

Workplace Sponsorship in Canada

Building Welcoming Communities



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What is Workplace Sponsorship?

Workplace refugee sponsorship describes a form of sponsorship that occurs when employees of a workplace, and potentially their employers, form groups to help refugee newcomers settle and integrate into life in their new community. As in any sponsorship, sponsors commit to providing financial, emotional, and settlement supports for one year. Sponsors, including workplace sponsors, are matched with refugees that have been referred to the CAD government by the UN Refugee Agency. Workplace sponsorship can range from a small, family owned business sponsoring one family, to a large company, sponsoring hundreds of refugees. Workplaces are communities in their own right that can both facilitate and support sponsorship, as well as become sites of refugee welcome and integration.

Who can I sponsor?

Workplace sponsorship must be a humanitarian effort. Sponsorship in the workplace cannot occur where the intention is to hire a person. Workplace sponsors have the potential to sponsor individual refugees and families from around the world, who are identified by the UN Refugee Agency and government as in need of a life-saving intervention.

Why should I become a Workplace Sponsor?

There are significant benefits to becoming a sponsor, some of which include:

- Enabling more refugees to find a safe, secure home so they can rebuild their lives.
- Learning from others with different perspectives.
- Facilitating integration for refugees by supporting their efforts to find housing, jobs, adapt to new culture, etc.
- Expanding others' and your own cultural understanding and intercultural communication abilities.
- Developing greater insight and appreciation for the opportunities and challenges of refugee resettlement.
- Building leadership skills such as project management, group facilitation, budgeting, fundraising, etc.
- Growing your multigenerational network both in and outside of the workplace; including with clients, former/retired employees, families and supporters.
- For an employer, some benefits of supporting workplace sponsorship include contributing to your Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) strategy, at the same increasing employee engagement.
- Giving a sense of social purpose in the workplace, particularly for millennial generation.



How could my Employer and Company/Organization be involved?

Your employer/company does not necessarily have to be involved in workplace sponsorship. However, there are multiple examples of how employers can support, with benefits for the employer, employee and refugee newcomer. These include:

More involvement



Less involvement

- Formalized mentorship and volunteer roles for employees participating in refugee sponsorship.
- Employment, training and volunteer opportunities for refugees in the same company.
- Formal and informal language learning for refugees and their families provided either on-site at the company and/or by employee volunteers.
- Enabling flexible work time and providing emotional support for employees as needed to meet their responsibilities as sponsors.
- Facilitated access to company networks (suppliers, clients, retirees) for fundraising, volunteer support, housing and furnishing, employment, etc.
- Employer funded, or partially funded (dollar matching), refugee sponsorship.
- Providing organizational human resources, including legal, accounting, contractors, etc. Infrastructure (meeting space, conference lines, computer access) for employees to discuss and complete sponsorship activities/tasks.
- Interest and encouragement of employees' engagement in sponsorship.
- Acknowledgement and staying informed of the workplace-based sponsorship.

Transform and enrich your workplace through refugee sponsorship.

Workplace Resources

Workplaces are communities, already equipped with many of the people, skills, networks and opportunities that are needed by recently arrived refugees and families. Employers and employees are often able to connect newly arrived refugees with their own networks, leading to housing options, employment opportunities and access to many social supports. The degree to which workplace sponsor groups access the networks, resources and support from their employer and workplace can vary from very little, to a holistic approach with workplaces covering the cost of wages for employees working on sponsorship, or even incorporating sponsorship into their programming or corporate social responsibility strategy.

Community Services

While many resources may be available through the workplace, sponsors often act as a bridge between refugees and community services. Local agencies may be available to provide settlement support, including housing, health and counselling services, sports and recreation facilities, social events, financial literacy, childcare facilities, career and employment counselling, language services, orientation services and tours, etc.

Examples of Workplace Sponsorship

A Manufacturing Company

A CEO of a multinational company sponsors hundreds of refugees, with his company entering into a sponsorship agreement with the Government of Canada. Employees are engaged in supporting refugees through their professional roles and as volunteers. The CEO coordinates efforts, networks and accesses company resources to support settlement and integration.

