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These Ukrainians Arrived Under a Biden Program. They Ended Up Homeless.

More than 280,000 Ukrainians have escaped the war through a program meant to resettle them into the homes of Americans. But not everyone has found a safe or welcoming place to stay.

By Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura

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For weeks, Stanislav Holotiuk had been searching for someone to help him flee the war in Ukraine and sponsor his resettlement in the United States.

He trawled through message boards on sites like Facebook late at night, when it was daytime in America. A few people in New York City and Chicago promised to help, then disappeared. Others asked him for money. Exasperated, he impersonated his girlfriend to see if that would change his luck.

After reaching out to more than 50 Americans, he finally received a message: "Sure, I'll help. Just send me your details."

Mr. Holotiuk, 27, was not sure of the sender's real name. The Facebook profile picture for the account showed an avatar. But finding a willing Samaritan sponsor was a prerequisite for a newly minted U.S. government program aimed at resettling thousands of Ukrainian refugees.

The program, led by the Department of Homeland Security, promised to vet both parties, so Mr. Holotiuk put his future into the hands of a stranger. In less than three days, he received his immigration papers.

But when he landed at Kennedy International Airport shortly afterward with his girlfriend, Maria Muzun, 22, last September, no one was there to greet them.

Stuck, with just $100 between the two of them, Mr. Holotiuk and Ms. Muzun spent their first night in America sleeping rough under a Coney Island pier. One night turned into weeks, so they pooled their dollars and bought a tent at a Walmart near J.F.K.

Mr. Holotiuk's case illuminates the ad hoc nature of the sponsorship program, Uniting for Ukraine, which was created two months after the Russian invasion last year and which the Biden administration has said was a radical shift in policy to help thousands of desperate people fleeing the war.

The program departs from the traditional, more time-consuming resettlement process, in which nongovernmental agencies help to house refugees and assign them caseworkers. After a vetting process that requires volunteer sponsors to sign a financial declaration and provide an income statement, Uniting for Ukraine hands the care of the refugees over to private individuals with no additional oversight. The Biden administration has also opened the process to Venezuelans, Haitians, Nicaraguans and Cubans.

The Ukrainians coming now are fleeing the worst ground war in Europe since World War II. More than 7,000 civilians have died, and supporters say the Uniting for Ukraine sponsorship program may have saved the lives of thousands.

"We are looking at this as a policy change that has allowed a significant number of people in need to very quickly and at scale leave a very dangerous situation," said Anya McMurray, president of Welcome.US, a platform that was built after the fall of Kabul in 2021 to match Afghan refugees with American sponsors. The initiative, whose honorary chairs include former presidents and first ladies, expanded to Ukrainians last year.

"I can't think of another time in our history when that has happened at that scale," Ms. McMurray added. "The question was, do we as a country ignore that tremendous need or do we find a creative alternative?"

For many of the Ukrainians coming through the program, the sponsorships are going well, supporters of the program say. Some have settled in with family, and others have been embraced by Americans eager to help in the war effort. Homeland Security has also issued warnings to Ukrainian refugees about the dangers of human trafficking, and the vetting process has been tightened in recent months.

Still, situations like Mr. Holotiuk's are "widespread," according to Kelly Agnew-Barajas, the director of refugee resettlement at Catholic Charities.

She said it was a common pattern for people to sign up as sponsors "who kind of were naïve, thinking, 'I'm doing a good deed,' but then really not following it up with anything."

Refugee resettlement agencies say that many refugees have arrived at their doors after sponsors bailed, despite volunteers signing a form declaring a two-year commitment to the person they're resettling. Agency staff also cited more extreme cases, like a Ukrainian woman who was asked by her sponsor to become a surrogate mother and another who had her passport confiscated and was pressured to become a second wife. New York City officials say some Ukrainians have ended up in homeless shelters.

About 282,000 Ukrainians have been either authorized to travel to or have already arrived in the United States as of March 21 under Uniting for Ukraine, which launched last April, according to the most recent statistics from Homeland Security. The refugees are granted a temporary legal status known as humanitarian parole, which allows them to work legally. (An additional 167,000 Ukrainians have been processed to arrive in the United States outside of Uniting for Ukraine.)

The American sponsorship program is modeled on one in Canada, although it differs because sponsors under the Canadian program must be organizations, community groups or groups of at least five individuals. This way the costs of resettling new arrivals are spread out and there is a smaller risk of a refugee being stranded.

A sponsor program in Britain has also run into some problems, including over a thorny application process and long waits for visas.

By far, New York has welcomed the most refugees coming to the United States. Many go to Brighton Beach, home to a sizable Ukrainian diaspora.

In addition to having the financial means, sponsors under Uniting for Ukraine must promise to house refugees and help them with health care and enrolling children in school. But the financial threshold is just above the poverty line, Ms. Agnew-Barajas said.

"It's a pretty low bar," she said.

Angelo Fernandez, a spokesman for Homeland Security, explained the vetting process as "a series of fraud and security-based screening measures" aimed at "protecting the refugees against exploitation and abuse to ensure that they are able to financially support the beneficiary."

