



Community Refugee
Sponsorship Australia

Group Mentorship Program

Executive Summary of Evaluation Report

August 2021



“I didn’t have family here. When I arrived I was alone. I was just kind of lost, just working, I didn’t know what to do. So when I get people around me and they have been here, they are Australians, so they know everything. I learn from them and they mentor me so I change my mindset. I know more than before now. I know what I need to do. I feel more confident about where to go.”

(Mentee, interview)

This is an extract from a full Evaluation Report published by E. Pritchard Consulting in August 2021, [available here](#).

References to CRSI in this document are to the joint initiative that has since been formalised as the new charity Community Refugee Sponsorship Australia (CRSA)

Executive Summary

Background to the Group Mentorship Program

The Community Refugee Sponsorship Initiative (CRSI) was formed in early 2018 and since that time has worked to develop and promote a model for community refugee sponsorship in Australia. In 2019 CRSI, together with partner organisations, developed a proposal for a small pilot sponsorship program, which was put to the federal government for consideration in early 2020.

Before the program was fully considered, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic began and Australia's international borders were closed, making implementation of the original proposal impossible. In response, CRSI developed the Group Mentorship Program (GMP), an adaptation of the pilot sponsorship program, whereby volunteer groups provided practical support to refugees already in Australia, as opposed to refugees arriving from overseas. The GMP was launched mid-2020 by CRSI with support from partner organisations.

In July 2021 Community Refugee Sponsorship Australia (CRSA), a new independent charity, was launched by the original members of CRSI to carry the work of CRSI into the future.

Description of the GMP

The role of mentor groups was to walk alongside their mentee households over a 6-month period and assist all members of the mentee household in an integrated manner to meet personal settlement goals in a holistic manner.

The role of mentor groups was underpinned by the following key principles:

- 1. Groups of volunteers:** Mentorship support was provided by organised groups of volunteers (minimum 5 people), with the emphasis on individual mentors coming together around a shared purpose of providing support to one or more refugee households.
- 2. Self-directed innovators:** Mentor groups were encouraged to engage in innovation and problem solving using the available resources in their local context.
- 3. Screened, trained and trusted:** Mentors were screened for good character, then trained by CRSI and entrusted to provide appropriate settlement support in close collaboration with professional case managers (where involved) and the mentee household itself.
- 4. Well supported:** Mentor groups were given a point of contact to access ad hoc advice from settlement professionals when required.



Embedded throughout the program were the understandings that the autonomy and agency of refugees in the program were to be respected at all times, and that support was to be given that recognised and built on their strengths and aspirations.

GMP participants

CRSI was assisted by settlement agencies and other partner organisations to identify refugee participants for the GMP. Agencies made referrals into the program and worked with CRSI to ensure informed consent of refugee participants. A total of 26 refugees (with 11 dependent children) across 15 households became mentees in the program.

CRSI sought applications from community members across Australia interested in being mentors in the GMP. A total of 172 individuals across 21 groups completed the screening processes (for example, police and Working With Children checks) and GMP training to become mentors in the program. Of the 21 groups, 14 were matched with a mentee household (i.e. an individual or a family group).¹ Only 12 of these groups are included in this evaluation as others commenced their work as mentors too late in the program to be included.

The first of the 6-month mentorships commenced in November 2020 with all mentorships formally concluded by July 2021, though most groups continued to support their mentee household beyond 6-month program.

At a glance – the Group Mentorship Program



26 refugees with 11 dependent children across 15 households needed mentorship



172 community members expressed interest and completed the full screening process



These screened participants made up 21 eligible groups to draw from



14 groups were matched with a refugee household



12 groups participated in the evaluation this summary is drawn from

About the evaluation

This evaluation covers the operations of the pilot GMP from its launch in July 2020 through to the conclusion of the 6-month mentorships in July 2021. It did not look at mentoring support provided beyond the initial 6-month mentoring period, nor at operations undertaken by CRSA to extend the GMP or recruit and train a second round of mentees and mentors.

The evaluation used a mixed methods approach involving interviews with key stakeholders (mentors, mentees, CRSI staff and staff from settlement agencies), an online survey of mentors, and examination of key project documentation, including Integration Star² data.