Example

Jim Estill of Danby Appliances, sponsors hundreds of refugees from around the globe to settle in Guelph, Ontario. From 2015 to early 2019, 110 families have been sponsored.

On Doing the Right Thing

'It is a humanitarian crisis. I did not want to grow old and say I stood by and did nothing. I wanted to help bring refugees to safety in Canada faster, and settle as many people as possible with the amount of money and resources that I had available.'

A Law Firm

Staff at a law firm create a sponsorship group and coordinate sponsorship activities through their workplace. The firm encourages and supports staff to fundraise for and manage the sponsorship process.

Example

Lawyers and staff at Goldblatt Partners LLP build an intergenerational group of employees to sponsor a family of five in Toronto, Ontario.

On Attracting Socially Conscious Staff

'Sponsorship has been good for firm morale and for spreading Goldblatt's reputation as a firm that is attractive for socially conscious lawyers. With current and former clients involved, sponsorship activities like fundraising and settlement activities have been a great way to engage clients.'

An INGO/Non-Profit

Employees at an International NGO working on human rights form a work-based community sponsorship group in the UK and receive Home Office approval. Several pioneering employees organize the group with their colleagues, partnering with a local charity. The group comprises 14 people with specific roles and functions, with many other colleagues supporting across the office.

Example

Employees at **Amnesty International's Secretariat Office** in London, U.K. sponsor a family of 6 Iraqis, with a 2nd Sponsorship underway, with support from the organization **Migrants Organise**.

On Establishing the group

'Once we had an idea of what sponsorship and specific responsibilities could look like, we organized an all-staff lunch time event. We put out 20 chairs and ended up with 100 people in the room!'

A Community Organization

Volunteers at a community organization form a sponsorship group with the assistance of the organization's network of volunteers. After successful project management and fundraising, the organization includes sponsorship as a program.

Example

Volunteers at the Ontario-based **Seva Foodbank and Sikhs Serving Canada** sponsored four families in 2018, including 20 individuals.

On Building Future Leaders

We are trying to establish values in the next generation. We are trying to raise a new generation of leaders, and you can only do that through leading by example. A large percentage of our volunteers are under 17. We are trying to build leaders within the organization and as volunteers.

What might be my responsibilities as a sponsor?

Prior to arrival

- Preparing application for permanent residence and compiling the supporting documentation along with certified translations.
- Sharing information and updates with refugee applicants throughout the application process.
- Ensuring refugees are aware of their interview and appear for the interview.
- Offering support for interview preparation.
- Communicating with refugees to learn about their particular resettlement needs.



After arrival

- Sponsors have a legal responsibility to provide refugee newcomers with care, lodging, settlement assistance, and support for the duration of the sponsorship period.
- Normally, this lasts twelve months starting from the refugee's arrival in Canada or until the refugee becomes self-sufficient; whichever comes first.

Employer Partnerships with Sponsorship Groups

Whether or not your workplace is able to sponsor, workplaces can support sponsored refugees through formal and informal partnerships with sponsorship groups in your community. Communities, workplaces and sponsored newcomers mutually benefit from employment opportunities that support the integration of newcomers. In addition to employment, workplaces can support sponsored refugees by including on-the-job language instruction and Canadian workplace training.

Examples

A Local Greenhouse

Roelands Plant Farms Inc. in Southwestern Ontario offered jobs to refugees that were sponsored through owner Adrian Roelands' refugee sponsorship group.

A Sponsorship Farming Initiative

Operation Ezra in Winnipeg is a farming initiative run by a Yazidi refugee resettlement group to grow produce for the sponsored refugee community and sell the surplus for profit. Dozens of synagogues, churches and schools are part of the group, which has sponsored a dozen Yazidi refugee families so far. The aim is to unite the Yazidi community and help refugees who are struggling to meet their own food needs.

Potential challenges of sponsorship in the workplace:

- Employers and employees must consider confidentiality and working with vulnerable people.
- Becoming a sponsor implies additional responsibilities that may impact an employee's existing workload.
- The sponsorship experience can impact group dynamics and change existing relationships.
- Employers and/or employees may inadvertently feel pressure to participate in sponsorship.
- Employee turnover could impact sponsor group roles and responsibilities.
- Sponsorship is a long-term commitment, which could last up to two years or longer depending on when the family arrives.

