



Settlement
Council
of Australia

Submission:
Australia's Humanitarian Program 2021-22

Settlement Council of Australia

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The Settlement Council of Australia acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land on which we operate, the Ngunnawal people. We also acknowledge the traditional custodians on the various lands on which migrants and refugees settle across Australia, and on which our sector operates.

We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging and celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to our lands and waters.

About the Settlement Council of Australia

The Settlement Council of Australia (SCoA) is the peak body representing the vast majority of settlement agencies across Australia providing direct services and support to people of migrant and refugee backgrounds.

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

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Introduction

SCoA is grateful for the opportunity to make a submission in response to the Discussion Paper on Australia's Humanitarian Program for 2021-2022. Australia's Humanitarian Program is a core component of our migration program that ensures Australia meets our humanitarian commitment to resettle refugees. Australia's world class settlement services play a crucial role in supporting humanitarian entrants as they begin their life in Australia.

COVID-19 and the subsequent disruption to the resettlement program, has had a devastating impact on settlement services. There is an urgent need to minimise disruption to the resettlement program and resume arrivals as soon as possible, in order to meet Australia's humanitarian commitments, safeguard Australia's world class settlement services, and promote good settlement outcomes.

This submission outlines the impact of disruption to the resettlement program, makes recommendations to mitigate the negative impacts of disruption in the short-term, and makes suggestions for enhancing settlement services in the medium to long term.

The impact of disruption to the program

The limited number of humanitarian arrivals since March 2020 has had detrimental impacts for both the beneficiaries of the program, as well as the infrastructure that supports humanitarian entrants upon their arrival into Australia to ensure they settle as soon as possible. We outline these impacts in further detail below.

The impact on humanitarian entrants

The significant disruption to the Humanitarian Program in the new era of COVID-19 has had significant impacts for the safety and wellbeing of humanitarian entrants and for their settlement outcomes.

There are currently a substantial number of refugees overseas who have been granted humanitarian visas by the Australian government but are unable to enter Australia, and have no certainty around when they may be able to. SCoA has heard reports of families that had quit their jobs and sold all their possessions immediately prior to COVID-19 in anticipation of travelling, and are now uncertain how much longer they will be stuck in limbo. Refugees waiting to travel to Australia face heightened risk and vulnerabilities, associated with new and intensified conflicts and the impacts of COVID-19. For example, refugees in Lebanon have been affected by upheaval and the recent bomb blasts, and the escalating crisis in Myanmar has had flow on effects for refugees.¹ Restrictions on movement and access to services (including health care) have exacerbated existing vulnerabilities, and created new ones.²

A substantial proportion of those who have been granted visas and are awaiting travel, have family in Australia and have applied to come to Australia in order to reunite with their families. Many people have already been separated from family for prolonged periods through war and

¹ United Nations High Commission for Refugees (2019), *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2019*, available online at: <https://www.unrefugees.org.au/media/5085/global-trends-report-2019.pdf>.

² *Ibid.*

displacement. The impacts of family separation on settlement outcomes are well documented,³ and nearly all of our members have directly been told of the human toll of these impacts by their clients who have family stuck overseas. Separation from families affects people's mental health and their ability to fully participate in Australian society, through engaging in employment, education, and developing social connections.⁴ As well as the significant emotional and social impact on individuals, this also creates increased demand on resources for intensive settlement service support and mental health services.⁵ Reuniting with family is an essential part of the settlement process for refugees. We simply cannot expect individuals to feel settled in Australia until they have been reunited with their families.

In addition, the settlement journeys of those waiting to travel are being heavily disrupted. Whereas they could have commenced learning English, understanding Australia's systems, and adjusting to new social norms, they instead find themselves in a continued state of displacement. This is neither beneficial for the visa holder, nor for Australian society, as it will mean that it will be a longer period of time before individuals are fully independent and participating in society.

The impact on settlement services

Settlement services provide essential support to newly arrived humanitarian entrants throughout their settlement journey. This is initially provided through the Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP) for the first 6-12 months of their arrival, and includes support ranging from sourcing accommodation, providing initial orientation, enrolments in schools, linking with health services and other immediate needs to live an independent life in Australia. The support from settlement services supports humanitarian entrants to be able to fully participate in, and contribute to life in Australia.

The fee-for-service model of the HSP has meant that the significantly reduced numbers of humanitarian entrants arriving in Australia since March 2020 has had an extensive impact on settlement agencies and their workers. Loss of organisational income from HSP has affected organisational sustainability for many settlement agencies, and had a devastating impact for those heavily reliant on HSP funding.⁶ The settlement sector workforce is one that is highly specialised. There is no qualification to work in the settlement sector, so settlement workers build their specialist skills and expertise through years of experience. However, due to the disruption to the program, many settlement workers have left or will leave the settlement sector, risking the loss of settlement expertise as workers seek employment in other sectors.

