



27th July 2012

Pilot of private/community refugee sponsorship submission
Assistant Secretary
Humanitarian Branch
Department of Immigration and Citizenship
PO Box 25
BELCONNEN ACT 2616

Dear Mr O'Callaghan

The Settlement Council of Australia (SCOA) is pleased to provide this submission to DIAC on the Proposed Pilot of a Private/Community Sponsorship Program. SCOA represents the broad network of over 70 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 member consultation and input from experts in the field has informed this submission. The proposal of a private sponsorship program has a range of benefits, and also raises a range of issues requiring careful consideration. The positive benefits of a pilot program are many, particularly in terms of family reunion and the beneficial impact family reunion has on settlement. In looking at private sponsorship of humanitarian entrants there are, however, a wide range of issues which need to be taken into consideration in terms of the model of the program and appropriate safety nets. There are a host of lessons which can be learnt from past experience in the development of any proposed pilot. The settlement sector has a strong history in terms of volunteer engagement, innovative program design, connection to refugee communities and the broader community, which can be of use in this regard.

The proposed pilot program meets a clear need for refugee communities to reunite with their families, both in terms of direct family members and their extended family. The settlement sector and many others have been calling for many years for an increase in the humanitarian program, so moves to increase numbers are welcome. There is a great deal of community support and goodwill which can be tapped into, which will be of natural benefit to refugee communities and new arrivals under this proposed pilot. The challenge comes in maintaining the integrity of Australia's world class settlement services for entrants in this proposed pilot program, and not creating an inferior class of settlement visa. There are examples internationally and locally which can be drawn on to support the development of a pilot and provide adequate safety nets. In looking at the levels of support proposed within the pilot the long term benefits of early settlement services must be kept in mind. There are countless examples of the need to, and long term benefit resulting from, investing in people's health, orientation, language and employment support in the early phases of settlement, which translate into stable productive settlement outcomes in the longer term.



Australia has historically seen strong community support for refugees, with involvement by community members and volunteers in programs such as Community Support for Refugees (CSR) and the Community Refugee Settlement Scheme (CRSS). In rural areas across the country Rural Australian's for Refugees (RAR) groups at different periods have formed, along with Sanctuary groups in particular locations. The presence of this variety of groups over time and location shows that there is support in the community for refugees. Facilitating this support to take practical form will be the challenge of this pilot.

One of the other key challenges for the pilot will be ensuring that the program does not create a second 'class' of refugees, due to the reduced level of settlement support to be provided under the pilot. There is already a fairly high degree of variability and complexity in refugee and asylum visas and conditions which can be a source of tension within and between communities. This has been a concern for settlement agencies who have direct experience in helping clients who have had complex settlement journeys.

Response to key questions:

1. Who should be able to sponsor refugees?

Family members seeking family reunion were identified as a key sponsor group. Volunteer and community groups could also sponsor entrants. It is considered important that any person or group sponsoring be able to demonstrate their capacity to provide support to entrants. In this regard a system for screening and monitoring groups providing support was recommended. The local settlement agencies may be able to provide assistance, with consideration given to transparency and conflict of interest issues.

Linking volunteer groups to refugee communities and vice versa may be helpful in providing additional resources for settlement support. However volunteer education and support, and provision of a clear safety net for entrants is crucial.

One other group that may be worth exploring as potential sponsors is regional groups in areas with identified employment needs. The relationship between employers, community groups and entrants would need to be closely monitored (see below for more detail).

2. Which refugees should be eligible for sponsorship?

In terms of identifying potential entrants for this program family reunion was again nominated as a key criteria in terms of eligibility for the program. Another key group identified included women at risk. Transparency of processing under any new arrangements was identified as important, ensuring that connections made between volunteers, community groups and entrants were handled in a fair and consistent manner is essential for any pilot program.



An innovative idea which may be worth exploring was linking entrants to gaps in the labour market, which could also be tied to regional settlement (as such gaps occur predominantly in regional locations). Providing direct early links to employment would address one key success factor in settlement (employment), but it does also raise issues of freedom of choice and movement, and ensuring that entrants are not exploited by unfair work conditions.

New regional communities may also be worth exploring as settlement locations, and could be connected to UNHCR identified vulnerable resettlement groups overseas. In these instances it would be essential that some form of support is provided to volunteers to ensure they have the necessary skills and sensitivity to support vulnerable entrants.

3. What should be the responsibilities of sponsors?

There were a range of ideas explored in relation to the level of support expected of sponsors. Some key elements identified included:

- Sponsors should provide social and some orientation support
- Sponsors should provide the cost of the airfare, ideally with the additional support of a loan program
- Sponsors need to demonstrate that they have connections to settlement agencies and capacity to deal with language barriers (if not 24/7 access to interpreters is essential).

Access to accommodation was not considered essential, but is naturally desirable. The challenges in accessing accommodation in almost all locations was acknowledged. Families may be able to provide short-term support with accommodation but this will be dependent on a variety of factors.