What next?

- Find answers to your questions in the **Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative's** guidebook on community sponsorship.
- Find out if any of your colleagues are interested in hearing more and then **Contact us** at info@refugeehub.ca
- Invite someone who is a current or former sponsor in a workplace to give a lunchtime talk.
- Learn more about community sponsorship through the **Refugee Sponsorship Training Program**.
- Read the **Workplace Sponsorship Case Studies**.

Workplace Sponsorship

An International NGO

THE FACTS

Location: London, UK

Name of Sponsoring Group: The Welcome Committee and Migrants Organise.

Number of Sponsors in Group: Core group of 14 with hundreds more supporting

Sponsoring Since: November 2018

Sponsoring Group Description: A group of London-based volunteers who formed the first work-based community sponsorship group in the UK to receive Home Office approval. Several pioneering colleagues from Amnesty International (AI) organized the group with their colleagues, with support from Migrants Organise who have taken on the legal responsibility and coordination of the resettlement.

Number of Refugees sponsored: One family of six; beginning sponsorship process for second family.



THE CONTEXT

In July 2016, the U.K. Government officially announced the “Community Sponsorship Scheme,” enabling community groups to play a leading role in resettling refugees. Under this pioneering scheme, communities organise themselves to take on all the responsibilities of resettling refugees, including housing, education, benefits, and, perhaps most importantly, bonds of friendship that are as essential to a resettled refugee as any new member of a community.

THE EXPERIENCE

How did your workplace sponsorship begin?

Individuals in our group had been working on community sponsorship in a professional capacity for a while and were inspired to practice what we preach and connect the community with refugees. While we work on global issues affecting refugees on a professional basis, sponsorship provided a tangible opportunity to directly support refugees arriving in our own city. We had the opportunity to do it, so why wouldn't we?

How did you engage colleagues at your workplace?

As a first step, we spoke with our manager to ensure there wasn't a conflict of interest with our work. From there, we started to gather information on how to become community sponsors and met with a representative from "Citizens UK," a civil society organization in the UK, who provided inspiration, encouragement and resources to help us on our way.

With this in mind, we organized an all-staff event to gather interest from others in our organization. We put out 20 chairs and ended up with 100 people in the room! We put an email sign-up sheet in the back of the room in order to keep interested colleagues informed. On a separate occasion, we invited Nick Coke from the Salvation Army, a member of one of the first community sponsorship groups in London, to visit the office and give an account of his experience as a sponsor. It was very inspiring! We ended up with 14 very committed people who turn up every week for meetings, and a broader group who get behind everything we do.

How did you fundraise for your sponsorship?

Our fundraising target was £18,000 (the minimum requirement for two families), but we were able to raise an incredible £45,000! Fundraising was surprisingly quick and easy. One of the most successful strategies was fundraising by appealing to our colleagues' sugar cravings through bake sales. Thanks to their generosity, we would often raise around £750 per bake sale. We also organized a craft fair, raffle and organized a way for people to donate online. Fundraising really brought people together, got them excited, busy, and engaged people outside of the organization, including local businesses. A neighboring barbershop even asked their customers if they'd like to contribute while they were getting their hair trimmed! Every group we have spoken to agreed that fundraising was the easiest part of the sponsorship.

What were some key factors for your successful workplace sponsorship?

- **Partnerships** - We partnered with an organization called Migrants Organise, who mobilize, train and support refugees and migrants in the UK, and who have experience working with refugee welcome groups- community groups who sprung up to support refugees arriving under the UK's resettlement scheme. Their guidance, expertise and commitment to our group has been massively appreciated.
- **Creating a collaborative, non-hierarchical group** – We created a constitution and elected three chairs to support if a conflict arose, for example, regarding financial implications, sustainable housing, etc. However, we have been mindful of creating an environment that is collaborative, with people feeling valued and respected, and where everybody finds something rewarding about participating.
- **Befriending Role and Reporting** – Within the group, we have several people who play the role of "befriender"- providing the day to day support for the family we were matched with. This includes 6 Arabic speakers who we managed to recruit from our wider networks when we realized that we didn't have the relevant language skills within our own staff group. Among the befrienders, specific people have taken a lead role on a thematic issue, i.e. health, education, ESOL, etc. With so much

going on, we've had to find a balance between sharing relevant information about the family with those who need to know while also respecting the family's confidentiality and autonomy. To this end, befrienders leading on a thematic area provide weekly reports to a central figure who identifies any gaps in the support we are providing. This avoids the family's affairs being discussed in plenary.

