

Summary: ‘Brokering Refugee Integration: Promises and Pitfalls of Refugee Co-sponsorship in the United States’

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Brokering Refugee Integration: Promises and Pitfalls of Refugee Co-sponsorship in the United States

Executive Summary

- Drawing on interviews with Resettlement Agency staff, volunteers, and refugees across several U.S. states, the authors analyse co-sponsorship as a system of brokerage that facilitates access to resources through institutional and social-navigational dimensions.
- Co-sponsorship positions volunteers as both brokers and objects of integration.
 - As brokers, volunteers extend the scope and duration of resettlement services beyond traditional government-funded limits, but vague role definitions can lead to unmanaged power dynamics and inconsistent service quality.
 - As objects of integration, volunteers undergo their own transformation, gaining deep knowledge of U.S. poverty governance and adopting cultural practices from the refugees they assist.

Introduction

- The authors evaluate two programs to understand how volunteer-agency partnerships rebuild U.S. resettlement capacity and influence the integration experiences of both refugees and community members.
 - *Co-sponsorship*
 - Co-sponsorship pairs volunteers with Resettlement Agencies, with volunteers acting as brokers who help refugees access services and navigate settlement systems.
 - While co-sponsorship can support early integration and social connections, unclear roles and limited training may lead to inconsistent support and power imbalances.
 - *Welcome Corps*
 - Welcome Corps expands U.S. refugee resettlement through community sponsorship, shifting greater responsibility to private citizens as part of broader efforts to rebuild resettlement capacity.
 - Sponsors often report greater empathy, political engagement, and awareness of systemic barriers through their involvement.
- Both models rely on volunteers to provide practical and social support beyond the capacity of formal agencies.
- Both demonstrate that integration can be a reciprocal process, affecting volunteers as well as refugees.

An Incomplete Picture of Refugee Co-Sponsorship and Immigrant Integration

- **Community sponsorship programs, where community members help welcome refugees, are becoming more common globally, with established systems in Canada and growing programs in the United States, Australia, and Europe.**

- In the U.S., co-sponsorship works as a brokerage model where volunteers help connect newly arrived refugees to important resources and services.
- Research on these programs shows mixed results. Canadian programs are linked to stronger employment outcomes and a greater sense of belonging, while some U.S. data suggests co-sponsored refugees may struggle with early employment and become overly dependent on volunteers.
- Existing research does not fully explain how volunteers and Resettlement Agencies work together in practice or how informal relationships shape integration outcomes.
- Participant accounts suggest that integration can operate as a two-way process, with volunteers reporting that their interactions with refugees influenced their perspectives, cultural understanding, and views on social issues.

Methodology

- The authors used a multifocal approach to study the U.S. resettlement system through interviews with volunteers, refugees, and Resettlement Agency (RA) staff.
- The study included 55 volunteers, 27 refugees, and 32 RA staff across several U.S. states, with refugees from countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, Colombia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.
- Participants were recruited through community organizations, Facebook groups, and snowball sampling, which likely captured more highly engaged actors in the system.
- Most interviews were conducted on Zoom, with some in-person interviews in major U.S. cities, and many were retrospective, covering experiences from the past one to five years.
- The researchers adapted their interview guides over time and analyzed the data using coding and thematic memos to identify patterns in brokerage and integration.

Rebuilding United States Refugee Settlement with Volunteers: A Portrait

- A 2021 executive order and the Biden administration's 2023 goal of resettling 120,000 refugees annually prompted significant changes to the U.S. refugee resettlement system, measures introduced in response to years of reduced refugee admissions, funding cuts, and agency closures that had weakened resettlement capacity.
- As part of this shift, the U.S. increasingly relied on private citizens and community sponsorship programs and community involvement was intended both to help rebuild lost resettlement capacity and to expand the system's ability to support a larger number of refugees.
- The system is moving from informal volunteer involvement toward more structured and formalized community-based resettlement models, with the main policy goal being rapid self-sufficiency within the first 90 days, defined by employment and system integration.
- Key programs include Welcome Corps and expanded co-sponsorship models that integrate volunteers more formally into resettlement work, with these models promoting two-way integration where interaction between refugees and volunteers is expected to shape social attitudes and reduce barriers.

Promises and pitfalls of co-sponsor brokerage

Volunteers as Brokers of Integration

- Co-sponsorship extends refugee support beyond the standard 90-day federal period to 6–12 months, with volunteers providing additional help such as after-hours assistance, job searching, housing, and administrative tasks.
- Because volunteers are not trained social workers, unclear roles, limited knowledge, and weak coordination with Resettlement Agencies can lead to inconsistent support and learning on the fly.
- Volunteers also help refugees adjust to daily life, but early interactions may involve cultural and language challenges.
- Without clear boundaries, power imbalances can lead to overstepping, including discouraging access to benefits or imposing personal views about self-sufficiency.

Volunteers as Objects of Integration

- Co-sponsorship functions as a two-way cultural exchange, where volunteers also adapt to refugee practices such as more flexible approaches to time and stronger norms of hospitality and shared meals.
- Volunteers often experience the administrative burden of poverty firsthand when helping refugees navigate systems like SNAP, Medicaid, and Social Security, shifting their understanding from abstract awareness to lived insight, often increasing empathy and political engagement.
- The experience can deepen volunteers' sense of identity and purpose, sometimes developing into fictive kinship relationships where refugees are seen as family through mentorship and sustained connection.

Conclusion

- Refugee co-sponsorship expands resettlement capacity by using volunteers as long-term brokers, but limited training and unclear power dynamics can lead to inconsistent service delivery and risks to refugee autonomy.
- The model also produces two-way integration, where volunteers are shaped by exposure to poverty and refugee cultural practices, with effectiveness depending on clear coordination between agencies and volunteers to reduce risks while maintaining meaningful relationships.
- The authors recommend that Resettlement Agencies clarify brokerage roles through clear expectations and structured guidance for both volunteers and refugees.
- They also highlight the need for stronger volunteer support systems, such as mentorship from experienced sponsors, to reduce burnout.
- At the same time, the authors caution that agencies should preserve some flexibility in co-sponsorship, as its informal and relational aspects are key to fostering genuine human connection and mutual integration.