

This FAQ document is not comprehensive and remains a work in progress. It is intended to provide some responses to key questions that those who are considering forming a HIAS Welcome Circle may have. Check back regularly for updates, and for information about the general sponsor circle model, visit sponsorcircles.org/resources.

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Big Picture FAQs:

What is the Sponsor Circle Program? And what is a HIAS Welcome Circle?

The U.S. government (State Department) has just approved private community sponsorship to aid in resettling and integrating Afghan parolees off of U.S. military bases, known as safe havens. Prior to this approval, newly arriving refugees and refugee-like populations went through the traditional U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). HIAS is one of nine national networks involved in resettlement via the USRAP. The U.S. has named the [Community Sponsorship Hub](#) (CSH) to oversee this Sponsor Circle Program, working in partnership with other organizations. This model is similar to those that are already thriving in Canada and other countries. HIAS is participating as an “umbrella” agency, in partnership with the Community Sponsorship Hub, to launch HIAS Welcome Circles with the goal to activate, support, and guide the Jewish community’s response to this emergency.

What is the difference between sponsor circles and the Afghan Placement and Assistance Program (APA)?

The key difference between sponsor circles and APA is the entity responsible for initial resettlement services to Afghan newcomers. APA is a resettlement program that was set up exclusively to address the Afghan population following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. It is essentially a mirror of the traditional U.S. resettlement program (USRAP), which involves the State Department’s national resettlement agencies working with local resettlement organizations, and through which clients receive formal case management.

Afghan guests being served through sponsor circles are choosing to receive initial resettlement services for their first 90 days (180 days in HIAS’ model) from a certified sponsor circle instead of a resettlement agency. There is no formal case management provided through the sponsor circle model. Aside from this, Afghan newcomers served through the sponsor circle program remain eligible for all other federal, state, and local benefits and services to which they are entitled. They are also eligible for certain refugee benefits that are offered by resettlement agencies, such as [Preferred Communities](#) and [Matching Grants](#), although the capacity of those agencies to take on clients may be limited, and as a result, access will not always be possible.

If traditional refugee resettlement works, why is this circle model happening? Is it responsible? Is it stepping on toes?

The sponsor circle program is an emergency initiative that is intended to augment the United States’ capacity to welcome and resettle Afghan newcomers. It is being launched in parallel to the existing and ongoing efforts of the U.S. refugee resettlement program. The sponsor circle model is being deployed now because the moment requires as many viable, responsible pathways for resettlement as are possible to meet such substantial needs.

HIAS Welcome Circle FAQs:

Who is eligible to form a Welcome Circle, and what are the requirements?

[Community Sponsorship Hub](#) (CSH) has established the following eligibility criteria for sponsor circles:

- Groups of at least five individuals over the age of 18 who reside in the same local community will be eligible to form a sponsor circle. All group members must complete a required background check. Circles forming under HIAS' umbrella are strongly recommended to launch with a minimum of five people and a maximum of eight people serving as the core group. Additionally, the minimum commitment required by CSH is three months; however, HIAS very strongly recommends a commitment of at least six months.
- Sponsor circles must demonstrate that they have fundraised 60% of the financial requirement of \$2,275 per Afghan newcomer that they will support. (Note that \$2,275 mirrors the maximum amount of funding provided through APA.) These funds are to be spent on behalf of Afghans to provide for their initial housing and other basic needs.
- Sponsor circles must pass knowledge assessments to demonstrate completion of a required online course that provides information on expected roles/responsibilities of sponsor circles, how to prepare/organize for supporting Afghan newcomers, key considerations for sponsorship (e.g., expectations, power, culture, religion, trauma, and privacy), and how to navigate challenges.
- Sponsor circles are required to submit a "Welcome Plan" through which they pledge and detail how they plan to provide core initial resettlement services to Afghan newcomers for at least the first 90 days after newcomers arrive in a local community. The Welcome Plan also requires sponsor circles to consider how they will facilitate cultural connections (e.g., connections to the Afghan diaspora and places of worship).