- **Coordination Role** - We had a group member who was on sabbatical for a year who coordinated our befriender's schedule. In the first few months it was a full-time job, making sure people weren't overwhelmed, that issues weren't dropped, that everybody knew where to be and when. We also tried to ensure that when making decisions about time and priorities, that the family were at the center of our thinking rather than our own assumptions and projections. Everybody expected the early period to be time intensive, but it still presented a learning curve, and given competing demands, we were very lucky to have someone on board who could dedicate the time to this essential role.
- **Organizational Support** – You need to have support from management in place, especially because sponsorship may require people to take time out of their working day to support the family they are matched with. Our management saw the benefit of sponsorship, not only in terms of effecting change for refugees, but also in bringing staff together around a shared goal and making the organization a more 'refugee-friendly' employer. It was helpful to discuss the positives with management, and identify areas where their support would be appreciated. Senior management ended up writing a letter to staff stating that group members were permitted to conduct their activities within working hours, including time spent with the family which would not require staff to use holiday entitlement.

What challenges did you encounter and how did you resolve them?

In the UK, a stumbling block for sponsorship can be the need to have charitable status. It can be a challenge if a sponsorship group finds the process of obtaining charitable status too complicated, or if they are unable to connect with a charity. We were able to resolve that challenge through our partnership with Migrants Organise.

Another challenge can be getting people to see their workplace as a community capable of sponsoring refugees. One person from the business world said, "oh yes, refugee sponsorship is really interesting, but we're not really a community." Our group has demonstrated that community is not limited to neighbours, nor does it depend on geography. Communities grow organically when people come together with a shared passion around something they care about. Our group is comprised of people who used to work a floor apart but who had never met, of people who live inside and outside of the city, people from different backgrounds and so on, but we were brought together through the opportunity sponsorship has provided.

What has been the impact of workplace sponsorship on you and your colleagues?

Most people joined the sponsorship group driven by the opportunity to directly support refugees and ensure that people arriving in the UK had a positive experience integrating. In fact, they themselves have also benefited from the sponsorship experience, gaining new skillsets, such as allyship, project management, event planning, leadership, etc.

NEXT STEPS

How are you moving forward?

We are planning to sponsor a second family! Interestingly, three staff members that are part of our sponsorship group have moved on to new workplaces, but have remained part of the sponsorship group. They are working with their new employers to accommodate their engagement in sponsorship. We are also looking at engaging new group members and we want to create ways for others to contribute.

Beyond supporting families through sponsorship, we are also reflecting on what we can do with our experience in a broader sense. For example, we are happy to support others who are interested in setting up their own sponsorship groups, and are considering how we can use our collective advocacy to speak on broader issues facing refugees in the UK.

Further Reading

- [The “Welcome Committee” sponsorship group website](#)
- [Sponsor Refugees: “First Staff-Based Group To Welcome a Family”](#)
- [Migrants Organise: “We’re becoming community Sponsors – You can too”](#)
- [Help Refugees: “The Community Sponsorship Scheme: welcoming refugees into British communities”](#)
- [GRSI Guidebook: The Experience of a business sponsoring refugees](#)

Workplace Sponsorship

A Canadian Company

THE FACTS

Location: Guelph, Ontario, Canada

Sponsor Group Size: Jim Estill, CEO of Danby Appliances, spearheads and organizes his company's sponsorship effort, with more than 800 current and former employees, community members and extended contacts volunteering to help settle sponsored families, including 100 mentor families.

Sponsoring Since: Autumn 2015, with the first families arriving early 2016.

