



Intentional Connections for Welcoming Communities

Improving Settlement for Privately Sponsored Refugees
in Ontario through Settlement-Sponsor Collaboration

A collaboration between



Funded by:



Immigration, Refugees
and Citizenship Canada

Financé par:

Immigration, Réfugiés
et Citoyenneté Canada

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



From 2018 to 2021, Allies for Refugee Integration (ARI) and its partners focused on creating more welcoming communities for privately sponsored refugees. Our approach is best summarised through the expression **Intentional Connections for Welcoming Communities**: with modest changes to policy and processes, we believe it is possible to improve settlement-sponsor collaboration for more successful integration of refugees.

Project partners, OCASI and Refugee 613 had both observed gaps in knowledge, relationship and operations between private sponsors and the formal settlement sector; gaps that often become cracks that negatively affected the settlement journey of refugees. As more refugees continue to arrive in Canada and settlement becomes increasingly complex, it is clear that even though sponsors and settlement are aligned in their goals, they aren't always working in tandem. Although in the early stages of the private sponsorship program sponsors were expected to shoulder the main responsibility for all settlement needs, IRCC has for several years encouraged refugees and sponsors to access settlement services as soon as possible — but the policies, institutional support and funding for this to happen in practice is missing.

The aim of ARI was to generate and test adjustments to the user experience for both settlement workers and sponsors, with the goal of improving access to support for refugees. Through co-designing, testing and evaluating promising practices in four communities in Ontario, the ARI pilots succeed in:



Increasing awareness by sponsors & refugees of formal settlement services



Contributing to the provision of services more responsive to the needs of refugees and their sponsors

Engaging Settlement Providing Organizations (SPO) and Sponsorship Agreement Holder (SAH) partners in implementing strategies together to better address the refugee newcomer experience



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A few key themes emerged in the practices we tested:



Proactive connection.

The timely and early connection of refugees and sponsors to a service provider made it easier for everyone to be on the same page and get the information they need at the right time.



One place to access information.

Sponsors & refugees wanted one place to access the expert information of settlement, rather than searching across multiple agencies.



Formal Partnerships.

Participating agencies reported that the biggest impact of the pilot was the value of building formal relationships between SPOs and SAHs.

Based on the success of the pilots, ARI has four recommendations to Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC):

1. **Create a policy of Intentional Connection practice for pre/post arrival coordination to ensure refugees have the support they need.**
2. **Support SPOs and SAHs to create formal partnerships.**
3. **Encourage SPOs to include sponsors & SAHs as full partners in information exchange opportunities.**
4. **Further define and test the Intentional Connection practice in order to scale up.**

We faced some challenges in testing our ideas: due to travel restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the ARI pilots had fewer participants to track over shorter periods of time. The shift to virtual service delivery during the pandemic also had an impact on our activities and evaluation. We adapted by building our capacity for virtual service provision and bringing on an additional pilot agency.

Although our recommendations are addressed to IRCC, other stakeholders would benefit significantly. For the settlement sector, early access to clients can create a smoother onboarding process for both settlement worker and client, and intentional connection from the beginning can lead to stronger relationships with sponsors to avert any potential crises. For sponsors and SAHs, who are almost always volunteers, working more closely with settlement can help reduce burnout by enabling direct access to expert settlement experience when it is needed.

We are excited about the future of strengthened settlement-sponsor collaboration to support refugees, and believe much of it is achievable within existing programs. Thank you for engaging with this report and considering how you might bring this knowledge into your work.

The Allies for Refugee Integration Journey

ABOUT ARI

THE CHALLENGE

We saw that privately sponsored refugees weren't always being connected into settlement services in a streamlined way and that both settlement workers and sponsors were not always able to work together effectively.

WHAT WE LEARNED

We did research to better understand the gaps and opportunities for improvement in the refugee settlement experience. We learned that roles & responsibilities were not well understood in practice (**51% of respondents said it was the greatest barrier to collaboration**) and there was a strong appetite for change.

Environmental Scan Research Report:

 [Download English Report](http://bit.ly/promoting-settlement-sponsor-collab-en)

<http://bit.ly/promoting-settlement-sponsor-collab-en>

 [Télécharger le rapport en français](http://bit.ly/promoting-settlement-sponsor-collab-fr)

<http://bit.ly/promoting-settlement-sponsor-collab-fr>

“ WE NEED A CENTRAL PLACE TO TURN. ENTHUSIASM IN THE SPONSOR GROUP DISSIPATES BY JUST TRYING TO UNDERSTAND WHO IS OUT THERE, WE DO A LOT OF UNNECESSARY RESEARCH WHEN THE PROS ALREADY KNOW. ”

- Sponsor participant

CO-DESIGN

Through a collaborative design process, we worked with refugees, sponsors and settlement professionals to identify their ideas of what tools and processes would make the biggest impact. This generated 15 different ideas that focused on improving the early settlement planning and information exchange process between settlement and sponsors.