All HIAS Welcome Circles will use the CSH website to submit applications. HIAS, as an umbrella agency for Jewish and interfaith circles, will vet and certify circles, approving them to welcome Afghans. CSH and their partners on military bases will facilitate the matches and notify circles when matches are made. HIAS will provide guidance and support to all Welcome Circles that have formed under our umbrella for the six months of commitment that we recommend.

Why form a Welcome Circle?

- You urgently want to be reunited with a friend or family member currently at a military base
- You want to respond to a humanitarian need
- You want to connect with those in your community
- It is aligned with your values

- You or your family was welcomed to the United States as immigrants
- You want to support refugee integration

What are the responsibilities of Welcome Circles?

Welcome Circles are responsible to support the Afghan newcomer(s) with the following:

- Secure housing
- Provide basic necessities
- Provide time-bound income support
- Assist in completing required changes of address
- Connect to legal assistance
- Support in obtaining a social security card
- Support in selective service registration, as appropriate
- Support in accessing medical services
- Support in accessing available benefits
- Enroll children in school
- Provide English language support
- Provide job search advice and support
- Provide community orientation
- Complete 30- and 90-day reports

What is the financial commitment of a circle?

There are two answers to this question.

- First, the requirement: all circles are required to raise a minimum of \$2,275 per Afghan individual they welcome. This is the same amount that is allocated for individuals and the resettlement agencies that resettle them through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). However, in order to be resettled through a circle, Afghans must opt out of the USRAP — so the minimum financial commitment of a circle is to raise the amount they would have received had they remained in the program.
- Second, the recommendation: cost of living — rent, food, transportation, technology, phone service, etc. — varies greatly across cities and states. Depending on your location, it is highly likely that you'll need additional funds available to put toward those and other expenses. We recommend that as you consider whether you are able to form a Welcome Circle, you conduct a budget exercise based on six months of support to determine the funding you will seek to raise to support this endeavor. Don't worry if you don't know how many individuals you will be welcoming yet; set up a budget based on the finances you have available and the housing

possibilities you have been looking at, and this will be used to determine the size of the family with whom you will be matched. At the time of application, you must show that you have raised 60% of the minimum funding required, and the rest can be collected later on (as long as you have identified where the funds will come from).

After six months, what happens to any funds remaining in the circle's account? Should we transfer it over to the family?

HIAS asks that all circles launched as part of our “umbrella” commit to this effort for six months; more often than not, 90 days/3 months is too short a time period to ensure that the path to self-sufficiency is firmly in place. For this six-month period, circles should create a budget based on the money raised and work with the individual or family you’re assisting to create a plan for when the circle’s financial support is no longer available; as such, it is likely that there won’t be much of a surplus at the end of this period. If there are remaining funds, they should be transferred to the newcomers and additional financial planning should take place.

NOTE: It is hoped that adults in the family will be employed by month four; additionally, they will receive cash assistance (public benefits). The amount that the Afghans you are assisting will need from the circles should decrease as they gain income from new employment and access benefits.

Is it advisable to launch a circle if we live in a community with a high cost of living and/or a low immigrant population?

There are many factors to consider when assessing how suited a community is for successful resettlement. We have seen success in unexpected places; for example, HIAS clients have been successfully resettled in high-cost places like Westchester County, NY and more rural parts of Connecticut with low immigrant populations. All Afghans who are considering participating in the Welcome Circle model are counseled about potential locations to ensure that they are able to make informed decisions about where they are heading. Additionally, HIAS hopes to encourage as many Welcome Circles as possible to form in shared communities, so that our new neighbors hopefully feel less alone.

Is any federal funding provided to each Afghan resettled through a circle?

There is no federal funding for Afghans who opt out of the USRAP and into the circle program. However, Afghans resettled through circles do have access to public benefits such as Medicaid, SNAP, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and TANF, and are eligible for some of the benefits that resettled refugees can access, including [Refugee Cash Assistance](#), [Refugee Medical Assistance](#), [Preferred Communities](#), and [Matching Grants](#).

