Recommendations for the Upcoming U.S. Private Sponsorship Pilot for Refugees
(March 15, 2022)

As the United States rebuilds its refugee resettlement program after years of devastating retreat on refugee protection—and as it confronts new and emerging displacement crises around the world, from Afghanistan to Ukraine and beyond—private sponsorship of refugees is a promising innovation to restore and transform U.S. leadership in the global system for humanitarian protection.

Private sponsorship offers communities, organizations, institutions, and companies the opportunity to directly engage in refugee resettlement. In particular, a private sponsorship program strengthens the public's sense of ownership of refugee resettlement, fostering even more direct relationships with their new neighbors and further deepening community member and newcomer engagement that already occurs through traditional resettlement and co-sponsorship.

The President's Report to Congress on Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2022 stated that "a major initiative in FY 2022 will be the implementation of a private sponsorship pilot program, whereby community members will take on the primary responsibility of welcoming and providing initial support to newly arrived refugees, helping facilitate their successful integration."[1]

The program's design and the actors who form its infrastructure will be critical to achieving these goals. As the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM) within the Department of State (DOS) draws closer to launching the pilot, the International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP), Amnesty International USA (AIUSA), the Community Sponsorship Hub (CSH), and the Niskanen Center offer the following recommendations:

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[1] U.S. Departments of State, Homeland Security, and Health and Human Services, "Report to the Congress on Proposed Refugee Admissions For Fiscal Year 2022" (Sept. 30, 2021), https://www.state.gov/report-to-congress-on-proposed-refugee-admissions-for-fiscal-year-2022/.

1. **Clarity on Timeline for Program Design & Launch**

PRM has yet to announce clear timelines for the design process and launch of the private sponsorship program. Given the breadth of actors whose participation—in the program's design, infrastructure, and/or sponsorship mechanisms once launched—is beneficial or even critical to program success, public clarity on this timeline would (1) encourage participation in design and operations by actors with important perspectives and expertise, (2) give those key actors more preparation time and confidence to commit to the program, and (3) create and sustain interest in the public, including from potential sponsors.

Recommendation:

PRM should commit to and **publicly announce a clear timeline for the private sponsorship program's design and rollout**, which will encourage interest and participation from the general public and actors key to program design and infrastructure.

2. **Additionality**

Private sponsorship should be used to increase the number of refugees resettled in the United States annually, with an additional number of refugees resettled via private sponsorship above and beyond the number to be resettled each year through the traditional U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) and co-sponsorship. This preserves the U.S. humanitarian commitment to resettle refugees through a government-led resettlement program and acknowledges the critical work resettlement agencies already do while utilizing community capacity to expand pathways to safety for refugees.

*Recommendation***:**

Any PRM publications or materials regarding the private sponsorship program should **reference PRM's intended goal of additionality by noting that the private sponsorship program will ultimately be used to increase the number of refugees resettled in the United States annually**. This mention would reinforce understanding in the field that private sponsorship opens, rather than replaces, pathways for resettlement.

3. Streamlining of Opportunities

For a private sponsorship program to be successful, it must be designed as a part of a broader community sponsorship system, inclusive of co-sponsorship as offered through resettlement agencies. This design should take into consideration prospective users of the system (e.g., sponsors and institutions) and their willingness and ability to navigate an increasingly complex community sponsorship system.

Recommendation:

PRM should design a community sponsorship system that **streamlines opportunities for engagement**, maximizing resources and making it easier for prospective users of the system (e.g., sponsors and institutions) to navigate and engage.

4. Multi-Year Design and Infrastructure

While the initial period of a private sponsorship program will be a "pilot" phase, PRM should demonstrate its commitment to the program by structuring a multi-year funding and iterative design trajectory. The program's success will depend in part on incentivizing the entry of new actors into the resettlement space and encouraging existing actors to take on new roles and functions; success will also depend on building out infrastructure in an intentional way with an eye to a longer vision for the program. A multi-year commitment to funding and design strategy from PRM will encourage these actors to make their own durable investments to engage in private sponsorship.

Recommendation:

PRM should **design, and structure funding for, the infrastructure to support a private sponsorship program as multi-year**. This will ensure investment in long-term infrastructure and program sustainability.

5. Open Identification of Refugees by Sponsors

Refugees are primarily referred for traditional resettlement through USRAP by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), embassies, or immediate family members. For private sponsorship, another option is an open "identification," alternatively called "naming" or nomination, of refugees by sponsors.

Open identification would incentivize potential sponsors, maximize alignment of interest and expertise, and allow the program to reach refugees who might not be encompassed by USRAP currently (e.g., expanded family reunification for non-nuclear family members not currently eligible to access USRAP through the Priority Three category; LGBTQI+ refugees or survivors of sexual and gender-based violence who fear approaching governmental or government-affiliated institutions where they currently live, but have U.S. contacts or are willing to approach NGOs; and people determined to be refugees due to, in part, climate change impacts).

Open identification would also be a mechanism for interested Americans to step up and directly welcome refugees fleeing from emergent conflicts and humanitarian crises abroad. As seen through the Sponsor Circle Program for Afghans, the opportunity to name or identify has enabled countless sponsors to support the specific Afghan newcomers with whom they have a direct connection.

> *Case Study*: The Sponsor Circle Program was launched in October 2021 as an emergency response to support the resettlement of Afghans into local communities at a time when many resettlement agencies were overstretched and unable to provide immediate assistance. It serves as a new way to enable everyday Americans to take on the responsibility of welcoming Afghan newcomers to their communities: groups of individuals can apply to form certified Sponsor Circles, no matter where they are located in the United States, and identify a particular Afghan newcomer they already know or be matched with one – mechanisms very similar to the open identification and matching options that could form the backbone of the private sponsorship program.