A survey of settlement services conducted by SCoA showed that well over 200 full-time equivalent (FTE) positions were lost in 2020 in the 73 organisations who participated in the survey. The same survey showed that organisations projected a further loss of over 130 FTE employees in 2021 (equalling a total loss of 280 FTE over two years).⁷ In a sector where the

³ Wilmsem, B (2016), 'Family separation and the impacts on refugee settlement in Australia,' *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 48: 241-262; Savic M, Chur-Hansen A, Mahmood MA, Moore V. (2013) 'Separation from family and its impact on the mental health of Sudanese refugees in Australia: a qualitative study,' *Australia N Z J Public Health*, 37(4):383-8.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Refugee Council of Australia (2021), 'Family separation and family reunion for refugees: The issues,' available online at: <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/family-reunion-issues/>.

⁶ Settlement Council of Australia (2021), 'State of the Sector – 2020,' available online at: <http://scoa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/State-of-the-Sector-2020-FINAL-REPORT.pdf>.

⁷ *Ibid.*

primary resource is skilled staff, this is an unprecedented shock to settlement service infrastructure. Without resuming arrivals at higher levels soon, or other investment to sustain the sector, the capacity of the sector to support a resumed humanitarian program will be placed at risk. This is especially so if there is expected to be a sudden increase in arrivals following borders re-opening, before the rate of arrivals stabilises. SCoA submits that increasing the number of humanitarian arrivals as soon as possible is essential for safeguarding Australia's world class settlement services, and ensuring humanitarian entrants continue to receive the same high quality support that enables them to fully participate in society sooner.

The need to increase arrivals

Australia's humanitarian program is a source of pride for all Australians. It signifies our ethos and commitment to upholding human rights as a nation. It is understandable, but unfortunate, that fewer humanitarian entrants arrived in Australia in 2020-21 due to the pandemic. However, this reduction in the size of the program must be temporary. Australia must take all practical steps to meet its existing targets, and should further increase the size of the program over time.

SCoA notes the use of the word 'ceiling' in the Discussion Paper to describe the numbers for the 2021-22 Humanitarian Program. SCoA is concerned about this shift in rhetoric in recent years from numbers being referred to as a 'target', to a 'ceiling'. We are concerned this rhetoric reflects a reduced effort to resume the humanitarian program at full capacity as soon as possible. Having clear targets and goals to meet these targets is essential.

We are further concerned by the recent reduction in the size of the program to 13,750 places. The size of the program should be returned to the pre-pandemic level of 18,750 as soon as practicable, and should further increase over time. Australia has the capacity to settle more refugees than it is currently settling. Through our own engagement, and our members' engagement with local communities and every day Australians we see great support for Australia receiving refugees. Increasing the humanitarian intake would be an appropriate and much-needed recognition of the growing global humanitarian crisis and a reflection of the seriousness with which Australia approaches its role as a global citizen.

The composition of the intake, both current and increased, must maintain the integrity of the program by prioritising selection based on humanitarian need. This was emphasised in the review led by Professor Peter Shergold, *Investing in Refugees, Investing in Australia: the findings of a review into integration, employment and settlement outcomes for refugees and humanitarian entrants in Australia*.⁸ Concerns have been raised with SCoA about perceived 'integration potential' impacting the composition of the program. These concerns are linked to issues outlined by the Refugee Council of Australia in their submission regarding the decreasing proportion of the program drawn from UNHCR referrals, and the increasing proportion being selected outside UNHCR recommendations. It is essential that selection of refugees for resettlement is based on the need for protection and the level of vulnerability.

⁸ Shergold P, Benson K, and Piper M (2019), *Investing in Refugees, Investing in Australia: The findings of a Review into Integration, Employment and Settlement Outcomes for Refugees and Other Humanitarian Entrants in Australia*, available online at: <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/reports-and-publications/reviews-and-inquiries/inquiries/review-integration-employment-settlement-outcomes-refugeehumanitarian-entrants>.

Practical steps to increasing arrivals

While appreciating the complications of facilitating travel in the current environment, it is still possible to increase the number of humanitarian entrants arriving in Australia. In this regard, we note the work of the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) in identifying practical ways to increase arrivals. SCoA has worked closely with RCOA in the development of these recommendations, and we fully endorse them. Further, the impact of prolonged displacement can be mitigated by allowing HSP providers to work with clients prior to their arrival in Australia. This allows some settlement gains to be made in the interim, gives humanitarian entrants something positive to engage with, and provides a tangible sense of hope.

