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Introduction

The approach of Month 13 catalyzed a fresh wave of anxiety among refugees, sponsors, and grassroots groups committed to settlement efforts. In response, WelcomeHomeTO invited a panel of speakers on November 30th, 2016 to discuss the challenges faced by newcomers in the GTA with the approach of the final months of their sponsorship term. The panel conversation was held at the Centre for Social Innovation: Regent Park and explored concerns through the diverse perspectives of newcomers, private sponsors, volunteers, grassroots and volunteer-led initiatives.

The conversation focused on a key question: “What are the challenges facing Syrian refugees as we approach Month 13?”. The ultimate goal was to explore innovative solutions that can support the next chapter in the resettlement journey. Our guest speakers were asked to share and present real life experiences and examples that can inspire impactful and practical solutions to the existing situation.

This report summarizes the key topics, concerns and ideas discussed throughout the event, both during speaker presentations and in the subsequent Q&A session.
Acknowledgements

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This report was prepared through the collaborative efforts of Craig Carter-Edwards, Derakhshan Qurban-Ali, Anna Bianca Roach, Kitty Shephard and Rania Younes.

Media Coverage

Special thanks to Devin Heroux of CBC Toronto for covering this important community conversation.


ii. Syrian refugees face a new kind of uncertainty as federal allowance ends, by Laura Fraser, CBC News, 4 Dec 2016
Disclaimer

This report presents a summary of the views and experiences of the participants who reside and work within the Greater Toronto Area. WHTO sees community volunteers and grassroots groups as key players needing to be better understood and involved in the overall settlement process. The views, opinions, positions and/or recommendations proposed herein are those of the participants alone, and do not necessarily reflect the views, opinions or positions of all private sponsor groups, grassroots organizations or volunteers. WHTO makes no representations as to the accuracy, completeness, reliability, non-infringement or currency of any information in this report, and will not be liable for any errors or omissions in this information, or any losses, costs, injuries or damages arising from its display, use or publication.
WelcomeHomeTO (WHTO) is a group of professionals from various disciplines collaborating to support the best settlement experience for new Canadians, with an immediate focus on Syrian refugees.

Formed in late 2015, the WHTO team has spent the past year documenting the integration journeys of both Syrian newcomers and established Canadians engaged in the settlement process. We have conducted user research, facilitated conversations between government, agency and citizens, connected social enterprises with opportunities to support the settlement process and provided mentorship and insight to all parties taking part of this uniquely Canadian enterprise.
Lessons from Month 13: Next Steps in the Resettlement Sector

INFORM
Develop and share insights and personal stories of settlement from diverse perspectives.

CONNECT
Create collaborative spaces and opportunities where newcomers and Canadians engaged in settlement efforts can connect, communicate, and collectively work towards a more effective refugee settlement experience.

EMPOWER
Empower and support community-driven, refugee-focused initiatives.

INSPIRE
Inspire existing and potential settlement supporters to create or adapt innovative solutions to the integration process.

We believe that, for Canada’s settlement system to meet current and future demand, it must be dynamic. This requires a greater emphasis on coordinating the efforts of engaged Canadians, settlement service providers, sponsorship agencies and social enterprises for maximum impact.
Lessons from Month 13: Next Steps in the Resettlement Sector

TINA ASEFFA, active volunteer

“Service providers out to provide true value of service and not to mainly focus on getting funds instead, they should look on creating meaningful dialogues with refugees to identify their real needs and challenges.”

– Tina Aseffa

Tina is a dedicated volunteer working with various community groups and settlement service providers to support newcomers. She has committed a great deal of time outside of her assigned volunteer positions towards the support of Syrian newcomers, serving as a confident and counselor.
Lessons from Month 13: Next Steps in the Resettlement Sector

JENNIFER NAGEL, private sponsor

“Private Sponsors have a duty to share their experience with all Canadians”

– Jennifer Nagel

Jennifer is a Toronto-area university professor who, moved by the plight of Syrian refugees, decided to co-sponsor a family to move to Canada and help them settle in.
SAM JISRI, grassroots group founder

“Volunteers have to be better trained on refugee’s cultural background and customer service”

– Sam Jisri

Sam is a Canadian entrepreneur who owns and operates a graphic design education firm. Empathizing with the challenges Syrian refugees would face settling in Canada, he founded Syrian Active Volunteers to support them.
Over 40 people attended and contributed their views to this event. The audience included newcomers, frontline workers, volunteers, curious citizens as well as social enterprises interested in applying their skills and services to the resettlement efforts and/or directly to Syrian newcomers.

