



2 June 2023

Australian Government
Department of Home Affairs

Dear Secretary,

RE: DISCUSSION PAPER – AUSTRALIA’S HUMANITARIAN PROGRAM 2023-24

Background

The St Vincent de Paul Society National Council of Australia (‘the Society’) is a lay Catholic charitable organisation that comprises over 45,000 volunteers and members and 6,000 employees who provide on the ground assistance across Australia. We have operated in Australia since 1881.

Each year, the Society distributes over \$50 million through its centres and home visitation program to help people meet their basic needs such as food, utilities, accommodation, transport, medical and educational costs. Information and referral to other services is also provided. This is in addition to the assistance provided through Vinnies vans, shops and emergency, transitional and community housing services.

In some jurisdictions, the Society provides direct, specialist assistance to people seeking asylum who have limited access to any form of income support and have no work, or insufficient work, and are unable to make ends meet. This assistance may include a small monthly living allowance, rental payments and help with utility bills and food. Regular contact is maintained to inquire on people’s wellbeing, build social connection and provide information on visa processes and access to income and any urgent material support.

The Society’s policy position on people seeking asylum is advised by its Vincentian Refugee Network (VRN), which comprises membership from across Australia, except the Northern Territory. We also work in partnership with other asylum seeker support organisations and networks including the Refugee Council of Australia, the Catholic Alliance for People Seeking Asylum, Catholics for Refugees, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and the Jesuit Refugee Service.

We recognise the expertise of these organisations, the importance of working collaboratively and the fact that there is currently no single organisation that has sufficient resources to meet all the needs of people seeking asylum. The reality is that many of these people turn to the goodwill of friends, their limited social and familial networks and charities to keep going.

Humanitarian Program

The Society’s advocacy position is outlined in our [Policy Paper on People Seeking Asylum \(April 2022\)](#).

We call on the Australian Government to implement the ALP’s National Platform, in particular, to increase the Humanitarian Program to 27,000 places with an additional 5,000 community sponsored places outside the Program.

We note that Minister Giles aspires to increase the Program and supports a non-discriminatory approach, prioritising those most in need of resettlement. We fully support a humanitarian approach that aligns with UNHCR priorities (noting only 350 UNHCR referrals in 2021) and rejects discriminatory practices such as mode of arrival, or consideration of religion, skills, English language or other attributes.

However, the 2023 Budget made no commitments concerning the 2023-24 Refugee and Humanitarian Program. Without an implementation plan and resources to support the increase, there will be little change over time.

We acknowledge the change in language from a ‘planning ceiling’ to a ‘planning target’, although note

a ceiling continued to operate in 2022-23 of 17,875 (13,750 + 4,125 Afghan places) and that the pace of progressing the caseload from Afghanistan was slow. It is concerning that Australia's Humanitarian Program has remained relatively stable for many years (average around 14,000), irrespective of the increasing global need for resettlement places, and with no requirement to meet the annual 'ceiling'.

We have also previously called for improved ways of recognising and responding to global crises as they arise by offering additional places above the annual humanitarian intake ([A Fairer Australia, 2022](#)) and call for this to be addressed.

Community Support Program (CSP) /Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Pilot (CRISP)

The Society welcomes the reduction in costs to the CSP (although they are still significant) and the pilot program to trial community-based sponsorship (CRISP) for up to 1,500 refugee and humanitarian entrants across Australia.

We note the Refugee Council of Australia's concerns about the CSP namely its costs, exclusionary criteria, requirement to purchase settlement support and high Approved Proposing Organisation fees. We support the Council's calls for CSP to be wound up and the CRISP to be expanded, with places made additional to the Humanitarian Program.

We are disappointed that places for both the CSP and CRISP remain within the base of the Humanitarian Program. This was a criticism identified in the 2019 review of CSP, namely that 'Australians more generally would be more motivated to donate time and money if they saw their efforts contributing to an increase in the overall number of refugees settled. There was also a strong sense that a lack of 'additionality' contributed to slow uptake by businesses'.ⁱ

Onshore Component

The Society welcomes an end to Temporary Protection Visas and Safe Haven Enterprise Visas, removal of Direction 80, and implementation of the Resolution of Status Visa.

