

Settlement Council of Australia (SCoA)

Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Program
Response to Australian Government's December 2008
Discussion Paper

2 February 2009

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1.0 Background

The Settlement Council of Australia (SCoA) formerly the National Council of Migrant Resource and Settlement Agencies (NCMRSA) is a national peak body representing settlement agencies across Australia. It operates as a formal network, to bring Migrant Resource Centres and Migrant Settlement Agencies together at a national level with the vision to create cohesion amongst members and improve collaborative and strategic planning processes for the settlement sector. Most importantly it provides 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. It is a legally constituted body and was incorporated in early 2003 under the Associations Incorporations Act 1981 (Vic).

The Settlement Council of Australia (SCoA) would like to thank the Australian Government for the opportunity to present this submission which provides comments on many of the issues for consideration in the planning process of the 2009-10 and beyond Refugee and Humanitarian Program. This document consolidates comments, thoughts and experiences from a number of SCoA member organisations.

SCoA firstly congratulates the Australian Government and the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIaC) for the administration of its Humanitarian Program and its transparent and inclusive processes to evaluate the effectiveness of its current program and to advance the responsiveness and delivery of future programs.

SCoA welcomes the changes made to the Australian Government refugee policy and those that are under consideration in particular:

- ◆ The ending of the temporary protection system
- ◆ The intention to close Australia's offshore detention centres and the resettlement of the last group of refugees held on Nauru
- ◆ The commitment to reform the immigration detention system
- ◆ The review of the citizenship test

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- ◆ The increase in the number of places in the Refugee and Humanitarian Program
- ◆ The commitment to a multi-year planning framework which would facilitate improved service planning and promotion of programs to the broader community
- ◆ The implementation of the new Complex Case Support Program
- ◆ The review of the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP)
- ◆ The development of a new national Employment Service Model

2.0 Multi-year Planning Framework

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 imperative Australia's policy includes strategies to encourage the UNHCR to seek other nations to expand or develop their capacity to provide settlement solutions to the world refugee needs. The longer term strategy would provide the Australian government the opportunity to work with the UNHCR to plan resettlement both at a camp and local level with Settlement Service providers in Australia. This planning will 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.

Under the current settlement service processes, Australian agencies are informed usually one month prior to arrivals; which does not allow agencies to plan the settlement process extensively to link with existing community members/groups, select the appropriate settlement location/s and work with other agencies and networks to ensure a strategically appropriate planned approach to the settlement process. Whilst it is recognised the majority of Australian settlement service providers deliver quality services, the multi-year planning strategy by the UNHCR and the Australian Government would provide agencies the opportunity to prepare the local community for newly arrived refugees, links into existing networks and develop strategies in advance for new and emerging communities, such as selecting locations/suburbs for groups to settle, develop a health/medical plan and prepare other agencies for the arrivals, these strategies would advance the settlement/community processes.

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The four year planning process will provide the opportunity for a holistic assessment of arrivals by agencies including skills, knowledge, health needs, family situations, language and housing requirements.

3.0 Size and Composition of Australia's Humanitarian Program 2009 – 10 and beyond

As stated in the RCOA report, Australia is currently at its lowest intake number since 1978 at a low 6.4%, which is over a 50% reduction. Australia has the experience, processes, programs, resources and ability to increase the intake numbers and target the most vulnerable in need; women, children and asylum seekers. SCoA fully supports the recommendations of RCOA for a larger refugee intake, increasing the offshore and humanitarian program over the next five years from 13750 places in 2009-10 to 20,000 placed in 2013-14. It is recognised by SCoA, Australia is experiencing economic climate change, however the long term benefit of the Humanitarian program on Australia's future growth economically and position within the world must be considered in the decision making processes.

4.0 Family Reunion

Evidence from agencies indicates the urgency to review the processes of the SHP provision. Currently many refugees are finding it extremely difficult and stressful 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 intake program levels. If the government is serious about improving 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 prohibitive costs of the application process (when using commercial migration advice), creates added stress and trauma to families.

It is suggested that the Government consider reviewing definitions and processes as an outcome of this process of consultation. The family reunion (SHP Entrants) of

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immediate family members separated by refugee crises, to broaden the definition of family to include relationships where dependency can be demonstrated.

As highlighted in the RCOA report and supported by SCoA, the composition of the resettlement needs and the current composition of Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Program, indicates two priorities for the program:

- ◆ Priority resettlement of refugees identified by UNHCR including women at risk
- ◆ The reunion of immediate families separated by refugee crises and review the definition of family as stated above.

