



**Submission to the Humanitarian Program
2010 – 11 and Beyond**

February 2010

1. Background

The Settlement Council of Australia (SCOA) welcomes the opportunity to contribute a submission to the discussion about the size and composition of Australia's Humanitarian Program for 2010-11 and beyond.

SCOA is the national peak body representing settlement agencies across Australia. We operate as a formal network, bringing together a wide range of migrant and settlement support agencies at a national level, with the vision to create cohesion amongst our members and to improve collaborative and strategic planning processes for the settlement sector. We also provide a credible and informed source of knowledge and advice on migrant issues, settlement planning, service delivery and related matters to inform Government and a range of other stakeholders. The Council has national representation with membership from all states and territories. SCOA's membership includes a wide range of settlement service providers, and this response is based on consultation with our membership.

SCOA supports the maintaining and enhancing of Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Program due to the benefits it provides on humanitarian, economic and social grounds. We look forward to further policy changes that strengthen Australia's commitment to a fair, flexible and non-discriminatory Refugee and Humanitarian Program, which provides protection to some of the world's most vulnerable people.

SCOA was encouraged by the recent announcement concerning the new Settlement Policy Framework by the Parliamentary Secretary, and looks forward to playing a strong role in helping to shape this new approach to the successful settlement of refugees and humanitarian entrants.

2. Multi-year Planning Framework

SCOA supports the announcement last year of multi-year planning for the Humanitarian Program. It is recognised by SCOA's members the importance of long term commitments to resolve the protracted refugee situations throughout the world, particularly in Asia, Middle East and Africa. It is hoped that this longer term strategy will provide the Australian government the opportunity to work with the UNHCR to plan resettlement at the refugee camp level, and at the local level with Settlement Service providers in Australia. Such planning will help to provide structures and support mechanisms and ensure a smoother settlement process for refugees and humanitarian entrants and the agencies working directly with these client groups.

Longer-term planning is necessary in order to allow agencies to plan the settlement process extensively, in order to link with existing community members/groups, select appropriate settlement locations and work with other agencies and networks to ensure a strategically appropriate and planned approach to the settlement process. A four year planning process would provide the opportunity for a holistic assessment of arrivals by agencies including skills, knowledge, health needs, family situations, language and housing requirements.

3. Size and Composition of Australia's Humanitarian Program 2010 – 11 and beyond

SCOA supports an increase in the number of entrants from the current level of 13,750 to 20,000. This increase should be staggered over the next four years. This target should be separated and “ring-fenced” from fluctuations in the overall immigration program.

SCOA supports and applauds the recent modest increase in overall numbers in the Refugee and Humanitarian Program. However, we are concerned that these numbers have remained relatively unchanged during a period of time when other parts of the immigration program have increased markedly. We believe that a wealthy and stable country such as Australia can do more to contribute to solving the world's refugee problem. It is imperative that Australia's policy also includes strategies to encourage the UNHCR to seek other nations to expand or develop their capacity to provide settlement solutions to the world's refugee needs.

SCOA recommends that the number of offshore Refugee and Humanitarian Program visas granted is separated from the number of onshore Protection Visas granted, so that these are treated independently of each other.

4. Family Reunion

Evidence from agencies indicates the urgency to review the processes of the SHP provision. Many refugees find it extremely difficult and distressful to settle, knowing loved ones have been left behind in horrendous conditions and/or all alone. The application process to be a sponsor through the SHP provision is difficult; the number of applications received by government far outweighs the places available under the current policy. If the government is serious about improving these processes, increasing numbers and commitment to supporting the UNHCR, then

family reunion also needs to be high on its agenda. The current very narrow definition of family, and the prohibitive costs of the application process (when using commercial migration advice), creates added stress and trauma to families.

Furthermore, feedback from our members indicates strong, ongoing concern about the average length of time taken to complete the SHP process. The anxiety created by the uncertainty of this process impacts deeply and negatively on the successful settlement of those family members already in Australia. This fear and uncertainty leads to significant health problems such as depression and post-traumatic stress, and may contribute to family violence and family breakdown. It is vital that the split-family provision of the Humanitarian Program is used effectively so that processing can be done in a more timely fashion.

SCOA recommends that the Government consider reviewing definitions and processes, after a process of consultation. SCOA strongly supports broadening the definition of family to include relationships where dependency can be demonstrated. SCOA further recommends that the current “split family” provisions be developed into a separate Family Reunion visa category.

5. Asylum Seekers

SCOA applauds the improvements to the welfare rights for asylum seekers, and the abandonment of the Temporary Protection Visa (TPV) policy. TPVs caused unnecessary hardship and suffering, and were ineffective in deterring those arriving by boat. SCOA strongly opposes the Federal Opposition’s call to reinstate TPVs.

SCOA strongly supports the onshore processing of asylum seekers and calls on the Commonwealth Government to abandon the excision zone policy. This policy denies asylum seekers who arrive in Australian Territory their full human rights. We also oppose the offshore processing on Christmas Island (or similar locations) as such facilities reduce people’s access to their full human rights, due to their isolation and limited service provision.

SCOA calls on the Government to honour in full its pledge to detain asylum seekers only as a last resort for fast identity, security and health checks and also ensure that no children are ever detained. SCOA is extremely concerned that some children are still reported to be in detention-like facilities despite formal changes in policy away from detaining children. SCOA also calls for the Government to honour in full its pledge for the faster processing of asylum seeker claims.

