



Conseil canadien pour les réfugiés Canadian Council for Refugees

Canada's Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program Proud history, Uncertain future

Unique in the world, Canada's Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program has allowed Canadians to offer protection and a new home to more than 225,000 refugees since its beginning in 1979. Despite its historical success, the Program has been facing dramatic changes and challenges in recent years.

Private sponsorship: the basics

- Privately sponsored refugees are resettled refugees. In other words, they are approved overseas and arrive in Canada as permanent residents. (In addition to resettling refugees, Canada protects refugees who come to Canada and make a successful refugee claim.)
- Private sponsors are groups of Canadians or organizations. Many sponsors represent faith-based communities. Others include ethno-cultural groups and settlement organizations.
- Private sponsors provide financial support and settlement assistance for the refugees they sponsor, usually for one year after arrival.

Fundamental principles of private sponsorship

The strength of the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program depends on its core principles:

- **ADDITIONALITY:** Privately sponsored refugees are **over and above** the refugees resettled by the government (Government Assisted Refugees). Canadians want to know that their government is fulfilling its responsibility, on behalf of all Canadians, to protect refugees through resettlement, and that any refugees they sponsor are **additional** to those resettled by the government.
- **NAMING:** Sponsors can propose the individual refugees they wish to resettle. Naming means that Canadians can respond to the needs of individual refugees or particular refugee communities that concern them.

Recent changes and challenges make private sponsorship more difficult. They include:

- New restrictive rules limiting which refugees can be sponsored, from where and how many.
- More burdensome paperwork: forms are extremely complicated and sponsors no longer have access to government officials locally to guide them.
- Very slow processing, especially in some regions of the world.
- Shortcomings in communication and consultation with sponsors by the Canadian government.
- New government expectations that sponsors will resettle refugees identified by the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, while the government is itself resettling fewer refugees.

The Future?

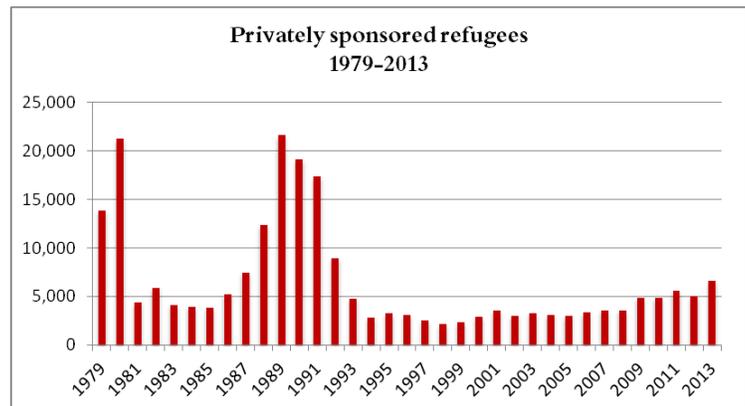
We seem to be moving towards a new private sponsorship model, in which the government decides who is to be resettled and private sponsors provide the financial and human resources.

Alternatively, we can recommit to the core principles of additionality and naming (the principles that motivate people to get involved in refugee sponsorship), and seek solutions to the restrictions, bureaucracy and delays that have been undermining the program.

Origins

Canada's Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program got off to a dramatic start in 1979 when Canadians responded in massive numbers to South-East Asian refugees. 35,000 Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laotians were privately sponsored in just two years. In 1986 this response earned the "people of Canada" the Nansen Medal, a United Nations award given for service to refugees. It is the only time an entire country has been given the award.

In the decades since, the program grew to respond to numerous refugee crises around the world, as well as to displaced groups left languishing for years, and individual refugees with no other durable solution. The annual number resettled has been smaller than in the first years, apart from another peak at the time of the fall of the Iron Curtain. In the past five years, about 5,000 privately sponsored refugees have been resettled each year.