We support the Government's commitment to completing the conversion process by early next year but remain concerned for the people who have had their claims rejected by the unfair fast-track assessment process, with the only avenue for further review being Ministerial intervention. We call for an end to the fast-track assessment in line with the ALP's National Platform.

Family reunion

Family support plays an important role in helping any human being to recover and rebuild their lives, particularly after escaping trauma, conflict, persecution and personal loss. No access to family reunion has been a source of great trauma for temporary visa holders. The Society therefore welcomes those granted permanent protection now being able to sponsor family members but supports the Refugee Council of Australia's call for a separate process for this cohort, such as a one-off additional quota through the Special Humanitarian Program.

Overall, the family reunion process is plagued by barriers including high costs, long wait times, limited numbers (making the process highly competitive), restrictive eligibility, income and health requirements and onerous documentation. We support calls for reform of the family reunion program.

Expand and fund the Status Resolution Support Service (SRSS)

The Status Resolution Support Service (SRSS) is one of the few programs available to people seeking asylum during their protection application process. However, it has been cut by 94 per cent since 2017. Eligibility criteria have also been significantly narrowed, with very few qualifying for financial and other support (from 29,000 in 2015 to just 1,600 now).

Charities, such as the Society, are helping these people, who are destitute and homeless. However, we are very concerned that demand far outstrips what we can provide. Like other charities, we are witnessing a housing and homelessness crisis, unmet need for medical care, decline in mental health and increased food insecurity. In addition, state governments are winding back support.

AHRC's 2019 report recommended SRSS be increased, to align with other income support payments, and its eligibility be expanded. We consider that it should prioritise the needs and vulnerabilities of individuals and families, not job readiness. We also call for access to mainstream social services, such as the Special Benefit payment.

Refugee protection

The Refugee Council of Australia has made many recommendations over the years calling on the Australian Government to 'promote international opportunities to increase the protection of refugees by drawing together Australia's humanitarian and overseas aid programs and its international diplomacy'. It notes that Australia needs to shift from policies in Asia which promote deterrence, detention and deflection of responsibilities to neighbouring countries, to policies which promote protection of the most vulnerable, stability and good governance.

We are disappointed at the Australian Government's lack of action to implement the ALP's National Platform pledge to work with Indonesia to assess asylum seekers there. Further, the same help should be extended to refugees in similar circumstances in other South-East Asian countries, including Malaysia and Thailand, and countries such as Pakistan and India.

Recommendations

The Society reiterates it calls for:

- Faster implementation of the ALP National Platform's to increase the humanitarian intake, particularly for Afghan places. Afghans who worked for the Australian Government and others in very high-risk occupations who have close links to Australia are not being sufficiently prioritised. An implementation plan towards an annual Humanitarian Program of 27,000 places, with 5,000 additional places for community sponsored refugees, by 2025-26, is essential.
- Recognition of the ongoing need to offer additional places above the annual humanitarian intake in response to crises as they arise
- The CSP to be wound up and the CRISP to be expanded, with places to be additional to the Humanitarian Program.
- Rapid introduction of a fairer process for those rejected by, or still subject to, the fast-track process. And in the meantime, immediate suspension of detention or deportation action for those rejected by the fast-track process, with them instead being granted visas to live in the community until they are able to access the new process
- Reform of the family reunion program
- Eligibility criteria for the SRSS to be expanded and funding reinstated. Specialist support should also be provided to help people navigate the complex social services system, including access to Special Benefit.
- Implementation of the ALP National Platform's pledge to work with Indonesia to assess asylum seekers there and consider accepting those found to be refugees within Australia's increased humanitarian intake, beginning in 2023-24. The same help should be extended to refugees in similar circumstances in other countries including Malaysia, Thailand, Pakistan and India.

Yours sincerely



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Chief Executive Officer

ⁱ Department of Home Affairs. Findings of the Review of the Community Support Program (July 2020 to March 2021) led by Ms Alison Larkins, Commonwealth Coordinator -General for Migrant Services, Accessed at: <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/reports-and-pubs/files/csp-review-findings.pdf>, pp 3-4