

## GRSI COVID Response Series: Outcomes

### Workshop 1: Meeting the immediate needs of sponsors and sponsored refugees

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WEDNESDAY, APRIL 1 // 15:30 – 17:30 EST

#### Executive Summary

This Workshop was the first in the Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative's (GRSI) COVID Response Series. Workshops in this series connect the sponsorship community around the world and provide a forum for idea exchange on key issues for our collective work in the time of COVID-19. This workshop focused on meeting the immediate needs of sponsors and sponsored refugees.

Representatives from community sponsorship organizations across the globe contributed to the discussion, which included sharing about stressors experienced by sponsor groups, refugees, and sponsor support organizations in various country contexts; and ideas for support, good practices, and resources. In all, 39 participants from nine countries attended the call.

Shared strategies for meeting needs included: building accessible and novel online learning resources for sponsors and newcomers; pursuing evolving, responsive, and timely communications; and providing morale-boosting ideas for engagement of and tangible support to sponsorship groups in creative ways. Participants shared a number of tools and resources they are using to support sponsors and newcomers. You can find all of these online tools and resources in our [online portal](#).

#### Issues and strategies—sponsors

Issues identified by participants included:

- **Financial security for sponsors:** relevant for a cohort of sponsors who are waiting for sponsored families to arrive and may have incurred expenses, but where arrival has been indefinitely delayed due to COVID-19. Some sponsors have already sourced housing for refugee families, and are now faced with the challenge of paying the mortgage/rent for an unspecified period of time. Participants offered some innovative strategies responding to this issue. For example, one UK sponsor group rented out a property to National Health Service front-line workers, providing financial respite for the sponsors while helping another at-risk group. Participants also noted that sponsorship organizations can support sponsors by writing letters of explanation to landlords on behalf of groups requesting a rent holiday or suspension.
- **Maintaining sponsor motivation:** relevant especially for the cohort of sponsors who have completed applications and are now waiting to be matched with newcomers – possibly for an extended period due to the suspension of resettlement. Participants strategized several ways to support this cohort, such as staying in touch via email and reassuring sponsors with regular updates about the resettlement situation, COVID-19 policies, and a continued commitment to see sponsorships move forward.
- **Anxieties around sponsorship activities in a context of social distance:** COVID-19 policies have restricted the ability for sponsors to provide in-person support to the newcomers they have sponsored, leading to worries about the newcomers' wellbeing and ensuring their settlement needs continue to be met. At the same time, concern was expressed that a primary

demographic of sponsors are people over sixty, who are in a high risk-category for COVID-19. Some participants expressed worries about how to meet the information needs of sponsors regarding settlement services available and how to support refugees during COVID-19. Participants shared different strategies to meet these needs, including hosting regular webinars to inform sponsor groups and facilitate sharing of strategies between groups, and offering a suite of services online. One example involved a website connecting refugee advocates in local communities, where sponsors can ask others to support newcomers by (for example) dropping off groceries and medicine.

### Issues and strategies—newcomers

A number of shared concerns about how refugee newcomers are experiencing sponsorship—and, more generally, managing life—during COVID-19.

Challenges identified included:

- **Communicating effectively and clearly with newcomers** about available services and supports, COVID-19 policies and plans, etc. This is particularly challenging when newcomers are pre-literate or do not have at-home internet access.
- **How to provide emotional support to newcomers who are entering communities in a time of social distancing:** For the many refugee newcomers who had experienced significant trauma, some aspects of the COVID-19 environment could be triggering (e.g. quarantine, food stockpiling, and community anxiety about disease). In this context, in-person visits and social gatherings are increasingly important, but difficult (or impossible) to realise.
- A shared, deep concern about the **wellbeing and safety of refugees who are still waiting to arrive**, and concern for family members of refugees who are living overseas, and who are at great risk.

Key actions being taken to address these immediate needs included:

- **Developing and rolling out multilingual online tools** for learning and information sharing. These included targeted educational resources for kids, and videos for pre-literate newcomers, which are particularly important for correcting misinformation newcomers may have received about COVID-19 policies. Participants also shared their experience of moving the [SPEAK](#) language-learning platform from an in-person service to a completely online format (available to sponsors and newcomers around the world).
- **Using virtual communications to connect:** Some organizations are encouraging 'online check ins' between newcomers and sponsors to reduce isolation, and are educating less tech-savvy sponsors about different communication media (e.g. WhatsApp, Facebook, Zoom) so they can stay in immediate contact with newcomers even if they can't be physically present.

### Issues and strategies —Settlement and Community Service Organizations

Issues identified by the participants included:

- **The importance of providing accurate and multilingual information**, and taking a multi-level, cascading approach to supporting sponsorship groups, given the varying stages of newcomer arrivals they are managing. Partners reported that a significant amount of short

term, one-on-one communication with sponsors is currently needed, but it will be difficult to sustain this high level of individualised communication.

- **Ensuring that sponsor support organizations engage refugee families directly**, responding to the concern that communicating with sponsors only can be disempowering for refugee newcomers. One example involved an [Allies in Refugee Integration Pilot](#), which creates a sustained point of connection between a settlement worker and a newcomer, in addition to the sponsorship group. Participants encouraged everyone to maintain connections with settlement services who still provide remote support for sponsors and newcomers, such as employment agencies and training centres, as this is a time when many newcomers will be losing jobs and missing in-person employment counseling opportunities due to COVID-19.
- **Practical and ethical concerns about fundraising for sponsorship** during the COVID crisis, given that many people are understandably focused on family care, working remotely, issues of health and financial insecurity.
- **How to share and promote positive messaging** about community sponsorship during this tumultuous time. Some participants gave recent examples of successful online fundraising and community engagement efforts, such as an online Zumba or yoga class, an online art auction, or 'remote porch concerts' where musicians play in the street and neighbours donate to the group.
- **Working to progress longer-stage objectives despite the current pause in resettlement**, such as promoting and expanding community sponsorship programs and motivating and building future sponsorship groups. For example, they are sharing positive stories about how sponsors and newcomers are responding to COVID-19 can help to grow the community of sponsors.