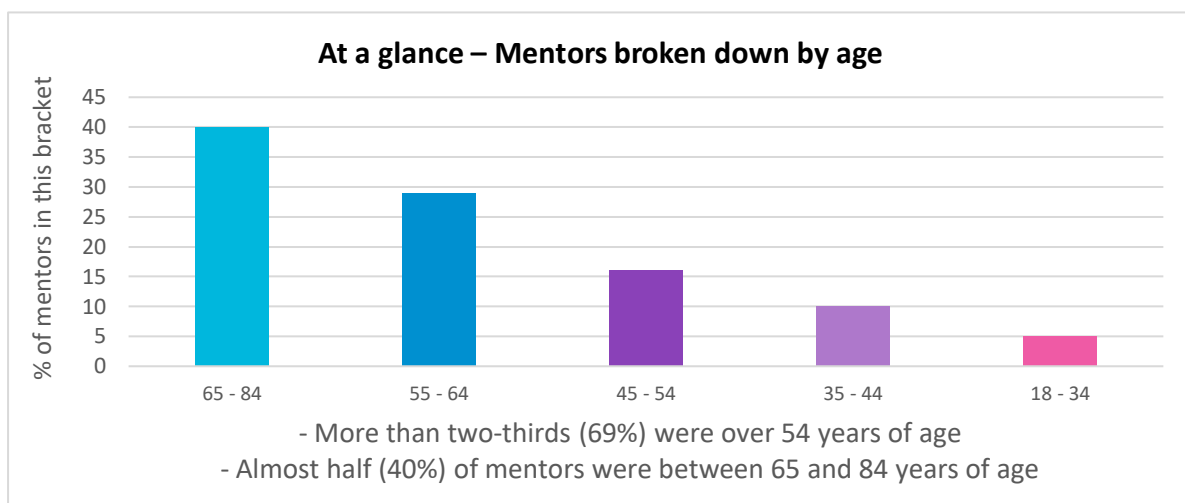
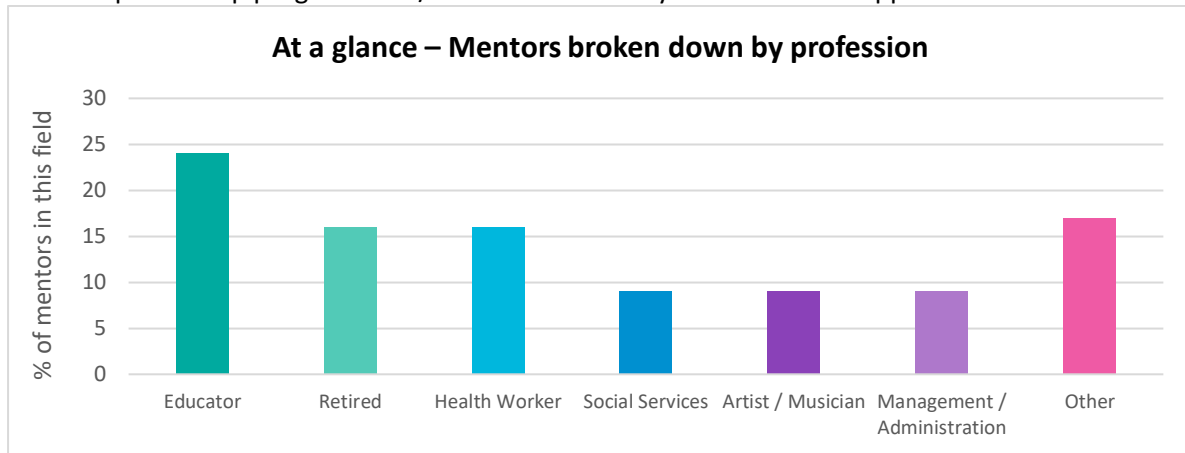
The evaluation answered the following key questions:

1. How was the GMP implemented?
2. What impacts did the GMP have on mentees?
3. What impacts did the GMP have on mentors?

¹ Two mentor groups mentored more than one mentee household.

² The Integration Star is an assessment tool for refugees that explores 8 key outcome areas in the settlement journey where practical support may be needed to integrate into a new country and culture. The GMP used this tool to help understand the needs of refugee mentees and observe changes. (See Appendix A for more details.)

