



Committee Secretary
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Email: covid.sen@aph.gov.au

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Settlement Council of Australia: Submission to Select Committee on COVID-19

The Settlement Council of Australia (SCoA) is grateful for the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Select Committee on COVID-19.

SCoA is the peak body representing the vast majority of settlement agencies across Australia providing direct services to people of refugee and migrant backgrounds.

Our members include agencies, large and small, who are committed to the successful settlement of refugees and migrants across the country. Their services range from greeting new arrivals at the airport, through to assisting them to secure housing, access services and find their first job. Australia's settlement agencies are recognised as being among the best in the world.

SCoA praises the government's efforts in containing the spread of COVID-19 and responding promptly to the health and economic impacts. Notwithstanding the strong government response, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on our members; and the individuals, families and communities they support.

In this submission, SCoA identifies key issues emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic and the Australian Government's response, and considers the most appropriate way forward. In particular, there are three issues we would like to address. These are:

1. support for people on temporary visas;
2. the impact of the pandemic on settlement agencies and their workforce; and
3. emerging discussions about Australia's migration program in light of the pandemic.

Settlement agencies are trusted services among migrant and refugee communities. The settlement sector is well placed to help migrants and refugees through this crisis, and to play a role in supporting Australia as a whole to recover from it.

1. Support for people on temporary visas

Our members deliver several settlement and specialist services to people on temporary visas. Many of these programs are reliant on volunteer, philanthropic or small scale funding.

During COVID-19, the settlement sector has faced unprecedented demand for assistance from people on temporary visas. These people are not usually eligible for income support, and are also predominantly employed in low-skilled workforces which have been heavily impacted by COVID-19. Thus the limited programs in place to support people on temporary visas are currently overburdened. While state and territory governments have introduced a range of measures to support people on temporary visas, this does not displace the need for a Federal Government response to support some of the most vulnerable people in our community.

There are three critical changes to the Australian Government's response that would greatly improve the settlement sector's capacity to assist during COVID-19 and in times of crisis generally. These are:

- provide emergency relief funding directly to settlement service providers;
- provide income support for people on temporary visas;
- streamline access to the SRSS program.

We elaborate on each of these in turn below.

Provide emergency relief funding directly to settlement service providers

SCoA welcomed the Australian Government's recognition of the hardship faced by people on temporary visas, and the announcement of emergency relief and casework support. However, it is critical that in times of crisis, emergency relief funding is also directed to settlement service providers who are at the frontline working with affected individuals and communities.

Australia's settlement services are trusted organisations among multicultural communities. Communities expect settlement services to provide assistance irrespective of visa status, and our sector regularly goes above and beyond to meet the needs of asylum seekers and temporary migrants who have few sources of support. In times of crisis, the demands on settlement services increase, and communities expect settlement services to be able to respond immediately to their needs.

While in some locations across Australia, sufficient funding was provided directly to settlement services, in other locations the funding was either insufficient, or provided primarily to mainstream charities. It is important that emergency relief funding is provided directly to settlement service providers to administer to their community groups, particularly in times of crisis. Providing emergency relief funding directly to settlement agencies is practical, considering many communities' familiarity with settlement agencies, as well as to reduce confusion, time and administrative burden for people receiving emergency relief.

Provide income support for people on temporary visas

Many people on temporary visas are employed in occupations hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. These individuals have found themselves in exceptionally difficult circumstances. While many of them have returned home, and others may be looking to—there are many who have no ability to return home due to a lack of flights, funds, or their status as asylum seekers.

Streamlined access to income support for this cohort is essential. If such support is not provided, it will result in an unmanageable burden on emergency relief and other assistance from charities, including settlement services. Moreover, the cost of administering regular income support is significantly lower than administering a high volume of needs-based one-off emergency relief assistance.

SCoA has signed an open letter supporting the expansion of JobSeeker and JobKeeper payments to people on temporary visas. In the interim, or should this not occur, we advocate for streamlined and prompt access to special benefit payments without access to those payments having a detrimental impact on visa pathways.

Streamline access to Status Resolution Support Services

Many settlement services provide the Status Resolution Support Service (SRSS), which provides support to eligible people seeking resolution to their status in Australia. With the current pandemic, the number of temporary visa holders, particularly asylum seekers, who would benefit from accessing the service has significantly increased. With job losses and limited other sources of support, entry or re-entry into SRSS would greatly assist asylum seekers to navigate the present crisis, including obtaining access to special benefit payments. We strongly advocate that access to SRSS be streamlined for asylum seekers.

2. The impact of the pandemic on settlement agencies and their workforce

In March and April 2020, SCoA consulted our members on the impact of COVID-19 on the settlement sector.¹ Based on these consultations and other feedback from our members, it is clear that there are pressing risks to settlement agencies and their workforce that are different to those faced by other organisations in the community sector. These risks have largely arisen from the temporary lull in the humanitarian program and migration program. In addressing these risks, there is an opportunity to not only safeguard the settlement sector, but make use of it as a key lever to assist Australia in recovering from COVID-19.

