

Summary: **‘Key Insights from Sponsorship in Rural Communities’**

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Key Insights from Sponsorship in Rural Communities

I. Executive Summary

- Sponsorship in rural communities has demonstrated strong mutual benefits for refugees and host communities in Canada, Australia, and Spain. Smaller communities can foster belonging, well-being, and successful long-term settlement for refugees, while supporting population stability, addressing labour shortages, and sustaining local services.
- Sponsorship programs become more resilient when communities build on existing infrastructure, recruit diverse volunteer teams, and foster public engagement. These approaches strengthen local settlement capacity and sustain future sponsorship efforts.
- Effective settlement depends on early coordination and preparation, including aligning sponsor and newcomer expectations, clarifying roles, conducting pre-arrival planning, and ensuring flexible in-person and virtual supports.
- Positive outcomes are driven by community mobilization and adaptability, as sponsors leverage local resources, social networks, and partnerships with service providers to coordinate and deliver flexible, responsive settlement supports.
- Successful integration is enabled by practical, community-led innovations, including assistance securing housing, volunteer-led language learning, and workplace support that help newcomers access services and employment more effectively.

II. Sponsorship in Canada

- Sponsorship in Canada occurs nationwide through two primary pathways: the Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) program, which relies on private sponsors as the primary support network, and the Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) program, a collaborative model where financial and settlement responsibilities are shared between the government and private sponsors.¹
- Sponsorship is a primary driver of refugee settlement in smaller, rural communities, with approximately 35% of BVOR and 5% of PSR refugees intending to settle in communities under 125,000 people.²
- Longitudinal analysis demonstrates that sponsored refugees have high long-term retention (~76% after 10 years) across Canada, including in smaller cities.³ Strong social networks and positive early settlement experiences help contribute to continued residence in rural communities.⁴
- Sponsors from rural towns report that media coverage of the Syrian crisis motivated them to begin sponsoring refugees. To foster welcoming environments, sponsor groups in

¹ Haugen et al. (2025, p. 2)

² Haugen et al. (2025, p. 2)

³ Kaida et al. (2020, p. 12)

⁴ RSTP (2026, p. 9)

predominantly homogenous communities initiate open dialogue through community meetings, fundraisers, and town council presentations, helping build support and strengthen collaboration.⁵

- To overcome the absence of public transit, some settlement support centers have successfully moved beyond their standard mandates by purchasing their own vans or minibuses to transport clients to programs.⁶
- Program sustainability is also strengthened as multiple sponsor groups undertake subsequent sponsorships, often motivated by family reunification while learning from their initial sponsorship experience.⁷

III. Sponsorship in Australia

- Sponsorship in Australia occurs through the Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Pilot (CRISP), made permanent on July 1, 2026 by the Government of Australia after launching in 2022.⁸ One of its objectives is to test if community-led approaches could expand refugee settlement into regional Australia beyond traditional metropolitan hubs.⁹
- Roughly 40% of CRISP participants have settled in regional areas, many of which were not previously designated as settlement locations. The program has seen high levels of community engagement, with 98% of households making meaningful social connections within their first year across Australia.¹⁰
- Additionally, this expansion of community-initiated regional settlement clusters allows local supporter groups and faith-based institutions to build their own specialized settlement expertise and resources, while boosting public support and trust for Australia's broader humanitarian program.¹¹
- Refugee employment outcomes under CRISP also demonstrate that community networks can successfully challenge the assumption that major cities offer better job prospects than regional areas by connecting newcomers to local workforce shortages and helping them launch small businesses within their first year.¹²
- Local supporter groups and service providers innovate to overcome settlement infrastructure gaps by partnering directly with established diaspora networks to build immediate community connections and create culturally responsive support programs.¹³

IV. Sponsorship in Spain

⁵ Haugen (2023, p. 137, 140); Verberg et al. (2024, p. 6)

⁶ Haugen et al. (2025, p. 9)

⁷ Haugen (2023, p. 145); Haugen et al. (2023, p. 11)

⁸ Department of Home Affairs (2026)

⁹ Button and Vitalien (2026, p. 68)

¹⁰ Button and Vitalien (2026, pp. 71-72)

¹¹ Button and Vitalien (2026, p. 75)

¹² Button and Vitalien (2026, p. 74)

¹³ Button and Vitalien (2026, pp. 76-77)