PARTNERS

This Month 13 panel was made possible by our partners, who generously donated their time to facilitate and document this event.

Facilitation  Photography  Space  Security
Lessons from Month 13: Next Steps in the Resettlement Sector

Executive Summary

- Language emerged as one of the most significant challenges for refugees as they approached Month 13. The ESL-learning system needs to be redesigned to better account for the diverse needs of newcomers.

- Employment is at the forefront of concerns for refugees as financial support dries up during Month 13. Vital need to create programs that educate and mentor professionals on alternative routes to employment that effectively utilize their transferable skills.

- Despite the wide array of support available, refugees report significant barriers in accessing information and services designed to assist them.

- Mental health and legal support access will be imperative as we move into month 13.
Lessons from Month 13: Next Steps in the Resettlement Sector

- Settlement service delivery is currently driven by quantitative metrics as opposed to qualitative delivery.

- There are noteworthy deficiencies in settlement capacity and a lack of trust between refugees and service providers.

- Citizen-led grassroots groups have succeeded in mobilizing immense amounts of resources in relatively short amounts of time.

- Effectively utilizing and magnifying the goodwill and resources of volunteers can ensure that resettlement efforts are agile and adapted to the emerging needs of refugees.

- Demand for a formal and regulated system to train volunteers working with refugees, and manage volunteer support and resources.

- Evident gap in educating refugees about realities in Canada and managing their expectations in terms of the Canadian labour market, wages, working hours, and workplace laws, etc.

- As Canada continues to welcome refugees and newcomers, we need a more comprehensive understanding of the backgrounds, skills and cultural experiences that new Canadians are arriving with.

- The creation of a central and effective communication system among refugees to provide information, communicate events, news, or other relevant things is much needed.

- The essential nature of collective impact and supporting refugees as a community, we are in fact strengthening the ever-evolving fabric of Canadian society.
Where can we do better?

Language training

“Language will always be the biggest barrier – the way to deal with it is to plan ahead.”

Language emerged as one of the most significant challenges for refugees as they approached Month 13. The quality of existing ESL programs has repeatedly been brought up as a major concern to their progress in language, and in so hindering their integration process. Here are the key reasons the current ESL classes are failing Syrian newcomers.
Limited capacity in beginner-level ESL classes.

Grassroots leaders and volunteers supporting newcomers highlighted the effects of the lack of availability of ESL classes. When there is not enough space for newcomers in classes at their own level, they are in fact being placed above it, in classes that are mismatched with their levels of literacy and English. As a result, they often feel they are not progressing as quickly as they should be in comparison to their classmates, not performing as well as they should be, and are often left discouraged and unmotivated by this experience.

Need for interactive and engaged learning structure

For those attending ESL classes, the existing structure requires long hours in class and offers a rigid academic approach, as opposed to activity-based training. At a time when language is keeping them from interacting with society and adapting to their new home, however, a more interactive, activity-based model would be less frustrating, more enjoyable, and more effective for newcomers.
All three panelists confirmed that the design of ESL programs has to take into consideration the diverse needs and experiences of the newcomers they enroll. The literacy levels of this specific refugee wave varies widely — while some have difficulty reading and writing even in Arabic (mother tongue language), others are highly educated and already have some training in English.

Additionally, an elderly refugee will not be able to study at the same pace and intensity as a young adult, despite comparable ESL levels. Refugees report feeling discouraged because they do not feel the material they are learning is of value in the real world. For some, combining language-learning with skills development (like baking bread) is more helpful, while others find immense benefit through interactions and dialogue with the public in every-day scenarios. Our panelists shared positive feedback from real-world learning experiences such as sports or city trips that incorporated organic interactions that produced meaningful and productive dialogues with Canadians.

“The classroom setting teaches newcomers English in a way they often do not feel is valuable in the real world.”

