



29th January 2015

Humanitarian Programme Submission
Assistant Secretary, Humanitarian Branch
Department of Immigration and Border Protection
PO Box 25
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SCOA Submission to Australia's 2015-16 Humanitarian Programme

The Settlement Council of Australia (SCOA) is pleased to provide this submission to the Department of Immigration and Border Protection on the size and composition of the Humanitarian Programme in 2015-16. SCOA represents over 80 agencies in the settlement sector, which comprise the majority of agencies involved in funded settlement programs including Settlement Grants Program (SGP), Humanitarian Settlement Services (HSS), Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) and Complex Case Support (CCS). SCOA members are involved in providing settlement support to recently arrived migrants and people of refugee background across Australia. SCOA's consultation with members and our research into the area have informed the preparation of this submission.

SCOA's submission will focus on the following points:

- Size and composition of the Humanitarian Programme
- Support for regional resettlement
- Family reunion priorities within the Humanitarian Programme
- Community Sponsorship Programme
- Inter-government settlement communication and planning
- Tenor of public discourse on refugees and asylum seekers

Size and composition of the Humanitarian Programme

SCOA welcomes the planned increases in the Humanitarian Programme between now and 2019, and the greater opportunities to provide protection this increase in places represents. The settlement sector has demonstrated historical capacity in settling increased and diverse cohorts of refugees, and can provide settlement services for an expanded program. Further comments on capacity opportunities are illustrated below and under regional resettlement. The increase in the Humanitarian Programme provides greater opportunity to positively contribute to alleviating pressures of refugee populations internationally. As importantly, an increased refugee program increases economic development and opportunities for local and regional communities. Past evidence confirms that migrants of refugee background take up jobs and in locations that do not attract many other Australians

The additional scope for family reunion that the current re-focussing of the humanitarian program provides is also welcomed by SCOA. Family reunion remains a key criteria for successful settlement

and sustainability with significant long term personal, social and community benefits realised through family reunion. Family reunion is critical for migrants and refugees living in regional areas where settlement sustainability is a key issue.

SCOA supports the ongoing special focus on the crisis caseload from Syria. Syria remains an area of significant concern internationally, and as a consequence it is important that Australia continues to provide support. The Humanitarian Programme provides an excellent avenue for focussing on protracted refugee caseloads and priority situations through the guidance and referrals from UNHCR.

SCOA welcomes the ongoing commitment to Women at Risk. The Women at Risk visa category remains an important tool for providing protection to vulnerable women and their families. SCOA members have commented on the specific needs of Women at Risk visa holders. Additional settlement support is recommended for this cohort.

Support for regional resettlement

SCOA is conscious of the great opportunities represented in regional refugee resettlement, and of the need to ensure agencies and regional communities retain the capacity to provide excellent regional resettlement support. The introduction of the Safe Haven Enterprise Visa (SHEV) and the re-introduction of the Temporary Protection Visa (TPV) will both have an impact on the locations of refugee and asylum seeker communities – steering them to regional locations. There are many positive benefits of regional resettlement, which can be seen in the existing regional refugee resettlement locations. SCOA recommends greater research and strengthening of regional resettlement locations in the forthcoming and future Humanitarian Programmes, and suggests that regional areas are areas that can be explored for targeted increases in the Humanitarian Program. Regional resettlement brings strong positive outcomes for refugees, their families and the broader community.

For the SHEV and TPV visa holders specifically it remains important that they have access to support, particularly in settlement and participation in the local communities, provision of orientation and information to navigate their social and physical environment and for securing employment. Although refugees can be highly motivated to find employment it can be difficult navigating an unfamiliar local environment and employment market.

Family reunion priorities within the Humanitarian Programme

Family reunion remains a priority for all refugees and asylum seekers. The damaging psychological impacts of preventing or significantly delaying family reunion are well documented. As well, are documented the economic advantage of family reunion with regard to social support and care support (family members looking after children for other family members). Research has shown the mental health and well-being and economic advantages of family reunion for individual families, for their community and for Australia. As such SCOA calls for a humanitarian response in relation to family reunion and a relaxing of the conditions. Family reunion needs to be a priority for unaccompanied minors and for sole male and female residents. However it is also important for people on TPV or SHEV visas.

Community Sponsorship Programme

SCOA has watched with interest the quick uptake of the Community Sponsorship Programme. Given the pressure on the Humanitarian Programme and the backlog of applications within the Special Humanitarian Programme SCOA suggests increasing the Community Sponsorship Program numbers and expanding this pilot into an ongoing program. Currently the allocation of places come from within the Humanitarian Programme, however it would be worth exploring the impact of providing the Community Sponsorship Programme allocation as an addition instead. There has been strong community applications for the programme and it could be a useful way to increase Australia's refugee protection response at limited expense to the Commonwealth.

Inter-government settlement communication and planning

Maintaining strong inter and intra governmental communication on settlement trends and programs remains vitally important. SCOA notes with interest the establishment of the SOSOG group and notes the importance of this group and the National Settlement Framework in ensuring that strong effective communication lines are maintained within the full range of government departments involved in supporting migrant and refugee settlement.

Tenor of public discourse on refugees and asylum seekers

SCOA remains concerned about the tenor of public discourse on refugee and asylum seeker issues. Refugees and asylum seekers are being denigrated in the public media, being scapegoated for seeking protection. Fostering tolerance, support for multiculturalism and social cohesion remain important to the settlement sector as it impacts on settlement outcomes which further impact on economic development and social capital. Building links and engagement between new settlers and community as a whole, especially in small regional communities, is paramount to effective and sustainable outcomes.

Conclusion

SCOA appreciates the opportunity to provide comment on the Humanitarian Programme for 2015-16. The Humanitarian Programme is a cornerstone of Australia's response to international refugee issues, and we can be proud of Australia's well renowned settlement programme which supports refugees build new lives and supports Australia's social and economic development. SCOA is keen to work with your department and other commonwealth departments to support and assist the Government's reception and settlement agenda.



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Chairperson