Whilst the Christmas Island facility continues to be used, more effort is needed to ensure that services involved in resettling people from Christmas Island to the

mainland receive adequate and timely notice of new arrivals and more detailed information about their settlement needs.

6. Public Perceptions and Positive Impacts

SCOA is strongly committed to promoting the positive social, economic and humanitarian benefits and contributions that Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Program has played, and continues to play in our society. SCOA congratulates the Government and DIAC for recent work to ascertain the economic contribution that refugees and humanitarian entrants have made, and SCOA is proud to be a part of this work.

SCOA calls on the Government to ensure that the Australian community is educated about the positive role and major contributions that former refugees now play in our society. We strongly urge a bipartisan approach that denounces and reframes the negative stereotypes and scaremongering that has become common in the media, and has been fuelled by both sides of politics. We strongly urge greater emphasis being placed on "good news" stories, such as the invaluable role that some refugees have played in filling workforce positions in agriculture and related industries in rural areas, many of which would otherwise go unfilled.

6. Settlement Issues/Challenges

6.1 Health Care

Evidence and experience indicates that refugees and humanitarian entrants continue to experience difficulty accessing appropriate health care. This is due to a range of factors including:

- Lack of service provision
- Lack of culturally sensitive and trained frontline medical staff
- Inadequate information about available services
- Poor access to interpreters or use of interpreters by medical staff
- No access to bulk billing
- negotiating complex and confusing health care systems

Medical practitioners find it difficult to diagnose and treat clients from multicultural backgrounds due to the language barriers, lack of access to appropriate interpreters, cost of utilising interpreters and little knowledge of cultural backgrounds. Some state-wide refugee health services have been implemented, which have provided

information and advice to the medical field. However, engaging GP's to work with refugee patients still has the above difficulties, and even more so in regional and remote areas.

Many refugees suffer undiagnosed mental health issues, which become apparent to service providers and/or medical services after an episode of violence or demonstration of mental instability. Some patients do not continue with prescribed medication due to the cost, or the need to provide another family member with other medication, and the basic need to provide food and pay the rent for their family.

Dental care is another area families find it difficult to prioritise and find the money for private treatment. Public clinics have long waitlists and therefore, individuals suffer with severe pain for many months and sometimes years.

SCOA recommends the development of standardised health screening tools for all newly arrived refugees and humanitarian entrants, including dental care, full immunisation (Australian minimum requirements) and mental health assessments. SCOA also recommends increasing the number of specialised refugee health clinics across Australia to support medical care, including providing interpreters. SCOA also supports the establishment of a National Refugee Health Database, along with adequate resourcing of the National Refugee Health Network to share research data and information, best practice models etc.

6.2 Family Issues

Settling in Australia brings with it dramatic changes in family dynamics. The benefit system is one example. The mother receives child support payments, whilst the father receives single payments and the older children receive their own payments. This causes the father to feel he has lost his powerbase in the family; the children do not believe they should contribute to the family income; the mother, who once never had any money, now has control and power within the home.

As a result of this and other changes, family violence increases, separation is on the rise, children leave home early or are in constant arguments with parents. Whilst settlement services provide basic information on Australian laws, families do not always understand that certain traditional and cultural family ways are not acceptable or legal in Australia.

Stronger involvement of community elders and leaders in early intervention and prevention strategies, and their involvement with the Police and Children Services at the point of attending the family home, may assist in reducing many of the removals of children, and could help to prevent or reduce domestic violence and family conflicts.

SCOA recommends the following:

- increased funding for culturally appropriate intervention and prevention strategies, and relevant training programs for newly arrived families and for government and non-government agencies
- the development of training programs for cultural elders/leaders to become liaison officers for police and children's services
- Encouraging the multicultural community to become foster parents to ensure that children remain connected to their community where removal of children does occur.

6.3 Employment and Training

Major barriers to employment include

- Lacking drivers licence and the financial costs to obtain a licence
- Lack of public transport to workplaces
- Poor knowledge of Australian Workplace Culture
- Lack of recognition of qualifications or lack of evidence of qualifications
- Expense of undertaking recognition of trade qualifications or RPL processes
- Lack of local work experience
- Direct or indirect discrimination by employers
- Poor knowledge of the pathways to employment
- Language and cultural barriers
- Some Job Network agencies have a preference not to work with multicultural people as they see it as "too difficult" to find placements

Given all of the above, SCoA was excited by the new Employment Services model tendered through the Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). Now that the new employment services contracts have been in operation for several months, SCOA recommends a thorough review of the effectiveness of these services in addressing the employment related needs of refugees and humanitarian entrants and of people from CALD backgrounds in general.

7. Final Comments

SCOA congratulates and acknowledges the extensive, detailed and professional report produced by the Refugee Council of Australia. This report reflects comments, discussions and research undertaken over an extensive period with a range of

stakeholders throughout Australia. SCOA members were heavily involved in the consultations, with over 70% of SCOA members taking part.

SCOA would also like to congratulate and acknowledge the dedication of workers both at a government and non-government level for their continued commitment to the refugee and humanitarian entrants.

Furthermore, SCOA recommends that the government acknowledge and recognise that best service delivery is usually delivered by local service agencies that understand their community as a whole, and work for the community to achieve outcomes at a local level.

SCOA continues to work closely with our partner organisations such as RCOA, FECCA and ACOSS to ensure continued improvements in the support provided to those arriving through the Refugee and Humanitarian Program.

Finally, SCOA would like to thank its members for their contribution to this report.