Title of Event: From Pilot to Permanent: Introducing CRISP as a permanent program
Notetaker: Mahmoud Elmasry, uOttawa Refugee Hub Knowledge Team
Host of Event: Community Refugee Sponsorship Australia (CRSA)
Date: 05-August-2026

Toplines:

- Following a successful multi-year pilot, the Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Program officially transitioned into a permanent UNHCR-referred matched sponsorship program in July 2026, establishing an annual allocation of 200 newcomer spots.
- The initiative facilitates direct public participation in refugee settlement, giving everyday Australians co-ownership of humanitarian reception while enabling partner civil society organizations to mobilize local networks, particularly across regional Australia.
- Beyond matched sponsorship, Community Refugee Sponsorship Australia and its partners are developing other complementary refugee pathways, including student education models with Skill Path, skilled labor pathways with Talent Beyond Boundaries, a framework for reformed named sponsorship developed with the Refugee Council of Australia, and targeted crisis-response models.
- Evaluation data from the University of Queensland demonstrated how community sponsorship consistently outperformed standard settlement benchmarks in language acquisition, local employment, and community connection, including in regional areas.
- Refugees, volunteers, and civil society groups all reflected on how sponsorship creates profound reciprocal benefits, giving incoming refugees an immediate sense of protection, warmth, and family-like belonging to rebuild their lives, while granting local sponsors a deeply gratifying experience that strengthens community solidarity and fosters lasting friendships.

Presenter(s):

- Blaise Itabelo, Community Partnerships & Engagement Manager, CRSA - Moderator
- Lisa Button, CEO, CRSA
- Adama Kamara, Co-CEO, Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA)
- Romy Vitalien, CRISP Program Director, CRSA
- Naomi Chua, CEO, Embrace Sanctuary Australia
- Philip Kennedy, Volunteer, Happy Home CRISP Group
- Julian Ibrahim, CRISP Newcomer, Rainbow Refugee Perth

Circulated Materials:

1. **Event recording:** From Pilot to Permanent: Introducing CRISP as a permanent program

Key Points:

Lisa Button – Introduction

A timeline of CRISP in Australia

- In 2017, CRSA was launched through a partnership among various organizations, including RCOA, Save the Children, Amnesty International, Welcoming Australia, Australian Churches Refugee Taskforce, and Rural Australians for Refugees, aiming to harness community action to expand resettlement and build on Australia's humanitarian legacy.
- In 2020, CRSA began as an advocacy group and launched the Group Mentor program, connecting everyday Australians with refugees (including post-Kabul 2021 arrivals), which demonstrated the public's capability and willingness to directly support integration.
- In 2022, CRSA partnered with the Federal Government (Department of Home Affairs), to co-design the Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Pilot (CRISP), collaborating with thousands of Australians, refugee newcomers and supporting community organizations who demonstrated the viability of sponsorship programs.
- In 2025, the federal government committed to making CRISP a permanent program, supported by positive evaluation findings from the University of Queensland on program outcomes.
- In 2026, CRISP officially became a permanent program as of July, transitioning from the Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Pilot into the Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Program.

CRISP and Broader Community Sponsorship Initiatives

- Community sponsorship grants everyday Australians direct co-ownership of the national humanitarian program. Increased program visibility will foster community buy-in and awareness, helping maintain existing resettlement opportunities and ensure Australia continues its contribution to refugee protection.
- CRISP is a matched sponsorship model for UNHCR-referred refugees and is one form of community sponsorship. CRSA is also working on expanding the community sponsorship model by developing two complementary pathways for refugees: an education pathway for students in partnership with Skill Path and a skilled labour pathway in partnership with Talent Beyond Boundaries.
- CRSA and RCOA, along with other partners, are developing a named sponsorship framework to advocate for resolving current program gaps and expanding community involvement, alongside a model tailored for responding to humanitarian crises.

Adama Kamara – Broader Context and Significance of Permanent CRISP

- Australia recently reached a historic milestone by welcoming its one millionth refugee since WWII, reflecting a long-standing legacy of settlement that has evolved over time.
- In 1979, a community refugee settlement scheme originally relied on local community members to directly support refugees, but this involvement declined as formal settlement services took over in the late 1990s.
- Recognizing that personal connections build essential empathy for successful resettlement, RCOA submitted formal policy recommendations in 2010 calling for greater public involvement in the Humanitarian Program.
- Establishing CRISP as a permanent program is a major milestone to celebrate, providing a positive, constructive alternative in an otherwise polarized socio-political climate surrounding refugee reception.
- CRISP enables everyday Australians to express tangible compassion and solidarity, turning local towns into sanctuaries and building lifelong friendships with newcomers.

