



Refugee Housing  
SOLUTIONS



# Community Sponsors Assisting with Newcomer Housing

This Best Practice document is written for refugee resettlement agencies and their housing partners nationwide. It draws primarily on the experience and learning of the International Rescue Committee (IRC).

The vital importance of community sponsors in resettling new refugees has become increasingly apparent as more Americans endeavor to give refugees a new home and a chance for a fresh start and sense of belonging. While refugee journeys are often filled with hope, they are also fraught with adversity and displacement. These journeys become easier for many refugees when they become a shared effort between themselves and their new community. Resettlement challenges like securing housing and achieving integration are multifaceted and complex and are made more manageable through collective efforts that transcend bureaucratic and organizational boundaries. This article delves into the critical role that community sponsors and partners play in assisting with refugee housing, highlighting how their engagement expands the success of resettlement efforts. By cultivating a compassionate and inclusive environment, sponsors and hosts can help build strong foundations upon which newcomers can bolster their resiliency. From providing a warm welcome at the airport to opening doors of opportunity, communities and individuals who host refugees can help newcomers reshape their lives. As the bonds between host and sponsor grow, so too does the tapestry of our united society.

Today, as increasing numbers of displaced people arrive from countries like Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Ukraine, more and more community groups are stepping up to offer their support through community sponsorship. Community sponsorship is an umbrella term for different ways refugees are paired with communities with volunteers ready to help them. These groups commit to financial and in-kind contributions, including tasks large and small. Many volunteers assist with that most pressing need: to find and secure safe, affordable housing for newcomers. Some group members help set up the home with furniture, appliances, and household supplies, while others greet the family or individual at the airport. Many other welcome and support tasks exist but vary depending on the sponsorship avenue that groups pursue.

Sponsor groups can be formed from a range of community groups, such as civic service clubs, higher education communities, faith-based groups, sports teams, and book clubs, to name just a few. Groups can work independently through private sponsorship programs such as **Sponsor Circles** or **Welcome Corps** or partner with a local resettlement agency through **co-sponsorship**. Sponsors can also seek on-demand technical assistance and in-depth training programs, weekly learning sessions, and learning resources from the **Refugee Welcome Collective**.

Community sponsors working with resettlement agencies to find housing have developed creative solutions to help refugees work around their lack of credit, rent payment history, and initial lack of employment. Because securing safe, affordable housing is critical to a positive start and foundation for success in the U.S., successful housing strategies are described here as requiring low, medium, or high investment.

## Low Investment

Community sponsors come with a range of connections to resources and individuals in their networks. For a low-investment solution, a sponsor or group can connect with someone in a solid position to help find housing. The person may own a rental property that they are willing to rent to a refugee/family or may know a landlord willing to rent to a newcomer/family.

A few examples of ways that sponsors have engaged in community outreach include:

- Guest speaking for 10 or 15 minutes at the end of a community meeting to explain the refugee sponsorship initiative they are involved in and the need for housing support. Rotary and Lions Clubs, Junior League or other women's club chapters, book clubs, school parent-teacher associations, neighborhood groups, and faith groups, such as mosques, churches, synagogues, and temples, are great places to reach community members.
- Writing a blurb about the need for refugee housing in the paper or digital newsletter of any of the above groups.
- Posting on community/neighborhood social media – Next Door or similar apps, local Facebook groups, or Instagram – with details of the types of housing needed.

## Medium Investment

A medium-investment solution that has worked for many community sponsors in identifying refugee housing is partnering with local faith groups and higher education institutions. These groups are playing an increasingly significant role in welcoming refugees through community sponsorship, by providing housing, and along other avenues. Two ways community sponsors have worked with these groups so far are these:

- Some community sponsors use church-owned housing, such as a rectory or empty convent, to house refugees. Essential considerations for this option include ensuring the housing meets zoning laws, building codes, and occupancy standards. An International Rescue Committee (IRC) community partner in Lumberton, New Mexico, plans to use a long-empty rectory on their church's property to provide housing to a refugee family this year. In partnership with other resettlement agencies, a Unitarian Universalist parish used a church-owned property in Tulsa, Oklahoma, to house an Afghan family and has renewed the lease for a second year. In partnership with Catholic Charities in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Catholic nuns are also using their convents to house refugees.
- Community sponsor groups from higher education institutions have successfully used their campuses to provide newly arrived refugee families with housing, English language classes, employment, and access to other services. Through a partnership with the IRC in Spokane, Washington State University co-sponsored two Afghan refugee families and provided 12 months of free rent in graduate and family housing. In collaboration with another resettlement agency, the Ethiopian Community Development Council, **World Learning used its campus for the entire summer of 2021 to house dozens of Afghan families** and, together with the town of Brattleboro, Vermont, helped them find permanent housing.

## High Investment

Although these options may only be suitable for some community sponsor groups, some community sponsors have taken a high-investment approach to bypass the barriers many refugees face when securing housing.

- Buying a rental property to house refugees is a successful model to ensure housing for multiple refugee families over time. An IRC community partner in Kalispell, Montana, purchased a duplex to lease to a family and was thereby able to set a reasonable rental amount. In Sacramento, California, a local affiliate of another national RA bought a seven-unit apartment building to house refugees permanently, and they also rented housing to use sequentially as temporary housing.
- Community sponsors have also had success co-signing leases or subleasing apartments to refugees. For both options, the sponsor takes on lease obligation. If sponsors can make this commitment, this model has made landlords feel secure in renting to people who have yet to arrive in the country. An IRC community partner in Potsdam, New York, used this lease co-signing strategy, so they had permanent housing ready for the refugees' arrival. Another IRC community partner in Kalispell signs all client leases and then makes individual subleases with each family. They have found that the landlords they work with prefer renting to their group rather than a newly arrived family, and the group has leveraged this knowledge to create a greater number of refugee housing opportunities. Another resettlement agency's Chicago, Illinois affiliate has an unwritten and longstanding relationship with an apartment building owner who has made his units available and affordable to refugees for many years.

Although the housing search and success on behalf of refugees can feel daunting for some community sponsor groups, there are options to collaborate with resettlement agencies for refugee housing at all investment and risk levels. The extent to which community sponsors engage with refugee housing varies depending on where in the country they are, the type of sponsorship they are participating in, and their agreement with a resettlement agency, if applicable. Since all options do not work for all community sponsors, each must assess its collective resources and opportunities to decide what housing strategies are feasible for their context. Given the housing supply shortage across the U.S., whether it is one housing unit or multiple, housing provided by community sponsors and partners is vital to welcoming refugees. For more information on other ideas and successes, visit [refugeehousing.org](https://refugeehousing.org) to read about your options and sign up for a conversation to learn more.

Refugee Housing Solutions is a project of CWS under an agreement paid for  
by the U.S. Department of State