

REFUGEE COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA

INCORPORATED IN A.C.T. - ABN 87 956 673 083

37-47 ST JOHNS RD, GLEBE, NSW, 2037
PO BOX 946, GLEBE, NSW, 2037
TELEPHONE: (02) 9660 5300 • FAX: (02) 9660 5211
info@refugeecouncil.org.au • www.refugeecouncil.org.au

Submission to 1999 review of material assistance to humanitarian program entrants

Introduction:

The Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) is Australia's peak agency, representing some 120 organisations and individuals working with and for refugees in Australia and around the world.

The aim of the Council is to promote the adoption of flexible, humane and constructive policies towards refugees, asylum seekers and displaced persons by the Australian and other Governments. In furtherance of this aim we monitor Government policy as it pertains to refugees and, where relevant, seek to represent the views of our members to relevant legislative and policy bodies.

On this occasion, RCOA will be seeking to contribute constructively to the Review of Material Assistance to Humanitarian Program Entrants currently being undertaken by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs. The submission will be divided into two sections. Section 1 will provide some general remarks and comments on the review process itself, the types of material assistance which Refugees and Humanitarian Entrants might need and how such assistance ought to be delivered. Brief analysis of the adequacy of the present arrangements will be provided using the normative framework of the guiding principles of service delivery contained within DIMA's discussion paper. Section 2 contains a possible alternative model of service delivery, albeit in a form which will require significant refinement.

RCOA also recognises that many of its members from all States will be producing written submissions for the review providing more detailed analyses of the current arrangements in their home States. The RCOA submission will thus concentrate on more generic issues regarding Material Assistance.

PART A: Refugee Settlement and Material Assistance.

Review Process:

Discussion Paper:

The Material Assistance discussion paper released by DIMA provided the community not only with a very succinct and useful description of present arrangements for the delivery of material assistance but it also served to focus issues and provided some subtle insights into the Government's thinking on future directions. This submission will regularly refer to this discussion paper and the normative principles found within.

Time Period:

Whilst RCOA agrees with the need to review material assistance measures, it would like its dissatisfaction with the time-frame formally noted. RCOA first received official notice of the review on 23 December, 1998. With the final date for receipt of written submissions being 20

January 1999, this left RCOA with very little time to prepare a submission which adequately reflects the views held by the organisation's membership. The fact that the Material Assistance Review also coincided with DIMA's review of IAAAS (also announced in late December), leads RCOA to query the level of coordination between DIMA's various sections. If the Government is serious about receiving quality input from the community sector, and in particular from peak specialist organisations such as RCOA, then more notice should be given of impending reviews.

Need to make Review Report Public:

In order to ensure appropriate levels of accountability and transparency, RCOA stresses the need to release to the public the final report and recommendations which follow DIMA's round of public consultations and call for written submissions.

Refugee Settlement and Material Settlement:

Any review of material assistance for refugees and humanitarian entrants must have its starting point in relating an entrant's needs to his/her refugee experience and the process of settlement which each entrant must undertake as individuals. This process could best be described as an individual regaining control over the path of his/her life including being able to make substantive decisions which enable him/her to participate fully in all spheres of a refugee's new society (private, economic, political). For the individual refugee this process is thus dynamic and can last for years, even decades. UNHCR has identified a series of indicators of successful settlement which can assist in guiding service providers to facilitate such a process. These include:

- secure and affordable accommodation;
- access to stable employment and income;
- language competency;
- access to education;
- good physical and mental health;
- presence of family members;
- support of people from similar background.

Material assistance, in particular, must be tailored and delivered in a form that reflects such a dynamic process and gives the individual refugee a solid foothold from which to begin it.

Section 3.1 (p.4) of DIMA's discussion paper rightly recognises many refugee needs in terms of such a process. Needs in respect to refugee settlement are not static and thus it is useful to understand them in terms of tasks that must be accomplished by individuals. Nevertheless, RCOA maintains that the list needs to be balanced by a greater emphasis on the psychological context in which such tasks are achieved. Much emphasis has rightly been placed on the mental health needs of torture and trauma survivors, but it should also be remembered that the general insecurity about the future and the sense of transience which marks the refugee experience in general can have significant implications for any refugee's ability to accomplish the tasks outlined in the paper. A refugee needs to do more than "form a household" in order to begin the long process of re-building his/her life: a refugee needs to establish a "home" - a place which is imbued with a sense of permanence and security, an abode which provides both a protective space from the insecurities of the new, strange environment and a launching pad from which he/she can face its challenges head-on. Material assistance should be aimed primarily at enabling the establishment of such a "home" at the earliest possible date after arrival.