Drawing on RCOA's recommendations, we summarise steps necessary to increasing arrivals as follows:

1. Streamline travel exemptions for humanitarian entrants

Australian Border Force decision makers have discretion in granting travel exemptions to anyone holding a 200, 201, 202, 203, or 204 sub-class visa, having regard to whether there are compassionate and compelling reasons to grant an exemption. All holders of these visas have established that they are in vulnerable situations and face compelling circumstances by virtue of being granted a humanitarian visa. The fact that they hold a humanitarian visa in and of itself should be sufficient to demonstrate a compassionate and compelling reason, and granting of travel exemptions for humanitarian visa holders should therefore be streamlined.

2. Escalate and prioritise vulnerable cases

While we understand there is a process currently in place for the UNHCR to refer emergency humanitarian cases for travel to Australia, no similar process currently exists for non-UNHCR referred cases, including 202 visa holders. A similar process should be implemented to identify those in the most precarious situations and prioritise their travel. Our settlement network can be used to engage with SHP proposers to support this process.

3. Increase access to quarantine spaces

A percentage of quarantine spaces should be prioritised for humanitarian entrants. This would not be at the expense of places for Australian citizens or permanent residents returning, but would be within the roughly 15% of quarantine spaces that are currently being allocated to international arrivals through the process of granting individual travel exemptions. In addition, further urgent efforts should be made to expand quarantine capacity.

4. Enhanced travel support for SHP proposers

Ordinarily, SHP proposers are expected to cover the costs of travel for sponsored 202 visa holders, whether directly or with the assistance of IOM who provide travel loans. The costs of travel are currently prohibitive, and could cause financial distress or long-term debt for proposers, especially if paying airfares for a family unit rather than an individual. We therefore recommend additional support for travel for 202 visa holders in the present situation.

5. Small cohort facilitation

A pragmatic approach should be taken by facilitating travel for groups of visa holders currently in locations where there are fewer logistical barriers to travel. For example, cohorts in Indonesia, Malaysia and the United States where there are direct flights to Australia, access to health and COVID testing, and exit requirements can be met. Further, the government should explore facilitated flights from locations where there are large groups of visa holders, such as Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Kenya, Thailand and India.

6. Enable HSP providers to work with clients prior to arrival

As noted above, the long delay between visa grant and travel to Australia is detrimental to settlement outcomes, as visa holders are unable to begin their settlement journey until they arrive in Australia and are connected with their HSP provider. This can be mitigated by allowing HSP providers to provide some services to humanitarian entrants while waiting to travel to Australia where this is practical to do so. We strongly encourage the Department to work with HSP providers to develop a model for this work. This would be beneficial in the long-term, as it could remain a feature of the program in the future, allowing the settlement process to start earlier on a more regular basis.

At a broader level and looking beyond the humanitarian program, the ‘Roadmap to Reopening’ Report by the Open Society Common Purpose Taskforce at the University of Sydney sets out the path for Australia to re-engage with the world, while strengthening our social foundations and generating economic prosperity.⁹ The recommendations of the report centre around:¹⁰

- widespread and rapid vaccination backed by measures to increase public confidence;
- rigorous border testing and immunity requirements for incoming travellers; and
- scaled up quarantine designed to meet the needs of specific industries.

SCoA endorses the recommendations made in this report, recognising the benefits to the humanitarian program as well as to Australian society more broadly of travel in and out of Australia resuming at a regular level.

Investing in settlement services

Well resourced, flexible and tailored settlement services are crucial to ensuring the lifetime wellbeing of refugees and their families settling in Australia. The settlement sector is the best placed to provide these crucial services, given its evolution into a dynamic and responsive industry with crucial cultural and language competencies and an understanding of the nuances of settlement. Over decades of experience, settlement service providers have developed expertise and experience which must be recognised and celebrated. However, there are challenges to settlement service funding that must be addressed to optimise the success of the humanitarian program.

⁹ Open Society, Common Purpose taskforce (2021). “A Roadmap to Reopening: A report of the Open Society Common Purpose taskforce,” Sydney Policy Lab, Culture Strategy, University of Sydney, May 2021.

¹⁰ Open Society, Common Purpose taskforce (2021). “How can Australia re-engage with the world?”, available online at: <https://www.sydney.edu.au/sydney-policy-lab/our-research/open-society-common-purpose-taskforce.html>.

Settlement service funding and eligibility

Funding of settlement services is under considerable strain, due in part, to the reasons outlined above. In the immediate term, it will be critical to ensure as many humanitarian entrants are able to arrive in Australia as possible and allow HSP providers to work with clients while waiting to travel, to prevent further 'brain-drain' from the sector, and safeguard the expertise and experience of a sector built and refined over decades.