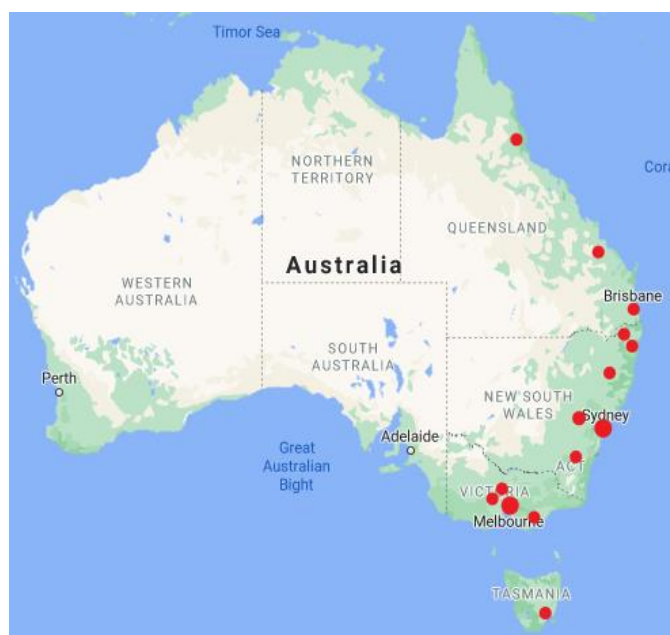
4. How appropriate was the program’s design in meeting mentees’ needs, addressing risk and empowering mentors to support mentee settlement?
5. What were the observations and/or recommendations to inform future community refugee sponsorship programs and/or other community-led settlement approaches?



**At a glance –
Group Mentorship Program
Groups across Australia**

Mentor groups were based in the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, Queensland, Tasmania and Victoria.

62% of mentors were based in regional areas.



Impact of the GMP on mentees

Every mentee who participated in the evaluation reported that their involvement in the GMP had positive impacts on their quality of life.

Mentees were provided a range of practical assistance tailored to their needs, as well as social and cultural experiences. Importantly, mentees received support in the areas they indicated they most needed help, including developing their English language skills, accessing education and employment opportunities, driving lessons and making social connections in their new community.

“ They are very good people; they help me with everything. It would have been harder if not for their help. We were not working because of COVID, we sat at home. They helped us get jobs and beds and household goods. We didn't move [here] with anything, so they helped us a lot. (Mentee, interview)

Mentees described that assistance from their mentor group helped them feel supported and provided a sense of security. This helped increase their confidence in themselves and their future in Australia.

“ They help to teach me how I can be if they are not with me in the future, how I can finish my problems myself. (Mentee, interview)

Several mentees described that the support they received from their mentor group had exceeded their expectations and had helped them transform aspects of their lives.

“ I didn't have family here. When I arrived I was alone. I was just kind of lost, just working, I didn't know what to do. So when I get people around me and they have been here, they are Australians, so they know everything. I learn from them and they mentor me so I change my mindset. I know more than before now. I know what I need to do. I feel more confident about where to go. (Mentee, interview)

Many mentees advised that a longer mentorship arrangement (for example, 12 months) to further help them settle in their new communities would be valued, and many groups have continued to support their mentees beyond the 6 months of the formal mentorship under the GMP.

Impact of the GMP on mentors

Individual mentors reported that during the formal mentoring program they spent an average of 2.3 hours per week on mentoring (range: 0 hours, 5 hours; mode: 2 hours). For groups with the minimum recommended membership of 5 individuals this equates to 11.5 hours of support per week for mentee households.

The evaluation found that all mentors who were matched with a mentee had positive experiences through the mentorship.

These included:

- learning about another culture
- developing new friendships (with mentees, other mentors, or both)
- experiencing joy in and reward from making a difference to the life of a refugee
- gaining a deeper understanding of the refugee experience.

“ We feel deeply connected to 2 beautiful young people who enrich our lives and family’s experiences. (Mentor, online survey)

“ It's a really positive experience. It's really nice to know that we as a group have helped a member of our community feel more a member of their and our community... And knowing that now she has all these resources at her hands you know, social resources, church groups, friends, people she can contact, knowing that we've been able to raise [money] that might help her get a car and more driving lessons, which will just open up their world and where they live, education, future employment... that it might just have been a bit more of a struggle... being able to help in those things has been really rewarding. And it's good to know that our community cares and wants to help other people. (Mentor, interview)

Almost every mentor (94% of those who participated in the evaluation) reported that they enjoyed being part of their mentor group and would recommend refugee mentoring to friends.

