

# Community Sponsorship and Active Allyship

Community Sponsorship pairs refugees, asylees, and asylum seekers in need of financial, in-kind, and volunteer support with groups of individuals willing to provide that support. It is a relationship managed by a local resettlement agency with experience in refugee resettlement, available community resources, and cross-cultural communications.

**Allyship is core to being an effective community sponsor and refugee rights advocate.** Note that there is a difference between being a passive ally and an active ally. Passive allies support impacted communities, yet are not deeply involved in driving change. Active allies (you may also have heard of the terms accomplices or co-conspirators) are actively engaged in change efforts but ensure that the work is led by those who are directly impacted, understand their own identity and power, and are willing to be uncomfortable and dismantle systems they themselves may benefit from. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

## Self-Awareness:

- Understand your culture and biases:
  - We often are not fully aware of our own culture, because it is obscured by its obviousness. But what is “normal”, “appropriate”, and “respectful” to one person may not be that way for others. We tend to judge and interact with the world by our own standards and the first step to being an ally is to uncover your own background and perceptions of the world and appreciate that they are a result of your upbringing, experiences and context. Because we’re human, we all have biases and assumptions and it’s up to us to recognize and mitigate them.
- Be aware of your position in relation to the other person based on a number of different factors:
  - This includes a number of considerations. In your role as a community sponsor, you hold a certain amount of power and privilege due to the fact that you are in a position to volunteer, organize with your group, and have access to resources and ways to making your voice heard. As the saying goes, with great power comes great responsibility, so follow the community sponsor guidelines provided to you by your local resettlement agency to ensure you are fulfilling your role appropriately. Also be aware that the people you sponsor or advocate with may be recognize and respond to your position and power in different ways.
  - If you are a documented citizen or resident in the U.S. and have never been a refugee, your legal status in this country and your experience of safety and security is likely to be very different from people who have had the experience of being

**“In order to walk a mile in someone else’s shoes, you have to take your own shoes off first.”**

**- Unknown**

displaced. You may not personally fully understand this fundamentally different framework, but being aware of this difference can help to increase your sensitivity and openness to learning about others' experiences.

- You may also hold other types of privilege, due to certain aspects of your identity, socio-economic status, educational background, the part of town in which you live, or your level of familiarity with American/local culture. Keep in mind that these may affect your perceptions of others and what is acceptable, and their perceptions of you.
- Recognize language implications:
  - This does not only include the privilege and access that comes with speaking the dominant language in a particular context; it also means that miscommunications can happen in translation and interpretation. It may also impact the extent to which people are able to express their emotions and experiences or convey their needs or preferences. As needed, adapt your communication and stay open and patient with each other.
- Manage micro-behaviors:
  - Micro-behaviors are small and often subtle ways in which we say or do things that impact others without our intention or awareness. The other party may feel unheard, unseen, not valued, offended or hurt, which may affect the trust and relationship building with each other. Before you say and do things, consider the impact it may have on others, develop understanding and empathy of other people's experiences, and work hard to align your words and behavior with your intentions of treating others with dignity and respect.

**“Becoming aware of privilege should not be viewed as a burden or source of guilt, but rather, an opportunity to learn and be responsible so that we may work toward a more just and inclusive world.”**

**– Unknown**

## Understand Others

- Learn about others:
  - Find opportunities to learn about other people and communities. We often rely on others to educate us, and of course we also want to get to know people and learn about them, but we also have a responsibility to pro-actively educate ourselves.
- Appreciate cultural diversity:
  - Be aware of different cultural patterns regarding communication style, expressing emotions, relationship to time, handling conflict, family dynamics, decision-making and numerous other manifestations of our rich human diversity. Try not to judge or try to change them; instead try to learn about them and respect them.
- See people as full human beings:
  - When we learn about others, our brains sometimes turn this information into generalizations and assumptions about everyone who is part of that group. Go beyond stereotypes, biases and one-dimensional interpretations by getting to know people as the whole and complex human beings we all are. We are all uniquely different but also have a shared humanity that enriches and unites us if we embrace diversity and invest in relationship building across difference.

**“The world in which you were born is just one model of reality. Other cultures are not failed attempts at being you; they are unique manifestations of the human spirit.”**

**- Wade Davis**

## Relationship and Trust Building

- Ask and listen:
  - Trust is built when people feel that you understand them. One of the ways to do this is by asking questions so that you can get insights into other person's feelings, perspectives, and preferences. Be mindful to not inundate people with questions but don't operate solely from your assumptions either.
  - When asking questions, it is just as important to listen from a place of empathy, non-judgment, and desire to understand the other person from their perspective rather than your own. Consider repeating back your interpretation of what you heard to verify the other party's intention.
- Respect people's space and property:
  - Space includes bodily integrity and physical space. Not everyone appreciates being touched by or being in close proximity to another person they don't know well. It can also mean certain preferences for opening up their home to others - when, how often, to whom, etc. Similar to space, people also have different relationships to property and other people handling their property, so ask before you act.
- Be mindful of your role and responsibilities:
  - You are there to support; not to make decisions for someone else. Different people need different things in order to feel comfortable, safe, connected, and happy; rather than *dictating*, focus on *facilitating* what the other person is asking for.

## Advocacy and Sharing Stories

- Make space rather than take space:
  - As an ally and an advocate, you are not speaking for others. You are creating space for them to make their own voices heard.
  - When creating opportunities for people to share their own stories, be mindful of power dynamics and follow the preferences of the speaker.
- Do not expect people to tell you their story:
  - Not everyone feels comfortable sharing their stories one or multiple times. This may especially be the case when people have experienced significant hardship and trauma, which tends to be the case for many refugees. Others may be eager to share their stories as a way to process their experiences, lift up the issues they want to see addressed, build relationship, etc., so communicating that you are open to hearing their story if they choose to share them without any pressure or expectation is important. People may or may not choose to share it with you as your relationship evolves.
- Ask permission and share responsibly:
  - If you would like to share another person's story, ask express permission to do so. Be clear on what you will share, how you will share it, why you will share it, and with whom you will share it. Do not embellish or otherwise edit the story to make a stronger point; staying true to the story respects the story's owner.
- Know the issue(s):
  - As an ally, it is important that you have a clear understanding of the issue(s) on which you are advocating and your motivations for advocacy. You don't have to be a subject matter expert, but you should be able to communicate the issue and the accompanying ask.

**“Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower, and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people. But stories can also repair that broken dignity.”**

**- Chimamanda Adichie**

## Ongoing Learning

- Continue to keep an open mind and invest in educating yourself.
- Recognize the difference between intention and impact.
  - Even though you may feel like you already are an ally and have the best of intentions, the other party may not always experience that in the same way.
  - Be open to receiving feedback and see it as an opportunity to learn and grow. Listen to the feedback, take full ownership of the impact you had on the other person, and apologize unconditionally. Work on both your self-awareness and your self-regulation. Remember, the best apology is sincere understanding and permanently changed behavior.
- Provide feedback to others if they are not showing up as an ally, and do so with respect and from a place of shared commitment and accountability.