

REFUGEE COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA

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MEDIA RELEASE

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COUNCILS DECLARE THEMSELVES REFUGEE WELCOME ZONES

Today Mayors and Councilors from nine Councils participated in a ceremony in Melbourne to sign a Declaration proclaiming their area a "Refugee Welcome Zone".

Council's present were the Cities of Melbourne, Casey, Darebin, Greater Dandenong, Hume, Maribyrnong, Moreland, Port Phillip and Yarra. They join a further seven Councils in Victoria and other parts of the country that have already taken the unprecedented step of publicly declaring their willingness to accept and support refugees and there are many more councils that are currently in the process of signing up.

Refugee Welcome Zones are an initiative of the Refugee Council of Australia, Australia's peak refugee support organisation, and today's ceremony was held to mark World Refugee Day.

The purpose of the Refugee Welcome Zones is to enable councils to declare that they welcome refugees into their area, to celebrate the diversity in their midst and to acknowledge the importance of upholding human rights of refugees who have been forced from their original homes by persecution.

When opening the ceremony at which the council representatives signed the Declaration, RCOA's President, David Bitel, spoke about the particular role of councils in providing leadership, responding to people's needs at a local level and educating their constituency.

Each of the Councils present at the ceremony made a statement reinforcing their commitment not only to sign the Declaration but also to implement the principles it contained.

Cr Kate Redmond, representing the Lord Mayor of Melbourne, reaffirmed the importance of strong and principled leadership on this important social issue. She reminded us that over the years Australia has displayed a wonderfully welcoming approach to people coming from many backgrounds and that its diversity is one of the great strengths of this country.

Cr Sue Corby, Mayor of Yarra, spoke of how the Declaration formalises the long commitment of the City of Yarra to refugees, mentioning in particular the large East Timorese community in the area for whom the Council provides a number of services.

Cr Liz Johnstone, Deputy Mayor of Port Phillip, highlighted the importance of statements of support for refugees in the current political climate. Port Phillip, she said, is a city in which richness and diversity are celebrated and which recently hosted a ceremony to acknowledge the captain and crew of the MV Tampa while the ship was in Melbourne.

Cr Stella Kariofyllidis, representing the City of Moreland, reminded those present that Moreland is home to people from 143 countries and its motto is “One Community, Proud to be Diverse”.

Cr Vince Fortana, Mayor of Darebin, said that the members of the Council were unanimous in deciding to sign the Declaration and that they saw it as a way to restore human rights and humanity following the hostile reception many arrivals get while they are seeking asylum. Darebin has been very active in providing support to refugees on Temporary Protection Visas.

Cr Paul Donovan, Mayor of Greater Dandenong, also represents an ethnically diverse community with 52% of the local residents born overseas. Dandenong also provides a home to 25% of the refugees who settle in Victoria. He spoke of the role of his Council in offering hospitality, understanding and openness to new arrivals who had fled pain and horror and about the wealth of experience, culture, language and traditions that refugees have contributed to the area.

Cr Graham Smith, Mayor of the City of Casey, spoke about how signing the Declaration provides an opportunity for the Council to reaffirm its long-held commitment to welcoming refugees into the community and to demonstrate its commitment to providing services to all its residents, whether they be newly arrived or long standing members of the community.

Like Cr Smith, Cr Ann Potter from the City of Hume welcomed the way the Declaration formalised her Council’s long-held commitment to supporting refugees and others from diverse cultural backgrounds. As the daughter of someone forced to flee his home, she was able to add from a personal perspective the gratitude of those who have been welcomed by this country.

The Refugee Council of Australia sees the willingness of so many councils to make this public statement as an indication of the growing community concern about policies that seek to demonise refugees and asylum seekers and undermine Australia’s proud record of providing assistance to some of the world’s most vulnerable people, and looks forward to many more areas becoming official Refugee Welcome Zones.