My congregation is located near a HIAS Resettlement Partner or another local refugee resettlement agency. Should we still pursue starting a HIAS Welcome Circle?

If you live near a HIAS resettlement partner (we call them “affiliates”), we recommend that you work directly with them! If you need to be connected with a HIAS resettlement partner, please contact Merrill Zack at merrill.zack@hias.org. If you’re already working with a local resettlement agency, you should continue working with them.

In previous years, my synagogue has helped resettle refugees with local agencies. How are HIAS Welcome Circles different from refugee sponsorship programs we may have done in the past?

Since 1980, when the USRAP was formed and put into place, nearly all community assistance in resettlement has been carried out in partnership with a local resettlement agency. Local agencies provide case management for refugee clients and work with community groups to assist with resettlement. Welcome Circles do not work with a local resettlement agency, and there is no case management in place for clients. The circle model is based on the Canadian private sponsorship model, and national umbrella agencies — in this case, HIAS — provide guidance and support to circles, but not case management.

Can Jewish organizations that are not synagogues or congregations (such as Jewish day schools, nonprofit advocacy organizations, other Jewish organizations) and non-Jewish partners (mosques, churches, and secular groups) create a HIAS Welcome Circle?

Yes! HIAS is a Jewish organization proudly grounded in Jewish history, culture, and values, and we work in coalition every day to serve refugees and asylum seekers of all backgrounds. We’re in an all-hands-on-deck situation, requiring communities and institutions of all kinds to work together in welcoming our new neighbors. HIAS will happily partner with non-congregations and/or non-Jewish groups to create a Welcome Circle.

We aren’t sure our congregation can do this alone. Can HIAS pair us with another congregation in the area to form a Welcome Circle together?

While we can’t guarantee that we can find a perfect pairing, we’re very happy to work with you to identify a potential partner congregation or organization to collaborate with on forming a circle.

How big should a circle be? What is the magic number?

Welcome Circles must have a minimum of five people over the age of 18, but HIAS strongly encourages a core circle of five to eight participants; that inner circle should be the group that has high touch with the individual or family you are assisting. Of that group, one will be the designated Welcome Circle lead who will communicate directly with a HIAS Welcome Circle Liaison throughout the commitment. There can be concentric circles of volunteers around this core group made up of

those volunteers who have less direct contact with the new neighbors; these volunteers can provide support through researching employment opportunities or schools, identifying healthcare providers who accept Medicaid, preparing new homes, gathering clothing for families, etc.

What direct support does HIAS provide Welcome Circles?

Each HIAS Welcome Circle will have a HIAS staff contact - a Welcome Circle Liaison - to serve as a guide throughout this process. Welcome Circle Liaisons will work with circles to build their Welcome Plans, prepare for arrivals, navigate post-arrival activities and challenges, and connect circles to technical and operational resources on best practices in resettlement. HIAS will also offer monthly office hours with technical experts to share guidance and resources on topics ranging from trauma-informed care and boundary setting to employment and housing. HIAS will also facilitate peer-to-peer mentoring, matching new Welcome Circles with lay experts from within the HIAS synagogue network, and we'll offer Jewish resources to ground the experience and the work.

Welcome Plan FAQs:

How can we find appropriate housing?

Housing needs, resources, and challenges will vary from one community to the next. Some areas have high costs, others are affordable but without access to public transportation, and others may have limited options altogether due to housing shortages. You may want to consider housing in two stages: short- and long-term.

- **Short-term housing** could be booked through Airbnb, or it might be an “in-law” suite or apartment owned by someone in your congregation. If you have a room or rooms in your home with a separate entrance, kitchen, and bathroom, then this could be a good temporary arrangement. Airbnb is planning to offer housing credits for circles, though details are not yet available.

