



SCOA Submission: response to discussion paper Offshore Refugee and Humanitarian Visa framework

The Settlement Council of Australia (SCOA) is pleased to provide this submission to the Department of Immigration and Border Protection on the refugee and humanitarian visa framework. 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:

- Supporting, simplifying and realignment, particularly efforts to streamline visa processing
- Importance of the principle of protection and alignment with international protection frameworks for the Humanitarian Programme
- Ongoing and urgent need to provide greater scope for family reunion within and beyond the Humanitarian Programme
- Importance of the Humanitarian Programme in responding to international situations of concern, and the flexibility needed to do so
- Improving community involvement and connection with the Humanitarian Programme
- Women at Risk visa holders and their special needs

Supporting simplifying and realignment, particularly efforts to streamline visa processing

SCOA supports reviewing the refugee visa framework, particularly in terms of streamlining and shortening visa processing and application timeframes. The backlog being experienced by applicants of 202 proposer supported visas have caused considerable distress within the community, so measures to reduce the backlog and prevent further delays are welcomed. Additionally it is hoped and expected that improved transparency in relation to the processing system and the reasons for approval and rejection can be incorporated into the new framework.

Importance of the principle of protection and alignment with international protection frameworks for the Humanitarian Programme

While reviewing the visa framework of the Humanitarian Programme it is vital that the principles which underpin the program remain at the forefront of thinking and program design. The protection of the most vulnerable should remain the key in any review. When the protection needs of the most vulnerable are held central the Humanitarian Programme will naturally align with the principles of the Refugee Convention and its protections, definitions and provisions, and international protection mechanisms and agencies such as UNHCR. The humanitarian visa framework needs to continue to provide spaces for refugees who have no current ties to Australia.

Ongoing and urgent need to provide greater scope for family reunion within and beyond the Humanitarian Programme

Family reunion for refugee and humanitarian entrants remains a priority, and an important facilitator for successful settlement. Family reunion needs are particularly acute for unaccompanied minor asylum seekers, who have been separated from their families as part of the flight from danger. The current application levels within the proposer supported 202 visa category made by family members resident in Australia indicate that this area needs to be reviewed, with a view to opening up options within other programs to promote and facilitate family reunion.

Importance of the Humanitarian Programme in responding to international situations of concern, and the flexibility needed to do so

The Humanitarian Programme is a key part of Australia's response to international situations of concern and as such the program needs to remain responsive and flexible to change. The allocation of a 'contingency quota' for rapid deployment in emergency situations which is in addition to the core program is recommended. A contingency quota would enable quick response where needed, while ensuring the ongoing important work within the Humanitarian Programme can continue.

Improving community involvement and connection with the Humanitarian Programme

SCOA sees many opportunities to increase and improve community involvement with the Humanitarian Programme, from sponsorship to settlement. The rapid uptake of the Community Proposal Pilot (CPP) has demonstrated that there is willingness to support refugee resettlement in the Australian community. The costs within the CPP remain a significant barrier to many, leading SCOA to recommend consideration of an assurance of support model rather than the high upfront fees which are currently charged within the CPP. Our understanding of current trends within the CPP indicates that it is primarily being utilized within specific communities, it would be useful to consider promoting the program in regional areas. Regional support for refugee resettlement has a long and strong history in areas of Australia, and would be worth exploring in greater depth to strengthen the capacity of the Humanitarian Programme.

Women at Risk visa holders and their special needs

It is important that Australia's provision of support for women who are particularly vulnerable through the Women at Risk program remains a priority. Provision of targeted settlement services would assist this group recover from the trauma often experienced by women in refugee situations. It is also important that the program remain flexible around the possibility of partner reunion. The vagaries of the refugee experience can result in families being split and losing contact. It is currently very difficult for women under the Women at Risk visa to reunite with their husbands in the happy situation that the family has been able to restore contact and links.

Conclusion

SCOA appreciates the opportunity to provide comment on the review of humanitarian visas. The humanitarian visa framework remains pivotal in Australia's response to international refugee issues, and we can be proud of the programme and the settlement services which support refugees build new lives in Australia.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dewani Bakkum', written over a horizontal line.

Dewani Bakkum

Chairperson