



14th February 2012

Humanitarian Program Submission
Assistant Secretary
Humanitarian Branch
DIAC
PO Box 25
Belconnen ACT 2616

Dear Mr Callaghan,

Re: Settlement Council Submission on the 2012-13 Humanitarian Program

The Settlement Council of Australia (SCOA) is pleased to provide this submission into the 2012-13 Humanitarian Program. SCOA represents the broad network of over 60 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 recent member consultation across Australia which highlights the impact of ex-detention caseloads on settlement, and the importance of providing professional sufficient settlement support to refugees settling in Australia.

Key issues covered in this submission are:

- Increase in the numbers for the humanitarian program
- Delink on and off shore programs
- 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)
- Support for private sponsorship, outlining the need for checks and balances within the process
- Priority within the limited SHP for split family reunion, and the need for additional support to apply for alternative visa categories.
- The strain bridging visas put on extended family and the community

Increase in the numbers for the humanitarian program

The settlement sector supports the increase of the humanitarian program to 20,000 places. The sector is well placed to provide settlement support to a larger number of humanitarian entrants, and a larger cohort of entrants would mitigate the impacts of current demographic trends from on-shore visa grants. The call for an increase in the humanitarian program is being reiterated from previous submissions, by SCOA and the sector more broadly.

De-link on-shore and off-shore humanitarian programs

The sector is conscious of the negative impact that linking on-shore visa grants to the off-shore humanitarian program has on the humanitarian program more broadly, and calls for the programs to be de-linked. This would enable the humanitarian program to function successfully, and provide greater responsiveness to humanitarian need, wherever it presents.

Impact of ex-detention caseload on settlement agencies

The settlement sector is servicing larger numbers of clients who have been recently released from detention with permanent visas, and who are thus eligible for settlement services under the Humanitarian Settlement Service. The sector is no stranger to changing demographics of entrants, and consequent changes in profile of need, however this particular cohort present with a range of needs and behaviours which relate quite particularly to their time spent in detention.

Clients released from detention present to agencies with a higher range of mental health issues, including self-harm issues. The sector has good connections with health providers across the country, however we are receiving reports that mental health services are stretched, and are not always well equipped to deal with the specific needs of ex-detention clients. Clients from a detention background can also find it difficult to develop trusting relationships with case managers, as their time in detention has fostered distrust in organisations and workers.

Accommodation is also being reported as a challenge across the country, especially in some locations. There are difficulties in obtaining rental accommodation for single men in terms of affordability, and for larger families in terms of availability of appropriate housing stock. At the lower end of the market vacancy rates are very low which creates pressure on families who may not yet have a good understanding of Australian tenancy laws, both in terms of their rights and responsibilities.

Agencies are also finding that clients who have been in detention are more likely to spontaneously move to a secondary settlement location. While this is often for good reasons (connecting with family, community or sourcing employment) it can create issues for settlement agencies who are trying to set up referrals, develop case management plans and provide settlement services for clients who may only stay in the area a short time.

Impact of ex-detention caseload on the Special Humanitarian Program

The Special Humanitarian Program (SHP) remains important for refugee and humanitarian entrants in terms of an avenue for family reunion, but in the last few years has been strained by very high numbers of applications, and a correspondingly high numbers of refusals, accompanied by little information on the reasons for refusals. Given that many people in the ex-detention caseload are being given permanent visas which come out of the allocation for the SHP there will be even lower acceptance rates than in the past. This is likely to have significant flow on effects for communities who are trying to sponsor family members to come to Australia. Family reunion has long been acknowledged as a critical component of settlement, and thus lengthy delays will have negative impacts on individuals and communities.

The alternative visa categories which may be open to people seeking family reunion are generally expensive and difficult to obtain, given that refugees and humanitarian entrants are just at the beginning of establishing their lives in Australia, so do not have access to the financial resources to cover visa application fees and exam costs (for example), let alone the cost pressures of the two year exclusion from Centrelink and related supports.

The increased pressure on the SHP may also strain community harmony, which to date has remained positive despite significant negative media coverage of asylum seekers. The sector is concerned about portrayal of refugees and asylum seekers in relation to their method of travel, as this has been creating divisions within and between communities.