Sponsor Group Description: A CEO of a large Canadian appliance company who coordinates employee volunteers, networks and company resources to support the settlement and integration of hundreds of refugee newcomers. The large scale sponsorship effort led to a sponsorship agreement between Danby Appliances and the Government of Canada.

Number of Refugee Newcomers sponsored: From 2015 to early 2019, 110 families and hundreds of individuals have been sponsored.

Interviewees¹: Jim Estill, CEO of Danby Appliances, four volunteer mentors, and four previously sponsored refugees, three of whom are now sponsoring and mentoring refugee newcomers themselves.



THE CONTEXT

In the Fall of 2015, during a surge in displacement caused by the conflict in Syria, the Government of Canada committed to bringing 25,000 refugees into Canada in the following months, with approximately 10,000 of those refugees expected to arrive through community-based private sponsorship. During that time, Jim Estill committed to spending at least CAD\$1.5 million to sponsor 50 Syrian families and to help them settle in the city of Guelph.

THE EXPERIENCE

How did your workplace sponsorship begin?

It is a humanitarian crisis. I did not want to grow old and say I stood by and did nothing. One of the phrases I repeat all the time is "Do the Right Thing." It is actually how we try to run Danby Appliances. So

¹ Interview responses are summarized primarily from a group interview and site visit held on January 16, 2019, as well as from previous interviews given by Jim Estill.

I am simply trying to “Do the Right Thing”. I wanted to help bring refugees to safety in Canada faster, and settle as many people as possible with the amount of money and resources that I had available.

How did you engage employees at your workplace?

Business people know how to organize and structure things. They know how to get things done. I always tell people if you can run a company with 800 people, you can run a volunteer organization with 800 people.

In our case, we organized it like a business with a director of health, director of education, director of housing, director of jobs, etc. The director of mentors assigned each family an Arabic-speaking mentor and 4-5 English-speaking mentors. Each mentor group had checklists that included things like: set up a bank account, get a doctor, get a Health Card, etc. And then there are bi-weekly scorecard check-ins to see what is needed; for example, a family might need a Skype tutor or a soccer team for the child, etc.

What were some key factors in the success of your workplace sponsorship?

Volunteerism – We have built a base of volunteers, including employees, friends, and business associates. We're just calling friends and saying, 'listen, I need a favour here.' The community has stepped up. Families have signed on as mentors, or super friends, to welcome people into their homes for the first two months after they arrive. Enough volunteers have come forward to ensure that each family can be matched with one English-speaking and one Arabic-speaking mentor upon arrival. These mentor, super friends, are instrumental in helping refugee newcomers to set up bank accounts, acquire official identification, enroll in schools and officially settle into the Canadian system.

This is also a full-time volunteer job for me, on top of my regular job running the company. I meet with each family's mentor group before and after the family arrives. I also visit each family and help resolve and troubleshoot issues as they arise.

Partnerships - We partner with local settlement organizations, as well as organizations like Salvation Army for furniture and clothes, local churches and community centers. Arrangements are in place through this broad range of partnerships to provide apartments, clothing, language instruction, and employment and career counselling.

Mobilizing Business Resources - Businesses have resources – not only cash, but staff, trucks, warehouses, contacts etc. that can be mobilized to help refugee newcomers find housing, deliver furniture, learn English and find jobs. One of the most important things for refugees is jobs and business people can influence other business people to offer them work. At Danby, we have the “Ease into Canada,” program that offers each refugee newcomer 90 days of supported employment and English language training at the company.

Setting expectations – As much as we can, we try and contact the refugee family before they arrive. I have seen that it sets them up for success here when they know what to expect for their new life, instead of a myth of Canada.

What challenges did you encounter and how did you resolve them?

The media attention we have received has created challenges. We don't always have the full support of our customers after they hear about our efforts. Part of my job is to grow our markets globally, so we aren't so affected by this.

Timing has been a challenge, as we aren't certain until sometimes just a week or two beforehand, of when a family is going to arrive. In order for families to have a landing pad when they first arrive, I have arranged to have flexible rent of a duplex apartment. This allows us to ensure that we have the time needed to arrange adequate housing for the family.

There can be high demand for English language assessments and classes, which can cause delays. Our English language buddies and teachers have been able to bridge that gap so that refugee newcomers have access to English classes as soon as possible.

