



The Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program: Current Challenges and Opportunities

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Introduction

Year after year, thousands of refugees are able to find a permanent new home in Canada through resettlement. One of the few countries in the world with a resettlement program, Canada is unique in giving citizens the opportunity to undertake to resettle refugees in addition to those resettled with government support. Each year, the government resettles approximately 7,500 refugees, while committed Canadians, working through the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program, bring in almost half as many again.

Given the opportunity, through an increase in the annual target, they will do still more.

What is private sponsorship of refugees?

Canadians, working through organizations or in informal groups, make a commitment to sponsor refugees outside Canada who are in need of a durable solution. The sponsorship undertaking is a guarantee to provide financial and personal settlement support. The refugees are processed by Canadian visa officers and on arrival in Canada are welcomed by their Canadian sponsoring groups who provide them with the funds, goods, personal and community support they need to start their lives in their new home.

Who can be sponsored?

To be sponsored, refugees must meet the definition of a refugee or of a person in a refugee-like situation as established in Canadian law. They must also meet admissibility criteria. Canadian visa officers decide whether applicants meet the requirements. For refugees sponsored to Quebec, the government of Quebec also plays a role in this selection process. Sponsoring groups can apply to sponsor specific refugees or they can sponsor refugees identified by the government as in need of resettlement.

Who can sponsor?

Canadians can sponsor refugees in three main ways:

- o Working through a *Sponsorship Agreement Holder*. Sponsorship Agreement Holders are established organizations that have signed a Sponsorship Agreement with the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration (or with the Quebec government). Currently there are over 90 Agreement Holders across Canada, ranging from religious organizations to ethnocultural groups and other humanitarian organizations. Over two-thirds of privately sponsored refugees are sponsored in this way.

- o Joining with others to form a *Group of Five*. Any group of five or more Canadian citizens or permanent residents, who are at least 18 years of age and who live in the community where the refugees are expected to settle, can join together to sponsor one or more refugees.
- o *Community Sponsors*. Any organization, association or corporation with adequate financial capacity and ability to provide settlement support can sponsor refugees to settle in the community where they are based.

What do sponsoring groups commit to do?

Sponsoring groups undertake to work alongside refugees in order to ensure that they have the necessary support to integrate into life in Canada. This means a commitment to providing the refugees they have sponsored with basic financial support (for example, lodging and food) and care (such as showing them how to register their children in school and providing a network of support and orientation). This commitment lasts for 12 months, or until the sponsored refugee becomes self-sufficient, whichever comes first. In exceptional circumstances, the length of the sponsorship may be up to 36 months.

Strengths of the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program

- ✓ More refugees are able to find a permanent new home.
- ✓ The lives of Canadians are enriched by their direct involvement in the resettlement process, through getting to know the refugees they sponsor and accompanying them as they integrate into Canadian society.
- ✓ The network of support provided by the sponsoring groups helps refugees settle more quickly. Statistics show that privately sponsored refugees integrate well, undoubtedly because sponsors offer personalized local support that the government is not able to provide.
- ✓ Private sponsorship does not rely on public resources, but rather taps the energy and funds of faith communities, ethnic groups, families and other community associations. The support offered through the program is the equivalent of approximately \$79 million annually, as well as an estimated volunteer contribution of over 1,600 hours per refugee family.
- ✓ Private sponsorship draws on the strengths of a three-way partnership between sponsoring groups, the government and the refugees themselves. Additionally, some provinces and municipalities are also offering tangible support to the Program. Notably, the Winnipeg and Manitoba initiatives are models of collaboration between the province, the municipality and private voluntary organizations.
- ✓ Private sponsorship allows communities right across Canada, large and small, to welcome refugees. Privately sponsored refugees have provided countless Canadians with their first opportunity to meet a refugee, thus building empathy, understanding and a concern for the wider problems of the world.
- ✓ Private sponsorship is one of the key channels through which immigrants settle outside the major centres, allowing more communities to benefit from the diversity and economic and demographic advantages that immigration brings.