Two-thirds (66% of mentors surveyed) reported that their engagement in the mentorship program influenced others in their community to show more favourable or compassionate responses to refugees.

The evaluation found that most mentors experienced only minor challenges in mentoring and, overall, those challenges were outweighed by positive experiences. Where challenges were reported, they primarily focused on:

- finding enough time for mentoring activities, particularly where the mentor and/or their mentee was working full-time
- documenting mentoring activities as requested by CRSI in the digital logbook provided.

CRSI provided a range of supports through the GMP to help mentors in their work with mentees. Most mentors (75%) reported that they felt well-equipped by the GMP to undertake their role as a mentor. By the end of the program, almost all (91%) reported that their group was able to problem-solve to meet their mentees’ needs.

Five tools and processes were particularly valued, rated by mentors as ‘very useful’ or ‘very helpful’:

- receiving the mentee’s background information from CRSI before meeting them (60%)
- direct engagement with the CRSI team (57%)
- training prior to the mentorship (50%)
- Mentor Group Code of Conduct template (40%)
- developing a Mentorship Support Plan (37%)

Several stakeholders highlighted the importance of the Mentor Group Code of Conduct template in helping groups outline a clear, safe and ethical mentoring approach.

Just over half of mentors (57%) reported that the digital logbook to record mentoring activities was either unhelpful or they chose not to use it.

Feedback from mentors involved in the Integration Star process was mixed. Some mentors reported that it was very useful for understanding their mentee’s situation and support needs, while others reported that it was either more burdensome than beneficial, or they had no strong feelings either way about the process. The main criticisms about the Integration Star were that the interview took too long to complete, the mentee found it confusing and most of the mentor group did not engage with the process or results.

There was feedback from mentors whose groups were not matched with a mentee during the pilot GMP that the training they received and participating in the Peer-to-Peer Forums were nonetheless

useful. They reported that those supports helped the development of their group and helped prepare them for work they hope to do in the future.

Learnings about the GMP model

Model of volunteering

The GMP utilised a relatively unusual volunteering model that did not have a central organisation overseeing and bearing responsibility for the day-to-day activities of the volunteers (the mentors) involved. While CRSI connected mentees and mentors, and provided training and ongoing supports to mentors, it was mentors themselves who were responsible for shaping and driving the mentorship activities and for the governance of their group.

The evaluation found that the model helped empower mentor groups to be self-directed while effectively safeguarding mentees. There were no incidents of concern reported during the pilot GMP and mentees who participated in the evaluation all reported that their privacy was respected by their mentor group and that they felt safe throughout the program. Almost all mentors (91% of survey respondents) reported that their group was able to independently problem-solve to meet their mentees' needs.



“ They help to teach me how I can be if they are not with me in the future, how I can finish my problems myself. ”

Filling gaps in services for refugees

While it was not the intention of the program to become a permanent feature in the Australian settlement arena, the evaluation found that the GMP filled some gaps in the current settlement support landscape by facilitating assistance that was both qualitatively and practically different from what is formally available to refugees through current programs.

The GMP's model of volunteering affords mentors the flexibility to provide support as and when needed. They can assist outside of business hours and can provide holistic support, such that a mentor might help a refugee with English language practice, while taking them shopping and then picking the refugee's children up from school on the way home. This is in contrast to traditional volunteer assistance provided through large settlement agencies that is usually structured around and limited to a single task or outcome, delivered at a particular time and location.

The type of support provided by mentors was often akin to what a friend or neighbour may provide, such as sharing meals, giving advice on buying a car, or showing mentees around local facilities and attractions. Professional settlement services are not typically able to provide these types of organic and flexible supports and connections, which are important for refugees to gain local knowledge, develop relationships in their community, and feel a sense of belonging.

Settlement agency stakeholders described that the assistance provided by mentor groups supplemented the work of agencies and enhanced the overall support to refugees.