What has been the impact of workplace sponsorship on you and your company?

Sponsorship at Danby has been a great, free, team building activity, and the group dynamic among employees is good. The employees and volunteers involved are building leadership and project management skills.

NEXT STEPS

What's next for your sponsorship group?

In June 2018, Danby Appliances became a Sponsorship Agreement Holder (SAH), which means that there is a legal agreement between the company and the Government of Canada to sponsor refugees. Our company is the only private sector firm to have this status and we are giving suggestions for government forms and criteria to make it easier for other businesses to become a SAH.

I am also talking to other businesses and associates about how they can support refugees. Many are interested in starting their own refugee sponsorship and employment/English language programs. Refugees who we sponsored are now volunteering, mentoring and supporting refugees themselves. Those who have opened a business are hiring refugees.

Further Reading

- [GRSI Guidebook: The Experience of a business sponsoring refugees](#)
- [Guelph CEO Jim Estill sponsoring 50 Syrian refugee families](#)
- [Danby CEO Jim Estill recognized as global hero for sponsoring Syrian families](#)
- [Refugee hero helps Windsor region fill skills gap](#)
- [Jim Estill, Guelph Businessman, Sponsoring 50 Syrian Families, Rallies Town](#)

Workplace Sponsorship

A Law Firm



THE FACTS

Location: Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Sponsor Group Size: 20-30 lawyers and staff, with support from personal and professional networks

Sponsoring Since: Autumn, 2015

Sponsor Group Description: Lawyers and staff at Goldblatt Partners LLP built an intergenerational group of current and retired employees, their families, firm clients and law firm partners to sponsor a family of five in Toronto, Ontario.

Number of Refugee Newcomers sponsored: A family of five from Syria

THE CONTEXT

In Autumn 2015, when a surge in displacement caused by the conflict in Syria motivated tens of thousands of Canadians to sponsor refugees, lawyers and law firm partners came together, rallied their colleagues and started to raise money for a future sponsorship.

THE EXPERIENCE

How did your workplace sponsorship begin?

One of the lawyers had been involved in sponsorship, in particular with the Refugee Hub's "Refugee Sponsorship Support Program," providing pro-bono legal support and advice for sponsors filling out sponsorship applications. In the summer of 2015, a few lawyers at our firm were already talking about sponsorship in Toronto, but we didn't see how sponsorship was going to scale to meet the urgent need for Syrians to be resettled. The tragic photo of Alan Kurdi² was an important moment, because it motivated all of us at the law firm to act, and leadership immediately became invested in making it work.

How did you fundraise?

We asked the firm management to match the money that we raised, up to \$15,000 CAD, for a total of \$30,000, and the firm generously agreed. We formed a fundraising committee and organized all kinds of fun activities – a silent auction, a number of high calorie "Monday Fundays" involving pies, samosas, bake and chocolate sales, a dreidel spinning contest, a concert, trivia night. One highlight was Carnival week at the firm, with contests and games, like a mini-golf course we constructed throughout the office. We found that clients of the firm pitched in and started volunteering, and we ended up having over 50 lawyers, staff,

² Alan Kurdi was a three-year-old Syrian boy of Kurdish ethnic background whose image made global headlines after he drowned on 2 September 2015 in the Mediterranean Sea.

clients and others involved. Fundraising activities contributed to good morale at the firm, and word spread about the positive work environment.

What were some key factors for your successful workplace sponsorship?

Group composition: Our group is an intergenerational group of volunteers, including everyone from senior partners at the law firm, lawyers, support staff, clients, retirees from the firm, and their spouses and children, among others. We found that the variety of people involved expanded the skill set of the group, as well as grew the network that we could tap into when we were raising funds, finding housing, etc.

For example, housing is notoriously expensive and difficult to find in Toronto, and it was only through the expanded network of our group that we were able to secure affordable housing for the family. The Aunt of one of the firm employees, who had recently downsized, offered her apartment to the family for free. The sponsorship group took on responsibility for repairs and maintenance, such as painting, cleaning, etc. When the family later moved into their own home, one of the sponsor group members co-signed the lease and was indemnified by the firm.

