

Settlement Council of Australia

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31st January, 2013

Jim Callahan
Assistant Secretary
Humanitarian Branch
DIAC
PO Box 25
Belconnen ACT 2616

Dear Mr Callaghan,

Re: Settlement Council Submission on the 2013-14 Humanitarian Program

The Settlement Council of Australia (SCOA) is pleased to provide this submission into the 2013-14 Humanitarian Program. SCOA represents the broad network of nearly 80 settlement agencies around Australia. As advocates and service providers, the sector has a unique knowledge of the realities of the settlement experience, over time, across the country, and among hundreds of different ethno-cultural communities.

SCOA's submission is informed by discussions and consultations with our members, which raised a number of issues, in particular the impact of the Expert Panel report and its recommendations on the settlement of migrants and refugees in Australia. SCOA and the sector welcomes the increase in the humanitarian program to 20,000, and is well placed to provide support to the additional arrivals. This has been a longer term policy objective for the sector as the benefits for the individuals and families affected and the broader Australian community are clear. This increase will help a significant number of additional people find safety and security in Australia, and we in turn gain from the immeasurable skills, life experiences and qualifications that they bring with them at little cost to Australian taxpayers. The settlement sector remains keenly interested in the implementation of the full range of recommendations from the Expert Panel report and in a timely manner.

Key issues covered in this submission are:

- Impacts of the Expert Panel and recommendations on the settlement sector
- Increased complexity of visa categories and eligibility, and the need for greater communication
- The priority for family reunion

- Pilot private sponsorship program
- Ongoing issues raised previously

Impacts of the Expert Panel and recommendations on the settlement sector

The Expert Panel report and its recommendations had and continue to have a significant impact on the settlement sector. SCOA issued a media release at the time of the report's release, commenting on the mixed nature of the recommendations – some seen to be positive and some negative from the perspective of the settlement sector. Time has borne out this analysis with the implementation of selected recommendations, with ongoing concern around regional processing, the discussion and application of the 'no advantage' principle and the high cost of the pilot private sponsorship visas (more detail on this point below). The increase in the humanitarian program has been universally welcomed by our members. The impact of this increase is still to be felt, and will need to be accompanied by an associated increase in funding for settlement services. HSS is a needs based program, and is funded as such – this principle is an important one to maintain in any program shifts or changes due to changes in the humanitarian program.

SCOA particularly calls for the review of the linkage between the on-shore and off-shore components of the humanitarian program. The ongoing program linkage is causing significant impacts in refugee communities across Australia, being felt more strongly as numbers of places in the SHP are under continued pressure.

Increased complexity of visa categories and eligibility, and the need for greater communication

The increased complexity of visas and changing support arrangements for refugees and asylum seekers is causing concern in the community, particularly in terms of fostering community support for refugees and resettlement in an increasingly toxic public debate. SCOA is troubled that community perception of refugees and asylum seekers is being negatively impacted by the high level of debate and confusion in the community. Inequity of settlement for different groups of refugees is also a concern, and is impacting on the successful settlement of some groups.

Some of our member organisations are reporting that this is causing tensions between different community groups where one group considers itself genuine refugees whereas the others are not. It also causes greater confusion for the generalist human service delivery sector, welfare groups and community leaders and their constituencies when services and programs offered are not universal but based on one's visa.

This causes further tensions between community organisations and settlement agencies as the community sees variances in assistance and assumes that settlement agencies are not consistent or balanced in their assistance to refugees and asylum seekers. In the shorter term a comprehensive communications strategy is required to inform the community of the complexities of visa categories and eligibility and in the longer term a move towards standardised programs and services.

Priority for family reunion

SCOA has noted the major shifts in the most recent program years, and is particularly hearing from clients and agencies of the continued need for family reunion to be a prime focus of the humanitarian program. Family reunion is a well acknowledged pre-cursor to successful settlement and as such remains a priority. SCOA is also naturally aware of the need for follow through increases to SGP funding, given the increase to the humanitarian program. SGP services are a key safety net for recent arrivals and as such sufficient funding is essential. Further, long term contracts should be offered that allows for sophisticated approaches to settlement programs and services and the development of a robust and professional workforce.

Pilot private sponsorship program

SCOA notes with continued interest the emerging details of the Pilot Private Sponsorship program, having completed a submission solely on this proposed program in July last year. SCOA considers the proposed application fees are very high, and will make the program out of the reach of many community groups and members. With the increasing pressure on the Humanitarian Program there has been a great deal of interest in the forthcoming project. The settlement sector is conscious of the desire of many community members and groups to participate, and wants to support this increased community involvement in settlement, while ensuring that safety nets, such as the HSS remain in place should communities run into difficulties in supporting those sponsored. The sector keen to support models that allows for an expanded humanitarian program. However, this requires suitable risk assessments and quality assurance measures to ensure that the community is not overburdened and that those sponsored not disadvantaged.

As mentioned in our earlier submission it is important that all groups involved in the pilot program are clear about their responsibilities. There is a great deal of detail to be worked out through the pilot program, with clear communication essential between all groups.

Ongoing issues raised previously

In examining the issues being raised about the Humanitarian Program for 2013-14, it is clear that while progress is happening in certain areas, and while some issues are unique to this year's program and current events, many issues remain of concern to the settlement sector. In particular the issues listed here require ongoing attention:

- The impact of the ex-detention caseload on settlement agencies
- The impact of the ex-detention caseload on the Special Humanitarian Program (SHP)
- The need for migration advice for humanitarian program entrants
- Concerns about the perceived lack of transparency in visa application processes, particularly in relation to the Special Humanitarian Program (SHP)

The settlement sector and SCOA appreciate the efforts of Department staff in working with the sector to ensure Australia remains at the forefront of settlement support in the world.

Please feel free to contact me should you require clarification or further information on any of the points raised.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sky de Jersey', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Sky de Jersey
Executive Officer

CC: Minister Kate Lundy, Minister for Multicultural Affairs

CC: Karina Sommers, Director, CSM Research, Evaluation and Planning, Settlement Branch