"D.H.S. remains committed to supporting Ukrainians in the United States, and we continue to explore opportunities to provide avenues for humanitarian relief and protection for Ukrainians fleeing Russia's unprovoked war," Mr. Fernandez said.

He said he could not comment on specific cases.

Even when refugees connect with sponsors, problems can ensue. Elena Afanasieva, 38, arrived in a small town in Pennsylvania in late June last year with her two daughters, who are 13 and 16. Ms. Afanasieva is originally from Kyiv, where she worked in a beauty salon. She found a sponsor, a 56-year-old woman who promised to help Ms. Afanasieva until she was self-sufficient, through a Facebook group.

Not long after she and her daughters arrived, things started to go awry.

Local groups raised money to help support the refugee family, but Ms. Afanasieva said that the sponsor wouldn't let her use it to pay for her daughter's school supplies, telling her she was selfish for asking for the money.

Eventually, Ms. Afanasieva said she was asked to leave. (The sponsor did not respond to requests for an interview.)

In desperation, Ms. Afanasieva moved to New York City, where she knew a friend from high school. She and her daughters contacted Catholic Charities for help and now live in a homeless shelter — a small hotel room in Manhattan — where they share a queen size bed.

"I feel excited to be here but also was disappointed by what humanity had to offer," she said through a translator.

Many refugees are settling in just fine, though sometimes the arrangements can be uncomfortable. Zoya Tatarinova, 63, was sponsored by a distant third cousin living in New Jersey. But she ended up staying in the living room of a friend in New York City. What was supposed to be a short sojourn turned into months.

Zoya Tatarinova, a music teacher in Ukraine, has been staying in the living room of a friend she met in New York City after she fled the war. Misha Friedman for The New York Times

"I felt guilty that weeks turned longer," she said.

The traditional process for sponsoring refugees is led by humanitarian organizations, like HIAS, a Jewish nonprofit, which said it has a tighter vetting process and recommends that a group of people serve together as sponsors so that the financial burden is spread out. The organization also discourages beneficiaries from living with their sponsors in order to avoid relationship breakdowns.

But the tighter the vetting, the smaller the pool of sponsors. The number of sponsors for Ukrainian refugees approved by HIAS is in the low thousands, compared with hundreds of thousands for Uniting for Ukraine.

Supporters of Uniting for Ukraine say that overall, the program has been successful.

Ms. McMurray, of Welcome.US, said that the nation's refugee system would otherwise not have had enough capacity to take in the staggering number of Ukrainians in need.

"More of them are coming every month because it is working," she said of the program, "because the stories that they are sending back to Ukraine is that this is a path worth taking. You can find safety here. The American people are welcoming you."

Mr. Holotiuk, who ended up homeless in Coney Island, is not ungrateful to his sponsor, even though he did not uphold his end of the bargain. (The sponsor could not be reached for comment.)

Ukraine has drafted most of its men to serve in the war, but Mr. Holotiuk, a computer scientist from Mykolaiv, a city that came under Russian attack early on, had medical issues and was allowed to leave.

He has been astounded by the generosity of Americans he has met. "Here, you can at least let your guard down. There are no sirens nor bombs. You can breathe," he said recently, as he walked down the Coney Island Boardwalk.

"I've made friends with them," he added, gesturing toward a gathering of homeless people who live under the pier.

Mr. Holotiuk is not ungrateful to the stranger who sponsored him so that he could come to the United States, even though he ended up homeless. Misha Friedman for The New York Times

Recently, Mr. Holotiuk and Ms. Muzun moved in with a fellow Ukrainian they met at a public library.

Not all of the sponsorship breakdowns involve strangers, refugee agencies said.

Mariia Semashkina, 30, a Ukrainian who came to the United States a decade ago and settled in White Plains, N.Y., offered to sponsor a family member when the war broke out. Her brother suggested she take in his ex-girlfriend, Alona Davydenko, 24.

The tension was palpable on a recent afternoon as the pair sat in a cafe.

"Thank God we have separate bathrooms," said Ms. Semashkina. "We hardly ever see each other because we're always working."

Last year, Ms. Semashkina bought Ms. Davydenko airplane tickets — even accompanying her because she was nervous about flying — and found her a job in a restaurant, so she could help with rent.

Mariia Semashkina, left, sponsored her brother's ex-girlfriend, Alona Davydenko, right, after the war broke out in Ukraine. The arrangement has not been ideal. Misha Friedman for The New York Times

"I wanted her to land and go to work right away. But she wanted to take a few days off first, and I was upset," Ms. Semashkina said. "I have money invested in her, OK? Give me my money back and then you can take your days off."

She laughed and gave a side-look at Ms. Davydenko, who giggled uncomfortably. Ms. Davydenko, a pharmacist who is originally from eastern Ukraine, has been teaching herself English and is eager to strike out on her own.

"I'm also not, like, a super easy person to deal with," Ms. Semashkina added. "She didn't know me, and she literally just packed her life in a backpack."

Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura was previously based in London, where she covered an eclectic beat ranging from politics to social issues spanning Europe, the Middle East and Africa. Born and raised in Paris, she speaks Japanese, French, Spanish and Portuguese. More about Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura

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