Grassroots organizing: One of the reasons our group was successful was because it was organized from the bottom-up, with millennials taking the lead in instigating the sponsorship, supported by senior colleagues. We saw that sponsorship became a prideful aspect of their job. It was an opportunity for younger employees to take leadership in the workplace.

Support from Senior Partners: We often work long hours, and we need to closely account for our time in a law firm environment. However, leadership recognized the volunteer time that we were putting into the sponsorship, and we were given flexible work loads, particularly during demanding times in the sponsorship, i.e. the first couple months after the family's arrival.

What challenges did you encounter and how did you resolve them?

Work-life balance is always a challenge in a law firm, but especially when taking on sponsorship activities on top of the work load. Thankfully, leadership was also involved in the sponsorship and invested in making it a success, so we had the flexibility we needed to respond during the more demanding periods of sponsorship.

Anti-immigrant rhetoric in society at large is an ongoing challenge. It can make businesses more reluctant to engage in what they may perceive as a politicized issue. However, businesses have a major leadership role to play, and if they are willing to engage in sponsorship, this can have a positive effect on political discourse as it relates to immigrants and refugees.

What has been the impact of workplace sponsorship on you and your firm?

Sponsorship has been good for firm morale and for spreading Goldblatt Partners' reputation as an attractive place for socially conscious lawyers. It gave many lawyers and support staff at the firm a sense of social purpose in their workplace. It also helped strengthen meaningful relationships with key clients who supported the initiative.

NEXT STEPS

What's next for your sponsorship group?

During the sponsorship experience, we created project management structures, organized tasks and ultimately created a roadmap for sponsorship in Toronto. For the time being, we remain deeply engaged in supporting the family and we have remained active in their lives well after the formal sponsorship has ended. We are continuing to provide assistance in helping the parents establish a career in Canada, and we treasure spending time with the kids and watching them grow and succeed. We will remain lifelong friends with them.

Further Reading

- [Goldblatt's Syrian Refugee Sponsorship Challenge](#)
- [GRSI Guidebook: The Experience of a business sponsoring refugees](#)



Workplace Sponsorship

A Community Organization

THE FACTS

Location: Ontario, Canada.

Name of Sponsoring Group: Seva Food Bank and Sikhs Serving Canada

Number of Sponsors in Group: Core group of 6 with 14 more supporting

Sponsoring Since: 2018

Sponsoring Group Description: A group of Ontario-based volunteers who worked together at the Seva Foodbank

Number of Refugees sponsored: 4 families, 20 people including 13 children



THE CONTEXT

In 2018, a group of volunteers and employees with the [Seva Food Bank](#) and [Sikhs Serving Canada](#) created a sponsorship group to sponsor four families through the Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) resettlement program. This program shares the costs and settlement responsibilities between the government and community groups in Canada. The sponsorship group accessed funds from the **2018 BVOR Fund**, provided by the University of Ottawa [Refugee Hub](#) and the [Shapiro Foundation](#), which provided funding for groups sponsoring people through the BVOR resettlement program.

THE EXPERIENCE

How did your workplace sponsorship begin?

Seva translates to 'selfless service,' and it's not only a core value for Seva Food Bank, but of Sikhism, as well. Our organization upholds values such as inclusiveness, diversity (culturally and with respect to life experience), the wellbeing of all, and eternal optimism, all of which are a huge part of why it made sense to sponsor through our organization.

How did you engage colleagues at your workplace?

It was really all word of mouth and who we knew within our own networks. We have four board members involved in the committee providing oversight and leadership. Former clients of the foodbank are also volunteering to support, particularly when we need translation help. There is one special volunteer from Honduras who, six years ago, when she and her sister-in-law were new to Canada, was coming to the Food Bank. Now she volunteers, sharing her experience as a newcomer, volunteering at the food bank, and supporting the sponsorship group with translation.

Our organization has a volunteer management system in place, including volunteer agreements and confidentiality agreements, which were helpful in organizing the sponsorship group. Now many of the sponsorship volunteers have become volunteers at the Foodbank. It's very interconnected. In December 2018, we did a big luncheon, volunteer appreciation event, and invited all the volunteers and newcomer families. We gave out awards to the committee, which was really nice.

