

Local Community Engagement Requirements & Guidelines for Co-Sponsors

To lay the groundwork for a successful resettlement, it is vital for co-sponsorship groups to engage with local officials as part of their preparation process, well before the family arrives. Each group's community engagement initiative will involve proactive outreach and substantive conversations with stakeholders in local government, public safety, and education.

Requirement

Prior to submitting your green light form, IRIS requires that each co-sponsorship group schedule meetings or identify key connections to secure meetings with local community leaders: at least one elected official, a representative from the police department, and a public school administrator.

Guidelines

The purpose of these conversations is to educate public-sector stakeholders on your group, your intent to resettle a refugee family in their town/ward/district, to solicit their questions, and ideally their support. Tell them what you are planning to do and the expected timeframe. Ask for and be sensitive to their questions and areas of concern, but keep in mind that you are not seeking permission to resettle a refugee family in that location.

In your conversation with each stakeholder, provide the following information:

- Information and [statistics on the global refugee crisis](#)
- Information on refugee resettlement in the US, including
 - [the pre-resettlement vetting process](#)
 - the agency-based model of refugee resettlement that is used in most states & cities
 - the community-based refugee resettlement model implemented through co-sponsorship
- Information about the general structure and process of becoming an approved community co-sponsorship group, including the resettlement agency's vetting and training of co-sponsorship volunteers
- Information about the resettlement agency's structure of oversight and support for co-sponsors during the family's initial resettlement period
- Your official relationship with the refugee resettlement agency, and the agency's responsibility to the U.S. Department of State for the resettlement of this family
- A general sense of the composition and size of the co-sponsorship group forming in your area
- The fact that you will not know any specific information about the family (e.g., country of origin, family size and composition), until their arrival is imminent.

Guidelines for Consultations with Specific Public-Sector Stakeholders

In addition to the general information listed above, here are guidelines for conversations with local officials in their specific roles.

Local Government

Mayor &/or Elected Officials in districts/wards where you are seeking housing for the family

- Prior to your conversation, do a little research regarding any public events s/he has participated in that could be relevant to refugee resettlement
- In the conversation, provide a general timeline for your organizing, and ask what s/he would like your group to keep him/her informed of as you move forward.
- Ask about her/his personal experience with anything immigration-related
- Ask, are there town resources or information sources that might be helpful to the resettlement?
- Ask, are there ways in which the co-sponsorship group could be helpful in meeting some of the town's goals? (Look for long range planning or annual goals like, "support diversity", for example)

Public Safety

Chief of Police and/or Police Department Community Liaison and/or Local Lieutenants

In addition to sharing the general information on p. 1, ask what on-going information and updates the department might want from our group, particularly as the actual resettlement unfolds.

Public Education

Superintendent, &/or English-Language Learner (ELL) Program Staff, &/or Principals

Before meeting, designate a volunteer from your group to serve as a "school liaison," whose role is to identify resources, develop plans for problem prevention and problem solving, and to provide support for refugee parents, students, and their teachers.

(Ideally, school liaisons will be recently retired teachers or PTA leader-level active parents from that specific school.)

In your conversations with school officials, inform them that your group is expecting to assist in the resettlement of a refugee family with school-aged children who will be English-language learners (without knowing what, if any, level of English they will arrive with.)

Ask what ELL resources particular schools in the district provide. (Keep in mind that many ELL programs are serving primarily Spanish-speaking students. Ask if they are prepared to provide support in languages other than Spanish.)

Best Practices (according to the experiences of veteran co-sponsors)

- Identify people in your group, or in your group's networks, who have connections with officials in the towns/wards/districts where you are looking for housing for the refugee family. Seek their advice and contacts and leverage their existing relationships with local officials.
- Prepare to share good, verifiable information about the program - including material to address what are known/potential questions of concern.
- Be proactive and persistent in reaching out.
- Whenever possible, work your volunteers' networks, so that there is someone participating in the meeting who is known to the official/group involved, and who has had credible/positive experience with that official/group.
- Prepare to offer / point out something(s) of value - benefits to the person in this specific role, benefits to the community / population this person serves
- Provide contact info should this person have questions or ideas; ask for the best contact person in their office for providing further information, or if issues arise as the resettlement unfolds.
- Demonstrate that refugee resettlement is congruent with local community experiences: e.g., there are a lot of immigrants or international residents in the area; a significant number of local residents have had international working or living experiences, local faith communities have engaged in refugee resettlement in the past.
- For engagements with school administrators:
 - Before meeting, designate a volunteer from your group to serve as a "school liaison," whose role is to identify resources, develop plans for problem prevention and problem solving, and to provide support for refugee parents, students, and their teachers.
 - (Ideally, school liaisons will be recently retired teachers or PTA leader-level active parents from that specific school.)
 - Communicate your group's flexibility to help the district to minimize the impact of adding some new students to the system. E.g., When speaking with officials from particular schools, ask where the school stands in terms of class sizes and whether adding a child at each grade would cause the school to go over "standard" in terms of class size. our flexibility to help the district to minimize the impact of adding some new students to the system.

Engagement with Other Local Groups & Leaders

(strongly encouraged, but not required)

The more local communities you can engage as you prepare to co-sponsor a refugee family, the greater chances of a successful resettlement that is mutually beneficial to the family, your group, and the town or city where the family is resettling.

Spread the word that you are available and interested in doing info sessions with groups, e.g., congregations, student groups, rotary clubs. You could also hold public information sessions at local libraries.

It's also a good idea to speak with someone from your local Community Services Commission. Here are some guidelines for your conversation: Emphasize that your group is working in conjunction with a refugee resettlement agency that is experienced in helping refugees access social services. Give an overview of the co-sponsorship model, the application, training, and planning process, and the oversight that the agency will provide. Share the community resources you've identified in the area (e.g., food pantries, diaper banks) and demonstrate how you're preparing to help the refugee family access these resources.