

## GRSI COVID Response Series: Outcomes

### Workshop 2: Maintaining engagement of sponsors in the time of COVID-19

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WEDNESDAY, APRIL 8 // 15:30 – 17:30 EST

29 participants from 9 countries joined this Workshop, which considered how community sponsorship countries can continue to keep sponsors motivated, interested in, and engaged in sponsorship during a time when newcomer arrivals have been suspended.

The participants identified the following challenges, needs, responses, and opportunities:

- **Communications to sponsors:** Sponsors find themselves along a **broad spectrum of engagement**, from early interest to being prepared for the imminent arrival of a newcomer family that has now been suspended. There is a need for **regular and reliable communications** to sponsors tailored to their circumstances along this spectrum. Several participants suggested that **individual follow-ups** may be needed to help particular groups process and adjust. It is important to consider when it is more appropriate for communications to come from the government or from civil society organizations.
- **Communications among sponsors:** Peer-to-peer exchanges between sponsors, even across the spectrum of engagement, is important and has shown success. One participant noted that a previously planned sponsor networking event has been moved to an online format. Conversations already facilitated at the national level have yielded fruitful exchanges and have made sponsors feel as though they are part of a broader national movement. It was suggested that replicating this approach at the international level could make sponsors feel even more plugged into a global movement.
- **Public communications:** This is a critical time to spread positive stories of community support, resilience, and how newcomers are stepping up. The point was made that a large proportion of the essential workforce is likely made up of newcomers who are taking on increased risk to provide valuable services. These types of stories will emphasize why sponsorship remains important, *especially* if and when they come from less typical sources (e.g. see [Piers Morgan's praise](#) of foreign health workers). The GRSI encouraged participants to share whatever stories they find for amplification on the GRSI [web portal](#).
- **Pre-arrival communications:** Where possible, pre-arrival communications between approved refugees and their matched sponsors can keep sponsors engaged and ensure important orientation information is conveyed that will support integration once they are able to travel.
- **Leveraging existing local networks:** Sponsors who were close to receiving newcomer arrivals had spent a considerable amount of time building community networks and an extensive knowledge base of local resources and services. Participants noted that these networks are now an important source of support, but also a valuable fountain of knowledge which can potentially be diverted toward the care of other vulnerable segments of the population.
- **Sponsor training:** Several participants highlighted the opportunity for pivoting their training resources to a virtual format to enable remote training to continue. However, important challenges will need to be addressed in order to maximize the utility of online training: e.g. some sponsors may not be tech-savvy; trainers must consider how to compensate for the loss of personal connection that can be gained among sponsors during in-person sessions; and

focusing on certain discrete topics may be more amenable to web lecture styles, while others require more interactivity.

- **Mobilizing application submissions:** For the most part, application preparation is a task that can be undertaken remotely. Participants suggested that this is a good time to mobilize the completion of as many sponsorship applications as possible, so that sponsors will be ready to receive newcomers in need as soon as international protection and mobility channels re-open.
- **Fundraising:** There are important opportunities available to sponsors to undertake fundraising in support of the newcomer families they will eventually receive. However, participants noted fundraising must be approached with a sensitivity toward individuals suffering as a result of COVID-19. Some individuals may have lost their income, or worse, are coping with an infection themselves or the infection of a loved one. On the other hand, a participant noted that there is a demographic sub-group of people who still have their income, and are not incurring the same daily expenses they had pre-COVID – e.g. costs of commutes to work. A fundraising campaign idea arose: *“Donate your commute money to a life changing journey for refugees.”* Another idea that had arisen in Workshop 1 was holding concerts from house porches, allowing passers-by to donate into a container at a safe distance. Sponsors themselves may be best placed to determine when and how to approach members of their community for contributions.
- **Investing in program co-design, evaluation, and refinement:** One participant noted that civil society organizations in their country were spending this time with government counterparts to review the existing program and to find opportunities for improvement, efficiencies, and scaling.
- **Investing in language training:** Engaging sponsors in offering remote language training opportunities to refugees, e.g. via [SPEAK's platform](#), could be a valuable way to remain engaged and feel productive. Taking this time to learn basic Arabic or other newcomer languages to improve the eventual integration experience of sponsored refugees was another idea noted.
- **Solutions for empty housing:** Some sponsors have already secured housing which is sitting empty and is costing them money. There is uncertainty around the length of delays, and sponsors are unsure whether to hold on to the property (and for how long), or to give it up and start the search over again once resettlement departures resume. Participants noted that some sponsors are coming up with creative ways to cover the costs of accommodations by, e.g. renting to health workers who need to self isolate due to COVID-19; or for asylum seekers who find themselves in dangerously crowded reception centres.
- **Ensuring refugee connectivity:** Refugee connectivity in the home was identified as a major barrier to providing adequate support in a social distancing context; in many homes, families rely on a single smartphone for their tech and connectivity needs. An idea was raised around a potential project or campaign to get refugees connected technologically at home.
- **Anxieties around the situation of refugees in host communities** were expressed, and the question was posed whether the sponsorship networks that have been built at the local, national, and global levels could be used to support refugee populations in countries of asylum that are facing especially serious threats from COVID-19.

A number of resources were shared by participants, which are available on the GRSI COVID-19 response [web portal](#).