If the temporary housing setup is a room inside your home with all of these spaces shared, it might be difficult or stressful for the family. This is particularly true for families where their religious customs dictate not being able to uncover their hair in front of a man they are not related to. But it also can be difficult because they have spent the past few months in a military base with little space for quiet time alone with their family, to process some of the difficult or traumatic experiences they've endured.

- **Long-term housing** will most likely be a rented house or apartment. After the support period ends, the family will be responsible for paying their own rent. For this reason, housing should be affordable, and/or in an area with housing subsidies available from the municipality or state government.

If you plan to have the family living on the same property as a member of your congregation, note that this should be treated as a landlord-renter arrangement with a signed lease and monthly rent payments. Consider how easily the family will be able to access transportation from the location. If it is not near public transportation, you'll want to plan on helping them obtain a U.S. driver's license and access to a used car to purchase.

In areas where affordable housing with access to transportation is difficult to come by, consider building relationships with members of the local real estate community who can help you navigate the challenges.

Additional resources can be found through the organization [Welcome.U.s](https://www.welcome.us), a non-profit set up to help with integrating Afghan newcomers into our communities across the United States.

Who should be part of the core group of a Welcome Circle?

Members of a congregation's social justice/action committee, as well as those with a social work background (even if they're currently not involved with a congregation's social justice/action committee), would be great places to start. Any other members with special skills to offer, such as educators, medical professionals, lawyers, etc. can also be useful members of the core group, or they can be identified as part of the larger community so that they can assist as needed. It is also critical to understand that at least some members of a circle should be available during workday hours, both to accompany new neighbors to appointments and to respond to urgent matters if/when they occur.

What is the level of detail that is needed to fill out the Welcome Plan? How specific does the housing plan need to be, for example, not knowing the timing of when the family would arrive/how many people?

You should be as detailed as you can, and most importantly, clear about your capacity in each area of the Welcome Plan. For example, if you think you can meet the initial needs of a multigenerational family of five, including a person in a wheelchair or with other health needs, you should specify that in your application. If you are only able to take individual adults, you can state that too. Be as detailed as you are able. If you have already identified housing and spoken with the landlord; collected commitments for in-kind donations of furnishings and household goods; had conversations with local agencies, charities, Afghan community groups, interpreters, etc., note that in the plan. You may even

want to specify in the plan who you've spoken to at a particular agency, and what guidance and/or support they've agreed to offer.

I'm having trouble budgeting without knowing how large a family to expect. What does HIAS recommend?

Start by determining how much money you expect your community can raise, and then build out a budget of monthly expenses, and that will help to determine what size family you would be able to accommodate. HIAS can help you with this, as well. You can use tools like [this](#) to help consider what expenses to include in your budget by selecting a city in your area from the menu at the top to see the average costs in your local area. You can also reference guides for the Canadian model, like [this one](#), which can help determine what costs to plan for and what can be reduced using volunteers and in-kind donations (donations of physical goods and items).

Application Process FAQs:

OK, I think we're in! How do we get started?

That's terrific. Go to sponsorcircles.org/apply and start your application now!

Is there any cost for the background check?

Yes, the background check has a \$15 fee. All core members of a circle are required to submit (and pass!) this standard background check administered by Sterling Volunteers via the CSH website.

I just submitted a request to complete the background check for myself. Can I start moving forward with the application form process while I'm waiting to hear that the check has been authorized?

Yes! We encourage you to start the application process as soon as possible, so you can continue to prepare while background checks are being processed. These steps are outlined [here](#), and you will find tools to support you in completing your application [here](#).

Can the actual application be submitted without a finalized/complete background check?

Applications will not be considered complete until all required pieces are submitted.

How long does the process from submitting an application to being matched with a family/individual take?

Once certified, circles will be flagged in the system as eligible to be matched. Most likely, it will be two to three weeks from the time a circle is certified to the arrival of the new neighbor/s.

Unfortunately, no one in our networks (or our circle) speaks Dari or Pashto. What if we are matched with a family that has minimal or no English language skills?