To that point, another source of frustration is the lack of agency that newcomers have in choosing language programs that work for them. Giving a greater freedom to ‘shop around’ for language classes in the program and with the teacher they prefer helps newcomers take ownership of their language-learning experience and makes it more personal and interactive. Volunteers mentioned the success of guiding refugees through an engaged class selection process as opposed to placing them with a teacher with little direct input.
Knowledge of English is imperative to every level of social and economic integration for a newcomer in the GTA. Thus, it is crucial that language classes serve the diverse needs of those enrolled. By tailoring classes to the needs of the students, giving options to newcomers on the kind of learning that best suits their language development, and giving them ownership of the experience, Canada can ensure that refugees have a strong foundation with which they can successfully integrate into Canadian society.

Providing employment pathways

“It is vital for refugees to become aware of career pathways available to them during their first year so that they do not become trapped in traditional survival jobs.”

Employment is at the forefront of concerns for refugees as financial support dries up during Month 13. The language barrier is directly tied to employment because of the difficulty in finding sustainable employment posed by a lack of fluency. For those who are not facing language challenges, the job market is
challenging because of the lack of clarity on the pathways and options available to access it.

Many newcomers have noted that understanding Canadian work culture and sector-specific knowledge would be very helpful. Our panelists discussed the need to create specific programs that educate and mentor professionals on alternative routes to employment that effectively utilize their transferable skills. For example, helping a former doctor understand the career pathways available to becoming a nurse or other form of registered health professional would help refugees work towards an employment they find fulfilling. It is vital for refugees to become aware of career pathways available to them during their first year so that they do not become trapped in traditional survival jobs.
**Access to information and support services**

This includes information and services relating to the Canadian health system, resources for dental care and mental health support and legal aid. Especially in the wake of Month 13 and the increased stress of losing financial support, which can trigger anxiety, depression, and exacerbate pre-existing mental health issues.

“Access to legal services and information on legal rights is crucial to integration because newcomers are vulnerable to exploitation, fraud and abuse by unethical employers.”

Refugees can be overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of information available on how to adapt past Month 13. Canadian systems are complex and often convoluted: for instance, one of our panelists had a sponsored family that wasn’t familiar with bank cards or phone plans. Thus, it is important that they have access to credible, consistent and reliable sources of information throughout their settlement process. One private sponsor noted that the inaccuracy of some information spread to newcomers can lead to exploitation – for instance, $0 iPhones offers, get rich quick schemes, and other scams that are endemic to the Canadian economy. Credible channels of information need to be provided, and increased access to resources that can assist their housing and employment search would greatly decrease stress during Month 13.
Lessons from Month 13: Next Steps in the Resettlement Sector

Service delivery driven my quality and not quantity

The speakers also indicated that despite committed efforts by settlement providers in the GTA to address refugee needs, there are noteworthy deficiencies in settlement capacity and a lack of trust between refugees and service providers. This is due in part to inconsistent information and ineffective referrals. The Month 13 panel discussion confirmed that many funded services for refugees and settlement service agencies are running on outdated models and procedures that need to be adapted to current realities on the ground. Common criticisms cite a faulty reporting system as a source of inefficiency, where delivery is driven by quantitative metrics as opposed to qualitative delivery. This evaluates agencies for the number of clients served but not for the quality of their help.

Despite the wide array of support available, refugees report significant barriers in accessing information and services designed to assist them.
Lessons from Month 13: Next Steps in the Resettlement Sector

The ineffective distribution of resources, lack of transparency and accountability mechanisms, and insufficient feedback loops in this sector, hampering efforts to create and support effective policies and programming. Service providers, currently driven mainly by quantitative results that guarantee renewed funding, need to reorient their focus on creating meaningful dialogues with refugees in order to identify their real needs and challenges. Both panelists and participants commented on the resources wasted due to lack of pre-arrival research and lack of qualitative case-by-case understanding of needs post-arrival.

As a result, refugees have been falling through the cracks of the system and volunteers are filling in the gaps. Grassroots groups have responded to this gap by mobilizing volunteers to serve this need, but how sustainable will that be without structure, communication and support.

In the Q&A segment, a few participants noted that the settlement agencies were already tight for resources prior to the large influx of refugees who arrived 2015-16, but increasing demand for their services did not always equate to a corresponding increase in funding.