- Launched in 2021, SOMOS is a community-based reception model in Navarra, where local communities provide economic, emotional, and social support until families achieve self-sufficiency and independence.¹⁴
- The SOMOS program successfully guides refugees toward full socio-economic autonomy by combining dedicated local volunteer companionship with institutional infrastructure like municipal housing and intercultural mediation, which fostered language acquisition, school enrollment, and active neighborhood participation.¹⁵
- To adapt to its shifting demographic reality, the Navarra region also integrates newcomers by aligning agricultural initiatives, delivering tailored vocational training, and providing specialized services for entrepreneurs, transforming settlement into a process for local business creation.¹⁶
- Additionally, Spain established labor mobility pathways to match the skills of displaced people with critical demands in renewable energy, manufacturing, and healthcare in Navarra and other rural areas, helping to address regional labor shortages and demographic challenges.¹⁷
- Achieving genuine social cohesion requires treating refugees as equal co-partners, utilizing structured capacity building to address community assumptions, and leveraging older generations and respected local figures to foster early trust-building encounters.¹⁸

V. Best Practices and Success Factors of Rural Sponsorship

- Establishing dedicated teams of 8 to 10 volunteers per refugee family is a key best practice that has emerged in some rural communities as it evenly distributed responsibilities, broadened community engagement, and ensured organizational longevity.¹⁹
- Sponsor groups have maximized local resources by intentionally recruiting community members with a wide range of skills, professions, and perspectives, giving refugees a much broader network to access from day one.²⁰
- Relying on established community umbrella organizations allows sponsors to leverage existing infrastructure and financial mechanisms to provide settlement support, enabling newcomers to seamlessly connect with broader, long-standing local resources like literacy and employment services.²¹
- Communities can also adapt quickly to settlement needs by coordinating volunteers to drive refugees to urban centers for appointments to overcome public transit limitations, while local grocers supported integration by ordering in specific cultural foods and dietary items.²²

¹⁴ Share Network (2025)

¹⁵ Share Network (2025)

¹⁶ Share Network (2025)

¹⁷ Share Network (2025)

¹⁸ Share Network (2025)

¹⁹ Haugen et al. (2025, p.12)

²⁰ Haugen (2023, p. 145); Verberg et al. (2024, p. 12)

²¹ Haugen et al. (2025, p. 10)

²² Haugen (2023, p. 132)

- Sponsors have deployed other community-driven solutions, such as establishing volunteer language-learning programs, buying homes in advance, and creating rent-to-own agreements to ensure immediate housing stability.²³
- Volunteers support successful employment outcomes by providing language and onboarding assistance, including acting as language coaches, arranging interpretation, and helping newcomers understand training, workplace norms, and orientation processes, which enabled employers to hire and integrate individuals with limited English skills.²⁴

VI. Key Lessons Learned and Policy Recommendations

- Overall, rural communities can foster belonging through close social networks and a safe, slower-paced environment that supports newcomer well-being, while also helping meet labour needs, address population decline, and sustain local services for host communities.²⁵
- Successful settlement can be supported through early, clear communication about sponsors' roles as private citizens, the local community setting, and the settlement process, which will enable sponsors and refugees to align expectations and navigate housing and employment realities more effectively.²⁶
- Rural settlement readiness can be strengthened through community mapping and proactive funding, assessing key supports such as housing, healthcare, education, language training, and transportation while ensuring services are in place before arrivals, and ensuring that refugee selection is aligned with local capacity.²⁷
- Access to professional services in rural and small communities can be improved by using virtual service delivery models, such as for language interpretation, and by supporting the necessary digital infrastructure, including reliable internet access.²⁸
- Employment outcomes can be enhanced through credential recognition processes and proactive labour matching by connecting refugees to sectors facing labour shortages, and by linking newcomers to bridging or apprenticeship programs.²⁹

²³ Haugen et al. (2023, p. 16)

²⁴ Verberg et al. (2024, p. 16)

²⁵ RSTP (2026, p. 3); Button and Vitalien (2026, p. 73); Share Network (2025)

²⁶ Haugen (2023, pp. 144-145); Button and Vitalien (2026, pp. 77-78)

²⁷ RSTP (2026, p. 4); Haugen et al. (2023, p. 8); Share Network (2025)

²⁸ Haugen et al. (2023, pp. 13-14)

²⁹ RSTP (2026, p. 6); Verberg et al. (2024, p. 8); Button and Vitalien (2026, p. 74)

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