Romy Vitalien – CRISP Overview and Outcomes

- CRISP operates as a "sponsor a stranger" model for UNHCR-referred refugees selected by the Department of Home Affairs, with direct 12-month settlement support delivered by groups of five or more everyday Australians part of Community Supporter Groups (CSGs).
- CRSA mobilizes, screens, trains, and personally matches CSGs, providing continuous coaching, monitoring, and quality assurance throughout the 12-month period.
- Refugee newcomers receive identical entitlements to standard humanitarian visa holders, with casework support via the Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP) or Specialised Support Services (SIS) serving as a safety net if required.
- The pilot program supported over 950 refugee newcomers across 235+ households representing 22 countries of origin and mobilized over 1,670 community members across more than 180 CSGs nationwide, with approximately 40% of groups located in regional/rural Australia.
- Most refugee newcomers felt welcome in their new communities, with the program outperforming standard settlement baselines across early employment, social integration, and local community cohesion. A large majority of sponsors also reported feeling a stronger sense of community, forming lasting friendships with assigned households, and expressed willingness to recommend CRISP to others.
- The transition from pilot to permanent required minimal operational changes due to continuous enhancements made throughout the pilot period, while establishing an annual allocation of 200 spots for newcomers.

Naomi Chua – Civil Society Involvement and Community Outreach

- Embrace Sanctuary Australia engages directly with local communities, helping members identify and align their specific skills and resources to make refugees feel welcome and fully included
- Education is a core focus, including school visits where people hear first-hand refugee stories so individuals can form their own perspectives within the current political climate. The organization also brings diverse groups together to share meals and exchange personal stories, fostering mutual understanding.
- CRISP directly complements Embrace Sanctuary's work by giving community members a tangible, structured way to get involved, welcome newcomers, and learn from one another. Embrace Sanctuary has helped establish 12 CSGs so far, with an additional 5 groups currently in development.
- While acknowledging the operational challenges, participants consistently report that sponsoring refugees through CRISP is a deeply rich and fulfilling experience. This allowed local communities to directly witness the positive impact of collaboration.

Philip Kennedy – Volunteer Involvement and Impact

- Volunteered with the Happy Home CSG, assisting refugee families from Afghanistan and Syria with practical settlement steps such as opening bank accounts, securing rental housing, enrolling in schools and English classes, finding local doctors, and accessing driving lessons.
- The experience taught him that a sponsor group's primary role is facilitating access to settlement and support services rather than attempting to provide those services directly (e.g., connecting newcomers with professional driving instructors rather than teaching driving themselves).
- He also highlighted how rewarding it is to watch families establish themselves, build independence, and overcome the disadvantages caused by displacement.

Julian Ibrahim – Firsthand Experience as a CRISP Newcomer

- Julian recalled meeting his supporter group (Rainbow Refugee Perth) at the airport, where their warm welcome provided an instant feeling of safety, comfort, and unconditional love.
- He shared how his group helped him navigate cultural and environmental changes with laughter and care, giving him a steady foundation to pursue a bright future.
- He expressed deep appreciation for CRISP staff and volunteers, emphasizing that dedicating their personal time, weekends, and mindset to help a stranger is a genuine "heart-to-heart" commitment that connects souls.
- He also described his group as his Australian family rather than simply volunteers, noting that their presence relieved his anxiety and made him feel completely supported both during and after the sponsorship period.

Blaise Itabelo – Program Growth and Practical Means of Participation

- Community sponsorship in practice can be understood as direct human connection where local communities step forward to make welcome practical, local, and deeply human.
- While CRSA provides the framework, training, support, and resources, the movement's growth and the ultimate success of permanent CRISP depend entirely on community leadership and participation:
    - Individuals can directly engage by either forming a new CSG or joining an existing one.
    - Current CSG members can expand their impact by choosing to support another refugee household or mentoring new groups.
    - Members of organizations can help build momentum by actively promoting CRISP across their local networks.
    - Strong local networks can serve as community intermediaries to introduce CRISP locally and host platforms for CRSA to initiate outreach conversations.

Q&A

1. **Are 200 visas more or less than what CRSA wanted?**

   Lisa Button:

   a. Matched sponsorship is inherently difficult to scale globally beyond the hundreds. The 200-visa cap was determined by the government and is understood to be one of the largest intakes across similar programs worldwide.
   b. While CRISP supported up to roughly 300 arrivals in a peak year during the pilot, the 200-visa allocation represents an achievable, practical target for both CRSA and the government in the current climate.
   c. The higher intake figures seen in international programs like Canada's are mainly driven by named sponsorship components, which scale differently than the matched sponsorship model does.

2. **Will there be a named community sponsorship program?**

   Lisa Button:

   a. The current named sponsorship program has been suspended for new applications due to recognized operational issues. CRSA is actively advocating for a reformed named sponsorship model to ensure a clear blueprint is ready as soon as a favourable political window opens.
   b. CRSA also remains dedicated to scaling the CRISP model to increase overall additionality beyond standard government refugee intake levels, and existing CRISP

infrastructure is being utilized to build and support complementary pathways, such as student and employment-based refugee programs.

3. **Does CRSA receive adequate funding to support CRISP at this scale?**

   Lisa Button:

   a. CRSA is comfortable with its current funding levels to effectively execute its core organizational functions at the target scale. While core functions are supported, community sponsorship offers endless opportunities to further enhance services and make community participation easier.
   b. CRSA must continuously balance its time and resources across a wide variety of organizational priorities. Philanthropic funding also remains essential to help support strategic priorities and supplement core operational funding.