Migration advice needed

Greater access to free or low cost migration advice is needed. The complexity of the visa application process requires support for many to manage. Greater provision of migration advice would both assist people make better and stronger applications for family reunion, and also reduce the burden on the Department of incomplete or inappropriate applications. IAAAS providers are also under pressure because of the large caseload presented by clients in detention. This impacts on the availability of low cost or free migration services in the community.

Transparency of visa application process

Concern has been raised by the sector that the application process, particularly for the SHP, is perceived to lack transparency. Community members spend a great deal of time and effort putting applications together for the SHP and then, after considerable time has elapsed, receive a standard rejection letter. The rejection letters do not contain reasons for the rejection, which leaves people unclear on what steps they should take next.

Support for private sponsorship, outlining the need for checks and balances within the process

SCOA notes with interest the proposal in the DIAC Discussion Paper for a private sponsorship component to the Humanitarian Program. This proposal, if implemented with monitoring and support, could be an effective way to increase humanitarian visa spaces in the program – an outcome long desired by the settlement sector. SCOA believes there is significant interest and support for a private sponsorship model in the community.

Careful consideration will need to be taken into account in terms of program model and implementation. It will be important to ensure that applicants can afford what they are committing to, and that they are linked to supportive community organisations. Equity of settlement outcomes for humanitarian entrants is also a factor. Given the desire for family reunion it will be an appealing option to many, despite the significant financial pressures on individuals and refugee communities. A vetting process to ensure community organisations understand their obligations and have some support structure to track implementation will help make the program successful.

A private sponsorship model poses some challenges for the sector and communities. The settlement sector may come under pressure to provide un-funded settlement support. Communities and people arriving under a private sponsorship model may not distinguish between visa category and eligibility for different levels of settlement support (this is already somewhat of an issue for some visa category holders). Communities may over-commit themselves in an effort to reduce the burden for community and family members suffering overseas.

Family reunion is a desired, needed, and most often a very successful process, but occasionally the pressure of re-settlement can strain relationships. At this point it will be necessary to provide support to entrants and their families, and access to services such as complex case support (or an appropriate equivalent) will be an important safety net.

With the appropriate checks and balances the program could be successful, particularly if it focusses on linking supportive community groups with refugee communities. There are a number of existing volunteer groups such as the Sanctuary group who have already been involved in supporting refugee communities settle in Australia for some time. A pilot program which could test out the waters, operating in a few areas (say a mix of three areas, including regional and metro) may be a useful way to test out program parameters and work through the support, monitoring and settlement issues which arise from this model of settlement. Targeted areas in regional Australia may be a particularly useful area for program development, as they are often areas seeking people, and may have accommodation and jobs more readily available.

Priority within the limited SHP for split family reunion, and the need for additional support to apply for alternative visa categories.

Determining priority within a constrained program is particularly challenging. SCOA believes that priority should be given to family reunion applications, particularly from unaccompanied minors. Family reunion, as mentioned above, is an important factor in successful settlement, with many additional flow on benefits to communities. Unaccompanied minors are in a particularly vulnerable position so prioritising their applications for family reunion is vital.

Given the pressure on places, notwithstanding any forthcoming private sponsorship program, refugees and humanitarian entrants should be given support to apply for alternative visa categories for family members, within both the narrow definition of family, and the broader definition which is used by many refugee communities. More options for families to re-unite are needed.

The strain bridging visas put on extended family and the community

The recent announcement of the increased use of bridging visas for clients released from detention is welcome in terms of mitigating the negative mental health impacts of detention, but the sector is concerned that the release of people on bridging visas without support will place a strain on extended family and the wider community. People on bridging visas often need specialist health services and a range of other supports, including help seeking work. Family and community can naturally provide support to an extent, however the sector is aware that the need for support may be quite high. There is also confusion within the sector (and the community) about the range of services and support bridging visa holders are eligible for, which is an additional complicating factor.

SCOA is conscious that some of these issues identified affect a range of government departments and different branches within the Department of Immigration. SCOA also has ongoing relationships with a range of government departments, such as DHS, FACSIA and DOHA, where related issues are discussed.

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

Yours sincerely,



Sky de Jersey
Executive Officer

CC: Senator Kate Lundy, Parliamentary Secretary for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs
CC: Karina Sommers, Director, CSM Research, Evaluation and Planning, Settlement Branch