If the principal objective of any program delivering material assistance is to facilitate the establishment of such a "home" then it is useful to look at a refugee's material needs as a two step process consisting of (a) immediate post-arrival needs and (b) short-term establishment needs. DIMA's discussion paper also recognises this two step process (5.2, p.7) but has little

to say about the transition process between (a) and (b). Certainly the present arrangements for providing material assistance (OAA and CRSS) tend to concentrate on either (a) or (b) and often leave entrants to their own devices to make that transition.

Excluding guaranteed income support, RCOA suggests that the following correspond to stages (a) and (b) identified in the preceding paragraph: Immediate Post-Arrival Needs:

- safe, secure, furnished accommodation in a supported environment;
- culturally appropriate food;
- clothing;
- information and orientation about the type of material assistance to which they are entitled and what is likely to occur to them in the coming weeks.

Short Term Establishment Needs:

- long-term guaranteed, secure housing suitable to individual/family needs;
- assistance with bond and utility connection fees;
- basic household goods and furniture (bed, bedding, table/chairs, refrigerator etc);
- knowledge of and access to specialist refugee settlement and mainstream services;

plus possibly:

- school uniforms and text books for refugee children.

RCOA is of the view that a refugee's settlement process is best facilitated by reducing the 'transition' period between (a) and (b) and that any material assistance program should be designed to encourage refugees and humanitarian entrants to move into the community at the earliest possible date whilst at the same time ensuring that the entrant is able to gain access to as many settlement support services as needed.

The degree of assistance which entrants will require will vary from individual to individual and from case to case depending on a myriad of factors including culture, gender, degree of trauma, health, language skills, pre-existing links to Australia etc. Because not everybody requires the same level of material assistance and because resource limitations prevent the implementation of a universal material system program of any substance, it is imperative that material assistance is directed towards those who are most needy. The question of determining eligibility will be discussed below.

Current Arrangements for Delivering Material Assistance:

Currently, material assistance to refugees and humanitarian entrants is delivered through the following programs:

On-Arrival Accommodation (OAA):

13-26 weeks subsidised furnished accommodation in Government owned or rented flats. Entrants also receive additional settlement support from Settlement Services Officers (SSOs) which endeavour to assist entrants with settlement orientation and information as well as linking them into other specialist and mainstream services. Upon leaving OAA, entrants receive a 4 week rental rebate to assist them in securing long term accommodation but receive no further assistance towards acquiring household goods and furniture.

Eligibility:

Unlinked entrants with visa subclasses 200, 201, 203, or 204 as well as some IDC releases with protection visas. During 1997-98, 2457 refugees and humanitarian entrants (approx. 20%) were placed in (OAA).

CRSS:

Entrants may also be referred to a CRSS group for settlement assistance. CRSS groups consist of community volunteers who assist entrants secure accommodation in the community and manage a material assistance grant to cover bond and utility connections, acquire household goods and other essentials. CRSS groups are also expected to provide settlement orientation and information as well as link entrants into specialist refugee service providers.

CRSS Eligibility:

Entrants holding visa sub-classes 200, 201, 202, 203 04 204 as well as the Burmese SAC. During 1997-98 some 3,220 program entrants (approx. 26.8%) were assisted through CRSS. During 1997-98, only 47% of all Humanitarian program entrants received material and settlement assistance through either OAA or CRSS. The remaining entrants were not eligible because:

- In their protection application they were linked to a proposer who had themselves been a permanent resident in Australia for 2 years or more (the majority of SHP and nearly all SAC entrants fall into this category). Proposers are expected to provide for the material assistance and settlement needs of the entrants.
- they received an 866 protection visa after being in the community as an asylum seeker.

