

GRSI COVID Response Series: Outcomes

Global Sponsor Summit

WEDNESDAY, MAY 6 // 15:30 – 17:30 EST

230 participants from **16 countries** joined this international Summit, which was the first opportunity for refugee sponsors from around the world to convene in real time with leading experts in migration, refugee protection and community sponsorship.

Sponsors from Argentina, Canada, Germany, Ireland, Italy, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States shared their personal reflections on the unique community-building exercise that is refugee sponsorship, and their ideas about how to maintain and expand sponsorship in their societies.

The [Hon. Bob Rae](#), Canada's Special Envoy on Humanitarian and Refugee Issues, and Ms. [Gillian Triggs](#), Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, UNHCR, provided expert reflections on the status of global refugee protection and sponsorship's valuable contribution to resettlement.

Representatives from Amnesty International Ireland, the UK Home Office, the Community of Sant'Egidio (Italy), and UNHCR Argentina reflected on the success of community sponsorship programs in their countries, noting that refugee sponsorship provides an enhanced resettlement experience for refugees, invigorates local communities, and gives citizens a meaningful role to play in refugee protection. The Community Refugee Sponsorship Initiative provided an update on the prospective introduction of a community sponsorship program in Australia.

[Gregory Maniatis](#), Director of the International Migration Initiative of Open Society Foundations gave remarks on the incredible expansion of community sponsorship globally since the GRSI was created in 2016, noting the great potential of sponsorship to not only address the huge challenge of displacement, but to also build more cohesive and compassionate societies.

Expert Reflections on Displacement, Refugee Protection and Sponsorship

The Hon. Bob Rae

Mr. Rae stressed that community sponsorship is (and will be) a critical tool in responding to the challenges facing refugee resettlement, particular over the next few years where national economies will contract, and the case for expanding opportunities for third country protection for refugees becomes harder to make. He noted that community sponsorship is one of the most important mechanisms available for positive public engagement on issues of refugees and migration, and the ability to communicate the importance of local responses to global problems. Mr. Rae emphasized that in an increasingly complex global context, we must work towards societies becoming more open and welcoming to the 'other' (including refugees and migrants). Community sponsorship is a powerful tool to help us achieve this goal.

Ms. Gillian Triggs

Ms. Triggs spoke compellingly about the challenges that the world is facing in terms of displacement. 80 million people are displaced and without access to supportive social systems. She noted that, in this context, community sponsorship is a vital for not only developing grassroots support for refugees, but also reinvigorating resettlement. Ms. Triggs highlighted that the COVID 19 crisis is layered onto, and exacerbates, existing crises of widespread social inequality, conflict, poverty, and environmental degradation. She noted that, while some States have responded to COVID 19 by shutting shut borders and hardening attitudes to immigration, there have also been heartening signs that people in local and

regional communities are showing great warmth, generosity of spirit, and compassion towards refugees. Sponsorship is a demonstration of this community spirit. Ms. Triggs concluded that the spontaneous emergence of acts of compassion and care toward those in need during the pandemic offer the world an opportunity to stand up and say, 'we cannot tolerate these conditions of inequality any longer'.

Reflections of sponsors from around the globe

With the stage set by Mr. Rae and Ms. Triggs, the remainder of the Summit was devoted to connecting and learning from the reflections of individual refugee sponsors from different countries. Many of the same themes were echoed in the contributions of sponsors from different countries.

1. The transformative power of community

Sponsors noted community sponsorship's ability to connect people and to build supportive and cohesive communities both locally and nationally. Sponsors commented that the hard work of preparing for the arrival of refugee newcomers, and then helping newcomers to overcome the challenges of resettlement in a new home, was made possible by the strong partnerships and community networks they developed through sponsorship. Sponsors emphasized the joy they felt as a result of working with newcomer families and other sponsors to ensure successful settlement experiences. These new relationships in turn strengthened their communities.

2. Building a narrative of shared humanity and dignity: 'we are all in this together'

Sponsors reflected that introducing a newcomer family to their community helped to 'change the story' about refugees. Sponsors noted that often, there was a lot of misinformation about and prejudice toward refugees in their local communities, but this perspective changed when people met newcomer families and began to see them as individuals, neighbours, colleagues and friends. Sponsors also emphasized the importance of sponsorship's flexibility to engage people according to their time and skills, so that larger groups were able to come together and to share the sponsorship experience throughout broader networks. To demonstrate the ability of community sponsorship to build new constituencies, a sponsor from New Zealand noted that following a successful pilot program in that country, thousands of individuals mobilized across New Zealand and pledged to sponsor refugees if an expanded program is introduced.

3. Sponsor motivation: preparation, communication, and patience

Sponsors spoke about the challenge of staying motivated and engaged during the pandemic, commenting that opportunities like this Summit—where ideas, strategies and challenges can be shared across the global sponsor community—are inspirational and practically helpful. Sponsors from Argentina and the UK shared creative solutions for maintaining energy in their sponsor groups when the arrival of newcomer families had been suspended, including: ensuring the group is organized and task-oriented from the beginning, holding regular online group meetings, negotiating flexible rent arrangements with landlords to ensure families have housing when they arrive, and educating others in the community about sponsorship and refugee needs in the time of COVID.

The session concluded with resounding expressions of the desire to continue connecting the global community of sponsors and creating a platform for information exchange; sharing of experiences, tools, and best practices; and feeling plugged into a global movement. The GRSI looks forward to continuing to work with sponsors, civil society partners, and government leaders around the world to keep this incredible momentum going, safeguard and grow protection opportunities for refugees, and transform societies into welcoming places for refugees.