Key risks to the settlement sector

The reduction in revenue from the Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP) has been significant for agencies delivering HSP services. The HSP operates on a fee-for-service model, meaning that some agencies have already incurred hundreds of thousands of dollars in losses. This has flow-on effects for other programs and workforces in the settlement sector. The infrastructure from the HSP enables settlement agencies to leverage other resources such as volunteers, philanthropic funding and smaller grants to service the broader needs of migrant and refugee communities, and is consequently affected.

The extent to which settlement services can access JobKeeper to sustain their workforce, and the degree to which JobKeeper is sufficient is unclear. SCoA welcomed changes allowing charities to exclude government revenue, however this still does not take into consideration the fee-for-service nature of HSP funding.

Alarmingly, 61.8% of respondents to our survey said they would have to reduce staff working hours by between 10 and 50%. The loss of settlement workers would be a devastating blow to Australia's world-class settlement program. Settlement work is a specialised skill-set. It is not an occupation for which there is any established university or vocational qualification. Rather, it takes time and investment in employees to develop the expertise and skill required to perform the job. The loss of these employees

¹ These consultation reports can be found here: <http://scoa.org.au/category/policy-hub/scoa-publications/>

would greatly impact the capacity of the sector to resume settling new arrivals when the resettlement program resumes.

If not addressed, these risks will have significant implications for Australia's world class settlement agencies and the people they support.

The way forward

The settlement sector has a significant role to play in helping refugees and migrants through this crisis, but also in supporting Australia, both economically and socially, in the recovery process.

SCoA strongly cautions against the diversion of any funding away from the settlement sector due to a reduction in referrals. Funding allocated to settlement programs must be retained. While the demand in some areas is reduced, funds should be re-purposed to meet other areas of increased need and demand, and to support economic recovery more broadly, by redoubling efforts to improve employment outcomes among migrant and refugee communities.

Repurposing the funds in this way will ensure the settlement workforce remains in place and ready to resume normal operations when the resettlement program recommences, while also extracting maximum value from the settlement workforce.

3. Emerging Discussions about Australia's migration program

COVID-19 has publicly revived calls for the Australian Government to review the Australian Migration Program.

As the Australian Government considers the shape of our migration program in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, we emphasise the valuable contribution that migrants make to Australia, both economically and socially. It will take several months and years for the economy to recover from this crisis. Historically, migration has been a key lever increasing Australia's economic output and has been a driver of growth. While the size and composition of the migration program may be reviewed, we expect growth fuelled by migration to continue to be a key economic driver in the recovery process.

SCoA expects the humanitarian intake to eventually resume as soon as the health situation permits. Australia's humanitarian program has a strong history of supporting refugees and is founded on humanitarian obligations rather than economic imperatives. Settlement agencies are willing and ready to resume this support as soon as the humanitarian program recommences.

Settlement agencies will play a central role in the COVID-19 recovery phase. The settlement sector can assist in this by ensuring migrants experience a quicker and more streamlined path to economic participation. This can be done for both humanitarian and non-humanitarian entrants. In reviewing the migration program, it is critical that settlement sector funding is also reviewed to ensure a broader cohort of migrants and refugees are supported by settlement services to attain full economic participation.

That support should not be viewed as a cost, but rather an investment. Our world-class settlement services are classed as such because of the value they yield in terms of social cohesion and economic prosperity. Allowing a greater proportion of migrants to benefit from settlement support will ensure the migration program accrues the social and economic benefits intended.

Summary

From SCoA's consultations and other feedback from our members, it is clear that COVID-19 and the Australian Government's response to the pandemic has had, and will continue to have a significant impact on settlement agencies and the people they support.

In their response to COVID-19, the Australian Government must consider greater support for people on temporary visas; including providing emergency relief funding to settlement service providers, allowing people on temporary visas to access income support, and streamlining access to the SRSS program.

It is also evident that there are pressing risks to settlement agencies and their workforce that are different to those faced by other organisations in the community sector. At the same time, this workforce possesses skills that are arguably needed now more than ever, with migrant and refugee communities facing increasing levels of vulnerability. Therefore, SCoA strongly cautions against the diversion of any funding away from the settlement sector. In addressing the risks to the settlement sector, there is an opportunity for the Australian Government to safeguard Australia's world class settlement sector, but also to make use of it as a key lever to assist Australia in recovering from COVID-19.

This is also pertinent considering that the Australian Migration Program is likely to be reviewed in light of the pandemic and the changing economic circumstances. As the migration program is reviewed, it will be important to also review settlement sector funding to ensure it is adequately funded to support a fuller breadth of migrants and refugees. This will ensure the migration program accrues the social and economic benefits intended.