With so many different initiatives emerging in response to the influx of refugees in Canada, it is vital to document which efforts prove effective or ineffective and why. The implementation of a feedback system that follows up with refugees being serviced by either government funded agencies or grassroots groups would create more accountability and transparency when it comes to the quality and effectiveness of programming.
Recognition and support for grassroots and volunteer-led initiatives

Driven by the lack of capacity in settlement services and quality service delivery, dozens of volunteer and grassroots initiatives stepped in to help support refugees. Some could not be sustained due to a lack of support and funding. Despite their limitations, many of these small, citizen-led grassroots groups have succeeded in mobilizing immense amounts of resources in relatively short amounts of time. As one of the panelists noted, while funded agencies failed to connect with their clients in order to provide timely and quality service, Syrian Active Volunteers (SAV Syria) for example was serving over 3000 refugees and had them connected across 30 WhatsApp groups, which proved to be the fastest method in delivering messages to refugees. As a result of their impact and success in effectively reaching out and handling the emerging needs of newcomers, they now have a MOU with a federal RAP agency to facilitate that vital connection role.

“Volunteers have to be better trained on refugee’s cultural background and customer service.”
Volunteer-led initiatives have played a huge part in the resettlement of the over 6000 refugees in the GTA. However, many volunteer and community-led initiatives burned out quickly due to the lack of support and recognition of what they could provide within the overall settlement system. Support offered to such efforts are not necessarily related to funding; support may be obtained through official collaborations, joint programming, or simply training and development, could have helped many of them stay afloat to provide extended coverage and capacity to the settlement sector.

It is particularly important to optimize the goodwill and resources of volunteers who address the gaps in services not offered by funded programs. By effectively utilizing and magnifying the goodwill and resources of volunteers, we can ensure that resettlement efforts are agile and adapted to the emerging needs of refugees, which is usually more difficult for larger organizations to respond to with swift. It would also be worthwhile to examine how existing social enterprise and start-up support can be adapted to help sustain settlement-specific grassroots groups. A formalized system is needed for government agencies to partner with grassroots groups in order to respond to emerging needs.

“Visits to the family is the responsibility of a settlement worker, to assist them with utilities, paperwork, banking, etc. Newcomers are supposed to have at least 1 visit per month, but some have told us they haven’t had a visit for 6 months.”
Managing expectations and effective communication

As Syrian refugees adapt to Canadian culture, a cultural mediator that has a concrete knowledge of both worlds is vital in order to ease and explain the transition while simultaneously facilitating expectation management. There’s a gap in educating refugees about realities in Canada; it's necessary to manage their expectations in terms of the Canadian labour market, wages, working hours, and workplace laws. Without this mediation, newcomers may accept poor treatment because they believe it to be the norm or, conversely, they may experience emotional distress when things do not progress as positively as they expected them to.

Not setting realistic expectations can lead to individuals being discouraged by the inability to understand what a “finish line” looks like, how to navigate towards it and the challenges that should be expected along the way. It is very beneficial to include the presence of settlement workers, volunteers, and interpreters who speak Arabic and understand the culture, because they can best communicate these ideas and processes.
Effective communication with newcomer families and within sponsor groups is fundamental to successful social integration. Private sponsor groups emphasized the importance of clearly communicating the scope and boundaries of the refugee-sponsor relationship from day one. Sponsors are recommended to clearly indicate what they will help with and what is out of their scope. When transitioning out of sponsorship, there is an increased risk of miscommunication and misunderstanding of the process, which is why our panelist highlighted the need for sponsors to stay involved during the transition in non-financial ways.

“Refugees face many barriers when deciphering what Month 13 means for them moving forward.”

Clear communication with refugees regarding the level of support available to them following Month 13 is important because it allows them to plan their year accordingly.

It is also important that the agency of a refugee is acknowledged and respected throughout the settlement process, in order to ensure that they feel empowered moving into Month 13 and are treated as autonomous and fully capable persons entering society. When they were welcomed to Canada, Syrian refugees were told: “Here you have rights, you are respected.” However, through their ongoing interactions within the settlement process, these newcomers have reported that their choices were not respected when they conflicted with what was considered best for them by sponsors, front line workers, or well-intentioned volunteers. Jennifer expanded, explaining that volunteers often did not respect newcomers' choices if they went against what we would have chosen for them.”
Lessons from Month 13: Next Steps in the Resettlement Sector

User-centered delivery of programs and services

As Canada continues to welcome refugees and newcomers, we need a more comprehensive understanding of the backgrounds, skills and cultural experiences that new Canadians are arriving with. This deeper understanding of diversity will help us better determine the best way to utilize this collective knowledge and experience to build a stronger Canadian society. With refugees in particular, a deep and nuanced understanding of their culture is critical when designing and delivering effective resettlement services.