It is definitely possible that the individual or family you welcome will not have fluency in English. We encourage you to explore local interpreters/translators in your area. Other free resources include Tarjimly (tarjim.ly), a free app using volunteers from around the world, and Talking Points (talkingpts.org) for free machine translation texting. There are professional interpreters available through for-profits like Language Line (languageline.com). As part of your Welcome Plan, you will be asked to consider if there are wider Afghan cultural groups or resources in the area. If there is a local community that you are in touch with, explore if they are willing to serve as a volunteer or, ideally, paid interpreter. You might find this [one-stop resource hub](#) made by Afghan American women helpful too. Additionally, HIAS is exploring whether we might be able to provide connections to interpretation support.

Before we decide, can we speak with a congregation that has done this before?

Certainly. Please reach out to us at isabel.burton@hias.org and we'll connect you with a volunteer from a synagogue or local group that has experience in assisting in this way with refugee resettlement.

We want to make sure our group is respectful of the boundaries and emotional distress that the family may have. What is your recommendation?

Keep in mind that the role of a Welcome Circle is to be a resource for capable, intelligent adults to get their feet on the ground in a new and unfamiliar community while they work towards self-sufficiency. The first step is always listening to the family about their wants and needs and respecting their decisions.

We also recommend not asking questions that bring up trauma. If the family you have sponsored offers information about their experiences, listen and be supportive; however, we should never ask people to share these experiences as it might be uncomfortable or cause them distress. Build trust. Dignity needs to be respected. You will find more information on trauma-informed support, boundaries, and expectations in the [Sponsor Circles Course](#) in Module 4: The Skillful Sponsor Circle.

It is also important that circles' members take care of themselves and practice self-care. Being exposed to someone else's trauma can take a toll on us as well.

The application requires me to enter information about the umbrella agency my circle will be associated with — is that HIAS? What should I enter there?

Step one is to ensure that a HIAS staff person knows that you'll be completing an application — we will be delighted to hear this news! Please email isabel.burton@hias.org to ensure that we are officially notified. You'll hear back ASAP with the information to include in the application form.

How do we handle and disburse the money that we raise? Should it be held in a synagogue account and disbursed from there? Should we set up a separate non-profit or a GoFundMe?

Circles will need to research their options and make choices that make sense for their groups. It may be possible, and make sense, to work with a congregation or local non-profit as a fiscal sponsor; you could also consider keeping the money raised in a separate fund in a synagogue account. If a circle is able to use a 501c3 account, then people can give tax-deductible donations, which is an advantage when encouraging people to support the work.

Circles will be asked to designate a member to oversee finances. This person is responsible for overseeing the expenditure of the resettlement funds and introducing refugee adults to family budgeting, credit, the banking system, and taxes.

Because the goal is for families to achieve self-sufficiency as quickly as possible, consider transitioning the budgeting for household expenses like utilities and grocery bills to the family early on. Funds for the household budget, along with additional pocket money, should be disbursed to the family on a regular basis (whether that is weekly or every other week will be part of your planning). You should plan to make rent payments directly to the landlord for the duration of the six months support period. Try not to make large transfers to the family at once, as this will appear as income and could jeopardize access to certain welfare benefits.

We need to go through our synagogue's formal process before saying yes — the board of directors, the Rabbis, etc. This takes time. Is it ok if we can't say yes for a month or two?

It is our current understanding that all cases on the safe haven military bases will need to be accounted for — either through Welcome Circles or through traditional resettlement agencies — by mid-February. We encourage you to consider fast-tracking the discussion and decision-making process because of the urgency of this situation.

What happens if the family or individual our circle has assisted is not on their feet after six months? What is our obligation to continue to provide financial support?

Refugees, as a group, have historically been expected to become economically self-sufficient in 3-5 months. Otherwise, the U.S. refugee program and the professional agencies that do this work would not be successful either. It is key to promote economic self-sufficiency from the very beginning, being

clear that the financial support from the circle is time-limited. Success for them — and for refugees coming to the U.S. in general — requires early economic self-sufficiency, defined as having the income to support basic needs. They will be eligible for welfare cash assistance, but in most locales, that is not enough to pay rent, much less anything else.