5.0 Settlement Issues/Challenges

5.1 Health Care

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

- ◆ lack of service provision
- ◆ lack of culturally sensitive and trained frontline medical practice staff
- ◆ access to general practitioners
- ◆ no access to interpreters or use of interpreters by medical staff
- ◆ poor understanding the medical system including calling ambulances for non emergencies
- ◆ not taking medication or attending follow up appointments
- ◆ limited access to bulk billing
- ◆ Negotiating complex and confusing health care systems

It is recognised by SCoA, that the medical field finds 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

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backgrounds. Some state-wide refugee health services have been established, 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, breakdown in family or demonstration of mental instability. It has been identified that some patients do not continue on their medication mainly 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 large waitlists and therefore, individuals suffer with severe tooth pain for many months and sometimes years.

Standardised health screening tools need to be established for all newly arrived refugees and humanitarian entrants including dental, full immunisation (Australian minimum requirements) and mental health assessments. Increase the number of specialized refugee health clinics across Australia to support the medical care including providing interpreters and potentially central recording/access to health records.

5.2 Family Issues

Agencies across Australia have stories to tell and experiences to share in relation to refugee and humanitarian families settling in their new country of Australia. Remembering they have come from long term camp situations, war torn countries, loss of family members, to a new country which is providing them a home, support services, income (benefits) and rules, regulations and laws never before experienced, let alone of which they have knowledge of. The dynamics of the family immediately change, the benefit system where the mother receives child support payments, whilst the father receives single payments and the older children receive payments. The father feels 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.

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Family violence increases, separation is on the rise, children leave home early or are in constant arguments with parents. Police and Children Services are called; adult family members are removed, young children also removed from the home and the family is in despair, and wondering what just happened? “ We love each other, who are these people, why did they break up our family? “

Settlement Services provide the basic information on Australian laws, however, families do not understand that some of their traditional and cultural family ways are not acceptable or legal in Australia; they don't understand the impact the law can have on their family life or understand changing their family discipline strategies would prevent removal of children or even what to change or how to change it. The community elders and leaders believe their involvement in an early intervention and prevention strategy, and/or their involvement with the Police/Children's Services at the point of attending the family home, may assist in reducing many of the removals and could prevent domestic violence and family conflicts from occurring or escalating. Funding for increased culturally appropriate intervention and prevention and relevant training programs for newly arrived families and government and non-government agencies; and development of training programs for cultural elders/leaders who could become liaison officers for police and children's services; encouraging the multicultural community to become foster parents to support the system and ensure children remain connected to their community, all of the above needs to be high on the government's agenda if we are to improve the settlement processes and improve family unity and relationships .

5.3 Employment and Training

An integral part of the settlement process for refugees and humanitarian entrants is to gain basic English language skills and employment as soon as possible after arrival. This allows them to financially support families back home or save money to sponsor loved ones, which are their highest priority. Major barriers to employment are:

- Lack drivers licence and financial costs to obtain a licence
- Lack of public transport to workplaces
- Knowledge of Australian Workplace Culture
- Lack of Data collection of Refugee and Humanitarian Entrant education levels , qualification and work experience. This information does not

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currently exist and must be part of any planned and strategic settlement process.

- Recognised qualifications or lack of evidence of qualifications
- Expense to undertake recognition of trade qualifications or RPL processes
- Local work experience
- Direct or indirect discrimination by employers
- Knowledge of the pathways to employment
- Knowledge of the employment system
- Lack of availability of quality work experience
- Language and cultural barriers
- Some Job Network agencies have a preference not to work with refugees and humanitarian entrants as they see/experience it as “*too difficult*” to find placements

Given all of the above, SCoA is extremely excited with the new Employment Services model recently tendered through the Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) and encourages the department to source agencies who specialize and have extensive experience working with CALD communities and in particular newly arrived refugee communities across a diverse range of service delivery mechanisms – this tender is an opportunity to seek “one-stop-shop” holistic service delivery for clients.

6.0 Final Comments

RCOA Report Endorsement.

The Settlement Council of Australia would firstly like to congratulate and acknowledge the highly 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 and we wish to endorse the RCOA’s findings and recommendations.

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The Settlement Council of Australia would like to congratulate and acknowledge the dedication of workers both at a government and non-government level for their continued commitment to the settlement of refugee and humanitarian entrants.

The Settlement Council of Australia would like to emphasise an point out to government providers that the best service delivery is usually delivered by local service agencies which understand the community as a whole and work for the community to achieve the best possible settlement outcomes at a local level.

Finally, the Settlement Council of Australia would like to thank its members for their contribution to this report.