

Next Steps and Reflections from Refugee Sponsors and Resettlement Professionals

By: John Carlaw, event organizer and Project Lead, York University Syria Response and Refugee Initiative (SRRI), with notes and photo from Pierre-André Thériault,, Osgoode SRRI Project Lead. Thank you to Amina Khan, volunteer Director of Communications and Outreach for layout and design.

On June 12th, 2017 York University's [Syria Response and Refugee Initiative](#) hosted a meet and greet for sponsor teams across the GTA University [Ryerson University Lifeline Syria Challenge \(RULSC\)](#) at Osgoode Hall Law School's Professional Development Centre in downtown Toronto.

The event featured a panel discussion highlighting reflections from York sponsor team leads Lesley Wood (Sociology & Friends on "Reflections at Month 3 and Coping with Delays") and Elizabeth Ivory (Project Connect, "Reflections from Month 11"). Melissa Scott, National Refugee Sponsorship Training Program (RSTP) trainer and [Centre for Refugee Studies](#) Alumna provided commentary on the remarks delivered while Karen Anderson, Supervisor, Direct Program, Yonge Eglinton Employment and Social Services discussed and patiently answered the audience's many questions on social services in Toronto and transitions to social assistance from sponsorship.

While not without its challenges, the event's keynote speakers reported that they have found the sponsorship experience to be profoundly positive while emphasizing that every sponsorship experience is unique- a truth echoed by Melissa Scott based on her experience as a sponsor group trainer. Notwithstanding this reality, several key themes emerged from the event, summarized below.

Empowerment and Self-Determination

[Earlier workshops](#) in this program featuring RSTP presenters have focused on educating sponsors of their [responsibilities](#) and called upon them to consider the ethics of sponsorship and to manage their expectations about the process. **A recurring theme has been the importance of recognizing and reflecting upon power imbalances** in situations where newly arrived refugees are dependent upon sponsors for their financial well-being and knowledge of the host society.

Scott noted that such power dynamics may mean that some sponsored newcomers- having arrived to a new country and having lived in limbo for some time- may at first hesitate to turn down suggestions or offers of support from their sponsors or express their views. This was a concern echoed by Elizabeth Ivory.

All speakers emphasized the **importance of fostering a sense of empowerment and self-determination** for the newcomers they have sponsored. While all accept this principle, it was acknowledged that in the face of the challenges resettled families experience it can be difficult to facilitate supports in areas sponsors may be

concerned about, such as mental health for those struggling to adjust to Canada or having experienced major trauma.

Nevertheless, “sponsors need to be enablers and promote self-determination,” Scott emphasized, noting that “it is important to recognize the difference and uniqueness of each sponsorship and be able to adapt.” In the same vein Ivory encouraged those in attendance to “have no expectations,” noting that stereotypes some hold of refugees as helpless newcomers are far from a given reality. Sponsors should also not assume they know what is going on within a family, she noted. **Teams can offer help, but should take cues from the family on what assistance is most useful to them.** Newcomers may have or quickly develop their own networks for example, and when they are shown how to do important tasks such as navigate public transit, make use of city services or connect with a doctor that speaks their native language they are better able to navigate their lives independently- a key goal of the resettlement process.



Sponsor Group Dynamics

Lesley Wood extended the discussion of power imbalances to those *within a sponsor team itself*, due to the fact that many of the sponsor teams in the Ryerson University Lifeline Syria Challenge are university based. She noted that it can be challenging to keep all members of a

sponsor group involved and invested in the process over the course of a year, for example, while the language abilities of some group members may result in them taking on a disproportionate amount of the support a family or individual may need. Furthermore, in the context of university-based teams some members are professors and university staff, while others are students, where there may be a relationship of professor to student or committee member to doctoral student, for example. These relationships also require reflection and care to manage in an ethical way. With sponsorships and support taking place for at least a year, it can also be challenging to maintain a cohesive group with a relatively equitable division of support.

Elizabeth Ivory, whose sponsor group is primarily made up of five couples, noted that to an extent some imbalance in workload is inevitable within a team- a reality which must either be consciously accepted or addressed. A key is to make sure sponsors realize that “it is not about the sponsor team,” to realize that **the team and its dynamics will evolve and that it is important to stay flexible and focused on supporting newcomers** in their settlement to Canada. Teams should “focus on the goal: independence and self-determination” for the newcomers they are sponsoring, she emphasized.

The Importance of Advocacy

The importance of empowerment and self-determination notwithstanding, the theme of advocacy in both pre-settlement and post-arrival contexts was also an important theme.

With the family her team sponsored having experienced a lengthy delay in arriving to Canada, Lesley Wood spoke to the importance of working with one’s Member of Parliament (MP) to follow up on cases experiencing delays and to keep such lines of communication open.

Such advocacy can make a major difference and become an important source of information about government processes.

Speakers noted the **importance of respecting refugees' privacy in any advocacy efforts and the need for consent in such contexts**, especially when choosing to do any form of public advocacy.

Melissa Scott noted that advocacy efforts can continue in different forms after arrival, particularly in helping those newly arrived to navigate Canadian systems such as health, employment and education, while reminding the audience of the importance of the line between knowing when to assist and when to respect self-determination and individual and family choices. Sponsors should also recognize the importance of community resources as well, particularly settlement and other community organizations that may assist newcomers in their adaptation to the country.

Ivory noted that the supports each family needs in establishing such ties will vary from sponsorship to sponsorship. Parents with no young children may not have the ties to the host society through the education system that families with children of schooling age develop by attending school, for example. So other ways of interacting and gaining knowledge may need to be pursued

Be patient, relate, and relax

In her closing comments, Elizabeth Ivory reminded the audience of the need for patience and to maintain perspective on the settlement experience. She noted that it takes time to adapt to a new country and that **sponsors should take care not to push the process too hard as families need to know that the promised support is there for the entire twelve month sponsorship period**. Sharing their own families' experiences when those sponsored

wish to do so can also be a "great leveller" between sponsors and those they are supporting. If one does not know what a family needs, ask! Karen Anderson reviewed the services and supports available to newcomers should they not be fully ready to operate without government assistance within a single year after arrival. She encouraged participants to explore government and settlement organization websites to learn about employment and social services in the municipality in which they live. **Social assistance rates apply province-wide, for example, but exact municipal services will vary**. Anderson patiently answered audience questions concerning social assistance and city services to help refugees stabilize themselves and begin to (re)build their careers in a new country. Access to and information about such supports were clearly a need and area of interest for teams in attendance.

Overall the short presentations allowed for a great deal of reflection, information exchange and learning from the collective experience of those in attendance. Thank you to all who participated!

We wish to give special thanks to our presenters and the fifty participants in the event, as well as York's Osgoode Hall Law School for donating the space at their Professional Development Centre and the Centre for Refugee Studies for supplying the catering for this event.

Suggested further resources:

- Refugee Sponsorship Training Program Resources: [Handbook for Sponsoring Groups](#) , [Settlement Services Information](#) , and [Your Rights as a Privately Sponsored Refugees](#) (multiple languages available)
- City of Toronto [Employment and Social Services Website](#)
- Canadian Council for Refugees' [Refugees Welcome Here! Advocacy Resources](#) and [Private Sponsorship of Refugees Toolkit](#)