In the medium to long-term, there are a number of additional changes needed in order to optimise the settlement support available. Firstly, funding should be made available for services for refugees who arrive in Australia on family visas under the general migration program. Such people are likely to be highly vulnerable in need of some support but are largely excluded from accessing much-needed services.¹¹ For example, many humanitarian entrants propose their partners and children through the partner visa process due to the limited places and long waiting times associated with proposing them through the humanitarian program. These families arrive in Australia and have comparatively little settlement support compared to those arriving through the humanitarian program. SCoA therefore recommends that availability of crucial settlement services be extended to family members of humanitarian arrivals who need them, irrespective of the visa on which they enter Australia. It is concerning that the visa a person arrives on, rather than their level of need, can determine whether they access a full range of services, a limited selection, or none at all.

Secondly, a resounding theme in SCoA's member consultations is that the time-limits imposed on the provision of funded settlement services are arbitrary and unhelpful and contrary to the government's commitment to ensuring the lifetime wellbeing of new arrivals in Australia. SCoA members witness that settlement can take longer than five years for some clients, though not for all, and therefore requires a flexible funding model that does not result in clients in need being turned away due to the length of time they have been in Australia. Considerable research demonstrates that as families establish their lives in Australia, sometimes over generations, settlement issues can become exacerbated and the need for quick, targeted and early settlement intervention is crucial.¹² The provision of federally-funded settlement services should therefore be assessed based on needs and not the length of a migrant's stay in Australia.

Finally, SCoA's member consultations point to a need to ensure greater flexibility in the funding of settlement services and associated support for refugees. This is especially true in regional Australia, where the absence of infrastructure and access to crucial services warrant a different model of service delivery. In this regard, SCoA welcomes the current reform program led by the Coordinator-General for Migrant Services, and looks forward to continuing to work with the Department to ensure settlement service models optimise good settlement outcomes.

Investment in regional settlement

As recognised in the Discussion Paper, regional settlement is a central component of the Humanitarian Program. The Australian Government's population policy includes an intent to promote settlement and population growth in regional centres through the Migration Program and the Humanitarian Program.¹³

¹¹ This will become exacerbated if the government proceeds with its proposal to extend the Newly Arrived Residents Waiting Period for most social services.

¹² Hugo, G. (2011), *Economic, Social and Civic Contributions of First and Second Generation Humanitarian Entrants*, p. 241.

¹³ Australian Government (2019), *Planning for Australia's Future Population*, available online at: <https://pmc.gov.au/resource-centre/domestic-policy/planning-australias-future-population>.

The evidence suggests that addressing settlement needs at the local level, and in a manner that is tailored to individual regional locations, is an essential factor for successful regional settlement. Essential factors for success include:

- place based assessments of industries and workforces
- assessments of the extent to which newcomers will bring skills that are not available locally
- targeted community capacity building work to increase the cultural responsiveness of local employers and services
- adequate availability of infrastructure (such as housing, schools, digital infrastructure¹⁴ and transport) and local services

The experience of settlement services across Australia is that employment alone will not attract and retain newcomers in regional centres. Most recently, research, backed by the experiences of settlement providers indicates that the cost of rent in many regional areas has increased exponentially in light of COVID-19 and increased numbers of people moving into regional areas.¹⁵ Providers have reported that in some places costs have doubled or tripled. It is imperative that housing availability and affordability issues are addressed for a policy of promoting regional migration to be practical. Further, without social support and other infrastructure, there is a high risk that migrants will seek employment in major cities.

In the early stages of establishing a strong migrant community in a regional location, the presence of strong and well-resourced settlement services is essential as these services build the capacity of both local host communities, and assist new migrant communities to establish. The current approach of funding settlement services primarily on the basis of the numbers of migrants within a particular area is counter-productive to ensuring adequate resources are available in regional areas to build the capability of regional areas to welcome migrants. The funding allocated to regional settlement services should be reviewed, recognising that there is a greater level of work required in setting up the factors for success for regional settlement compared to undertaking settlement in cities.

Conclusion

Australia's Humanitarian Program brings many social and economic benefits to Australia, and ensures we meet our global humanitarian commitments. Our world class settlement services are central to ensuring positive outcomes for humanitarian entrants and the broader Australian community through the innovative and tailored supports they provide. While it is understandable that there have been fewer arrivals since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is critical that Australia work constructively to find practical pathways to increase the number of humanitarian entrants arriving in Australia. This is essential for meeting our humanitarian obligations, as well as ensuring the sustainability of our sophisticated settlement services. Further enhancements to settlement services are also needed to enhance good settlement outcomes. The sustainability and success of our Humanitarian Program and

¹⁴ Settlement Council of Australia (2020), Supporting the digital inclusion of new migrants and refugees, available online at: <https://scoa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Supporting-the-digital-inclusion-of-new-migrants-and-refugees.pdf>.

¹⁵ Anglicare Australia (2021), *Rental Affordability Snapshot*, pp.4-9. Available online at: <https://www.anglicare.asn.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/rental-affordability-snapshot---national-report.pdf?sfvrsn=8>.

migration programs, as well as our status as a leader in the response to the global refugee crisis is at stake should this not occur.