Matching mentors and mentees

The matching process involved weighing up how the different needs, capacities and lives of participants in the GMP might align. CRSI used information about mentors from their application and initial survey, and information about mentees from their initial survey.

The evaluation found that 4 key factors influenced the extent to which mentors and mentees were a good match:

1. Range of skills and experience across the mentor group, especially in the areas mentees most need support.
2. Mentor group members between them having enough time available and at times that suit mentees who may have busy work/study schedules.
3. Compatible age and stage of life of mentors and mentees, with mentor groups including younger members, or connections with young people, well suited to supporting younger mentees.
4. Mentors and mentees living near each other or having ready access to reliable transport between their areas.

Factors that support effective mentoring

The evaluation identified aspects of mentor groups that supported the group in bringing about positive benefits. A range of personal qualities of individual mentors and group approaches to mentoring were found to support effective mentoring.

The personal qualities valuable for individual mentors to possess were:

- able to support without fostering dependence
- able to understand and respond to the needs and goals of mentees without expectation or judgement

- accepting of differences
- aware of own strengths and weaknesses
- authentic
- calm
- compassionate
- flexible and adaptable
- passionate about supporting refugees
- patient
- open to different ways of doing things.

The following group approaches were identified as key to effective mentoring:

- collaborate and communicate regularly with any caseworkers supporting the mentee
- develop the Mentorship Support Plan with the mentee as the relationship develops, and mentors and mentees better understand one another
- tailor the Mentorship Support Plan to match the mentee's needs with the mentors' different capacities
- maintain good communication channels within the group
- work as a group and draw on the different strengths and offerings of each member.

The evaluation found the following factors supported the mentors in having a positive mentoring experience:

- mentors are realistic about the support they can offer, including mindful of individual time availability, skills and other commitments
- relaxed and flexible approach
- non-judgmental attitude
- supportive family and/or friends
- understand that support is intended to be short-term
- understand that while friendships may develop, that is not the main aim
- aware of incidental costs (such as eating out and transport) and have the ability to bear them
- mentor groups consist of members with mixed skills and a range of different time availability
- good communication within the group
- understand and respect for each other's skills and availability within the group.



“ It's a really positive experience [...] And it's good to know that our community cares and wants to help other people.”

Summary of recommendations

The evaluation offers the following recommendations. (See main report for full recommendations.)

- I. Diversify referral pathways for identifying refugee participants for future iterations of the program.
- II. Review and strengthen refugee recruitment and onboarding processes.
- III. Provide mentors with more information about the settlement landscape and guidance about how to collaborate with settlement agencies.
- IV. Require all mentor groups to adopt minimum behavioural standards in a code of conduct.
- V. Strengthen the matching process through collecting additional information about mentees and mentors.
- VI.
- VII. Review CRSA's supports for mentor groups and refine how they are offered and promoted.
- VIII. Extend the standard mentorship period from 6 months to 12 months.
- IX. Cease use of the digital logbook.
- X. Offer the Integration Star tool as optional.
- XI. CRSA to further develop its approach for increasing awareness and understanding of the GMP model among staff at settlement agencies.
- XII. CRSA to facilitate initial meetings between mentor groups and caseworkers at the commencement of mentorships.

Conclusion

Like so many organisations in 2020, CRSI suddenly found itself unable to implement its planned work and had to rapidly develop new ways of operating. The pilot GMP was thus created and, by way of it, CRSI was able to test elements of its proposed community refugee sponsorship program (for example, approaches to mobilising, screening, training and supporting volunteer groups) and gain insights that will strengthen the program at such time as it is possible to implement.

All stakeholders involved in the GMP benefitted: mentees experienced improvements to their quality of life; mentors had rewarding experiences; and, the support from settlement agencies to refugees was enhanced by the program. CRSA learned that there may be a need for, and value in, a mentorship program that is separate from a sponsorship program.

Overall, the pilot GMP proved to be a valuable endeavour that created meaningful changes in participants' lives. It also proved to expand and strengthen CRSA's future capacity in helping members of the Australian community effectively support refugees in Australia.



With thanks to E. Pritchard Consulting
and all our supporters.

For more information about Community
Refugee Sponsorship Australia,
please visit refugeesponsorship.org.au or email
info@refugeesponsorship.org.au