Citizen-led grassroots groups have succeeded in mobilizing immense amounts of resources in relatively short amounts of time.

Nuanced cultural understanding leads to both social and economic benefits. One of the panelists noted how the ineffective and wasteful delivery of services at hotels that housed incoming refugees was caused by a lack of cultural awareness, where for example, “refugees were served seafood, even though seafood isn’t a familiar item in their traditional diet... by understanding the food and culture of
Syria, it would have made more sense to serve chicken and rice which is both cost effective to provide and more familiar for the refugees.” This two-way cultural exchange is important for the general Canadian public, because **when a receiving society does not understand the culture of a refugee’s country of origin, it leads to wasted resources, ineffective program design, and inefficient service delivery.** For this reason, complex issues like mental health and domestic violence must be understood through a cultural lens in order to effectively provide services that address the issues facing vulnerable populations who have undergone severe trauma prior to arrival.

Informed and targeted research that is focused on listening to the needs of refugees and those involved in their settlement is the foundation of designing and maintain effective programming. Researching the challenges experienced along the way for refugees and individuals in the resettlement service sector can help design solutions that incorporate a holistic understanding of how these groups interact and support one another. For this reason, **honest and open storytelling is a crucial component of sharing findings and communicating the lived experiences of refugees and the settlement experience.** This means creating accessible spaces where refugees can openly discuss challenges relating to sensitive topics without facing increased stigmatization as a result of disclosing these complex lived realities. If there is not a safe space to begin openly discussing these challenges, it will be difficult to provide services that effectively address them.
**Formal training for volunteers**

There is also demand for a formalized and regulated system to train volunteers working with refugees and manage volunteer support and resources. Despite the aforementioned capacity challenges, service providers have years of experience and valuable wisdom that has been developed as a result of their long history managing refugee settlement. *This knowledge is a resource that everyday citizens, grassroots groups, and sponsors often do not have access to, which results in significant resources being wasted in an attempt to understand the settlement process.*

When designing a regulated volunteer training program, cultural sensitivity and awareness *must* be a central theme for those who wish to work with refugees of any background. It is necessary to adapt volunteer training so that it emphasizes the importance of understanding a refugee’s cultural background and how it informs service delivery.

“Private Sponsors have a duty to share their experience with all Canadians.”
**Information-sharing for refugees and those who help them along the way**

Currently, refugees largely use WhatsApp to communicate information. The creation of an effective communication system among refugees to communicate information, events, news, or other relevant things is much needed.

- **Guides illustrating the operational flow of the settlement process**
  Resource-sharing platforms that contain settlement pathways would assist those involved in the refugee settlement efforts (sponsor groups and volunteers). An accessible, holistic and clear systems-level explanation of the current process and existing resources would optimize their use and prevent duplication of efforts.

- **A responsive FAQ resource for private sponsors**
  Private sponsors need a responsive and up-to-date resource to consult when they have questions, for instance regarding dental care options, welfare claims, tax filing and child benefits. Currently, Facebook groups are used to communicate between private sponsors, but there are limitations to this platform.

- **A peer-support network to share best practices**
  The best practices, history and stories of the settlement experience should be openly shared by sponsors, service providers, and organizations working with refugees. Canadian society would greatly benefit from understanding the challenges and opportunities that refugees and private sponsors worked through together. Using these lived experiences, future sponsorships can be done with more ease and support, allowing for greater impact and stronger communities.
Conclusions

Our panel discussion has brought to light a diverse array of complex and interconnected challenges facing Syrian refugees as Month 13 approaches. **By bringing together the varied and unique experiences of Syrian newcomers, sponsorship groups, grassroots and volunteer led initiatives, we have been able to paint a more comprehensive and connected landscape of challenges and opportunities that emerged during the refugee resettlement experience.** Our objective was to better understand these experiences and provide an open space where they could be shared, discussed and built upon in order to develop collaborative and innovative solutions.
Collective Impact

It is clear that by supporting each other, and by supporting refugees as a community, we are strengthening the ever-evolving fabric of Canadian society. By actively listening and responding to the challenges that emerge in our community, we can ensure that no refugee falls through the cracks of a system designed to support them.

