St Vincent de Paul Society
NATIONAL COUNCIL of AUSTRALIA Inc.
good works

6 August 2025

Department of Home Affairs

Dear Secretary,

RE: Discussion Paper - Australia's Humanitarian Program 2025-26

Introduction

The St Vincent de Paul Society National Council of Australia ("the Society") welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Department of Home Affairs' 2025–26 Humanitarian Program discussion paper. As one of Australia's largest and most experienced charitable networks, the Society draws on its direct assistance to people seeking asylum and refugees across the country provided over the past 50 years to inform this submission.

The Society's response is grounded in Catholic Social Teaching, especially the principles of human dignity and common good which call us to treat all people with respect and work as a community to improve the wellbeing of all. Through the Society's Vincentian Refugee Network and our ongoing partnerships with organisations such as the Refugee Council of Australia and the Catholic Alliance for People Seeking Asylum, we advocate for policies that are principled, practical and responsive to global humanitarian needs.

Composition of the Humanitarian Program

The Society strongly supports the Refugee Council of Australia's call to expand the humanitarian intake to 27,000 places per year, with an additional 10,000 places allocated to complementary pathways. These places should be allocated as follows:

- UNHCR Referred Refugees: Prioritise referrals based on protection need, especially for women, children, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and those from protracted displacement situations;
- Special Humanitarian Program ('SHP'): Maintain robust access for those with community and family links, while removing unnecessary cost, documentation and eligibility barriers; and
- Community Support Program (CSP) and Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Pilot (CRISP). These programs should be additional to the core humanitarian intake, not absorbed within it. CRISP should be expanded to 2,000 places by 2027–28.

  The onshore protection visa program must be uncapped and decoupled from the offshore program. Capping the onshore component (currently at 3,000 places per year) reduces the number of offshore places and contributes to a growing backlog. Onshore protection should be considered a distinct protection obligation.

Responding to Global Crises and Protracted Displacement

The 2025–26 Humanitarian Program must incorporate emergency reserve places for emerging crises, in addition to the planned intake. The Society holds that Australia has a moral and an international obligation to respond to displacement caused by ongoing conflicts in regions such as Afghanistan, Myanmar, Gaza, Ukraine and Sudan.

The Society reiterates it call to urgently resolve the situation of the 37 people still stranded in Papua New Guinea. These individuals have suffered for over a decade without resettlement options or legal protections. Many face severe mental and physical health crises. They must be evacuated to Australia or a safe third country without further delay.

We also support urgent resolution and permanent protection for the 1,000 individuals medically evacuated to Australia from Nauru and Papua New Guinea, many of whom face ongoing uncertainty and are living on rolling six month bridging visas with limited government support.

Emergency Humanitarian Response Framework

The Society supports the development of a national emergency response framework for people displaced by emerging crises. This was previously called for by Catholic Religious Australia and endorsed by the Vincentian Refugee Network. While recent responses to Afghanistan, Ukraine and Gaza show Australia can act swiftly, they have been ad hoc and uneven.

A dedicated framework would ensure more coordinated, consistent and equitable responses by clarifying intake pathways, service access, and community partnerships, so that people in crisis are met with timely and compassionate support when it is needed most. A framework helps to expedite Australia's response and minimise the possibility of the issue becoming politicised.

Family Reunion and Community Links

The family reunion process is fragmented, costly, and deeply traumatising for many refugee families. We call for:

- A separate family reunion stream for individuals who have gained protection in Australia;
- Clear, published guidelines on priority grounds;
- Removal of discriminatory restrictions based on mode of arrival;
- Investment in capacity and case management to address the growing backlog; and
- Family unity is critical for effective settlement, social cohesion, and long-term wellbeing.

Reforming Complementary Pathways

We welcome the Government's efforts to pilot complementary pathways, including the Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot and the Refugee Student Settlement Pathway. However, these initiatives must be scaled and better integrated. To achieve these goals, the Society recommends the following:

- Setting a target of 5,000 skilled refugee entrants by 2027–28;
- Supporting the Student Pathway Pilot with wraparound services and permanent residency options;
- Ensuring CRISP and CSP places are additional to the Humanitarian Program; and
- Streamlining CSP application processes and reducing costs to ensure accessibility.

Community Support Program Reform and Backlog

While the Community Support Program has potential to expand Australia's resettlement capacity, the current backlog, stretching up to eight years, is placing significant strain on applicants and sponsors.

The Community Support Program must be reviewed and reformed in collaboration with community stakeholders, with a focus on clearing the backlog, reducing costs, and ensuring it is

truly additional to the core Humanitarian Program. Greater transparency and fairness are essential to maintain trust and make the program accessible to those it aims to support.

Settlement and Integration Support

The success of the Humanitarian Program depends on properly funded and accessible settlement services. The Society supports the development of the Humanitarian Integration and Settlement Program ('HISP') and calls for:

- Greater resourcing for community organisations that provide housing, food, material aid and social support;
- Reviewing the eligibility criteria for the Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) to increase the number of people eligible for assistance while seeking asylum;
- Ensuring access to Medicare, study and work rights for all people awaiting status resolution; and
- Embedding trauma-informed, community-led settlement strategies through long-term partnerships.

Immigration Detention and Alternatives

The Society continues to advocate for immigration detention to be time-limited and used only as a last resort.

We support the reintroduction of a 90-day statutory cap on immigration detention, as recommended by the Joint Standing Committee on Migration and introduced under the 47th Parliament by Ms Kylea Tink MP (Migration Amendment (Limits on Immigration Detention) Bill).

Detention is harmful, expensive to Australian taxpayers and largely ineffective. The cost of holding a person in Nauru exceeds $21 million annually, compared to under $4,000 for a person living lawfully in the community on a bridging visa. The Society's members and those connected to other community-centred support organisations walk beside these people helping integrate them back into community and delivering a range of goods and supports to assist them re-establish a meaningful life. We urge the Government to invest in community-based alternatives and to phase out offshore processing permanently.

Conclusion

Australia's Humanitarian Program should reflect the values of compassion, fairness and responsibility. It must be responsive to global need, grounded in human rights, and supported by effective settlement policies. As a national organisation providing direct assistance to thousands of people seeking protection, the Society stands ready to support a more just and principled approach.

We make the following key recommendations:

- Increase the Humanitarian Program to 27,000 places per year, with 10,000 additional complementary pathway places.
- Decouple and uncap the onshore protection program.
- Ensure CRISP and CSP places are additional to the Humanitarian Program.
- Evacuate and resettle all remaining individuals in PNG and Nauru.
- Reform and expand family reunion processes.
- Scale up complementary pathways including skilled migration and student visas.

- Review the eligibility criteria for the SRSS to ensure access to Medicare, study, and work rights and prevent those seeking asylum from living in destitution.
- Legislate a 90-day cap on immigration detention.

On behalf of the Society's National Council and our 45,000 members, volunteers and employees I thank the Department for this opportunity and would welcome continued engagement on these matters.

Yours sincerely,

Toby oConnor
Chief Executive Officer