Other forms of material assistance available to refugees and humanitarian entrants include:

IHSS Material Assistance Strategies:

DIMA has funded material assistance strategies in 4 States which seek to provide the most needy of entrants with assistance. In NSW, The St Vincent de Paul Society has been able to provide a small number of needy refugees with packages consisting of a bed, table/chairs and refrigerator. Whilst this has been a worth while initiative, minimal funds have meant that the actual numbers of entrants who have been assisted by the scheme have been extremely small.

Church and Charity Based Assistance:

Many churches and charity organisations provide refugees and humanitarian entrants with material assistance where this is possible. This occurs largely at a local level and is necessarily outside of any coordinated strategy to provide systematic assistance. Nevertheless, much of the work done by such groups goes largely unrecognised by DIMA officials and community workers alike and much could be done at the regional level to tap into such groups.

Concerns about Current Arrangements:

Whilst recognising the complexity of the problems facing the Australian Government in any effort to meet the needs of refugees and humanitarian entrants, as well as appreciating that in many respects Australia is a world leader in providing settlement services to this group, RCOA, nevertheless, holds concerns as to the effectiveness of some aspects of the present arrangements. These are discussed below. RCOA also recognises the differences between States and that these reflect both the local make up of service providers as well as the size and composition of the humanitarian intake. Much of what follows refers principally to NSW as this State receives just under 50% of total entrants.

Eligibility: A repeated theme in DIMA's discussion paper is that access to any material assistance scheme should be dictated by the needs of the entrant (see 8.4, p.12). It is difficult to see how the current system complies with DIMA's own stated principle. Currently, eligibility for referral to OAA or CRSS is determined almost exclusively by an entrant's visa sub-class (with limited flexibility). As the principal determining factor of the visa sub-class is supposedly

the protection needs of the applicant, it is unlikely that post-arrival material assistance needs will correspond to this. Reducing either material assistance needs or access to other specialist refugee services to what effectively amounts to an administrative decision taken overseas ignores the following possible scenarios:

- that the proposer has neither the financial or material resources nor sufficient knowledge of Australian society and its services to provide adequate settlement assistance to the entrant;
- that many people who enter the country under SHP or SAC have suffered similar or identical experiences to those who have entered as Convention refugees but have been processed under the other categories because of family or community links.

RCOA is well aware that the current numbers accepted under Australia's resettlement program is predicated on the Australian community absorbing much of the settlement costs for a substantial number of entrants. This has also allowed the Australian Government to recognise the legitimate protection needs of many people who do not technically satisfy the narrow criteria established by the 1951 Convention. Because of this, RCOA is reluctant to call for a material assistance program which grants equal entitlement and assistance to all entrants as this might result in a significant reduction in intake - an unwanted trade off as protection needs must always take precedent over settlement needs.

RCOA recommends that the criteria for eligibility for material assistance be reviewed and that such assistance be delivered on a needs basis. Ideally this would involve the introduction of some form of post-arrival assessment to establish eligibility for and the level of assistance required. Part 2 of this submission presents a model for this.

Equitable Standards across Programs:

RCOA has further concerns over the ability of the current OAA/CRSS/proposer system's ability to deliver material assistance in a manner which facilitates the settlement process described above. Each component of the current program will be discussed below:

OAA:

Although OAA provides greater levels of assistance to entrants in terms of their immediate on-arrival needs, there has been some evidence to suggest that some entrants at the end of their 13 to 26 week stay are ill-equipped to move into the community as little direct material assistance is provided to facilitate this transition. This especially the case in States in which resources are stretched due to large numbers. The level of overstaying in the NSW OAA program is possibly symptomatic of this. RCOA consultations also revealed that many entrants who stayed in OAA were envious of the concrete material assistance received by those allocated to a CRSS group which, in their view, eased the process of establishing a permanent household. In areas such as Sydney where the housing market is tight and establishment costs are high, the situation has been particularly acute for many leaving OAA. In States where OAA has been more successful, such as Queensland, this has been the case because SSOs have been able to work more intensively with the entrants and the program has been able to assist the entrant find longer-term housing arrangements more effectively and general establishment costs are lower.