Challenges facing the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program

Like too many other categories of immigrants and refugees, privately sponsored refugees face unacceptably long processing delays, with waits of three or four years being routine. While no immigrants should have to wait so long, in the case of refugees delays can cost lives.

Resettlement is first and foremost a humanitarian program, intended to provide protection and a durable solution to people forced to flee. A program that asks refugees to wait for years cannot provide protection to refugees whose lives are at imminent risk.

Refugees waiting for private sponsorship may be under threat of deportation back to a situation of persecution. Even if they are not deported, they are living with insecure status, vulnerable to violence and deprivation. Children may go without schooling, adults without the right to work, and all without adequate access to health care. Families live separated with no way to reunite. When finally privately sponsored refugees arrive in Canada, they may face additional serious challenges to their integration as a result of the long delays. Children who have missed schooling may never be able to fully catch up. Untreated physical ailments may have caused permanent damage to refugees’ health. Long separation may have wrenched families so far apart that the gap can never be crossed.

The following table provides information on times to complete processing at visa offices of private sponsorship applications. The actual waiting time for refugees is significantly longer since the application also has to be processed in Canada before it even reaches the visa office. It is to be noted that processing times vary greatly by region, with refugees in Africa and the Middle East, who are living in some of the most precarious situations, waiting the longest.

Private sponsorship processing times at visa offices, 2005

	All regions	Africa/Middle East	Asia	Europe	Western Hemisphere
50% of cases take more than:	21 months	28 months	19 months	13 months	5 months
20% of cases take more than:	35 months	38 months	22 months	21 months	17 months

The long processing times for privately sponsored refugees were recently deplored by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops in their Pastoral Letter *Immigration and the Protection of Refugees* (at <http://www.cccb.ca/MediaReleases.htm?CD=531&ID=1804>). See also the CCR report, *No Faster Way: Private Sponsorship of Refugees Overseas Processing Delays* (at <http://www.web.ca/ccr/doceng.htm#resettle>).

Why do privately sponsored refugees wait so long?

The long delays are essentially caused by the fact that the government each year finalizes fewer private sponsorship applications than are submitted, leading to an ever growing backlog of cases waiting to be finalized. The table below illustrates how the backlog has been accumulating over the last six years.

Private sponsorship applicants, referred and finalized

Year	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2000-2005
Applicants Referred	7,822	10,175	7,359	7,439	7,665	9,458	49,918
Applicants Finalized*	4,770	7,775	5,348	6,300	5,219	6,568	35,980
Shortfall in finalizations	3,052	2,400	2,011	1,139	2,446	2,890	13,938

*Applicants finalized include number of visas issued, persons refused and persons withdrawn.

On 31 December 2005, there was in fact a backlog of 14,855 private sponsorship applications. Based on this backlog, a refugee whose application is now arriving at a visa office can expect, at the current rate of processing, to wait two and a quarter years.

Annual targets for privately sponsored refugees

Clearly the number of private sponsorship applications finalized each year has not been matching the number of applications submitted. The finalization numbers relate to the annual targets for privately sponsored refugees, established as part of the government’s annual immigration plan. Visa officers are resourced and mandated to finalize enough cases to allow them to meet at least the lower end of the target for each immigration category (given refusals and withdrawals, finalizations need to exceed the target number).

Targets and actual arrivals, privately sponsored refugees

	2003	2004	2005	2006
Lower end of target	2,900	3,400	3,000	3,000
Upper end of target	4,200	4,000	4,000	4,000
Actual arrivals	3,252	3,115	2,975	?

The table above shows that the targets are far below the capacity and willingness of Canadians to sponsor refugees. While sponsoring groups have been submitting on average over 8,000 applications a year, the annual target aims to bring in fewer than half that number. Furthermore, actual arrivals have been close to, or even under, the lower end of the target.

As noted above, the very significant resources offered by Canadians reflect their interest and commitment to refugees. In the law and according to the Sponsorship Agreement signed by the government and sponsors, there is no limit on the number of refugees Canadians may undertake to sponsor in any given year. Their commitment is based on their resources and abilities to support the refugees on arrival.