WHAT WE TESTED

We selected the top 2 ideas and pilot tested them in 4 locations across Ontario through 2020-2021. The pilots were:

INTENTIONAL CONNECTION PILOTS

Through formalizing SPO-SAH partnerships, we connected sponsors and refugees with a settlement worker both pre- and post-arrival, to discuss roles and align efforts.

23 sponsor groups, 68 refugees, and 5 settlement workers

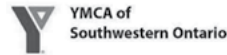
participated in three pilots across Ontario, led by:



Catholic Crosscultural Services in the Greater Toronto Area



YMCA of Three Rivers and Mennonite Central Committee of Ontario in the Kitchener-Waterloo area



YMCA of Southwestern Ontario and the Diocese of London Refugee Ministries in Windsor area

We trained **153** settlement workers on **how to work with sponsors**

87% of survey respondents said the training was very helpful or helpful in understanding the needs of refugees and **90%** in understanding sponsor responsibilities

SPONSORS CALLED THE PILOT **"INVALUABLE"** AND **"A GODSEND"** AND REFUGEES SAID IT WAS **"HELPFUL"** AND **"WONDERFUL"**

KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE PILOT

This community knowledge exchange brought together sponsors, settlement agencies, and refugees for discussions and information-sharing on settlement topics.

70

people participated in **5 knowledge exchange events** led by our pilot partners at **Immigrant Services Kingston & Area**.



EVALUATION

We worked with external evaluators throughout the project and used a mixed-methods qualitative approach to collect data on the impact of the pilots, including online surveys, interviews and pilot agency reporting on client indicators. Participants and piloting agencies were involved at every step to give their feedback and we made adjustments as we went along to respond to input.

To learn more from the refugee participants: <http://bit.ly/ARI-video-1>



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IRCC



#1

Create a policy of Intentional Connection practice for pre/post arrival coordination to ensure refugees have the support they need.

We recommend that IRCC provide policy and financial support for an ongoing Intentional Connection practice, including:

- Agreements between SPOs and SAHs to coordinate sponsor and refugee referrals
- A pre-arrival meeting (in person or virtual) between a dedicated settlement worker and sponsor group representative to gather context and share information
- A post-arrival meeting (in person or virtual) between the settlement worker, a sponsor representative, and the refugee to assess needs and coordinate supports
- Ongoing and responsive settlement service for the refugee as needed, with a single point of settlement information and support for both refugees and their sponsors

This work would require institutional and financial support from IRCC for SPOs to be able to work with sponsors as part of their contribution agreements.

WHY?

During the pilot testing, this practice increased awareness of community resources for both refugees and sponsors, and a more responsive service delivery. Through our evaluation, we saw that:

- settlement workers reported being able to do their job better by eliminating duplication of efforts and enabling early identification of refugee needs. For example, one refugee participant had flagged their health needs pre-arrival and an Arabic-speaking doctor was identified right away.
- sponsors reported being better prepared for arrival of the refugees and knowing which services they could access. The pre-arrival meetings in particular fostered more in-depth and targeted settlement planning support for sponsors.

Two main success factors identified were:



TIMING - Early connections to settlement generated efficiencies.



SINGLE POINT - Having one settlement worker who speaks the preferred language of the refugee to answer the sponsor and the refugee's questions was extremely valuable for responsive and targeted information flow.

Sponsors rated the pre/post arrival meetings

4.9/5

for how they encouraged settlement-sponsor communication. In comparison, they rated previous experiences of working with settlement before the pilot at only

3.6/5



THESE INTERACTIONS WITH THE SETTLEMENT WORKER ARE WONDERFUL. WE DON'T KNOW ANYONE HERE, AND ONLY MET OUR SPONSORS A FEW TIMES BECAUSE OF COVID-19. IT IS HELPFUL TO ASK QUESTIONS, HOW TO GET DIFFERENT DOCUMENTS AND MORE. ”

- Refugee participant

Hear from the Sponsor participants:
<http://bit.ly/ARI-video-3>



Hear from the Settlement Worker participants:
<http://bit.ly/ARI-video-2>



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IRCC

#2

Support SPOs and SAHs to create formal partnerships.

We recommend that IRCC support the creation of SPO-SAH partnership agreements. We saw that both our SPO and SAH partners benefitted at an organizational level from formal agreements. Mutual learning and capacity building, along with warm referrals and coordination of efforts streamlined the settlement journey of the refugee.

These partnerships took the form of formal MoUs that clarified roles and responsibilities, detailed joint activities, and defined how information would be shared. Activities included;

- Coordinated referrals & joint response to complex refugee cases behind the scenes before they are in crisis
- Joint initiatives like orientations to settlement for sponsors or capacity building and training for settlement workers on the Private Sponsorship of Refugees program



WHY?