For some the lengthy transition period of 13-26 weeks for OAA entrants is an unnecessary period marked by uncertainty and waiting with no guarantee that they will be able to find permanent housing and be able to afford basic household goods. RCOA maintains that most entrants are better prepared for the settlement process if they enter the community and long-term accommodation at the earliest possible date after arrival. The challenge for policy makers and service providers alike is to facilitate the move of the entrant into the community whilst still ensuring that they are adequately linked into the services and support networks which many need.

CRSS:

Given the above remarks, CRSS support has the potential to be more effective in providing the foundation for the settlement process. CRSS assisted entrants generally enter the community and long-term accommodation immediately after arrival and are provided with direct material assistance through a grant managed by the CRSS group in order to cover establishment costs. CRSS groups are also supposed to provide the entrant with a basic introduction and orientation to life in Australia and ensure that the entrant is linked into the services which he/she may need. Importantly, because CRSS utilises volunteers, settlement costs are minimised. The volunteer nature of CRSS, however, places inherent limitations on both the quality of service delivered across groups and the legitimate expectations on what sort of tasks such groups can assume. These and related issues are discussed below.

Increasing Complexity of Tasks:

In recent years expectations on what tasks CRSS groups should take on have risen. This is largely due to both the increasing complexity of the settlement service landscape (a direct result of the Government's decision to devolve responsibility for service delivery to a myriad of private and community organisations) and increasing awareness of refugee settlement needs. In many respects CRSS groups are now expected to act as semi-case managers, linking entrants through referral into the various services. Such developments have, furthermore, coincided with a much reduced level of logistical and training support from DIMA due to ever tighter resource restrictions. Many groups themselves feel that the tasks now expected of them are unrealistic given their limited time and ability to keep abreast of rapid changes in the area. Complicating this further is the fact that many CRSS groups now consist of people who themselves are recent arrivals, many with refugee backgrounds, and are still struggling with their own settlement process. Recent IHSS initiatives developed to resource, assist and train groups to be able to cope with such tasks, while useful, are unlikely to provide a quick solution to the problem as they themselves involve CRSS groups working with a series of non-DIMA organisations and represent somewhat of a culture shift in the way which the groups are accustomed to operating. More important in the short term is the need to redefine formally the explicit domain of CRSS groups and ensure that expectations are commensurate with the time restrictions and abilities of volunteer base from

The Problem of Long-Term Housing for Refugees and Humanitarian Entrants

The availability and affordability of long t

yet it to DIMA's Client Services Charter remains uncertain despite repeated request from RCOA and others to have this clarified.

Vetting Volunteers:

In registering groups for CRSS, DIMA registers groups rather than individuals. Typically only one or two people from any given group will receive any form of training, but it is common practice amongst groups, especially ethno-specific groups, to call on numerous other members of a community or friends to assist them in carrying out settlement related tasks. In such cases, DIMA has little or no control over who is actually assisting the entrants or whether such people are of either appropriate ability or character to assist individuals and families, many of whom are extremely vulnerable. This issue is particularly serious in cases where CRSS groups are assigned to assist Women at Risk entrants and should be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Proposers:

Close to 50% of all Humanitarian Program entrants receive no targeted material assistance. As so-called "linked entrants" they are dependent upon their proposers for material and settlement assistance. RCOA appreciates that by transferring some of the costs to the community in this way that this allows the Australian Government to expand both the size and selection criteria for its Resettlement Program but more can be done to ensure that proposers are better prepared and able to undertake that which, for many, can be difficult and stressful experience. Many proposers (often family members) agree to sponsor entrants despite having limited financial resources and/or little knowledge about the obligations which come with it or other refugee settlement services. In some cases linked entrants find that their sponsors can offer them little in terms of support and are left to their own devices to undertake the settlement process.

In order to enhance the level of support which proposers can offer entrants, and thus retain the present resettlement program numbers, it is imperative that proposers are better prepared, resourced and supported. This should include a pre-arrival induction program where the proposer is made aware of his/her obligations (financial or otherwise) and of what he/she is likely to experience as a proposer. The proposer needs to receive regular settlement service information updates so that entrants can be more effectively linked into the services of which they are in need.