The key take-out from the Month 13 discussion, it is that our settlement system must be collaborative and dynamic, combining the resources of engaged Canadians, the experience of sponsorship agencies, and the wisdom of settlement service providers.

The essential nature of collective impact to addressing the multifaceted needs of refugees during their settlement process is crucial. It is common to hear from interested citizens and the private sector that they wish to help but don’t know how or where to begin. Thus, there is a need for comprehensive systems-level maps or guides for volunteers, sponsors, businesses, and for anyone else interested in engaging in the settlement process.
A responsive system will ensure that newcomers are set up for success, and that their communities can embrace them as neighbors. WelcomeHomeTO believes that an integrated system will have the ability to scale up and down, adjust to newcomers’ specific needs and adapt to different and simultaneous displacement crises as they emerge. Moreover, when government and engaged communities work together to set up newcomers for success, we reinforce our values of inclusion and opportunity for all.

We hope that our panel discussion helped connect dedicated parties and that the discussions inspired impactful and practical solutions. We are looking forward to building on these ideas as new challenges emerge and would like to extend a warm invitation to everyone involved to continue this conversation with us as we move forward together.
Terms and Acronyms

**Collective Impact** - Collective Impact is a framework to tackle deeply entrenched and complex social problems. It is an innovative and structured approach to making collaboration work across government, business, philanthropy, non-profit organizations and citizens to achieve significant and lasting social change.

**Newcomer Vs. Refugee** - a newcomer is an immigrant new to Canada. While refugees are immigrants, the term “refugee” emphasizes the conditions these individuals are fleeing. A refugee is an individual who has left his or her native country and is unwilling or unable to return to it because of persecution or fear of persecution (as because of race, religion, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion).

**Echo Effect** - the psychological impact of refugees trying to settle into a new life while worrying about the safety of family/friends still at risk. Can also refer to the challenge refugee newcomers face in bringing their family members at risk to Canada, as Canadian policy states newcomers can only do this when they have a demonstrated ability to support their family members here.

**ESL** - English as a Second Language, often used in the context of English as Second Language training programs.
**Grassroots Groups** – groups formed by private citizens to support the settlement of Syrian refugees. These groups have no external mandate or requirements and are reliant on their own networks/social media to build capacity, promote their services, etc.

**GSR** – a Government-Sponsored Refugee

**Month 13** – the end of the period of financial commitment which either the federal government (GSR), private sponsors (PSR) or Blended Visa Office-Referred Program (BVOR).

**NIMBY/NIMBYism** – Not In My Back Yard. A general rejection from communities to outside things being brought in, especially those which can be seen as threatening their existing quality of life – wind turbines, socially-assisted housing, refugees.

**Private Sponsors** – groups of private citizens (groups of five) or non-governmental organizations (community sponsors) that make the decision to support the settlement of refugees.

**PSR** – Privately Sponsored Refugees.

**RAP** – The Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) is a contribution program that operates within program terms and conditions and a program budget approved by the Treasury Board of Canada. The program has two main components: income support and a range of immediate essential services.
**Settlement** – the process through which new Canadians acclimatize to their new life in Canada, and their new community acclimates to them.

**Settlement Sector (Official)** – government-funded agencies with a mandate to provide specialized services and programming to immigrants and refugees.

**Settlement Sector (Informal)** – individuals, groups and organizations that commit themselves to supporting the settlement of immigrants and refugees that are not funded by government and have no official mandate.

**Settlement Services** – specialized services offered to support the successful integration of newcomers in Canada. These can be funded or unfunded, offered to broad categories of newcomers or specific demographics.

**Social Enterprise** – a group or organization that applies business methodology towards achieving a social good.

**Sponsorship Agreement Holders (SAHs)** – organizations that have been approved for a committed to an agreement with IRCC Immigration, Refugees and citizenship Canada to sponsor refugees.

**Volunteers (Settlement)** – individuals who dedicate time and skills to support settlement agencies without any promise of financial or other return for their work.