All refugees would meet the U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act refugee definition, and undergo the same vetting processes as other refugees entering the United States.

Recommendation:

PRM should **design the program with a mechanism for U.S. sponsors to identify the eligible refugees they wish to welcome, and support the new infrastructure needed for this open-identification mechanism** (see recommendations below).

At the same time, the program should **also begin with and retain a mechanism for "matching"** other refugees referred by UNHCR, embassies or consulates, and NGOs to sponsors in the United States, allowing sponsors without a pre-existing connection to refugees overseas, the opportunity to welcome.

6. **Engaging New Actors in Sponsorship and Sponsorship Infrastructure**

A newly-established private sponsorship program will enable more Americans to take primary responsibility for providing direct resettlement support to refugee newcomers that they identify or with whom they are matched. In so doing, the private sponsorship program will significantly expand the resettlement capacity of the United States and diversify welcoming communities and actors. Entities like higher education institutions or organizations that work with LGBTQI+ populations can bring new perspectives and additional resettlement capacity, as well as identify and create access for particular refugee populations, such as student refugees or LGBTQI+ refugees.

Recommendations:

PRM should incentivize diverse new actors to participate in operationalizing a private sponsorship program. In addition to creating a mechanism for open identification and committing multi-year funding for infrastructure (see above), **PRM should recognize that some support for particular refugee populations may be necessary** (e.g., process alignment with academic calendars for university-sponsored refugee students; vetting of credentials or documentation to meet additional criteria beyond refugee status, such as academic qualifications) **and support limited dedicated infrastructure that operates within the broader framework of a private sponsorship program with open identification**.

7. **System-Wide Infrastructure for Open Identification & Core Operational Functions**

A successful and sustainable private sponsorship program requires national, standardized, and centralized infrastructure aimed at supporting a global, open-identification mechanism.

Although dedicated support for particular refugee populations within the overall private sponsorship program may be necessary (e.g., for university sponsorship of higher education student refugees), it is key to the overall vision that organizational infrastructure to support the private sponsorship of particular refugee populations does not dilute the policy setting of open identification. The relevant dedicated infrastructure can operate fully and effectively within the open identification system.

Many core operational functions will need infrastructure across the private sponsorship system, rather than just within discrete subsets of a pilot aimed at certain populations. Examples of key functions may include:

- Sponsor application vetting and certification;
- Referral and vetting of sponsor-identified refugees;
- Centralized, national program coordination;
- Management of specialized initiatives serving specific sponsors and/or specific refugee populations;
- Mobilization of sponsors;
- Sponsor application support;
- Overseas case counseling;
- Matching of sponsors to refugees;
- Refugee overseas medical examinations, pre-departure orientation, and travel;
- Sponsor training and support;
- Sponsor oversight;
- Program monitoring and evaluation;
- Program design and modification (e.g., policy settings, process flows, forms); and
- Management of a private sector fund to which sponsors can apply for financial support.

***Recommendations*:**

PRM should **ensure there is infrastructure for a global open-identification mechanism with a diversity of potential refugee beneficiaries**, which is critical for ensuring that the goal of open identification of refugees by sponsors can be realized – while also encouraging specialized and complementary infrastructure tailored to support specific

groups (e.g., higher education students, LGBTQI+ refugees) welcomed through an open-identification mechanism.

PRM should **prioritize core operational functions critical to the program's success**, and ensure that all key functions can be fulfilled across the private sponsorship program either through existing infrastructure or through additional funding support.

8. **Leverage Existing Infrastructure for Refugee Processing, While Developing Infrastructure for New Functions**

Infrastructure for refugee case processing, including that for expedited processing, exists and can be leveraged in the new private sponsorship program. However, private sponsorship cases necessitate certain new functions for case processing, including:

- Application support and quality control, to ensure that the private sponsorship applications received by the U.S. Government are credible and high-quality and thereby increase efficiency in the system.
- Guidance on the integration of sponsorship into all aspects of overseas case processing, including early-stage counseling on sponsorship options during standard refugee counseling.
- Infrastructure to facilitate matching between refugees and sponsors who will not personally identify a refugee, which could include the creation and management of a matching database.

Recommendation:

PRM should **leverage existing refugee case processing infrastructure** where possible but also **support infrastructure to fulfill new functions, including application support and control; counseling on sponsorship options; and facilitation of matching between refugees and sponsors**.

9. **Public Mobilization & Sponsor Recruitment**

In addition to the operations infrastructure described above, a successful program requires sponsors and fundraising capacity. The success thus far of the Sponsor Circle Program for Afghans evidences the American public's significant interest in directly welcoming refugees, but PRM will need a means of promoting the broader new private sponsorship program

and tapping into that public interest to recruit sponsors, especially in the program's early iterations.

Furthermore, American individuals and institutions will likely want to engage with the program in capacities beyond that of "sponsor." An even broader swath of the American public will come into contact with the program by learning of sponsorships that happen in their community, offering opportunities for public mobilization. Private sector philanthropists and businesses may wish to contribute funding to sponsor groups - which, in turn, would attract and mobilize more sponsors.

***Recommendation*:**

PRM should **also fund public mobilization and sponsor recruitment**. This category could include advocacy-oriented initiatives and public communications campaigns, as well as plans to establish and manage private sector funding to attract more sponsors.

IRAP, AIUSA, CSH, and the Niskanen Center encourage the U.S. government to design the program and its infrastructure as a sustainable, long-term part of U.S. resettlement architecture supporting expanded access for refugees and opportunities for American engagement in welcoming them. Through a cohesive system with streamlined, standardized infrastructure that also leverages existing infrastructure where possible and incorporates specialized infrastructure where necessary, PRM's own commitments can inspire the commitment of new actors with new ideas and new capacity–including individuals and organizations all across the country.