Any system that targets material assistance to refugees and humanitarian entrants in accordance to need must allow for the fact that circumstances might lead to many linked entrants finding themselves in extremely vulnerable situations. There must be flexibility to allow for such people to receive targeted material assistance should the need arise. The post-arrival assessment model developed by RCOA in Section 2 of this submission allows for such flexibility.

The Problem of Long-Term Housing for Refugees and Humanitarian Entrants

The availability and affordability of long term housing for refugees and humanitarian entrants continues to be a major concern, especially in the tighter housing markets of Sydney and Melbourne. The need to find creative solutions to these problem is of utmost urgency and such solutions need to be found in respect to both public housing arrangements and enhancing access to the private rental market.

Public Housing:

Despite repeated approaches to the various Housing Departments by concerned groups, refugees and humanitarian entrants are not necessarily classified as a priority access group for public housing (depending on the State). They can receive assistance in accessing the

private rental market through such initiatives as the Rental Assistance Scheme (bond + connections) but more could be done in this area. One possibility is the expansion of publicly funded headleasing schemes where accommodation in the private rental market is leased by the Department of Housing or another suitable agency for the full market price and then leased to the entrant at a subsidised rent. There have been recent proposals in Victoria to develop such a scheme for Humanitarian Program entrants and RCOA would welcome such development there and in other States.

Private Rental Housing:

A constant problem experienced by refugees and humanitarian entrants in tight rental markets such as Sydney and Melbourne is the attitudes which real estate agents hold towards renting properties to large families. More action needs to be taken to educate real estate agents on the needs of entrants and of the reality of their circumstances.

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Service Delivery: The Role of Cross-Sectoral Partnerships:

RCOA recognises that DIMA and other government agencies are increasingly seeking partnerships with both community and private organisations in order to deliver many social services which have typically in recent times been the domain of the State. That the Government is leaning towards this approach of devolution in respect to the delivery of material assistance to Humanitarian Program entrants was expressed as much in DIMA's discussion paper where it was noted that:

An overarching consideration in developing a contemporary service model should be that government should not diminish the contributions made by others but should support, complement and fill any "gaps" that may lead to inequitable outcomes. (10.12, p.19)

RCOA certainly recognises the benefits of developing cross-sectoral partnerships in respect to the delivery of material and other services to refugees and humanitarian entrants for the following reasons:

- it allows Government to tap into pockets of both professional expertise and local or regional knowledge and networks which State bureaucracies of scale are generally unable to do;
- recognises the work already undertaken by many non-State groups at both the local and regional levels;
- by using community organisations and volunteer groups as "mediating structures" between private individuals and an often alienating bureaucratic structure, service delivery can often be enhanced, especially in terms of access to some of societies more marginalised groups. For example, only by working through Somali community organisations will service providers gain significant access to many of the Somali women.

Whilst recognising the potential for such a "cross-sectoral partnership" approach to service delivery, RCOA would also like to point out some of the implications which need to be considered when pursuing such a line.

Re: Contracting Services: In contracting services out to community or other organisations on a short to medium term basis, there is a danger that organisations will not be able to retain

experienced and highly skilled staff given the insecure working conditions and lack of career development path which jobs created under such circumstances involve.

Re: Fragmentation of Services:

By contracting services to a diverse number of specialist organisations, DIMA makes the coordination of services even more complex and, furthermore, more confusing for many of the refugees and humanitarian entrants who require them. From a perspective of access for people unacquainted with Australian society in general, the fewer service providers, the better.

Re: Economies of Scale:

By contracting or tendering out service provision, the number of funded providers risks being increased without a corresponding increase to the total amount of funding. This has meant that each provider receives less funding and is unable to take advantage of efficiencies of scale, staff specialisation, resource development etc.

Re: Tendering Process:

By introducing a competitive environment where organisations (both large and small) are competing against each for a share of a decreasing or static pool of funds, there is the risk that service coordination will become even more difficult as each seeks to stake out its exclusive area of expertise.

The Need to Resource Funded Community Organisations: If community organisations (in particular, smaller ethno-specific ones) and volunteer groups are going to be utilised for service delivery purposes then this will have significant resource and financial implications if such groups are to receive the training and back-up support which are required for them to be able to under-take what are often extremely complex tasks.