

A/S Noyes's Keynote Address at
Building the Future Through Community Sponsorship of Refugees
Rome, Italy, September 27, 2022

Thank you, Phillippa, for the very kind introduction. And thank you to the International Catholic Migration Commission and the government of Canada for organizing these two days of discussion and learning.

As some of you may know, I spent three very happy years living here in Rome while I served as the Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. Mission to the Holy See. Being here today feels very much like coming home. So, I want to thank U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See Joseph Donnelly, Deputy Chief of Mission Patrick Connell, and their team – especially Sarah Tatum – for proposing and supporting my return home to discuss an issue very close to my heart. I am honored by the invitation to be with you today and to share some reflections on how the U.S. government is seeking to enhance and expand refugee resettlement through community sponsorship.

It is fitting we that gather here today at ICMC's invitation for these conversations. For decades before United Nations member states adopted the Refugee Convention in 1951, it was small groups of citizens all over the world – often organized and supported by religious organizations and institutions – that formed the heart of refugee resettlement efforts. Long before we had a refugee convention, we had churches, synagogues, mosques, and meetings whose congregants lived out their faith by opening their arms and hearts to the vulnerable.

This is also personal for me. As I said at my confirmation hearing almost exactly one year ago, the opportunity to lead the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration is the greatest honor of my professional life. That is because without the work of the bureau, that life would not have been possible. My own parents came to the United States as refugees from Cuba, forced to flee the rise of the Castro regime. They arrived decades before the United States formally established the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, relying on their neighbors and community institutions for help as they built new lives in the United States. Throughout my life, I have heard their stories about all the people who helped them. My work in PRM is an opportunity to repay that debt of gratitude.

In my first six months on the job, I have seen and heard repeatedly how eager Americans from seemingly every part of our society are to welcome Afghans and Ukrainians to their communities – just as previous generations did for my parents and so many others like them.

And now, as we work to find ways to meet President Biden's ambitious refugee resettlement goals, we will rely on average citizens' generosity and compassion more than ever. Soon after taking office in January 2021, the President issued an executive order instructing the State Department to design a community-led private sponsorship pilot program as a complement to the government-led U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. Or, as we call it, USRAP.

We got to work immediately and were planning an early 2022 launch when Kabul fell on August 15. We immediately redirected all resources to mount the largest resettlement effort in modern U.S. history. And we did it with an overstretched staff and a domestic resettlement infrastructure weakened by years of underfunding and neglect.

But, with the help of a large coalition of partner organizations, we overcame those daunting obstacles. In just six months, the PRM team resettled over 82,000 relocated Afghans. And while we hated to pause our work on the broader private sponsorship pilot program, we were able to use the progress we had made to find innovative solutions for relocated Afghans.

In October 2021, we launched the Sponsor Circle Program, a testament to our critical work with new partners. The program is a community-led policy innovation that unlocks critical resettlement capacity for Afghans. By enabling everyday Americans to take the lead in welcoming Afghan newcomers, the Sponsor Circle Program allowed us to tap into the energy and enthusiasm of ordinary Americans to quickly expand our domestic resettlement capacity.

Since we launched the Sponsor Circle Program nearly one year ago, more than 100 sponsor circles have welcomed hundreds of Afghan newcomers across 29 states.

These circles represent pockets of new capacity around the country and remarkable acts of engagement by everyday Americans from all walks of life, including a Vietnamese-American coalition in Seattle, Washington; military veterans in Wickford, Rhode Island and Farmington, New Mexico; faculty and staff at institutions of higher education in Montclair, New Jersey and Williamsburg, Virginia; faith congregations in Denver, Colorado and Huntsville, Alabama; and even groups of State Department staff in Washington, DC, who signed up in their personal capacities.

And, of course, in early 2022, while we were hard at work on Sponsor Circle, we collectively pivoted once again – this time to respond to the call to find solutions for those fleeing further Russian aggression against Ukraine. We drew on shared insights and experiences gleaned from the Sponsor Circle Program with colleagues at the Department of Homeland Security to inform their thinking on linking sponsorship to non-resettlement pathways.

The result was “Uniting for Ukraine” (or U4U) – a new initiative that enables Ukrainians to access a streamlined humanitarian parole pathway initiated by private sponsors, who in turn commit to providing support to Ukrainians while they are in the United States. U4U represents another U.S. government effort to adapt a private sponsorship model and harness the widespread outpouring of interest from the American public in supporting Ukrainians who wish to come to the United States.

In the months since U4U launched, it has received tens of thousands of applications from sponsors – further demonstrating the enormous potential of private sponsorship as a policy innovation that can effectively leverage the capacity of motivated community actors to welcome newcomers.

Our work on a broad-based community sponsorship pilot program continues, and gatherings like this one are timely for a sad reason. We are facing an unprecedented displacement crisis, one that will require all of our creativity and innovation to address. I've been so inspired by the countless examples of extraordinary generosity I have seen in the United States.

Let me finish by highlighting what we all know: such generosity isn't a uniquely American instinct. In just my second week in this job, I traveled to Poland and Moldova, where I saw average citizens and small businesses opening their arms and their hearts to displaced Ukrainians offering food, shelter, employment, education, and friendship. The very next week I visited Mexico, where local religious communities and businesses are supporting migrants fleeing violence and extreme poverty in Venezuela, Cuba, and elsewhere in the region.

In July, I visited Uganda, where refugees from Sudan, Congo, Burundi, and other neighboring countries live side-by-side with their Ugandan neighbors and have for decades, continuing a deeply moving Ugandan tradition of welcome refugees as brothers and sisters. As we look toward the future of refugee resettlement, I am more and more convinced that our own citizens will be our most important resource.

Let me end by once again thanking ICMC and my Canadian colleagues for organizing this event and for inviting me to participate. I am excited to hear this afternoon's discussions. Thank you again!