Strengths of Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program

The private sponsorship program has many benefits – for the refugees resettled, for the sponsors and for Canada as a whole. The program:

- Engages individual Canadians, giving them an opportunity to connect with the world through personal relationships with people who have survived persecution in various corners of the globe.
- Offers the refugees sponsored the direct support of Canadians in settling. Statistics show that privately sponsored refugees find employment faster than Government Assisted Refugees.
- Brings refugees to all regions of Canada, not just the major centres.
- Adds to Canada's capacity to offer refugees safety and a permanent home, through the contributions of private resources from the community. (Sponsors must cover the financial needs of refugees for one year following their arrival.)
- Responds to situations around the world and to refugees who have been forgotten or who do not fit the priorities of governments or the UN.

Major recent changes:

1. Centralization of in-Canada processing

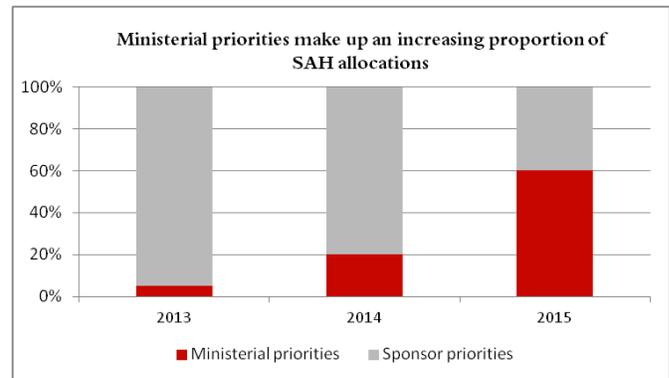
Traditionally private sponsors submitted their applications to a local office of Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC). In 2012, processing was centralized in Winnipeg, leading to long delays. A 2013 internal evaluation reported that the Centralized Processing Office Winnipeg (CPO-W) had developed critical backlogs, largely due to being understaffed. Decisions on sponsorship applications were supposed to be made within 30 business days, but were taking nearly a year in most cases. Since then improvements have been made, but delays at CPO-W, as well as issues with consistent decision-making and communication, continue to be of major concern.

2. More burdensome paperwork

The forms that sponsors need to complete have become more complex. Since April 2012, sponsors must submit all the forms together, including those filled out and signed by the sponsored refugees. This is challenging for refugees in precarious situations with little or no access to telephones or internet (especially as the refugee form requires a barcode only generated when completed electronically). While the paperwork has become more complex, sponsors have less access to help from CIC. In the past, they could contact a local official: now they send forms into CPO-W and in many cases get them returned with a note saying there are errors.

3. Limits on how many refugees can be sponsored (and from which region)

Starting in 2011, the government has imposed a complex system of caps and allocations on the number of refugees that Sponsorship Agreement Holders can sponsor (most private sponsorship is done through established organizations that have signed an agreement with the government). The limits include very restrictive caps on sponsorship through the visa offices in Nairobi, Cairo, Pretoria and Islamabad. Since 2012, Sponsorship Agreement Holders have each had to work within an annual quota, individually assigned. In 2015, 60% of the spaces are reserved for Ministerial priorities. As a result, Sponsorship Agreement Holders often find they cannot sponsor refugees in need of resettlement because they have reached their limit, either overall or for the specific visa office.



4. Cuts to the Interim Federal Health Program (IFHP)

Since the June 2012 cuts to the IFHP, most privately sponsored refugees are no longer covered for supplementary health benefits, such as prescription medications or prosthetics. This increases the financial burden on sponsors. It is also a strong disincentive: the fear of catastrophic costs discourages groups from sponsoring.

5. More restrictive rules for Groups of Five and Community Sponsors

In 2012, the government introduced new rules that bar Groups of Five and Community Sponsors from sponsoring refugees who have not been individually determined to be a refugee by either the UNHCR or the government of the country in which they are staying. A Group of Five is an ad hoc group of five Canadians who join together to sponsor a refugee. Many refugees, such as Syrians in the Middle East or Afghans in Pakistan or Iran, do not go through individual determination, so they cannot be sponsored by Groups of Five or Community Sponsors.