A process for sponsors to identify what level of support they can provide, with appropriate backup from a settlement agency was suggested as a way to both maximise volunteer and sponsor involvement while ensuring provision of strong settlement support. Clear communication around who is providing what will be very important.

It was identified that expecting sponsors to provide income support was inappropriate. All entrants should be eligible for full income support through Centrelink. Full access to income support is essential to ensure entrants are not disadvantaged in their settlement. Access to income support is also important to ensure relationships between sponsors and entrants are not unduly strained or unequal.

4. What elements need to be included in any pilot program, particularly in terms of the development of the model?

There were a range of innovative ideas put forward to consider in terms of the model of the pilot program. Important elements for any program are:



- A form of safety net, for volunteers and entrants is essential
- Community education on the different visa categories and related access to services
- Involvement of the settlement sector in some form
- Transparency of operation of the pilot
- Strong links between volunteer groups, refugee community groups and settlement agencies, which the settlement sector can help foster and strengthen.

Ideas for program development included:

- Settlement services being involved in assessing applications, particularly in terms of assessing and supporting the sponsor in their role
- Volunteer groups and settlement agencies co-developing case management plans for entrants with sponsors
- Supporting volunteer groups to build relationships with refugee communities and settlement agencies to expand the pool of resources available to entrants and sponsors.

Additional factors to consider in the development of the pilot:

- The pilot will need to ensure entrants receive the same level of support that those currently arriving receive through the HSS.
- Management of entrant and community expectations will impact on the success of the pilot. The community grapevine is a quick but not always accurate source of information for sponsors or entrants.
- Naturally pressure of numbers in the pilot will be high as there is a pre-existing high level of unmet need, which will be a contextual issue the pilot must address in communication and operation.
- Exercising rigor in the selection process between volunteer group, sponsor and entrant will help identify strategies to avoid breakdowns in relationships.
- Volunteers may be able to provide a wide range of support, however each individual volunteer may only be able to provide one element of an entrants' needs. For example one volunteer may be able to help with orientation, another with short term accommodation, but there may not be a volunteer who would be able to provide both orientation and accommodation. Tapping into a broad network will help develop a comprehensive support net for entrants and expand the range of people involved in supporting refugees.

5. What is the ideal involvement of the settlement sector in any proposed safety net?

The settlement sector is naturally well placed to provide a safety net for entrants, volunteer groups and refugee community members. Each group does have distinct needs and concerns, which will need to be addressed by the pilot program. Coordination and communication are naturally



consistent important elements in the pilot program and will help forestall potential problems. In extreme cases access to CCS may be necessary.

Elements of a safety net for entrants include:

- Provision of settlement support consistent with current Australian settlement program standards (i.e. HSS)
- Consistent communication about level of services and who is responsible for providing services to entrants
- Knowing who to turn to if the relationship with sponsor or volunteer support group deteriorates.

Elements of a safety net for refugee community members include:

- Clear understanding of what volunteers will and can provide
- Transparent processing of applications and associated links to volunteer support groups
- Knowing who to turn to if the relationship with entrant or volunteer support group deteriorates.

Elements of a safety net for volunteer support groups include:

- Education on refugee and humanitarian entrant settlement issues, including the impact of torture and trauma on settlement, and vicarious trauma
- Education on settlement programs, and in particular where the pilot program fits in with HSS and SGP
- Knowing who to turn to if the relationship with sponsor or volunteer support group deteriorates.

Implicit in the safety net for all three groups is a funded professional provider in some form available to support and guide the settlement process.

6. Should the pilot program be national or only specified regional areas?

Opinion differed on whether the pilot program should be national, to give every state a chance to test the program and highlight the regional variation in issues, or region specific, which would give the pilot a chance to have a more focused developmental phase. Implementation in a few discreet areas (metropolitan and regional) may help in stronger development of program and addressing issues which may arise before rolling out the pilot more widely. As mentioned above, linking entrants to employment may be fostered by targeted regional settlement. However, secondary



settlement remains a potential issue also. Accommodation issues can also be less acute in regional areas (although transport and access to service issues can then become a factor).

Conclusion:

SCOA, and the sector, supports the development of a pilot, and remains available to discuss further details and program design elements as they are developed. A steering committee to guide the development of the pilot may be a useful mechanism to enable a wider range of input to the program as it is implemented. It will also be important to articulate principles for operation of the pilot, including measurements for success and length of pilot operation. It is unclear from the documentation provided the scope of the pilot, which will be of keen interest to all.

While the settlement sector is supportive of the pilot, and has the capacity to contribute, this capacity is in terms of skills and expertise, and requires funding and resources, i.e. the sector cannot be a voluntary partner in the pilot program.

Please feel free to contact me should you require any further information or clarification on any points raised in this submission.

Yours sincerely,

Sky de Jersey
Executive Officer