In effect, however, the annual targets, set as low as they are, act as a brake and restriction on the generosity of Canadians, and limit the number of resettled refugees that can find a home in Canada each year. The low targets also mean that those refugees who do make it here have routinely been forced to wait years in difficult and even dangerous circumstances before they can start a new life in Canada.

Who is being sponsored?

The challenge of long processing times is linked in various ways to the issue of the acceptance rate of privately sponsored refugees (48% in 2005). In considering this issue it is helpful to bear in mind how refugees come to be sponsored.

Private sponsorship applications are submitted for the following three main categories:

- Refugees identified through the sponsoring group's networks internationally as being in need of resettlement.
- Refugees referred by visa officers. This category has been significantly reduced in recent years because of a lack of capacity by visa offices to make referrals. However, when available, private sponsoring groups respond enthusiastically to such referrals (for example, the Somali Madhiban group resettlement cases and the upcoming Burmese Karen group).
- Refugees identified by family members or friends in Canada. While it is understood that the private sponsorship program is not a family reunification program, Canada is the appropriate destination for refugees in need of resettlement who have family here. The presence of family will facilitate their integration. Meanwhile, the family members in Canada, often refugees themselves, also benefit from their arrival, since they remain preoccupied and anxious as long as their relatives have not found safety and stability. This category of sponsorship has grown over the years, as arriving refugees, including government assisted refugees, soon come forward with requests for sponsorship for family members in situations of insecurity. It is also well established that the presence of family members is an important factor in retaining newcomers in smaller communities.

Why are half of the sponsorship applications refused?

There is a range of reasons that may explain why approximately half of sponsorship applications are refused:

- Because of the long processing delays, there are changes in circumstances that mean that, by the time of the decision, the applicant is no longer a refugee (for example, there has been a change of government in the home country) or the applicant has found another solution (for example, been resettled to another country).
- The sponsoring group, who generally cannot interview the applicant themselves, does not have all the relevant information about the applicant. While sponsors can and do work to make the best possible evaluation of the case, there are limits to what they can do to assess the case of someone thousands of miles away.
- The sponsoring group did not have all of the relevant information and training when the application was submitted. Sponsoring groups have been receiving ongoing training, notably through the Refugee Sponsorship Training Program, funded by Citizenship and Immigration Canada. However, due to the delays in processing, the cases being finalized now were submitted before detailed information and training were offered in recent years. Similarly, the long processing delays mean that feedback from visa offices, for example, that a certain category of persons generally does not meet the definition, doesn't reach sponsoring groups for years, by which time many hundreds of such cases may have been submitted, based on the information available at the time.

- The visa office decision is not always the right decision. Visa officers work under extreme pressure, dealing with many cases and without access to most of the resources, such as training, documentation, legal updates, and counsel support, available to members of the Immigration and Refugee Board making similar decisions in Canada. Private sponsorship cases rarely go to the Federal Court for review because of the expense and communication difficulties: when they do, decisions are not infrequently overturned.

As can be seen from the above, quicker processing times would assist in addressing a number of the causes of refusals of sponsorship applications.

Recommendation

The Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program represents a marvellous response from Canadians who want to help protect refugees through resettlement to Canada. The sponsoring organizations invest financial resources and thousands of volunteers to support the refugees in their settlement in Canada. This massive investment of time, energy and money by ordinary Canadians deserves to be encouraged and facilitated.

The Canadian Council for Refugees recommends that the Government of Canada support private sponsorship by **increasing significantly the annual target for privately sponsored refugees.**

An increased target would:

- Provide more refugees with protection and a permanent home. Given the recent dramatic reduction in the numbers of refugee claimants arriving in Canada, we need to resettle more refugees to ensure that Canada's overall response to refugees does not drop significantly.
- Reduce processing delays for refugees, cutting short their exposure to danger and allowing them to get on with their lives in safety.
- Help to address the challenge of relatively low acceptance rates, by reducing the time between submission of the application and decision.
- Provide encouragement for and recognition of Canadian sponsoring groups who have made enormous contributions to the protection and welcome of refugees, working tirelessly out of the limelight.
- Take advantage of the existing capacity to settle a larger number of refugees, with minimal impact on government resources, since the settlement costs are borne by the community.