Agencies were better able to address the needs of their clients by engaging partners to implement strategies together to welcome refugees.

- All players had greater clarity of roles and responsibilities of sponsors and settlement workers in practice.
- Reduction of the burden on sponsors: being able to leverage settlement worker expertise alleviated the stress of navigating unfamiliar services alone.
- Connecting SAH and SPO partners soon after the arrival of the refugee to Canada led to increased trust and clear communication channels for the refugee.
- All SPOs and SAHs engaged in the pilot project reported that they intend to maintain these partnerships beyond the life of the ARI project, and strongly recommended other agencies consider the practice as well.



OPEN COMMUNICATION BETWEEN AGENCIES ABOUT CASES WHERE FOLLOW-UP IS NEEDED ALLOWED US TO COORDINATE OUR EFFORTS MORE EFFECTIVELY AND ENSURED BETTER OUTCOMES FOR CLIENTS.

- Piloting Settlement Agency

To hear from our Pilot Agency partners: <http://bit.ly/ARI-video-4>



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IRCC

#3

Encourage SPOs to include sponsors & SAHs as full partners in information exchange opportunities.

We recommend IRCC provide financial and institutional support to SPOs to include sponsors and SAHs in their outreach and events for a “whole of community” approach to welcoming refugees.

90%

of the attendees surveyed found the event very or somewhat helpful in increasing their understanding of resources available locally to support sponsored refugees

WHY?

- Our knowledge exchange pilot found that through intentional outreach and inclusion of SAHs and sponsors in SPO information sessions and community events, they were able to be more responsive to the needs of refugees and increase awareness of their services in the community.
- These events enhanced partnerships by bringing together SPO staff, SAHs, and other community partners to identify and respond to gaps in the community. For example, the pilot surveyed sponsors and created a local resource guide based on their request.
- This practice breaks down the settlement-sponsorship barriers and encourages resource sharing by targeting events for current topics of interest like mental health and including sponsors and SAHs to share their experiences.

#4

Further define and test the Intentional Connection practice in order to scale up

The Intentional Connection practice has proven to make a positive impact in our pilots. However, before scaling up we are recommending to IRCC that further testing is needed to further define and fine-tune this approach. This should be in close collaboration with key stakeholders in the settlement and sponsorship sectors. We recommend;

- The practice to be tested with a larger sample size, in different regions of Canada, in rural communities, with grassroots and community-based organizations and small SAHs, and with G5 and Community Sponsors.
- The support of a third-party evaluator to formalize this as an evidence-based model for adoption that builds upon this ARI pilot would be a logical next step.

WHY?

Due to the drastic reduction in refugee arrivals in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic, we were not able to test this practice in a large sample size and with all necessary stakeholders in a way that would be required before implementation on a Canada-wide scale. We were only able to measure short-term outcomes of the pilots and not the medium-term impact of these pilots on the integration of the refugees. The shift to virtual services had its own challenges with settlement workers reporting that it was taking longer than usual to build trust with clients and the additional burden of onboarding clients to using technology. However, the pilots adapted wonderfully with hosting virtual events and meetings, and a new pilot coming on board in Southern Ontario.

Questions still remain about implementing this practice in the current policy environment, such as the principle of SPOs maintaining confidentiality with their clients while simultaneously working with sponsors. Refining elements like this one could allow the practice to be strengthened and scaled up.

FROM IDEAS TO ACTION

WHAT COULD ARI RECOMMENDATIONS LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

Below is a menu of different options for harnessing ARI's learnings into action whether you are a policy maker, settlement worker or SPO, sponsor or SAH.

They are divided into two categories; **big ideas** are suggestions for changes for the medium term. And the **small fixes** are suggestions for changes you could make right away even without additional funding or policy changes.

POLICY MAKERS



BIG IDEAS

- Allow information sharing with sponsors to be a fundable service for SPOs, including funding for a pre-arrival sponsor orientation for settlement planning.
- Fund SPOs to be a hub for referrals for refugees & their sponsors, including one contact for sponsor enquiries.
- Work with SAHs to enhance their capacity to provide post-arrival support for sponsors and refugees. This could include indirect funding for SAHs through partnering with SPOs so they have staff capacity for this work, or additional capacity for the SAH Navigation Unit, RSTP, or LIPS to implement some of these recommendations in the SAH community.
- Allow flexibility in funding agreements with SPOs so that they can support rural sponsors & refugees virtually even outside their catchment area, and include SAHs and sponsors in their community programming.
- Engage with refugees directly to better explain how to best access the support of both actors and connect them directly to services.