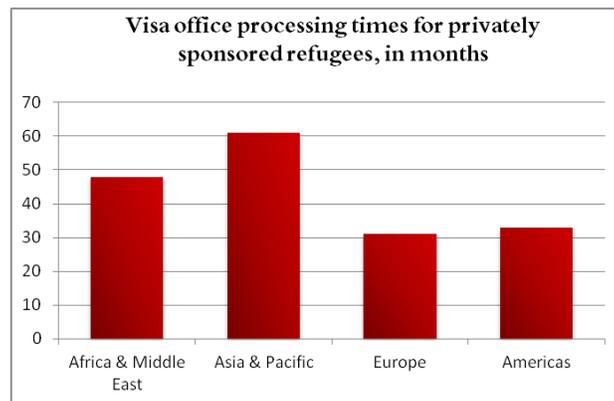
6. Narrowing of the definition of dependent child

In August 2014, the maximum age of dependent children under immigration rules was reduced from 21 to 18 years. This means that refugee families with older children are at risk of being separated.

Note : Quebec administers its own private sponsorship program. Some of the issues outlined here do not apply to sponsored refugees destined to Quebec.

Other challenges: Long processing delays

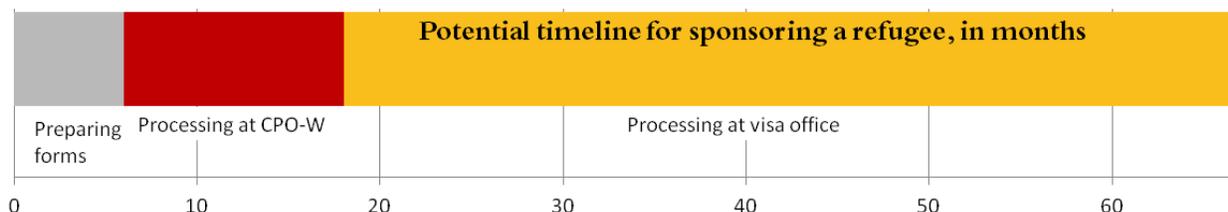
The Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program has been plagued by extremely long processing delays overseas. While some refugees arrive quite quickly, especially if identified as a ministerial priority (e.g. Syrians in 2014), other refugees routinely wait for years. The processing time is 49 months (and this is only the processing time *after* the application gets to the visa office). The processing time is currently 45 months in Cairo, 54 months in Nairobi and 64 months in Islamabad.



The excruciatingly slow processing times are completely unacceptable for a program that is supposed to protect refugees in danger. The long delays also discourage potential sponsors from getting involved.

Lack of attention to private sponsors

While private sponsors must deal with the changes and manage the slow processing, there appears to be little priority given to supporting their efforts. In July 2013, the government announced that private sponsors would be expected to sponsor 1,100 Syrian refugees, without consulting or even informing private sponsors. The Minister of Citizenship and Immigration has not met with the Sponsorship Agreement Holders’ Council, despite repeated requests, since he took office in July 2013. Sponsorship Agreement Holders were not given their 2014 allocations until the end of July – more than half the way through the year.



Future directions?

Are we heading towards a remodelled resettlement program which is government-led, but privately funded?

- Fewer Government Assisted Refugees, more Privately Sponsored Refugees.
- Privately sponsored refugees increasingly determined by “Ministerial Priorities”.
- Sponsors’ priorities squeezed out by caps at visa offices not favoured by the Minister, long processing delays, and lack of supplementary health coverage.
- Loss of core principles that are key to the success of the program: additionality and naming.
- Neglect of regions that are not considered priority, notably Africa.
- Government responsibility to resettle refugees increasingly borne by private citizens.

Alternatively, the government can recommit to the fundamental principles of the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program, devote the resources necessary and reengage with private sponsors to ensure that Canadians can continue to respond to refugees through this unique program.