The key source of income is employment. Depending on where the families live, this may mean one full-time worker can support the family, but in some cases, two workers will be needed. It is often the case that even high-skilled individuals with fluent English have to take jobs below their station until they learn more about the U.S. world of work and are in the position to “compete” for advanced-level jobs. Job search, interviewing, and workplace expectations are likely very different from what they know.

There may be employment services available in your area, but circles play a role in helping adults secure employment. Circles members and their networks should be tapped, and the family should use any connections they have. There may be refugee providers in your area that can help with this. There will be mainstream providers as well. Typically, anyone on welfare is assigned to an employment program. Circles will have access to HIAS’ robust trainings and guidance as well as from national providers, Switchboard (switchboardta.org) and Upwardly Global (upwardlyglobal.org) for higher-skilled professionals.

Providing financial literacy early on, with a major focus on budgeting, is the best way to engage and educate the family, giving them the information, and perhaps eye-opening reality, of their situation at this early stage of resettlement. It’s helpful for them to create short-term and longer-term goals so they know they are not stuck where they are. Perhaps there are connections to high-paying jobs for Afghan professionals, but in most cases, finding those jobs takes more time than what they have due to their financial reality. They can be simultaneously working a “survival” job and pursuing their longer-term goals. It may be helpful to think back to when you or your ancestors came to the U.S., how they may have struggled, and where they are today.

Other considerations: There could be emergency cash assistance to help families over a short-term hump. If there is someone over age 65 or someone with a permanent disability, they will be eligible for disability support. If the rent is simply too high for the family, then relocation may be necessary. There also could be subsidized housing options in your area.

What other support services are available after the six months are up?

The Afghans you assist may be able to access support through refugee and/or mainstream programs that offer employment-related assistance and/or case management. They may automatically be

connected to these services upon opening welfare cash. Your State Refugee Coordinator will have information on these services; they likely have a web page. The families will also have access to any services for low-income households and/or regular mainstream services. Aside from employment, this could include special education, disability, senior services, mental health/behavioral supports, and other human services. The families will likely continue to receive food stamps and Medicaid while they remain low-income. As stated earlier, they may be on cash assistance, but it is not enough to live on.

NOTE: Depending on where you live, the service providers may be less familiar with serving limited English speakers and/or non-Western populations. Advocacy and education on their behalf may be required. There are civil rights laws that require federally funded service providers to provide interpretation. More guidance on this will be provided.

I understand humanitarian parole is a temporary status that may run out after two years. What is our responsibility as a Welcome Circle in adjusting their status? What if we don't have a lawyer in our group who knows how to help them apply for another type of visa?

That is correct. The Afghans will need to adjust their immigration status. It is the responsibility of the Welcome Circle to connect the Afghans they are assisting to legal support. There may be pro bono or low-cost immigration services in your area, and HIAS' pro bono network may be able to assist as well. Some law schools have immigration clinics. Through your connections, you may be able to find an immigration attorney to take the case. These connections should be made as soon as possible after arrival, as the immigration system is slow-moving.

NOTE: Do not practice law unless you are legally qualified. Errors could have devastating ramifications.

Can you share an example of what success looks like in this model, after six months?

Early success looks like this: the family is in permanent housing and has the understanding and means to cover basic expenses through employment. They are likely still receiving food stamps and Medicaid. The children are attending school, and adults are attending English as a Second Language classes (if needed). They have daily living skills (e.g., transportation, shopping, home maintenance, important U.S. cultural practices) and know where to turn if they need help, especially for medical and other urgent needs. They are aware of basic U.S. laws on child safety, the requirement to notify homeland security when they change address, the need to adjust their status, etc. Families are supported by their faith and/or ethnic community if they so choose. Continued support from circle members as friends would be a great benefit.