOs](#). The visa fee alone is estimated to be [over \\$19,000](#), while each of the APOs charge a different administration fee. If a sponsored refugee accesses Medicare and other social security services in their first 12 months in Australia, sponsors are also required to pay the costs of these services back to the government. These costs are considered to be [prohibitively high](#) and present a barrier to access for a wide segment of the community. In contrast, the [Canadian sponsorship scheme](#) enables sponsors to pay for living expenses while the government covers the costs of visa processing, healthcare, education and other integration programs.

The CSP has also been [criticised](#) for lacking the principle of 'additionality', as CSP places are drawn from Australia's annual refugee and humanitarian quota. In contrast, equivalent

programs in [Canada](#), [New Zealand](#) and the [United Kingdom](#) reflect the importance of providing sponsored resettlement places *additional* to their governments' existing quotas. The engagement of the community and the private sector in the resettlement of refugees should not absolve the government of its responsibility to allocate budget and resources to the provision of protection to asylum seekers and refugees. If the CSP is expanded as it currently operates, it would likely lead to a net reduction of government support to refugees. This fundamentally undermines the role that private and community sponsorship programs should play in *increasing* a country's overall protection capacity.

The CSP can [also be criticised](#) for its focus on integration rather than protection. Given the current Department of Home Affairs criteria (age, English and job skills noted above), it could be argued that the CSP effectively distorts Australia's resettlement program, which has traditionally been focused on protection of the most vulnerable refugees and humanitarian entrants. The Australian Government is currently [undertaking a review](#) of the CSP.