Read our Guide to Supports for Refugees: <http://bit.ly/supports-for-PSRs>



SMALL FIXES

- Include education on the Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) program as part of professional development for all settlement staff.
- Encourage SPOs to include sponsors & SAHs as key players in service provision while maintaining confidentiality. For example, settlement workers could ask refugees if they want their sponsors present in intake meetings.
- Support SPOs to engage SAHs through formal agreements to collaborate on referrals, capacity building, and community programming.
- Ensure IRCC messaging to sponsors & refugees strongly encourages early connection to settlement and offers clear instructions on how to access timely information.

FROM IDEAS TO ACTION

SPOs & SETTLEMENT WORKERS



BIG IDEAS

- Identify a key SAH in their area and reach out to build a partnership, for example see this MoU template:

<http://bit.ly/MoU-SAH-SPO>



- Meet with sponsors pre-arrival either one-on-one or in a group and have tools to better facilitate role understanding. For example, they could adapt this Collaborative Action Plan form:

<http://bit.ly/CAP-tool>



- Include sponsors and SAHs in their outreach strategies to plan and co-lead information-sharing events.
- Consider these recommendations in tandem with efforts to streamline intake of newcomers through a centralized process.



SMALL FIXES

- Include the sponsor in the first meeting with the refugee upon their request.
- Clearly state on the SPO website that their agency is open to sponsor questions and suggest one person, email, or telephone number to contact.
- Train settlement workers on the PSR program, specifically the role of the sponsor in settlement, and share tips on how to better work with sponsors.

Training Slides for Settlement Workers:
Introduction to the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program: <http://bit.ly/ARI-workshop-slides>



- Attend local SAH events and offer to provide orientation to sponsors on settlement.
- Work with SAHs in the area to identify topics of common interest and host knowledge exchange events together. For example, they could adapt this tool;

Event Checklist: <http://bit.ly/ARI-event-checklist>



FROM IDEAS TO ACTION

SAHs & SPONSORS



BIG IDEAS

- Reach out to a local SPO about potential partnerships to enhance SAH capacity to support refugees and sponsors in the post-arrival phase.
- Facilitate an early and automatic referral of sponsors to a local SPO upon arrival.
- Bodies such as RSTP and SAH Navigation Unit could facilitate capacity building for post-arrival support through workshops and support in building partnerships for sponsors.



SMALL FIXES

- Ensure the refugee gets a needs assessment at a SPO upon arrival.
- SAHs could invite settlement staff to their orientations for sponsors to share about agency services and make a personal connection to a settlement worker pre-arrival.
- If capacity is an issue, concentrate on those who may benefit the most from extra support, such as high-needs cases or first-time sponsors.



CONCLUSION

Allies for Refugee Integration has been about dreaming of a future where privately sponsored refugees have a consistent and smooth settlement journey in Canada. With the support of hundreds of stakeholders and dozens of partnerships, we have tested ways to achieve this dream and concluded that even small adjustments in policy and practice can have a great impact for refugees' experience as well as for the settlement workers and sponsors supporting them.

Big ideas can be difficult to implement for SPOs with funding restrictions and for SAHs that rely on voluntary support. However, this is a time of adaptation for the settlement and sponsorship sectors with the increase in virtual service delivery and uncertainty about the future arrivals of newcomers to Canada. There is an opportunity for small, achievable adjustments and optimisation in our systems to make them better for the future. There still remains a need for understanding to be built between settlement and sponsor communities, particularly where misconceptions sometimes persist that refugees shouldn't access settlement services or that sponsors should do everything themselves.

These recommendations point to ways the system could be improved to better meet the needs of refugees. They open us up to the possibility of a future where refugees have a continuity of support from their sponsors and a settlement worker from pre- to post-arrival.

Our hope is that the work of Allies for Refugee Integration has inspired you to action. We hope that what we've learned encourages you to continue sponsoring refugees, creating more successful outcomes for refugees, and sharing some of our tools to build welcoming communities for refugees in Canada.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We want to thank our pilot partners:

- The YMCA of Three Rivers & Mennonite Central Committee of Ontario
- Catholic Crosscultural Services
- The YMCA of Southwestern Ontario & the Diocese of London Refugee Ministries
- Immigrant Services Kingston & Area

ARI gratefully acknowledges IRCC's Service Delivery Improvement funding.

Many people contributed to the success of ARI over the years including:

- The team at OCASI: Sajedah Zahraei, Michelle Ball, Sara Shahsiah
- The team at Refugee 613: Louisa Taylor, Barbara Nzigiye, Sally Dimachki, Lorene Moran-Valenzuela, Stirling Coulter-Hayward, Diane Tuyishime

Thanks to the members of the ARI Advisory Group, to our external evaluators at Logical Outcomes, and Joey Sabourin for the Graphic Design of this report.

For enquiries, contact **Michelle Ball** (ARI Project Coordinator, OCASI) at mball@ocasi.org

<https://ocasi.org/allies-refugee-integration>