How did you fundraise?

Because it was our first time sponsoring, access to the Canadian BVOR fund to cover our costs was very important to us. However, we were going to take on the sponsorship even without the fund, and we did fundraise additional dollars. If we would have fundraised more, we would have thrown some sort of dinner or high-level event through our organization to raise money. We did end up requesting in-kind donations from the community, since we wanted to reduce start-up costs as much as we could.

We used Facebook and personal contacts to let the larger community know that we were sponsoring four families and looking for furniture. We found all the furniture we needed, and, in fact, that was one of the most inspiring parts of the project. One company even donated brand new bunk beds, bedding and mattresses for all four of the families.

Since we know there will be some difficulties adjusting once our sponsorship support officially ends, we have a goal of raising up to \$50,000 by the end of the first year.

What were some key factors in the success of your workplace sponsorship?

Family Coaches: We assign two different people to each family who meet at least biweekly with each family. The coaches sit down and look at mail, budgets, and discuss any questions that arise for the family, particularly questions related to immigration paperwork that are time sensitive. It works well and makes sure that nothing falls through the cracks. It was a huge shift in how we were functioning and allowed for a reduction in everyone's stress level. With the family coaches, not a week goes by that we don't contact the families.

Communication Tools: Seva Food Bank uses a communication tool called Slack, through which we have created communication channels for each settlement topic, using hashtags such as housing and finances. Volunteers and employees find it is fundamental to our communication with each other. We have channels for each family, and any time something comes up, we post it in that group and are able to tag one another.

Organization of Information: We created and organized an excel document that contained the key information about the families. Any time we received information about the families, such as a notice to travel, we were sure to include it in the excel document. We created profile tabs for each family with date of birth, gender, education, visa number etc. This way it was easy to share necessary information with team members as they filled out documents with the families. We also created a work plan through excel with a huge list of tasks, and logged when they were completed and by whom.

What challenges did you encounter and how did you resolve them?

Having daytime availability: Having someone with day-time availability is really important. Luckily, we had the perfect people!

Housing: The biggest challenge for us was finding affordable housing, especially since the Toronto region is so expensive. We got the notice of arrival ten days before the families arrived, and we didn't think the families would arrive so close together. We thought we would have a couple weeks in between each of them. There weren't a lot of houses that were affordable and were clean, so we were lucky to have a real estate agent as part of the group, and eventually, we did find housing. The landlords were also quite risk averse, so it was hard to find someone to rent to the families when they had no credit or leasing history. We overcame this by having Seva Food bank as an organization co-sign the lease.

Volunteer burnout: Volunteer burnout is a real part of this project. On the whole, we have done a good job at checking in on people, and this has really helped prevent burnout. We understand that sponsorship is taxing, and sometimes just acknowledging that people might be under a lot of pressure, does a lot to reduce the chances of burnout.

What has been the impact of workplace sponsorship on you and your colleagues?

"I have done community work for years and years. Last year, I felt stagnant, like I was being pulled to do something bigger. The refugee settlement project motivated me and gave me the fire I needed. It has been a very emotional, personal experience. The work has been challenging, but I have made super friends. It has been a loving experience."

"For me, one of the added benefits of sponsorship was that my son has been able to experience the process first-hand. He's seven years old. He was learning about refugees at school. Now he is experiencing refugee sponsorship through me, has come to meetings, and has helped set up a home for a family. We are trying to establish values in the next generation and raise a new generation of leaders, and you can only do that through leading by example."

NEXT STEPS

What's next for your sponsorship group?

Seva Food Bank is unique in that we have incorporated private sponsorship into our programming. We tried it this year, and hopefully we can grow it under the initiative of settlement in Canada. Now we are assessing what is sustainable programmatically and doing some high-level strategic planning before moving forward. That said, we are all very enthusiastic about the future of sponsorship in our organization and we are having informal discussions about entering into a formal sponsorship agreement with the Government of Canada.

Further Reading

- [Seva Refugee Resettlement Pilot Project](#)
- [GRSI Guidebook: The Experience of a business sponsoring refugees](#)